

1. J.R.R. Tolkien *Letters* p.49
 2. *Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers* v.4 London: Dorothy L.Sayers Society, 2000 (*Letter to Barbara Reynolds* 21 December 1955)
 3. Quoted in the *Times Literary Supplement* 7 October 2005
 4. Adams, Pauline *Somerville for Women* Oxford: OUP, 1996
 5. For this and other historical information on Oxford see: Brittain, Vera *The Women at Oxford* London: Harrap, 1960
 6. Benson, E.F. *As we were* London: Longmans, Green, 1930 pp 147-8
 7. *Proceedings of the J.R.R. Tolkien Centenary Conference* (1992) pp12-13
 8. Quoted in: Leonardi, Susan *Dangerous by Degrees* New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989
 9. Article in *The Yorkshire Post*, quoted in: Brittain, Vera *Testament of a Friendship* London: Macmillan, 1940 (p.134)
 10. Scull, Christina and Hammond, Wayne *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Chronology* London: Harper Collins, 2006 (p.16)
 11. "Boats and boathouse destroyed by fire at Oxford", *The Daily Graphic*, 4 June 1913, p.3. My thanks to John Garth for this reference.
 12. For the experiences of Mary Renault and her contemporaries, see: Sweetman, David *Mary Renault: a Biography* London: Chatto and Windus, 1993
 13. Information on Mary Salu and Simonne D'Ardenne from the *Tolkien Family Album*
 14. Quoted in: Scull, Christina and Hammond, Wayne *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* London: Harper Collins, 2006 (v.2 p.1111)
 15. Byron *Don Juan Canto I*
 16. Attributed to William James
 17. Carpenter, Humphrey *Biography* p. 159.
 18. *Unfinished tales*, p.20
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Commentary: **Demons, Choices, and Grace in *The Lord of the Rings***

Chad Chisholm

After Frodo, Sam, and Gollum climb the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Gollum disappears and Sam asks a metafictional question: "Don't the great tales never end?" Tolkien puts into Frodo's mouth a wonderful answer: "No, they never end as tales... But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended." Frodo's comments transcend Tolkien's sprawling invention of Middle-earth and speak towards an element that draws us to all the great tales: something that *transcends* the story itself.

In his lecture *On Sorcerers and Men*, Michael Drout suggests that the ascension of fantasy within popular literature is that fantasy is concerned largely with themes that are beyond the commonplace. Theologically, the transcendent lies beyond time and the universe; in Kant's 'theory of knowledge' it lies beyond the limits of human experience. Existential questions such as 'What is the meaning of life and death?' 'What duty does a society have to offer mercy to defeated and dangerous foes?' and 'How does a descent person coexist in a world of pain and suffering?' have existed since the time of Socrates, *transcending* every time and culture. Drout asserts that as modernist writers of the early 20th century began to veer from these transcendent themes, Tolkien and other writers took them up, which led directly to the rise of George Orwell's political fables *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and to the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*¹.

Two transcendent themes in *Lord of the Rings* are the *diabolical* and *grace*. The scene inside Mount Doom at the end of *The Return of the King* contains both in the moment when Frodo refuses to toss the Ring of Power into the flames. Here Frodo and Sam are on the "brink of the chasm," and when Sam cries out to Frodo, Frodo turns and makes this speech in "a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard" Frodo use:

I have come... But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!

Tolkien chooses these words carefully, and "I choose not" and "I will not" convey the theme of *choice*. The themes of *diabolical* and *grace* transcend Frodo, Gollum, and all peoples of Middle-earth and the *choices* they make. The characters of Middle-earth cannot evade choice. When Éomer asks the trio of Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, "What doom do you bring out of the North?" Aragorn answers with, "The doom of choice." The enemies of Middle-earth thrive on this ineluctability. Saruman tries to

persuade Gandalf to join him with, “I said *we*, for *we* it may be, if you will join with me” and “This then is one choice before you, before us.”

Considering *choice*, Drout asks if Frodo really the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*? From Frodo’s words inside Mount Doom, it is easy to conclude that Frodo is not a hero, but *choice* is weighed differently in myth and literature. Tolkien often emphasizes the inward thought such as when he tells us that the bravest thing Bilbo ever did was not stealing from Smaug, or riddling with him in his lair, but Bilbo’s *decision* to face the dragon. Frodo’s and Gollum’s decisions concerning the Ring are insignificant compared with their choices, and both choices are freely evil ones. But Tolkien gives his gift of *grace* to Frodo and withholds it from Gollum. Tolkien bases his choice on the *whole* of the choices of his characters. Our modern sensibilities would perhaps reward Gollum with a promotion, a salary increase, and floor seats to the New York Nicks, but not Tolkien! This is not his *choice*.

Although Drout discusses *grace*, he hardly touches on the diabolical in *Lord of the Rings*; however, the diabolical has quite a hold on Western literature and art. The diabolical has various names in Western culture, but its shadow has loomed often in lives of men and has shaped geopolitical events. In 1642, the Puritan wood-turner Nehemiah Wallington took up arms in the English Civil War against an ‘Antichrist’ spirit manifested in the form of Charles I. From the time of the *Beowulf* poet to the present day, the diabolical has been a cultural reality. In the Italian Renaissance, the diabolical was redefined by Luca Signorelli who painted his ‘Deeds of the Antichrist’ on the walls of the San Brizio chapel in Orvieto, Italy. On this wall, Signorelli transforms his Antichrist into a handsome duplicate of Christ adorned in a burgundy robe. But rather than miracles, destruction and spectacular miseries surround this Antichrist who listens intently to the whisperings of a horned, slouched figure².

Signorelli’s representation adds a duality to the diabolical: a primary and secondary manifestation. The horned figure represents a diabolical that exists infinitely within the universe, a force which, like Milton’s Satan, if it cannot have Paradise, will unrepentantly impose “a hell of heaven” on everyone. This diabolical is in search of souls, but does not want disciples...or not for long. In his *Screwtape Letters*, dedicated to Tolkien, C.S. Lewis’s *Screwtape* gives an excellent analysis of diabolical desires:

To us a human is primarily food; our aim is the absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of selfhood at its expense... We want cattle who can finally become food... We want to suck in... We are empty and would be filled... Our war aim is a world in which Our Father Below has drawn all other beings into himself.³

Screwtape’s analysis is similar to Tolkien’s Shelob, the giant spider:

But still she was there, who was there before Sauron... and she served none but herself, drinking the blood of Elves and Men, bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts... for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness.

But the primary diabolical depends on those who can be led and freely *choose* to commit diabolical acts. Signorelli fashioned his Antichrist after Jesus to portray him with a higher nature than his deeds convey, monstrous only because he is so enthralled with the horned figure’s whisperings that he remains unshaken by his deeds. While he retains the origins of his human nature, Signorelli’s Antichrist has chosen to accept deeds that his humanity abhors, but, in the words of Macbeth, he has decided that “To know [his] deed, ‘twere best not know [himself].” This is his *choice*.

While Sauron is Tolkien’s horned figure, the Ring of Power is the *diabolical* that Frodo and others face. Revealed in its inscription ‘in the darkness bind them’ in Mordor where ‘the Shadows lie’ indicates that the Ring’s forger has little desire to be the ruler of Middle-earth. Mordor is dark and desolate, devoid of beauty; other than merciless obedience to the ‘Lidless Eye,’ there is little order. This separates Sauron from Hitler: Sauron is not interested in being Middle-earth’s next manager or emperor, but its devourer. Sauron comes forth from Mordor not to cleanse Middle-earth or exploit it, but to ‘bind’ it, vanquishing all traces that make it beautiful and free. Control of Middle-earth for Sauron is a means, not an end, which is especially clear when the Lord of the Nazgûl, Sauron’s mirror reflection, warns Éowyn:

Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shriveled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye.

Killing Éowyn and mutilating her flesh is a means for the Lord of the Nazgûl, but his desired ends are more: to crush her mind and spirit, which is common of the diabolical in literature.

The ravenous diabolical in *The Lord of the Rings* transcends into modern literature nowhere more vividly than in George Orwell's *1984*. Winston Smith's world of Oceania is Orwell's dry, stale Mordor: a land of hate and fearful obedience ruled by its own 'Lidless Eye.' Orwell's novel has obvious similarities to Tolkien's with Big Brother and Sauron, and O'Brien and the Lord of the Nazgûl as their mirror manifestations. But *Lord of the Rings* and *1984* emphasize the *choice* of their protagonists. As Tolkien makes it clear with Bilbo, Orwell emphasizes Winston's inward choice more than his actions. In Frodo's speech at the 'brink of the chasm' at the fires under Mount Doom, when he says he does "not choose now to do what [he] came to do," Tolkien makes it clear that Frodo's decision comes not from an addiction to the Ring. After all his struggles against not only external evils such as spiders and orcs, but against the influence of the Ring, Frodo chooses not to save Middle-earth, but to freely take the Ring and doom Middle-earth. While Winston's choice in *1984* cannot lead to the fall of Big Brother, his choice is the same. Towards the end of section Two, Winston concludes that while the Thought Police can force him to confess, he decides that if he "can feel [that] staying human is worth while, even when it can't have any result," then he will have the final moral victory. However, once inside Room 101, Winston fails as Frodo fails to do what he knows he must. Instead Winston, in a sudden ebb from his panic, freely chooses to "interpose another human being...between himself and the rats" he fears⁴.

Both Winston and Frodo are on a moral quest, and while both stood on their own 'chasm' and failed, are they both failures? Winston fails because, like Othello, he hardly knows himself anymore: he has been transformed into an orc for Ingsoc. While the outcome is better in *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo also fails. What makes Winston's and Frodo's failures most devastating is their occurrence near the brink of victory, Frodo at Mount Doom, and Winston at the door of Room 101. On the other side of the spectrum, the surrender is all the more diabolically delectable. In C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, added to a later edition of *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape concludes his address to the graduates of the Tempter's Training College by proclaiming proudly, "Nowhere do we tempt so successfully as on the very steps on the altar."³ If O'Brien is the narrator of *1984*, he is not telling us the story of a man broken mentally or emotionally, but The Party's greatest convert story: how Winston learned to make "a small effort of will," the "act of submission...the price of sanity."⁴

Nowhere in any adventure is a hero in more danger of losing his mission and himself as when his quest is almost complete. But the consequences of Frodo's failure are far more than Winston's: Frodo's failure feeds the opposite hunger and makes the ravenous appetite of the diabolical Sauron more dangerous to Middle-earth. When Éowyn stands before the Lord of the Nazgûl to mount a heroic defence, far from planting fear in her enemy, she instead further sparks his diabolic creativity. The Lord of the Nazgûl imagines her "mind" brought in its "shriveled" state before Sauron for the Dark Lord's pleasure. If Éowyn's pure heroism cannot thwart a diabolical imagination, then Frodo's willing failure is certain to cause its sheer ebullience. The devil does not rejoice when a sinner loses his faith: he rejoices most when one who has endured all the persecutions and exiles looks down the lion's throat and quits.

However, *1984* and *Lord of the Rings* have once difference: the *choice* not of the protagonists, but of the authors. Winston Smith and Frodo Baggins both come face to face with the primary diabolical. Frodo carries the addictive shadow of Sauron to be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom, but the further Frodo carries the Ring, the more he is barraged with its whispers. Winston is strapped into the torturous bed while O'Brien, with his own methods, opens Winston's 'shriveled mind' and leaves it 'naked to the Lidless Eye' of Big Brother. Both endure uncommon suffering with a degree of courage and dignity, but in the end choose to surrender themselves—mind, body, and soul—to that heinous force. In the face of such a diabolical force, the consequences of surrender are direr than a moral compromise or even a tragedy. Othello dies after recognizing his deeds and inflicts justice on himself, regaining his dignity. However, Winston and Frodo have lost more: they have lost *themselves*. But Frodo receives a gift from Tolkien that Orwell could not give Winston: *grace*.

It is tempting to blame Frodo for his weakness, but all should bear in mind Aragorn's admonishment to Merry who is upset with Pippin who touched the palantíri:

If you had been the first to lift the Orthanc-stone, and not he, how would it be now?...You might have done worse. Who can say?

Frodo's task is one where many could do worse. Frodo is on a mission to bear the Ring of Power through Middle-earth to the fires of Mount Doom to free Middle-earth from the 'shadow' of evil. Frodo is the hero until the end when, with the fires of Mount Doom at his feet and Nazgûl flying overhead, with the end of his quest in sight, Frodo makes an admission not that he cannot surrender the Ring, but that he *will not*. Frodo here loses his status as hero, but Tolkien's grace restores him. As Drout points out, when Gollum tears the Ring from Frodo's finger and then falls into the chasm, this is not because Tolkien is making Gollum the hero, but it is Tolkien's gift for a hero who has suffered so much for so long. It is especially fitting for Tolkien to use Gollum to deliver grace for Frodo because he has often given grace to Gollum, sparing his life, and this mercy makes it possible for Gollum to be at the cracks of Mount Doom at the end when Frodo has his crucial moment.

Grace is Tolkien's constant, often undeserved gift. Aside from Frodo's grace to Gollum, grace is ever present in *The Lord of the Rings* such as the Rohirrim's mercy to the Hillmen after Helm's Deep and Gandalf's attempts to sway Saruman at Orthanc. Grace is often discussed, but not always understood. The best example is in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus tells a parable that makes little economic sense — the story of the landowner and the workers in the vineyard. In the story, the landowner hires men one morning to work in his vineyard, and promises them a *denarius* for their wages. Three hours later, the landowner hires others to work in the vineyard, and every three hours after that he hired more men to work in the vineyard. When evening came, the landowner called all the workers and paid them: all the workers, from the ones who started in the morning to those who were hired at the eleventh hour, were paid the *denarius* offered to the early workers. The parable explains that grace is not something calculated, contracted, or even earned: it is a *gift*.⁵

As Paul explains in his legalese letter to the Romans, the gift of Christ and grace is necessary because salvation is otherwise impossible. In the same way, grace is necessary for Frodo because otherwise his task is impossible. Before the climax of Tolkien's long novel, Frodo has faced so many trials and struggles, including separation from his friends, the loss of Gandalf, and the mines of Moria, all for this moment so Frodo could bring Sauron's ring to the one place in Middle-earth where its destruction is possible. No other character in *The Lord of the Rings*—not Aragorn, Galadriel, Gandalf, not even Sam—could have brought the Ring of Power so far. Yes, Frodo does fail. Worse than failure, as Frodo faces the chasm inside Mount Doom, he has decided, now and forever, to join himself to the very evil he wished to destroy. Like Orwell's Winston, Frodo has lost himself. It is grace that saves Frodo and Middle-earth from the diabolical Sauron. But the fact that Frodo needs help to do what he has come to do does not diminish him in Tolkien's eyes. As Gandalf says to Bilbo at the end of his own adventure:

You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins...but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!

Gandalf's words are a great comfort to Bilbo and all of Tolkien's characters. Tolkien's little hobbits find courage within themselves and strength that they thought they never had. However, Tolkien never intended these little Halflings to defy the Dark Lord and save Middle-earth single-handedly, and they don't need to. For Winston in *1984*, grace does not exist because Orwell failed to provide it. Winston can only place his hope in man, but towards the novel's climax, he can only put faith in himself that "To die hating them, that was freedom." Orwell creates a world where only man, like the coral in the glass, is small, delicate, and alone. And this is the choice of the authors that makes Orwell's *1984* different from *Lord of the Rings*: Frodo Baggins and Tolkien's other hobbits don't have Winston's pressure. No matter their dangers, fears, or triumphs, Tolkien's hobbits have the comfort of knowing that they are only 'quite little fellows' in a much larger scheme.

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