

THE POIGNANCY OF EMANCIPATION AS SEEN IN  
THE LORD OF THE RINGS, by J.R.R. TOLKIEN

1999 - Honors Thesis

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The Road goes even on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with weary feet,  
Until it joins some larger way,  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The Lord of the Rings, a three-volume fantasy couched in the form of a monumental historical epic by J.R.R. Tolkien, has been hailed by many as the major creative work of the century. Young and old alike have been drawn to this literary work and have found it to be both compelling and delightful, but The Lord of the Rings has found its greatest appeal among creative young people who have formed a devoted cult of Tolkien followers. C.S. Lewis has summed up the feeling of Tolkien's admirers by saying, "Here are beauties which pierce like swords or burn like cold iron; here is a book that will break your heart....good beyond hope."<sup>2</sup>

This trilogy is undoubtedly good, but one might ask, "What is it about The Lord of the Rings that is especially appealing to the creative young person? What is so fascinating about Frodo's journey into the Shadows of Mordor to destroy the Ring of Power?" And, most pointedly, "How do the events which change and shape Frodo and his companions have substance for the Tolkien cult?"

It is my intention to play upon the thesis that that which generates the "magical appeal" of the Tolkien volumes rests, in part, upon the following motif: that the reader empathizes with the theme of the loss of a child's idyllic world as the responsibilities of manhood encroach. With the support of on-going fantasy one is taken along the poignant path of emancipation from those idylls which, I am presuming, are among the most cherished property of the creative child.

To accomplish this end, I have divided the content of this paper into, essentially, two parts. In the first part I intend to explore, along the lines of traditional categories developed in Social-Anthropology

and Community Sociology, selected aspects of the social structure and institutions of Tolkien's fictional land of the Shire with a view toward relating them to possible corollaries in the creative child's idyllic world (society). The second part of this paper will deal with Frodo's journey from the Shire and will attempt to show how his experiences might relate to the presumed value systems of some creative students as they pertain to the emancipation from childhood---and to the poignancy of that emancipation.<sup>3</sup>

PART I - Social Structure of the Shire related to the Child's Idyllic World

The child's idyllic world is a very simple one, represented in the Tolkien volumes as the Shire, one of the fictitious lands created by Tolkien. It is an agrarian society and is, perhaps, similar in locale to Northern Europe.

The inhabitants of the Shire are much like children, especially in that their stature is small, ranging from two to four feet tall. They call themselves Hobbits but, appropriately, are sometimes called "Halflings" by those from other regions. They are supposed to be related in some way to men, although it is stated that "the nature of this relationship can no longer be discovered."<sup>4</sup>

As the government of the idyllic child's world might be expected to be simple, so it is in the Shire. This land had once been in the dominion of a high king, but the kings have long ceased to exist, and the Hobbits now look after their own affairs. In doing so, however, they keep the old laws, "For they attributed to the king of old their essential laws; and usually they kept the laws of free will, because they were The Rules (as they said), both ancient and just."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, they had need for very little government. The hereditary office of the Thain, once a substitute for the king's office, and commander of the military, had become a nominal dignitary after the long years of peace. The only real office in the Shire is the Mayor of the entire Shire. This official is selected for seven year terms by way of popular elections. The office calls for his presiding at banquets and directing the offices of Postmaster and First Shirriff. Aply in this kind of a world, the more numerous and busier of the

two offices consisted of the Messengers, who deliver letters from one end of the Shire to the other. The Shirriffs are the nearest equivalent to the police, but are, of happy necessity, more concerned with the straying of beasts than of people. More numerous are the Bounders, employed to keep Outsiders out of the Shire, for Hobbits very zealously maintain their way of life, preferring to let no disruptive influences into their land and themselves keeping very much within the confines of the familiar world.

Perhaps not fitting in with the idyll, yet seemingly very natural in an English author's childhood, is the modest degree of social stratification within the Shire. Class position is determined mainly by family name, and Hobbits place high importance on family trees, knowing who is related to whom and in what degree. Nevertheless, class status is not rigid, e.g., the major figure of Frodo had a rustic servant, Samwise, who became an important figure in the Shire and Mayor of Michel Delving.

However, Hobbits were content with their appointed lot, being, as a rule, "generous and not greedy, but contented and moderate, so that estates, farms, workshops and small trades tended to remain unchanged for generations."<sup>6</sup> For the most part, families kept to themselves, spending most of their time in growing and eating food and minding their own, well-ordered business, and it was on this basis that the Shire lived in relative peace.

As the child's world revolves around the family, so is the family the most important institution in the Shire. It is through the family that the culture is perpetuated and order is maintained, for it manages most of its own affairs and looks after its own kin. With few exceptions, males dominate the family and society. Although, realistically, relatives

are not always on the best of terms, it is apparent that Hobbits are clannish, for, in some cases, many generations of relatives live together in one many-tunnelled mansion.

Religion is another area that, perhaps, follows the child's world, for in the Shire there are no religious institutions of any kind. As with children, there is no conception of a God, although there is a vague conception of the ultimate forces of Good and Evil. In truth, these simple Hobbits had lived in peace so long that:

They came to think that peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all sensible folk....They were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it.<sup>7</sup>

They, like children, are not sophisticated enough for formal religious doctrine; neither do they have primitive tribal rites. And, like many children, they had a great love of elaborate formal ceremony---which they used for almost any occasion.

However it is clear that they rely on plain hobbit-sense in ordering their lives. Although there is little evidence of formal rules for moral and ethical behavior, there seems to be a certain amount of rustic folk tradition, in the form of adages, which are often used as guidelines for behavior, e.g., "It's the job that's never started as takes longest to finish."<sup>8</sup>

In the simple life of the Shire, education is considered part of the family responsibility, and there is no provision for formal schooling. The most important things to be passed on to the younger Hobbits are the practical and vocational skills that were practiced in the family setting. After that, if there is a tutored Hobbit in the family he might teach the young Hobbit "his letters", but it was not generally considered important. "A love of learning (other than genealogical lore) was far

from general among them, but there remained still a few in the older families who studied their own books, and even gathered reports of old times and distant lands from Elves, Dwarves, and Men.<sup>9</sup>

But most Hobbits have little appreciation for books and poetry, finding most delight in "books filled with things that they already knew, set out fair and square with no contradictions."<sup>10</sup> Here indeed is the child's idyllic world, for it emphasizes knowledge that can be readily understood by all. And if formal learning is not popular among Hobbits, they seem to know enough to meet their simple needs. Yet Hobbits delight in learning lists of things, especially geneological history, to the extent that, as Gandalf the Wizard put it, "These Hobbits will sit on the edge of ruin and discuss the pleasures of the table, or the small doings of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers, and remote cousins to the ninth degree, if you encourage them with undue patience."<sup>11</sup> In addition, they had very little curiosity about things beyond their immediate sight.

In this child's idyllic world of the Shire, work is put at a minimum and enjoyment of leisure time is a much-practiced art. Hobbits' pleasures are simple and include eating,<sup>12</sup> sleeping, drinking a good mug of beer at the local Inn, smoking and blowing smoke rings (for Hobbits invented pipes), and even walking trips to visit friends. But most of all, "They were hospitable and delighted in parties, and in presents, which they gave away freely and eagerly accepted."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it was the custom to give away presents on one's birthday, which meant that many Hobbits would receive a present at least once a week, if they had many friends.

At this point it should be noted that, although Hobbits had lived a life of ease for as long as they could remember, they are not soft. For at need even the fattest Hobbit has an inner strength that astounds even Wizards, and they have a capacity to resist evil and can exhibit courage beyond the bravest men:

Nonetheless, ease and peace had left this people curiously tough. They were, if it came to it, difficult to daunt or to kill; and they were, perhaps, so unwearingly fond of good things not least because they could, when put to it, do without them, and could survive rough handling by grief, foe or weather in a way that astonished those who did not know them well and looked no further than their bellies and their well-fed faces. Though slow to quarrel, and for sport killing nothing that lived, they were doughty at bay, and at need could still handle arms.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the Hobbit world in many ways reflects the child's idyllic world, for the Shire contains simple people who lead simple lives and enjoy simple delights. And herein lies one fatal flaw of the Shire and of the child's idyllic world, for in shutting out all Outsiders, they shut out the Good with the Bad. Thus, in not knowing Evil they cannot effectively combat it when it ultimately threatens them, and, in not knowing Good, they cannot always recognize it when it comes to them. Although they live in simplicity, it seems that they also live in ignorance of the fullness of life, for knowledge of a world beyond their own is not in their ken.

PART II - The Painful Venture into Adulthood

It is out of this background that the Hobbit, Frodo, comes, the unwitting possessor of the Ring of Power:

One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.<sup>15</sup>

This Ring belongs to Sauron, Shadow of Evil, and if regained by him will give him absolute control over the Middle-earth. It is the task of Frodo and of those who choose to accompany him to take the Ring and cast it into the fire of Mount Doom from which it was made---in the land of Mordor, the very stronghold of the "Satanic" Sauron.

Tolkien's three-volume work relates the adventures and perils that befall "The Fellowship of the Ring", as they are called, not the least of which is the temptation to use the power of the Ring and, hence, to be corrupted by it. And, as others oppose the armies of Mordor, the epic follows Frodo and his servant Samwise in their accomplishment of the task of destroying the Ring and thus bringing about the defeat of Sauron.

It is my intention to show that, in part, Frodo's Quest represents the awesome journey from childhood into manhood. The idyllic childhood world is relived vicariously within the context of equally imaginative elements. But more than this: the recast idyllic life in the Shire is tintured progressively and irrevocably by Frodo's agonizing venture into the land of Mordor, into the painful land of adulthood with its ambiguities and darkening complexities.

Even before he leaves the Shire, Frodo experiences the pain of internal conflict, for even as he knows he must leave, he realizes that the world of the Shire is very dear to him. He knows he must take on the responsibility that possession of the Ring of Power has thrust upon him, yet he cries out,

I am not made for perilous quests. I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?<sup>16</sup>

This, perhaps, is the cry of the child who does not really want to grow up, the young pupil who does not want to leave home, the young person who does not want to take on the responsibilities of an adult world.

From the Wizard, Gandalf, comes an answer to the child in his world:

Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have.<sup>17</sup>

Frodo, as with many young people, feels unprepared to take the responsibility and would gladly give it to others:

But I have so little of any of these things! You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?<sup>18</sup>

For the Curse of the Ring is a terrible thing. In the Shire Frodo had been aware of the magical qualities of the Ring, but not of the danger. By way of illustration, the Ring brings two seemingly delightful powers to its bearer: a) it gives unchanging longevity, so that the owner never really grows older and, b) when placed on his finger, it makes the wearer invisible. In the Shire this is a delightful toy and a way to avoid unwelcome guests.

But to leave the Shire is to become aware of the Ring's other powers, for in the outer world these delights become deadly evils. As the bearer

And yet, although there are reasons why Frodo must leave the Shire, he also realizes that he wants to leave; and herein lies the painful dichotomy. For the world holds places he would like to see, secrets he would like revealed, and people he would like to come to know. If he is to grow in understanding he knows he must venture beyond the Shire, to explore the world more deeply. So it is with many young people. Reluctant to leave the security of the child's world, they are yet lured by the promises of the adult world: independence, growth, knowledge, experience. All these are available, but as Frodo sensed, not without cost.

The world becomes a different place to Frodo as he leaves the Shire. He experiences terror for the first time in his life. From the very first he is hunted by terrible Servants of the Dark Lord who would take the Ring. Because the Ring contains so much Evil power, it is always attempting to betray him, even as it did with others before him. Indeed, the power of the Ring struggles with his own will:

Something seemed to be compelling him to disregard all warnings, and he longed to yield. Not with the hope of escape, or of doing anything, either good or bad: he simply felt that he must take the Ring and put it on his finger.<sup>1)</sup>

The forces of Good and Evil continue to envelope him, but in the desperate struggle between the Voice of Good and the Eye of Evil within him, Frodo becomes aware of something more:

The two powers strove in him. For a moment, perfectly balanced between their piercing points, he writhed, tormented. Suddenly he was aware of himself again. Frodo, neither the Voice nor the Eye: free to choose, and with one remaining instant in which to do so. He took the Ring off his finger.<sup>2)</sup>

done the Ring he becomes aware of another, both invisible and evil, world that has hitherto been hidden from sight. Moreover, although the owner never grows older, he begins to fade into this evil world and eventually passes from human sight.

In addition to all this, the lust for the Ring grows on the bearer until eventually he cannot willingly part with it. And further, although the Ring cannot be used for good, it tempts good men to try to do so, and thus corrupts them. For no matter how strong and good his intentions may be, the Ring eventually controls and turns to evil anyone who tries to use it. Thus, although by its use Sauron may be conquered, in the end he will be replaced by another and greater wielder of the Ring of Power as long as the Ring is in existence.

This is the curse of the Ringbearer. Not only must he face all the terrors of the Ring, but he must resist being corrupted by it. So, perhaps, does the corrupting influence of the world face the young person who leaves his idyllic world. Will he find that the delights of childhood are deadly games when taken from the child's world? Can he face the responsibility of his journey into adulthood and not be betrayed by it in the end?

Frodo must face the task that lies before him. He must leave the Shire; and with that realization comes an appreciation for it that he has never before felt:

I should like to save the Shire, if I could - though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words, and have felt that an earthquake or an invasion of dragons might be good for them. But I don't feel like that now. I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the choice for the ordering of his life is his alone. He can listen to the forces of Good and Evil that are within and around him, but in the end he is something more and separate from either of these: he is Himself.

Yet this is not the final battle, but just one of many which Frodo must fight with the Ring before the completion of the Quest. As he nears the goal, the power of the Ring grows until it is such that:

As it drew near the great furnaces where, in the deeps of time, it had been shaped and forged, the Ring's power grew, and became more fell, untameable save by some mighty will.... He felt that he had from now on only two choices: to forbear the Ring, though it would torment him; or to claim it, and challenge the Power that sat in its dark hold beyond the valley of shadows. Already the Ring tempted him, gnawing at his will and reason.<sup>21</sup>

The Ring even had the power to distort his vision of his truest friend and companion, his faithful servant Sam, who has loved him and stayed with him in his darkest hours:

Sam had changed before his very eyes into an orc, leering and pawing at his treasure, a foul little creature with greedy eyes and slobbering mouth.<sup>22</sup>

The vision passes, but it takes all of Frodo's strength to keep going as he nears the end. One aid to him is the light he carries: the bottled light of the stars that only the darkest Evil can dim. Another aid is Sam, his faithful servant, without whom the Quest could not have been completed. For it is Sam's love for him that gives him hope in the midst of despair. Sam even carries Frodo when the burden of the Ring becomes such that Frodo's will can no longer command his body.

Yet, in the final hour the Ring of Power is too strong for even Frodo's will. As he stands in the crucial moment above the fires of Mount Doom, he suddenly takes the Ring and claims it for his own:

I have come. But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!<sup>24</sup>

Here is a crucial point in life and one which chills the heart of many. For in leaving the child's world, even the wisest cannot predict the end of the Quest. If a person stays in the simple child's world, the story would have a predictable ending: "...and they all lived happily ever after." Not so in the adult world, for the end of the Quest is hidden.

So it was that, as Frodo journeyed, he became less and less the person he had been in the Shire. Now he had come to the final and ultimate test of his will. Having been untested in the Shire, he was strengthened by many things along the way: the undying love of Sam, the healing power of the Elves, the wisdom of Gandalf. But in the end he was alone, and with each step towards the goal the threat of being overcome by the Quest had become stronger and stronger.

Perhaps in some obscure way this is the fight that each person must make into adulthood. Each step from the child's world contains both the bitter and the sweet in the struggle for mastery of oneself against the forces of the outside. Like Frodo, perhaps a person is unable to assume adulthood until he has destroyed that which would control him. These experiences and others are possibly a part of the young person as he ventures into the adult world. The struggle for the mastery of one's own self is perhaps his greatest attainment, for after that he can again look homeward, as Frodo did.

After the accomplishment of the Quest, Frodo and his companions finally returned to the Shire. Here they expected to find rest and peace in which to end their days, but it was not to be. The Shire was not as secure as it had seemed. It was only through the vigilance of others that it had been protected, and when this vigilance was relaxed, ruffians intimidated the inhabitants of the Shire and took control. The Hobbits had been protected for so long that they could not give effective resistance, and so it was when the travellers returned. Frodo and his friends pressed Gandalf the Wizard to return and put things right in the Shire, but times had changed, they had changed, and he no longer would accept that role:

I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for. Do you not yet understand? My time is over; it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so. And as for you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now. Grown indeed very high; among the great you are, and I have no longer any fear at all for any of you.<sup>24</sup>

The travellers had "grown up" and their roles had changed. So it is that the role of the young person changes when he becomes an adult. He must be responsible for the world and accept his adult roles. He must, in theory, be a guardian of his Shire. No longer can he live in ignorance. He had changed and the world will never be the same for him. Here is the deepest cut of all, and he may then cry with Frodo:

There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?<sup>25</sup>

Here is where the poignancy of emancipation lies. Frodo travelled the long road from the Shire to the end of the Quest, but now things could

not be the same again. For his companions it was different because they had not suffered the burden he had, although they had been through much. Their fortune was to lead the Shire again through a well-ordered existence. But, as Frodo explained to Sam before he eventually sailed over the Western Sea:

I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.<sup>28</sup>

This then is where the ultimate appeal of the Tolkien volumes rests. For the creative young person, Frodo's Quest can represent the emancipation process; the journey into adulthood. But even as a person takes this journey, he ever longs for the security of the child's world--- a security he, like Frodo, can never again enjoy. It is his lot to build a world for someone else. He can never again live in the childhood world.

## FOOTNOTES

### Part I

- 1 J.R.R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings, Volume I, Page 110. (Ballantine Books)
- 2 C.S. Lewis, Back cover of Lord of the Rings, Volume I. (Ace Books, Inc.)
- 3 Tolkien, op. cit., page 21.
- 4 Ibid., page 30.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., page 25
- 7 Ibid., page 467.
- 8 Ibid., page 467.
- 9 Ibid., page 21.
- 10 Ibid., page 28.
- 11 Ibid., Volume II, page 172. (Ace Books, Inc.)
- 12 Hobbits eat six meals a day when available.
- 13 Tolkien, op. cit., Volume I, page 20. (Ballantine Books)
- 14 Ibid., page 25.

### Part II

- 15 Ibid., page 81.
- 16 Ibid., page 95.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., page 96.
- 20 Ibid., page 262.
- 21 Ibid., page 519.
- 22 Ibid., Volume III, page 189. (Ace Books, Inc.)
- 23 Ibid., page 202.
- 24 Ibid., page 242.
- 25 Ibid., page 301.
- 26 Ibid., page 293.
- 27 Ibid., page 338.