

Good and Evil and the Flow of Information in *The Lord of the Rings*

ENGL 283: The Tolkien Legendarium

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Oct. 22, 2024

In Book III of *The Lord of the Rings* when Gandalf is speaking in the Golden Hall of Edoras, he rebukes Wormtongue for speaking ill of Lothlórien, saying "the wise speak only of what they know, Gríma son of Gálmód" (Tolkien 503). This motif is repeated throughout the book: those aligned with Sauron and Saruman are generally more prone to jump to conclusions based on incomplete information, and those aligned against them and with more wisdom are generally more cognizant of what they do not know and more willing to change course once new information is gained. For example, Théoden and Wormtongue are unwilling to hear Gandalf's ill news, and they blame him for it rather than heeding it. Another example that exemplifies this motif is the battle of Helm's Deep, where the army of Théoden does not give up hope despite the situation appearing hopeless, and the men of Dunland are better able to be reasoned with than the Uruk-hai. Sauron also displays a tendency to draw conclusions too quickly in his interaction with Pippin in the *palantír*: he assumes that Pippin is Frodo and that he is captured in Orthanc rather than outside and not bearing the Ring. Throughout the narrative, characters who oppose evil have hope in divine providence and thus are more humble and more willing to believe that situations and their information can change than are characters who are more evil than good, who tend to trust in their own strength and power and thus are less prone to humility regarding their knowledge.

One example of adjusting poorly to new information is with Théoden under the influence of Wormtongue. Theoden says to Gandalf:

You have ever been a herald of woe. Troubles follow you like crows, and ever the oftener the worse. [...] When Éomer brought the tidings that you had gone at last to your long home, I did not mourn. But news from afar is seldom sooth. Here you come again! And with you come evils worse than before, as might be expected. Why should I welcome you, Gandalf Stormcrow? (501)

Gríma echoes this sentiment, asking "why indeed should we welcome you, Master Stormcrow?

*Láthspell* I name you, Ill-news; and ill news is an ill guest they say" (502). Wormtongue has

convinced Théoden that Gandalf is not trustworthy because Gandalf often brings news that Théoden does not like and that disrupts his worldview. He has been lulled into a false sense of security and comfort, and his poor leadership is characterized by his slowness in adjusting to new information. He has put his trust in the wrong advisors, and his people suffer for it. Gandalf eventually shakes him from the grip of Wormtongue, and this is shown by his renewed willingness to be decisive and ride to war against Saruman based on new information.

In the battle of Helm's Deep, the different parties all handle information differently. For most of the night, the battle seems largely hopeless for the army of Edoras: they withdraw to Helm's Deep in a desperate effort to rally what is left of the army, and once they are there and Saruman's army comes, they are vastly outnumbered. Some in Théoden's army despair because of this, but those in the Company do not. Consider this scene late into the night:

Aragorn looked at the pale stars, and at the moon, now sloping behind the western hills that enclosed the valley. 'This is a night as long as years,' he said. 'How long will the day tarry?'

'Dawn is not far off,' said Gamling, who had now climbed up beside him. 'But dawn will not help us, I fear.'

'Yet dawn is ever the hope of men,' said Aragorn.

'But these creatures of Isengard, these half-orcs and goblin-men that the foul craft of Saruman has bred, they will not quail at the sun,' said Gamling. 'And neither will the wild men of the hills. [...] They hate us, and they are glad; for our doom seems certain to them.' (524)

Gamling points out that the enemy is certain in their strength and imminent victory. Aragorn, however, ends the conversation by saying "'Nonetheless day will bring hope to me,' said Aragorn. 'Is it not said that no foe has ever taken the Hornburg, if men defended it? [...] Then let us defend it, and hope!' (525). Legolas has a similar sentiment, saying to Aragorn that things go "ill enough, but not yet hopeless, while we have you with us" (525). While Aragorn and Legolas are weary and discouraged by the battle, they are not willing to despair since, as Gandalf says in the Council of Elrond, "despair is only for those who see the end beyond all doubt" (262). Dawn

is a symbol of divine providence, and since they do not know how the battle will end, they have hope it will turn to their side. Aragorn projects this mentality when on the wall speaking to the enemy army, saying “none knows what the new day shall bring him [...] get you gone, ere it turn to your evil” (527). After he finishes speaking,

So great a power and royalty was revealed in Aragorn, as he stood there alone above the ruined gate before the host of his enemies, that many of the wild men paused, and looked back over their shoulders to the valley, and some looked up doubtfully at the sky. But the Orcs laughed with loud voices; and a hail of darts and arrows whistled over the wall, as Aragorn leaped down. (527-8)

The Orcs, feeling confident in their own power and relying on the strength of their numbers are completely unwilling to consider what Aragorn says, which reflects that they are nearly fully corrupted. The men of Dunland, however, are more moved by it, and when they are released the next day, they are “amazed; for Saruman had told them that the men of Rohan were cruel and burned their captives alive” (532). These men are a bit more willing to readjust their understanding given new information, which reflects them being a bit more redeemable.

Sauron, like the Orcs, is prone to overestimate his fortune and to jump to conclusions based on unsubstantiated beliefs. For example, when Pippin looks into the *palantír*, he says “we shall meet again soon. Tell Saruman that this dainty is not for him. I will send for it at once” (579). Pippin says “he laughed at me. It was cruel. It was like being stabbed with knives [...] he gloated over me. I felt I was falling to pieces” (579). Sauron immediately jumps to the conclusion that Pippin is the hobbit who has the Ring and that he is “captive in [Orthanc], driven to look in the glass for his torment by Saruman” (581), and he is so confident about this conclusion that he simply laughs at Pippin rather than questioning him. Gandalf comments on this, saying to Pippin that “you have been saved, and all your friends too, mainly by good fortune, as it is called [...] If he had questioned you, then and there, almost certainly you would have told all that you know, to the ruin of us all. But he was too eager” (579). Thus, it is divine

providence in some sense that Sauron bends toward arrogance regarding gaining information—if he had questioned Pippin, a creature whom he considers beneath his attention or conversation, all would have been lost. Indeed, much of the plan hinges on Gandalf and Elrond’s expectation that Sauron will not expect them to set out to Mordor: Gandalf says in the Council of Elrond that “into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this, we shall put him out of reckoning” (262). Thus, like the Orcs and others aligned with him, Sauron puts all his stock and confidence in his own power and numbers. As such he has no humility, ignores the possibility of divine providence, and stands in contrast to Gandalf’s proverb that the wise speak only of what they know.

Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

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