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### The Importance of Free Will in *The Lord of the Rings*

#### Abstract

A short discussion of the importance of free will, and the evil of the domination of wills, in *The Lord of the Rings*.

#### Additional Keywords

Free will and determinism; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Orcs; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Religion

# The Importance of Free Will in The Lord of the Rings

Richard P. Bullock

In J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien emphasizes the idea that all intelligent beings are born with a free will. The ability to keep and use this will is the most important theme present in this epic novel. It is necessary to maintain free will if good and order are to prevail.

The domination of wills is considered by Tolkien to be the greatest of all evils. This evil is clearly portrayed in the arch-antagonist Sauron, the Dark Lord. Sauron's great act of forging the Ruling Ring is the best example of his nature. Elrond at the Council explains that the purpose of forging the One Ring was to control the lesser Rings of Power.<sup>1</sup> This purpose takes noticeable form in the domination of the nine human kings, later called the Nazgûl. This desire to dominate Middle-earth leads to the one flaw in Sauron's master plan that enables the West to defeat him once and for all.

The Ring itself is simply a mirror of the will of Sauron. Gandalf explains to Frodo that "a Ring of Power looks after itself... (and it was) the Ring itself that decided things" (I p. 64-65). Gandalf tells Frodo that Sauron "let a great part of his former self pass into it" (I p. 61). This power that Sauron "passed into it" gave the Ring its own will that worked in conjunction with Sauron's will. Its purpose was to corrupt all who desired the Ring. Examples of this corruption are seen in the characters of Boromir, Bilbo, Gollum and Frodo. Boromir was driven by his desire for the Ring into attacking Frodo on Amon Hen (I p. 417). Like Boromir, Saruman and Denethor also became enthralled with the idea of possessing the Ring (I p. 273, III p. 87). This domination of wills by the desire for the Ring leads to the downfall of the wizard and the steward and almost costs the West the War. This facet of will tends to lean more towards Tolkien's ideas on the corruption of power or the desire of it.<sup>2</sup> Bilbo, Gollum and Frodo are better examples of what the Ring does to its possessor. The Ring shows its possession of Bilbo and Gollum when they refer to it as "my precious." On the slopes of Mount Doom Frodo proclaims, "The Ring is mine!" (I p. 42, III pp. 223, 224). In these examples Tolkien shows that whoever thinks they possess the Ring is indeed possessed by it.

A corollary to Tolkien's theory that domination is evil is the surrender of the individual will is also evil. The orcs and other servants of Sauron were not originally evil. Elrond says, "Nothing is evil in the beginning" (I p. 281). To the orcs it is easier to obey Sauron than to fight him, thus out of fear they choose to come under his control. It is this choice to be under evil that makes them so. Paul Kocher says, "Orcs, trolls, dragons and their like... were free once but they surrendered their will to Sauron and have become his slaves."<sup>3</sup> Because they sold out to Sauron they are doomed to fall with him.

Tolkien blends the idea of a greater cosmic order with that of free will. This greater order is identified with the One or Eru in The Silmarillion, though not actually given an incorporated form in The Lord of the Rings.<sup>4</sup> Gandalf insists that the ring was meant to be found by the West (I p. 65). However

neither he nor Elrond is quick to hand out the edict that Frodo must bear the Ring. When Frodo reluctantly chooses to bear the Ring to destruction Elrond says, "I think that this task is appointed to you." Elrond recognizes that the higher order has appointed Frodo Ring-bearer. Elrond reminds Frodo that he is free to accept or deny the task. But he adds, "...I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right" (I p. 284). Paul Kocher seems to believe that the obverse is true; that if Frodo did not choose to go that he would be wrong. He further adds that "the foreseen event will occur only if a creaturely will freely consents first" (Master of Middle-earth p. 39). Because of the importance that free will plays in the novel, I believe that had Frodo chosen not to bear the Ring, then someone else would have. This secondary Ring-bearer would have been given the same divine blessings that Frodo had been given, though his abilities may have been different than those Frodo possessed. About the Ring, Gandalf says, "behind that (the finding of the Ring) there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than to say that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring and not by its maker" (I p. 65). If the Ring was not meant to be found by an emissary of the Dark Lord, then had Bilbo not found it some other "thief" of the West would have. However, Bilbo did go on the trip with the dwarves and came to work with the divine will to deliver the Ring into the hands of the West. Likewise working with the same divine will, Frodo was able to bring the Ring to its destruction. This example in particular stresses the importance of free will and divine will working together.

Lastly, Tolkien bases the triumphs of man (or hobbit or elf or dwarf) on the free choices he makes. Frodo's decision to travel into Mordor with Sam helps him mature spiritually as well as destroy the Ring (I p. 422). Aragorn's decision to follow Merry and Pippin brings him to the awakening of Rohan and eventually to the Paths of the Dead which enables him to rout the enemy at the Battle of Pelennor Field (II p. 21). Sam's choice to bear the Ring when Frodo is "killed" by Shelob insures that the Ring will not fall into the hands of the Enemy (II p. 343). Choices like these are made successively throughout the novel. Even those choices which seemed to go amiss are turned to victories. Gandalf's choice to enter Moria and his subsequent fall is redeemed by his triumphant return as Gandalf the White (II p. 125). Only once did divine will seem to overrule free choice. When Frodo claims the Ring for his own, Gollum saves Frodo and the Quest from failure by seizing the Ring and falling into the Cracks of Doom. Through Gollum's accidental fall, divine will was able to accomplish what the West could not. Gandalf told Frodo before his journey that he felt that Gollum still had an important part to play for good or evil (I p. 69). A clear message that Gollum's fate, as well as the Ring's, was in divine hands.

Tolkien defines the side of Good in the novel as being free happy people promoting the greater good. Evil is the domination of others' wills. He points out that if Man does not use and keep his free will then he will cease to be Man. This quality is what makes men

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Lewis chose to write fantasy because it was the best form for what he had to say (*Of Other Worlds*, 23, 37). Because it is equally accessible to children and adults, the mode of fantasy enabled him to write about the most serious issues of human life without preaching or talking down to either segment of his audience--the child who listens or the adult who reads aloud. The subtle interplay between chronological age and spiritual development which he achieved in the Narnia books is ample evidence that he understood exactly what fantasy is for. After all, everyone, young and old, can see that witches are even nastier than stewed prunes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The "Outline of Narnian History" published by Walter Hooper in "Past Watchful Dragons" shows Edmund to be only two years older than Lucy, and she only one year older than Eustace and Jill. I do not believe this chronology accurately reflects the differences in ages as described in *The Last Battle*--Tirian would not have perceived at a glance that Eustace and Jill were younger than Lucy, for example. Far from being helpful, I believe the chronology leads us away from an accurate perception of the artistic impact of the Narnia series.

<sup>2</sup>I have discussed the way the spiritual experience of children brought up in a liturgical church differs from that of children brought up to expect a peak experience of personal conversion, and the effect of this difference on one's response to *The Chronicles of Narnia* in "The Compleat Anglican: Spiritual Style in the Chronicles of Narnia" (Myers, 148-160).

<sup>3</sup>Glen Goodknight has suggested (personal communication, 18 August 1984) that Uncle Andrew's delusion that Jadis might fall in love with him is vanity rather than lust. I agree with his comment, but with the added observation that vanity is nearly always a large component of lust.

<sup>4</sup>I am indebted to Paul A. Olson of the University of Nebraska for the reference to Silvestris.

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individuals. Tolkien uses his novel to make a statement against the fact that modern man is progressively losing his own free will and identity to the modern Mordor he is creating out of his world. The idea is a simple one. Man is and should remain one of the "free people."

## NOTES

- 1 John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), p. 255. This book is a one volume work, however the book is commonly published in three volumes: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*. In later footnotes these divisions are referred to by their volume numbers: I, II, and III.
- 2 Agnes Perkins and Helen Hill, "The Corruption of Power," *A Tolkien Compendium*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), pp. 60-72. This footnote was included for those who would like to follow up on this point.
- 3 Paul Kocher, *The Master of Middle-earth*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), p. 76.
- 4 John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977), p. 15.