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## Power and Knowledge in Tolkien: The Problem of Difference in "The Birthday Party"

Jane Chance

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

It is not altogether clear from reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time how political the hobbits Bilbo and Frodo are, even in the introductory chapter "A Long-expected Party". For there exist power struggles among the different hobbit families in the Shire, absurd in some cases, significant in others. One mark of the ability of Bilbo and Frodo is their sensitivity to the politics of the Shire, a faculty born of nurture and nature that will enable Frodo's mission and attract followers. This paper will reveal how Tolkien's understanding of leadership rests upon what might be termed a Post-modernist relationship between power and knowledge.

### Additional Keywords

Foucault; The Hobbit; leadership; The Lord of the Rings; politics; power

# Power and Knowledge in Tolkien: The Problem of Difference in “The Birthday Party”<sup>1</sup>

Jane Chance

**Abstract:** It is not altogether clear from reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time how political the hobbits Bilbo and Frodo are, even in the introductory chapter “A Long-expected Party”. For there exist power struggles among the different hobbit families in the Shire, absurd in some cases, significant in others. One mark of the ability of Bilbo and Frodo is their sensitivity to the politics of the Shire, a faculty born of nurture and nature that will enable Frodo’s mission and attract followers. This paper will reveal how Tolkien’s understanding of leadership rests upon what might be termed a Post-modernist relationship between power and knowledge.

**Keywords:** Foucault, *The Hobbit*, leadership, *The Lord of the Rings*, politics, power

Tolkien shares with the social philosopher and theorist Michel Foucault similar concerns relating to the question of power and knowledge. Although Tolkien’s major fictional writings did not emerge in response to the political and academic events in France during the late sixties, as did Foucault’s essays, nevertheless he spent most of his mature life as a professor working within the British equivalent of the academy, and his greatest popularity coincided with a similar historical phenomenon – the rise of student power during the late sixties and early seventies. To provide this context for the study of Tolkien, then, is to invite comparison with a thinker whose views on the question of power and knowledge share a remarkable likeness.

Most important, both thinkers question power as sovereignty, power as substance. In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, Foucault notes that, “Power in the substantive sense, ‘le’ pouvoir, doesn’t exist . . . In reality power means relations, a more-or-less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations” (Foucault, 1980, p. 198). This concept of a power grid implies constant change and flux and therefore by definition a “complex domain” of particular powers and many issues (Foucault, 1980, p. 188). To analyse this network requires attention to the whole interworking rather than to the responsibility of the individual alone, requires attention, that is, to what might be termed the domain of the political: “Every relation of force implies at each moment a relation of power (which is in a sense its momentary expression) and every power relation makes a reference, as its effect but also as its condition of possibility, to a political field of which it

forms a part” (Foucault, 1980, p. 189). Tolkien, as we shall see, might well agree with this politicization of power – and of knowledge.

Like Foucault, both Tolkien and his fellow Inkling C.S. Lewis question the validity of the human sciences to represent the rationality of the age. Foucault focuses upon the institutional matrices of hospital and asylum at a time when the working class was in revolt against the power of institutions, whether schools, hospitals, or prisons, and therefore against the knowledge they claimed as their province. Tolkien fictionalizes this institutional matrix through the creation of the Dark Lord Sauron and his imitators linked with the land of death, Mordor, that he ruled so tyrannously. Both thinkers object to the importance of post-Enlightenment technologies in the governance of peoples.

In “The Eye of Power”, Foucault defines the essential institutional model as Bentham’s eighteenth-century architectural device of the “Panopticon,” a ring-shaped building enclosing a tower that oversees cells that might contain a convict – or a lunatic, a patient, a worker, or a student (Foucault, 1980, p. 147). It is the same model used by Tolkien to locate the nature of Sauron’s power, Saruman’s power, Shelob’s power, even the Sackville-Bagginses’ power. Visibility – the searching Eye of Sauron – is necessary to ensure access to all individuals; it is this same visibility which insists upon a rigorous and universal power. The ultimate form of visibility locates within the individual, or what Foucault describes as “the gaze” – “An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first published as part of Jane Chance’s *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power* (1992, pp. 19-35).

by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself. A superb formula: power exercised continuously and for what turns out to be a minimal cost. When Bentham realizes what he has discovered, he calls it the Columbus's egg of political thought, a formula exactly the opposite of monarchical power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 155). Through this structure power becomes what Foucault terms a "machinery that no one owns" (Foucault, 1980, p. 156). For this reason there is no point in the prisoners taking over the tower in Bentham's Panopticon: in echo of one of Frodo's central points about "ownership" of the Ring (a type of Panopticon), Foucault asks rhetorically, "Do you think it would be much better to have the prisoners operating the Panoptic apparatus and sitting in the central tower, instead of the guards?" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 164-5).

Like Tolkien, Foucault has criticized the concept of power as formulated through the repressive speech-act of the "interdict," or the "enunciation of law, discourse of prohibition" (Foucault, 1980, p. 140). Instead Foucault has identified a positive desire for productive power running through the social body (Foucault, 1980, p. 119), making necessary an "incorporation" of power in order to have access to individuals' bodies (Foucault, 1980, p. 125). And it is the intellectual as free subject ("the clear, individual figure of a universality whose obscure, collective form is embodied in the proletariat," my italics, p. 126), especially within the university, who has become most aware of specific struggles in the precise arenas where work or life has engaged him or her. An example of the "specific" intellectual in the post-World War Two period, Oppenheimer suggests the scientific knowledge available in making the atomic bomb which posed a political threat because of a "universal" discourse, in that the nuclear threat affected the entire world (Foucault, 1980, p. 128). If we substitute "Saruman," "Gandalf," or even "Bilbo" and "Frodo" for J. Robert Oppenheimer, we begin to understand how Tolkien's concept of the wizard, or the scholar-historian who bears the Ring, functions analogously to the figure of the specific intellectual embodying the "proletariat." Like Foucault, Tolkien is concerned with the political problem of the intellectual, one not of "science" or "ideology," but of "truth" and "power." So Foucault concludes his essay, "Truth and Power," "It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time . . . The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is truth itself" (Foucault, 1980, p. 133).

The context, then, from which Tolkien derives his vision of power is institutional and political, like that of Foucault – meaning the university, academia. And the philosophy he propounds accordingly is constructed by means of the tools of the specific intellectual in attaining the primary goal – the power of language in the pursuit of truth. Both the context and the philosophy are concealed by the fictional veil of the heroic narrative, whose singular structure, repeated in its

various books, assumes its own power.

The power of truth and its liberation from hegemony is indeed the great theme of *The Lord of the Rings*. A novel that mythologizes power and the problem of individual difference (as theoretically defined), *The Lord of the Rings* in its three volumes focuses first, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, upon the problem of individual and class difference within the social body or construct, second, in *The Two Towers*, on the heroic power of knowledge and language in the political power struggle, and third, in *The Return of the King*, on the ideal of kingship as healing and service, in a unique inversion of master-servant roles and the domination of one by the other.

The introduction to this mythology of power begins with the role of the individual within society as symbolized by "A Long-expected Party", or what might be termed "The Birthday Party," the first and most important chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and thus of *The Lord of the Rings*. Here, this conventional celebration of the individual, the self (Bilbo, in this case) is marked by his gift-giving to others (liberality) and climaxes in his disappearance. That is, intellectual heroism, in Tolkien's world, is achieved through social involvement, service to others, the disappearance of self-indulgence. The "gift" of the Ring by Bilbo to his nephew Frodo is the gift of invisibility, because wearing it "stretches" the self: that is, resisting the desire to submit to the authority of its maker, Sauron, wears out any individual, but the resistance paradoxically, over time, strengthens the determination to resist.

In the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, the individual uses this gift to test resistance to institutionalized power and the power of others within the community. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, language as the articulation of knowledge and desire serves as moral and political weaponry against threats to survival and community (which threats often take the form of subversive language and its concomitant power). In *The Two Towers*, knowledge, as reflected in the power of language, can be used or misused as an effective and manipulative weapon by the powerful, or those who aspire to power – Wormtongue and Saruman, chiefly. The adversaries in this volume also include the inarticulate and dumb (Gollum, Shelob) whose rage leads to murder, or Mordor: a greater evil than the cunning manipulation of words is wordless and mindless violence, untameable by communication or rational discourse.

But this second volume also reveals the civilizing power of service to others – Gollum, serving Master Frodo, becomes Sméagol. Similarly, in the third volume, *The Return of the King*, the leader's true power emerges from wise and healing service to the community. The maintenance of society is best advanced by the caretaker and the gardener, those who take care, nurture others, and continue the work of the family or nation. In their role of understanding and tolerating individual differences within the community, indeed, using those differences productively, the caretakers empower both the individual and society, or, together, the social network.

For it is not altogether clear from reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Lord of the Rings* the first time (much

less the fifth or the tenth) how political are the hobbits Bilbo and his nephew Frodo, even in the introductory chapter, "A Long-expected Party". This lack of clarity arises because the Shire in which they live exudes a pastoral innocence that masks the seeds of its potential destruction. We recall the "charming, absurd, helpless hobbits" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 79) in the Shire, whom Gandalf worries might become enslaved by Sauron, the "kind, jolly, stupid Bolgers, Hornblowers, Boffins, Bracegirdles . . . not to mention the ridiculous Bagginses" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 79). For the moment they are protected because Sauron has "more useful" servants, but there is always a threat from him because of his "malice and revenge." And yet the difference between the isolated, safe, jolly Shire and the distant, evil Dark Power is not as marked as it might seem. For there exist power struggles among the different hobbit families in the Shire region, absurd in some cases, significant in others. One mark of the ability of Bilbo and Frodo – their power – is their sensitivity to the politics of the Shire, a faculty born of nurture and nature that will enable Frodo's mission and attract followers.

The political problems in the Shire grow out of its deceptively "safe" isolation from the rest of Middle-earth. Its inhabitants suspect those who come from outside, who are different from them in ways they do not understand. A stranger – initially and more familiarly, a Brandybuck, later and more ominously, a Dark Rider – arouses mistrust, and the inhabitants band closer together. Sandyman the Miller, from the beginning, creates a problem for Frodo through his suspicious notice of the queerness of the visitors to Bag End (among whom are the strange dwarves and the magical Gandalf). This queerness extends also therefore to Bag End itself and ultimately, by association, to its owners, Bilbo and then Frodo (Tolkien, 1965, p. 47). Sameness is familiar and secure, and sameness means hobbitlike. The hobbits relish what is natural for them, which involves physical activities, living close to nature – living in holes, eating, smoking tobacco. To do otherwise is unhobbitlike. "Hobbits", Tolkien once acknowledged, "have what you might call universal morals. I should say they are examples of natural philosophy and natural religion" (Norman, 1967, p. 100). Marks of distinction – wealth, education, even leadership – can set a hobbit apart, make him different. The major political problem for any potential leader, then, is to maintain the trust of those led – to make leadership seem "natural," and to diminish "queerness."

Bilbo is "very rich and very peculiar," largely because of his perpetual youth (Tolkien, 1965, p. 43), both of which make him seem different, queer: "It isn't natural, and trouble will come of it!" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 43). Part of this "trouble" results from social inequities that his wealth and good physical fortune exacerbate. But in addition Bilbo is "queer" to the other inhabitants of the Shire (Tolkien, 1965, p. 77) because he has been changed by his travels – his knowledge of the world – and his possession of the Ring, which has stretched him thin (that is, his awareness of moral issues – his knowledge of good and evil – has been expanded by having carried the Ring for so long). The tug between the desire of the self for the Ring (the "Precious," or for what the

self wishes to incorporate into the self) and the hobbit's desire to think of others beyond himself – to protect the Shire and the world by keeping the Ring hidden from Sauron's eye – has made him thin; it is no accident that the natural wearing of the Ring on the finger renders its wearer invisible – when the Ring masters its wearer, it totally erases the *identity* of the wearer, that is, he becomes without a self. Bilbo never connected the "life" of the Ring with the Ring. "He took all the credit for that to himself, and he was very proud of it. Though he was getting restless and uneasy. *Thin and stretched* he said. A sign that the ring was getting control" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 77). Ironically, the Ring appeals to the desires of the self for gold, power, love, as a means of mastering that individual.

The anticipated "trouble" is, however, averted in part by Baggins' generosity. He shares his money with his friends and relatives: "He had many devoted admirers among the hobbits of poor and unimportant families" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 43). Again, generously sharing his fortune allays the fears of difference among the less fortunate hobbits. He is considered "well-spoken," polite, gentle, largely because, as well-off as he is, he treats his servant the Gaffer (Sam Gamgee's father) with great deference for his knowledge – reversing the usual master-servant relationship: "Bilbo was very polite to him, calling him 'Master Hamfast', and consulting him constantly upon the growing of vegetables – in the matter of 'roots', especially potatoes, the Gaffer was recognized as the leading authority by all in the neighbourhood (including himself)" (Tolkien, 1965, pp. 44-5). Bilbo's sensitivity to the lower social class of his servant allows him to balance out their relationship through his genteel deference to the authority that his servant does demonstrate, knowledge of vegetable-growing. Bilbo has also taught the gardener's son Sam to read (Tolkien, 1965, p. 47) – a Middle-earth reflection of the Victorian ideal of educating the poor. The mutual respect of the hobbit "aristocrat" and the gardening servant-authority makes Bilbo politically correct and an astute politician.

Two major social problems engage the political skills of Bilbo. First is the arrival of Frodo, an orphan and his heir, which causes the Sackville-Bagginses (Bilbo's other close heirs) consternation because their expected inheritance will presumably be reduced. Second is the necessary inheritance of Bag End (and its "treasure") by Frodo, predicated upon the disappearance of Bilbo at the advanced age of 111 after a magnificent Birthday Party. Because of the continued enmity of the detested Sackville-Bagginses after the disappearance, Frodo will inherit these same familial problems requiring *his* political skills.

The Birthday Party, in the Shire, represents a symbolic paradigm for the ideal relationship between master and servant, wealthy aristocrat and members of the populace. As a site for potential self-aggrandizement and indulgence – which would not have been tolerated by the inhabitants within if they had been either not invited, or invited, but expected to bring gifts – its signification for the political hobbit Bilbo is to mark the abundance of self-confidence, largesse of the self, by *giving away* gifts to all who attend and by offering the splendour of fireworks, songs, dances,

music, games, and fine and abundant food for all. It is, then, the perfect symbolic and political moment for Bilbo to disappear – that is, his largesse signifies the disappearance of *selfishness*, and masks his literal individual disappearance. At this party, no one is not invited, and every guest is given presents, in the hobbit fashion (Tolkien, 1965, p. 50). Indeed, the liberality of Bilbo in inviting everyone to his Birthday Party is, as the Gaffer reminds the suspicious and manipulative Sandyman, another, more positive aspect of Bilbo's "queerness." The party thus also symbolizes Bilbo's long political concern for others – he is a noble man, a true gentleman, *because* he thinks only of others. And hobbits, in general, who have the practice of giving presents to others on their own birthdays, are the least acquisitive of beings. The Sackville-Bagginses – Otho and his wife Lobelia – attend even though they "disliked Bilbo and detested Frodo" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 53), largely because of the magnificence of the invitation.

Political Bilbo in his speech to the hobbits expresses his fondness for all of them and praises them as "excellent and admirable" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 54). This speech is important, because the occasion also honours his heir-nephew's birthday, which means Frodo will come of age, and therefore Bilbo must make his disappearance. But even generous Bilbo, as a natural aristocrat, has difficulty in ridding himself entirely of the Ring – hobbit that he is, he is still related to the Sackville-Bagginses, and thus shares in their (even for hobbits) excessive greed. Desire is a part of what the Ring represents.

The Ring of course works its power – illustrating the nature of the novel as a work about power – because more than anything it wishes to return to its maker-master and therefore wants to be put on (to make the wearer *naturally* invisible but supernaturally visible to the Eye of Sauron). In relation to the individual, then, possessing it means the individual loses sense of who he is and what he truly wants.

Bilbo initially has difficulty giving up the Ring – he wants to keep it, or the Ring wants him to – and he loses sight of that facility of the Ring, which makes him mistrust others as different, and therefore (as with Sandyman) not with-me, for-me:

"Now it comes to it, I don't like parting with it at all, I may say. And I don't really see why I should. Why do you want me to?" he asked, and a curious change came over his voice. It was sharp with suspicion and annoyance. 'You are always badgering me about my ring; but you have never bothered me about the other things that I got on my journey' (Tolkien, 1965, p. 59).

Bilbo wants to keep the Ring because it is his – he found it: "It is my own. I found it. It came to me" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 59). The specialness of the Ring – and therefore the specialness it confers upon its owner – enhances the self, fills him with the illusion of power. And perhaps that specialness is what has made him "queer" to others. It is the last gift, the one he most has to give away – to Gandalf first, and then to his heir Frodo. As with Frodo on Mount Doom, however, fighting first with himself and then with Gollum, Bilbo

resists Gandalf as an adversary, using the same language as Gollum: "It is mine, I tell you. My own. My precious. Yes, my precious" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 59).

To free himself Bilbo has to let it go – which he finds difficult. Gandalf's demand for the Ring (as it lies on the mantel) arouses Bilbo's suspicions and fear that the wizard is a thief. Gandalf wins him over by saying, "I am not trying to rob you, but to help you. I wish you would trust me, as you used" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 60). Bilbo apologizes, "But I felt so *queer* . . . And I don't seem able to make up my mind" (Tolkien, 1965, pp. 60-61, *my italics*).

What does the queerness represent, if not Bilbo's power in the Shire, which he regrets giving up – his power as "lord"? His specialness as an individual, the reason he is young perpetually, wealthy, generous? It is an enabler. For this reason it is difficult for Bilbo to give up the Ring, and yet death – another way the "disappearance" signifies – is what we all must pass through, to give up ourselves. Renunciation is the final gift – to allow the self to grow and mature, one must learn to be selfless. Thus, the "presents" given to Bilbo's relatives are all "corrective" gifts, intended to change vices in the relatives (a pen and ink bottle to a relative who never answers letters, for example): "The poorer hobbits, and especially those of Bagshot Row, did very well" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 65).

The present Bilbo gives his nephew Frodo is similar in function – the Ring. With this possession comes the necessity for the quest – no "gift" at all, but an unequalled opportunity for maturation. Frodo at the age of fifty (when Gandalf pronounces the need for the quest to return the Ring) "comes of age," becomes himself, an individual – but in the narrative, unlike the normal *bildungsroman* on which this work is modelled, he must *return* his "gift" to its maker, at Mount Doom – such a return, the ultimate hobbit birthday gift – to its "mother" source rather than its "father" owner Sauron. Instead of going on a quest to obtain some knowledge or thing, he goes instead to divest himself (and the world) of this power. In life, maturity means the loss of the child into adulthood. This quest reverses this – the adult Frodo (at fifty) must attempt to recuperate the child – as the Ring returns to its origin.

What does this quest signify? We have established that the political hobbit we see in Bilbo "rules" his Shire through self-abnegation and generosity; but the rule implied by the Ring is entirely different. As the inscription testifies, it allows for differences – Elves, Dwarves, Men – but only because there is One Ring intended to align their differences. "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, / One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them, / In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie" (Tolkien, 1965, p. 81). Returning the Ring to its origin means refusal of power as domination of the One – of sameness – and acceptance of power as respect for difference and diversity. It is Frodo, more different even than his unnatural uncle Bilbo, who is better suited to this quest.

Different from Bilbo because of his mother's dark familial roots in the Old Forest, Frodo may be acceptable to the Shire only because of his uncle Bilbo's wealth and favour. Like his

uncle Bilbo Baggins, Frodo is “queer.” Most interestingly of all, Frodo Baggins begins his fictive life (as does his creator his maturity) as an orphan, and an orphan from “across the river” (also like his creator). He is a Baggins (from Hobbiton) but his mother was a Brandybuck, from Buckland “where folks are so queer,” says Old Noakes (Tolkien, 1965, p. 45). Their “queerness” is caused by living on the wrong side of the Brandywine River, next to the Old Forest, and also because they use boats on the big river, which “isn’t natural,” says the Gaffer, at least for hobbits (Tolkien, 1965, p. 45).

Indeed, his father, Drogo Baggins, was a “decent respectable hobbit” until he drowned in an uncustomary outing on the water. It was because he and Miss Primula Brandybuck (Bilbo’s first cousin on his mother’s side) took out a boat on the river one night after a grand dinner at the home of his father-in-law Old Gorbodoc that either his weight sank the boat or she pushed him in (Tolkien, 1965, pp. 45-46).

After Bilbo’s disappearance – or rather, his successful self-renunciation – Frodo’s first test as Lord of the Manor comes of course from the Sackville-Bagginses (who offer him low prices for other things not given away and who spread rumours that Gandalf and Frodo conspired to get Bilbo’s wealth). That he can tolerate difference is symbolically clear to the reader (if not to Lobelia Sackville-Baggins) because he is accompanied by his cousin Merry *Brandybuck* – like Frodo’s mother, from Buckland near the Old Forest. But Frodo mistakenly assumes at first that Bag End is his “inheritance” – his for keeping.

As time passes, Frodo perpetuates Bilbo’s reputation for “oddity” (Tolkien, 1965, p. 70) by continuing to give Birthday Parties for his uncle. His closest friends are Merry Brandybuck (from the queer Brandybucks) and Peregrin Took and other younger hobbits who had descended from the Old Took and had been fond of Bilbo (Tolkien, 1965, p. 71) (we remember that *Bilbo’s* mother was a Took). Like Bilbo, Frodo preserves his youth, and at fifty the Shire inhabitants begin to think him “queer.”

This tension between the “normal” and the “queer” hobbit blossoms into the ethical drama of *The Lord of the Rings* in later chapters and books. The question Tolkien addresses is this: how can individuals (and nations) so different from another coexist in harmony? The danger is clear: the Brandybucks will be forever stigmatized by the Shire inhabitants because they choose to live beyond the river in unhobbitlike fashion. And what is to prevent a Dark Hobbit Lord from then using this Shire fear of difference to separate the Brandybucks from the Bagginses? To divide one family branch from another, to insist that all must be the same and live within the Shire? To act and to think and to dress as all the Shire inhabitants?

Difference, for Tolkien, leads to recklessness (the unusual youthful Frodo stealing mushrooms and venturing into others’ lands), adventure (Bilbo, Frodo, going off on their respective journeys), and ultimately, wisdom and understanding. Difference can also be social – the difference between a Baggins and a Gamgee, which is artificial and

serves no valid purpose if used to separate the two. The validity of manual labour (for example, gardening, domestic service) is ultimately certified by Sam’s heroism, as he carries Frodo up Mount Doom, just as Gollum’s moral deficiency is validated by his final contribution to civilization and cosmic Good when he disobeys his Master and steals the Ring. The servant – Sam or Gollum – ultimately contributes as much or more to Middle-earth than the Master Frodo. For Tolkien, it is the generosity of the Master, but also his obverse chief weaknesses, pride and avarice, that depend upon and demand the unflinching support and dedicated valour of the humble servant, whose chief strength is his humility and his chief weakness, lack of self-assertion. Tolkien’s point is that each serves the other; where the difference of one ends the complementary difference of the other begins. The relationship is circular and yet based on both need and desire, necessity and obligation, the dance of Self and Other, until the music ends.

Despite his initial difference-seeming, Gollum, in a sense, is a type of distant hobbit, an *alter ego* for Bilbo-Frodo (just as the Cain-and-Abel parable of Déagol-Sméagol emphasizes family-murder and cousin-hate). So Gollum, like Frodo, regards the Ring as his Birthday Present because he acquires it on that special day. For Frodo, Gollum is the Shire equivalent of a Brandybuck, and the hobbit reacts to the idea of Gollum as did Sandyman to him – by suspecting Gollum’s strangeness, his “queerness.” Frodo wishes Gollum had been killed long ago (Tolkien, 1965, p. 92), not understanding the mercy or pity that stayed Bilbo’s hand – and therefore (ironically), the same mercy or pity that will save **him** ultimately on the lip of Mount Doom. Even more ironically, it is Gollum’s disobedience toward his “Master” Frodo at Mount Doom – only in a greater and providential sense to be construed as mercy, pity – that saves Frodo. And it is not that Gollum’s (or Frodo’s) *hand* is stayed – ironically, it is his *finger* that is bitten off with the Ring still attached – that saves Frodo – and Middle-earth.

If we look more closely at the role of minor characters in the novel, the tension of difference between self and other, familiar and unlike, becomes more clear-cut. Tolkien’s joy in creating characters is to reverse suspicious expectation in his “heroes” and in his readers. For example, it is not clear to Frodo whether Farmer *Maggot* is friend or foe (Tolkien, 1965, p. 132): his name suggests a disgusting creature associated with the eggs of flies and decaying organic matter, death, the earth. And to adult Frodo whose youthful memories recall the anger of Maggot and his dogs over the theft of mushrooms the Farmer looms as an adversary. Maggot, however, provides a different point of view for Frodo when he recalls Frodo as “reckless,” one of the “worst young rascals” (Tolkien, 1965, pp. 135-136). The truth is that a protective Maggot has shielded the hobbits from the inquiries of a hooded Black Rider, and also that the recklessness of youthful Frodo represented an harbinger of his present heroics and venture into Mordor. Nevertheless, Farmer Maggot remains a hobbit whose advice to Frodo now reflects the typical suspiciousness of the Shire: “You should never have gone mixing yourself up with Hobbiton folk, Mr.

Frodo. Folk are *queer* up there” (Tolkien, 1965, p. 136, my italics).

Further, Frodo’s fellow hobbits Merry and Pippin and his servant Sam have “conspired” (Tolkien’s word) behind Frodo’s back to accompany him on his journey. This “conspiracy,” normally a pejorative term, occurs despite Frodo’s protective attempts to keep the purpose of his mission (and the existence of the Ring) a secret from them. His misguided attempts to shield them from danger seriously

underestimate their own “queerness” (for Brandybucks and Tooks live beyond the River next to the Old Forest) and thus their own potential for heroism and adventure (to say nothing of their common hobbit desire to serve, epitomized in the Gardener Sam Gamgee, the most modest, socially and personally, of them all). Difference, and the power of words to empower or else end that difference, polarizes the forces of good and evil, social class, and political group in *The Lord of the Rings*.

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