



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

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

Volume 25
Number 3

Article 7

4-15-2007

The Monstrosity of the Gaze: Critical Problems with a Film Adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*

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Harl, Allison (2007) "The Monstrosity of the Gaze: Critical Problems with a Film Adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 25 : No. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss3/7>

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Abstract

Applies the theory of the “gaze” to the audience’s interpretation of Peter Jackson’s films, emphasizing Tolkien’s own characterization of the power of the hypnotic gaze of many of his monsters.

Additional Keywords

The gaze in film theory; Horror films; The Lord of the Rings (film trilogy). Dir. Peter Jackson; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Monsters

THE MONSTROSITY OF THE GAZE:
CRITICAL PROBLEMS WITH A FILM ADAPTATION OF
THE LORD OF THE RINGS

ALLISON HARL

IN the essay, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*," J.R.R. Tolkien contends with early critics who debunk the poem's poetic and structural artistry: "[T]he monsters are not an inexplicable blunder of taste; they are essential, fundamentally allied to the underlying ideas of the poem" (19). Because of Tolkien's insistence on the significance of the monsters in *Beowulf*, the study of monsters in Tolkien's own work is without question an essential task for scholars seeking to discover meaning in his narratives. The conception of many of his own monsters reveals an underlying classical Christian doctrine that declares that evil is not created as an autonomous force; rather, it is only the perversion of good. Therefore, evil functions as a kind of parasite, corrupting the pure for its own dark purposes. As Frodo reminds Sam, "the Shadow [...] can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own" (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] 893). Some monsters of Middle-earth seek to guard the passages that allow the progress of the good, some seek to feed on the good to satisfy their dark lusts, and some seek to possess the good in order to corrupt it to their own evil wills. Interestingly, Tolkien empowers many of his monsters with the weapon of vision as they struggle to achieve these ends. Through a close study of three of the monsters in *The Lord of the Rings*, The Watcher in the Water, Shelob, and Sauron, the reader can discern a distinct, objective characterization of evil as a 'watcher' which seeks to control its victims through the power of the visual gaze. This concept can then be taken a step further to examine the relationship of audience to text in Peter Jackson's film adaptation. Unlike the reader, the audience as viewer can be seen as inherently resembling this distinct, objective characterization of evil 'watcher.' Middle-earth is perceived through the lens of the camera that characteristically behaves like an 'evil eye.' Through an examination of the function of the camera in the adaptation of the text from a written to a visual medium, one can see how Jackson's audience is cast in a role like that of Tolkien's monsters, seeking to control and dominate through the means of the visual image.

The Gaze in the Book

Though a minor monster in the narrative, a highly significant beast that embodies the theme of 'evil seer' is The Watcher in the Water (as it is named in the ancient book of Mazarbul). This creature is believed to have been a Kraken bred by Morgoth in Utumno ("Watcher"). According to Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Power of Myth*, "metaphorically, water is the unconscious, and the creature in the water is the life or energy of the unconscious, which has overwhelmed the conscious personality and must be disempowered, overcome, and controlled" (180). As the Company stands at the edge of the water trying to figure out the password to open the doors of Moria, Boromir awakens the monster asleep in the lake by throwing a stone. As many familiar with the nature of horror (such as Alfred Hitchcock) know, that which cannot be seen is often much more threatening than that which is visible. To see a thing is, in a sense, to have a measure of control over it, to have some power to resist it. Frodo expresses his sense of helplessness as he feels, rather than sees, the presence of the monster: "I am afraid. I don't know of what: not of wolves, or the dark behind the doors, but of something else. I am afraid of the pool. Don't disturb it" (*LotR* 300). At the moment the password is discovered and the doors are opening, the Watcher in the Water emerges from the pool and seizes Frodo. Campbell explains, "In the first stage of this kind of [unconscious] adventure, the hero leaves the realm of the familiar, over which he has some measure of control, and comes to a threshold, let us say the edge of a lake or sea, where a monster of the abyss comes to meet him" (180). The Watcher in the Water represents a kind of gatekeeper whose goal, in the context of the archetypal journey, is to guard the passage through 'watching,' to keep the good hero from entering into new territory, psychological or spiritual.

In addition to the water-monster, the hobbits must contend with Shelob the spider, also referred to at times as "The Watcher" (*LotR* 705). This monster seeks not to guard, but to feed her insatiable gluttony, like her mother, Ungoliant, who, in *The Silmarillion*, turns from her service to Morgoth to serve only herself. Ungoliant consumes the light of the two trees of Valinor and belches out impenetrable darkness through which even the most powerful cannot see. The initial encounter with Shelob is not when the hobbits first see her; instead, it's when they realize that they are *being seen by her*. Sam says, "There's something worse than Gollum about. I can feel something looking at us" (703). Again, not being able to see the monster compounds their sense of powerlessness. The hobbits do eventually see Shelob's eyes. "Monstrous and abominable eyes they were, bestial and yet filled with purpose and with hideous delight, gloating over their prey trapped beyond all hope of escape" (704). It is interesting that Tolkien employs this synecdoche, indicating through his choice of the plural possessive "their" that the prey belongs, not to "her" (Shelob), but to her eyes. Her gaze

holds Frodo and Sam, and the text indicates initially that it is not Shelob as a whole monster, but only her eyes that threaten the hobbits: "Frodo looked back and saw with terror that the eyes came leaping up behind" (705). The Phial of Galadriel shines brightly in the darkness, which forces Shelob's gaze to turn away, and the hobbits seem safe for the moment. Sam asks, "Have those eyes come back?" Frodo responds, "No, not to be seen [...]. But I still feel that they are looking at me, or thinking about me: making some other plan, perhaps" (706). The spider's numerous eyes seem to have a mind of their own, able to formulate the hobbits' destruction. When Sam attacks Shelob, he slashes at her eyes, and "[O]ne great eye went dark" (711). Sam finally escapes the monster by stabbing her and shining the light of the Phial of Galadriel into her wounded eye. Shelob loses the power of her gaze, and she retreats in defeat. The hobbits' first encounter with Gollum is described in a similar way as the creature is introduced as merely a pair of eyes. On the Great River, Anduin, Frodo meets Gollum as he wakes to see "two pale lamplike eyes" gazing up at him (375).

By far the most powerful of the monsters in *The Lord of the Rings* is Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord. Sauron is the highest-ranking of the corrupted servants of Morgoth, and the Lord of the Rings. In his disembodied state, Sauron is reduced to a single, large, unblinking eye that perpetually searches over the lands of Middle-earth for the One Ring of Power. The gaze of the Eye of Sauron holds captive those whom it beholds and seeks to know its victims by reading their thoughts. Through this act, watching becomes, in a very real sense, a means of possession through dominance and control. The possessive gaze seeks to annihilate the Self through the watcher's total appropriation of the one who is being observed. When Frodo puts the Ring on as Boromir tries to take it from him, he finds himself sitting in the Seat of Seeing on Amon Hen where he experiences the amazing power of unlimited sight in all directions. Thus, the power of the Ring is largely the power of vision. However, a shift occurs suddenly, and, under the supremacy of the monster's gaze, the hobbit loses power as he becomes the *seen*. Frodo shifts from the active to the passive position as he is diminished from 'the watcher' to 'the watched': "[S]uddenly he felt the Eye. [...] It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. Very soon it would nail him down, know just exactly where he was" (392). In a later instance, Gandalf chastises Pippin after he looks into the *palantír* where Sauron "held his eyes, so that now he could not look away" (578). Gandalf says, "[Sauron] did not want information only: he wanted *you*, quickly, so that he could deal with you in the Dark Tower, slowly" (580). Again, the monster seeks to possess his prey, and his means of accomplishing this feat is through visual domination. 'To see' is 'to know,' and Tolkien's classical Christian theology warned that seeking to know the nature of evil was, ironically, a perilous invitation to be known by it. Elrond counsels the fellowship as they embark on

their journey from Rivendell, "You should fear the many eyes of the servants of Sauron" (272).

Joseph Campbell believes that monsters represent "powers too vast for the normal forms of life to contain them" (278). From Polyphemus and Goliath to Moby Dick and the creature of *Frankenstein*, monsters of all forms have continued to serve an important function in literature throughout history. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Middle-earth's geography can be read as a psycho-spiritual landscape where the fields are bloodied with our own internal battles with the great evil monsters who seek to guard our passages, to destroy us, and, ultimately, to possess us in their powerful gaze of knowing.

The power of vision is one of the greatest forces in Middle-earth, and though the monsters wield it maliciously, benevolent characters such as Galadriel employ it for good. Shortly after the fellowship enters Lothlórien, Galadriel "held them with her eyes, and in silence looked searchingly at each of them in turn. None save Legolas and Aragorn could long endure her glance" (348). Later, she asks Frodo if he wishes to look into her mirror to see things past, present, and to come.

"Do you advise me to look?" asked Frodo.

"No," she said. "I do not counsel you one way or the other. I am not a counsellor. You may learn something, and whether what you see be fair or evil, that may be profitable, and yet it may not. Seeing is both good and perilous." (354)

Galadriel's omniscient, powerful gaze can be likened to Sauron's, and Galadriel's mirror functions similarly to Sauron's *palantiri*; however, the Lady of Light's intentions are the inverse of the Dark Lord's. Galadriel acknowledges the danger inherent in the power of vision, and she treats the matter with caution. In addition, she seeks to use her vision for a knowledge that serves only the good. She proves strong enough to resist Frodo's tempting offer of the Ring, thus resisting the desire to be queen and rule over all Middle-earth. Instead, as a result of her humility, she will "diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel" (357). Therefore, the visual act of 'seeing' only becomes evil when its function results in domination, possession, and control. Sauron's eye appears in the mirror with these evil intentions as it roves searching for the Ring.

But suddenly the Mirror went altogether dark, as dark as if a hole had opened in the world of sight, and Frodo looked into emptiness. In the black abyss there appeared a single Eye that slowly grew, until it filled nearly all the Mirror. So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or to withdraw his gaze. The Eye was rimmed with fire, but was

itself glazed, yellow as a cat's, watchful and intent, and the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing. (355)

Galadriel explains to Frodo, "I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind, or all of his mind that concerns the Elves. And he gropes ever to see me and my thought" (355). Hence, the great power of vision is wielded by the light as well as the darkness according to their purposes.

The Gaze in the Movies

Peter Jackson's adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to the visual medium of film creates a paradoxical experience for the viewer who, while seeming to identify with the heroic characters in the cause for good, is actually participating in a role more closely aligned with the evil beings in the narrative. In the role of filmmaker, Jackson inadvertently works toward the same ends as Tolkien's monsters as he seeks to bring the text under the controlling devices of a visual medium. Jackson's intentions in creating a cinematic presentation of Tolkien's text were by no means malicious; indeed, the benevolent filmmaker sought only to express his loyalty to Tolkien's work as he brought his vision of the book he loves to the screen to share with thousands of moviegoers. However, though Jackson is a master of his filmic craft, ironically, the innovative cinematography and the ground-breaking computer generated imagery, while engaging the viewer's imagination with highly stimulating effects, in many ways also limit the readers' unbounded imagination. Any singular, exclusive visual interpretation of the text harnesses and dominates the uninhibited imaginative experience of reading the written text. Despite the admirable fidelity to the original text, like the *Shadow*, a film adaptation of the original work "can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own." The camera operates as the controlling visual device that manipulates the text to serve its purposes within the medium. Consequently, to a greater or lesser degree, the film has no choice as it achieves its ends but to do violence to the original text. In addition, a close examination of the function of the cinematography in Jackson's film reveals that his camera often behaves like an 'evil eye' as it aligns the audience's perspective with that of the monsters. Hence, to a significant degree, the audience as spectator is subjected to a visual experience that resembles the gaze of the monsters.

In Jackson's film, the camera functions in many ways like the evil *palantir* used by Sauron and Saruman for the purposes of communicating visions or ideas and controlling those who dare to look into the perilous visual trap. Enslaved to the Dark Lord through one of the *palantiri*, or "seeing stones," Saruman (Christopher Lee) explains the powerful gaze of Sauron to Gandalf (Ian McKellan) at Isengard. "The Lord of Mordor sees all. His gaze pierces cloud,

shadow, earth, and flesh [...]. A great eye, lidless, wreathed in flame [...]. He is gathering all evil to him." When Gandalf asks Saruman how he knows this, his response is, "I have seen it." Saruman foolishly uses the *palantír*, and when Gandalf remarks that the seeing stone is a "dangerous tool," Saruman asks, "Why? Why should *we* fear to use it?" (*Fellowship* scene 12). Like Saruman with his *palantír*, Jackson chooses to look through the perilous lens, putting his camera to use to exert control over the text.

In his book *Signatures of the Visible*, film theorist Frederic Jameson opens with the statement, "The visual is *essentially* pornographic" (1). He makes a connection between power dynamics and the visual image.

Our society has begun to offer us the world—now mostly a collection of products of our own making—as just such a body, that you can possess visually, and collect the images of. [...] [A]ll the fights about power and desire have to take place here, between the mastery of the gaze and the illimitable richness of the visual object. (1)

To enter into the dimension of the Ring is to enter into a visual dimension where a distinct struggle for power ensues. When the Ring slips onto Frodo's finger at the Prancing Pony, Sauron's surveillance homes in on him, and the Great Eye says, "You cannot hide. I see you" (*Fellowship* scene 15). Frodo (Elijah Wood) stands almost helpless before the monster's dominating gaze. Strider (Viggo Mortensen) understands the important survival skill of remaining inconspicuous and outside the realm of visibility. He says drily to Frodo, "I can avoid being seen, if I wish—but to disappear entirely, that is a rare gift" (*Fellowship* scene 15).

In her ground-breaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey also elaborates on the dynamics of the possessive nature of the visual gaze in the context of a film medium. She explains the concept of scopophilia (pleasure in looking), an idea derived from Freud's work *Three Essays on Sexuality*, as a process where the viewer enjoys watching others and subjecting them to a controlling gaze. "At the extreme, [this pleasure] can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (2184). Mulvey's feminist study focuses particularly on the male gaze in the cinema, and though her critical approach could easily be applied to Peter Jackson as male filmmaker, her ideas seem more reasonably appropriated in this study to the visual experience of film in general.

As Mulvey's theory describes it, the camera, like the Evil Eye of Sauron, puts the audience in the position of a voyeuristic, ubiquitous watcher. For instance, in *The Two Towers* the camera journeys toward Isengard then zooms into the dangerous *palantír*, taking the audience into an omniscient and privileged

perspective by giving them the power to see over all the lands of Middle-earth. The commanding view concludes with the spectacle of Mordor and, ultimately, with the Great Eye of Sauron. This camera sequence resembles the all-seeing perspective of Sauron and reinforces an alliance with the Dark Lord as the audience's gaze finally meets and rests on his. Additionally, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the camera aligns itself with the *crebain*, the birds that serve as spies of Saruman. From the perspective of these evil creatures, the audience flies down into the Orc breeding pit of Isengard where Saruman is informed that the fellowship is planning to journey through the Caradhras Pass. The audience watches these scenes from the point of view of the monsters.

Tolkien believed that a text's form and content are inextricably bound. In his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," he explains an important difference between literature and visual art forms:

The radical distinction between all art (including drama) that offers a *visible* presentation and true literature is that it imposes one visible form. Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive. [...] If a story says "he climbed a hill and saw a river in the valley below," the illustrator may catch, or nearly catch, his own vision of such a scene; but every hearer of the words will have his own picture, and it will be made out of all the hills and rivers and dales he has ever seen, but specially out of The Hill, The River, The Valley which were for him the first embodiment of the word. (185)

Tolkien argues that visual arts such as the dramatic misunderstand and limit pure story-making, and in practicing a dramatic technique, the producer's desire is "power in this world, domination of things and wills" (161). Through his visual medium, the filmmaker imposes his singular form onto the readers' multifarious imaginations. Because Tolkien's central theme in *The Lord of the Rings* centers on the destructive nature of an evil power that seeks to dominate "things and wills," it could be argued that the text has been more than just perverted in a film adaptation; indeed, in many ways Tolkien's narrative purposes have been overthrown.

Perhaps Jackson instinctively understood the diminishing power of the visual translation of the text and, for this reason, chose to open his film with no image at all, thereby recognizing the power of the original text in its pure story-form. "In the beginning was the word," and Jackson chooses aptly to speak his dramatic world into existence using Tolkien's Elvish tongue. The voice-over of Galadriel (Cate Blanchett) begins the story with the line, "The world is changed" (*Fellowship* scene 1), and is set against an empty, black screen for the first thirty seconds of the film. The world of Middle-earth is changed not just historically as we enter the Third Age in the narrative, but it is changed in the presentation of

its new medium as well. As Galadriel continues her narration, the first actual image presented to the viewer is the forging of the Ring, which can be likened to the filmmaker's forging of Tolkien's text. "One Ring [or film] to rule them all." At the very least, Jackson's treatment of this significant initial scene shows his sensitivity to the power of language, if not his recognition of the authority of the story over its visual representation.

Finally, Tolkien argues in his essay that "in human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature" (157). The author explains why he believes that drama is "naturally hostile to Fantasy":

Drama has, of its very nature, already attempted a kind of bogus, or shall I say at least substitute, magic: *the visible and audible presentation of imaginary men in a story*. That is in itself an attempt to counterfeit the magician's wand. To introduce, even with mechanical success, into this quasi-magical secondary world a further fantasy or magic is to demand, as it were, an inner or tertiary world. It is a world too much. To make such a thing may not be impossible. I have never seen it done with success. (159)

Despite what Tolkien might have thought of Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, critics and audiences alike have considered it an overwhelming success, evidenced further by the Academy awarding *The Return of the King* eleven Oscars. Many Tolkien fans are so relieved (and surprised) that Jackson did not diminish their beloved text into yet another trite Hollywood formula story, and they are so impressed with the overall artistry of the film, that perhaps they are willing to overlook the problems with the transition from text to screen. Whatever the reasons, few have commented on the inherent critical problems with the film medium. Granted, all film adaptations must be accused of similar deficiencies, so one might question the purpose of singling out Jackson's *magnum opus* when, compared to so many other adaptations, his stellar work has risen above the critics' expectations. However, after examining some of the underlying themes in *The Lord of the Rings* and considering various approaches to film theory in conjunction with the author's own literary philosophies on the dynamics of the dramatic arts, the critical problems of Jackson's film become uniquely relevant to the on-going scholarship concerning the text.

Though the adaptation from print to celluloid in many ways reflects the monstrosity of the evil gaze, in another distinct way, Jackson's method also serves a more benevolent and enlightening purpose. With good intentions, the filmmaker invites his audience to the powerful screen just as Galadriel invites Frodo to the illuminations of her magic mirror. His films function like the Lady's mirror as he shows us what 'might be' or what 'could be' in a visual interpretation of the text. But perhaps Galadriel would warn Jackson that things

as we 'see' them aren't often as they truly 'are.' Perhaps she would warn the viewer that "seeing is both good and perilous" (*LotR* 354). Ultimately, though, thousands of contemporary movie-goers have responded to Jackson's precarious invitation just as Tolkien's hero did long ago in Middle-earth. "'I will look,' said Frodo, and he climbed on the pedestal and bent over the dark water" (354).

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