

4-2023

Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring: The Reality of Tolkien's Master Ring

Larry L. Burriss

Middle Tennessee State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burriss, Larry L. Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring: The Reality of Tolkien's Master Ring

This Note is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: <http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Mythopoeic Society's Online Midwinter Seminar 2024

17th–18th February 2024: Something Mighty Queer

Submission Deadline: November 30, 2023

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2024.htm>



Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring: The Reality of Tolkien's Master Ring

Abstract

In this paper, the author proposes J.R.R. Tolkien's Ring of Power actually possesses (within the fantasy "frame") both sentience (consciousness) and sapience (the ability to think and act). Numerous other writers have investigated the literary and mythic origins of the One Ring, but there appears little discussion, beyond its creation, of how and why the Ring does what it does. The author here uses Tolkien's own writing (rather than the myriad of fan speculation or the numerous adaptations of the Tolkien canon) to show the One Ring has, within the frame of the story, an innate ability to think and act, that is, possesses actual sentience and sapience.

Additional Keywords

One ring; Psychology; Free Will; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The One Ring; Free will and determinism

NOTES

SENTIENCE AND SAPIENCE IN THE ONE RING: THE REALITY OF TOLKIEN'S MASTER RING

LARRY BURRISS

THE SCOFIELD STUDY BIBLE BEGINS WITH A STATEMENT familiar to millions of people: "In the beginning God" (*Authorized King James Bible* [KJB]. Gen. 1.1). Cyrus I. Scofield then goes on to explain the Bible does not argue for the existence of God, it rather presupposes the existence of God (KJB, Note 1). Over the ages, innumerable religious systems, some of which have lasted for thousands of years, have developed, built on these four words. Scofield, and millions of other believers, start with the assumption those first four words are true, and there is thus no point in debating them.

These words also illustrate the proposition that it is possible to construct an entire *weltanschauung* (world view) on just a few words, if we first accept the truth of the initial statement.

In the literary world, this is sometimes called "willing suspension of disbelief," and the phrase has been applied to such modern media forms as movies (Ferri), video games (Brown), and mass communication theory:

The "willing suspension of disbelief," a term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) to describe how readers disengage from reality and suspend their skepticism for a brief period to enjoy a piece of fiction, is used similarly in media theory to describe the way audiences ignore the troubling vagaries & truth/fiction in order to embrace a fictional narrative. (Hoechsmann and Cucinelli 97)

The above reference to Coleridge is earlier found in *Biographia Literaria*, his explanation of how he and fellow writer William Wordsworth came to compose their *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798:

In this idea originated the plan of the LYRICAL BALLADS; in which it was agreed, that my endeavors should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient

to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* [emphasis added] for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us. (6)

These ideas are also expressed in J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-stories," in which he took a somewhat negative view of the willing suspension of disbelief, but only to the extent he believed readers do not go far enough in suspending disbelief and engaging or participating in what he termed a "sub-created" world.

That state of mind has been called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator'. He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. [...] [And] if they really liked [the story], for itself, they would not have to suspend disbelief: they would believe. (Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 132).

Further,

Probably every writer making a secondary world [...] every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it. If he indeed achieves a quality that can fairly be described by the dictionary definition: 'inner consistency of reality', [...] '[i]s it [an event in the sub-created world] true?' The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): 'If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world.' (OFS 155)

Tolkien also pointed out that within the frame of the story, there are rules, relevant to that frame, that must be obeyed: "There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away" (OFS 114). And again, "the point of the story lies [...] in the necessity of keeping promises (even those with intolerable consequences) that, together with observing prohibitions, runs through all Fairyland" (OFS 152-153).

Further, in one of his letters Tolkien himself speaks approvingly of simply assuming facts not explicitly presented: "In [*The Hobbit*], hobbitry and the hobbit-situation are not explained, but taken for granted, and what little is told of their history is in the form of casual allusion as to something known" (*Letters* 158, #131).

In a 1958 letter commenting on an early film treatment of *Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien forcefully commented on the "reality" of his creation: "We are not in 'fairy-land', but in *real* river-lands" (*Letters* 272, # 210, emphasis added).

Let us start, then, with two axioms, or assumptions, or propositions, or beliefs, or statements that will, for our purposes, require a willing suspension of disbelief:

1. Inanimate objects ("things") can have human powers (anthropomorphism).

The talking harp which betrays Jack in "Jack and the Beanstalk," and the North Wind in numerous fairy tales and Greek legends, quickly come to mind. There is, in fact, a large body of research into various aspects of anthropomorphism, ranging from the academic and theoretical (Epley, et al, "When We Need"; Epley, et al, "On Seeing Human") to the semi-whimsical (Hutson). And yet again, "more than a hundred papers [...] show that people treat computers as if they were real people. [...] Although it might seem ludicrous, humans expect computers to act as though they were people" (Nass and Yen 8).

So at the psychological level, at least, it would not be unusual for someone to give human attributes to the Ring of Power. It is important, however, to reiterate here: we are not speaking of an *objective* reality in which inanimate matter takes on actual human traits, but rather of a literary frame in which these objects exist.

If we thus accept the reality of this first statement, then our second assumption necessarily follows:

2. Tolkien's One Ring, although an inanimate object, can, within the "frame" of Middle-earth, have both sentience (consciousness) and sapience (the ability to think and act). And it has these attributes both connected to, yet at the same time, independent of, its creator, Sauron.

As might be expected, Sauron's Ring of Power has attracted a great deal of research interest, particularly the origins of the Ring story (McGregor; Day; Honegger). But, one may be tempted to argue, the author here is attributing free will to an inanimate object, which is "constitutionally incapable of making an informed choice" (Gottlieb 89). And that is exactly what the author is arguing: If willing suspension of disbelief is a valid literary technique, then one can, in order to be internally consistent within the story, make these two previous assumptions.

Other authors have manifestly attributed human powers, including consciousness, to the Ruling Ring:

The One Ring [...] displays panpsychic tendencies. [...] [W]ith its ability to think and act for itself as well as influencing [...] the personalities of those who possess it [...]. The One Ring, with its all-pervasive consciousness, undoubtedly relates to [...] integrality and multifacetism [...] as well as [...] liminal detachment and cosmic awareness. (Sheppard-Goodlett 8)

However, and here is the heart of the matter: if we are going to construct such a literary world and its concomitant belief system, it will be necessary to prove the truth behind our assumptions. We must find evidence to support our initial assumptions. The author maintains this proof is, in fact, present in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien himself provides proof of sentience and sapience.

We will, therefore, take the following statements from the author of the Ring's sub-creation, J.R.R. Tolkien, at face value (in support of sentience and sapience) without any attempt to over-analyze or second-guess what he might have meant:

The Ring has strength (power) and a will of its own: "Whether it was an accident, or a last trick of the ring before it took a new master, it was not on his finger" (*Hobbit* V.99).

And just a few words later, Tolkien says, "it [the Ring] slipped on his [Bilbo's] finger." Notice the implied action taken by the Ring itself: Bilbo did not slip the ring on his finger. Rather, the Ring, apparently taking action on its own, slipped onto his finger.

But later in *The Hobbit*, in chapter 8, "Flies and Spiders," the dwarves apparently make no connection between Bilbo's "magic" ring and the rings of power. Had they forgotten the ancient stories?

And much of the strength and will of Sauron passed into that One Ring; for the power of the Elven-rings was very great, and that which should govern them must be a thing of surpassing potency. (*Silmarillion* [Silm] 287)

The Ring is self-aware and can make conscious decisions. Here is Gandalf making his assessment of the Ring, based on his own extensive studies:

A Ring of Power looks after itself, Frodo. *It* may slip off treacherously, but its keeper never abandons it. [...] It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left him. [...] There was more

than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master. It had slipped from Isildur's hand and betrayed him; then when a chance came it caught poor Déagol, and he was murdered; and after that Gollum, and it had devoured him. It could make no further use of him: he was too small and mean; and as long as it stayed with him he would never leave his deep pool again. (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.2.55-6)

And further,

Isildur himself escaped by means of the Ring [...] until he came to the River and plunged in. There the Ring betrayed him and avenged its maker, for it slipped from his finger as he swam, and it was lost in the water. (*Silm* 295)

The Ring can act independently of its maker, Sauron: “And [Saruman] deemed that the Ring, which was Sauron's, would seek for its master as he became manifest once more; but if he [Sauron] were driven out again, then it [the Ring] would lie hid” (*Silm* 301).

This idea of independence from Sauron is also explored by Croft, who notes: “Sauron's Ring [...] represents a concentration of power into an object separate from, and significantly, separable from, its creator. [...] Its power does not depend on its creator, though its power is at its greatest when he wields it” (86). And, of course, if the Ring can act independently of its creator, then it is, logically, capable of many other actions on its own.

The Ring is capable of independent malice: “So passed the first victim of the malice of the masterless Ring: Isildur, second King of all the Dúnedain, lord of Arnor and Gondor, and in that age of the World the last” (*Unfinished Tales* [UT] 275).

The Ring can, in at least some instances, force others to act, thus demonstrating both will and power. The Ring can make choices among options, and one of the characteristics of the Master Ring (and the other Rings of Power as well, to a lesser extent) is that it influences its owner to their particular degree of psychological and physical aptitudes: “they enhanced the natural powers of a possessor” (*Letters* 152, #131).

Yet many have thought that the ferocity and determination of their assault on Isildur was in part due to the Ring. It was little more than two years since it had left his hand, and though it was swiftly cooling it was still heavy with his evil will, and seeking all means to return to its lord (as it did again when he recovered and was re-housed). (*UT* 283)

“But as for throwing it away, that was obviously wrong. These Rings have a way of being found” (*LotR* I.2.60). And in still another passage, Galadriel explains to Frodo the psychological power of the Ring:

‘I would ask one thing before we go,’ said Frodo [to Galadriel], ‘a thing which I often meant to ask Gandalf in Rivendell. I am permitted to wear the One Ring: why cannot *I* see all the others and know the thoughts of those that wear them?’

‘You have not tried,’ she said. ‘Only thrice have you set the Ring upon your finger since you knew what you possessed. Do not try! It would destroy you. Did not Gandalf tell you that the rings give power according to the measure of each possessor? Before you could use that power you would need to become far stronger, and to train your will to the domination of others. Yet even so, as Ring-bearer and as one that has borne it on finger and seen that which is hidden, your sight is grown keener.’ (*LotR* II.7.366)

The Ring can control its own physical shape, which also shows an independent will: “Though [Bilbo] had found out that the thing needed looking after; it did not seem always of the same size or weight; it shrank or expanded in an odd way, and might suddenly slip off a finger where it had been tight” (*LotR* I.II.47).

The Ring is part of a larger “truth” behind Middle-earth, which, within its own frame of reference, is true. “I believe that legends and myths are largely made of “truth,” and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear” (*Letters* 147, #131).

It is also significant that despite its power, the One Ring is not omnipotent, and is apparently limited in the help it can provide its wearer, which is perhaps indicative of its evil power. For example, Frodo was seriously stabbed while wearing the Ring at Weathertop, and much later, while struggling for control of the Ring, Gollum bit off Frodo’s ring finger.

Perhaps more significantly, Sauron’s himself was defeated in battle, and his physical self was eventually killed (although “his spirit fled far away and hid in waste places; and he took no visible shape again for many long years”) (*Silm* 294) while he was wearing it.

Although the One Ring seems to be capable of independent action and thought, there are indications that although the Ring can actually move by itself, this power may be somewhat limited. In other words, it seems to be dependent on human action to move any significant distance from one place to another.

After all, if the Ring were capable of moving great distances by itself, why was it necessary for the Black Riders to find it and bring it back to Mordor?

For example, the Ring fell *from* Isildur's finger (*Silm* 295) and ages later it fell *onto* Frodo's finger ("For a moment he wondered if the Ring itself had not played him a trick" [*LotR* I.9.160]). And, as usual, Gandalf knows more about the power of the Ring than most: "The Ring was trying to get back to its master, [but] as long as it [the Ring] stayed with him [Gollum] he would never leave his deep pool again" (*LotR* I.2.55-6).

Throughout the story the Ring is interacting (and moving) in various ways with a number of characters. Table 1 is a list of three groups of people: nine who handled the Ring, seven who wore the Ring, and the three who were considered to be Ring-bearers. All three lists are in chronological order:

Handled the Ring	Wore the Ring	Ring-bearer
1. Sauron*	1. Sauron	
2. Isildur*	2. Isildur	
3. Déagol		
4. Gollum*	3. Gollum	
5. Bilbo*+	4. Bilbo	1. Bilbo
6. Gandalf		
7. Frodo*+	5. Frodo	2. Frodo
8. Tom Bombadil*	6. Tom Bombadil	
9. Sam*+	7. Sam	3. Sam
Frodo	Frodo	
Gollum		
(Ring Destroyed)		

* = also wore the ring
+ = Ring-bearer

Unfortunately, this list also seems to introduce two problems: first, has anyone else handled the Ring, and second, who exactly is a Ring-bearer? For answers, we must, again, turn to the canon itself for clarification.

Although Tolkien clearly tells about nine entities who actually handled the Ring, there is at least one other instance where someone else, not named, could have done so: following the wounding of Frodo on Weathertop, he recovers in Rivendell, where it is written, "When he had dressed, Frodo found that while he slept the Ring had been hung about his neck on a new chain, light but strong" (*LotR* II.1.232). Someone, or something, apparently took the Ring from Frodo, put it on a new chain, and returned it to him. There is absolutely no indication of who this was.

For the second question, among those who handled the ring, who is actually a Ring-bearer, we must piece together the answer in order to include those who could, and exclude those who could not, bear the title. As the table above indicates, taking both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* together, it is obvious that numerous entities handled the Ring, some for years at a time and some for only a few seconds. Unfortunately there is no one place in the story to specifically tell us who a Ring-bearer *qua* Ring-bearer is. However, using what information is available, and then applying inductive logic, we can determine who they are, but again, assuming the statements are true.

- During Frodo's recovery at Rivendell, Gandalf makes the following declaration: "[Y]ou Frodo] are the Ring-bearer. And you are the heir of Bilbo, the Ring-finder" (*LotR* II.1.224).
- Following the destruction of the forces of Sauron the survivors gathered on the Field of Cormallen to honor Frodo and Sam:

Long live the Halflings! Praise them with great praise!
[...]
Praise them with great praise, Frodo and Samwise!
[...]
Praise them! The Ring-bearers, praise them with great praise!

Notice the plurals refer first, non-specifically to the "Halflings," and then several references to "them," and then specifically to Frodo and Samwise, then to "Ring-bearers," plural (*LotR* VI.4.953).

- On the road to The Grey Havens we have this exchange:

Then Bilbo woke up [...]. "And now I think I am quite ready to go on another journey. Are you coming?"

"Yes, I am coming," said Frodo. "The Ring-bearers should go together."

"Where are you going, Master?" cried Sam, though at last he understood what was happening.

"To the Havens, Sam," said Frodo.

"And I can't come."

"No, Sam. Not yet anyway, not further than the Havens. Though you too were a Ring-bearer, if only for a little while. Your time may come." (*LotR* VI.9.1028-1029)

Here the identification of a Ring-bearer is a little more complicated. First, Frodo and Bilbo are talking to each other and Bilbo asks Frodo if he is coming to The Havens. Frodo's response indicates both he and Bilbo are Ring-bearers. Frodo, a moment or two later talking with Sam,

specifically calls him a “Ring-bearer.” Although several other people are going to The Grey Havens, among them only Gandalf had handled the Ring, and that for only a moment years before the trek to Mordor began. In this exchange apparently only Bilbo and those who carried the Ring during its journey to Mount Doom are considered Ring-bearers.

- In Appendix B, Tolkien writes, “The Ring-bearers are honoured on the Field of Cormallen.” The only people so-honored are Frodo and Sam (LotR Appendix B.1095).

Thus, through inductive reasoning, observation of facts (statements in *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* taken to be true) leading to a reasonable conclusion, we can conclude the only Ring-bearers are Bilbo, Frodo and Samwise.

Table 2 is a list of the 12 times when the Ring was actually used, and thus moved from place to place.

1. Sauron when the Ring was created
2. Isildur to escape Orcs in river
3. Gollum to sneak around
4. Bilbo to escape Gollum
5. Bilbo at his birthday party
6. Frodo at Prancing Party (accident?)
7. Frodo on Weathertop
8. Tom Bombadil
9. Frodo on Amon Hen to escape Boromir
10. Frodo to escape by boat
11. Sam to rescue Frodo
12. Frodo at Mt. Doom

One must ask, in both Table 1 and Table 2, how many of these actions were solely dependent on the person involved, and how many were influenced by, or actually caused by the sentience and sapience of the Ring?¹

Curiously, although the main effect of the Ring was to confer invisibility, apparently Sauron never used it for that purpose. Rather, he used the One Ring to control dwarves and elves through the other Rings of Power. In addition, all of the other uses, except for Tom Bombadil’s, were to help the wearer escape trouble. Bombadil, on the other hand, seemed to almost treat the

¹ It should be noted that, as indicated earlier, the author has avoided using the seemingly unlimited non-canonical references to Ring-lore. However, a list of those who carried or simply handled the Ring is available at <https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Ring-bearers>).

Ring as an object of jest. But of course, Bombadil's strange use seems to be in keeping with the strange nature of the character himself.

A central question still remains, however: were those who used the Ring doing so of their own volition, or was the Ring acting on its own to influence what they were doing? Was free will involved, and if so, who, or what free will was acting? Were they using their own sentience and sapience, or was it the Ring's sentience and sapience?

As we have seen, within the framework of Middle-earth the One Ring appears to have both sapience and sentience, which raises a number of intriguing questions: Could the Ring at any point choose not to go on the next part of the journey towards Mordor? Did it choose to go with Isildur, which would have been a refusal of its call to evil, except that it later led to Isildur's death? Is the Ring trying to get back, not to Sauron per se, but back to Mount Doom to be destroyed and perhaps resurrected? After all, despite its destruction, a later, but abandoned, story, "The New Shadow," indicate a new evil has arisen in the world (*Peoples of Middle earth* 409-421). Did it ever resist Sauron's call?

Could the Ring have worked its own will so it would not be destroyed? If it could, why didn't it? If it could not work its own will, then how much power did it actually have over the person possessing it?

Does fate, in the sense of fore-ordination, play a role in the life of the Ring? And, perhaps most significantly, does the Ring have free will?

At best, the relationship between the One Ring and Sauron appears to be symbiotic, both mutualistic and parasitic at the same time: Sauron poured much of his power and will into the Ring, but as we have seen, he does not have total control over his creation. Likewise, the Ring, as we have noted, appears to be somewhat incapable of independent movement, and thus, initially at least, requires Sauron to move from one place to another.

Again, we must look at the complex relationship between Sauron and the Ring, and recall its ability for independent thought and action. The Ring was initially created by Sauron to help him gain dominion over all of Middle-earth through its power over the other Rings of Power. Yet the One Ring apparently did nothing to assist Sauron in the Battle of Dagorlad before the gates of Mordor.

At this battle, the Last Alliance, led by Gil-galad and Elendil, laid siege to Mordor,

[A]nd Sauron also was thrown down, and with the hilt-shard of Narsil Isildur cut the Ruling Ring from the hand of Sauron and took it for his own. Then Sauron was for that time vanquished, and he forsook his body, and his spirit fled far away and hid in waste places; and he took no visible shape again for many long years. (*Silm* 294)

At this point, the question must be asked, did the One Ring make a choice in not helping Sauron win dominion over Middle-earth? Was the Ring refusing the call for which it had been created?

Another possibility is that the Ring, in order to be truly effective, had to have a “host” of sorts. Remember, Sauron has been vanquished but his spirit still existed, immediately went into hiding and began preparations to reanimate. But the Ring, apparently, cannot exist in symbiosis with an immaterial entity. It must find another living host.

At this point in the canon, the Ring has had no independent action. It was, apparently passively, cut from Sauron’s hand and taken by Isildur, who was going to consider it a compensation for the loss of his father and brother. Despite warnings that it should be destroyed, “Isildur refused this counsel [of Elrond and Círdan], saying: ‘This I will have as were-gild for my father’s death, and my brothers’” (*Silm* 295).

Isildur later journeyed to reclaim his kingdom, but in the process was attacked by Orcs, and then, in what is apparently the first independent action taken by the Ring on its own behalf, it actively betrays Isildur and deliberately acts to avenge its maker and master:

Isildur himself escaped by means of the Ring, for when he wore it he was invisible to all eyes; but the Orcs hunted him by scent and slot, until he came to the River and plunged in. *There the Ring betrayed him and avenged its maker* [emphasis added], for it slipped from his finger as he swam, and it was lost in the water. Then the Orcs saw him as he laboured in the stream, and they shot him with many arrows, and that was his end. (*Silm* 295)

Here again philosophical questions arise: Is the Ruling Ring supernatural? That is, did something outside the Ring itself caused it to fall from Isildur’s finger? On the other hand, if we assume the frame within which *The Lord of the Rings* operates is internally consistent, then very little, including the One Ring, deals with the supernatural. So once again the Ring, as Tolkien makes clear above, is acting on its own, without supernatural help, thus once again, the One Ring demonstrates sentience and sapience.

Then there is the Ring-connection between Déagol and his friend and cousin Sméagol/Gollum. The Ring, having fallen of its own free will from Isildur’s hand, sank to the bottom of the River Anduin, where it remained for 2,461 years, and was lost, as Gandalf tells Frodo, to common memory: “And there in the dark pools amid the Gladden Fields [...] the Ring passed out of knowledge and legend; and even so much of its history is known now only to a few” (*LotR* I.2.52).

At this point the Ring is found in the river by Déagol, who is subsequently murdered by Sméagol. It is important to note here the murder is apparently independent of any overt influence by the One Ring over Sméagol. Tolkien merely points out Sméagol wants the Ring, Déagol refuses to give it to him and is then murdered. Tolkien makes no implication of the Ring influencing Sméagol.

If, however, the Ring is capable of independent action, then it willingly goes with Sméagol, as it could have easily slipped from his finger and waited for someone else to discover it in the river. Or it could, at any other time, leave Sméagol and go with someone else, as it will do when it is later discovered by Bilbo.

One of the most significant episodes in the entire legendarium is the story of how the Bilbo Baggins found the Ring 478 years after Gollum had taken it to the heart of the Misty Mountains. The details of that story need not be recounted here, except to the extent that sentience and sapience of the Ring of Power come into play: Gollum loses the Ring (or does the Ring of Power deliberately betray Gollum by hiding from him?), and Bilbo “accidentally” finds it in the dark (how much of a coincidence is it that in the entire cave system, in the dark, Bilbo reaches out and puts his hand directly on the Ring? Did the Ring want to be found?) Recall, the only living beings capable of leaving the cave system and moving the Ring along on its journey are the goblins (not likely to leave the caverns), Gollum (not likely to leave and later give up the Ring) and Bilbo.

Although the One Ring appears to have acted by design so as to be found by Bilbo, there was still no guarantee Bilbo would correctly (legally) complete the riddle game. As noted in *The Hobbit*, issues of reward and punishment came into play during the game: if Bilbo had lost the game, he would have been eaten (certainly not a reward!), and the Ring would have remained with Gollum, perhaps a kind of punishment. Thus the Ring, while able to influence the physical world, at that point it apparently had no power over Bilbo’s mental state. That is, while it could be argued (as, indeed, we are) that the Ring of Power could take deliberate action, there is no indication the Ring influenced Bilbo’s questions and answers in the riddle game, which would certainly have facilitated its “escape” from Gollum and the caves.

At this point the Ring of Power has, whether by accident or design, escaped from its 478-year imprisonment with Gollum, has passed completely through the caves, and is now in the possession of a covert agent who is deliberately heading East, in the general direction of Mordor and its maker Sauron.

As briefly alluded to earlier, while the Hobbits are talking with Tom Bombadil, five curious incidents involving the Ring occur: First, Frodo

inadvertently told him (confessed, as to a father figure?) of his quest and the nature of the Ring. Second Frodo willingly hands the Ring over to Bombadil. Next Bombadil puts on the Ring and does not disappear. He then spins the Ring in the air and it disappears and then reappears. Finally, Frodo puts the Ring on and becomes invisible to the other Hobbits, yet remains visible to Bombadil (*LotR* 1.VI.132-134).

Bombadil obviously has a different relationship with the Ring of Power than, apparently, any other being in Middle-earth, a trait that Gandalf would later explain at the Council of Elrond:

“Could we not still send messages to him [Bombadil] and obtain his help?” asked Erebor. “It seems that he has a power even over the Ring.”

“No, I should not put it so,” said Gandalf. “Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others.” (*LotR* II.2.265)

Thus Bombadil is apparently the only being over whom the Ring has no power. Indeed, there is something of a stand-off between the Ring of Power and Bombadil. As Gandalf noted, the Ring has no power over Bombadil, but Bombadil has no power over the One Ring.

Nevertheless, if we first accept the premise that the Ring has both sapience and sentience, then it is no small matter to place it into a sub-created world and have it act as any other living creature, including humans. The Ring is simply another actor whose activities can, and should be, carefully analyzed.

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Douglas William. *The Suspension of Disbelief in Videogames*. 2012. Brunel University, PhD dissertation.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. 1817. Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Croft, Janet Brennan. “The Name of the Ring; Or, There and Back Again.” *Mythlore*, vol. 35, no. 2, #130, 2017, pp. 81-94.
- Day, David. *The Ring Legends of Tolkien*. Easton Press, 2020.
- Epley, Nicholas, et al. “When We Need a Human: Motivational Determinants of Anthropomorphism.” *Social Cognition*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2008, pp. 143-155.
- Epley, Nicholas, et al. “On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor of Anthropomorphism.” *Psychological Review*, vol. 114, no. 4, 2007, pp. 864-886.
- Ferri, Anthony J. *Willing Suspension of Disbelief: Poetic Faith in Film*. Lanham, 2007.
- Gottlieb, Sam. “Determined to Feel Free: The Psychological Reality of Moral Responsibility.” *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2010, pp. 88-114.
- Hoechsmann, Michael and Giuliana Cucinelli. “My Name is Sacha: Fiction and Fact in a New Media Era.” *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2007, pp. 91-100.
- Honegger, Thomas. “‘What have I got in my pocket?’ —Tolkien and the Tradition of the Rings of Power.” *Journal of Tolkien Research*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-23.

- Hutson, Matthew. *The 7 Laws of Magical Thinking*. Hudson Street Press, 2012.
- McGregor, Jamie. "Two Rings to Rule Them All: A Comparative Study of Tolkien and Wagner," *Mythlore*, vol. 29, no. 3/4, #113/114, 2011, pp. 133-153.
- Nass, Clifford and Corina Yen. *The Man Who Lied to His Laptop: What Machines Teach Us About Human Relationships*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2010.
- "Ring-bearers." *Tolkien Gateway*, 2022, <https://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Ring-bearers>.
- Scofield, C.I., and E. Schuyler English, editors. *The New Scofield Study Bible: Authorized King James Version: New Scofield Study System with Introductions, Annotations, and Subject Chain References*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Sheppard-Goodlett, Lisa R. "Panpsychism and J.R.R. Tolkien: Exploring a Universal Psyche in *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*." *Journal of Conscious Evolution*, vol. 13, no. 13, 2018, pp. 1-14.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*. 50th Anniversary ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1966.
- . *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary ed., Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- . "On Fairy-stories." *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, HarperCollins, 1990, pp. 109-160.
- . "The New Shadow." *The History of Middle Earth Vol. XII: The Peoples of Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 1996. pp. 409-421.
- . *The Silmarillion*. Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- . *Unfinished Tales*. Houghton Mifflin, 1980.

LARRY BURRISS is a professor in the School of Journalism and Strategic Media at Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, where he teaches Media Law and Mass Media & National Security. He previously published "Television in Middle-earth: The Palantiri and the Mirror of Galadriel," in *Amon Hen: The Bulletin of the Tolkien Society*, No. 214 (2008). His first foray into Middle-earth was at The Ohio State University in 1967 with the unauthorized Ace edition.



THE ONE RING OF KING SOLOMON

GIOVANNI CARMINE COSTABILE

INTRODUCTION

IN A LETTER TO PROFESSOR L. FORSTER DATED 31 DECEMBER 1960, Tolkien dismissed a comparison of the One Ring to the atomic bomb by writing that "*The Lord of the Rings* was actually begun, as a separate thing, about 1937, and had reached the inn at Bree, before the shadow of the second war. Personally I do not think that either war (and of course not the atomic bomb) had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding" (*Letters* 303, #226).