

Pity, Mercy, and Empathy: Emotional Weapons for Internal Battles in The Lord of the Rings

By Angela Bebb

At its core, J. R. R. Tolkien's vast epic The Lord of the Rings is a tale of the War of the Ring. Ironically, though the term 'war' usually evokes military actions and combat, the characters and reader soon realize that the War of the Ring will be fought on drastically different terms. The success of the War finally depends on Frodo's quest to destroy the Ring rather than the numerous battles in the narrative, which serve only to repel Sauron's emissaries and distract Sauron from Frodo's task. While other members of the Fellowship fight with sword, ax, bow, and even magic, the destruction of the Ring demands a more subtle weapon. As Matthew Dickerson observes, "For all of the glory given to those who lost or risked their lives in battle at the Field of Cormallen, the highest honor is given to Frodo and Sam, who do not fight in any physical battle at all" (55). Rather than achieving victory on the field of battle, Ringbearers earn laud through their eventual moral victory over the temptation offered by the Ring to dominate others. The Ringbearers face one such temptation when each gets the opportunity to kill a momentarily vulnerable Gollum. The underlying agency of empathy, often referred to by Tolkien as 'pity,' ultimately brings the quest to a victorious conclusion as Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam instead come to feel for Gollum and spare his life, thereby ensuring the Ring's destruction. Consequently, the ability to develop an attitude of empathy and to consequently resist the urge to solve problems through physical dominance becomes one of the greatest weapons of the powers of the West.

Power in The Lord of the Rings takes many forms, but many critics conclude that true power draws on feminine power structures, not male-centered models of behavior, because using

violence to accomplish good consistently dooms the effort.¹ Maureen Thum considers “traditional heroic qualities” the preserve of men, who “desire to accomplish great deeds,” “store up and enhance the power of the realms with which they are charged,” and “challenge the enemy head on and win the game” (236). These qualities, she posits, serve only as “traps,” ironically leaving men who solely rely on them to dictate their behavior “weak, subject to temptation, and unable to carry out heroic deeds or exercise their authority” (236). Nancy Enright agrees that “power, when presented in the traditional male-oriented way,” creates problems, since it is “weaker morally and spiritually than its nontraditional counterparts” (93). According to her interpretation, Aragorn and Faramir only succeed as heroic figures because, unlike Boromir, they allow their traditional masculine power to be “tempered” by their skills of healing and wisdom, showing “an awareness of [physical strength’s] limitations and respect for another, deeper kind of power” (93). Enright defines feminine power in the words of a passage describing the Three Rings of the Elves: “They were not made as weapons of war or conquest—that is not their power. Those who made them did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained” (Fellowship 322). “The kind of power described here,” Enright explains, “is the alternative to traditional, male-oriented power” (99). Clearly, the designation of this power as ‘feminine’ power is not exact; men often employ its strategies, while some women decline to use them. Tom Bombadil, like Luthien, uses the power of song to free the captive hobbits from Old Man Willow and the barrow wights when physical strength fails. Elves as a race seem to value these creative and preserving elements more than Dwarves or Men, while Marjorie Burns posits that Hobbits, as Tolkien’s ideal race,

¹ I here employ the language of many adherents of this critical position. While feminist readings comprise a rich vein of critical thought about power in *The Lord of the Rings*, many of its supporters essentialize both the male and female genders by utilizing existing cultural norms to attribute to each certain traits and attitudes that fail to hold true for all individuals.

unite the most of these feminine traits. Yet, although Eowyn², as a woman, has access to this female power base, she instead defines herself according to masculine power structures for most of the narrative. This identification creates a situation that Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride note contributes much to her despair; “debarred from a life of glory on the battlefield,” she slowly becomes “sick to her soul” because she lacks an opportunity to create a positive self-image (113). Many scholars comment on the similarity of Eowyn’s situation to that of the hobbits, usually Merry in particular. Within masculine power structures, they are both marginalized: “she...because of her gender and he because of his size” (Thum 244). No one considers them strong enough to be anything but burdens and cause for concern. However, though they violate the prohibition of Theoden and nearly die in the process, they together accomplish a song-worthy deed, a decision on Tolkien’s part that “valorizes the least heroic character” (Middle Ages 172). Although they bring about this feat in a traditionally male context that glorifies battle, according to Melissa Hatcher, “this defeat of evil in Middle-Earth reinforces the idea” “that even the smallest and most marginalized people,” “women and hobbits, can be as valiant in arms as their male compeers, but they, unlike one dimensional characters like Boromir and Gimli, are [also] well-equipped to pursue what is essential—peace, preservation, and cultural memory” (50). Hatcher thus argues that women—and hobbits—have the ability to fight physically, but they have some internal motivation to do so entirely different from masculine systems of power, which lessens the desire to dominate others. This motivation primarily stems from their desire to protect their kindred, spurred by their identification with those for whom

² Feminist critics consistently balk at Eowyn’s characterization, protesting that “her desire for action stems from her despair that Aragorn cannot return her love,” and that “Tolkien ends by altering Eowyn’s personality and by settling her a bit too suddenly into a suitable marriage” (Partridge 192, Burns 149). However, given this new definition of feminine power, and its apparent desirability in Tolkien’s works, Maria Benvenuto contends that Eowyn finds her “true ‘liberation’ is not effected through the imitation of typically masculine ideas of power and military glory,” which she considers “harmful to men and women alike,” but in her subsequent rejection of the warrior role to “embrace...creation” and love (53).

they fight. Apparently, women and hobbits inherently tap into feminine power structures which innately suit them to preserve and create, rather than yield to the desire to use physical strength to manipulate and control others, a denial centrally based on empathy.

Other analysts observe similar dichotomies emerging from the sources of power used by the forces of good and of evil. Jane Chance describes “true power” simply as emerging “from wise and healing service to the community;” she rejects corrupted power sources altogether (Mythology 24). Voicing a more typical vision of power distribution, Anne Petty pits external power, associated with machinery and Sauron’s seemingly inexorable domination, against internal power, innate to heroic individuals. Patricia Spacks again divides power between the natural power of Ents and Elves as opposed to the enemy, who characteristically depends “on machinery rather than natural forces” (55). More specifically, Frank Riga associates Sauron and Saruman with corrosive use of power as compared to Gandalf, who “does not seek to become the all-powerful wizard who wrenches destinies to his own ends [and] uses his magical powers to change the course of history” (Online). Yet another interpretation differentiates military might from moral strength, a reading closely related to the conclusions of feminist critics but stripped of its gendered constructions. Dickerson, for example, by attributing a dualism to Tolkien’s work which views the “spiritual nature” as “infinitely more important” than the physical, concludes that physical battles are much less important than moral and spiritual strength (149). A clear correspondence may be drawn here between Dickerson and Enright, who asserts that “spiritually based but physically ‘weaker’ type[s] of power [are] invariably shown to be the stronger in the long run” (102). Both scholars, representing different branches of criticism, view physical strength as secondary and weaker than moral and spiritual strengths. Therefore, in spite of the greater visibility of the many martial conflicts that occur before the Ring meets its doom,

moral conflicts, and the spiritual weapons used to win them, emerge as central concerns of the text. One of the spiritual strengths Enright rightly notes as especially strong in Frodo is his ability to empathize with, and so pity, the unlovely Gollum. This gift is not exclusive to Frodo, however; all hobbits appear to have this ability to some degree, and it can be augmented through instruction and having shared similar experiences. The innate empathy of hobbits proves vital to coping with and overcoming the spiritual challenges the Ringbearers encounter. Quite apart from resisting the impulse to use the Ring to impose their own wills on others, Bilbo, Sam, and Frodo must also defeat the superficially lesser temptation to use similar tactics of domination when each encounters a chance to end Gollum's life. Empathy enables all three to rise above the desire to yield to the temptation offered by the Ring even in this microcosm. Only the unmerited mercy the hobbit Ringbearers show Gollum through the agency of empathy preserves him until he fulfills his final destiny, inadvertently saving Middle Earth from subjugation to Sauron's will as a result. Thus, the Ringbearers, Bilbo, Sam, and Frodo, after initial disgust or even hatred, eventually empathize with Gollum by realizing his ruined kinship with them, which enables them to master their desire to kill him and show him mercy instead, a mercy that brings about the successful completion of the Quest.

Perhaps the most naturally empathetic of the three Ringbearers, Bilbo Baggins chooses to spare Gollum's life after experiencing an unlikely moment of connection with the "small slimy creature" (Hobbit 71). When Bilbo first introduces himself to Gollum, he originally sees Gollum as a "wretched" but "murderous" creature "as dark as darkness," with "two big round pale lamplike eyes in his thin face" (71, 83). Nothing in the appearance of this cadaverous figure suggests kinship between the two. Indeed, Bilbo's references to Gollum as a "slimy thing" and "black shadow" imply that he considers Gollum merely a stunted orc, lacking any vestige of

personhood or potential for redemption (82, 86). In spite of witnessing Gollum's "utter misery" upon discovering the loss of his "precious," Bilbo can "not find much pity in his heart" in his anxiety to escape with his life (81-3). This same instinct of self-preservation leads to Bilbo's temptation to kill Gollum. "Desperate" to "get away, out of" the "horrible darkness," Bilbo begins convincing himself that "he must fight...stab *the foul thing*, put *its* eyes out, kill *it*," since "*it* meant to kill him" (87, emphasis mine). In this moment of rationalization, as Bilbo tries to convince himself that his own life is worth the sacrifice of the "wicked" Gollum, the impersonal language employed in the text peaks (83). Can he but distance Gollum far enough from himself, reducing him to the anonymity and irredeemable wickedness of an orc, Bilbo could kill him with a clear conscience.

Given Bilbo's general nonviolence, this justification, especially the cruel inclination to "put its eyes out," seems to be an impulse channeled to Bilbo through the Ring, an impulse Bilbo masters through empathy. Immediately after this rationalization, Bilbo returns to himself, checking the earlier compulsion to violence by reasserting his moral code and opening himself to connection with Gollum:

No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. (87)

In the preceding pericope, Bilbo consciously realizes Gollum's relation to himself. Currently "miserable, alone, [and] lost" himself, Bilbo sees that under the same circumstances, he could become much like Gollum, similarly exiled and desperate. Henceforth, Bilbo uses

Gollum's name and the masculine pronoun 'he,' reasserting Gollum's claim to respect as an individual. Bilbo has earlier, subconscious moments of connection with Gollum, such as immediately after Gollum's appearance when he asks who, not what, Gollum is. He may also realize that Gollum's success in answering the riddles reflects their similar backgrounds, as Gandalf later suggests. Bilbo spares Gollum's life out of respect for what he once was and what he may yet become, though he cannot love or trust him as he is. Through empathy, Bilbo doubly defeats the Ring, thwarting its urging to dominate a completely alien Gollum and enabling its eventual destruction.

Samwise Gamgee also experiences a cycle of disgust and distrust followed by empathetic understanding, if not acceptance, of Gollum. From the first moment he sees Gollum, Sam regards him as a "nasty creature" of murderous intent and a threat to his master, an impression perhaps created by Bilbo's renditions of the Riddle Game to him as a child—an account no doubt influenced by the Ring (Fellowship 452). His opinion never changes in anything more than degree. When Frodo decides to trust Gollum's guidance, Sam's "anger and disgust" quickly mount to the point that he wishes to remove the danger with his own "twitching fingers" (Towers 245). In Ithilien, he hopes that he and Frodo have lost Gollum for good, and wishes it were his decision to tell Anborn to shoot the oblivious Gollum as he catches fish in the forbidden pool of Henneth Annun, rather than the more merciful Frodo. His "red fury" and "desire to kill Gollum" in Shelob's lair even distract him from protecting Frodo at a critical juncture; although Sam finally remembers Frodo's situation, he arrives too late to prevent Shelob from stinging his master, and must face her malice alone (380). Like Bilbo, his hatred and willingness to kill Gollum are symptomatic of his failure to realize that Gollum is not just a "villain" and a "sneak" (367). In spite of his knowledge of Gollum's origins, he cannot imagine Gollum ever being

anything more than the treacherous creature of Bilbo's stories, and so cannot conceive of Gollum's redemption. He, more so than Bilbo allowed himself to, sees Gollum as akin to the fundamentally evil orcs rather than as a fallen hobbit.

Lacking Bilbo's natural empathy and preoccupied by his fierce desire to protect Frodo, Sam only begins to appreciate Gollum's essential relation to hobbits after he briefly becomes the Ringbearer, long after the moment Gollum could have benefited from Sam's compassion. When Gollum ambushes Frodo and Sam just before they reach the Crack of Doom, Sam finally has a chance to kill Gollum without Frodo knowing or caring. At first, "his mind hot with wrath and the memory of evil," Sam is grimly pleased to be able to "deal with" Gollum "at last," but though he tells himself it is "just and many times deserved...to slay this treacherous, murderous creature," and also "the only safe thing to do," "deep in his heart...something...restrain[s] him" (King 237-8). He can "not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched" because now "dimly he guesse[s] the agony of Gollum's shriveled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again" (238). Now that he knows the burden of a Ringbearer, Sam finally grasps the power of the Ring to pervert even the wisest and most powerful into something ugly and horrible, and that Gollum, corrupted as he is, might once have been little different than himself, or even Frodo. While he cannot fix what his attitude has done to Gollum, and lacks the ability "to express what he [feels]," falling back on his usual harsh words, Sam does show mercy to Gollum in tribute to whatever vestige of Sméagol still exists, out of respect for his fallen, but innately akin, spirit (238). Out of empathy, Sam, too, finally refuses to assume power over Gollum's life and death, unwittingly saving his master's quest in the process.

Though Frodo also follows the pattern of disgust and pity and lacks his cousin Bilbo's

innate faculty for empathy, he develops the closest emotional bond with Gollum, having been most involved with the Ring and primed to pity him by Gandalf. As the “wisest of the Maiar,” Gandalf “learned pity and patience” from the Vala Nienna, giving him great empathy for “all the Children of Iluvatar,” “even [Sauron’s] slaves,” including Gollum (Silmarillion 16, ROTK 81). His understanding allows him to sift through Gollum’s lies, half-truths, and stubborn silences to create a realistic and even moving portrait of Gollum’s former life.

At first, however, in spite of Gandalf’s attempt to present Gollum’s history as “a sad story,” Frodo indignantly denies that such a “loathsome” being shares any kinship with hobbits (Fellowship 79). In his initial terror and dismay upon learning that he currently holds the One Ring and must take on an impossible task, not only does he “not feel any pity for Gollum,” but fails to understand how Gandalf can pity him, or even “endure long speech with him” (85, 305). Frodo’s disgust of the creature extends to the point that he suggests Bilbo made a mistake when he chose to let Gollum live, since Gollum “now at any rate is as bad as an orc” and “just an enemy” who “deserves death” (85). Gandalf chastises him:

Many that live deserve death. Some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends....And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end, and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not the least.

(86)

Frodo internalizes this advice, referencing it several times in the course of the journey to Mount Doom, most overtly when he first decides to take Gollum as his guide to Mordor. As though in dialogue with Gandalf, Frodo muses out loud that while he still fears betrayal, he “will not touch

the creature,” for now that he sees Gollum, he does pity him (Towers 246). He again recalls Gandalf’s advice when Faramir puts before him the choice to spare Gollum’s life. The text preserves no record of an internal struggle for this third temptation, perhaps because of Frodo’s ingrained faith in Gandalf’s merciful judgment. He immediately responds by appealing to Faramir’s respect for Gandalf as a former mentor, pointing out that the wizard “would have bidden you not to slay [Gollum],” just as he “forbade the Elves to do so” (331).

Frodo’s knowledge of Gollum’s origins as well as his growing acquaintance with the power of the Ring and the threat of the Eye give him the strongest connection to Gollum. Even Sam sees that “the two [are] in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another’s minds” (250). Frodo appeals to the long-submerged Sméagol by offering companionship and faith that he can be redeemed; Gollum, in turn, intimately understands the power of the Ring and the horror of the Eye in a way few other living beings can. Even after their relationship sunders irreparably in the face of Gollum’s betrayal in Shelob’s lair, their connection brings both inexorably to Mount Doom. There, at the quest’s goal, Frodo succumbs to the Ring and to the desire to dominate. However, when Sauron’s triumph appears inevitable, the quest succeeds finally through Gollum’s unintentional assistance as he and the Ring fall into ruin. Ultimately, Frodo fails to perform the task he took on, worn down by the corrupting power of the Ring and the poisonous aura of Mount Doom, the center of Sauron’s kingdom. Yet, the innate strength of hobbits to relate the experiences of others to themselves succeeds as the mercy Bilbo, Sam, and Frodo showed to Gollum brings the unexpected gift of victory to Middle-Earth. The power in hobbits which inclines them toward empathy rather than unconsidered domination of an enemy preserves Gollum’s shadow of a life until his ultimate destiny redeems Middle-Earth, if not himself.

In Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, internal battles fought against the militaristic desire for power and dominance by individual forces of good count most in the ultimate victory of the forces of the West. In such battles, especially central in the role of Ringbearer, empathy provides the most reliable weapon to defeat the selfish desire to rule others. Putting themselves in the position of the other and feeling as the other feels reveals the true harm of controlling actions, enabling each to resist the desire for dominance. Each Ringbearer, in addition to resisting the temptation of the Ring, has the opportunity to do a just thing by putting Gollum to death. But each, with the unique will given to hobbits, empathizes with Gollum and shows mercy, rather than giving Gollum the death he deserves and has often dealt out. Here, the self-restraint and denial of physical violence exhibited by the hobbits mirrors the Christian concept of grace. Though Gollum only rarely displays signs of goodness, and that often unobserved by the hobbits, the Ringbearers all eventually release him from the sentence of death that his actions merit, even though this mercy may harm them. Similarly, Frodo's failure to relinquish the Ring and Gollum's subsequent repossession of it represent a climactic low, a point where there seems to be no possibility of a happy ending. The miraculous reversal of these expectations through Gollum's death and the Ring's destruction creates what Tolkien terms the eucatastrophe, a concept based on the death of all hope and hope's unlooked-for resurrection in the biblical narrative. Providence, an unspoken but strong source in Tolkien's work, rewards each hobbit's loyalty to his nature when all the suffering Gollum has caused in his thin, stretched life is turned to good in the greatest eucatastrophe since Eru Iluvatar's revelation of snow-flakes to the Valar and an abashed Melkor, proving that even destruction can serve the ends of an omnipotent deity. In Tolkien's fundamentally Christian cosmology, the pity of Bilbo, Samwise, and Frodo and the treachery of Gollum work together to create the best outcome possible for a fallen Arda.

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