



mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 10  
Number 3

Article 2

1984

## Silent Commands? Frodo and Gollum at the Cracks of Doom

Robert A. Hall Jr.

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

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Hall, Robert A. Jr. (1984) "Silent Commands? Frodo and Gollum at the Cracks of Doom," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 10 : No. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol10/iss3/2>

This Article 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](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

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



---

## Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

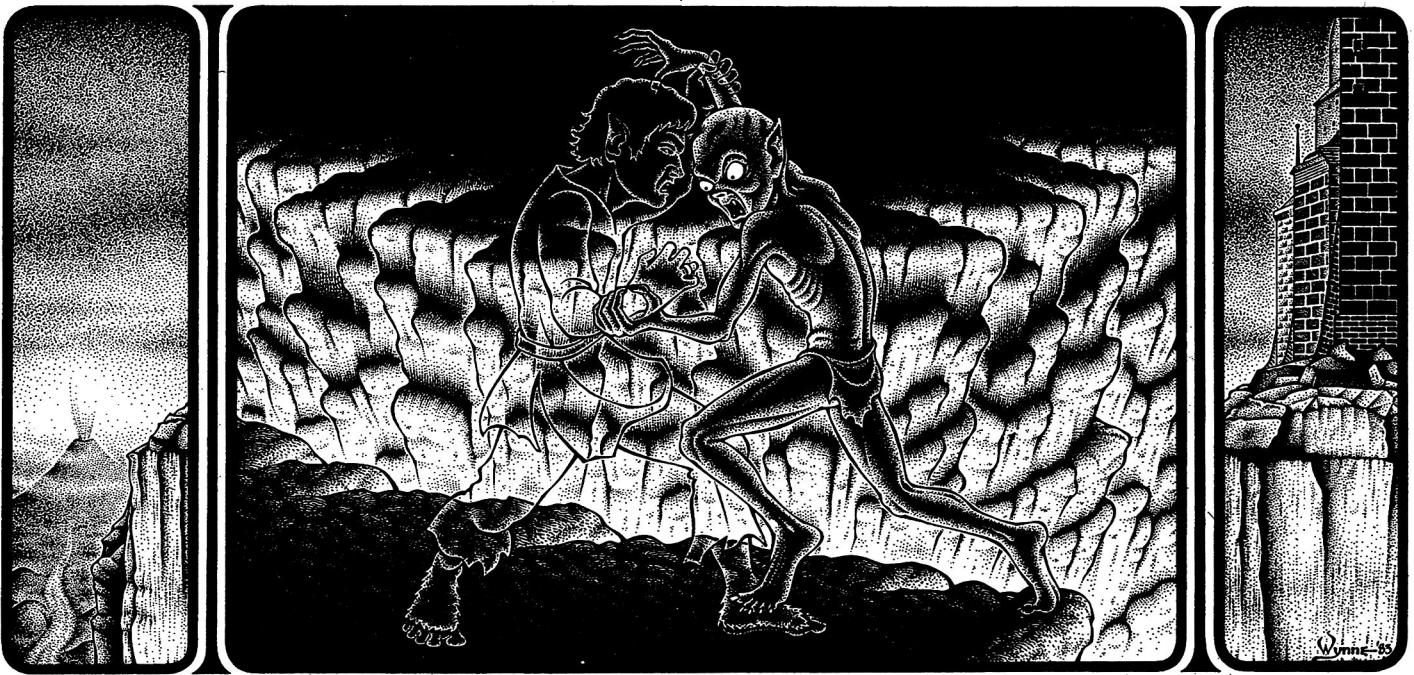
<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

Analyzes the key scene at the Cracks of Doom, which the reader sees through Sam’s viewpoint, for hints as to the powers of the bearer of the Ring and his ability to command others. Considers similar scenes from the Bible, *Beowulf*, and *Chanson de Roland*. Concludes that Frodo issued Gollum a “silent command” to throw himself into the pit with the Ring.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Frodo—Motivations; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The Ring; Patrick Wynne



## *Silent Commands?*

### *Frodo and Gollum at the Cracks of Doom*

*Robert A. Hall, Jr.*

The climactic scene of The Lord of the Rings, the struggle between Frodo and Gollum which results in the latter's falling with the Ring into the Cracks of Doom, is presented from Sam's point of view. The only verbal communication that he hears, once he has followed his master into the cavern leading to the Sarnath Naur, is Frodo's proclamation of his claim to the Ring. After Gollum has knocked Sam out in his rush to attack Frodo and seize the "Preciouss," all that Sam hears, on recovering from his momentary blackout is Gollum's hissing. So far as Sam (and, therefore, the reader) can conclude on the basis of spoken words, Gollum's biting off Frodo's finger with the Ring on it is a result of his own volition, and his falling into the pit of Mount Doom is essentially fortuitous. On the basis of this interpretation, many commentators have considered that the destruction of the Ring, despite Frodo's yielding to its power at the very end of his Quest, is due to a benevolent Fate, acting through chance, and based upon Frodo's merciful actions on previous occasions.

Yet immediately after Gollum's fall, Frodo says to Sam: "But do you remember Gandalf's words: Even Gollum may have something yet to do? But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring." (I, 227) The clear implication of this sentence is that it was Frodo himself who destroyed the Ring, as

\*All volume and page references are to the Ballantine paper-back edition.

a result of Gollum's involvement. This interpretation is possible if we assume that, despite the absence of speech, Frodo issued Gollum a silent command, at some point during their struggle on the brink of the pit, to hurl himself and the Ring into the fire.

This assumption is, I believe, justified in the light of several passages at earlier points in the story. Frodo, when speaking severely to Gollum, says (II, 314) "In the last need, Smeagol, I should put on the Precious; and the Precious mastered you long ago. If I wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire." The last words which Frodo speaks to Gollum turn this prophecy into a specific threat: "If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom." Note the passive here: some other agency than Gollum himself will cast him in.

But does "being cast" necessarily imply the use of someone's physical force, or can it mean simply "caused to fall"? If the latter, will it be caused by an abstract Fate, or will it happen as a result of Frodo's own will, as Frodo had forecast earlier? For the latter interpretation, all we need assume is that at some point in their struggle—even perhaps, at the very end, when Gollum has already begun to bite through Frodo's ring finger, but while it is still part of Frodo himself—that the latter does just as he had foretold he would do, and

commands Gollum to hurl himself into the fire, of course taking his "Preciouss" with him. Gollum has, for that matter, been expecting his end to come very soon (III, 273), saying that he would die into the "dust."

Silent commands, especially (but not exclusively) in relation to the Ring, are attested at several points in The Lord of the Rings. The first is in the encounter between Frodo and the Ring-wraiths at the Ford of Bruinen. There, he feels their command to give himself and the Ring to them (I, 295): "In any case, he felt that he was commanded urgently to halt." After he has replied aloud, and again after he has invoked the names of Elbereth and Luthien, they call "with deadly voices" (I, 286); but at the threat of their leader, who raises his sword, Frodo is stricken dumb.

After Boromir has attempted to take the Ring from Frodo, the latter puts it on for himself, and suddenly senses Sauron's "fierce eager will" (I, 519), clearly ordering Frodo to bring the Ring to him. For the reader, the linguistic situation is left unclear. We are not told whether Sauron's will is expressed in words or not. Frodo himself does not know whether he has called out in reply "Never, never!" or "Verily, I come, I come to you!". Another thought, from another "point of power," comes to his mind, telling him "Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!". Then Frodo becomes aware of himself and, as Frodo, "neither the Voice nor the Eye," he makes up his mind through an exercise of purely free will, although he still has the Ring on his finger.

This and other episodes furnish support for the hypothesis that Tolkien presents his readers with situations in which the language used in commands and responses is either entirely unheard or confused; and that Frodo is still able to exert his free will even while wearing the Ring. Anticipating events somewhat, we may point out that we need not view Frodo as immediately and wholly enslaved by the Ring when he puts it on at the Cracks of Doom. He is far from being in Gollum's condition, of being entirely possessed by the power of the Ring.

Sauron through out enforces his will on his hordes through a silent exercise of power. When his attention is finally drawn to the true situation by Frodo's putting on the Ring and claiming it for his own, Sauron's will falter's and his armies, who have already begun to attack Aragorn's at the Black Gate, silently feel its weakening and are in consequence disoriented: "...through out his realm a tremor ran, his slaves quailed, and his armies halted, and his captains suddenly steerless, bereft of will, wavered and despaired" (III, 275; cf. also 278-279).

There ensues a silent struggle of wills between Frodo and Sauron, who has forgotten his armies, and "the whole mind and purpose of the Power that wielded them was now bent with overwhelming force upon the Mountain"

(III, 274). The Nazgul hurtle thither at his (again, silent) command. As for Gollum, we are not told whether he acts on Sauron's unspoken command or not when he struggles with Frodo and wrests the Ring from him. One is inclined to wonder whether such a command on Sauron's part would be necessary. Even before Frodo puts on the Ring for the last time, Gollum has been sneaking up in back of the two hobbits, in spite of Sam's threats (III, 273-274). Since Gollum's whole being is already thoroughly and exclusively permeated by his all-consuming desire for the Ring, Frodo is not invisible to him; and he leaves Frodo no time to exert any power through having put it on. Nor does Gollum put it on himself to exert any power, but simply holds it aloft "with a finger still thrust within its circle" (III, 275) to gloat over it. Gollum's intervention is best explained, I believe, as independent of Sauron and beginning even before the latter has become aware of the situation.

Frodo's claiming of the Ring for his own is essential to the denouement of the story, in two respects: distraction and destruction. It was necessary for Tolkien to have Sauron's attention drawn away from his armies, who have already begun their attack. Had this not happened, Aragorn's forces would have been, if not defeated, at least decimated. Furthermore, not only Sauron, but Gollum must be destroyed together with his "Preciouss." This could hardly be accomplished by any other means than his falling into the fire, since certainly neither Frodo nor Sam could be presented as destroying him at this point.

If my suggestion is valid, the end of both the Ring and Gollum is indeed the result of Frodo's better self having willed it, despite his yielding (momentarily, as it turns out) to the Ring's power at the edge of the chasm. I believe this interpretation is justified also from the psycho-symbolic point of view. As many commentators have observed, Gollum represents the dark side of Frodo's character. The relation between the two is similar to that between the major antagonists in Wagner's Ring des Nibelungen. Alberich the dwarf is Schwarz-Alberich "Black Alberich," whereas Wotan is Licht-Alberich "Light-Alberich." After Frodo's better self has yielded to the Ring's power on the brink of the chasm, his evil self wrests it from him, but he is able to get rid of the evil side of himself and, thereby, of all desire for power by causing both Gollum and the Ring to be consumed.

In the "homestretch" of his painful journey to the Cracks of Doom, Frodo finally comes to a renunciation of all use of weapons, telling Sam "I'll bear no weapon, fair or foul" (III, 284). He is, however, no pacifist a outrance, since he declares, during the "scouring of the Shire," that no killing is to be done except to save hobbits' lives: "But remember: there is to be no slaying of hobbits, not even if they have gone over to the other side.... No hobbit has ever killed another on purpose in the

Shire, and it is not to begin now. And nobody is to be killed at all, if it can be helped" (III, 357); "I wish for no killing, not even of the ruffians, unless it must be done, to prevent them from hurting hobbits" (III, 357). This position is close to that of St. Augustine (De civitate Dei [1, 21]) who not only approves killing in a "just war" but declares that he who carries out his superiors' orders to kill is not himself responsible for the death he deals.

Although Tolkien's Middle-earth is of course pre-Christian, not only his basic approach, but many of the individual episodes are, as some have suggested, Christian in their nature, either foreshadowing Scriptural events (such as the walk to Calvary) or embodying fundamental moral principles. Viewed from this angle, Frodo's action is strongly reminiscent of the passages (Matthew 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-48) in which Jesus commands his hearers to cut off a hand or foot, or to pluck out an eye (without anesthetics!), in preference to being cast whole into hell-fire "where their worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44, 46, 48). Symbolically, Frodo's finger has caused him to sin, by being the part of himself on which he places the Ring. Is it too much to suspect that he may even have commanded Gollum to bite the finger off, so that he, Frodo, may sacrifice it lest he fall whole into the fire, and so that he may never again have such a desire for power? Perhaps this is too daring an interpretation, but the thought is tempting.

Imagery strongly reminiscent of the Bible is also present in the way in which Sam sees Frodo "with other vision" (III, 272). When Frodo speaks to Gollum for the last time before entering Mount Doom, Sam sees standing before him "stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white," holding at its breast a wheel of fire. Sam is clearly expecting Frodo to perform (avant le lettre, as it were) a Christ-like act of salvation for the world, by hurling the Ring directly into the fire, and sees him robed in white, as Christ appeared transfigured to his disciples (Mark 9:2-3). But Frodo, being hobbit-human, accomplishes his Quest in a much less idealized fashion.

Is there, then, a deus ex machina at the end of Frodo's Quest, in the shape of Gollum, to do for him what he was, at the very end, not able to bring himself to do? At present, I am inclined to doubt it, in the light of the interpretation just proposed. Nor can Sam's sparing of Gollum, just before they enter the cavern leading to the Cracks of Doom (III, 273), be taken as such, for the mercy he shows Gollum is well founded in his realization of the creature's misery. If there are any dei ex machina, they are Gwaihir and the other eagles sent by Gandalf to rescue Frodo and Sam (III, 280, 282) from what would otherwise have been certain extermination in the lava pouring forth from Mount Doom.

The manner in which Tolkien has Frodo

end his Quest is consonant with all three of the genres to which, as Verlyn Flieger has pointed out, The Lord of the Rings belongs. (Tolkien: New Critical Perspectives, N. Issacs and R. Zimbaro, eds., University Press of Kentucky, 1981, pp. 40-62.) It involves a final struggle which is epic in its intensity, if not in the social status of its protagonists. (This latter is present, rather, in the conflicts between the armies of Rohan and Gondor, on the one hand, and those of Sauron on the other, together with such typically epic exploits as that of Eowyn and Merry in slaying the Ringwraith.) An epic denouement often involves a struggle between two antagonists in single combat, who outcome is for a time in doubt. (Think of the climactic battle between Charlemagne and Baligant in laisses 258-261 of the Chanson de Roland, or that between Beowulf and the dragon in verses 2538-2751 of Beowulf.) In this instance, the epic battle is between a most powerful being, the force of evil personified in Sauron, and a representative of the least powerful, the hobbit Frodo. The entire fate of Middle-earth and the possibility of the transition from the Third to the Fourth Age depends on whether this one little hobbit can succeed in destroying the One Ring and thereby defeating Sauron. The conflict is, by this fact, rendered all the more dramatic and its outcome uncertain until the very last moment.

In addition to the "eucatastrophe" or happy ending of the fairy story, The Lord of the Rings has the Quest which is essential to the romance. Frodo's Quest is not merely (as some have suggested) an "anti-Quest," involving the destruction rather than the gaining of an object. In a broader sense, Frodo's Quest is indeed positive. By destroying the Ring, and with it Sauron's power and threat to Middle-earth, Frodo has gained an invaluable treasure for all who come after him in the Fourth Age: the possibility of living and developing free from malevolent oppression. In this respect, we can see the "parallelism" which Tolkien admitted might exist between his tales and real events. In the same way as Frodo did for those who came after him, those who sacrificed their lives and health in the Kaiser's War and in Hitler's War won a similar freedom for their children and grandchildren. The latter would do well to remember Frodo's words to Sam (III, 382): "It must often be so, Sam when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may enjoy them."

Do these considerations add anything to our understanding and enjoyment of The Lord of the Rings? I dare to hope so; for such is the only valid purpose of literary criticism.



I am indebted for helpful criticism and suggestion to Rose A. Zimbaro, Geoffrey Robertson-Mellor, Anne C. Petty, and Paul H. Köcher, to all of whom my heartfelt thanks.