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### Ring Tolkien Matters

*J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings debuted more than 50 years ago, but its message—about what it takes to be good in a hostile world—is just as pertinent today.*

By Melinda Mahaffey

Forget about all the Oscars that were lavished on Peter Jackson's *Rings movies*—a work's message can get lost among so much glitter. The trilogy focuses heavily on the unraveling of the plot and epic battle scenes, but deeper than that lies a story about what it takes to be good in an upside-down world—today's world, as it turns out.

There are two sides to the battle that reigns over Middle-earth: Good and Evil. These ideas are as fixed as the stars, but no one is doomed by fate: Everyone holds the choice, at every moment, to choose between Right and Wrong. This is the message of a doorstop-sized book boiled down to 13 words. Unfortunately for those who believe in happy endings, Good is often the most difficult choice.

What with the fantastical creatures that flit through the pages—Orcs, Elves, and Ents among them—I wouldn't blame you if you thought the novel was a complete fantasy. But Middle-earth is not an imaginary place located just north of Never Never Land. It's here, the planet that we inhabit. The term "Middle-earth" is Tolkien's corruption of an Old English word—Middangeard—meaning the lands inhabited by men.

Despite his large hairy feet and short stature, Frodo—our fun-loving hobbit protagonist—is not that different from us, or from the author himself. For starters, Tolkien spent the majority of his childhood at the turn of the century in a small English village outside of Birmingham, and there is little doubt that it was a peaceful spot—much like the Shire, home to the hobbits, at the beginning of the novel.

Tolkien's idyllic world turned upside down in 1916. World War I had been raging across continents for two years already, and Tolkien, with his newly minted literature degree, was plucked out from among the spires of Oxford and plopped down into the Battle of the Somme, one of the most gruesome battles in history, where 20,000 British soldiers perished on the first day of fighting.

*The Lord of the Rings* is not an allegory, but there are unmistakable parallels between the war's introduction of new inhuman weaponry and the Dark Lord's engineered Orc army—and how these "advances" intrude upon and irrevocably change even the most tucked-away corners of the world. As it turns out, we're the hobbits; when we come of age, we're thrown out into the big, scary, unforgiving world, where battles have raged for centuries before our births and will continue long after our deaths. The only difference is that suddenly, it's our turn to join up.

Here Good and Evil are concepts so big, they deserve capital letters. But Tolkien is an artist—he doesn't just write, "So-and-so was good, and the other so-and-so was bad, The End." He creates characters who resemble each other physically, like two sides of a coin—what separates them are the choices they make along the way. Take Gandalf and Saruman; wizards cut from the same mold, they are identical in appearance with their white beards and cloaks, and yet you can hardly confuse the two—the first is kind where the second is bitter, generous where the other is greedy. In fact, no one illustrates this schism better than Gollum (the fallen hobbit-creature who guides Frodo), who gets to be both sides of the coin through his schizophrenia. He is the angel-devil complex in one, good Smeagol perched on one shoulder, naughty Gollum on the other. The first has pledged to help you, the other, well, he's planning on slitting your throat when his work is done.

Tolkien confronts every major character in some way or another with the central question, which will decide where they ultimately stand: When the Ring comes to me, what will I do? And this Ring, the one for which the novels are named, is more than an eye-catching piece of bling; it is the One Ring, the circlet that maintains the tenuous balance of power in Middle-earth by keeping the Dark Lord at bay.

Despite the occasional detour down fantasy lane, this choice comes with concrete and sudden consequences. Those who attempt to take the Ring by force are categorically punished. Boromir tries to wrench the Ring away from Frodo and he pays for the mistake with his life. Other characters, such as Boromir's doppelganger and brother, Faramir, refuse the Ring, even when Frodo directly offers it. Gandalf wisely speaks for all of them when he says that as much as he would like to take the Ring with good intentions, he knows he would eventually be swayed by its selfish power to do evil.

This theme, of doing unscrupulous things in the name of good, is nothing new. The dictum that "the end justifies the means" has been in use since at least 1532. In modern times, this means planting evidence and persuading folks to do dirty deeds against their wills, as opposed to fighting over some all-powerful Ring, but it all ends the same—in death and disaster. As they say, the road to Mordor is paved with good intentions.

After Frodo destroys the Ring and vanquishes the Dark Lord, the hobbits trek back to the Shire. While they have been away saving Middle-earth, all hell has broken loose at home, as the pettier factions, led by the disguised wizard Saruman, have taken over. Some thanks for saving the world, you might say. But Tolkien wants us to see a continuing battle because there is never a true end to the struggle between Good and Evil—only pauses once in awhile.

There is no riding off into the sunset once the bad guys have been sufficiently punished. Good is not

just a choice—it is the most difficult choice, because more often than not, the right choice comes with the highest personal price. Frodo does not get to return to being the fun-loving little hobbit he used to be. The carrying of the Ring, its burden, has changed him, aged him, and he can't go back: That is his reward for saving Middle-earth, for saving strangers in far-off lands that he will never know.

So at the end, the real question is: If there is no guaranteed reward for doing good, if helping strangers can lead to your own downfall, then why bother? Because in the best of people, there's a yearning to do what's right; the unselfish act is its own reward. We are each like Frodo, presented at various times with unasked-for burdens—as the hobbit received the Ring and WWI claimed Tolkien—by the world at large. It may be fate or coincidence that we've ended up with such a burden, but there it is. No one said it would be easy. It's up to us to decide what to do with it, for good or ill.

That's the message that Tolkien wants to get across. Today, what path are you going to choose? It's a decision you make not once, but over and over again. Anyone can choose to do their best, any day. If you were cruel or spiteful yesterday, today you can choose differently—you can choose to do better.

When the choice comes to you, what are you going to do?  
*Melinda Mahaffey is the assistant managing editor of Spirit.*

And now for something a bit lighter: [The Tolkien Sarcasm Page](#).

"*The Lord of the Rings* is one of those things: if you like you do: If you don't, then you boo!" Read more quotations by and about Tolkien [here](#).

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