

Temptation in the lord of the rings english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Extended Essay Student Name: Boyan Dinev Session: May 2013 Student Number: 001441-025 Word count: 3938 The Themes of Power and Temptation in "The Lord of the Rings" Extended Essay

Abstract

The research question of this extended essay is: "How are the themes of power and temptation in J. R. R. Tolkien's book "The Lord of the Rings" presented?" This extended essay also looks into how the possession of an object of ultimate power - the One Ring, influences different characters. First off, I started by researching what role the Ring has for the course of events in the book and how come it is so powerful and thus desired by almost everyone. Secondly, I investigated how the Ring tempts different characters - some are truly tempted by the power it may give them (Gollum, Frodo, Boromir), others experience some kind of temptation (Gandalf, Faramir) and there are even some that are genuinely not tempted by the Ring's power (Sam, Tom Bombadil). Except for the One Ring, there are also other symbols of power in the book - for example, the other Rings of Power, the Wizards' Staffs and different swords. I also looked into the question why the Ring affects some of the characters but does not have any influence on others. The conclusions I reach are that the Ring tempts characters in a way, which makes them do evil deeds, although they believe they are doing it with good intentions. The temptation of the Ring corrupts both the mind of its holder and their appearance and they are not able to part with it. The concept of the Ring's power is applicable to real life situations, in which people should remember that when they are given great power they should think about what consequences their decisions may carry.

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Introduction

The aim of this extended essay is to discuss the themes of power and temptation and the influence of the One Ring on different characters in J. R. R. Tolkien's masterpiece "The Lord of the Rings". The theme of power is represented by the influence exercised by the One Ring, created by Sauron, and by which almost everyone is tempted. I have chosen the book "The Lord of the Rings" because I believe it is one of the greatest books in its genre - fantasy. This book is one of my favorites because of the atmosphere in it, because the story is told in a very realistic way. Another reason for my loving the book is also be the great movies, filmed after the story. The book itself is such an interest to readers, because of the world created in it and because of the way good and evil clash, not only on the outside, but also psychologically and emotionally - in the characters. Interestingly, the straightforward course of events in the book hides many themes in the plot - these include the theme of friendship, power and temptation, selfishness and self-sacrifice, as well as death and immortality. These themes are also a part of our everyday life and this makes the trilogy even more interesting to readers. I will start by reading the book "Lord of the Rings", and then

conduct in-depth research about the author, the time when the book was written, the reasons for writing and the style of writing. After reading the book and gaining background knowledge about it, I will make my own conclusions about the themes of power and temptation. I will discuss how the Ring influences the various characters in the book and why is it that some are not affected at all, while others immediately fall prey to it. I will look for information in the book, on the internet, in critical literature on "Lord of the Rings", and academic articles.

Historical background and plot

The book "Lord of the Rings" was written by the English writer and philologist John Ronald Reuel Tolkien in the period between 1937 and 1949 during World War II. Tolkien graduated in English Language and Literature in 1915 at Exeter College. After showing great interest for philology, Tolkien also started creating his own languages. During his time spent at university teaching English and Anglo-Saxon, Tolkien started writing a book named "The Hobbit" to read to his children. A London publisher persuaded Tolkien to give them the rights to publish his story. Although it was meant to be a children's book, it was purchased mostly by adult readers and earned great popularity. Because of his work's success Tolkien was asked to write a sequel which became an even greater production - "The Lord of the Rings" took Tolkien more than 10 years to write and his main idea of it also being a children's book quickly was changed into a far more complex and problem-involving piece of writing." The Lord of the Rings" is a fantasy book, with many story lines. It is a story about good against evil that starts in the Shire,

home of the hobbits - creatures that are usually not the adventurous type. It ends in Mordor, the root of all evil in this fictional world. Frodo gets a golden ring from his uncle Bilbo, which he has to destroy. With the help of many creatures, all part of the Fellowship of the Ring (the hobbits Samwise, Meriadoc and Peregrin; the wizard Gandalf; Aragorn - a Ranger of the North and rightful heir to the throne of Gondor; an elf called Legolas; Gimli - a dwarf and Boromir, son of the last ruling steward of Gondor), and after going through numerous adventures and many obstacles, caused by the Dark Lord Sauron, creator of the Ring; the nine servants of Sauron, called nazguls; the depraved white wizard Saruman and Gollum - the previous owner of the Ring, Frodo accomplishes his mission.

The role of the Ring

The Ring can grant power, but with this power come many temptations and corruption. Everyone that possesses the Ring becomes corrupted by it and even the main characters want to have the Ring's power only to themselves, in order to change the world the way it suits them. That is why it has been so hard to destroy it - the brightest example is Frodo, who goes through hundreds of obstacles on his way to the place where the Ring was created and the only place where it can be destroyed - Mount Doom, but he finds it really difficult to let go of the Ring and throw it into the lava. Even some of the most powerful people in the story are afraid to take the Ring. Gandalf and Galadriel refuse to take it, as they both know that this small item can corrupt people and transform them in something unbelievably evil. And almost no one can escape the temptation of the Ring. But everyone has a

different attitude towards temptation – some of them try to stop themselves from being tempted, others try to prevent others from being tempted, and third ones just yield to the temptation of the Ring. For example, it may be that Frodo's greatest opponent is not the physical obstacles that he goes through, but his own mind, which makes him fight against the temptation to leave his journey and take the power that he can easily possess. The Ring is the symbol for ultimate power throughout the whole book. Created by Sauron, in his desire for complete power over everything, this Ring is associated only with the evil desires of its maker. Almost everyone is tempted by it, but whoever yields to its temptation actually becomes its slave, while at the same time not being able to part with it. The power that the Ring gave Sauron in the past was huge. It is quite clear that Sauron ruled the Middle-earth, causing fear in everyone. But actually a true Lord of the Rings does not exist, because the Ring can be used even against Sauron, although it was made by him. When Boromir says he wants to use the Ring against its creator, Elrond tells him that it cannot be used by just anyone, because its strength is too great. This is only for those with great power of their own. According to Elrond, the reason why the Ring should be destroyed is that there is no real Lord of the Rings – it is actually the Ring that controls the people. If any of the Wise decide to use it to dethrone Sauron, he would actually become the new Dark Lord. It is even a danger for the Wise, because if they got hold of it, they would start using it to do good deeds, which would eventually turn out evil.

Characters Affected by the Ring

Even one of the greatest Men, Isildur, yields to the power of the Ring. Isildur cut it from Sauron's hand and by doing this killed his physical part. But Isildur did not destroy the Ring, although he knew that he had to do it. He kept it - but even he failed to withstand the temptation of unlimited power. Throughout the whole book there is proof that no person in Middle-earth is powerful enough to control the Ring. Gandalf and Galadriel also refuse to take the Ring. Although they are among the most powerful characters, they know that their good intentions will be corrupted. Gandalf tells Frodo not to tempt him to take it, even for keeping it safe, because he knows that through him it would gain great power and defile the good desires of the Wizard. In "One Ring to Rule Them All" David Harvey (1995) states: "Tolkien was of the view that Gandalf would have been a worse Ring lord than Sauron. He would have been righteous but self-righteous, He would have rules and ordered things for good, and for the benefit of his subjects according to his wisdom. And therein lays the trap, for Gandalf would be the controller and determinator. His subjects would have no choice, and the Ring would control rather than give free will and free choice." The best example for yielding to the temptation is Gollum. According to Harvey (1995), he is addicted to the Ring and its power, but he is too weak to control it and is obsessed by it. Actually his mind is divided in two and in this way he lies even to himself. These two minds have conversations with each other and with the Ring - the Ring which has led to irreversible damages to both his mind and body. Gollum has become the perfect example of evil. "Hating the Ring, but loving it at the same time," (Harvey, 1995) Gollum even swears

that he will help Frodo finish his quest, but knowing his previous actions and the way he treats Frodo and Sam, it could be deduced that he g that oath just to get his hands on the Ring again. To finish the discussion about Gollum, I will again quote Harvey (1995): " At the last it is Gollum's desire for the Ring that destroys him. He cannot bear to be parted from it. He has always opposed Frodo's desire to destroy it. For an ecstatic moment he is reunited with his treasure, only to fall at the end, a victim of the Ring's animus, Frodo's curse and his own unbridled lust, not for power, not for control, but for the mere possession of the Ring, and his own petty, self-serving desires." The influence of the Ring on Bilbo is somewhat strange. He has found it on his quest and before he gives it to Frodo it has been in his possession for around 60 years. During this time it seems that the Ring has not done anything to Bilbo's personality, but has only kept him young and in good physical shape. He almost does not use the Ring at all and this is why it does not corrupt him. But even after he has parted with the Ring, Bilbo still has a mental bond to it and this becomes clear when he asks Frodo to see it. His consequent reaction is very similar to the behavior of Gollum. Slowly, even Frodo grows fonder of the possibilities that the Ring offers. At first he uses it only when he thinks he needs it, although he was warned by Gandalf not to do so. This shows that every hour he spends with the Ring; Frodo becomes more tempted by the power that it can grant. In the beginning, every time he puts on the Ring, nothing good comes of it -in the " Prancing Pony", he blows his cover and the Black Riders gain on the hobbit's trail. The next time he is tempted to put it on - on Weathertop - he gets stabbed. When Frodo uses the Ring at Amon Hen so that he can escape from Boromir

and from the Fellowship, he understands the abilities of the Ring and when it is appropriate to use it and when not. After that he uses the Ring's power over Gollum to manipulate the creature to help him finish his quest. Harvey (1995) comments on Frodo's manipulation: " Frodo is actually using the Ring, but not by wearing it. He is using Gollum's subservience to the Ring as a means of controlling him, and in a sense is doing what a Ring lord would do - using the Ring to control. He allows Gollum to choose to swear, but really, given Gollum's desire and corruption, has he any other choice if he is to keep the Ring in his sights. Thus we see the transformation of Frodo from one who is naive concerning the Ring to one who is able to indirectly use its power." The temptation of the Ring is greatest in the last part of Frodo's quest, when he enters the land of Mordor. Frodo does not want to share the burden of the Ring with Sam, although it has become too heavy for him. He thinks that Sam might steal it - it seems the Ring has almost taken Frodo's mind away. Frodo, just like Isildur before him, stands in the crack of Mount Doom, having the opportunity to destroy the Ring, but at that moment even the innocent soul of the hobbit yields to temptation. His quest might have failed if not for the appearance of Gollum. In his desire to have the Ring, the creature manages to destroy it. He bites it off Frodo's finger, but during his mad celebration he falls into the lava of Mount Doom, thus ending the rule of the One Ring. Boromir is almost constantly tempted by the Ring, and he desires it right from the moment he sees it, imagining that he can use its power to help the people of Gondor. As the Fellowship's journey unfolds, his desire for the Ring becomes stronger and at the hills of Amon Hen he demands it from Frodo. After he wants to see it, his temptation becomes even greater as he

imagines taking down Sauron using his Ring against him and he sees in himself the new Ring-lord. Harvey (1995) shows the stages that Boromir goes through: " Boromir tries to persuade, adopts a friendly approach, but his goal is the Ring. First he says that he needs it, then asks Frodo to lend it to him, demands it, and then uses force. Frodo puts the Ring on to escape, and Boromir, after a moment, realizes what he has done, and claims that a madness has taken him. His fall continues, however, when he does not confess to the Fellowship what has happened. It is only with his last breath that he confesses to Aragorn that he tried to take the Ring from Frodo and that he has paid." Boromir's brother - Faramir is the exact opposite. He does not crave for the power of the Ring and it is obvious that although somewhat tempted, he does not yield. Faramir wants to have nothing to do with it.

Characters Not Affected by the Ring

The Ring has almost no influence on Sam - he is never tempted and never even thinks about getting it. He thinks that the Ring is Frodo's responsibility and he must help his master keep the Ring and achieve his task. He seems to have great respect for the Ring itself and for the quest. Even when Frodo appears to be dead, Sam is not quite sure if he should take the Ring and finish the quest by himself. The decision is hard for him and even when he takes the Ring, he does not put it on his finger in the search for power, but only to escape from the sudden danger he is in. It immediately becomes a huge burden for him. A very interesting character is Tom Bombadil, the master of the wood, water and hill. The four hobbits from the Fellowship meet him in the Old Forest at the beginning of their quest, as he saves them

from the Barrow-wights in this mysterious place. He is important for my theme, because the Ring has absolutely no power or influence over him. Tom Bombadil is able to see Frodo when he is bearing the Ring, and when he puts the Ring on his finger, it does not seem to have any effect on him, as he does not become invisible. According to [www. lotr. wikia. com](http://www.lotr.wikia.com) (2005) we cannot be sure why the Ring does not affect Tom, but most probably it is due to his origin, which is also an enigma. He tells Frodo that he is the Eldest, that he " remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn". When discussing the faith of the Ring, Elrond proposes, that it should be given to Tom to keep, but this should not be done, because he would lose it, as " such things had no hold on his mind." Harvey (1995) provides an explanation of the temptation of the Ring - the Ring tempts those who do not have it to want it, those who possess it to use it for good or evil and those who have possessed it to try to reunite with it. But, for example, it is not only temptation that makes Frodo put on the Ring, when Black Riders are around him - he actually obeys the will of the enemy, and not only his temptation to it. He just cannot struggle with the greater force of Sauron's servants.

Other Symbols of Power in the Book

Besides the One Ring, there are other symbols of power in the book. There are the other rings of power, created by Sauron - three for the Elves, seven for the Dwarves and nine for the Men. He made these to extend his power, as they were under the One's control, but his idea was not entirely successful, as the Elves were wise enough to hide their rings and not use them, while the Dwarves' rings did not respond to the power of the One.

Only the men's rings turned their possessors in Sauron's greatest bringers of fear - nazguls. The Elves do not even show their rings to anyone and after the destruction of the One, these become powerless. The seven rings of the Dwarves have a different story - four are destroyed by dragons and three are taken back by Sauron. Another symbol of power is the sword Anduril, forged from the remains of the sword used to take down Sauron - Narsil. Anduril's power is used by Aragorn to make the residents of the Paths of the Dead form a great army to help Aragorn in his battle against the marine army of the Corsairs of Umbar. This sword is feared by everyone, and thus is so powerful, because it has been used to take down the embodiment of evil in the Middle Earth - Sauron. Its great history also contributes to its powers as it was forged by dwarves, used by men and later forged again by elves. But greatest contributors to its force are the runes on it, as they are usually a symbol of magical power in Tolkien's book. The powers of the sword are demonstrated several times in the book, as it shines when there is a battle. The Wizard's Staff is also a symbol of power as it gives power and is the source of magic for the Wizard that possesses it. Gandalf's staff is a powerful weapon in his hands - he uses it to stop the Balrog in the Mines of Moria, so that the Fellowship can continue their quest. According to <http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Gandalf> (2012), the staff can be used for illumination, for pushing foes back (also called magical kinesis), for casting blinding light upon foes, for calling the Lord of Eagles to help, and for calling Shadowfax - Gandalf's horse.

Why Does the Ring Affect Some, But Not Others?

The Ring finds a way to understand what someone fears and to find out the positive and negative sides of one's personality and use them for its benefit. While some people have knowledge about the Ring and thus are tempted by the power it may grant them, some of them, such as the hobbits Merry and Pippin, know nothing about the Ring before they encounter it and this is why they are not even tempted or affected by it. Hobbits do not want much – they have food, shelter and are always in a good mood and this is enough for them to lead a happy life. They also have no evil streak, have no big goals and this is why the Ring does not have influence on them. This is also the case with Gimli and Legolas. Their nature is good – they do not want power, they do not have anything that cannot be obtained without the power of the Ring, they do not have any great plans. An example of how uncorrupted Gimli and Legolas' souls are is the fact that they come from different races. Despite of these differences, they become friends, because their character, values and aims are the same. They are fighting for the same cause and this draws them closer. They are able to understand what kind of evil the Ring is and this is why they do not want it for themselves. Gimli's first reaction, when he understands about the Ring is to try to destroy it. His actions show that he does not need this kind of power. Aragorn knows that through the Ring great evil can be accomplished and this is why he refuses to take it even for the quest. In no way is he a perfect human being. However, he is aware of his flaws and is capable of controlling his impulses, which allows him to resist the Ring's temptation. Faramir is tempted by the Ring, but does not want it because he realizes that much evil can come of it. His good

nature prevails, and it is clear that he wants to have no interaction with it. He is absolutely dedicated to the task set by his father and does not want to go off track. He understands what the Ring has done to his brother and does not want to make his mistake. Sam is also not tempted by the Ring, because he thinks that it is too great responsibility for him and is even afraid of its power. Just like Merry and Pippin he has no great goals and is content with what he has. He believes that carrying the Ring and destroying it is his master's task and he continues to keep this opinion with the help of his toughness, which is characteristic of all hobbits. The characters that are affected by it have some kind of evil hidden inside their souls (Gollum), have had it in their possession for a great period of time (Gollum, Bilbo and Frodo), have killed to obtain it (Gollum), or have great desires that can be obtained through the Ring (Gandalf, Galadriel and Boromir). If even one of these features is in the character's mind, he will inevitably fall under its power and be tempted.

Conclusion

The themes of power and temptation are widely included in J. R. R. Tolkien's book. The One Ring can be a source of endless power, but many temptations and corruption are connected to this power. As a symbol of ultimate power, almost everyone is tempted by it in way which makes them actually choose the wrong path and not the better alternative. Although they know that the Rings causes only evil, people that want to possess it believe that they are best suited to keeping the Ring and that they would use it only for good. It is not only a symbol of power, but also of the endless evil that can be found

both in the world around us and in people themselves. The temptation for the power of the Ring can corrupt people not only on the inside - their minds, but will also damage their outer appearance, if they hold on to it long enough. The temptation of the Ring's power is addictive and thus no one is able to part with it. This concept is known also in the real life, as people who have been granted some kind of power cannot learn to live without it later on. It is important for us, as people, to make the correct decisions when given some kind of power and remember the example the One Ring's addictive power.