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## The Precious and the Pearl: The Influence of *Pearl* on the Nature of the One Ring

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### Abstract

Examines some roots of Tolkien's One Ring in *Pearl's* themes and motifs, characters, and allegorical functions.

### Additional Keywords

Pearl (poem); Pearl (poem)—Characters—The Jeweler; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The Ring—Sources



## THE PRECIOUS AND THE PEARL: THE INFLUENCE OF *PEARL* ON THE NATURE OF THE ONE RING

NOAH KOUBENEC

IT IS PERHAPS THE MOST IRONIC ATTRIBUTE OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S sub-created universe that the power of the One Ring, though a critically important idea in the *Legendarium*, is chronically undefined; aside from its ability to make most of its wearers invisible, the distinguishing attributes that make it a Ring of Power are imprecise. A popular position (if we judge from Peter Jackson's reimagining of Tolkien's vision), and indeed one backed up by many of the texts of Middle-earth themselves, would suggest that the primary ability of Isildur's Bane is the promise of military power and empire. Throughout its history, the Ring is a catalyst for conquest, emboldening the wearer and kindling thoughts of greatness. In *The Lord of the Rings* [*LotR*], for instance, Boromir focuses on just this attribute at the Council of Elrond when he proposes that the One Ring be put to what he considers good use: "Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need? Wielding it the Free Lords of the Free may surely defeat the Enemy" (*LotR* II.ii.260). Yet a close examination of Tolkien's notion of the Ring's greatest power reveals a vision that is markedly different, one that shares some significant similarities with the theme of *Pearl*, a Middle English dream vision that tells the story of a man, the Jeweler, who is bereaved by the loss of his daughter, referred to in the poem as his "Pearl." As we shall see, though Tolkien's career-spanning translation of this medieval masterpiece was primarily related to his interests in philology, the dream vision also affected Tolkien on a conceptual and thematic level, exerting a powerful influence on the nature of the One Ring and the ring-bearers.

In the preface to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, Christopher Tolkien explains that his father had been involved with the poem to some degree since his authorship of an essay for the introduction of E.V. Gordon's translation of *Pearl*, on which the two collaborated after their 1925 publication of a *Gawain* translation. Tolkien's letters indicate that his translation of *Pearl* was an ongoing project, and that it took place in parallel with the composition of his more famous works of Middle-earth. In a September 1944 letter to his son Christopher, the author mentions fleetingly that he "must try and get on with the Pearl" (94) confirming that even at this early point he had been

engrossed in the poem for some time.<sup>1</sup> Over twenty years later, in 1965, Tolkien was still working on his translation; in a letter to Rayner Unwin he writes: "I want to finish off *Gawain and Pearl*, and get on with the *Silmarillion*" (*Letters* 363). These two documents alone confirm that he was preoccupied with the poem for much of his writing life, during a period that corresponded with the composition of most of the works of his *Legendarium*.

Despite the fact that, as A. Keith Kelly and Michael Livingston have recently observed, *Pearl* clearly "fascinated Tolkien for much of his life both spiritually and professionally" (91), surprisingly little scholarship has been written concerning the influence of the *Pearl*-poet on Tolkien's fiction. Even more, the majority of the extant criticism on the subject focuses not on *Pearl*, but on the arguably more famous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Michael D.C. Drout, for instance, spends much of his article, "Tolkien's Medieval Scholarship and its Significance," discussing the admittedly abundant connections between Tolkien and *Sir Gawain*, but only mentions *Pearl* in passing or as one component of the manuscript that includes *Sir Gawain*. This emphasis is perhaps understandable given the former work's greater popularity and its significance as "Tolkien's first major published work" (125). To be sure, scholars have acknowledged *Pearl* as a general source of inspiration to Tolkien, but the larger avenue of a connection among the poem, the ring-bearers, and the themes of obsession and death has been left unexplored. In *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, for example, Tom Shippey notes the similarity of elements of *Pearl* to Tolkien's imagined geography. Shippey explains that the Elven kingdom of Lórien may be seen as Tolkien's own version of "the strange land, the 'nameless land', with its brilliant trees and shining gravel" (197), where the Jeweler stands as he looks to the New Jerusalem. Shippey's discussion of the matter of *Pearl* and the *Legendarium* does not venture beyond the borders of Lórien, however, with the exception of a discourse on the dialogue of Treebeard and its structural similarity to the language of *Pearl* in *Road to Middle-earth*. Kelly and Livingston object to Shippey's views on Lórien and *Pearl* while arguing for the poem's significance to Tolkien's work in general. Even so, treatment of the subject is brief, with only one paragraph of the essay pointing out connections between *Pearl* and Tolkien's writing. In her 2005 dissertation, "Apocalypse and Memory in 'Pearl,'" Rebekah Long also makes reference to *Pearl* as an important influence on Tolkien, but her argument deals primarily with its relation to his essay "The Nameless Land" and his theories of medievalism, rather than with its direct connections to the *Legendarium*. Stefan Ekman's 2009 *Tolkien Studies* article, "Echoes of *Pearl* in Arda's Landscape," makes a crucial step in the direction of

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<sup>1</sup> For further examination of this early work on *Pearl*, see Shippey's "Tolkien and the *Gawain*-poet."

analyzing the *Pearl*-poet's influence on Tolkien, but it is only one scholarly effort where many are warranted. Since we have long understood Tolkien's debt to medieval literature such as the *Poetic Edda*, *The Volsunga Saga*, and *Gawain*, it is somewhat bewildering that the likelihood of a much more extensive relationship between *Pearl* and the Legendarium has not been more thoroughly weighed than these tentative and passing critical comments. This minimal treatment is especially striking when one considers how long and how closely Tolkien worked with the poem, and how intricately connected he presumably would have felt to its Christian subject matter.

*Pearl*, this dream vision that so fascinated Tolkien, has as its central theme the human problem of loss. The anguish of the Jeweler, the dreamer-protagonist of the poem, stems from his inability to accept the death of his young daughter, who is metaphorically termed the "Pearl," now lost beneath the earth. The dream vision that results of his despair carries a clear message of the spiritual danger of obsession, as in stanza 23 of Tolkien's own translation, wherein the Pearl, revealed in his vision to be a perfected, grown woman, chides the Jeweler for his misguided desire to hold onto her memory after her passing:

But, jeweller gentle, if from you goes  
Your joy through a gem that you held lief,  
Methinks your mind toward madness flows  
And frets for a fleeting cause of grief. (23.1-4)

From this passage—and from the text of *Pearl* as a whole—may be drawn the poet's message of the futility of worldly attachment and its grave consequences. It is this same message, as we will see, that Tolkien focuses on in his fiction. Although there is no dearth of scholarship arguing for a more allegorical interpretation of *Pearl* and potentially discounting a father's literal struggle with grief and obsession, this article is based upon a literal reading as a source for connections between the dream vision and the Legendarium. Tolkien could have viewed the poem allegorically, but the opportunities for analysis are more than sufficient for the scope of this article when his understanding of the poem is assumed to be literal. The overall prevalence of the elegiac view allows us to make such an assumption without too much discomfort.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The extant *Pearl* elegy-allegory debate can be traced back more than a century; Schofield made a case for allegorical interpretation in 1904 in response to an already-established base of scholarship supporting an elegiac interpretation. In 2001, the argument persisted with Burrow stating in *The Gawain-Poet* that "The baby girl is associated in the dream with a rich cluster of symbolic pearls, but she is not herself to be understood allegorically. So far as concerns the narrative, her death before reaching the age of two stands as a literal fact" (6).

By Tolkien's own design, the power of the Great Rings lies in their ability to preserve. In his 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, he explains that "the chief power (of all the rings alike) was the prevention or slowing of *decay* (i.e., change viewed as a regrettable thing), the preservation of what is desired or loved, or its semblance" (*Letters* 152). This power of the One Ring in particular to preserve is indeed mentioned several times in the works of Middle-earth, particularly in *The Lord of the Rings*, where the author's ideas are more fully developed. When Gandalf recounts his interrogation of Gollum in "The Council of Elrond," he explains that

I learned then first that Gollum's ring came out of the Great River nigh to the Gladden Fields. And I learned also that he possessed it long. Many lives of his small kind. The power of the ring had lengthened his years far beyond their span; but that power only the Great Rings wield. (*LotR* II.ii.247)

Gandalf's implicit rebuke of Gollum's artificially lengthened life is consistent with Tolkien's presentation of unnatural preservation from the earliest ages of Middle-earth: the desire to lengthen one's days is repeatedly presented as an abomination throughout the *Legendarium*. In the preface to *The Silmarillion* [*Silm.*], Tolkien explains that

This desire is at once wedded to a passionate love of the real primary world, and hence filled with a sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it. It has various opportunities of 'Fall'. It may become possessive, clinging to the things made as its own, the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator—especially against mortality. (xvi)

This notion of the inherent danger of persistence in the mortal realm is borne out again and again in Tolkien's stories. For instance, a component of *The Silmarillion*, the author's work *Akallabêth*, tells the history of the Númenóreans, a race of men whose prosperity and long lifespans came to an end of their own doing. Concerning these ancient peoples, Tolkien writes that

the fear of death grew ever darker upon them, and they delayed it by all means they could; and they began to build great houses for their dead, while their wise men laboured unceasingly to discover if they might the secret of recalling life, or at least the prolonging of Men's days. [...] But those that lived turned the more eagerly to pleasure and revelry, desiring ever more goods and more riches; and after [...] the offering of the first fruits to Eru was neglected, and men went seldom any more to the Hallow upon the heights of Meneltarma in the midst of the land. (*Silm.* 318-19)

Here Tolkien demonstrates clearly that the growing fear of death of the Númenóreans directly coincided with the decay and downfall of their society. In fact, the very notion of death as the “Gift” of Eru to men as it was first intended, the corruption of its perception among men, and their intense desire to avoid it led them ultimately into the trap of Sauron (*Silm.* 329).<sup>3</sup> The demise of the Númenóreans was rooted in their consuming desire to cling to their worldly existence.

The similarities between the *Akallabêth* and *Pearl* are numerous; in both, the desire of the main character or characters gives rise to a desire to reach heaven—that is, an environment that is not burdened by death. For the Jeweler, this mythical location is the New Jerusalem, a place where the notion of mortality does not exist, and where all is in a perpetual state of flawless glory, as indicated by the medieval poet’s description of the city as free from blemish:

Neither sun nor moon ever shone so sweet  
As the pouring flood from that court that flowed;  
Swiftly it swept through every street,  
And no filth nor soil nor slime it showed. (89.1-4)

For the Númenóreans, paradise exists in an equally alluring yet inaccessible form. *Akallabêth* describes the longing of the great men for a paradise across the sea:

Now this yearning grew ever greater with the years; and the Númenóreans began to hunger for the undying city that they saw from afar, and the desire of everlasting life, to escape from death and the ending of delight, grew strong upon them; and ever as their power and glory grew greater their unquiet increased. (*Silm.* 315)

The Númenóreans’ desire to reach Valinor is remarkably similar to the Jeweler’s yearning to reach the New Jerusalem. Indeed, as Kelly and Livingston have discussed in their effort to identify Valinor with the earthly paradise of Eden, Tolkien’s Undying Lands and the New Jerusalem are parallel even at the level of basic geography: they are separated from experiential reality by uncrossable water. The verses of *Pearl* make clear that the New Jerusalem—and the Jeweler’s lost Pearl—is inaccessible to all but those who are divinely admitted:

Delight there pierced my eye and ear,  
In my mortal mind a madness reigned;

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<sup>3</sup> For a more complete discussion of death in Tolkien, see Greenwood.

When I saw her beauty I would be near,  
Though beyond the stream she was retained. (97.1)

By the same token, Valinor is a forbidden land, making it ever more tempting for the Men whose hearts are eventually overcome by desire:

The Lords of Valinor forbade them to sail so far westward that the coasts of Númenor could no longer be seen [...]. But the design of Manwë was that the Númenóreans should not be tempted to seek for the Blessed Realm, nor desire to overpass the limits set to their bliss, becoming enamoured of the immortality of the Valar and Eldar and the lands where all things endure. (*Silm.* 313)

These parallels between *Pearl* and the story of the Númenóreans are useful in verifying the thematic significance of the poem to the nature of the Ring in the Legendarium. With an understanding of this relationship, it is possible to detect the encapsulation of the grand concepts of death, change, and obsession in the One Ring and the ring-bearers that occurs later in the history of Tolkien's created universe.

Even prior to thematic connections, there are clear philological similarities that make the prospect of *Pearl* as a direct creative inspiration for Tolkien's Ring and its bearers nearly undeniable. The most obvious such similarity may be found in the use of one word to refer repeatedly to the respective objects of endearment and obsession in both *Pearl* and the Legendarium: *precious*. It is unlikely that a man of Tolkien's intellectual background would randomly settle on the word repeatedly used by the Jeweler to describe his treasure, especially as he labored on his translation of the medieval poem throughout the course of his work on the more famous tales of Middle-earth. The prominent presence of the word in *Pearl* and the Legendarium indicates that Tolkien's use of the Middle English text carried over into the very language of his *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>4</sup>

The natural point to begin this examination would be *The Hobbit*, wherein Gollum in his encounter with Bilbo Baggins commonly ends his phrases with "my precious." In *Pearl*, the Jeweler's lamentations likewise repeatedly conclude with a reference to his "precious pearl." This similarity, significant in and of itself, becomes fundamental when it is considered as part of the relationship between *Pearl* and Tolkien's works. A scholar of Tolkien's field would have painstakingly selected a word with such prominent featuring and significance to the identity of a character as important as Gollum; his use of the

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<sup>4</sup> While I am utilizing Tolkien's translation of *Pearl* throughout this essay, it is worth note that the original Middle English text is consistent in its use of *precios*.



same word employed by the *Pearl*-poet is thus especially significant. Both works use the word in the same manner; that is, the term may refer either to the value of the Ring or the Pearl to their admirers, or to the actual physical form of either object. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*—for which Tolkien worked from 1919 to 1920<sup>5</sup>—*precious* denotes something “Of great moral, spiritual, or other non-material value; beloved, held in high esteem,” which accurately describes either the Pearl or the One Ring.<sup>6</sup> Further, the *OED* notes that the word *precious* first appeared in 1300 in reference to “a stone of a kind prized for its beauty, hardness, or rarity and used in ornamentation or jewellery; a gemstone, a jewel” (*precious*, adj., adv., and n.). Thus, Tolkien’s usage evokes the earliest meaning of the term, which suggests that what is signified by *precious* in his writing is the same as what is signified by *precious* in *Pearl*: an object, in both cases an item of jewelry, with significance far beyond its material form and power over its owners in the form of obsession. In *The Annotated Hobbit*, Douglas Anderson notes an interesting philological connection between *Gollum* and *precious*:

The Old Norse word *gull* means “gold.” In the oldest manuscripts it is spelled *goll*. One inflected form would be *Gollum*, “gold, treasure, something precious.” It can also mean “ring,” as is found in the complex word *finger-gull*, “finger-ring” —points that may have occurred to Tolkien. (120n8)

In “The ‘Lost’ subject of Middle-earth,” Gergely Nagy responds to this connection as it relates to the word’s etymology, but he neglects to mention that *Pearl*, with its prominent use of the word (it is mentioned 12 times in Tolkien’s translation), represents the most probable philological and creative impetus for Tolkien’s use of “precious.”

The Ring and the Pearl are likewise united in that both prove unable to provide peace or consolation for their respective admirers. It could be argued that *Pearl* contains an ultimately comforting message of salvation or at least a final note of consolation for the Jeweler that runs counter to the overwhelmingly negative depiction of the Ring and its power, yet in both *Pearl* and Tolkien’s works, consolation comes only when the object of obsession is abandoned (voluntarily or otherwise). Indeed, *Pearl* is as much a sober warning as Tolkien’s treatment of the Ring. In her argument for the *Pearl*-poet’s indebtedness to Biblical form, Sarah Prior writes of *Gawain* and *Pearl* that “they are not genres of restoration and return, except potentially, and only in fallen human versions,” and that “the sudden, heartbreaking end to the dreamer’s dream in *Pearl*”

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<sup>5</sup> For an excellent overview of Tolkien’s time at the *OED* and his work, see Gilliver et al.

<sup>6</sup> For all references to the *OED*, I have used the online version, the text of which generally corresponds to the second print edition.

emphasizes the unattainability of providence for mortals rather than the promise of redemption (*Fayre Formez* 16).<sup>7</sup> The structural circularity of *Pearl* should not be mistaken for a rosy outlook, and what consolation there is in the poem derives not from the object of obsession but from the Jeweler's willingness to accept its loss. W.A. Davenport further explores the tragically one-sided relationship between the Jeweler and the Pearl:

In the poet's presentation of the Maiden there is necessarily an abstract, adamant quality: the fact that she is a figure translated into something other than the human child and that the world she inhabits is one where human rules no longer apply have to be represented by an absence of human feeling and of a sense of earthly relationships. She is, therefore, allegorically incapable of offering comfort to the Dreamer, since the relationship which might make comfort appropriate no longer in her world exists. (16-17)

The Ring is similarly unable to comfort its bearer—instead, it has a corrupting and maddening effect, worsening rather than relieving the symptoms of its victims. Still, the Jeweler and the various ring-bearers seem confident that one more moment or touch with the objects of their desire will satisfy their obsession; for both, that confidence is misplaced. The Jeweler seeks to cross the river in an effort to embrace his lost Pearl, and at Rivendell Bilbo begs Frodo for a glimpse of the Ring long after it has passed to the new bearer: "I should very much like just to peep at it again," he says (II.i.225).

A deeper example of the relationship may be found in the sentiment of profound attachment and consequential grief that is exhibited both by the Jeweler and by the ring-bearers who are separated from Isildur's Bane—most notably Gollum. Speaking to his Pearl, the Jeweler mourns,

Now my lost one found again I greet,  
Must bereavement new till death be mine?  
Why must I at once both part and meet?  
My precious pearl doth my pain design! (28.3)

The Jeweler's language indicates that he is shattered by the disappearance of his Pearl. In like manner, Gollum mourns for the loss of his ring with hopeless, grief-stricken exclamations: "Losst it is, my precious, lost, lost! Curse us and crush us, my precious is lost!" (*Hobbit* V.128).

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<sup>7</sup> For a particularly mathematical look at the structure of the *Pearl*-poet's works and an examination of *Pearl*'s circularity, see Condren.

Indeed, it is a point of interest that the Ring and the Pearl are alike in the very form they take, as both are pieces of jewelry, beautiful to behold. For both, however, their physical form serves mainly as a manifestation of a deeper concept—for the Jeweler, his love for his daughter, and for the ring-bearers of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, their obsession with the power and allure of the Ring.<sup>8</sup> The Pearl is the embodiment of the soul of the Jeweler’s daughter, the Ring the embodiment of the power of Sauron. The Jeweler is burdened by his attachment to the Pearl; the ring-bearers, most prominently Frodo, are repeatedly “weighed down” by the Ring.<sup>9</sup> Both are also struck by the beauty of their respective burdens, with the Jeweler explaining that

No tongue could in worthy words declare  
The beauty that was there displayed,  
It was so polished, pure, and fair,  
That precious pearl on her arrayed. (19.9)

And Tolkien likewise reveals that Gollum owns “One very beautiful thing, very beautiful, very wonderful. He had a ring, a golden ring, a precious ring” (*Hobbit* V.127). The consequence of his attraction to the Ring is a powerful possessiveness that eventually grows to consume the ring-bearer. Though Gollum is an obvious example of this effect, he is by no means the only character to suffer from it. Bilbo, when confronted about the Ring and challenged to abandon it by Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings*, first becomes defensive, then quickly gives way to an outburst eerily reminiscent of the language of Gollum: “It is mine, I tell you. My own. My precious. Yes, my precious” (I.i.33). Still, Gollum may be seen as the most acute specimen of the ring-bearer’s curse. For all its simplicity, the similarity of Gollum’s and the Jeweler’s behavior demands exploration. Though the Jeweler is certainly less deranged than Sméagol, both suffer from an enslaved mind: the forces at work within the two characters are sufficiently similar to produce the same behavior and even cause them to speak in like manner.

Gollum’s desire for that which has perverted his mind is such that he pursues it even when his actions mean the demise of the Ring and himself. This is most apparent in Mount Doom, after wrestling the ring from Frodo (who is himself under its spell):

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<sup>8</sup> For a defense of the significance of the material aspects of the objectified Pearl, see Riddy.

<sup>9</sup> Obsession with an object is a prominent theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, but to regard Tolkien’s most famous work as having a monopoly on the idea would be to ignore the rest of the Legendarium. Fëanor and the Silmarils in *The Silmarillion* and Thorin Oakenshield and the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit* are both clear examples of the theme permeating every corner of Tolkien’s created world.

“Precious, precious, precious!” Gollum cried. “My Precious! O my Precious!” And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone. (VI.iii.925)

Ultimately, Gollum’s desire to have that which he could not rightfully possess resulted in his destruction and the disintegration of the Ring, the object of his obsession. In much the same manner, the Jeweler found himself unable to resist the allure of the Pearl and the kingdom across the river. He jumped into the water in a desperate attempt to grasp it:

[...] I leapt o’er  
Those marvellous bounds by madness swayed.  
Through headlong haste me heedless bore,  
Yet swift arrest was on me made,  
For right as I rushed then to the shore  
That fury made my dream to fade. (98.1-6)

Here the Jeweler too succumbs to his desire a final time, and his precious Pearl vanishes along with the kingdom that he so longs after. As it so happens, the events here are also strongly evocative of the fate of the Númenóreans.

As we have already seen, the prominence of the word *precious*, found most often in passages where Gollum plays a part, represents a striking similarity between *Pearl* and the Legendarium. But its frequency throughout Tolkien’s works also illuminates the progression of his concept of Gollum and the Ring. The word, as part of Tolkien’s careful construction of *The Hobbit*, existed in the earliest drafts: Douglas Anderson points out in *The Annotated Hobbit* that “In the first edition of *The Hobbit* (1937), Gollum uses the phrase ‘my precious’ to refer only to himself. In the second edition (1951), in which Gollum’s role was significantly altered [...] the phrase might be taken to refer to the ring, as is often the case in *The Lord of the Rings*” (120n8). In a later note, Anderson explains that the increased usage of *precious* coincided with the development of Gollum into a more obsessed and disturbing character (128n25). *Precious* thus became more common as Gollum became more deranged and Tolkien’s notion of the Ring developed—even as he continued his translation of *Pearl*.

Because of its presence through so much of the development of Gollum’s character, the word *precious* served as a foundation for the structuring of his speech—no small consideration for Tolkien, who was exceptionally aware of the language and diction of his characters. Gergely Nagy explains that

The word “precious” acts as a central signifier in Gollum’s language. It comes up functionally integrated into sentences, but also as a sort of interjection, something which does not have any further meaning than being used in certain positions and situations in speech. In fact, “precious” is the *addressee* of Gollum’s language: it is both himself and something else which at least superficially seems to be the Ring [...]. (60)

In other words, *precious* becomes an obsession in and of itself, permeating Gollum’s speech. But *precious* is not simply a compulsion, a by-product of his deranged mind. Instead, it is intricately connected with his personality, and thus his idiolect. The word’s sibilant phonology profoundly influences both his hissing speech patterns—“It’s got to ask us a quesstion, my preciouss, yes, yess, yesss. Jusst one more question to guess, yes, yess” (*Hobbit* V.125)—and his repetitive and occasionally singsong language.

If Gollum is an acute example of a Ring of Power’s effects on its bearer, his decay is not complete. *The Lord of the Rings* is rife with instances where Gollum demonstrates traces of his old, uncorrupted nature. The furthest depths of despair brought by the Ring and its subordinates are best seen in the characters who have become so enslaved to the Ring that their own wills have been completely destroyed: the Nazgûl. In *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*, Tolkien describes the Dark Riders as “kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old” (*Silm.* 346). They achieved power, but the most significant consequence of their status as ring-bearers—the one that led to their enslavement—was the extension of their lives, which resulted in their eventual succumbing to darkness:

They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them. They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in the world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men; but too often they beheld only the phantoms and delusions of Sauron. (346)

Here, Tolkien suggests that allowing the Rings of Power to carry out their purpose in the “prevention of decay” ultimately results in the eternal confinement of the Nazgûl to an evil realm.

And one by one, sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the good or evil of their wills in the beginning, they fell under the thralldom of the ring that they bore and under the domination of the One [...]. And they became forever invisible save to him that wore the Ruling Ring, and they entered into the realm of shadows. (346)

The Nazgûl are examples of the dangers of the very extension of the natural life—of things or of people—that is at the root of Gollum’s desire, as well as that of every ring-bearer who is subject to the allure of Isildur’s Bane. The Jeweler’s desire is the same, with an unnatural life with his daughter being that which he longs for. In the Dark Riders, Tolkien created his projection of the consequences of unchecked obsession, a fate Bilbo and Frodo are spared by Gollum’s intervention, which is spared him, in turn, by his accidental death, and spared the Jeweler by his waking from the dream-vision.

Tolkien’s genius, in great part, lies in his use of precedent. His objective was not the creation of something entirely different from preexisting myth. Instead, Tolkien sought to sub-create, to connect every detail of his Legendarium with some facet of actual legend. In the case of the corrupting nature and consuming power of the One Ring, we see reflections of *Pearl* not unlike those in the mirror of Galadriel—some quite clear and philological, others more subtle and thematic but all significant for our journey through Tolkien’s challenging universe. Simply put, the words and ideas of the *Pearl*-poet bear more than a passing resemblance to Tolkien’s work. How Isildur’s Bane affects its bearers and the nature of its power are directly connected with the content of the poem. Consideration of *Pearl* in parallel with the writings of Middle-earth therefore reveals an influence that suggests the Middle English poem on which he labored for so long had deeply permeated Tolkien’s imaginative process. The *Pearl* was, in the end, fundamental to the creative forging of the Ring.



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