

Tolkien advocated the stewardship of nature and not the domination of it. "Tolkien meant to convey a harmonious relationship between humankind and nature" by writing it as an "inseparable relationship"⁸. The beings of Middle-earth must eliminate the perception of nature and industry as a duality in order to preserve it.

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Tolkien's use of free will versus predestination in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Tolkien's use of free will versus predestination is the cornerstone of *The Lord of the Rings*. Without it, would there be a story at all? Or would it be much like a tapestry on a wall with a single loose thread?

Apparently at first glance this thread is a flaw, a mistake of the weaver but the greater mistake still is to try to resolve this flaw. In doing so you will find, for all of your good intentions, a pile of thread on the floor where once had hung a tapestry. Even though the pile of thread is the same material as the tapestry it no longer forms a coherent picture. Much the same thing happens to *The Lord of the Rings* if you 'pull' out the free will. You are left with two-dimensional characters doing their parts out of obedience to some unknown power.

The concepts of good and evil also suffer from the removal of free will. Until Eve bit from the apple there was no concept of evil or wrong. If you have no evil, how can good be compared to a nonexistent idea? Therefore if you remove free will, you also remove good and evil.

Most examples of free will have a counterpart of predestination. It is a double-edged sword. Tolkien throughout *The Lord of the Rings* makes his characters choose one thing or another. This is always backed up with the idea that the choice they make is somehow tied into the big scheme of things. Also, had they made a choice other than the appropriate ones, disastrous things would occur. For example, about Bilbo finding the Ring, Gandalf says: "Bilbo's arrival just at that time and putting his hand on it, blindly, in the dark", which leads us to believe no choice was made here. On the contrary, the choice was made by Bilbo to pick up this 'thing'; he could have let it lie. Also, it is out of ignorance that he picks it up, as Tolkien points out by his use of the words "blindly" and "in the dark". Had Bilbo the least inkling of what the Ring was about and all the trouble it would cause he would never have picked it up. Was it fate that put Bilbo there at that time or was it Tolkien? Aren't they one and the

same within the context of *The Lord of the Rings*? The fact that Tolkien worked on these books for 17 years¹ means there was nothing left to chance, but he skilfully manoeuvres the reader to think that there is a choice. He also leaves some issues unresolved to make the reader ponder.

If *The Lord of the Rings* is read, as it was supposedly written, a narrative history of Middle-earth prior to, during and just after the War of the Ring, the reader is caught up in questions such as: had Bilbo killed Gollum would Frodo have had the resolve to cast the Ring into the Cracks of Doom? Or if Bilbo had started his ownership of the Ring with an act of violence instead of mercy, wouldn't the Ring have gained control of him? And wouldn't this have made the first question academic? The variety of questions is endless.

Most readers also find themselves relating to the hero (Frodo), and asking themselves whether or not they would have made the same decisions under the same circumstances. This is where Tolkien's true ability shines through. He draws on real life and the fine line between fate and free will, whereby people say 'if I had my life to live over I would do things differently'. They think this may change events. In the context of *The Lord of the Rings* this would not hold true, because the events would be carried out only with different characters.

Some characters no longer have any free will because a stronger will has been exerted on them. This is the case with Saruman, his will has been consumed by Sauron. Here I must take the opposite view from James Robinson, who says of Saruman "he is the only character who, when faced with the choice of good and evil, consciously chooses evil. He was under no compulsion to make such a choice"². From the time Saruman took up residence in Orthanc, and began to use its palantír, he gave up his free will. Had Sauron not had another palantír the one Saruman used would have been relatively harmless. But because Sauron did have one,

Saruman was soon trapped and had to do Sauron's bidding.

Another example is Gollum; by the time we encounter him he has been in hiding for almost 500 years. During this time he has possessed the Ring (a great deal of Sauron's will and power), but the reader realizes that, in fact, the Ring possesses him. He cannot do anything unless he knows his "precious" is near at hand.

It was then that Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit from the Shire, came along and by 'chance' found the Ring. I say 'chance', because it is more than that; it is destined that he and nobody else finds the Ring.

As Gandalf says:

"A Ring of Power looks after itself, Frodo. It may slip off treacherously, but its keeper never abandons it. At most he plays with the idea of handing it over to someone else's care and that only in the early stage, when it first begins to grip. But as far as I know Bilbo alone in history has ever gone beyond playing, and really done it. He needed all my help, too. And even so he would not have just forsaken it, or cast it aside. It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left him."

"What, just in time to meet Bilbo?" said Frodo "Wouldn't an Orc have suited it better?"

"It's no laughing matter, not for you. It was the strangest event in the whole history of the Ring so far: Bilbo's arrival just at that time, and putting his hand on it, blindly, in the dark!

... Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire! Behind that there was something else at work; beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it."

(The Fellowship of the Ring: The Shadow of the Past)

At this point Frodo first understands why he was meant to have the Ring and that he must use whatever resources he has to make a dangerous journey. His saving grace is the fact that he is humble, wanting only the safety of the Shire over his own. But as his journey continues he learns of the rest of Middle-earth from which he had previously been isolated. This knowledge comes with a great price, he is no longer responsible for the Shire alone, but to the entire of Middle-earth.

It is here that his resolve stiffens and he says: "I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way." Elrond replies to this by saying: "If I understand all that I have heard, I think this task is appointed for you Frodo and that if you do not find a way, no one will." (No pressure here, it's only the fate of all the free peoples of Middle-earth!) Elrond then adds: "But it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say your choice is right."

Here again Tolkien juxtaposes free will and predestination, after Frodo says he will take it then Elrond need not give his speech, but Tolkien uses this to set up a conflict. Although Frodo will take the Ring freely, Elrond seems to be giving Frodo a way out on the one hand, while giving him a 'guilt trip' on the other. Here Tolkien makes us think,

did Frodo have a real choice or was his path already laid out far him?

In the same way, Tolkien uses Gandalf, Aragorn and Galadriel as the Three Fates of classic mythology, or Noras, of the Germanic peoples, to determine Frodo's fate. To rid himself of the Quest, Frodo tries three times to give the Ring away; first to Gandalf, second to Aragorn and last to Galadriel. Only after the third has turned him down does he fully realize that the responsibility is on his shoulders. It is now Galadriel tells Frodo: "In the morning you must depart, for now we have chosen, and the tides of fate are flowing."

Clearly Galadriel has chosen not to take the Ring. Frodo on the other hand, has only chosen by default.

There are many times that Frodo chooses by default and these must fall into the realm of fate. For example, Frodo being given the Ring in the first place; he didn't necessarily want it or not want it. It was just one of the things passed down to him from Bilbo.

To say he didn't want it, however, may not be entirely true. As he lived so long with Bilbo and in close proximity to the Ring it may have had its influence on him. Did Frodo have a secret desire to possess the Ring, so secret that he himself did not dare think about? And didn't this desire become manifest at the Cracks of Doom? Here Frodo says: "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!"

He didn't have this desire at all. Having carried the Ring for so many miles and through so many perils he used the Ring only four times before claiming it for his own — once each at the house of Tom Bombadil; in Bree at The Prancing Pony (where he used it — or should it be, it used him to reveal its whereabouts); then again at Weathertop where Black Riders were closing in on them (and here again the Ring tricked him and led the riders straight to him); and finally when the Fellowship broke up and he and Sam went west towards Mordor. In two of these cases, the Ring and not Frodo was the force behind the decision. This is the point I want to make, when Frodo claimed the Ring for his own he had no free will left, it was the Ring (incarnation of evil) that was speaking through him.

"Frodo spoke with a clear voice, indeed with a voice clear and more powerful than Sam had heard before."

(The Return of the King: Mount Doom)

It was Frodo's choice to keep the Ring, and then again it was not, because the being we knew as Frodo had at that moment become an instrument of the Ring. The Ring, sensing its own impending doom, was making one last effort to save itself. Immediately after Gollum bites Frodo's finger off, Frodo reverts to his own self.

Gollum/Sméagol was in his Gollum form at this point, and totally corrupted by the Ring. In his Sméagol form he was more polite and eager to be of help. These two personalities test each other's will throughout the novel. In the end, Gollum's side wins out. He cannot bear the thought of Frodo destroying 'his precious.' When he sees that Frodo is taking



the Ring for his own, something inside him snaps. Whereas he couldn't bear the thought of someone destroying it, worse yet would be someone else possessing it.

From the beginning Gandalf alluded to Gollum being tied up in the fate of the Ring.

“For even the wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many.”

(*The Fellowship of the Ring: The Shadow of the Past*)

Indeed the pity of Bilbo, at the very beginning — and the pity of Sam, at the very end, were both signs of fate. Sam saw almost immediately the part he played by not killing Gollum, whereas it was many years before Bilbo could see the end results. Had Sam killed Gollum on Mount Doom, Frodo “could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain”.

If Tolkien had tried to write *The Lord of the Rings* without the interplay of fate and free will he might have achieved

a marginal success through his knowledge of languages, and his story line of good versus evil. It is inconceivable that the success he achieved, in the 1960s through to the present, could have been done without free will versus predestination.

Without the twin pillars, free will and predestination, reading *The Lord of the Rings* would have been much like looking through only one eyepiece of a stereoscope. You would see an image in only two dimensions. But if you use both eyepieces you would see a scene in the illusion of three dimensions. This three-dimensional world is what Tolkien has attempted to create through his use of the dichotomy of free will versus predestination. m

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