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**A Study of the Theology and Moral Structure of  
J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings***

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## **Abstract**

Since its first publishing in 1954, *The Lord of the Rings* has been read by millions, and it has become the subject of many scholarly studies. However, one of its most famous characters, Gollum, has only been marginally examined. The aim of this essay is to counteract precisely that and examine how Gollum exists within, and in his own way embodies, the theological and moral system of *The Lord of the Rings*. In order to study Gollum, I have identified four key aspects of Christian theology and morality in these novels: binary moral values, free will, temptation and redemption. The first section of the analysis has a wide focus, using these four aspects to examine the moral structure of Middle-earth. This serves as the context in which Gollum exists and can be studied. In the second section of the analysis, he is, in turn, discussed in relation to the four aspects presented in the first section, with the addition of kinship as a fifth aspect. I reach the conclusion that despite Gollum's extreme behaviour, he fits seamlessly into the Christian moral system of Middle-earth, struggling with the same issues as the other characters, although it takes on another shape in his story. It is also made clear that such a reading of Gollum opens up for an interpretation of him being a symbol of the general moral struggle found in the other characters of the story.

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# 1. Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, consisting of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*, has been the object of study for a multitude of literary scholars. Whereas the classic methods, such as historical criticism, gender criticism and eco criticism, have been applied to *The Lord of the Rings* by scholars like Tom Shippey and Robert Eaglestone, the angle which has attracted the most scholars is undoubtedly the mythopoeic or archetypal one (Eaglestone, "Introduction", 3). The mythic and religious themes of *The Lord of the Rings* have proved to be an inexhaustible source of curiosity and inspiration for these. More specifically, the connections between the works of Tolkien and the Christian faith have almost become a field of its own. One way to explain the scholarly interest in the connections between the works of Tolkien and the Christian faith is Tolkien's own faith and interest in religion. Christianity undoubtedly had a strong effect on his writings. In a letter to Father Robert Murray, Tolkien wrote, "[t]he Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (Carpenter and Tolkien, 172). The Christian element in the story has inspired some Christian scholars to write with a confessional approach, examining parts of the story which might be of spiritual significance for them personally. Ralph C. Wood, in his "theological meditation on *The Lord of the Rings*" (ix), claims that "the perennial appeal of Tolkien's great novel lies in this bright vision of hope, and thus in the moral and religious strength that it yields" (75). Most scholars have, however, written about the connections between Christianity and *The Lord of the Rings* from a purely academic standpoint. While some scholars examine the themes endemic to Catholicism in *The Lord of the Rings*, most Christian themes in the story are not exclusive to Catholicism but instead are held as theological truths by most churches. This particular study does not investigate any of the specifically Catholic themes and will thus make use of the term 'Christian' when describing theological points and themes in the story.

Considering the complexity and originality of the character Gollum, one might assume that there should be an excess of writing about him. This is not the case, however. Gollum is certainly present in most critical assessments of *The Lord of the Rings*, but sadly, few critics dive into the depths of him. It is not uncommon to use Gollum as a point of reference while writing about the trials and tribulations of Frodo. Nonetheless, Gollum himself certainly deserves to be seriously investigated.

Among the major themes of *The Lord of the Rings*, like Tolkien's view on evil and Christological imagery, morality is not an uncommon topic of study. Stratford Caldecott claims that the moral structure of Middle-earth "comes straight out of the New Testament" (17), and Kevin Aldrich argues that it is a story "which contains and out of which shines certain religious and moral truths" (86). Tolkien's personal Christian view on morality is undoubtedly visible in the story through the moral struggles of the characters. The moral complexity that comes to life in the story is apparently not visible to all readers though. Tom Shippey claims that *The Lord of the Rings* has been accused of being populated by flat characters who lack "a proper sense of inner conflict", that "good and evil are presented as absolutes" and that the story does not "mirror 'an adult experience of the world'" (*Road*, 123). Based on Shippey's response to this criticism, it is evident that what these unnamed critics mean by 'adult' has to do with the presentation of Middle-earth. That these opinions might arise is understandable. Fantasy is, after all, not known to cloak itself in realism. There are elves, dwarves and even dragons present in Middle-earth and concerning the portrayal of the characters, it would not be surprising to find that many readers consider Tolkien to rely heavily on tropes of heroism and villainy as opposed to realism and nuance. One could nonetheless argue that an adult experience of the world has to do with the capacity to look beyond appearances and see nuance. Criticism of the fantasy element is only relevant for a surface-level reading. In fact, realism and nuance spring forth from even the smallest and most wretched hobbit under closer scrutiny.

The purpose of this paper is to study both the moral structure of *The Lord of the Rings* and Gollum's role in said structure. More specifically, it aims to investigate how Gollum, consisting of both Sméagol (the good) and Gollum (the bad), can be read as a symbolic representation of moral struggle in the story. He could be read as a somewhat comical and infantile representation of greed, since he lacks any form of human subtlety and constantly expresses himself in an extreme manner, but I intend to bring a layer of nuance to the reading of Gollum. My thesis is that the moral structure of the story is largely Christian and that Gollum can be read as a representation of the duality of human moral existence and that he therefore, despite his extreme behaviour, could be interpreted as a very human character. In order to understand Gollum, and the moral structure in which he operates and exists, this essay firstly establishes its theoretical basis – the theological and moral framework of *The Lord of the Rings*. This is accomplished by looking at binary moral values, free will, temptation and redemption in Middle-earth. These four aspects are key to a theological reading of the books as they mirror the view of morality held by the majority of the Christian faith. Secondly, Gollum's moral struggle is analysed by

examining the same four aspects during his journey with Frodo and Sam, with kinship added as a fifth aspect. I will argue that Gollum shows signs of the same dualistic struggle found in the other characters and that his relationship to Frodo and Sam is crucial to the outcome of said struggle. Gollum's duality is, however, much more extremely expressed, but fits well into the moral structure of the story, nonetheless. This puts Gollum in a new interesting light, where he can be read both as a complex character in and of himself and as a symbol of the larger moral struggle of the story.

## **2. Morality in Middle-earth**

The focus of this section is the moral structure of the larger story in which Gollum exists with the aim of creating a context in which he later can be analysed. The section is divided into four parts which all examine one aspect of morality each. These aspects are inherent to mainstream Christianity and therefore important to bring up when studying the theology and morality of *The Lord of the Rings*. The first part deals with the moral values of Middle-earth and how they exist on a firm binary scale ranging from 'good' to 'evil'. The second part examines free will in Middle-earth with the argument being that the characters in the story have free will and are thereby responsible for their actions. The third part explores temptation and how characters with free will are affected by it and react to it. The topic of the fourth part is redemption where I argue that all characters, because of their free will, have the possibility for redemption.

### **2.1. Binary Morality**

An interesting place to begin the analysis is in the criticism presented by Shippey, previously mentioned in the introduction (*Road*, 123). One piece of this criticism, which does indeed aptly describe the moral system of Middle-earth, is that 'good' and 'evil' are presented as binary and absolute. One could turn to Tolkien's extensive lore and thus find that 'evil' is firmly represented by corrupted Valar and Maiar (subsets of angelic characters) such as Sauron and Morgoth. The 'good' is, in turn, represented by the heavenly hierarchy of the uncorrupted angelic characters, with the creator-God Eru Ilúvatar at the top of said structure. This information, however, requires the reader to turn to other works of Tolkien, such as *The Silmarillion*. If we hold to these representations, 'good' and 'evil' do not have much of a role in *The Lord of the Rings*. Neither Sauron nor Eru is ever seen. In the case of the former, he is

clearly present in the story, but the reader only ever gets to meet his various henchmen, whereas in the case of the latter, he is only mentioned in *The Silmarillion*, not in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, most representations of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are not overtly divine, but instead found in characters who at every given moment make the choice to situate themselves somewhere along the spectrum of the moral poles. Concerning representations of evil in the story, Charles W Nelson writes, “Tolkien shows the origins of evil through the faults of individuals” (83). The moral complexity, which is very much present in *The Lord of the Rings*, is of course not primarily found in Sauron, but instead in the either heroic, villainous or simply ordinary deeds done by the ‘regular’ characters who populate Middle-earth. Joseph Pearce argues that “[t]he spiritual warfare between the forces of dark and light in Tolkien’s world forms the landscape within which the characters exercise their free will and make their sacrifices. Indeed, it is the knowledge of this conflict, and the responses to it, which give meaning to the sacrifices that the heroes make” (*Man*, 116). Thus, having firm, absolute poles on the moral scale does not necessarily reduce the potency of the morally complex situations in which characters might find themselves. Instead, the firm moral structure enhances the importance of the moral struggles.

Aragorn, quite true to his character, makes the binary nature of morality in Middle-earth quite clear in a conversation with Éomer, where he is asked about how to judge what is right and wrong in these strange times. Aragorn replies that Éomer should judge “[a]s he has ever judged [...]. Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man’s part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house” (*Towers*, 38). Morality in *The Lord of the Rings* does evidently have an absoluteness to it, and it is most certainly presented in a binary model, but that does not necessarily mean that the characters are morally flat.

## **2.2. Free Will in Middle-earth**

Essential to the understanding of the story and the analysis of morality is that the peoples of Middle-earth have been given free will. This is quite explicit and, in fact, a major theme of the story. Brian Rosebury writes, “the implicit theology of free will is clear enough in *The Lord of the Rings*: no character is intrinsically [...] evil or good” (*Cultural*, 38). The theology that he refers to, is, as mentioned in the introduction, that of the Christian faith. Tolkien’s Christian

view on free will and morality clearly permeates the entire work, as freedom of choice is completely fundamental. Adam Roberts claims that “[f]ree will in Christian theology means that we all have – at all times, whenever we make a choice – the freedom to choose to do good or evil” (67). This freedom is firmly ingrained in *The Lord of the Rings*.

As a staunch believer, Tolkien has not only given freedom to the so-called regular peoples of Middle-earth, but also to the more divine characters. Ralph C. Wood argues that “they are not creatures of a fixed fate. Gandalf and Saruman, as well as Sauron and the Balrog, are maiar who demonstrate this principle” (41). The latter three clearly embody this principle as they were all created good, or perhaps neutral, and subsequently came under the influence of evil and chose to live by its principles. Gandalf, on the other hand, is one of those characters who could be read as quite flat. Throughout the story he has a grandfatherly appearance, guiding Frodo and the Fellowship with his wisdom, and inspiring the political leaders of the free peoples to take charge and revolt against evil. He rarely makes bad decisions, if any, and is thus presented to the reader as a ‘good’ character. This is, however, an oversimplification of Gandalf’s morality, which builds on the assumption that goodness is his default mode, not an active choice. In Bag End, Frodo asks Gandalf to take the Ring, to which Gandalf emphatically replies,

‘No! [...] 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.’ His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. ‘Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. (*Fellowship*, 81)

This passage strikingly highlights the freedom of choice that even Gandalf labours beneath. Not even he may enjoy the relief of being entirely good, and thereby only capable of making good choices. Instead, he recognizes and confesses that the temptations of the Ring would affect even him and implore him to slide down the scale of morality towards the evil of Sauron. The reason for Gandalf’s success, as opposed to the failures of his fellow Maiar, is not that he did not experience any moral struggle. He experienced precisely that and fought against his own desires with a victorious outcome.



Indeed, many, if not most, of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* show this awareness of the complexity of their own moral nature, which, yet again, aligns with the Christian worldview. Middle-earth is a world filled with fallen creatures. It is not the case that only Sauron and the orcs are representations of the fall, but the fallen nature of existence affects the entire story. In a letter from 1951, Tolkien writes, “all this stuff is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine” (Carpenter and Tolkien, 145), and Jonathan Evans, commenting on precisely this passage argues that “Tolkien’s use of the word ‘fallen’ is not accidental – we may be certain he means it in its fullest sense as a theological term describing the moral condition of human imperfection, which for Tolkien and many of his readers is central to the Christian myth” (203). This tenet of Christianity creates a neutral moral battle ground in *The Lord of the Rings* where everyone must endure the pulling forces of good and evil. Everyone is, as Martin Luther said, *simul iustus et peccator* – at once justified and sinner. While Tolkien, being an ardent Catholic, might have been sceptical to some of the teachings of Martin Luther, the view of humankind as being under the demanding pressure of two opposing gravities certainly shines through in *The Lord of the Rings*.

### **2.3. Temptation and the Ring**

The clearest symbol of how evil, sometimes gently and sometimes fervently, pulls on the minds of the characters is without question the Ring. It tempts people to make use of it in a variety of ways, but it always latches on to a deeply felt emotion within the person. For Gandalf, the allure of the Ring is that it would grant him powers to help the peoples of Middle-earth. The Ring thus appeals to his sense of pity. Other characters are tempted by different things. A rather banal example is that of Gollum’s desire to become “Lord Sméagol? Gollum the Great? *The* Gollum! Eat fish every day, three times a day, fresh from the sea” (*Towers*, 296). For him, the Ring appeals to his appetite and his deep-seated feeling of being ostracised from the rest of society, but under these basic human desires lies the call to domination, as his list of titles and epithets shows.

The seductive powers of the Ring are undoubtedly great, but different characters respond to its call in a variety of ways. Those who are aware of the Ring’s persuasive power shun it vigorously before the temptation may take a firm hold of them. Elrond, for example, makes it quite clear that he does not wish to carry the Ring (*Fellowship*, 351), neither does Galadriel, a similarly powerful and wise elf, even though she does show a greater level of temptation (*Fellowship*,

480). On the other hand, both Gollum and Frodo are ultimately seduced by the Ring during the climactic scene at Mount Doom (*Return*, 265-266). Different characters thus have different outcomes from their dealings with the Ring.

The case of Sam shows the altruism in the character. When the Ring tempts him, he does wish to become “Samwise the Strong, Hero of the age” but the results of his battle against Sauron would be bountiful and he envisages Mordor becoming “a garden of flowers and trees” (*Return*, 206). To see Mordor bloom is certainly not a bad aspiration, but within that dream, the Ring clearly calls for a heroic pedestal onto which Sam should place himself, but Sam is aware of the Ring’s potency as he has seen Frodo’s burden first-hand and is thus able to quickly identify that “all these notions are only a trick” (*Return*, 207).

Boromir’s case is quite similar, but with a different outcome. As he charges Frodo with giving him the Ring, the fears, hopes and wishes from behind which the Ring beckons him, are brought into light:

We of Minas Tirith have been staunch through long years of trial. We do not desire the power of wizard-lords, only strength to defend ourselves, strength in a just cause. And behold! in our need chance brings into light the Ring of Power. It is a gift, I say; a gift to the foes of Mordor. It is mad not to use it, to use the power of the Enemy against him. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory. What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could not Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner! (*Fellowship*, 523)

Boromir’s desire to save his city is in itself a good and heroic pursuit; it is, after all, a goal which is achieved later in the story. Nonetheless, thinly veiled beneath this benevolent purpose lies the Ring’s calling to Boromir’s wishes for self-aggrandisement. These selfish wishes become clearer by every word that comes out of his mouth and is perhaps one of the most direct examples of how evil and selfishness often cloak themselves in good intentions within the novels. His desire for heroism persuades him to commit a truly unheroic act in attempting robbery. Jonathan Evans writes, “[i]n the example of Boromir, we see portrayed with psychological subtlety the moral temptations of a Man confronted with the desire to do good in the world but corrupted by the power he sees as necessary for doing it” (213). Boromir might

be one of Tolkien's strongest creations in terms of moral complexity and his storyline serves as an example of the moral duality that pervades the story.

Writing about the Ring's effect on people, Tom Shippey argues that "Tolkien allows exceptions to his own rule. Both Sam and Bilbo do after all hand over the Ring with only momentary reluctance. Other characters show no interest at all in having it or taking it, Merry and Pippin, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli" (*Author*, 118). Adam Roberts agrees with Shippey's analysis of these characters, calling them "indifferent" towards the Ring (62). While these critics argue that this discrepancy creates an inconsistency, their argument is not necessarily valid. The characters listed do not join Frodo for the entire journey, and Sam's experience of the Ring clearly displays that even the most loyal friend may be tempted and corrupted given enough opportunities. That neither Gimli nor Merry ever show signs of desire for the Ring does not mean that they would not have done so, had they followed Frodo to the end.

It is also counter-factual to believe that Tolkien's highest rule is that the Ring is impossible to resist. There is perhaps no character who would have been able to toss the Ring into the fire, but Shippey himself brings up Sam and Bilbo as examples of characters who have had the Ring and managed to give it away. A much higher rule of Tolkien's is that of free will, and it might very well be the case that the free will of the characters mentioned by Shippey is actively used to not pursue any desire for the Ring. Contrary to this point, Boromir spends as much time with Frodo as the rest of the Fellowship does, and he definitely shows more lust for the Ring than the other members do. As to the difference between him and the rest of the Fellowship, one could understand that his need for some sort of power is greater than most others; his kin make up the vanguard of the free peoples and his city is soon to be under siege. It could also be the case that he simply has a predisposition for wanting to become heroic, or that he lacks the inner moral fibre which the others perhaps have.

As for those in the Fellowship who show no visible signs of temptation when journeying with Frodo, it would be reductive to say that they have no moral struggles of their own. Neither Shippey nor Roberts explicitly argues that case, but if the Ring is the only measurement of moral complexity, and these characters do not seem tempted by the Ring, then one must assume that Shippey and Roberts think that they lack complexity. A cursory glance at the initial arrogance and prejudice of Gimli and Legolas, or at the foolhardiness of Pippin, is sufficient to lay that view to rest, at least as a generalization of the Fellowship. In fact, only one character seems to remain mostly static throughout the story – Aragorn. He does, however, not share very much of his emotional life with the reader, so it is equally plausible, if not more so, to believe

that he is having roughly the same moral struggles as the rest of the Fellowship and that he handles it well. Struggle and temptation are inherent to existence in Middle-earth and all characters must deal with that in whatever way they choose.

## 2.4. Redemption

Another example of Christian morality in Middle-earth is the possibility for redemption. For the reader to believe in free will, it cannot be impossible for a person to change his or her ways. Redemption and change are major themes in *The Lord of the Rings*, with some characters changing for the better and other characters showing, at least, signs of wanting to behave better. In perhaps one of the most Christian scenes, when Boromir is dying, having defended Merry and Pippin, he is given absolution by Aragorn as he confesses his sin (*Towers*, 6). Writing about this scene, Sean McGrath states that “[h]e clearly wins a mighty victory over death and achieves a deep level of reality” (180). The end of Boromir’s story is on the one hand tragic, but on the other hand it is also exceptionally hopeful. The same goes for Théoden who, under the influence of Saruman, gravely neglected his responsibilities as king. Continuing, McGrath declares that “Théoden is another shining example, crumpling in glory beneath the black wings of the Nazgûl with the battle cry of his Rohirrim raging about him” (180). Both Boromir and Théoden heed the call of the good in the end and are redeemed.

Redemption is, however, not always the fate of those who wish for it. Gríma Wormtongue, the henchman of Saruman, is offered to stay in the Shire when Saruman is banished. His reaction shows that the possibility of redemption certainly attracts him: “Wormtongue halted and looked back at him, half prepared to stay” (*Return*, 362). Saruman, however, accuses and belittles Gríma who responds by murdering Saruman. Gríma is subsequently killed by the hobbits (*Return*, 363). His is a tragic end, with the faint outline of redemption hanging over it. Even Saruman, after having lost the battle at Helm’s deep, is offered a chance at redemption. Gandalf wishes for him to come down from his tower and join them, and further argues that there might be hope in their war against Sauron. Saruman’s reaction shows clear signs of genuine moral struggle:

A shadow passed over Saruman’s face; then it went deathly white. Before he could conceal it, they saw through the mask the anguish of a mind in doubt, loathing to stay and dreading to leave its refuge. For a

second he hesitated, and no one breathed. Then he spoke, and his voice was shrill and cold. Pride and hate were conquering him. (*Towers*, 227)

Saruman, the traitor, is offered one last chance, but his fears ultimately get the best of him, and he chooses evil. The important part to note is not what Saruman chooses in the end, but that he is offered redemption. Therefore, we must assume that Sauron too, in theory at least, could be redeemed. Gandalf's offer to Saruman shows that redemption is an indisputable possibility in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Agency, will, and redemption are ultimately in the hands of the individual characters. Everyone may position themselves along the moral axis in whatever fashion they see fit. Jonathan Evans declares,

In all Tolkien's works we see human beings and members of other races presented with opportunities for nobility, for heroic resistance against external forces of evil in which mustering the resolve to resist is as important as the success or failure of the outcome. And we see them presented with internal temptations to cowardice, pride, self-deception, and the tendency to regard others as somehow not quite human. (214)

It is in this nuanced and complex moral context one must place Gollum, in order to give the character a fair reading. He exists in a world where free will is the burden and privilege of everyone, where he will either endure or succumb to the temptations of evil, and where everyone, to some extent, is at once sinner and justified.

### **3. Gollum and Sméagol**

The focus of this section is on Gollum. More specifically, how he fits into the four aspects from the previous section and how he functions as a symbolic character. This section is also divided into four parts, but they do not exactly match the four parts of the previous section. The first part deals with the binary nature of Gollum, introducing his duality as a mirror for the binary moral values discussed earlier. The second part engages with free will, temptation and the ongoing struggle between Gollum and Sméagol. The argument is that he has the same free will as other characters, but it takes the shape of two warring personalities instead of an internalized struggle. The third part investigates Gollum's possibility for redemption and argues that redemption is just as possible for Gollum as for any other character. temptation and how

characters with free will are affected by it and react to it. The fourth part discusses kinship, what role it has in how Frodo and Sam can relate to Gollum and how it opens up for a reading of Gollum as a symbolic representation of the larger moral theme of the novels.

### 3.1. The Binary Nature of Gollum

The first real contact the reader has with Gollum occurs roughly halfway through *The Two Towers*, as Frodo and Sam are lost among the maze-like cliffs of Eryn Muil. As they rest for the night, Gollum pays them a nightly visit. He has indeed been introduced earlier in the story. Gandalf and Frodo have a conversation about him in Bag End (*Fellowship*, 69-79) and at the council of Elrond he is one of the main topics (*Fellowship*, 326-336). It is, nevertheless, in Eryn Muil that the readers get to see Gollum, in his entirety, for the first time. Even upon his approach to the hobbits, it is made clear that he is different. Sam describes him as spiderlike and recounts that “[he] was coming down head first” looking “like some large prowling thing of insect-kind” (*Towers*, 268). This is very un-hobbitlike behaviour, but Gollum is most certainly a hobbit. Gandalf declares as much in his conversation with Frodo at Bag End (*Fellowship*, 69). This hobbit, moving like a spider, climbing headfirst down a sheer cliff face creates a sense of uncanniness.

In fact, he fits excellently into Bennett and Royle’s definition of ‘the uncanny’ as being “a sense of unfamiliarity which appears at the very heart of the familiar, or else a sense of familiarity which appears at the very heart of the unfamiliar” (35). The reader’s knowledge of Gollum being a hobbit and parts of his appearance, such as his height and humanoid features, create a sense of familiarity, but his schizophrenic mutterings and insectoid movements create a sense of unfamiliarity, which is essential in uncanny writings. Sue Zlosnik, writing about Gothic tropes in *The Lord of the Rings*, categorizes Gollum as an “abject figure”, meaning something between the familiar and the unfamiliar (53-54). In this first real meeting with Gollum, the reader is introduced to a truly uncanny hobbit, a mix of familiarity and strangeness. Tolkien thus establishes him as dualistic and different, right from the outset.

This dualism becomes clearer as the reader gets to know Gollum. He consists of two personalities: Gollum, the personality born from his use of the Ring, and Sméagol, the original personality. These personalities are juxtaposed within his body and mirror the binary moral

values of the story. As Frodo and Sam begin the process of taming their new guide, Gollum and Sméagol therefore come to struggle against one another again, for the first time in five centuries.

### 3.2. Free Will, Temptation and Struggle

The first significant thing Frodo does to tame Gollum has to do with names. Gollum's kin gave him that name some five hundred years earlier, as they mocked his guttural coughing. His birth name was Sméagol, but due to the Ring's presence in his life, he has lost that name – and consequently, he has lost himself. Similarly, the Lieutenant of the Tower of Barad-dûr has long since forgotten his name when he encounters the Fellowship outside the Black Gates. Writing about him, Colin Gunton declares that “[t]o serve the power of evil is to lose one's name, that which we gain by virtue of our loving relationship with others; it is to enter a slavery in which our very identity is taken away” (135). This certainly applies to Gollum as well. In serving the evil of the Ring, it has stolen his true name and given him a new one, along with an entire new personality to cohabit his body. His very identity has been radically altered by the Ring. Frodo decides to call him Sméagol once more, and the change in character is dramatic: “Then suddenly his voice and language changed, and he sobbed in his throat, and spoke but not to them. ‘Leave me alone, *gollum!* You hurt me. O my poor hands, *gollum!* I, we, I don't want to come back. I can't find it. I am tired. I, we can't find it, *gollum, gollum,* no, nowhere” (*Towers*, 272). When hearing his old name, the owner of the old name comes back to him. Sméagol enters the body again and starts speaking in the first person singular. This signifies the rebirth of the duality and struggle between Gollum, who refers to himself in the plural form, and Sméagol, who refers to himself in the singular form.

The second significant thing Frodo does, is that he makes Sméagol swear an oath to him. Invisibility and isolation have been the key marks of Gollum's existence for the last 500 years. He has been hidden away in a cavern, speaking primarily to himself. Ralph C. Wood argues that “authentic existence is always communal” in the works of Tolkien (49). This means that Gollum's existence for the last half-millennium is not simply the effects of him being introverted, but truly tragic and extensively crippling for any individual. Wood continues his commentary on Gollum by noting the degeneration that this isolation has afflicted Gollum with, making points about his primitive movements and his aversion to civilized food (55). Suddenly, however, Gollum finds himself communicating with fellow hobbits once more, and not in just any fashion, but in the civilized way of taking an oath:

‘We promises, yes I promise!’ said Gollum. ‘I will serve the master of the Precious. Good master, good Sméagol, *Gollum, Gollum!*’ Suddenly he began to weep and bite at his ankle again.

‘Take the rope off, Sam!’ said Frodo.

Reluctantly Sam obeyed. At once Gollum got up and began prancing about, like a whipped cur whose master has patted it. From that moment a change, which lasted for some time, came over him. He spoke with less hissing and whining, and he spoke to his companions direct, not to his precious self [...] he was friendly, and indeed pitifully anxious to please. (*Towers*, 276)

According to Robert Eaglestone, Frodo and Sam “draw [Sméagol] back, through language, into a participatory community” by making him swear the oath (“Invisibility”, 79). Swearing fealty to Frodo makes Sméagol a part of a group, something that he barely was even before he took the Ring in the first place. When Gollum says that Sméagol is lost and that he will never return (*Towers*, 273), he is actually wrong. The change in Gollum’s character shows that Sméagol has returned and stays with them for quite a while. “There is a tiny ray of light peeking into the prison cell of Gollum’s life, making him long to leave his wretched isolation and to find companionship with another creature of his own kind” (Wood, 131). By communicating with him, calling him by his name and asking him to join them, Frodo has managed to bring Sméagol back into the story.

So, who is Sméagol, as opposed to Gollum? That depends on whose analysis the reader should go by. The entirety of Gollum’s time spent with Frodo and Sam is done so under the watchful and suspicious narration of Sam. This is important to note, as it might, and probably does, actively colour the reader’s perception of Gollum during most of the scenes. Sam is rarely nuanced: “[h]is simple mind is accustomed to dealing in moral simplicities rather than complexities: everything is either good or bad, and Gollum is bad” (Wood, 131-132). He tends to make an assumption and stick firmly to it until proven otherwise, and the protectiveness for his master definitely makes him defensive towards both Gollum and Sméagol. Sam’s response to the rebirth of Sméagol clearly shows this defensiveness: “Sam said little to him of any sort. He suspected him more deeply than ever, and if possible liked the new Gollum, the Sméagol, less than the old” (*Towers*, 276). Sam is not blind to the complexity of their guide, and names the two personalities *Stinker* – Gollum, and *Slinker* – Sméagol (*Towers*, 302). He acknowledges the two personalities, but he does not believe there to be any difference in the trustworthiness



of the two halves. For the reader, Sam's suspicion is justified by the end of the book, as Gollum does come out on top, which gives his view a, perhaps unjustified, level of credibility.

Frodo, on the other hand, decides to trust Sméagol and make use of him as a guide, which might strike the reader as naïve. Sam advises him not to trust Gollum, to which Frodo replies, “Perhaps you're right, Sam,' [...]. 'There *is* a change in him, but just what kind of a change and how deep, I'm not sure yet. Seriously though, I don't think there is any need for fear – at present” (*Towers*, 282). Frodo uses reason in choosing to trust Gollum, knowing that something within the old hobbit has changed and that they certainly need a guide in order to get to Mordor. Consequently, Frodo is not necessarily naïve in showing trust. More importantly, Frodo pities the creature (*Towers*, 271). It is true what William N. Rogers II and Michael R. Underwood write about Gollum, that he “has so shrunken in spirit and degenerated physically and morally that only vestiges of hobbit nature remain” (128), but those vestiges of hobbit nature still produce empathy within Frodo.

Both attitudes towards Gollum are completely viable, because Gollum has two personalities. During their travels, it is clear that Sméagol has gained a serious foothold in the contest. Gollum has reigned unchecked for half a millennium, but the simple human decency afforded him by Frodo, suddenly, makes it possible for Sméagol and Gollum to have a debate without any clear victor (*Towers*, 295-296). Gollum tries to persuade Sméagol to circumvent the oath by becoming the master of the Ring himself, as he only promised to protect the ‘master’. Sméagol, however, makes it perfectly clear that he does not wish to hurt Frodo (*Towers*, 296). Sam believes that Gollum won the debate, although no clear conclusion is ever reached, but that is not what matters.

This conversation makes it evident that Sméagol actually wants to do good. Furthermore, one might question if Sméagol even wants the Ring. He never mentions it, as opposed to Gollum who is continually plotting to acquire it. Gollum seeks power, but Sméagol does not seem to have any intentions, good or bad, concerning the Ring. Whenever other characters have stated their desire for the Ring, it has been cloaked in good intentions. Sam dreams of gardens and Boromir dreams of security. As they are ‘normal’ characters, experiencing their moral complexity and duality within the same personality, they must somehow rationalize their dark desires. In the case of Gollum, the good intentions have been compartmentalized into one of the personalities and the egoism into the other. Therefore, the good intentions of Sméagol have nothing to do with the Ring. He only wants what is best for his master, the first person to treat him with dignity and kindness in half a millennium. Conversely, Gollum does not even try to

hide or rationalize his desire for the Ring. He is a wholly self-centred character, who only wishes to gain power. Freedom of will expresses itself very differently for the other characters. They have the possibility of analysing and experiencing two forces of attraction, good and bad, and deciding to act on either one. Gollum is the bad force, just as Sméagol is the good one. There is no neutral personality which must be swayed into action. There are only the two wills, which have both been given a personality. This is not to say that Sméagol, before murdering his cousin and taking the Ring, was the epitome of goodness. That would contradict the nature of morality and free will in the rest of the story, but it seems to be the case during his time with Frodo and Sam.

A possible counterargument for viewing this part of Gollum's story as an example of true duality is that when they find the Black Gate to be heavily guarded, Gollum suggests that the trio should take the stairs of Cirith Ungol into Mordor (*Towers*, 308). In the tunnel at the top of the stairs resides Shelob, a monstrous spider, and Gollum certainly hopes that she would eat the hobbits, leaving the Ring for him. One must, nevertheless, take Sméagol's opinion into account too, and he makes it clear that he does not like that suggestion (*Towers*, 296). The problem with seeing Gollum's choice of this route as a clear-cut argument for a lack of duality in Gollum is, other than Sméagol's reluctance, that there is no other reasonable way into Mordor. Yes, Gollum intends to make spider-food of the hobbits, but Sméagol, eager to please, is trying to help his master into Mordor, and for a mission relying on stealth and efficiency, this road is objectively the best one.

### **3.3. Gollum's Possibility for Redemption**

The recovery of Sméagol seems to continue and increase during their travels. He remembers "tales from the South" told in his youth and, while weeping, tells Frodo and Sam about the beautiful craftsmanship and architecture of old Gondor (*Towers*, 306). Brian Rosebury claims that this "evanescent ability to think beyond his own despair" reflects his recovery (*Cultural*, 52). Additionally, he occasionally continues to refer to himself in the first person singular: "For one thing, he noted that Gollum used *I*, and that seemed usually to be a sign, on its rare appearances, that some remnants of old truth and sincerity were for the moment on top" (*Towers*, 309). Sméagol is clearly moving in a direction of recovery, so how does he end up betraying Frodo and Sam? In rapid succession, two events occur, which Gollum's descent into his old ways could be attributed to.

The first event is, in all fairness, a bit speculative. In Ithilien, Frodo tricks Gollum into being captured by Faramir and his men. Gollum reacts with murderous fury: “[a] green light was flickering in his bulging eyes. ‘Masster, masster!’ he hissed. ‘Wicked! Tricky! False!’ He spat and stretched out his long arms with white snapping fingers” (*Towers*, 368). Frodo is saved by the Gondorians who capture Gollum. Frodo, however, vouches for Gollum and thus protects him from the soldiers. The reaction to this protection is affectionate as “[Gollum] seemed better pleased with himself than he had been, though he kept close to Frodo and avoided the glance of Faramir” (*Towers*, 377). Nonetheless, one could easily assume that this event influences their relationship in a negative way. Up until that time, Frodo had been truthful with Gollum, and while he does not outright lie, he is regretful that he treats Gollum treacherously (*Towers*, 367). The event does not explicitly affect their relationship; it is, in fact, never brought up again during the rest of their travels. It might, nevertheless, be problematic for Gollum’s recovery and an impediment for the ability to trust, which Frodo, since their first meeting, has nurtured in him. Since the reader is not made aware of any explicit deterioration of Gollum’s behaviour between this event and the scene upon the stairs, the argument is admittedly speculative. It is, nonetheless, hard to ignore Gollum’s first outburst of violence towards Frodo since Eryn Muil and it does almost immediately precede Gollum’s ultimate treachery, which might strike the reader as being too convenient to overlook.

The second event, which clearly causes Gollum to win the struggle against Sméagol, was apparently heart-breaking for Tolkien to write (Carpenter and Tolkien, 110). Upon the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Gollum climbs ahead, and presumably gets in contact with Shelob. When he returns, he finds the hobbits sleeping:

A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo’s knee – but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing. (*Towers*, 403)

As Sméagol experiences what is probably his biggest struggle against Gollum in the entire story, Frodo stirs in his sleep and makes a noise which awakens Sam who questions Gollum’s

actions. It is worth noting that Gollum replies “softly” when Sam first awakens (*Towers*, 404), indicating that Sméagol is in control of the body after the internal debate. Sam, however, accuses him of being sneaky and villainous. This garners a strong reaction: “Gollum withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids. Almost spider-like he looked now, crouched back on his bent limbs, with his protruding eyes. The fleeting moment had passed, beyond recall” (*Towers*, 404). He takes Sam’s accusation to heart and refers to himself as “a sneak.” Frodo reprimands him, saying that he should not take names to himself, to which Gollum replies, “Sméagol has to take what’s given him [...] He was given that name by kind Master Samwise, the hobbit that knows so much” (*Towers*, 405). This profoundly parallels how Frodo gave Sméagol his old name back in the beginning of their journey (*Towers*, 272), but in the opposite way; his true name is taken away and a mean nickname is bestowed upon him. The rediscovery of the name Sméagol, which was arguably imperative for his recovery, is here undone in one swift motion by Sam.

Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, Gollum, not Sméagol, comes out of the situation on top and leads them straight into Shelob’s lair. Just as in the hobbits’ first meeting with Gollum (*Towers*, 268), he is once again described as “spider-like” (*Towers*, 404), which not only foreshadows Frodo and Sam’s close encounter with Shelob, but also reverts Gollum back to his status as an abject figure. Brian Rosebury claims that Sméagol, at this point, comes exceptionally close to redemption (*Critical*, 34), which, sadly, is easy to agree with. Although he has come a long way towards redemption, Sam’s behaviour towards him is the final nail in the coffin. From this point onwards, Gollum is in control and few signs of any duality remain.

### **3.4. A Sense of Kinship**

In Bag End, when Frodo declares that Bilbo should have slain Gollum and that he does not feel any pity for him, Gandalf remarks, “You have not seen him” (*Fellowship*, 78). Wood argues that “Gandalf is urging Frodo to acknowledge his elemental kinship with ‘that vile creature’” (152). When Frodo does see him and is presented with the same opportunity for violence as Bilbo, he lowers his sword and says, “I will not touch the creature. For now that I see him, I do pity him” (*Towers*, 271). Frodo is clearly able to relate to Gollum, which Wood attributes to two similarities and one hope. Firstly, they are both of hobbit-kind, sharing language, stature and, to some extent, traditions. Tolkien pushed this point in a letter to his publisher, quoted by William N. Rogers II and Michael R. Underwood: “[He] should not be made a monster, as he

is by practically all other illustrators in disregard of the text” (128). Secondly, they are both Ring-bearers. When Frodo sees what the Ring has done to Gollum, he instinctively understands that Gollum’s current nature is a perfectly possible future for himself as well. He does, however, hope that he will not end up like Gollum, and therefore he must hope that Gollum, too, can recover from his addiction to the Ring (Wood, 131). Gandalf claims this hope to be slim, but still existent (*Fellowship*, 79). The hope of recovery and redemption is absolutely central for the understanding of Frodo’s and Gollum’s relationship.

Frodo’s kindness towards Gollum goes completely beyond Sam, who would be “much happier if Gollum remained wholly evil” (Wood, 132-133). It would simply be easier for Sam to keep Gollum on a leash and continue to believe that Gollum is not really a hobbit like himself. To recognize him as an equal, worthy of some form of decency, would be too difficult. Ultimately, Sam’s suspicions are proven to be true, as Gollum betrays them, but his attitude towards Gollum changes in the end. As he is given the possibility of executing the creature, whom he has for a long time believed to be an enemy, he spares his life, feeling restrained by something: “He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum’s shrivelled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again” (*Return*, 263). Sam has finally reached a point where he is able to relate to Gollum, and the key in doing so is that Sam now too has carried the Ring. For Frodo, this understanding came much earlier, for obvious reasons. While Frodo’s sense of kinship with Gollum depended on physical resemblance, the hope of redemption and the weight of the Ring, Sam seems to have been oblivious to the first two reasons. Only in carrying the Ring does he comprehend Gollum’s situation, and perhaps it is in the understanding of what it means to carry the Ring, that the reader too may find empathy for Gollum.

Acknowledging the kinship between the three hobbits opens up for a reading of Gollum as a symbol of the general human experience. Tom Shippey argues this point about Frodo, writing that he represents “an image of natural humanity trying to do its best” (*Author*, 187). Arguably, Gollum is just the same – an image of the everyman, struggling with his morality, trying to do good but sometimes, maybe even oftentimes, failing. The story of Gollum could be read as Tolkien’s representation of the saddening and brutally honest words of Paul the Apostle: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (*Revised Standard Version*, Rom 7:15). Of course, this passage only highlights the occasions of failing in the struggle against temptation, but Gollum does ultimately fail, becoming a symbol of Paul’s lament. For readers who empathize with Paul’s view on his own struggle and

shortcomings, Gollum can thus be read as a symbol for themselves and their own experiences. The ending of *The Lord of the Rings* might be considered too simple and too happy but reading Gollum as a symbolic everyman makes it much more complex and tragic. Shippey captures this sadness, writing, “[a]mong the unnoticed casualties of Middle-earth, one should realize, is the old hobbit Sméagol, as well as the creature he turns into, Gollum” (*Author*, 154). The failure and demise of Gollum should perhaps not be read as the victory of good over evil, but instead as the realistic and tragic possible outcome of moral struggles in a more general sense.

Upon the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Frodo and Sam speak of tales and the roles of heroes and villains. Sam remarks that Gollum would be a good character in a story and he poses a question: “I wonder if he thinks he’s the hero or the villain?” (*Towers*, 401). The answer is simple, but maybe not for Sam: Gollum is both hero and villain, just as Boromir, Sam, Frodo and all the other characters are too. Through uniting the two unnuanced personalities into one entity, engaged in a war of wills, comes a complex and nuanced symbol of moral struggle. Gollum might be an enemy of Frodo’s quest, but he is also a friend of Frodo’s. He is most certainly greedy and devious, but also loyal and obedient. Gollum is, simply put, many things at once and when the strange grammar and extreme behaviour is stripped away, one is left with a realistic, nuanced and deeply interesting portrait of humanity.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the aim of this essay was twofold. The first aim was to investigate the theological and moral structure of *The Lord of the Rings*, in order to create a context for the second aim. This has been achieved by examining different characters in relation to four concepts within the realm of theology and morality. Firstly, it has been established that moral values in *The Lord of the Rings* exist on a binary scale – good and evil exist, and the characters must navigate and discern between the two. Secondly, all characters operate with full autonomy – they have the free will to choose between good and evil. Thirdly, all characters suffer under temptation and the main symbol of this temptation is the Ring. Fourthly, everyone has the possibility for redemption – everyone does not act on this possibility, but it still exists. Tolkien has treated these four concepts in a consistent manner throughout the novels and they largely align with Christian theology. Consequently, morality in *The Lord of the Rings* is closely tied to this theology.

The second aim was to study how Gollum fits into the framework of morality. This has been accomplished by analysing both scenes where Gollum himself acts or speaks and scenes where

other characters speak about him or react to him. His story has then been examined in the light of the results from the first section of analysis. Firstly, it has been found that Gollum is an essentially binary character, mirroring the poles of the moral value scale of the larger story. Secondly, free will is different for Gollum than for the other characters. He does not have a neutral ego choosing between good and evil. Instead, his two personalities seem to be individually attracted to either pole. However, the struggle between these personalities is, for the majority of his journey with Frodo and Sam, unresolved, which shows that he does in some capacity have the same possibility for free choice as the other characters. Thirdly, redemption is possible for Gollum too – it is not ultimately what happens, but it remains a prospect. Fourthly, a sense of kinship is essential in the understanding of Gollum, and it opens up for a reading of him as a symbol of the moral struggle inherent to the larger story. Gollum is not a simple or unsubtle character, as one might think due to his extreme behaviour. He is complex and nuanced. He is at once sinner and justified.

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