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## The Moral Epiphanies in *The Lord of the Rings*

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# The Moral Epiphanies in *The Lord of the Rings*

Joe R. Christopher

**Abstract:** The topic of this study is not entirely new – other critics have written about the visionary moments in *The Lord of the Rings* that show various types of insights – but the author is interested in a modern context for those which are most psychologically orientated, suggested by Ashton Nichols’ *Poetics of Epiphany*, and also in their use in the genre of the prose romance.

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As a romance, *The Lord of the Rings* is filled with marvels of various sorts. There are dream visions and a variety of magic. But in this paper I would like to concentrate on one particular type of vision which seems somewhere between magic and psychology, but closer to the latter.

However, let me begin with two examples which are not what I am discussing. They will set up a contrast that will clarify the later illustrations. First, when Tom Bombadil tells Frodo, Pippin, Merry, and Sam the history of the daggers he gives them from the Barrow-wight’s treasure,

[t]he hobbits did not understand his words, but as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow. Then the vision faded, and they were back in the sunlit world.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 161, 1:8)<sup>1</sup>

In this case, I am not certain if this “vision as it were” is simply an imaginative response to Tom’s history or if it is a magical vision due to some of Tom’s power. Perhaps it is due to nothing more than Tolkien’s desire to be as imagistic as possible, not to bog his narrative down in straight historical summaries. But, at any rate, this is a type of historical vision, and I am interested in visions revealing the psychology of a person – usually in this romance an almost archetypal aspect of the person.

My second example, also from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, is closer to my psychological concern. This occurs at Rivendell when Bilbo asks Frodo first to show him the Ring and then indicated he would like to hold the Ring:

. . . Frodo quickly drew back the Ring. To his distress and amazement he found that he was no longer looking at Bilbo; a shadow seemed to have fallen

between them, and through it he found himself eyeing a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 248, 2:1)

Obviously this vision does not show Bilbo’s true nature. It is psychological revelation, assuredly, but one of Frodo’s tie to the Ring. It is close to the borderline of my concerns.

I am going to print three examples of what I am concerned with, cite some more evidence, and then give two more contrasting examples, not from Tolkien, before I reach my conclusion. The first of my basic examples is close to what I have just read. It occurs when Frodo and Galadriel are talking in Lothlórien; he offers her the Ring, and she responds to the temptation by saying, “In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen.” And then she demonstrates her point:

She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 385, 2:7)

I said when I began that these revelations of character seemed somewhere between magic and psychology. Obviously Galadriel’s is at the magical side of the scale; it is also the only one of my examples which reveals a *potential* character. If she were given the Ring, she would become the evil queen – beautiful but deadly. It is clearly an archetypal role.

Let me move to *The Two Towers* and give an example at the opposite extreme: purely psychological. This is the episode in which, as Gollum leads Frodo and Sam near the gates of Minas Morgul, he returns one time to find them asleep.

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<sup>1</sup> References to *The Lord of the Rings* include book and chapter after the page number.

Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face . . . [his eyes] went dim and grey, old and tired . . . slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee – but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 742, 4:8)

Tolkien is so orientated to one person seeing another in these visions that he has to imagine what Gollum would have looked like if Frodo or Sam were awake. But, despite the rhetorical framework, what is depicted is a psychological moment in which Gollum's original hobbit nature resurfaces. It has parallels in, I assume, all of our psyches when we respond to some stimulus as we would have years earlier. A rekindled romance at a high-school reunion is one example. This most psychological of these moments in *The Lord of the Rings* – when Gollum's long-buried, better nature is in the ascendancy – is also the least archetypal, as one might expect.

Finally, let me consider what I think is a typical example. This occurs earlier in *The Two Towers*. At this point, in the presence of Gimli and Legolas, Aragorn announces his name and titles to Éomer, produces the Broken Sword that has been reforged, and charges Éomer to choose quickly to aid him or not:

Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement, for they had not seen him in this mood before. He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 454, 3:2)

The reference to “the kings of stone” is to two stone statues of Aragorn's ancestors seen earlier, on the companions' journey down the river Anduin (Tolkien, 1991, p. 413, 2:9). Both Gimli and Legolas here observe their friend's growth in stature, and it is the elf – usually in Tolkien the elves are of a higher spiritual nature than the other rational beings – it is the elf Legolas who observes the crown-like flame on Aragorn's head. Aragorn's kingly grandeur is being revealed, his archetypal kingly qualities, so to speak.

A reader also notices the word *seemed*. “He *seemed* to have grown . . .”, “. . . it *seemed* to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered . . .” This is typical of Tolkien's handling of these moments: in Galadriel's rejection of the Ring, she stands, “*seeming* now tall beyond measurement”; in Gollum's moment of *caritas*, if the sleepers had “seen him, they *would have thought* [him] an old weary hobbit . . .” (stresses added). Whatever the cause of Tolkien's impulse toward these Hawthornean ambiguities, they seem appropriate in a romance published in a naturalistic milieu. They allow a reader to intellectually deny the vision that,

nevertheless, affects his or her emotional response to the book.

At this point, I imagine a reader of this paper complaining, “This is it? These are your three examples? Do you expect to reach a conclusion on the basis of such limited evidence? The flaw here is that of the hasty generalization.” Let me, therefore, make a list of what I take to be examples of this sort of psychological revelation. The first example is my final one from *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

(1) When Gandalf leaves Frodo after Bilbo's farewell party, “the old wizard looked unusually bent, almost as if he was carrying a great weight” (Tolkien, 1991, p. 54, 1:1). A minor example, obviously, but the “almost as if” suggests the *seeming* of the above instances.

There are three more examples from *The Two Towers*:

(2) When Gandalf returns from Moria, he reveals himself to Gimli, Aragorn, and Legolas when

[h]e . . . leaped to the top of a large rock. There he stood, grown suddenly tall, towering above them. His hood and his grey rags were flung away. His white garments shone.

(Tolkien, 1991, pp. 515-16, 3:5)

There is something of a “resurrection body”, in Christian terminology, about Gandalf's appearance here; but the essential point is that his tallness suggests his power, or his greatness in general, and his white garments suggest his goodness.

(3) When King Théoden rejects Saruman's offer of peace, Saruman reacts with anger, leaning

over the rail as if he would smite the King with his staff. To some suddenly it seemed that they saw a snake coiling itself to strike.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 604, 3:10)

In the western tradition, at least, the snake is an archetypal image of evil.

(4) When Frodo swears Gollum by the Ring to be good, [f]or a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown and Gollum had shrunk: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud [the elven cloak], and at his feet a little whining dog.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 643, 4:1)

It is difficult to say whether this should be described as archetypal or as metaphoric.

And, finally, there are three examples from *The Return of the King*; I pass over Frodo's vision of Sam as an orc, when he discovers Sam is wearing the Ring (Tolkien, 1991, p. 946, 6:1) – it is the same type of vision as his distorted view of Bilbo, discussed earlier. Here, then, are the three:

(5) When Sam looks across the plain of Mordor toward Mount Doom,

Sam's plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if/ he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 969, 6:3)

Is this visionary at all? It is certainly close to being

simply a psychological description with a semi-simile introduced by “as if”. And certainly it is the only one of these instances when a focal character is aware of his own change. But the word *thrill* – “he felt through all his limbs a thrill” – suggests that something is happening to Sam beyond his control.

- (6) Perhaps the most elaborate of these visions is that given to Sam after Gollum has attacked Frodo on the way up Mount Doom:

Then suddenly . . . Sam saw these two rivals with other vision. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing . . . ; and before it stood stern . . . a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 979, 6:3)

I have cut that passage some and I omit the speech from the fire, not *per se* from the figure in white. But what I have quoted is archetypal enough, and the phrase “other vision” is basically what these passages are about.

- (7) The final passage is parallel to the earlier one about Aragorn’s kingship; when he is proclaimed king and is about to enter Minas Tirith, this is his description:

. . . when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him.

(Tolkien, 1991, p. 1004, 6:5)

This might be taken as a mere description, yet one notices the double use of *seemed*, the emphasis on his tallness, and the final, presumably non-literal clause, “a light was about him”.

I offer these seven instances, and the earlier three, as my evidence of a type of revelation in *The Lord of the Rings* that involves the characters; typically they are shown to be moral or immoral; their archetypal aspects are normally revealed.

I said at this point that I wanted to give two more contrasting examples, neither from Tolkien. I do, but they are very different contrasts and will support different points. First, I want to contrast what Tolkien is doing with religious visions. Let me go to one of the basic ones in the western traditions – the Transfiguration in the New Testament. All three of the Synoptic Gospels have versions of this (Mark 9:2-9; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36). I will use a condensation of St. Matthew’s:

. . . Jesus took Peter, James and his brother John, and led them up a high hill by themselves; in their presence he was transfigured, his face shone like the sun, and his clothes turned white as light. There appeared to them Moses and Elijah, who conversed with Jesus . . . a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved,  
in him is my delight:  
listen to him.”

When the disciples heard the voice, they fell on their faces in terror . . .

(Moffatt, 1950, *NT* p. 23)

Jesus’ association with light and his white clothes may suggest some of the figures in Tolkien, such as Gandalf the White; but most of the details are unlike Tolkien. The Bible does not use the word *seem*; the incident is asserted to *be*, not to *seem*. The usual interpretation of Moses and Elijah is that they are symbolic, standing for the Law and the Prophets, the two parts of the Jewish Scriptures that were canonized in Jesus’ day. (The third division of the Jewish canon, the Writings, was not completely accepted until about AD 100.) Implicitly, the vision is claiming that Jesus and his teachings are equal to the Jewish tradition. *This* sort of didacticism, a type of allegorical presentation, is alien to Tolkien. The theophanic speech from the cloud is also alien to Tolkien’s emphasis on the revelation of the inner nature of the individual. And, of course, the disciples falling on their faces may be typical of the Middle East, but it is not appropriate for Tolkien’s non-theophanies.

My purpose in this contrast of *The Lord of the Rings* and the Bible is not to depreciate either work, of course. After all, Tolkien wrote the former and believed the latter. My only point is that the visionary moments I have pointed to may be archetypal but they are not religious in any ordinary sense.

My second contrast will be with a work, *Dubliners*, by James Joyce. But here I need to explain part of my title. Joyce, as is generally known in literary circles, used the term *epiphany* to mean two things: (1) a “moment of revelation in which an object (often a person) or an experience reveals” its inner essence, its quiddity, its whatness; or, somewhat later in Joyce’s development, (2) “a verbal strategy by which numerous details in a poem or story are coalesced into a sudden disclosure of meaning” (Nichols, 1987, p. 10). The second of these is not what concerns me, but only the first. The first suggests the type of revelation I have traced in Tolkien’s work in which a person reveals his or her inner essence. Joyce, however, inhabits a naturalistic world, not an archetypal one, so his revelations do not have the same dimensions as Tolkien’s.

I suppose I should immediately give an example from Joyce, but let me digress for two paragraphs. What suggested this topic to me was a book of criticism I was reading – Ashton Nichols’ *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Movement*. It was not ideal for my purpose, as it is mainly concerned with the use of the secular epiphany in poetry – from Wordsworth’s “spots of time”, through Coleridge, Shelley, Browning, Tennyson, Yeats, Wallace Stevens, down to Seamus Heaney; it even gives part of chapters over to Hopkins’ and T.S. Eliot’s revival of the religious epiphany. It would take this paper far from its topic to discuss these writers, but what I found interesting in the book was the attempt by secular writers to find a basis for meaning. But my phrasing is probably not fair to them: it is better to say that they have momentary experiences which seem fraught with meaning, probably for psychological reasons, and they then recount

these moments in their poems.

It does not work the same way for fiction writers, obviously, unless their works are autobiographical. But many modern writers do create epiphanies for their characters. An embittered teacher of commercial fiction from whom I once took a course claimed there were only two types of stories: one began with the hero having a problem and ended with him happy; the other began with the hero happy and ended with him having a problem. The first was the type of story that sold and that people liked to read; the second was the type that did not sell and that English majors liked to read. As I said, he was embittered. It would be fairer to say that the traditional-story plot is problem, complication, solution. The solution does not have to be happy – although it often is – so long as it develops logically from the problem and complication. The other type of story – of which Joyce is one of the founders – has a plot that goes problem, complication, realization. Joyce's term for that realization is *epiphany*.

Let me give a couple of simple examples from Joyce's book of short stories. First, let me use the end of the short story "Araby". This is one of the first-person narratives in the book. In it, a boy goes to a special type of sale and social event in Dublin, called a bazaar, planning to buy a gift for the older sister of a friend of his, being infatuated with the young woman; but, when he finally gets there, as the bazaar is closing, he cannot decide quickly what to buy, being perhaps also intimidated by the English accents of some of the people. This is the way the story ends:

. . . I turned away slowly and walked down the middle of the bazaar. I allowed the two pennies to fall against the sixpence in my pocket. I heard a voice call from one end of the gallery that the light was out. The upper part of the hall was now completely dark.

Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger.

I assume this is a naturalistic story; the voice calling that the light is out is someone reporting a fact to someone else. But the light of the boy's infatuation, so to speak, is also out, and it is the narrator himself that sees the significance of the epiphanic words, sees what they reveal to him about him. Earlier, I referred to Sam's hardening as he looks at the plain of Mordor as the single example in which the focal character at any one point in *The Lord of the Rings* experiences, rather than observes, an epiphany. Here, in the first person, is the same sort of experiencing. But the difference between a heroic romance and a naturalistic short story lies between the tone of the fictions and what the characters learn – Sam gains strength, the boy realizes his folly.

The conclusion of another story will show an example of the other strategy, in which an onlooker realizes the significance of an epiphany – in this case, of course, a naturalistic epiphany. This story, titled "Clay", tells of an elderly woman, Maria, who works in a laundry and who, on an All Hallows' Eve – what Americans would call Hallowe'en – goes to visit friends. Evidently she was a nursemaid years ago to the man of the house, and she is still treated like a relative of sorts. As the story closes, she sings

"I Dreamt I Dwelt", repeating the first verse by accident instead of singing the second. Some critics make a point of what is omitted, but I assume the one stanza Joyce prints provides the ironic epiphany. She sings of dreaming she dwells in marble halls, but actually she works in a laundry; she has no "vassals and serfs at [her] side", and so on through the stanza, ending with someone loving her, which is also not true. This is the way the story ends:

. . . when she had ended her song Joe [her foster son, in some sense] was very much moved. He said that there was no time like the long ago and no music for him like poor old Balfe, whatever other people might say; and his eyes filled up so much with tears that he could not find what he was looking for and in the end he had to ask his wife to tell him where the corkscrew was.

There are two ways to read this conclusion, I believe. One way is to assume that Joe has missed the irony – what I have called the ironic epiphany, which reveals the complete barrenness of Maria's life – and he does indeed get sentimental over the old music. This is to treat Joe as part of the irony and the reader is the only perceptor. The other way of reading this is to see him as reacting to the ironic revelation, making excuses in terms of music to cover up his tears. Since this is a realistic fiction, and the conclusion is handled objectively, there is no way to decide between these readings, although I prefer the latter.

However, my basic point is how different this is from anything Tolkien is doing. Can both Joyce and Tolkien be said to be using the epiphanic technique? I believe so. I said that *The Lord of the Rings* is a romance, and *Dubliners*, to slightly simplify, is naturalistic fiction. Naturalism has nothing to show beyond this world, unless it is a dream or a daydream. The epiphany has to be without a visionary aspect. In the simple instances I have used, the naturalistic revelations are of one's own folly and of one's limited life; the means are a shout about the light being out and a sentimental song.

Tolkien's examples I have already given, but I should make it clear that I do not suggest that he was consciously influenced by the other writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, if he had known he was doing anything similar to James Joyce, he probably would have cut every epiphany in *The Lord of the Rings*. But sometimes ideas or artistic techniques simply seem to be "in the air", to be part of the temporal milieu.

Tolkien's problem was an artistic one, of course. How could he show moral qualities – particularly potential ones or developing ones – in his fiction? He could, of course, directly comment to his reader, and he does some of that, perhaps influenced by the *Beowulf*-poet who moralizes directly in his poem. Tolkien would have known, if he ever considered Hemingway's attempt to remove all moral reflections from the authorial voice, that the weight of tradition was against Hemingway.

But Tolkien was not satisfied with telling his reader; he wanted, in Joseph Conrad's term, to make his reader *see*. This was shown in the first quotation I used, in the historic

vision that accompanied Tom Bombadil's account. For this purpose, Tolkien developed the visionary epiphany – the use of “other vision”, as he calls it – which reveals the moral and archetypal qualities of characters.

So far as I am aware, it is not a technique used extensively, nor in most instances at all, by other writers of romances. But it seems a technique very appropriate for a romance. Forgive me for introducing another critical name, in this case that of a pure critic, not an involved writer; but this point *is* one of critical significance. Northrop Frye has created a chart of narrative types running from myth at the top; through romance next; down to high mimesis, such as in tragedies, and low mimesis, such as in comedies; to a form on the bottom which he called irony but logically should have been called naturalism and some related forms that most often deal with people below average in one way or another (Frye,

1957, pp. 33-34). I use Frye simply as typical of the common feeling that the romance is close to myth. As such, the vision of the archetypal characteristic of the individual – the mythic characteristics, so to speak – is *not* surprising; and the use of a vision is as appropriate for the romance as it would be out of place in a low mimetic and in a naturalistic work. The genres call for very different types of epiphanies.

In his use of the epiphanic moment, then, I find Tolkien to be doing something that is typical of modern literature; but he is doing it in an artistically appropriate way for his genre and in a way to make as concrete as possible the morality of his characters. This is only one aspect of his artistry out of many, but it is one which reveals Tolkien both as an unconsciously modern author and, more importantly, as a consciously moral author, as most great authors have been.

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