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The Rings of Power

Abstract

Examines how Tolkien's rings of power "evolved until they bear little resemblance to the magic rings" of folk-tales. Using information on the nature of the One Ring and other "statements and clues planted by Tolkien," speculates on "how the Seven and the Nine acted upon their keepers."

Additional Keywords

Ring (symbol) in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Symbolism



The Rings of Power

Melanie Rawls

"Gandalf held it up. It looked to be made of pure and solid gold.

"... he now saw fine lines, finer than the finest penstrokes running along the ring, outside and inside: lines of fire that seemed to form the letters of a flowing script. They shone piercingly bright, and yet remote, as if out of a great depth."

from *The Fellowship of the Ring*¹

Magic rings are a recurring motif in folktales. There are rings to make one invisible, rings to make one fly and rings that call up djinns and dwarves who can instantly grant any wish. There are rings which identify the enchanted princess, hold the tiny golden key to the secret room, give one the power to transform oneself into any form -- animal, vegetable, or mineral: duck, lake, rock or tree on a plain, and so escape the ogre.

Rings of power are as various and multitudinous as is the human imagination.

Twenty magic rings figure in the tale of *The Lord of the Rings*, three for elves, seven for dwarves, nine for men and one for the master of magic, Sauron. The last ring is the greatest, the Ruling Ring, as it is called. Our first glimpse of the Ruling Ring is not very impressive. In the hands of Bilbo Baggins, it is a chance-found trinket, useful for making it possible for him to avoid unpleasant people and situations. However, by the time J.R.R. Tolkien finishes developing this motif for *The Lord of the Rings*, we are presented with rings of power significantly different from the invisibility-granting, genie-calling trinkets of traditional

fairytale. Using his rings of power, Tolkien makes a series of observations on human nature and human fate. He gives us a symbol; and, as is the wont of symbols, the statement is made in a direct, to-the-heart-of-the-matter fashion but with meanings and associations multiplying and radiating outward.

We know from the beginning that the Ruling Ring, in particular, is both a symbol of and an instrument of absolute power; we know that Tolkien is resonating in his own manner the statement that the desire for absolute power corrupts absolutely. But Tolkien's rings are not as straightforward as they initially seem. Once Tolkien set about trying to determine what a ring of power was and how it functioned, his rings evolved until they bear little resemblance to the magic rings we were previously accustomed to. His rings, going far beyond infantile wish fulfillment, are another theme entirely.

The tale of the rings builds slowly and some of the facts are straightforward. As the tale lengthens, the information on the twenty rings becomes more implied, rather than stated, and subject to many meanings and interpretations.

One of the first facts we learn about the Ruling Ring is that it turns on its keeper. Gandalf speaks of the Ring as "eating up" Gollum's mind and will, going on to say that he fears the Ring because its power over him will be even deadlier. This is not a usual component for magic rings, though this has occurred in other tales, principally the Norse Ring Cycle, where a magic ring is part of a cursed hoard. In most tales of magic rings, evil use of such a talisman derives from the wickedness or greed or stupidity of the keeper. The talisman itself is

neutral. Tolkien increases the stakes of the moral struggle which possession of such a talisman entails by making his ring active, self-willed and malevolent.

The Ruling Ring gives power according to the stature of its wearer. Sauron has worked into this ring the ability to measure the stature of its wearer, an ability which calls for considerable skill in reading the natures of the various intelligent inhabitants of Middle-earth. Naturally, Sauron, like his master Morgoth, perverts understanding: "Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use."²

In addition to perverting understanding, the Ruling Ring takes self-knowledge and distorts it. Using its power of insight, it seizes upon the dearest desires of the wearer and twists and inflates these desires. Thus Sam dreams that he is able to make even Mordor a garden, while Boromir, under the Ring's influence, envisions himself given power to drive forth the hosts of Mordor and then crowned king. The wretched Gollum speculates on becoming *The Gollum*, wreaking vengeance on his enemies and perhaps having fish three times a day. The Ruling Ring makes all grandiose wishes seem possible.

The Ruling Ring also gives its wearer the power to see into the minds of others -- insight again. The functioning of this skill is best demonstrated by Galadriel, who is able to read and test the hearts of the members of the Fellowship, using a form of telepathy perhaps, or some other kind of extrasensory perception. Galadriel tells Frodo that he perceives her thought "more clearly than many that are accounted wise," (*The Fellowship*, p. 474.) and attributes his acuity to the influence of the Ruling Ring. But she warns him that in order to really use all the ring's power, he must train his mind to the domination of other minds -- the maker of the Ruling Ring forged it to be used in this manner.

Other forms of extrasensory perception which the Ruling Ring appears to bestow upon a wearer are the ability to perceive the Unseen or the spirit world, as Frodo did on Weathertop, and clairvoyance. The bearer may witness events of the past or future or events happening in the present but at a distance. Such clairvoyance manifests itself in dreams or visions, including the small but clear visions that allegedly appear in crystal balls.

Each group of rings was constructed to appeal to some aspect of racial character, but only individual elves, dwarves or men are able to wield them. Sauron was careful to see to it that these rings went to individuals of position and influence within their societies, hoping to control groups by controlling the groups' leaders. He is only partially successful with this strategy. The elven rings, for example, were never touched by him and were shielded from his influence because the purpose of these rings is diametrically opposite to his purpose, which is to conquer and dominate. The rings remain susceptible to him, however, because he cast a greater spell in the forging of the One Ring and because their maker, Celebrimbor, learned some of the techniques for power ring forging from Sauron. As for the dwarves, their maker, the Vala Aule, created them to withstand the rigors of life in Middle-earth and to resist domination. They could not be reduced to shadows enslaved to another's will. (p. 446 *The Return of the King*.) Sauron had more success with the nine human

ringbearers because they shared his own ambitions for worldly power.

Given the nature of the One Ring plus other statements and clues planted by Tolkien, it is possible to speculate on how the Seven and the Nine acted upon their keepers.

The elvensmiths of Eregion forged the Seven Rings of Power for the dwarf-lords with the aid of a disguised Sauron. These rings were designed by Sauron to exacerbate the treasure fever of dwarves and their tendencies to hoard and hold grudges. (p. 446, *The Return of the King*.) Thus, the extrasensory powers which rings of power appear to bestow upon their wearers may have given a dwarf ringbearer the ability to sense hidden treasure -- including, perhaps, treasure hidden in the mountain homes and mines of other dwarves. No better method to create enmity and division among dwarves could have been devised. Thieving, claim-jumping and outright demands for more treasure were sure to have been perpetrated by a dwarf-lord convinced by the self-inflationary spell of a ring that he is "Lord of All Treasure." Four of the dwarf rings were consumed by dragon fire. It may have been that four dwarf lords, persuaded of their invincibility and their absolute right to treasure, may have attempted to wrest treasure from dragons or to defend a hoard from the creatures.

The sad history of Thoror, grandfather of Thorin Oakenshield, demonstrates how one ring wreaked havoc in the dwarvish nation. The ring Thoror possessed had him in a double bind: it lured him with the possibility of treasure greater than any in Middle-earth and it drove him with a bitter thirst for revenge against those who had earlier seized the treasure from his people -- an inspired application of carrot and goad to send him headlong to destruction. Thoror dies horribly in Moria. His death and mutilation are avenged by his people but at a terrible price of many thousands of dwarvish lives. Suicidal folly and mass slaughter are the accomplishments of this ring.

Because the Nine Rings for Mortal Men were constructed to give dominion in worldly affairs, we may speculate that these rings worked as a lesser kind of Ruling Ring. The nine rings will have sharpened their keepers' perceptions, in much the way the Ruling Ring heightened Frodo's. By means of the rings, these nine lords may have been enabled to look into the hearts and minds of followers and enemies and thus play on their deepest desires and fears.

How long these nine lords were able to exercise this power before the rings seized control, Tolkien does not tell. But it is safe to assume that it did not take the nine rings much time to bring their keepers under the dominion of the One, for each exercise of the power makes one more susceptible to a ring's baleful influence. At any rate, mankind is peculiarly vulnerable to the desire for dominion -- and thus peculiarly vulnerable to domination.

Once the Nine Rings seized control, the wearers were condemned to a spectral existence. Like their master Sauron, they degenerated and lost their corporeal forms. They also lost their normal five senses and were left with those uncanny extra senses bestowed by the rings: says Aragorn, "They themselves do not see the world of light as we do, but our shapes cast shadows in their minds which only the noon sun

destroys; and in the dark they perceive many signs and forms which are hidden from us; then they are most to be feared. And at all times they smell the blood of living things, desiring and hating it. Senses, too, there are other than sight or smell. We can feel their presence -- ...they feel ours more keenly." (p. 474, *The Fellowship*.)

That rings of power may have an effect on voices is hinted here and there in the tale. This effect gives one power of the Spoken Word, a power which may be used mightily for good or evil, as Martin Luther King and Hitler have evidenced in our own histories. Fearor was a persuasive speaker, as were his sons. According to Gandalf, the ability to sway or daunt other persons with his voice was a talent of Saruman's. (p. 234, *The Two Towers*). The ring that Saruman forged and was wearing when he lured Gandalf to Orthanc may have been a device to augment this power.

Sauron also possessed the talent, best evidenced by his seduction of Ar-Pharazon and his cozening of the elvensmiths. After Sauron lost his physical form in the destruction of Numenor, he was forced to employ another being, known only as the Mouth of Sauron, to be his voice. This Mouth shows no particular talent for vocal beguiling during the parlay before Barad-dûr. The Mouth also wears no ring of power.

The Ringwraiths have great vocal powers. They have passed too far into the realms of terror to sweet talk their listeners -- "And his fell voice was lowered, and he would have sweetened it if he could," (p. 316, *The Fellowship*) Gloom says of Sauron's messenger who has come to the dwarves in search of Bilbo. But they can certainly use their voices to terrorize and coerce others, Harry the Breeland gatekeeper being one example. The mere sound of their voices is enough to freeze the blood and bring despair, and was a potent weapon during the siege of Gondor.

It is not illogical to suppose that before these nine men were reduced to wraiths, this enhanced vocal power was useful in cajoling, seducing or frightening others into submission.

During the council of Elrond, Gandalf repeats in the language of Mordor the spell inscribed on the Ruling Ring: "The change in the wizard's voice was astounding. Suddenly it became menacing, powerful, harsh as stone," (Ibid, p. 316). The language, the spell -- or the One Ring responding to the spell may have altered Gandalf's voice.

Frodo's voice, also, once, undergoes an alteration due to the influence of the Ring. Indeed, it may be that in the following scene, the Ring itself, and not Frodo, is speaking to Gollum: "... a crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing... before it stood... a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held 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 the Fire of Doom.'

While wearing the One Ring, Sam notices that his sight is dimmed but that his hearing is sharpened. The hearing of Ringwraiths also appears to be preternaturally sharp. Frodo's hearing, whether or not he has the Ring on his finger, is also made more

acute. Only he and Aragorn, the trained ranger, hear Gollum padding behind the Fellowship in Moria and later on the path to Lorien.

There is an intimate relationship between speaking and hearing and the revelation of truth and lies. Sauron, whose purpose is to twist truth and wield lies for his own gain, may have constructed his rings with the idea of affecting speech and hearing. He would wish to harness the great power in words spoken and words heard, knowing that the evidence of the ears -- hearing what one wishes to hear -- can overbear the evidence of one's eyes. When wearing the Ruling Ring, one's vision is dimmed or very sharply focused and narrowed, effectively preventing one from seeing the entire picture. This diminution of eyesight is the physical manifestation of the diminution of moral and intellectual vision brought about by the Ring. With the loss of moral vision comes a preternatural sharpening and focusing of the ears -- for eavesdropping, for hearing what one wishes to hear -- and an enhancement of vocal powers, again for the misuse of Language, a misuse which also betokens a loss of visionary integrity.

This constellation of eye, mouth and ear and the relationship of these sensory organs to perceiving, speaking and hearing truth or lies is a subtle literary device. Here Tolkien illustrates what a devious, crafty (in both senses of that word) and corrupting being Sauron was. The artifices of the One Ring are among his most malefic.

The Ruling Ring also had other more direct effects on vision. The most obvious effect is that the wearer becomes invisible to other eyes. Meanwhile, the wearer becomes susceptible to tricks played by the Ring on his eyesight, such as when Frodo sees a vision of Gollum in place of Bilbo and Sam. During the journey through Moria, Frodo also notices that he can see in the dark better than anyone except Gandalf.

The Ring may also project an illusion of physical enlargement. Sam experiences this when he wears the Ring during his search for Frodo in the tower of Cirith Ungol. First, he feels himself to be changed: "As Sam stood there, even though the Ring was not on him but hanging by its chain around his neck, he felt himself enlarged, as if he were robed in a huge distorted shadow of himself, a vast and ominous threat halted upon the walls of Mordor." (Ibid, p. 216).

Later, an orc is granted the same vision: "For what it saw was not a small frightened hobbit trying to hold a steady word; it saw a great silent shape, cloaked in grey shadow, looming against the wavering light behind..." (Ibid, p. 220.)

Ringwraiths also appear to undergo this illusion of enlargement. In their black cloaks they seem larger than life, looming over hedges, stooping over victims, enveloping, overwringing.

From such clues we may deduce the following: a ring of power augments, enlarges and distorts. It confers insight into the thoughts, desires and natures of others as well as other special kinds of vision and extrasensory perception, but at the same time it dims, tricks or narrows normal visions as well as intellectual and spiritual perception.

In fact, it creates physical analogues for what are essentially psychological or metaphysical conditions -- literal blindness for spiritual blindness,

physical enlargement for delusions of grandeur. One's personal aura or charisma is also enhanced.

Rings sharpen yet distort the sense of hearing. They enhance the power of the Spoken Word, by augmenting whatever natural powers of persuasion or intimidation a wearer already possesses.

But every ring is a trick, a magician's sleight of hand. The source of power of a ring of power is the life energy of its keeper. Thus are the keepers mastered by the kept -- ringbearers literally devour themselves. They are as self-consuming as was Ungoliant. Even Elrond and Galadriel admit that upon the failure of the Three Rings at the destruction of the One Ring, they and the other elves must either depart into the West or dwindle, become less than what they are. They will irretrievably lose life energy. Though elves have not been interested in personal acquisition or self-aggrandizement -- in enlarging the individual at the expense of others -- they were seduced by Sauron's promises of great power to achieve what they most wanted and skills and gifts to surpass those of the Noldor of the First Age. Their motives were not wholly pure, and the artificial enhancement of what should have been natural and naturally developed powers and talents rebounds against them.

Hobbits are slow to be affected by the Ruling Ring because, as Paul Kocher observes, hobbits originally lack the desire to dominate others. In fact, hobbits generally lack the desire to be outstanding or unusual in any fashion, nonconformity being the height of bad manners in hobbit society. Few hobbits would seek to enlarge themselves in the first place, much less at the expense of other hobbits. Even the Tooks and Brandybucks, acknowledged leaders and usually considered eccentric as hobbits go, did not have the desire to be much more than they were. The ambition of the Sackville-Bagginses was a distasteful and most unhobbitlike characteristic.

The tale of the Fellowship of the Ring is quite the opposite of this puffery of the individual. The journey of the Ring is no deed of an Individual Hero who will take all the risks and reap all the glory. Frodo has Sam with him to share the burden and the praise and every member of the Fellowship makes important contributions to the success of the quest, Boromir included. The tale of the Fellowship shows that alone and in concerted effort with others, the individual may rise to greatness and become the best that he can be -- and yet not at the expense of others nor in a false coin of egotism and megalomania. There is glory enough for all and to share.

To enlarge the individual at the expense of others -- this is the keystone of the spell of the rings of power. The keepers of the Seven Rings and the Nine Rings were certainly interested in such an enlargement through treasure-seizing and kingdom-taking.

The great irony of all this, the irony of Sauron's malicious intent and one to which he himself eventually falls victim, is that these attempts to enlarge the self only serve to make the self much less. Thus Smeagol fragments into two miserable personalities, Smeagol and Gollum, or Slinker and Stinker, as Sam rudely calls them. Frodo loses a finger and suffers a failure of his spiritual health which necessitates a journey into the Otherworld for healing; he loses, also, the Shire. The dwarf ringbearer Thrór is quite literally hacked to pieces;

his son and ringheir Thrain ends his existence in the Necromancer's dungeons as a crazy, miserable, gibbering remnant of dwarvish strength and pride. Nine mortal men lose almost all trace of their humanity, becoming so much less than they once were as to inspire a degree of horrified pity. Sauron himself is scattered in bits and pieces all over Middle-earth, his substance dispersed in the Ruling Ring, the Seven and the Nine, and perhaps even in the deadly Morgol blades, such as the one used to wound Frodo on Weathertop.

The elves passionately regretted the making of the rings of power. Magic was no substitute for straightforward personal endeavor. And magic (or technology) designed to raise one above one's fellow beings for the purpose of exploiting them is illusory and, eventually, both self-defeating and self-destructive. Seven dwarves, nine men -- and perhaps even Sauron, in his last moments perceiving Frodo and Gollum balanced precariously on the lip of the Crack of Doom -- even Sauron may have lamented with the elves that "it would be better if (the rings) had never been." (p. 351, *The Fellowship*.)

Notes

1. J.R.R. Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965) p. 80.
2. J.R.R. Tolkien *The Silmarillion* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977) p. 31.
3. J.R.R. Tolkien *The Return of the King* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965) p. 272.

