Technology, Power and Ignorance: The sources of corruption in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract

Since the first Industrial Revolution and up to our current days, there has been an exponential growth in the power of technology over nature and over humanity. Simultaneously, the concern about the negative impact that an excessive use of technology may have on people has equally increased, and it still does. These concerns have taken many expressions in Western society for some centuries now, which show the universality and importance of the topic. Literature is one of the major instruments of these expressions, especially fantasy, and J. R. R. Tolkien was one of the main exponents of the 20th Century in this field. Particularly in *The Lord of the Rings*, he projected his ideas regarding this highly relevant issue, motivated greatly by his experience of the terrors of World War I. The industrial transformation of Isengard has typically been analysed by scholars as the principal reference to this issue in the novel, but another important example is the One Ring. It is presented as a device which provides utter and destructive power, corrupting practically every individual that interacts with it. However, is it only from the Ring that the characters' corruption emerges, or does it have another source? The aim of this paper is to prove that corruption is not a single-source phenomenon, but that it has two sides: one external and other internal to the individual, and that the latter is most important. For this purpose, I will first look at Tolkien's views regarding technology, evil and corruption. Then I will show how the Ring is presented as a device that brings corruption to individuals, and I will analyse a spectrum of those characters and their interaction with the Ring in order to determine the true source of their corruption and its implications.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien; *The Lord of the Rings*; The One Ring; Corruption; Technology.

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0. Introduction

Literature is one of the best mirrors into which society is reflected. In terms of the harmful effects of technology on human morals, already in the Romantic period there were literary expressions of preoccupation for the rapid and damaging advance of technological and industrial development. Romantic authors such as Mary Shelley with her *Frankenstein* (1818) prophesied a disastrous outcome due to the development of technology and the human ambition to go beyond our limits.

At first, for many readers such portrayals of technology as an external force that provides us with unnatural power seemed far-fetched and improbable, pure fantasy and science-fiction. Yet, it has proven to be far more powerful in real life at times, and even more dangerous. Technology has been used for purposes of warfare and mass destruction, and to enhance business at the expense of others. The additional power provided by technology can be understood in terms of corruption, as some of the people making use of it tend to do so disregarding the wellbeing of others.

Literature is a magnificent way of studying human society and nature, as the authors often write from their own perspectives of their times and pour, consciously or unconsciously, their ideas into their texts. With regard to technology and the corruption it gives rise to, J. R. R. Tolkien is an exceptional source from which to extract many ideas. In his most famous book, *The Lord of the Rings*, he explores the nature of power and human corruption, among many other issues. For this exploration, he makes use of a magical element, the One Ring, as a device that provides power—and is thus likened to technology—and corrupts the individual's mind.

Even if Tolkien claims that he intended no conscious message in his work, we can undoubtedly draw conclusions from his ideas concerning the themes mentioned above, of how we relate to machines and how this relation affects our morality and nature. With respect to this topic, there is a generalised view that good and evil in Tolkien's works are two equal and absolute forces that clash and cause conflict. However, the issue is clearly more complex than that, as good and evil can actually be found in every single individual in the stories, as scholars like Kreeft argue (149). In fact, there is a constant clash between forces external and internal to the individuals that in the end lead them to act in one way or another. This idea has been supported by many

scholars, and although they all agree that there is an external evil agent of power and an internal corrupting force, they differ in a fundamental aspect.

Shippey argues that the internal corruption in Tolkien follows the scheme of Boethius, who claimed that evil does not exist externally, but sprouts only from internal weakness (154). This would leave the external power out of the reasons for the individual's corruption. Similarly, Kreeft says that "the power of evil [in Tolkien's works] is … not external but internal" (158). This, again, underestimates the effects of external forces on the internal moral status of the individual, so that only internal processes are emphasised. Differently, authors like Steeves and Katz argue in favour of a unified conception of evil and corruption in Tolkien's works, in which not only external and internal causes exist, but also they interact with each other. Thus, the corruption of the individual not only depends on the internal force but also on the external power, even if the internal aspect is still more relevant. We will further develop these authors' ideas throughout the paper.

My aim in this paper is to prove, from the perspective of Tolkien's critique of technology, that the source and nature of the corruption that arises from the characters that interact with the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings* is twofold: it has an external cause, the Ring, and an internal one, each character's desires, fears, and other psychological characteristics. Additionally, I aim to prove that of the two, the internal cause has more relevance in the process of corruption.

For this purpose, I will first contextualise the author in the two most relevant periods for the development of his ideas about machines and corruption: his childhood and his service in the First World War. This will serve as a justification that Tolkien did actually have a negative opinion on technology. Then, I will explain how Tolkien drew similarities between real-world technology and magic in his invented world, so as to clarify why the corrupting effect of the Ring can be likened to that of our technology. I will later develop Tolkien's notion of evil and corruption based on his Christian beliefs. All these ideas will serve to develop an analysis of eleven characters from *The Lord of the Rings* and their specific interactions with the Ring, comparing those corrupted by it to those uncorrupted. This comparative analysis will allow me to draw generalisations of how an individual is corrupted in Tolkien's work and why, and how he or she can avoid it. Finally, I will provide some general conclusions about the nature of corruption

in Tolkien's works derived from the analysis. Throughout the paper I will use MLA 8th edition style for quotations and references.

1. Tolkien in his context

In this section I will set forth some basic notions of Tolkien's life experiences that helped create his dislike for and distrust in machines. In addition, some of these experiences also made him question the true nature of human goodness and evil, and how men can be corrupted by external forces. This will help us understand the reasons why Tolkien acquired this specific set of ideas that connected technology and human corruption, that would later be portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings* through the device of the One Ring.

1.1. Tolkien's childhood

If we had to emphasise a particular personality trait that Tolkien developed in his first years of life, that would undoubtedly be his love for nature. At the age of 4, Tolkien moved with his mother and his brother to Sarehole, a small hamlet on the outskirts of industrial Birmingham. According to Humphrey Carpenter in his book *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Tolkien's four-year experience in Sarehole had a "deep and permanent" effect on Tolkien (35). "Just at the age when his imagination was opening out, he found himself in the English countryside", Carpenter further states (35). He had come from "dry" and "dusty" Bloemfontein (25) and industrial Birmingham, so this rural and natural environment was totally new for him. The sight of rivers, countless trees, green grass, flowers, and all sorts of natural elements, as well as the tales and stories that he would read, stirred his young imagination. His world was filled with enchantment and a living nature.

This, together with his mother's education in botany and love for all things living, created a feeling of being a part of nature, in harmony with it, especially with trees and plants. He would usually "climb them [the trees], lean against them, even talk to them" (Carpenter 38). No wonder that whenever he saw human actions against them, he felt miserable. This would undoubtedly be represented—although not on explicit purpose—in his writing.

Tolkien's distrust in progress and technology was reinforced when at the age of 8 the family moved again to Birmingham. The change from the idyllic countryside to the grey, smoking, urban Birmingham was a "dreadful" experience for young Tolkien (Carpenter 43). He came to see the city as a cage, trapping and isolating him (52), and was filled with a sense that Sarehole had become a lost paradise. Taking this into account, it is only natural that Tolkien developed a strong feeling of disgust at industrialism and the machines that maintained and strengthened it. However, the most important period in the shaping of Tolkien's anti-technological mind was to come some years later, during the First World War.

1.2.   Tolkien in the Great War

So far, we have seen the enormous impact that the clash between nature and industry during his childhood had on Tolkien's mind. Additionally, a truly traumatic event was to take place in 1916, when he was 24, and not only for Tolkien himself, but for the whole of Britain. It would definitely shape his utter rejection of the idea of technological progress of the time. Two years had passed of a war that was supposed to last for some weeks only. The innocence with which British society had faced the beginning of the war was destroyed in the battle of the Somme, in which Tolkien took part.

The first day of the battle of the Somme was possibly the cruellest of the war. Nearly 20.000 soldiers died in less than twenty-four hours, only among the Allied troops (Carpenter 116). Tolkien himself described his experience in those trenches of France as "animal horror" (*Letters* 72). However, the greatest shock came from the underlying manner of action of English generals: low-rank soldiers were used as pawns by the high ranks, ordered to continually attempt to cross "No Man's Land" and face almost certain death. Soldiers were of no more importance than ammunition and the morality of that way of using soldiers was strongly questioned[1].

What caused such a shock was the shattering of an illusion. As I have mentioned before, the war was at first confronted with great innocence by the English. They considered it to be no more than a game, like a sport; but it turned to be extremely crueller and deadlier than expected (Fussell 25-28). What is more, perhaps the greatest

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[1] As seen in poems such as "The General" and "They" by Siegfried Sassoon.

surprise for British troops—Tolkien among them—was to find an enemy on their own side. They were fighting for ideals such as freedom and peace, but what they experienced was the obligation to obey orders of meeting their own death, while other soldiers waited their turn behind, watching the massacre. This probably made Tolkien consider the righteousness of the fight, and the evil that can spring from apparently good intentions, but there was one more reason for his to be so.

This battle was the first one in which tanks were used (Garth 191). For soldiers of both sides, they seemed like infernal, fire-breathing metal worms with the only function of destroying everything they met. The tank was called a "monster" and "the devil's chariot" by the Germans (221). Ironically, this demonic invention came from the Allied side, from the British. Tolkien's allies had created machines with the sole purpose of harming the enemy, and saw not only them, but also the natural landscape around them utterly destroyed. In fact, Tolkien himself admitted that desolate landscapes in *The Lord of the Rings* such as the Dead Marshes and the surroundings of the Black Gate of Mordor were inspired by "Northern France after the Battle of the Somme" (*Letters* 303). The realization that his allies had been corrupted by the desire to win the war, treating people as dispensable machines and developing technology of destruction, created a ground for existential doubts.

From these experiences it seems logical that he would develop a critique of excessive and incorrect use of technology in his literary works. Additionally, as I have mentioned before, his works show Tolkien's preoccupation with the nature of evil in humans, whether human essence is good, and how and why it is corrupted.

2. Tolkien's ideas

In this section I will present some of Tolkien's conceptions that sprang from the aforementioned background. These ideas will be the basis of the subsequent analysis. First, I will explain the idea of Magic in a Secondary World taking the same part as machines in our Primary World, so that we can draw a direct relation between the Ring and our real-world technology. Then I will present Tolkien's notion of evil, and how it relates to human corruption and technology.

2.1.   Machines and Magic

As we have seen in the previous section, Tolkien was not very fond of technological progress, at least not as he had seen it used. Victorian times had brought the idea of progress to new and previously unknown levels. So fast and sudden was Britain's industrialization that it helped the Empire reach its highest point in history. Constant invention, improvement and energy were at the core of that society (Graves 32-34). However, many authors of the time were extremely worried about the unpredictable consequences of this mentality on human behaviour. Well-known works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* are clear examples of this, and Tolkien would express a similar critique in the mid-20th century with *The Lord of the Rings*.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the destruction caused by all sides in the war brought about a general feeling of loss and confusion in British society, captured by the Modernist movement. At this time, authors like Ezra Pound, in order to provide this new life with some meaning, spread the idea of building a new world out of the ashes of the old, as he famously expressed in his motto "Make it new!". Yet, for people like Tolkien, how could a new world be better than the old one when mankind had reached such level of destruction, when the idealized progress had led to one of the major catastrophes of human history?

For Tolkien, all kinds of technology and machinery (whether for war purposes or in daily life) have the sole object of "actualis[ing] desire, and so to create power in this world" (*Letters* 87). Thus, machines would only serve its users in order to get what they want in a much easier and faster way, whether they wanted to travel faster, or win a war. In Tolkien's words, "labour-saving machinery only creates endless and worse labour" (88). Thus, we can claim that, for Tolkien, machines are forces external to the individual, which help achieve his or her desires in the world by exerting a power over it. This way of defining technology can also be linked to the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*, and so we can draw similarities between both elements.

In fact, Tolkien himself in his essay "On Fairy Stories" defined Magic as being a "technique" to acquire "*power* in this world, domination of things and wills", and highlighted the differences between this and what he called human Art and elvish

Enchantment, the latter two not serving to create power in our world (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" 143). Furthermore, in a letter to Milton Waldman, his editor, Tolkien established an explicit relation between the machines in the real world and Magic in a Secondary World. He stated that the Machine serves "for making the will more quickly effective", which is practically the same definition that we have proposed in he previous section (Tolkien, *Letters* 145). At this point, he explicitly states that "the Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognised" (146).

Thus, a correspondence between Machines and Magic is proposed, and both are given a negative nature. For Tolkien, what leads to the use of the Machine or of Magic is a feeling of dissatisfaction with the world, normally connected to our mortal nature. For humans, their mortality leads them to greed for their own creations, to cling to their love for the world. This unwillingness to renounce their worldly possessions leads them to aspire to become gods and control what they have created. This is how, in Tolkien's terms, they suffer a Fall (similar to the Biblical Fall of Adam and Eve) which leads them "to the desire for Power" and to commit evil actions (*Letters* 145). Knowing the relation between Machine and Magic, and the fact that they are very closely related to evil in that they corrupt individuals, as we have just seen, we should now turn to explore the nature of this corruption.

2.2. Evil and Corruption

As I stated in the introduction to this paper, my aim is to determine the source and nature of the corruption that arises within the characters that interact with the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings* from the point of view of Tolkien's critique of technology. So far, we have seen the reasons why Tolkien rejected the use of machinery, and we have understood that he made use of Magic in his invented world as a symbol and critique of our real-world technology. Now, we need to develop a last idea in order to complete the basis for the analysis in the following section: how he perceived evil and its effect on humans.

In order to treat a theme such as evil and its corruption from Tolkien's perspective, it seems necessary to establish a religious background and filter through which to develop the ideas. It is a well-known fact that Tolkien was a convinced

Catholic throughout most of his life, mainly due to his mother's faith. This leads to the supposition that his works must have some religious element in them, religion having such an important role in the author's life and mind. This was confirmed by Tolkien himself in a letter to his friend Robert Murray, in which he admitted that *The Lord of the Rings* was "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" (*Letters* 172).[2]

Taking all this into account, it seems logical that Tolkien's idea of evil and corruption should have been similar to that of Catholic doctrine, although perhaps not totally the same. Rouven Steeves in his paper "Deadly Nothingness: A Meditation on Evil" uses the concept of evil proposed by Augustine of Hippo to explore evil in Tolkien. For Augustine, evil has two main sources: one external, coming from the figure of the devil, and the other is internal, inherent to all human individuals, "inherited from Adam" (89-90). This seems a logical division of evil and corruption from a Catholic point of view, supported by Biblical text through the figure of the serpent corrupting Adam and Eve as an external source of corruption, and the words of Christ in the New Testament, claiming that "all these evil things come from within, and defile the man", thus inferring that internal evil also exists and is indeed very powerful (*King James Version*, Mk. 7.23).

However, there is a nuance in this division, as it is not really dualistic. That is, not both forces act with the same power. For Augustine, the external forces of evil cannot affect the individual if the internal self is controlled and uncorrupted. Thus, while the individual keeps the inner desires and will under control, no external evil will be able to affect him or her (Steeves, 90). Now, did Tolkien follow a scheme like that of Augustine? One of the most renowned Tolkien scholars, Tom Shippey, is quoted in answer to this question. Shippey claims that a system of both "internal/Boethian and external/Manichean" sources of evil are in Tolkien's mind and expressed in *The Lord of the Rings* (Shippey 155). However, the Boethian theory denies the existence of evil, and so corruption would be only an internal phenomenon "caused by human sin, weakness and alienation from God" (154). Shippey's idea does not exactly fit with what Augustine claimed as it denies in part the effect of external evil on the internal moral

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[2] For further insight on religious elements in *The Lord of the Rings*, see Testi; Kreeft, especially ch. 2; Bruner and Ware; and Morrow.

status of individuals, but neither do we find it as such in Tolkien's work, as we shall see.

Instead, I agree with Steeves that Tolkien's expression of evil and corruption in *The Lord of the Rings* was closer to a division like that of Augustine. The internal moral status of individuals—their will to resist their hearts' temptations caused by their Fall *and* an external evil cause—is of primary importance, and it does not deny the existence of evil as an external force that tries to corrupt those individuals (98). Now, we have a hypothesis of what would be the nature of corruption on human beings according to Tolkien. In the following section I will try to confirm this idea from the point of view of Tolkien's critique of technology in *The Lord of the Rings*. That is, the Machine, or Magic, would be an external force of evil tempting the individuals, while those individuals would also have inherent lusts and desires tempting their own hearts and triggered by the Ring.

3. *The Lord of the Rings*

As mentioned at the end of the previous section, we will now delve into Tolkien's major and most well-known work: *The Lord of the Rings*. Written mainly over a period of 12 years, between 1937 and 1949, it is one of his more complex and manifold stories, out of which a wide variety of themes can be analysed. In this section, I will present the One Ring as a magical element symbolizing real-world technology and its corrupting effect on individuals, be they humans, hobbits, elves, or angelic beings. Then, I will present an analysis of all the characters that interact with the Ring at some point in the story, and I will finish by conducting a comparative analysis to extract generalisations regarding the nature of their corruption.

3.1. The One Ring As a Device of Power that Corrupts

Let us now present the central figure of our analysis, the element which causes corruption to appear in its presence: the One Ring of Sauron. It is a magical object seemingly made of gold, forged by a divine spirit, Sauron. It is undoubtedly the central element around which many of the subplots in *The Lord of the Rings* revolve. As we have seen before, it can be interpreted as a symbol for real-world technology, and as

such it shares some characteristics with it. The main of these characteristics is that which we have mentioned before: machines, as well as magic, serve as a catalyst for the individual to actualise his or her desires, by exerting power over the world—power over the wills of others, for instance.

In the case of the Ring, this power to dominate other wills is engraved on the same surface of the object, in an inscription: "*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them*" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 50). These words in the Ring clearly illustrate its function: to exert a power over other wills so great that none can resist it, so that Sauron can rule over them. However, this power described by the inscription is not the one we can see throughout the story. Those words explain what happens when the Ring is in the hands of Sauron, but in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is never in his possession, but in others'. So, what effect does it have when other individuals possess it?

The idea of this paper, as already proposed in previous sections, is that this corruption caused by the Ring has two sides: an external one, which would be an effect emanating directly from the Ring itself; and an internal one, related to the individual's inherent desires, lust, fears or weakness. Authors like Katz have argued in favour of the idea of the external element of this corruption, stating that "the One Ring corrupts the desires, interests, and beliefs of those who wield it", so that the individual plays a passive role, while the agent is the One Ring (Katz 18-19). This is supported by Gandalf's explanation of Gollum's relation with the Ring that "it was not Gollum … but the Ring itself that decided things" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 55).

So, it is clear that the Ring is an entity that has a will of its own and *acts* in order to get what it wants (to reach its Master). This clearly fits with one part of Augustine's notion of evil, the external one, which is the easiest to detect. So far, then, we see that Tolkien's system follows that of Augustine, as Steeves—and Shippey to a lesser degree—argue. But, in order for this hypothesis to be correct, we still have to determine where the internal side of evil resides, and how it works in *The Lord of the Rings*. This is where the analysis of the characters comes into play.

3.2. Characters Interacting With the Ring

Now I will start with the brief analysis of the interaction between the characters and the Ring. I have divided the characters into three groups, according to their level of corruption with respect to the Ring, from the most to the least. The first group is that of the totally corrupted, in which only Sauron, the maker of the Ring, appears. However, we will see that the issue of his corruption is not as absolute as it may seem. Then, I will present five partially corrupted characters: Gollum, Saruman, Frodo, Boromir, and Bilbo. Finally, we will look at another five characters who, when faced with the Ring's temptation, manage to overcome it and stay completely apart from its power: Tom Bombadil, Galadriel, Gandalf, Faramir and Samwise Gamgee. This method will allow us to see what specific characteristics the individuals of each group share in order to extract general ideas about the nature of their corruption.

3.2.1. Totally corrupted characters

In this subsection, I will look at the figure of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the relation between the Ring he creates and his apparently inherent malice and corruption. I will first look at his nature before creating the Ring, then at his motivations for forging it, and finally how his nature and desires changed with it.

It is clear that Sauron was already considered evil before forging the Ring, as he was the most loyal servant of the primordial Dark Lord, Morgoth (we could imagine the latter as similar to Satan in Christian tradition). However, we can argue that, before creating the One Ring, there was a part of him that was not totally evil. In fact, as Tolkien himself stated, "Sauron of course was not 'evil' in origin" (*Letters* 190). Actually, he was one of the divine spirits that served Ilúvatar, the equivalent of God in Tolkien's mythology, later to be corrupted, though not totally, by Morgoth. This "good" initial nature is supported by Elrond's words in his Council, when he states that "nothing is evil at the beginning" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 267). This is an interesting idea, as it implies that all evil must sprout from goodness, being thus an inferior, less powerful corruption of it (Kreeft 147). This could lead us to infer that goodness will prevail over evil in the end, and so evil will inevitably lead to a positive denouement, as we shall see later with the analysis of Gollum.

We know then that Sauron was corrupted by Morgoth at some point at the beginning of times, but we also know that he was not wholly evil before creating the Ring. In fact, in Tolkien's words, "at the beginning of the Second Age [just before the Ring] … he [Sauron] was not indeed wholly evil, not unless all reformers who want to hurry up with reconstruction and reorganization are wholly evil" (*Letters* 190). Here, then, we have the reason why Sauron decided to create the Ring: his aim was to "reconstruct" and "reorganise" the world as soon as possible. Of course, as we have mentioned earlier, Magic is the force which serves to actualise one's desires faster than by any other means. Thus, Sauron's intentions were actually "good", from his perspective—a tyrant's one, wanting to order the world according to his sole ideology, but seeking order nonetheless (243).

However, once the Ring is created, Sauron's mind changes significantly. The Ring he creates is itself a corruption of the elves' magic, who created the other rings of power with the object of making the world a better place (Glover 41). The Ring being a corruption of such magic, it also acquired corrupted (and corrupting) effects. Having created such a powerful artefact and being of an immortal and divine nature (high above any other being on Middle-earth), Sauron started to desire sheer power and domination upon all inferior races, being completely indifferent to his original desires of order (Tolkien, *Letters* 243). His evil actions now serve an evil purpose, Sauron just seek "power for power's own sake", and evil becomes "immaterial" and "metaphysical" (Arvidsson 9-10).

Now we see that the Ring's evil is metaphysical; that is, it only seeks to control other wills, with no material or worldly desires, only sheer domination. It has been created by a spirit who is beyond the nature of any other incarnate being on Middle-earth. This situation poses a fundamental question: can mere incarnate beings, even the most "saintly", resist the power of Sauron's Ring? This is a question that Tolkien treats in one of his letters, and he suggests that individuals themselves cannot, but only by the combined efforts of many can this evil be overcome, not by good individuals but by good causes (*Letters* 252-253). We shall now see whether this idea applies completely to all characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.

3.2.2.   Partially corrupted characters

As I have said at the beginning of this section, not all of these characters are corrupted to the same degree. Some are close to completely losing themselves, and some are just minimally affected by the Ring. To analyse them, I will follow the same logical order as in the overall section: from the most corrupted character to the least.

Perhaps one of the most widely known Tolkien characters is Gollum, a slimy creature who only lives to take care of his "precious", the One Ring. He is known to be of hobbit origin or similar, and this is used as one of the possible explanations for his resistance to the Ring's power, when Gandalf claims that "he had proved tougher than even one of the Wise would have guessed – as a hobbit might" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 55). This is because, after keeping it for half a millennium, he should have ended up "fading", as the Men with lesser Rings who became the Nazgûl did. However, the Ring just kept "eating up his mind" (55).

This, then, is a case of a character who, even if he is extremely tormented and dependent on the Ring, is not yet "wholly ruined", as Gandalf states (55). His mind is somehow split in two: an evil part created because of the Ring's effect, and a part which is still his own, a hobbit's mind, and is stirred when exposed to some memory of his past, as when he heard a hobbit's voice again in his meeting with Bilbo (55). However, he is corrupted enough to base every act and every decision on taking back the Ring from Frodo's hands. In fact, he offers to guide him to Mordor, the most horrible land in Middle-earth, but planning to trick him and take the Ring.

Yet, as I said in the analysis of Sauron, we know that in Tolkien's system, all evil sprouts from an apparently good source, so it must be just a corruption of it, and thus be dependent on it. This takes form with Gollum, whose evil purposes serve the good cause of destroying the Ring when Frodo fails at the end in Mount Doom. This idea is also supported by Tolkien in his letters, when he says that evil is "preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in" (*Letters* 76).

Now we turn to a completely different character: Saruman, an angelic spirit, similar to Sauron, but of lesser rank. He is sent to Middle-earth to help its races defeat Sauron, just like Gandalf (Tolkien, *Letters* 159). He is characterised by his skills and craft, and he uses his power to industrialise his lair Isengard, as seen in Gandalf's

account of the place "filled with pits and forges … a dark smoke hung and wrapped itself about the sides of Orthanc [the tower of Isengard]" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 260). His reason to do so goes back to when he learns the lore of the Rings of Power. He desires to acquire a knowledge that may serve him to help in the fight against Sauron, but in the process, and especially when he learns that the One Ring was lost and may be found again, he starts changing his mind and his aspirations. It is worth noting that he never actually *sees* the Ring, but the mere *thought* of it corrupts him.

His new plans are unveiled in his conversation with Gandalf, when he urges him to join Sauron, as he apparently cannot be defeated. Thus, he claims, they can gain his favour and slowly get to control him, replace him on his throne and thus "become a Power" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 473). However, he still defends his plan with good purposes, when he states that there would be "evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 259). Thus, we see a character of a similar nature to Sauron's, who is following his steps from goodness, to "justified" evil, and probably to utter and unjustified power.

The third character that we will analyse now is Frodo. He is a hobbit who inherits the Ring from Bilbo. Before the story of *The Lord of the Rings* he has had it for 17 years, and when Gandalf finds out that it is Sauron's Ring, he urges him to take it away. Already before starting the mission he feels the effects of the Ring on him, when "with an effort of will he made a movement, as if to cast it away – but he found that he had put it in his pocket" (60). We see here that an "effort of will" is necessary in order to reject the Ring, and even then it may prove unfruitful, as in this case, when Frodo is not in control of his actions and unconsciously keeps the Ring. Nevertheless, we can still say that Frodo has a very strong will, as he leaves the Shire determined to get rid of the Ring.

Frodo's difficulty in keeping his aim to destroy the Ring intensifies as the story unfolds. It is made clear that the nearer he gets to Mordor, the heavier it becomes for him to bear, physically and mentally. Finally, the heaviness of the burden disappears for him, but not in the way he expected: he makes the final decision of keeping and using the Ring for his own benefit, at the very verge of the abyss where he can destroy it. He then fails at the end of his journey; after unimaginable suffering he cannot overcome the

Ring's evil. Then, both Gollum and Frodo end up accidentally casting the Ring into the fire, and ultimately succeeding in its destruction.

Let us now turn to Boromir, a Man. He is a proud, brave warrior that cares for his people. He first appears in the Council of Elrond, where the fate of the Ring is debated amongst all races. His desire is to use the Ring against Sauron, but he is warned that that the Ring's strength "is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own" (267). This implies that there is a limit beyond which the Ring is controllable, but that anyone below it would be susceptible to its corruptive power. Even so, he later tries to take the Ring from Frodo, again for good purposes that lead to his evil actions: he urges Frodo to give up the Ring "to use the power of the Enemy against him" (398), and upon Frodo's refusal he attacks him, and fails. However, he finally realises his mistakes and the Ring's tricks and redeems himself by dying to save Merry and Pippin, who will later be crucial for the success of the cause against evil.

We now end this subsection by looking at Bilbo, another hobbit. He acts as a bridge between Gollum and Frodo in the story of the Ring. He spends about sixty years with the Ring, secretly keeping it in the peaceful Shire, and not really knowing its true nature. All these years with the Ring are noticed in that he feels "thin, sort of *stretched*" (emphasis in the original) and in his difficulty to leave the Ring behind when he leaves the Shire forever (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 32). In fact, when faced by Gandalf regarding this matter, he reacts in an aggressive and angry way, and he needs to be convinced to make the decision of dropping it. However, there is a last moment of unconsciously clinging to it, and as happened with Frodo, he briefly puts it back in his pocket before finally surrendering it (33-35).

3.2.3. Uncorrupted characters

Finally, we will discuss the group of uncorrupted characters. We are going to see one of each race, from the most powerful to the least: a being of unknown origin immune to the Ring; an incarnate spirit; an elf; a man, and a hobbit. The first of these is Tom Bombadil, and he is the only one who is not even tempted by the Ring, so he obviously is not corrupted by it. The other four characters, on the contrary, are indeed tempted by the Ring, or at least they consider the idea of keeping and using it. As I have mentioned,

Tom Bombadil is a character of an unknown nature, seemingly some kind of spirit with a power beyond anything on Middle-earth. He is called "the Master of wood, water and hill," which shows his power over natural elements (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* 124). Of his nature, he claims that he existed before the trees and the rivers of Middle-earth, even before Morgoth arrived there, which was at the very beginning of time, thus implying his supernatural and unknown nature (131). Also, Elrond's words that only those with great power can wield the Ring at will confirm the extraordinary power of Bombadil and, arguably, this is far beyond that of Sauron himself, judging by his playful attitude with the Ring and the fact that he does not become invisible when wearing it.

Let us now consider a character of less power, Gandalf. He is an Istar, an angelic being more powerful than the races of Middle-earth, yet less than Sauron (Tolkien, *Letters* 159). Unlike his equal Saruman, he is not corrupted by the Ring. Relevantly, he is closer to hobbits than Saruman, and appreciates more the value of a simple and peaceful life. He is characterised by his wisdom and compassion, traits by which he was chosen to help Middle-earth against Sauron, and not by skill and craft as Saruman. The first two seem to be vital features to overcome the Ring's power—as well as being fundamental Christian values—, as we shall see later. We could argue that he is able to reject the Ring as soon as it is offered to him because he *knows* that the Ring would acquire too great a power over him, that he would not be able to act correctly even if he wanted to and would become an Enemy himself (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 61). This, again, reminds us of the idea that evil can arise from good purposes, if the means to succeed are wicked and despicable. It also hints at the importance of a knowledge of negative consequences, and of one's own limitations, in order to resist evil.

The case of Gandalf could be similar to that of the elven queen Galadriel. She, like Gandalf, Saruman and Sauron, is immortal, though she belongs to the physical world and is bound to it, unlike the other three. She is very powerful, but on her lies an ancient curse of her race that originated because of their resistance to the will of the Valar[3]. Their fall came when the elf Fëanor created the Silmarils, great jewels into which he imprisoned the light of the Trees of Valinor, the original sources of light on the world. When those trees were killed by Morgoth, Fëanor and his kin refused to give

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[3] Figures similar to gods, of higher rank than Sauron himself.

up their gems to recover the light, they fell into possessiveness, and this led to the "Kinslaying", a massacre of elves against elves that doomed Fëanor's kin, of which Galadriel was part, and to their subsequent exile (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 55-75). We can see her then as a Fallen creature, in the Christian sense of the word, just as we humans are Fallen creatures because of Adam and Eve's original sin. So, she has weaknesses, and as a Fallen being she may be more liable to be corrupted by a powerful evil device like the Ring.

She faces the test of temptation when Frodo offers her the Ring, and she passes it. The reason for her success is similar to that of Gandalf. In the story, she acknowledges that if she used the Ring, she would replace the Enemy and sit on his throne. Yet she knows that it would be of no good to the world, and so she would not serve her own desires, which as an elf are to take care of the beauty of the world, preserving and improving it. In the end she "remain[s] Galadriel", she knows her nature and who she is, and that she does not belong with the Ring and its power, and so rejects it (366).

A similar knowledge is that which helps Faramir defeat the Ring's temptation. He is a man, brother of Boromir, but he is not such a passion-driven warrior as him. Faramir makes better use of his knowledge and prudence, and he knows that using the Ring would do no good to his people and identifies it as "the peril of Men" (681). This thought never came to his brother's mind, who blindly, ignorantly and desperately tried to take it from Frodo by force. Faramir then decides that the best part he can play in the story of the Ring is to let Frodo try to destroy it in Mordor, while he fights in his own lands with the weapons that belong to him and his people.

Finally comes the figure of Samwise Gamgee, the hobbit who is considered by many to be the true hero of the story. He is the loyal and loving companion of Frodo in his quest, and his desire and hope are to succeed, save the Shire, and return there with his friends and family to live the simple and happy life of a hobbit. The most important moment in his story comes in the few hours in which he is the bearer of the Ring. In this moment, the Ring is "tempting him, gnawing at his will and reason" by making him visualise the power he would acquire if he claimed it for himself (901). However, the two explicit reasons for him to reject the Ring and to follow the quest are his *love* for Frodo (who is in danger, taken by the Orcs), and the *knowledge* that "he was not large

enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere trick to betray him", which they actually were (901). These two motivations, love and knowledge, prevent him from being corrupted.

3.3.   The sources of corruption

Let us now take all these brief presentations of characters and their interactions with the Ring, analyse them, and try to extract the core ideas for corruption and evil in *The Lord of the Rings*.

We shall start by determining whether Augustine and Steeve's dichotomy introduced earlier in this paper fits with what we have seen in Tolkien's work. It is clear that the external force of the Ring is present in practically all of the cases, save Saruman, who never gets to interact with it, and so we can deduce that it does not directly affect him by itself. Additionally, in every character we see an internal fight with themselves and the Ring's power, fighting against their deepest desires, and impulses, which are those which the Ring uses. Authors like Katz argue that in this struggle "all beings are capable of rejecting the use of a Ring of Power [including the One]" if they "make a personal choice to reject unlimited power and to act by the principles of morality" (16).

This implies that, in Tolkien's mythology, it is indifferent to which race an individual belongs, or his or her amount of power, when it comes to defeating the Ring. It is entirely inside each one of them to make the decision of rejecting it, in accordance with their own capacities and morality. Now, does this correspond with the analysis we are making? Arguably, it does. We can see that members of practically each race are both in the category of the corrupted and in that of the uncorrupted: Sauron, Saruman, and Gandalf; Frodo, Bilbo, Gollum, and Sam; Boromir and Faramir. Finally, we have the exceptional case of Bombadil, and Galadriel, the only elf whose temptation is shown.

In consequence, there must be some other factors determining the individual's resistance to the Ring and, as said before, these must reside in their personal characteristics. To determine these, I will now first look at the corrupted characters, and see what they all may lack that could be considered as reasons for their failure, later to see if the uncorrupted characters *do* possess those characteristics. This would lead us to

a tentative conclusion concerning what personal traits are needed to overcome the Ring's power, and also which ones may cause failure.

It seems necessary to divide the corrupted characters into two groups: one the one hand, those which are of a lesser nature and power, and bound to the earthly world, namely Frodo, Bilbo, Gollum and Boromir; and, on the other, those beings beyond the nature of the world, which have a power that is supernatural. In this way, we see that each group has different reasons for their failure, as they lack different traits. The characters of the first group are all characterised by their lack of knowledge about what the Ring truly is and how it works. Of them, only Boromir knew that the Ring was Sauron's when he first saw it, and that it had a power beyond all of them. And even if he knew beforehand of the nature of the Ring, he was not familiar with the way it actually *worked*, how it tricked them to believe they could achieve impossible deeds. The other three either acquired that knowledge later (the case of Frodo and, presumably, Gollum) or never knew it at all while bearing it (the case of Bilbo). This lack of knowledge led them all to be imprudent, and not to take heed of the power of the Ring over them until it was too late.

On the other hand, we have Sauron and Saruman. As we have seen before, they are clearly more powerful than hobbits and men, and yet, they are the most corrupted of all, the two main enemies of the story. What is more, they have proven to be more easily corrupted than the others. Sauron was already corrupted before forging the Ring, and he was even more corrupted after doing it, but all that evil emerged from himself, when he poured it into his creation. In the case of Saruman, he does not even need to see the Ring to feel its effect, and to turn evil. This is indeed noteworthy, as there seems to be a correlation between the power of the being and its level of corruption. As we have seen before, personality and power do not affect the possibility to be corrupted, but they do affect the degree of that corruption.

We thus see that the "weaker" and more simple individuals prove to be tougher and more difficult to corrupt than the more powerful ones. Hobbits were tempted by *touching* and *using* the Ring, the Man only by *seeing* it, and Saruman by *thinking* of it. In other words, there is a correlation between the degree of power and the degree of corruption. The reason for this to happen could be the following: while weaker individuals are corrupted mainly because of their lack of knowledge and precaution, the

more powerful ones are characterised not by lacking some trait, but by having additional ones: ambition and greed. Their power is so great that they know they could actually use the Ring for their benefit, and their lust for knowledge and domination drives them to covet the Ring.

If we now turn to look at the uncorrupted characters and divide them in the same way—Faramir and Sam on the one hand, and Tom Bombadil, Gandalf and Galadriel on the other—we see that the first two share the trait that was lacking in the corrupted characters, and the last three lack the trait that was found in the powerful corrupted characters. Both Faramir and Sam, when confronted with the Ring, have the wits and the wisdom to identify the dangers of the Ring and to know that they are not able to overcome them, and so they reject it from the very beginning. Not without effort, of course; the Ring amplifies the fears and desires of individuals, and if they have the wisdom to know that and act in consequence, they then need all their "courage and guts" to act as they know they should (Tolkien, *Letters* 76).

All in all, we can conclude that knowledge and wisdom are fundamental traits to reject the Ring's temptation (with posterior additional values such as courage), and that if an individual's ambition and greed are greater than their wisdom, as happens usually with already powerful beings, they will possibly fall into temptation. Taking all this into account, I will now follow to the last section of this paper, in which I will proceed to draw general conclusions about Tolkien's portrayal of human nature and corruption with relation to technology and machines.

4.   Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude that there are four general ideas present in the analysis I have made of *The Lord of the Rings*, which might help us better understand the corrupting influence of machines from the perspective of Tolkien's critique of technology. The first one confirms the aim of this paper: there are indeed two sides to human corruption, the external and the internal. The external one, the Ring—or technology—, acts as the element that triggers our desires, lust and fear, and makes us act in evil ways, even if unconsciously so. However, this does not mean that individuals are defenceless against external evil, as we will see next.

The second idea is that only through prudence and wisdom (knowing the means that can be used and how they work and acting accordingly) such corruption can be avoided. This is derived from the idea that "nothing is evil in the beginning" proposed by Elrond in the book, which means that all evil must necessarily be a corruption of an originally good source. Thus, when it comes to human behaviour and morality, we could argue that a good purpose may lead to the use of evil means—to the corruption of the individual. Yet, as we have seen with the cases of the uncorrupted characters, when they face their test against the Ring, they have acquired the sufficient knowledge to know that their good purposes would have terrible consequences, and they are wise and prudent enough to avoid making use of it. Thus, it is possible for every to avoid ignorance, to act against the external evil and to resist being corrupted by it, as authors such as Katz and Steeves claim.

The third idea, although the examples are admittedly limited, that we can infer is that this use of evil means will most probably come from those who already have a substantial amount of power in our world, and that simpler people willing to have a happy, peaceful life will be much harder to corrupt. That is, those who have more power are those who most wish to increase it and their greed may exceed their wisdom, so that even if they know that evil consequences will come out of their actions, they still act at the expense of others. Sauron, for instance, starts his evil actions willing to create a world more fitted to his standards, through unjustifiably evil means. Thus, the message derived from Tolkien's work seems to be that in order to avoid temptation one should strive to live a simple life, not dedicated to gain power or wealth, but just making of the world around us a more peaceful and beautiful place—like hobbits do.

The fourth and last idea is the most metaphysical one. This also stems from the notion that at the beginning nothing is actually evil, but good. From this we could deduce that, as evil is just the corruption of good, and not an equal to it, in the end only good will endure, and evil will be defeated. This is an idea that follows very clearly the Christian perspective, in which all happens according to God's plan, and his goodness shall never be defeated. Thus, we can see how Tolkien presents a concept of evil that invites us to face it—and in terms of my paper to face the corruption of harmful technology—, but which does not promise individual success, just as Frodo or Boromir fall in the end into temptation. Yet it does promise the success of general goodness, that

the sum of all good, small actions in favour of the world and of its inhabitants will cause the defeat of individual corruption.

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