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Above All Shadows Rides the Sun: Gollum as Hero

Abstract

Extensive discussion of the complexity of the character of Gollum/Sméagol. He can be seen as a kind of hero, intensely flawed but with incomparable endurance, and essential to the Quest.

Additional Keywords

Heroes; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum—as hero

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Above All Shadows Rides the Sun Gollum as Hero

Elizabeth Arthur

Long after, but still very long ago, there lived by the banks of the great river on the edge of Wilderland a clever-handed and quiet-footed little people. I guess they were of hobbit-kind; akin to the fathers of the fathers of the Stoors, for they loved the River, and often swam in it, or made little boats of reeds. There was among them a family of high repute, for it was large and wealthier than most, and it was ruled by a grandmother of the folk, stern and wise in old lore, such as they had. The most inquisitive and curious-minded of the family was called Sméagol. (I, 62)

Gollum is my favorite character in *The Lord of the Rings*. Every time I have read the trilogy — and I have read it many times — the thing I have most looked forward to was the next appearance of Gollum in the text. No one, I think, would dispute that Gollum is an important, even a crucial character in the trilogy, since it was with the simultaneous introduction in *The Hobbit* of Gollum and the One Ring that Tolkien began his exploration of not just the evil but the fascination of power — an exploration which was to climax on Mount Doom, where Gollum and the One Ring went together into the Fire — and there is no question that it is only through Gollum's intervention on Orodruin that the power of Sauron is destroyed and Middle-earth freed from the Great Darkness. Though the fall is glossed over as accidental, the fact remains that but for Gollum, "The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end." (III, 225) Gollum has often been called a monster; I cannot believe, however, that I am alone in my feeling that he is more interesting, and touching, than any other being, good or evil, who dwells in Middle-earth, and

that as the most fully rounded character in *The Lord of the Rings* he is not only the most complex, but ultimately the most important creature Tolkien created.

Indeed, in his way, he is the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*. One of the most thoroughly satisfying things about *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, is that, with few exceptions, the good guys are very good, and the bad guys very bad. When the story was first gaining significant critical attention in the United States, there was some criticism leveled at it on the grounds that the extreme polarization of good and evil broke all the rules of good mimetic fiction, that, as Matthew Hodgart wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, "Alas, in this world there are no goblins or orcs..."¹ Twenty-five years later, that comment seems rather silly; *The Lord of the Rings* is a fantasy and almost anyone would agree that it is inappropriate to try and apply standards of the modern novel to such a work. Fantasy gains most of its strength from the utilization of archetypes; it is powerful and appealing at least partially because it *ignores* some of the basic principles of realistic fiction. One of those principles, of course, is that all characters should be complexly motivated by often conflicting instincts, and that those instincts should exist on the unconscious as well as the conscious level. But fantasy often breaks the complex characteristics of a single human being down into simple, archetypal components, so that figures which Jung identified as the Wise Old Man, the Good Mother, the Temptress, *etc.*, replace the Person Next Door as the central concern of a writer. And the story does not, on the face of

it, seem to have a character with whom the reader is supposed to identify more completely than the rest; it allows the characters taken together to represent the complexity of life. The only exception to this rule may be Gollum; he alone could be removed from the pages of the story and the shores of Middle-earth and, unsupported by his world, retain his power to move us.

Who, then, is Gollum? In "The Shadow of the Past," Gandalf leaves no doubt about his hobbit origins. Although he has changed almost past recognition, he was once of hobbit-kind and lived peacefully with his family on the banks of the Great River. More than just a common hobbit, he was in fact of good stock, from "a family of high repute, for it was larger, and wealthier than most." (I, 62) A clear comparison is made with Bilbo's roots. In *The Hobbit* we are told that: "The Bagginses had lived in the neighbourhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and people considered them very respectable... most of them were rich..."² In "The Shadow of the Past," Gandalf goes on to tell Frodo that Gollum's grandmother ruled the family, "a woman stern and wise in old lore" (I, 62). Bilbo's mother, of course, was "the famous Belladonna Took, one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took."³ We are told in *The Hobbit* that Bilbo had something "a bit queer" in his make-up, a Tookish curiosity which made him wish "to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves."⁴ According to Gandalf, Gollum (who was called Sméagol as a child), was "the most inquisitive and curious-minded of that family... He was interested in roots and beginnings; he dived into deep pools." (I, 62) The two hobbits, both of wealthy and respectable families dominated by strong women, are both unusually curious youngsters. Gollum, in the days when he was still Sméagol, was, in fact, not unlike Bilbo. As Gandalf points out, even Bilbo's story about their meeting in the cave suggests kinship:

There was a great deal in the background of their minds and memories that was very similar. They understood one another remarkably well, very much better than a hobbit would understand, say, a Dwarf, or an Orc, or even an Elf. (I, 64)

Although Gollum is indisputably derived from hobbit stock, he has, of course, become something else, "a small slimy creature," pale and skeletal, wiry and tough. He has borne the Ring for over five hundred years. Since Bilbo bears it for sixty-one years and Frodo for only eighteen, it is clear from the start of the story that Gollum, whatever defects of his character, has been exceptionally unfortunate. Having started life as a hobbit not unlike Bilbo, he has had the misfortune not only to be present at the discovery of the One Ring, but to carry it for almost ten times as long as any other Ringbearer. There is little doubt that Gollum is a picture of what any of the other Ringbearers might have been, had circumstances treated them less kindly, or their own characters been less strong.

It is crucial that Gollum is identifiable as a twisted hobbit, a hobbit who has gone wrong. Although Middle-

earth has seven intelligent races, it is the hobbits who dominate the action of the story, the hobbits who represent the dominant point of view, and the hobbits with whom it is easiest for most people to identify. As Deborah Rogers writes, "the hobbits are the race par excellence... Tolkien uses their point of view."⁵ Roger Sale says emphatically: "everyone knows that without them the story would not stand a chance. When Tolkien is 'good with the hobbits' then everything else seems to go well."⁶ In *Tolkien's World* Randal Helms presents a very good case for the assertion that little major action occurs in *The Lord of the Rings* which is not precipitated by a hobbit.⁷ And Elrond makes an unequivocal statement of the hobbits' importance during the Council which establishes the Fellowship of the Ring: "This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and councils of the great." (I, 284) If there is a race which is more likely to nurture the Person Next Door than any of the other races of Middle-earth, it is surely the hobbits, and since Gollum is identifiable as a hobbit, perhaps it is hardly surprising that he is full of complexity, even though his most obvious role is to act as a foil for the other Ringbearers.

Although "foil" may not be the right word, certainly Tolkien sometimes sets up a contrast between Gollum and the other Ringbearers; but very often Gollum is more truly compared than contrasted, and this comparison is made explicitly as several crucial junctures in the Quest. The first of these occurs after Frodo has recovered from the Morgul wound and has met Bilbo in the Great Hall of Rivendell. After the two have talked for a very short time, Bilbo tells Frodo that he would like to see the Ring once more. Frodo feels a "strange reluctance" to show it, but he slowly draws out the chain.

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. He felt a desire to strike him. (I, 244)

The "shadow" is the shadow of Gollum. Certainly this scene demonstrates the extent to which the Ring's absolute power has already taken possession of Frodo's mind; it implies, too, that Bilbo, had he held onto the Ring for very much longer, might well have been transformed into a creature like Gollum. But it also indicates that whatever sympathy we are able to feel for Bilbo, and the Ring-desire of an ex-Ringbearer, we should be able to feel in equal measure for Gollum. The comparison is as important as the contrast.

A similar scene takes place in Book VI. Frodo lies naked in the Tower of Cirith Ungol. Sam has found him and told him the Ring is safe. Sam is reluctant to burden his master with it again and offers to share the burden:

'No, no!' cried Frodo, snatching the Ring and chain from Sam's hands. 'No you won't you thief!' He panted, staring at Sam with eyes wide with fear and enmity. (III, 188)

Frodo's vision shows him not Sam, but a foul little orc. In

this moment, it is Frodo himself who becomes, for an instant, Gollum. Sam has taken on the role of the present possessor of the Ring, and Frodo has adopted the role of the Ring's slave who has lost his precious to another hobbit. Frodo's venomous "No you won't, you thief!" has all the resonance of Gollum's endless and bitter refrain "Thief, thief, thief! Baggins! We hates it, we hates it forever!"⁸ Although Frodo's vision clears, from that point on a significant role-reversal takes place, as Sam becomes the strong guiding force of the Quest, Frodo more and more completely is in the power of the Ring. Clearly the loss of will which Gollum manifests in its most extreme form, is steadily growing in Frodo, and equally clearly the pity we feel for Frodo must extend to Gollum as well. Even Sam, who is not too bright, sees Gollum and Frodo as "akin." Beneath the cliff of the Emyrn Muil, he has the first of two visions:

for 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, and at his feet a little whining dog. Yet the two were in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another's minds. (II, 225)

and later, on the slopes of Mount Doom:

Then, suddenly, as before under the eaves of the Emyrn Muil, Sam saw these two rivals with other vision. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing, a creature now wholly ruined and defeated, yet filled with a hideous lust and rage; and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. (III, 221)

The first scene enacts two recurring themes of the book: the interchangeability of ruler and ruled and the thin line that divides madness from sanity. Any ultimate condition has the potential for reversal. In the second scene Frodo is clearly on the brink of that at ultimate condition: he may be robed in white, but he holds at his breast the wheel of fire. Tolkien is paving the way for the moment at the Crack of Doom, when Frodo fails in his resistance to the Ring and when Gollum and Frodo switch roles at last. Gollum is indeed the "shadow of a living thing." He is the dark side of Frodo's white fire at this last crucial point, and as the shadow of greatness, he must have the potential for greatness himself.

But our perceptions of Gollum's complexity do not all grow out of the way that he mirrors Frodo. He exists as a character in his own right, and his fascinating ambiguity can serve to locate many of the story's major explorations. Gollum is far from one-sided, and his ability to remain multi-faceted after five centuries of carrying the Ring illuminates Tolkien's treatment of power and of the hobbits as representatives of the kind of power which is *good* in Middle-earth: the power to resist, the power to remain unchanged. As Gandalf says of Gollum:

He had proved tougher than even one of the Wise would have guessed — as a hobbit might. There was a little corner of his mind that was still his own, and light came through it, as through a chink in the dark. (I, 64)

The hidden strength of the little people does not produce towers and kings and great warriors, but it is, in the end, the decisive power of courage, willpower and kindness. "They are a remarkable race," says the Warden of the Houses of Healing. "Very tough in the fibre, I deem." (III, 147) All the hobbits prove their strength at one time or another — Pippin actually confronts Sauron without suffering permanent harm. Frodo carries the Morgul-knife sliver for seventeen days, Merry recovers quickly from the Black Breath — but it is Gollum who exhibits the most extraordinary toughness of all. Although he has been dominated by the Ring for more than five hundred years, he has not fallen under the dominion of the Ring's Master. He is still free to hate Sauron; he is not a Ring-Wraith. Even while he is Gollum, tied to the Ring "with no will left in the matter" (I, 64), he remains Sméagol as well. And as Sméagol, he's enough to break your heart. I cannot agree with Agnes Perkins and Helen Hill who write in their essay "The Corruption of Power": "The most complex character to succumb completely to the desire for power is the loathsome creature from *The Hobbit*, Gollum..."⁹ Complex he is. Loathsome he is not. Although he is a schizoid character, his Sméagol side is very hobbit-like still.

Not least of Sméagol's endearing qualities is his charming manner of speech. In *The Hobbit*, the first thing he says is "Bless us and splash us, my precioussssss!"¹⁰ and he continues to talk in this child-like way all the way to the wastes of Mordor. "Wake up, wake up, sleepies!" he whispers to Frodo and Sam in the journey to the crossroads. "They mustn't be silly," he hisses (II, 310). He can also be delightfully sarcastic. When Frodo asks him if they must cross the Marshes, Gollum answers:

No need, no need at all... Not if hobbits want to reach the dark mountains and go to see Him very quick. Back a little and round a little... Lots of Hispeople will be there looking out for Guests, very pleased to take them straight to Him, oh, yes. (II, 233)

So striking are Gollum's fussy verbal peculiarities that Sam can scarcely say a sentence to Gollum without parodying him, and though obviously this serves in part to illuminate their kinship — the intensity with which Sam dislikes Gollum might be the result of his inability to gain perspective on a creature who is like a twisted reflection of himself — it also simply draws additional attention to those peculiarities and the way that they make Gollum seem consistently human. When he says to Sam, on the slopes of Mount Doom:

Don't kill us... Don't hurt us with nasty cruel steel! Let us live, yes, live just a little longer. Lost, lost! We're lost. And when Precious goes we'll die, yes, die into the dust. (III, 221).

he invokes sympathy in a way that none of the "loathsome" creatures ever do.

After Gollum makes his promise to Frodo on the edge of the Marshes, Tolkien writes:

he was friendly, and indeed pitifully anxious to please.

He would cackle with laughter and caper, if any jest was made, or even if Frodo spoke kindly to him, and weep if Frodo rebuked him. (II, 225)

In his essay "Aspects of the Paradisiacal in Tolkien's Work," U. Milo Kaufmann remarks that readers of the story:

should notice one ramification of the paradisiacal which in fact constitutes a flaw in the probability of *The Lord of the Rings*, namely the way Gollum the monster keeps his promises.¹¹

I would say that the flaw lies rather in Kaufmann's reading of the story, since Gollum is held to most of his promises by the power of the Ring itself. But he does more than simply keep his promises. He is often spontaneously helpful and good-hearted. When Sam asks him to find them something to eat in Ithilien, Gollum comes back with two rabbits, which he gives without demur to Sam, though he himself is very hungry. He guides the hobbits faithfully through the Marshes, despite his numberless opportunities for deserting them, betraying them, or murdering them, and when they tire, he is kind and understanding and encourages them to go on.

Now on we go!... Nice hobbits! Brave hobbits! Very, very weary, of course; so are we, my precious, all of us. But we must take master away from the wicked lights, yes, we must. (II, 236)

Only after he is reminded of the strength and cruelty of Sauron — when the Nazgûl fly overhead — does he conceive the idea of taking the Ring for himself, and even once the idea has begun to trouble him, he still retains traces of goodness; there's a chink of light in his brain. He argues with his Gollum side: "But Sméagol said he would be very very good. Nice hobbit! He took the cruel rope off Sméagol's leg. He speaks nicely to me." (II, 236) Responding with great hunger to Frodo's kindness, Sméagol comes, in fact, to truly love him, with that part of his mind which is still free. Of course he hates Frodo also, in much the same way that he loves and hates the Ring, and loves and hates his precious self. Torn between responding to love with love and protecting himself from evil with wickedness, Gollum eventually betrays the hobbits largely for his fear of Sauron. These would be complex feelings for an archetypal Monster, but not for a believable and struggling hobbit/human.

Then, too, Gollum retains an ability to appreciate the beauty in life, and has a genuine fear and hatred of the wasteland. A wholly evil creature would hardly be able to talk about Minas Ithil like this:

Tales out of the South... about the tall Men with shining eyes... and the silver crown of their King and his White Tree: wonderful tales. They built very tall towers, and one they raised was silver-white, and in it there was a stone like a moon, and round it great white walls (II, 249),

or to remember Mordor with nothing but horror, horror not just at the torment he endured, but at the place itself. When he discovers that Mordor is Frodo's destination, his

reaction is one of graphic loathing:

Ach! Sss! said Gollum, covering his ears with his hands, as if such frankness and the open speaking of the names hurt him. 'We guessed, yes, we guessed... and we didn't want them to go, did we? No, precious, not the nice hobbits. Ashes, ashes and dust, and thirst there is; and pits, pits, pits, and Orcs, thousands of Orcs.' (II, 222)

Thus, after bearing the Ring for centuries, Gollum is still himself: a hobbit at heart. He is certainly wicked in a large part of his being, the part with which the Ring has become inextricably linked. In his Gollum phase, he addresses himself as "my precious," a term which he uses indiscriminately for the Ring as well. But, as Frodo notices, he also sometimes uses I, and it is always a sign that sincerity is present. As Gandalf says of Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, and as he says of Frodo twice in the story, "there is more to him than meets the eye." Kindness, an appreciation of beauty and good tales, humor and sarcasm — these are all attributes of complex human beings, as is Gollum's love of fish, an appreciation of the pleasures of the table which is not unlike the passion of hobbits for mushrooms.

Do we need more evidence that Gollum is anything but a monster? Then we should look to the most touching moment in the entire story, when Gollum, warring all the way with his better self, has led the hobbits into the Tunnel of Círih Ungol, in the hope that when Shelob has eaten the hobbits she may discard the Ring or give it to Gollum as a reward. Frodo and Sam are sleeping when Gollum returns from a scouting expedition; Frodo rests with his head in Sam's lap. Gollum looks at them, as they lie peaceful and trusting in their sleep.

A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up toward the pass, shaking his head as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and 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. (II, 324)

When Sam wakes up suddenly, he speaks roughly to Gollum and "the fleeting moment" passes beyond recall. But the fact is that it has happened and that Gollum has had a moment of potential greatness, a moment in which love has almost conquered the overwhelming might of evil. As Roger Sales writes:

Sméagol loves the specialness that is Frodo's care of him. The love is almost without parallel in our modern literature, because it is neither filial nor sexual but the tentative unbelieving response to a caring so unlikely that it seems heroic even to Gollum.¹²

And Gollum's ability to love Frodo is decisive in locating his position in Middle-earth's scheme of good and evil. If,

as W.H. Auden writes, “the primary weakness of evil is a lack of imagination, for while Good can imagine what it would be like to be Evil, Evil cannot imagine what it would be like to be Good,”¹³ then Gollum epitomizes the struggle between the opposing forces: he can imagine what it would be like to be good.

As I have noted before, good and evil are clear and consistent in Middle-earth and, with few exceptions, the good guys are very good and the bad guys very bad indeed. But this is not to say that the demarcation between them is unflinchingly rigid. Some characters — Elrond, Arwen, Treebeard — are indeed wholly good, and other characters — the Lieutenant of Barad-dûr, the Nazgûl, the Orcs — are indeed wholly evil. Most of the characters, however, contain both good and evil, and though some resist temptation more successfully than others, even the best may fall and the worst repent. Each of the major characters is revealed at some point in relation to the temptation of the Ring: Aragorn, Gandalf, Elrond, Boromir, Faramir, Denethor, Saruman, Frodo and even Sam, are all exposed to the lure of absolute power. Four of them succumb to it — Boromir, Saruman, Denethor and Frodo — but the first three of those characters play only peripheral roles in moving the action of the story forward, and Frodo falls only at the very last. But Gollum vacillates back and forth between the possibility of good and the lure of evil, and this lies right in the middle of the spectrum of Tolkien’s exploration. He might be said to represent the average soul.

One of the central questions posed by the story is what the possibility of unlimited power will do to those who desire or possess it. The answer, of course, is that power corrupts. Randel Helms writes:

part of the reason Tolkien’s vision is so necessary to so many is that it provides a richly satisfying experience of a fully worked out mythological influence, spiritual and probably eternal, against which man is doomed to fight, but which he has no hope of conquering on his own.¹⁴

But if evil, once it has possessed a person, is allowed to win without any further struggle, then there would not be much hope for us mortals, since all of us are, incipiently, Gollums, likely to be present when a Ring of Power is found. If Gollum, who was unfortunate enough to be swimming in a river when a circle of bright gold glittered on its bottom, had been irrevocably lost, what kind of hope could the world have retained, and what kind of interest would that world hold for readers? But Tolkien implies that there is at least a chance that Gollum may be cured before he dies, and this chance, this hope, reverberates throughout the story. Gollum reflects the position of Middle-earth itself; when Gandalf says, “Alas, there is little hope... for him,” then adds, “Yet not no hope,” (I, 64) he might, with a change of pronoun, be speaking not of Gollum but of the world, since the Quest seems a fool’s errand from the first and there is little hope that the Ring will go into the Fire — but not, thank God, *no* hope.

Gollum also reflects the position of Middle-earth in the struggle of life against death. That struggle is all-pervasive in *The Lord of the Rings*, extending from the broadest plotline to the narrowest examinations of character and landscape. “The war... is the story of the fight of the world in all its variousness to stay alive when... the darkness threatens to obliterate the natural separateness of living things,” writes Roger Sales, and he goes on to point out that the world itself is peculiarly alive.¹⁵ In the land of Hollin, Aragorn senses watchfulness and fear in the land itself, and when the Army of the West approaches Mordor, it is noted that “Tree and stone, blade and leaf, were listening: (III, 160). Growth and greenery are associated with the forces of good; in Lothlorien, even the houses are made of growing trees. Desolation is always associated with evil, as is machinery; Fangorn characterizes the traitor Saruman as having a mind “of metal and wheels,” and having no concern for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment. In Mordor, nothing will grow but a thorn bush. Hugh T. Keenan notes:

The peculiar achievement of the author is to have created a world which is at once completely (or to a superlative degree) sentient and yet dying, to have presented vividly, objectively and emotionally the eternal conflict between life and death.¹⁶

Like the vision of the Ancient Mariner, Gollum contains the central conflict in his very being, he is Death-in-Life, a perversion of life from the encroachments of death. In this, Gollum stands alone. The Orcs are wicked, but they are alive — they need food and drink, and they can presumably die of old age, unlikely though it is that they will get a chance to. The Nazgûl are dead — they neither eat nor drink, they do not have bodies, and they will endure for as long as the Ring does. But Gollum is both alive and “dead”; he is four hundred years too old for any creature of his race, and although he must eat and drink, he seems able to get along on less than any other living creature would deem possible. He lives on the lowest forms of life — as Sam guesses — “worms or beetles, or something slimy out of holes” (II, 233). The highest form of nourishment which he desires is raw fish, which is the lowest form of animal life although also, significantly, a common fertility symbol, and when he attempts to eat *lembas*, the food of the Elves, he spits and coughs, saying that it tastes like “dust and ashes” (II, 229). Perhaps the most explicit description of his deathly appearance comes after the passage of the Dead Marshes:

an eagle poised against the sun... might have paused to consider Gollum, a tiny figure sprawling on the ground: there perhaps lay the famished skeleton of some child of Men, its ragged garment still clinging to it, its long arms and legs bone-white and bone-thin: no flesh worth a peck. (II, 253)

And, of course, although Aragorn and Gandalf search for Gollum initially through a great part of the wilderness, it is in the Dead Marshes that Aragorn finally confronts him: “Lurking by a stagnant mere, peering in the water as

the dark eve fell, I caught him, Gollum. He was covered with green slime." (I, 266) In fact, although Gollum lurks always on the edge of the company's trail, both the first and the second time that he actually confronts a company member, the meeting takes place by the Marshes of the Dead. Not only does he always seem to surface there, but by his own account he is the only creature in Middle-earth who can find a safe path through them. Yet he does not love them. He calls the candles of the corpses "Tricksy Lights." He hates the stink of the Marshes, but "good Sméagol bears it," though he does not bear the Tower of the Moon, which has become a place of death; he urgently tries to get the hobbits past its exhalation of decay. As in the spectrum of good and evil, Gollum vacillates between life and death, like a reflection of Middle-earth itself.

In fact, even the events which are precipitated by and which surround Gollum enact the central laws which govern Middle-earth. Randel Helms, in his essay "Tolkien's World," attempts to summarize the internal laws of Tolkien's fantasy world. Three of the laws which he distinguishes are: The cosmos is providentially controlled; Intention structures results; All experience is the realization of proverbial truth. Helms writes of the first law:

Perhaps the clearest example of the working of Middle-earthly Providence is in Gandalf's remark to Frodo about the discovery of the Ring: "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and not by its maker."¹⁷

But surely an equally important demonstration of this truth lies in the numerous references to the part which Gollum may play in the Quest, a part which cannot be predicted or defined. Gandalf says "my heart tells me that he has some part to play, for good or ill, before the end" (I, 69). Later he points out to the Council — after Gollum's escape from Mirkwood has been reported — that "he may play a part yet that neither he nor Sauron have foreseen" (I, 269). And Gandalf several times makes the point that "even the Wise cannot see all ends." Clearly, there is some power working behind Gollum, a power which is intimately tied up with the structure of Middle-earth. Since in the end the part he plays is, against all possibility of prediction, a good one, to some extent he must be seen as an instrument of Providence when he takes the Ring to its destruction.

He is also, however, demonstrating the essential truth that on Middle-earth good intentions lead to good results.¹⁸ At various times Gollum's life is spared by Bilbo, Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn and Sam, and they are all well rewarded for showing pity and mercy. Gandalf explains to Frodo that Bilbo took so little hurt from the evil of the Ring and escaped its power in the end because he began his ownership of the Ring by showing mercy to Gollum. By extrapolation we may be assured that Middle-earth takes so little hurt from the evil and escapes in the end because the representatives of Middle-earth acted with

mercy to Gollum, who thus survived to become the saviour of the world.

The proverbial truth expressed thus by Théoden, "Evil will shall evil mar," is intimately connected with the way that good intentions lead to good results in Middle-earth. Examples of evil tripping up evil abound in *The Lord of the Rings*,¹⁹ but again one of the most important demonstrations of this truth can be found in the role Gollum plays in the latter part of the Quest. As Gandalf (speaking of Gollum), says to Pippin, "A traitor may betray himself and do good that he does not intend." (III, 89)

When Frodo is stuck beneath the cliff of the Emyrn Muil, unable to find a way forward and equally unable to retreat, the future of the Quest looks very dim. There are Nazgûl flying overhead and orcs about. Suddenly there arrives the only creature in Middle-earth who knows the way across the Dead Marshes: Gollum, drawn only by his hatred for the bearer of the Precious and by his lust for the Ring itself. Of course, as I have pointed out, Gollum leads them safely in part because he comes to feel affection for, and gratitude toward, Frodo. But Gollum arrives in time to save the Quest as a result both of his own evil intentions and the good intentions of those who have spared his life. When Frodo sees that the Morannon is impassable, Gollum, his better self defunct for the moment, tells Frodo that there is another way into Mordor. Planning treachery, Gollum hopes to lead the hobbits to Shelob. The Pass of Cirith Ungol is, however, quite literally the only other way into Mordor — and the only force which is capable of leading them there is the evil will of Gollum.

The most striking and important demonstration of this pattern in Middle-earth is also the climactic event of the story. The scene at the Crack of Doom has been called "one of the most perplexing episodes in *The Lord of the Rings*."²⁰ But when Gollum is seen as the complicated character that he is, a struggling human being as well as a symbol of the battle between opposing forces, then the scene at the Crack is not perplexing, but a masterful culmination of themes and motifs. The climax begins when Sam, carrying Frodo on his back, is suddenly struck from behind by Gollum, who has caught up with them. In hand to hand combat Frodo defeats Gollum, who crouches at his feet. Sam sees Frodo as a figure robed in white who holds at his breast a wheel of fire:

Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice. "Begone and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into Mount Doom." (III, 221)

The reader's thoughts should turn back to the scene beneath the Ephel Dúath when Frodo reminds Gollum of his promise:

You swore a promise by what you call the Precious. Remember that! It will hold you to it; but it may seek a way to twist it to your own undoing... In the last time, Sméagol, I should put on the Precious; and the Precious mastered you long ago. If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire. And such would be my command. (II, 248)

Frodo has now given that command. Although he is not, on the slopes of Orodruin, actually wearing the Ring, the Ring's power has become so great as it draws close to the fire where it was forged that, as Frodo tells Sam, "I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades." (III, 215) There is no veil between Frodo and the power on his breast, and when he says to Gollum "If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom," he says so with the power of the Ring behind his words. Gollum, bound to the Ring by his promises and his centuries of enslavement, cannot escape the power of that statement, which becomes simply a statement of what must be now. When Gollum "touches" Frodo, he does so by biting off his ring finger:

'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My precious! Oh, my precious!' And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *precious*, and he was gone. (III, 224)

Gollum is indeed "cast into the Fire of Doom," by the power of his own complex shackles to the Ring. And here is the ultimate demonstration of the truth that evil works often against itself. For how could the Ring know that it would be in Gollum's hand when it invested with the power of evil Frodo's command to Gollum? The greatest power of evil works here for the accomplishment of great good. Moreover, in one masterful stroke, Tolkien indicates again that the cosmos is providentially controlled. For although no one living could foresee the role Gollum would play, yet Gollum is there at the crucial moment, when Frodo claims the Ring for his own.

Patricia Spacks writes of the fall into the Fire, "In the presentation of this event the idea of free will intimately involved with fate receives its most forceful statement."²¹ I have always been a great believer in both destiny and free will, and perhaps that is why *The Lord of the Rings* became an important book for me; all the characters in the story perceive their own actions as the result of free will and all have good reasons for their actions — they are *motivated* — and yet the underlying pattern of Middle-earth works always in favor of goodness. Well, Gollum, more than a monster, more than a symbol, is also an agent of that pattern.

The pattern takes over partly because in the final moments of his life Gollum is no longer acting from his own free will. In the space of four pages dealing with the scene upon Orodruin, Tolkien four times mentions Gollum's "madness." When Gollum attacks Frodo, Tolkien notes that "a wild light of madness flamed in his eyes." Gollum turns and follows Sam up the slopes of the mountain with "a wild light glaring in his eyes." When Sam comes to the edge of the Crack, he sees Gollum "fighting like a mad thing." And when Gollum snaps off Frodo's finger, he holds aloft the Ring, "dancing like a mad thing." If Gollum is mad then he is clearly no longer

morally responsible for his actions and though he has completely failed in his ability to resist evil, he himself is neither evil nor good any longer; the two poles which have been struggling in him struggle no longer and the "underlying pattern" of Middle-earth is free to function, turning Gollum into an agent of good through the power of the law that evil often defeats itself.

Of course, Tolkien brands Gollum as mad for another reason as well. When Frodo says, "I have come... But I do not choose to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (III, 223), this must be perceived not as the victory of the evil in him over the good, but simply as a crucial failure of the will to resist any longer; must, in fact, be understood as the madness that the Ring imparts, sooner or later, to all its bearers. If this were not so, the very strength of the Ring as a symbol would be undermined. In fact, when the Ring is destroyed, Tolkien writes that in Frodo's eyes there was "peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness." (III, 224) Even though Frodo fails at the end, it is essential that he remain admirable, and in order to function effectively as Frodo's inverse image or alter ego, Gollum must fail for the same reason that Frodo fails, because of a madness. The instrument of the Ring's destruction is, in fact, not simply Gollum, but Gollum and Frodo together, both beset by madness and no longer in possession of their wills.

I have argued up to now that Gollum is the most fully developed character in the Ring story; implied that if he is a monster, he is merely the monster in all men. He is not terribly evil; he is not terribly good. He is weak, limited, vulnerable, at once very frail and in his struggle to win out against his wicked instinct — very heroic. He is a hobbit, which is to say a human being, and in his lust for power and his tentative response to love he embodies the dilemma which besets all men. Both through acting as a foil to the other, more appealing Ringbearers, and through his personal charm — his verbal tics, his spontaneous helpful actions, his appreciation of Frodo's kindness and of the beauty of life itself — Gollum demands the sympathy of every reader. He has two sides to him, one representing life and goodness, the other death and evil, and the battle which those two sides engage in is heartbreakingly close to the battle we all engage in, and the one which is portrayed in any character in a good piece of modern non-fantastic fiction. In this world there are no goblins or orcs, nor any Aragorns or Gandalfs either, but there are certainly a lot of Gollums. And insofar as Gollum precipitates and is surrounded by events which enact the central laws of Middle-earth, he might be called a modern hero, one who — for all that he does wrong — at least does one thing right: he takes the Ring into the Fire.

Certainly it is fitting and inevitable that Gollum and the Ring are destroyed simultaneously. Gollum has, in effect, been given life by the Ring, and when it is destroyed he will die in any case. Sam does not, however, describe Gollum as dead. When he reflects upon the part

Gollum has played, he says that he is “gone beyond recall — gone forever.” (III, 225) There can be no final victory for good or evil, for life or death; with each generation the struggle begins anew. But just as evil can be for a time defeated, so the perversion of life can be, for a time, banished.

But how can an accidental fall be called in any way heroic? Well, perhaps it is not entirely accidental. As Gollum stands on the brink of the Crack of Doom, holding aloft a bloody finger and a shining band of gold, he is happy for the first time since he lost the Ring to Bilbo, and at peace for the first time since he murdered to gain it. Re-united with the thing which has consumed his life, Gollum has fulfilled his own personal quest and has nowhere left to go. He knows, he must know, that when Frodo claimed the Ring for his own, the Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and shaking his mind free from all his stratagems and wars, had bent his whole mind and purpose upon the Mountain. Even as Gollum stands there crowing, the Nazgûl are hurtling toward Orodrin, faster than the winds themselves. And Gollum’s last wail from the depths, after all, is not a scream of anguish, but the word “precious,” as bright as living fire. Even as he falls, plummeting toward death, he holds the golden thing aloft, crowing with great joy. Who is to say what is really in Gollum’s mind? Since we are dealing with a character who, unlike most characters in fantasy, is complexly motivated by often conflicting instincts, I hope it is not stretching a point to suggest that those instincts may exist on the subconscious level as well as the conscious level. Surely it is not usual for a man to *want* to destroy something which he both loves and hates, particularly if he otherwise must lose it, and not unheard of for him to *wish* to die in a moment of great ecstasy. Gollum is human enough to choose to destroy the Ring which has destroyed him, even if that choice is made unconsciously.

I think it would be difficult to argue that Gollum is the hero of *The Lord of the Rings* if we are dealing with an absolutely traditional fantasy — one in which the hero really has to be a Hero, a figure who follows the pattern described in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. But although Tolkien’s story is certainly not a work of traditional fiction and it certainly does capture Jungian archetypes in many of its characters (Shelob might be seen as the Devouring Mother, for instance; Galadriel as the Good Mother) neither does it follow the traditional pattern of a fantasy, in which a single individual (a Hero) engages in a process which Campbell describes as Separation/Initiation/Return, goes through terror or self-annihilation for the purpose of re-birth, and emerges victorious. This is a book about — in C.S. Lewis’ brilliant phrase — “the dethronement of power,” and individual Heroes, even vulnerable Heroes, cannot be central to a book with such a theme. Had Frodo put the Ring into the fire, the balance of the story would have been destroyed. He would have become a kind of Christ-figure and that would not have served to dethrone the concept of power. *The Lord of the*

Rings is not an ancient myth, it is a twentieth century novel, and the twentieth century has not proved to be a time when individuals can rely on other individuals to save the world. Societies have become entirely too complex for the individualistic ethic to be anything but dangerous; no man can rely on one person to make all wrong things right. The best that we can hope for is that working as a *community* of men we may avert catastrophe — and thus Tolkien’s choice to have a kind of committee (the Fellowship) take the Ring to Mordor and to have a weak and inadvertent saviour carry it into the flames is crucial choice both in terms of the story’s theme and in terms of its great appeal.

Of course, Frodo does experience separation, initiation, and return, and he does go through terror and self-destruction for the purpose of re-birth, but he is scarcely the only character in the book who does that — Gandalf is lost in the Mines of Moria and Aragorn tested on the Paths of the Dead — and, most importantly, Frodo does *not* emerge victorious. He does not make a conscious or even an unconscious choice to destroy the Ring or part with it, and after its dissolution he never has a happy day again. He returns to the Shire only to pass some little time there, taking no real action, until he decides to set sail for the outer lands — decides, in fact, to die. In her essay “Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown,” Ursula LeGuin argues that this is something entirely new to fantasy and science fiction as a genre — a vulnerable, limited, rather unpredictable hero who finally fails at his own quest. LeGuin argues further that although Frodo is not a fully developed novelistic character, it is when put together with Sam and with Gollum and Sméagol that we find a complex and fascinating character indeed. In passing, she writes, “Gollum is probably the best character in the book because he got two of the components, Sméagol and Gollum.”²²

Well, I think LeGuin is on the right track, but that she does not follow it quite far enough. I agree with her that what ultimately carries any great work of fiction is a Mrs. Brown, a real person with whom it is possible to identify and through whom one can perceive the tragic struggle of all men, the struggle to find light on the other side of darkness. And I agree with her that Frodo is a real person, though not quite a real as Gollum. But I think that Gollum is a strong enough character to stand on his own nasty little feet as a Mrs. Brown — that far from being merely Frodo’s alter ego or *doppelgänger*, Gollum does not even need Frodo to be an alter ego for *him*. It seems to me that having two of the components — darkness and light, the Self and the Other, the Slinker and the Stinker, as Sam calls them — is quite sufficient to define a truly developed character. We may dislike Gollum because he so brilliantly manifests the disagreeable weakness of mankind, or pity him because he suffers from it, but we may not ignore the ways in which he is absolutely central to the theme of *The Lord of the Rings*, and the ways in which his embattled personality — the Self which has almost been consumed by the Shadow — still fights almost to the end to let that “chink of light” penetrate the darkness in which he lives. And though he hates and

fears the Sun, and travels by night whenever he can, in the end it is *his* action, (even if it is an action motivated by unconscious desires), that frees the world from the Great Darkness. Gollum is nobody's Shadow; he carries his own Shadow with him, and that makes him a whole person. He is certainly not a Hero; but I think that he is a kind of hero, a nasty, snivelling, struggling, touching, heartbreaking man who is fighting the long defeat, and who destroys the Ring because he loves and hates it, because he is happy at last. Although this may not seem much of a testament to Tolkien's optimistic view or the future of the world itself, and of the power of life to work somehow toward the good. When the oldest hobbit frees himself from his bondage to evil, he frees the earth as well. ❖

Notes

1. M. Hodgart, "Kicking the Hobbit," *New York Review of Books*, VIII, 8 (May 4, 1967) p.11.
2. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p.15.
3. *Ibid.*, p.16.
4. *Ibid.*, p.28.
5. Deborah Rogers, "Everycloud and Everyhero: The Image of Man in Tolkien" in *A Tolkien Compass*, ed. Jared Lobdell (Illinois: Open Court, 1975), p. 71.
6. Roger Sale, "Tolkien and Zimbarado" in *Tolkien and the Critics*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Frodo Baginno (Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1968), p.263.
7. Randal Helms, *Tolkien's World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), pp. 90-98.
8. Tolkien, p.93.
9. Agnes Perkins and Helen Hill, "The Corruption of Power" in *A Tolkien Compass*, ed. Jared Lobdell (Illinois: Open court, 1975), p.60.
10. Tolkien, p. 79.
11. U. Milo Kaufmann, "Aspects of the Paradisical in Tolkien's Work" in *A Tolkien Compass*, ed. Jared Lobdell (Illinois: Open Court Press, 1975), p. 150.
12. Sale, p. 286-7.
13. W.H. Auden, "The Quest Hero" in *Tolkien and the Critics*, Ed. Isaacs and Zimbarado (Indiana) University of Notre Dame, 1968), p. 57.
14. Helms, p. 67.
15. Sale, p. 263.
16. Hugh T. Keenan, "The Appeal of *The Lord of the Rings*: A Struggle for Life" in *Tolkien and the Critics*, ed. Isaacs and Zimbarado (Illinois: University of Notre Dame, 1968), p. 64.
17. Helms, p.80.
18. *Ibid.*, p.80. Helms argues that the basic difference between the moral structure of Tolkien's world and our own is that on our earth the intention directing an action has less than nothing to do with the result of that action, but on Middle-earth moral law has structured reality and "the meaning of all its actions is reducible to the terms of a mathematical truth table."
19. For example, it is Saruman's evil greed which causes the transportation of Merry and Pippin to the eves of Fangorn just in time to arouse the Ents to the destruction of Isengard. Similarly, only Grishnakh's desire for the Ring gets them safely beyond the battle. Wormtongue's hatred for Saruman and Gandalf results in the palantir of Orthanc reaching the hands of Aragorn, who uses it to precipitate the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. Thus the war comes before Sauron is at his full strength, and Gondor's victory can be seen as a result of Saruman's greed, Grishnakh's greed, Wormtongue's hatred, and Sauron's own greedy haste.
20. Patricia Spacks, "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*" in *Tolkien and the Critics*, ed. Isaacs and Zimbarado (Illinois: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1968), p. 94.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
22. Ursula K. LeGuin, "Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown" in *Science Fiction at Large*, Ed. Peter Nicholls (London: Victor Gollancz LTD, 1976), p. 21.

MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. In order to be a general help, the following is what might be considered a core reading list, containing the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle", 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954, *The Two Towers* 1954, *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977.

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1937; *The Greater Trumps* 1937; *Shadows of Ecstasy* 1939; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Tales from through Logres* 1958, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).

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- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. Boston: Ballantine Books, 1966.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965.



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