
Nothing is Evil in the Beginning

An Essay on Good and Evil in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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Introduction

The Lord of the Rings is one of the most popular works of literature in modern times, and as such it has been much discussed and debated, giving cause to a wide range of opinions, with extremes on both sides of the scale. On the one hand there are the devoted fans who without hesitation would defend Professor Tolkien's works against any form of negative criticism. On the other there is a group of critics who frown at anything which gains great commercial success and call *The Lord of the Rings* simple escapism and not 'real literature' (Isaacs, *On the Possibilities of Writing Tolkien Criticism*). Over the years a significant body of serious criticism has been written, however, and *The Lord of the Rings* has been analysed from a variety of viewpoints. Some of the most discussed points are whether the book can be seen as allegorical, the Christian and mythological influences, the lack of female characters and the depiction of good and evil (Isaacs). It is this last point that I will look closer at in this essay.

One common complaint against *The Lord of the Rings* is that there are no nuances between good and evil; the bad guys are all bad and the good guys are all good. I do not agree with this. I think there is a great complexity in the way Tolkien depicts how some people fall into evil while others are able to resist it, and there, in the *fall*, is where I believe the key is. "[N]othing is evil in the beginning" Elrond says, but some become evil and various reasons for this fall can be found (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 351. This book will from now on be referred to as FotR).

In *The Lord of the Rings* the main reason for falling into evil is the Ring and throughout the book it is a constant threat and temptation to the characters. In the first chapter of this essay I will look at four pairs of characters and explore how the Ring affects them and why they do or do not fall for its temptation. I will then use the second chapter to look closer at a number of central concepts found in the comparisons.

When discussing *The Lord of the Rings* in the 21st century it is almost impossible not to mention Peter Jackson's film adaptation, which has become the most wide spread interpretation of the book. When adapting a book of the scale of *The Lord of the Rings* to fit a film format some changes have to be made and one of the biggest changes is significant to the topic of this essay. In the film, Faramir almost falls for the temptation of the Ring – even going as far as to take Frodo and Sam captives and bring them to Osgiliath – while in the book, the Ring hardly seems to affect him at all. The change is partly dramaturgical; since Shelob was moved to *The Return of the King*, another obstacle was needed for Frodo and Sam in *The Two Towers*, and Faramir would have seemed the logical choice. It also works to add dimension to the character of Faramir and to emphasise the power and danger of the Ring (Boyens). The fact that this change was needed in the film implies that the Faramir we meet in the book is one of the alleged 'all good' characters, who could never be tempted by evil. If Faramir had acted true to Tolkien's words in the film, he would certainly have come across as 'all good', but does he in the book? If he does, is he still a credible character? I will attempt to answer these questions later, in my comparison between Faramir and Boromir.

Before examining the power of the Ring, however, I will look briefly at the origins of evil in Tolkien's universe. If nothing is evil in the beginning, evil must have come from somewhere and it is relevant to first examine how this happened in order to understand Tolkien's idea of good and evil.

Chapter One: Character Comparisons

According to Tolkien's mythology, evil first arose in the beginning of time when Ilúvatar, the One God, gave the Ainur, a form of minor deities or angelic beings, a great theme to sing and through this song the earth was created. But as they sang, Melkor, the most powerful of the Ainur, started to create a theme of his own, "for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself" and a discord arose which changed the world from the ideal image that the song of the Ainur had first conjured up (*The Silmarillion* 4. This book will from now on be referred to as S). As the world was completed some of the Ainur chose to go down into it and tend to it. These came to be called Valar or gods. Melkor was one of them, but rather than taking care of the world and the creatures living there, he wished to "have subjects and servants [...] and to be a master over other wills" (S 8). Melkor soon became the chief enemy of the other Valar and constantly sought to destroy what they made. Many of the Children of the Earth; Elves, Dwarves and Men, resisted him, but many also came to serve him and it is from him that all other evil stems. Even Sauron, the main antagonist in *The Lord of the Rings* and the maker of The One Ring, began as a servant of Melkor.

In the beginning Melkor was the mightiest of his kind and had "the greatest gifts of power and knowledge", but he was proud, impatient and hungry for more power and his wish to "bring into Being things of his own" made him go against Ilúvatar, which eventually caused his fall (S 4).

Can these characteristics of Melkor's, established in the beginning of time, be found in others who have fallen into evil in Tolkien's universe? Do all who fall share the same personality? Can it be predicted from the beginning who will fall and who will not? In this essay I am going to look at four different pairs of characters, each of which consists of one 'good' character and one which has fallen into evil, and compare the characters to each

other, to the other pairs and to Melkor in order to see whether there is any pattern to be found that unites those who fall.

The Wizards

The first pair I will look at is Saruman and Gandalf. They both belong to the order of Istari, or wizards, who were sent by the gods to fight Sauron. While they look very much alike, especially after Gandalf returns from his fight with the Balrog, their personalities are notably different. Saruman is the head of the order and the mightiest of the wizards, and he can make others obey him simply by talking to them (FotR 335, *The Two Towers* 754. This book will from now on be referred to as TTT). Not so long after arriving in Middle Earth he settled down in Isengard, an impenetrable stone tower built long ago by the Númenorians and there he studied the Rings of Power and “the arts of the Enemy” (FotR 335). He is a great scholar and his very name, which means Man of Craft, suggests knowledge and skill. As his knowledge grows, however, so does his pride, and he becomes jealous of his knowledge and reluctant to share it, and the more he learns about the Ring, the more he comes to desire it himself (FotR 63). As opposed to the ‘fallen’ characters in my other pairs, Saruman never even comes close to the Ring, but the mere knowledge of it is enough for him to be ensnared.

Gandalf, on the other hand, never has a permanent residence, but travels around Middle Earth and learns much by talking to its inhabitants, even to Hobbits and others whom Saruman finds too insignificant to be worthy of attention. He gladly shares his wisdom and often appears where people are in most need of council, despite the unpopularity this sometimes gains him. Unlike Saruman, who bends people to his own will with soft words and an enchanting voice, Gandalf has a fiery temperament and is quick to reprimand foolishness in rather harsh words, even when he is trying to counsel kings and lords. Most importantly,

however, Gandalf is “not proud, and [seeks] neither power nor praise” (*Unfinished Tales* 505. This book will from now on be referred to as UT).

When the Ring is offered to him he can therefore resist the temptation, knowing that he would not be strong enough to wield such power without being corrupted by it (FotR 80-81). Saruman, on the other hand, is too proud to admit that, and thinks instead that he could use the Ring to conquer Sauron and achieve his goals of “Knowledge, Rule [and] Order” without being affected by the evil he knows it contains (FotR 338, Shippey 126). Along the way, however, he focuses more and more on finding the Ring, and blinded by his lust for it he forgets his original goal.

The comparison between Saruman and Gandalf very clearly illustrates how the concept of knowledge works both for good and evil in Tolkien’s universe. In Saruman’s case, knowledge is gathered simply for the sake of knowing. It is detached from reality, gained from dusty scrolls in a secluded tower and seldom put to practical use. Saruman rarely shares his knowledge, but uses it rather as a source of power and a means to put himself above others. This type of knowledge does not engender the understanding of one’s self needed to resist the pull of evil, but leads rather to delusions. Gandalf’s knowledge, however, is gained from experience as much as studying and is constantly put to use in the war against Sauron. While Saruman thinks that he could use his knowledge to conquer Sauron alone, Gandalf uses his to counsel and aid others in their struggle.

The Kings

The second pair is Isildur and Aragorn. They are both of the Dúnedain, descending from the Númenorians, an ancient race of Men with knowledge and skill superior to that of other Men. Isildur was the son of Elendil who was king of Arnor and Gondor, the mightiest of the kingdoms of Men, when Sauron was conquered for the first time. In that last battle Isildur cut

the Ring from the hand of Sauron and, despite the counsel of Elrond and Círdan, he would not destroy it, but kept it for himself (FotR 316-317).

Isildur is long since dead when *The Lord of the Rings* begins, so we are not told much about his personality, but one thing can be understood from his story: that he was a brave and powerful man, who dared to go up against Sauron himself and managed to cut his finger off. The most important fact about him is not told, though: his reason for not destroying the Ring. It is said that he took it as payment for the death of his father and brother but that, like Gollum's and Bilbo's lies about having got the Ring as a present, is just an excuse to take it, a way to try and make his ownership of it legitimate (FotR 63, 74-75, 317).

The real question is not why he kept it, but why he did not destroy it. Was he too ignorant to understand its power and importance? Did he think it had lost its power when Sauron was conquered? Or was he too proud to think that he would be corrupted by it? The first two options do not seem very credible. Even if Isildur himself had not understood the Ring's power, Elrond and Círdan were there to tell him and they were both wise and powerful elves whose advice Isildur and his father had listened to, up until then. Was it pride, then? A section in *Unfinished Tales* confirms this guess. Here the story of Isildur's death is told in more detail and before he dies, Isildur regrets the pride that kept him from destroying the Ring and admits that he has tried to bend it to his own will, but realised that he was not powerful enough (UT 354-355). So even if Isildur's pride caused his fall, he was not too proud to admit the limits of his power after he had tested them, but then, unfortunately, it was too late.

His counterpart in this comparison, Aragorn, is Isildur's heir and in *The Lord of the Rings* he strives to regain his rightful place as king. Although Aragorn himself admits that "[l]ittle do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur as they stand carven in their majesty in the halls of Denethor" it is easy to see similarities between him and Isildur (FotR 323). Like his ancestor, Aragorn is brave and strong in battle, and he challenges Sauron eye to eye in the

palantír (*Return of the King* 1150. This book will from now on be referred to as RotK). While Isildur lived the life of a prince and, for a short while, king, Aragorn lives as a ranger in the woods, protecting unknowing villagers and wandering far and wide. He is used to being treated with suspicion and dislike due to his torn clothing and ragged looks and there is no room for excessive pride in an existence like that. All his life he has been striving to correct the mistake his ancestor made, by attempting to defeat Sauron and reinstate his kingdom, and this is why he is able to resist the Ring when it is offered to him (FotR 321).

Here we see once again how Tolkien uses the concepts of pride and knowledge to separate the 'good' characters from the ones who fall into evil. Despite their similarities, Aragorn's humble background saves him from the pride that leads Isildur to fall, and the knowledge, or experience, of Isildur's fall helps Aragorn to make the right choices in times of temptation.

The Brothers

Now we come to the pair mentioned in the introduction: Boromir and Faramir. They are brothers, sons of the steward of Gondor and "unlike [...], and yet also much akin" (TTT 878). Boromir is the eldest and best liked by their father. He is a man of action, brave and fearless in battle, and a great leader. He is confident of and takes pride in his and Gondor's strength, but when it comes to more 'intellectual' problems he is not afraid to ask the advice of those wiser than him. At the Council of Elrond he willingly asks for help to solve the riddle of his and his brother's dream, but is careful to emphasise that he does not seek any aid in battle and speaks proudly of how Gondor alone defends the rest of the West.

This confidence is reflected in the fact that he is the only one at the Council who speaks of using the Ring (FotR 348). He speaks in general terms, saying that it could be a weapon for The Free Lords and the valiant men of Gondor, but behind those words is the

suggestion that he could wield it. If the Ring were to go to Gondor as a weapon in the war, it would surely be wielded either by Boromir or his father. Like Isildur he either overestimates the strength of himself and his kin, or underestimates the power of the Ring, but unlike Isildur he listens to Elrond's advice and agrees to help destroy the Ring. However, in the end, as shown by Hammond and Scull, his worry for his beloved Gondor, his wish to lead Minas Tirith to victory and his inability to fully understand the decision to destroy the Ring leads him to try and take it from Frodo (Hammond & Scull 349). He regrets it almost instantly, however, and dies trying to make amends for his deeds by protecting Merry and Pippin.

Faramir is significantly different from his older brother, as he himself explains in *The Two Towers*:

I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Númenor; and I would have her loved for her memory, her ancience, her beauty, her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise. (878)

Because of Faramir's lack of interest in warfare and glory, he is constantly overshadowed by his brother, less loved by both their father and the people. The relationship between Faramir and Boromir is described in a very telling quote from the appendices of *The Return of the King*: "It did not seem possible to Faramir that anyone in Gondor could rival Boromir, heir of Denethor, Captain of the White Tower; and of like mind was Boromir" (1385). Faramir is humble and gentle, while Boromir is proud and well aware of his position, but despite, or maybe because of, these differences the brothers always get along well.

In spite of the general opinion that Boromir is braver and stronger than his younger brother, Faramir is the one who can resist the power of the Ring and contribute to the fall of Sauron. The scene where Faramir finds out that Frodo carries the One Ring is a crucial moment in the development of the character Faramir, and, as mentioned above, Peter Jackson's film version of this scene differs greatly from the book version. In the film, Faramir sees this as a chance to finally win the favour of his father, so he takes Frodo and Sam prisoners and brings them all the way to Osgiliath before he realises his mistake and lets them go. In the book, however, Faramir only for a fleeting moment speaks as if he meant to take the Ring, then he laughs and declares that he has no interest in it and offers to help Frodo and Sam on their journey. This lack of interest in the Ring might at first glance seem strange. As Philippa Boyens, co-screenwriter for the film adaptation, puts it:

You've just been desperately trying to establish that this [the Ring] is one of the most evil things ever created, that it's tearing apart the mind of your main character who's desperately trying to resist it [...] and then suddenly you come across a character [Faramir] who says 'I would not pick this thing up if it lay by the wayside'- I mean, you've just stripped the Ring of all power. (*From Book to Script: Finding the Story*)

It might at first seem odd that Faramir is not even slightly tempted by the Ring, or, if his "strange smile" is a sign of temptation, that he can resist it with a shrug of his shoulders, and on film it would certainly have looked like a contradiction of the Ring's power (TTT 890). With the detail provided in the book, however, his reaction is quite natural. Faramir himself provides two explanations to why he does not want the Ring. Firstly, that he had already promised not to take it ("I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway") and the Men of

Gondor are true to their words¹, and secondly that he is not the kind of person who would desire such a thing, lacking the overconfidence in his own strength and the desire for glory which might lead people like Boromir to want it (TTT 877, 890).

In the light of the previous comparisons made in this essay we can add some to the explanation. Like Aragorn, Faramir has a warning example of the consequences of trying to claim the Ring, having just heard how it caused his beloved brother's fall and death. Furthermore, Faramir's interest in history and his conversations with Gandalf have provided him with the knowledge to understand the importance and danger of the Ring in a way that Boromir could not (TTT 876-877).

Once again, excessive pride leads to a fall, while humility is needed to make the right choice. As opposed to the case of Saruman, however, knowledge here works for what is good. Faramir can use his knowledge of history and of what happened to Boromir to come to the conclusion that he should and could not use the Ring and thus resist its temptation.

The Hobbits

My last pair includes the character who is perhaps the most severely corrupted by the Ring, but who is also most different from the other 'fallen' characters seen in this essay. I am referring, of course, to Gollum. In contrast to him we have Merry. They are both hobbits or "of hobbit-kind", but unlike most hobbits both their families live by a river and use boats (FotR 69, 129). The circumstances under which they first encounter the Ring are also similar. Gollum, or Sméagol as he is then, sees it when his friend Déagol finds it on the bottom of a river during a fishing trip. He does not know what it is or that it has any special powers, but upon seeing the beautiful, golden Ring in his friend's hand, he is immediately overcome by desire for it, and when Déagol refuses to give it to him, he kills Déagol and takes it (FotR 70).

¹ Boromir never swears any oaths concerning the Ring, see FotR 365

When Merry first encounters the Ring, he does not even know that it is a ring. He just catches a “glint of gold” when, hidden behind a hedge, he sees Bilbo disappearing to hide from the Sackville-Bagginses (FotR 137). Although Merry never mentions any desire to own the Ring, he starts spying on Bilbo to find out more about his magical disappearance. It can not be said for sure whether this spying is a sign of him being seriously tempted by the Ring, or simply a demonstration of childish curiosity, but as neither Merry nor any of the other hobbits show any signs of desiring the Ring throughout the rest of the book, the last seems more credible. How is it then, that Merry, seeing a mysterious, golden object which can make one disappear, does not seem tempted by it in the slightest, while Sméagol, who sees nothing more than a golden ring, kills without hesitation to get it?

To answer this, we first have to look closer at hobbits in general. Despite the fact that most of them live a peaceful and eventless life, they are “curiously tough [...] difficult to daunt or to kill [...] and [can] survive rough handling by grief, foe or weather” (FotR 7). Gandalf also seems to think that this ‘toughness’ includes a natural resistance against the power of the Ring (FotR 64).

This is not primarily a matter of resisting the Ring, however, because most of the time there does not seem to be anything for them to resist. The Ring is no temptation to the hobbits, simply because it cannot offer anything that they want. The things that the Ring most commonly uses to lure people with; glory, victory in battle and the power to rule others, does not appeal to the average hobbit. Fundamentally, hobbits are a “contented and moderate” people (FotR 12). They are quite happy living the way they always have; farming, eating and smoking, and do not desire anything else. They have no real government apart from the Thain, who is officially responsible for the Shire-moot, The Shire-muster and the Hobbitry-in-arms, but since these “were only held in times of emergency, which no longer occurred, the Thainship had ceased to be more than a nominal dignity”, and the Mayor, whose main task is

to “preside at banquets” and who is responsible for the post office and the twelve Shirriffs (FotR 12-13). The Shirriffs are the Shire police force, but since the hobbits generally keep “the laws of free will”, their chief purpose is to catch escaped cattle (FotR 12-13). The hobbits have no love of war and never kill for sport, they are “generous and not greedy”, do not wish for any other knowledge than what is needed to live their lives and have no wish to rule or be ruled by others (FotR 3, 7, 12). So what can the Ring offer them which they do not already have? Even when Sam, alone and desperate in the land of Mordor, sees in his mind how he can save his master and overthrow Sauron with the help of the Ring, his “plain hobbit-sense” tells him that his place is not as a fearsome leader with realms to command, but as a simple gardener in his own garden, and he is able to resist the lure of the Ring (RotK 1178). As Davison puts it: “the hobbits have something of a natural sense of their proper place” and are not easily tempted to leave it (106).

Hobbits are not, however, “immune to temptation” Davison argues, and points to Frodo, who falls at the very end and claims the Ring for his own (107). While I agree with the statement, I do not think that Frodo is a relevant example. When he at last reaches Mount Doom, he has carried the Ring so far and gone so deep into Mordor that he has become almost completely distanced from his hobbit nature. The things which hobbits usually value over everything else no longer mean anything to him; he cannot even remember food or trees or flowers (RotK 1226). He is thus almost bereft of his “plain hobbit-sense” and “natural sense of [his] proper place” when the time for his fall comes and can no longer act as a hobbit would.

As examples of ‘fallen hobbits’, then, I would instead use Lotho Sackville-Baggins and Ted Sandyman. When Saruman takes over the Shire they join him, step out of their proper place, wishing to “own everything [themselves], and then order folk about” as Farmer Cotton puts it (RotK 1324). This proves that even among hobbits there are individuals

who wish for more than their fair share and who, under the wrong circumstances, can fall into evil.

Returning to Sméagol and Merry, then, we must first remember that Sméagol was not a hobbit, but “of hobbit-kind” (FotR 69). We do not know much about his people, other than the fact that Sméagol came from a rich, influential family, ruled by a strong matriarch (FotR 69). This might suggest that Sméagol’s river-folk was more hierarchical and more disposed to have a strong government than the Shire-people, but it might also just be a case similar to the Tooks and the Thain in the Shire (FotR 12-13). What we do know, however, is that Sméagol was a strange character and not representative of his people. He was the “most inquisitive and curious-minded of that family”, being so interested in “roots and beginnings” that he eventually stopped looking upwards, but kept his head constantly turned towards the ground (FotR 69). The facts that he so readily kills to get what he wants and that he never seems to hesitate about using the Ring for ill purposes shows that his mind was already twisted and an easy target for temptation (FotR 70).

When it comes to Sméagol, it is not power that the Ring offers to tempt him, but knowledge. Throughout Tolkien’s works, Evil often uses knowledge to lure those who cannot be tempted by power. Morgoth shares his knowledge of crafting to gain the confidence of the Noldor and turn them against the Valar, thus causing the first elves to fall, and Sauron does the same to the smiths of Eregion to trick them into making the Rings of Power for him (S 67, 344). Sméagol was, as we have already seen, interested in secrets and the Ring, or rather, the invisibility that came with it, enabled him to find out hidden things about his friends and relatives (FotR 69). Despite these tendencies, Sméagol was not evil from the beginning. He was an outsider, perhaps, and easily corrupted, but not evil. When Frodo takes him as a guide and starts treating him kindly, Gollum shows small but recurring signs of turning back to goodness and every act of evil he carries out is clearly governed by the Ring. The culmination

of his change comes at the scene on the Stairs of Cirith Ungol, where he finds Frodo and Sam sleeping and almost seems to be on his way to change his mind about betraying them to Shelob (TTT 935). In this scene he appears for a moment as an old, tired hobbit, completely free from the influence of the Ring. If there had been no goodness in Sméagol from the beginning, there would have been no goodness for Gollum to fall back on after all those years and if Sméagol had never come across the Ring, he might never have become evil in the first place (if he ever is).

So while Merry is an ordinary hobbit whose “plain hobbit-sense” prevents him from being tempted by the Ring, Sméagol’s unusual curiosity and the way he is ready to use knowledge for a bad purpose causes him to fall and become the most visibly corrupted character of the book.

Chapter 2: Concepts Discussion

As seen in the comparisons above it is a complex matter who falls into evil and who does not.

In the case of Aragorn his background plays an important part in him being able to resist the Ring, while Boromir is very much a victim of expectations and circumstances, and none of the fallen characters would have become evil had they not been tempted by something evil in the first place. Yet four key concepts can be discerned from the falls illustrated in this essay: Power, Pride, Knowledge and Greed. In every case of a character becoming evil, starting with Melkor in the very beginning, one or more of these concepts play an important part. In this chapter I will look more closely at these concepts and how they function both in Tolkien's universe in general and in the pairs above.

Power

Of the three concepts discussed here, power is the one most closely connected to the Ring. Being the mightiest of the Rings of Power, Sauron's Ring can give its wielder power according to their own strength. Not everyone is strong enough to wield it, and even for those who are, there is a constant struggle between overpowering the Ring and being overpowered by it.

Power is not necessarily evil, however. The three elven Rings of Power all work for the good of Middle Earth, because Sauron never touched them and because their wielders (Galadriel, Elrond and Gandalf, who even without the rings are very powerful) choose to use them so (S 345). Aragorn, when crowned King of Arnor and Gondor, is the most powerful Man in the west, but he uses that power to do good. So when does power lead to evil?

One might say that power leads to evil when it is in the wrong hands. When power is used to rule simply for the sake of ruling or pursued for no other reason than to have

it, it is evil. This kind of desire for power can be seen for the first time in Melkor, who went down into the world with the goal of having “subjects and servants [...] and to be a master over other wills” (S 8). He has no other purpose than to enslave all others and to have absolute power. When Melkor is conquered, his strongest servant, Sauron, assumes this goal and creates the One Ring in order to rule the world himself.

None of the fallen characters of the pairs above have these ideas of absolute power to begin with; Boromir only wants the strength to defend his people, Saruman wishes to fulfil the task for which he was sent to Middle Earth. However, the Ring contains not only Sauron’s power, but his idea of power, his wish to “rule all and in the darkness bind them” and therefore its power is “altogether evil” (FotR 348).

As Katz claims, the Ring symbolises the desire for absolute power and in Tolkien’s world absolute power is always evil (6). This belief is clearly shown in a quote from *The Silmarillion*, where Tolkien writes that “Sauron [...] was only less evil than his master [Melkor] in that for long he served another and not himself” (24). The epitome of evil is thus to serve no one but yourself, to be the sole ruler over yourself and others.

Katz compares *The Lord of the Rings* to Plato’s story of Gyges’ ring, in which a man named Gyges finds a ring which makes him invisible. He uses this ring to break into the palace, kill the king and seduce the queen, and because he has the ring he can do this without having to fear any negative consequences. Using this story, Plato poses the question whether a person with unlimited power needs to be moral. He eventually comes to the conclusion that even if there are no physical consequences, immorality corrupts the soul and should therefore always be avoided. According to Katz, Tolkien agrees with Plato’s statement and many of his characters, Gollum most of all, clearly illustrate how immoral deeds lead to spiritual – and sometimes even physical – corruption. Every character that comes close to the Ring faces the choice between absolute power and morality, since these two cannot co-exist (Katz 6). They

can either choose to use the Ring, to act immorally and fall into evil, or they can choose to reject it, be moral and stay good. It is this choice that separates Gandalf, Aragorn, Faramir and Merry from Saruman, Isildur, Boromir and Gollum, and while they all have different reasons for choosing the way they do, the concept of pride is almost always involved.

Pride

Throughout his works Tolkien uses the word proud/pride in two different ways. The adjective form, *proud*, is often used as a positive word to describe the heroes, indicating kingliness and strength. The noun form *pride*, however, is used more as a concept, which, like the Christian sin, often leads to a fall. It is pride that makes Saruman think he can deceive Sauron and use the Ring to defeat him. It is pride that makes Isildur think he can keep the Ring without being corrupted by it, pride that makes Boromir think he can use the Ring's power to defend Gondor. "It is pride", Spacks claims, "that lures all toward the Ring" (92).

I would not say that it is the pride that lures them, however, but rather that it keeps them from realising that they should reject whatever it is the Ring lures them with. The Ring, or Sauron's power working through it, always seems to know what to offer its victims to best tempt them into using it. Gandalf knows this, and furthermore he knows what the Ring would use to tempt him: "the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good" (FotR 81). Because Gandalf is aware of his own weakness and, most importantly, because he is humble enough to admit it, he is prepared for the temptation of the Ring and knows how to resist it.

A character like Boromir, on the other hand, is not prepared in the same way. All he knows is that he wants to protect Gondor and that the Ring can give him the power to do so. He is used to being able to trust in his own strength in every situation and because of his pride he cannot imagine why this should be any different. This also applies to Saruman

and Isildur. They are both seen as powerful and wise, by others as well as themselves, and see no reason to why they should not be capable of mastering the power of the Ring. Saruman especially suffers from this overconfidence, as shown not only in his desire for the Ring, but also in his frequent usage of the palantír, which will be discussed more in the next section (TTT 779-780).

Knowledge

We have already seen that knowledge is a complex concept, which can work both for good and for bad. In the case of Aragorn and Faramir, their knowledge of Isildur's and Boromir's falls helps them to resist when faced with the same temptation. Like Gandalf they also have some knowledge of the Ring's corrupting powers and because of their humility they can use this knowledge to make the right choice. Gandalf's counterpart Saruman also has this knowledge of the Ring's corrupting powers, however. In fact, he has more of it than anyone else, being a master of Ring lore, but rather than saving him, this knowledge becomes the cause of his fall (FotR 63). Knowledge, like power, is in Tolkien's universe something that should be handled carefully.

“It is perilous to study too deeply the arts of the Enemy, for good or for ill” Elrond says and Torre illustrates this with the example of the palantír² (FotR 345, Torre 71). Saruman and Denethor both look into their palantírs, knowing full well that by doing so they run the risk of exposing themselves to Sauron. Pride and a lack of self-awareness once again overcome wisdom and they believe that they can use the palantír on their own conditions, and turn their gaze away whenever they wish. As soon as Sauron sees them in the palantír, however, he can control what they see and shows them only glimpses of his great power.

² The Seeing Stones, brought to Middle Earth by the Númenorians. They can be used to communicate with other possessors of a palantír. At the time of *The Lord of the Rings* there are three palantírs left; one in Isengard with Saruman, one in Minas Tirith with Denethor and one in Barad-dûr with Sauron.

Once Saruman and Denethor have seen this, they are caught and desire only to see more, still believing that they are in full control of their own wills.

This false knowledge of Sauron's power causes them both to believe that he is invincible and while Denethor falls into despair and eventually madness, Saruman, who also has a deep knowledge of the Ring and has come to desire it, decides to join Sauron. He does so with the intention of pretending to help him look for the Ring, while planning to take it for himself, thinking in his pride that he stands a chance against Sauron alone.

This is an example of how evil, as mentioned above, often uses knowledge to ensnare the innocent. *The Silmarillion* especially is full of examples of evil characters offering knowledge to gain the confidence of Elves, Dwarves and Men, in order to spread despair and mistrust amongst them.

There are many similarities between Tolkien's view of power and of knowledge. As with power, knowledge works for evil when in the wrong hands. Knowledge on its own is empty, it is only when it is put to use that it becomes good or evil. It can be used to deceive and betray, as Sauron does, and it can lead to delusions and despair, as with Saruman and Denethor. Only when it is used with humility and self-awareness can it be turned into wisdom and used for good. Imagination is also an important part of the wisdom of the good, Auden claims: "Sauron cannot imagine that anyone who knows what the Ring can accomplish [...] will not use it, let alone destroy it" and that is the mistake which allows Frodo and Sam to enter Mordor and get as far as Mount Doom before they are discovered (57). Gandalf, Elrond and the others, however, can imagine what Sauron might think, and that is why they dare to take the risk of sending the Ring into Mordor at all (Auden 57).

Greed

While the previous discussions have made rather clear the cause of the falls of Saruman, Isildur and Boromir, Sméagol remains a bit of a mystery. It is true that he enjoys the knowledge that he can obtain by using the Ring, but that is only what secures the Ring's hold of him, not what made him want it in the first place. Unlike the others, Sméagol is not a powerful wizard, a king or a mighty warrior, and he does not have any great goal which he hopes to achieve by using the Ring. He is just a simple hobbit on a fishing trip with a friend and he takes the Ring for no other reason than "because the gold looked so bright and beautiful" (FotR 70). This is something as simple as an act of greed, and in Sméagol, who is not involved in the elaborate plans or politics of the other characters, we see the essence of the danger of the Ring: it makes people greedy. They do not only want the Ring, they want it for *themselves*, not to be used or touched by anyone else. As we have learned, wanting something all to oneself, be it power or knowledge or glory, leads to evil.

As Curry, author of *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*, claims, Tolkien was a pluralist. "Lord of the Rings is a multicultural and multiracial book. Against that pluralism we have Mordor, which is *one* Ring. One Ring to rule them all" (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Creator of Middle-earth*). The theme of community can be found throughout the book. It is not only Frodo who is the hero, but the entire *fellowship*. Without Sam, Frodo would never have made it to Mordor. If Aragorn had not lead the army of the West to the Black Gates, Frodo and Sam would never have been able to pass through Mordor. If Merry and Pippin had not come to Fangorn and woken the Ents, Saruman would not have been defeated, and so it goes on. In the end the overthrowing of evil is not accomplished by one heroic deed, but by the combined forces of every race and country fighting on the side of good. By those combined powers, evil, which always strives for absolute power and sole dominion, will always be conquered.

Conclusion

From the above discussions we can draw the conclusion that to avoid falling into evil in Tolkien's universe we have to be humble, but still be confident enough not to fall into despair. We have to be powerful enough to fight the forces of evil, but not let the power corrupt us. We have to know our enemy to some extent, but we have to know ourselves even better. It is, to use Galadriel's simile, like standing on the edge of a knife; if we stray but a little to either side, we will fall (FotR 464). This is something that can happen to anyone. Even hobbits, the ideal image of innocence and goodness, can sometimes succumb to greed. As Shippey says, Tolkien's image of evil is both convincing and uncomfortable, because "what it says is; it could be you [who falls], and in fact [...] under the wrong circumstances it will be you" (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Creator of Middle-earth*).

Even the 'bad guys', who are seen in the book as being nothing but evil, have at one point been the victims of evil temptation and fallen for it. As Davison shows, evil cannot create in Tolkien's world, only corrupt that which already exists (107-108). The nazgûl, the embodiment of the evil of the Ring, were once good Men whom Sauron seduced with Rings of Power. The orcs, wretched and evil creatures who cannot even keep peace amongst themselves, were elves once, transformed into slaves by Melkor. Even Sauron himself was good before he came to serve Melkor, and Melkor, as we know, was good in the beginning, but was corrupted by the greatness of his own power.

So if one just looks a little closer at *The Lord of the Rings*, it is plain to see that the allegations of a simplified characterisation of good and evil are unfounded. It is true, as Elrond says, that nothing is evil in the beginning and behind every evil character or creature there is a fall as complex as the ones discussed in this essay.

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