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## So Far From the Shire: Psychological Distance and Isolation in *The Lord of the Rings*

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### So Far From the Shire: Psychological Distance and Isolation in *The Lord of the Rings*

#### Abstract

Considers Frodo's psychological isolation in *The Lord of the Rings* and offers a perspective on Frodo and post-traumatic stress syndrome, looking closely at what was happening to him during his quest rather than after and using current understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse to provide a framework for understanding his experiences and reactions.

#### Additional Keywords

Domestic abuse; Post-traumatic stress disorder; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Frodo



O FAR FROM THE SHIRE:  
PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE  
AND ISOLATION IN  
*THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

GINNA WILKERSON

TOLKIEN'S EPIC TALE *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* follows the journey of Frodo Baggins as he travels away from the safety and familiarity of his home in the Shire to fulfill the almost impossible mission of destroying the powerful One Ring. Along with his faithful servant Sam, Frodo travels literally to the other side of his world of Middle-earth; for much of the journey the two hobbits travel alone, isolated from their companions. It is this isolation and psychological distance, even more than the physical distance, that separate Frodo from all that is safe and known and ultimately take a toll on his self confidence and emotional strength.

Devin Brown, in a 2006 article in *Mythlore*, explored Frodo's consistent preference for seclusion, citing his quest in the text as one of moving "from isolation to community" (Brown 163). Following this focus, Frodo's sense of isolation as he loses all of his fellow travelers except for the faithful Sam is self-imposed: a character trait about which Frodo is warned by Gandalf and others. According to Brown, "if Frodo is to grow from his condition of isolation to the more mature condition of community, he will have to give up the Ring and his pattern of seclusion" (166). Inevitably, this type of personal quest remains incomplete; although Frodo does manage to destroy the perilous One Ring, he remains an introvert who prefers few friends and quiet times.

I would strongly disagree, however, with Brown's perspective on introversion and isolation: Frodo's ultimate success in carrying out his nearly impossible mission may be seen as proof that being "the quiet type" is not necessarily problematic. Frodo *does* care about his family and friends—indeed, he cares enough about the fate of all those in Middle-earth to risk his very life to save them. Rather, I contend, Frodo's increasing isolation as he journeys to Mount Doom is imposed on him from the outside, from a most powerful and unrelenting source—the Ring itself.

Previous scholarship by Michael Livingston (among others) has suggested that Frodo's array of psychological symptoms resulting from his arduous quest may be likened to Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome. Though Tolkien himself, in a letter to L.W. Forster in 1960, emphasized that he did not think that either of the World Wars "had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding" (*Letters* 303), it is well known that PTSD first became a recognized mental disorder in treating returning World War I soldiers. Livingston's analysis seems quite apt in describing Frodo's change in outlook and behavior *following* his return from Mount Doom. The present essay, however, seeks to explain Frodo's emotional state and subsequent behavior *during* the quest, while under the direct, targeted influence of the One Ring's power and control.

Intensifying the negative effect of isolation on Frodo's inner turmoil is the constant presence of the evil power attached to the Ring that he carries. The fact that Bilbo's heir took on the burden of the Ring willingly fails to mitigate the downward psychological spiral that Frodo experiences as the Ringbearer; like the typical victim of emotional abuse, Frodo becomes aware of the Ring's ability to affect his behavior—and his spirit—long after he enters the original situation. The possession of the Ring ties Frodo irrevocably to the power of the Dark Lord, Sauron, and to the power inherent in the Ring itself. As Frodo gets further from the safety of the Shire and from all that makes him secure and confident in his ability to fulfill his quest, the Ring begins to take possession of Frodo's will; the dual elements of isolation and lack of control work against him and nearly destroy the usually stout-hearted hobbit.

Near the end of the tale, Frodo has lost his strength, his confidence, and even his will to live. It is Sam who almost forces his master to go on, and the Ring is ultimately sent into the Crack of Doom by the misguided actions of Gollum. Frodo himself is beaten down, without hope or the ability to fight the Ring's persuasive power: the very picture of a victim. The One Ring becomes much more than an inanimate object that came from the evil power represented by Sauron and is now carried in the pocket of a small hobbit. For Frodo, and indeed any who dare to possess the Ring, it begins to have agency of its own; it is the evil power of the Ring that saps Frodo's will and controls his life, playing the role of a human abuser. Perhaps Frodo may be seen as a victim of psychological abuse—abuse inflicted in a very personal and direct way by the dark power of the Ring and his ever-increasing isolation throughout his long journey.

It is almost certain that Tolkien's intent was not to show Frodo as a victim, and it is acknowledged here that the concept of emotional and psychological abuse is a modern one. Yet Tom Shippey, in *The Road to Middle-Earth*, effectively uses the paradigm of drug addiction, largely anachronistic for Tolkien's time, to explore and define the behavior of Gollum surrounding the

Ring (139-40). In addition, Tolkien's experiences in World War I undoubtedly affected his approach to subsequent writings, whether or not the author intended a direct correlation. As will be made clear in this essay, the paradigm of psychological abuse provides a valuable lens through which to observe Frodo's troubled relationship with the Ring.

An important exploration of images of domestic violence, including emotional abuse, in works of fiction was undertaken in a volume of essays *The Aching Hearth: Family Violence in Life and Literature* edited by Sara Deats and Lagretta Lenker (1991). At that time, the most widely used model for understanding domestic violence was a family systems approach, exploring the dynamics within a family system to uncover sources of violent behavior. The essays in this book make use of the concept of "learned helplessness," also popular at the time in dealing with issues of spousal abuse. For example, in Deats' essay "From Pedestal to Ditch," she says of Shakespeare's Desdemona: "when he [Othello] inexplicably turns on her, like the typical battered wife she withdraws, stunned into passivity, denial, and helplessness" (88). Although Deats is careful to avoid blaming the victim, the abusive situation is nevertheless viewed through the lens of the victim's response.

This sense of pathologizing the behavior of the victim along with that of the batterer underlies one of the common critiques of the systems approach. An alternative approach to domestic violence based on the desire of the perpetrator for power and control was developed by the Domestic Violence Intervention Project in Duluth, Minnesota. Beginning in the mid-nineties, the associated "Power and Control Wheel" became widely used in understanding the dynamics of all types of abusive behavior.

In the Duluth Model, power and control form the foundations of all types of abuse. The Power and Control Wheel, a graphic representation of the standard elements of an abusive relationship,<sup>1</sup> shows isolation as one of eight key factors. Abusers may effectively isolate their partners by forbidding contact with friends, relatives, and neighbors. The sense of aloneness experienced through this isolation adds to the fear and uncertainty of the victim; the victim begins to believe that there is no escape from the situation, and no hope of change. The victim's self-image and sense of agency are eroded through prolonged physical and emotional isolation.

As Frodo gets further from his companions and loses all hope of aid or rescue, he and Sam feel similarly abandoned on Mount Doom. "Psychological abuse isolates victims of violence, erodes their self-esteem, and tends to make them more susceptible to external control" (Shepard and Pence 129).

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<sup>1</sup> This model can be found at <http://www.duluth-model.org>.

It is important to remember here that Frodo and Sam (and the other hobbits in the Fellowship) had lived in a peaceful environment before their involvement with the Ring quest; by comparison, any acts of violence, even in self-defense, place them outside their normal psychological parameters. By the time Frodo and Sam reach Mordor and approach Mount Doom, they have experienced far more violence happening around them and to them than they would have experienced in an entire normal hobbit lifetime.

As previously discussed, some scholars have equated the psychological and physical damage that Frodo experiences with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In both Michael Livingston's article "The Shell-Shocked Hobbit" and Bruce Leonard's intriguing conference paper discussed in Chapter Seven of Janet Brennan Croft's book *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, the symptoms of PTSD are shown to fit well with the image of Frodo seen in the final chapters of *Lord of the Rings*. As the point of the present essay, however, is to uncover reasons for Frodo's behavior *during* his traumatic experiences, the abuser/victim dichotomy seems a better fit.

As the victim experiences the negative effects of ongoing abuse, including isolation, the abuser gradually becomes the individual's only frame of reference. For Frodo, the Ring does indeed consume more and more of his energy and will as he travels further from his home and companions. The Ring eventually comes to define and control Frodo's world; on Mount Doom, Frodo has lost most of his own will and intention. The Ring and the dark power behind it have come to define and control Frodo's world.

Before he began his troubled relationship with the One Ring, Frodo spent his days contentedly in his familiar home at Bag End, surrounded by friends and relatives. The safety of his hobbit world with its long traditions and close ties gives Frodo confidence and a sense of identity. Gandalf warns him about the dangers of the Ring early in the narrative:

[I]f he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he *fades*: he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. (*LotR* I:2, 46)

This warning means that Frodo knew the potential for unimaginable personal danger before he accepted the task of carrying the Ring. In spite of his initial fear, Frodo remains willing to go on the journey with Gandalf as his guide. He has no idea at this time that the final leg of his journey will isolate him (along with Sam) both physically and psychologically from all that is familiar. Later, when his companions Sam, Merry and Pippin join him, Frodo feels comfort in the knowledge that his friends will accompany him on the journey.

Although some unfamiliar elements are introduced before the hobbits reach the Prancing Pony in Bree (for example, the company of elves and the home of Tom Bombadil), the menacing aspect of the dark power that will eventually sap Frodo's strength and will become more obvious in "A Knife in the Dark." It is in this chapter that Frodo first feels his connection to the power of his enemy; when he puts the Ring on his finger, his view of the Black Riders changes. "[T]hrough everything else remained as before, dim and dark, the shapes became terribly clear" (*LotR* I:11, 191). Like the victim who begins to identify with his abuser, Frodo feels the pull of the dark power; this centrality of the Ring and its master increases ominously as Frodo gets further from home both physically and emotionally. The Black Riders, which feature so prominently in the danger and menace of evil later in the story, have already been introduced while the travelers are still safely in the Shire. The images Tolkien gives us of the Nazgûl become more threatening and powerful as Frodo steps outside of his familiar world.

The wizard Gandalf is part of the larger world of strange magical happenings outside of the Shire, but he is also quite familiar to Frodo and his companions. He has always been interested in "hobbit-lore," and has frequented the Shire for many years. In addition, he is the one who explained at least a piece of the Ring story to Frodo, and sent him on the journey. Hence, as long as Gandalf remains either with the party or accessible, some element of familiarity and safety is retained for Frodo and his companions. However, Gandalf is believed dead after his encounter with the Balrog in "The Bridge of Khazad-dûm" in the first book of the trilogy.

The reader knows that he returns later in the story as Gandalf the White, but Frodo and Sam believe him to be dead until almost the end of the entire epic. In the depth of despair and hopelessness of Mount Doom, Sam reflects on the effect Gandalf's absence had on the outcome of the quest, "Things all went wrong when he went down in Moria" (*LotR* VI:3, 913). With the guidance and protection of Gandalf gone, the sense of isolation increases for the remaining company.

Even though the gathering of the fellowship seems to emphasize the value of working together and traveling in numbers, Frodo and Sam operate on their own through most of the trilogy, beginning at the close of the first book. They will not be reunited with their fellow travelers until late in the narrative, after Frodo's mission is accomplished. All of the negative effects of isolation exhibited by victims of abuse seem to close in on the two lonely hobbits rather quickly. Fear, insecurity, social isolation, and alienation are all identified outcomes of long-term abuse, both physical and psychological (Rokach 367). As it often does for actual abuse victims, the isolation Frodo experiences as he travels further from the Shire with only Sam (and sometimes Gollum) for

company begins to erode his sense of agency; the psychological distance he feels as they cross the Land of Shadow and approach Mount Doom mirrors the physical distance they have traveled.

Frodo is indeed a victim, a victim of Sauron's power, the strangle hold of the Ring, and the obligation the Council of Elrond placed on his shoulders. He is fighting not only the external war with the darkness that threatens Middle-earth, but a private battle to maintain his sanity and strength of will long enough to accomplish his mission. Psychological torture as it is used with prisoners of war and hostages is defined by Amnesty International as including isolation, deprivation of food and sleep, denial of victim's powers, monopolization of precepts, and inducing altered states of consciousness (Walker 34-35). Along with physical distance and emotional isolation, Frodo and Sam certainly experience a shortage of food as they approach the end of their journey. More than once, they have been rescued from hunger by the intervention of others wishing to help; at the end, no one remains to come to their aid, and the *lembas* of the elves is stretched beyond its limit to sustain them. On Mount Doom, the days have long passed since a luxury like rabbit seasoned with herbs was available; *lembas*, unfamiliar as it is, becomes more precious than gold.

Researcher and author Ami Rokach has studied the condition of loneliness experienced by groups of people in particular situations; Rokach's most recent study focuses on the loneliness of victims of domestic abuse in women's shelters. The study found that the overwhelming emotion experienced by these newly rescued victims was a pervading loneliness. The upheaval, which might be interpreted as distance from the familiar, and the isolation of the shelter setting lead to loneliness. Like these victims, Frodo and Sam experience the desperation of extreme isolation ever more profoundly as they get further from the Shire and closer to their dark destination. As Rokach describes this emotional state, they "do not feel safe in the world" (371). Even after Frodo is rescued and finds safety and healing in Ithilien, he is permanently changed as a result of his experience of deprivation, fear, and aloneness. Ultimately, he cannot stay in his beloved Shire but must sail away with Gandalf and the elves.

In further describing the loneliness of long-term victims of abuse, Rokach explains that their loneliness is associated with "feelings of intense pain, inner turmoil, hopelessness, and feelings of emptiness" (369). Indeed, even before they attempt the climb to Mount Doom, Frodo seems to have sunk to the depths of despair, expressing feelings of lost hope and emptiness. Frodo laments to Sam, "They've taken everything, Sam. Everything I had." And again on the same page, "The quest has failed, Sam. [...] We can't escape" (*LotR* VI:1, 890). Although, of course, the Ring is the most essential element that has been taken, Frodo seems to be despairing on a more profound level, as if literally his entire world has been stripped from him, along with his clothing and his hope.



Along with his physical nakedness after his capture by Sauron's orc servants, Frodo feels ever more emotionally vulnerable as well. He is constantly aware of the Dark Power keeping watch for him, "brooding in deep thought and sleepless malice" (*LotR* VI:3, 914); as a victim of the power harnessed in the One Ring, Frodo can never feel safely hidden from Sauron's evil intent. Frodo even identifies with his abuser when he sees even the loyal Sam as his enemy; the dark power of the Ring speaks through Frodo when he calls his faithful servant a thief for having carried the Ring with the intent to help. By this point in the journey ("The Tower of Cirith Ungol"), there is nothing left of normality in Frodo's mind, even in his memory. He can't see any of the familiar scenes of home that Sam describes, telling Sam, "I am naked in the dark" (916).

Loss of hope is a tragic side-effect of the isolation of psychological abuse: loss of hope and insidious doubt that anything will ever change or improve. Frodo doubts himself in this way as he gets further into the unfamiliar and intimidating environment of Sauron's stronghold. When all of Frodo's sense of efficacy is drained from him, he can only follow Sam blindly toward their destination.

"For the hobbits each day, each mile, was more bitter than the one before, as their strength lessened and the land became more evil" (*LotR* VI:3, 914). This draining combination of ever-diminishing emotional strength and ever-increasing abuse is all too familiar to victims of domestic abuse and psychological torture. "Soul murder," a term coined by playwright August Strindberg and used by Philip Sipiora in his essay on abuse in *The Great Gatsby*, can be defined as psychic murder: destroying an individual's sense of self and reason for living. Sipiora uses a powerful phrase from Leonard Shengold: "The capacity to destroy a soul hinges entirely on having another human being in one's power" (Shengold, qtd. in Sipiora 203). Soul murder seems an apt term for what happens to Frodo as he gets closer to the completion of his journey to Mount Doom.

In extreme instances, victims of abuse can come to perceive suicide as the only way to regain control of their shattered lives: if they have nothing left to control, perhaps then they can at least control when life will end. Frodo, too, gives up all hope and will to live in the isolation and despair of Mount Doom. Even Sam, who faithfully attempts to shore up Frodo's strength both physically and emotionally, begins to doubt the possibility of a successful end to their mission. Evidence of their lack of all hope of survival comes when Frodo and Sam decide to lighten their load by discarding anything that is not directly needed to get to the Crack of Doom. They know they will not survive to begin a return journey. As Frodo says, "This is the end of ends" (*LotR* VI:3, 921).

Even after the mission is accomplished and the One Ring is destroyed, the hopelessness and despair that psychological distance and isolation have

imposed on Frodo's thinking remain. He prepares to die there on Mount Doom: "We are lost in ruin and downfall, and there is no escape" (*LotR* VI:4, 929). At that moment, Frodo's emotional state perfectly illustrates the devastating effects that isolation in various guises can have on an otherwise confident and competent person—or hobbit. Tolkien, intentionally or not, provides an insightful depiction of the results of isolation and psychological abuse in his portrait of Frodo under the control of the Ring.

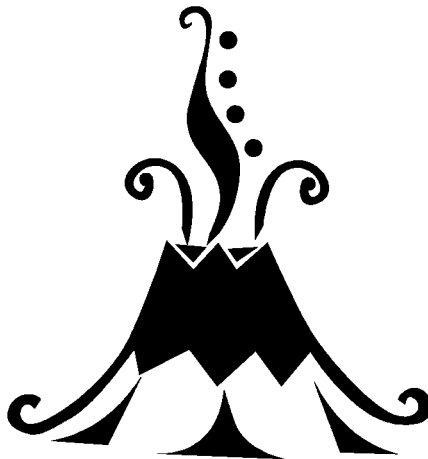
In the reality of domestic violence treatment programs, there is hope that victims may, with help, go on to recover from the effects of the abusive situation. Nursing professionals working with victims and their families have found that "limiting intrusion" is an important skill for families to foster in beginning to recover (Wuest, Merritt-Gray, and Ford-Gilboe, 259). Intrusion may take the form of continued contact with the abuser (not an issue for Frodo—the Ring is destroyed), health and emotional issues resulting from abuse, and changes in the living situation as a result of separation from the abuser. "Families promote their health in short- and long-term by *strengthening capacity to limit intrusion*" (italics in original; 259).

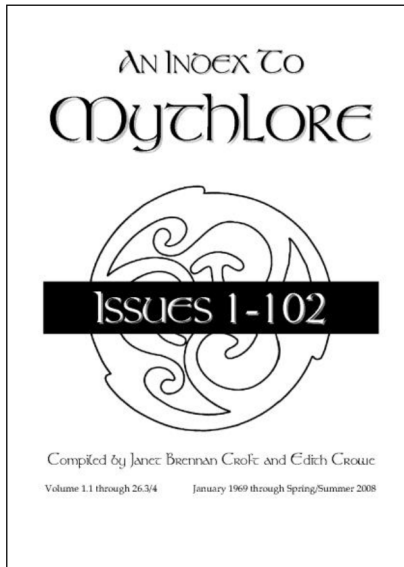
In the final chapters of *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo finds it impossible to integrate himself back into his former life in the Shire. The daily business of living is indeed too much for him: an intrusion with which he cannot cope. With the Ring—and the evil power it represents—permanently removed from Frodo's life, perhaps Frodo will indeed find a healthy capacity to "limit intrusion" by retreating to Valinor. There he will find not only rest and healing, but safety as well.

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