

Rings of Power: Symbolism of Power and Corruption in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2024

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:131:375294>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-03-24**



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DIPLOMSKI RAD

Rings of Power: Symbolism of Power and Corruption in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and
The Silmarillion

(Smjer: engleska književnost i kultura)

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Ak. godina: 2023./2024.

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INTRODUCTION

J. R. R. Tolkien is today well-known for his fantasy works, mostly *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*. These works have found their way into the mainstream culture and remain relevant and read more than fifty years after the author's death. However, Tolkien was also a noted scholar, mainly of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic corpora. From these and many other sources he drew his inspiration for writing his fantasy works. One of the more compelling motifs Tolkien created is the One Ring, an object that permeates every aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* and serves as the central plot device. The goal of this paper is to investigate the apparent dichotomy between the One Ring's promises of power and the corruption it brings, how it is used as both help and hinderance, while also revealing the struggles between good and evil in characters that come into contact with it, which, as will be argued, lays bare the complex struggles in the human psyche.

For this purpose, the thesis is organized into four chapters. The first chapter provides a survey into the life of J. R. R. Tolkien, his academic works, and briefly explains how Tolkien rejected the often-claimed notions that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory of the Second World War. The second chapter explores several myths, legends, and tales which are relevant to and most likely inspired Tolkien's concept of the Rings of Power. Furthermore, the third chapter offers a short introduction into the origins of the Rings of Power in Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, their intended purpose, and history. Lastly, the fourth chapter will analyze in detail many of the One Ring's most prominent aspects, how they influence the characters and the story, what they symbolize, and how the One Ring represents the struggle between good and evil that is inherent to Tolkien's works. In short, the work will analyze the One Ring and its psychological influence on the minds that come into contact with it.

TOLKIEN – A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa (then part of the British Empire). After his father passed away, the four-year-old Tolkien moved to Birmingham, England, together with his mother and younger brother. A devout Catholic, Tolkien ended up as a ward of a Catholic priest after his mother's death in 1904. According to Wayne G. Hammond, around 1908 Tolkien fell in love with another orphan, Edith Bratt, who would inspire his fictional character Lúthien Tinúviel, but his guardian disapproved of this relationship and not until his 21st birthday could Tolkien and Edith marry each other (Hammond). He studied at Exeter College, Oxford, and also served in World War I, most prominently in the Battle of the Somme, and after the war ended, he was briefly on the staff of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Hammond). As a professor at Leeds and later at Oxford he taught English language and literature with special emphasis on Old and Middle English, producing several academic publications, the most notable of which are *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1953) and a lecture on *Beowulf* published later as “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” (1936). He also completed a translation of *Beowulf* in 1926 that was later published posthumously (Hammond). Before any of his other works, he privately started working on writing an “elaborate series of fantasy tales” which eventually became known as *The Silmarillion*, “partly to provide a setting in which ‘Elvish’ languages he had invented could exist” and “from a desire to tell stories, influenced by a love of myths and legends” (Hammond). Because he also wanted to entertain his four children, Tolkien would devise lively and humorous stories, the most prominent of which was *The Hobbit* which he eventually published in 1937. The book became so popular that Tolkien's publisher asked for a sequel. It took Tolkien seventeen years to write *The Lord of the Rings*, often cited as his masterpiece. Hammond states that “a few elements from *The Hobbit* were carried over, in particular a magic ring, now revealed

to be the One Ring, which must be destroyed before it can be used by the terrible Dark Lord, Sauron, to rule the world” (Hammond). *The Lord of the Rings* quickly became popular, despite its initial mixed reviews which ranged from the ecstatic to the damning (Doughan). According to David Doughan, through a curious set of circumstances the books had by 1968 “almost become the Bible of the ‘Alternative Society’” (Doughan). Tolkien soon became very popular, about which Tolkien, as Doughan asserts, had mixed feelings:

Fans were causing increasing problems; both those who came to gawp at his house and those, especially from California who telephoned at 7 p.m. (their time - 3.a.m. his), to demand to know whether Frodo had succeeded or failed in the Quest, what was the preterit of Quenyan *lanta-*, or whether or not Balrogs had wings. So he changed addresses, his telephone number went ex-directory, and eventually he and Edith moved to Bournemouth...(Doughan)

As Doughan further states, Tolkien was first and foremost a philologist, “which also translated into the creation of his own languages like Sindarin or Quenya, ‘purely for fun’” (Doughan). Since he was a professor of Old and Middle English, Tolkien was exceptionally versed in Anglo-Saxon literature, and his rare scholarly publications were often “extremely influential, most notably his lecture ‘*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*’” (Doughan). Also, as Doughan further asserts, Tolkien’s “seemingly almost throwaway comments have sometimes helped to transform the understanding of a particular field – for example, in his essay on ‘English and Welsh’, with its explanation of the origins of the term ‘Welsh’ and its references to phonoaesthetics” (Doughan).

Lastly, although it was theorized that the entire story of *The Lord of the Rings* is some sort of an allegory of the Second World War, Tolkien himself has denied that. In his Foreword to the

Second Edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien stated that some chapters had been written long before “the foreshadow of 1939 had yet become a threat of inevitable disaster” (*The Lord of the Rings*¹ xxv). He went on to describe how the story might have looked like if he had indeed been inspired by the war:

...then certainly the Ring would have been seized and used against Sauron; he would not have been annihilated but enslaved, and Barad-dûr would not have been destroyed but occupied. Saruman, failing to get possession of the Ring, would in the confusion and treacheries of the time have found in Mordor the missing links in his own researches into Ring-lore, and before long he would have made a Great Ring of his own with which to challenge the self-styled Ruler of Middle-Earth. In that conflict both sides would have held hobbits in hatred and contempt: they would not long have survived even as slaves. (xxv-xxvi)

Even though the story cannot be the allegory of the Second World War, it does serve as a tribute to the spirit of the ordinary soldier of the First World War. As Stratford Caldecott writes, most of Tolkien’s male friends had been killed within a few short years, and he was greatly inspired by the heroism of the “ordinary English soldier” and that heroism found its way into *The Lord of the Rings*, into the figures of the hobbits and especially Samwise Gamgee (Caldecott 22).

In addition to drawing his inspiration from his war experience, Anglo-Saxon literature, and language, Tolkien was also greatly influenced by other northern European myths, particularly those of Nordic and Germanic origin. From them he drew particular inspiration regarding the nature of the One Ring. The following chapter will look more closely at some of the myths and real historical

¹ Hereinafter as *LotR*

events where a given ring has played a prominent role, and also examine how these rings functioned and what were their most prominent characteristics.

RINGS IN MYTHOLOGIES AND HISTORY

According to David Day, a noted Tolkien scholar, Tolkien once “described how the discovery of the One Ring in an Orc cavern by Bilbo Baggins was as much a surprise for him as it was to his Hobbit hero, knowing, at the time, as little of its history as Bilbo Baggins did. Tolkien had previously explained how it grew from a simple vehicle of plot in *The Hobbit* into the central image of his epic tale *The Lord of the Rings*” (10). As a linguist, Tolkien studied, among other things, Sanskrit, Gothic, Old Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Russian, Old Norse, Old Saxon, Old and Middle High German, and Old English (Carpenter 66). This meant that he also learned and studied their respective mythologies, and many of those mythologies happened to feature stories known as “ring quest tales” which have a ring or a symbol of a ring at the center. Day claims that “such tales are an ancient form of storytelling that are thought to date back to a time before the pyramids of Egypt were built or the walls of Babylon were raised” (Day 10). Besides these tales, rings play a prominent role throughout human history.

Some of these tales from history may have inspired Tolkien. Day argues that the “War of the Ring”, which is featured prominently in *The Lord of the Rings*, actually has some historical precedents. He mentions an example from the era of the Roman Republic, when, according to Pliny the Elder, “a quarrel over the possession of a ring erupted between the famous demagogue Drusus and the chief senator, Caepio. The dispute led directly to a blood feud and the outbreak of the Social War (91 BCE-88 BCE), which resulted in the collapse and ruin of the Republic of Rome”

(Day 16). Though this conflict did destabilize the Republic, it was not the main cause for the fall of the Republic. Nevertheless, the idea that a ring may have played a pivotal part in it is interesting. Another tale from history where a ring was involved was in the 16th-century Netherlands. There lived a physician – later known as the Sorcerer of Courtray – who was accused of obtaining his powers from a ring that he wore on his hand and that he “consulted” constantly. Allegedly, the ring had “a demon enclosed in it, to whom it behooved him to speak every five days” (Day 18). The man was eventually tried, proscribed for sorcery, and executed, and the “demon” ring was later “layd [sic] on an anvil, and, with an iron hammer beaten in pieces” in full view of the citizens (Day 18-19). Though this was definitely not a major conflict of any kind, it nevertheless resulted in the death of a valued citizen. Another story can be found in the 14th-century England, where Alice Perrers, a mistress of Edward III., King of England, was accused of swaying the king “by use of magic rings” (Day 19). It was claimed that, through the power of these rings, Alice managed to alienate Edward from his queen, involved him in illicit sexual frenzies, and more. A trial was held, and it was discovered that she had a master who was a magician and who “used rings such as Moses used to make – rings of oblivion and memory – so that the King was unable to act any day without consulting his false predictions” (Day 19). As Day goes further, “because of the King’s intervention, it proved impossible to bring down the full and fatal force of the law of the time onto the accused. However, Alice Perrers was banished from court and noble society forever after” (20). A ring also allegedly played a crucial role in Byzantine history, through the use of so-called dactylomancy or “ring divination”, which was commonly practiced throughout much of human history (Day 20).

There are several key “aspects” that Tolkien’s One Ring possesses, and these can also be found – alone or in tandem – in various mythologies and stories. One of these is in the Völsunga saga, an epic tale revolving around the heroes of Völsunga and Nibelung dynasties.

As Day explains, “the fates of the Völsung and Nibelung dynasties were bound up with that of a magical ring called Andvarinaut. This was the magical ring that once belonged to Andvari the Dwarf” (64). According to Day, “the tale of Andvarinaut has become the archetypal ring legend, and is primarily concerned with the life and death of the greatest of all Norse heroes, Sigurd the Dragonslayer (64). Eventually Sigurd claims the ring, and “laden with the Ring of Andvari on his hand, Sigurd the Dragonslayer goes out of that burned wasteland in search of more adventures. He seeks and achieves further honor, for he makes war on all the kings and princes who murdered his father and his kinsmen, and slays them every one” (Day 82). The story clearly indicates that “the mere sight of the ring was a torment” (Day 75) and later in the saga Atli the Hun’s experience with the ring is described as follows: “He has heard much of the huge treasure that Sigurd the Dragonslayer once won, and that the Nibelungs have taken this hoard by a foul murder. Each time Gudrun walks before Atli, her gold ring glints and Atli finds that he can think of nothing else but that golden treasure” (Day 89). This concept of the “curse of the Ring-bearer” was adopted by Tolkien and features more prominently in his work, though in *The Lord of the Rings* there is only one Ring-bearer, Frodo, whose relationship, and moral qualms with the One Ring will be analyzed later.

Another aspect of the One Ring is its ability to make the wearer invisible, and invisibility itself can be tied to power and corruption, as de Armas asserts: “Since ancient times, the desire for invisibility has been coupled with the fear that such a power in the hands of a human being may

corrupt, may be an impediment to enlightenment or may be used for evil ends” (de Armas 121).

De Armas also states that:

although Tolkien’s models are mostly Medieval and derived from Germanic mythologies, it may well be that the motif of invisibility with its concomitant desire for power stems from Plato. In *The Republic*, Glaucon [Plato’s brother] argues that justice is not natural to humanity and is practiced because generally, men and women “have not the power to be unjust”. As a test of humanity’s desire to disregard justice in their desire for power, Glaucon proposes to give them “complete liberty of action”, something that becomes possible through invisibility. To prove his point, he tells the tale of Gyges. (de Armas 122)

Glaucon then tells the story of Gyges, a shepherd, who finds a ring inside a great chasm. He figured out that the ring, after putting it on, granted him invisibility at will. He used this power to ill ends: “by the opportunity of which Ring he ravished the Queen, and slew the King his Master, and killed whomsoever he thought stood in his way and in these villainies no body [sic] could see him, and at length by the benefit of this Ring he became King of Lydia” (Agrippa 95). As Stratford Caldecott states, Plato used the story and the ring to ask whether “we act justly only because if we don’t we may be found out? The truly just man is one who doesn’t care what people think, he only wants to do the right thing. He will not be corrupted even by such a ring” (Caldecott 132).

Beside the myths and legends of northern Europe, Tolkien also drew some inspiration from his Catholic faith. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this is most clearly visible in the date when Frodo and the Fellowship set out from Rivendell – December 25th, the date when Christ, according to Judeo-Christian tradition, was born. Thus, there exists a parallel between Christ and Frodo, and as the journey progresses Frodo’s mission increasingly resembles Christ’s journey to the cross (Caldecott

50). Concerning the ring, it too can be found in Judeo-Christian legends, most prominently with King Solomon, whom a ring gave the power to control the spirits and demons (Day 211). As regards invisibility, this trait can be tied to both Christ and Satan. Christ is often considered by Christians to be invisible because he is supposed to be omnipresent and omniscient. With Satan, on the other hand, invisibility can be tied to deception, temptation, and trickery, all of which are his hallmarks. Christ and Satan both represent diametrically opposite moral values, and this struggle between goodness and divine power against temptation and corruption is also evident in many characters that come into contact with the One Ring in Tolkien's work, as putting on the One Ring and becoming invisible is tantamount to committing sin. As Caldecott argues:

To commit sin, in Christian terms, is to turn oneself away from one's fellow man and to destroy all possibility of real communion and communication with others. It is especially to turn away from God. It is therefore highly appropriate that one who makes himself invisible with the Ring has made himself untouchable by the light, which passes straight through him. (Caldecott 138)

In conclusion, most of the above-mentioned myths and tales showcase the concept of the ring in a negative light. This is also true in Tolkien's works that are analyzed here, though therein the One Ring is constructed as much more nuanced and complex and can be used as both a tool with a wish to do good and as a tool of evil and domination, as will be discussed. Nevertheless, the exploration of these myths, tales, and theological beliefs offers a valuable insight into Tolkien's ability to be inspired by these stories but also to combine their many aspects into a singular object that in many ways transcends the ones it was inspired by, and finally weave it into a "novel that has renewed, invigorated and finally reinvented the ring quest for the 20th and 21st centuries" (Day 12).

THE RINGS OF POWER IN TOLKIEN'S WORKS

At the thematic center of *The Lord of the Rings* are altogether twenty rings of varying importance to the story. Tolkien does not go into great detail explaining how they were forged, but he does provide some important information. He states that they were forged in the realm of Eregion by Elven Smith with the guidance of Sauron, who was disguised into a fair form so that the Elves would not recognize him:

It was in Eregion that the counsels of Sauron were most gladly received, for in that land the Noldor desired ever to increase the skill and subtlety of their works [...] Therefore they hearkened to Sauron, and they learned of him many things, for his knowledge was great [...] and they took thought, and they made Rings of Power. But Sauron guided their labours, and he was aware of all they did; for his desire was to set a bond upon the Elves and to bring them under his vigilance. (*The Silmarillion* 126)

Tolkien explains that the Elven smiths of Eregion formed a brotherhood called Gwaith-i-Mirdain, led by Celebrimbor. Sauron's grasp on the Mirdain became so powerful that he even convinced them to revolt against Galadriel and Celeborn and seize power in Eregion. When later Celebrimbor learned of Sauron's treachery and his secret forging of the One Ring, Celebrimbor revolted at last against Sauron, and an all-out war broke out (*Unfinished Tales* 237-238).

Sauron achieved his goal despite being discovered by Celebrimbor and the other Elves. The twenty Rings of Power that were forged are named in the story by Tolkien's narrator in the following well-known poem:

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. (The Fellowship 66)

The poem is recited at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and it divides the Rings of Power into several groups. The first group is the three Elven rings, which differ from the others in several key aspects. While all the other rings were designed with the intent to corrupt and ensnare their wearer to Sauron's will, the Three had a different purpose which, as described in *The Silmarillion*, was the ability "to ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world" (126). They were not forged with Sauron's help, but by Celebrimbor himself and no one else, and Sauron's hand had never touched them and sullied them; but since they were made using Sauron's craft, they were still bound and subjected to the One (*The Silmarillion* 126). Because of their power and beauty, Sauron desired them more than any others (*The Silmarillion* 126). Lastly, as mentioned in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, the Three did not make their wearers invisible, unlike the others (129). The three Elven rings were also the only Rings of Power, except for the One Ring, that had proper names. The first one is Nenyà, also known as the Ring of Adamant, and in *The Fellowship of the Ring* it is discovered that it belongs to Elven lady Galadriel (475). In *The Unfinished Tales* the story reveals that the ring has the great power to strengthen her realm and

bring it to great prosperity, but that it also has the unfortunate effect of increasing her latent desire for the Sea and to return to the West, and therefore she is never truly happy in Middle-Earth as long as she keeps the ring (237). The second ring is known as Vilya, described as “a ring of gold with a great blue stone”, and as the “mightiest of the Three” (*LotR* 1346). According to the story in *The Silmarillion*, it was given first to Gil-galad, the high-king of the Elves, who later bestowed it to Elrond whom he appointed to be his vice-regent in Eriador (142). The ring is also called the Ring of Air and it gave Elrond the power to preserve his realm of Imladris from decay, making it a safe haven for elves and other free peoples of Middle-Earth (142). The third ring, known as Narya, or the Ring of Fire, was first given to Círdan The Shipwright, one of the greatest elves of the Second and Third ages (*The Silmarillion* 151). When Gandalf and the other *Istari* came to Middle-Earth some thousand years into the Third age to combat the rising threat of Sauron, Círdan welcomed them in the Gray Havens (*LotR* 1423). Having a great gift of foresight, and “seeing further and deeper than any other in Middle-Earth” (*LotR* 1424), he recognized the role Gandalf would play in the battles ahead, and gave Narya to him: “Take this ring, Master, for your labours will be heavy, but it will support you in the weariness that you have taken upon yourself. For this is the Ring of Fire, and with it you may rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill” (*LotR* 1424). Gandalf never openly wears the ring, and he presumably uses its powers to inspire hope in people around him, thus giving them enough morale and strength to combat Sauron’s evils. He is only seen openly wearing it at the very end of *The Lord of the Rings*: “As he turned and came towards them Frodo saw that Gandalf now wore openly on his hand the Third Ring, Narya the Great, and the stone upon it was red as fire” (1348). This is important because it at last symbolizes the diminishing power of the Three rings – because the One Ring has been destroyed, they no longer hold the power they once had and thus Gandalf is free to wear it openly.

The second group of rings consisted of seven rings which were gifted by Sauron to the seven Dwarf-kings (*LotR* 67). But, as the narrator states, the dwarves proved more stubborn than Sauron anticipated:

The Dwarves indeed proved tough and hard to tame; they ill endure the domination of others, and the thoughts of their hearts are hard to fathom, nor can they be turned to shadows. They used their rings only for the getting of wealth; but wrath and an overmastering greed of gold were kindled in their hearts, of which evil enough after came to the profit of Sauron. (*The Silmarillion* 126)

By their very nature the Dwarves are resistant to some of the Rings' effects, but the Rings nevertheless enhance their already innate greed and lust for gold. It is even explained that the Rings gave them the power to multiply the gold they mined (*LotR* 1413) and helped the Dwarves create the fabled Seven Hoards of the Dwarf-kings (*The Silmarillion* 126). But the hoards attracted dragons that eventually consumed four of the rings, while the remaining three are reclaimed by Sauron (*LotR* 67).

The last group was made out of Nine rings which were given by Sauron to great lords of Men:

Those who used the Nine Rings became mighty in their day, kings, sorcerers, and warriors of old. They obtained glory and great wealth, yet it turned to their undoing. They had, as it seemed, unending life, yet life became unendurable to them. They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men; but too often they beheld only the phantoms and delusions of Sauron. And one by one, sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the

good or evil of their wills in the beginning, they fell under the thralldom of the ring that they bore and under the domination of the One, which was Sauron's. (*The Silmarillion* 126)

Completely under Sauron's will, they became invisible except to the wearer of the One Ring, and they became known as the Nazgûl or Ringwraiths, "the Enemy's most terrible servants" (*The Silmarillion* 126).

All the aforementioned groups of rings are tied to and under the domination of the One Ring and its bearer. Sauron intended to control all of them with the One but, as explained, he only ever got the full control over the Nine, because the Dwarves who wore the Seven were too stubborn, and the Elves had removed the Three from their fingers and did not wear them as long as Sauron had ownership of the One Ring. Sauron eventually loses the One Ring, and at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* the ring is in possession of no man, elf, or dwarf, but of a hobbit. The following part of the thesis will explore how the One Ring influences its wearer and other characters who are tested and corrupted by the ring's allure and promises and it will be further analyzed how the One Ring's power and corruption appears in several different forms.

ONE RING – THE POWER OF THE NAME

Being a noted linguist, Tolkien put great emphasis on the importance of language in his works. In her paper "The Name of the Ring: Or, There and Back Again", Janet Bernnan Croft postulates that Tolkien's legendarium follows a certain cyclical pattern which goes through several distinct phases that the scholar appropriates from Northorp Frye: *metaphoric* phase, *metonymic* phase, *demotic* phase, and the *ricorso* (81). In the *metaphoric* phase, "subject and object are linked by a common power or energy", and there is "potential magic in any use of words" (Frye 6).

According to Owen Barfield, “the farther back language as a whole is traced, the more poetical and animated its sources appear, until at last it seems to dissolve into a kind of mist of myth” (qtd in Croft 82). This is true in Tolkien’s novels. In *The Silmarillion*, the world was created through a great song. Eru Illuvatar simply proclaims: “Let these things Be!” (5). As Croft states, this can be easily expressed with the phrase “this is that”, as the “world is performed by language” (82). The entire world is created through the use of language, and many major events are also set through language. This story of genesis through a superior being uttering things and life into existence bears parallels to the Bible where the Gospel of John begins with the following words: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. Furthermore, Croft states that “shortly after the Valar ‘entered into’ the newly-created Eä, Morgoth, who was then still known as Melkor, announced to them ‘This shall be my own kingdom; and I name it unto myself!’” (84). Croft further argues that this linguistic act of naming is deeply metaphoric, “for as Morgoth names Arda to himself, it becomes both a physical extension of his own power, and inseparably a part of himself” (84). Croft also draws attention to “how pure and unadorned the act is – no spells, no complex formulae, simply ‘I name it unto myself.’ Melkor says it is his, and so it is” (84). Croft continues:

Tolkien explains that Morgoth “attempted to identify himself with Arda” in order to control the “physical matter of the world”. “Melkor ‘incarnated’ himself (as Morgoth) permanently” – and thus incarnated himself as part of the physical world, becoming identical with it through a metaphorically powerful speech act. (85)

To further prove the point, Croft cites an excerpt from Tolkien’s *Morgoth’s Ring*:

Thus, outside the Blessed Realm, all “matter” was likely to have a “Melkor ingredient”, and those who had bodies [...] had as it were a tendency, small or great, towards Melkor:

they were none of them wholly free of him in their incarnate form [...] in this way Melkor lost (or exchanged, or transmuted) the greater part of his original “angelic” powers, of mind and spirit, while gaining a terrible grip upon the physical world. [...] Morgoth’s vast power was *disseminated*. (qtd in Croft 85)

Croft finally states that “this identification with matter is why Morgoth must be combatted physically, and why his power can never be completely eradicated while the matter of Arda exists (85).

Next, Frye states that “in the *metonymic* phase, ‘abstraction becomes possible’ as subject and object are becoming more consistently separated” (7). “‘This is put for that’: language becomes a ‘verbal imitation of a reality beyond itself’ rather than a generator of reality” (Croft 83). “It becomes prose, typified by dialectic and logic and analogy: if this, then that”, Croft argues (83). According to Barfield, “man was not yet felt, either physically or psychically, to be isolated from his surroundings in the way that he is today” (Barfield qtd in Croft 83). In this phase, Croft concludes, Sauron created the One Ring (86). As Croft asserts, “Sauron’s Ring, in contrast to Morgoth’s, represents a concentration of power in an object separate from, and significantly, *separable* from, its creator” (86). Thus, “the Ring can be lost, taken, or stolen; it can be separated from its creator, its power does not depend on its creator, though its power is at its greatest when he wields it, and in fact he ‘is wedded to a physical reality’ if he is to be able to use its power (Croft 86). Instead of “I name it unto myself”, it becomes “One Ring to rule them all” (Croft 86). This turns the One Ring into Sauron’s greatest weapon, but also his greatest weakness, because it can fall into the hands of his enemies and be used against him. Croft further argues that, while Morgoth seeps a part of himself into all matter, even the living things, in the *metaphorical* phase of Tolkien’s legendarium, Sauron does no such thing – his orcs and other beings he controls are free to think

about life without his rule over them. And unlike Morgoth, who represents “sheer nihilism” and who hates anything that is not himself, Sauron is perfectly happy with the existence of the world, as long as he can do whatever he wants to with it: “The metonymic separation of object and subject is evident here as well: Sauron wants subjects, other beings under his control, and in order to dominate them, they must be separate from him” (Croft 87). Morgoth can thus be seen as a metaphor for pure evil, whereas Sauron is merely an extension of himself. If Morgoth is Lucifer, the angel who lost his grace with God and was banished from Paradise, then Sauron is merely one of his many minions comparable to Lucifer’s angelic minions such as Beelzebub, Moloch and the others. Though Sauron is by far the strongest of Morgoth’s servants.

The *demotic* phase can be described as descriptive and common-like. It is the speech most often used today, and “its essence lies in how close it hews to reality and truth” (Croft 88). In Tolkien, *demotic* speech is visible in the character of Saruman:

Saruman’s speech habits particularly embody a failure to negotiate this gap between illusions and demotic reality. Ensnared by his obsession with a being of metonymic power, in a Girardian case of “imitative desire” he tries to replicate Sauron’s success in “putting this for that”. But demotic language, the political language of “compromise and calculation” has no magic in it. (Croft 89)

Furthermore, Croft states that

Saruman also reveals a parallel between Frye’s demotic phase of language and ironic phase of the story; while in origin a semi-divine character who should be at home in myth, and embodied in a physical form that should at least place him at the romance level, his inability to deal appropriately with the demotic and its built-in preference for true words makes him

“inferior in power or intelligence”, at least to his own conception of himself, and thus places him firmly at the ironic level. [...] Saruman claims the title of Ring-maker, in imitation of Sauron and out of jealousy over Gandalf’s possession of Narya; though Gandalf sees a ring on Saruman’s finger, we do not learn its name or its powers, find out how or when it was forged, or see it in action. It seems powerless. [...] He fails even at self-naming; he may call himself “Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many colors!”, but no one else ever does because names have little relation to the truth, and in the end he does not even understand the truth of the nick-name “Sharkey” given to him by his band of ruffians. His desire for power is petty, driven by resentment and revenge. (Croft 89)

The One Ring becomes that symbol of his desires, and it ultimately is the main reason why he abandons the good side and joins Sauron. He is jealous of Gandalf who is supposed to be his inferior, and this only places him closer to the demotic level than to the metaphoric level where he should belong. His inability to make even a seemingly useful ring further showcases that.

As Croft further maintains, Gollum also presents a problematic relationship with demotic speech: “in addition to Gollum/ Smeagol doubling of name and personality, does his catch-phrase “my precious” refer to himself or the Ring?” (90). In the original version of *The Hobbit* (1937), Croft argues that “Gollum used the phrase ‘my precious’ to refer only to himself” (90). However, in the second, revised edition from 1951 in which Gollum’s role is substantially altered, “the phrase might be taken to refer to the ring, as is often the case in *The Lord of the Rings*” (Croft 90). Croft then claims that this seeming ambiguity would make sense at a *metaphoric* or *metonymic* level in order to emphasize just how intertwined Gollum and the One Ring have become over the centuries of being inseparable, but when Gollum finally loses the Ring, it becomes separate from him and his later use of the phrase “my precious” refers nearly exclusively to the Ring, “the thing evoking

the word” (90). Croft explains that “Gollum is evil at its most trifling level: hardly even really evil, simply scrabbling for survival by any means with no concern for morality” (90). Because of this he cannot even think at a *metonymic* level and try to conceive of using the One Ring to control others, and “the Ring, while precious to him personally, is more importantly a device he can use to turn himself invisible, to make *himself* uncontrollable by being unwitnessed and unnamed” (Croft 90). Much like with Sauron, the One Ring is Gollum’s greatest weakness and greatest strength. For centuries he lived a relatively peaceful and solitary life while he bore the One Ring and kept it to himself. But as soon as he loses it, he too becomes lost and is fueled by the sole desire of reuniting with his precious: he is “forced into the *demotic*, into a clear separation of subject and object, by his loss, but he longs to return to the identification of himself with his precious Ring” (Croft 90). This reunification with the One Ring would not only fulfill his sole desire but also move him out of the *demotic*, because he would be physically and metaphorically reunited with the Ring.

Concerning the hobbits, it is evident that they yearn for an “age of poetry and magic and elves – a yearning for the language of the metaphoric phase”, but they are nevertheless “native to the *demotic* age, and about as solidly grounded in reality as their hairy feet on the earth can make them” (Croft 90). Croft explains that Bilbo does not even try to name or understand the One Ring, and because of that the ring can be considered firmly separate from his being (90). When it comes to Frodo and Sam, they too remain firmly separate from the One Ring all the way to the slopes of Mount Doom where “the categories begin to slip” (Croft 91). When Frodo makes the decision to claim the Ring for his own, he finally puts it on his finger and thus literally erases the separation of subject and object (91). He declares: “The Ring is mine!” (*LotR* 1237), echoing Morgoth’s earlier phrase of naming the world unto himself and spreading his being and power into matter. As

Croft argues, “similarly, Frodo and the Ring are merging into one thing” (91). But Gollum intervenes and severs the connection, quickly returning Frodo to his former self. According to Croft, this implies the following:

Frodo has returned finally to a demotic, clearly demarcated relationship with the object. “Precious, precious, precious!” Gollum cries out – but does he mean himself or the Ring as he topples into the fire, reunited both physically and metaphorically? (Croft 91-92)

Even though Gollum stopped Frodo from merging with the One Ring, Gollum at last merges with the ring, both physically and metaphorically. Thus, when he cries out “Precious, precious, precious!”, it may no longer matter if he is referring to himself or the ring, because they are reunited and are one at the very end.

Claiming the One Ring for themselves means that the person will gradually become completely influenced by the ring which ultimately means they will become corrupted and dominated by it. The hobbits may prove resilient at first, but even Frodo is not able to escape its allure and promises of power on the slopes of Mount Doom. According to Richard P. Bullock, “the Ring shows its possession of Bilbo and Gollum when they refer to it as ‘my precious’”, and when Frodo proclaims that the Ring is his on the slopes of Mount Doom, it is an example of showing “that whoever thinks they possess the Ring is indeed possessed by it” (29). Without the Ring, “Frodo is himself again, his burden gone, and Sam, the most hobbitish of hobbits, in firm practicality leads him from the conflagration and sighs over the imaginary future telling of their tale” (Croft 92). Croft further states that

Sam, while appreciating the metaphors of the great tales, remains demotic, and these heroes’ losses of their bodily integrity, of finger and hand and their associated powers of

making and doing, to metaphorically powerful objects means nothing to him. Frodo, without the Ring's power to make a *ricorso* so potentially dangerous, sails into the metaphor of the West with Bilbo. (92)

The *ricorso* is, according to Croft, “a return to the beginning, a restarting of the cycle” (83). Frye postulates that, with “new realization that matter is an illusion of energy”, we begin to lose that “clear separation of subject and object” (14). Croft also asserts that “Tolkien refers to *Recovery* as an essential function of the fairy-story, as the “regaining of a clear view” of objects as “things apart from ourselves” (84). But, as Croft further states, Tolkien “is not referring here to using language in a demotic sense to scientifically describe things that are totally separate from our own bodies and inner life, but to draw us back to deeper, metaphorical meanings at the heart of these things, where language once again creates phenomena” (84). Thus, the *ricorso* can also be explained as “the re-returning from *demotic* to *metaphoric* language” (84). This danger of a *ricorso* exists in Tolkien's story, but it is balanced by the hobbits, as Croft maintains:

The “Morgoth ingredient” that makes all of Arda Morgoth's Ring, then, is a danger ever present in language itself and the temptation of an unwary *ricorso* to the magical, metaphoric stage – balanced, however, in *The Lord of the Rings* by the ability of the Hobbits to yearn for and love the metaphoric level of language while keeping their demotic feet firmly on the ground. (92)

ONE RING – THE POWER OF CORRUPTION

Power plays an important role in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Tolkien tries to demonstrate that “power is the true weapon only of Evil, and that even in the hands of Good it eventually must

result in corruption and suffering” (qtd in Levitin 11). Therefore, the consequence of power is also one of the themes present in Tolkien’s novels. According to Alexis Levitin, Tolkien “associates Power, and all its concomitants, with his wicked characters, but, for the most part, he denies them to his heroes”, thus the five wizards who came from the Far West were “messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force or fear” (11-12). Nevertheless, “it is clear that good people may be powerful without destroying their goodness”, and characters such as “Gandalf, Elrond, Glorfindel, Galadriel, and Aragorn are all quite powerful, yet manage to avoid falling to evil ways” (Levitin 12). Levitin furthermore states that Sauron, though his power is the greatest of its kind in Middle-Earth, has several inherent weaknesses. He simply cannot imagine that someone’s attitude towards power would be different than his, and therefore he could not even comprehend that someone would be willing to destroy the Ring (Levitin 12). At the Council of Elrond, Gandalf uses this to the Council’s advantage:

Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy! For he [Sauron] is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this, we shall put him out of reckoning. (*LotR* 351)

Sauron’s inability to imagine how it is to be good proves to be his ultimate doom. He puts too much faith in the One Ring and its corrupting powers, while simultaneously underestimating the goodness in the hearts of his enemies, which leads to him pulling out the short end. This is evident when Frodo puts on the One Ring at the Cracks of Doom:

The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. Then his wrath blazed in consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him. For he knew his deadly peril and the thread upon which his doom now hung. (*LotR* 1237)

Levitin claims that another weakness of Evil is its inability to command solidarity in its forces. Sauron's orcs serve him out of fear, not loyalty, and would not even serve him for any other reason beyond fear, "unless it were the enticement of great reward" (Levitin 13). Even Saruman, whom Sauron considers to be under his dominion, wants the One Ring for himself. As Levitin states, Saruman is a traitor to both the good cause and to the evil one, because "he wants Power, incarnate in the Ring, for himself alone" (Levitin 13).

Characters such as Saruman, Boromir, and Denethor all want the Ring because "the Ring plainly is a symbol of Power" (Levitin 13). Therefore, it can give its wearer unlimited power, but the wearer is bound to "lose his freedom and become a slave to that Power" and "even the best intentions in the world will eventually be smothered by the Ring's insidious influence upon its user" (Levitin 13). Indeed, the descriptions of characters in the novel can allude to their desire for the One Ring, even before they themselves reveal this desire:

He [Saruman] is great among the Wise. He is the chief of my order and the head of the Council. His knowledge is deep, but his pride has grown with it, and he takes ill any meddling. The lore of the Elven-rings, great and small, is his province. He has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets of their making... (*LotR* 63)

Some characters are wise enough to understand that by using the Ring with the intention to do good they will nevertheless be corrupted by it. When Frodo offers him the One Ring, Gandalf sternly refuses: “With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. [...] Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself” (*LotR* 80-81). Later in the story, when Frodo offers Galadriel the One Ring, she is greatly tempted but ultimately, she “refuses the temptation to use Force, recognizing that the Ruling Ring is an Evil Power that must dominate, compel, subjugate, and destroy” (Levitin 12). Levitin also ties the One Ring’s allure to Christianity, claiming that the Ring “attacks its victim through Pride, the primary sin of Christian theology” (13). Boromir and Denethor are both drawn to the power of the Ring because they are shackled by the visions of the greatness of their kingdom and of themselves, and they are not wise enough like Gandalf to see past the Ring’s allure. When Boromir tries to take the Ring from Frodo, the darkness within him comes to light, and Gandalf later tells Denethor that Boromir will have fallen to the Ring and kept it for his own. Both Boromir and Denethor, and at one point Saruman, used to be good and noble and only wanted to bring glory to their people, but the very notion of the One Ring’s power turned them into unrecognizable versions of themselves. As previously stated, their purposes may have been noble, but the Ring would sooner or later lead them astray. Therefore, using the Ring is tantamount to being used by it.

The One Ring’s allure and temptation scales with the inherent power of the being that carries it. Therefore, the Hobbits are the perfect Ring-bearers because they possess no inherent powers or ambitions, and “they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favorite haunt” (*LotR* 1). Tolkien’s narrator describes them as good-natured folk:

Their faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them). They were hospitable and delighted in parties, and in presents, which they gave away freely and eagerly accepted. (*LotR 2*)

The hobbits are therefore Tolkien's idealistic version of a pre-industrial society, and as such they are the heroes that the Quest for the Ring needs. This ideal Hobbit hero can be seen in the character of Samwise Gamgee. According to Sarah Shahan, "Sam must rescue Frodo from the Orcs that steal him away, bravely putting his fears aside to save the spider-stung Ring-bearer. And even when Sam carries the Ring himself, feeling its weight and now able to understand completely the burden of his master, he is able to ward off temptation" (22). After using the Ring to make himself invisible and sneak closer to Frodo, his reason and will are tempted, and great fantasies arise in his mind, fantasies of him becoming the Hero of the Age, a mighty gardener, and the whole of Mordor being turned into one giant garden:

It is revealed to the reader that Sam, in arguably one of his darkest moments, *wants* to be a hero. The Ring, acting in this scene as a powerful, dangerous, "psychic amplifier", shows a most secretive, selfish desire – to be renowned for his work, not just geographically within his home of the Shire, but 'of the Age', suggesting that *all* would know of his deeds for centuries. But why is this desire only surfacing now, with the push and prod of the Ring? Sam's "fantasies" of heroism are set within the dark experience of the Ring tempting him. This suggests that Sam might have been harbouring this desire all along, but more importantly, that he may have been stifling it, and the lure of the Ring was the only thing strong enough to bring it into full recognition. (Shahan 22)

Nevertheless, because of his love and loyalty to Frodo he resists the Ring's promises of turning him into a hero, and it ultimately leads to him becoming one:

In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command.
(LotR 1178)

He does not harbor any illusions towards himself or his abilities, which cannot be said for many others whom the Ring tries to tempt. He also sees the effect the Ring has on his master Frodo, and he knows how burdensome it is to wear the Ring. It is this disillusionment that makes him a hero and eventually save Middle-Earth. In this sense he proves to be wiser and nobler than many others who usually look down on him. He is inherently resistant to the effects that the Ring only amplified, and this, coupled with his love for Frodo, results in the Ring having no power over him. In other words, he does not want power and therefore the Ring cannot assert its power over him.

According to Charles W. Nelson, "his [Sam's] concern for Frodo, his willingness to cook for him, care for him, and even die for him because Sam is of lesser importance in the fulfillment of the quest also underscore his degree of humility" (57). Furthermore, when Sam is forced to carry the ring himself, "it is this same humility and realistic appraisal of his own strengths and weaknesses which allow Sam to successfully resist the temptation of the ring" (Nelson 57). As Jan Wojcik also states, Sam is "the humblest in origin of the Fellowship, and has really only one virtue: love that gives birth to all his heroism" (17). Even though throughout the story he almost constantly

expresses his longing for home, “he continually grows in character, always voicing a desire for the peace of home, but always responding heroically to the conditions that keep him from the comfort and security he so thoroughly desires” (Rosenberg 11). Furthermore, “throughout these adventures, Frodo’s own dependence upon Sam suggests even more fully the stature and humanity of Sam’s character” (Rosenberg 11). However, Sam, despite all his qualities, is not perfect, as Rosenberg argues:

Sam’s character, then, is a perhaps not-so-strange combination of village gossip, humble servant, able warrior, knowledgeable scout, faithful friend, merciful enemy, and hard-nosed skeptic who can be incorrect in judgement, as he is in his early mistrust of Strider. Lacking the nobility of Aragorn, the grandeur of the Elves, the harsh wisdom of Gandalf, the missionary zeal of Frodo, and the other utopian virtues of the more idealized members of the novel’s community (many of whom leave Middle Earth for the fantasy realm beyond the Sea), Sam remains behind, in the real world of Middle Earth. Here he marries, prospers, and finally grows old, helping all the while to bring the world, or at least his small part of it in the Shire, successfully into the Age of Men – men whose virtues and flaws are so reflected in Sam’s character. (11)

Despite these flaws and imperfections – or perhaps because of them – Sam is the ideal hobbit hero who plays a crucial role in the destruction of the One Ring and who serves as a perfect companion to the ring-bearer Frodo.

Though Sam and Frodo are the most resistant to the Ring’s corruptive influence, there is only one character in *The Lord of the Rings* who appears to be completely unaffected by the Ring and its allure. When the four Hobbits meet Tom Bombadil in the early stages of their journey,

Frodo tells him all about the Ring, and Tom desires to see it. Frodo offers it to him without hesitation, to his own astonishment:

Then Tom put the Ring round the end of his little finger and held it up to the candle-light. For a moment the Hobbits noticed nothing strange about this. Then they gasped. There was no sign of Tom disappearing! Tom laughed again, and then he spun the ring in the air – and it vanished with a flash. Frodo gave a cry – and Tom leaned forward and handed it back to him with a smile. (*LotR* 174)

In a short time span, several curious incidents, according to Larry Burriss, happen with the Ring. First, Frodo tells Tom all about the Ring, even though he is discouraged by Gandalf to do so. Second, he willingly gives the Ring to Tom. Third, Tom Bombadil puts on the Ring and does not disappear, then he spins the Ring in the air and it disappears then reappears. And lastly, Frodo puts on the Ring and becomes invisible to the other Hobbits, but Tom Bombadil can still clearly see him (*LotR* 174). Furthermore, according to John Flood, Tom Bombadil is an unusual character even for this story because he is a nature spirit who represents “the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside and as such the normal rules of human psychology do not apply to him” (13). Tom Bombadil has no desires or ambitions whatsoever and because of this the Ring cannot influence him, and the Ring seemingly has no influence on Frodo or the other Hobbits either when they are in Tom’s house. But because Tom is so disconnected from normal human psychology, “he cannot be given the Ring as he is so unworldly that he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away” (Flood 13). According to Gene Hargrove, “Tom’s role was to show that there were things beyond and unconcerned with domination and control”, and that “in terms of the moral traits that most fascinated Tolkien both as an author and as a scholar, Tom Bombadil is Tolkien’s moral ideal” (24). Furthermore, as explained by Suzanne Jacobs, “Tom Bombadil can be seen as an attempt to

include a figure which has a similar function to that of Pan, but who has a less explicit connection to the narrative tradition of myth” (104). With the character of Tom Bombadil Tolkien can also “be seen to hark back to the medieval riddle tradition by putting not only his characters, but also his audience in a position which leaves them frustrated and dissatisfied with, or at least intrigued by, a highly unusual speaker with a list of cryptic epithets” (Jacobs 105). Jacobs further asserts that, “like the riddles, Tom prompts his audience to ponder his nature, and, in so doing, the nature of the divine as it is represented in Middle-earth”, and that “he remains an ‘enigma’ in both the older and the newer sense of the word” (105). Keith Masson also maintains that “The Ring has no power over him because he has no desire for the kind of power it offers – cannot even understand why others would want it” and that “he is secure in the power of joy, and the power of darkness can get no hold in his mind” (8). Therefore, there can be many possible interpretations of Tom Bombadil’s character, but within the story he is so disconnected from the rest of the characters that it would be a great danger to leave the One Ring in his custody.

ONE RING – THE POWER OF INVISIBILITY

Even though the One Ring’s corruptive influence on the characters is not always visible or evident, there is one aspect of the Ring that is clearly and explicitly shown throughout the story, and that is its ability to turn its bearer invisible. But even though it may seem that the bearer is invisible, it is not strictly so. As Gandalf says: “You were in gravest peril while you wore the Ring, for then you were half in the wraith-world yourself, and they might have seized you. You could see them, and they could see you” (*LotR* 289). He tells this to Frodo after Frodo narrowly escapes death at Weathertop. The wearer of the One Ring is indeed invisible, but he becomes visible to the creatures in the Wraith-world which includes the Nine Ringwraiths. This realm is not explained in

detail, but Gandalf states the following: “They [Elves] do not fear the Ringwraiths, for those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live at once in both worlds, and against both the Seen and the Unseen they have great power” (*LotR* 290). Furthermore, as stated by Håkan Arvidsson, “the powerful Elves are not invisible when they wear their rings” and “instead, they are able, as is Tom Bombadil, to make the rings invisible” (50).

Much like Plato’s ring of invisibility, which in *The Republic* Gyges used to “seduce the queen, and with her help conspired against the king and slew him, and took the kingdom” (Plato 52), the One Ring’s power to grant its wearer invisibility can be tied to power itself. But unlike Gyges in Plato’s story, who uses the ring’s powers of invisibility to gain himself power, fame, and wealth, the One Ring’s aspect of granting invisibility is more nuanced and complex. According to de Armas, “while the dragon epitomizes greed, the ring is that treasure that transforms human beings into dragons of greed, for they must possess it so as to wield unlimited power” (122). In Plato’s story, Gyges has “complete liberty and impunity through the acquirement of a supernatural power” (de Armas 124). But Tolkien’s Ring does not give that to its wearer. In fact, it can be argued that the One Ring *wants* to be used, which in most cases leads to a disastrous end for its wearer. It can also be argued that “within the framework of Middle-Earth the One Ring appears to have both sapience and sentience” (Burriss 194). Burriss explains Sauron’s relationship with the One Ring as symbiotic, “both mutualistic and parasitic at the same time” (194). While Sauron pours much of his power into the Ring, he does not have full control over it, but the Ring, having no capability of independent movement, requires Sauron to move from one place to another (Burriss 194). Even though the Ring was created to give Sauron dominion over Middle-Earth, it apparently does nothing to assist Sauron in the Battle of Dagorlad, according to Burriss (194). Burriss also questions whether the Ring is refusing the call for which it has been created. Nevertheless, Sauron

wearing the Ring during the battle enables Isildur to use the hilt-shard of Narsil to cut the Ruling Ring from Sauron's hand, thus leading to Sauron's vanquishment and defeat (*The Silmarillion* 129). Isildur keeps the Ring for himself and decides not to destroy it, which already showcases the Ring's powerful grasp on Isildur's will. When later Isildur journeys to reclaim his kingdom, he is ambushed by the Orcs and puts on the Ring to escape:

Isildur himself escaped by means of the Ring, for when he wore it he was invisible to all eyes; but the Orcs hunted him by scent and slot, until he came to the River and plunged in. There the Ring betrayed him and avenged its maker, for it slipped from his finger as he swam, and it was lost in the water. Then the Orcs saw him as he laboured in the stream, and they shot him with many arrows, and that was his end. (*The Silmarillion* 129).

According to Burriss, the One Ring “actively betrays Isildur and deliberately acts to avenge its maker and master”, and thus “the One Ring demonstrates sentience and sapience” (195). The Ring remains in the river for over two thousand years, until it is found by Déagol. But his friend Sméagol sees the Ring and wants it for himself, and therefore he murders him. Burriss states that the murder probably has nothing to do with the Ring's influence over Sméagol, because “Tolkien merely points out that Sméagol wants the Ring, Déagol refuses to give it to him and is then murdered”, and “Tolkien makes no implication of the Ring influencing Sméagol” (196). However, the Ring most likely did already influence Déagol, and therefore Déagol's stubborn refusal to part with it results in his death. Furthermore, regardless of whether the Ring has free will or not, it remains with Sméagol, now known as Gollum, for several centuries. It corrupts Gollum, turning him into an unrecognizable version of himself, both physically and mentally (*LotR* 70). When Bilbo Baggins comes to the Misty Mountains where Gollum is hiding, the Ring seemingly

abandons Gollum, and Bilbo accidentally finds it in the dark cavern. This, according to Burriss, raises several questions:

Gollum loses the Ring (or does the Ring of Power deliberately betray Gollum by hiding from him?), and Bilbo “accidentally” finds it in the dark (how much of a coincidence is it that in the entire cave system, in the dark, Bilbo reaches out and puts his hand directly on the Ring? Did the Ring want to be found?) Recall, the only living beings capable of leaving the cave system and moving the Ring along on its journey are the goblins (not likely to leave the caverns), Gollum (not likely to leave and later give up the Ring), and Bilbo. (196)

Though there is no clear answer to these questions, it appears that the One Ring *wants* to abandon Gollum and it *wants* to be found by Bilbo. Burriss goes on to explain that the Ring probably had no influence over Bilbo in the very beginning, and though its influence over him grows over time, he is able to resist it, much like the fellow hobbits that would wear it after him. However, Bilbo does have a certain level of obsession with it:

Sometimes I have felt it was like an eye looking at me. And I am always wanting to put it on and disappear, don't you know; or wondering if it is safe, and pulling it out just to make sure. I tried locking it up, but I found I couldn't rest without it in my pocket. I don't know why. And I don't seem to be able to make up my mind. (*LotR* 45)

Despite this seeming influence, Bilbo willingly gives up the Ring and leaves it for Frodo, who is not as fortunate with the Ring as Bilbo. Frodo uses it several times throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, but almost every time he uses it to become invisible, it turns out to be to his detriment. When he uses it at Weathertop to escape the Ringwraiths, he inadvertently enters the Wraith-world and sees the Ringwraiths' true forms. This leads to the Witch-king of Angmar stabbing him with a

Morgul blade which almost leads to Frodo's death. Every subsequent time Frodo uses the Ring to escape danger – most notably to escape Boromir who wants to take the Ring from him – it exhausts him physically and emotionally (*LotR* 523). Furthermore, the closer Sam and Frodo come to Mordor, the more dangerous it becomes to use the Ring, because even though it would grant them invisibility, it would alert Sauron to their presence. The Ring weighs down Frodo, and the closer he is to Mordor where the Ring was forged, the stronger the weight becomes. Furthermore, it can also be argued that every time Frodo uses the Ring to become invisible, he subsequently becomes more influenced by the Ring. As Arvidsson notes, “as long as one possesses the ring, one is preserved from without, but at the same time corruption works from the inside” (50). This view is also asserted by Mason Harris, who claims that “its power to make the person who wears it invisible – a property only of Sauron's ‘One Ring’ – seems symbolically related to its ability to erode the self” (50). This inevitably leads to Frodo succumbing to the One Ring at the very end of his journey:

The One ring was fashioned by the evil Sauron, imparting it not only with the greatest of power, but also insinuating corruption within it, so that all that use it would inevitably begin to veer away from virtue. Interestingly, the Ring's most obvious gift is that of invisibility, a power that Frodo utilizes at that crucial moment when he is about to save Middle Earth. However, he uses it in order to surrender to the Ring's allure, in order to surrender to its corruption. (de Armas 121)

At the Crack of Doom, the place where the One Ring was forged by Sauron, the Ring's power is at its most potent, and no being alive would be able to resist its allure. Frodo brought the One Ring further than any other human or hobbit could, but even he falls into its temptation in the end. In his letter to Eileen Elgar in September 1963, Tolkien himself states that he does not think

that Frodo's failure was a moral one, because "at the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum – impossible, I should have said, for any one [sic] to resist" (Tolkien 1).

Invisibility can, therefore, be directly tied to power, as exemplified by the One Ring's relationship with Frodo, and the act of choosing to become invisible can be seen as an act of surrendering to the grasps and promises of power.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, J. R. R. Tolkien's One Ring successfully draws upon many mythological aspects of a magic ring and combines them into a singular object. Its very name, its corruptive abilities, and its ability to grant invisibility all combine to make the One Ring the ultimate symbol of power in *The Lord of the Rings*, and to an extent in *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*. Because of its complex nature the One Ring has an equally complex relationship with every one of its wearers and even with characters who have never even seen it. The Ring's allure influences even the noblest of these characters, many of which succumb to it. Moreover, many of the characters want to use the Ring to do good with it, but through its inherent evil corruption the Ring twists them into distorted versions of themselves. Inevitably, it even leads the noble and resilient Frodo astray at the very end of his journey. Even Sauron, the maker of the Ring who pours much of his power into it, ultimately loses because he and everything he built has become too dependent on the One Ring and its survival. The characters that fare best – like Sam and Bilbo – are the ones who do not desire power in the first place, because that way the Ring has no way to exploit and corrupt them. With this Tolkien gives a valuable lesson and a warning to his readers – power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes the power and influence of the One Ring in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. It looks at some other prominent examples of magic rings throughout history and mythology which have influenced and inspired Tolkien, and it also explores the various ways the One Ring influences the characters of the story. The power of the one Ring is discussed through three main aspects – name, corruption, and invisibility. These aspects synergize to make the One Ring Sauron's greatest weapon and greatest weakness. Almost every character that comes into contact with the One Ring is greatly tempted by it, which causes conflicts both in the character's minds and on the battlefields.

Key Words: *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, J. R. R. Tolkien, the One Ring, power, corruption, invisibility, influence