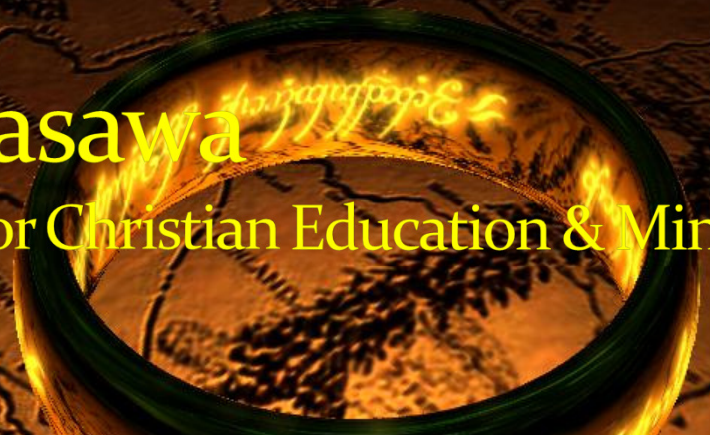
The Theology of Tolkien's

LORD OF THE RINGS



Mako A. Nagasawa

The Anástasis Center for Christian Education & Ministry

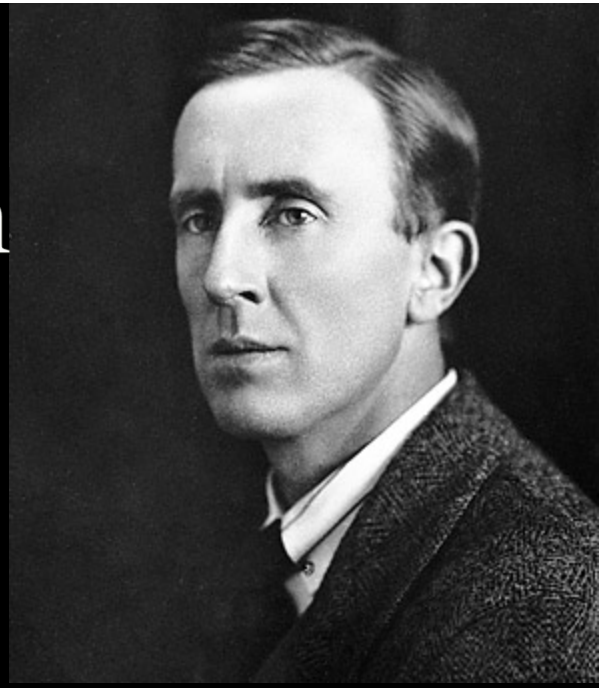
The Theology of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

1. Introduction: J.R.R. Tolkien
2. Theodicy: A Good God and the Problem of Evil
3. Identity: The Role of Humanity
4. Salvation: The Defeat of Evil
5. Ethics: What is the Right Thing to Do?
6. Epistemology: How Do We Know?

Introduction

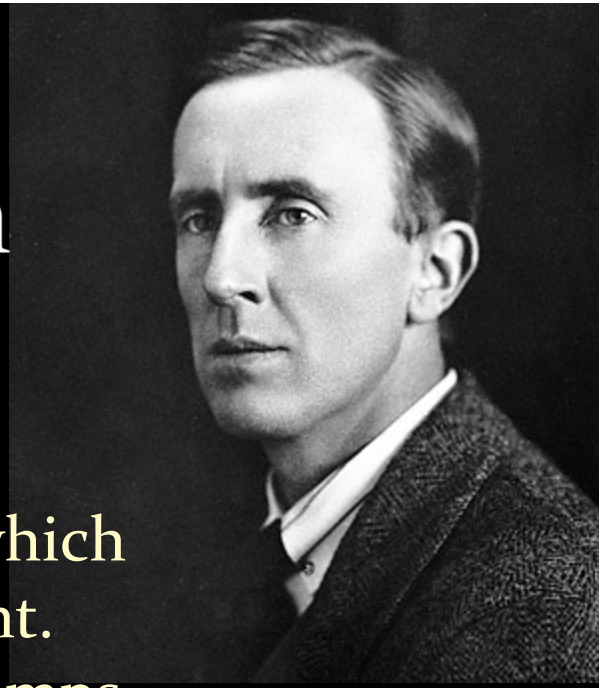
- A very brief biography of J.R.R. Tolkien
- Tolkien's purpose in writing *The Lord of the Rings*

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien



- January 3rd, 1892 – September 2nd, 1973
- Faith life: Roman Catholic from age 8
- Loved to invent languages:
  - Animalic, Nevbosh, Naffarin
- Soldier (2nd Lt) in World War I, trench warfare in France

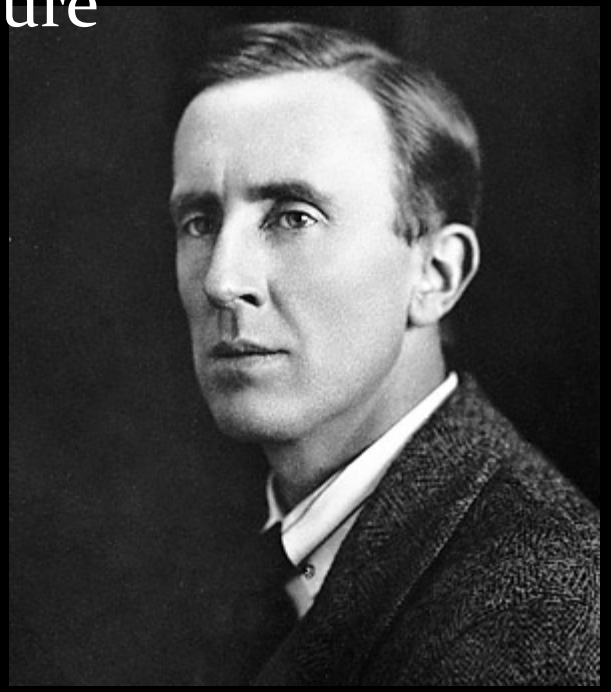
John Ronald Reuel Tolkien



- Husband to Edith
  - 'Edith and Ronald took to frequenting Birmingham teashops, especially one which had a balcony overlooking the pavement. There they would sit and throw sugarlumps into the hats of passers-by, moving to the next table when the sugar bowl was empty… With two people of their personalities and in their position, romance was bound to flourish. Both were orphans in need of affection, and they found that they could give it to each other. During the summer of 1909, they decided that they were in love.' (Humphrey Carpenter, *Biography*, p.40)

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien

- Devoted husband and father
- Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, 1925 – 1945
- Professor of English Language & Literature, 1945 – 1959
- "Father of modern fantasy literature"
- "Author of the century"



Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A story that anchors words (philology and literature)
- A myth for England (mythology)
- A "Hebrew Bible" for pre-Christian England (missiology)

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A story that anchors words (philology and literature)
  - Dwarf (dwarves): dweorgh (Old English), dvergr (Old Norse), twerg (Old High German) dvairgs (Gothic)
  - 'Gandalph' vs. 'Gandalf'
  - Elvish

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A myth for England (mythology)
  - The earliest Anglo-Saxon literature is Beowulf (7th century), already influenced by Christianity
  - What could a *pre-Christian* Anglo-Saxon literature have been like?

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A myth for England (mythology)

> He took from the box a small sword in an old shabby leathern scabbard. Then he drew it, and its polished and well-tended blade glittered suddenly, cold and bright. 'This is Sting,' he said, and thrust it with little effort deep into a wooden beam. 'Take it, if you like. I shan't want it again, I expect.'
>
> Frodo accepted it gratefully. (*FotR*, bk.2, ch.3)

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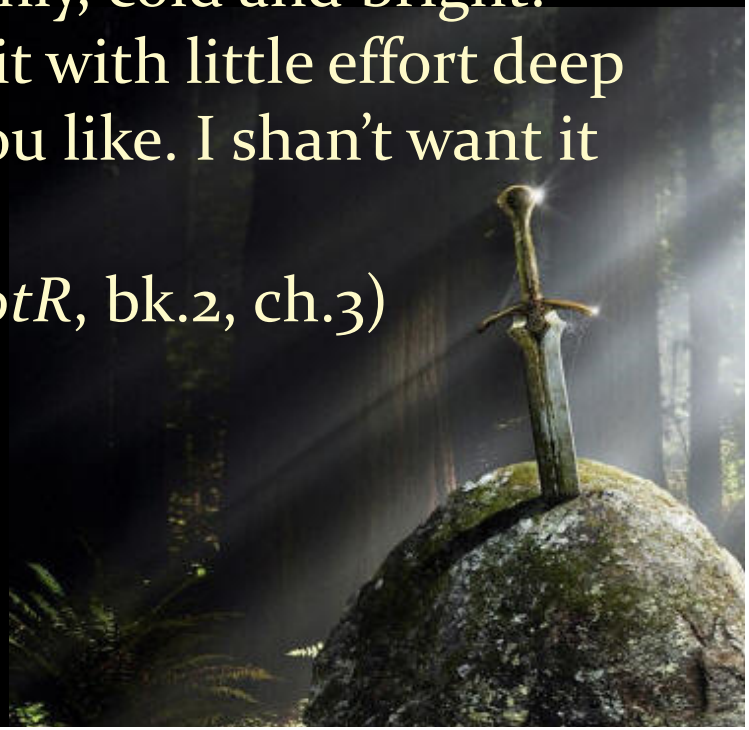


Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A "Hebrew Bible" for a pre-Christian world (missiology)

- Augustine of Canterbury in 597 AD, in Kent, preaching to King Aethelbert, king of the Anglo-Saxons, the first English king to became a Christian
- Tolkien was imagining Christian mission to the English

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A "Hebrew Bible" for a pre-Christian world (missiology)
  - 'Tolkien insisted that the fact that he was "a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic," was the most important and "really significant" element in his work.'
    - Joseph Pearce, *Why Tolkien Says,* http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/arts/al0161.html
  - What allusions or patterns would a Christian missionary have worked with?

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A "Hebrew Bible" for a pre-Christian world (missiology)
  - March 25th, Self-Sacrifice, and Frodo
    - "But in Gondor the New Year will always now begin upon the twenty-fifth of March when Sauron fell, and when you were brought out of the fire to the King." (*RotK*, bk.6, ch.4)
  - March 25th, Self-Sacrifice, and Jesus
    - "In Anglo-Saxon belief, and in European popular tradition both before and after that, March 25 is the date of the Crucifixion." (Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*)

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

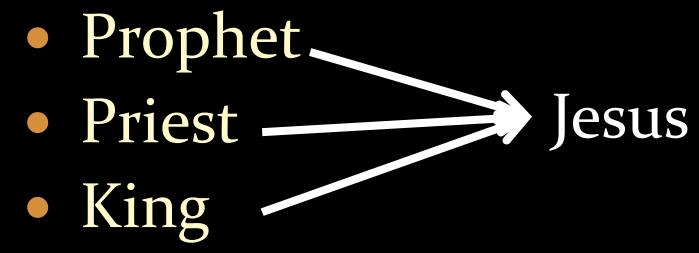
- A "Hebrew Bible" for a pre-Christian world (missiology)
  - The Resurrected Gandalf
    - At last Aragorn stirred. 'Gandalf!' he said. 'Beyond all hope you return to us in our need! What veil was over my sight? Gandalf!' (*TT*, bk.4, ch.5)
  - The Resurrected Jesus
    - 24:15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself approached and began traveling with them. 16 But their eyes were prevented from recognizing him… 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. (Lk.24:13 – 32)

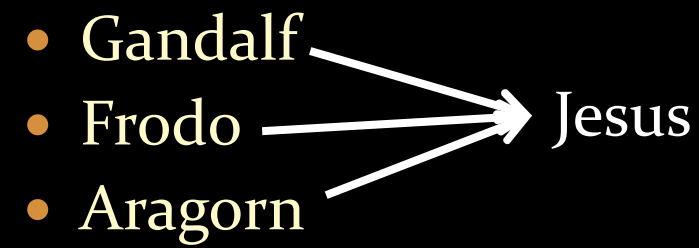
Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A "Hebrew Bible" for a pre-Christian world (missiology)
  - Aragorn as King
    - But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir cried: 'Behold the King!' (*RotK*, bk.6.ch.5)
  - Jesus as King
    - I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom (Daniel 7:13 – 14)

Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A "Hebrew Bible" for a pre-Christian world (missiology)

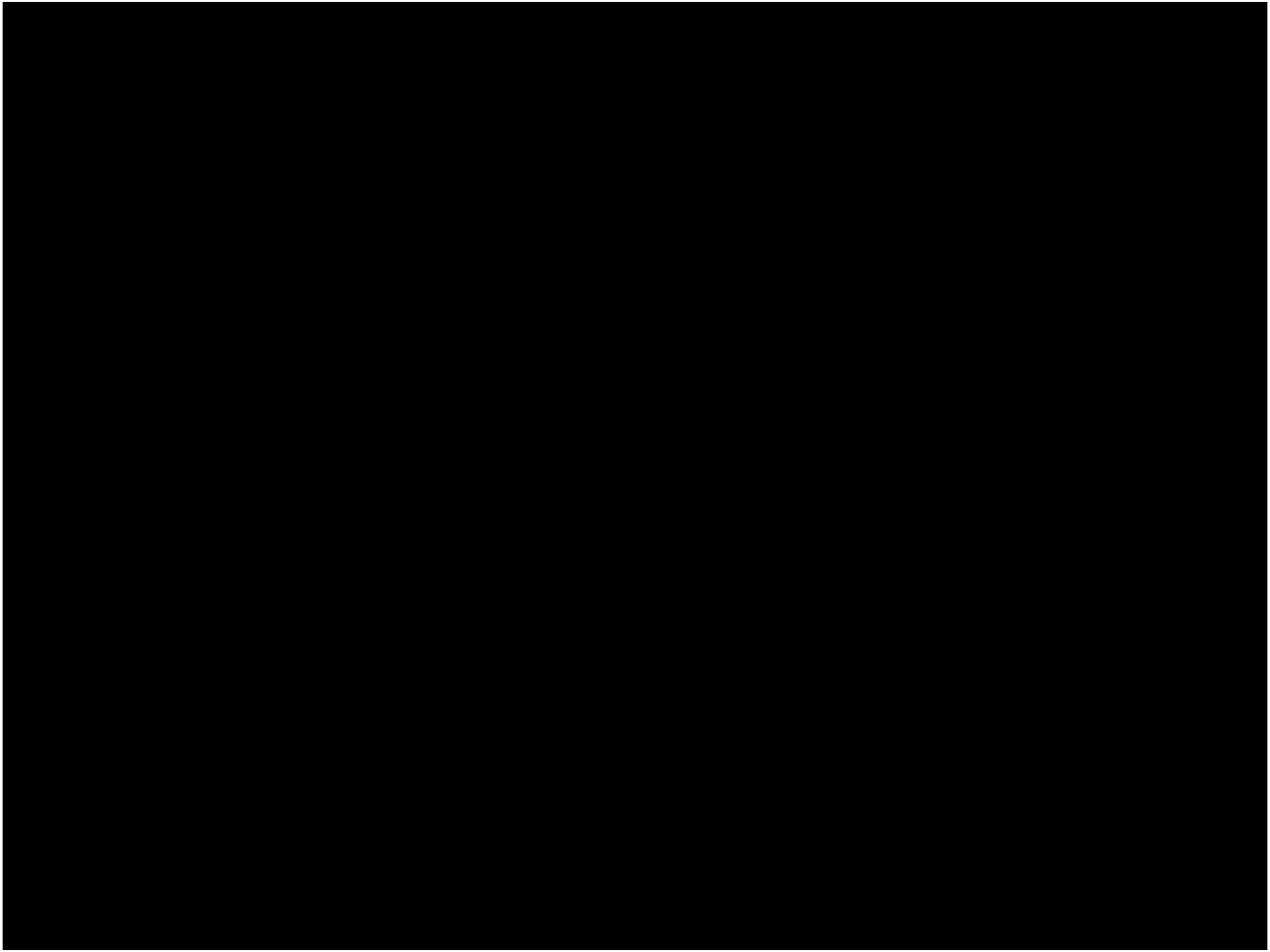




Tolkien's Purposes in Writing LOTR

- A story that anchors words (philology and literature)
- A myth for England (mythology)
- A Hebrew Bible for pre-Christian England (missiology)

- What is the theology of Tolkien? How do we see that in *The Lord of the Rings*?



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What Kind of Story is This?

1. Happy Ending?
2. Non-Happy Ending?

And why is that relevant?

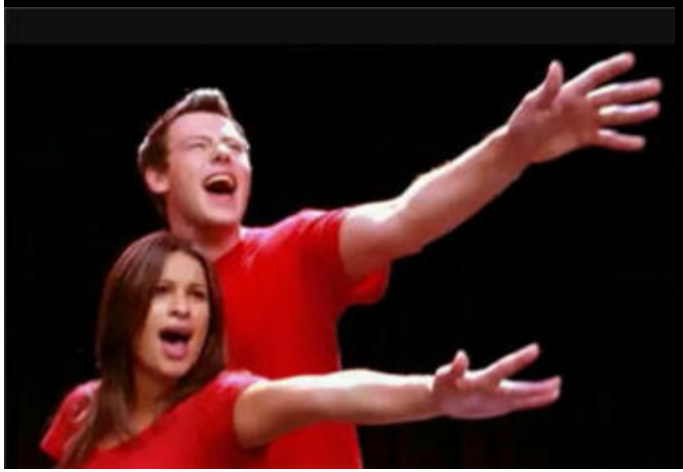
What Do These Movies Have in Common?

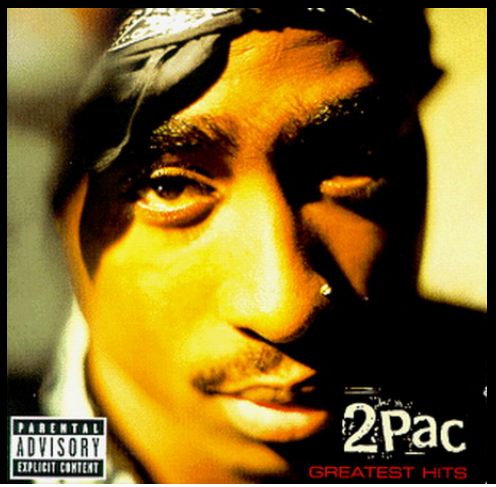
1. Up in the Air
2. The Social Network
3. Romeo and Juliet
4. The Butterfly Effect
5. The Departed
6. Blood Diamond
7. Pay It Forward
8. Boys Don't Cry
9. Gangs of New York
10. Scarface
11. Atonement
12. Moulin Rouge
13. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
14. My Sister's Keeper

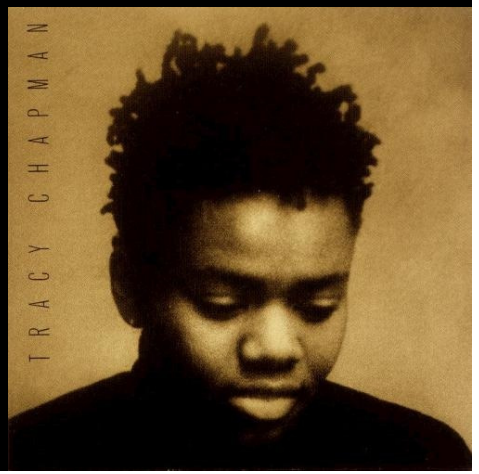
No Happy Ending: The Evil Banks Win

Songs With No Happy Ending

1. Don’t Stop Believing, by Journey
2. Changes, by Tupac
3. The Way It Is, by Bruce Hornsby
4. The End of the Innocence, by Don Henley
5. Fast Car, by Tracy Chapman

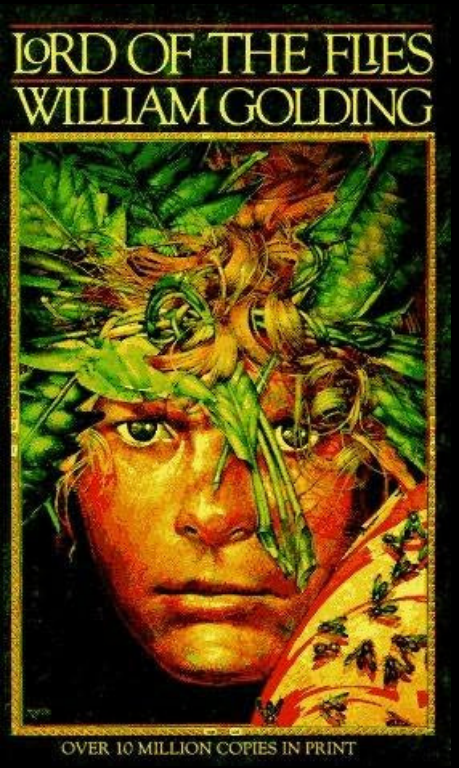


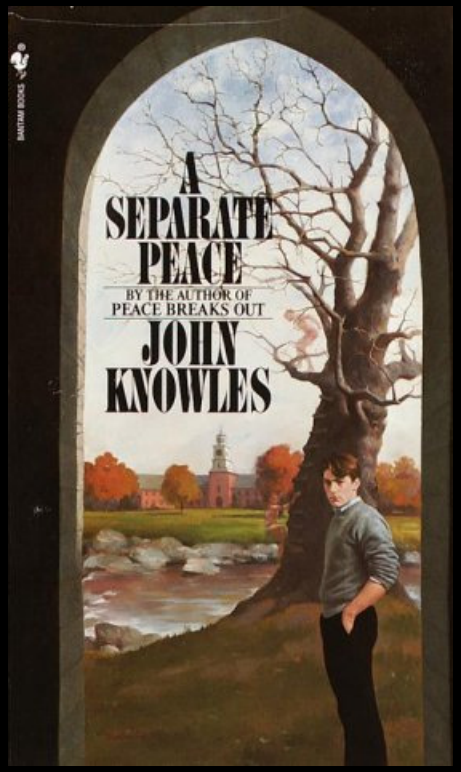




Books With No Happy Ending

1. Lord of the Flies, by William Golding
2. A Separate Peace, by John Knowles

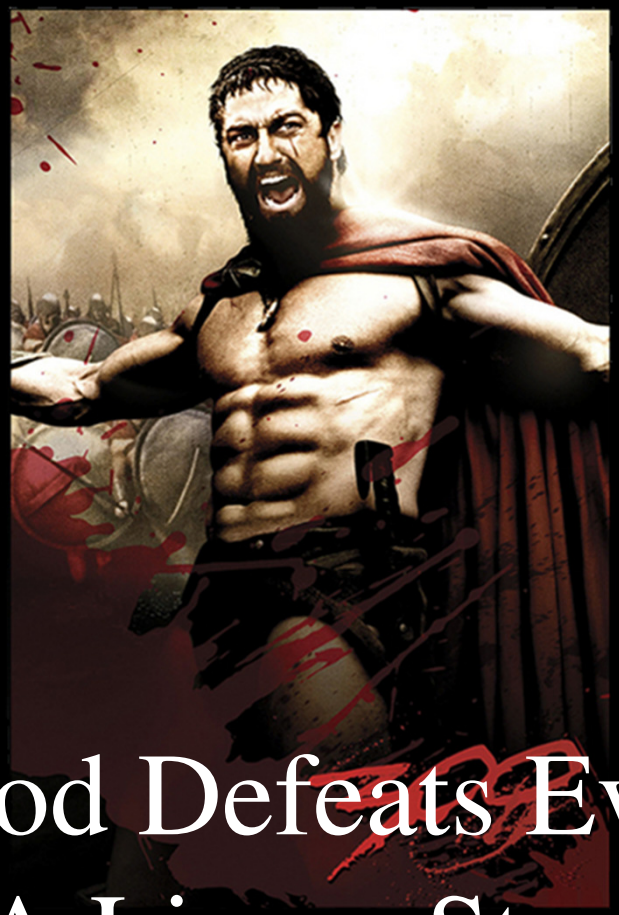




The Fatalistic Story

Good and Evil Coexist Forever – A Circular Non-Story

The Hero Story

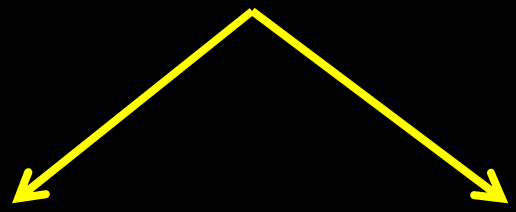


Good Defeats Evil –
A Linear Story

Movies With a Happy Ending

1. Every Disney movie
2. The superhero who defeats the villain
3. The kids who stop the robbers
4. The guy and girl who hold out for each other
5. The family that stays together through adversity
6. The natives who beat the invaders
7. The lawyer who persuades the jury of the truth
8. The scientist who beats the disease
9. The teacher who gets through to the kids

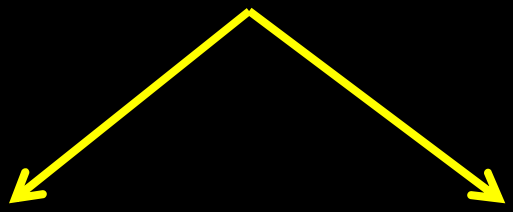
The 1st Question: Happy Ending or Not?



No Happy Ending
Good = Evil

Happy Ending
Good > Evil

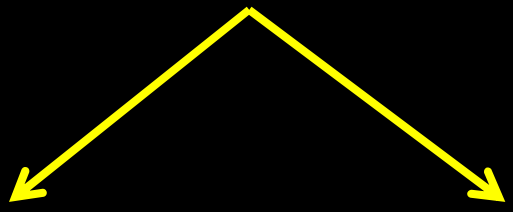
The 1st Question: Happy Ending or Not?



No Happy Ending
Good = Evil

Happy Ending
Good > Evil

The 2nd Question: Is the Villain External or Internal?



Internal

External

Who's the Villain in This Story?

External Internal

- Snow White

Who's the Villain in This Story?

	External	Internal
• Snow White	• X	•
• Transformers		

Who's the Villain in This Story?

	External	Internal
• Snow White	• X	•
• Transformers	• X	•
• Star Wars IV, V, VI		

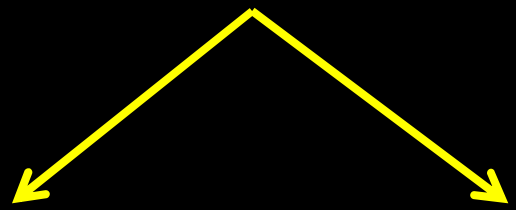
Who's the Villain in This Story?

	External	Internal
• Snow White	• X	•
• Transformers	• X	•
• Star Wars IV, V, VI	• X	• X
• Lord of the Rings		

Who's the Villain in This Story?

	External	Internal
• Snow White	• X	•
• Transformers	• X	•
• Star Wars IV, V, VI	• X	• X
• Lord of the Rings	• X	• X

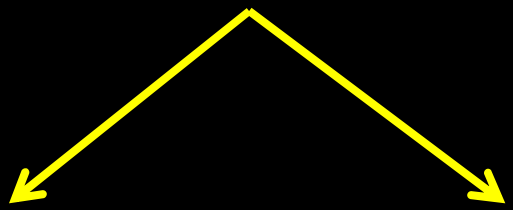
Belief Systems Are Stories



No Happy Ending

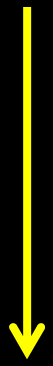
Happy Ending

Belief Systems Are Stories



No Happy Ending

Happy Ending



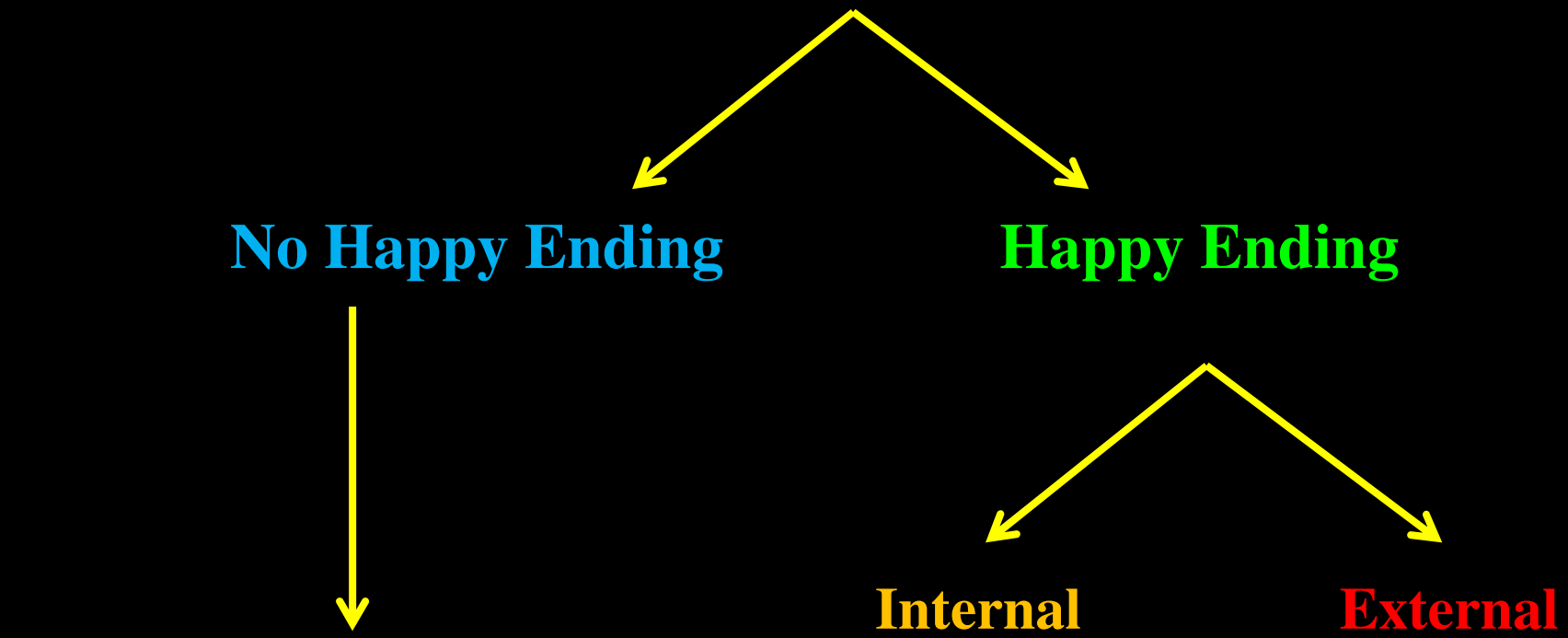
Cycles of reincarnation

Escape to nothingness

Eternal battle of good vs. evil

There is no good and evil

Belief Systems Are Stories



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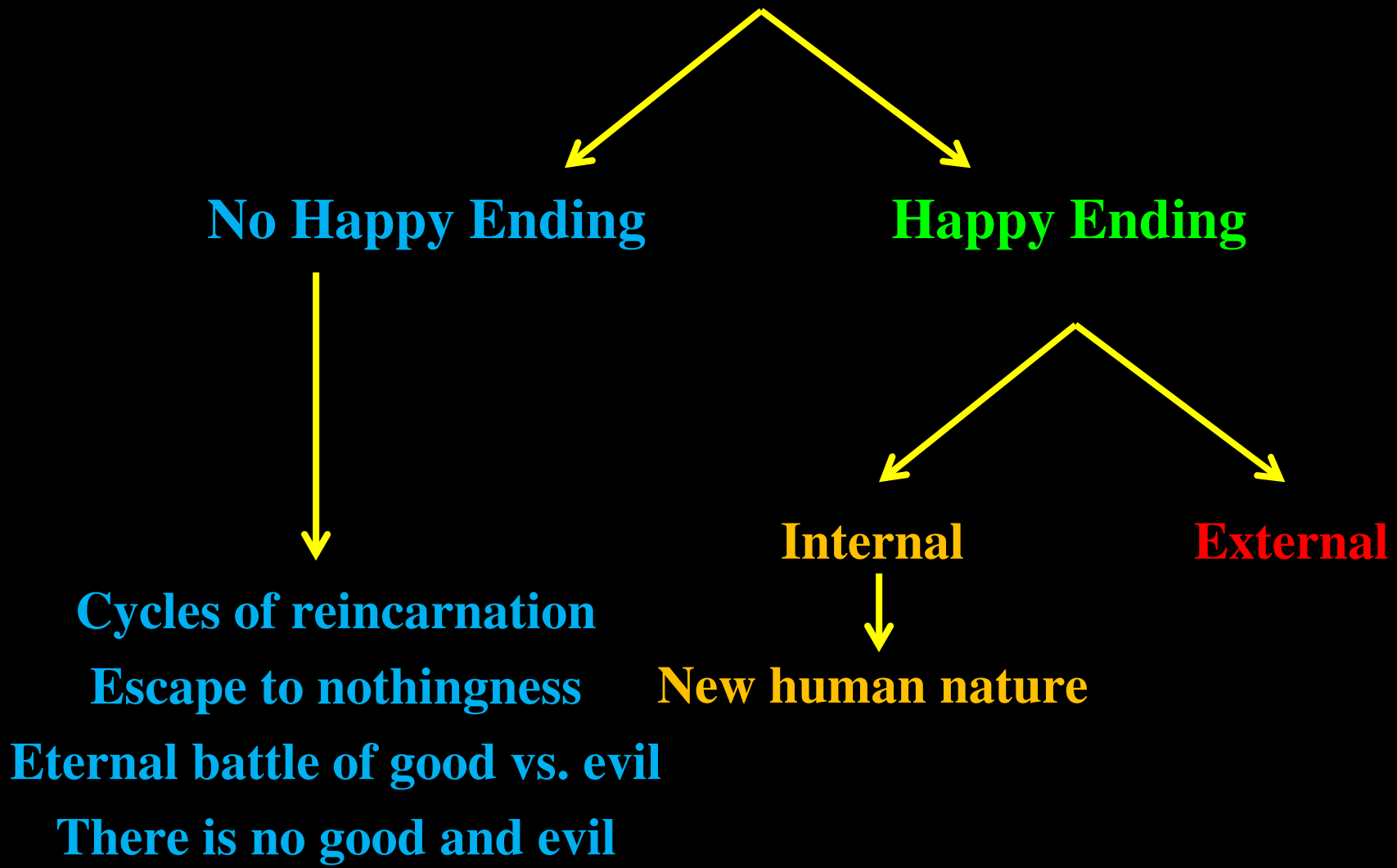

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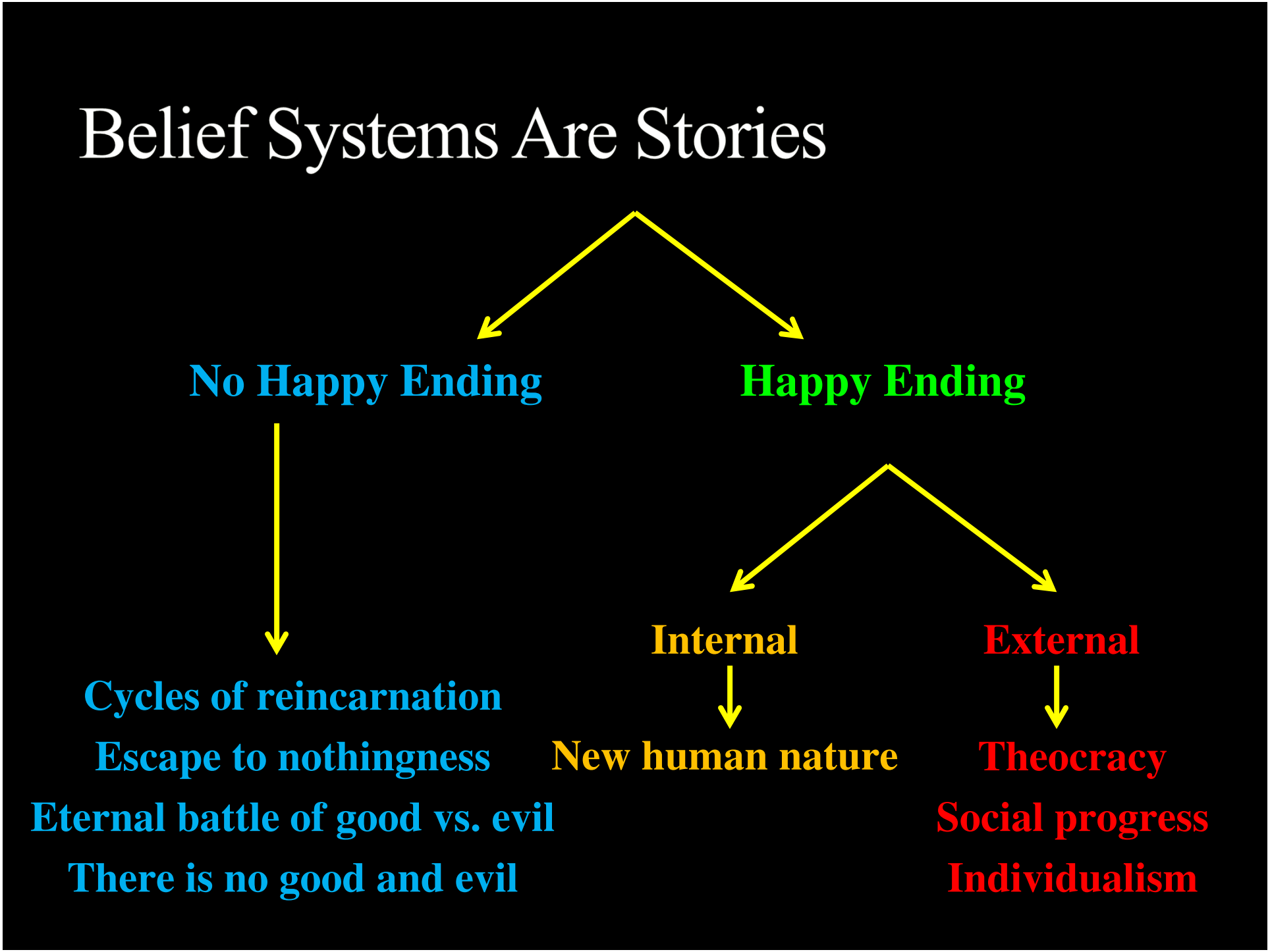
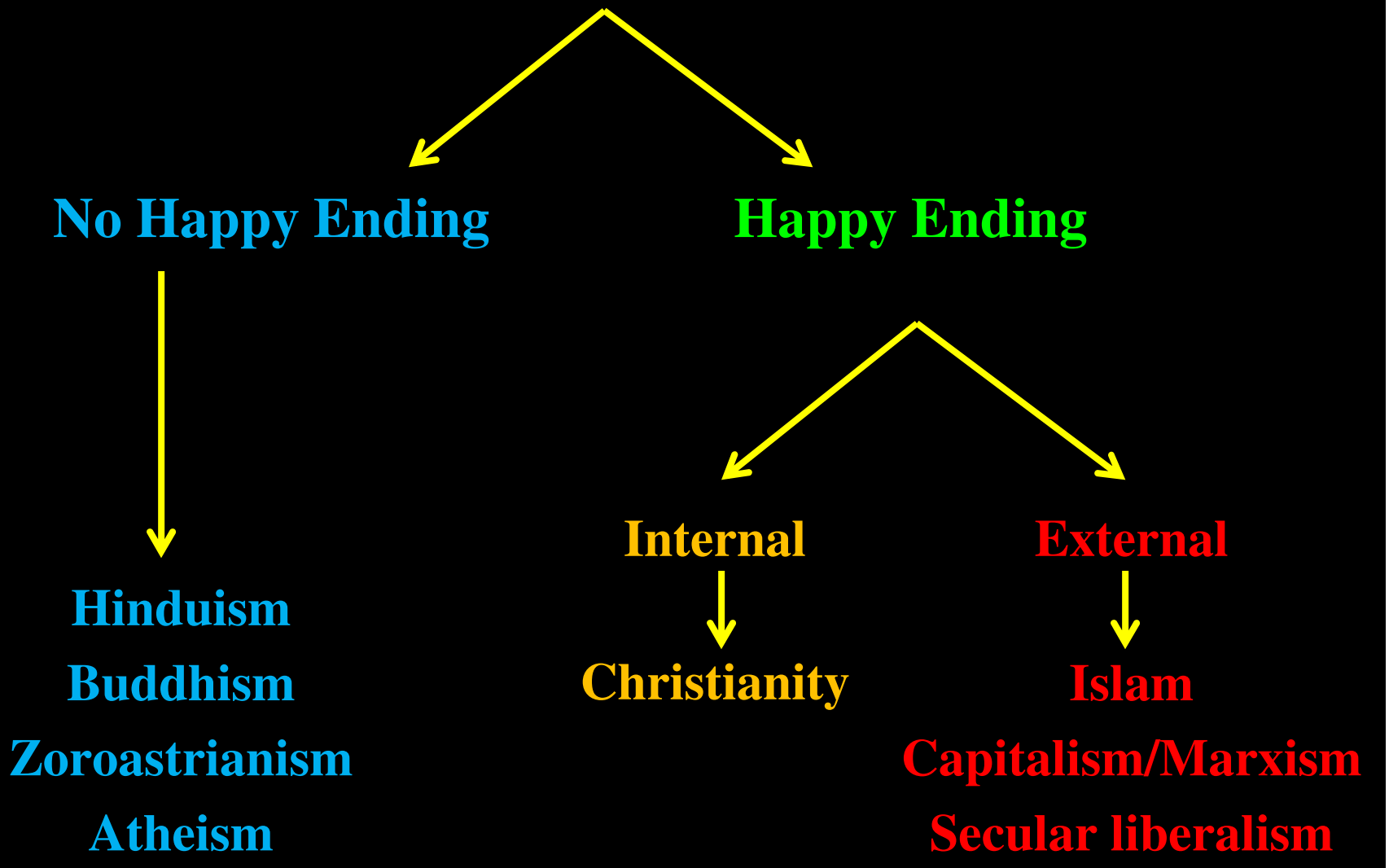
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