

# Power, Domination and Egocentrism in Tolkien and Orwell

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If the characters of Tolkien's fiction who do not live under totalitarian systems have a degree of free-will, what can be said about the moral relationship between agents and power? The most obvious place to begin examining this question is with the Ring, the most manifestly powerful object in the Third Age of Middle-earth.

One of the most evident facts about the Ring is that the Wise of the West (who could wield it to its fullest potential, unlike for example the Hobbits or Gollum) shun its use. Both Gandalf and Galadriel reject it when they are offered it by Frodo. Elrond (in a passage which is informative in other respects) explains why:

Alas, no...We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength...is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron's throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 281).

Only Tom Bombadil, the benign protagonist of miscellaneous adventures in the pages of *The Lord of the Rings* and elsewhere, appears to be as unaffected by the Ring as he is by the menaces of Willow-Man, Badger and the Barrow-Wights:

Then suddenly he put it [the Ring] to his eye and laughed...Then Tom put the Ring round the end of his little finger and held it up to the candle-light. For a moment the Hobbits noticed nothing strange about this. Then they gasped. There was no sign of Tom disappearing!

Tom laughed again, and then he spun the ring in the air - and it vanished with a flash. Frodo gave a cry - and Tom leaned forward and handed it back to him with a smile (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 144).

Tom's nonchalance in his handling of the One Ring is impressive. However, he is not simply a mortal character in the usual sense of the word. Rather, Tom - with his continuous sing-song speech and his watersprite wife - is an Ainur, a sort of nature spirit, a *genius loci* if you like. For Tolkien he represented 'the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside' (Tolkien, 1990, p. 26) and as such the normal rules of human psychology do not apply to him. For this reason he cannot be given the Ring as he is so unworldly that 'he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away' (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 279).

Characters with a more usual psyche, though, will either not use the Ring or else, if they do (like Frodo and Gollum) they seem to succumb to it. Is the moral then simply that of Lord Acton's 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (Shippey, p. 104)? This appears to be too simplistic an answer. After all do not the forces of the West exercise very obvious power in their defeat of Saruman and in their vanquishing the armies of Mordor in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields? Gandalf shows his power in the impressive scene he creates in Meduseld to help free Théoden from the ensnaring power of Wormtongue's crooked counsels. No, power is merely an instrument which may be turned to various ends: there is nothing in it which inherently corrupts.

It is more correct to look on power as something which amplifies natural tendencies already present in the human psyche. Free from societal constraints 'Man deþ swá há byþ þonne hé mót swá hé wile' (Shippey, p. 104); he shows his true colours when he can do as he wishes. Bilbo then is to be all the more praised for not slaying Gollum in the dark; he refrains from exercising the full power of his invisibility, thus showing the basically moral nature of his character.

Why then cannot the West use the Ring? Well for one thing, as Elrond pointed out above, it is the product of an evil will, forged as it was by the hands of Sauron in Orodruin (thus setting it apart from the Three Rings of the Elves which were forged by

Celebrimbor of Eregion and never tainted by contact with evil). The One Ring is a kind of avatar of Sauron; part of himself subsists in it. For this reason it is not entirely passive and appears to have an agency of its own. After Isildur cuts it off its master's hand after his defeat in the Battle of Dagorlad it 'was still laden with Sauron's evil will and called to all his servants for their aid' (Tolkien, 1984, p. 273). Similarly, in *The Lord of the Rings* it appears to call to the Ringwraiths, particularly if it is put on (as Frodo learns to his cost on Amon-Sûl). 'A Ring of Power looks after itself,' Gandalf informs Frodo, 'It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left him' (Tolkien, 1966a, pp. 65).

The message here appears to be one which was noted by Old Major in *Animal Farm*: 'remember also that in fighting against Man [the Enemy], we must not come to resemble him' (Orwell, 1987a, p. 6). Gandalf recognises this danger when offered the Ring: 'Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself' (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 71). Using the methods of the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* against Sauron would - perhaps - give Winston, or the forces of the West 'victory but no honour' (Tolkien, 1983a, pp. 25-6). Anyone living in Oceania who is prepared to commit murder...acts of sabotage...to cheat, to forge, to blackmail, to corrupt the minds of children, to distribute habit-forming drugs, to encourage prostitution, to disseminate venereal diseases...to throw sulphuric acid in a child's face...to commit suicide (Orwell, 1987b, pp. 179-80) will hardly manage to overcome the Party, as to attempt to do so is to work from within the already existing structures.

For the great enemy of both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Lord of the Rings* is domination, not Sauron or Big Brother. That is why the Free Peoples are ranged against the totalitarian might of Mordor. That is why we sympathise with Winston Smith in his struggle against the Party. Gandalf as Ring-Lord would not have been "corrupted" by power; it is not as simple as that, rather

He would have remained 'righteous', but self-righteous. He would have continued to rule and order things for 'good', and the benefit of subjects according to his wisdom (which was and would have remained great) (Tolkien, 1990, p. 333).

From this one can imagine a Gandalf who believed in happiness and stability presiding over a Middle-earth

like Huxley's Mustapha Mond.

The cardinal evil of Middle-earth and Oceania then appears to be egocentrism, regard for oneself at the expense of others. Certainly greed is a recurrent theme in Tolkien. One of the strongest manifestations of this theme is to be seen in the long and fraught history of the Silmarils. The Silmarils are of themselves 'holy' jewels, capturing as they do the blended light of the Trees of the Blessed Realm, Telperion and Laurelin. However, the enchantment of beauty, even that of the Silmarils 'has two faces, the two responses to beauty: love and lust' (Helms, p. 50). Morgoth's lust after and theft of the Silmarils ultimately gives rise to his being pursued by Fëanor and his allies. Thus begins a tale of woe that commences with the Kinslaying at Alqualondë, ultimately winding its way through the catastrophe of Nirnaeth Arnoediad and the personal tragedies of Beren and Lúthien.

One of the recurring symbols in Tolkien's life's work is the figure of the dragon, a beast traditionally celebrated for its greed and its jealous guarding of its hoard. Ancalagon the Black, Glaurung, Smaug and Chrysophylax Dives (whose very name gives away his self-centred character) all spring - to one degree or another - from the same mould. 'A dragon is no idle fancy,' Tolkien tells us, he 'is richer in significance than his barrow is in gold' (Tolkien, 1983a, p. 16). It is interesting to note then that one of the other things the dragon symbolises is 'something terrible that must be overcome', and the slaying or taming of the dragon, the primordial enemy, represents the sublimation of personal wickedness (Cirlot, pp. 85-7). Read in this manner, the tales of Bilbo and Farmer Giles take on a more universal anthropological significance. Their quest was to set out to defeat the dragon of possessiveness, the great challenge to all people.

Zipes - who reads the dragon as 'the picture image of the capitalist exploiter' - tells us that 'there are unusual similarities between orthodox Catholics and orthodox Marxists (Zipes, p. 152). It should not surprise us then to learn that Orwell too was very concerned with questions of selfishness. As a committed socialist he identified greed as the cause of many of his country's ills (Orwell, 1969, v. 3, p. 208) and his concern with poverty and social issues is blatantly manifest in works such as *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Egocentrism is the constant subject of his censure, even when it is to be seen in characters who are

purely fictional (Orwell, 1969, v. 4, p. 510).

These concerns also come across strongly in his fiction. Reading *Animal Farm* one is left in little doubt as to how seriously the pigs' claim that they are eating all the apples for the good of the Revolution is to be taken. Taking in the smaller, less obvious details of this novel, one can note the censure implicit in Orwell's depiction of the selfish cat and the vain Mollie. One could also appreciate the distaste of Orwell, the political writer, for the figure of Benjamin who is 'essentially selfish, representing a view of human nature that is apolitical' (Lee, p. 124).

It is selfishness of a more subtle kind that Orwell considers in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. On a casual reading of the novel one might not consider that Winston was particularly self-absorbed. However, as his readiness to do anything for the sake of the Brotherhood demonstrates, he can hardly be commended for being other-regarding. Then there is the fact of his stealing his sister's chocolate when they were young children. Indeed, if one looks closely at Winston, there gradually emerges the picture of a man who is very self-involved indeed.

Winston appears to have no qualms about using others. One of his earliest thoughts concerning Julia is a fantasy rape. She appears to be little more than a sex object for him. There seems to be but slight indication that Winston loves her to any real degree. On their first sexual meeting Winston is merely flattered that such a beautiful young girl, the girl of his fantasy, would desire him: 'All he felt was incredulity and pride' (Orwell, 1987b, p. 126). It is clear that he loves her as much from a sense of their shared rebellion against the Party as from anything more personal: 'Listen. The more men you've had, the more I love you. Do you understand that?' (Orwell, 1987b, p. 132). Their relationship is summarised by the narrative voice: 'Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act' (Orwell, 1987b, p. 133).

The point which should be brought out of this is that Winston's 'love' for Julia is born out of his hate for the Party. His love and his hate are both, like the glass paperweight, 'his, the personal property of his conscious selfhood' (Small, p. 157). Thus he is easily understood when, early on in captivity, he is moralising on the question of pain and his love for Julia:

He thought: 'If I could save Julia by doubling my own pain, would I do it? Yes, I would.' But

that was merely an intellectual decision, taken because he knew that he ought to take it. He did not feel it (Orwell, 1987b, p. 250).

If this is Winston Smith before he has been subjected to any rigorous degree of torture, is it any surprise that he denies his love (and consequently his humanity) in the face of the rats of Room 101?

Tolkien also gives consideration to more subtle forms of egoism than mere greed. The "original sin", so to speak, of his cosmos is already present at the beginning, in the very Music of the Ainur itself:

But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself (Tolkien, 1983b, p. 16).

Increase of glory was a subject that Tolkien was well used to considering. The concerns of Éomer and Éowyn to do deeds of song in battle is typical of the Anglo-Saxon culture that Rohan is based upon. Tolkien's objection to the selfishness of this concern for personal glory at the expense of others is clearly stated in his drama *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, which is in effect an extended comment on lines 89-90 of *The Battle of Maldon* where Beorhtnoth in his overweening pride (ofermode) yields ground to the Northmen allowing them to cross a causeway which would otherwise have cost them many casualties to cross. Here one hears Tídwald speaking; though he truly loved his fallen master Beorhtnoth, he nonetheless expresses his disapproval for his ofermode:

Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault,  
or so in Maldon this morning men were saying.  
Too proud, too princely! But his pride's cheated,  
and his pryncedom has passed, so we'll praise his  
valour.

He let them cross the causeway, so keen was he  
to give minstrels matter for mighty songs.  
Needlessly noble. It should never have been:  
bidding bows be still, and the bridge opening,  
matching more with few in mad handstrokes!  
Well, doom he dared, and died for it  
(Tolkien, 1953, p. 10).

Before finally returning to the Ring it is worthwhile to consider another of the works which is outside the more popular realm of Tolkien's fiction. In *On Fairy-Stories* - his exposition of the nature and purpose of the genre he himself mostly wrote in - Tolkien says that the function of Fantasy is threefold;

Recovery, Escape and Consolation. It is the first of these, Recovery, that is relevant to our considerations here.

Recovery is the process by which we heighten the awareness that there are things apart from the self. It is a return to the familiar world so that we can appreciate anew the uniqueness and the wonder of the ordinary. Recovery is Patrick Kavanagh's return to the fresh view of the childhood world that has been obscured by triteness:

This triteness is really the penalty of 'appropriation': the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us by their glitter, or their colour, or their shape, and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them (Tolkien, 1988, pp. 53-4).

This 'appropriation' of things is one of the crimes of Middle-earth, a derivation from the cardinal sin of egoism. Things in themselves have an innate beauty which is the result of the wonder of their uniqueness. This is the principal difference between Gandalf and Saruman; Gandalf's love of learning and his long travels are the result of his 'disinterested curiosity'. He sees the value of things in themselves while Saruman is interested in 'pursuing knowledge only for the sake of personal power' (Rosebury, 1992).

In the Third Age of Middle-earth the Ruling Ring is the ultimate possession. Its very name suggests it; it is 'the precious'. This name has a very complex and significant etymology as 'precious' is one of the standard glosses for *maðum* 'a word used in Beowulf for treasure, and specifically to refer to the dragon's hoard' (Fliieger, p. 58). 'Precious' is also the name that Gollum uses to refer to himself; thus the reader can infer that he has begun to identify with his sometime possession. This psychological assertion is further strengthened by the fact that *gollum* is an inflection of the Old Norse word for 'gold, treasure, something precious' (Tolkien, 1989, p. 83n).

The ultimate expression of powerful egoism is to be had in the manipulation of other people. 'The supremely bad motive is (for this tale [*Lord of the Rings*], since it is specially about it) domination of other 'free' wills' (Tolkien, 1990, p. 200). Sauron's evil lies in the fact that he annihilates individual

freedom and choice. Sauron reduces those in his power to mere pawns to satisfy his own insatiable hunger for total domination. In contrast, the good achieve victory by recognising the importance of individual choice and action (Veldman, p. 84).

It is precisely for this reason that the forces of the West will not wield the Ring (except of course those in the West who are seeking it for their own aggrandizement; men like Boromir or his father Denethor). Freedom is the all important value which is opposed to totalitarian systems even if they were to be benign:

Power can compel but it cannot compel freedom. It can only withdraw and by withdrawing create the conditions within which freedom can come into being, and with it the individual himself (Brown, p. 88).

Both the Party and Sauron impose themselves on the societies over which they rule, in such a way that we can read their minds 'writ large' as it were in the environments they have created:

...evil tends to homogeneity. Its keynote is aggrandisement of self and negation of not-self, whether through the literal consumption of others...or through the imprisonment and torture of other persons and the destruction of growing things. There is only one form of political order, a military despotism which terrorises its own soldiery as well as its enemies; sexuality is loveless, either diverted into sadism or confined to the organised breeding of warriors; economic life is based on slavery, and is devoted not to the cultivation, but to the exploitation, and ultimately the destruction, of resources. Industrial purposes are developed solely for the purposes of warfare...(Rosebury, p. 41).

O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is explicit about the Party's intentions with respect to the domination of others. Not only does the Party dominate, it exults in its domination, its domination is necessary to it:

'How does one man assert his power over another, Winston?'

Winston thought. 'By making him suffer,' he said.

'Exactly. By making him suffer. Obedience is not enough. Unless he is suffering, how can you be sure that he is obeying your will and not his own? Power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new

shapes of your own choosing' (Orwell, 1987b, p. 279)

This raises the question of the psychological coherence of O'Brien. Power for power's sake, the image of a boot stamping on a human face forever, is rejected as 'a parody by exaggeration - the idea expanded into absurdity', (Wykes, p. 77) a jump from 'rationalistic common sense to the mysticism of cruelty' (Deutscher, p. 130). The picture of Oceania which Orwell paints for us is criticised, as its 'dangers are gross and so identifiable' (Elliott, p. 98) that it is scarcely credible, comparing unfavourably with the subtlety of the psychology of the Grand Inquisitor (from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*), O'Brien's prototype.

One critic however has had reason to change his mind on this score. Irving Howe in his *Politics and the Novel* (1957) was initially inclined to agree with the mainstream of Orwell criticism:

At least in the West, no modern ruling class has yet been able to dispense with ideology. All have felt an overwhelming need to rationalise their power, to proclaim some admirable objective as a justification for detestable acts. Nor is this mere hypocrisy; the rulers of a modern society can hardly survive without a certain degree of sincere belief in their own claims. They cling to ideology not merely to win and hold followers, but to give themselves psychological and moral assurance (Howe, 1992, p. 249).

Nevertheless, despite this well-reasoned objection on the part of Howe, he came to hold a more pessimistic view of the potentialities of human nature in later times:

Can we now be so certain that Orwell was wrong in giving O'Brien that speech about power? I think not. For we have lived to witness a remarkable development of the Communist state: its ideology has decayed, far fewer people give credence to its claims than in the past, yet its power remains virtually unchecked...the party remains.

What then do the apparatchiks believe in? They believe in their apparatus. They believe in the Party. They believe in the power these enable. That a high Soviet bureaucrat might now talk to an imprisoned dissident in the bluntly cynical style that O'Brien employs in talking to Winston Smith does not therefore seem inconceivable. It does not even seem far-fetched (Howe, 1983, p.

13).

Accepting that this potential for the domination of others is actually present in human psychology is vital for our reading of both Tolkien and Orwell. Remember that they are attempting to portray psychologically credible characters in the persons of Sauron and O'Brien; they are not aiming to depict 'a simple confrontation - in more or less the traditional terms of British melodrama - of the Forces of Evil and the Forces of Good, the remote and alien villain with the plucky little home-grown hero' (Wilson). Indeed, if there is a psychological flaw in the portrayal of O'Brien or the Party, it is that they do not go far enough. It seems to me that 'The appetite for power involves the maximum interference with other human beings' (Lewis, p. 191) and hence the Party's not dominating the Proles is an inconsistency, one which Sauron could hardly be accused of.

As we would expect, one of the features which accompanies the dominating mentality associated with Sauron and the Party is the desire to maintain the status quo that gives them power over others. Indeed, stasis is generally characterised as undesirable in both the works of Tolkien and of Orwell.

To a great extent the question of stasis is bound up with egoism and possessiveness. Once more, one of the first examples of this is to be found in connection with the Silmarils. The Silmarils preserve the lost light of the Two Trees which is in itself a good thing, though this leads to the struggle for possession of them and the evils which accompanied it. The point then seems to be that preservation based on selfishness is - like all other such manifestations of egoism - to be condemned as it will finally lead to evil.

For Sauron, the ultimate expression of stasis resides in the Ring. This artefact would give him the power he needs to extend the hegemony of his will to all corners of Middle-earth. The Ring, as a symmetrical object, is itself a symbol of changelessness (Ciriot, p. 291). In the narrative not only does it free its wearer from the restrictions of social spaces, it also arrests time, liberating its possessor from its ravages, so that Bilbo and Frodo both live beyond their natural span.

Sauron is not the only creature in Middle-earth to be subject to this temptation. Tolkien's world is not divided into Black and White, Good and Evil. The Elves, associated throughout *The Lord of the Rings* with the forces of right 'are not wholly good or

in the right. Not so much because they had flirted with Sauron; as because with or without his assistance they were 'embalmers'. They wanted have their cake and eat it: to live in the mortal historical Middle-earth because they had become fond of it...and so tried to stop its change and history...' (Tolkien, 1990, p. 197).

This feature of Elven psychology is associated with the power of the Rings and appears during the Third Age which was 'the fading years of the Eldar'. The Three were in their possession and Sauron had apparently been vanquished so the Elves 'attempted nothing new, living in memory of the past' (Tolkien, 1966c, p. 365). Part of Tolkien's skill as a narrator is to make us feel the desires of the Elves ourselves. *The Lord of the Rings* is often characterised as a work which is filled with nostalgia and this effect is principally achieved by Tolkien's treatment of the Firstborn. From the beginning of the book it is made clear that whatever the outcome of Frodo's quest the result for the Elves will be disastrous. Either Frodo will fail and the Dark Lord will overwhelm them or else Frodo will succeed and the powers of the Elves will fade with their Rings.

One of the points at which this is felt most keenly is in the portrayal of Lothlórien, which Aragorn calls 'the heart of Elvendom on earth' (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 367). Tolkien invests the full power of his descriptive prose to evoke for his readers the picture of an unsullied paradise and its inhabitants. The ultimate test comes for Galadriel when Frodo offers her the Ring; in effect presenting her with a way to preserve her home forever. Nevertheless, this she declines, realising in her wisdom that it is not to be; she 'will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel' (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 381). With Gimli the reader mourns the passing of what was once so fair, and at the end of the book the reader realises that the "happy" ending is tinged with a profound note of sorrow and regret:

Tell me, Legolas, why did I come on this Quest?  
 Little did I know where the chief peril lay! Truly  
 Elrond spoke, saying that we could not foresee  
 what we would meet upon our road. Torment in  
 the dark was the danger that I feared, and it did  
 not hold me back. But I would not have come,  
 had I known the danger of light and joy. Now I  
 have taken my worst wound in this parting, even  
 if I were to go this night straight to the Dark  
 Lord. Alas for Gimli son of Gloin!  
 ...all such comfort is cold. Memory is not what

the heart desires. That is only a mirror, be it as clear as Kheled-zâram. Or so says the heart of Gimli the Dwarf (Tolkien, 1966a, p. 395).

Change 'is the unfolding of the story,' Tolkien believed, 'and to refuse this is of course against the design of God' (Tolkien, 1990, p. 236). As a Catholic biblical scholar he well knew that time had a beginning (the creation of Eru), a continuation and an end. Rather than time taking the form of Nietzschean recurrence or of stasis it 'is a process, a development through crisis...History tends to a term' (McKenzie, pp. 262-3). The message of *The Lord of the Rings* in this respect is the message of Arthur in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*:

The old order changeth, yielding place to the  
 new,  
 And God fulfils himself in many ways  
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world  
 (Tennyson, p. 559).

A similar preoccupation with stasis is to be seen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the future projected by the Party: Oceania is about to produce the eleventh and final edition of the *Newspeak Dictionary*. One of the standard torture mechanisms is to cut the victim off from any sense of the passing of time:

There was a dull aching in his belly...It might be twenty-four hours since he had eaten, it might be thirty-six. He still did not know, probably never would know, whether it had been morning or evening when they arrested him... (Orwell, 1987b, p. 217).

Just as in Tolkien Sauron is not the only one to fall into the temptation of stasis, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the desire for changelessness is not restricted to Big Brother. If Winston's paperweight is the Silmaril of Oceania, he can be read as falling into the same trap as the Elves, with the paperweight functioning as the representation of an ideal past which is also a possession and escape. It is a 'tiny world' he can hold in his hand and yet in which he is contained: 'The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal' (Small, p. 157).

In this respect the place of the Ring (as a source of adequate power) in Tolkien is taken in Oceania by the advances of science which enable elites to freeze the status quo (Kessler, p. 567). Up until this point (as O'Brien points out) tyrannies have not been in a position where they could suppress changes in modes of production, demography or wars. By the time of

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* however, the tripartite division of the world and the resultant conflicts give rise to a stability in all of these otherwise variable factors (Orwell, 1987b, pp. 206-7).

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