

The Path to Corruption: The Lord of the Rings

Research Question: To what extent do the objects of power corrupt the individuals in the world of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*?

English B HL – Category 3

Word Count: 3991

1. Introduction.....	2
2.1 Benign Artifacts of Middle Earth.....	3
2.2 Neutral Artifacts.....	4
2.2.1 Denethor's Palantir.....	4
2.2.2 Saruman's Palantir.....	5
3. Corrupt Artifacts.....	6
3.1 Seven Rings of Dwarves.....	6
3.2 Nine Rings of Men.....	7
3.3 The One Ring.....	7
3.3.1 Untempted Individuals.....	7
3.3.2 Tempted by Uncorrupt Individuals.....	9
3.3.3 Corrupted Individuals.....	10
4. Conclusion.....	11
5. Bibliography.....	14

1. Introduction

The “Lord of the Rings,” written by J.R.R. Tolkien, introduced a fresh approach to faerie tales with a strong connection to magic and artifacts of power that grant supernatural abilities, even invisibility. Tolkien’s artifacts, however, are not simple instruments added as a sideline to enhance the storytelling. Rather, he introduces them as the symbol of human desire to “...rebel against the laws of the Creator”, especially to overcome mortality, which eventually leads the user to “...the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective, – and so to the Machine (or Magic).” (Letters, 99). In his letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien concludes that this desire fuels the possessiveness, causing the individual to “cling” to his own creation, and finally fall to the “...corrupted motive of dominating...or coercing other wills”. The Ring of Sauron, a powerful magical ring, created to ultimately “... rule them all” (Tolkien, 2005:6) is placed at the center of the story as the main artifact that embodies Tolkien’s views on corruptive machinery, which incites the primal human desires, such as greed, lust for power, and possessiveness. In addition to the One Ring, however, Tolkien gave us numerous other magical artifacts that lead their owners either to salvation or to their doom. Depending on the purpose and function of those artifacts, identity and intent of their users, we see that the One Ring is not the only item symbolizing or possessing “Power” that Tolkien used in his tale when referring to the corruption of the soul. Therefore, the research question “To what extent do the objects of power corrupt the individuals in the world of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings?” tries to give a broader picture on how Tolkien’s magical artifacts worked their way into the individuals in Middle-earth. To find the answers to this research question, I will first identify and classify magical artifacts based on their nature; then I will analyze their effects on the bearers and discuss the source and mechanism of corruption. Finally, I will make an assessment on the role of Tolkien’s objects of power in corrupting individuals and the factors affecting the strength of their influence.

2.1 Benign Artifacts of Middle-Earth

The main protagonist, Frodo, and the members of the Fellowship used various magical objects that aided them in their journeys, such as Phial of Galadriel to ward off wild beasts, The Sting to reveal presence of Orcs, elvish bread Lembas to sustain themselves, elven cloaks to camouflage, elvish rope that could untie itself, and the Stone of Eärendil to heal wounds. Finally, the three elven Rings of Power; Narya, Nenya and Vilya, forged by Celebrimbor had the ability to “...ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world.” (Tolkien, 1999:361).

These artifacts are presented as instruments that facilitate certain tasks with their magical powers without any indication of corruptive influence or at the cost of the wielder’s mental and physical health. In fact, the nature of these artifacts is essentially founded on protection, healing, and restoration. Therefore, they can be marked as “benign” in their alignment. Furthermore, contrary to the greed and the possessiveness that the One Ring creates on its wearers, these artifacts are freely handed over from one character to another just as Bilbo passes The Sting to Frodo and Galadriel gives magical gifts to the Fellowship.

2.2. Neutral artifacts

The second type of items seem to have no alignment towards good or evil but could be used in either way depending on the user’s intentions. Staves allowed wizards, such as Gandalf and Saruman, to cast either protective or offensive spells. The Mirror of Galadriel was a scrying device showing the user “...things that were, things that are, and things that yet may be.” (Tolkien, 2005:528). Similarly, the Seat of Seeing on top of Amon Hen, allowed the user to see far distant lands. Meanwhile, the Palantiri (plural for Palantir) enabled the users to glimpse at far distances or communicate with another user.

In the story, there are two important figures, Denethor and Saruman, who frequently used the Palantiri and exposed themselves to a third user; Sauron himself. Sauron used the stone in his possession to search for the One Ring and also to spy on the surroundings of the other Palantiri and in limited cases to communicate with their holders (Tolkien, 1980:403). Therefore, Denethor and Saruman's experience with the Palantiri needs further examination to understand how corruption could come through even neutral objects of power.

2.2.1 Denethor's Palantir

Palantir is a crystal spherical magical object crafted by elves and there were seven such artifacts in Middle-Earth. Having a Palantir at his disposal, Denethor frequently used it to probe Middle-Earth for knowledge on the tidings and possible threats, including Sauron's actions. However, as soon as Sauron realized Denethor's scrying attempts, he used his powers to force the Palantir to distort the visions revealed to Denethor to deceive him. Gandalf confirms that Denethor "...was too great to be subdued to the will of the Dark Power, he saw nonetheless only those things which that Power permitted him to see." (Tolkien, 2005:1220). Therefore, although Denethor resisted Sauron's corruptive influence channeled through the Palantir, the superior will force of Sauron and the dark images of an inevitable defeat selectively revealed by him greatly depressed Denethor, and reinforced by loss of his son Boromir and fatal injuries of Faramir, resulted in his suicide. Here Tolkien uses despair as a complete moral failure rather than just simple sadness. Denethor's breakdown does not come from just sorrow or corruption but from rationalism. Whereas Palantir was supposed to give truth, it became an instrument of deception, leading Denethor to lose all hope in the face of enemy's strength as he now considered defeat as a certainty rather than a possibility. The same rationalism that protected

him from corruption ironically became the reason of his fall due to his intellectual assessment that power would decide on their fate. Therefore, Palantir's magic was not the real cause of Denethor's fall but a facilitator to the true source, which was the direct deceptive influence of Sauron's willpower.

2.2.2. Saruman's Palantir

During the time they spent in Middle-Earth, Saruman dwelled in ancient lore on magic and artifacts in seclusion while Gandalf nourished relationships with its inhabitants; "...and this rivalry turned at last to a hatred, the deeper for being concealed, and the more bitter..." (Tolkien, 1980:349). Fueled by this jealousy, eventually Saruman's motives shifted from collaborating with the Council of Wizards against Sauron's influence to a different thought on seizing the One Ring for himself. While extending his search "Further and further abroad he gazed... Then he was caught!... the roving eye of Saruman was trapped and held; and how ever since he has been persuaded from afar, and daunted when persuasion would not serve." (Tolkien, 2005:855). Under Sauron's influence and instructions through Palantir, Saruman committed a number of acts that betrayed his ultimate mission, such as capturing Gandalf in his tower to learn the Ring's location, creating an army of orcs to raze Rohan lands, and even launch an attack on Helm's Deep. Although he never came close to acquiring the One Ring, Tolkien portrays Saruman's corruption a process, which starts with his interest in Ring-lore and then wanting the One Ring for himself (Tolkien, 1980:413). Furthermore, his mastery over magical artifacts and relics he developed in his isolation nurtured his pride, causing him to believe that he could even outmatch Sauron's power over the One Ring. Eventually, simply the thought itself to possess the ring opened the way for Saruman's corruption, which was reinforced even further by counsels of Sauron through the Palantir. Here again, the Palantir's neutral magic was not the main reason for Saruman's corruption. Similar to Denethor's case, Palantir was just a means of

communication giving Sauron the unique chance to gain access to Saruman's mind and bend his will with deceptions to ultimate corruption.

3. Corrupt Artifacts

As Lord Acton famously said, "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Shippey, 154). Tolkien presents an increased concentration of power with each step of the forging of the Rings towards absolute power, which brings us to the final category of artifacts: Those tainted by Sauron during their making. In total, 20 Rings of Power were forged in Middle-Earth. Other than the three rings forged by Cerebrimbor himself, Sauron supervised and guided the elves in making 16 rings "...And all those rings that he governed he perverted, the more easily since he had a part in their making...and they betrayed in the end all those that used them." (Tolkien, 1999:362). Sauron then secretly forged the One Ring by himself to control all other rings, passing most of his power to this final ring to make it far stronger than all others, hence the most corruptive in nature as it will be seen in following sections.

3.1 Seven Rings of Dwarves

Sauron gave seven rings to dwarven kings to bend their wills and control them. However, Sauron was unable to dominate them or read their minds because of their stubborn nature, or turn them into shadows. Tolkien associates dwarves with deep mines, stones, metals, and he presents them almost like some part of the mountain, hence picturing them as tough, resilient and enduring beings. Even the names he uses for dwarves, such as Thorin, Durin, and Thrór, sound highly masculine compared to elven or human names, again pointing at the strength of their characters. However, despite all these powerful aspects, "...wrath and an overmastering greed of gold were kindled in their hearts, of which evil enough after came to the profit of

Sauron.” (Tolkien, 1999:362). Sauron could not fully corrupt the dwarves into “Ringwraiths” due to their strong nature as he did to Men. But partial corruption of dwarves; embodied as greed and lust for wealth, eventually served his interests by leading them to digging deeper into the mines and releasing the Balrog of Moria.

3.2 Nine Rings of Men

The fate of Men under the Rings is a demonstration of Tolkien’s myth of power: that the promise of domination eventually enslaves those who desire it. Men are the most susceptible of all races to corruption in Tolkien’s world due to their greed for wealth - like dwarves - and their lust for power and domination. Accordingly, they were the quickest and most badly affected, who turned into shadows, called Nazgûl or “Ringwraiths”, losing their identities and willpower. Tolkien’s description of their transformation hints that the process was not instant. The rings initially helped the bearers become powerful kings and sorcerers, amplified their strengths but “...sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the good or evil of their wills in the beginning, they fell under the thralldom of the ring that they bore and under the domination of the One...” (Tolkien, 1999:362). Therefore, the Nazgûl were born as archetype fallen rulers; demonstrating how the desire for power resulted in one’s own destruction.

3.3 The One Ring

The One Ring is described as the most powerful artifact and the primary agent of corruption in the Middle-earth because it “...contained the powers of all the others, and controlled them, so that its wearer could see the thoughts of all those that used the lesser rings, could govern all that they did, and in the end could utterly enslave them.” (Tolkien, 1999:19). After Sauron lost the One Ring, it was wielded or owned by many other characters. Examining the experiences of

those owners reveals varying degrees of temptation but not instant corruption. Instead it signals to ultimate corruption in the end depending on how long they are exposed to its influence.

3.3.1 Untempted Individuals

In *Defending Middle-Earth*, Patrick Curry argues that Tolkien's work criticizes power that aim to control wills and instead it cherishes trust, humility, and service. Accordingly, Gandalf's guiding role among the people of Middle-Earth and his refusal of the One Ring can be seen as an embodiment of power used as service rather than control. Even when greater force would be to his advantage, Gandalf instantly refused to carry the Ring, knowing or fearing that "with that power, I should have power too great and terrible." (Tolkien, 2005:116). Similarly, Aragorn's humble motives throughout the book, such as traveling as a ranger when he is the rightful King of Gondor and immediate refusal of Frodo's offer to take the ring by saying "It does not belong to either of us" (Tolkien, 2005:369) reflects Tolkien's approach to humility over control.

Sam, on the other hand, did not hesitate taking the Ring to protect it from falling in enemy's hands, even though he knew there would be consequences for holding it. His resistance to Ring's temptation, however, is another example of how simplicity and humility prevails over domination. As Tom Shippey observes in *The Road to Middle-Earth*, Hobbits possess little desire for power or control over others, therefore leaving the Ring with less options to tempt them. Sam's brief possession of the Ring therefore produced not dreams of domination but fantasies of gardens and potatoes.

The most intriguing character, however, is Tom Bombadil who seemed to be completely immune to the Ring's magic. After Frodo handed him the Ring, not only he was untempted by it but Tom did not even turn invisible when he put it on. In addition to his immunity to the Ring's charms, he could also see through the invisibility effect that the Ring gave to its wielder.

Tom never had to distance himself from the ring like Gandalf and Aragorn or fight an inner battle with himself like Galadriel. While Tolkien does not clearly explain his immunity in his letters, Shippey observes that the Ring does not appeal to Tom Bombadil as he has no desire for power or dominion. Gandalf, however, connects his immunity to his immortality saying the Ring is “...so powerful that in the end it would utterly overcome anyone of mortal race who possessed it.” (Tolkien, 2005:94), “And if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come.” (Tolkien, 2005:396).

3.3.2 Tempted but Uncorrupt Individuals

Bilbo Baggins used the ring many times in his adventures but always hiding the truth about it, even lying to Gandalf that it was a birthday present. When leaving the Shire and his belongings to Frodo, he was still under temptation of the Ring and argued with Gandalf trying not to let it go until Gandalf pressed on using his own magic scaring him to submission. Other than his prolonged lifespan and occasional temptations, however, ring left no other marks on Bilbo and he remained uncorrupt. This has two reasons; easygoing nature of hobbits without greed of gold, wealth or power whom Tolkien describes, “They love peace and quiet and good tilled earth.” (Tolkien, 2005:31) and the relatively shorter duration of keeping the Ring in his possession compared to Gollum.

Isildur, too, fell under the One Ring’s charm as soon as he took it in his hand after cutting it from Sauron’s hand in battle. Despite the counsel of Elrond, he refused to cast the Ring into Orodruin’s fire due to his pride as he claimed the Ring as a “weregild” for his father (Tolkien, 2005:364). Compared to transformation of Ringwraiths, however, he remained uncorrupt despite being tempted as the Ring did not stay for too long with him to fuel his pride even further.

Boromir tried to take the Ring from Frodo by force even if with good intentions to use it against the enemy and prevent it from getting into enemy's hands. As soon as Frodo put on the Ring to turn invisible, however, the temptation was gone and Boromir realized his mistake begging for forgiveness. While Shippey considers Boromir's temptation as a result of his "patriotism and love for Gondor", he adds that his "ends justify the means" type of behavior gives credit to corruption (Shippey, 154).

Galadriel was not as quick as Gandalf or as distanced as Aragorn in refusing the offer to take the Ring. Where the Ring exploited Boromir's patriotism and Saruman's intellectual pride, it approached Galadriel through beauty and elegance, causing her to openly consider the possibilities of how "beautiful", "fair", and "Stronger than the foundations of the earth." she would become. After an inner battle with herself, Galadriel finally shrugged off the charm saying "I pass the test...and remain Galadriel." (Tolkien, 2005:534).

The most detailed example of the Ring's corruptive transformation, however, can be observed during Frodo's journey. At Bag End, he tried to throw the Ring to the fire as Gandalf suggested to see if he can actually do so "...and then with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away-but he found that he had put it back in his pocket." (Tolkien, 2005:115). In addition to such growing possessiveness, Frodo experienced physical and mental decline as he came closer to Mordor causing him to feel great weariness. At Cirith Ungol the Ring took control of him: "...as if some force were at work other than his own will, he began to hurry, tottering forward..." (Tolkien, 2005:1004) as the Ring tried to return to its Master. At the end of his long journey, Frodo's temptation was complete when he refused to throw the Ring to the fires of Mount Doom: "But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" (Tolkien, 2005:1346).

3.3.3. Corrupted individuals

Once a hobbit, centuries spent under the influence of the Ring not only mentally but also physically transformed Sméagol into Gollum; a completely wretched creature that almost worships his “precious” ring. Sméagol, fell victim to the Ring’s charm as soon as he saw it in the hand of his cousin Déagol and when the latter refused to give the Ring to him as a birthday-present, Sméagol strangled his cousin to death in cold blood. This is the worst temptation reaction in the story. There is no proof or past story that relates with the fact that Sméagol was an evil character before but the Ring’s temptation on him was so strong that it turned him into a murderer in an instant. In the centuries to come, Gollum’s physical shape gets twisted under Ring’s influence and his personality is split into two. One part of him hates the Ring for what it has turned him into and the other part longs for it. Boyd’s analysis of his split personality draws a clear picture of how deep his corruption has become: “...the envy and malice seen in his eyes, and the hatred that consumes him shows a kind of narrative account of what envy does to a soul...But envy cannot fulfill the promises it makes to the envious, because even when the envious possess the object of their desire, they are never satisfied since they have chosen a lesser good over the greater good of friendship and community.” (Boyd, 2023)

4. The Root of Corruption

According to Shippey, the corruption of the One Ring is a slow process and does not happen in an instant which aligns with Gollum and Frodo’s example. The Ring acts like an intelligent being; deciding when to abandon an owner, taking control of the wearer, and causing him to find a reasonable excuse for all his actions. Such actions would often be the ones that the owner often wants himself so he suggests that the corruptive effects depend on the bearer. “...on the one hand the Ring is a sort of psychic amplifier, magnifying the unconscious fears or selfishness

of its owners, and on the other that it is a sentient creature with urges and powers of its own, are both present from the beginning...” (Shippey, 135). He also defines the Ring as “addictive”, which clearly explains how certain characters may keep their distance from the Ring while others slowly develop a bond which gets stronger in time. “One use need not be disastrous on its own, but each use tends to strengthen the urge for another. The addiction can be shaken off in early stages (which explains Bilbo and Sam), but once it has taken hold, it cannot be broken by will-power alone.” (Shippey, 121)

Meanwhile, Flieger suggests that the One Ring corrupts by dividing the consciousness while magnifying the bearer’s desires to possess and dominate, which eventually replaces the personal will with the will of Sauron and she concludes that the source of this influence is a destruction of the self-identity and moral values: “The Ring is inherently evil, made by evil for evil purpose. It works on the inner darkness of the possessor with one consistent effect — it can only corrupt. It is the embodiment of Lord Acton’s dictum that ‘power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ Although the Ring appears to confer power on its possessor, the reality is that it gains power over that person.” (Flieger, 141).

Tolkien’s description of “corruptive power”, highlighted by Shippey and Flieger, is embodied in the Sauron’s ultimate willpower. Whenever the One Ring tempts, it is in fact Sauron’s will reaching out to dominate the lesser wills. When lesser rings of power awaken greed and lust for wealth and power, it is Sauron’s will that is rousing and feeding those desires towards ultimate corruption. Whenever Palantiri are used, it is Sauron’s will that would twist and bend what they see and ensnare their wills towards a bitter end. And all the examples of temptation and corruption we have seen reveals that the order of the pattern remains the same: First comes temptation, then addiction, and finally corruption.

5. Conclusion

Going back to the research question, it can be concluded that the corruptive extent of Tolkien's artifacts is proportional to the concentration of Sauron's willpower that they are able to channel to the subject. And the concentration of willpower exerted on the subject is then determined by; the potency of the artifact in terms of containing or channeling Sauron's essence, the inherent ambitions of the subject, and finally the amount of time exposed to the artifact, hence the willpower of Sauron. In a hierarchical order, The "One Ring to rule them all" is the most potent of all as it contains a great portion of Sauron's essence transferred to it during its creation and is able to instantly charm its subject as shown in the immediate temptations of Sméagol, Boromir, and Isildur. Extended exposure to the Ring increases the amount of addiction allowing Sauron to even control the actions of the subject evidenced during Frodo's journey, and beyond certain point fully corrupt the soul and even split the personality as seen in Gollum's story. The second group of artifacts are the lesser rings given to dwarves and men, which were also tainted by Sauron during their creation that could easily corrupt men to mindless servants and fuel the dwarves' greed to help his cause. Finally, although not tainted by his essence, Palantiri gave Sauron access to the minds of the subjects enabling him to influence them through deceits and trickery, if not by magic, as he tricked Saruman to his service and drove Denethor mad. Furthermore, depending on the race and wisdom, hence the inherent ambitions of the subject, the potency of the artifacts is enhanced or diminished. Where Tom Bombadil's immortal nature completely nullifies even the One Ring's magic, men yield almost in an instant to its temptations. Finally, the time of exposure is the last critical element that decides the fate of the subject and the extent of his corruption. Although resilient to greed, Gollum is the best example of how corruption sits in time or how short lived it can be as in the case of Boromir, who was instantly tempted but then who instantly regretted, as well. Although it is impossible to tell, perhaps even Tom Bombadil could fall victim to the Sauron's magic, given enough time.

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