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## A Comparison of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Peter Jackson's Film Adaptations

Jonathan Mendyk

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**Introduction**

A literature professor, writer, and academic, J.R.R. Tolkien had insatiable curiosities in both philology and high fantasy. Tolkien spent a lifetime integrating these interests into his stories of mythical creatures, their histories, and that of Middle Earth. Inspired by fairy tales that he would tell his children, Tolkien published *The Hobbit* in 1937 and thus created Middle Earth and some of the people and creatures that inhabit it. After widespread critical acclaim and popularity among his readers, Tolkien was urged by his publishers to write a sequel to the story despite feeling that he had little more to say about hobbits at the time. *The Lord of the Rings* began as this sequel to *The Hobbit* but soon became a work far more complex and nuanced. In the process of writing this epic high fantasy novel, Tolkien created a world that was exceedingly intricate; Middle Earth evolved from the mythical setting of his first novel into part of an entirely new world of which Tolkien considered himself discoverer rather than creator. It was in this pursuit that Tolkien eventually “uncovered” the creation account of Arda and its powers but importantly also the history of Middle Earth and its peoples, histories, cultures, and languages. It is within this larger context that *The Lord of the Rings* is situated.

In the early 2000s, Peter Jackson directed film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*. These adaptations are recognizable depictions of Tolkien's original writings as the characters are largely the same and they must embark on the same quest that becomes the thrust of his story, but there are several changes that arose in the process of dramatization. As with any film

adaptation, it would have been impossible to include every detail from Tolkien's original works, especially considering the expansive context in which they exist, but some of the revisions and excisions made critical changes to the nature of the story. Through writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien not only indulged his appetite for fantasy, fairy stories, and mythical creatures but also incorporated his insights from fighting in World War I and watching the world change irreparably afterward. These experiences gave Tolkien a unique understanding of the nature of evil and the fragility of the world in which we live. Grasping these themes is key to understanding *The Lord of the Rings* as Tolkien wrote it, but because the films spent more time covering major battle scenes, demonizing its villains, and depicting The War of the Ring as a simple struggle between good and evil, Tolkien's original intentions were lost. While the bulk of the plot remained intact, the Peter Jackson adaptations excised material and altered characters in ways that rendered Tolkien's original vision obscured and inaccessible.

Christopher Tolkien said of Peter Jackson's films, "The commercialization has reduced the aesthetic and philosophical impact of the creation to nothing... They eviscerated the book by making it an action movie for young people aged 15 to 25." With this paper I will examine some key aspects of the Jackson films that could legitimize so harsh a criticism of such a widely acclaimed film series. This paper will first discuss the removal of the Tom Bombadil sequence and what was lost from the epic tale by ignoring this character. It will continue with a discussion of Saruman and the key differences between this character in books and the films. I will then conclude with what is probably the greatest departure from Tolkien's original work: removing The Scouring of the Shire. While these three omissions may seem disparate, at least initially, I aim to draw key connections between them and ultimately argue that Peter Jackson's films fail to

grasp the expansive context in which *The Lord of the Rings* exists, misrepresent Tolkien's ideas about the nature of evil, and fail to capture Tolkien's vision of the fragility of Middle Earth.

### **Tom Bombadil**

The Tom Bombadil portion of *The Fellowship of the Ring* is among the most puzzling that Tolkien included anywhere in his epic novel. While Bombadil is not critical to the core of the story, he is an immensely old and powerful figure that provides insight into the history and breadth of Middle Earth. Tom Bombadil signals that these stories exist in a much larger context and his removal from the films are a striking example of how Jackson ignored this context. After the basic premise of the story has been laid out, Tolkien spends a great number of pages depicting Frodo and his companions' departure from the Shire, especially compared to when Bilbo did the same in *The Hobbit*. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, however, this provided an opportunity to foreshadow that the Shire and the lands nearby were not actually as safe or secure as had previously been depicted. For example, Frodo and company find themselves in danger soon after entering The Old Forest when Merry and Pippin are captured by Old Man Willow. The first demonstration of Tom Bombadil's power over nature occurs here as he simply sings to the tree and the interned hobbits are released.

Now scared and discouraged, the hobbits do not hesitate to accept Tom's offer and follow him through The Old Forest to his home. Upon arriving, the hobbits meet Tom's wife, Goldberry, and receive nothing but a very cryptic answer as Frodo attempts to ask her who exactly Bombadil is. Tom provides a history of himself that is far more revealing as he states, "Eldest, that's what I am... Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn... He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless – before the

Dark Lord came from Outside.” (Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 182.). In this passage Tom reveals his age but importantly emphasizes the age of Middle Earth itself. In stark contrast to the films which are firmly rooted exclusively in the Third Age, Bombadil provides a glimpse into the expansive history of Middle Earth and is thus a prime example of how the Jackson adaptations eliminated much of the context in which the story resides. Through writing Middle Earth’s history, Tolkien created a rich world that could mirror our own. Ignoring this history excludes the allegorical nature of Tolkien’s creation.

Another crucial aspect of Tom Bombadil is that his presence is virtually inexplicable. As a result, there are many theories as to who Tom may be, but Tolkien himself does not provide any further explanation. For instance, when the hobbits ask Goldberry who Tom is, she simply replies, “He is.”. Considering both the similarity of this response when compared to God’s own to Moses in the Old Testament and Tolkien’s devout Catholic faith, there is at least some reasonable basis for the theory that Bombadil might be Eru Ilúvatar, The One Father of All. Regardless of whether this theory is true, it demonstrates the incomprehensible nature of this character. In a letter to a fan, Tolkien writes, “As a story, I think it is good that there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation exists) ... And even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally).” (Tolkien, *Letters*, 174.). Again, in contrast to the films, an enigmatic character like Tom is important in demonstrating the vast world in which this story occurs. Not all things in this mythical tale are meant to have proximate causes or explanations and this fact becomes important to understand some of what Tolkien is trying to say with it. The world we live in, much like Middle Earth, is not categorical; instead, we are faced with mysteries, paradoxes, and problems to ponder. By removing a mystery like Bombadil, the films repudiate that notion.

Instead of allowing mysteries and enigmatic clauses to exist, the story as presented in the films is logical and entirely explainable.

The last great mystery of Tom Bombadil left to discuss is that of his apparently immense power. Prior to the hobbits' departure from Bombadil's home, he asks to see the One Ring. Hesitantly, Frodo gives it to him, and Tom then places it around his finger. Strangely, the ring does not have an apparent effect on Tom; he is not invisible, but instead continues to make light of the ring. Stranger still is the fact that Tom remains able to see Frodo when Frodo then tries wearing the ring himself. These occurrences can only indicate some inherent power that Tom possesses; the ring itself is very powerful and wields its desire over its owner, so Tom must possess a power that is greater than that of the ring. Tom clearly is not evil—he has saved the hobbits and offered them lodging, but he wields a great power. Tolkien's view of evil is that it arises from a desire (even a well-intentioned desire) to impose one's will over another. Without Bombadil, this notion gets lost. Because Tom is so powerful, it would be simple for him to impose his will over Middle Earth, but he instead chooses to live quietly and coexist with creation. It is in this way that we can see how Tom Bombadil is immensely powerful yet not evil in contrast to the character of interest in the next section of my discussion: Saruman.

### **Saruman**

Another major departure from Tolkien's story crafted for Jackson's films was the depiction of Saruman. True, in both versions of the story, Saruman meets Tolkien's criteria as evil and is certainly a villain, but the films chose to do very little with this interesting, dynamic character. As he is depicted in the films, Saruman is a unidimensional, evil character. In the latter version, Saruman's history is never acknowledged, and he is never given an opportunity for redemption;

to the contrary, the theatrical releases of the films fail to even dispose of this character as he instead remains just a forgotten loose end. In Tolkien's original version, however, Saruman was the wisest of the Istari and the first of which to arrive in Middle Earth. As with Tom, ignoring this history obscures Tolkien's views. At one time a character of such esteem and importance, Saruman had to suffer a long descent to reach his position as a villain in the War of the Ring.

In the films, Saruman is introduced as Gandalf rides to Isengard to consult him about the one ring. Immediately, the film depicts that Saruman has aligned himself with Sauron and, in this way, he is established as a villain in this story. This development marks a stark departure from Saruman as recounted in Tolkien's legendarium. In his *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth*, Tolkien provides a background of Saruman that rather shows a powerful wizard with fragile pride instead of the strictly evil power Jackson created. Before he or Gandalf could have discerned that there was any connection between the hobbits and the one ring, Saruman began taking secret trips to the Shire. Only because of Saruman's fragile ego and nagging intuition that Gandalf was the wiser, more powerful wizard did he begin to take these trips. This point is further emphasized as Saruman openly mocked Gandalf for using pipe-weed, the common vice of the hobbits, but secretly began using it himself. This backstory provides evidence that Saruman is not inherently evil but is in some way an insecure wizard who ironically tries to imitate his subordinate. In this way, Saruman is more sympathetic and his story more tragic than the film adaptations ever allow. Instead of considering Saruman an innate villain that must be defeated, Tolkien depicted a complex, vulnerable character. The films woefully over-simplify Saruman and thus do not accurately represent Tolkien's nuanced understanding of evil.

While he does seem to sympathize with Saruman, Tolkien's view on the nature of evil can be discerned from the wizard's apparent fall from grace. In his article "Song of Saruman", Robert Tally makes the argument that the simplification of Saruman is one of the most egregious errors of Jackson's adaptations. Saruman was not evil because of his alliance to Sauron; in fact, in Tolkien's writings he makes explicitly clear the fact that Saruman was never in league with Sauron. More accurately, Saruman cooperated with Sauron only to benefit his own pursuit of the ring. Saruman is certainly an evil villain in this story, but not for reasons so obvious as those laid out in the films. Tally writes:

The movie version of Saruman ignores his good intentions, and it also ignores his efforts to combat Sauron. By making Saruman a mere lackey of Sauron, the filmmakers vastly simplify the narrative, effectively insulting its own audience by assuming its members cannot handle multiple enemies at once or imagine conflicting values irreducible to simple "good versus evil". (Tally).

Clearly, Tolkien's ideas about evil and how it arises are more complex than the movies allowed. Saruman was an insecure character with good intentions but only descended to evil in the pursuit of these intentions.

Tally continues to make the point that Saruman's intention was to protect Middle Earth from Sauron and organize it according to his own rationale, but interestingly, this is the pursuit that ultimately led him to become evil. In another letter Tolkien elucidates how this may be possible as he writes, "The enemy in successive forms is always 'naturally' concerned with sheer Domination, and so the Lord of magic and machines; but the problem: that this frightful evil can and does arise from an apparently good root, the desire to benefit the world and others... is a recurrent motive." (Tolkien, *Letters*, 146.). To Tolkien, there is not a categorical definition of

evil, rather it arises from one's desire to impose their ideals on other people. This is a profound philosophical idea of Tolkien's that gets lost with the films revised Saruman; Saruman in Tolkien's writings provides a key example of exactly how evil arises, but Jackson's revision obscures this point. Further, the movies depict the War of the Ring as a struggle between good and evil; it certainly is, but it is not a simple dichotomy. Because Tolkien shows that evil can even arise from good intentions, he can also show that evil is rather ubiquitous. This is exactly the point that he intends to make with "The Scouring of the Shire", the final major excision of Jackson's that fundamentally changes the nature of this tale.

### **The Scouring of the Shire**

Removing "The Scouring of the Shire" is one of the most dramatic cuts that Peter Jackson made to *The Lord of the Rings*. The movies depicted Middle Earth as a world that was redeemable through the valiant effort of its heroes whereas Tolkien had always envisioned it as world, like ours, that was fragile and broken in some fundamental way (though Tolkien would, and did, strenuously object to allegorizing our world through Middle Earth). Tolkien needed to include this scene to demonstrate that destroying the ring and ousting Sauron would not eradicate evil but represented merely one victory in a perpetual cycle of violence that can never be ended. The real tragedy, though, comes from understanding the Shire as Tolkien's representation of the England in which he was raised. After the War of the Ring, this landscape would be forever changed just as Tolkien's own home was after World War I. Clearly this is an important sequence that was critical to conveying Tolkien's vision, but in fairness to the film adaptations, "The Scouring of the Shire" was not completely ignored, just misplaced and misused. In the film, Frodo peers into Galadriel's Mirror sees a vision of the ill fate that would befall the Shire should

he fail to destroy the ring—a major misrepresentation of Tolkien’s writings. For Tolkien it is crucial that the Shire is destroyed even when Frodo is victorious.

With the way Tolkien depicts the Shire in his novel, it is not difficult to understand the similarities it shares with the England of his youth. On maps of Middle Earth, it is depicted in the same relative location as England is in a map of Europe, it has a certain dialect and colloquialisms of its own, and the climate and landscape are mostly the same. After his father’s death and his family’s departure from South Africa, Tolkien grew up in a similarly serene version of England that he idealized. After fighting in World War I, Tolkien returned home and realized that despite victory, the world would be forever changed. In the Forward to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien famously wrote, “By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead,” a sentiment that encompasses his postwar experience. While World War I was contemporaneously considered “the war to end all wars”, Tolkien lived to see World War II and came to understand that this industrialized evil would never be eradicated but instead would always exist in some way. With these insights, the Shire consequently could not remain the serene, idyllic landscape he originally depicted, but much like his own home, had to change because of the War of the Ring. Therefore, The Scouring of the Shire was crucial to Tolkien’s story and it is in this way that the Shire and the evil that came home to roost within elucidate parts of Tolkien’s own personal experience and philosophy. When the films exclude the Scouring of the Shire, they ignore how Tolkien tried to include his life in his work; in some way, they utterly disagree with Tolkien by presenting the War of the Ring as a conflict that could really be “won”.

Instead of encapsulating Tolkien’s insights from fighting in World War I and observing the world after, Jackson’s goal was to dramatize Tolkien’s epic novel. Consequently, any

singular event, like The Scouring of the Shire, became much less significant and did not carry the same thematic weight. The Jackson film adaptations were able to largely ignore this crucial event, but the story remained recognizable as Tolkien's work. However, by removing The Scouring of the Shire, the movies fundamentally changed the symbolic significance of the work. In this reimagined version, preserving the Shire and returning it to its prior state of being would be the consequence of victory over Sauron. Tolkien, however, came to understand the verity that war always comes at a great cost to all parties involved, including the victor. Tolkien's grandson, Simon, writes in an article describing his grandfather's experience of the war, "There is a sense too that the world has been fundamentally changed by Sauron even though he has been defeated ...how terrible it must have been to fight 'the war to end all wars' only to have to send your sons to fight in another war 20 years later." (S. Tolkien.). Instead of the Shire and the rest of Middle Earth returning to the way they were prior to the war, Tolkien understood that they would be changed forever (indeed, his intuition was correct as he would eventually watch his son join the Royal Air Force during World War II).

What is lost by this drastic change in the movie is the view that Middle Earth, much like our own world, is not impervious to evil. Instead, this landscape is fragile and will always be entrenched in this struggle against evil. Despite the valiant effort of its inhabitants in the struggle to uphold good and virtue, evil will always exist and will therefore always threaten idyllic visions of Middle Earth. It is my view that this is precisely the aesthetic and philosophical impact that Peter Jackson's adaptations failed to capture in Tolkien's works. Instead of incorporating Tolkien's central themes, these dramatizations continually reduced and revised this story in a way that left the plot intact but erased Tolkien's most central insights and messages.

## **Conclusion:**

In the interest of writing fairy stories, J.R.R. Tolkien found himself in a process of writing an epic novel and creating an entire secondary world that would consume the rest of his life. His experiences and insights from living through the World Wars became inextricably connected with these tales as did his resulting philosophical musings. Only through creating this complex and fragile world with such an expansive history was Tolkien able to express these ideas as many events and places mirrored those from his own life. In the process of making film adaptations, Peter Jackson and his team made revisions and rooted *The Lord of the Rings* firmly and exclusively in the Third Age of Middle Earth. While most of the plot remained intact, Tolkien's underlying vision and philosophical contributions were lost along the way. Considering that the films ignored the rich history of Middle Earth, simplified interesting, informative characters, and completely saved the Shire, Christopher Tolkien's assessment, while harsh, can at least be justified.

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