
Fall 10-15-1989

The Middle-earth Epic and the Seven Capital Vices

John L. Treloar S.J.

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



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

Recommended Citation

Treloar, John L. S.J. (1989) "The Middle-earth Epic and the Seven Capital Vices," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 16: No. 1, Article 8.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol16/iss1/8>

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>



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>



The Middle-earth Epic and the Seven Capital Vices

Abstract

Examines Tolkien's use of habitual evil choices of free beings leading to vices. Defines the seven capital sins more properly as vices, or habitual patterns, based on the work of Thomas Aquinas, and shows how Tolkien used them to give depth and motivation to characters in Middle-earth.

Additional Keywords

Aquinas, Thomas—Theory of vices; Evil in Middle-earth; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Evil in; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Vices in; Vices in Middle-earth

The Middle-earth Epic and the Seven Capital Vices

John L. Trecloar, S.J.

I. Introduction

Because Tolkien refers to the one ring in *The Lord of the Rings* almost exclusively as the ring of power, one can yield to the temptation of claiming that the Middle-earth epic explicates the evils of power. Perhaps the tale simply develops the implications of one or other saying about power such as we find either in Shelley's "Queen Mab," "Power like a desolating pestilence, / Pollutes whate'er it touches,"¹ or, Lord Acton's often quoted saying from a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely." This approach, however, provides only a simplistic view of evil in Tolkien's set of novels. While one may say that Tolkien uses power to symbolize all evil, one also can say that he treats evil in all its complexity and analyzes it comprehensively.²

I have argued previously that Tolkien's treatment of evil manifests characteristics of both apocalyptic and metaphysics. Apocalyptic resorts to such great images as war and grotesque evil beings destroying the helpless. Metaphysically all beings start out as good and then they deteriorate as evil gets more hold of them. Elrond expresses this notion during the council meeting at Rivendell, for he says, "...nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so."³ Apocalyptic and metaphysical themes, however, do not fully capture Tolkien's concern with evil.⁴

In this article I want to examine Tolkien's treatment of moral evil. Now, this kind of evil results from the choice of a free being. If we look at an evil action apart from a context we call such a choice a sin or a morally evil action. When such choices become habitual we name them vices. I will argue that habitual confrontation with moral evil as vices provides Tolkien with an opportunity to give depth to his characters offering a means for the reader to identify with them because their failings are really our failings.

I will initially outline the abstract notion of the seven capital vices as it occurs in Thomas Aquinas and then show how this doctrine gets into the general literary tradition. Next, I will look at how Tolkien uses these vices in *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings* and draw some conclusions about their impact on the epic.

II. Some Philosophical, Theological and Literary Background

As we move into the expository part of this study, we must clear up some technological confusion. The habitual ways of acting which I have called the seven capital vices are often called the seven capital sins, but they really do not qualify as sins at all.⁵ We more appropriately

call them vices, for they show up as a behavior pattern rather than as an individual wicked act. If we take sin as a given evil act, we then say that the motive force for such an action resides in a vice of some sort. For example, I steal a piece of jewelry from Tiffany's; my action finds motivation in the vice of avarice. The first point we want to make, then, comes to this; when we talk about the seven capital vices in the Middle-earth epic, individual evil acts, such as Gollum's destruction of Frodo's finger at the end of *The Return of the King* do not concern us. Rather, the vice that motivates such an act interests us. As with the theft of jewelry, the impetus for Gollum's action comes from avarice.

Suddenly Sam saw Gollum's long hands draw upward to his mouth; his white fangs gleamed, and then snapped as they bit. Frodo gave a cry, and there he was, fallen upon his knees at the chasm's edge. But Gollum dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the ring, a finger still thrust within its circle. It shone now as if verily it was wrought of living fire.

"Precious, precious, precious!" Gollum cried. "My precious! O 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 wall precious, and he was gone. (*LotR*, III, 275-76).

As an illustration of the habitual way Gollum looks at life to cause such an action, this excellent story-telling also effectively employs the larger doctrine of the capital vices. At this point in the story Gollum no longer has any interest in himself or his own safety. His "precious" commands his whole personality, and we could not have a better description of avarice.

Thomas Aquinas' teaching on these vices provides the best source for a quick overview of the seven capital vices. While the doctrine has a long history prior to Aquinas, his systematization in the Thirteenth Century made the teaching easily accessible to succeeding generations of authors.⁶

Aquinas begins his treatment of these vices by a general treatment of habitual human action. When I say that I have a habit of typing or of playing basketball what do I mean? Relying on Aristotle's analysis Aquinas concludes with a definition of habit as, "A disposition whereby that which is disposed is well or ill disposed either in regard to itself (its nature) or to something else (the goal)."⁷ If we cut away the medievalism of this passage we find that a habit bears the following marks — 1. it exists as a disposition 2. it helps or hinders our actions, and 3. these actions either advance or hinder our nature or our goals. As a disposition a habit

does not operate constantly but only when called upon to facilitate action. Since habits help or hinder, they bring about either good or evil acts; and as such good habits advance and evil habits obstruct either our nature or our goals in life.

This general doctrine of habit gives Thomas Aquinas an easy way to talk about virtue and vice. He describes virtues as good habits; he characterizes vices as bad habits. As good or bad habits virtues and vices develop in our personality over time and by means of repeated virtuous and vicious acts. Now, in the context of the article we are not chiefly interested in virtues, though as we shall see they do come into play as we talk about overcoming vice. Our main concern rests with the seven capital vices, i.e. those vices serving as a foundation for all other vices.

Without going into all the complexities of Aquinas' reasoning, we note first that within the human being we find a variety of faculties or powers for action. Two of these faculties, called the sense appetites, have special interest for us. One faculty named concupiscible appetite helps us seek pleasure; we need the appetite in order to take care of ourselves. If we did not find anything pleasurable, we would not seek food; and lack of food has disastrous consequences for us as individuals. If we did not find sexual union pleasurable, we would have no propagation of the species. The second faculty, designated the irascible appetite, helps us avoid danger. If we do not protect ourselves from the attack of a vicious dog, we experience serious injury. If we do not feed the people of the world, we cease to exist as a species.⁹ Aquinas now shows that all the capital vices reside in one or other of these two sense powers. Thomas lists seven such vices. He places avarice, gluttony, lust and sloth in the pleasure faculty. He locates pride, anger, and envy in the faculty for avoiding pain.¹⁰

The next move Aquinas makes requires him to prove that these seven actually operate as the source of all other vices and individual evil acts. He does this by establishing that avarice and pride function as the fountains for the other five; they also serve as the source of any other vice or evil act. On the one hand, he defines pride as inordinately seeking the good of honor and praise. On the other hand, he considers avarice as inordinately seeking the good of riches.¹¹ We will see that Tolkien makes use of these two capital vices to fill out the moral life of key characters in the Middle-earth epic.

Aquinas compares avarice to the root of a tree. Just as the root furnishes sustenance to the whole tree, so avarice provides a source for all other vices and sins; for by means of riches a person acquires the means to commit any sin whatsoever. Since money helps people to obtain all kinds of temporal goods, avaricious gathering of wealth allows people to satisfy lust, gluttony and sloth — lust by giving a way to satisfy sexual desire as in prostitution, gluttony by providing the means for satisfying our yearning for food, sloth by giving funds to avoid labor.

Pride, taken as the inordinate desire to excel, develops

in a person who refuses subservience to any superior, especially God. Aquinas does not have a handy metaphor for this vice as he did for avarice, instead he distinguishes between pride of intention and pride of execution. Pride of intention works as the beginning of every sin. Pride of execution depends on riches for satisfaction; consequently even pride depends to some extent on avarice. With respect to intention pride allows people to develop anger and envy — anger because we avenge a wrong done to us, envy because we are sad about the good of another which appears to denigrate our own excellence.

Thomas develops this teaching on the seven capital vices in the *Summa Theologiae*, *The Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, and the *Disputed Questions Concerning Evil*. Since Tolkien has kept his sources to himself, we cannot assert one way or the other whether he knew these works.¹² As far as I can determine, Tolkien himself nowhere makes reference to a direct knowledge of Thomas Aquinas.

How, then, does Tolkien appropriate the doctrine of the seven capital vices? Three possibilities come to mind as sources for this knowledge. First, as a Catholic youngster in early Twentieth Century England he would have learned the basics of his faith from a catechism. Since catechisms function as great sources of indoctrination, he could well have learned about these vices from such a manual; for almost all of the catechisms of this period list the seven capital vices and give a brief description of each.¹³ So, from his Catholic youth he would have been familiar with a version of these vices.

A second possibility comes from his background as a medievalist. Any medieval scholar will have to confront Dante's *Divine Comedy* in his/her scholarly career. This "theological" poem, written shortly after Thomas Aquinas flourished, incorporates much Thomistic philosophy and theology. Once again, Tolkien does not give direct references regarding Dante. Some evidence, however, exists to show his knowledge of Dante, for Kocher claims that a section of "Leaf by Niggle" depends on Dante's *Purgatory*.¹⁴ When Niggle arrives at the workhouse on the other side, he has to go through a series of labors to make reparation for his sins. In the *Purgatory* itself Virgil leads Dante up the side of the mountain. As the companions reach various levels, they meet people performing different labors as a means of doing reparation for one or other of the capital vices. From Canto X, which discusses the nature of pride, to Canto XXVII, which praises the virtue of chastity as a remedy for lust, Dante systematically examines these vices. If Kocher correctly understands Niggle's experiences, materials in Dante concerning the seven capital vices might undergird Tolkien's epic as well as "Leaf by Niggle."

Up to this point we have drawn only tenuous lines of influence from Thomas' abstract doctrine to the Middle-earth epic, but the third and final possibility for influence exists quite clearly in Tolkien's background. According to Humphrey Carpenter in his biography of Tolkien, George

Brewerton, Tolkien's teacher in Sixth Class at King Edward's, urged his students to read *The Canterbury Tales*. Brewerton even recited the tales to them in the original Middle English.¹⁴ This experience had a double effect on Tolkien; it not only kindled his enthusiasm for language, it also sparked an interest in Chaucer that turned into a special area of scholarship for him. He prepared a scholarly paper on *The Reeve's Tale* in 1931¹⁵ and participated in 1938 and 1939 in public recitations of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*.¹⁶ We see that Tolkien developed a profound and long lasting interest in Chaucer; for our purposes this is crucial because the final Canterbury tale presents an extended treatise on the seven capital vices.¹⁷ *The Parson's Tale* like Dante's *Purgatory* uses the doctrine of virtues and vices as a structural element to strengthen the story. *The Parson's Tale* also shows this Canterbury pilgrim advocating medieval scholastic thought and his tale develops not as a story but as a dissertation on the seven capital vices and their opposing virtues.

We can draw the conclusion at this point that Tolkien knew of the teaching on the seven capital vices. It would appear in both his religious and literary backgrounds even if he did not have acquaintance with the detailed philosophical and theological treatment of Thomas Aquinas. As we turn now to the Middle-earth epic itself a couple of cautions arise — 1. The seven capital vices do not create a literary structure for Tolkien as they do for Dante or Chaucer's parson. 2. Tolkien does not systematically examine each of the vices in the epic, for example, lust plays almost no part at all. The next two sections of this article argue that the doctrine of the seven capital vices gives depth to Tolkien's characters and provides solid psychological motivation for their actions.

III. Avarice, Gluttony and Sloth in Middle-earth

We have already mentioned avarice as the vice that finally destroys Gollum, but it also influences the epic at several other places. According to Aquinas, the avaricious person seeks a material good by trying to fulfill himself/herself by means of this good.¹⁸ Toward the end of *The Hobbit*¹⁹ we find Smaug sleeping on an immense pile of dwarvish wealth; in this picture Tolkien provides an imaginative representation of this vice. After Bilbo steals the cup on his first trip into the mountain and Smaug begins to awaken, the narrator tells us, "Dragons may not have much real use for all their wealth, but they know it to the ounce as a rule, especially after long possession and Smaug was no exception." (*H*, 207) In describing Smaug's reaction when he discovers that he has lost the cup, Tolkien explains this kind of rage, "... is only seen when rich folk that have more than they can enjoy suddenly lose something that they have long had but have never before used or wanted." (*H*, 208) We first see in this incident how Smaug finds his habitual identity in possessions, and here Tolkien gives an excellent imaginative portrayal of the scholastic description of avarice. We next recognize in this event the fact that avarice leads to the additional vice of rage.

Not only dragons live in avarice, but dwarves also have a special vulnerability to this vice. One of the most pathetic pieces in the Middle-earth epic occurs when Thorin Oakenshield at long last recovers Erebor after Smaug's death. He succumbs to avarice, claiming all the treasure for himself as opposed to sharing with the others who fought the dragon and he plans to defraud Bilbo of his reward, even though the hobbit had joined the quest only reluctantly. (*H*, 256) Thorin's actions illustrate one of the major flaws of the dwarves; they are too much enthralled with material wealth.²⁰ Such infatuation leads to Thorin's destruction in the Battle of the Five Armies. (*H*, 272-73) Thorin's avarice functions as a root for his deception of Bilbo and causes the war.

Smaug and Thorin, however, react to avarice quite differently. Since Smaug exists as thoroughly evil, he allows avarice to destroy him. Thorin frees himself from avarice at the end of the war as he prepares to die. He calls for Bilbo in order to reconcile himself with the hobbit. Thorin says,

Farewell, good thief, . . . I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers until the world is renewed. Since I leave now all gold and silver, and go where it is of little worth, I wish to part in friendship from you and would take back my words and deeds at the Gate. (*H*, 272)

In his final words to Bilbo, Thorin draws a kind of moral from all that has gone before, "... if more of us valued food, and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world." (*H*, 273) Since capital vices abide in a personality as habits potentially leading to sin, a person of good will like Thorin can always overcome them. Thorin's final actions show a free person admitting his wrong and putting priorities straight.

In the Thomistic presentation of the seven capital vices, avarice encourages in a special way gluttony and sloth. Gluttony destroys by means of excessive pursuit of meat and drink.²¹ Sloth creates a sadness about personal good because such good would require bodily exertion.²² The hobbit parties need some investigation in light of this definition of gluttony. The condition of Rohan when we first meet that kingdom provides an excellent example of sloth.

The epitome of feasting in *The Lord of the Rings* occurs with Bilbo's eleventh birthday party. Otho and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins cannot refuse Bilbo's invitation to the party because, "... their cousin Bilbo, had been specializing in food for many years and his table had a high reputation." (*LotR*, I, 53) Tolkien's description of the preparations for the party shows Bilbo depleting the town food reserves and "The guests were not disappointed: they had a very pleasant feast, in fact an engrossing entertainment: rich, abundant, varied and prolonged." (*LotR*, I, 53) When Bilbo disappears at the end of the party, the guests soothe their distaste over his joke by more eating and drinking. Perhaps Bilbo's feast presents the height of excessive eating and drinking in this epic, but Tolkien's multiple references to the delight hobbits take in good food

and drink show how inordinate desire for food affects the whole personality.

The pattern of Thorin Oakenshield repeats itself in the matter of gluttony. Through the journey to Mount Doom the hobbits endure much deprivation of food. They have no food but *lembas* (i.e. waybread), the food given them at Lórien by the elves. This food nourishes but does not yield to overeating. A small amount suffices for a day's journey. Consequently the hobbits learn to moderate their habitual penchant for overeating by the temperate use of *lembas*. When they do return home and have cleansed the Shire, we find that food plays no part at all. Tolkien could have created an ending with a great feast, but he chose the gentler one of the close of the Third Age. (Cf. *LotR*, III, 372-85)

The final vice of those connected with the faculty of pleasure, sloth, bears careful description because our modern term "laziness" does not display the real evil of this vice. In contemporary language sloth looks more like what we would call depression, which often manifests itself as inactivity. Whether we call the vice sloth or depression Théoden of Rohan has a devastating case of this disorder when the travelers first arrive in Rohan. Gandalf's description of Théoden captures a person tormented by sloth, "Too long have you sat in shadows and trusted twisted tales and crooked promptings." (*LotR*, II, 151) Théoden's despairing words to Gandalf betray the vice. He complains that Gandalf brings woe. He rejoiced that Shadowfax returned to Rohan without Gandalf. (*LotR*, II, 149) His actions also reveal his slothful state. When he rises to make his speech against Gandalf, he leans heavily upon his staff. When he sits down again, he does so slowly. All of this indicates much more than a personality experiencing advanced age.

When we trace the history of Théoden, we discover that this vice appeared at the same time as Grima (Wormtongue), Saruman's advisor. In the one short speech we have of Grima to Théoden, we see how he does everything possible to discourage and create inactivity. He reminds Théoden that Théodred has been slain. Éomer cannot be trusted. The Dark Lord stirs in the East. He names Gandalf illnews; and "... ill news is an ill guest they say." (*LotR*, II, 149) Ironically he actually names himself with this accusation against Gandalf. No wonder Théoden, a once proud warrior, fears exertion of any kind.

Gandalf silences Wormtongue, and an amazing transformation of Théoden takes place. He leads the king from the throne room saying when they are outside, "Now Lord ... look out upon your land! Breathe the free air again." (*LotR*, II 152) Théoden responds tentatively at first "It is not so dark here." (*LotR*, II, 153) and then he experiences a new physical vigor and mental toughness. He concludes, "Dark have been my dreams of late. . . but I feel as one new-awakened. I would now that you had come before, Gandalf." (*LotR*, II, 153) Like Thorin with avarice and the hobbits with gluttony, Théoden overcomes his sloth and spends the last days of his life in intense activity and

ultimately dies a warrior. (*LotR*, III, 145)

A study of the capital vices connected to the appetite for pleasure shows us Tolkien's acute understanding of any free being's tendency to seek gratification without restraint. He also demonstrates that by overcoming the vice, the being decides its ultimate moral condition in victory rather than defeat. Because moral agents learn such vices, they can also unlearn them by the opposite virtuous action. Escape from the vice requires a conversion of sorts, but without it Sauron accomplishes his destruction. Turning to the opposing virtue of liberality, temperance, or courage, however, creates noble individuals such as Thorin Oakenshield and Théoden of Rohan.

IV. Pride, Anger, and Envy in Middle-earth

The second set of capital vices reside in the irascible appetite and create special problems with relationships. While the vices we have already examined emphasize personal satisfaction, this set of vices move to the outside world. As with avarice, gluttony and sloth, which have opposing virtues, these vices also disappear with the development of the opposing virtue. And so, Tolkien's characters conquer pride with humility, anger with patience, envy with love of neighbor.

The very best example of the effects of pride and its related vices of anger and envy as moral defects in Middle-earth occurs in the personality of Saruman. We do not intend to trace the chronology of his decline, for the ultimate results of his pride become evident during the conversation at Orthanc, the tower of Isengard, and Tolkien symbolically shows the pride of Saruman in two ways.²³

As the companions approach the tower Gandalf tells them, "Beware of his voice," (*LotR*, II, 232) for one's voice provides the chief means by which one communicates interior pride. Tolkien describes Saruman's voice as melodious in sound, but every word he utters has an undertone of superiority about it. Saruman's first words and Tolkien's editorial comments betray the wizard's pride.

'Well?' it said now with gentle question,

'Why must you disturb my rest? Will you give me no peace at all by night or day?' Its tone was that of a kindly heart aggrieved by injuries undeserved. (*LotR*, II, 234)

The tone may indicate "a heart aggrieved," meaning, however, comes across as full of pride and irritation. Saruman has a voice whose tonality says one thing and whose meaning speaks something else.

The second indication of Saruman's pride comes with the description of his visual appearance. He started out as Saruman the White; by the time the reader actually sees him in *The Two Towers* he has started to call himself Saruman the Many Colored.²⁴ Tolkien displays this transformation by dwelling on the iridescence of Saruman's cloak, "... the colour of which was not easy to tell, for it changed if they moved their eyes or if he stirred." (*LotR*, II,

234) This apparently innocent picture gives a pictorial representation of the same prideful nature we discovered in the voice. Just as hearers could not remember what the voice said, so also no one can tell the color of the cloak. The irony of all this lies in the fact that white already contains all colors, as any high school student knows who has performed experiments with a prism. Saruman, however, displays each color individually to indicate his superiority.

Pride as a vice breeds anger in a special way, and we see how the mere thought of someone not following his will infuriates Saruman. As Théoden listens to Saruman's attempt to conquer him and the kingdom of Rohan by word, Éomer persuades the king to pay no attention. Saruman responds, "If we speak of poisoned tongues, what shall we say of yours, young serpent! . . . Meddle not in policies which you do not understand." (*LotR*, II, 236) The soft speech and anger alternate until Saruman faces a choice of whether to descend from the tower or to stay there. Tolkien summarizes by saying,

A shadow passed over Saruman's face; then it went deathly white. Before he could conceal it, they saw through the mask the anguish of a mind in doubt, loathing to stay and dreading to leave its refuge. For a second he hesitated, and no one breathed. Then he spoke, and his voice was shrill and cold. Pride and hate were conquering him. (*LotR*, II, 239)

We have to wait until "The Scouring of the Shire" to understand how pride and envy relate to each other. Having discovered that Sharkey is really Saruman, the hobbits prepare to drive him out of the Shire. He speaks to Frodo about Gandalf, showing envy deeply rooted in his pride, "When his [Gandalf's] tools have done their task, he drops them. But you must go dangling after him, dawdling and talking. . ." Here we see the former leader of the White Council expressing envy over all the good Gandalf has accomplished. But, the most touching episode depicting Saruman's envy occurs after his attempt to kill Frodo. Tolkien writes,

There was a strange look in his eyes of mingled wonder and respect and hatred. 'You have grown, Halfling,' he said. 'Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you!'

The great Saruman envies a poor hobbit creature, for Frodo's actions toward him at this point show the three opposing virtues of humility, patience, and love of neighbor. Frodo tells Sam,

'Do not kill him even now. For he has not hurt me. And in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil mood. He was great once, of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hand against. He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him in the hope that he may find it.'

Saruman made his decision at Orthanc to live in pride, anger and envy. His habitual way of looking at existence so deeply affects his personality that he cannot change like

Thorin Oakenshield, the hobbits, or Théoden. Because these three vices have to do with relationships, they are more difficult to eradicate than those concerned with personal pleasure. To develop them we must dominate another free being; to conquer them we must allow others to exist according to their own manner. Saruman and Gríma follow Sauron's pattern of attempting to dominate right to the end.

V. Conclusion

As we conclude these remarks on Tolkien's use of the seven capital vices we can refer to his notion of "recovery" as it appears in the essay, "On Fairy-stories." He defines recovery in fantasy stories as a return and renewal of health; one regains a clear view.²⁵ One result of studying the Middle-earth epic in the context of the seven capital vices comes when we realize that each character who conquers one of these vices comes to see things with a clear view. As with a dirty window, the moral view of the character has been obscured by the vice. When a virtue opposite the vice clears the windows of the soul, the character obtains a fresh view of reality. Characters such as Saruman and Gríma who never submit to virtue end up destroying themselves.

It might seem strange that we have spent so much time speaking of moral evil in the Middle-earth epic and have only mentioned Sauron in passing. If we take Thomas, Dante, and Chaucer as background for Tolkien's treatment of moral evil, we would have to say that Sauron's evil does not fit with the capital vices at all. Sauron has descended so far from reality that his personality simply will not fit into these categories. In the epic Sauron functions as the metaphysical source for all evils, drawing all beings to himself in order to conquer them. Sauron plays the part of a metaphysical black hole consuming anything that approaches him. While the major metaphysical struggle of Middle-earth comes from the need to overcome Sauron's negative will, the peoples of Middle-earth also must face the weakness and failings of their own personalities.²⁶

Finally, in light of Dante's description of purgatory, one can ask whether Tolkien intends to imply a similarity between Middle-earth and purgatory. The epic shows that Middle-earth exists as a place of struggle and personal renewal, and purgatory plays the same role in Christian theology. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings* the Third Age finds completion with the prospect for a new and brighter reality. This also occurs in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for he writes of *Paradise* as the fulfillment of all reality in the final part of his poem. If Thorin fought with avarice to experience deliverance by the insight that companionship expresses more important values than possessions, and if Théoden's encounter with sloth taught him that courageous engagement not inactivity solves the evils that beset us, then struggle does not lead to ultimate meaning. And, when Saruman yields to pride because he refuses to battle his habitual way of looking at life, we grieve for what he might have been. If Tolkien's characters successfully win the fight with self, they rise to new freedom. If they

fall in virtue, they submit to a worse slavery than any Sauron devises, domination by their sense appetites.

A study, then, of the seven capital vices in Middle-earth becomes an examination of the dynamics of moral renewal. In this light we appropriately end with the final lines from *Purgatory*.

From that most holy wave I now returned
... remade as new trees are
renewed when they bring forth new boughs, I was
pure and prepared to climb unto the stars. ♀

Notes

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem* (New York: William Baldwin and Co., 1821) III, p. 28.
2. Richard P. Bullock in "The Importance of Free Will in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore* Vol. XI, no. 3 (Winter Spring 1985) makes the point that the issue of power in the epic centers on the attempt to dominate another's will.
3. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 volumes [I. *The Fellowship of the Ring*; II. *The Two Towers*; III. *The Return of the King*] (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), I, 351. All future references to this work will appear in the text of the article by simply noting *LoTR* volume and page number of this edition.
4. I developed these ideas more extensively in my paper, "Tolkien and Christian Concepts of Evil: Apocalypse and Privation," delivered at the XVIII Mythopoeic Conference in Milwaukee, July 1987, and printed in *Mythlore* 56 (Winter 1988), pp. 57-60. Paul Kocher noticed the evil as privation theme as early as 1972 in his work *The Master of Middle-earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972), pp. 77-79. Kocher traces the idea to Thomas Aquinas. T.A. Shippey renounces these claims in the work, *The Road to Middle-earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1983), pp. 107. Shippey traces the notion to Boethius. Actually the ideas arise in Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book II and III.
5. The phrase "the seven capital sins" has an extremely muddy tradition. Thomas Aquinas, whose doctrine we will examine in this section, shifts back and forth; sometimes he calls these actions "capital sins" and at other times "capital vices." Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 84, art. 3. At the heading of this Questions he asks, "Whether any other special sins besides pride and avarice should be called capital?"; later in the answer to the fifth objection he says, "These vices are called capital because others arise from them..."
6. The understanding of capital vices comes from monastic asceticism and some of the principal early proponents were John Cassian in his *Conferences* (Patrologiae Latinae, 49, cols. 609-642) and *Institutes of the Cenobites* (Patrologiae Latinae, 49, cols. 201-476) and Gregory the Great in his *Commentary on Job (Moralia)* (Patrologiae Latinae, 76, col. 621).
7. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 49, art. 3. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV, 20 (1022^b 10).
8. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 81.
9. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, II, 42, 2.3 and *Disputed Questions Concerning Evil*, Q. 8, art. 1.
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 84, art. 4.
11. Because of his Catholicism, some critics have been too quick to identify aspects of Tolkien's thought with a Thomistic influence. While the philosophy and theology of Thomas Aquinas pervade Catholicism, one must always be very careful to sort out Thomas' original thought from materials he merely synthesizes. Paul Kocher in *The Master of Middle-earth* discusses the metaphysical aspects of Tolkien's understanding of evil and attributes the original idea to Aquinas (Cf. pp. 77-79). T.A. Shippey points out in *The Road to Middle-earth* that the concept of evil as negation finds its clearest expression in Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 107. Actually, evil as negation probably originates with Augustine and finds a detailed expression in his *On Free Choice of the Will*, Books II and III. My general point concerns the care we must use when we claim that one or another author presents the Catholic viewpoint when we base our argument on medieval texts.
12. Although Tolkien himself would not have used it *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine: Revised Edition of the Baltimore Catechism* (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1941) displays the typical format of a pre-Vatican Council II Catholic Catechism. He would have learned his faith from a manual similar to this. Questions 74 and 75 of this work list and explain the seven capital sins.
13. Kocher, *The Master of Middle-earth*, p. 164. Cf. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Leaf by Niggle," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), pp. 100-120.
14. Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), p. 28.
15. J.R.R. Tolkien, "Chaucer as Philologist: The Reeve's Tale," *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1934), pp. 1-70. Carpenter claims that, "this work is required reading for anyone who wants to understand the regional variations of fourteenth-century English. Tolkien: A Biography," p. 138.
16. Carpenter, *ibid.*, p. 214.
17. As a piece of collateral evidence concerning Tolkien's interest in Chaucer we find in J.R.R. Tolkien, *Scholar and Storyteller: Essays in Memoriam* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979) edited by Mary Salu and Robert T. Farrell four lengthy essays on Chaucer. The authors of these essays undoubtedly knew of Tolkien's admiration for Chaucer and honored Tolkien's memory by their contribution on various aspects of Chaucer's work.
18. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 84, art. 1 and art. 4. Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*, II, pp. 741-745.
19. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965). All future references to this work will appear in the text of the article as e.g. (H., ...).
20. Robert Foster in *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth: From The Hobbit to The Silmarillion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971) says in his entry entitled "Dwarves" that they could not be overcome by evil and never forget wrongs or debts. "Their greatest flaws were a tendency toward wrath, possessiveness, and gold-lust." p. 131.
21. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 84, art. 4. Chaucer *The Parson's Tale*, II, 817-20.
22. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 84, art. 4. Chaucer *The Parson's Tale*, II, 676-77.
23. A brief history of Saruman appears under "Saruman" in Foster, *The Complete Guide to Middle-earth*, pp. 437-38.
24. Cf. Foster, "Saruman," *Complete Guide*, p. 438.
25. J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine books, 1966), p. 77.
26. An interesting issue concerning the presence of evil in Middle-earth occurs in W.H. Auden, "Good and Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Tolkien Journal*, Vol. III, no. 1 (1967), p. 5. Auden discusses the necessity for a character to have the capacity for speech before we can even think of it as evil. In other words, in order to make moral choices one must be rational.
27. Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, Allen Mandelbaum, trans. (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), canto XXXIII, II, 142-45.

Editorial Note

The Poetry Editor, Ruth Berman, has resigned her position on the *Mythlore* Staff. Her efforts to obtain Poetry submissions were conscientious, and thanks is owed for her service. Following her leaving, a change in editorial policy on Poetry has been made. In future, (after the small backlog of poems is printed) only poetry that is Inklings-related in theme will be accepted.

TOLKIEN JOURNAL

Complete sets of *Tolkien Journal*, numbers 1-15 (excluding #12, which is the same as *Mythlore* #5) are available for \$27, plus \$4 shipping. Write to Orders Department, 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801.