



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 35
Number 1

Article 8

10-15-2016

The Disabled Hero: Being and Ethics in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*

Todd A. Comer
Defiance College, OH

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Comer, Todd A. (2016) "The Disabled Hero: Being and Ethics in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 35 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol35/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>



Abstract

Explores the imagery and implications of the wounded body in Peter Jackson's films of *The Lord of the Rings*, and applies principles of disability theory to several characters but in particular to Frodo.

Additional Keywords

Disability Theory; *The Lord of the Rings* (film trilogy). Dir. Peter Jackson



THE DISABLED HERO: BEING AND ETHICS IN PETER JACKSON'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

TODD A. CODDER

Why must Peter Jackson's films be so interminably, so *painfully* long? My simple response is that Jackson's films are ultimately an untimely meditation on pain, on the way that a wound affects *being* in the world. Consider for a moment the towers of Barad-dûr and Orthanc, Sauron and Saruman's towers, respectively. These towers are impregnable, impervious, impermeable. The exteriors are like smooth metal, allowing for no crevices or entry points to the interior. The only thing in the films that is less permeable would be the Ring of power itself which must be seen—in light of the rigid purity of its band—as the exemplary symbol of exclusion. Mount Doom, by contrast, is riven with cracks and openings. Mount Doom is *open*. Its interior is gaping open to others, a wounded tower through whose crevices we can glimpse an interior of blood-like lava—and, no, it should come as no surprise that this impermeable ring comes to its end in a space of such utter permeability.

Of course, Frodo Baggins is the obvious example of wounding or disability with Gollum and Sauron running closely behind. One of the chief concerns of disability studies is the way in which people with disabilities are represented, and Jackson's films are intriguing in that they offer both a disabled villain and a disabled hero. Sauron, who has lost a finger and thereby his entire body, is a typical caricature. As Paul K. Longmore puts it succinctly, “[d]eformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul” (133). In stereotypical fashion, Sauron's bodily deformity then indicates an interior (moral) perversion. However, the films also provide us with Frodo, short of stature and permanently wounded, who is not merely a hero, but a hero worthy of obeisance from King Aragorn. Frodo is that rarest of things, a seemingly positive representation of a person with a disability. This theme of woundedness and disability is made explicit in the naming of Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's nurse of sorts. *Gamgee*, also the surname of Joseph Sampson, a surgeon, has a direct connection to wounds since “gamgee” has come to “designate a wound-dressing” named after the above surgeon (“gamgee”). The essential drama of the films, as I argue below, is bounded by a concern with health and disability as the openness of a wound is a threat to Sauron, and to Jackson's narrative; for Sauron, it is a literal threat as he wants to return to a whole, therefore more powerful body; for Jackson, I

argue, that his own extended narrative is excessive and lengthy because it is trying to rope in, or heal, a kind of hole in its own narrational body or being.

A considerable amount of scholarship on J.R.R. Tolkien has in fact involved issues of the body and even wounding. Chris Vaccaro's 2013 collection, *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium*, is perhaps the most notable. The collection includes, for example, Verlyn Flieger's "The Body in Question: The Unhealed Wounds of Frodo Baggins," in which Flieger argues that the

changes that come about in various circumstances and situations are emblematic of Frodo's changing relationship to himself, to the 'real' world around him, and to the quasi-metaphoric, quasi-psychological world of the Ring, which represents the dark side of the human personality. (12)

Of course, Tolkien's Middle Earth is not Jackson's Middle Earth. The very transformation bound up in the move from text to film inevitably warps and transforms the source text. For me, it is the absence of the crucial passage in which Tom Bombadil and the nature of his "mastery" (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* I.7.124) is implicitly juxtaposed against the assimilative mastery of Sauron that dramatically changes Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. In my own teaching, I tend to see this excised passage as a crucial thesis moment for Tolkien's story in general. The absence of Bombadil and Goldberry in Jackson's films makes room for another reading, my own reading focused on ethics, disability, and being in the world. More generally, the changes (from text to film) touched on above substantiate a close examination on Jackson's films *on their own*, and not merely for reasons of comparison to Tolkien's complex and profound *oeuvre*.

My interest is not merely to trace the appearance of the wound motif throughout Jackson's trilogy, but also to make an argument about Frodo as a particular kind of *disabled* hero whose essence is to remain open to others, by contrast to Sauron.¹ My central concern is disability, in particular the question of being, or *how* the disabled body of Frodo signals a more ethical way of being. More specifically, I am interested in Jackson's films as a way of thinking through how disability affects the interpretive and narrational nets that we use to orient ourselves in the world and in order to begin to formulate an ethics grounded in disability.²

¹ All references are taken from the special extended editions of Jackson's films.

² The way Tolkien himself thought of and developed images and ethics of disability in his legendarium was heavily influenced by his WWI experiences and post-WWI society, and explored by Margaret Sinex in "Wounded by War: Men's Bodies in the Prose Tradition of *The Children of Húrin*," but in this paper I will be focusing on Jackson's interpretation nearly exclusively.

David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder use *disability* to refer to mental and physical differences that depart from normal “ideas of mental ability and physiological function” (“Introduction” 2). Frodo carries the weight of my argument about disability since he is wounded in such a way that he is physiologically weakened and thereby exceeds physical norms. The fact that his wound is permanent is crucial. Stories are able to easily narrate the stories of wounds because stories by their very nature are concerned with that which is abnormal, different, unstable, or exotic. In a romance, for example, typically the default position—that of a man and woman in a stable, loving relationship—is torn apart. The rest of the narrative exists to explain how that relationship tear occurred and, most importantly, how it will be healed. By the end of most stories, status quo reality, normality, has returned. In the case of a story focused on the disruption caused by a disability, in most cases such a narrative follows quite easily the journey from ill health to health, the typical journey of a body recovering from a normal illness, or of a wound scabbing and, eventually, healing (Mitchell and Snyder 3). What happens when a wound does not follow a natural healing course? And, if stories focused on disability typically mirror the natural healing process of the body, what then happens to a story when the body it represents does not heal?

W.A. Senior argues that J.R.R. Tolkien's work is centrally concerned with “death and immortality” (173). This remains true for Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*. The Babel-like towers described above are intended to make Sauron immortal. They are defined by distance and exclusion. The walls—borders or, better, skins—of the towers in Jackson's films are metaphors for non-relation to the world, which may be the defining characteristic of the modern individual.³ To be an individual (in terms of continental philosophy, at any rate) is to imagine life without dependence. It is to imagine a human that is so self-sufficient that said human never needs to communicate, travel to the grocery market, obey any external dictate, and so on. When such an individual assumedly leaves these walls behind and invades another country—Gondor or the Shire—these walls inevitably come along. In a certain sense, we could say that Sauron never leaves home, but turns the world into his home, wherever he happens to be. The ultimate aim of an individualistic identity is to envelop all, assimilate the world, and by so doing confirm the individual's self-sufficiency. The individual, in other words, desires to be like a god without *exposing* its inside, its “self,” to others.

³ Jean-Luc Nancy writes of the individual and, by extension, his or her textual creations, “By its nature—as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible—the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition. It is another, and symmetrical figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty” (3).

What I write above is absolutely essential for everything that follows because in short the essay hinges on the question of how to live with or without borders, with or without a seamless skin: Sauron without his wound amounts to the illusory self-sufficient individual I describe above. Frodo and his wound, as I will describe in detail, represents another way of being, a way of living in the world that recognizes dependence (as metaphorically embodied in and through the wound), on others and the world.

The towers, as any reader of Foucault knows, are very much about power. Jane Chance, Jes Batts, and others have written on this in relation to Tolkien, if not the films, so I will be brief. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon consisted of a central tower surrounded by a multitude of prison cells which were so situated as to allow a prison guard perfect sight of the condemned. Crucially, the "inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault 200-201). For this to be possible, Bentham suggested blinds for the central tower that would mask, but not obliterate, the presence of the tower guard. Invisible and all-seeing behind such blinds, Bentham's guard would mimic the omniscience of God. Saruman describes Sauron's situation in a similar way, "Concealed within his fortress, the Lord of Mordor sees all. His gaze pierces cloud, shadow, earth and flesh. [...] A great eye, lidless, wreathed in flame" (scene 12). Never knowing if they are seen, but always assuming that they could be, those under the gaze internalize the desires of the eye. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf's hesitation to use the *palantir* speaks exactly to this uncertainty. The very fact that the Seeing-Stones "are not all accounted for" (scene 12) reproduces exactly this same uncertainty about being seen. Sauron's eye desires that everyone conform to his plan; he does not "share power" (scene 22), as Gandalf reminds Saruman.

Jackson's camera work during the above scene—the quick snake-like zoom into the chamber—clearly suggests that the eye is well within the chamber before the Palantir is even uncovered. Sauron's eye *is* lidless. In the film, it can be said to lack body almost entirely. The eye floats separate from the tower. It is not a surprising image in light of what I have discussed above. Once again we have here an image of simplicity: this globe of fire is alone, seemingly without relation to the world around it; the eye is an individualistic "I."

By contrast, the Shire *appears* to offer some difference.⁴ Consider the eye of the Shire, for Hobbits, yes, also have eyes. As one might suspect of beings of short stature, the Hobbit eye is embodied, close to others, and mortal. It is an opening and an exit. It is a door. Every hobbit door is not only round, like an eye, but also surrounded by earth, by folds of earth that amount to skin, to a lid.

⁴ See Jes Batts' "Gazing Upon Sauron: Hobbits, Elves, and the Queering of the Postcolonial Optic" for a reading of Hobbits (in Tolkien) somewhat similar to what I put forward here.

A Hobbit eye, door, looks out from beneath a hat of grass and trees that are changeable and mortal as the seasons. Against the eye of Sauron that looks upon a great expanse and assimilates it all to one great individualistic purpose, we *could* consider the Hobbit eye as essentially "situated," close to and not separate from the world, implying that Hobbits recognize their dependency and relation to the world (Haraway 188). Any Hobbit eye, door, once opened, exposes, wound-like, the interior world to the outside world whereas, in Sauron's case, the very possibility of this opening is eliminated with the loss of the eyelid. Rather than being an opening to the world—this eyeball floating outside the body cavity and open to the world—Sauron's eye is evidently a metaphor for an identity that is so (allegedly) self-sufficient that it can dispense with the very semblance of a bodily border—an eyelid!

This reading, while insightful, is not entirely convincing for a number of reasons, the most significant being that Frodo sees his own experience, his wound, once as he returns as making him distinct from the Shire—the folk of the shire are somehow not open to his mortal state of being. He feels, for this reason, that he must leave the Shire. In Jackson's *The Return of the King*, Frodo is hunched over his version of the story, and is heard to say,

How do you pick up the threads of an old life? How do you go on when in your heart you begin to understand that there is no going back? There are some things that time cannot mend, some hurts that go too deep, that have taken hold. (Scene 75)

During this voiceover, Jackson's camera foregrounds the round, eye-like doorways within Frodo's home. Frodo even stands before a round window in one shot. Everything in the scene foregrounds the visual, making us feel like we are in the house, voyeuristically watching Frodo go about his day-to-day existence. The shot is little different from the fast-moving, long, piercing camera shot which introduces the conversation between Gandalf and Sauron about the Palantir. In the early situation, tension and violence were basic concerns and the camera movement conveyed both masterfully. In this later scene, a certain elegiac quality colors the sinister reminder of the eye. All of this and Bilbo's opening speech about the Shire suggests that the Shire is an Edenic place for *individuals*; yes, there may be less violence in the Shire, but the basic logic of violence remains. Here there is little change, little mixing with the outside and lots of purity, demonstrating very clearly that the Shire's "eye" is not a door that would let in the other.

My interest in *The Lord of the Rings* is grounded in an attempt to construct a more ethical way of being than that portrayed by the two towers and the Shire. Is Frodo essentially no different than Sauron? Is there essentially no

difference between the forces led by Sauron and Aragorn? Frodo's wound, in my view, offers a second way of thinking about being. He has been stabbed by a sword of Mordor and his wound, we are told, will never "mend". My argument in brief is that if Sauron's individualistic way of being is defined by an (alleged) inability to share his being, Frodo's disability points to a way of being that begins with sharing, connection, and mutual dependency.



Before diving into the text at hand, consider this issue in theological terms, a context that, as many others have shown, seems relevant to *The Lord of the Rings*. There is an enormous distance between, 1. a theology that holds that Jesus died and returned whole, perfectly restored, and even empowered from the crucifixion and, 2. a theology that, even with a miraculous return, retains the marks of Jesus' death (which in fact is what happens in the Biblical record: see John 20:24, for instance).⁵ The former paves the way to a dangerous triumphalism, while the second finds a middle ground between such fundamentalism and the other extreme (the sheer relativism implicit in an absent resurrection). In this middle ground, there is action, but it is a hesitant, perhaps humble, action or being in the world that does not deny a connection to the other, as I will argue more fully below.

We know that if Frodo were to be wholly taken by Mordor, he would lose his self and his name, even as Sméagol loses his identity, his "mé," if you will as he evolves into Gollum. Frodo would be subsumed into Sauron's individualistic identity. This may be likened to the borders of Sauron's empire slowly reaching out and assimilating Frodo to its own self. Epidemiologists tell us that our skin is our first defense against disease, and they are right. Skin is a border whose health assures us of a stable, controlled separation between the

⁵ George Bataille's (a)theological thinking of the wound is worth revisiting. Bataille writes:

The killing of Christ injures the being of God.

It looks as if creatures couldn't communicate with their Creator except through a wound that lacerates integrity.

The wound is intended and desired by God.

The humans who did this are not less guilty.

On the other hand—and this is not the least strange—the guilt is a wound lacerating the integrity of every guilty being.

In this way God (wounded by human guilt) and human beings (wounded by their own guilt with respect to God) find, if painfully, a unity that seems to be their purpose. (93)

Without the wound, humans and God remain trapped in "isolation," which is to say, a solipsistic subjectivity.

interior and the exterior (or between the self and the other, a separation that is the origin of what passes for a healthy individualistic identity). Skin is permeable, dotted as it is with pores; obviously, this permeability is self-serving—the other does not benefit from the fact that skin is porous and, in that sense, this porousness remains exclusive. Skin, then, is an individualistic border and its wounding suggests a way of being *sans* borders.

The violent identity that Sauron represents is grounded in a precise separation of the healthy individual from the other on the outside, a separation that is facilitated by borders, understood broadly. Frodo's wound violates this neat world. He and his wound become a metaphor for how identity cannot be held back behind the illusions of individualism: we always have our identity with others, even when we persist in thinking otherwise. A wound then amounts to a violation of individuality and an impeachment of absolute power.

Continental philosophy tends to see the individual as never alone, but always in the world and with others. In other words, against much of recent Western thinking, humans do not begin as bubbles who then reach out and connect to others. Each of us is, from the beginning, already part of the world, intertwined with society, because, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues in *The Inoperative Community*, the "I" originates *with* others in, if you will, Frodo's metaphorical wound. To pull back from the wound is to lose that *plural* origin in others and, in that sense, decompose back into the illusion of the individual (Nancy 19). Consider the Orcs and the Uruk-hai. At first glance, the films imply a clear, racialized—*individualized*—distinction between good (Elves) and evil (Orcs). But the apparent "racial" distinction—the idea that they were separate at origin—is unfounded. Orcs were once elves. They were "tortured and mutilated. A ruined and terrible form of life. And now . . . perfected," Saruman says (*FotR* scene 40). Racial distinction is not "racial" at heart in the trilogy, but grounded in industrialization: the Uruk-hai's birth is an industrialized affair. What passes for "race" in Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* is rather symbolic of the degree to which industry has perverted the "essential" plural core of a dwarf, elf, or human. "Blackness" is better likened to the grit and grime of an Isengard smokestack.

Saruman's Uruk-hai are created not only in the ground, but in a riven ground that looks *wounded*, though there is no indication that Saruman and his Orcs were behind this laceration. Rather, like Mount Doom, where the Ring of power—the exemplary symbol of individualism—is born, these wounds in the ground appear natural; in other words, these chasms or gulleys appear to be a natural product of an evolving geology. In Jackson's films, identity begins with an original wounding, whether it be the Uruk-hai who are born in the wounded chasms around Isengard or the Ring of Power manufactured deep within the cracks of Mount Doom. All of Saruman's industry—dropped down into these chasms—can be thought of as a vain attempt to put the wound to work, to

gamgee it, when the wound, like death, cannot ever fully be mastered. What this means, ultimately, is that there is never any “essential core.” Before the “I” of the individual, there was the mortal “we” which is revealed in this original wounding.⁶

Frodo certainly experiences Bilbo and Sméagol’s struggles with mortality and this experience has opened up his own, at times, individualistic being.⁷ The Ring, as we know, lengthened both Sméagol and Bilbo’s lives so that their desire for the Ring is really a (futile) struggle for the illusive immortality of the individual. But it is a Ringwraith’s sword that has touched Frodo and it is this touch that must be understood. Sauron and the Ringwraiths are liminal figures as they are not entirely alive or dead, or embodied in the normal sense. They live in an eerie in-between state. However, Sauron’s entire project may be understood as the obsessive pursuit of normative embodiment. In that sense, the Ringwraiths’ liminality exists only so that they may erase that state of being for Sauron who wants to be fully present, in a more or less normal body. From this perspective, Sauron is no different than any human: we are all touched by mortality and most of us pursue the illusion of individuality, the perfect body. The horrors, then, of Sauron and his liminal accomplices are metaphors of an ableist ideology which is taken too far.

⁶ Nancy describes this in terms of spatiality. The logic of the individual is to take everything and assimilate it to itself, eliminating space through the surmounting of borders. By categorizing the world into self and other, the self, essentially, has assimilated the world all to its own pinprick monadic being (categorizing rids the world of otherness, thereby stabilizing the self and bolstering its self-presence). This denies the essentially spatial dimension of identity. Our identities are always found outside of ourselves *with* others (19). He uses the word “exposure” to point to how we find ourselves *posed* outside (*ex*) of ourselves (39). Elsewhere Nancy describes this more concretely when he likens this experience to a glove being turned inside-out: that which is “interior” finds itself exposed, touching, the “exterior.” In this case, it is Frodo (through his wound) that is turned inside-out, foregrounding his relation to others (33). Death, Nancy says, has the power to reveal “clear consciousness at the extremity of its clarity, where consciousness *of* self turns out to be outside the self of consciousness” (19, emphasis in original). Clearly, one needn’t think too long about “Mordor” to see its etymological connection to “murder” or “mortality.” But that is not the kind of death that concerns Nancy. Nancy writes of the death of *the other* as opening the individual up to the outside—the other’s death is such that it cannot be *rationalized* and put to work by the self. Sauron, at the center of Mordor, is dead and suffering to some degree, but the films provide no real basis for understanding his situation as a concrete prompt for Frodo’s exposure.

⁷ Christopher Fynsk has revised Nancy’s Heideggerian account: “Dasein knows its mortality only by way of its experience of the other’s relation to its death. The other’s *existence* (not its death, in the sense of something that has overcome it) first seizes us and draws us beyond ourselves” (original’s emphasis; xvii).

The Ringwraiths are not open to their own mortality: their very being seems to exist to return Sauron, and assumedly themselves, to an able body that is defined by power and exclusion. Aragorn explains at one point that they were once men, and kings of men. But they do not look human. The film's wraiths do not look embodied (where is their flesh, their skin, if so?). Their desire for power has disembodied them, and we can be certain that the loss of the human form was not intentional. In other words, despite their power, the Ringwraiths are marked by death. It is written all over them in the absence of their bodies, bodies which are very much hidden by clothing and by shadow. This reading only makes sense against the larger backdrop of Sauron's desire to return to his body, a desire which seems to suck the life out of all others in its process. To be an individual is to return to a "healthy," embodied form—that is the general, violent movement of the films. That the body's power is sheer illusion and an illusory product of story is demonstrated by Sauron's first defeat: Sauron loses his finger and Ring (with its self-stabilizing inscription), but he should be able to grab the Ring, and insert another finger. That would be believable. However, the very fact that he cannot foregrounds the incredible fragility of our selves: our armor, skin, narratives. It only takes a pinprick to bring down the world, which is to say, *we are all mortal*.

While it is impossible to marginalize the above concerns, ultimately, it is the wound, or disability itself, that needs to be analyzed for its impact on Frodo. Sauron, estranged from his body, desperately wants to retrieve the Ring/narrative, and secure his identity. Frodo, for much of the film, decides not to heal. The fact that he will not wield the Ring which promises, however deceptively, to heal or empower him, speaks to his decision to remain disabled. Much of what follows will link the wound to a kind of ethical connection to others, *through* an analysis of how Frodo's wound affects the exclusionary narratives that "healthy" individuals create. For the moment, let's simply return to the following quote:

How do you pick up the threads of an old life? How do you go on when in your heart you begin to understand that there is no going back. There are some things that time cannot mend, some hurts that go too deep, that have taken hold. (Scene 75)

Recall that during this voiceover, Frodo is bent over his *story*, the tale of *The Lord of the Rings*. Stories exist to make sense, *normalize* even (as I write above) the strangeness in the world.

Only when, if the above is true, our stories fail us is an opening made for the other to enter, without being normalized or forced to fit into our individualistic expectations. Disability in the above quote appears to allow for

this opening to the other to occur. What we see in this voiceover connects Frodo's wound and the undermining of his narrative, both his life and the book before him ("How do you pick up the threads of an old life?"). If narratives carry ideas that substantiate and order reality on an unconscious level, then certain ableist ideas are displaced at this moment. All the ethical benefits that I describe above and below can be traced to this opening.



Just as a printed novel is bounded by cover and spine, and a film by title and credit sequences, every healthy story has a border (Derrida "Living On" 256). This border defines an inside and (an excluded) outside, and thereby creates a seemingly pure interior world. At the end of *The Two Towers* we find an exemplary moment of this narrative operation. Frodo and Samwise are walking through the forest. Sam begins the conversation:

"I wonder if we'll ever be put into songs or tales."

"What?"

"I wonder if people will ever say, 'Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring.' And they'll say 'Yes, that's one of my favorite stories. Frodo was really courageous, wasn't he, dad.' 'Yes, my boy, the most famousest of hobbits. And that's saying a lot.'"

"You left out one of the chief characters. Samwise, the Brave. I want to hear more about Sam. Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam."

"Now Mr. Frodo, you shouldn't make fun. I was being serious."
(scene 66)⁸

This is a telling moment for a number of reasons. Story is explicitly connected with heroism (no surprise), but also to the nature of heroes. Frodo will not be alone as a hero, but foregrounds others. He "wants to hear more" about others. In sharing his "heroism," Frodo undermines the very basis of that supremely individualistic and, yes, ableist notion. He even goes so far as to include Sméagol among these others throughout their journey against Sam's wishes. This is no surprise if we are to read Sam's surname, Gamgee, as an explicit commentary on his role as healer. Yes, Sam is a good friend, but he is also on the side of a therapeutic individualism to the degree that he, as a *gamgee* of sorts, wants Frodo to "mend" and rethread his life narrative, placing Frodo then on a conventionally violent heroic path.

⁸ Mary R. Bowman has written perceptively on such metaliterary moments in Tolkien. See "The Story Was Already Written: Narrative Theory in *The Lord of the Rings*."

In the foreground of this scene, Sméagol is having one of his fascinating debates with himself, that is, Gollum.⁹ Juxtaposing these two conversations implies that it is a *mistaken* awareness of exclusion, of the remounting of narrational borders, that leads to Sméagol's choice to be Gollum. Since he does not hear himself included in Frodo's relatively progressive story, he chooses to be in opposition to Frodo. Whole, healthy narratives lead to exclusion and create the enemy as a category. Wounded narratives, by contrast, are hospitable to the other. Frodo's wounded narrative foregrounds, and stalls, and makes evident the basic hermeneutic movement that takes place *between* the "self" and "other." Just as Frodo pauses Sam's story ("You left out"), any of Frodo's narratives would similarly pause and, in pausing, allow the other to enter in, undermining the opposition that would create the enemy. It is here in this space that we must locate the ethics of disability.

In her reading of Tolkien's texts, Chance considers this openness to difference, or the ability to *imagine* other points of view, the essential distinction between Sauron and the Hobbits. She links "knowledge of difference" to power and to the ultimate defeat of Sauron (64-65). This is an all-too-hasty linkage in my view. Difference, as described above, cannot be *simply* put to work by Sauron, or anyone else. If it is put to work for power, then it is immediately assimilated to an individualistic structure, and no longer difference. Difference interrupts power. Taken to an extreme, a radical openness to difference would not allow for power or action. I argue for a middle path that—due to a wounded body, and its effect on the mind and the mind's own tendency to narrate reality—allows for action, but always in a broken, hesitant manner that oscillates between the "self" and "other." Consider Frodo and Samwise's slow rise to Mount Doom. The trip itself amounts to an attack, the killing of the other, Sauron. Frodo is willing to make the trip, but in such a way that he is constantly stopping, constantly needing Samwise to assist him. Compare this *chastened praxis* to Frodo the moment after he has decided to keep the Ring: at that moment all hesitance, all weakness are gone.

Frodo is a *disabled* person who at each step is reminded of the weakness of his body. If there is proof anywhere of a relation to the other on Frodo's part, it must be seen here in his wound, written on his body, which exposes his inside (self) to the outside (other). His wound reminds him of the impossibility of individualism. His wound compels him to think of Sauron's impossible desire for embodiment, and of Gollum in a compassionate manner because their lives

⁹ Sméagol, unfortunately, is the sole figurehead for all Others in the film as he is the only one that is experienced in person to any great extent. See Tom Shippey's "Orcs, Wraiths, Wights: Tolkien's Images of Evil" for a discussion of how the novels produce more complex and humanized representation of orcs.

parallel one another: Gollum's transformation matches Frodo's eventual transformation if things remain as they are. But the wound is foremost an internal state for Frodo.

While we all have bodies, most of us give so little thought to this fact that our bodies disappear, just as those of us who wear glasses often forget that they sit on our noses and are constantly translating the world for us. As the Ring's inscription and Frodo's book attests, our bodies are naturalized through narrative, a state which quickly links to ableist norms. Frodo's wound cannot be normalized, essentially forcing him into an awareness of the world of relations around it. Consider Sauron's situation. Sauron's power *appears* to abide in his disembodiment. The disembodied eye reproduces the omnipresent, omniscient eye of a god. In this position, Sauron exists allegedly in non-relation to the world around him. But his obsession after embodiment belies this substantiality. Until Sauron retrieves his body, he cannot be at rest or secure in his individuality. Sauron, apparently, wants both embodiment *and* his place in the tower, both mobility and omniscience.

It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that an embodied Frodo is wounded by Ringwraiths on Weathertop, a hill where a watchtower once stood. The film highlights in this way the impossibility of non-relation, if only by foregrounding the lesson of Shelley's "Ozymandias": all armaments, all towers, all human constructions are destroyed by time. Just as this tower cannot protect an embodied Frodo from the mark of the other, so Sauron, embodied or not, cannot be expected to keep the world at bay. The state of being wounded forces Frodo to recognize his relation and dependence on the world around him, which is to say, that he is in relation to the world and not an individual trapped in a separate tower. From this standpoint, Jackson's films become a long, productive gloss on how disability affects humans on the level of being and ethics. Frodo's visceral relation to mortality, his disability, is the origin of his willingness to include Sméagol rather than exclude Gollum, as Samwise would have it.

Now, to act in the world requires the replacement of representation: one cannot act in the world without first *representing* the world as an object to be acted upon. A disabled person, however, is not simply immobile, but is involved in what I term a *chastened* praxis. It helps to consider that while Frodo has a permanent disability it is not altogether immobilizing: to be wounded, to be physically impaired, is not to be incapable of action. It is simply to be slowed. His is a permanent injury, an injury through which all action has to continually pass, not in order to sublimate the pain or hurt, raising it to a higher plane of meaning, but simply because it is a fact and it must be dealt with. When mortality is inscribed on one's body, when the body aches and does not fit the physical world like a glove, then everything becomes denaturalized: one's heroic representations falter. The Western individual finds itself moving back

and forth between the representation of the well-bordered individual and the interruption of this "individual." It is upon this oscillating process that a chastened practice may be built.

How are we to understand the place of the Ring in the context of disability? The trek up to Mount Doom is obviously excruciating; we find Frodo wincing in pain at the end of the second film and can only assume that that same pain was with him on his quest. But Frodo has an additional burden to carry: the Ring weighs more as he nears Mount Doom. It is difficult to disentangle this weight from actual physical pain. Frodo bears his own disability, but with the Ring he also bears a panacea, however illusory, for his and Sauron's illness. Frodo's hesitance, his slowness, is both physical and psychological in this sense. He is wounded, but he also has to mentally gird himself against healing, because healing is not healing in these films, but violent embodiment. In a certain sense, when carrying the Ring, the basic drama of the series is concretized. Frodo carries both the mark of abnormality and normality at the same time, denying a return to the illusory norm with every step, yet somehow ensconced between the two extremes.



Bilbo's book, "There and Back Again," implies that, yes, *contra* Thomas Wolfe, you can return home and be none the worse for wear: such a return would imply the radical elimination of the other (*there*) and a renewal of the self (*back again*).¹⁰ Consider, for a moment, the Ring, symbolic of borders, distance, and power. Inscribed on its band are words, a tightly knit *narrative* if you will, that assures a return on any investment, even immortality. A ring band acts as an apt figure for Bilbo's "there and back again" as any journey begun on this golden strip is bound to return the traveler to his or her origin with no loss incurred. The goal of the traditional narrative is to *return* refreshed with all the narrational borders back in place.

Consider the transformation of the Ranger into King Aragorn. Aragorn's wound is concretized in the form of Isildur's sword which lies shattered in Rivendell. By the end of the trilogy, the wounded sword has been

¹⁰ Bowman discusses how the firm conclusion (as if there were no more to be said) in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* prompted him to create a framing narrative for the series, putting himself in the position of editor and freeing him to write a sequel (274). She connects Bilbo's desire for closure with being at home and then shows how Tolkien's text emphasizes non-closure in a conversation between Frodo and Sam that does not appear in Jackson (5). It is interesting that Jackson also takes advantage of a similar framing device even though he was not facing the problem confronting Tolkien—*The Hobbit* will be the last of the series to be filmed.

reforged and Aragorn has regained what had been lost. There is no clear evidence that something, anything, of the horror of his loss remains. Loss, in other words, has fueled a greater accretion of identity which, separate from a permanent reminder of our mortality—a disability—and connection to others, returns us to Sauron's violent essence.

In a sense, with Aragorn's new bride he has even gained immortality. Prior to whatever mystical catalyst transforms Arwen into a mortal being, her coupling with Aragorn is an interesting image of what Frodo performs. The immortal side of this dyad is that side inherent in each of us that yearns for the permanence of borders and the healthy identity that such borders make possible. However, Aragorn is mortal, even *dis-credited*, and this tension between having one's identity and yet not having one's identity is very much what is asked of Frodo. He must move against an enemy—movement requires a stable sense of self—while acknowledging his connection with that enemy (in the form of Gollum) at every moment. With the economic undertones of the title, *The Return of the King*, and the manner in which Arwen is given to Aragorn in the finale it is difficult, however, not to see her as trope for Aragorn earning a return on his investment.¹¹

Unlike Aragon, Frodo has no book or film named after him. His narrative is tiresome, interminable. It is a painful narrative because Frodo has no enemy, really, to fight against. He makes friends with his enemies (much to Samwise's dismay). By acknowledging his relation to his enemy Frodo undermines the healthy narrative joy of clear-cut conflict that feeds off of well-defined, well-bordered narratives.

Bilbo found closure (the closure of a children's book, *The Hobbit*). Frodo finds closure impossible. Even if "Frodo Lives," there is no return. We never see him *at home* once he does, finally, return home (there is no wife to wed, or children to raise; he stands apart from the natural joys of Hobbit life). We should understand this economically. Derrida describes this as the difference between a restricted and a general economy. In a restricted economy, all risk is predicated on a greater ultimate return on one's investment, which is to say, the self is never really at risk. He writes, "To stay alive, to maintain oneself in life, to work, to defer pleasure, to limit the stakes, to have *respect* for death at the very moment one looks *directly* at it—such is the servile condition of mastery and of the entire history it makes possible" (*WD* 255, emphasis in original). Here Derrida speaks of the economic manner in which we manage our own beings, never truly

¹¹ From Arwen's standpoint, the situation is entirely different. Her gift to Aragorn can see no return and falls within Derrida's notion of a general economy. Linda Greenwood has written extensively on this topic in Tolkien's texts. See Greenwood's "Love: 'The Gift of Death.'"

risking ourselves. This is no less true of the narratives which constitute our very being. It is only through representation (e.g., such as that inscribed on a ring) that an individual creates that which he or she recognizes as a self (256). Without a narrative, a restricted narrative, our selves are jeopardized, as Frodo's own shaken identity attests. Sauron, then, like Frodo or Aragorn, is also far from home, and his journey is defined by his desire to return home with no loss in power.

On the road to Mount Doom, only Sam holds out hope for a return. Later, after his "return," Frodo explicitly states, as we have seen, that any return home is impossible, "the hurt is too deep" and "How do you pick up the threads of an old life?" There is no return for Frodo. The Ring is broken and so is Frodo. If there were closure, there would also be a return of borders. Closure is what borders do. But the "threads" of his life, like the story he is writing, do not come together. His life and his/story are veritable hemorrhages, as he experiences what Derrida terms a "general economy," the opposite of the playing-it-safe restricted economy.

Sauron's dilemma is that he is also wounded. Jackson's film highlights Sauron's defeat, in this context, by having him defeated by nothing more than a detached finger—just a flesh wound, really. This minor wound mirrors Frodo's own. Sauron wants to heal and the entire movement of his violence has one purpose, to return him to the Ring: that is, to eliminate the space between himself and the Ring. Lacking the Ring, his violence, his action, is muted. Without this Ring—and recall that this Ring is an emblem for his own narrational self-creation—Sauron is exposed to the horror of relation and the groundlessness of his being. He cannot become a substantial living being, the consummate individual, that he so desires. Frodo, similarly wounded, not only assists in giving up the Ring (which promises god-like power even as it squashes one particular self along the way), but, more to the point, leaves behind his unfinished narrative, which operates, in fact, as his version of the Ring of Power. If Sauron needs his Ring to be complete, Frodo needs this narrative, a story only he can complete in order to *return* to himself. Bilbo had been "there and back again" and so could Frodo. But, no, he leaves the book behind with another, Sam, choosing to remain wounded and disabled, letting go of his narrative and giving it to another to finish. This is a crucial distinction between Sauron and Frodo. Leaving his narrative behind, he chooses space, the space and relational nature of his wound and of his disability. Had he taken his book with him to Tol Eressëa, this trip could have been read in the obvious manner: in pain in the Shire, Jackson whisks his hero off of to health, heaven, and immortality.

The series, of course, seemingly finds perfect closure as Sam and family turn their backs to the viewer and enter their home. Our last image is of a closed door; the last words are, “Well, I’m back.” There seem to be two contrary narratives here. Yes, Jackson “wrote” both narratives, but they do not sit well with one another. Frodo’s narrative—internal to Sam’s “I’m back” narrative—denies closure, preferring to remain un-bordered, open to the other, and disabled (as opposed to that of Sauron). Jackson’s tendency, especially toward the end, is to find closure at all costs through overwrought, overproduced, overly controlling sounds and images. As indicated above, the entire series at eleven hours is painful to watch because it is a film about pain and a hero whose heroism is grounded in disability. It is best to understand this ridiculous length as a game of sorts on the part of Jackson. The films must be this long in order to better surround, border, demarcate the sickly narrative at its core: The films operate as a “narrative prosthesis” to use Mitchell’s term (20), as the films show us a physical impairment, and, by so doing, substantiate their reason for existing, only to, by the end, to “rehabilitate or fix the deviance” in some manner.

This schema works up to a point in *The Lord of the Rings*. Sauron acts as the dangerously disabled deviant and much of what follows is an attempt to explain his “origins.” Then things become a bit murky. To fix the deviance which is Sauron is to deny him normative embodiment; it is to keep him well within the parameters of “abnormal.” It is, ultimately, to erase him as a discursive being (again, the inscribed Ring). Sauron, as other, is threatening because he appears to be entering or displacing the norm, the social norms that ground a stable society. This is complicated by the fact that Frodo, more evidently disabled (i.e., deviant), is the one who defeats Sauron. How *is* the viewer of these films supposed to feel about the disabled?

Ultimately, the films privilege disability, I believe, as a position of ‘humility’ on the level of being. Sauron’s disability, as I imply above, is the *materialization* (Mitchell) of one basic idea: that we are (or will be) disabled and that what is dangerous is an obsessive pursuit (via technology) of god-like embodiment which denies our essential sharing, our essential disability.¹² (When we see Sauron’s body in the flashbacks, we hardly see it—it is as if even that embodiment is insubstantial, null, when finally achieved. The end result of power is not wholeness, normativity (as if these states were possible), but a perpetual desire that eats away at the “essence” of our being.) A better way of

¹² Jackson and Tolkien’s texts do use disability as material metaphors (see Mitchell) to embody certain abstract ideas. This objectification of disability—e.g., how a person with a disability in a story must always seemingly *mean* something and cannot merely just *be* in a narrative—needs to be roundly critiqued. Such a critique is unfortunately not central to this already overly long essay.

putting this perhaps: what is dangerous is our obsessive jockeying for the position of the norm. In that sense, Sauron is not disabled as such, but an image of the majority of humanity (this explains how Sauron can be powerful and yet technically disabled at the same time). Certainly, the mortal position that Frodo exists within cannot be made into a stable and simply exclusive norm.

Jackson's inability to find an end to his film points to the fact that at its center is a narrative that belies god-like embodiment, ends, borders, and closure. Frodo's narrative operates like Mount Doom for Sauron; it "embodies" that crack in the very midst of identity which undermines the individual's pursuit of self-presence. If narratives exist to represent bodily deviance and then to rein in this deviance, this narrative fails in its prosthesis. Or, if we read the films as a critique of norms in the sense elaborated upon above, it succeeds to a remarkable extent in "embodying" the impossibility of the ground upon which healthy subjects are allegedly built.

Ironically, the very fact that Jackson includes a nested narrative implies that his narratorial borders are permeable. Borders are solid to the degree that they disallow any serious reflection on their origin and status as natural. Foregrounding Frodo's narrative makes us question Jackson's narrative. Books, narratives generally, rely on a basic division between inside and outside: the author-god is outside; the characters are on the inside. This is a crucial defining border for both identities. Frodo's internal writing of his tale which is the external tale that we are reading/viewing violates this dichotomy—the author is now on the inside after all. The omniscient author-god is undermined as his attempt to abstract his own being from the world he is creating is cast into doubt. This questioning could take an even more basic form: Is Jackson telling the true story as Frodo wrote it? As Tolkien envisioned it? Such questioning undermines the healthy narrative that is inextricably tied to the being of the individual.

If the logic of power is tied up with walls and towers and exclusion, it is fascinating and ironic that that which destroys Sauron is already there in his midst: Mount Doom. The volcano's presence in Mordor demonstrates that there is no such thing as total individuality. Rather, even when we think that we are most in control of ourselves—the world being circled about with walls of steel—even then, at the center of our being, there is a crack. Similarly, the closure Jackson founds on Sam's "Well, I'm back" is shattered by Frodo's disabled narrative that Samwise has brought home with him to the Shire. Frodo says to Sam, "you cannot always be torn in two," but his gift and departure seem to have done just that. Prior to leaving, Sam continued his friendship with Frodo and married. He had the best of both worlds. Now, it seems the communal bond (i.e., border) he had created with Frodo is breached and, even more, Frodo has entrusted him to finish *The Lord of the Rings*, a task of enormous difficulty in light of its history. How does one insert one's own story into another's narrative (the

narrative that substantiates and heals them)? How does one do this without simply subsuming the other?

It would take a hero, a disabled hero, to deal justly with such a task.



WORKS CITED

- Bataille, Georges. "Christ." *The Bataille Reader*, edited by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell Publisher, 1997, pp. 92-93.
- Battis, Jes. "Gazing Upon Sauron: Hobbits, Elves, and the Queering of the Postcolonial Optic." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2004, pp. 908-926.
- Bowman, Mary R. "The Story Was Already Written: Narrative Theory in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Narrative*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2006, pp. 272-293.
- Chance, Jane. *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*. University Press of Kentucky, 2001.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Living On: Border Lines." *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, edited by Peggy Kamuf, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 254-268.
- . *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Flieger, Verlyn. "The Body in Question: The Unhealed Wounds of Frodo Baggins." *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on Middle-Earth Corporeality*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro, McFarland, 2013.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.
- Fynsk, Christopher. "Foreword: Experiences of Finitude." *The Inoperative Community*, by Jean-Luc Nancy, edited by Peter Connor, The University of Minnesota Press, 1991, pp. vii-xxxv.
- "Gamgee." *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition, 1989.
- Greenwood, Linda. "Love: 'The Gift of Death.'" *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 2., no. 1, 2005, pp. 171-195.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.
- Jackson, Peter, director. *The Fellowship of the Rings*. 2001. Extended DVD edition, New Line Home Entertainment, Inc., 2002.
- . *The Two Towers*. 2002. Extended DVD edition, New Line Home Entertainment, Inc., 2003.

- . *The Return of the King*. 2003. Extended DVD edition, New Line Home Entertainment, Inc., 2004.
- Longmore, Paul K. *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Temple University Press, 2003.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. "Introduction: Disability Studies and the Double Bind of Representation." *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, edited by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, U of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 1-31.
- Mitchell, David T. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder et al., Modern Language Association, 2002, pp. 15-30.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Edited by Peter Connor, The University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Senior, W.A. "Loss Eternal in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth." *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-earth*, edited by George Clark and Daniel Timmons, Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 173-182.
- Shippey, Tom. "Orcs, Wraiths, Wights: Tolkien's Images of Evil." *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-earth*, edited by George Clark and Daniel Timmons, Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 183-198.
- Sinex, Margaret. "Wounded by War: Men's Bodies in the Prose Tradition of *The Children of Húrin*." *Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I*. Ed. Janet Brennan Croft. Altadena, CA: The Mythopoeic Press, 2015. 38-59.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary ed., Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TODD A. COMER teaches English at Defiance College where teaches a wide variety of texts, including, comics, films, and novels. He is currently writing a monograph on the films of Peter Weir. He blogs, albeit infrequently, at toddcomer.com.



JOIN THE MYTHOPOEIC SOCIETY TODAY AND ENJOY:

- **THOUGHT-PROVOKING AND RESPECTED PUBLICATIONS**

Our reviews quarterly *Mythprint* (free with membership) keeps readers up to date on newly published fantasy literature, films, and academic titles. Members also receive the *Annual Report* and *Member Directory*. The peer-reviewed journal *Mythlore* features scholarly articles on mythopoeic literature. Our annual literary magazine, *Mythic Circle*, publishes new fiction, art and poetry with mythopoeic themes. The Mythopoeic Press publishes both scholarly editions of literary works and critical essays. The Society also produces specialized works on Tolkien's invented languages and other topics. **Members receive advance notice of new publications and special discounted rates.**

- **OUTSTANDING CONFERENCES**

Our annual conference (Mythcon) encourages scholars, authors, and readers to exchange ideas and share their insights and love of mythopoeic literature. Guests of Honor have included authors such as Neil Gaiman, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Tim Powers, as well as noted scholars such as Michael Drout, Verlyn Flieger, Douglas Anderson and Christopher Tolkien. As a small conference, we enjoy an intimacy with our guests that most conferences cannot provide. The Society has been instrumental in the development and encouragement of young scholars. There is a special award for best student paper at Mythcon, and funding to help "starving scholars" defray conference costs. **Society members receive big discounts on registration and can share in other benefits.**

- **LITERARY AND SCHOLARLY AWARDS**

Our Society's book awards nominees are selected by our members. Society members can nominate books for the Mythopoeic Fantasy Awards for both adults and children or for the Mythopoeic Scholarship Awards in Inklings Studies and Myth and Fantasy Studies. Society members may also serve on the juries to review nominees and select winners.

- **COMMUNITIES OF READERS AND SCHOLARS**

Society members share their love of and scholarly interest in fantasy literature through organized discussion groups in various regions across the United States. They can also join an email discussion group, connect through our Facebook group, follow us on Twitter, or use other social media options. From our "Members" page you can link to your own web site or blog.

- **KEEPING THE MYTHOPOEIC FLAME ALIVE**

The Mythopoeic Society (founded in 1967) is one of the oldest organizations extant for those interested in fantasy and its study and appreciation. Though we have made impressive contributions to Mythopoeic Studies, we have always been a small nonprofit, run totally by unpaid volunteers. *Without memberships, we'd cease to exist.* We cover all the Inklings. We welcome scholars from a variety of disciplines, independent scholars, and *anyone* who reads and loves fantasy literature. **As a member you can have influence on the direction of the Society by voting on its leadership—or become part of that leadership yourself.**