

Fantasy and Utopia

“Fantasy fiction offers an escape into a simplified world of good and evil, where there is never any doubt as to which side we should be on.”

Discuss.

Introduction.

As the title suggests, fantasy fiction is often perceived as literature of a mere escapist nature without ambiguity. It has become associated with an image of a pure and truly good protagonist faced with an enemy evil through and through, the story leading up to the inevitable battle between the two. No subgenre suffers more often from this generalisation than the quest narrative, and no book of this subgenre probably more often than *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien. It is unarguably the most well-known work of its kind, and therefore all the more likely to be subject to criticism. The sense of the quote in the title of this essay has in all likelihood been used to describe *The Lord of the Rings* on numerous occasions, both by its critics and its fans. True, on the surface one can see a clear division of good and evil, and if one had to choose sides between the Hobbits of the Shire and the Nazgûl of Minas Morgul, there is indeed very little to no doubt as to our pick. Yet one has to question whether it truly is that simple, if everything in Tolkien’s Middle-earth is black or white.

This essay will look closer at some of the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* to ascertain whether they can be classed as good or evil or if there is too strong an element of ambiguity in some. Is it the characters as such that are good or evil, the persons or creatures they are, or is there an all-encompassing notion of good and evil? The question can also be asked: is it always clear on which side the characters themselves are?

In comparison and contrast, Roger Zelazny’s *Amber Chronicles* provide a set of quest narrative books (and with their main focus on a quest for the throne, the classification can hardly be questioned) that stand as an example of fantasy fiction where there is much doubt as to if anyone can be singled out as

good or evil. Even the main character seems as ‘evil’ as anybody else, and one can easily imagine seeing the story through another person’s eyes, perhaps even through those of his enemies. That is not to say Zelazny has successfully proved critics and others wrong in their generalisation, for it is just as important to look outside the cast of characters and on a broader scale see if there perhaps still are good and evil forces in the world.

The idea of ‘escaping’ into these worlds is one worthy of exploration in light of the conclusions hopefully reached at the end of the discussion of the novels. Would one escape purely because these worlds are simpler, if so is the case, or can there be other reasons?

Good and Evil in Middle-earth.

Tolkien has populated his world with many different peoples and creatures. For the most part, these can be roughly divided into ‘evil’ or ‘good’ by whether they have sided with Sauron or not. Sauron stands alone as the evil lord with all his forces beneath him. Saruman may have thought it possible to take power himself, but as Gandalf puts it “only one hand at a time can wield the One” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*: 340), and even Saruman is not strong enough to withstand the might of Sauron. He is his servant, whether he admits to it or not. Those who oppose Sauron and join in the battle against him, would seem to be good. The men of Gondor, the Rohirrim, the Dunedain, the Hobbits, the Elves and Dwarves – all these peoples are represented as opponents of Sauron.

What then of the Ents? While it is true that they despise Orcs, who make up the main forces of Sauron, they care little for what goes on in the world around them. As long as Fangorn is left to grow in peace, who rules on the outside is of small concern.

‘Hoom, hm, I have not troubled about the Great Wars,’ said Treebeard; ‘they mostly concern Elves and Men. That is the business of wizards: wizards are always troubled about the future. I do not like worrying about the future. I am not altogether on anybody’s *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*, if you

understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them...'
 (*The Two Towers*: 75)

One could assume that if it was not for Saruman cutting down trees in Fangorn, the Ents would have played a completely passive part in the war of the Ring. Treebeard and his kind have nothing against Saruman's alliance with Sauron – it is his destroying the forest that bothers them. Because what they do has a positive effect on the war for the 'good', we also perceive Ents as 'good'. This impression is reinforced by Treebeard's friendship with Merry and Pippin, yet we also know Ents are not always of a kind disposition towards the 'good', and a pair of Dwarves armed with axes may not have been as well received.

Another example of someone (or something) who has not chosen sides is Shelob. In this instance, however, the gigantic spider is seen as evil. But how different is she from the Ents? Like them, she only cares for herself. The Ents, while not violent like Shelob, only wish to be left alone, as nothing in the world interests them. Shelob wants nothing but to satisfy her hunger, and she feeds upon anyone who may pass, Orcs as well as humans or Hobbits. She herself makes no distinction between good or evil, and although she serves Sauron's purposes as a guard almost impossible to pass, she does not do so knowingly. Again, because Sam and Frodo are attacked, we look upon Shelob as evil.

Yet there is one important difference between the Ents and Shelob. Greed. The desire to have more. Shelob's insatiability is not matched in any way in the Ents, and this is a returning trait of evil in Middle-earth. Is it not indeed Sauron's will to be all-powerful that is the root of the evil within him? He is greedy for power, just as Shelob is greedy for meat. It is Saruman's downfall that he desires more power, and the very thing that turns him evil. Paul Kocher writes of Tolkien's philosophy of evil:

We are not to be like dragons hoarding in our dens as treasure whatever we can snatch from the living world around us. People and things are not meant to be our property; they belong to themselves. (Kocher 1972: 66)

Tolkien has even collected the ‘good’ under the name of The Free Peoples. They do not fight Sauron for more power, but for their own freedom. Of course, it is never as easy as that. Throughout this trilogy, the Ring, the ultimate source of power, is in the hands of the good. And not even the innocent Hobbits are immune to its temptation. Least of all, humans are.

The ambiguous character of Boromir is an excellent example of the influence the Ring has over men. Boromir is a son of the Steward of Gondor, the oldest at that, and set to inherit the Stewardship that in the absence of a king means the throne. He is proud of himself and his country, yet he desires little more than peace for Gondor, and he is certainly not evil. But the need of him and his people is great, and the possibility to use the Ring as a weapon is too appealing. Boromir is not evil, and he is not unintelligent, so why can he not accept that the Ring cannot be used to make good, despite being told by a number of people, older and wiser than himself? The answer lies of course in the Ring. By making the Ring almost sentient, Tolkien lifts some of the blame from Boromir, for even though power can be seductive in itself, it takes more than that for an honest man to attack someone half his size, as Boromir does in trying to take the ring from Frodo. It is as if Boromir is under some spell, for when Frodo disappears he immediately regrets his actions: “ ‘Come back! A madness took me, but it has passed. Come back!’ ”(*FR*: 519)

The Ring attracts not only those who wish for power. Hobbits of the Shire are quite content in pottering around in the garden and enjoying a good pint of beer at the local pub. They have no desire for power over anyone else, and in a sense is much like the Ents. As long as they are left to their happy lives, nothing bothers them, and they bother no one. Their way of life make them particularly resistant to the pull of the Ring, but as mentioned earlier, they are not immune. It seems to affect them differently, however, as can best be seen in the creature Gollum, who was once something similar to a hobbit. Gollum is addicted to the Ring in a strange sense, and he follows it everywhere, yet he has no great ambitions:

‘See, my precious: if we has it, then we can escape, even from Him, eh? Perhaps we grows very strong, stronger than Wraiths. Lord Sméagol? Gollum the Great? *The* Gollum! Eat fish every day, three times a day, fresh from the Sea. Most Precious Gollum! Must have it. We wants it, we wants it, we wants it!’ (*TT*: 241)

Even when he had the Ring for centuries, he did nothing but eat fish and think of riddles, and when he imagines himself as ‘Lord Sméagol’, his only demands is that the fish comes fresh from the sea. All things considered, the Ring has not turned Gollum wholly evil, and his hate for ‘Bagginses’ comes only from the fact that Bilbo took the Ring from him, and who can really blame him for liking nobody, when he is liked by no one himself. Although he is far from likeable, we pity him, and his split personality shows Sméagol as he once was. There is still a conscience underneath the layers of meanness that the Ring’s corruption has covered him in, a Sméagol who can think of even a Baggins as a “nice hobbit” (*TT*: 240). It does seem like an amazing stroke of luck that during all these years, the Ring has been with Gollum and Bilbo, who in their lack of ambitions in terms of power, have never used it to its full purpose: to rule the other Rings.

It seems then that the Ring is a device of evil, something that can bare the evil sides of the best of men (and hobbits). And the Ring was made by Sauron, so is Sauron the ultimate source of evil? He may be responsible for almost everything evil about Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*, yet as Elrond says, “ ‘...nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so.’ ” (*FR*: 350) and we are told in the *The Tolkien Companion* by J. E. A. Tyler that Sauron is akin to Gandalf and Galadriel: “...it might seem likely to later scholars that Sauron himself was ultimately of Eldarin race, seduced into evil far back in the First Age, when he became ‘a servant’ of a greater Power, Morgoth of Angbad.” (Tyler 1976: 423) His first claim to evil seems to have been causing the division of the Númenorians, which eventually led to the battle between Sauron and Elendil, and although Sauron’s body was destroyed, his spirit lived on, ever

seeking revenge and power over Elendil's line, of which Aragorn is descendent. (*The Return of the King*: 1955)

This is hardly a redeeming explanation in Sauron's case, yet it shows that Tolkien did not create a Middle-earth with two original forces of good and evil. In the beginning, nothing is evil, and therefore, nothing can be said to, in the beginning, be good. As for Morgoth, once Sauron's master and scholar, he was once a Valar, a god-like being "whose greed and fall from grace brought about a change of the world" (Tyler 1976: 423). However, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the background of Sauron is not discussed in depth, and readers are left with what little is provided. And, based on ordinary common sense, there can be no real question that Sauron and his intentions are evil. There is nothing about Sauron that appeals to the reader, as in the case of Gollum. In this light, there is in fact no doubt as to what side we will choose in *The Lord of the Rings*, if one side means Sauron. Brian Rosebury writes:

...it is one of the triumphs of Tolkien's literary judgement in *The Lord of the Rings* that fully-accomplished evil is represented by states of personality (or unpersonality) which no sane reader could envy. (Rosebury 1992: 41)

If we now return to the Ring, this small object that Sauron has somewhat foolishly put so much of his power into, we can see that while its existence is necessary for the spirit of Sauron to survive, it is also what makes him vulnerable if it should fall into the hands of his enemies (Kocher: 1972). Yet even though this is precisely what happens, the task of the opponents is still a difficult one because of the evil nature of the Ring. Neither Elrond nor Gandalf would take it in Rivendell. Galadriel would not in Lothlorien. Both Aragorn and Faramir resisted temptation, knowing it to be ruinous, and all hope lay then with the hobbits.

And still there is one over whom the Ring has no command. Tom Bombadil can not only wear the Ring without becoming invisible, but he can also see Frodo when he puts it on. Of course, invisibility is but one of the many uses of the Ring, but even so, it shows that Bombadil in some way is

different. He seems to have a power of his own that is greater than that of the Ring, not letting the Ring have any effect on him at all. Not only that; his genuine disinterest in the Ring as a tool of any kind seems to put others at ease, knowing full well that he would not try to use it against them:

‘Show me the precious Ring!’ he said suddenly in the midst of the story: and Frodo, to his own astonishment, drew out the chain from his pocket, and unfastening the Ring handed it at once to Tom... Then Tom put the Ring round the end of his little finger... There was no sign of Tom disappearing! Tom laughed again, and then he spun the Ring in the air – and it vanished with a flash. Frodo gave a cry – and Tom leaned forward and handed it back to him with a smile. (*FR*: 183)

Tom Bombadil is unique in this sense, and though one can almost imagine him singing his way to Mount Doom unhindered by anything, flowers springing up around his feet as he dances through Mordor, he, like the Ents, is not concerned with such things. He is the antithesis of Sauron, ever content, always singing, loving all living things. And because of this, he desires nothing, not even to destroy evil.

This work of fantasy fiction, one of the best-known around the world, can then be said to clearly show signs of dividing the world into good and evil. If it by that simplifies it, is another matter. The reader will know what side to be on as a whole, but Tolkien, often accused of not developing characters, has created individuals of an ambiguous nature, and it is their personalities, rather than the obviously good or evil, that he explores the most rigorously. Compared to many later followers, notably the hugely popular *Belgariad* by David and Leigh Eddings, Tolkien’s world is multi-layered, rich and detailed, and *The Lord of the Rings* offers much more food for thought than what can be seen on the surface.

Zelazny's Amber:

do Order and Chaos equal Good and Evil?

Winner of both Hugo and Nebula Awards, Roger Zelazny is best known as a writer of Science Fiction. His Amber series, and in particular the first five, however, are quest narrative books where we follow Corwin, prince of Amber, as he attempts to win the throne.

The reader sees the world through Corwin's eyes, and the first person narrative makes bias almost inevitable. He is a very human protagonist with flaws such as arrogance, sexism and selfishness, a more realistic character than his counterpart of sorts in *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn, who is of real hero stuff. As the reader comes to know Corwin very intimately, (especially in *Nine Princes in Amber*, where Corwin knows as little as we do, and he and the reader explore his background together) it is not difficult to think of him as 'good'. Thus one may at first think of his brothers Eric and Julian as 'evil' in their willingness to kill Corwin, were they given a chance. Evil, not like Sauron, for their desire for power is shared by Corwin himself, but merely for opposing Corwin.

Regarding Corwin's relatives as truly good or evil based on their current status in terms of friendship does seem a rather extreme idea, and one easily dismissed as it becomes increasingly clear that these friendships are both fleeting and false, created out of cunning rather than fraternal love. Unlike *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Amber Chronicles* seem to focus on the opposing forces of Chaos and Order rather than the Evil Lord (which can be found in many incarnations throughout fantasy literature) and the king (similarly exchangeable for hero, wizard, prince etc).

Conventional evil can first be spotted in *The Guns of Avalon*, when Corwin is faced with first of all the Black Circle in Lorraine, and then, more notably, the Black Road. The demonic creatures that come out of the Circle and travel on the Road kill innocent people, the very nature in their immediate area withers and dies. Yet this evil has been granted entry into Shadow and eventually

Amber by Corwin himself. His curse, directed at Eric and uttered in fury took shape in this manner. Although at first described as something out of Shadow, it soon becomes evident that these demons belong in the Courts of Chaos, and Corwin has set them loose:

And then it raised its hand and made a sign, and I had a vision of the Courts of Chaos come upon me – a vision that made my hackles rise, made a chill wind blow across my soul, to know what I had done. (*The Great Book of Amber*: 155)

And still in realising he is responsible for this evil threat against Amber he contemplates bargaining:

“...You see?” it was saying. “You gave us this Gateway. Help us now, and we will restore you to that which is yours.” For a moment I was swayed. It was possible that it could do just what it had offered, if I would help. But it would be a threat forever after. Allies briefly, we would be at each other’s throats after we got what we wanted... (*GBA*: 155)

It is perhaps only years of intrigues within his family that keeps Corwin from making this bargain to get to the throne. He considers this offer, if ever so briefly, seriously. A scenario impossible to imagine in *The Lord of the Rings*, comparable to a hypothetical meeting between Saruman and Gandalf where the latter seriously considers using the Ring against Sauron.

The great difference lies in the origins of these creatures, and ultimately the origins of Corwin himself. In Zelazny’s Amber, only Chaos existed from the beginning. Dworkin, himself a demon lord of the Courts, rebelled against his family and created Amber through the Pattern. He thus created a counterweight to Chaos, and instead of an evil power rising, as in *The Lord of the Rings*, beauty and tranquillity rose in the shape of Amber.

We perceive the demons of Chaos as evil because of the stereotypical image of evil in our minds, because Order rather than Chaos is what we think of as good. Yet what claim has Order of being good, when Chaos was once everything? As Corwin discovers more about the Courts of Chaos and of

Dworkin's – his grandfather's – origins, he begins to understand that the Courts is more than a mere haunt of demons. Furthermore, he becomes personally involved with it when he discovers that Dara, a lover of his, is part demon.

Yes, it was Dara! Tall and magnificent now. Both beautiful and somehow horrible at the same time. The sight of her tore at the fabric of my mind... I was mightily repelled and simultaneously attracted as I had never been before. I could not understand this overwhelming ambivalence. (*GBA*: 254)

Dara is the link between Chaos and Order, and although her intentions are initially to overthrow Amber, she learns to love it as much as she loves her home in the Courts. She and Oberon, the returned king of Amber, join in an attempt to restore balance between Order and Chaos. If Chaos indeed represented evil, this would be a rather unimaginable scenario, because we are used to evil characters being thoughtless and brutal, incapable of regret and change of heart. Dara could be seen as an exception, being part human, yet the Lords of the Courts of Chaos are on the whole not interested in a war on Amber, and Dworkin, of course, is a demon lord himself.

In spite of all this, there is still evil in the Amber/Courts multiverse, of a kind comparable to that in *The Lord of the Rings*. Brand, Corwin's brother, at first only had the ambition to take the throne of Amber, but as his knowledge grows, his plan turns to creating a whole new universe for himself. Again, greed is what makes Brand evil, a mad desire to control everything, and to be awed by his brothers and sisters. Although it is never explained why Brand acts the way he does, Corwin gives it thought.

Brand might have been borderline psychotic, whatever that means, and then again maybe not. There is always a reason... If someone does something really rotten, there is a reason for it. Learn it, if you care, and you learn why he is a son of a bitch. (*GBA*: 479)

Again, Zelazny proves himself different from other authors of quest narrative fiction by getting closer to that ‘evil’, in some ways excusing it. If the thought occurred that Sauron was out of his mind, it would probably have been agreed with, but would anyone question if it was really his fault? Unlikely. Sauron is evil and must be destroyed. Brand is evil and perhaps just as dangerous as Sauron, and must also be rid of, and both are endangering the existence of everything. But Brand has family, people who know him, some of whom once loved him. If Sauron did, they are long forgotten.

At the end of the fifth book, Corwin has not succeeded in becoming king of Amber, and for all his pains, he is not sure he would want the throne anymore. Yet though his initial quest was not completed, the balance of Chaos and Order seems restored, and the princes and princesses of Amber seem to for once have put their differences aside to defeat their brother and save Amber – the real quest in the end.

The notion of Escape.

Whereas this essay has discussed good and evil, it has yet to pay attention to the important word ‘escape’ in the title quote. Tolkien expresses a dislike for the term in his essay on fairy-stories in *Tree and Leaf*:

I have claimed that Escape is one the main functions of fairy-stories, and since I do not disapprove of them, it is plain that I do not accept the scorn or pity with which ‘Escape’ is now so often used, a tone for which the uses of the word outside literary criticism give no warrant at all. (Tolkien 1975: 60-61)

And although that may or may not be the tone of the quote in the title, we must accept ‘escape’ as a term that means wishing to exit this world, and enter that of a literary work. Rosemary Jackson has not used the word, but otherwise expresses the sense of the quote:

A creation of secondary worlds through religious myth, faery, science fiction uses ‘leagalized’ methods...to establish other worlds, worlds which are *compensatory*, which fill up a lack, making up for

an apprehension of actuality as disordered and insufficient. (Jackson 1981: 173-174)

Whether or not ‘compensation’ is used as a euphemism for ‘escape’ will remain unsaid, but the important point is that Jackson also acknowledges a want for simplicity, an escape from that disordered actuality.

With the cult following of *The Lord of the Rings*, and in particular the numerous Live Role Playing communities based on it, there is no doubt that it is a work one can be absorbed by, and fans are heard discussing the characters as if they were real. Is it then a morally simpler world that attracts so many? Or is it the fact that Tolkien has tried his utmost to make Middle-earth seem like yet another part of real history, and in some ways been successful? Is it the battle between good and evil that absorbs the reader, or is it the construction of another world, complete with a history and family trees, that makes it captivating? As with most things, there will be a different opinion for every reader, but many will probably admit to forgetting the real world in favour of Middle-earth for a few moments. And as Tolkien points out, that is hardly a terrible thing.

What then of *Amber*? Can a reader escape into a world where it is always uncertain if the next person you come across is a friend or an enemy? In *The Amber Chronicles*, the world becomes more complicated with every page, as new things are revealed to us and to Corwin. One sometimes gets the feeling that Zelazny himself did not know what was going to happen next. The first-person narrative contributes to this as the reader is only told of things as Corwin comes across them in thought or conversation. Tolkien, however, can stop the main story for a few pages of background history, providing readers with information none of the characters would be likely to know of.

The attraction of *Amber* is perhaps the joy of discovering something that the reader might not have been able to imagine him/herself. Also, as the reader starts to know Corwin (indeed the only character we truly know), just a desire to know what happens to him in the end can be enough for an escape to *Amber* for a few hours.

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