



The Problem of Greed in JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

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Throughout what is referred to as the *legendarium* of JRR Tolkien, the underlying value of objects and deeds is a prominent motif. Beginning with *The Hobbit* in 1937 and continuing through *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), Tolkien constructs a narrative that builds on the struggles of class warfare and the problems wealth brings, both intellectual and financial, with a key focus on the problems of greed. In this paper, I aim to outline Tolkien's philosophy on how greed corrupts many of the protagonists in the Middle-earth he created, as well as highlight his insertion of the problems of the real world.

The moral dilemma of greed in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is a prominent theme, driving the narrative forward as characters become bogged down in the ethical and moral choices and consequences of their actions. It is plain to see, for example, that the Dwarves in *The Hobbit* are not driven by a desire for freedom from tyranny, or to create a utilitarian utopia, but are rather driven almost completely by greed, to recover the hoard of treasure guarded by the great dragon Smaug in the depths of the Lonely Mountain. The dragon made many enemies in his own lust and greed, which would ultimately lead to his destruction at the hands of Bard the Bowman on the edges of the lake town of Esgaroth (*The Hobbit* 228-9).

Here we see how Tolkien criticizes those that lust after wealth and are completely selfish and driven by greed: to hoard vast wealth and to keep it all to one's self is one of the greatest vices an individual can be guilty of, with the eventual end proving that no good will come from it.

The same can be said of the Dwarves themselves, many of whom do not learn from the destruction of the dragon. Thorin Oakenshield, for example, leader of the Dwarven band that is the focus of *The Hobbit*, falls after the Battle of the Five Armies; he was driven solely by a lust for wealth, letting nothing stand in his way. His greed got the better of him even before the group left Bag End. However, only when it is too late does Thorin see the folly in pursuing wealth for greedy purposes: he overcomes death due to avarice with an act of great humility, repenting his greed. To Bilbo – the most humble, selfless, least greed-driven of the band – he says, “There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West... If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world” (290), finally admitting that happiness is where there is an absence of greed and materialism.

Another of the party of Dwarves falls victim to avarice and greed also, but this comes later:

Balin, cousin to Gimli of the Fellowship of the Ring, returns to the stronghold of Moria in search of the vast wealth it is rumored to contain, despite warnings of a shapeless, nameless fear that later is revealed to be a Balrog (fire-demon), also known as Durin's Bane (the reason Moria was left deserted in the first place). The wealth of Moria, as we learn from Gandalf during the Fellowship's passage through its vast network, comes from a substance called Mithril; as he describes it, Tolkien creates a mythos round the substance that would draw anyone towards it:

Mithril! All folk desired it. It could be beaten like copper, and polished like glass; and the Dwarves could make of it a metal, light and yet harder than tempered steel. Its beauty was like to that of common silver, but the beauty of *mithril* did not tarnish or grow dim. (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 309; emphasis in original)

Such material would be worth risking everything for, surely. However, Tolkien's criticism of greed and self-interest here illustrate how concerned he was with the way things were changing in the world around him. He had a dislike for giant machines and industrial works, favoring nature and simpler things – hence his decision to become a horse-breaker during the First World War. Working with animals and nature was a passion for him, mainly because they were free, not just in terms of being able to roam at will, but because they had no desire for material possessions. Greed does not exist in the natural world, and Tolkien shows this in the depiction of the Elves in particular. Many of the Elves we meet in his more popular novels live in woods: Legolas is from the realm of Mirkwood; Galadriel and the lord Celeborn live in Lothlorien, where, instead of demolishing the wood to make space to live, they utilize the trees themselves, showing no desire to master nature; conversely, they wish to draw from its vast

wealth and live symbiotically with nature. Greed does not seem to exist in the Elves of Tolkien's narrative, perhaps illustrating his philosophy on how we should live in the real world.

Throughout *The Hobbit*, greed drives the Dwarves onward, while the only thing driving poor Bilbo Baggins on is the chance of a comfortable bed and the possibility of a hearty meal; his desires are much less substantial than his companions because he has never known what greed or desire for power are. He was always – as are all hobbits according to Tolkien – quite content to live within one's means, for as Bilbo himself says, "it is no sin to live a simple life." Little did he suspect that he would become the catalyst for the re-emergence of the greatest evil in the narrative – and almost the personification of evil in Tolkien's work – the Dark Lord Sauron. In the deepest roots of the Misty Mountains, Bilbo stumbles upon a ring; it is unusual for something like that to be in such a desolate and remote place, but curiosity makes him keep it. Not greed, though, as Bilbo has never known greed. Hobbits are a very simple folk, keeping themselves within their own lands, "[possessing] the art of disappearing swiftly and silently, when large folk whom they do not wish to meet come blundering by" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 1), living an agrarian (almost Amish-like) existence. There are no grand palaces or lordly halls – the most lavish dwelling of the hobbits is an extended series of tunnels and rooms excavated by the Brandybucks on the borders of Buckland. Tolkien's hobbits are simple, peaceful, content with their lot, and (most importantly) generous; for example, when it comes to a hobbit's birthday, it is the one who's birthday it is who gives presents to their party guests, not receiving any! Greed, therefore, is not something one would associate with hobbits... unless they are Sackville-Bagginses (Bilbo's wealthy and greedy cousins).

Within the simple existence of hobbits, Tolkien presents for the reader a view of how life could be if we were to shed ourselves of greed and desire for power. Despite his experiences in the First World War, and the gathering clouds of war again across Europe, Tolkien's view of humanity never changed very much. He did everything he could to show his readers that living within one's own means, and not for the pursuit of wealth and power, is for the greater benefit of all. It is arguable that Tolkien constructed this idea of peace within the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* to be a tale of the most humble overcoming the most arrogant of forces. Hobbits help to bring down Sauron (and Saruman, not to mention myriad other evil creatures), despite being little more than farmers, brewers, cooks, and carpenters, who "do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools" (1). Services are often repaid in kind, rather than by exchanging currency. Wealth, then, does not feature as a driving force for victory, but rather the power of individual spirit and conviction; the ability to work together in a classless, non-hierarchical society allows the hobbits to live freely.

As for the Ring, the driving force for greed in much of Tolkien's work, while it represents a source of wealth due to its construction (presumably of gold), its magical qualities are what make it valuable. Its ability to make the Bearer invisible is a trick Bilbo employs to great effect – escaping Gollum (*The Hobbit* 78-84), making it in to Smaug's keep and stealing the Arkenstone (217), leaving the Shire at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (30; 35). However, as with so many things, the power comes at a heavy price: the Bearer becomes tired, living much longer than normal, a shadow of their former self (after a while, almost literally, if one were to keep using it). But in passing the

Ring freely down to Frodo, Bilbo shows that even the greatest item of wealth and temptation can be given up. Critics have argued that this is simply due to Bilbo not knowing exactly what he possessed, and that if he had known, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* would be completely different novels. Of course they would, but in choosing the route of having Bilbo give up the Ring of his own free will, Tolkien presents a character who is the embodiment of hope for the world, someone that is not overcome by greed and lust for great wealth and dominance. Bilbo is content with his lot; he has overcome the allure of great power, unlike many of the Ring's other unfortunate Bearers.

Let's now consider wealth as it appears in *The Hobbit's* sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*. As with *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* has greed as its driving narrative force, but in varying degrees. Instead of having a single band greedily pursuing riches (the Dwarves ironically being cast as the 'good' guys), *The Lord of the Rings* contains many interwoven plots revolving around the Ring's recovery, destruction, and power. This illustrates Tolkien's concerns for a world that is becoming ill at ease with itself, fighting against itself more and more, with people using others to get to the top. The Fellowship itself sets out from Rivendell on a quest to eliminate the one thing that has brought them all together: the Ring of Sauron. The One Ring. It is interesting that Tolkien describes it as 'the One', since there are many other rings of power, but obviously this one "rules them all":

Three Rings for the Elven-Kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne
In the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,

One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness
bind them
In the land of Mordor where the shadows lie.
(*Letters* 153)

That is not all, though: it is also the single most important object in the world at that time, the fate of the world depends upon what happens to this Ring. The one thing standing between freedom and tyranny is the destruction of the object that will provide the most wealth to its owner, for as Tolkien himself says, the only way Sauron could be truly defeated is if “some other seized [the One Ring] and became possessed of it” (*ibid.*). The ‘shadow’ cast by the Ring extends even beyond its physical being, consuming the minds of those who desire the wealth of knowledge and riches that absolute power can bring about. The Gondorian Steward, Denethor, is one of the few characters in *The Lord of the Rings* who is completely obsessed with retaining (and gaining more) power, since he is but a Steward, “a man of [great] lineage, though he is not called king,” as Gandalf tells Pippin before they meet him (*The Return of the King* 737). Gandalf also tells the young hobbit to “leave quiet the matter of Frodo’s errand,” because Denethor desires the Ring of power for himself (hence the reason for his son, Boromir, to be at the Council of Elrond). Denethor believes that the Ring will give him the power and strength to defeat the forces of Mordor, against which he has been defending his realm (and those of all Middle-earth) for many years, and will allow him to be crowned King. His greed and desire to be supreme ruler make him dysfunctional and foolhardy (though there are other factors that are not directly pertinent to this discussion – those of Denethor’s use of the *palantír*, his knowledge of Aragorn’s lineage, etc.), but they nevertheless have a direct affect on the battle for Middle-earth. Denethor’s greed, then, is an example of Tolkien’s dislike for anyone that desires – or,

indeed, acquires – wealth through selfish and misguided means.

Imagine in our world, if we had to make a choice: continue suffering under the relentless oppression of those in power, stripping away our financial stability and sense of what is morally right; or, stand up to tyranny, destroy that which they covet, and live as though we depended on each other, not because we had to but because we want to. This was, in a nutshell, Tolkien’s criticism of a power-hungry, greedy society that had the potential to lose control and destroy itself, both financially and physically. He was always careful, however, not to get caught up in the world of politics – at least, not directly. When asked if his literary work was an allegory of the 20th century by Sir Milton Waldman in 1951, Tolkien stated that he disliked allegory, both “conscious and intentional”, arguing instead that his works were simply discussions of “Fall, Morality and the Machine” (*Letters* 145). The science fiction author, Isaac Asimov, did, however, consider *The Lord of the Rings* to be an allegory, this time in terms of the Ring being a symbol of modern technology, of industrial revolution and so on; the driving force behind the narrative is also the driving force that is moving the world forward.

With regard to the Ring as an heirloom, a symbol of power and wealth, its effects can be seen most clearly in the characters of the Nazgul, the Ring-Wraiths. Early in Sauron’s quest for power, under the disguise of the Ainur Annatar, he created a series of rings, bestowing them upon the peoples of Middle-earth freely: within the rings was the power to govern each race (though it is not clear how they would be governed). The Dwarves had seven rings, but did not use them to their full might: they were simply heirlooms, nothing more. The Elves made three rings, but Annatar/Sauron did not touch them, so his greed and evil did not taint them. Men, however, used

the nine rings they were given, and all was brought to darkness. The great Kings of Men fell to their greed and the lust for power that the rings brought, falling under the influence of the Ruling Ring. At the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*, they are unleashed, sent to track down their Master's ring, forever bound to it through fear, desire and greed.

Saruman, head of the White Council and traitor to Middle-earth, also desires to possess the Ring for himself, feigning friendship and loyalty to Sauron in order to gain power: the arguable 'bargain with the devil' of Tolkien's narrative. In doing so, his greed becomes his strength as well as his weakness. Of course, should Saruman come in to possession of the One Ring he would not turn it over to Sauron, but use it himself to usurp Sauron as Dark Lord and ruler of Middle-earth; as with all those who have desired the Ring for themselves through the long history of the Ring, it will prove to be his downfall. Saruman joins the likes of Isildur, Gollum, Boromir, even (as I believe) Frodo Baggins, the so-called 'hero' of *The Lord of the Rings* (but that is subject to only brief discussion later). In a world where companionship, trust, pride and dignity are the ruling forces of morality, greed and material wealth hold no place in the social order of things, and all those that pursue these negative morals almost always come to an end, with very rare instances of repentance. A lot can be learned from characters such as Thorin and Boromir, as both openly repent of their lust for power and wealth, albeit on their deathbeds; Isildur (King of Gondor and the one who removed the Ring from Sauron at the end of the Second Age – approximately 3000 years before Frodo came to possess it) kept the Ring for himself, instead of destroying it, thus ending all evil: Tolkien's criticism of mankind's greed and wish to dominate is personified in Isildur, as he thinks only of himself and what material wealth

can do for him, not how it can better the world around him.

As for Gollum/Sméagol, his story is fairly obvious to any that have read the books or seen Peter Jackson's adaptation: he has been consumed by greed completely, shunning all forms of companionship save that of his "Precious", the Ring that (arguably) converses with him, telling him what to do, how to be, where to go. After losing the Ring, Gollum becomes enraged, a burning desire envelops him to find his one treasured possession at all costs:

[Gollum] had lost it: lost his prey [Bilbo], and lost, too, the only thing he ever cared for, his precious... "Thief, thief, thief! Baggins! We hates it, we hates it, we hates it forever!" (*The Hobbit* 82)

He lifted his head again, blinked at the moon, and quickly shut his eyes. "We hates it," he hissed. "Nassty [sic], nassty shivery light it is – sss – it spies on us, precious – it hurts our eyes."

... "Where iss [sic] it, where iss it: my Precious, my Precious? It's our's, it is, and we wants it. The thieves, the thieves, the filthy little thieves." (*The Two Towers* 599)

Clearly, Gollum has been completely consumed by greed over the "Precious," the One Ring, and when he loses it, he thinks Bilbo has tricked him, and so curses the names of Baggins and Hobbits forever for stealing the only thing he ever cared for. Indeed, it is ironic that Gollum curses Bilbo for 'stealing' the Ring, when all Bilbo did was 'find' it; Gollum, on the other hand, is the real thief in the long history of the Ring, as Gandalf explained to Frodo:

"Give us that, Déagol, my love," said Sméagol, over his friend's shoulder.

"Why?" said Déagol.

“Because it’s my birthday, my love, and I wants it, said Sméagol.

“I don’t care... I found this, and I’m going to keep it.”

“Oh, are you indeed, my love,” said Sméagol; and he caught Déagol by the throat and strangled him, because the gold looked so bright and beautiful. Then he put the ring on his finger.” (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 52)

The Ring has a power that only a few can withstand, so it is understandable that a lowly, common creature like Sméagol would fall prey to its controlling influences. Sméagol, of course, does not immediately know what he has come in to possession of, but he quickly learns that he can use its magical properties to his advantage, making himself extremely powerful in relative terms: he sneaks in and out of rooms, gathers information that he uses to blackmail people, all thanks to the invisibility the Ring bestows on its bearer when worn. This pursuit of material wealth ultimately brings about his (timely) downfall in the fires of Mount Doom, along with the fate of our ‘hero’, Frodo Baggins.

Frodo is seen by many as the ultimate hero in *The Lord of the Rings*: he remains loyal to his companions (mostly), he never deviates from his appointed task, and he shows great kindness and humility towards Gollum/Sméagol, mainly because he sees that he will become that piteous creature should he fail to destroy the Ring. However, I believe that Frodo becomes a villain of the narrative, due to the important point that he ultimately fails to destroy the Ring; not only that, but he keeps it for himself, declaring “I have come... But I will not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (*The Return of the King* 924). As Isildur did 3000 years before, Frodo had overcome great mortal peril, but succumbed to the lust and greed

the Ring instilled in its possessor. Some may argue that Tolkien is implying that one cannot sometimes help but fall to desire and greed, and this may be true, but to have him come so far only to fail utterly is a problematic issue for me, and one that requires more discussion than time permits here. I simply mention it here to illustrate the problems greed can cause if given enough time to develop: had Frodo been able to destroy the Ring sooner (or, even, without going all the way to Mordor, where its powers are magnified), he would perhaps have been successful and saved himself as well as Middle-earth. Instead, he does not succeed in destroying the Ring, having claimed it for his own – he simply loses it, and it ‘accidentally’ falls into the fires of Orodruin with Gollum. Frodo is unable to live in a world where he cannot have the Ring – his ‘Precious’ – and so he has to eventually leave; he craves what he cannot have, and cannot live in peace without it: this, arguably, is an appropriate definition of greed.

The real world is, of course, filled with instances of people doing things for the right reasons, only to end up failing at what they do, but it is the wealth of knowledge that one gathers on the way and the conviction of one’s actions that proves to be the true wealth of a person, in Tolkien’s estimation at least. Possessions, wealth, greed, they all come and go, but the one thing that remains constant in all of us is honesty. If we are to get through the troubled times we live in today, we must take a page out of Tolkien’s works and become more like his kind, heroic, honest, charming hobbits. We need to live in a world where we take care of one another, not compete against everyone all the time; we need to help each other through crises, just like the great Samwise Gamgee; we need to consider all paths, choosing the one that will cause the least harm to all, like Gandalf; and above all, we must start to alleviate ourselves of a quest for wealth, power and greed, for otherwise we, too, will fall

in to the Mountain of Doom: as a society we will become Gollum, shunning all that is good in the world and become utterly selfish. This is not the world Tolkien created, nor is it the one we should continue to live in.



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