Episode 720: Mythology, Tolkien, and Liberty

Guest: Brad Birzer

WOODS: Of course what I want to do is talk about music because of the conversation we were having before we started this, which was a great conversation about concerts coming up and albums we love or don't understand at all —

BIRZER: I'm sure we can sneak a little bit in.

WOODS: Yeah, we've got to do that soon. *Soon*. The people are demanding it.

BIRZER: (laughing) The people?

WOODS: Yeah, when I say "the people," I mean a tiny, tiny sliver among the listeners.

BIRZER: Okay, you're not talking about those who are supporting one of the two major parties.

WOODS: (laughing) Yeah. So it has to be done — anyway, one of these days you're coming back on, you're going to tell me what I should be listening to, and I'm going to do what you say.

BIRZER: Any time, Tom. And I want your advice on things too.

WOODS: (laughing) All right, here we go — I'll let you know if that Anderson/Stolt album ever actually breaks through the way the Steven Wilson album did for me, but —

BIRZER: Good.

WOODS: Anyway — it's one of these albums, by the way — see, here we go. (laughing) Sorry.

BIRZER: But it's got some great textures.

WOODS: Yeah, it's one of these things that I — see, I do a lot of listening in the car, but when I have the kids in the car I don't want to play them something they've never heard. You know, this sort of music takes a while to get into it, and a lot of kids don't

have the attention span to do this, and they'll just think, oh, this is terrible; I don't want to hear this. So I want to get into it so I can introduce them to it correctly. So I have no time to listen. The car is my time.

BIRZER: That's part of being a good father, Tom, come on. Introduce your kids to good music.

WOODS: (laughing) I know. And honestly, it really has taken in the case of my 13-year-old. She has tremendous taste in music. All right, I want to talk about the course you did for Liberty Classroom, because it raised a lot of issues that would be of interest to listeners of this very show, and of course there's a lot of overlap between listeners of this show and subscribers of Liberty Classroom. The course is called "Mythology and Western Civilization: From Plato to Tolkien." Now, before we get into the weeds here, I want to get into some specific topics you raise. I would like you to tell me what the main themes you're trying to convey here are. What story are you weaving between all the people whose opinions and whose outlooks you are soliciting, from the Greek philosophers all the way to Tolkien?

BIRZER: Thanks, Tom, that's a great question. And of course, you know me; I'm much more of a humanities guy than I am a social science guy, in all kinds of ways. And one of the things that I've always loved about libertarianism but have always been frustrated about is that quite often when I talk to libertarians they always know everything about — well, I wouldn't say everything, but they know a lot about Austrian economics. They know about incentives; they know about profit motive.

But one thing that I have found that libertarians are often missing — and this isn't just libertarians; it's across all the political spectrum. It's not just that they, libertarians in the sense of economics, but I often feel like in the way that libertarianism is presented, even though it's radically individualist, there's always a missing element of free will. That is, there's always some kind of, well, we're all moved by the mechanistic universe; there are all these things happening, which of course is all true. But what I've always found attractive — and this is all the way back to my grade school days, Tom — I have always been attracted to the notion of free will.

So I'm as libertarian or anarchist as your next listener, but one thing I'm always interested in is not just why liberty, but what liberty is for. And I think that so many of the stories we tell in mythology, whether they're Homer's stories or Virgil's stories or Milton's stories or Tolkien's stories, always hinge on the idea of personality, individualism, and without question, everything comes down to choice. So it's not that there aren't fate things; in a lot of mythology there's a lot of fate. But so much of what the heroes in mythology do is that they fight that fate. They go against it in every way possible. They take fire to the humans, or they break the Gordian knot, or they throw the ring into Mount Doom. Whatever it may be, there is always that choice.

So I love that idea that in literature, in really good literature, in mythology, we're always talking about individuals going against inhumane forces. And to me — and I realize not every libertarian would agree with me on this, Tom — but to me that's really the essence of libertarianism. Again, I don't want to ever suggest that material factors don't matter. I don't want to suggest that the environment doesn't matter. If you, Tom, are dressing exactly the way you do in Florida as you did in January in Topeka, clearly you're being foolish. I mean, there's no doubt that weather matters, climate matters, environment matters. But you still also make choices all the time, and so it's not that the environment doesn't delimit us, but it doesn't shape or determine us either. So that's what I'm most taken with. In mythology I find great stories of free will, individual liberty, individual dignity. To me, at essence, mythology is when properly understood libertarian.

WOODS: Now that's a bold statement. That right there.

BIRZER: (laughing) I hope a good one.

WOODS: When I first listened to your course, I was expecting it to be a bunch of lectures about different mythological accounts. And there is some of that, but there's also commentary about mythology, and there's also discussion of topics that might seem far afield from the discussion of mythology, so I want to dive into some of those and see what themes you're getting out of them and how you've traced them back to the theme of your course, which is mythology.

So let's start with, I choose almost at random, your coverage of Cicero and the natural law. Now, this is not something I would expect to be covered in a course on mythology. Now, I heard how you linked it up, but maybe you can do that for us now. First let's talk about the significance of Cicero and his discussion of the natural law for Western civilization, but then secondly, how does this belong in a course on mythology.

BIRZER: Yeah, that's a great question. And of course, any time, Tom, I can talk about Cicero I talk about Cicero. For better or worse, he's just one of my favorite figures. In terms of Rome, there were really a number of great writers who came right at the end of the republic. So you have Cicero, Virgil, Tacitus, and Livy. And then Seneca and a few others, but these are really the great figures. And a huge part of what Cicero was trying to do, because philosophy was not well accepted in Rome — in fact, it wasn't until Cicero made it acceptable that it became acceptable, at the end of the republic.

But part of what Cicero's trying to argue in his commentary on the natural law is that it is only by looking at another person — and we would call this political correctness now, but that's not of course how he meant it. He meant that we had to look at each person and see that they carried something universal within them, and he uses the concept that goes all the way back to Plato — and Cicero was very much a Platonist. Not his politics, but his idea on philosophy and poetry.

So Plato had argued that there are two ways we know things. Number one, we know things through logos. That is — and he took this from a great philosopher named Heraclitus, who would have been probably the age of his great grandfather. But Heraclitus had argued that there was this thing, logos, which if you're coming from Christian tradition — I know you are, Tom, but I'm thinking about your listeners — in the Christian tradition, of course, we always identify that with St. John and with the Word and with the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ. But it's actually a concept that's about 500 to 550 years older than Jesus.

Logos was this idea that each one of us carried within us the light of the divine, whatever that divine may be, whether it's Zeus or just the natural law or some cosmic entity. But every human carries that within them. Then the logos — so the logos is universal. Everybody has it. It doesn't matter male, female, black, white, African, Asian. Doesn't matter if you're from Minnesota or Florida or Botswana. Everybody has an element of this, because it shines out of what is eternally true.

But then we're born into mythos; we're born into story. So you, Tom, you're born into a very specific two-parent family. Your genetics come from those two parents. Each of their genetics come from their two parents, and so on. So you didn't get a choice that you were born into the world when you were born. You didn't get to choose your date; you didn't get to choose your parents; you didn't get to choose the religion you were brought up in or your ethnicity. You didn't get to choose the language or the country. Now, you can forsake a lot of that, but you're still born into that.

So what Cicero says is that we can only understand the dignity of the human individual by recognizing that each person is born at a very specific time and place of no choosing of his own, but each person has access to that thing that is true to everybody. So it doesn't matter if I'm talking to my brother who has all the same genetic makeup generally that I do, same language, same religion, we're both Kansans; or if I'm talking to some immigrant, a woman from Africa, maybe from Ethiopia, and maybe they're one of the kind of interesting sects of Jews. It doesn't matter how different that person is; Cicero argued that there is a universal quality there that transcends that, and that quality ironically, which is universal, is also what helps make us individual.

So when Cicero writes his first great treatise, which is the first great treatise in all of history on natural law, which of course is intimately tied to natural rights — when he writes on natural law, his argument is that all people — and this is in his dialogue, *On the Laws* — all people have this thing. But he begins by saying a lot of this we cannot prove. This is based on our mythology; this is based on our story; this is based on faith. So I can't necessarily prove this North African is my equal, but by understanding the way that mythology works, by recognizing the universal versus the particular, we can accept that we're all equal at some level.

And this is really what leads to natural rights theory in intellectual history. So natural rights, I don't want to say they're mythic — I mean, there is a mythic quality to them of course, but even our very understanding of rights and freedom comes in many ways

from our old stories and mythology that have been honed and passed on from generation to generation.

WOODS: Part of me wants to cheat and move ahead to Tolkien, because I know people love him —

BIRZER: (laughing) I know it's not Tolkien, but —

WOODS: Listen, but we'll get to that in a minute.

BIRZER: Is it making sense, Tom, why that fits in for us as libertarians?

WOODS: Oh sure, I mean, it made sense to me at the beginning, but it wouldn't be obvious to somebody just glancing at the topic, so I wanted to give you a chance to talk about that.

BIRZER: I also think it fits — I know how much you admire if not adore — and I agree; I'm with you — Rothbard. Rothbard has that very strong mythic sense as well. No matter how rigorously logical he is about things, his natural rights theory is in many ways very traditionally Western and mythic.

WOODS: All right, you know, let me ask you to elaborate on that a bit. Flesh that out, because I think there will be some people for whom that will leave a bad taste in their mouths. Because they'll think you're putting it down.

BIRZER: (laughing) No, no, just the opposite. Of course this is part of the problem with modernity, Tom. Think about words we corrupted. Probably the word we've corrupted more than anything else is "love." Love now means possession or lust or domineering. And of course traditionally "love" means the giving of oneself voluntarily, the giving of oneself to another. But myth is another word. It's not as powerful as love, of course, because I don't tell my wife "I myth her" (laughing), but I do tell her I love her. And so we still use it properly.

But for the most part, mythology has become this bad word among especially very rational types of people. And rationality's good; don't get me wrong. I'm not knocking it; I'm just saying it has to be part of something larger. Mythology has become this thing — if I'm in conversation with friends, someone tells me a story that seems a little farfetched, I might say, "Oh, that's just a myth; come on." And we basically mean a lie. But mythology traditionally never meant a lie; it always meant a true story that could not be explained by mere fact — meaning we can't replicated it; we can't put it under the microscope; we can't duplicate it; we can't even totally verify it.

So Tom, I hope your listeners will forgive us for this, but I'll use a religious understanding here. There's no way either of us, you or I, no matter how devout we are in our Catholicism, we could never prove the resurrection of Jesus. We could never prove that the wafer and the wine become the body and blood of Christ. And yet both of those things, the resurrection as well as transubstantiation, at least for us as

Catholics, are fundamental to what we believe, but we can only explain them in mythic terms because we don't have the factual basis. We may have Thomistic language and some rational way of explaining it, but we don't have a factual way of explaining it. There's a leap of faith we take when we go up to the communion rail and take Communion.

So mythology's definitely not bad; it's just become corrupted. And again, mythology just means a story with elements that cannot be explained by fact.

WOODS: All right, as I said, we are definitely getting to Tolkien so everybody hold your horses, but I do want to talk about this talk here called "Sanctifying the Pagan," and I want to see how this fits into the story, because my way of thinking is that — I don't think this is unique to me, but when you look back basically going back to the pre-Socratics and then Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, they, certainly with Socrates and thereafter, there is an understanding that the world is in some fundamental sense a given. There are parts of the world that are a given, that aren't made by us but are discovered by us. There is a structure to how things work. There are absolute values. There are absolute principles. There are absolute standards. These are not things that we invent or modify; these are things that we discover.

And then when Christianity comes along, I bet a lot of people would be of the opinion that Christians must have said, oh, the Greek philosophers came before Christ so they couldn't possibly have anything worth learning or talking about. But that's obviously not true. The Christians, to the contrary, thought we are the completion of this tradition of thought. We supply what these people were groping toward and yearning for. Fill in those blanks.

BIRZER: Well, yes, and of course you're absolutely right, Tom. And one of the greatest fights of the early Church was the fight between Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. Tertullian, who was actually trained as a philosopher but ironically said, look, everything that came before Christ is utterly worthless. There is nothing we can learn from any of the ancients. They're pagan; they're corrupt; they're disgusting. And what Clement of Alexandria said to both fathers of the Church — though they both got in trouble for having extreme views on this issue; one one way and the other the other way. But what Clement says is, look, why would we ever expect God to create something that was so worthless and so evil that it would not matter.

So he makes the point — and I think he may exaggerate this to a certain extent, but I would rather be on his side than Tertullian's. He makes the argument that philosophy prepared the Greeks for Christ as much as the Jews prepared the law for Christ. And that argument's a little too extreme. What Augustine says later on, 150 years after Clement and Tertullian had this debate, Saint Augustine says, look, what we have to do is take what we can and sanctify or baptize it and leave the rest. And that became the norm of the Church, that every time it encountered, whether it was druidism or worship of Odin or Thor, it never became when Christian missionaries and evangelists went up to these pagans, it was never, "You evil fools; this is totally wrong." It was

always, "We are so glad you worship something besides yourself. Now let's talk about what that is, and let's see what's right about it and what's wrong about it.

And part of Protestantism, Tom, part of the reason Protestantism developed under Luther 500 years ago next year, and then later Calvin and other Protestants — part of the reason Protestantism spread was because there was a fear that Catholicism had been too loose on these pagan things, that it allowed too much in. But the Catholic response to that, which I think is the philosophical response — and I don't even mean to get into theology here but just to get into a continuing discussion of individual liberty and so forth — part of what the Catholic response to this is, look, when Saint Paul went to Athens he did not condemn them. He looked around at their statues, and he saw one statue that said "The Unknown God." And rather than just harping on Athena or Apollo or Zeus, he said, look, there's your unknown god. That's great that you guys have that thing that you want, because somehow even in your utter ignorance you understood that there was something greater than what you know. And that became really the mantra of the Catholic Church.

So just think about this, Tom. There's no reason of course Christmas should be when it is, but it was put there because they thought — they were four days off, but Christmas was placed on December 25th because they thought it was winter solstice. It was the darkest day of the year. It was an utterly pagan day. Or just the fact you and I are recording this on a Wednesday, which in Norse, in old Germanic is Odin's day. This is the day we worship Odin, the king of the Norse gods. Tomorrow is Thursday, the day we worship Thor. Friday is the day we worship Freia, the goddess of fertility. And we never went around and said, okay, today can no longer be "Friday" or "Wednesday," because that's just evil. We understood that, well, all right, so Thor doesn't exist, but we can appreciate that there's a power there. And yes, we would say it's God, but that's fine.

And we've done that a lot. We do it for Easter; we do it for a lot of Church holidays. All the time we do it. It's everywhere. Even — my mom — and I've never been there, Tom; you may have. But my mom, when she went to Assisi a few years ago sent me a picture of the famous basilica there, which is a Roman temple with a medieval church built literally on top of it. They didn't tear down the Roman temple; they just sanctified it. They built right on top of it. And it's fascinating. And we've done that as a Western people over and over again, maybe sometimes to a fault. But that's what I mean when I say that we have to take that seriously, at least in terms of kind of baptizing these things and not throwing them out completely.

WOODS: It's worth noting incidentally that, on that whole "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" thing that Tertullian is associated with, that really you can only find a handful of people who took that view. There's Tertullian, maybe Epiphanius, one or two other people. Very few people. I mean, the vast majority were on the side of Clement of Alexandria, the Cappadocian Fathers, and others who wanted to have a meeting of these traditions and to reach out to the Greeks by showing that, look, you're already part of the way there, instead of saying we repudiate everything. On the question of Christmas, I think there are a variety of ingredients here. One of them

actually was that there was an ancient tradition that held the date of the Annunciation to have been March 25th —

BIRZER: March 25th, that's right.

WOODS: So nine months from then would have been December 25th, and then you have that. All right, let's go — since we have only so much time. Let's talk about — I want to skip Saint Augustine, if you can believe that, because nobody ever gets to — we never get to Dante.

BIRZER: Oh sure.

WOODS: I want to talk about *The Divine Comedy*, because I did a video on that for the Ron Paul curriculum, and I'm curious about your take on it. I mean, we know the basic — well, I don't want to assume people know the basic story. What happens in *The Divine Comedy*? What's happening there? Who's in it? Well, who are the main people in it? There are a lot of historical figures in it.

BIRZER: Sure. Well, of course there are tons of people in it that Dante knew and either liked or disliked in his own day. But aside from that, the story is Dante as our age; he's middle age. He's in his forties; he's out; he realizes that he's led a pretty lost life; he's trying to find the right path. And he sees this figure, Beatrice, that he's always been kind of in love with from afar. She represents all goodness. And as he's kind of following her in the woods, he encounters the great pagan, who is regarded as *the* greatest pagan because of a poem he wrote, Eclogue 4, which seems — 40 years, 50 years before Christ was born — seems to have anticipated the birth of Christ, even though he was utterly a pagan. And this is Virgil, Virgil who wrote *The Aeneid*.

So Virgil becomes the guide of Dante and takes him through the nine levels of Hell. They actually have to go through the digestive system of Satan to get out of Hell. And once they do, they find themselves in Purgatory, which is not necessarily a nice place, but it's so much nicer than Hell that Dante is utterly overwhelmed. But when we get to the shores of Purgatory, the guard there, of all people, perhaps one of the single greatest libertarians who has ever lived or ever will live, is Cato the Younger.

And Cato of course was the last military general to fight against Julius Caesar. He's defeated, and he commits suicide rather than accept defeat. And yet no matter how much that might go against Catholic belief because of the suicide, Dante places Cato the Younger as the guardian. Here's this pagan who committed suicide, but he's the guardian of Purgatory. And that to me tells us a lot about the way Dante is incorporating these people and what he's trying to do and what he's trying to say. He's creating a real wholeness from Adam to the last man.

After Dante and Virgil make it through Purgatory, Virgil kind of fades offstage. We don't know what happens to him. Dante enters Heaven, knowing it's Heaven because he hears singing now rather than speech, singing being the highest form of speech according to Dante and most of the medievals. Beatrice, it turns out, whom he's been

in love with forever from afar, is not Beatrice but the Virgin Mary. So he follows the Virgin Mary, and lo and behold it's not the Virgin Mary; in fact, it is Jesus, and he encounters the Trinity. And that's the end of the book, the encountering of the Trinity. That's his "divine comedy," his divine happiness.

So it's an absolute must read for every educated person, Tom, as you well know. But it's not just that. It's an exciting read. There's a lot going on it. And I know a lot of our schools only assign the *Inferno*, but I think that's a crime. They should not assign the *Inferno* and leave it there. We don't send our students to Hell and hope they stay. You have to make it through the *Purgatorio* and then the *Paradiso*. And Tom, you maybe be familiar with this, but the best translation by far is Tony Esolen's translation.

WOODS: I was just going to say that. He's at Providence College. Yeah, it's extremely readable.

BIRZER: Yeah, absolutely, Tom.

WOODS: And you know, there's some controversy when you're translating works like this if you should try to maintain the rhyme scheme or not in the new language —

BIRZER: Right.

WOODS: — and I come down on the don't-try-to-do-that, because it's enough to convey the richness of the meaning, but also to try to — there's no reason to think that you could convey that in a rhyming way that wouldn't be so strained in the other language that it would compromise the meaning.

BIRZER: I'm with you, Tom. Absolutely. I mean, it's great when you can find someone — I think Robert Fagles, when he has done Homer as well as Virgil I think he's done an amazing job at making the language not quite poetic but beautiful. And that to me is what Tony does. Tony is accurate, but he's also beautiful.

WOODS: Yeah, I've been thinking of inviting him on the show; I just need an excuse to do it. All right, let me ask you this: what does an outsider — what does a Martian learn about Western civilization from reading that?

BIRZER: Oh, well, everything really up to that point. Dante, when he — of course he dies in 1350, but when he's writing that he's a Thomist but he's also deeply liberally educated. He's very skeptical of politics, and he does everything possible — like I think Saint Paul tried to do in Athens, Dante does everything possible to pull all of Western civilization together into a whole. And this is why his story ends — maybe a little exaggeration, but his story ends — people like Donald Kagan, especially old school historians, will talk about — Daniel Boorstin — will talk about Dante as having, not created, but really explaining that great medieval synthesis that ties together the ancient and the Christian world without much of a break. So Jesus is not seen as a break in the world; he's seen as a fulfillment in the world.

WOODS: All right, I'm going to tell you right in advance — I never do it this way — what the final three questions I'm going to ask you are, so you can budget your time; you can plan.

BIRZER: All right.

WOODS: Okay, here they are.

BIRZER: We've got about 15 minutes, right, Tom?

WOODS: Yeah, something like that, and then right after that I myself am being interviewed on another show, so what a life I lead, Brett.

BIRZER: Good for you; yeah, you're the man.

WOODS: Well, I'm doing my best.

BIRZER: You're an awesome man.

WOODS: (laughing) Good of you to say. All right, here they are: When you have a lecture title, "Why Tolkien Despised Democracy," you're going to get asked about that, so that's the first one.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: Second one: "Tolkien and World War I." You have a talk on that; I'll ask you about that. But then finally, I want to know — I mean, this really goes to the last four talks of the course. I want to know about themes in his own writings that are, let's say, that we would find congenial, we as people who listen to this show or subscribe to Liberty Classroom.

BIRZER: Oh yeah.

WOODS: So let's start with "Why Tolkien Despised Democracy." I may actually make that into my email subject line one of these days.

BIRZER: Ah, good.

WOODS: See how many people open it up. All right, go ahead.

BIRZER: Well, I actually don't think — yeah, I only went to Mises University once back in the summer of '99 with my good friend Jim Otteson. But Tom, you know, for me, I thought Hans Hermann Hoppe, I thought he got it exactly right in what I listened to and what I understood. I found him to be an absolutely brilliant person. I'm not sure I caught everything he was trying to say, but I loved it. And it reminded me very much of Tolkien's understanding.

Tolkien, he's a traditional libertarian. He called himself an anarchist. And what he believed, I think, very importantly, is — and this'll get your third question — is power corrupts; no question about that. But Tolkien didn't see democracy as anything to be cherished. Democracy is nothing if everybody can vote on everything. He truly, in an old de Tocquevillean sense, Tolkien believed that democracy was very dangerous, because yes, you get the right to vote, but once you get the right to vote that sphere of politics takes away all that matters in humanity. It takes away what we can do in family, what we can do in church, what we can do in our fraternal societies.

And he and C.S. Lewis — Lewis has great damning essays of democracy. They basically argue that in a real democracy, and the way democracy will move even if it hasn't gotten there yet, that friendship will be really illegal at some point, because democracy and its radical demand for equality will not allow for people who have differences to pair off. Lewis in his essay on "The Four Loves" says there's probably nothing more that a democracy hates than real friendship, because real friendship by its very essence is an exclusion from the mass of society. It's basically saying, hey, we don't like where society's going, but you and I like each other. Let's break apart. It's always — as Lewis says, every friendship is a secessionist movement.

And not only do I agree with that, but I think that Tolkien was very worried about that. These guys, Tolkien and Lewis, they are old, traditional, Western men, very libertarian in their views on politics. Conservative in their own social views and in their own life, but very, very radical in terms of their own politics. They worried that democracy was really nothing more than conformity. It was a form, a pretty form, a soft form, but it was a form of conformity, and that worried them greatly. Tolkien and Lewis both used to talk about democracy as a mechanized form of politics. It didn't allow for real diversity.

So I hope that answers you, but Tolkien said quite often that he thought democracy was every bit as dangerous as Stalinism or of Hitlerism; it's just that democracy was always so kind about it, so in a sense it was more insidious. Rather than having a jackhammer squish our face, we're being given free milk, free healthcare. But he had a very de Tocquevillean sense about that. And this is an old Magna Carta guy. This is a guy who believes that real liberty comes from individuals within their chosen communities fighting for rights. I mean, Tolkien is nothing if not a pre-Norman Anglo-Saxon in his views. So does that help, Tom?

WOODS: It does; it does. All right, so second part of our — it's not really a lightning round, because you don't have to give lightning answers —

BIRZER: (laughing) We were talking about Thor, so that's great.

WOODS: Yeah, that's right; that's right. What did he have to say about World War I?

BIRZER: That's one of those interesting aspects about Tolkien, and there's a British author by the name of John Garth, who I think has really done the best work on Tolkien and World War I. In fact, he just came out with a brand new book

on Tolkien leading up to World War I. Tolkien had been — right when World War I started, Tolkien, who had already had a pretty terrible life, frankly — I mean, he made his life good, but his mother had died; his father had died; he was being raised by one of Cardinal John Henry Newman's priests; a guy named Father Francis Morgan was his legitimate father — or his legal, I should say, adopted father. And that was all good. Tolkien loved it, but he had already lost so many people in his life. He was really what we might call a displaced person, which is amazing thinking about it.

But when World War I starts, Tolkien begins to train in cavalry. And he's a great horseman. He's a natural horseman, absolutely. And that's where, for those of you who've read *The Lord of the Rings*, your audience, that's where the Riders of Rohan come from. They're basically Tolkien's own experience mixed with the American Indians out of James Fenimore Cooper. That was his great influence. But Tolkien, when he actually is sent over to fight, the British military recognizes his amazing communication skills. So no matter how good he is as a horseman, he is much, much better at communication. So he becomes a messenger and a translator in the trenches.

And he does his duty. I mean, this is a guy who, you know, he's not thrilled with the war, but he volunteered, and he certainly believed that when he was in the war he would do everything possible. He had grown up in poverty, had never been privileged in his life, but he had been educated, got into Oxford. And he was very taken in the war with the lower class guys who had been drafted. And this is where Sam Gamgee comes from. Sam Gamgee is basically Tolkien's homage to all of those working class Brits who really had no choice but made the best of what they could.

But he hated the war. Tolkien hated it in every way. He lost his two of three closest friends. So imagine, he's now lost his dad, his mom, his two of three best friends in this war. And he won't even talk about it. The war — he will not talk about World War I or his experiences in it until 1968, five years before he dies. It's the first time he will talk about it. And yet it's all over *The Lord of the Rings*. The war, the trauma, the heroism, everything. So that war shaped him like it shaped every person of that generation. And Tom, again, I know you know this, so I apologize for speaking to the choir here, but it probably — there's no one who came out of that war who felt that they deserved to come out of that war. Almost every one of the British soldiers had survivor's guilt, and that's, I'm sure, not only did Tolkien not want to talk about it because it was horrible, but he felt terrible that he didn't die in the war. It's crazy. What a war. Truly the war that changed all of Western civilization.

WOODS: Yeah, no kidding; no kidding. Well, I'm asking you to do that impossible here in what I'm about to ask, but I'm going to supplement this conversation with a link on the show notes page to the time I talked to Jay Richard —

BIRZER: Oh good! Jay's a great guy.

WOODS: No, he is great. I remember, I went to a conference that he was speaking at, but he was going to be leaving the next morning, and so he wouldn't get to hear me.

But I was arriving that night, and when I got in there, he was sitting like in the lobby, waiting for me to arrive so that we would at least have a chance to talk. And he was sitting with Michael Matheson Miller —

BIRZER: Oh yeah, he's great.

WOODS: And so yeah, so we sat there; I was supposed to be sleeping and getting ready for my talk the next morning, and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah —

BIRZER: Yeah, Mike's a talker.

WOODS: Which is great for a podcast host, by the way, which is why I've had him on. Anyway, I'm going to link to the Richards episode, but just give us a skeleton answer to the question, if I read Tolkien, what themes can I draw out that will resonate with this particular audience. But secondly, how do these themes fit into the overall story you're telling in the course?

BIRZER: Yeah, I'll try and start not with that and end with that. So probably the most important thing Tolkien is trying to do — and he's an expert at it. He is trying to show beauty in a horrible world. So this is the most important thing for him. He wants to show that no matter how much hell is happening, how much things are falling apart — terrorist actions, countries falling apart, nuclear bombs being dropped — Tolkien wants to show that in the end there are really beautiful things, first in creation, and then — Tom, I hope this answers exactly what you're looking for — but also in individualism. Tolkien is nothing if not a pure individualist in the way that he draws out his characters, and this, of course for any of us who's read a *Lord of the Rings*, we all know the incredibly distinct personalities, whether it's Frodo or Sam or Merry, Pippin, Legolas, Boromir, Gandalf, Sauromon. We know these people — Tom Bombadil. Tolkien is brilliant at showing personality. We learn so much.

But he also, if you'll notice, Tom — and this is so rare. And don't get me wrong; I'm not puritan. I like Stephen King and others. But what Tolkien does that is — and Lewis does the same thing. But what Tolkien does that no other modern writer, with the exception of Lewis and just a few other people can do, is he has an entire story in which we watch the whole plot develop over three books through the eyes of the good hero. Not falsely good, not goody two shoes, not without flaws, but he never once puts us in the mind of evil. And I think that — that's an amazing feat, because I'm sure if you've ever read a Stephen King novel, Tom, you know that King loves to take us through three or four pages of intimate detail of a rape scene. Yeah, it's not enough just to say there was a rape; we have to go through all of it.

And that is not what Tolkien ever does. Tolkien gives us the view of Sam, gives us the view of Frodo. And what's the real genius in this is he's really not just talking about personality and individualism, but he's making those people real in the sense that they are as distinct from one another, they have their own free will, they make their own choices — not always right, but they make their own choices and they have to live with their own consequences, just as you and I do every moment of every day.

And one of the things that struck me on rereading some Tolkien — and I don't even know how many times I've read *The Lord of the Rings* now, but I'm just on *The Return of the King* right now, the third one yet again. And one of the things that strikes me is there are guys who do the right thing even though it's against the law, and when they talk to Gandalf about it, Gandalf says, yes, of course that was the right thing, but you do know that you will be punished for that, and there's just no way around that. And that's amazing to think about that.

So I hope that helps answer, Tom. But Tolkien, he hates power. He loves liberty. He is fearful of what men do with power, because he knows that men are easily corrupted, but he also knows that men are capable of immense, immense beauty, immense sacrifice, and that they can use their liberty very wisely.

WOODS: Well, that will do it, and that was an excellent answer —

BIRZER: Thanks, Tom.

WOODS: No, look, all this —

BIRZER: I love talking to you; it's always so natural just to talk to you. I feel like we've known each other forever. We could be brothers. So thank you, Tom.

WOODS: I bet people think that's the case, but they'd be shocked at how recently you and I met. Well, anyway, I want to tell people you should definitely of course check out LibertyClassroom.com, because you're going to get this and 16 other courses in things that you're going to be interested in and want to know about and will help you win debates in a lot of cases. So I'm going to have on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/720, I'll have a link to the different topics that Brad covers, and I will also have — wait for it — coupon codes for you. So TomWoods.com/720 is where to go for that. Brad, we're going to talk about music again soon, right?

BIRZER: Oh yeah, any time, Tom. Any time. And especially now that I'm back in civilization. Next 10 months we can do whatever we want.

WOODS: (laughing) That's the spirit. All right, thanks again.

BIRZER: Thank you, Tom.