

Philosophy and Fantasy

Symbolism of the Ring: The Embodiment of Evil

"One Ring to rule them all,  
One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all  
and in the Darkness bind them"

(1 LotR II,2 The Council

of Elrond)

One of the masters of British Literature, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien has the unique ability to create a fantasy world in which exists a nearly endless supply of parallelisms to reality. By mastering his own world and his own language and becoming one with his fantasy, Tolkien is able to create wonderful symbolism and meaning out of what would otherwise be considered nonsense. Thus, when one decides to study The Ruling Ring, or The One Ring, in Tolkien's trilogy "Lord of the Rings", one must not simply perform an examination of the ring itself, but rather a complex analysis of the events which take place from the time of the ring's creation until the time of its destruction. Concurrently, to develop a more complete understanding of the symbolic nature of the ring, one must first develop a symbolic understanding of the characters and events that are relevant to the story. This essay begins with a brief background of Tolkien's life, followed by a thorough history of the "One Ring" including its creation, its symbolic significance, its effect on mortals, and its eventual destruction. Also, this essay will compare Tolkien's Ring to the Rhinegold Ring of Norse mythology, and will also show how many of the characters in the trilogy lend themselves to Christ-figure status. By examining the Ring from these perspectives, a clearer understanding of its symbolic significance will be reached.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, an English scholar and storyteller, became fascinated by language at an early age during his schooling at, particularly the languages of Northern Europe, both ancient and modern. This affinity for language did not only lead to his profession, but also his private hobby, the invention of languages. He was also drawn to the entire "Northern tradition", which inspired him to study its myths and sagas thoroughly. His broad knowledge eventually led to the development of his opinions about Myth, its relation to language, and the importance of stories. All these various perspectives: language, the heroic tradition, and Myth, as well as deeply-held beliefs in Catholic Christianity work together in all of his works, including The Lord of the Rings (LotR).

The creation of the "One Ring" or the "Ring of Sauron" goes back to the years following the fall of Morgoth. At this time, Sauron established his desire to bring the Elves, and indeed all the people of Middle-Earth, under his control. It was his opinion that Manwë and the Valar had abandoned Middle-Earth after the fall of Morgoth. In order to bring the Elves under his control, Sauron persuaded them that his intentions were good, and that he wanted Middle-Earth to return from the darkness it was in. Eventually the elves sided with Sauron,

and created the Rings of Power under his guidance.

Following the creation of these rings, Sauron created the One Ring in secret, so that he would be able to control the other rings and consequently control the Elves. The creation of the Ring, and the essence of its power is revealed in the following passage. "and their power was bound up with it, to be subject wholly to it and to last only as long as it too should last. And much of the strength and will of Sauron passed into that One Ring; for the power of the Elven Rings was very great, and that which should govern them must be a thing of surpassing potency; and Sauron forged it in the Mountain of Fire in the Land of Shadow. And while he wore the One Ring he could perceive all the things that were done by means of the lesser rings, and he could see and govern the very thoughts of those that wore them." (from The Silmarillion, Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age)

The power of the One is recognized by the Elves as soon as Sauron puts the Ring on his finger. They realize that he can control their thoughts, and they decide to remove their rings and not use them. The history of the ring, then, follows that the Elves and Sauron became bitter enemies, and the One ring remained in Sauron's possession until it was taken by Isildur after Sauron's defeat, and was then lost in the river for many years. Eventually, it was found by Deagol, who was in turn murdered by his brother Smeagol. Smeagol is the same person as the pitiful Gollum, who retained the ring until it was taken by Bilbo Baggins. From here, it logically follows that it was given to Frodo Baggins by Bilbo, under the guidance of Gandalf the Grey, and so we reach the beginning of LotR. The nature of the One Ring can be explained in three distinct ways. First as a personification of Sauron's power. Second as a symbol of evil in general. And finally, as an inanimate object with a mind of its own, with the ability to work away from its creator as well as return to its creator of its own accord.. The next section of this essay will examine these three explanations.

Indeed, as the Ring's creator and original "owner", Sauron had placed a great amount of his own power into the ring for the purpose of controlling the other rings. Because of this, the Ring is effectively an extension of Sauron's might. The loss of the Ring does not destroy Sauron, as would the destruction of it. Rather, his power is simply spread around, and his influence affects whomever should have possession of the Ring at any time. Should Sauron recover the ring again, however, his power will be greater than ever, as is explained in Book one of LotR. "If he recovers it, then he will command them all again, wherever they be, even the Three, and all that has been wrought with them will be laid bare, and he will be stronger than ever."(1 LotR I,2 The Shadow of the Past) Even without the ring, then, Sauron's power was immense. Throughout LotR, however, there are only hints of this power. Sauron's power lies in control and dominion, and the deprivation of free will. One example of Sauron's power reflected in LotR is in Gollum, whose pitiful condition is the result of Sauron's domination over him as the bearer of the One Ring.

The Ring presented as a symbol of evil is possibly the most important idea represented in the trilogy. In Tolkien's world, evil is the antithesis of creativity, and is dependent on destruction and ruin for its basis. Conversely, goodness is associated with the beauty of creation as well as the preservation of anything that is created. The symbolic nature of these two ideologies is represented in the Elven Rings, which symbolize goodness, and the One Ring, which is wholly evil. A main theme of LotR, then, is the struggle between good will and evil. Another theme that is in accordance with this struggle is the theory that while goodness can create and be beneficial, evil can only serve to pervert and destroy. Therefore, evil cannot exist unless there is something that can be perverted and destroyed. This idea is the main essence of Sauron's evil nature, and thus the One Ring is the essence of evil as well, as it is the personification of Sauron. In the "Letters" of Tolkien, it is said that, "Essentially the primary symbolism of the Ring is as the will to mere power, seeking to make itself objective by physical force and mechanism, and so also inevitably by lies." (Letters 180) This is to say that the purpose of the Ring is to destroy, through deceit and corruption, anything good in the world. Another way to show the symbolic nature of the ring is to say that it represents the omnipresence of evil. Its very existence, because it contains the evil will of its creator, has the power to tempt, corrupt, and in doing so destroy.

The next way in which the nature of the Ring can be examined is in the way it has seemingly animate abilities as an inanimate object, namely the ability to work away from and return to its creator. In order to understand this, one must realize that if the Ring is evil in itself, which has been explained earlier, then it must also have the ability to work evil. It cannot necessarily create evil ideas on its own, but instead it can take advantage of any opportunity which presents itself to the Ring. Specifically, whenever Frodo is tempted to use or actually uses the Ring, the Ring has a chance to work corruption on him, even in the absence of the creator. In this way, the Ring is advantageous, and the stronger the presence of evil, the easier it is for the Ring to work on the bearer. For example, on Weathertop, the presence of the Witch-king is a tremendous evil, and the Ring takes advantage of this, convincing Frodo to use it in order to escape. Although Frodo is not permanently corrupted at this point, the Ring is slowly eating away at him, and its power over him grows each time he uses it. This leads inexorably to the final failure of Frodo, that being at the Cracks of Doom, when he decides that the Ring is his by right. At this point, the Ring has won, and it is only by chance that it is successfully destroyed. It can be said that it is either the culmination of the Ring's corruption of Frodo that resulted in its victory or else it is that the Ring finally had enough outward evil presence to aid it in conquering the bearer, that presence being Mordor itself, the heart of evil.

The idea that the Ring has a mind of its own is further explained in the way it is never lost or forgotten for long. As Gandalf explains in Fellowship, "A Ring of Power looks after itself, Frodo. It may slip off treacherously, but its keeper

never abandons it." (1 LotR 1,2 The Shadow of the Past) This statement shows how the Ring will protect itself from destruction if at all possible. The further explanation, that, "It was not Gollum...but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left him." (1 LotR 1,2 The Shadow of the Past) again shows how the Ring always strives to return to its creator. This goes to further the notion that Sauron has control over the Ring even when it is not in his possession. His power is not vanquished by the absence of the Ring, simply reduced and spread out. The Ring will always be found, and it will always return to its creator so that its evil nature can be whole.

The temptation of Frodo throughout LotR is another important aspect of the power of the One Ring. Unless one first understands what is involved in a struggle between Good and Evil, it is incomplete to simply say that such a struggle exists. Also, in order to examine the nature of temptation, one must also discuss the idea of free will. If the essence of Evil is control and domination, which has been explained earlier, and the essence of goodness is freedom and creativity, then it seems as though temptation is based on evil. The Ring does tempt Frodo, in an effort to subvert him and conquer his ability to choose whether or not to wear the Ring, but it is not the nature of goodness to prevent this from happening, because to do so it would be to destroy Free Will in a different fashion with the same result. From Frodo's point of view, the entire trilogy is an examination of choice and free will. When Frodo chooses to take the Road to the Fire at the Council of Elrond, he is not only choosing to take a dangerous path, but he is also choosing to continue to allow himself to be presented with the temptations that are presented by the Ring. There is a very important relationship that concerns both temptation as well as the general effect of the Ring on mortals. This is the conflict between Frodo and Boromir. Their confrontation is an example of the choice issue, and the temptation and fall of Boromir is the first of two critical choices that are made at this point. Boromir is overwhelmed by the Ring's power, and it eventually results in his madness. The Ring preys upon Boromir's desire for the power of Command, and it corrupts him through this weakness. In the end, Boromir is rescued only by his death, which, coupled with his last-breath admission of his attempt to retrieve the Ring, give a bittersweet sense of redemption. Aragorn's words following Boromir's death, "In Minas Tirith they endure the East Wind, but they do not ask it for tidings. But now Boromir has taken his road, and we must make haste to choose our own." (2 LotR III, 1 The Departure of Boromir) sum up the fall of Boromir, and show what the future must hold for the rest of them. The second choice made at this point concerns Frodo's choice to use the Ring in order to escape from Boromir. At this time, the power of the Ring nearly conquers Frodo, and it is only the last-minute intervention of Gandalf which saves Frodo. The enhanced powers of perception that Frodo has when he wears the Ring is the essence of temptation put forth by the evil forces at work. Frodo is obviously tempted to use the Ring for his own prosperity, for the power of perception is very great with the Ring. At this time, he is unable to see the danger of the Ring that is ever-growing. This section of the trilogy is one of the most

important of all, and it is a turning point in both the reader's understanding of the Ring as well as Frodo's. There is an interesting parallel here, concerning an issue which will be expanded on at a later point, a parallel between Frodo's individual struggle with temptation on the summit and Christ's temptation on the summit. Not necessarily to say that Frodo Baggins is a Christ-figure, but rather to suggest that the issue of free will is an individual matter seems relevant here.

The effect of the Ring on mortals is not limited to temptation and corruption. In addition to these, the Ring works in different ways, exploiting the weaknesses and fears of each individual who encounters it in any way. Evidently, there are only three individuals who are not tempted by the Ring. Sauron is immune to the power of it, for it is the personification of his own evil nature which the Ring represents. Sam is only tempted by the Ring once, before the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and he defeats the temptation. This is most likely because of his undying loyalty to Frodo and his intentions. He would never think to upstage Frodo by allowing the Ring to become an issue for him. The third individual who is immune to the temptation of the Ring is Tom Bombadil, who is possibly the strongest reference to a Christ-figure in the trilogy. He is "the Master of Wood, water, and hill" (Elwood 105) according to Old Man Willow and other inhabitants of nature. It is his nature not to be influenced by the evil forces of the Ring. He knows his bounds, and will never go beyond them. It is this which prevents him from becoming corrupted by the Ring. He has set bounds for himself, and is completely content with them. This lack of ambition is something not present in any other character in the story. Any other character, including Gollum, Frodo, Boromir, and even Gandalf, possesses an innate sense of ambition which allows for the evil of the Ring to work. The most obvious example of the Ring's effect on a mortal is obviously Gollum. Gollum is the result of nearly complete corruption by the Ring, and his situation demonstrates to us the way that the Ring's evil works. He is evasive, cunning. He lies and deceives everyone, including himself. He has a peculiar relationship with the Ring, hating and loving it at the same time. In effect, Gollum represents what Frodo could have become. Also, he represents in an exaggerated fashion what becomes of Frodo whenever he wears the Ring. Gollum's mind and soul are shattered by his obsession for the Ring, and its retrieval is his only and ultimate goal. This advanced stage of corruption is another example of the parasitic, evil nature which the Ring represents.

The next section of this essay deals with the destruction of the Ring, including the failure of Frodo and the irony of Gollum's intervention. At the last moment, in the heart of Sauron's kingdom, Frodo wavers in his quest, and gives in to the temptation completely. The Ring has complete control over Frodo for only an instant before the intervention of Gollum, whose death is redeemed only by the ultimate completion of his quest, that to retrieve the Ring. His intervention seems to prevent an ultimate catastrophe, but one must realize that Gollum would've attempted to retrieve the Ring from Frodo whether or not Frodo had accepted it as his own. Therefore, it is irrelevant to wonder what would have happened

if Frodo had not failed in his individual quest. At first, it seems as though this ending to such a complicated ordeal is too incomplete, leaving too much to chance. However, it is this ending which further develops the concept of evil explained earlier. Evil is a destructive force, and it carries within it the formula for its own destruction. Therefore, because the Ring is the embodiment of Evil, it had the potential for self-destruction. This idea, of the self-destructive nature of Evil, is the most important issue concerning the destruction of the Ring. There is a major flaw in the mind of Sauron, and in turn the mind of Evil, which is that Sauron never considered the possibility that anyone would desire to destroy the Ring. Similarly, the Ring itself, in its desire to return to its master Sauron, never considered the possibility that the level of corruption that it had performed against Gollum would turn against it. Indeed, Gollum was so obsessed with the Ring that when he finally gets it back, he is so ecstatic that he missteps. In both cases, Evil has deceived itself, which in turn has brought about its destruction. The Ring, the symbol of Evil and evil power, has been defeated, not by the will of goodness, but rather by its own doing.

The next section of this essay will make comparisons between LotR and Norse Mythology, specifically the myths of the Rhinegold Ring and Otter's Ransom. Also, comparisons will be made between LotR and Christianity, specifically the possible presence of one or more Christ-figures in the trilogy. Through these comparisons, a greater understanding of the universality of the Ring's symbolic significance will be reached. The Myth of Otter's Ransom is a retelling of a myth contained in the Volsunga Saga of Norse Mythology. In this account, three gods, Loki, Odin, and Honir, are in a predicament over the accidental killing of Otter, brother of the giants Fafnir and Regin. The gods are trapped by the brothers, and held to avenge Otter's death. In order to save them, Odin makes an offer to repay the family for the death. The ransom price set by the family is a horde of red gold, enough to entirely cover the body of Otter. In order to accomplish this, Loki leaves while Odin and Honir remain. Loki borrows a net from another god, and proceeds to capture the dwarf Andvari from the bottom of a pool inside a cavern. Loki demands that Andvari give him his horde of gold that he controls within the pool. Andvari reluctantly agrees, and gives Loki the gold. After this, Loki notices a ring on Andvari's finger, and demands it as well. A conflict emerges from this demand, and eventually Loki gets the ring, along with Andvari's curse upon it and the gold. Loki returns, and they give the gold to the family and cover Otter's body with it. As they leave, they tell the family of the curse. The important thing to realize about this story is that the ring is actually the Rhinegold Ring of Norse Mythology. The bearer of this Ring is the one who controls the massive horde of Rhinegold. A case can be made for the horde as a symbol of power, in which case there is direct relevance to the One Ring in LotR. Whoever bears the ring has power, the power to command. This possibility in itself has the power to corrupt those who desire possession of the ring. Another account of the Rhinegold Ring is portrayed in Stephan Grundy's novel, "Rhinegold". In this account, the power of the ring is shown more clearly than in the first account. After the father of Otter, Hraithmar, puts on the ring, he is overcome by his desire for

the gold. As soon as he comes upon the pile covering Otter's body, he is drawn to it. "The longer Hraithmar gazed at the gold, the hotter its light seemed to burn in his body, shaking him with a sudden fear of desire." (Grundy 35) In a shocking similarity to LotR, the Ring, once used, has a tremendous power to corrupt and overpower. These are two examples of the many parallels that exist between Tolkien's fantasy and that of Norse Myth.

The possibility of a Christ-figure in LotR is a difficult issue for several reasons. First, Tolkien himself denied any such allegorical meaning behind the trilogy and in fact denied nearly any allegorical meaning at all in his works. Also, it seems as though many of the characters bear some similarity to Christ at times, but none are completely representative of Him. There is almost always some area in which the character in LotR is lacking with respect to his Christ-like status. For example, The character of Tom Bombadil, discussed earlier with respect to the Ring's power, seems to be extremely Christ-like in that he is considered by those who know him to be, "The Master of wood, water, and hill." (Grundy 35) Also, he is truly the master of himself, and he knows his limitations as a man. Like all men, he is limited; like Christ, he limits himself. At this point, it would seem that Tom is a good representation of Christ. However, there are two distinct differences that separate Christ from Tom. The first is the fact that Tom knows of the miserable existence of the Barrow-Wights, yet is unmoved by the thought of them in misery. This lack of human compassion is a key difference between Tom and the Christ of faith. Also, while Tom has limited himself like Christ, he has never suffered to gain his humility. He has never been ambitious, and is not tempted. To create another symbolic reference to the One Ring, Tom would never feel the temptation for the Ring, in the same way he would never be tempted by a source of power such as the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. This is an aspect of Tom that would suggest that he is less human than he would appear to be. Perhaps he is a "joyful savior" rather than the type of savior that the faith Christ was portrayed to have been. Tom is one example of a Christ-figure in the trilogy. Others include Gandalf, whose remarkable return to life after the battle with the Balrog could be symbolic of Christ's resurrection. Also, Gandalf's ability to be tempted yet resist temptation, his ordeal after his resurrection in which his friends did not at first recognize him, and his transformation from Gandalf the Grey to Gandalf the White are all areas in which parallels can be drawn to Christ. The only problem with the theory of Gandalf is that he is ultimately unable to save Middle-Earth. Although he guides Frodo in his mission, he can hardly receive credit when the mission fails. He is not strong enough to save middle-earth, and this is because he was too strong in his successful attempt to resist the temptation of the Ring.

In order to summarize the essence of this study on the symbolism of the One Ring, it can be said that the Ring itself can be explained separately from an explanation of the Evil nature of the Ring. The Ring itself is the reality of Evil in the physical world. In every way, it is the nature of evil which must be either accepted or rejected outright. Its mere presence is a personification of the opportunity for people to have and execute free will and make morally correct or incorrect decisions. Also, the ring is a symbol of power, evil power. It is the part of nature that continually strives to destroy a person's ability to exercise free will. The exercise of Evil, and in essence the power of the Ring, is the exact opposite of freedom. As for the nature

of evil, it has been shown that no good can possibly come from evil means, but evil results can be averted if one can acquire the evil object while resisting the evil nature of it. Also, the Ring is both real and symbolic. While the physical nature of the Ring is behavioral, and can be physically observed, the essence or power of the Ring is also a concept, a concept which opposes morality. Because of this, the Ring may be destroyed physically, and with it the power of its creator, but its essence, Evil, will remain present in some form until the end of time.

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