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"A Jest, Too Bitter for Laughter":  
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A Study of the Central Theme of Irony in  
J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings

by

Martha Hamill Pipes  
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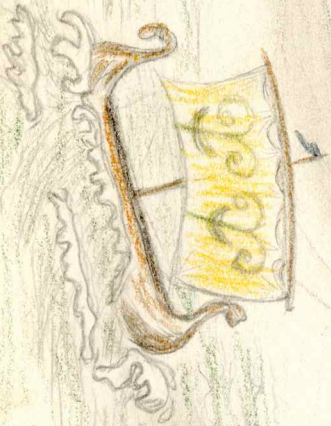
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## ABSTRACT

The thesis "A Jest Too Bitter for Laughter," by Martha Hamill Pipes, is a study of the central theme of irony in J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy The Lord of the Rings. The thesis is developed in four chapters, each treating one level of the spiral of irony found in the trilogy.

The first chapter is an examination of the ironic fate of the individual good creatures on Tolkien's Middle-earth. These creatures are faced with the present necessity of opposing evil in the Third Age. They have a limited perception of the ultimate futility of this action, as seen through the remarks of three major characters, Frodo, Sam and Gandalf the wizard. Thus the irony of their individual positions forms the core of irony in the trilogy.

The second chapter treats the evil creatures present on Middle-earth during the Third Age. Their constant antipathy for the good creatures creates a world of eternal conflict, for neither side can ever be finally defeated. The evil is too firmly rooted to be destroyed by the good. Yet the very nature of the evil creatures insures that they will never be able to conquer the good creatures. So the spiral of irony evolves from the individual lives of the good creatures to their interaction with other creatures.

The third chapter begins with a brief history of Middle-earth. The First and Second Ages of Middle-earth were as fraught with conflict as the Third Age. All indications from the predictions of Gandalf the wizard and others are that this history of war will not end with the Third Age. Evidence of a recurring cycle of war and peace indicates that the spiral of irony encompasses not only individuals and their relationship with others in one time and in one land, but for all time and in all lands.

Finally, the total creation of Eru, God of Middle-earth, is discussed in a fourth chapter. There are few hints in the trilogy of Eru's ultimate design, but his occasional interventions and the control exercised by his guardians of Middle-earth, the Valar, indicate that Eru intended to create this ironic situation on Middle-earth and that he intends to perpetuate it.

Tolkien's Middle-earth, then, is not the affirmative universe many critics have found it to be, according to this interpretation of the actions and lives of Tolkien's creatures. These creatures are caught in a recurring cycle of history in which their efforts to reach a final solution merely perpetuate the cycle. There is no rest, no resolution, nor is there likely to be any. The Lord of the Rings, understood in this context, is "a jest too bitter for laughter."

## Introduction

J. R. R. Tolkien's trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, chronicles the war between good and evil during the Third Age of Middle-earth. This is not the first such war on Middle-earth, nor will it be the last. Eru, God of Middle-earth, created the eternal conflict between good and evil when he created that planet. The good creatures have always wished to be free and to enjoy beauty. The evil powers have ever sought to dominate others and to turn their beautiful creations to base ends. In such a world, where neither side can ever be completely destroyed, there is short rest for the weary. No action can have more than temporary success, nor can any failure remain a final defeat.

A sense of irony pervades this world of eternal conflict. It is the irony of ordinary, everyday lives--the discrepancy between the actual circumstances and those which people anticipate. There is on Middle-earth an "incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result" of this series of events (Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1965 ed. Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1965 , p. 448). It is ironic that the creatures of Middle-earth must ever choose to do what they would not if the conflict

did not exist. It is ironic that all action taken to solve this conflict only perpetuates it. And it is ironic that the perpetuation of this conflict appears to be part of a larger design by Eru, a design which seems to involve his total creation. Tolkien does not reveal what this over-all design is, but he supplies sufficient evidence throughout the trilogy to substantiate the theory that there is such a design.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine these layers of irony. I read the theme of irony as central to the work itself, central in the sense that it operates in the concerns of individuals and that it also operates in the greater concerns of Eru--in the lives and actions of Frodo and Sam to the total creation of the One. This discussion of irony will take the form of ever-widening spirals of meaning or meaninglessness.

One can graph the layers of this irony by an expanding spiral. At the center lies the Ring of Power--a symbol of ultimate irony. It gives the wearer all power, but such power eventually destroys him. The wearer who desires power carries the seeds of his own destruction within himself, and those seeds begin to grow when he slips on the Ring. Fruition of the Ring's power occurs with the destruction of its wearer.

The several temporary possessors of the Ring are the creatures of Middle-earth. The good creatures are wise

enough not to wear the thing or attempt to use its power. They seek only to destroy it and in them and these actions lies the first level of irony on Middle-earth. The creatures are caught between the present necessity of subduing an opposing force and the ultimate futility of this action. The conflict between the forces of good and evil, with each side trapped in this dilemma, generates the second level of irony. The tension is unresolvable, even with the destruction of the Ring, for as long as both sides exist there will never be final victory for either side. The history of Middle-earth is a record of the wars caused by this conflict. Thus the irony is not confined to one age or to one war; it demonstrably permeates all ages and repeated conflicts. The history of Middle-earth is the third circle of this spiral of irony.

Beyond space and time lies the total creation of Eru. His design is not clearly stated, but it is he who created this preposterous situation on Middle-earth, and it is he who intervenes when the Men attempt to disturb his design. Readers of the trilogy will remember, for example, that during the Second Age, against Eru's command, Men sailed west in an attempt to reach the Undying Lands. The Valar, guardians of the world, laid down their responsibilities and called on Eru. The One responded with the Middle-earth version of the great flood. He sank Númenor, island kingdom of the Men, into the sea and removed the Undying



Lands from within the circles of the world. Obviously it is no part of his plan that Men should gain immortality.

Tolkien does not elaborate on this outer circle of his central theme. But it would be difficult to imagine that a world of such ironic proportions as Middle-earth could ever evolve within an ordered and meaningful universe. Internal evidence in the trilogy also suggests this theory.

In this paper then, the writer will attempt to prove the thesis that irony is the central theme of Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. The chapters will correspond to the form outlined in the preceding discussion. The first chapter will discuss the irony of the individual good creatures' lives. Their limited perception of this irony is seen most clearly in Frodo, Sam and Gandalf the Grey. Other characters of the alliance of good will be mentioned, but these creatures are the most intimately involved in the conflict and yet retain the calmest perception of the holocaust around them.

In the second chapter the character of the evil creatures will be examined. They have little or no perception of the irony of their situation and this chapter will attempt to explain why. The blindness of the evil creatures to the futility of their actions contributes to their recurring war with the good creatures. Therefore, this second chapter will also discuss the second layer of irony mentioned above: that the irony of individuals'

lives contributes to the irony of the conflict between good and evil forces.

The third chapter will include a summary of the history of Middle-earth with an emphasis on the pattern of peace and war. The third layer of irony, that the history and future of Middle-earth is bound to repeat this pattern eternally, is created by the never-ending conflict between good and evil, which is the second layer of irony.

Finally, in a fourth chapter, this paper will discuss the evidence found in The Lord of the Rings of an ironic universe created by an unknowable God. His dealings with Middle-earth and his creatures' concepts of him will be examined to determine what, if anything, one can learn about his ultimate design for Middle-earth. This last layer of irony creates an almost invisible outer circle; yet it is almost certainly there.

## Chapter One

The setting of the following scene from the second book of the trilogy, The Two Towers, is just outside of Mordor at the entrance called Cirith Ungol. Sam and Frodo eat their last meal before entering the Nameless Land. They are resting a bit and presently they begin to talk about their quest and what they are likely to find in Mordor. (This and all following quotations are taken from the three-volume, paperback edition of The Lord of the Rings published in New York by Ballantine Books, Inc., by arrangement with Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company. The original copyright date is 1965.)

'I don't like anything here at all,' said Frodo, 'step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.'

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually --their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on--and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right,

though not quite the same--like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?

'I wonder,' said Frodo. 'But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to.'

'No, sir, of course not. Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it--and the Silmaril went on and came to Earendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got--you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?'

'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later--or sooner!' (II. pp. 407-08)

This passage describes the clearest perception of their predicament that Frodo and Sam ever achieve. The writer has quoted it in full rather than in part because she believes that Frodo and Sam's awareness grows throughout the passage and that to quote individual remarks out of context detracts from the essential meaning of the scene. As the passage progresses, Sam and Frodo come to realize that their quest is only a small part of a larger and longer mission and that their part in this greater time span accounts for mere seconds on some eternal clock. They know that they have a choice in this matter, that they can turn back if they wish. They recognize that if they did fully perceive the end of their adventures, "happy-ending

or sad-ending," the perception would affect their ability to accomplish their goal. And finally, Frodo and Sam realize that regardless of their actions, whether they succeed, fail or turn back, their own part will end "later--or sooner."

Still, they are content to be a chapter within a "great tale." They do not ask themselves the question which might logically follow this realization, "Why bother?" Rather they view their part as a present necessity, a feat which, if accomplished to their satisfaction, will benefit others for the time being. They never put this conclusion into words in precisely this way, but Sam and Frodo are willing to ignore the implication of ultimate futility and concentrate on a goal to be achieved, if possible, within their brief span of time.

Evidence for this limited perception of their predicament abounds in The Lord of the Rings. In the third book, The Return of the King, Frodo prepares to leave for the Grey Havens, and Sam pleads with him to stay in the Shire and enjoy all that he had sacrificed so much for. Frodo answers:

' . . . 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: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you. . . . Your hands and your wits will be needed everywhere. You will be the Mayor, of course, as long as you want to be, and the most famous gardener in history; and you will read things out of the Red Book, and keep alive the

memory of the age that is gone, so that people will remember the Great Danger and so love their beloved land all the more. And that will keep you as busy and as happy as anyone can be, as long as your part of the Story goes on.' (III. pp. 382-83)

Sam too feels that he has a part to play; and hell, high water, and the death of his beloved Mr. Frodo will not keep him from playing it. In the second book, Frodo is stung by Shelob, the giant spider; so death-like is his trance that Sam believes him dead. In grief and agony Sam holds a conference with himself to determine his proper course of action. He contemplates committing suicide, staying by Frodo's side until found by the Orcs, or going in search of the traitor Gollum. Finally he thinks about the quest, and when his mind turns to that, the answer comes swiftly, "See it through."

'What? Me, alone, go to the Crack of Doom and all?' He quailed still, but the resolve grew. 'What? Me take the Ring from him? The Council gave it to him.'

But the answer came at once: 'And the Council gave him companions so that the errand should not fail. And you are the last of all the Company. The errand must not fail.'

'I wish I wasn't the last,' he groaned. 'I wish old Gandalf was here, or somebody. Why am I left all alone to make up my mind? I'm sure to go wrong. And it's not for me to go taking the Ring, putting myself forward.'

'But you haven't put yourself forward; you've been put forward. And as for not being the right and proper person, why, Mr. Frodo wasn't, as you might say, nor Mr. Bilbo. They didn't choose themselves.'

'Ah well, I must make up my own mind, I will make it up. But I'll be sure to go wrong: that'd be Sam Gamgee all over.' (II. pp. 433-34)

Sam debates a bit longer and then resolves to continue the quest. His dedication to the quest and to victory for his alliance overcomes all objections within him. He feels that keeping the Ring from the Enemy is something he must do and something that he will do. Both Sam and Frodo are too committed to the present necessity of their actions to entertain seriously notions of the ultimate futility of those actions.

Gandalf the Grey is the character with perhaps the clearest historical perspective of the irony of his lot. He arrived with the Istari, or wizards, who sailed out of the west to Middle-earth at the beginning of the Third Age. He has traveled the width and breadth of Middle-earth and has seen the pattern of rise and fall. Sent by the Valar to aid in the war against Sauron, Gandalf knows that he is merely the latest of a series of such warriors. He knows too, that, even if he is successful and Sauron is completely and finally defeated, another Shadow will rise to disturb the peace of the good creatures. Nevertheless, Gandalf bends all his efforts to preparing for his hour of action during the Third Age. Awareness of the ultimate futility of such actions does not paralyze him. Examples from the trilogy give ample evidence both of his awareness and his decision to act.

In the first book of the trilogy, The Fellowship of the Ring, Gandalf reveals to Frodo the true nature of that

pretty bauble the Hobbit carries on a chain around his neck. The wizard warns Frodo that a Dark Power has arisen from its hiding place and searches for its Ring.

'But last night I told you of Sauron the Great, the Dark Lord. The rumours that you have heard are true: he has indeed risen again and left his hold in Mirkwood and returned to his ancient fastness in the Dark Tower of Mordor. That name even you have heard of, like a shadow on the borders of old stories. Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again.'

'I wish it need not have happened in my time,' said Frodo.

'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. And already, Frodo, our time is beginning to look black. The Enemy is fast becoming very strong. His plans are far from ripe, I think, but they are ripening. We shall be hard put to it. We should be very hard put to it, even if it were not for this dreadful chance.' (I. pp. 81-2)

This passage reveals that Gandalf knows the eternal nature of the Shadow, "Always after a defeat and a respite, the Shadow takes another shape and grows again." But such knowledge does not blunt his will and desire to oppose the Enemy. It is not for people to decide when they shall live or to wish away their problems, he tells Frodo. Rather people have only to decide what they shall do in the time they have been given. Within this time they have a choice. Gandalf's choice, and the choice he presses on Frodo, is to defeat the Shadow--one more time.

This discussion between Gandalf and Frodo also contains evidence that Gandalf knows that a design beyond



his understanding is operating during the Third Age. The wizard explains to Frodo how Sauron lost the Ring and how Gollum murdered Déagol for it. He recalls Bilbo's finding of the Ring and implies that a supra-natural force is at work.

'It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things. The Ring left him.'

'What, just in time to meet Bilbo?' said Frodo. 'Wouldn't an Orc have suited it better?'

'It is no laughing matter,' said Gandalf. 'Not for you. It was the strangest even in the whole history of the Ring so far: Bilbo's arrival just at that time, and putting his hand on it, blindly, in the dark.'

'There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master. It had slipped from Isildur's hand and betrayed him; then when a chance came it caught poor Déagol, and he was murdered; and after that Gollum, and it had devoured him. It could make no further use of him: he was too small and mean; and as long as it stayed with him he would never leave his deep pool again. So now, when its master was awake once more and sending out his dark thought from Mirkwood, it abandoned Gollum. Only to be picked up by the most unlikely person imaginable: Bilbo from the Shire!

'Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.' (I. pp. 87-8)

The exterior force seems to have been insuring that the good creatures would have a fighting chance against the evil ones. If Bilbo had not found the Ring, and an Orc had, the Enemy would have become all-powerful, virtually invincible. Since the Enemy does not have the Ring, a balance of power is restored to the warring forces. One will win, for the time being. The peace will not be

eternal, however, for the Shadow "will grow again." This greater design of which Gandalf speaks so reverently appears to be merely a continuation of the status quo-- the conflict between good and evil.

If Gandalf is aware of the repetitiveness of the history of Middle-earth, as these passages indicate, he still does not comprehend the ultimate futility of his attempt to save Middle-earth. Rather, like Frodo and Sam, he is committed to stop-gap action. He feels that he must act during the time that is given him; so he leaves future time and future wars to men who will come after him.

Another passage which reveals Gandalf's attitude appears in book three. Gandalf and Denethor, steward of Gondor, spar verbally about the importance of repelling Sauron's attack. Denethor, who has looked into a palantir, or seeing stone, knows the vast extent of Sauron's power. He is in despair and fears that all is lost. His only concern is the protection of Gondor, the ancient city of the Númenoreans. Gandalf challenges this selfishness, saying: "The rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward . . ." (III. p. 33).

Sam and Frodo are missionaries and Gandalf is a steward. Each is partially aware of the irony of perseverance in the face of futility; yet each perseveres. Thus not only their fates but their actions are ironic. Because of the existence of evil, they cannot live as they would wish. Because of the existence of evil, they will never live as they would wish. Gandalf speaks for all of them, perhaps, when he tells the council of Elrond the Elf-lord that to destroy the Ring is not an act of desperation or folly: "'Despair, or folly?' said Gandalf. 'It is not despair, for despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt. We do not. It is wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope'" (I. p. 352).

Frodo, Sam, and Gandalf are not the only creatures for whom the War of the Ring and the passing of the Third Age reveal an ironic position. The Elves permit their power to pass with the destruction of the Ring. This sacrifice allows the inferior race of Men (still noble, but inferior to the immortal Elves) to dominate Middle-earth. Thus the Elves allow the perfect beauty of such homes as Rivendell to be destroyed in order that pleasant places like the Shire might survive. Their sacrifice is ironic in that by attempting to retain what is good in Middle-earth, they destroy the best part of that goodness.

But their passing is a present necessity in the war with Sauron and, like Frodo and Sam, they are willing to play their part.

At the council of Elrond in Rivendell, the good creatures discuss the possibility of this grievous loss:

'But what then would happen, if the Ruling Ring were destroyed, as you counsel?' asked Gloin.

'We know not for certain,' answered Elrond sadly. 'Some hope that the Three Rings, which Sauron never touched, would become free, and their rulers might heal the hurts of the world that he has wrought. But maybe when the One has gone, the Three will fail, and many fair things will fade and be forgotten. That is my belief.'

'Yet all the Elves are willing to endure this chance,' said Glorfindel, 'if by it the power of Sauron may be broken, and fear of dominion be taken away forever.' (I. p. 352)

When the Elves pass, much of the magic of the world will pass with them, and the next age will be left in the practical hands of Men. That the reign of Men is to be feared at worst and accepted with resignation at best, Legolas the Elf and Gimli the Dwarf discuss in a passage in book three. They stand on the towers of Gondor and have just bid farewell to Imrahil, a prince of Men.

'That is a fair lord and a great captain of men,' said Legolas. 'If Gondor has such men still in these days of fading, great must have been its glory in the days of its rising.'

'And doubtless the good stonework is the older and was wrought in the first building,' said Gimli. 'It is ever so with the things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise.'

'Yet seldom do they fail of their seed,' said Legolas. 'And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked-for. The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli.'

'And yet come to naught in the end but might-have-beens, I guess,' said the Dwarf.

'To that the Elves know not the answer,' said Legolas. (III. p. 182)

These words summarize the hopes and despair that the creatures of Middle-earth feel for Men. Men are strange creatures whose motives cannot often be fathomed. Of all the peoples allied for good during the Third Age, the tribes of Men only have renegades who deserted to the Enemy. The Men of Rhûn, Harad, Easterling, and Southron fight for Sauron against their hated enemies in Gondor and the Mark. A Man is the Mouth of Sauron, the Dark Lord's first lieutenant. Except for the Rangers (the descendants of the noble Numenoreans) and the Men of Gondor, the several tribes of Men inhabiting Middle-earth are rather crude. Proud and brave they are, to be sure, but warlike and fonder of horses than of culture.

It is true that the Elves had their defectors during the First Age of Middle-earth, but these rebels were individuals. Such uncivilized behavior is not the hallmark of their race as it is of Men. Finally, that the Elves allow their great civilization to pass from Middle-earth in order that the comparative barbarity of Men might survive is an irony which marks the very center of the trilogy.

The lives of all the good creatures of Middle-earth are prey to this central irony. In a historical perspective, they are ever torn between the present

necessity of fighting evil and the ultimate futility of this action. The departure of the Elves for the sake of lesser creatures demonstrates that even the accomplishment of a temporary goal often bears the heavy price of a Pyhrric victory. The presence of evil in their world destroys any hope the good creatures have for a world of peace and order, and yet that disturbing presence was created by the same Maker who gave the good creatures their desire for such peace and order. The eternal frustration of this wish, without hope of respite, creates the inmost circle, the core, of the theme of irony in Tolkien's trilogy.

## Chapter Two

According to Tolkien's history of Middle-earth, goodness was created first, and good creatures took up residence in Valinor, land of the Valar. The Elves lived there, too, proteges of the godlike Valar. All went well until one Elf, Fëanor, made three jewels, the Simarili. The jewels were of such great beauty that they tempted Morgorth, the Enemy. Morgorth stole the jewels and fled to Middle-earth. He was accompanied by his servants, of whom Sauron was one, and the Balrogs. Fëanor, in his pride and despair over his loss, followed Morgorth. He too left Valinor with an entourage of Elves. The war that followed was the result of this outbreak of evil and, as usual, solved nothing. Evil continued to thrive and prosper on Middle-earth. The evil beings made more evil beings in mockery of the good creatures. The disease of greed and pride infected other creatures living on Middle-earth. Evil, like goodness, was there to stay.

Therefore, any study of the ironic situation of Middle-earth must include a study of the evil creatures as well as the good ones. It is their presence which eternally frustrates the goals of the good creatures. But the existence of the good creatures is the *raison d'etre* for the evil forces. They thrive in the presence of their

antithesis. Without the existence of evil, the good creatures might be able to lead lives of peace and fulfillment. But the evil beings' whole purpose is to oppose good and strive to dominate their opponents. The irony of evil lies in the fact that such creatures do not realize that they are but shadows of something more substantial, perversions of original goodness. As such, they prey upon the good creatures. The good creatures cannot attain their goal of peace and harmony as long as the evil exists, and evil cannot attain its goal as long as good remains free.

It should be noted here that the evil creatures tend to have a collective nature. They are arranged in a pyramid of power with the masses of Orcs and Trolls forming the broad base and with Sauron at the apex. All evil creatures serve Sauron, except for Mount Caradhras and Shelob the spider. Mount Caradhras and Shelob are obeying their own instincts when they attack the Company of Nine Walkers--they are free from Sauron's direct control. Most of the evil creatures on Middle-earth are Sauron's puppets, however, and possess little or no will of their own. It is natural therefore to speak of evil as a single force with a single goal.

The good creatures, on the other hand, are distinctly individuals. Aragorn is the king of the lands of the West, but he has no authority over Gandalf the Grey nor wishes



any. Frodo and Sam are as important as Aragorn and Gandalf--without them the quest would have failed. The godlike Elves and the eldest Ents do not owe allegiance to any of Middle-earth's creatures. The Dwarves, the Men of Gondor and the Mark, and the Rangers of the West, operate independently of each other. Each tribe and individual had its own personal goal and all are joined together in war to preserve a value they hold in common--their freedom from domination.

The collective nature of the evil creatures plays a part in the irony of their situation and their hostile relationship with the good creatures. Their strengths are Sauron's strengths, and their weaknesses are his weaknesses. As a unit they possess three traits which will forever prevent them from making successful war on the good creatures--they are unnatural, they cannot understand the nature of the good creatures, and they fear intelligence and independent action. Thus their own nature creates the irony of their situation, whereas the sociological setting of Middle-earth, that is, the presence of evil, creates the irony of the good creatures' lives.

The first damning characteristic of the evil creatures is that they are unnatural. Of the original fugitives from Valinor, only Sauron remains, and he has lost his fair shape. He made Orcs and Trolls in imitation of Elves and Ents and bred them in darkness and filth until they

were fit creatures for his desires. The Men under his command he has twisted with hatred and greed, nourishing their desire for reprisals against their fellow-men who repelled their previous attacks. One of Sauron's most powerful weapons against goodness is his ability to corrupt it. The Men who fill his ranks were originally members of a peace-loving race, "corrupted by Sauron, and who hated above all the followers of Elendil. After the fall of Sauron their race swiftly dwindled or became merged with the Men of Middle-earth, but they inherited without lessening their hatred of Gondor" (III. p. 403). The essence of this corruption is represented by the Nine Nazgûl, mortal men doomed to immortality in hell. They are only shadows of their living selves and are totally creatures of Sauron's will. Like the Trolls and the Orcs, such men are perversions of good things, natural things.

As perversions of good, then, the evil creatures are the antithesis of good in every way. Even the homes of the warring forces depict this difference. The good beings are capable of creating places of order and great beauty like the Shire and Rivendell. Mordor, fortress of Sauron, is a hellhole. The approach to it is "barren and ruinous" and all about it lie "great heaps and hills of slag and broken rock and blasted earth, the vomit of the maggot-folk of Mordor" (III. p. 200). The countryside around Mordor is a reflection of the fortress itself. All

within it is dark and foul, poisonous to anything not spawned and reared there. Flowers emit a rotten odor and streams give off cold and deadly vapors.

The creatures of Mordor are no more organized than the landscape. The Orcs and men war among themselves. Each faction has private grievances, and always there is a bickering and quarreling over authority. The vital message to Sauron that two small creatures have slipped in through the Cirith Ungol Gate is waylaid by a fatal squabble between Orcs. Watches are not kept conscientiously. Whole companies of Orcs and men are misdirected and deserters from the ranks are common. Even Sauron himself can be drawn into petty revenge when the whole of his plan depends upon his unwavering attention to finding the Ring. An example of Sauron's error may be seen in a scene in the second book of the trilogy when Pippin looks into the Palantir and is caught by the eye of the Dark Lord. Sauron assumes that he is Frodo Baggins, prisoner of Saruman, and, instead of questioning him immediately about the Ring, gloats over his capture. Sauron releases Pippin from his trance and sends one of the Nazgûl to bring him to the Dark Tower. Gandalf interprets this action for the frightened hobbit: "'You have been saved, and all your friends too, mainly by good fortune, as it is called. You cannot count on it a second time. If he had questioned you, then and there, almost certainly you

would have told all that you know, to the ruin of us all. But he was too eager. He did not want information only: he wanted you, quickly, so that he could deal with you in the Dark Tower, slowly" (II. p. 254). Sauron's own vindictiveness has proved his own undoing.

Sauron's unnatural creatures have been born and bred to destroy. They have been nurtured on hatred and self-interest. Even if Sauron were to regain the Ring and destroy "root and branch" every free creature on Middle-earth, he would still have to deal with his subordinates. Not a few of them, particularly the Men under his command, have subversive plans of their own. The Mouth of Sauron, that renegade Man, has plans to rule the western lands from Isengard after Sauron's victory. Saruman, had he not been defeated by the Ents, planned to challenge Sauron for supremacy after the defeat of the alliance of the good. Even a few ambitious Orcs have private plans to raid the countryside once the war is over.

If Sauron had won and if these creatures had carried out their plans, Sauron's victory would not have lasted for long. He would be ever at war with rebel factions. The destructive and dominating instincts of these creatures would never allow them to live at peace with one another. They could never understand that to live free, one must allow others to live freely. They have learned

the lessons Sauron taught them too well, and they turn against him even as he encouraged them to turn against others.

The second trait that renders the evil forces incapable of finally defeating the good creatures is the evil ones' inability to understand the nature of good. The good creatures possess the ability to comprehend evil, for it was spawned by the corruption of themselves. The evil ones have never known what it means to be good and to desire to live freely. Therefore, they must always operate with false notions about their enemy, and it is this misconception which eventually defeats Sauron.

Sauron assumes that one member of the alliance of the good will take the Ring and emerge as the Lord of the West. The good creatures know that he fears this. At the Council in Rivendell, they discuss the several options Sauron may take and those that are open to themselves. They decide to do the one thing that he cannot imagine: they will destroy the Ring. Gandalf explains why to some of the incredulous members of the Council: "'Well, let our folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy. For he is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it,

that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this, we shall put him out of reckoning'" (I. p. 353).

Sauron cannot imagine that anyone would throw away great power, and face a great force with only the weapons at hand. He himself would never do so, and he cannot comprehend the mind that would. So he keeps watch for the great opponent who will never come, and slowly, Sam and Frodo make their way to Mordor.

The third trait of the evil creatures which contributes to their defeat is their fear of intelligence and independent action. Their tyranny demands subservience and obedience to orders. Sauron bred his Orcs and Trolls with these qualities in mind, and the result is hordes of thick-skinned and thick-skulled fighters. The Orcs are not very brave, but they are ill-tempered enough and en masse they wreak havoc. Asking one to attempt something like carrying the Ring to Mount Doom with all the attendant dangers and decisions would be unthinkable. An Orc is fit only for marching more or less in place and, on a given signal, attacking something weaker than himself.

Sauron, with his fear of creating a rival, requires only servants who can be controlled. He cannot bear to see creatures free of his tyranny. As Gandalf tells Frodo: "'And hobbits as miserable slaves would please him far more than hobbits free and happy'" (I. p. 79). In opting for this army of might and mindlessness, however, Sauron has

restricted his chance for victory to a battlefield where might must win the day. He is not prepared to match the courage and resourcefulness of Frodo and Sam with creatures of his own. Such evil creatures simply do not exist.

The irony of the evil beings' battle to defeat the good creatures is revealed in these three traits. The Enemy is self-defeating. Yet its very existence and its historical antipathy to goodness and order ensure that whatever defeat it suffers will never be final. The evil creatures' lives and goals are perversions of the good creatures' lives and goals, and thus the irony at the core of life on Middle-earth spirals outward to include not only its individual creatures, but also their relationship with each other.

### Chapter Three

Tolkien supplies a history of his Middle-earth during the First and Second Ages in the appendices in book three. The history of the First Age is not described in detail, for Tolkien is presently engaged in writing that history in detail in a mighty project entitled The Silmarillion. The Second Age he treats more fully, listing not only genealogies of the characters involved, but also chronological charts of events. A study of these two ages, as well as the events of the Third Age, reveals that the ironic situation present on Middle-earth during the War of the Ring has been there since the beginning. The predicament created by the co-existence of two irreconcilable forces and their actions in the face of this situation is the history of Middle-earth. The problems which confront them are bound to no one age or no one people.

A brief history of the two ages will support this statement. It can be recalled from the second chapter that Fëanor made three fabulous jewels, the Silmarilli, which contained the light of the Two Trees of Valinor. These jewels were stolen by Morgorth the Enemy. Morgorth destroyed the Two Trees and took the jewels to Middle-earth. There he guarded them in his great fortress of Thangorodrim.



Against the will of the Valar, Fëanor and many Elves left Valinor and attempted to recover the jewels by force. They were joined in this task by the Edain, the three peoples of Men, who, coming first to the West of Middle-earth and the shores of the Great Sea, became allies of the Elves against the Enemy. The Edain and the Eldar (the Elves) were defeated by Morgorth.

There were three unions of the Elves and Men. One such marriage produced Eärendil, who wedded Elwing. Elwing, daughter of a second such union, possessed the only Silmaril recaptured from Morgorth. Eärendil used its light to sail to the Uttermost West and petition the Valar for help to overthrow Morgorth. The Valar sent aid, but Eärendil was not permitted to return to mortal lands and his ship bearing the Silmaril was set in the heavens as a star. The other two Silmarilli were lost in the destruction of Morgorth, so that only the Silmaril in the sky preserved the ancient light of the Two Trees.

The sons of Eärendil and Elwing were Elros and Elrond, the Half-elven. At the end of the First Age, the Valar gave them the choice to which kindred they would belong. Elrond chose to be an Elf. He would become immortal, and when he wearied of Middle-earth, he could take a ship at the Grey Havens and sail to the Uttermost West. His children must either pass with him from Middle-

earth or remain behind as mortals. Elros chose mortality and stayed with the Edain.

The Valar then rewarded the Edain for their efforts against Morgorth and gave them the great island of Elessa. It was the westernmost of all mortal lands and from a tall mountain in the center of it one could see the white tower of Eressea, home of the Eldar. On Elessa, the Edain founded the kingdom of Númenor.

During the First Age the Eldar and the Edain were close friends, speaking the same language and sharing knowledge and wisdom. One ban only was laid on the Númenoreans, that they never sail west out of sight of their own land. They were forbidden to set foot on the Undying Lands. Thus would the Men remain mortal. At the beginning of the world, this ban was called the "Gift of the Valar." Before the end of the Second Age, however, the Númenoreans changed their minds.

The destruction of Morgorth during the First Age left Sauron and at least one Balrog to be reckoned with during the Second Age. Sauron set up his realm of evil on Middle-earth and grew in power. The Númenoreans also grew powerful. They became great mariners and explored all the seas to their east. As they grew in strength, however, they also grew in pride and came to resent the ban of the Valar. Their friendship for the immortal Eldar ended and use of the Elven tongue was forbidden. There were

rebellions in Númenor. Ar-Pharazôn seized the throne and decided to challenge Sauron the Great for mastery of Middle-earth. So powerful were the Númenoreans that when their great armada landed on Middle-earth Sauron's slaves deserted him and Sauron was captured by Ar-Pharazôn. The king carried his prisoner back to Númenor and soon fell under his evil spell. Sauron convinced many of the Númenoreans that immortality would be theirs if they would take the Undying Lands and that the ban was imposed only to prevent the kings of Men from surpassing the Valar. Ar-Pharazôn, in fear of death and pride of his arms, listened to this counsel. He prepared a great armament and sailed westward. But when his foot touched the shore of the Blessed Realm, the Valar laid down their guardianship and called upon the One. Eru sank Númenor into the sea and removed the Undying Lands forever "from the circles of the world."

Only a handful of the Númenoreans escaped from the downfall. These were called the Faithful, a group of Númenoreans who had remained friendly with the Elves and had protested the attack on the Valar. Elendil and his sons sailed in nine ships upon the waves of the storm and finally were cast upon the shores of Middle-earth. There they established in the northwest the Númenorean realms of Arnor and Gondor, among others. Unknown to them, Sauron also came back to Middle-earth. He lost his body in the

uproar, but remained a spirit of hatred and malice. He hid in Mordor and grew in strength again.

After a while, Sauron counted himself strong enough to challenge the hated Elendil, but he struck too soon. In the last alliance of Elves and men Sauron was overthrown and the One Ring which he had had made by the Elven smiths was taken from him. Thus ended the Second Age.

The Third Age, of which the trilogy reports only the years 3001 to 3021 from a total of 3141 years, includes the War of the Ring, the return of King Aragorn and the passing of the Elves. Indeed, the end of the Third Age is marked by the Elves' departure. Then begins the Fourth Age, the age of man, which, presumably, is the present age upon the present earth. About this age, Tolkien says nothing.

It may be seen from this brief summary of major events that evil is a force the good creatures of Middle-earth have had to deal with since the beginning of time. Evil began in Valinor with the greed of Morgorth and the pride of Fëanor. It flourished in Middle-earth with the cruelty of Angmar the Witch-King, the ambition of Sauron the Great, the greed of the dragons, the ignorance of the Orcs, the pride of the Númenoreans and the deceitfulness of Saruman. No place on earth was free of its taint. It spread like a fungus and could not be rooted out.

The good creatures have always fought the aggression of evil. Even in Valinor, the home of gods, the response

was the same. "Against the will of the Valar Fëanor forsook the Blessed Realm and went in exile to Middle-earth, leading with him a great part of his people; for in his pride he purposed to recover the Jewels from Morgorth by force," Tolkien explains (III. p. 388). This war was the first, but it was not the last. Fëanor's pride in accomplishment and possession heralded the pride of the Númernoreans and his doom signalled their doom. Orcs and Trolls were bred by the evil powers, "teaching them what little they could learn, and increasing their wits with wickedness" (III. p. 511). Men grew distrustful of each other and even great minds, such as Denethor and Saruman, could be corrupted by evil influence. The evil of the First Age generated the evil of the Second and Third Ages, and the response of the good creatures in the First Age was the same as the response of the good creatures of the Third Age.

Thus has the history of Middle-earth become the history of wars. The interaction of the two main forces on Middle-earth has always produced wars, and no other action has been tried to find a solution to such difficulties. Eru has not intervened to solve the differences of his separate-but-equal creatures. The evil beings have not been content to control merely themselves and leave the good creatures in peace. And the good

creatures have not been able to remain passive in the face of enemy attack.

Gandalf speaks of this history time and again in the trilogy. But he mentions the future also occasionally and one such instance is in book three. In the last debate before the combined forces of good stage a diversionary attack on Mordor, Gandalf tells the assembled lords: "Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule" (III. p. 190).

Other inhabitants of Middle-earth also have a sense of the irony of the history of their world. In book three, as the pitifully small Army of the West rides toward Mordor, Imrahil, Prince of Belfalas and Gondor, suddenly laughs aloud:

"Surely," he cried, "this is the greatest jest in all the history of Gondor: that we should ride with seven thousands, scarce as many as the vanguard of this army in the days of its power, to assail the mountains and the impenetrable gate of the Black Land!"

.....

"If this be jest, then it is too bitter for laughter," answered Aragorn (III. p. 194).

These words are an accurate and insightful commentary on the history of Middle-earth.

It appears, then, that Middle-earth is a world of fixed stimuli and fixed response. A certain action causes a certain reaction. Unless something--Eru--forces a change in this situation or eliminates one or both of the conflicting parties, the pattern will last for eternity. The Fourth Age will imitate the Third Age and the Fifth Age will imitate the Fourth Age. Characters and goals will change, but each age will be merely another refrain in an endless war chant. In this there is evidence that the irony central to Tolkien's trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, spirals out to include the lives of all people and all times as well as the lives of individuals and their interaction with other individuals.

## Chapter Four

This thesis has traced the spiral of irony from the very center of individual actions on Middle-earth through the relationships of its inhabitants and through the whole history of the planet. There is another layer of irony to be considered beyond these, however. The irony of individual lives and the irony of the history of Middle-earth indicates that Middle-earth itself is part of a larger irony. It seems that Eru created this situation with every intention of allowing, indeed, insuring that this history of frustration would always exist.

Tolkien does not speculate at length on the nature of the universe that surrounds Middle-earth. In fact, God is mentioned seldom and his plans for his creatures never. There is no organized religion. Only the Elves, who never have to face death, know what waits them when they tire of Middle-earth--Valinor, that Garden of Eden they left to follow Fëanor. Men and Hobbits, Orcs and Trolls, Ents and Dwarves, these creatures do not know what lies beyond their deaths. The creatures of the Third Age assume that the fate of future generations will be similar to their own--uncertain life and certain death, times of peace and times of war. There is some evidence that Eru intended to create this ironic situation on Middle-earth



and that he intended to perpetuate it. To give the reader some knowledge of the barely visible outer layer of irony, what hints there are in the trilogy will be examined in this chapter.

The reader may remember that Morgorth the Enemy was present in Valinor at the beginning of the First Age. Thus one must assume that Eru created evil at the moment he created Middle-earth. He set the forces in opposition and then withdrew, leaving the world in the hands of the Valar. Just what the Valar are supposed to do is never made clear. But their actions in the trilogy indicate that Eru left them there to protect some unnamed design. They intervene only when it looks as though one of the forces on Middle-earth is finally gaining complete ascendancy.

For one example, the Valar sent the Istari, the five wizards of which Gandalf and Saruman are two, to help the Third Age resist the domination of Sauron. In the appendices of book three, Tolkien writes, "It was afterward said that they came out of the Far West and were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron and to unite all those who had the will to resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force or fear" (III. p. 455).

Gandalf is the prime mover in the war against Sauron. It is he who protects the young Aragorn from Sauron's hatred. He sends Bilbo on the fateful "adventure" with the Dwarves. He searches out the knowledge of the Ring and

reveals to Frodo what must be done with the thing. He accompanies the quest until he falls in Moria with the Balrog. He returns from death on the mountain Celebdil, solely to aid the forces of good in their last battle with Sauron. Gandalf describes the experience and its meaning to Legolas, Gimli and Aragorn: "'The darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell.

'Naked I was sent back--for a brief time, until my task was done. . . . There I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was as long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to my ears came the gathered rumour of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone'" (II. pp. 134-35).

If the Valar had not sent Gandalf, Sauron would not have been defeated. Many of Middle-earth's good creatures recognize the important part that Gandalf has played, and Aragorn speaks for all of them when he says, "'Let none now reject the counsels of Gandalf, whose long labours against Sauron come at last to their test. But for him all would long ago have been lost'" (III. p. 192). Gandalf believes that if Sauron triumphs, there will be no new age. The wizard has been sent to insure that no one power comes to dominance. So he urges the lords of Gondor to attack Mordor, knowing full well that they have no chance, in

order that Frodo and Sam might have a chance to destroy the Ring while Sauron is occupied elsewhere. Gandalf tells the council of lords: "'But this, I deem, is our duty. And better so than to perish nonetheless--as we surely shall, if we sit here--and know as we die that no new age shall be'" (III. pp. 191-92).

The Valar interfere another time with the course of events. It will be remembered from the third chapter of this paper, that there was a time when Men grew so powerful that they dared to defy the "ban of the Valar" and sailed westward in an attempt to reach the Undying Lands. The Valar did not deal with the rebels themselves, but rather called upon Eru. The One caused the world to be changed at that moment and removed the Undying Lands forever from the "circles of the world." He also sank most of the Númenoreans' ships and their homeland of Elenna. Only a few of the Faithful (men who had not aided the rebellion) escaped this holocaust.

Tolkien does not say why the Númenoreans are denied immortality. Nor does he say why the Valar do not treat with the sailors themselves. Surely the guardians of the world had the power to do so. As for immortality, it was not impossible for mortals to obtain it for special favors. Indeed, Queen Arwen, Aragorn's Elf bride, gives her place in Valinor to Frodo that his "wounds and weariness" might finally be healed. Sam too eventually

passes over the sea, his reward as one of the Ring-bearers. Why, then, were the Númenoreans who aided the Elves in the first wars against Morgorth forced to remain mortal?

The Valar sent help to overthrow Morgorth at the request of the Elves and men. Therefore, one cannot assume that the Valar did not look with displeasure on the Men's part in this venture. Perhaps Tolkien will answer some of these questions in the massive The Silmarillion he is currently preparing. Until he does, however, one can only assume that Eru had some master design which precluded men gaining eternal life. He had set the pattern he wished to exist on Middle-earth and he would tolerate no interference with it.

Gandalf often speaks of this design or fate. Several such instances have already been mentioned in this paper, for example Bilbo's lucky finding of the Ring. Even Sam has glimpses of the operation of a higher power and plan when he takes the Ring from a lifeless Frodo and determines to carry the thing on.

The irony of this larger plan of Eru's is that it seems to be leading nowhere for the creatures of Middle-earth. If Eru had deliberately set the pattern in the beginning and if he has some predetermined end in mind, then all the struggles of the creatures of Middle-earth seem ultimately futile. Eru allows them the freedom to

live their everyday lives as they wish, as long as their actions do not endanger his master plan.

If this master plan could be proved to have a definite goal, heaven, hell, or nothingness for the creatures and serenity of any kind for the earth itself, then such a plan would be enduring. But the history of Middle-earth and the actions and lives of its creatures indicate that no such plan operates there. Instead, Eru seems determined to keep life on Middle-earth in a constant state of flux. The creatures of Middle-earth are forced to feel that they must take some kind of action even though that action is ultimately futile.

A God is unknowable; his reasons are his own, and his plans for his creatures beyond their understanding. Gods work in mysterious ways. Accepting Eru as a genuine God, then, one must realize that speculations about his motives are merely that--speculations. But until Eru, or Tolkien, steps forward to clarify the intention of the God of Middle-earth, this reader will retain the disquieting feeling that the fate of Middle-earth is "a jest too bitter for laughter."

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