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Middle-earth's War on Terror: a Post-9/11 Reception Study on the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

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Middle-earth's War on Terror:
A Post-911 Reception Study on the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

Middle-earth's War on Terror: A Post-911 Reception Study on the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

by

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this thesis is to investigate the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, specifically *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*, through the lens of America's post-9/11 culture to discover how the attacks and subsequent political actions influence Americans to read these works.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first is a précis that explains the thoughts that led to this thesis, as well as a brief introduction to it. The second part examines how Peter Jackson's film adaptations of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* portray the trilogy, specifically through depictions of war. The third, fourth, fifth parts examine the Shire, the forces of evil, and the Just War Theory, respectively, to argue that Tolkien condemns pacifism and expansionism while upholding war as a last resort. The final section investigates wartime problems, like treatment of prisoners and mercy. The purpose of doing so is to reveal how post-9/11 Americans can interpret, and indeed have read, Tolkien's works.

In conclusion, this thesis argues that the events on 9/11 changed the way Americans read Tolkien's work, especially in terms of military policy and justifying the actions of the noble characters. The intent with this thesis is to give future generations a marker about how historical events changed the literary interpretations of such popular works.

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Précis

Addressing Congress and the United States in 1941, president Franklin Delano Roosevelt explained the previous day's events: "December seventh, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the empire of Japan." 60 years later president George W. Bush recalled these words on the evening of September 11th: "Today our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts." After both attacks the US government immediately prepared for war against its aggressors, her citizens almost unanimous in their cries for vengeance. While the US populace had no intent to fight the Japanese in 1941 or al Qaeda in 2001, most of them decided that an attack on their nation demanded a military response.

Before either of these events, J.R.R. Tolkien pondered war and its justifications throughout his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR* hereafter): is it even acceptable to wage war? Are there times (after an attack, for instance) when people should abandon pacifism and isolationism, embrace the just-war theory, and take human lives? Some readers of Tolkien may think the obvious answer to these questions is a resounding yes, but *LotR* actually proves much more ambivalent. While the text indeed revolves around a wartime crisis and climaxes with a great battle, it also distances itself from battle while decrying it. To bring this back to military actions, perhaps being attacked compels military action, but politics (and this text) also have opposing views. How, then, does one synthesize these voices? What merit does *LotR* have on the topic of war?

This study originates from a discussion on the proximity of two seemingly unrelated events: the attacks on September 11, 2001 and December 19, 2001, the day Peter Jackson's *The*

Fellowship of the Ring (*FotR* hereafter) debuted in theaters. A mere three months passed between the deadly attacks on the US and the release of Jackson's first film, in which the various races of middle-earth gather to defend themselves against evil. Brimming with political fervor, US viewers divided into vehement factions: some saw the tragedies of September 11th and the plight of the US reflected in Jackson's film, while others angrily opposed this notion altogether, saying this idea "misrepresented" the movie's intended message (Medved). The problem was this: an attack and the prospect of war suddenly confronted a population that largely experienced Tolkien's trilogy for the first time via film adaptation, not through via the text itself. This is not to say that some (if not many) viewers had not read the books prior to seeing the films, but countless viewers seemed unaware of the differences between films and text, much less the dichotomous voices on war in the text. I intend to rectify this. What follows is a study of Tolkien post 9/11. How did 9/11 influence people to read *LotR*'s messages regarding war, terror, prisoners, torture, and etc?

In the first section, entitled *Depictions of War*, I begin with a brief film study, focusing on how Peter Jackson's adaptations depict war, and how that depiction differs from the text. In the next sections, I analyze how different societies in *LotR* view knowledge, and how those views govern them to justify or demonize war. Moving from my sections on *the Shire* to *Forces of Evil* and *Just War Theory*, I analyze the Hobbits, evil characters, and then the Elves, Dwarves, and men, respectively—the point of these sections is to show how passivity and aggression draw the text's ire, while the novel supports using war as a last resort. Following those sections comes *Issues in War*, a discussion on topics that accompany war, such as the treatment of prisoners and the qualities that constitute effective leadership. In this way, readers can see that Tolkien's novel condones using war as a last resort, but this option still comes with a price and a warning.

Several scholars have analyzed Tolkien in regard to his religion, war, linguistic inspirations, and creations, but a reception study on post-9/11 America has yet to occur. Given Jackson's film adaptations and their influence on Tolkien fandom, such a study seems appropriate. I will touch upon many topics that other scholars have already discussed. For instance, T.A. Shippey has done extensive work not only on the nature of evil in the *LotR*, but also on comparing several of Tolkien's cultures to historical societies. Many other scholars have studied Tolkien in a religious frame (Peter Kreft, Shippey and Humphrey Carpenter, for instance), and a thesis by Shana Watkins studies how Americans during the Vietnam War interpreted *LotR*. However, while many critics discuss the films and how they relate to the messages in the text, few tackle how 9/11 influenced people to interpret both the film and text, or consider how the resultant views differ from interpretations people held previously (although Matthew Dickerson comes close, as he discusses whether or not the text supports violence). As Tolkien scholarship is budding and Middle-earth fervor reaches a new climax, I intend this thesis to investigate how modern American readers may interpret various wartime issues through Tolkien's story.

Chapter One – *Depictions of War*

In an interview just weeks before Peter Jackson's *The Two Towers* steamrolled theaters in 2002, actor Viggo Mortensen, who plays Aragorn in the film, gave an interview wherein he bridges Jackson's adaptation and politics of the time. He counters his contemporaries who find political and cultural similarities between the film and America's foreign struggles, insisting instead that "I don't think that *The Two Towers* or Tolkien's writing or our work has anything to do with the United States' foreign ventures...and it upsets me to hear that" (Durbin). Writer Kathy Durbin goes on to defend Mortensen, especially since Tolkien avoids allegory and his work, while similar to many wartime conflicts, precedes 9/11 by some 60 years. However, she also admits that, while "accidental," the movies hold some "echoes" of the time's politics: "evil or 'Evildoers?'" Sauron or Saddam? And how many towers?" (Durbin). Furthermore, a few years after this interview, Michael Medved examines comments made by another *LotR* actor to argue that, in spite of the timespan from book to film, the films have political implications indeed. John Rhys-Davies, who plays Gimli the Dwarf and the voice of Treebeard the Ent, believes that "Tolkien says that some generations will be challenged, and if they do not rise to meet that challenge, they will lose their civilization. That does have a real resonance with me" (Medved). In other words, many people began comparing Tolkien's 60-year-old text with America's post 9/11 political developments only after Jackson's film adaptations introduced some people to a work that examines war. Therefore, while some demand that political developments have nothing to do with the films, others cannot help themselves from wondering what messages they can draw from these films that investigate wartime heroes and villains. Specifically, how do these films encourage or discourage violence and war?

Jackson's film adaptations of *LotR* serve as fair stewards to Tolkien's story, but they come with problems in how they depict war. The films' changes do not detract from the ethos of the story, the symbolism and plot development closely follow the text, and the depictions of loyalty inspire (nearly) as much affection as the story does, but they also misconstrue important messages on battle. For instance, Jackson inserts many violent elements that oppose the text's misgivings about conflict, so they seem to glorify war rather than depicting it as a necessary evil. The problem with this is that the novel also describes war in some ways that encourage sensationalism, so *LotR* encourages people to detest war while it also celebrates heroic battle scenes. This means that the films indeed miss some of the text's crucial messages about war, but the text's own sensationalism exonerates Jackson's. While leaving room for viewers to relate cinematic violence to current conflicts, Jackson's films may send mixed messages about war, but perhaps because the text does so as well.

While Tolkien's *LotR* depicts many battles, the text often employs language that distances itself from the gore and glory of battling with melee weapons. First, the text often uses lack of agency and personification to distance itself from combat. In one battle, "Gimli stood with his stout legs apart, wielding his Dwarf-axe" while "the bow of Legolas was singing" until "their enemies were routed and did not return" (291). These passages avoid gore and glory, but they follow a few grim depictions when "through the throat of one huge leader Aragorn passed his sword" as "Boromir hewed the head off another." It seems strange to include such precise and violent depictions of battle only to switch to distant views, but the text seems to get close enough to see war's gruesome side, only to recoil and wish for more space. This occurs many times in the *FotR* alone, as when Frodo stabs a troll's foot and "black *drops* dripped from the blade" (316, emphasis mine), and as when the sword "Andúril *came down*" upon an enemy (317,

emphasis mine), but the text avoids saying that blood dripped and some man chopped his foe's head in half. Also, when Gandalf faces the Balrog in Moria, their swords have a moment of conversation, almost to avoid engaging actual people: "From out of the shadow a red sword leaped flaming. / Glamdring glittered white in answer" (322). The text further avoids carnage when Boromir dies, as the only mention of his heroic death comes with a single sentence, "many Orcs lay slain, piled all about him and at his feet" (404). Even more to the point, when Pippin recounts the battle where in Boromir died, the text again skips the gruesome details that many people relish in films. Additionally, when Pippin explains how the Ents stormed Isengard (again, a story and not a textual description), he glosses over their kills and mentions instead how the Ents could "tear [rock] up like bread-crust" and how they were "breaking pillars, hurling avalanches of boulders [and] tossing up high slabs of stone" (553-554). This means he focuses more on the Ents' strength rather than their violence, and he measures their strength against nature rather than prowess in combat. Perhaps the Ents are strong, but they impress people with the quality alone, not because they can use it in impressive ways while eradicating their enemies. Lastly, at the battle of Helm's Deep Aragorn heroically jumps into a throng of Orcs to keep them from spilling into the fort, but the text offers no examples of whom he kills. In other words, as many battles as the text describes, it often uses language that distances itself from the carnage of battle, a sight that may be too distressing to describe.

Second, when the text *does* approach the carnage of battle, it often does so with a tone of disgust. When Rohan defends itself from a siege at Helm's Deep, they kill so many Uruk-hai that "before the wall's foot the dead and broken were piled like shingle in a storm; ever higher rose the hideous mounds" (523). This is no pile of enemies that speaks to the valor of the fort's defenders; instead, the word "hideous" suggests that no one marveled at the mounds, and the

word “mounds” suggests the funereal mounds of some ancient societies, a lamentable, not a celebratory place. Also, when Merry walks upon the battlefields outside of Gondor, he “gave little heed to the wreck and slaughter” nearby, perhaps because “stench was in the air, for many engines had been burned or cast into the fire-pits, and many of the slain also, while here and there lay many carcasses of the great Southron monsters [gigantic elephants], half-burned, or broken by stone-case, or shot through the eyes” (840). The “slain” who burned in “fire-pits” show up as an afterthought, hence the distancing, even while the stinking “carcasses” nearby depict such violence that few healthy readers could appreciate it. As a final point, some depictions of violence seem to celebrate gruesome details, but the words nevertheless repulse readers with the disgusting imagery. When Sam watches one Orc kill another in *Return of the King* (*RotK* henceforth), he sees a horrifying scene:

[An Orc] sprang on to the fallen body, and stamped and trampled it in his fury, stooping now and again to stab and slash it with his knife. Satisfied at last, he threw back his head and let out a horrible gurgling yell of triumph. Then he licked his knife, and put it between his teeth, and catching up the bundle he came loping towards the near door of the stairs (886).

The sheer bloodlust not only to “stamp,” “trample,” “stab” and “slash” a body reveals the Orc fought well beyond what was necessary. This overkill suggests he enjoyed the act, which the text emphasizes with the “gurgling yell of triumph” and the appalling way the Orc “licked his knife.” Therefore, many of the text’s depictions of war not only use devices to distance itself from carnage, but some of its violent depictions come with such awful imagery that readers cannot at all enjoy it.

Lastly, the text also repeatedly vilifies war itself, because while the forces of good implement the Just War theory (see chapter four), the characters have almost little to say in favor of such a war. For instance, at one point Aragorn argues that war is necessary albeit awful as he

justifies his mission to destroy the Ring of Power in spite of the results. He mentions that “there are some things that it is better to begin than to refuse,” meaning people must take some actions because they are the right choices, not the easy ones (430). He discusses Gandalf’s death with these lines, so despite the rightness of battle, Aragorn still mentions that it is a difficult task, or one to take on with great thought.

Faramir also degrades the glory of war, especially because he finds no pleasure from killing. When he meets Frodo in the wild of Gondor, he says he is “commanded to slay all whom [he finds] in this land without the leave of the Lord of Gondor. But I do not slay man or beast needlessly, and not gladly even when it is needed” (650). Frodo endorses Faramir, calling him both “sterner and wiser” than his brother Boromir, so his dislike of killing alerts readers to follow suit. Even still, Faramir admits that his people “now love war,” a love that means his people “can scarce claim any longer the title High” (663). The message here is clear: if a culture loves war, it forfeits nobility. Pippin shares this dislike of war, as he mentions that he is “no warrior” and “dislike[s] any thought of battle” (749). Even though he earns considerable renown, Pippin dislikes the causal acts and wishes he could avoid battle all the same. Therefore, these characters turn to war as a last ditch effort, even though they hate it, and their language reveals their disdain. If one decided to make a film out of this trilogy, this hatred for war should confront viewers boldly.

However, Jackson’s film adaptations celebrate violence through drawn out battles and added scenes of violence. When Ringwraiths attack the hobbits and Aragorn at Weathertop, the text follows Frodo as he gets stabbed and passes out; only when he awakens do readers learn that the wraiths retreated, even though Aragorn “cannot think why” (192). However, the film introduces to the fray Aragorn, who singlehandedly fends off five Ringwraiths with nothing but a

sword, a torch, and undeniable courage. To add to the spectacle, Aragorn not only frightens his enemies away, but does so with flair: he ends the encounter by hurling a torch at one wraith and lodging it in his head. As no pivotal points develop during the film's encounter on Weathertop, this added scene of violence and pizzazz serves only to entertain viewers. Additionally, Jackson's *FotR* ends with added violence and flair, as a spectacular battle plays out with heroic deeds and plenty of killing. Aragorn sacrifices himself by distracting the Uruks from Frodo, Boromir strides out of the woods to succor Pippin and Merry, and Legolas kills knives many enemies to the ground, much to the visual delight of the audience. At one point Legolas even lands several skill shots with his bow, as when he shoots an arrow strongly enough to kill an Orc, but not so strongly as to pass through the Orc to strike Aragorn on the other side. He even stabs one enemy with an arrow before he strings and fires it, and later Aragorn has an arduous battle with the captain of the Uruks, which ends with a blood-squirting decapitation. This last scene represents every aspect of violence a viewer could ask for, but Jackson made it all up, so he violates Tolkien's distance from killing. In fact, the text's *FotR* ends *before* this battle takes place, which suggests that Jackson only included it to season his film with blood. Furthermore, when the novel *does* describe this scene, it follows Aragorn as he stumbles upon the carnage after the battle has already ended. This means that Jackson not only invented a glorious battle to capstone his film, but he also includes violence only to entertain. Lastly, the novel's chapter that contains this fight is titled "The Departure of Boromir," and not "The Brave and Manly Deeds of the Fellowship." So, rather than glorifying battle, the chapter title focuses on the consequences of it to suggest that war, while necessary, produces anguish and death. In summary, Jackson's *Fellowship* relishes violence while the text distances itself from war and condemns it. If

Jackson's film were true to form, it would have less violence, and more thoughts about battle as a useful, but terrible tool.

Moving on to *The Two Towers*, Jackson again draws out some battle scenes that violate the text's reluctance for war. First, the battle of Helm's Deep dominates the last half of Jackson's film and contains the climax of the film, which communicates that this battle has vital importance. Indeed it does, as it could spell doom for the armies of Rohan, but several problems betray Jackson's stewardship of Tolkien's work. For instance, while Jackson's siege swallows twenty minutes from the moment the first dart flies to when Gimli and Legolas finish arguing about their contest (in the extended edition), the battle nibbles out only a single chapter in the text. The novel offers fifteen pages to account for this battle (a twentieth of the middle book), but Jackson prioritizes this fight to stretch it to almost a tenth of his. If screen time directly correlates with importance, then Jackson prioritizes a fight that Tolkien barely mentions. To emphasize the point, Tolkien's *Two Towers* ends after the battle as the characters discuss their next strategy, but the film misses the mark as it ends with the siege to highlight the spectacle.

Additionally, as Legolas fights at Helm's Deep, he seems desperate to get attention—at one point he throws a shield down a flight of stairs, rides it like a surfboard, and while doing so demonstrates incredible balance and marksmanship as he kills three Orcs by shooting arrows. If that fails to impress viewers, he raises the ante when he lands, as he uses his feet to launch the shield into the neck of an enemy, even as he draws more arrows from his quiver. Now *here* is a warrior bred for entertaining in battle! And who could forget his homage to Western films as he cuts a rope by shooting an arrow at it? Not only does Legolas have considerable skill, but he also entertains while using it.

The problem with all of this skillful shooting is that the text details only a single kill for Legolas during this siege, meaning Jackson only uses the additions to entertain. Again, this would not be so grievous given that films rely on visual rather than verbal stimuli, but the problem is that Tolkien's novel questions war, so any adaptation should as well. Lastly, to end the film's battle Gandalf leads an army of cavalry down a hill with the sunrise on his shoulders as the music crescendos to a melodramatic victory. If Jackson sought not only to entertain viewers but also to glorify battle, then he accomplishes his goal, even though Tolkien might groan as a result.

Jackson's film also involves a game of killing where Legolas and Gimli compete to kill the most Uruks, which deserves considerable attention. First, the text *does* include this game, but not in such a fun-loving way. As Dickerson points out, this contest garners little attention in the text, as it only depicts four kills between the pair, "and little picture" is given "even of these" (42). In other words, Legolas and Gimli do make a game of killing their enemies, but readers only see brief glimpses of this game. Additionally, Dickerson points out that, rather than chasing the murderous duo around Helm's Deep to show their kills, the text only mentions the contest "during moments of respite" which speaks to their "current state of...hope or despair" (41-42). In other words, the text not only limits the killings it describes, but it also only discusses the game when the pair must rejuvenate their bodies and spirits with conversation. Lastly, Dickerson points out that Gimli initiates the contest, and "though he is noble for a Dwarf and grows to be wiser than more others of his race," he is "yet a Dwarf and not the symbol of wisdom in Tolkien's tales" (42). Maybe Gimli initiates a game that celebrates death, but readers can see this as base given his race. Therefore, as the text downplays the context, Jackson has little textual authorization to turn it into a comic affair.

However, such minimized scenes of violence fail to restrain Jackson, nor does Dickerson's defense defend Jackson well. Gimli initiates the game in both the text and film, and while he does not represent wisdom, Legolas does as an Elf, so his participation automatically endorses the contest. This matters because he seems quite ready to play such a cruel game, as he counts his kills before Gimli initiates it. In the film when Gimli brags to his friend that he has killed "two already," Legolas answers that he is "on seventeen...nineteen" he says smiling, after he kills two more. In response to this, Gimli declares that he will "have no pointy-ear outscoring" him, so he turns back to the fight, hitting one Orc in the groin as it eclipses a ladder. This stroke seems more slapstick humorous than necessary on a field of battle, so Jackson superimposes humor on a game that the text diminishes with its occasional glances during moments of respite. Jackson relies on Gimli for comedic effect, as the film also shows one moment when Gimli stands between two ladders bashing the heads of mounting Orcs. As he bellows his score, "21, [smack], 22, [smack]" audiences laugh that only an Orc would be dumb enough to ascend a ladder with a formidable foe playing whack-an-Orc at the top, but Tolkien included no such scene, so the added, entertaining moment violates the text's somber tone. Lastly, if any element of the game elicits laughter, its ending does the most. As Gimli smokes a pipe at the battle's end, viewers realize he sits on top of a dead Uruk, who represents his last point in the game. Legolas shoots an arrow into the dead Uruk, dangerously close to Gimli's vitals, and then claims to have tied Gimli's score. They argue about who actually killed the Uruk, but again to the delight of viewers. This scene should shock people, as no one seems to question Gimli's callousness toward death by sitting on an enemy, and Legolas plays along to underscore the Dwarf's benign neglect. However, viewers simply laugh, because it is just a game, after all.

Indeed, Jackson's film entertains viewers further as viewers watch the Ents battle Saruman's forces at Isengard. As mentioned above, the text skips this encounter and tells it briefly through the eyes of Pippin, but the films offer much more than a brief, boring story with no blood. Jackson's film opts instead to depict death in ways that are, in a word, funny. When the Ents mount the walls of Isengard, many of them jump into the center to begin fighting. However, given that they are giants, a natural outlet arises for killing and laughter, as one Ent jumps and plants each of his feet directly onto Orcs, crushing them instantly. The effect is humorous, as when another Ent picks up two Orcs and rams them together head first in the air. The fact that the Ents could kill more effectively than this lends itself to humor, but again viewers receive a message that promotes rather than undermines war. As a final point, the Orcs utilize fire against the Ents, which would be grisly if the Ents were human, but audiences laugh as Ents endure the blaze and run to an oncoming torrent to put out their fires. Perhaps these scenes evoke humor, but they also undermine how the text despises violence, because audiences laugh rather than recoil from the inherent gore and sadness.

Lastly, Tolkien's novel concludes by denouncing unnecessary killing, but Jackson omits this lesson entirely. As mentioned in the second chapter, Tolkien's trilogy concludes with Frodo returning home to a ravaged Shire, as Saruman's lackeys have scorched the entire territory and hoarded all its provisions. In response, Frodo and his battle-hardened companions (Sam, Pippin, and Merry) organize a revolt to cast out the humans and reclaim their country, but Frodo cautions restraint: "I wish for no killing; not even of the ruffians, unless it must be done, to prevent them from hurting hobbits'" (986-987). He even encourages this behavior during battle, as when the revolution ends he "had not drawn sword, and his chief part had been to prevent the hobbits in their wrath at their losses, from slaying those of their enemies who threw down their

weapons” (993). This means that Tolkien’s trilogy is as much a bildungsroman as an epic, because Frodo grows from one who fears violence to one who sees it as a necessary evil, but Jackson finds such synthesis unnecessary.¹ In fact, not only does he avoid such scenes with Frodo, but he also eliminates the Scouring of the Shire, which means the films only serve as interesting stories that have no compelling thoughts about war. Granted, Jackson does give Frodo several lines that denounce killing, as when he restrains Sam (repeatedly) and Faramir’s rangers from killing Gollum, but viewers could misconstrue Frodo’s motives as needing Gollum’s help rather than his pity and disgust with killing. By avoiding this essential piece to Frodo’s characterization, Jackson avoids the ultimate message of the trilogy, to avoid killing whenever possible. Presenting violence in such a way without admonishing it undermines the integrity the films.

As a closing point on this issue, film may only *seem* more violent than writing as it relies upon visual aspects for its storytelling, but such thinking does not excuse Jackson’s glorious battle scenes, nor his glaring omissions from the text. Perhaps the text describes death dramatically, as when “Boromir hewed the head off [an Orc]” (291), but Jackson debases these scenes by adding grotesque elements, as in his *Fellowship* when Aragorn beheads an Orc in Moria and blood squirts out of the neck like a fountain. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier Jackson capstones his *Two Towers* with Gandalf charging his enemies with the sun rising and the music climaxing, but Jackson actually uses this trick twice. At the end of his *RotK*, the kingdom of Rohan arrives at Pelennor Fields with, the sun on their shoulders, the music stirring viewers from hopelessness and Tolkien’s message being completely obscured in a beautiful battle. In other words, the images may connote more glory than Jackson intends, but accomplished

¹ Frodo does have an inconsistent war strategy, as discussed in chapter two, but that point will be addressed later.

filmmakers should know their own craft well enough to anticipate this, meaning Jackson clearly dismissed the idea to downplay war.

In summary, Jackson glamorizes many scenes of war that the text either excludes or downplays, and he even inserts comedic elements into battle, and both of these problems question his stewardship. As mentioned above, he honors the text's symbolism, plot, and sense of loyalty, but in glorifying war his films are flawed. On the other hand, the text has other elements of war that authorize Jackson's enhanced violence, which suggests either that Jackson missed the point, or that the text fails to stigmatize violence consistently. The text certainly downplays or denigrates battle, but other scenes glorify it even more than Jackson does. Remember Faramir's words about his culture loving war (663): while this line is absent from the film, Jackson embodies the spirit of it in his films.

While the text exposes some awful crimes of war, however, it also undermines the distance it places readers and violence. The text may personify weapons to downplay agency, and it may discuss war in indirect ways, but grisly scenes nevertheless jump out at readers. For instance, at one point "an axe swung and swept back. Two Orcs fell headless" (522). The text may try to distance itself from Gimli as he decapitates two Orcs, but the image still sears readers, even as the film shows less violence than this at times. Also, while Legolas protects Aragorn's retreat at Helm's Deep, Legolas fires his bow, and "the foremost fell with Legolas' last arrow in his throat" (525). Over and over the text wants to avoid gore, but it also embraces it in descriptive and unnecessary ways. At one point, "through the throat of one huge leader Aragorn passed his sword" and "Boromir hewed the head off another," so the text flirts with violence, but not so much as to seem as if it enjoys doing so (291). So, perhaps Jackson shows some restraint

given such violent examples, especially as the text's distancing methods seem more and more like an impotent defense.

Furthermore, while Dickerson defends the contest between Gimli and Legolas, his defense lacks conviction, because he minimizes some serious problems. He defends the text, saying it only shows "little picture" to the few killings in the game, but he *should* ask why this contest even occurs. He tries to answer the question when he states the contest speaks to the characters' "current state of...hope or despair," because he suggests that the pair turns killing into a game to separate themselves from the sadness of killing. However, not only does he not offer this defense outright, but the text does not defend itself at all—it simply provides two warriors making a game out of killing enemies. Without discussing why the game happens, readers are left to jump to their own conclusions, which can readily point to dark humor. Additionally, Gimli may not represent wisdom in Tolkien's tales, but Legolas does, so his involvement in the game makes the game suspect, thus nullifying Dickerson's defense for Gimli. When Gimli mentions that he has slain two Orcs, Legolas mentions that he "[has] done better," meaning that even the noble races can see killing as a sport (522). Perhaps Jackson forces humor into a situation where the text has none, but he *depicts* violence where the text does as well.

In terms of violence, several noble characters seem to exude not only violence, but also bloodlust. For instance, Jackson lifts many lines from the story and places them in his films, including ones that suggests dark humor about killing. In Jackson's *RotK*, Gimli says to Legolas as they charge the Pelennor Fields that "there's plenty for the both of us; may the best Dwarf win!" Again, Gimli sees this encounter as a game, adopts a jaded view of the eminent killing, and does little more than delight the audience with these awful thoughts. While this may seem to indict Jackson for favoring violence, the line comes directly from the text, albeit from a different

scene. “There are enough for us both,” he tells Legolas outside of Helm’s Deep, suggesting that he not only sees killing as sport, but he looks forward to the act, a thought that seems inconsistent with the text’s dislike for war (523). Unfortunately, textual Gimli displays even more bloodlust when he confesses his weariness before the battle of Helm’s Deep, but give him “a row of Orc-necks and room to swing and all weariness will fall” (520). Now, killing is not only a game, but it is also exhilarating, which should shock readers, and justify Jackson’s violent tastes.

To turn to other characters, a boy from Gondor named Bergil expresses an odd thought about war, because he seems to enjoy it in spite of the risks. After he meets Pippin and the two must part, Bergil confesses that “Almost I wish now that there was no war, for we might have had some merry times,” but why does he “*almost*” wish that there was no war (754)? What benefits of war does he see? Granted, as a boy he may not understand the consequences of war, so he may instead focus on how these circumstances inconvenience him. However, this cannot be true, seeing as Gondor has been fighting Mordor for quite some time when he says this, and his father serves in the army, so he must know that war could mean the death of his family. Why, then, would he enjoy war even a little? The text offers no answer, which again forces readers to decide for themselves. As a result, the text’s stance on whether to glorify or abhor war muddies, because Bergil’s words cannot convince readers one way or the other. If the text requests readers to despise war, what better way than to have a child long for its end? However, this child only halfheartedly wishes it over, perhaps a symbol for the text’s equivocation on the matter.

Lastly, if Gimli and Legolas shoulder some bloodlust for treating war as a game, then some characters should also draw disapproval when they use games as a metaphor for war. Both Gandalf and Aragorn speak of war in such a way, as before the siege of Minas Tirith, Gandalf

mentions that “tomorrow will be certain to bring worse than today...and there is nothing more that I can do to help it. The board is set, and the pieces are moving” (743). Perhaps readers write this off, as many military strategists equate war to a game, but this metaphor still suggests lighter consequences than those that accompany war, like death and slavery. Turning war into a game reduces the consequences to victory and loss, which neglects the terrifying aspects of conflict; it overlooks immediate issues like barbaric deaths on fields surrounded by enemies; it overlooks grieving wives and children as men die.² Instead, people Gandalf sees war as a game in terms of winning or losing, and nothing more. Aragorn also uses this lighthearted metaphor to discuss war. To offer some context, after the siege of Minas Tirith Aragorn marshals capable warriors to march on the Black Gate so he can divert Sauron’s attention from Frodo, who sneaks closer to Mount Doom to destroy the Ring of Power. Therefore, Aragorn knows he risks the life of every soldier he leads, which he seems to appreciate when he states that “if this be jest, then it is too bitter for laughter” (864). He displays the grief that such a dire act demands, but he then quickly diminishes this grief by saying “it is the last move in a great jeopardy, and for one side or the other it will be the end of the game.” This means he shows that he understands the consequences, but then he disregards them with a metaphor about games. The text omits Aragorn’s motive, so readers *could* deduce that he is being either calloused or grieved as he makes light of a sacrificial strategy. It fits better with Aragorn’s characterization to uphold that he grieves his sacrifice and that of his soldiers, but with other textual examples of bloodlust and violence readers could believe, with just as much conviction, that Aragorn is a violent man who minimizes death.

² While women are quite capable warriors, in this novel they do not, save one.

Lastly, no culture exudes such bloodlust as Rohan. This should perhaps come as no surprise, since they have many connections with Old English societies.³ For example, the names of Rohan's characters draw directly from Old English, as *Théoden* means 'prince' in the ancient tongue, and their generational names share stems (Thengel begat Théoden who begat Theodred) as occurred in Old English society (Cynewulf and Cyneheard, for example). Furthermore, Aragorn quotes one of Rohan's poems that draws from the *ubi sunt* tradition in Old English literature (see chapter two), they raise mounds for their dead leaders, and Rohan values valor from combat just as this ancient culture did. However, Rohan's love of valor occasionally goes too far, especially in the battle of Pelennor Fields. To begin with, the riders from Rohan charge a force that outnumbers them, which indeed shows valor, but then Tolkien offers a frightening image:

The hosts of Mordor wailed, and terror took them, and they fled, and died, and the hoofs of wrath rode over them. And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them, and the sound of their singing that was fair and terrible game even to the City (820).

Perhaps Jackson placed some gratuitous violence in his films, but he never put jolly warriors who "sang as they slew" with the "joy of battle." Perhaps they resemble Old English society, but Rohan's warriors seem more insane than brave in this setting. The Rohirrim perhaps follow the example of their leaders, as Éomer shows considerable insanity not much later—after Théoden dies in the battle, Éomer quotes a dirge, "yet he laughed as he said them" because "once more lust of battle was on him" (829). One may wish to condemn Rohan's warriors for such conduct, but its leaders also demonstrate such "lust" and delight in war, so the culture together is flawed, not just the warriors. As if all these images do not denude Rohan enough of sanity, when

³ Many critics have drawn this conclusion, including Shippey, but while they emphasize how Tolkien's scholarship pervades his work, that scholarship exposes problems with violence.

Aragorn arrives on the battlefield, “the mirth of the Rohirrim was a torrent of laughter and a flashing of swords,” which solidifies Rohan’s culture as a clan of bloodthirsty lunatics (829). Given these awful images, is it any wonder that any film adaptation of the trilogy *might* celebrate violence?

These textual celebrations of violence indeed worm their way into Jackson’s trilogy, but he also attempts to redeem these terrible scenes with other inventions of his own. While he does infuse the battle of Pelennor Fields with considerable glory, he also exposes the agony that comes with war, as when Éomer discovers his sister lying seemingly dead on the battlefield. As men pick their way through the dead, a cry breaks out off camera, which jumps to a scene of undeniable grief. As Éomer’s face contorts and his cries continue, viewers know instantly that he has found his sister, beside he kneels, cradles her head, and weeps loudly, unashamedly, and inconsolably. On the other hand, the text has Éomer find his sister, but it makes no mention of his sorrow, which commends Jackson in his unprompted exposure of manly grief. Also, many times Jackson draws out scenes of fealty between warriors, as first with the fall of Gandalf. When Gandalf falls in the Mines of Moria, a single sentence shows that the group “wept long,” (323), and Aragorn offers a rather brittle farewell before encouraging his companions onward, “Did I not say to you: *if you pass the doors of Moria, beware?*” (324). These textual images fail to convey much sorrow, but Jackson shows the Fellowship weep and ache before Aragorn spurs them forward, the effect of which is more sorrowful than the few sentences the text offers. In other words, Jackson’s depictions of death may be more spectacular, but his depictions of grief convey compassion, even when the text does not. Additionally, when Boromir dies Jackson includes touching sentiments without any textual precedence. In the novel, Boromir’s last words in the text are “Orcs bound them,” referring to Merry and Pippin, but in Jackson’s film he tells

Aragorn, “I would have called you my brother, my captain, my king,” a much more satisfying reconciliation and departure for a warrior and friend.

Even more, Jackson takes time to characterize Faramir as thoughtful, as he lifts a line from the text to introduce this warrior. Sam speaks these lines in the text, but Jackson’s Faramir approaches a dead warrior to ask, “I wonder what his name is, where he comes from, and what lies have led him thence” before remarking that “war will make corpses of us all” (*Two Towers*). In other words, Jackson puts words in a character’s mouth to show his compassion, or the grief of killing, which makes Faramir seem not only manly, but also wise. Finally, while the battle outside the Black Gate earns only a few paragraphs in the text, Jackson takes some time to show how his characters deeply care for each other, even though he invents these scenes. Gimli grumbles that, “I never thought I’d die side by side with an Elf,” but he smiles and agrees when Legolas asks, “What about side by side with a friend?” Furthermore, when a troll advances on Aragorn in this last battle, Legolas notices the danger from afar, and plunges into considerable danger to aid his friend—he runs between combatants and exposes his back many times simply to help someone he loves. Perhaps Jackson celebrates violence more than the text, but he also focuses on the love these warriors share. Perhaps that does not redeem the carnage that he adds, but he does try to capture the loyalty that the text promotes. The films indeed contain many killings, but they seem appropriate given the text’s irregularities.

In other words, the text depicts violence in two ways: it both avoids it and glorifies war. If the text’s gory scenes should promote disgust, why then does the text also promote war’s glory? If the text wants to show the grisly carnage of battle, why avoid it at all? Faramir may suggest that a culture that loves war forfeits nobility (663), but he avoids discussing why, which leaves readers grasping for answers. Are the cultures ignoble because they love the violence?

Are they ignoble because they love an event that kills innocent people? The text is unclear, so readers must piece frayed ends together about loving and hating war. On the other hand, the film still lacks the text's (attempted) message that people who love war transform into monsters. As the Orc gave out his "gurgling yell of triumph" discussed above (886), readers may draw a parallel between this Orc and the Riders who "sang as the slew," but the films attempt no such lesson (820). The text argues that war is indeed evil, but unfortunately common, so the films miss this point as they predominantly show battle as an opportunity for glory.

Jackson's depictions of *LotR* miss the point as they fail to convey the horror of war. The text speaks a jumbled message on war, so some of Jackson's scenes are even more poignant than the text's, but these inconsistencies do not justify the violence in the films. As readers and viewers process the trilogy through book and film, they must wrestle with the fact that these media try to downplay violence, but then they also glorify battle. If the wise equate dishonor with the love of war, then they encourage readers to avoid such folly by seeing conflict as a tool, something that is useful, but not delightful. Because the film misses this crucial point, it avoids a poignant message in Tolkien's trilogy.

Introduction to the Text

Two wars began in the wake of September 11th. The first started as coalition forces invaded Afghanistan to hunt down al Qaeda, the guerilla fighters who planned and executed the attacks on the US. The second started on March 19, 2003, when President George W. Bush told the nation “we have no ambition in Iraq except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people” (Bush). Thus, the two wars began based on knowledge: the knowledge of who caused violence and the knowledge of who *would* cause violence. The campaign in Afghanistan received almost unanimous support, revealing that at the time American citizens approved of retaliatory warfare; but the Conflict in Iraq factionalized citizens, as many people protested the legitimacy of preventative measures. These wars created a pointed debate: how much knowledge does one need to justify war?

J.R.R. Tolkien asks this same question in his *LotR* as he embeds various philosophies of war into the text’s races. In doing so, he creates a spectrum, with Hobbits on the most passive end and the forces of evil on the most aggressive one. The races of Elves and Dwarves in between, and finally men balance these elements in the center. As Tolkien develops how each society defines knowledge and how they wage war, he questions wartime philosophies to propose war as a viable option, but only as a last resort. The problem is that, as much as the text condones war, it also offers a conflicted message, because it subtly undermines its own arguments. For instance, post-9/11 readers can find the trilogy justifying and even enjoying war, but some critics, like Matthew Dickerson, see it criticizing and distancing itself from combat at the same time (21). In other words, while the trilogy occasionally lauds war, its varied voices simultaneously disagree with war, which demands a thorough investigation of the book’s message on combat. This becomes evident when one examines how each society in *LotR* defines

knowledge, understands how that represents a philosophy of war, and notes how those societies change throughout the story.

Chapter Two – *The Shire*

Tolkien begins his discussion of war philosophies by examining Hobbits. They suffer from two fundamental problems, ignorance and inaction. The Hobbits focus so diligently on themselves that they have no knowledge of the outside world, hinted at by the fact that, when looking at a map, Frodo wonders “what lay beyond its edges: maps made in the Shire showed mostly white spaces beyond their borders” (42). This point seems particularly condemnatory for many reasons. First, Tolkien’s own affinity for maps confronts anyone who owns the trilogy, as it comes stockpiled with not just one, but several maps. In an indexed section entitled “Note on the Maps,” readers can find that “the original edition published in 1954-5...consists of a general map of the western regions of Middle-earth and a more detailed map of Rohan, Gondor, and Mordor” (1140). Thus, at its debut the text included four maps of its entire world, a feat the Hobbits could not manage after countless generations. The trilogy is now sold in a single volume, the last pages of which contain Stephen Raw’s map of Middle-earth, his detailed maps of each quadrant (four separate maps), and finally another map that shows the realms of Rohan, Gondor, and Mordor, the theater for most of the battles (1141-1147). The material of the book forces readers to pay attention to maps, so the book’s societies become suspect by ignoring them.

LotR’s predecessor, *The Hobbit*, also contains maps that give much more information than geographical markers. Following the Table of Contents, Thrór’s Map spreads itself over two pages. Those who have read the novel can intuitively decipher the locations and runes (or, at least *what* they are), but the map confuses first-time travelers to Middle-earth for a couple of reasons. First, and perhaps most confusingly, the map has north on the left-hand side of the page, with east lining the top—this is a Dwarf map and Tolkien’s Dwarves orient their maps to face

east.⁴ This detail may seem small, but for Tolkien to assign such a peculiar quality to a fabricated race instantly grants the Dwarves an exotic identity. Little differences stand out to travelers as much as larger ones, as any American who has visited the United Kingdom can attest little is as baffling as looking the other way to cross the street. In the same way, orienting their maps to face east makes the Dwarves foreign to readers without a single written word. Turning the map ninety degrees baffles people, so readers know of the Dwarves' identity—of their differences and unique character—before they even meet one in the text. In the landscape of Tolkien scholarship, maps reveal much more than geography.

Secondly, Thror's map further confuses first-time readers with its inscrutable runes from a foreign, fabricated language, but these also invite excitement as readers learn about these signs. While most readers cannot interpret the Dwarven runes on the map, Gandalf explains them in the book's opening chapter: a secret door leads to a mountainous hall where a dragon guards a hoard of treasure (20). Maps entice many people with the promise of adventure and new experiences, but when one seems inscrutable and later foretells of treasure and dragons, it becomes downright seductive. Later events in *The Hobbit* expose even more wonder for the Dwarves, as more of the map's details unveil themselves slowly. The company finds another secret on the map when Elrond (the Elven king of Rivendell) discovers "moon-letters" on the map (51). He explains that

Moon-letters are rune-letters, but you cannot see them...not when you look straight at them. They can only be seen when the moon shines behind them, and what is more, with the more cunning sort it must be a moon of the same shape and season as the day when they were written. The Dwarves invented them and wrote them with silver pens (51).

⁴ This is a replica of a map carried by a Dwarf named Thror. Tolkien's use of apparatuses seems to justify the scholarship of his works, as if he studied a foreign work extensively to recount a tale from long ago. However, he invented this world, raising questions about him anticipating the post-modern movement of texts being self-aware. Furthermore, Tolkien may have drawn this orientation from medieval O-T (orbis terrarium, circle of lands) maps which also face east, but for religious reasons.

Here, maps not only unlock the promise of adventure, treasure, and exotic locations, but they also blend a sense of magic and wonder with what seems like only a map turned sideways. This all means that *The Hobbit's* maps whisper about a culture's identity. Exotic, alluring, and wondrous, maps in Middle-earth do much more than reveal terrain: they teach readers about a society and conjure connotations without relying upon words.

The narrator's voice confirms the importance of geography as it focuses repeatedly on nature. Countless times during the journey, the narrator takes several paragraphs to describe the setting, which accomplishes a few effects. Often these descriptions flesh out the environment, as in the Garden of Ithilien with its "rose-brambles...iris-swords...and water-lily leaves" that decorate "a small clear lake" (636-637). However, the descriptions also depict the passing of time, as when Aragorn leads the Hobbits toward Weathertop, a ruined tower roughly halfway between Rivendell and Frodo's home. The narrative could have whisked the Hobbits and Aragorn to Weathertop with a single sentence, but it does not; instead, readers must follow the group into "a wide flat expanse of country...[that was] difficult to manage" before emerging into "the pathless wilderness" that eventually leads to "marshes [that] were bewildering and treacherous," until finally getting close enough to see Weathertop several days ahead of them (178). As the narrator takes his time escorting readers through the world, the act of reading reflects Frodo's laborious journey: it becomes a vehicle for travel as readers confront new places.

This leads to the most compelling reason for the text's attention to nature: Middle-earth is vast. As paradisiacal as Ithilien seems, Mordor's land "all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked" (902). The Elven kingdom of Lothlórien may blend many seasons into one, as the "air was cool and soft, as if it were early spring" while still conveying the "deep and thoughtful quiet of winter" (349). But the Dead Marshes outside Mordor hold countless bodies,

“all rotting, all dead” in “waters as noisome as a cesspool” that have Frodo and Sam “slimed and fouled almost up to their necks [until they] stank in one another’s nostrils” (614). This means the Hobbits’ geographical ignorance shows they ignore a large world, and thereby its locations, happenings, people, and history. This kind of self-centeredness eventually undermines Sauron (the main antagonist), who ignores the Hobbits until Gollum directs him to search the Shire for the Ring of Power (48). Had he considered the Hobbits a possible threat before, perhaps the *LotR* would end with his victory, but in focusing on himself he authors his own defeat. If ignoring the smallest societies contributes to Sauron’s downfall, then the Hobbits, who ignore the whole world, seem idiotic at best.

What does this have to do with knowledge in the Shire? After understanding the importance of maps to the trilogy, the revealing secrets of the Dwarves’ map in *The Hobbit*, as well as the effects of the narrator’s emphasis on geography, then an image such as an incomplete map implies much more than disregarding the world’s features. Knowing that maps expose a culture’s identity, readers can now deduce much from the incomplete Hobbit maps: they are ignorant of affairs beyond their borders, they focus on themselves completely and exclusively, and they either avoid or do not care for information on any society but their own. In other words, they represent isolationism, as they avoid knowledge of their neighbors and busy themselves with their own lands. Their blank maps encourage readers to suspect the Hobbits of ignorance and foolishness, because within this narrow, small society, the text reveals an ignorant people that is aware of and prefers its ignorance, so much so that they will erase others from their concern, knowledge, and cartography.

The Hobbits avoid knowledge so thoroughly that it becomes not only useless, but also suspicious to them. Readers may pause when the Gaffer gossips that odd Mr. Bilbo has “learned

[Sam] his letters—meaning no harm, mark you, and I hope no harm will come of it,” because it seems strange to justify literacy in a developed country (24). However, the Gaffer’s hope that this literacy will cause no trouble reveals the Shire’s deep-seated prejudice against knowledge: Hobbits wish to know nothing of the outside world, and also little in their own. The book’s first sentence epitomizes their narrow attention span: “When Mr. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton” (21). The story begins with a zoomed-in look at a small people with even smaller views on the world, a society ignorant of foreign affairs, suspicious of those who can read, and excited about a party when their world is poised on the brink of destruction. This party represents the Hobbits’ lifestyle through metaphor: with all the happenings in Middle-earth—enemies advancing on several fronts, war in many kingdoms, and the free nations across the continent facing complete obliteration—the Hobbits gossip about Bilbo, who “was going to be *eleventy-one*, 111, a rather curious number, and a very respectable age for a Hobbit” (22). They do not know that they owe their safety to the Dúnedain, Aragorn’s kinsmen who protect the Shire’s Eastern borders—“guarding from evil things folk that are heedless” (142); they also do not know that Gandalf the wizard’s “real business was far more difficult and dangerous” than “his skill with fires, smokes, and lights,” but they only care for the latter (25). Instead, the Hobbits define knowledge from an isolationist stance, a way that defiantly claims, “I don’t see what it matters to me or you” (44).

The Hobbits’ ignorance creates their second fundamental problem, inaction. Because their thorough isolation limits their knowledge of the outside world, they prove ill-prepared to resist the world, especially its violent problems. When the Dúnedain retreat to fight alongside Aragorn, they expose the Shire’s Eastern borders to Saruman, an evil wizard, who sends bullying

overlords to denude the Shire of its goods. Even though “the year’s been good enough” with regard to crops, Saruman’s men “do more gathering than sharing, and [Hobbits] never see most of the stuff again” (976). While away, Frodo and his companions think repeatedly of returning to the comforts of the Shire, but they return to find “no beer and very little food,” along with rations for wood-fires (977). Perhaps most revealing of all, while resting in a guard-house for the night, Sam asks for the touchstones of Hobbit culture, a smoke and conversation, but hears instead, “there isn’t no pipe-weed now...at least only for [Sauron’s] men” (977). As indulgence and merriment mark Bilbo’s birthday party, readers expect the Hobbits to resist such un-Hobbit-like behavior. However, Merry guesses rightly when he argues that “getting under cover...is just what people have been doing, and just what these ruffians like” (983). Unfortunately, due to their ignorance and isolationism, the Hobbits learn Gandalf’s lesson about pacifism the hard way: “the wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out” (82).

The Shire’s isolationism and pacifism might appear idyllic at first glance, as it did to hippies during the Vietnam era. In “Embracing the Took: Kinship between Middle Earth and Sixties Youth,” Shana Watkins addresses the way in which hippies “claimed a special bond with Tolkien’s works in the Sixties, insisting that they shared much with the nature-loving Elves and the pacifist Hobbits” (54). While hippies may have believed their lifestyle aligned with the Shire in peaceful living and keeping to themselves, Watkins argues that hippies interpreted the trilogy all wrong. She cites numerous examples of social critics lambasting the hippies’ helplessness, capsizing their delusions with their own hypocrisy: “for example, when opportunists began to mass produce counterculture fashion, hippies were the ones who were buying, feeding the

capitalism's exploitation of the counterculture" (55).⁵ The hippies may have believed their lifestyle and the Shire's to be ideal, but this inaction and helplessness betrayed their causes. This also applies to the Hobbits, especially in regard to war; in fact, *LotR* opposes pacifism and isolationism through multiple conversations and examples. Gandalf begins the criticism when he tells Frodo that "Ever since Bilbo left [he has] been deeply concerned...about all these charming, absurd, helpless Hobbits" (48). As attractive or Edenic as the Shire may seem, its inhabitants hold a worldview incompatible with reality; they are absurd and helpless, which primes them for subservience.⁶

Other cultures in the text look down on the Hobbits' ignorance and inaction, which further criticizes their isolated pacifism. As Frodo flees the Shire, he meets an Elven company led by Gildor, who seems dumbfounded at Frodo's ignorance of the Ringwraiths, Sauron's evil lieutenants. In response to Frodo asking what these wraiths are, Gildor's replies, "Has Gandalf told you nothing?" (82). Perhaps this response insults Gandalf as much as Frodo, suggesting Gandalf's reticence was unwise, but Gildor's reply also suggests that Frodo *ought* to know more than he does, especially regarding such dangerous foes. In other words, the Elves belittle Frodo's ignorance, just as the Dwarves belittle idleness. At the Council of Elrond, Glóin the Dwarf hears of Sauron's plan for worldwide domination, so he recalls the three Elven Rings of Power, "Very mighty Rings, it is said. Do not the Elf-lords keep them...are they idle?" (261). He asks, If the powerful Elves know their enemy intends harm, why do they do nothing? In this way, ignorance

⁵ This parallels the criticism that Mary Hicks heaps onto the Occupy Wallstreet protestors (Hicks, Mary B. Sunday Fun: Occupy Wall Street – Who Parented These People?" *The Disciplined Investor*. 6 Nov. 2011. Web. 9 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.thedisciplinedinvestor.com/blog/2011/11/06/sunday-fun-occupy-wall-street-who-parented-these-people/>>).

⁶ To be clear, hippies are not fault for criticizing the Vietnam War, a conflict which many people now view as pointless, but they err in misreading Tolkien's support of pacifism.

and inaction of any kind are senseless, so the Hobbits have their troubling symptoms exposed as they confront other textual voices.

Middle-earth's non-humans also criticize the Shire's isolation and passivity, as the race of tree-men called Ents demonstrate when they defend themselves from Saruman. Treebeard, their leader, knows that Saruman has cut down many trees near Isengard, Saruman's home, and he laments this treachery as he also swears action: "Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves. I have been idle. I have let things slip. It must stop!" (463). While the Ents show passivity, they also welcome knowledge, which does not allow crime to endure for long. In fact, Treebeard touches on the same logic that Glóin does about idleness when he leads his Ents to battle, "of course, it is likely enough, my friends...that we are going to our doom...But if we stayed at home and did nothing, doom would find us anyway, sooner or later" (475). Many societies in the novel condemn ignorance and inaction, so examples repeatedly crop up that disagree with the Shire's isolationism and pacifism, thus bringing these qualities into question.

The peril in Rohan, a neighboring country, also foreshadows the Scouring of the Shire, as its problems also stem from isolated idleness. When readers meet Rohan's king, Théoden, he has grown weak under a spell of Saruman, which has welcomed "some, close to the king's ear...that speak craven counsels" (426). In response to these counsels, Théoden closes his city "save to those who know [his] tongue and are [his] friends" (497). In short, he wishes to avoid fighting (pacifist), so he isolates himself rather than taking action against what news he gathers (isolationist). The connotation of "craven," when coupled with xenophobia, characterizes these as undesirable political maneuvers, confirming that cultures *should* avoid them. Furthermore, the

fact that idleness has allowed craven counsel colors both behaviors as stratagems of the enemy. Rulers who avoid “craven counsels” would take action, especially tyranny. When Éomer, a chieftain in Rohan, describes the sadness in his country, he tells Aragorn that “[Saruman] has claimed lordship over all this land, and there has been war between [Rohan and Saruman] for many months” (426). The fact that Théoden relies upon “craven counsel” after such conflict makes him suspect; therefore, other societies that display this behavior, i.e. the Shire, merit the same judgment.

Indeed, even the poetry of Rohan recalls a time of valor and laments pacifism:

Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?
 Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?
 Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?
 Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?
 They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;
 The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.
 Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,
 Or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning? (497)

A “horse and rider,” blowing horn, “helm and hauberk,” and flowing, bright hair all formerly existed in Rohan, but they are now gone. These images carry positive connotations, evidenced by the affirming use of “bright” and the questioning use of “now,” meaning some stimulus has removed them. Their absence and the poem’s retrospective gaze create a tone of lamentation felt through the remote images of “rain on the mountain” and “wind in the meadow.” Furthermore, as “Spring” and “harvest” suggest times of rebirth and abundance, these now-missing attributes (the “horse and rider,” and etc.) are likened to seasons that benefit mankind; therefore, their absence implies seasons that harm humans: summer and winter and their extreme temperatures. These lines suggest doom, sealed with the absence of the sun, as “the days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.” As night symbolizes death, readers know they have judged rightly: while Rohan once boasted of valor and wealth, those qualities have departed. As

its poetry fortifies the perils of idleness and ignorance by lamenting the loss of valor, Rohan exemplifies the consequences of such passive politics before the Scouring of the Shire. If valor departs from a society that practices isolationism and pacifism, one can predict a similar outcome for a similar society.

This poem mirrors Roman and medieval *ubi sunt* ('where are they') poetry, and in doing so sheds more light on passivity. *Ubi sunt* poetry typically takes a pessimistic view of present-day society, especially as it recalls the glory of the past to question the inglorious present. Old English poets used this mode repeatedly, as is apparent in the Old English poem "The Ruin," which grieves over a destroyed Roman city:

*Beorht wæron burgræced, burnsele monige,
heah horngestreon, heresweg micel,
meodoheall monig dreama full,
oþþæt þæt onwende wyrd seo swiþe.
Crungon walo wide, cwoman woldagas,
swylt eall fornóm secgrofra wera;*

The city buildings were bright, the bathing halls many,
gable-houses abundant, with great martial sounds,
many a mead-hall was full of revelry,
until mighty fate suddenly changed that.
Slaughter spread wide, pestilence arose,
and death took all those brave men away.

While "The Ruin" asks *ubi sunt* marvelous structures and powerful civilization, the Rohan poem asks the same of strength and the warriors who possessed it. Readers who recognize this mode of poetry understand that, while the poem itself may wonder about absent valor, the structure hearkens to a rich tradition that emphasizes the poem's elegiac tone. The text marries words of loss with a somber structure, implying that Rohan's days of nobility have ended.

However, Aragorn's poem closes with a cryptic couplet. At first, these lines seem to ask who will rebuild Rohan rhetorically, implying that none remain who can. The ruin from "dead

wood burning” certainly seems irreparable, so readers may initially believe the poem to voice defeat. But, the impossible happens in the last line, as “flowing years” return from “the Sea:” that time can return recalls the previous images of rebirth in “Spring,” which calls survivors to rebuild themselves rather than discount their capabilities. Also, notice that the rhyme scheme of the ending couplet differs from the negative answers, “They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow; / The days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.” These closing lines do *not* begin a new sequence in the rhyme scheme, but rather rhyme with the first quatrain. The question may seem rhetorical, but the rhyme scheme connects it to the former “horse and rider,” taking readers back to the beginning of the poem to suggest rebirth. The answer to “who can rebuild Rohan?” is anyone who can renew a mode of war, especially the still-living Théoden, who reverts to his old self after Saruman’s spell is broken. He insults his craven servant Wormtongue, saying that “there is yet time to clean the rust from your sword” and fight rather than sit (508). As Théoden quits idleness and rouses his country for war, he accomplishes what all of the Shire cannot—defense from Saruman’s thugs. Isolationism and pacifism certainly create problems for Rohan, but one of its poems reveals that the answer lies in action. When Théoden asks Gandalf what to do when all hope is lost, Gandalf swiftly answers, “To put your trust in Éomer, rather than in a man of crooked mind. To cast aside regret and fear. To do the deed at hand,” which the Hobbits do not do (507).

Finally, no one condemns the Shire’s foreign policy as thoroughly as Tom Bombadil, whose embodiment of pacifism draws condemnation from both the text and Tolkien himself.⁷ Tom possesses considerable power, especially over the natural world, as the text shows many times. When he makes his debut, Frodo and his Hobbit companions are in dire need, as a tree has

⁷ While navigating Tom Bombadil’s character is impossible, given that he is arguably the most enigmatic character in the novels, his actions reveal some power and perspective on conflict.

consumed and threatens to kill both Merry and Pippin. No worry, though, as a simple scolding from Tom forces the tree to relinquish its prisoners: “He then seized Merry's feet and drew him out of the suddenly widening crack. / There was a tearing creak and the other crack split open, and out of it Pippin sprang” (80-81). Tom’s wife further affirms his power, when “as if to herself” she says that, ““the trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master”” (82). Lastly, when a Barrow-wight traps and threatens the four Hobbits, Tom again comes to their rescue—after Frodo mutters an incantation, “light streamed in, real light, the plain light of day” brought on by Tom Bombadil unearthing them (93). So, Tom has considerable influence over nature, which includes Sauron’s Ring of Power. When in Tom’s home, Frodo attempts to sneak past his host by slipping on the Ring, but Tom sees Frodo, calling out: ““Hey there!’ cried Tom, glancing towards him with a most seeing look in his shining eyes. ‘Hey! Come Frodo, there! Where be you a-going? Old Tom Bombadil's not as blind as that yet. Take off your golden ring! Your hand's more fair without it. Come back!’” (88). Additionally, the Ring does not turn Tom invisible when he wears it, meaning he has considerable power over the world and its powers (87).

However, in spite of this power over nature and the Ring, Tom Bombadil and his pacifism are subject to the fate of the Ring like everyone else. At the Council of Elrond, Gandalf condemns Tom for his isolationism and pacifism, saying that ““[Tom] is withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them, waiting perhaps for a change of days, and he will not step beyond them”” (171). In other words, Tom isolates himself, but this will not save him, because, ““in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come”” (171). Gandalf states outright that isolationism and pacifism will not save Tom, powerful as he is, which means the Hobbits welcome far worse

problems in their isolation, as they cannot even imitate Bombadil's power. Lastly, Tolkien himself criticizes such pacifism. In his *Letters*, he calls Tom Bombadil's behavior "a natural pacifist view" that crumbles under pressure, because "ultimately only the victory of the West will allow Bombadil to continue, or even to survive. Nothing would be left for him in the world of Sauron" (196). Tom can hide from and resist war all he wants, but these ideals will not save him; only a wartime victory will allow him to live. If powerful friends like Tom Bombadil will die under such tactics, then the Hobbits are guilty by association, and they cannot uphold isolationism or pacifism and survive.

With all this evidence mounted against the Shire's foreign policy, a shift seems necessary as well as imminent. The text indeed admonishes isolationism and pacifism through subtle criticism of hobbits' maps, their ignorance of geography, and the blatant chidings from other cultures, but all this fails to bend the Hobbits. What, then, compels the idle and the uneducated Hobbits to change? The obvious answer may seem to be personalizing conflict, to have their homes overrun with enemies, but this does not embolden the Hobbits to fight. In fact, before Frodo and his companions return, Farmer Cotton reveals that he wanted to fight "all this year," but did not, because "folks wouldn't help" (984). So bringing war to the Hobbits does not embolden them to fight, but what *does* is the same problem that causes their troubles. When Frodo and his companions learn how the Scouring began, they learn that Lotho Baggins, a relative of Frodo's, bought up property, "a sight more than was good for him," hired some thugs for protection, and called himself "Chief Shirriff, or just Chief, and did as he liked" (989). In other words, although the Hobbits wanted to blame the ruffians for the Scouring, the trouble

actually began with a self-entitled chief, one of their own, who ran the Shire as he saw fit.⁸ In this way, Lotho becomes a symbol for the Hobbits' own culpability: his self-centeredness invites the Scouring, but the Hobbits do nothing to stop it. Saruman certainly perpetrates countless crimes that devastate the Shire, but the Hobbits allow it to happen. Although they refuse to acknowledge so, they possess the power to overwhelm their oppressors and restore order: when local farmer Tom Cotton estimates the number of thugs, he guesses, "there's not above three hundred of them in the Shire all told," a number he confidently knows they can "master...if [they] stick together" (986). In fact, when they fight off one sizable group, he remarks that it "seems almost too easy after all...I said we could master them. But we needed a call" (988). Thus, the Hobbits must blame those truly responsible for the Scouring, themselves. Just as Théoden must learn to "do the deed at hand," so must the Hobbits.

And yet, one sect of the Shire opposes stagnancy from the start, complicating this neat interpretation. Before the Hobbits fight, they strategize with Farmer Cotton who reveals that, while the thugs certainly invaded the Shire wrongfully, they did not draw first blood. When Merry argues for vengeance because "[Saruman's men] started the killing," Cotton corrects him, replying, "Not exactly...Leastways not the shooting. Tooks started that" (986). The Tooks are an ancient family whose leader claims to "be the right Thain of the Shire" given his lineage and long-standing authority over his territory (986). Readers might anticipate approval for such defiance, which Pippin immediately gives as he cries, "Good for the Tooks!" (986). Unfortunately, his support cannot convince readers of the cause, because Pippin is *not* the voice of reason among the quartet of Hobbit travelers. He does mature substantially throughout the trilogy—he emerges heroic for stabbing the Witch-King at the Battle of Pelennor Fields, and he

⁸ Lotho indeed began as "a wicked fool," says Frodo, but eventually is taken "prisoner in Bag End" by his own thugs who ultimately serve Saruman (989).

receives great honor for his leadership during the Hobbits' rebellion—but his main role is one of mischief and curiosity, which constantly plague the Fellowship. For instance, after he steals a palantír (a seeing-stone) from Gandalf, he confesses his act and begs forgiveness, but Gandalf pronounces that, “A fool, but an honest fool, you remain, Peregrin Took” (579). While he displays honesty, Pippin *remains* a fool: he was one before, and still is one now. Also, although readers learn long before that Aragorn will be king in Gondor, Pippin learns this information after 700 pages and stands “amazed.” The length of time it takes Pippin to learn an exoteric fact justifies Gandalf's scolding, that if “[he has] walked all these days with closed ears and mind asleep, [he should] wake up now!” (737). In fact, Pippin becomes more of a lightning rod more for abuse than for wisdom, so his approval of the Tookish resistance seems irrelevant at best, and condemning at worst. Perhaps the Tooks defend themselves from invaders while the text shames others for complying, but the valor of the Tooks is rendered suspect given that they initiate bloodshed, and only a fool openly approves.

While Saruman's thugs invade wrongly, which may seem to justify bloodshed, the Tooks disregard some rules of war, which further questions the rightness of their cause. First, the Tooks never had enemies in their lands to begin with, evidenced because Lotho had to “[send] his men” to subdue the Tooks, implying their remoteness (986). Because the enemy had to travel to the Tookland, the Tooks stand apart from the crimes throughout the rest of the Shire. What is more, even though Lotho “sent his men” to the Tooks, this does *not* mean bloodshed, even though they send an army. In other words, the Tooks have no enemies in their borders, nor does the text make it clear that they lost any lives, but they attack anyway, as they “won't let the ruffians come on their land. If they do, Tooks hunt 'em. Tooks shot three for prowling and robbing” (986). Such a damning account forces readers to reconsider previously established opinions about conflict,

especially as Frodo opposes death altogether, “nobody is to be killed at all, if it can be helped” (983). Since Frodo has led the group from the start, the Hobbits who rebel heed his advice in battle, and offer terms to a group of ruffians before responding to violence (987). But, the Tooks live isolated from the conflict, have not yet seen death, they escalate the violence by killing first, they use deadly measures to counter robbery without offering terms, and all of this in contrast to the call for mercy from Frodo, the embodiment of Hobbit wisdom. While the Tooks may solve their own problems with violence, their isolationism and violence do not solve the problems for the Shire, earning them halfhearted praise rather than complete approval.⁹ Isolationism raises questions, as does isolationism when one group knows that another suffers: rather than riding to the aid of the Shire, they look out only for themselves.

One source of knowledge, ancestry, dominates the Shire, and this further undermines the Tookish resistance. While the Hobbits ignore their surroundings, they possess “a passion for family history,” fittingly fixing their attention backward rather than forward (22). When Sam’s father discusses how Bilbo adopted his nephew Frodo, he mentions seemingly innocuous information, “You see: Mr. Drogo, he married poor Miss Primula Brandybuck. She was our Mr. Bilbo’s first cousin on the mother’s side (her mother being the youngest of the Old Took’s daughters)” (22-23). That is, Primula, Frodo’s late mother, descends directly from the Old Took (as does Bilbo), which means nothing to those who have not read *The Hobbit*, but this means Frodo comes from a besmirched family. Explaining Bilbo’s lineage, *The Hobbit* says “that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife. That was of course absurd, but there was still something not entirely Hobbitlike about them, and once in a while members of the Took-clan would go and have adventures” (2). Repeatedly this strange Tookish nature seems

⁹ This is the same philosophy the Elves embody, as discussed in chapter four.

responsible for adventure, as in *The Hobbit* when “The Took side had won,” and convinces Bilbo to travel with some Dwarves to a remote mountain in search of treasure (17); and again with Frodo, who feels the Tookish need to “go and have adventures” when “a great desire to follow Bilbo flamed up in his heart...so strong that it overcame his fear” (61). On the one hand, this family nature seemingly agrees with Pippin and the Tookish rebellion, especially because the stories follow this besmirched family’s progeny: “Good for the Tooks” indeed! Yet, fairies have not always had the kind dispositions they have today. Tolkien alludes to the rougher history of fairies in his essay “On Fairy Stories,” writing that fairies “put on the pride and beauty that we would fain wear ourselves,” and that the “magic that they wield for the good or evil of man is power to play on the desires of his body and his heart” (3). While these creatures display “beauty” and can use magic “for the good” of people, they nevertheless flaunt the “pride” a human would avoid, and they can also use their magic for sinister purposes.¹⁰ Furthermore, while fairies produce seemingly admirable Hobbits such as Bilbo and Frodo, they also produce Pippin and his foolish curiosity. Therefore, this fairy nature both fortifies the Tookish resistance with a sense of adventure, and simultaneously questions it with a seedy history and debased descendants. While readers may wish to laud the Tooks for their warlike posture, the text provides sufficient information to doubt this reading.

From here readers could debate whether certain actions are indeed correct according to these arguments. For instance, do the Hobbits show too much or too little restraint when they take prisoners and kill combatants? Do readers believe these thugs deserve no quarter, since they invade the Shire? Should the Hobbits instead sentence them to rebuild the Shire, or do they even

¹⁰ Shippey discusses the evil of fairies, but the point here is to draw attention to Frodo’s family.

deserve the bondage of a single night?¹¹ Furthermore, the question of fault becomes a challenge, especially the fault of starting conflict. Certainly the Hobbits deserve some blame for allowing the invasion, but what of the Tooks? Remember Glóin's earlier question about the three rings being idle: do the powerful share guilt if they allow crimes to continue? Should the Tooks take responsibility for allowing Saruman's thugs to rape the rest of the Shire? They had the power to resist in their own territory, so are they to blame, even to a small extent, for any devastation? The text does not mention this, but if it calls one powerful group into question, the three Elven Rings of Power, it questions any who could end violence. Lastly, while the Rangers thanklessly defend the Shire's eastern borders, one might wonder whether their service helped or harmed the Hobbits. Had the Rangers left the Hobbits to their own devices, perhaps the helpless Hobbits would have never adopted the attitude that "folk...near the border...have to be more on their guard," but not everyone in the interior (89). Without danger in the Shire's interior, the Hobbits relax, which allows their enemies to overrun their homes. Blaming the Rangers seems irresponsible, especially since they only protected a society the wizened Gandalf deemed helpless, and since they have no invested interest in the lands of the Shire. Certainly the Hobbits deserve most of the blame, but if the powerful belittle idleness, perhaps they deserve blame for *encouraging* idleness, because they prevent a society from learning to defend itself. Perhaps the Rangers do the Shire a *disservice* rather than a thankless favor. Therefore, isolationism creates disaster for the Shire, both from the passive Hobbits and the violent Tooks. But protecting another society to their detriment becomes questionable, as with the Rangers enabling the Hobbits to grow ignorant of war. What this shows is that the passive end of the spectrum on war philosophies has its faults, leading to interesting questions regarding a society's role in a global

¹¹ This raises many questions about prisoners and their treatment, a topic discussed in chapter five.

community. As clearly as the text upholds war as a viable option, *LotR* also offers enough evidence to question societies, regardless of their seeming benevolence.

Perhaps an unsuspected example, Gandalf demonstrates the problem of blaming people for war. As much as he helps other societies, the text nevertheless provides numerous examples that leave readers questioning him. He arrives only during times of peril, earning him the nickname “Stormcrow” as Théoden likens him to a squawking pest that accomplishes little more than a warning. Gandalf’s answer is that such a man “may be such as leaves well alone, and comes only to bring aid in time of need” (502). He defends himself, arguing in favor of conditional isolationism—one ought to leave others alone, and act only when needed. The text seems to uphold this theory (as discussed above) that isolationism has merits in leaving others alone, as Saruman’s thugs *should* have done to the Shire. However, if the text argues this position as fervently as it does, it seems strange that Gandalf takes so long to take action. Before leaving the Shire, Frodo asks how long Gandalf knew Bilbo’s ring was Sauron’s Ring of Power, and Gandalf’s answer draws from the history in *The Hobbit*: “in the year that the White Council drove the dark power from Mirkwood, just before the Battle of Five Armies, that Bilbo found his ring” (46). Appendix B in the *LotR* reveals that Bilbo would have been 51 at the Battle of Five armies, which means 60 years pass before Gandalf takes any action whatsoever, given that the story starts on Bilbo’s eleventy-first birthday. This timeframe seems excessive, even given the fact that Gandalf must discover the Ring’s secret identity for himself. Skeptics might raise an eyebrow if Gandalf waited 60 weeks or even 60 months to act, but 60 years of idleness elicits incredulity. Granted, Gandalf defends himself well, saying he should have “consulted Saruman the White, but something always held [him] back” (47). Gandalf wanted to talk to his superior earlier, but he chose to avoid it and, given Saruman’s eventual treason, Gandalf’s reservation

pans out fortuitous. But he nevertheless accepts Saruman's counsel blindly, despite his reservations. He tells Frodo that "when the Rings were debated in the Council, all that [Saruman] would reveal to us of his ring-lore told against my fears. So my doubt slept—but uneasily" (47). Therefore, Gandalf suspects Saruman for quite some time, but he accepts his counsel in spite of these fears. One might accept that Gandalf has his doubts about Saruman, even though they rest "uneasily," but readers may wonder why they rest at all, since he knows Saruman withholds information? He does not say that Saruman spouts a wealth of information that assuaged him; he says, "all that [Saruman] would reveal," suggesting Saruman reserves some facts rather than sharing them. Gandalf seems to remain idle, despite overwhelming evidence that he should act.

To summarize, Gandalf trusts a man he suspects, belies his fears despite knowing that Saruman conceals information, and he does this for 60 years as Sauron grows stronger. Now, Gandalf deserves no more blame for the war than any other force of good; this in no way suggests that he is responsible for Sauron's war. And yet for far too long Gandalf commits the same faults that plague the Hobbits, as he confesses: "I watched and I waited" (47). One might argue that his actions during the war exonerate him completely for his initial idleness, but if the Hobbits shoulder guilt for the Scouring of the Shire, then Gandalf must shoulder some too for allowing Sauron to come to power. He admits this in the Council of Elrond, "There I was at fault...I was lulled by the words of Saruman the Wise; but I should have sought for the truth sooner, and our peril would now be less" (244). Elrond excuses him, and readers might as well; but, through the text's discussion on war, he certainly owes this apology, so his actions are perhaps more indebted payment rather than altruistic sacrifice.

Ultimately, *LotR* argues not only that isolationism and pacifism seem incompatible with reality, and that they also expose citizens to devastating consequences. When war overruns

passive characters in the novel, the aggressors do not hold all responsibility, because the helpless Hobbits must accept their fault, adapt to change, and embrace war during times of defense. However, societies must follow certain rules during war: offer terms, avoid unnecessary violence, help others when possible, and avoid running a war for allies. This becomes plain with the quartet of Hobbits: as they become enlightened, they initiate action for all of the Shire, but action they view as agreeable. The Shire raises many questions about war, but it seemingly approves of defensive and sacrificial combat, even as it questions various political maneuvers that enable violence. Although the text endorses combat, it seems to disagree with itself, as if it cannot endorse combat altogether. The Hobbits come to embrace conflict and defend themselves, but the novel suggests there is still political work to do.

Chapter Three – *Forces of Evil*

While the US government assured its citizens otherwise, the American military failed to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq at the beginning of the Iraq Conflict. This raised the question of how much a government must know to justify war: can nations fight because they *believe* a problem exists, or must they seek concrete evidence, even if doing so they expose themselves to attack? While these questions still plague politics, the forces of evil in *LotR* have a rather aggressive answer to them: the hobbits' suspicion of knowledge cages them in the Shire, but the forces of evil hunger for power, which flings them through the world to find it. Knowledge becomes their idol, as any scrap of information that could either strengthen them or weaken their enemies becomes paramount. No doubt these characters are ruthless, but, as many Americans asked after the attacks of 9/11, why? Why are they evil? Moreover, what are the effects of their domineering foreign policy? The answer to these questions lies in Tolkien's religion: Satan and evil beings in Catholicism mold the evil forces in the trilogy to suggest that an unrestrained pursuit of knowledge destroys a culture.

To start with, a religious approach to *LotR* yields a considerable paradox: while Tolkien was Catholic, his trilogy avoids the religion altogether. In his *Letters* he discusses his religious views and Catholicism repeatedly; in fact, in a letter to his son, he waxes more spiritual adviser than professor as he reflects, "I become less cynical rather than more – remembering my own sins and follies; and realize that men's hearts are not often as bad as their acts, and very seldom as bad as their words" (337). Furthermore, Tolkien not only supported religion, but also upheld it strongly; as many people know, he strongly influenced the conversion of C.S. Lewis from atheism to theism and, eventually, Christianity.

Additionally, many scholars analyze Tolkien's writing through a Christian lens. Shippey

remarks that Tolkien felt strongly convinced about “the identity of man and nature...it was probably his strongest belief, stronger even than his Catholicism (though of course he hoped the two were at some level reconciled)” (131-132). Additionally, Carpenter’s biography outlines Tolkien’s religion as completely dominated by Catholicism. In other words, while readers would not know it from *LotR*, Tolkien clung tenaciously to his religious faith throughout his life.

Despite his religious convictions, Tolkien still avoids any blatant references to religion in his trilogy. He does fill his text with religious references, as his *Letters* reveal that the gods of Middle-earth stem from a monotheistic creator (194), and he also writes that “God...only peep[s] through in such places” of the novel that mention some external force governing the world (201); however, not once does he shove his beliefs onto his invented cultures, nor does he ever discuss these cultures’ religious practices. The closest he edges to a spiritual plane is through burial rites and a quasi-blessing before a meal.

As the hobbits travel to Rivendell, they encounter mounds that contain rulers from a long-withered kingdom. Emerging from a spell of sleep, Frodo realizes that he and his companions lie inside a mound:

...he saw lying beside him Sam, Pippin, and Merry. They were on their backs, and their faces looked deathly pale; and they were clad in white. About them lay many treasures, of gold maybe, though gold chains were about their waists, and on their fingers were many rings. Swords lay by their sides, and shields were at their feet (137).

This scene conjures religion, but vaguely. Readers may liken it to Egyptian pharaohs buried with their riches for the afterlife, and they may also recall the Vikings who sent their warriors to heaven with the weapons of the foes they beat in battle.

These images of burial apply to other cultures in the trilogy as well, as Balin’s tomb resembles a sarcophagus in Moria (311-312), Rohan buries their rulers in mounds outside Edoras

(496), and Gondor buries its rulers in a sacred hall, in which Denethor wishes for an ancient burial tradition with a “pyre...no tomb...we will burn like heathen kings” (807). Again, readers may deduce their own ideas about religion from these burial rites, but Tolkien inserts nothing into the text to declare the characters’ religion.

Another nonspecific religious element is a quasi-blessing that Faramir and his company offer before a meal. Before Frodo and Sam eat with Faramir, he and “all his men turned and faced west in a moment of silence,” which he explains as them looking “towards Númenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be” (661). This blessing, and the burial rites like it, suggests some religious power, but it limply points to that power without any solid commitment. It seems odd that Tolkien’s religious beliefs influenced him so strongly, because readers would never know it from the trilogy alone.

Thus, a religious approach to *LotR* seems paradoxical, given Tolkien’s strong beliefs and the text’s lack of religion, but those strong religious convictions nevertheless echo throughout the story. In fact, in his *Letters* Tolkien calls his trilogy “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work,” which readers may see when they compare the text’s forces of evil with those in Christianity (172). The material of the trilogy offers little background information on the text’s sinister characters, but four years after Tolkien died his son Christopher published *The Silmarillion*, which describes (among other things) the beginnings of Middle-earth. The story begins with Ilúvatar, the supreme god, speaking the world, its creatures, and several god-like figures into existence. One of these god-like figures, or Vala, is Melkor, who receives “the greatest gifts of power and knowledge” among all the Valar (plural for Vala), and in fact he “had a share in all the gifts of his brethren” before he opposes Ilúvatar and is cast out of his presence (16). These two stories of creation and Melkor’s fall have biblical parallels, the most obvious of

which is the story of creation in Genesis, when God speaks, and the universe takes form.

However, Melkor's story also mirrors Lucifer's in the book of Isaiah:

How you are fallen from heaven, / O Day Star, son of Dawn! / How you are cut
down to the ground, / you who laid the nations low! / You said in your heart, / 'I
will ascend to heaven; / I will raise my throne / above the stars of God; / I will sit
on the mount of assembly / on the heights of Zaphon (Isaiah
14:12-13)

To complete the symbolism, as Lucifer falls and earns the name Satan, so goes Melkor: when he un.masks himself and opposes his creator and the other gods, an Elf renames him Morgoth, “the Black Foe of the World, and by that name only was he known to the Eldar ever after” (79). Thus, Morgoth becomes a satanic figure—he awakens from benevolent intent with mighty blessings, but he grows jealous, “envying the gifts with which Ilúvatar promised to endow [Elves and men]; and he wished himself to have subjects and servants, and to be called Lord, and to be a master over other wills” (18). Although, it may seem paradoxical to discuss religion in a text devoid of religious conversation, the text lends itself to such conversation through its strong Christian parallels.

If readers believe these parallels are either accidental or meaningless, they err on both counts. Tolkien does not haphazardly embed Christian elements in his trilogy; instead, he addresses a hard question: how could evil develop or endure if a supreme God loves mankind? To answer, Elrond states that “nothing is evil in the beginning,” which means characters destined for nobility corrupt themselves into enemies (261). In other words, just as Ilúvatar creates Melkor who *becomes* Morgoth, so too does the Christian God create Lucifer who *becomes* Satan. In an example from the text, a man named Wormtongue turns traitor to his king, Théoden, who wishes to kill his unfaithful subject. However, Gandalf intervenes: “See, Théoden, here is a snake! With safety you cannot take it with you, nor can you leave it behind. To slay it would be

just. But it was not always as it now is. Once it was a man, and did you service in its fashion” (509). Wormtongue shows his true colors, but he develops wickedness rather than always being wicked. Tolkien uses such religious parallels to argue that evil stems from choice, not vague determinism.

Additionally, Christianity inheres not only in how Middle-earth’s villains develop, but also in how they multiply. One may readily understand how Lucifer and Melkor choose damnation, but they also captain legions, and readers may wonder how their armies ever grow with such a malicious campaign. Both the *Bible* and *LotR* show that these villains lack the power to create *ex nihilo*—they cannot build sentient beings through the power of their voices as both God and Ilúvatar do. Therefore, the wicked armies must also *choose* wickedness. To unpack this, consider the story of the Fall of Man in the book of Genesis:

But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Genesis 3:4-6)

The serpent’s temptation works because it offers no mere fruit, but rather equality with God through wisdom. Its words have some truth, because Adam and Eve certainly realize the difference between good and evil after they eat, but the serpent tells only a half-truth as it distorts knowledge for its own purposes. In the same way, Middle-earth’s villains multiply their numbers by distorting knowledge, an idea the text confirms when Frodo explains that “the Shadow...can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own” (893). To show this, compare the serpent’s temptation with Saruman’s as he offers Gandalf a co-starring role in worldwide dictatorship:

A new Power is rising...We may join with that Power. It would be wise,

Gandalf...there will be rich reward for those that aided it...the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it...approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order...there need not be...any real change in our designs, only in our means. (253)

Saruman tempts Gandalf not with power or riches, but the desire for “Knowledge, Rule, Order,” the noble practices that benevolent leaders wish for their people. In this light, joining with Saruman seems ideal, but this is corrupted knowledge. Gandalf knows that “only one hand at a time can wield the One, and [Saruman] know[s] that well,” so this offer will only twist Gandalf into a servant, not a powerful ally (253). While using words that resemble the serpent’s temptation, Saruman indeed chooses wickedness for himself, but he relies on corruption to convert people into slaves.

While Saruman seeks allies through corrupted knowledge, Morgoth (again, Melkor after he falls) writes the book on this tactic. To build his armies for wars against the other Valar, Morgoth abducts creatures to corrupt them into his soldiers. To start with, the dreaded, countless Orcs originally come from Elves. *The Silmarillion* reveals how, eons before *LotR*, Morgoth captures some Elves and perverts them in his dungeons to rival the Elves in combat. The material of *LotR* explains that these corrupted Elves survive the cataclysmic ending of their world by hiding in mountain caves, which become their preferred homes until the stories of *The Hobbit* and *LotR* begin with Orcs aplenty (Foster, 387). The same corruption characterizes the Uruk-hai, who Foster explains as a “strain of Orcs bred by Sauron” (513). While Orcs prove formidable, they come with some problems, as many copies do: they cannot travel under daylight and they stand shorter and scrawnier than most human warriors. To level the playing field, Sauron abducts men and crossbreeds them with Orcs to morph his minions into taller, stronger foes who can travel by day, the Uruk-hai (513). So, while readers may hate the Orcs and Uruk-hai for their treachery (and rightly so), their inception demonstrates Elrond’s point: these creatures do not

awaken malevolent; rather, they *become* malevolent through environmental factors. Perhaps they are evil, but not because they are inherently so.

Trolls and Balrogs also devolve into wickedness. Trolls do not emerge from Ilúvatar's creativity, but rather from Morgoth's twisted experiments. Foster writes that "Trolls were originally bred by Morgoth in the First Age from some unknown stock, perhaps in imitation of Ents" (496). In other words, Morgoth created trolls using the same formula as that for his Orcs: he abducts one creature and bastardizes it into another species to match the strength of his foes. In fact, as the Ents march toward Isengard with Merry and Pippin, Treebeard reveals this quite bluntly:

'Will you really break the doors of Isengard?' asked Merry.

'Ho, hm, well, we could, you know! You do not know, perhaps, how strong we are. Maybe you have heard of Trolls? They are mighty strong. But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves. We are stronger than Trolls. We are made of the bones of the earth' (474).

As Treebeard explains the genealogy of his counterparts, he furthers the theme of evil developing from choice and corruption rather than intelligent design.

This formula of corruption also applies to Balrogs. While not in the books, Peter Jackson's film adaptations allude to the fall of the Balrogs, as Gandalf describes one as "a *demon* of the ancient world" (*Fellowship of the Ring*, emphasis mine). Critics may ask how a demon chooses to be evil, but Foster explains that these Balrogs are "Maiar who rebelled with Melkor" (39). "Maiar" is a term similar to angels, and these beings serve the Valar in Valinor, or heaven. However, when Melkor rebels and becomes Morgoth, many Maiar follow him, metamorphosing themselves into their demonic counterparts, Balrogs. More and more creatures add to Morgoth's

arsenal, but these characters do so from the will of evil and not the designs of the creator.¹²

At the top of *LotR*'s power structure, Saruman and Sauron also fall from lofty heights. Saruman's beginnings may initially confuse readers, as the text offers little more on wizards than some hints through Gandalf. For instance, when Gandalf the Grey returns to Middle-earth as Gandalf the White, he makes two interesting claims. First, when some characters suspect he is Saruman, he answers that "Indeed I *am* Saruman, one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been" (484). The words "should have been" suggest intent, meaning someone designed Saruman to be better than the evil dictator of Isengard, his fortress. This leads one to ask what authority governs the wizards, and what role does Gandalf fill that Saruman failed? Unfortunately, *LotR* offers no answer to these questions; in fact, it only exacerbates that itch with Gandalf's second claim. While describing his resurrection he explains that "Naked I was sent back — for a brief time, until my task is done" (491). The words "sent back" mean Gandalf does not return on his own accord, but rather that some entity sends him. Who does the sending? The end of the trilogy offers no answer. Only in *The Silmarillion* can readers rest their curiosity, because Tolkien finally explains the origin of wizards. In a section entitled "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age," readers learn that about 2,500 years before Frodo destroyed the Ring, the following events occurred:

There appeared in the west of Middle-Earth the Istari, whom Men called the Wizards...afterwards it was said among the Elves that they were messengers sent by the Lords of the West to contest the power of Sauron, if he should arise again, and to move Elves and Men and all living things of good will to valiant deeds (299).

This means that the Valar send the wizards to Middle-earth as sentinels against Sauron, so

¹² This raises interesting questions about pity and mercy: if Orcs, Uruks, and Trolls became evil through another's will, do they deserve mercy? If so, how much? I will engage these questions in chapter five.

Saruman defies divine authority when he allies with his declared foe. Indeed, Foster deduces that “the Istari [wizards] were Maiar,” the class of angels that serve the Valar, or gods. Therefore, Saruman comes from Valinor to combat a threat, meaning he has designs for noble purposes, but his lust for power corrupts his purpose. He follows Melkor's path to destruction, showing that Middle-earth’s people and angels can choose right from wrong. So, when Saruman tempts Gandalf, he argues that they “may join” with Sauron to “direct its courses,” proving he not only chooses corruption once, but he also chooses corruption after he falls.

Lastly, Sauron also follows Melkor's descent to the letter. Once again, readers must consult *The Silmarillion* to learn Sauron’s tragic story:

Among those of [Morgoth's] servants that have names the greatest was that spirit whom the Eldar called Sauron...and was only less evil than his master in that for long he served another and not himself. But in after years he rose like a shadow of Morgoth and a ghost of his malice, and walked behind him on the same ruinous path down into the Void (32).

Sauron is a Maia, or angel, but he serves Morgoth in many wars against the other Valar. After his master finally loses the war and suffers imprisonment, Sauron flees to save himself rather than risk the same fate. Once he escapes, he emulates his master's plans by twisting both men and Elves to his will. Foster explains that he “corrupted many races of men...seduced many groups of Elves” and eventually uses his minions to forge the “Rings of Power, by which [he] hoped to ensnare the Free Peoples” of Middle-earth (435-436). As a satanic figure in the trilogy, Sauron rightly earns the nickname Sauron the Deceiver as he advocates the same method for gaining power as does his master: corruption.¹³ He not only chooses evil when he falls, and he not only corrupts other beings to populate his armies and fortify his power, but he also seeks to dominate the will of others through deceit. Sauron may follow Morgoth's footsteps to become the ultimate

¹³ The Bible’s book of John 8:44 calls Satan the “father of lies.”

enemy of Gandalf and all other "living things of good will," but he does so through his own choices, not the will of Ilúvatar. He comes with higher purpose, but in breaking it he becomes the enemy.

To make one final point, choice affects more entities than just characters in the *LotR*. First, many natural elements in Middle-earth become horrible through the consequences of evil. The text's prologue has a rather curious sentence for those who do not know the history of the trilogy, because it mentions "Greenwood the Great" without a moment of explanation. This location supposedly lies east of the Misty Mountains near the Anduin River, but maps of Middle-earth show this space occupied by a forest called Mirkwood. While puzzled, readers may eventually learn that these places are one and the same, as Greenwood "became darkened and its new name was Mirkwood" (3). The darkness in Mirkwood may surprise only a few readers, given that nearly 15 years before the trilogy was published *The Hobbit* describes this place as pitch black and filled with evil. But, this darkness stems from a character called the Necromancer, or Sauron in disguise, who lay there in wait until restoring his power in Mordor (1064). In other words, this place becomes evil because an evil character corrupts it from a beautiful forest to a nightmarish lair.

Choice indeed devastates nature, as not only Mirkwood, but also the mountain of Caradhras, shows. This anthropomorphized mountain seems to hate travelers, easily seen when it pummels the Fellowship for trying to cross it. As the mountain hurls "wind," a "blinding blizzard," and "stones...from the mountain-side...[to whistle] over their heads," Boromir admits to the Fellowship that "there are fell voices on the air; and these stones are aimed at us" (281-282). The mountain begrudges the presence of the Fellowship, but it turns out it does so with good reason, as Aragorn reveals that "there are many evil and unfriendly things in the world that

have little love for those that go on two legs” (282). While this does not reveal why Caradhras loathes humans, one can deduce its rationale from another natural element: a tree called Old Man Willow, who hates humans so much that, when the hobbits are between the Shire and the town of Bree, it captures Merry in its roots and draws him inside its trunk. Sam and Frodo attempt to burn Merry out, but Merry protests, screaming from inside the tree, “Put it out! Put it out! ...He’ll squeeze me in two if you don’t! He says so!” (116). This bloodthirsty behavior seems odd for nature, but Tom Bombadil unveils the history of Old Man Willow's forest: as he speaks, his “words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were...filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers” (127). The forest may hate people, but it does so in response to several crimes that people commit against the trees. Caradhras and nature seems cruel, but usually due to the consequences of sin, not a sinister disposition.¹⁴

Several items and structures in the trilogy also serve sinister purposes due to corruption. For instance, a number of wicked characters communicate with Sauron through items called palantíri, which the trilogy explains as “Seven Seeing-stones” that are “gifts of the Eldar” that allow instant communication over long distances (1013). However, as the kingdoms with these stones fall into ruin, enemies claim several stones, including the ones in Isengard and Mordor, which allow talks between Saruman and Sauron. While these channels of communication are originally gifts to valiant men, they eventually serve the enemy, because the powers of choice can twist any good to serve evil. Indeed, because Sauron possesses one of these stones, he can

¹⁴ The text does show one such crime that humans perpetrate against nature, when Saruman causes both the rape of Fangorn Forest for his war, and the Scouring of the Shire for revenge in his defeat. Passages such as these have led to an environmental reading of the trilogy, particularly “Ents, Elves and Eriador: the Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien,” that remains consistent with Tolkien's philosophy on choice and corruption leading to evil.

work his will against others from afar, like Denethor and Pippin. Occasionally Pippin suspects Denethor of his knowledge, as he does when he “[marvels] at the amount [Denethor] seemed to know about a people that lived far away, though it must...be many years since Denethor himself had ridden abroad” (789). This suspicion proves valid when, as war rages outside his city, Denethor seeks to kill himself, because in spending countless night with a palantír, seeing what Sauron wanted him to see, he believes that “against the Power that now arises there is no victory” (835). While these palantíri are tools, they can cause harm in the hands of fools.

Foolishness indeed characterizes Pippin when he seizes a palantír despite Gandalf's warning. When he examines the stone, he later explains “[he] saw things that frightened [him],” including Sauron who “came and questioned” poor Pippin. He further explains that “[Sauron] laughed at [him]...it was cruel...it was like being stabbed with knives” (579). These stones offer considerable knowledge, as they allow people to speak instantly when technology lacks the means, but with wicked intent they become tools for destruction rather than aid. In the hands of Sauron, Denethor, and Pippin, these stones become dangerous rather than helpful.

Finally, consider the Rings of Power. The forces of good have the Elven Rings, which are made for “understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained” (262). These rings encourage noble virtues, because they only reflect the restorative nature of the Elves. On the other hand, Sauron's Ring of Power contains the will to dominate, so it plays a sexier, more seductive role. Many characters demonstrate this will when they consider possessing the Ring. When Frodo asks Gandalf if he would take the Ring, Gandalf recognizes that, while with the Ring he would have “pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good,” he also knows that “the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly” in his hands, because he could not control himself (60). Later, Frodo offers the Ring to Galadriel, who admits that she “greatly

desired to ask” for the Ring so she could “not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and Night” (356). Lastly, as Boromir attempts to beguile the Ring from Frodo, he argues that “true-hearted Men” such as he “would not be corrupted” by the Ring; instead, it would “give [him] the power of Command...[to] drive the hosts of Mordor” (389). All three of these characters seek the Ring for noble purposes (pity, beauty, and command), but their inability to control it means they would inevitably serve Sauron. This Ring takes the will of others and bends it to a more sinister cause: control. The Ring unmasks the schemes of the wicked as it manipulates good intent to serve evil instead.

Hence, Tolkien subtly blends religion with his trilogy by discussing the power of choice. As Melkor becomes Morgoth, he seeds all other evil creatures, Orcs, Uruks, Trolls, Balrogs to even his ally Saruman. The choice to become evil also explains the corruption of several natural environments and items that can serve both powerful and malicious purposes. This may all seem straightforward, but intuitive readers will unpack this further to uncover Tolkien’s finer point about religion: in structuring evil this way, he not only explains evil’s beginning, but also its inevitable demise. In each of these cases, good *must* exist for evil to develop. In other words, good can thrive apart from evil, but evil depends on good not only to thrive, but also to be. As they corrupt others to facilitate power, the forces of evil in the *LotR* resemble an expansionist empire that requires repeated conquest to fuel its existence. Because evil can produce nothing that naturally regenerates on its own, it must act as a parasite on good to perpetuate itself. This proves especially true when readers examine the fortresses for evil characters, the actions of evil characters, and the role of terrorism.

While the text’s enemies possess several fortresses, Sauron and his minions do not build any of them. Orcs build the tower in which Sauron lives, and Saruman converts Isengard from a

tranquil tower to a war factory, but they do not lay the foundations for these bases. To begin in Mordor, when Orcs capture Frodo and take him to the tower of Cirith Ungol, Sam realizes, “almost with a shock, that this stronghold had been built not to keep enemies out of Mordor, but to keep them in. It was indeed one of the works of Gondor long ago, an eastern outpost of the defences of Ithilien” (880). Long before Frodo and his story with the Ring, the kingdom of Gondor has considerable power during the first war of the Ring, in which Isildur cuts the ring from Sauron. Before their power dwindles, Isildur and his brother build several fortresses along the borders of Mordor to keep the land under surveillance and to serve as forward bases during war. However, once the kingdoms erode and Sauron eventually reclaims power, evil forces occupy these structures, including Cirith Ungol. The same fate befalls the entrance to Sauron's land, where “stood the Teeth of Mordor, two towers strong and tall...built by the men of Gondor in their pride and power” (622). Again, after the kingdom of Gondor weakens, Sauron takes these outposts as his own and builds a wall between them to create the Black Gate. Sauron's minions also capture a fortress called Minas Ithil, Tower of the Moon, built by Gondor, but they rename it Minas Morgul, and there the Witch King reigns during the trilogy. To move west, Isengard eventually becomes an assembly line that streams forth the deadly Uruk-hai for war. However, when Gandalf and his company approach Isengard after the battle of Helm's Deep, the narrator describes the splendor it held before falling prey to Saruman: “once it had been green and filled with avenues, and groves of fruitful trees, watered by streams that flowed from the mountains to a lake” (541). Despite its ruin, where “no green thing grew there in the latter days of Saruman,” it once boasted an Edenic surrounding, a fortress that the “mighty works the Men of Westesse had wrought there of old” (541). As neither Sauron nor Saruman have any qualms about hijacking the works of others to expand their power, they prove that they depend

on good both to thrive and to function.

Not only do evil's structures depend upon good, but their actions also demonstrate their dependency. For instance, Saruman uses considerable subterfuge to keep Sauron from finding the Ring, not because it is a noble task, but because he wants it for himself. To recall this thesis's previous chapter, Gandalf dates his suspicions of Bilbo's ring to "the year that the White Council drove the dark power from Mirkwood." Now, at this time Saruman suspects that the One Ring is in a river where the last known ring-bearer died, and he further suspects that Sauron also knows this. So when the White Council drives Sauron out of Mirkwood, they do so because Saruman, according to Appendix B, "agrees to an attack...since he now wishes to prevent Sauron from searching the River" (1064). This means that even as Bilbo finds Sauron's Ring of Power, Saruman has plans to wield it. The text's ambiguity might suggest a positive reading of Saruman: perhaps he orders the attack to prevent Sauron from obtaining the Ring. But, the appendix's entry before this one explains that "Saruman discovers that Sauron's servants are searching the Anduin [River]...and that Sauron therefore has learned of Isildur's end. He is alarmed, but says nothing to the Council" (1064). If Saruman has no ulterior motives for the Ring, why does he keep this troubling information from his peers? The answer is purely speculative, since again the word "alarmed" does not necessarily connote deception. However, because Saruman's purpose was to prevent Sauron from rising to power, any action he avoids that enables Sauron ultimately thwarts his divine charter. Furthermore, he would never know as much as he does about the Ring, nor would he have the power he does, unless he has a divine charter from the Valar. Saruman was sent for a purpose and imbued with the power to execute that purpose, but he plots his own rise to power for over 80 years, and he acts in the White Council only to facilitate his search for the One Ring. The Hobbits may fear knowledge and thus keep to themselves, but

Saruman uses it to buttress his own strength, that is to find the Ring. He seeks to expand his power by any means possible, including violating his given purpose as a wizard.

Additionally, when Saruman sues Théoden for peace he again relies upon the existence of good and the pursuit of knowledge for his own benefit. When Gandalf and Théoden interrogate Saruman at Isengard, Saruman attempts to ingratiate himself, asking, “Will you have peace with me, and all the aid that my knowledge, founded in long years, can bring?” (565). It seems wise enough to trust an ancient and learned wizard, but Théoden sees through this ruse. He answers, “You are a liar, Saruman, and a corrupter of men’s hearts...even if your war on me was just...what will you say of your torches in the Westfold and the children that lie dead there?” (566). Again Saruman offers the benefits of knowledge, just as the serpent does; in this case, Saruman hopes that Théoden also idolizes knowledge, so in offering some he may bargain for his sins. The point here, though, is that Saruman could offer abundant knowledge, but his offer would be meaningless if knowledge was not in itself good. He is trying to capitalize on his advantage of wisdom, but that means wisdom is good apart from Saruman, thus his dependency. Also, he hopes to endure due to mercy, but he cannot accept it even when it is offered to him in the Shire: “I hate it!” (996). Even in defeat Saruman sticks with the expansionist philosophy that ensnares him, but he fails to realize that all he can do is corrupt. He could not offer knowledge or plead for mercy if these ideas did not exist first, proving not only his dependency, but his ultimate inferiority.

No image emphasizes how greatly evil depends on good more than the ways in which the armies of the wicked survive the choking terrain of Mordor. Peter Jackson's film adaptations depict Mordor as a dry, fire-ridden desert with no lights except those erupting from Mount Doom and the Eye of Sauron. The description in the text offers no more welcome, as Frodo and Sam

find a “tangle of thorny bushes,” wherein Sam suspects the “thorns must be a foot long by the feel of them” (896). Even more, in the distance Mount Doom is “belching forth a great fume that, beaten upwards by the opposing airs” chokes the bowl of the mountains (899). This landscape does not connote farmland, so readers may wonder how the vast armies of Mordor endure such a climate. To demonstrate how Orcs and evil characters do not just survive, but rather thrive in this area, the narrator hints at their numbers when Aragorn leads an army as a last ditch effort to assail the Black Gate: “there marched up an army of Easterlings,” and “down from the hills on either side of the [black gate] poured Orcs innumerable,” and “all about the grey mounds where [Aragorn's army] stood, forces ten times and more than ten times their match would ring them in a sea of enemies” (873). This mighty host gushes out of Mordor, and they seemingly survive on smoke and ash since these are the only abundant resources in their land. While readers may scratch their heads as to the logistics of such an army eating healthy foods and drinking water, they get their answer as they follow Frodo and Sam to Mount Doom:

Neither [Sam] nor Frodo knew anything of the great slave-worked fields away south in this wide realm, beyond the fumes of the Mountain by the dark sad waters of Lake Núrn; nor of the great roads that ran away east and south to tributary lands, from which the soldiers of the Tower brought long waggon trains of goods and booty and fresh slaves. Here in the northward regions were the mines and forges, and the musterings of long-planned war (902).

While the forces of evil cannot survive unless they expand and enslave others, while they stamp out nature wherever they go, and while they seek to eradicate the good creations that propagate life, they inherently depend on these resources for their own existence. They cannot live without food or water, but they seek to control it to buttress their own strength. If the forces of evil depend on good, nothing exemplifies that more than their inability to feed themselves.

The text's forces of evil prove their inferiority yet again through their primary war tactic, terrorism. When Aragorn explains the Black Riders to the four Hobbits in Bree, the following

exchange occurs:

'What will happen?' said Merry. 'Will they attack the inn?'
 'No, I think not,' said Strider...that is not their way. In dark and loneliness they are strongest; they will not openly attack a house where there are lights and many people, not until they are desperate...but their power is in terror (170-171).

The captains of evil rely primarily on terror, because they avoid united enemies and would rather frighten others into irrational decisions than risk a face-to-face encounter where the parties have equal odds. Their terrorism reveals itself as a cloud that “will overshadow the last armies...cutting off the sun” (487). When a Nazgûl screams high above Frodo and Sam, in Mordor “its terror was far greater: it pierced them with cold blades of horror and despair” (593). Also, the Witch King is “crowned with fear” (691); he is a “spear of terror in the hand of Sauron” (800). He further uses terror through invisibility, as “a crown of steel he bore, but between rim and robe naught was there to see, save only a deadly gleam of eyes,” so he seems like a killer lurking in shadows (822). Other evil characters rely on tactics of fear, as at the Siege of Gondor Orcs launch the heads of killed Gondor soldiers over the walls into Minas Tirith (804), and the Nazgûl fly above the city for the battle, filling the air with “evil and horror” (805).

In other words, terrorism *only* works because it exploits the values of its victims. People value security, so the wraiths intermittently threaten the hobbits to encourage constant fear; people value their sight, so the Witch King confuses his enemies with invisibility; people value life and friendship, so enemies emphasize death as they hurl the heads of dead warriors back over their own walls. The evil forces use terrorism to corrupt security, sight, and friendship, but they prove their dependence in doing so.

However, as much as evil characters corrupt good elements, evil is still a choice, and one that good characters choose regularly throughout the text. Consider terrorism: it can cause

constant suspicion, but that suspicion promotes acts that seem evil. When Frodo and Sam are sneaking to Bree, a Hobbit named Farmer Maggot takes the pair in a wagon for some of the trip. A rider approaches. Knowing already about the Black Riders, the trio feels fear, so Farmer Maggot declares, “Don't you come a step nearer! What do you want, and where are you going?” (95). Fear makes them cautious of everyone, so they react harshly to a stranger on the road, even though this stranger turns out to be their friend Merry.

Suspicion also plagues the Riders of Rohan. When Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas encounter a company of horsemen in the wild, they soon “found themselves in a ring of horsemen...drawing ever inwards...a thicket of spears pointed towards” them (421). War and terror lead these people to defend themselves first and ask questions later, so the Riders take no chances with these travelers, even though they only number three and two of them are royalty (Aragorn and Legolas). To symbolize this point, before the battle of Helm’s Deep Gandalf indicates the east where Frodo and Sam travel, but as Legolas peers into the distance, he perceives a “tiny tongue of flame...endlessly remote and yet a present threat” (505). Evil exists in enemies far away, but also present ones, so the forces of good take extra precautions in case that means someone nearby. In this way, evil begins with corruption, but it also fuels itself through wicked choices that even good characters make.

Eric Gelder discusses evil’s elusive nature to show that terror functions the same way in the text as it does in real life. Drawing from the emotional climate of post-9/11 America and Peter Jackson's film adaptations, he notices how terror pervades cultures even if terrorists are far away. He argues that “a violently-registered presence, and a disconcerting absence” of terrorists encouraged Americans across the country to fear the fallout of 9/11 and additional attacks of subsequent anniversaries, even though the armies of Al Qaeda were across the Atlantic Ocean. In

other words, terrorism frightens people everywhere and constantly, not just in certain locations or at certain times. In the same way, terror in *LotR* plagues only a few locations, Mordor and Isengard, but the resulting fear is ubiquitous. Farmer Maggot fears unknown riders, the hobbits fear every step will reveal the Nazgûl, and the Riders of Rohan become defensive with three strangers. But, Legolas perceives that the true reason for fear sits quite far away, the “tongue of flame.” Terror exists far away, but it distorts even the thoughts of people to see threats in every situation. Unfortunately, this means terror can lead good creatures to evil, meaning the stimuli that encourage choice can be internal.

LotR upholds the power of choice in pursuit of knowledge, but idolizing knowledge and power lead to destruction. People can choose to prioritize power and knowledge, but that means they corrupt other creations to bolster their strength, which ultimately renders them subservient parasites to the forces of good. While the hobbits fear knowledge and eschew it, the opposite end, loving and craving knowledge, seems equally destructive. In answer to how Tolkien's world approaches knowledge, neither the Hobbits nor the forces of evil offer a long-term solution to govern behavior. Both approaches yield death, thereby necessitating alternative solutions and different foreign policies.

Chapter Four – *Just War Theory*

While *LotR* discusses many foreign policies regarding war, it upholds only one: war as a last, defensive resort. The Hobbits prove that pacifistic isolationism renders them impotent for dealing with conflict, but the text vilifies the forces of evil for their expansionist empire. To bridge the gap, the text offers a solution through the forces of good, because they seek to fight when they must. With this foreign policy, the forces of good have a guide for behavior both in peace and war, but they incriminate themselves repeatedly as they break their own rules. While the text upholds a foreign policy that involves war, it also suggests that the forces of good have yet to master this strategy.

The forces of good seek to live symbiotically with other cultures, so they design their tactics to promote community. For instance, rather than caring only for themselves, the kingdoms of Rohan and Gondor ally with each other to aid the other during war. In the text's materiality, a map reveals that the capital cities of these two countries, Edoras and Minas Tirith, are nestled in the same mountain range. The people of these cities harness these mountains to create a speedy distress signal during times of need. On their ride to Minas Tirith, Pippin notices "Fire, red fire!" in the night, but Gandalf explains that "the beacons of Gondor are alight, calling for aid. War is kindled" (731). The kingdoms of humans not only desire peace for themselves, but they also desire peace for their friends, so much so that they will ride to war even if they earn no direct benefits. Indeed, many warriors succor Gondor, as Minas Tirith welcomes myriad soldiers into her city before the battle begins. Aside from the warriors of Rohan, who boast "well nigh five and fifty hundreds of Riders fully armed, and many hundreds of other men with spare horses lightly burdened" (785), Forlong the Fat comes, leading "a dusty line of men, well-armed and bearing great battleaxes" (753). And so came

men of the Outlands marching to defend the City of Gondor in a dark hour...the men of Ringló Vale behind the son of their lord, Dervorin striding on foot: three hundreds...tall Duinhir with his sons...and five hundred bowmen...a long line of men of many sorts, hunters and herdsman and men of little villages...a few grim hillmen...fisher-folk of the Ethir, some hundred or more...Hirluin...with three hundreds of gallant green-clad men...and last and proudest, Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, kinsman of the Lord...and a company of knight in full harness...and behind them seven hundreds of men at arms (754).

This list excludes Aragorn, his kinsmen and the army of the dead he leads, but in total some thousands of warriors march to a war that does not involve them directly. These people could sit safely at their homes, but Middle-earth's humans do not uphold such an isolationism. Instead, they promote community, which means sacrificing for each other even if it hurts.

Aside from providing military support, the forces of good also promote community by maintaining open talks between each other. The trilogy begins at a time when these cultures discuss politics with other peoples only on a limited basis, but a certain item suggests that they developed this reticence rather than being naturally inclined to it. The previous chapter discusses the palantíri, "Seven Seeing-stones" that were "gifts of the Eldar" to enable instant communication (1013). By grasping one of these stones, one could summon people to other stones and talk telepathically, as Pippin does when he filches a stone from Gandalf and encounters Sauron (579). The purpose of these stones is to connect cultures with communication in spite of their distance. For instance, the stone Pippin uses comes from Saruman, who readers can assume found it in Isengard, since "there was little doubt in men's minds that Saruman went to Isengard in hope to find the Stone still there" (1042). Additionally, Sauron communicates through a palantír that his troops captured when they "laid siege to Minas Ithil" a thousand years before the events in the trilogy (1027). This means that Saruman and Sauron communicate instantly from Orthanc, the tower of Isengard, to Barad-dûr, the tower of Mordor, a distance of roughly 500 miles over swamp lands, plains, and two mountain ranges (according to the text's

maps). So, these two characters speak over a distance just shy of the width of Texas, and they hijacked this gift from the gods, who deemed communication a boon. If peace requires open talks, the forces of good originally sought just that.

Additionally, the forces of good further underscore their desire for community as they discuss their choices before responding to threats. Before the Fellowship sets out from Rivendell, the forces of good must first create the Fellowship, which happens only after many cultures sit down with Elrond to seek his advice. In a chapter called “The Council of Elrond,” many people gather together to plan a defense against their enemy. However, rather than only humans attending this meeting, Elves from Rivendell, Mirkwood, and the Grey Havens all attend, as do Dwarves from the Lonely Mountain, Hobbits of the Shire, men from Gondor, and Aragorn of the Dúnedain, a mixed breed of Elves and men (234). This means that five races of seven different cultures all attend this impromptu discussion to discuss how they will respond to a threat: the warriors here may ride to war, but they do so with a collaborative effort. Not only does this council affirm the communal approach of the forces of good, but so does the Entmoot, at which the Ents take counsel before responding to the tyranny of Isengard. As Saruman rapes Fangorn Forest to feed his furnaces, the Ents who inhabit the forest eventually decide to destroy Saruman’s forges, but not before they discuss their grievances with each other and decide on a course of action. As Treebeard explains, “Deciding what to do does not take Ents so long as going over all the facts and events that they have to make up their minds about,” meaning they may quickly choose action, but they will do so after they completely understand why they must do so (471). Additionally, as Entmoot literally means “giant meeting” in Old English, the words imply that this is no war counsel, but rather a discussion of what has occurred and how the Ents should respond. These gatherings reveal that one characteristic of belonging to the forces of good

is the desire for community; rather than charging into battle to avenge their grievances, noble characters talk openly beforehand to ensure that they respond honorably.

Admittedly, the forces of good manage these tactics of community after considerable internal conflict. While a group of noble forces indeed unites against Sauron, before this war they served their own interests more than the interests of others. For instance, as the trilogy begins the Dwarves and Elves despise each other, few people know of or highly regard the Hobbits, and Gondor and Rohan have little communication. Also, these societies finally scrape together a last ditch effort with absolutely zero time to spare, meaning they indeed win, but barely. Also, the forces of good may win many battles throughout the trilogy, but their victories at Helm's Deep, Gondor, and the Black Gate all largely depend upon the impeccable timing of others, that is luck as well as unity. Had Gandalf *not* arrived at Helm's Deep with 1,000 footmen when Uruks overran the fort, had Aragorn's and Théoden's armies *not* arrived at Pelennor Fields while Orcs poured over the walls of Minas Tirith, had Frodo and Sam *not* destroyed the Ring of Power while Aragorn's forces endure a slaughter at the Black Gate, then the enemy would have won. In other words, while the forces of good exude communal efforts, they also fight quite a bit along the way, and they only barely succeed given the might and cohesion of Sauron's forces.

However, these disagreements seem more realistic, as the symbol of unity, the Fellowship, also disagrees with each other. When debating whether to go through Moria or over the mountain of Caradhras, Aragorn and Gandalf disagree repeatedly:

'What do you think of your course now, Aragorn?'

Frodo overheard these words, and understood that Gandalf and Aragorn were continuing some debate that had begun long before. He listened anxiously.

'I think no good of our course from beginning to end, as you know well, Gandalf' (279).

These two leaders may be allies, but that does not mean that Aragorn and Gandalf always agree. Boromir also disagrees with the Fellowship, as he repeatedly requests that they retreat with the ring to Minas Tirith, “‘let the Ring be your weapon, if it has such power as you say’ ... ‘Alas, no,’ said Elrond” (261). Disagreements may plague the Fellowship, but sorting through them makes the group stronger, as does their willingness to help others against all odds. True enough, these forces of good arrive at battles without a moment to spare, but they do so at great personal cost. Gandalf leads Erkenbrand and his 1,000 footmen to Helm’s Deep, but he “‘made use of the speed of Shadowfax,” his horse, as well as “the stout legs of the Westfold-men marching through the night” to arrive in time (530). Also, the text’s “Appendix A” describes how Théoden leads his army to Gondor through the night, and how Aragorn sails his army up a river to flank his enemy two days later, showing again that perhaps they arrive without time to spare, but they do so with a combination of luck *and* effort (1068). Lastly, Frodo destroys the Ring of Power at the last possible moment, but only as a result of sacrifice from Aragorn distracting Sauron, Sam for carrying Frodo and the Ring, and Gollum who ultimately destroys the Ring against Frodo’s wishes. Yes, the forces of good do not unite into a beautiful, seamless group, but one with cracks and problems, which makes their strength all the more believable.

Finally, the Ringwraiths offer a foil to the Fellowship to emphasize the importance of community. For instance, consider the wraiths’ tactics: when they pursue the Hobbits from the Shire to Rivendell, they only appear once as a complete group, when they sprint to the borders of the Elf haven (207-208). All other times before this the wraiths assail the Hobbits with only a few of their numbers, as when “three black figures entered, like shades of night” to assault the home Frodo feigns to inhabit, the house at Crickhollow (172). Meanwhile, other Ringwraiths pursue the Hobbits to an inn at Bree where, under Aragorn’s advice, they secretly change rooms

in the night to protect themselves. When they visit their original rooms in the morning, they find that “the windows had been forced open and were swinging, and the curtains were flapping; the beds were tossed about, and the bolsters slashed and flung upon the floor; the brown mat was torn to pieces;” the wraiths sacked the original room in vain (173). These enemies may lack full strength at a given time, but that does not stop their reckless pursuit either in Crickhollow or Bree, nor does it stop them at Weathertop. When the Hobbits take shelter overnight in this ancient fort, the wraiths ambush them, even though they only number “five tall figures: two standing on the lip of the dell, three advancing” (191). It seems sensible for the wraiths to divide their numbers given that they seek elusive Hobbits sneaking through the countryside, but their tactics reflect an individualized approach rather than a team effort. For instance, Matthew Dickerson notes that the number of the Fellowship’s members match the number of the wraiths, because “the nine who set out on the Quest from Rivendell, in contrast to the Nazgûl, are not *nine individuals* but *one Fellowship*” (46). The balance between these two groups, from their tactics to their numbers, reveals that the forces of evil promote individuality, but the forces of good rely on community. Or, to quote Dickerson quoting Galadriel, “hope remains while *all the Company* is true” (46).

Despite their efforts to promote harmony, the forces of good nevertheless engage in a war, which suggests that other cultures oppose this foreign policy. For instance, the forces of good need to discuss military aid because the need for it exists; they have meetings to discuss their response to conflict because conflict occurs. While the noble characters show a communal spirit, they also understand that war befalls people whether they want it or not. So, even though they promote peace, war comes to them, which demands them to make a plan. Do they preemptively strike their enemies in the ironic name of peace, or do they idolize diplomacy so

much they erode their territory and honor to nothing? In answer to this, they fight, but with a condition: the adage may say it takes two to tango, but Middle-earth's forces of good would justify their involvement with that famous excuse, "he started it." The text ultimately upholds this rationale as justification for war, because the forces of good in Middle-earth do battle, but only against unsolicited violence. Time after time the text promotes this stance with many cultures, particularly in the passive way they discuss war. When Glóin the Dwarf outlines the troubles in his country, he mentions that "already war is gathering on his [king's] eastern borders," suggesting that the war comes whether Rohan invites it or not (235). Additionally, when Boromir discusses Gondor's problems, he mentions how "sudden war came upon us out of Mordor," meaning his troops do not provoke war, but they must fight one anyway. Perhaps no one describes this idea better than Éowyn, shield maiden of Rohan. After a hospital warden complains that "the world is full of enough hurts and mischances without wars to multiply them," Éowyn defends her country by arguing that "it needs but one foe to breed a war, not two" (937). To hearken back to the adage above, the warden questions why they fight, but Éowyn says they fight because Mordor started it. "Those who have not swords can still die upon them," so why not defend oneself and *risk* death rather than refuse to fight and *welcome* it (937)? Perhaps the forces of good wage war, but they only do so only because the alternative is destruction.

Indeed, this philosophy characterizes even the most powerful forces of good, as they almost unanimously uphold war as a defensive option. Théoden strongly agrees with this philosophy, as he exonerates his own involvement in war due to Saruman's instigation: "Even if your war on me was just – as it was not, for were you ten times as wise you would have no right to rule me and mine for your own profit" (566). Théoden believes that wisdom does *not* authorize aggressive conquest, but enduring conquest certainly authorizes violent resistance.

Additionally, Aragorn believes that war comes even to the peaceful. When he first meets Éomer in the wild of Rohan, Éomer reveals a foreign policy that resembles the isolationist Hobbits, because he and his countrymen “desire only to be free, and to live as we have lived, keeping our own, and serving no foreign lord, good or evil” (423). As harmonious as this may seem, Aragorn understands “the doom of choice” that faces Rohan: “open war lies before [them], with Sauron or against him” (423). Éomer and his kingdom may long for peace, but that option will elude them, at least while their enemies crave war. Lastly, Faramir also desires peace, but he needs no prompting to echo Éowyn’s rationale for war. Of all descriptions of a high civilization, Faramir’s may be most admirable, because he not only desires his country to be strong, but also to see one city “full of light, high and fair, beautiful as a queen among other queens: not a mistress of many slaves, nay, not even a kind mistress of willing slaves” (656). Faramir wants not only reprieve from war, but also the fruit that comes with reprieve, the benefits of having no conflict; he does not want any captives in his land; rather, he wants his country to promote knowledge and beauty, not war. On the other hand, while he longs for this paradise, he further knows that “war must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword...nor the arrow...nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend” (656). This last bit hammers his point home: he loves his city, but he also sees war as a tool to protect what he loves. In short, many noble characters do not *want* to fight, but they will if they must.

If the noble civilizations live in peace and only use war as a last option, this obliges them to have sufficient information or grievances that justify war. This proves especially true given how the text vilifies Théoden for his ignorance and inaction. Before the text begins and once it ends Théoden boasts great power, but the text begins in *media res* when he is a decrepit waste who can barely stand on his own feet. In fact, when Gandalf arrives at the king’s palace to spur

him to war, this ancient leader “Slowly...rose to his feet, leaning heavily upon a short black staff” to mutter at his guest, and then “slowly he sat back down again in his chair” exhausted from this effort (501). This leader seems quite incapable of action, but his condition is not his biggest problem. Despite his inability to fight, he insulates himself from guests, and thereby news. When Gandalf arrives at Edoras, the king’s city, a sentinel tells him that “none are welcome here in days of war but our own folk” and “save those who know our tongue and are our friends” (497). This filtered way of gaining information subjects Théoden to the lies of his servant Grima, a double-agent of Saruman, who lulls him into a false sense of safety. After Théoden returns to his chair from asking why Gandalf has come, Grima takes over speaking for the king, breeding suspicion in the king’s family—“In Éomer there is little trust,” as well as Gandalf, for “ill news is an ill guest” (502). What is more, Théoden reflects this pessimism when he calls Gandalf Stormcrow, saying he brings “evils worse than before,” when, in fact, Gandalf only goes where he is needed (501). In his insulated, xenophobic way, Théoden resembles the Hobbits in the Shire, who care only for news that affects them—he buries his head in the sand not only from conflict, but also from any information that encourages it. Théoden’s crime is inaction due to chosen ignorance, and both are unbecoming of a leader during a time of war.

Even though news eventually forces itself into Théoden’s kingdom, learning about a problem does not solve it. Leaders must not only learn of threats, but also take action against them, which Denethor exemplifies in his failure to do so. While he governs Gondor with both wisdom and power, his actions during war eventually call him into question. True, he possesses considerable fortitude, as when Gandalf compares him to Théoden, calling him “another sort, proud and subtle, a man of far greater lineage and power” (737). Additionally, Gondor boasts great strength under Denethor’s leadership, as his soldiers reclaim the fort of Osgiliath from Orcs

and send a battalion of Rangers to patrol its borders to the north and south. However, despite his wisdom and power, Denethor's wartime actions prove his incapacity for leadership. When the armies of Mordor march to his doorstep, instead of marshalling his strength, he despairs, telling Gandalf that "against the Power that now arises there is no victory" (835). Eventually Denethor dies in ritual suicide, which all means Gondor can withstand the siege given Denethor's faculties and allies, but he nullifies his right to rule as he cowers to fear and invites defeat. However, despair alone does not condemn him. To be fair, he faces insurmountable odds against nightmarish foes, and many a warrior in Gondor also despairs when they face their enemies; with this in mind, Denethor's inaction seems more human than weak. Additionally, he could redeem this weakness, which would reclaim his honor and confirm his rule. Despair does not condemn Denethor, but rather despair when he knows better. He *knows* his foes inch closer and closer to his city, because he communes with Sauron through a palantír long before this siege begins. Gandalf explains that Denethor "looked in his own [palantír] and was deceived...the knowledge which he obtained was...often of service to him; yet the vision of the great might of Mordor that was shown to him fed the despair of his heart until it overthrew his mind" (838). Therefore, Denethor draws criticism not because he shows some understandable fear, but because he takes no action to prevent a known threat, and he kills himself prematurely on a pyre while his people still suffer. Sauron twists information to scare his foe, but Denethor nevertheless chooses inaction.

To view this problem in another way, what might readers think about people who enable crime through silence? Can people forgive a man charged with leadership if he exposes his people to a needless slaughter because he is afraid? As steward, Denethor is responsible for protecting his people until his king returns, so he lacks the right to quail and give up his charge of protection. Gandalf blasts Denethor when he observes that "a Steward who faithfully

surrenders his charge is diminished in love or in honour,” and perhaps both (836). If the forces of good should espouse knowledge with action, then Denethor violates his command—he certainly has knowledge, but not the gall for action.

These two leaders show that the forces of good have standards for their leaders, especially when it comes to war. Leaders should not be like Théoden and avoid knowledge, but when they have knowledge they should not be like Denethor and do nothing. Instead, they must gather as much information as possible, and take action when it becomes necessary, as the Fellowship demonstrates. However, when *is* action necessary? What information deems war necessary? While these two leaders suggest that a checklist for war must include both knowledge and action, that checklist seems incomplete without an acknowledgment of when to transition from peace to war. After all, many characters show mercy to several others, so when should they disregard mercy and instead embrace a fight?

Many factors compel the noble races to war, the first being unprovoked violence, because the forces of evil are the aggressors in almost all major conflicts. Ringwraiths attack the Hobbits and Aragorn; Saruman’s Uruk-hai attack the Fellowship; Saruman’s forces pillage Rohan and march on them at Helm’s Deep; Saruman’s servants burn Fangorn Forest, home of the Ents; Sauron masses forces in Mordor to lay siege to Gondor; and Saruman’s thugs infiltrate the Shire to control its resources. All of these acts come unprovoked, which means the forces of evil attack others without any grievance or right to rule. In these situations, the forces of good justify war, and their conversations with evil characters reflect this mindset. Remember Théoden’s criticism of Saruman, when he mentions that the war was unjust (566)—this criticism scratches at the door of reasons that justify battle, but being wiser, more militarized, and lacking the right to rule do not *endorse* such conflict. Additionally, Aragorn’s heralds also cite justice as they initiate a hail-

They battle at the Black Gate of Mordor, “Let the Lord of the Black Land come forth! Justice shall be done upon him. For wrongfully he has made war upon Gondor and wrested its lands. Therefore the King of Gondor demands that he should atone for his evils” (870). Again, while the forces of good seek to avoid war, they will use the option if they defend themselves against unprovoked violence.

Secondly, unprovoked violence alone does not compel the forces of good to wage war—it must be unprovoked violence on their home turf. If noble races engaged in clandestine affairs that drew attacks, or if they travelled through enemy territories without an easement, then the enemy’s attacks would have some merit. However, the noble races usually fight after an attack they did not deserve, and while they rested in their own borders. The forces of evil bring a fight to all the locations listed above—Weathertop, Rohan, Gondor, Fangorn Forest, and the Shire—so these forces of good can then seek retribution—the Ents march on Isengard and Aragorn gathers an army at the Black Gate. In other words, the forces of good can only justify war if they live peacefully within their borders, but an enemy still invades. After these infractions, the forces of good can support war, but they must prove their complaint.

Lastly, to prove their grief the noble cultures must justify themselves to their peers *before* marching to war. A culture may strive for community and peace within its own borders, but it must also check its anger even after war comes knocking to ensure that they avoid overreacting. For instance, consider once more the Council of Elrond, which reveals not only that these forces desire community, but also that they want to avoid war if they can. As the trilogy begins, every culture recognizes a surge of problems that requires thought: the Dwarves far to the east see an increase in Orc attacks; Gondor faces annihilation from Mordor; wood Elves lose their prisoner Gollum during an Orc raid, which they think may have been a rescue attempt; Gandalf must

figure out what to do with Sauron's Ring of Power; four Hobbits somehow get mixed up in these terrible affairs; and Aragorn of the Dúnedain fears the nine Ringwraiths traveling abroad. These events all occur independently, so other cultures do not know of problems elsewhere, but they all seek counsel from Elrond, one of the wisest beings in Middle-earth. None of these parties answer a summons from the Elf lord, but they all show up anyway:

You will learn that your trouble is but part of the trouble of all the western world. The Ring! What shall we do with the Ring ... That is the doom that we must deem. / That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called, I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem ... it is so ordered (236).

These forces seek counsel spontaneously, because they want not only to take action, but to take *correct* action. This means that, even if a culture has the correct grievances and information, they still strive for peaceful resolutions before resorting to war. Rather than keeping their own counsel and lashing out at foes, these forces choose a slower approach to seek wisdom and support before they fight. Therefore, while they certainly think there is a time to fight, they wish to know what they are dealing with before they do so.

Elrond's explanation alludes to the final question that drives these politics, which is, from where do they come? He offhandedly mentions "it is so ordered" that they all show up to decide a strategy against Mordor, but who does the ordering? In other words, why do all the forces of good agree on this foreign policy? Is there a boot camp that trains noble races to be noble, or is there some manual that outlines such politics? As it happens, there *is* a manual: the Just War theory, a Catholic idea that governs waging war. In his *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, Peter Kreft notes that "the two simplest philosophies of war are, of course, pacifism and militarism. Pacifism demonizes war, militarism glorifies it...Tolkien accepts neither. He subscribes to the traditional Just War theory which takes a middle road" (167). The theory demands that innocent victims

suffer before a defending nation may justify violence: this describes all the textual situations concerning unprovoked violence.¹⁵ Additionally, people can only wage war for specific reasons, like addressing some irrevocable wrong, such as the unprovoked invasions and unsolicited slaughter the text's forces of evil perpetrate. Lastly, people can turn to war only as a last resort; hence the deliberations that many noble cultures hold, during which they decide that their foes will not listen to reason. Comparing the Just War theory with *LotR*'s forces of good suggests they all upheld this idea, even if they avoid labeling it so. While this theory does not explain who does the "ordering" in Middle-earth, it does suggest that the "ordering" involves a specific policy for waging war.

This war policy indeed enables the noble cultures to wage defensive wars, but it also demands that they adhere to certain principles while doing so. For instance, this theory restricts combatants from using means that are *mal in se*, evil in itself, meaning combatants should avoid inherently evil tactics. For instance, both Saruman and Sauron seek more than conquest, they want to annihilate their foes. The *LotR* seems to pardon conquest under certain circumstances, as the forces of good march on Mordor without a hint of wickedness. However, total annihilation indelibly checkers the forces of evil, as the ring bears its forbidding words, "One Ring to rule them all...One Ring to bring them all and in the Darkness bind them" (49). These words reveal that the enemy offers no quarter, which an Elf named Glorfindel validates when he suggests that Tom Bombadil would also fall to the power of evil once "all else is conquered" (259). Seeking total annihilation seems *mal in se*, which the forces of good seem to know, since countless

¹⁵ Information regarding the Just War Theory draws from *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* and the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.

people grant mercy to Gollum, and Frodo beseeches the Hobbits to show restraint on the Shire's invaders.¹⁶ So, the noble forces indeed abide by their rules of war, but they do so inconsistently.

Unfortunately, even though the forces of good uphold the Just War Theory, they also violate it multiple times. For instance, if the Just War theory bans total annihilation, why do the forces of good seek this option against Sauron? Why do they completely rule out judgment that would spare his life, and instead decide to kill him and his slaves? It seems irresponsible to excuse the forces of good solely because Sauron ached for world domination, because while the excuse "he started it" certainly justifies war, it does not seem powerful enough to excuse crime. What is more, this aggression garners suspicion as the history of Middle-earth offers a precedent for sparing Morgoth, Sauron's master. In *The Silmarillion*, when the gods finally overwhelm Morgoth, they imprison him "through the Door of Night beyond the Walls of the World, into the Timeless Void; and a guard is set for ever on those walls" (254-55). In other words, the gods imprison Morgoth forever, sparing him in spite of his heinous crimes that lasted millennia. Thus, the fact that the forces of good seek only death seems questionable, because they could have imprisoned him forever with his Ring. Instead, they defy the lesson from Sauron's predecessor and use an act that they call "evil" to end life.

The forces of good utilize even more evil tactics, such as terrorism. As discussed in chapter three, the Ringwraiths and other forces of evil use terrorism against their enemies, as when Gandalf calls the Witch-king a "spear of terror" (800), and when the Orcs fling the heads of killed prisoners into Minas Tirith (804). The text predominantly associates terror with evil, which suggests that the forces of good should shun this strategy. In fact, even when the forces of good withstand a siege at Gondor, they plan to march on Mordor at its "northern gate...but

¹⁶ As discussed in chapter two.

against this Gandalf had spoken urgently, because of the evil that dwelt in the valley, where the minds of living men would turn to madness and horror” (866). Terror boasts such strength that even after victory the forces of good avoid it like the plague, so using it as a tactic condemns its perpetrator.

Given that terror is evil and that good characters should refuse to use it, what title does a suicide bomber earn when seeks he to kill and demoralize his enemy regardless of personal cost? What title does a man earn if he harnesses a weapon of the enemy to assassinate the leader of his opposition? In the real world his title would be terrorist, but in the text his title is Master Frodo Baggins. Frodo seeks to destroy the Ring of Power, which, according to Elrond, will destroy Sauron:

Fruitless did I call the victory of the Last Alliance? Not wholly so, yet it did not achieve its end. Sauron was diminished, but not destroyed. His Ring was lost but not unmade. The Dark Tower was broken, but its foundations were not removed; for they were made with the power of the Ring, and while it remains they will endure (237-238).

To undo the Ring would undo Sauron, his fortresses, power, and minions, so the Just War Theory would condemn this *mal in se* act of total annihilation. If the text thus condemns terrorism, how does Frodo escape judgment as he sneaks into enemy territory to destroy his foes at the cost of his own life? In Mordor he shirks his clothing and unnecessary gear, because he knows that “we shan’t need much on that road. And at its end nothing:” he suggests his journey is a one way trip, much like a suicide bomber (916). In this light, how can the forces of good justify this act if they align themselves with the Just War theory? Oddly enough, the text counters this kind of vengeance when someone speaks up to spare Saruman’s life: “it is useless to meet revenge with revenge: it will heal nothing” (995). This character speaks powerful words,

but perhaps the words are cheap, seeing as they come from not only a hero, but also a terrorist named Frodo.

Before moving on, it must be stated that the trilogy does not encourage this reading, which would probably draw considerable ire from many critics, but post-9/11 readers *could* read this view of Frodo into the story. While the novel commends Frodo's altruism, his tenacity to attack his enemy in spite of death reflects how other people destroy themselves to attack their own enemies. Just as people may view religious warriors as radical, Frodo seems radical, even as Aragorn and his company honor him: after destroying the Ring and being rescued from Mordor, Aragorn and his company shout "Praise them with great praise!" as the Hobbits enter a banquet, and Aragorn even "bowed his knee before them" (801). Of course, Aragorn and his fellow warriors honor Frodo, because he won the war by forever eliminating a great evil from Middle-earth. So, the question is *not* can readers see Frodo as a hero, because the answer is decidedly yes. The question for post-9/11 readers is this: can one find real world examples that incriminate Frodo as a zealot who chooses death to kill his opponent, and the answer is *also*, decidedly, yes. Again, this reading is both controversial and extra-textual, but it is also apt given the novel's strong support of Just War.

Tom Shippey offers an explanation for the evil of noble characters, because he argues that evil behaves as both an independent power and one that encourages evil in people. In investigating the Ring of Power and how it functions in the text, he notices that it acts both actively and passively. On one hand, the Ring "'betrayed' Isildur to the arrows of the Orcs; it 'abandoned' Gollum, says Gandalf, in response to the 'dark thought from Mirkwood' of its master," meaning the Ring can act of its own accord, or choose evil on its own (142). On the other hand, Shippey also notes many instances when the text avoids agency regarding the Ring,

as when Frodo gives it to Gandalf “so that its identity can be confirmed, ‘It felt suddenly very heavy, as if *either it or Frodo himself* was in some way reluctant for Gandalf to touch it’” (142). In this instance, Shippey explains that readers cannot decide if the ring acts as “sentient creature or psychic amplifier,” because it acts as both at the same time (142). Perhaps it wishes to avoid Gandalf’s power, goodness, and/or grasp, but Frodo also wishes to keep it for himself, which may only occur as it magnifies the selfishness inherent in Frodo. So, evil acts both actively and passively, Shippey argues depicts evil accurately. If evil only *corrupts*, “without echo in the hearts of the good,” then anyone who is strong enough could handle the Ring without fearing that he would become a servant of Sauron (145). However, if the Ring completely depends upon people to act, then “all they would need do is put it aside and think pure thoughts,” thus eliminating evil by simple willpower (145). Thus, evil must both be sentient *and* a psychic amplifier to relate to the characters, and thereby readers.

Shippey proves quite right that evil acts as a psychic amplifier, especially when the forces of good repeatedly enact war crimes against their enemies. For instance, as Aragorn leads an army of the dead through the kingdom of Rohan, “lights went out in house and hamlet as they came, and doors were shut, and folk that were afield cried in terror and ran wild like hunted deer” (771). Perhaps Aragorn does not exhort terror the way his enemies do, but it still robs him as it does the Nazgûl, even though he does not choose such terror, and his ghostly allies seek to repay a debt. Moving on, not only do the forces of good use terror as a tactic, but it also defines their battle plan from the start. The kingdoms of Middle-earth face complete obliteration, which they unanimously agree is evil, but that makes it evil for them to obliterate other cultures, regardless of the justifications for it. If Shippey argues that the Ring acts as a psychic amplifier, then the good characters reveal a hypocritical belief when they seek to eradicate others while

they also oppose being eradicated. In other words, Shippey argues that the Ring amplifies the evil in people, but it fails to atone for the wartime actions the text upholds. For instance, as much as they promote mercy (see chapter one), the forces of good withhold it in many other occasions. Gandalf convinces Théoden to show mercy to Wormtongue at Isengard, and Frodo grants mercy to Saruman after he devastates the Shire in the text's penultimate chapter, but no one even considers a way to give mercy to Sauron. The desire for safety may be enticing, but an enticing option does not authorize people to annihilate their enemies. Remember Saruman's temptation: the desire for "Knowledge, Rule, Order" seems noble, but the end do not justify the means for Gandalf then, so they should not justify the means now. Perhaps readers and the noble characters doubt Sauron would ever negotiate anyway, but if the text argues for moral objectivity, then either it is flawed, or the noble characters are. Given Shippey's explanation, the forces of prove themselves evil with their crimes, and should punish themselves under their own wartime philosophy.

Lastly, if the Just War theory promotes conflict only as a last resort, then readers must consider what steps it suggests to prevent this awful, ultimate policy. For instance, suppose a weapon exists that people *knew* would lead to additional wars, countless deaths, and war crimes against innocent civilians. Would people who knew about this weapon have any responsibility to destroy it, especially if they won a war to rule it? Supposing these people *did* have some responsibility to destroy the weapon, would this responsibility allow them to use subterfuge and murder for the sake of long-term peace? People who advocate utilitarianism would say yes, but Elrond would seemingly say no. At the council of Elrond, the Elf-lord reveals that thousands of years ago he had an opportunity to destroy this one Ring, but he did not take it:

Isildur took [the ring], as should not have been. It should have been cast then into Orodruin's [Mount Doom's] fire nigh at hand where it was made. But few marked

what Isildur did. He alone stood by his father in that last mortal contest; and by Gil-galad only Cirdan stood, and I. But Isildur would not listen to our counsel (237).

Elrond attempts to excuse his inaction, as when he says it “*should* not have been” and it “*should* have been cast then” into the fire (emphasis mine). Unfortunately, “should” implies design, meaning some entity morally ordained this ring to be destroyed, which obliges Elrond to see the deed completed. What does he mean it *should* have happened, or, at least, if it *should* have happened, why did he let it *not* happen? Furthermore, while it seems merciful and wise to let Isildur live, Elrond *should* know better than to let the Ring endure, particularly because of his wisdom. Even when he fought this war with Isildur thousands of years ago, he was already thousands of years old. Indeed, while recalling this war at his council, he mentions that this battle “recalled to me the glory of the Elder Days and the hosts of Beleriand,” the battle that resulted in Morgoth’s captivity. Elrond is older than old; he is ancient. He is wiser than wise; he is wisest. Why, then, does he allow this thing to endure, this thing that alone has the ability to reanimate his demonic foe, this thing that can reinvent the terrible wars he has waged over thousands of years? Sauron is literally the last Maia in Middle-earth who seems hell-bent on destruction, and Isildur gives him a way to continue plotting, but partially due to the inaction of Gil-galad, Cirdan and Elrond. If the Just War theory compels people to avoid war at all costs, these three failed to do so, perhaps because killing is *mal in se*, and because the forces of good are above that, but their other crimes suggest otherwise.

These failures on the part of good characters muddy the text’s message. The text condemns the isolated, pacifist Hobbits who avoid knowledge and conflict, but it also condemns the forces of evil for hungering for it. This reading encourages readers to promote the same foreign policy as the humans and Elves, but their own inconsistent application calls either the

characters or their foreign policy into question. If the policy is, in fact, the best way to conduct a war, then the characters stand condemned and deserve punishment at some over-arching war tribunal. This punishment confronts readers who admire these characters, because they ignore or excuse the characters' heinous crimes, acts that only promote further hypocrisy and villainy in the real world. On the other hand, such inconsistencies may suggest that the policy itself cannot account for all war situations. The fact that the forces of good imperfectly implement the Just War Theory may mean the policy itself needs changing; while good, the policy could be better. The inconsistencies lead readers to wonder if a culture can wage war with restraint, or if the gloves come off when someone breeds war, a dilemma that still plagues modern conflicts. There may be a manual for waging war, but its pillars seem less solid and more fluid in the hands of Tolkien. As the text encourages a muddled view of war, post-9/11 thinkers can agree, because war is anything but straightforward.

Chapter Six – *Issues in War*

The prison at Guantanamo Bay sparked controversy when it opened, mainly over torture. Perhaps the prisoners therein were taken hostage during a time of war, but many United States and foreign sources questioned if being a wartime prisoner authorized torture. In fact, the Republican candidates for the 2012 presidential nomination frequently discussed torture in their televised debates, drawing ample attention (again) to an issue that has raged for a decade. As post 9/11 thinkers become increasingly concerned about the treatment of prisoners, they may be surprised to encounter the same topic in the *LotR*. The text depicts several scenes of prisoners, hostages, and their treatment that raise questions about which punishments constitute abuse and which ones the rules of war allow. Examining the text's several scenes of prisoner treatment may provoke not only disapproval, but also perhaps disdain for friend and foe alike, as both forces take prisoners and commit questionable acts.

While the text avoids explicit depictions of torture, it does suggest that the forces of evil utilize it. Two separate instances reveal this: Gollum at the hands of Sauron's minions in Mordor, and Merry and Pippin in the custody of Saruman's Uruk-hai. As to the first scene, before fleeing the Shire Gandalf tells how Gollum spied out Mordor only to be caught and tortured, "Wretched fool! In that land he would learn much, too much for his comfort. And sooner or later as he lurked and pried on the borders he would be caught, and taken—for examination" (57). While this does not explicitly mention torture, readers can infer Gandalf's meaning with the uncomfortable dash to introduce "examination," along with the word's menacing implications. Regardless of the absence of the word "torture," readers deduce that Gollum suffered in Mordor. When talking with Gandalf, he explains "as far as the end of the Riddle-game and Bilbo's escape" depicted in *The Hobbit*, when Bilbo won the Ring of Power,

but concerning his time in Mordor, Gollum “would not say any more, except in dark hints. Some other fear was on him greater than [Gandalf’s]” (55). Again, while the text avoids the word “torture,” Gollum nevertheless avoids discussing an event that incites “fear,” thus encouraging readers to conclude that the stay was troubling at best. Therefore, Gandalf’s discussion yields two interesting points. First, both Gandalf and Gollum, two characters with numerous lines of dialogue, avoid mentioning torture, as if the text cannot bring itself to acknowledge the unspeakable act. Second, the first mention of torture connects to the forces of evil, thus distancing itself from the forces of good. This shows that the text invites readers to expect torturous treatment from evil characters, but honorable characters should avoid the practice entirely, both in action and words.

Indeed, the second instance of torture with Merry and Pippin under the Uruk-hai confirms this interpretation. When the Uruks escort the two Hobbits toward Isengard, they use treatment that blurs the line between rough and torturous. In the first stage of the journey the Uruks carry the Hobbits piggyback, so that “Pippin’s face was crushed,” and the “Orc’s clawlike hand gripped Pippin’s arms like iron; the nails bit into him” (437). Few would call this torture, but it does violate ethical treatment of prisoners with unnecessary pain.¹⁷ Furthermore, the promise of torture still hangs over their heads, as one Orc mentions that they “have ways of paying for tricks that [the hobbits] won’t like, though they won’t spoil [their] usefulness” (438). Rough treatment certainly continues, as during a moment of respite one Orc picks Pippin off the ground by his hair twice (438), and when running to Isengard both he and Merry are “licked every now and again with a cruel thong cunningly handled” (440). According to *Appendix B*, the Hobbits endure this treatment for three days with little food and drink before they eventually escape, but it would

¹⁷ Chapter four discusses the origin of these ethics in the text.

be punishment enough if it only lasted one (1067). Perhaps no one single act suggests torture, but these experiences demand a harsher label than “rough treatment,” as the childlike characters endure excruciating conditions for days while expecting even worse abuse when they reach Isengard. Again, while the text seems unwilling to expose torture, it nevertheless whispers the idea as the forces of evil commit terrible acts of violence on those who are tiny, unarmed, and who pose no physical threat.

On the other hand, occasionally the forces of evil counter their barbarism with surprising instances of mercy. While the Uruk-hai indeed mistreat their hobbit prisoners, they also care for them in ways that modern readers must acknowledge as fair, to say the least. The Hobbits may have little to eat and drink as they stumble to Isengard, but the Orcs do share some sustenance with them. Before forcing the Hobbits to run, their chief “thrust a flask between [Pippin’s] teeth and poured some burning liquid down his throat: he felt a hot fierce glow flow through him. The pain in his legs and ankles vanished. He could stand” (438). Later, during a reprieve, Pippin “guessed that he had been given another draught” of the hot liquid based on the “heat in his body,” and he also received “some bread and a strip of raw dried flesh” from one of the Orcs (440). While these Uruks cannot evade their judgment as rough captors, they nevertheless provide the Hobbits with enough provision to keep them moving.

Aside from tending to their diets, the Orcs also provide crude medical treatment for a prisoner’s debilitating wound. As the Orcs captured him, Merry suffered a gash on his head that rendered him unconscious and incapable of running; to cure this, the Orc chieftain “smeared the wound with some dark stuff” to “[heal] Merry in Orc fashion; and his treatment worked swiftly” (438). While few would envy the Hobbits’ plight, they still receive strange acts of kindness from their notoriously cruel captors. One may certainly counter this reading—that the Orcs only help

the Hobbits so the group can move faster, or so the Orcs can ensure that the hobbits arrive with “no spoiling,” as Saruman commands—but these arguments seem inconsistent with the rough treatment described above (436). Famished, exhausted and wounded do not mean “spoiled,” so the Orcs could have withheld these kindnesses with impunity. The fact that they help their hostages suggests some strange mercy on their part, despite their wicked tactics.

Furthermore, while evil characters counter their stereotypes with mercy, many noble characters counter their mercy with troubling acts. To continue with Merry and Pippin’s story, the pair seemingly go from bad to worse as they escape the Uruks and enter the custody of Treebeard. Although Treebeard eventually befriends the duo, he initially suspects them of destruction. Upon seeing them, he confesses that “I almost feel that I dislike you both,” and that “if I had seen you before I heard you, I should have just trodden on you, taking you for little Orcs, and found out my mistake afterwards” (452-453). While Treebeard investigates his prisoners before treating them poorly, his treatment does reveal his attitude toward Orcs: they deserve no quarter. The problem here is that Treebeard stands “at least fourteen foot high” and could crush an enemy to death with a stomp: his sheer size safeguards him from almost any Orc in Middle-earth (452). This seeming invulnerability could, and perhaps should, compel gentle treatment, since he has nothing to fear, but he nevertheless takes no prisoners with Orcs and would kill any he finds. Readers can debate whether this is fair, since the Orcs devastate Treebeard’s forest and kin, but the fact remains that, although a pair of “little Orcs” pose no threat to this giant, his intent is to strike first and ask later. Size advantage aside, only the Hobbits’ voices save them from being trampled, not any sense of nobility from a character the text repeatedly calls wise.

The Ents also reveal a monstrous attitude in how they treat Grima and Saruman. After

they conquer Isengard, they occupy the stronghold and imprison Saruman inside. Their moods improve little, if any, for Treebeard neither helps nor hinders Grima from swimming across the flooded interior to the tower where Saruman waits. As Treebeard “wade[s] after him and watch[es] his progress,” readers must remember that Isengard spans a vast area (559): when Théoden and his company arrive at Isengard after the Battle of Helm’s Deep, they stand at the location Grima would have begun swimming and can see “far off...veiled in winding cloud” the tower of Orthanc where Grima would have ended his trip (543). Forcing a man to swim this length may not seem torturous, but watching a man struggle for a considerable stretch when he admits he “cannot swim” resembles cruelty more than harsh treatment (559). As to Saruman, the only reason he is imprisoned in his tower comes more from lucky chance than any Entish mercy. Saruman fled to his tower as the Ents invaded, but an Ent named Quickbeam spotted and pursued him, so that “[Saruman] was within a step or two of being caught and strangled when he slipped in through the door” (554). Not only would Quickbeam have caught Saruman, he would have strangled his enemy because “his people suffered cruelly from Orc-axes” (554). While Saruman is no prisoner when Quickbeam pursues him, their stature and Saruman’s flight demand some level of restraint from the Ents. These giants may abide by the rules of war, but if they do, they do so barely.

Finally, tracking back to the creature who introduces torture to the text, Gollum falls into captivity repeatedly, but not only under evil forces: noble characters also enthrall him, and their treatment falls short of admirable. To move from the novel’s end to its beginning, Gollum last endures imprisonment in Gondor as Faramir and his troops capture him at the Forbidden Pool. Gollum escapes with his life thanks to Frodo’s urging, but when he is seized the troops treat him with less hospitality than one expects from a regal and learned captain such as Faramir. Gollum

does receive kind treatment after the troop questions him, but initially he is bound, and “none too gently” (673). Admittedly, they do this after he fights, “biting and scratching like a cat,” but Frodo reminds these warriors that “he has no strength to match” their own (673). Perhaps they spare his life, but they did nab the pitiable, unsuspecting creature in the dark, perhaps provoking rather than discouraging a violent response. Also, does Gollum’s resistance merit his being bound “none too gently?” Of all characters who may agree, Gandalf and Aragorn seem to do so. Back in the Shire, when Gandalf tells Frodo how he interrogated Gollum, he says, “I endured him as long as I could, but the truth was desperately important, and in the end I had to be harsh. I put the fear of fire on him, and wrung the true story out of him, bit by bit, together with much sniveling and snarling” (55). Words like “the fear of fire” raise an eyebrow; they are both suggestive of cruelty and vague in their specific tactics. Moreover, one can infer that, given the phrase “bit by bit,” this was not a short interrogation, and one that incited fear.

Gandalf, perhaps the noblest of the noble characters, uses scare tactics and has no reservations using them for a prolonged period, much as the Orcs do to Merry and Pippin. Those Orcs used the promise of violence to compel the hobbits on their run, so readers must condemn Gandalf if they condemn the Orcs. Additionally, Gandalf’s attempt to explain his tactics via the importance of the truth and the need for quickness wax too utilitarian to convince readers thoroughly. Perhaps in times of war this excuse holds water, but the world’s modern standards for prisoner treatment formed specifically to restrain this mentality. In other words, the pressing timeframe and dire need for truth fail to justify mistreatment, especially since rules of war forbid this tactic.

Lastly, and rather disappointing, Aragorn also mistreats Gollum, and in ways far worse than Gandalf manages. When recounting how he captured Gollum in the wild at the Council of

Elrond, Aragorn confesses,

He will never love me, I fear; for he bit me, and I was not gentle. Nothing more did I ever get from his mouth than the marks of his teeth. I deemed it the worst part of all my journey, the road back, watching him day and night, making him walk before me with a halter on his neck, gagged, until he was tamed by lack of drink and food (247).

This admission raises several red flags. First, while Gollum may have drawn first blood with a bite, Aragorn still looms much larger and stronger than Gollum, forcing readers to ask if his “not gentle” reaction was necessary. Also, if Aragorn seeks empathy by bemoaning this terrible journey, he fails to gain it when he mentions that Gollum suffered under a halter, gag, and lack of sustenance. Perhaps Aragorn’s journey was unpleasant, but Gollum’s seems worse. Regardless of his kingly descent, this confession besmirches Aragorn’s nobility, especially considering that the Orcs not only heal and feed the hobbits, but also avoid halters and gags. If honorable characters should treat their prisoners well, Aragorn joins ranks with Gandalf and the Ents those who occasionally falter. Perhaps the text avoids acknowledging torture, but it does expose several characters, bad and good, who use it.

The torture of Gollum should discourage vengeance, especially since Gollum helps destroy the Ring of Power. While he does suffer from torture and mistreatment, several characters also pity him enough to spare his life. Throughout the novel, Gollum receives mercy from a number of characters of many races. First, in *The Hobbit* Bilbo resists killing him in the Misty Mountains’ caves; then, in *LotR* Sauron’s forces in Mordor release rather than execute him; Aragorn and Gandalf spare him next after tracking him in the wild; the Elves in Mirkwood imprison him although many admit the creature deserves death; the Elves in Lothlórien have him in range of their bows, but they let him live for ignorance of who or what he is; Aragorn again allows him to survive as he tracks the Fellowship down the Anduin River; Frodo chooses to let

him live after meeting him in Emyn Muil; Sam repeatedly resists throttling him due to Frodo's wishes; Faramir and his company capture rather than shoot him at the Forbidden Pool, per Frodo's request; and Shelob endures Gollum's presence in exchange for fresh meat.¹⁸ Had a single character in this long and distinguished list chosen justice rather than mercy, the text's ending would turn bleak as Frodo wavers from his quest and claims the Ring for himself. Instead, Gandalf's wisdom proves right: Gollum *did* have "some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end," but his role came in the disguise of villainy: he attacks Frodo, bites off the jeweled finger, and falls to the fires of Mount Doom to his and the Ring's undoing (58). Because of Gollum's ultimate role in spite of his crimes, the text suggests that vengeance is nothing more than a short-sighted act.

In spite of this, the text still upholds characters who seek vengeance. While Sam faithfully follows his master Frodo to the edges of Mount Doom, at times carrying him, he still wants vengeance on Gollum on several occasions. Before Sam meets Gollum, or indeed knows anything of Sméagol, Sam threatens to "give him *gollum* in his throat, if ever [he gets his] hands on his neck" (590). He has no qualms about resorting to violence, and he also suspects mercy, as when he thinks of Frodo's propensity for kindness, "he's as wise as any, but he's soft-hearted, that's what he is" (625). Lastly, when momentarily separated from Frodo, Sam has to master his lust for revenge before pressing on, as "his anger would bear him down all the roads of the world, pursuing, until he had him at last: Gollum. Then Gollum would die in a corner" (715). While "that was not what he had set out to do" and he brings himself around to focus on rescuing Frodo, he seems bent on vengeance to such an extent that only loyalty to Frodo retrains him (715). Sam earns considerable merit for helping Frodo, but his merit wanes from an intense

¹⁸ Admittedly Gollum partly survives on the Anduin River due to his skill at swimming rather than Aragorn's mercy, but rather than hunt Gollum Aragorn chooses to press forward.

desire for revenge, which he considers right and just.

The sons of Elrond, Elladan and Elrohir, offer further gust for the investigation of vengeance, as they sully the nobility of the Elves with a lengthy campaign for killing. When Frodo arrives in Rivendell, he attends a feast at which these two go truant, as they “were out upon errantry: for they rode often far afield with the Rangers of the North, forgetting never their mother’s torment in the dens of the Orcs” (221). *Appendix A* in *LotR* explains that their mother, Celebrían, “was seized and carried off...suffered torment and had received a poisoned wound” that eventually forced her to “pass over Sea” to Valinor, Elf heaven (1019). Because the Orcs captured, tortured, and poisoned their mother, which forced her to depart prematurely, Elladan and Elrohir continually punish Orcs by hunting them. Their wrath seems reasonable enough given that Elves possess immortality, meaning these sons miss an untold number of years in Middle-earth with their mother, despite the comfort that they may see her again in Valinor. Because Elves endure forever, time both soothes and exacerbates their loss, whetting their appetite for constant revenge. However, modern thinkers may question the justice of vengeance based upon a timeframe. For instance, while many supported the Afghanistan War at its outset, support has weakened as the campaign has lasted more than a decade, eventually growing into the longest military engagement in US history. In the same way, how long can immortal elves claim the moral high ground for the torture and untimely departure (not death) of one Elven queen? Does the mistreatment of one Elf justify a year, decade or century of vengeance?

Appendix B of *LotR* lists important events throughout Middle-earth’s history: it notes that Celebrían was poisoned in the year 2509 of the Third Age, and departed for Valinor the following year (1062). The events described in *LotR* also take place in the Third Age, which leaves no room for error in calculating the length of the feud: subtracting 2509 from 3018, the

year Frodo arrives in Rivendell and the sons of Elrond still seek revenge, leaves 509 years (1066). In regard to time alone, that means these noble sons of Elrond have spent five centuries continually punishing the Orcs in the name of their mother. If modern thinkers disdain a ten-year war for the 3,000 deaths from the 9/11 attacks, what answer can they give to such a lengthy endeavor over one life?

Furthermore, in the chapter following the feast these sons cannot attend, Tolkien uses a strange word that undercuts the vengeance of the Elves. As Elrond recounts Isildur's words when he finds the Ring of Power, he quotes him: "this I will have as *weregild* for my father, and my brother" (237, emphasis mine). *Weregild* is an Old English word meaning 'man gold,' the monetary compensation for killing in Anglo-Saxon society, and the rules governing both payment and vengeance had strict parameters. Dorothy Whitelock explains how *weregild* functioned for the Anglo-Saxons:

A composition, in money or property, could be accepted without loss of honour provided it was adequate to the rank of the slain man...but it was always open to the injured kindred to refuse settlement and carry on the vendetta if they preferred...It was a great grief and humiliation if a kinsman lay 'unavenged and unatoned for' (40).

This means that Isildur accepted payment from Sauron, but he fully possessed the right to initiate a vendetta, which the sons of Elrond clearly chose. Not only do these sons have the right to a vendetta, but they would have shamed themselves had they avoided it without compensation. Thus, the sons of Elrond have some legal backing then, but they lose footing when Whitelock explains that a vendetta "was not a wild act of lawlessness; the conditions under which it was carried on, and the details of the procedure, were carefully regulated by law" (40). If one Anglo-Saxon killed another, a relative of the injured party could execute the murderer in claim of vengeance, but the feud ended there: an injured party had no right to execute numerous members

of the criminal's kin. Applying this to the case of the sons of Elrond, the only way they can lawfully claim a vendetta for 500 years is if they spent that time tracking down only those Orcs who assailed their mother and spared those who played no part in these crimes, but this seems rather unlikely. They may have had the right to claim a vendetta on the Orcs for torturing and poisoning their mother, especially since it resulted in her having to flee Middle-earth, but according to the idea of *weregild* Isildur cites, they violated the rules of warfare because not only did Celebrían survive, but they also pursued far more Orcs than the perpetrators alone. Perhaps Elladan and Elrohir can boast a noble ancestry and race, but their feud is far from honorable.

Readers may find ways to excuse these actions, but being a noble character means one must do what is right, not what is easy. A speech from Aragorn on the danger of their task depicts this best: because “the counsel of Gandalf was not founded on foreknowledge of safety, for himself or for others...there are some things that it is better to begin than to refuse, even though the end may be dark” (430). He reminds his companions and readers alike that the forces of good must restrain themselves from tempting acts, and rather cleave to honor regardless of its difficulty. They have a code that requires action, but action with rules. Perhaps these characters deserve praise, but in breaking certain ethical rules they also invite criticism.

This finally calls leaders into question as the text holds them accountable for the actions of their subjects. Readers must understand that, although flawed, the noble characters nevertheless exude leadership of a high caliber. For instance, consider how their roles in the battles elevate the protagonists far above their enemies. First, neither Saruman nor Sauron engage in combat at all, as they prefer to send their armies rather than lend their considerable

might to the fray.¹⁹ On the other hand, Gandalf and Aragorn often lead the charges into battle. Gandalf allows the Fellowship to escape while he alone faces the Balrog: “Fly! This a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way. Fly!” (321). He also leads a thousand footmen “marching through the night” to succor Théoden at Helm’s Deep (530). Additionally, many stout-hearted warriors help defend Gondor while it is under siege:

Legolas, and Gimli wielding his axe, and Halbarad with the standard, and Elladan and Elrohir with stars on their brow, and the dour-handed Dûnedain, Rangers of the North, leading a great valour of the folk of Lebennin and Lamedon and the fiefs of the South. But before all went Aragorn. (830)

These men have flaws, but they also have honor. Furthermore, Gandalf and Aragorn both have considerable power outside of war, as they both reveal exceptional skill at healing. After Pippin struggles with Sauron via the palantír, others find him “lying on his back, rigid, with unseeing eyes staring up at the sky” (578). He may seem dead, but Gandalf “laid his hands on [Pippin’s] brow” and revived his pint-sized friend. Aragorn also shows dexterity in treating pain, as he treats Frodo’s wounds from the Witch-King with a “healing plant” (193), and he also works so well in Gondor’s houses of healing that the herb-master calls him “a lore master, not merely a captain of war” (847). In short, readers may wish to criticize these leaders, but they have more qualities than simply the wicked ones.

In fact, the text seems to beg readers to question leadership, not for the leaders’ flaws, but because these flaws need not be present. It is not enough to point out the flaws in leaders, but to ask why they exist in the first place. In other words, Tolkien revolutionized Old English scholarship and penned what Amazon.com voters deemed the English book of the millennium, so he clearly had the wits to make his characters foolproof if he so desired. In fact, he edited his

¹⁹ Perhaps this is unfair to Sauron, since he lacks a body, but he still prefers oily tactics of seduction and corruption rather than assault, making him more cowardly, regardless of his incorporeal nature.

characters multiple times before publishing a word, which suggests he included these flaws intentionally. The question, then, is why invent characters who simultaneously show merit and then repeatedly fail to measure up?

To address the reasons behind Tolkien's flawed leaders, know that Tolkien does not believe he invented, but rather discovered his characters. Consider the trilogy's "Foreword to the Second Edition," wherein Tolkien describes how he wrote the story:

The process had begun in the writing of *The Hobbit*, in which there were already some references to the older matter...as well as glimpse that had arisen *unbidden* of things higher or deeper or darker than its surface...the *discovery* of the significance of these glimpses and of their relation to the ancient histories revealed the Third Age and its culmination in the War of the Ring. (xv, emphasis mine)

Here he describes how he conjured his story, but words like "unbidden" and "discovery" suggest it was not entirely his own. Indeed, he hints at this even further as he credits *The Hobbit* to "earlier chapters of the Red Book, composed by Bilbo himself" (1), and the story known as *Lord of the Rings* "was a copy, made at the request of King Elessar," that is Aragorn (14). To put it bluntly, the material of the book suggest that Tolkien found this trilogy, meaning the story had a life of its own, regardless of authorship. Although many authors feel a sense of finding their story rather than writing it, Tolkien's characters have a realistic feel to them in part because of their flaws. His characters would dull readers if they unilaterally avoided evil, but the fact that they must overcome and often fall prey to temptation makes their victory even more believable. These complicated characters allow readers to question and ultimately admire flawed characters who constantly seek to improve, so Tolkien *may* have allowed the flaws solely because they already existed, but also because real leaders also have real flaws.

It is good to criticize leaders, but more importantly than revealing error, criticism hearkens to the critic's desire for a higher standard. Perhaps imprisonment should have rules,

people should avoid torture, show mercy, and disdain vengeance, but that means people want leaders to do the job *right*, not just to do the job. People do not elect leaders to avoid sin, but rather, as Gandalf says, “to decide ...what to do with the time that is given,” and that is a difficult job indeed (50).

Epilogue

Many people oppose political readings of *LotR*, but it still happens. Actor Viggo Mortensen and Tolkien himself both discourage people from reading current political issues into the text or forcing them into the movies, but people cannot seem to help themselves from doing so. The events of 9/11 disabused isolationist Americans from thinking themselves unreachable, and many of them found an empathetic friend in Frodo, who learned that terrorists sought him in his own isolated country. A line in the sand markedly divided those who identified with Frodo and the Shire from those who believed the story should stand alone, but the point is that many people came to Tolkien's novels shortly after terrorist attacks rocked the US and Jackson's adaptations depicted similar strife. People forced views into Tolkien's and Jackson's works that could not escape the political upheaval of the time, but they also reveal how the American psyche changed from isolationism to militarism and then to criticism. A German man once told me that 9/11 changed nothing except how Americans viewed themselves. In light of Tolkien's admonition against pacifistic isolationism and the calamity it can cause, that seems change enough to me.

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