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Who is The Master of The "Precious"?

Abstract

Considers to whom Gollum's phrase "the master of the Precious" actually refers. Concludes that Gollum was actually thinking of himself as such. Sees Gollum not merely as a shadow of Frodo but a character with his own agenda.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum

Who is The Master of The "Precious"?

Robert A. Hall, Jr.

The relationship between Frodo and Gollum has, inevitably, been at the center of much critical discussion of The Lord of the Rings. Is Gollum simply "the dark side" of Frodo's character, or is he more independent as a character, even to the point of being, as has been suggested recently[1], a "misunderstood hero"? Some further light may be cast on this problem, I believe, by a detailed examination of the expression the master of the Precious, whom Gollum promises to serve (II, 285). Just whom does Gollum mean by this expression, and how does his promise affect his further actions?

In the first angry confrontation between Frodo and Gollum (II, 278-288), the former forces the latter to take an oath, whose exact form is not arrived at without considerable wrangling. The elf-wrought rope with which Sam has tied Gollum torments him, but Frodo will not release him "unless there is a promise you can make that I can trust" (II, 284). Gollum replies "We will swear to do what he [i.e. Frodo] wants," on the "Precious," but Frodo refuses to let him see or touch the One Ring, insisting instead that he must swear by it. Finally Gollum says "We promise, yes, I promise. ...I will serve the master of the Precious." Sam releases him, and he begins his service as guide to Frodo and Sam on their journey into Mordor.

In Gollum's promise there is, however, an ambiguity which is crucial to our interpretation of the events between that scene and the climax of the action at the brink of the Cracks of Doom. Whom, exactly, does Gollum mean by "the master of the Precious"? (This is his own phrase, incidentally, not suggested to him by Frodo or Sam.) On the face of the matter, that expression might be taken to refer to Frodo, in whose possession the One Ring remains for almost all the rest of the journey to Mount Doom[2]. Here, as in many other places, we are not told what goes on in Frodo's mind; perhaps he does take this oath as a promise to serve him. Yet he is certainly not its master, in any meaningful sense, until the very last instant when he claims it for his own, saying "The Ring is mine!" (III, 274). Up to that point, Frodo has not proclaimed himself as its master. There are two other possible candidates for the referent of Gollum's phrase-- Sauron and Gollum himself.

If the maker of the Rings is to be considered their master, then of course it is Sauron to whom the expression might be taken to refer. According to Gandalf (I, 86), a Ring of Power has a volition of its own, and in this instance the One Ring "was trying to get back to its master," by slipping from one keeper to another. When it could no longer make use of Gollum and "when its master was awake once more and sending out his dark thought from Mirkwood" (another silent command! [3]) "it abandoned Gollum. Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire!" (I, 87). Yet Gollum shows no awareness that Sauron is the "master" of the Ring, even though he was drawn by its magic to Mordor and there interrogated (I, 91-92) and sent out to search for it. Gollum also says specifically, at two points, once to Frodo (II, 2 85) and once to himself in his dialogue with his alter ego

Smeagol (II, 304) that he will "never, never let him [i.e. Sauron] have it." It is safe to conclude that the master of the Precious, in Gollum's oath, does not refer to Sauron.

There are, on the other hand, numerous indications that Gollum regards himself as the one who ought, by right, to be the master of the Ring. His intense desire to possess it led him to murder his brother Deagol in order to take it, and he held it for hundreds of years. It gave him power "according to his stature" (I, 85), and he used it for catching fish and eating them raw. When Bilbo finds the Ring where Gollum has left it, and (in the revised version of The Hobbit, ch. 5) keeps it by outwitting Gollum to a guessing-game, the latter considers that Bilbo has stolen it from him. Gollum's last words to that scene are "Thief, thief, thief! Baggins! We hates it, we hates it for ever!"

At several points along the journey to the Sammath Naur, Gollum indulges in fantasies as to what he would do if he were to recover the Ring, which, it is clear, he still regards himself as having a right to. He thinks he might grow stronger than the Ringwraiths and, as Lord Gollum, would have fresh sea-fish three times a day (II, 304). The same fantasy reappears at the Forbidden Pool (II, 375, 378). His hatred for the hobbits erupts in the scene in Shelob's lair (II, 425), where he casually argues that he will not be responsible for Frodo's death because Shelob will get him. Even on the path up the side of Mount Doom, Gollum is still trying to wrest the Ring from Frodo. As Tolkien says (III, 271) "This was probably the only thing that could have aroused the dying embers of Frodo's heart and will: an attack, an attempt to wrest his treasure from him."

The expression his treasure indicates clearly that, as virtually all critics recognize, Frodo has by this time definitely come to regard himself as the Ring's master; but he proclaims himself such only on the very edge of the Cracks of Doom (III, 272). From Tolkien's point of view as narrator, this was the best place in the narrative to put Frodo's claim, for several reasons. It comes at the crucial point of the story, greatly increasing the dramatic tension. It provides the motivation for Sauron's deflecting his attention from Aragorn's army, and thus depriving the forces of Mordor of motivation and impetus in their attack. It gives Tolkien the opportunity of having Gollum repeat, even on the very brink of the abyss, his attempt to seize the Ring and to succeed at last-- only to fall in with it. It also makes clear that, all along, Gollum has been regarding himself as the rightful "master of the Precious," and has been serving his own aim to regain it, acting wholly out of self-interest, in no wise with any good intentions.

In an earlier article (Hall [1983]), I suggested an explanation of Frodo's later statement that he had destroyed the Ring (III, 271), by assuming that Frodo had given Gollum a silent command to bite off his, Frodo's, finger with the "Precious" on it and to hurl himself into the fire. It has been objected (Yates [1984]) that if Frodo had used the Ring to give a

command, he would instantly have become corrupt and subject to Sauron. This objection rests on a misapprehension of the Ring's nature and of its effect on its wearers. First Gandalf and then the Lady Galadriel refuse the Ring because they know the effect it would have on them— not all at once, but gradually. In Gandalf's case, the Ring would at first find its way to his heart through "pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good" (I, 95). For the Lady Galadriel, it would end by being an instrument to increase her beauty and enable her to become a femme fatale, arousing desire in everyone: "All shall love me and despair!" (I, 473). However, her wisdom leads her to "pass the test" (II, 474) and refuse the Ring. When Sam wishes that she would take it and "set things to rights," she says "That is how it would begin, but it would not stop with that, alas!" (ibid.).

In this respect, as in a number of others[4], the Ring that Sauron made is like that which Alberich fashioned from the Rhinegold. As Cooke observes (1979:398):

It is often asked why, if the ring confers absolute world-power on its master, Alberich should be unable to prevent Wotan from wresting it from him in Scene 4 [of Das Rheingold]. But to ask such a question is to assume that the ring is intended to function as an instrument of instantaneous world-power, and no such idea can be found in Wagner's text. If it could, there would be nothing to stop Alberich in taking over control of the world from Wotan the very instant he had made the ring.

Mutatis mutandis, the same argument applies to Sauron's Ring.

The hypothesis of a silent command given Gollum by Frodo to "hurt" himself and the Ring (which, incidentally, Gollum has not put on [5]) into the fire also makes it clear why Tolkien has Gollum bite off Frodo's ring-finger. In this way, a portion of Frodo's body is also consumed. If Frodo has actually commanded Gollum to bite it off, the loss of the ring-finger indicates that Frodo has immediately realized that he has done wrong in claiming the Ring for himself, and is rejecting it. He has thus put himself beyond the possibility of ever putting on any other ring, since his ring-finger is gone[6]. Metaphorically, he is no longer able to exert power, as is shown in the "scouring of the Shire" (III, Book VI, ch. 1), in which he uses no force at all, although he advises Merry and Pippen how to use their strength. In any case, Frodo's silent command, if we assume there is such, brings his instant atonement with it, and the Ring certainly does not corrupt him or put him in any wise under Sauron's domination.

In the view just set forth, both Gollum and Frodo have fully developed characters of their own, each with his own aims and actions to attain the goal he has set himself. The clash between the two characters lasts up to the very instant when Gollum falls into the abyss, with Frodo yielding momentarily to his desire to assert himself as "master of the Precious," and then taking advantage of Gollum's undying desire for the Ring so as to carry out, indirectly but none the less effectively, his (Frodo's) mission to destroy it. In this way, the relation between the two is much more than simply that between two sides of Frodo himself, and Tolkien uses it as the ultimate determinant of the outcome of The Lord of the Rings.

Notes

1. Callaway (1984). All references to the text of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings are to the Ballantyne paper-back edition (New York, 1970, and later reprintings).
2. This is the interpretation favored by various commentators, e.g. Foster (1979:218); Miller (1975:54, 81).
3. Cf. Hall (1983).
4. The oft-quoted statement attributed to Tolkien, that, in the comparison between Alberich's and Sauron's rings, "both rings were round and there the resemblance ceased" (cf. Carpenter [1978:202]) was manifestly inaccurate (cf. Hall [1978]). Tolkien's remark was, like many other observations made by authors, probably simply a way of avoiding further, unwanted discussion.
5. He is not wearing it, as asserted by Kocher (1977:82). Note also that neither Frodo nor Gollum use the Ring to exert power over any events in the world outside Mount Doom. The change in Sauron's strategy is called forth simply by Frodo's assertion of ownership of the Ring.
6. Gollum's holding Frodo's finger aloft with the Ring still on it, and Frodo's lack of a ring-finger thereafter, might be made the object of elucubrations suggested by modern Vulgarfreudianismus; but I believe that any such interpretation would be very much out of place in view of Tolkien's conservative, Christian out-look on existence.



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