



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 14
Number 2

Article 4

Winter 12-15-1987

Misery loves... A Root of Villainy

Deborah Webster Rogers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rogers, Deborah Webster (1987) "Misery loves... A Root of Villainy," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 14: No. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol14/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



Misery loves... A Root of Villainy

Abstract

Sees a common motive in three villains of fiction: Gollum, Captain Hook, and Salieri. Each believes that he lacks something “and devotes himself to making it good at the expense of a protagonist who has what the villain wants.”

Additional Keywords

Barrie, J.M.—Characters—Captain Hook—Motivation; Shaffer, Peter—Characters—Salieri—Motivation; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum—Motivation

Misery loves... A Root of Villainy

Deborah Webster Rogers

Someone is following.

As our hero throws his all into fulfilling his destiny, someone is shadowing him to wreck the hero and seize what the shadow desires. "I follow but to serve my turn upon him," as *lago* puts it.

Not your braggart quarrelor, your sadist, your Fuhrer, nor your common thief will I investigate today, but a particular kind of villain and his motive. We shall study him in three settings: Tolkien's Middle-earth, Barrie's Neverland, and Peter Shaffer's Vienna; Gollum, Captain Hook, and Saliери.

What (you may ask) have they in common: a burrowing sneak, a pirate in a Charles II wig, and a real — well, historical — well, historically based artist and successful man of his time?

I did not think out their resemblance; it came to me like a Hirschfeld cartoon, apparently of *Peter Pan*. But the figure flying and crowing, "Oh, the cleverness of me!" was Mozart. The villain stalking him, of course Saliери, was saying, "I have bitten one finger off the Muse and will never rest until I have devoured her entirely!" — But the yen to eat the rest of someone is not Captain Hook's, it's the crocodile's; and a finger is bitten off by Gollum, never by Saliери!

But this mixed-up cartoon shows the common theme among these villains: their motive. All our authors make clear that the villain's main perception is that he lacks something, hence his villainy. Each feels a lack and devotes himself to making it good at the expense of a protagonist who has what the villain wants. Besides getting "It," each Villain also says he wants revenge.

Gollum wants the Ring. He wanted revenge first on Bilbo, "Thief Baggins," for having taken it; later on any Baggins or any Ring-bearer he can find. The intended victim of his stalk which we witness is Frodo.

Hook wants to avenge himself on Peter Pan for cutting off his hand. Though this has not disabled the pirate, it has endangered his life by giving the crocodile an appetite for him. Hook and his crew also want to steal Wendy.

Saliери's want is want of talent. He stalks Mozart and craves revenge because (as Saliери sees it) Mozart not only has talent, he has been given talent — by God, with Whom Saliери thought he himself had a deal. So he pursues revenge, as he says, through Mozart, on God. Is talent something one can seize like a ring or a girl? Saliери is going to try: to steal the credit for Mozart's *Requiem*.¹

So there is each villain's motive for revenge, object of desire, and intended victim. Longing and striving as he does to destroy his victim, the villain obviously hates him. Hook says, "Most of all, I want their captain, Peter Pan... I've waited long to shake his hand with this. Oh, I'll tear him!"² Gollum yells, "We hate it forever!"³ Saliери confesses, "My heart was filling up with such hatred for that little man!"⁴

They hate their victims, right? Wrong. Take Hook. Besides revenge and his quest-object, more involves him with Peter. Peter is admired! He has Good Form! He is "Youth, Joy, a little bird that has broken out of the egg!"⁵ And what Hook really would crave is to be Peter Pan.

But a longing to identify with someone goes with love, not hate. What is going on? What about our other villains? Gollum villainously wants to identify with Frodo as Ring bearer, feeling he himself should be it. He leaves himself free to hurt Frodo by confounding the two in his trick oath, "I will serve the master of the Precious" (II, 285). Yet we glimpse some disinterested identification. Sam sees Frodo and Gollum as "akin" (II, 285).⁶ When Gollum finds Frodo and Sam asleep, "a strange expression passed over his lean and hungry face.... A spasm of pain seemed to twist him.... slowly putting out a trembling hand.... he touched Frodo's knee — but almost the touch was a caress." He looked like "an old weary hobbit" (II, 411).

Saliери obviously longs to identify with "God's beloved" composer. Mozart's music transpires him like love's own arrow, plunging him into positively petrachian paradoxes: "agonizing delights" (S, 519), or "a phrase of such delight it had me trampling," which becomes "Long lines of pain around and through me" (S, 497, cf. III, 286).

But perverse loves, when they are all Hell-bent on robbery and murder. Those are no fruits of love, but of hatred. Again, what goes on? Oh, I never said these villains weren't driven by hatred: I said hatred was not the crux of their feelings for their victims. Hook, Gollum, and Saliери all hate themselves. We are bidden to love our neighbor as *ourselves*; these twisted three, hating themselves, take it out on their neighbor. The best short term for their common motive would be a French coinage: *haine-propre*.

They hate themselves for the lack which underlies all they know of themselves. "Now... I feel my emptiness as Adam felt his nakedness" (S, 519); "Poor Smeagol... went away long ago. They took his Precious, and he's lost now" (II, 283); Hook "felt his ego slipping from him" (PW, 112).

The protagonists have what the villains lack. We have heard Peter's Key words, "joy," "youth," and the riddlesome "a little bird that has broken out of the egg." Again *lago* sums it up: "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly."

That our villains lack beauty need hardly be belabored. That they crave it — yes, all. Hook affects Restoration dress and (Barrie says) goes in for music. Music is Saliери's passion (second only to that for himself). Looking at Mozart's manuscripts, he says, "I was staring through the cage of those meticulous ink strokes at an Absolute Beauty" (S, 519). And Gollum: when he says the Ring he had no thought of gaining invisibility, nor food, nor power; he only wanted it "because the gold looked so bright and beautiful" (I, 85). Beautiful gold, emblematic of plenitude, antithesis of lack. Saliери lacks his apartment with gold. Hook's *Jolly Roger* no doubt carries golden loot.

So they lack but crave beauty. Their lack of joy -- well, given that their central perception is of themselves, and that self lacking, how could one be joyful? "Unsmiling concentration upon self," says C.S. Lewis, "is the mark of Hell."

The phrase "a little bird that has broken out of the egg" incorporates two ideas, youth and freedom. Do the villains lack freedom compared to the protagonists? Saliery seems more free; his smooth conduct has won him the entree anywhere, whereas Mozart is poor and less popular: limited. Yet Mozart has free access to some divine vein of music. He is altogether too free in his speech. And the circumspect Saliery surmises he is free to leap into bed with sopranos! Which just turns the screws on Saliery's sense of his own limitations.

Gollum traverses Middle-earth far and wide, and he had the Ring of Power for some five hundred years. This sounds free! He is bound by no duty to others, as Frodo is. But Gollum is incapable of desiring anything but the Ring, and following it. Frodo has his own will, has freely assumed this obligations, and actually opposes the Ring, carrying it towards destruction. And what happened while Gollum had the One Ring, its longest possessor except for Sauron its maker? Gollum spent almost five hundred years alone, in eternal dark and wet, existing on raw fish and orcs. If that is freedom, I'll take poverty, chastity, and obedience.

Peter Pan's freedom -- he can fly, for human beings the greatest image of freedom. And he can pass back and forth between Neverland and London. Captain Hook aboard his ship has not broken out of any shell.

Peter is also free to choose to remain a boy and never grow up, which brings us to the subject of youth. Lo, it matters in all three works we are studying. All our authors make a point of youth, and neoteny, which is the retention of youthful features in an adult specimen.

Barrie is the most overt. How ever long Peter has been in existence, he is and will be a boy. Barrie says several times that he still has his first teeth. Hook, on the other hand, is a Grownup (ugh). Further, he is usually played by the same actor as George Darling, Wendy's father. Barrie characterizes Darling Daddy as having his own villainous streak, self-absorbed and dishonest.

Saliery is older than Mozart by six years: not a lot. Saliery has qualities we would praise as "mature": he has developed his ability and moved from being a small-town kid to a sustained career at court. This hardworking adult is outraged to find in "infantile Mozart" "an obscene child!" (S, 520, 497). Mozart, aged from twenty-six to thirty-six, is small and restless, childish traits; also irreverent, potty-mouthed, and a showoff. Seeing this creature gifted and believing him beloved, Saliery becomes perfectly miserable with his grownup status. (So, by the way, are Shaffer's Dr. Dyarrat and Pizarro.)

Tolkien puts neoteny at the center of his fiction with hobbits. They are two to four feet tall and don't grow boards. Other races have trouble taking them seriously. Their long lifespans go with extended youth: Frodo at thirty-three is only just of age. Gollum, also of hobbitish nature, has had his lifespan stretched by the Ring and is "tired." Tolkien's leading

case of what we could call pernicious adulthood is a human villain, Denethor.

So villainy inheres in adulthood, one gets to Heaven by being a child, and our Villains' main lack is of youth? No. Not one of our authors is simply stating that the grownup is the bad guy. Shaffer makes clear that Mozart's neoteny damages him and is not a necessary yoke-fellow of his talent. Barrie makes Peter stunningly attractive, yet undercuts him too: he tells us Peter is impoverished in personal relations, e.g. he can't be touched. And after the capture of the *Jolly Roger*, Peter can be found striking attitudes as a mini-Hook. Tolkien, with the greatest variety of neoteneous characters, shows us with Pippin's pranks that mere childishness brings trouble. (Imagine Pippin and Mozart let loose at the same party!)

But if neither adulthood nor childhood makes a villain, what have youth and age to do with our study? Plenty, given that the villains are driven to discontent with themselves. Human children and adults are notorious for feeling their own lacks and wanting to be the other. The child feels helpless, the grownup feels burdened; both feel they lack freedom. Each is certain that the other has more fun. Gollum's desperate need and Denethor's conviction that he is the Sole Responsible Party give us the two poles.

So the question of how not to be a villain becomes a pair of questions: how can one be young without being a baby or a brat, and how can one be mature without being a Grownup (ugh), miserable, envious, and self-hating?

Barrie and Shaffer provide no answer. Mozart and Hook are dead, Peter is frozen in time; and Saliery, "alive though barely," combines a degree of dementia with Final Impenitence. The playwrights are limited to one evening's matter.

Tolkien can range wider and does. Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin survive, to mention only the hobbits; and hobbits particularly have the features Tolkien seems to deem necessary for a successful, non-villainous life. Primarily two: fun and company.

I have mentioned that among us, children and adults suspect each other of having more fun. But among hobbits, all ages frankly enjoy bright colors, fetes and fireworks, and presents. Fun includes learning -- a hobbit conning her family tree or Faramir in the archives of Minas Tirith. Fun includes all the arts (remember beauty?): dwarves forging, hobbits dancing in the springlering, or Mozart composing.

The villains don't have fun. You'd think Hook would, "for it is, it is a glorious thing to be a pirate king," especially in Neverland. But he is so obsessed with not being Peter and revenge for his hand that he poisons his own existence. Captain Hook's hand is in a class with Captain Ahab's leg; we should also mention Saliery's futile attempt on his jugular. Their personalities have something cut off. Frodo, left with the same mark as archvillain Sauron, the missing finger, finds he no longer much enjoys Shire festivities.

Saliery loves music, except he makes himself hate it when it is not his, and his own is no more fun for him since it isn't Mozart's! Otherwise all he enjoys is sweets, and he makes even that an occasion for self-hatred: "It's a little repellant,.... but... the first sin I have to confess to you is Gluttony. Sticky gluttony at that. Infantine -- Italian gluttony!" (S, 488). Now,

would any hobbit mock itself for taking seconds on crema al mascarpone?*

I said all Salieri enjoyed was sweets, and I hope those of you familiar with the stage version of *Amadeus* will retort, "What about Katherina?" That brings us back to the subject of company. Our villains lack it. On the stage, even though Salieri has a wife and a mistress, the marriage is deliberately cold and boring, and the affair was entered into more from spite than lust. In the screen version, Shaffer wisely cuts both (Katherina is solely a pupil, despite the lust). This gives us a more accurate picture of Salieri's mentally lone condition.

Hook lacks the rapport with his band that Peter has with his. "As dogs he treated and addressed them, and as dogs they obeyed him" (PW, 66). Gollum is Tolkien's most isolated character except for dragons and Shelob, who aren't even anthropomorphic.

Company, externally, is being with other persons. Internally, it ranges from recognizing some common interest up through all kinds of love. Company can even exist without presence: Aragorn and Arwen are "with" each other; Elbereth is "with" Sam in Mordor.

Two easy occasions for becoming company are with one's likes and (often) with the unfortunate; harder are with persons different from oneself and (for some) with the fortunate. Examples: hobbits generally are alike and have an easy time being company with each other. Elves and Lost Boys band together easily. The other easy in is when one sees someone in misfortune and feels a sadness for it. This is pity, spoken of by all our authors and specially stressed by Tolkien.

The playwrights raise the subject only to deny it, "Does no feeling of compassion disturb his sombre breast? The man is not wholly evil.... What really warps him is a presentiment that he is about to fail" (P, 73). "Could I not have stopped my war? Shown him some pity? Oh yes... if He above had shown me one drop of it!" (S, 537). In Tolkien, Pity is a hero's quality. Bilbo, Frodo, and even Sam take pity on Gollum; and snared by pity, he resolves the plot when Frodo will not. Gollum had (as we saw) his moment of feeling pity and companionship with Frodo and Sam, but Sam's pitiless attitude at that point isolated Gollum again into his villainy. It's these possibilities getting wasted that make our villains tragic (specially Salieri) and not just bad.

So with one's likes or the unfortunate it is easy to become company; less easy with others. For instance, someone of the opposite sex in an Other. Tolkien's ents and entwives have allowed their differences to sunder them completely. Lust can provide a fast start toward a relationship, but as we saw with Salieri and Katherine and Theresa, going to bed with someone does not necessarily mean much company. Mozart and Constanze, on the other hand, have a lurch for each other and have fun and stick together through thick and thin. This is company. (If Tolkien had ever lowered himself to lurk around in wing chairs the way Salieri does, God forbid, we might find out Sam and Rosie have coarse private jokes. "Mind your own beeswax" (S, 411).)

People of different races are Others. Bilbo the Hobbit starts with the dwarves as the merest grudging on both sides, common-interest companion, and Tolkien shows us by what gradual stages he becomes a full companion and friend. Elf and dwarf, Legolas and Gimli, begin as suspicious roadfellows and become



Paola Di Santa / 1987

friends because of Galadriel the elf's appreciation of dwarvish arts.

Then we get the situation which calls for reverse pity (is there a word?). Hook and Salieri are confronted with a superior, a creature of wonder. We have seen that something in them would wish to join with him, to rejoice and to love. But they don't. Neither will Denethor, the hitherto faithful steward, rejoice in his returned King. They won't be companions.

Why not? Because the Villains are entirely stuck and centered on themselves. We have spoken of their main perception of themselves as lacking; now shift emphasis: they perceive just themselves, and it lacking. It's I and Me and Mine from here to Hell with all of them. God is a member of Salieri's entourage! He and Denethor make the same dying declaration: "I would... be Lord of this City.... But if doom denies this to me, then I will have naught" (III, 158); "If I cannot be Mozart then I do not wish to be anything." This is pride, as Gandalf observes: pride, the villains' besetting sin even more than envy.

Now, everybody is lacking, protagonists too. Mozart says frankly, "I'm a jackass" (S, 528), and goes on composing his heavenly music. Frodo feels and is very small in the face of his task. He gladly appreciates the help of his company, specially Sam, and even Gollum. Everyone lacks, somehow. Our villains feel this personally, judge it wrong, and make it the center of their universe. Their selves being defective, they worship the defective, which cyclically warps them more and more.

continued on page 40

continued from page 10

- ²⁴ In a paper read at The Tolkien Workshop in London, 15 May 1987
- ²⁵ Patrick K. Ford Trans. and Ed. *The Mabinogi and other Welsh Tales* (London: University of California Press 1977)
- ²⁶ Evangeline Walton *The Song of Rhiannon* (New York: Ballantine 1972)
- ²⁷ Marilyn E. Hicken (*Cumulated Fiction Index 1975-1979* (England: Association of Assistant Librarians 1980); Marilyn E. Hicken *Cumulated Fiction Index 1980-1984* (England: Association of Assistant Librarians 1985))
- ²⁸ Mary Stewart, *The Crystal Cave* (London: Hodder and Stoughton 1970)
- ²⁹ John Glos, *Artorius Rex* (London: Cassell & Co. 1977)
- ³⁰ T.H. White *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins 1958)
- ³¹ Leelle Alcock *Arthur's Britain* (London: Pelican Books 1973)
- ³² Kathleen Herbert, *The Lady of the Fountain* (Frome: Bran's Head 1982)
- ³³ It cannot be coincidence that Finnbogi is also mentioned in Graenlendinga Saga as one of the earlier settlers of Greenland. He is unlikely to be Snorri's father, as he was murdered in his first winter there.
- ³⁴ Jefferson P. Swycaffer, "Historical Motivations for the Siege of Minas Tirith" in *Mythlore* Number 35, page 47; Jessica Yates in *Mythlore* Number 39, page 41

continued from page 25

Companions, who look outside themselves, are made better. Childish Pippin and rustic Sam become heroes. Vulgar Stanz becomes a prop to her gifted, neotenus husband. Jealous little inhuman Tinker Bell shows herism when she drinks Hook's poison.

Our villains claim to be poisoned by the Other, but they aren't. Each is overdoed to death with himself.

Notes

- ¹ Not far-fetched: historically, that Mass was commissioned by someone who wanted to steal the credit, though it wasn't Salieri.
- ² J.M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (New York, Scribner's, 1926), p. 72. Further quotations from this book will be identified in the text with PW and the page number.
- ³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York, Ballantine, 1965), p. 93. All Tolkien quotations will be from the Ballantine paperbacks, identified by page number and II (*The Hobbit*), II (*The Two Towers*), and III (*The Return of the King*).
- ⁴ This line is from the screenplay, no printed text of *Amadeus*. Most quotations are from *The Collected Plays of Peter Shaffer* (New York, Harmony, 1982), identified with S and their page number.
- ⁵ J.M. Barrie, *Collected Plays*, p. 84.
- ⁶ This is before Sam borne the Ring; it will become vital that before the end, he too is akin in this respect (see below, pity).
- ⁷ *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, Macmillan, 1967), p. ix.
- ⁸ Shaffer can do even worse in respect of having no fun: Mark Askalon in *Shrivings*.
- ⁹ This line is only in the acting script (New York, Samuel French, 1981), p. 113.

continued from page 31

- ⁴ St. John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, iv, 2, quoted in Merton, op. cit., p. 80.
- ⁵ David Lindsay, *A Voyage to Arcturus*, (Secaucus, Citadel Press, 1985), p. 48. All text quotations are from this edition.
- ⁶ *A Voyage to Arcturus*, p. 218.
- ⁷ Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), pp. 92-3.
- ⁸ Melvin Raff, "The Structure of *A Voyage to Arcturus*" in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), Vol. XV, pp. 262-67.
- ⁹ Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 92-3.
- ¹⁰ Raff, op. cit., p. 264.
- ¹¹ Jeanette Hume Lutton, "The Feast of Reason", *Mythlore*, Whole #47 (Autumn 1986), p. 37-41.
- ¹² Merton, op. cit., p. 25.

Moving?

When you move, please let us know, so your issues will arrive at your new address in timely manner. Send change of address information to: *Mythlore*, P.O. Box 6707, Altadena, CA 91001.

Check Your Label

Please look at the mailing label on the envelope your copy of *Mythlore* was mailed in. The number following your name indicates the issue your subscription is due to expire. If that number is "52" or "53", please renew now to avoid any interruption to your continuing issues.



Benefactors

Benefactors support the improvement and outreach of *MYTHLORE* by making donations beyond the price of subscription. For this much appreciated support they are listed for four issues. You are encouraged to become a Benefactor by writing the Editor, Glen GoodKnight (see page 2).

Bonnie Callahan	Pasadena, CA
Paula DiSanti	Great Point Woods, MI
Robert B. Gribbon	Hyattsville, MD
Robert Hall, Jr.	Ithaca, NY
Helen Hobbs	Salem, IN
Theodore Keller	E. Stroudsburg, PA
Alison Lewis	Hayward, CA
Frank Medlar	Chestnut Hill, MA
Anne Osborn	Orange, CA
Dean Picton	Hollywood, FL
Mary McDermott Shideler	Boulder, CO
David Townsend	Woburn, MA
Marion VanLoos	Horton, MI
Holly Wilkinson	Corona Del Mar, CA