

Problems of Good and Evil in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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It is a frequent allegation made by detractors of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien that they present an oversimplified view of reality, through their depiction of a world in which good and evil are polarised antagonists, and in which good triumphs despite overwhelming odds. It is argued that good and evil are, in the real world inhabited by Tolkien and his readers, seldom so clear-cut as they appear in his works; that the heroic figures of Tolkien's fiction have no counterpart in a world where even the best of us are capable of acts of cruelty and violence; and that the lesson of history is that it is might and seldom ever right that inevitably triumphs.¹

This essay will argue that such criticisms are made in ignorance of the very real nature of good and evil in Tolkien's world. Good and evil in Tolkien are indeed antagonists, but they are not polarised. Indeed there exist many "grey areas" between the two – as even the most cursory glance at *The Lord of the Rings* will show. What emerges on a closer reading is even more interesting – that *The Lord of the Rings* is a vision of a world in which good cannot destroy evil, merely force it into new forms.

To say that good and evil are not polarised is not to deny that they are absolutes. They are – but the absolute figures that originate them are, by the time of *The Lord of the Rings*, removed from the circles of the world. Ilúvatar, the originator of good, has intervened in his creation only twice since the Music of the Valar: before the awakening of the Elves, when he gave independent life to the Dwarves (Tolkien, 1977, pp.43-4), and at the time of Ar-Pharazon's assault on Aman which led to the downfall of Númenor (Tolkien, 1977, p.278). Morgoth, the originator of evil, has been expelled from the circles of the world at the end of the First Age of the Sun (Tolkien, 1977, pp.254-5). The opposed wills of both are executed by figures who, to the best of their abilities, attempt to carry out the designs of their

masters. The Valar are the regents of Ilúvatar in the world, yet for all their wisdom and their comprehension of the will of Ilúvatar they are fallible – as their error in summoning the Elves to Aman illustrates (Tolkien, 1977, p.52). They are thus not wholly good. The same is true of Sauron. He is not wholly evil: as Tolkien notes in a letter to Milton Wadman, his initial motives in Middle-earth in the Second Age are "the reorganising and rehabilitation of the ruin of Middle-earth" (Tolkien, 1981, p.151). It is his lust for power (a point to which I will return) that leads him to evil.

Between the two – between the Valar with their flawed potential for good and Sauron with his incomplete capacity for evil – there lie the characters of *The Lord of the Rings*. Each is capable of both good and evil to an equal degree. Indeed as Ursula le Guin points out in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989, p.??)², the "heroic" figures of the novel – Frodo, Aragorn, and Gandalf – each have a darker counterpart, a shadow-self which represents the potential for evil that they bear within themselves: Gollum for Frodo, Boromir for Aragorn, and Saruman for Gandalf. But even this is a more penetrating analysis of the nature of evil than is necessary to perceive how evil works in the novel. Were the heroic characters as pure in their goodness as Tolkien's detractors would have us believe, the novel would comprise three chapters. Frodo, having learnt the nature of the Ring in the second chapter, would surrender it to Gandalf who, borne aloft no doubt on the back of Gwaihir the Windlord, would have carried it away to Mordor and there consigned it to the Cracks of Doom. No need for quest or Fellowship, for Gollum or Saruman or the lust of Boromir and Denethor.

But of course this is not how the novel develops. It takes the form it does because the Ring appeals to one particular aspect of the evil that lurks within the

¹ Edmund Wilson's essay "Oo, Those Awful Orcs" (which originally appeared in *The Nation*, April 15, 1956, and was reprinted in *A Tolkien Treasury*, edited by Alida Becker, pp 50- 55), is a case in point. This essay has become the point of departure for most attacks on Tolkien's fiction.

² These comments are made in a review of *The Dark Tower* by C.S. Lewis.

hearts of most of the characters in the novel. Were Frodo wholly good, there would be no need for Gollum to seize the Ring at the climax: Frodo would not succumb to its power. Frodo's failure at the end of his quest is proof enough that he is imperfect. The same is true of each of the characters to whom Frodo offers to surrender the Ring: Gandalf, Aragorn, and Galadriel.

Upon being offered the Ring, Gandalf admonishes Frodo not to tempt him, adding that the way of the Ring to his heart

...is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good...The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. (Tolkien, 1966a, p.71).

Later, at the Council of Elrond, Frodo offers the Ring to Aragorn as the heir of Isildur. Aragorn declines – but we still get a glimpse of what he might have become had he accepted when, after the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Legolas thinks

...how great and terrible a Lord he might have become in the strength of his will, had he taken the Ring to himself. (Tolkien, 1966c, p.152).

The most significant of the three occasions on which Frodo attempts to surrender the Ring to another bearer occurs in Lórien, when he offers it to Galadriel. This passage, perhaps the most important in Book Two, is the climax to an ancient drama that began when Galadriel, moved by visions of vast realms to be ruled in Middle-earth, joined Fëanor in his revolt against the Valar. The ban on returning to Valinor imposed on the leaders of the revolt of the Noldor has not been lifted from Galadriel, who has never repented of her desire to rule and wield power. By the time of , she rules Lothlórien: Frodo offers her the chance to rule all Middle-earth. She refuses, strong though the temptation is, and is rewarded with the lifting of the ban: "I will diminish," she says, "and go into the West" (Tolkien, 1966a, p.381).

The fact that all three refuse the Ring – refuse temptation – is not the point. The crux of the matter is that all three can be tempted, because each is susceptible to the particular form of evil to which the Ring appeals. The only character in the novel to whom the Ring poses no threat is Tom Bombadil, over whom, as Gandalf notes at the Council of Elrond, the Ring has no power. Is Bombadil then not wholly good?

About Bombadil, nothing can be said for certain (he is, as Tolkien admits in a letter to Naomi Mitchison, a deliberate enigma (Tolkien, 1981,

p.174)). One might surmise that he is of the order of the Maiar, perhaps of the following of Yavanna. What little else we can say we must base on the ambiguous hints of Goldberry and Bombadil himself. One point seems pertinent here. When asked by Frodo if Bombadil is the owner of the Old Forest, Goldberry replies that he is not: each thing in the Old Forest belongs to itself. Tom is "the Master" (Tolkien, 1966a, p.135). I believe that herein lies a clue to Bombadil's resistance to the Ring. He can resist the Ring because he does not desire power.

This is the nature of the evil to which the Ring appeals – the desire to wield power. We see this in the four characters who succumb one way or another to the desire for the Ring: Saruman, Boromir, Denethor and Gollum.

Saruman's desire is to supplant Sauron as ruler of Middle-earth. When he addresses Gandalf on his plans, he tries to conceal his intentions, claiming that he seeks only to control the excesses that Sauron might commit in his rise to mastery, but his real intent is clear enough:

...our time is at hand: the world of Men, which we must rule. But we must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see. (Tolkien, 1966a, p.272).

Saruman's lust for power leads him into an alliance with Mordor, and later into betraying that alliance – by the time of his attempt to capture hobbits, and his assault on Rohan, he has become Sauron's greatest rival. At the end of the novel, he has transformed the Shire into a shadow-image of Isengard, which in turn was an image of Mordor. Dominance of other wills, the control of the lives of others, these are the "high and ultimate" purposes of which Saruman speaks to Gandalf.

Boromir desires to be a King and not merely a Steward like Denethor his father. Speaking to Frodo about his visions of how he would use the Ring, Boromir describes

...plans for great alliances and glorious victories to be; and he cast down Mordor, and became himself a mighty king, benevolent and wise. (Tolkien, 1966a, p.414).

This is echoed when Faramir recollects how, as a child, Boromir wanted to know how many years it would take for the Steward of Gondor to become a King if the King did not return (Tolkien, 1966b, p.278). Though he respects Aragorn while on the quest, he is sceptical about Aragorn's authenticity at

the Council of Elrond and, as Faramir notes, if he and Aragorn had become rivals in the wars of Gondor, it is unlikely that they would long have remained allies (the situation rather resembles that of Denethor in the days of his youth when he grew envious of the honour accorded to Aragorn, when the latter fought in Gondor in the guise of Thorongil (Tolkien, 1966c, p.335-6).

Whereas the influence of the Ring makes Boromir aspire to his own power as King of Gondor, Denethor is content to be a Steward, as long as Gondor remains the most powerful of all the realms in Middle-earth. The root of Denethor's distrust of Gandalf is that the latter openly admits to not placing the survival of Gondor above anything else:

...for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair...in days to come. (Tolkien, 1966c, p.30-1).

For Denethor, it is imperative that the political power of Gondor be preserved by whatever means possible, even if this means using the Ring. Thus he tells Gandalf that were the Ring

...in the deep vaults of this citadel, we should not then shake with dread under this gloom, fearing the worst, and our counsels would be undisturbed. (Tolkien, 1966c, p.87).

In order to maintain the power of Gondor against the superior military strength of Mordor, he risks looking into the *palantir*: to seek to learn the secret counsels of Sauron he will resort to any device. But it is not solely with the power of Gondor that Denethor is concerned. He is concerned with his own power as well, often to the detriment of Gondor. His final diatribe before his suicide illustrates the extent to which Denethor confuses his own power with the best interests of Gondor. He has guessed that Aragorn is coming to Minas Tirith to claim the throne of Gondor. He has, in his arrogance and thirst for power, little faith in the strength of the Line of Isildur to resist Sauron, and it is this, coupled to the knowledge that his supreme authority in Gondor is about to end, that pushes him over the brink into final despair. He is perhaps the only person in Gondor who lacks faith in the Line of Isildur or who does not want the restoration of the Kingship.

The power which Gollum desires is much what one might expect from a hobbit. In its own way it is reminiscent of the desire which Sam Gamgee feels when he dons the Ring and looks into Mordor from

the high pass of Cirith Ungol, to turn Mordor and the whole world into a garden (Tolkien, 1966c, p.177). One is reminded in this instance of Gollum's dream of being Lord Smeagol, Gollum the Great, *The Gollum*, with fresh fish brought to him every day from the sea (Tolkien, 1966b, p.241). Both visions are fundamentally absurd, the simple visions of a hobbit grown into bloated megalomania. Tolkien's strategy of presenting the events of Books Four and Six mostly from the perspective of Sam does not allow us a glimpse of what form Frodo's lust for the Ring takes, but one suspects that it would be of equally small scale, though perhaps more noble (like Gandalf's) and less selfish. This is because he is a hobbit, a member of a race given to simpler pleasures and less lofty causes than those of other races. For this reason he is about as safe a guardian for the Ring as can be found – though again one might speculate about the Ring in the hands of Lotho Sackville-Baggins or Ted Sandyman, both of whom are susceptible to greed and the desire for power.

“Oft evil will shall evil mar” (Tolkien, 1966b, p.200), remarks King Théoden, and Gollum's attempt to seize the Ring leads to its destruction when Frodo succumbs to its lure. But does the destruction of the Ring mean the destruction of evil?

At no time does Tolkien ever claim that it does. “Sauron is himself but a servant”, Gandalf tells the assembled Captains of the West (Tolkien, 1966c, p.155), and it is an essential feature of Tolkien's world that the defeat of the personal embodiment of evil does not mean that good is wholly triumphant. Those who perceive his work as a simplistic conflict between good and evil have not paid sufficient attention to the penultimate chapter of the novel, with its vision of the corruption of the Shire. And it is in this section of the book that we witness the darkest moment of the novel and see the final degradation of Grima Wormtongue.

What can we say about Grima son of Galmod, whom men name Wormtongue? His initial motivation in betraying Théoden to Saruman is quite clear: he too desires power, the rule of Rohan after Isengard has captured it, and power too over Éowyn, for whom he has long lusted (Tolkien, 1966b, p.124). But more can be surmised about Grima if we consider carefully his epithet Wormtongue.

“Worm” in this respect has its archaic meaning of “dragon”/“serpent”/“snake”. The association is borne out by the description of Wormtongue's long pale tongue (Tolkien, 1966b, p.124) and his hissing voice

(Tolkien, 1966b, p.125, and (Tolkien, 1966c, p.299), and by Gandalf's description of him as a snake (Tolkien, 1966b, p.125). It also has implications of eloquence – particularly eloquent flattery, if one recalls Bilbo's conversations with Smaug – and when we first meet Wormtongue we are struck by this very quality. But the very serpentine implications recall another hissing voice – that of Gollum. And just as Gollum envisions power in terms of the satisfaction of a physical hunger, it is in satisfying hunger that Wormtongue at last manages to assert some power.

Consider for a moment his position in the Shire. He has fallen from the exalted position of trusted counsellor to the King of Rohan to being Saruman's lackey. Saruman has in turn fallen, from being the leader of the White Council and the head of the Order of the Istari, to being a fugitive and a renegade. The only place left for Saruman to command any respect is in the Shire, long occupied by his agents. They alone do not know of his fall. Once ensconced in Bag End, the only person around him who knows of his humiliation by Gandalf is Wormtongue. It seems inevitable that Saruman should seek to degrade Wormtongue, to make him the least of "Sharkey's men". Saruman, it seems, starves Wormtongue – certainly the creature that crawls like a dog (Tolkien, 1966c, p.299) after Saruman is far removed from the wise and cunning counsellor who sat beside King Théoden. In order to survive – both physically and psychologically – Wormtongue has had to degrade someone else. The most immediate victim – next rung on the ladder down from the least of Sharkey's men, as it were – is Lotho Sackville-Baggins.

But Wormtongue has done more than merely degrade Lotho. He has indeed become another Gollum in his resort to cannibalism. This most degraded of crimes recalls several other allusions to anthropophagy in Tolkien – to the Uruk-Hai, whom Saruman feeds on man's-flesh (Tolkien, 1966b, p.49), and to Gollum, who wants to eat Bilbo when they first meet in *The Hobbit*, and who is rumoured in Mirkwood to have abducted and devoured the infant children of the wood-men (Tolkien, 1966a, p.67). Both the Uruk-Hai and Gollum have this excuse: that they are corrupted, in one instance in consequence of their race, and in the other by the Ring. Wormtongue however is a Man, not an Orc, and he has never been under the power of the Ring.

Cannibalism has long been associated with megalomania, whether in the form of Grendel (the monster in *Beowulf*) or in the tale of *Jack and the*

Beanstalk. In our own century, Stephen Sondheim has associated it with a vicious parody of Industrial Capitalism in his 1979 musical version of *Sweeney Todd*, while there are horrific real-life instances (such as Bokassar and Amin) of megalomaniacs who have dined off human flesh. The association between anthropophagy and power is made in by Gollum, who envisions the total power of Sauron in possession of the Ring in terms of his eating all the world (Tolkien, 1966b, p.245). Wormtongue's act is thus the product of an extreme lust for power – closer to that of Gollum or Sauron than to that of the Uruk-Hai. It is the lust for power normally associated with the Ring – except that Wormtongue has never desired, possessed or even come near to the Ring.

Does this mean that the evil of the Ring has escaped into the world after its destruction at Mount Doom? In order to answer this question, let us consider the Shire as it appears in the penultimate chapter of the novel.

The Shire which greets the returning hobbits is profoundly changed from the rustic utopia it was at the beginning of the novel. The shiriffs, once no more than hay-wards, have taken to spying on one another and arresting anyone who defies the Orders that come from above – from so far above that no-one knows who issues them any more. There are also the "gatherers" and "sharers", who supposedly redistribute equitably the produce of the Shire – though there is little enough sign of anyone other than Sharkey's men getting a fair share. And there are the Lockholes in Michel Delving, a prison for dissidents and anyone else whom the Shire's new masters do not like. A nascent secret police, a remote and autocratic bureaucracy, centralised and collectivised control of the economy, a concentration camp in its infancy – these are all disturbingly familiar features to Tolkien's readers. They are all hallmarks of a contemporary totalitarian regime. This is a jarring note in a novel that has hitherto seemed no more than an engrossing fantasy. These elements suggest that Tolkien intends his reader to make some connection between the world he has created and the world the reader inhabits.

This is not to confuse applicability with allegory, something against which Tolkien warns the reader in the preface to *The Lord of the Rings*. It would be incorrect to read allegorical significance into the novel and to see the Shire as a portrait of any particular Twentieth Century totalitarianism (be it Nazism, Stalinism, or any other such regime). Rather

we should contrast the Shire with Mordor and see how the lust for power can take different shapes.

Mordor, for all its being the dark shadow that looms so threatening over the world that Tolkien creates, is still a fairy-tale vision of evil, guarded by giant spiders and by towers with gates of iron. The corrupted Shire is not. It is a much more recognisable form of evil, one which (if we accept Tolkien's conceit that Middle-earth is our world in a distant past) has survived into the present day. The evil of the Ring has grown until not even the destruction of the Ring can contain it.

The pessimism of this vision is consistent with Tolkien's own nature: as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter notes, he was a profoundly pessimistic man (1978, pp.39 and 133). It also is in accord with Tolkien's own interpretation of Catholicism: in a letter to Amy Ronald, he writes:

Actually I am a Christian, and indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' – though it contains ... some ... glimpses of final victory. (Tolkien, 1981, p.255).

The same is true of the world which he creates – indeed Galadriel uses the term "long defeat" to describe the eventual end (the decline of her power, and indeed that of the Elves) which she and Celeborn have long fought (Tolkien, 1966a, p.372).

The imperfect knowledge of the Valar, teachers of the Elves in their youth, precludes us from any more certain knowledge, but there are references to the Last Battle "that shall be at the end of days" (Tolkien, 1977, pp.44, 48 and 279), to the remaking of Arda afterwards (Tolkien, 1977, p.44), and even to the Music of the Ainur being sung again, without the discord of Melkor (Tolkien, 1977, pp.15-6). These prophecies of apocalypse and the triumph of good are however as remote for Frodo as they are for us. At the time of Frodo's departure from Middle-Earth, good has still not triumphed, and has indeed lost a great deal. The elegiac tone of the last chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* derives from the fact that much which was good and beautiful must now pass from the world, and the world is poorer without it. We are forced at the end of the novel to recall the conversation on the road to Isengard between Théoden and Gandalf:

'...may it not so end' [said Théoden] 'that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass forever out of Middle-Earth?' 'It may,' said Gandalf. 'The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured, nor made as if it had not been. But to such days we are doomed.' (Tolkien, 1966b, p.155).

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