Sauron is Watching You: The Role of the Great Eye in The Lord of the Rings

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Abstract
Finds a source for the Eye of Sauron, and other representations of baleful eyes in Tolkien's work ("one of the most pervasive and compelling patterns of imagery"), in the Celtic mythological figure Balor of the Evil Eye.

Additional Keywords
Balor of the Evil Eye (figure in Celtic mythology); Celtic mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sauron; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Celtic mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Symbolism
Sauron is Watching You:
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The Lord of the Rings
by Edward Lense

One of the greatest strengths of *The Lord of the Rings* is Tolkien's use of figures from Celtic and Nordic mythologies as inhabitants of his secondary world. Dwarves, Elves, Wizards, and even Orcs seem almost familiar compared to such beings as Shelob or Treebeard; they form a bridge between the traditions of the primary world and the realities of Tolkien's secondary world. However, Tolkien did not confine himself to such well-known figures. He was, as a Medievalist, familiar with many more arcane legendary characters, so well-acquainted with them that his imagination could work on them as naturally as if he talked to them every day. Beorn in *The Hobbit*, for example, is a character in his own right, and never seems to be an echo of Norse mythology. In any case, Tolkien has imagined him so thoroughly that even when a reader is aware of his origin he remains a living character. Sauron, too, is not a figure from mythology under a new name, but a character imagined by Tolkien; nonetheless, it is clear that he is modeled on Balor of the Evil Eye, one of the most unpleasant figures in Celtic mythology, whom he closely resembles in almost every way.

It seems unlikely that Tolkien intended his readers to recognize Balor in the character of Sauron, since such a recognition adds little to the story. It is more likely that the Irish legends about Balor "inspired" Tolkien by giving him the images he needed to build up his own figure of absolute evil. In particular, tradition gave Tolkien the Evil Eye, the most striking feature of both Balor and Sauron. Further, the Great Eye and its lesser counterparts served him as convincing emblems of evil (all the negative characters have really nasty eyes), and as a way of creating a strong sense of dread throughout the work. Burning and baleful eyes, copies of Sauron's Great Eye, are everywhere, and, naturally, make the good characters very nervous; the sense of being constantly watched by terrible eyes is an important part of the texture of life in Middle-earth. Sauron's (or Balor's) Eye is, then, both a link to Celtic myth and the center of one of the most pervasive and compelling patterns of imagery in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Balor is a central character in the oldest forms of Celtic (especially Irish) mythology, but he is almost as elusive a figure as Sauron himself, since he is mentioned only occasionally in the sagas. He was a king of the Fomóire, an evil race who ruled Ireland until they were defeated by the *Death of Danaans*, a godlike race who strongly resemble Tolkien's Elves. The *Fomóire* in general were a great deal like Sauron as he appeared in the Third Age; that is, they were evil spirits who took on hideously deformed bodies. Although the legends about them are fragmentary and confused, one thing is clear: every Fomorian had one arm, one leg, and one eye. The only physical representation of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, a bust executed by the Orcs and put on an old statue, looks exactly like the head of a Fomorian:

It's [the statue's] head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst of its forehead.1

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3 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Bal-
This is not the only way in which Sauron resembles the Fomóire. That race lived in deformed bodies because they were evil, and the reason Sauron is so horrible to look at is the same. His outward form, which can only be guessed at aside from the Eye, reflects his true nature in a way that his original, beautiful body did not:

Sauron was indeed caught in the wreck of Númenor, so that the bodily form in which he long had walked perished; but he fled back to Middle-earth, a spirit of hatred borne upon a dark wind. He was unable ever again to assume a form that seemed fair to men, but became black and hideous, and his power thereafter was through terror alone. (III, 393)

This change resembles that of Döre's illustrations for Paradise Lost, in which Satan visibly decays from an archangel to the kind of hideous shape that Sauron and Balor share with him.

Aside from his physical resemblance to Balor and the Fomóire, Sauron is the ruler of a land much like theirs. Mordor is, essentially, a Celtic hell to match the Celtic heaven of the Uttermost West. Several critics have already pointed out that the Undying Lands are based on Tyr na nDg, the Land of Youth, the Celtic Earthly Paradise that lies in the Atlantic, i.e., in the farthest West. While not strictly a supernatural realm like Valinor, Mordor has, nonetheless, all the marks of the traditional Land of the Dead as A.C.L. Brown describes it:

Some distinguishing marks of the tower of the dead in European tradition are known. It is made of glass or iron; it has iron doors; it is occasionally adorned with human heads stuck on pikes; it is beyond a terrible river or is cut off by marshes or thickets. The marshes in this case are the Dead Marshes, which, as you would expect, are haunted by the ghosts of warriors slain in battle. They form the barrier that heroes must cross to get into the supernatural realm, and like Mordor itself, they are physically real and part of this world, yet full of a power that makes them otherworldly at the same time, like Lothlorien and Imladris. The tower of the dead is represented by Minas Morgul with its wavering corpse-light and revolving turret, and, of course, the Dark Tower, the "mountains of iron" in the heart of Mordor. In any case, topography is not the only sign that Mordor is a land of the dead: even though it is peopled with living men from the South and East and with Orcs, its rulers are spirits of the dead. Sauron himself has died twice already and is hardly in this world at all, and his chief servants, the Nazgûl, are, like the barrow-wight and the oath-breakers, dead men under powerful spells. Tolkien even uses the word "undead" in reference to the Captain of the Ringwraiths.

It appears that Sauron's deformed body and his role as king of the land of the dead make him analogous to a king of the Fomóire like Balor, who ruled the dead from a tower of glass. But the definitive link between them is the evil eye. Brown thought of Balor as "a personification of the evil eye or of death," and the evil eye is certainly the most formidable thing about him. The Irish saga of "The Second Battle of Moytura" describes it as something of an ultimate weapon:

An evil eye had Balor. That eye was never opened save only on a battle-field. Four men used to lift up the lid of the eye with a polished handle through its lid. If an army looked at that eye, though they were many thousands in number they could not resist [a few] warriors."

Iantaine, 1965), II, 395. Further references, noted in the text, are to this edition.


Ibid., p. 6.


This eye, even allowing for the hyperbole of Celtic sagas, is obviously supernatural, like Sauron's. It was also the source of Balor's strength, and the evil power that made the Fomóire unsuccessful in battle. While killed by a stone slung through the eye, his army disintegrated—prod­eled along by the way the eye came out the back of Balor's head and killed twenty-seven of his own warriors. The effect is much the same as when Sauron's army scattered after the last battle at the Black Gate.

The basic way in which Tolkien drew on Balor of the Evil Eye for Sauron the Great is quite clear, and, as I have mentioned, it is hardly surprising that he should have used such a model given his deep learning in Celtic mythology and his ability to see legendary figures as living 'things.' But the most interesting thing about this borrowing and reworking is not the ways in which Sauron resembles Balor but rather the ways in which, through Tolkien's imaginative use of his source, Sauron transcends Balor as a figure of primal evil. The difference between them is clear if you compare Balor's eye with the eye that appears in Galadriel's mirror:

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 did Frodo's eye stand 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. (I, 471)

Sauron's Eye is "terrible," but it is not terrible merely because it is a weapon (although it is a powerful weapon): rather, it is a "window into nothing," the opening into the abyss, an emblem of ultimate despair. He and the other evil beings of the work are eaten up with hatred of the living: damned themselves, they want to be avenged for their fall by dragging the rest of the world down with them. The fire of the cold light of their eyes is Tolkien's (very traditional) way of expressing their rage and hatred. Sauron's Eye is so much worse than Balor's, then, because Balor is merely a figure of death, Sauron of damnation. That is why when Frodo felt the Eye as he stood at Amon Hen, hundreds of miles from Mordor, he "lost all hope": facing Balor's eye in a battle must have been unnerving as well as dangerous, but facing Sauron's despair and his power at the same time would be immeasurably worse.

Sauron is utterly cruel, and the Eye is also an emblem of cruelty, itself part of his despair. The Captain of the Nazgûl uses its terror to threaten Eowyn before the gates of Minas Tirith:

"Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! Or he will not slay thee in thy turn. He will bear thee away to the houses of lamentation, beyond all darkness, where thy flesh shall be devoured, and thy shrivelled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye. (III, 141)

All of Sauron's malice is concentrated in the image of the Lidless Eye. In this case the eye is an instrument of torture; in the Mirror of Galadriel it shows intense anxiety, as it restlessly seeks out Galadriel to destroy her. When Frodo feels it on Amon Hen, he is aware of the same destructive will:

"And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. A fierce eager will was there. It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. (I, 519)

But, most of all, the Eye embodies Sauron's power. It can search out Frodo from hundreds of miles away, and "leap towards him" so powerfully that its presence is almost palpable; its great power is even more evident when Frodo feels it again in the Dead Marshes on the borders of Sauron's realm:

The Eye: that horrible growing sense of a hostile will that strove with great power to..."
pierce all shadows of cloud and earth, and flesh, and hear your deadly gaze, naked, immovable. (II, 301)

This image, which occurs several times in the work, is already a great expansion on Balor's eye: Tolkien has transformed it from a straightforward emblem of death into a compelling symbol of power and hatred, a piercing force that wants to strip its enemies naked and destroy them. Had he left it at that, it would have been a mere reminiscence of Sauron's evil will. But he went on to tie almost all of the evil beings of Middle-earth together by giving them lesser versions of the Great Eye, so that a reader is confronted with its terrible image again and again in many different forms.

Sauron's eye is burning, "rimmed with fire," and so are the eyes of other evil creatures, no doubt because they feel something of his rage. Grishnakh, for example, though he is merely an orc and not an evil spirit, has eyes that flame up when he suspects that the One Ring is within his grasp: "His fingers continued to grope. There was a light like a pale but hot fire behind his eyes" (II, 73). Shelob, an evil spirit in spider form, has eyes that are much more formidable:

Not far down the tunnel, between them [Frodo and Sam] and the opening where the torch had reeled and stumbled, he [Frodo] was aware of eyes growing visible, two great clusters of many-windowed eyes—the coming menace was unmasked at last. The radiance of the star-glass was borrowed close back from Frodo, thousand facets, but behind the glint of a pale deadly fire began steadily to glow within, a flame kindled in some deep pit of evil thought. Monstrous and abominable eyes they were.... (II, 419)

Shelob, like Sauron in the Mirror of Galadriel, is reduced by metonymy into 'monstrous and abominable eyes': the rest of her spider-like body is invisible and, at the moment, serves as most irrelevant. Her desperate and deadly fire behind her eyes, and that fire is far more awful than the mechanical horror of her body.

The fell light of such beings is not necessarily a flame, though; since evil beings in the work are essentially lifeless, it is appropriate that their eyes should often have a cold gleam, something like the chilling little flames and corpse-lights of the Dead Marshes. These pallid lights are like weak reflections of the flames in Sauron's Eye. The barrow-wight is typical: "He [Frodo] thought there were two great cold though lit with a pale light that seemed to come from some remote distance" (I, 193). Saruman after his fall is much the same; Gandalf noted that "in his eyes there seemed to be a white light, as if a cold laughter was in his heart" (I, 338).

The Ringwraith's eyes are less closely described, which is natural enough since they are invisible. But, again, the terror of their Captain's presence is concentrated in his eyes. In the only scene in which the narrator is close to him, as he stands on the Pelennor Fields confronting Eowyn, the hidden eyes are the most terrifying thing about him: "A crown of steel he bore, but between rim and robe naught was there to see, save only a deadly gleam of eyes: the Lord of the Nazgûl" (II, 141). His first act is to deliver to Eowyn his speech about how "thy flesh shall be devoured, and they shrivelled and died and became not the Lidless Eye." On the next two pages, Eowyn "raised her shield against the horror of her enemy's eyes"; Merry, nearby, "hardly dared to move, dreading lest the deadly eyes should fall on him"; and the great Nazgûl, preparing (as he thought), to finish off Eowyn, "bent over her like a cloud, and his eyes glittered." It would be strange anywhere but in The Lord of the Rings that these eyes, visible only as a glitter, should be the most terrifying thing in such a scene. Other writers would surely stress the more spectacular images here: the overwhelming darkness, the flying monster, the Nazgûl's empty robes, the fires and clamor and ruin of the battle all around. But it is characteristic of Tolkien that the hypnotic eyes should impress and cow Merry and Eowyn more than all the rest, and that Tolkien could return to them so consistently. Those glittering ghostly eyes seem to have been important to Tolkien; he used the same image a little later, in Legolas' account of the march of the oath-breakers, in which, after Aragorn's victory at Umbar, the host of the Dead "stood silent, hardly to be seen, save for a red gleam in their eyes that caught the glare of the ships that they were burning" (III, 187). This particular detail of the ships is, I think, the most frightening image of the Dead that Tolkien presents, and it is certainly a fitting one, since that army is made up of evil ghosts; it is an integral part of the horror of Mordor even though Aragorn uses it against Sauron.

The ghostly eyes of the Witch-king and the other dead may be terrified and chilling, but, aside from the Great Eye itself, no evil character's eyes can match Gollum's for sheer gaudiness. Gollum's eyes glowed with a pale or green flame even in The Hobbit:

As suspicion grew in Gollum's mind, the light of his eyes burned with a pale flame.

He [Bilbo] turned now and saw Gollum's eyes like small green lamps coming up the slope.

In The Two Towers, where there are over a dozen references to the light in his eyes, the two colors even seem to correspond to his moods: a pale light indicates that he is relatively happy, a green light that he is in a rage. At times he looks like a traffic light. When he is debating within himself whether or not to betray Frodo and Sam, for example, the lights switch back and forth rapidly (II, 303). Or, again, when Frodo traps him at the Forbidden Pool, he is glowing: "He [Gollum] looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. (II, 411)

Unlike such entirely evil beings as Sauron and Shelob, Gollum can change, and the signal for his recovery of himself is that the light fades from his eyes; because the evil is not really part of him as he was in the beginning, he can be "cured" still, as Gandalf often insists. But the cure is fragile, and here, when Sam at his most boorish broke the peaceful mood, Gollum "withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids."

All of these evil eyes, even Gollum's, are basically lesser versions of Sauron's Eye, and are lighted by the same will for power that drives him. Not only do they resemble his Eye in physical appearance, but, taken together, they are as ubiquitous as his. It seems that no matter where you go or what you do in Middle-earth, you will inevitably find yourself confronting someone like Grishnûk or Gollum, or, if you are really unlucky, Sauron himself.

Frodo, exposed to the Eye because he is carrying the Ring, feels the powerful hostile will that strives to "pin you under its deadly gaze, naked, immovable," but, while he is more subject to this feeling than anyone else in the work, he is not alone in his feeling that he is being watched, that invisible eyes are trying to get at him. This sense begins with his feeling of lurking danger just before he leaves Bag End, and continues steadily through his long

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journey. Still, his and Sam's experiences as they approach Mordor demonstrate this sense of dreadful watchfulness most clearly, because Mordor is full of watchful eyes. It is an evil place, and, in The Lord of the Rings, part of the definition of an evil place is that it is watching you.

Frodo's first reaction to Mordor as he approaches it, but still far from it, is a passing thought: this is a matter of terrible eyes that fill the world: they are dreadful in themselves, but also reminders that Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf, and their companions are in constant danger. In a sense, however, no reminders are ever necessary, since the plot of the work is, in simplest terms, a story of flight and pursuit. It is true that the direction of flight is toward the pursuers, but it is flight nonetheless, from the moment when Frodo first hides from a Black Rider in the middle of the Shire until he finally stands exposed to the Eye at the edge of the Cracks of Doom. The complexities of the struggles, battles, marches, and bluffs that Gandalf sets up are only devices to keep the Eye looking in the wrong places; Gandalf, especially, sometimes seems like a madman who spends all his time constructing elaborate plots to keep his enemies off balance. He is given to saying things like, "His Eye is now straining toward us, blind almost to all else that is moving" (III, 191). One of the things it is blind to, as Gandalf intends, is the fact that Frodo is approaching Mount Doom to unmake the Ring. It is characteristic of Sauron that he should be looking in the wrong place, but it is also characteristic that he should be looking with great intensity.

The sense of watchfulness that Gandalf is referring to starts very early in The Fellowship of the Ring; long before anything seems to have happened, Bilbo starts to worry because his gold ring has been "growing on my mind lately. Sometimes I have felt it was like an eye looking at me" (I, 61). This is the kind of remark that leads to kind suggestions about taking a nice long rest, but after this point there is no rest or escape from the Ring's watching eye until the Ring has gone into the fire. Under the strain of constant surveillance, the Company come to seem far more dangerous than Bilbo. Aragorn dives to the ground when he sees a flock of crows, as if they were spies; Frodo sees even the moon over Rivendell as "a watchful eye" (I, 392); Sam sees "a log with eyes" floating down the Anduin (I, 495). From such beginnings the tension increases steadily throughout the work as one evil being after another appears, always with chilling or burning eyes, and, most of all, as Frodo repeatedly feels the power of Sauron's Eye that is always at the point of finding him out. The pressure of imminent discovery becomes intense during the last journey into Mordor, and reaches its climax when the Eye finally, but too late, sees Frodo.

The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. (III, 275)

Tolkien's phrasing is unusually ironic here: Sauron's belated understanding of what has been going on comes to him in a "blinding flash," but he has actually been blind all along. The things that make his Eye terrible are the things that lead to his fall: the malice that makes him look out from his own land toward enemies that he wants to destroy, the anxiety that makes him look only for armies which can destroy him by brute force (the only power he really understands), the despair that makes Frodo love for the Shire, and his willing self-sacrifice, incomprehensible. As a result of his blindness, then, Sauron is defeated and passes into the void, and all the eyes that have been such an important part of the texture of Middle-earth vanish with him. He does no better than Balor in his last battle: Balor died because his eye was better as a target than as a weapon, Sauron because his Eye could see everything except what really mattered.

The Eye failed Sauron, but it did not fail Tolkien. His skill in building up a simple motif from an obscure saga resulted in one of his most persuasive and memorable images: the Eye is not only all that is revealed in the Ring's messages (to see of Sauron, but an effective emblem of all the dread and sense of menace that Sauron inspires in Middle-earth. And, most of all, it is a brilliant concrete representation of the nature and power of absolute evil.