



Boromir speaks:

“I do not understand all this,” he said. “Saruman is a traitor, but did he not have a glimpse of wisdom? Why should we not think that the Great Ring has come into our hands to serve us in the very hour of need? Wielding it the Free Lords of the Free may surely defeat the Enemy. That is what he most fears, I deem. The Men of Gondor are valiant, and they will never submit; but they may be beaten down. Valour needs first strength, and then a weapon. Let the Ring be your weapon, if it has such power as you say. Take it and go forth to victory!”

— *The Fellowship of the Ring*
Chapter Two: “The Council of Elrond” (pp. 280-1)

Sam Speaks:

“But if you’ll pardon my speaking out, I think my master was right. I wish you’d take his Ring. You’d put things to rights. You’d stop them digging up the gaffer and turning him adrift. You’d make some folks pay for their dirty work.”

Galadriel replies:

“I would” she said. “That is how it would begin. But it would not stop with that, alas! We will not speak more of it. Let us go!”

— *The Fellowship of the Ring*
Chapter Seven: “The Mirror of Galadriel” (p. 382)

A BLOODY GOOD READ

For me, *The Lord of the Rings* works on every level, and I refer to both the magnificent new motion picture and the trilogy of books, which I first read in the early 1970’s as a child and have re-read many times since. It works on the most basic level as a glorious epic, rich with its own mythic cycle that borrows from Celtic, Nordic and Saxon traditions. Simply put, it is a bloody good read, and the motion picture captures that most effectively, editing and abridging where needed without doing a fatal violence to the source.

FRODO IS US

Yet *The Lord of the Rings* can be read in many other ways as well. It also works extraordinarily well as a series of quite deep allegories. Certainly many people have subjected J. R. R. Tolkien’s remarkable epic to the Bunsen burner of allegorical analysis before, particularly those looking to divine a racist subtext. I have only ever read a couple such works and to be honest was unimpressed. I have read a few summaries of others but it has always struck me that the arguments of this or that critique of his work usually skirt around the core issue, for there are really only two facets of the story that truly matter: Frodo, and the Ring itself.

I have always thought that the allegorical meaning of *The Lord of the Rings* is starkly obvious and quite profound. Mankind in all its varied forms and mythic archetypes can be found with the story, yet in truth the reader is presented



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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

with a single representation of themselves: Frodo Baggins, the Hobbit. Frodo is us.

PERSONAL MORAL COURAGE

The entire story is about Frodo and his relationship with the Ring. Everything else is the supporting artifice. Frodo is Everyman, who does not choose the world in which he lives, rather the world is thrust upon him by forces at first seemingly outside his power to influence or even understand fully. It is Frodo, more than any other character, who dwells most upon the issue not just of dynamic reaction to events, but of moral choice. Although surrounded by mythic heroic archetypes of every shape and form, Frodo is physically puny, banal by predisposition and would be hard pressed to intimidate an irritable rabbit. Yet he is indeed strong, in that his strength is entirely moral strength ... and because he chooses to exercise that moral strength, in the end he has no equal. We are shown that it is from personal moral courage that all other strengths derive and that all the weapons in the world count for little without that.

THE RING IS THE ANTITHESIS OF INTERPERSONAL MORALITY

So if the Hobbit is us, then what is the Ring?

The Ring is everything which Frodo is not. He is a weak little man, vulnerable and multifaceted. The Ring is strong, almost indestructible and pure in its single minded malevolence. It tries to corrupt all who touch it or are ever associated with it and it is about absolute and pitiless control of others. Frodo deals not through agents or proxies, but directly, face to face ... The Ring makes its wearer invisible and extends its power terribly through its influence over the other Rings. It is the antithesis of interpersonal morality. No matter how pure of heart the person who wields it is, no matter how just their motivation for taking that power upon themselves, the end result is always corruption. Yet the lure of such power is so overwhelming that only the most truly moral can resist it when it is dangled in front of them: Gandalf and Galadriel are both offered the Ring but refuse it. Elrond too sees it for what it is and will have none of it:

“We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know all too well. It’s strength, Boromir, is too great for anyone to wield at will, save those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron’s throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear.” (page 281)

Powerful, corrupting and impersonal. The Ring is of course an allegory for the modern state.



The adjacent article was first published on January 7th 2002, as a posting on **Libertarian Samizdata**, the “Web-log” (www.samizdata.blogspot.com), which is edited and run by Perry de Havilland (in association with the Libertarian Alliance). The piece was originally headed **“One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them – A personal and long standing view of Lord of the Rings”**.

Soon after that, Samizdata received the following email in response, from **Michael Drout**, Assistant Professor of English at Wheaton College, Massachusetts, USA:

I enjoyed Perry de Havilland’s discussion of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and thought it would be useful to point out the most libertarian line in the book in that it sums up the total inability of the statist mind (left or right) to understand the libertarian project. Said by Gandalf of Sauron:

“That we should wish to cast him down and have no one in his place is not a thought that occurs to his mind.”

In some unpublished scholarship that I’ve edited and will soon be published (a book on *Beowulf and the Critics*) Tolkien also equated Englishness with a love of freedom. It’s interesting that the academic criticism of him (in a political sense) has been so poor as to be blatantly and obviously self-contradictory. It’s clear to me though, after much study of his thought and years spent editing his work, that, while he might not have identified or recognized himself as such, and while he portrayed kings and hereditary hierarchies in a good light (sometimes), he was at heart a lover of freedom = a libertarian.

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy consists of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Two Towers* (1954), and *The Return of the King* (1955), first published by George Allen and Unwin, London. The page numberings on page 1 of this are from the GA&U hardback 2nd edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1966).

When asked about where to find the quote he refers to, Michael Drout (to whom our further gratitude) emailed us again as follows, in a way that throws light on the problems of Tolkien scholarship generally:

The quotation is from *The Two Towers*, the chapter entitled “The White Rider”. Gandalf is speaking to Aragorn:

[Sauron] “supposes that we were all going to Minas Tirith; for that is what he would himself have done in our place. And according to his wisdom it would have been a heavy stroke against his power. Indeed he is in great fear, not knowing what mighty one may suddenly appear, wielding the Ring, and assailing him with war, seeking to cast him down and take his place. That we should wish to cast him down and have no one in his place is not a thought that occurs to his mind.”

Citing the *Lord of the Rings* is tricky because there are so many textual variants (due to multiple printings and re-printings and Tolkien’s tendency to revise each set of galleys sent to him). A “clean” text was only finally developed in the late 1980’s, so most people just cite by Volume, Book, and Chapter number. Thus the above would be: TT, Bk III, ch v. But if you want a more traditional cite, it is page 100 in the Houghton Mifflin hardback edition, the closest thing we have to a “standard” edition in Tolkien scholarship.