



Material Value Concepts in J.R.R. Tolkien's Fantasy

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Abstract: J.R.R. Tolkien's works, primarily *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, are not only celebrated for their complex narratives and mythological depth but also for the subtle exploration of material values. Throughout his fantasy universe, Tolkien weaves rich commentary on the nature of wealth, the moral implications of material possession, and the societal structures formed around material goods. This article delves into how material value is portrayed in Tolkien's legendarium, analyzing its thematic significance, its impact on characters and societies, and how Tolkien's own historical and philosophical context shaped these ideas.

Keywords: Material value, J.R.R. Tolkien, Middle-earth, One Ring, greed, Dwarves, treasure, Elves, Silmarils, Hobbit, Shire, industrialization, wealth, power, corruption.

Introduction: J.R.R. Tolkien's works, particularly those set within Middle-earth, often engage with themes of power, greed, and the corrupting influence of material wealth. Through his detailed world-building, Tolkien offers a nuanced exploration of material value, presenting objects of significant symbolic and practical importance. This paper examines how Tolkien addresses the concept of material wealth and its moral implications, reflecting his personal beliefs on industrialization, spirituality, and the human condition. Central to this investigation is the question of how material goods, be they gold, jewels, or land, shape the destinies of individuals and entire civilizations within Tolkien's works.

METHODS

The most obvious and potent symbol of material value

in Tolkien's mythology is the One Ring, a physical object that possesses not only immense power but also a corrosive influence on its possessors. [2, 4] The Ring represents the corrupting power of greed and the overwhelming desire to control and possess. It is a material object imbued with dark magic, turning its bearer's desires into compulsive, destructive actions. The transformation of Smeagol into Gollum, driven by his obsession with the Ring, is perhaps the clearest illustration of Tolkien's view on the dangers of material greed.

The Ring's materiality is not just as a physical object but also as a metaphor for the illusory and ultimately hollow nature of material wealth. Tolkien's portrayal of the Ring as a symbol of ultimate power points to his critique of materialism and the human tendency to value possessions over relationships, integrity, and moral character. [5]

In contrast to the malefic power of the One Ring, Dwarven culture is deeply centered around material wealth, particularly in the form of precious metals and gemstones. The Dwarves of Erebor, under King Thorin Oakenshield, are portrayed as a people whose societal structure and values are heavily influenced by the pursuit of material wealth. The Lonely Mountain, with its vast hoard of treasure, is a central focal point in *The Hobbit*, symbolizing both prosperity and corruption. [1]

Thorin's descent into obsession with the treasure, leading to his eventual downfall, mirrors the same themes of greed and materialism that the One Ring embodies. However, the Dwarves' relationship with material goods is more complicated than simple greed. It is entwined with a sense of honor, legacy, and identity, yet it ultimately leads to strife, war, and tragedy. This duality reflects Tolkien's understanding of the tension between the legitimate pursuit of wealth and the destructive force of an unrestrained desire for it.

In stark contrast to the opulence and material struggles of other regions in Middle-earth, the Shire represents an idyllic agrarian society that values modesty, simplicity, and community over wealth. Hobbits, with their peaceful, rural lives, have little interest in material conquest. Their wealth is defined not by gold or jewels but by the health of their crops, the quality of their food, and the closeness of their familial bonds.

Tolkien, who had a strong disdain for the industrialization of England, used the Shire as a model of a pastoral, pre-industrial society, one where materialism has not corrupted the inhabitants. Yet, even in the Shire, there is an awareness of material wealth, such as the subtle competition between

families (e.g., the rivalry between Bilbo and the Sackville-Bagginses), which reflects the less overt but still present nature of material values.[4]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Elves are perhaps the most complex representation of material value in Tolkien's works. Unlike the Hobbits or the Dwarves, Elves possess an understanding of both the temporal and the eternal, being inextricably linked to the natural world and its beauty. Yet, even they are not immune to the corrupting allure of material wealth. This is evident in the tale of the Silmarils, the three radiant jewels crafted by the Elf Fëanor, whose desire to possess and control these jewels leads to ruin, war, and betrayal.

The Silmarils symbolize the tension between the pursuit of material beauty and the perils of obsession. While the Elves are depicted as having a higher understanding of beauty and the natural world, their fallibility is shown in their attachment to physical objects of beauty and their desire to hoard what cannot be truly owned. In this way, Tolkien critiques both the idealization of material possessions and the failure of even the noblest races to resist their pull.

Tolkien's personal experiences, particularly his disdain for industrialization and his nostalgic longing for a simpler, pre-industrial world, are woven into his representation of material value. [1, 3] He grew up during a time of rapid industrial change in Britain, and his works often reflect a critique of the damaging effects of industrial progress, especially its degradation of nature and the loss of spiritual values in the pursuit of material wealth.

The destructive consequences of industrialization are symbolized in the character of Saruman, whose lust for power leads him to exploit the land and its resources for his own gain, using industrial methods to ravage the environment. Saruman's manipulation of nature reflects Tolkien's belief that materialism, when taken to extremes, leads to the destruction of the very things that give life meaning—beauty, community, and the natural world.

CONCLUSION

J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy works provide a rich, multifaceted commentary on the nature of material value. From the corrosive influence of the One Ring to the wealth-obsessed Dwarves and the idealized simplicity of the Shire, Tolkien's exploration of material wealth serves as a profound critique of industrialization, greed, and the human tendency to prioritize possessions over spiritual and communal values. Ultimately, Tolkien's legendarium suggests that while material goods hold a place in human society, they must

not be allowed to overshadow more enduring and meaningful pursuits, such as friendship, honor, and a harmonious relationship with nature.

In Tolkien's world, the true value of material wealth is not in what it can buy or how it can elevate one's status, but in how it is used and the impact it has on the bearer and their world. The tension between the corrupting power of materialism and the ideal of a simpler, more spiritually aligned life forms the backbone of many of his most enduring themes.

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