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Abstract

Traces Gollum’s story through *The Lord of the Rings*. Notes that Gollum tended to evil before possessing the Ring, and comments on the mutability of the master/servant situation.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gollum

AN INTERPRETATION OF GOLLUM by Stephen A. Gottlieb

By studying Gollum's role and character, we gain insight into Frodo's task and Frodo's heroism in The Lord of the Rings. Just as Gandalf and Frodo himself warn against underestimating Gollum's role or destroying him, so Gollum must be pitied yet hated, preserved and yet held at a distance--difficult mandates for the reader. Understanding Gollum would seem to govern our understanding of key ambiguities in a work which studies the ambivalencies of heroes and of heroism. Gollum, flexible as device and symbol, both precedes The Lord of the Rings and is a prime component in its climax at Mount Doom. He lost the Ring in The Hobbit; he simultaneously gains and loses it in Book VI of the Ring trilogy. Throughout the trilogy, the care with which Tolkien has woven Gollum into his thematic purposes is everywhere apparent.

In The Fellowship of the Ring Gandalf had warned of Gollum's importance at the Council of Elrond, where he and Aragorn had discussed Gollum's fate and whereabouts. Sauron has found out Bilbo's ownership of the Ring through Gollum, and, after suffering much, Gollum has sworn never to allow Sauron to repossess the Ring. Gollum's relationship to the Ring is therefore different from that of everyone else in that he alone has faced Sauron directly, and his love of the Ring has set him in opposition to Sauron. This hatred of Sauron makes him, in effect, the greatest aid to Frodo in the moment of Frodo's need, for it is Gollum who destroys the Ring. Tolkien's contrivances here, and typically, are detailed and totally appropriate; for it will be argued that the symbolism complements the use of Gollum as a device.

Gandalf had said that Gollum "may play a part yet that neither he nor Sauron has foreseen" (I, 336). It is wise to remember this remark when we question Frodo's kind treatment of Gollum in Book IV of The Two Towers.¹ First, it is clear that Frodo understands the relation of Gollum to the unknown, to fate itself. He remembers "voices out of the past...." Then he is not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends" (II, 281). Vengeance and the use of power breeds more death and more. It is self defeating, and Gandalf had been sent to Middle-earth with just such a warning. Also, that Gollum symbolizes the unknown qualities of "hobbit" motivation (he once was "of hobbit kind," Aragorn had noted in I, 84) is suggested in the final phrase of the above quotation. With Gollum, in fact, blind longing and hatred lead to schizophrenia. He is Gollum/Smeagol; he is, for Sam, "Slinker and Stinker"; he is, for himself, Smeagol and Precious composed within the same person.² His connection with Frodo enumerates the dangers of the Ring comically and with more power than even the tragedy of Boromir.

As for the power of Tolkien's portraiture of Gollum, we feel Sam's horror at being immersed within alien life, as he and Frodo move towards Mordor. Gollum is described as a "large prowling thing of insect kind" (II, 278). The description of Gollum parallels and makes horrid the growing degeneracy of Frodo which the Ring promotes. The monomania of Gollum also serves to increase the reader's sense of urgency concerning the Ringbearing task, but also parallels the increasing effect of the Ring upon the ringbearer. Gollum knows that the hobbits are journeying towards and into Mordor,

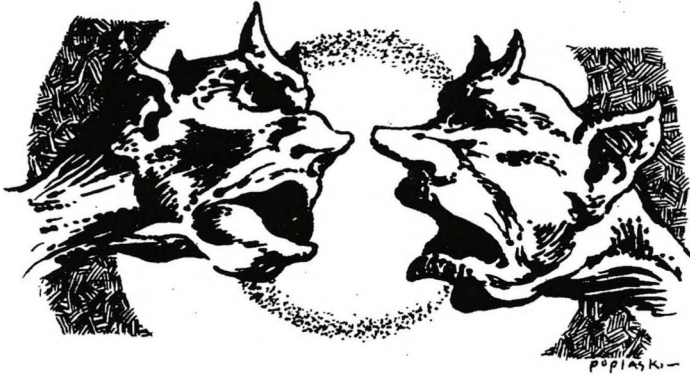
for his mind is on the same wavelength as Frodo's (II, 282). His becoming their guide, a dangerous assistance, strengthens the motif of the Ring as being both help and bane, as it had been in the Frodo-Boromir encounter, where the price of escaping Boromir was the breaking up of the Fellowship. Thus, Gollum augments the reader's feel of the ringbearer's horror, and through an understanding of the Frodo-Gollum relationship, which the reader comprehends better than Sam, the reader is himself drawn into the horror.

The horror of the Frodo-Gollum relationship reaches its climax when Frodo assumes a lordlike posture to enforce Gollum's pledge of assistance. Frodo here is quite in control of his mental state, but the scene also serves to describe the power of a Ring which indeed could reduce Frodo to the reptilian past, to the fundamental lusts. Frodo becomes simultaneously the master of the Ring and its victim at the moment when Gollum promises: "I will serve the master of the Precious" (II, 285). The ambiguity is complete: by being in charge of the situation, Frodo runs the danger of entering into a mental state (similar to that of Gollum) which frightens Sam, whose consciousness now merges with that of the reader:

For a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown and Gollum had shrunk: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in a grey cloud, and at his feet a little whining dog. Yet the two were in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another's minds. (II, 285)

Aside from the similarity to the deteriorating Saruman-Wormtongue relationship, the situation rehearses a recurrent theme, the interchangeability of ruler and ruled, of master and servant. Any ultimate condition can bring about reversals: madness and personal stagnancy lie just beyond absolute clarity of mind, and Gollum's condition could become Frodo's.³ So it is not folly to feel pity and hatred towards Gollum, who delineates, as symbol and as device, many of the ambiguities of the trilogy.





Gollum, it should be noted, had already become Gollum before he acquired the Ring. His situation thus represents the constancy of evil lurking in everyone. The Ring serves to amplify this inner corruption. But unlike Frodo, who with Gollum faces the Ring directly, other characters tend to portray less primeval kinds of evil tendencies. For instance, Saruman and Denethor cannot be saved because of their respective commitments to power (domination) and glory. It is therefore fitting that they make their connection with Sauron through the Palantir stones because they remain at a rational distance from the kinds of inner corrosion that beset Gollum and, to some extent, Frodo. Saruman and Denethor do not present the totality of corruption which lust for the Ring often entails. It should also be remembered, however, that Frodo's ritualistic task and Sam's presence preserve him from the full exposure to the Ring and to himself which Gollum has experienced: while Gollum is a Ring-possessor, Frodo remains a Ringbearer. Ritual and Fellowship protect the hero from his naked self.

Gollum finally repossesses the Ring at the ultimate moment of Frodo's corruption. Frodo has reached a stage of suffering whose profundity is reinforced by the allusion to King Lear's spiritualization of his own suffering following his madness.⁴ Prior to Frodo's walk to the edge of the chasm, Sam sees him standing before Gollum, "stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice" (III, 272). By virtue of its allusion, the "wheel of fire" image bespeaks the positive aspects of a wisdom learned through suffering. Like Lear, Frodo has arrived at the center of the rational fire, a posture gained by man's extension beyond madness into sanity--a stage never reached by Gollum. Gollum's presence is crucial at this point because Frodo's final struggle with this tormented and hideous figure sets limits to his heroism: Frodo loses the struggle with Gollum because, like Gollum, he has given in to the power of the Ring. Gollum's action forces Frodo, like Lear, to live despite suffering, failure, and spiritual crisis, or perhaps because of them. Gollum's fate is fixed in part because he is a reverse image of Frodo and therefore must succeed ultimately at the very instant that Frodo fails ultimately. Thus, while Frodo must live with the mark of the Ring,

Gollum is able to die with the Ring because he is the wheel of fire of the Ring itself, united with its mad fire. Frodo must live aware that his horror was enacted by Gollum.

FOOTNOTES

¹Frodo must not kill Gollum because Gollum has been exiled from his society for murdering Déagol (I, 84-86). This section was quoted in Karen Corlett Winter's comparison of Gollum with Grendel, "Grendel, Gollum and the Un-Man: The Death of the Monster as an Archetype," *Orcrist*, II (1967-68), 29. Later, Frodo avoids killing Saruman (III, 369). Gollum is destroyed but Frodo's implication in his death is avoided. References to *The Lord of the Rings* are to the Ballantine, 1965 edition and provide the volume and page.

²Gollum is the only character in *The Lord of the Rings* whose name-changing signifies complete loss of identity through self obsession. Yet, the Ring exerts this general effect on each character touched by its power. Those who refuse to touch the Ring or to think in terms of acquiring it retain their inclusiveness of vision, their selfless relation to the cosmos. Gandalf, Aragorn and Galadriel do not think in such parochial terms as Boromir or Gollum.

³*The Hobbit* presents a more detailed portrait of Gollum's stagnancy (see Chapter V): his secretiveness, the pools, the island. Gollum is on an evolutionary retreat.

⁴When Lear awakes, Cordelia asks how he feels. Lear's reply includes the lines, "...I am bound/Upon a wheel of fire that mine own tears/Do scald like molten lead" (Any edition, IV, vii, 46-48).

