



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

Preprint

This is the submitted version of a paper published in *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Arvidsson, S. (2010)

Greed and the nature of evil: Tolkien versus Wagner.

*Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 22(2): Article ID: 7

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.22.2.007>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-8230>

## **Greed and the Nature of Evil: Tolkien versus Wagner**

Stefan Arvidsson  
Associate Professor in the History of Religions Assistant Professor  
Study of Religions Department for the Study of Culture  
Linnæus University  
Sweden

### **Abstract**

Scholars studying J.R.R. Tolkien have often chosen to ignore the influence of Richard Wagner on Tolkien's opus. This article starts out with showing how profound this influence was and continues by analysing Tolkien's and Wagner's common interest in the Old Norse Mythology of the Vikings. Examining the recently published *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* by Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*, the author penetrates and compares the important themes of greed and evil in these books and in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The author takes up for discussion the radically different political views of the two artists and indicates how this is important for their respective view of power and greed.

[1] There is a familiar anecdote in Sweden concerning how furious Tolkien was when he heard that in the first Swedish edition of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Trilogin om Härskarringen*, 1959-61) his then Swedish translator, Åke Ohlmark, had drawn a parallel between the trilogy and Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.<sup>1</sup> Tolkien reacted acridly: "Both rings are round, and there the resemblance ceases."<sup>2</sup> However, in spite of this comment, in spite of the many critics who have written of Tolkien's antipathy to Wagner, and in spite of the loyalty many scholars have shown toward Tolkien in this respect, there is no doubt that Wagner's *Ring* brought a powerful influence to bear on Tolkien.<sup>3</sup>

[2] There is a great deal of evidence concerning Tolkien's interest in Wagner's *Ring*. During the late 1920s, Tolkien studied Wagner with the other members of the academic Kólbítar Club.<sup>4</sup> During the 1930s, when he was a member of the informal literary discussion group The

Inklings, it appears that Tolkien and C.S. Lewis began to translate the libretto of *Die Walküre*. Lewis, who remained Tolkien's closest friend for decades, was quite a Wagnerian. He collected recordings, owned a set of Arthur Rackham's illustrations of the *Ring*, dreamt of writing a prose version of *Die Walküre*, and took Tolkien along to London to see a production of the opera there.

[3] There are, of course, striking similarities between the titles of the two works, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, an opera meant to be performed during one evening and three days, and *The Lord of the Rings*, a narrative trilogy.<sup>5</sup> It is clear, for example, from the medieval *Nibelungenlied* that the nibelungs are more than just little gnomes, they are also the owners of the ring and the treasure. Hence the only real difference between Tolkien's and Wagner's rings is that in Tolkien the one ring becomes several, as a reminder of their origins, the Old Norse ring *andvaranaut*, which, according to Snorre Sturlasson (*Skáldskaparmál* 39) was supposed to multiply. The fundamental idea of a ring endowed with power, a ring that confers power and wealth upon its bearer, while it also entices those who come in contact with it to evil deeds and breaks them down, is not found in the medieval sources. Rather, Tolkien must have borrowed it straight from Wagner. The two works, Wagner's opera and Tolkien's epic tale (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*), contain very similar motifs, some with medieval roots, others not. In addition to rings that bear a curse, both works contain dragons that guard treasures, talismans of invisibility, broken swords that are repaired, grey deities who wander, women who lose their mortality, birds that speak, dwarves who seek wealth, worlds that collapse, Valkyries who go out into battle, and more. It seems self-evident to me *The Lord of the Rings* (along with *The Hobbit* and possibly even *The Silmarillion*) should be seen as a variation on what the scholars label the Nibelungen cycle. A simple comparison between the narrative elements in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *The Lord of the Rings* is in it self persuasive.<sup>6</sup>

<b>Wagner's <i>Der Ring des Nibelungen</i></b>	<b>Tolkien's <i>The Lord of the Rings</i></b>
1. The gold is taken from the Rhine.	4. Sméagol finds the ring in the bed of the river Anduin.
2. Alberich renounces love and receives ring of power.	2. Sauron forges the One Ring in the volcanic Mount Doom.
3. The Nibelung dwarves make a treasure in underground forges.	1. In collaboration with the dwarves and with counsel from Sauron the elves forge the Rings of Power for themselves, the dwarves and human beings.
4. The ring is temporarily in the possession of Wotan.	8. The ring nearly falls into the possession of Gandalf (and Aragorn and Galadriel).
5. Wotan is forced to give up the ring.	3. Sauron and Isildur lose the ring.
6. The ring is the possession of Fafnir, which transforms this giant into a dragon.	5. It comes into the possession of Sméagol, transforming him into Gollum.
7. Siegfried wins the ring.	6. Bilbo gets the ring by trickery
8. Siegfried voluntarily gives the ring to Brünnhilde (the compassionate).	7. Bilbo voluntarily gives the ring to Frodo (the compassionate).
9. The ring is on the funeral pyre.	9. The ring is destroyed in the lava of Mount Doom.
10. The ring vanishes into the Rhine.	

[4] To a large extent, Tolkien and Wagner shared an appreciation of all that was Nordic.

They were both passionate about Old Norse culture, with the interest not of antiquarians

but of activists.<sup>7</sup> Tolkien saw Nordic mythology as an instrument that could be used to

intervene in contemporary society:

It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that ... put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage. [...] So potent is it, that while the older southern imagination has faded for ever into literary ornament, the northern has power, as it were, to revive its spirit even in our times. It can work, even as it did work with the *godlauss* viking, without gods: martial heroism as its own end.<sup>8</sup>

Tolkien wrote these words in 1936. He was probably referring to himself when he imagined reviving the Nordic spirit in his own times, since he began writing *The Lord of the Rings* the very next year. There were, of course, already individuals on the opposite side of the English Channel who considered themselves to have successfully revitalized the Nordic spirit.

Examples include the Wagnerian Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose *Die Grundlagen des*

19. *Jahrhunderts*, was published in 1899 and Alfred Rosenberg, whose *Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhundert* was published in 1930. For his part, Tolkien detested both national and international socialism. When his German publisher asked Tolkien if he was of Aryan descent he described himself as an admirer of the Jewish people, and then took the opportunity to add that the true “Aryans” (from the Sanskrit *aryas*) of Europe are the Romani people, descendants as they are from India.<sup>9</sup> Still, it is worth noting that the conservative English tradition of which Tolkien was an ardent supporter often had its own displays of racism. There are more than a few such elements in *The Lord of the Rings*, focused in typical English fashion on the peoples the English colonized (the Negroes, the Arabs, and the “slant-eyed” Asians)—but they were seldom anti-Semitic.<sup>10</sup>

[5] Although it can be said that much of the enlightened bourgeoisie had a passion for the Nordic throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is also true that the biblical Middle East, classical Greece and Rome, and the Orient never entirely lost their charm. In any case, it became problematic to worship Nordic culture in the 1930s and 40s. In a letter from 1941, when the Third Reich of the “Nordic race” was at the zenith of its power, Tolkien expressed his view of the way the Nazis romanticised all that was Nordic:

Anyway, I have in this War a burning private grudge – which would probably make me a better soldier at 49 than I was at 22: against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler (for the odd thing about demonic inspiration and impetus is that in no way enhances the purely intellectual stature: it chiefly affects the mere will). Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved, and tried to present in its true light.<sup>11</sup>

[6] To Tolkien, the quintessential Nordic spirit, which he had “tried to present in its true light,” was to be found in the stories of Sigurd in *The Poetic Edda* and the *Völsunga Saga*: “best of all the nameless North of Sigurd of the Völsungs, and the prince of all dragons.”<sup>12</sup>

Tolkien first read these texts in the English translations by William Morris and Eiríkr Magnússon, and the poems narrating the Nibelungen cycle so fascinated him that he drafted a

version of his own. Christopher Tolkien published it as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* in 2009. There are two poems or “Lays” as they are known: *The Lay of the Volsungs* and *The Lay of Gudrun*. J.R.R. Tolkien put a great deal of effort into these texts, which run to a total of more than 500 lines of verse. Tolkien was never hasty, to say the least, and these two Lays seem to have been thoroughly worked through. It is uncertain precisely when he first drafted them, but Christopher’s guess, the early 1930s, seems reasonable, since that was the time during which Tolkien was, in practice, professor of Old Norse languages and literature at Oxford. These were also the years when he and his friend C.S. Lewis were in their most intensive Wagner period.

[7] While Tolkien could not but admire Wagner for his ability to breathe new life into the traditional Germanic and Nordic sagas and myths, and in spite of the fact that Tolkien borrowed themes, ideas and characters from *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Wagner (at least in his youth) represented a great many of the phenomena Tolkien despised: atheism, socialism, romantic view of violence and sexual liberalism.<sup>13</sup> In addition, as we know, Wagner came with the passage of time to be considered both an Ur-German and a proto-Nazi. William Morris, British socialist and romantic medievalist, had tried as early as during the late nineteenth century to create an anti-Wagnerian, British rewrite, with his *Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Nibelungs*.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Morris’ work, written as it is in heavily archaic, difficult-to-penetrate prose, Tolkien’s recently-published draft was closer in both style and content to the heroic sagas of *The Poetic Edda*. This choice kept him closer to the original than I might have imagined, and Tolkien’s stylistic conservatism in this respect can probably be regarded as an anti-Wagnerian pose.

[8] Otherwise, the most distinctly innovative bridge from *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* to *The Lord of the Rings* is the Christianizing of the heathen narratives. Many scholars have claimed that *The Lord of the Rings* is to be regarded as a Christian tale.<sup>15</sup> Such researcher

focus, as a rule, on the simple, benevolent hobbits, who embody a kind of blend of Jesus of Nazareth and middle class rural Englishmen. Hobbits are typified by their love of life in the local community and a complete lack of interest in power that corrupts. During the course of the adventures they also display more than a modicum of compassion, which Tolkien would have regarded as a Christian trait—and if he wished to create an anti-Nazi mythology, what better weapon with which to equip his heroes than compassion?

[9] Even in the recently-published draft Lays, it is clear that, like an improbable proto-Frodo, Sigurd, shows a desire to demonstrate compassion and healing powers. Tolkien's baptism of the heathen tales takes other forms of expression as well: *Götterdämmerung*, the twilight of the gods, becomes the day of Doom, Hel becomes Hell, faith is described as the most important object for mankind, and Sigurd becomes the World's chosen, who dies once but never dies:

If in day of Doom  
One deathless stands,  
Who death hath tasted  
And dies no more,  
The serpent-slayer,  
Seed of Ódin,  
Then all shall not end,  
Nor Earth perish.

Sometimes the fusion of the heathen and the Christian in Tolkien's Lays is more bewildering than apologetically successful:

Thus soon came Sigurd  
The sword bearing  
To glad Valhöll  
Greeting Ódin.  
There feast he long  
At his father's side,  
For War waiting,  
The World's chosen.

Here we see Sigurd as a Jesus leading the heavenly choir on the day of judgement, or as Archangel Michael (parenthetically the name Tolkien gave his second son; the firstborn was

baptized Christopher), or a Saint George killing the dragon. It would have made the Wagner who wrote *Der Ring des Nibelungen* about the just *Götterdämmerung* of the corrupt, authoritative gods nauseous.

[10] In “Tolkien’s Hobbit tetralogy as ‘Anti-Nibelungen’”, Robert A. Hall interprets *The Lord of the Rings* as a critical companion piece to Wagner’s *Ring*. The two works do differ in many ways. Wagner’s characters have to place their confidence in their own abilities to redeem themselves, owing to the fact that the gods are corrupt. Tolkien’s characters, on the other hand have either already fallen or in the process of falling. In Wagner’s work the end of the world of the gods presages a promising future for mankind, while in Tolkien’s the emigration of the elves bodes ominously, and the coming era of the human beings is shadowed in dark cloud, owing to the inherent Faustian hunger for power of human beings, and their urge toward revolt against the cosmic order of creation. While Wagner dreamt of man as a humanistic *übermensch*, a being who could toss aside the divine crutch and burn the heavenly security blanket on the bonfire of the revolution (in *Die Kunst und die Revolution* from 1849 Wagner talks about the coming “Revolution of Mankind”, the social as well as artistic *Menschheitsrevolution*), Tolkien believed that human beings were unable to cope without divine assistance.<sup>16</sup> While Wagner dreamt about the end of the world, the *Götterdämmerung* of the ancienne regime, and wrote in order to expedite its coming, Tolkien felt that he was working in the shadow of the disappearance of good traditions and the doomsday of war. While Wagner was celebrating violence, Tolkien leaned toward pacifism. While Wagner’s Siegfried broke the old to pieces (his father’s sword) in order to be able to make something of his own from the shards, the hobbits made artefacts and tools that were meant to last for generations. The vast differences between Wagner and Tolkien become even more distinct if scrutinize the basic theme, the nature of evil, in detail.

[11] In *The Poetic Edda* and *The Völsunga Saga*, the medieval sources of inspiration for both Wagner and Tolkien, evil is random and natural, and has its roots in both the treasure of the river and the greedy people whose paths cross both the ring and the treasure. But in the Wagner *Ring*—and this is really the subject of the entire opera cycle—evil is explicitly the result of greed, prospecting and exploitation. In comparison with the medieval sources, Wagner also added scenes describing the production of wealth and the exploitation of the mineworkers (the Nibelungen dwarves).<sup>17</sup> In his *Ring*, as is proper for a Socialist, questions about the ethics of ownership and the relationship between the fruits of nature and the fruits of labour, emerges. While in the medieval narratives wealth has natural or natural-magical origins, in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* the origins of wealth are both natural-magical (the gold of the Rhine) and labour-based (the treasure of the Nibelungen).<sup>18</sup>

[12] In Wagner's *Ring* one of the fundamental—if not the most basic—driving forces is the radical opposition between love and ownership/power. In fact, the ring only begins to circulate and to reap victims after Alberich has been rejected and, in turn, forswears love:

**Wellgrunde**

The world's wealth  
would be won by him  
who forged from the Rhinegold the ring  
that would grant him limitless powers. [...]

**Woglinde**

Only the man who forswears love's sway  
only he who disdains love's delights  
can master the magic spell  
that rounds a ring from the gold. [...]

**Alberich**

Still not afraid?  
then whore in the dark,  
you watery brood!  
Your light I'll put out,  
wrench the gold from the rock,  
and forge the avenging ring:so hear me you waters:—  
thus I lay a curse on love!<sup>19</sup>

Many researchers hold the view that this opposition between ruling and loving disappears in *The Lord of the Rings*. One might have imagined that the Wagnerian theme of love as the only cure to greed and the thirst for power would appeal to a Christian author like Tolkien, but this was apparently not the case. In stark contrast to Wagner's *Ring*, Tolkien's rings of power have to do with power for power's own sake. In *The Lord of the Rings* power becomes an utterly abstract phenomenon, almost Foucaultian: ubiquitous but with no clear focus. In *The Lord of the Rings* then, the struggle is not a battle for wealth through which it is possible to enlist people to serve one, as in Wagner's *Ring*, but a more general power struggle. Power becomes immaterial.

[13] Tolkien was not alone in depoliticizing this power theme of Wagner's, conversion of greed to lust for power. The scholars have reinforced it. Deryck Cooke is only one of many examples of researchers who claim that it was the philosophy of Schopenhauer that made Wagner *deepen* his analysis from the theme of greed to "lust for power" in general.<sup>20</sup> Cooke approvingly quotes another author who asserted (on the subject of George Orwell) that "the love of power is stronger and more perverting than any material or economic motive." Cooke goes on to explain that it is appropriate to see Alberich, the autocrat of the Nibelungen dwarves, as a kind of Orwellian Big Brother.<sup>21</sup> According to this Schopenhauerian analysis, the drama never comes to a resolution: the craving for power is the constant companion of humankind, as constant as the presence of death. The only hope is the development of a new type of human being, totally loving.<sup>22</sup> In reality, however, this view is overly idealistic: The dramaturgy of the *Ring* really begins with the theft of the gold of the Rhine and ends when the greed of Hagen makes him throw himself into the waters of the Rhine, which is overflowing its banks, and he drowns. Between those two events the thirst for gold leads to the downfall of giants, dwarves, human beings and gods.

[14] The force of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is embodied in a gnomish under-god by the name of Sauron, who was originally a servant of Melkor, the god of fire and darkness. Sauron (Tolkien's demonized Alberich) is the one who originally forges the ring of power. But what does he really want it for? Sauron appears only to be driven by a kind of metaphysical desire to destroy. Logically, he is symbolized by a watchful, disembodied red or yellow eye, reminiscent of traditional Christian images of the transcendental presence of God. Author and journalist Alex Ross commented humorously:

When Tolkien stole Wagner's ring, he discarded its most significant property — that it can be forged only by one who has forsworn love. (Presumably, Sauron gave up carnal pleasures when he became an all-seeing eye at the top of a tower, but it's hard to say for certain. Maybe he gets a kick out of the all-seeing bit.) [...] And what, honestly, do people want in it? Are they envious of Sauron's bling-bling life style up on top of Barad-dûr?<sup>23</sup>

In Tolkien's books, power has more magical-supernatural than underworldly-economic origins: the Biblical serpent (“more subtil than any beast of the field”, Genesis 3:1) rather than Pluto, guardian of the treasures of the underworld, is Tolkien's real villain.

[15] The theme of greed as the essence of power, although not present in *The Lord of the Rings*, was indeed present in *The Hobbit*. In Wagner's *Ring*, greed exerts its magnetism on gods and giants, men and dwarves alike, while in *The Hobbit* this deadly sin is less of a relay baton to pass along and more the characteristic of a given “race,” specifically the dwarves (Wagner's Nibelungen). And there was one thing Tolkien did learn from Wagner: what the dwarves lust for are explicitly treasures they themselves made (and the dwarves are a race of craftspeople).<sup>24</sup> In other respects Tolkien's description of the dwarves reeks of the cultivated, putatively idealistic prejudices of the middle class about “materialistic” physical labourers. And yet, at least according to folklore scholar Jack Zipes, it also contains an inherent critique of capitalism.<sup>25</sup> According to Zipes this is most clearly seen in Tolkien's portrayal of Smaug the dragon:

Dragons steal gold and jewels from men and elves and dwarves, wherever they can find them; and they guard their plunder as long as they live (which is practically for ever, unless they are killed), and never enjoy a brass ring of it. Indeed they hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value; and they can't make a thing for themselves, not even mend a little loose scale of their armour.<sup>26</sup>

Zipes sees this as the quintessential description of a capitalist, and thus he sees the relationship of the dwarves to dragons as a parallel to that of workers to capitalists.

[16] Tolkien is consistent with this symbolism when he describes the disease of greed as striking a man so that he “fell under the dragon-sickness.”<sup>27</sup> This sickness, always rife among the metalworking dwarves, also spread to the holder of power (*the Master*) in *The Hobbit* and thus to the human beings in the big town. When Smaug the dragon is ultimately shot down by a heroic marksman from the town, the crafty townspeople rebel: “We have had enough of the old men and the money-counters! [...] Up the Bowman, and down with moneybags!”<sup>28</sup> In accordance with this typical early twentieth century vitalistic anticapitalism, it is only right that the Master (significantly nameless) succumbs to the skilled warrior.

[17] In *The Hobbit*, the shift of power from the Master to the hero is a righteous one. What was Tolkien's own view of political power? In a letter to his son Christopher dated 29 November 1943 he describes himself as an advocate of non-constitutional monarchy, presumably meaning that he was in favour of hierarchies that arise at local level, in which the best suited person (whoever that might be) takes the top position and becomes an absolute ruler.<sup>29</sup> In *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn, descendent of the gods and the elves, fights to prove to himself and others that he truly possesses the qualities needed to ascend to the throne. Thus Tolkien replaces Wagner's materialistic anarchism and socialism with supposedly apolitical conservatism. He pairs this view with a general sense of anti-modernism, militant hostility toward the new, industrialism, mechanisation and modernisation of the cultivated landscape technologies (well portrayed in the films directed by Jackson as Saruman's ravaging of the forest). While to Wagner the enemy is above us (the gods and

giants) and among us (Hunding and Hagen), to Tolkien the enemy is more distant, and among the others.<sup>30</sup> The enemies— known as goblins in *The Hobbit* and Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* and created in true Zoroastrian fashion by perversion of good by evil (Orcs from elves, trolls from Ents, Balrogs from Maiar)—are associated with Slavic and Far Eastern malevolence and a filthy cult of mechanization, and they fight, not surprisingly, under red and black banners.<sup>31</sup>

[18] As discussed above, Tolkien depoliticized Wagner in the sense that in Tolkien's books power becomes a totally abstract entity. Another indication of this depoliticization in the work of Tolkien is the fact that in Tolkien power is an instrument that corrupts anyone to whom it comes, irrespective of motive and interests. In the case of the ring, Tolkien was apparently implying that merely touching the instrument of power had a perverting result. Tolkien may have inherited this anarchistic idea from Bakunin via Wagner: "You can't fight the Enemy with his own Ring without turning into an Enemy."<sup>32</sup> Thus when the ring is offered to Gandalf the wizard, he shouts:

Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me!<sup>33</sup>

And the benevolent Lady of Lórien reacts similarly:

In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love and despair!<sup>34</sup>

Even Sauron ("The Abhorred"), the arch-enemy, begins his career by trying to do good, although in a way that is not in accord with the high god's plan (meeting the same destiny as his master Melkor who, in his day, tried to make music that followed new laws of his own creation).<sup>35</sup> In other words, the ring brings to fruition the innermost longing of each of these beings (for instance doing good or creating something unique) at the same time as this

capacity, this power, perverts them into evil beings. Therefore, in the work of Tolkien, the view of power shifts from power in the sense of the ability to shape one's own destiny (irrespective of any preset [divine] plan) to power in the sense of the ability to rule over others. It is as if Tolkien never really succeeded in distinguishing between the freedom to take one's fate into one's own hands and the power to govern others. In the same letter to his son Christopher mentioned above (dated 29 November 1943, in which Tolkien proclaimed that he was a supporter of non-constitutional monarchy) he also, and paradoxically, describes himself as an anarchist, claiming that he "would arrest anybody who uses the world State [...] and after a chance of recantation, execute them if they remained obstinate!" The anarchistic element in the work of Tolkien, however, is more closely related to "green" or "brown" decentralism and small-scale conservatism than with Wagnerian dynamite-like revolutionary romanticism.

[20] In *The Lord of the Rings*, and even more so in Peter Jackson's films (2000-2003), this picture of the destructive impact of the lust for power is reinforced. This aspect of the ownership of power was previously and powerfully embodied in William Morris' *Sigurd the Volsung* (interpreted by Jane Ellen as a kind of "anti-Ring").<sup>36</sup> In *Sigurd the Volsung*, Morris' depiction of the treasure-hungry dwarf Andvari is somehow sad, unreal and narcotic. He is a poor soul, once wise and good, but now living only to accumulate wealth, ever since greed took him in its powerful grip. Andvari, according to Morris (and like the English capitalists Morris, a socialist, despised), had been all over the world seeking gold, and was now doomed to dwell "in the wan realm pale as the grave" and "at the desert of dread in the uttermost part of the world".<sup>37</sup> The world of this "Elf of the Dark" is not the dreary Sisyphean hill of the worker but the isolated treadmill of the capitalist, a *wasteland* of the greedy.

[21] Wagner and Tolkien shared Morris' passion for Nordic romanticism. All three men were out of synch with the society of their day. Yet all three of their proposed solutions to the

political dilemma, like the ancient myths on which they based their narratives, differ radically from one another.

## References

- Arvidsson, Stefan. "Drudgery Dwarf: On the Absence of Labour in the Nibelungen Tradition." Ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere. *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions : An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006.
- Arvidsson, Stefan. *Draksjukan: mytiska fantasier hos Tolkien, Wagner och de Vries*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2007.
- Berry, Mark. *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's Ring*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.
- Birzer, Bradley J. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-Earth*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002.
- Bolen, Jean Shinoda. *Ring of Power: The Abandoned Child, the Authoritarian Father, and the Disempowered Feminine : A Jungian Understanding of Wagner's Ring Cycle*. 1<sup>st</sup> edn. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Caldecott, Straford and Thomas Honegger, eds. *Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: sources of inspiration*. Zurich: Walking Tree Publisher, 2008.
- Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1978.
- Chance, Jane, ed. *Tolkien the Medievalist*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004.
- Chism, Christine. 2003. "Middle-Earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan Nation: Myth and History in World War II." Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist*, 63-92.
- Cooke, Deryck. *I Saw The World End: A Study Of Wagner's Ring*. London: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Donington, Robert, *Wagner's 'Ring' and its Symbols: The Music and the Myth*. 3rd edn. London: Faber & Faber, 1974.
- Ennis, Jane Susanna. "A Comparison of Richard Wagner's Ring and William Morris' Sigurd the Volung." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leeds, 1993.
- Foreword to the first Swedish translation and edition, "John Tolkien och hans fantasivärld", in J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sagan om ringen*. Uppsala: Gebers förslag, 1959.
- Hall, Robert A. "Tolkien's Hobbit Tetralogy as 'Anti-Nibelungen'". *Western Humanities Review* 32 (1978): 351-59.

Lazo, Andrew. "Gathered Round Northern Fires: The Imaginative Impact of the Kolbítar." Chance, ed., *Tolkien*, 191-228.

Moorman, Charles. "The Shire, Mordor, and Minas Tirith." Ed. Neil Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo, *Tolkien and The Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969.

Morris, William, *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. 12: The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and The Fall of the Niblungs*. London: Longmans Green, 1911.

Ohlmark, Åke. "John Tolkien och hans fantasivärld." J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sagan om ringen*. Stockholm: Geber, 1959.

*The Poetic Edda*. 1999. Translated by Carolyne Larrington. Oxford.

Poliakov, Léon. *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*. London: Chatto & Windis, 1974.

Ross, Alex. "The Ring and the Rings: Wagner/Tolkien." *The New Yorker*, December 22 and 29, 2003. [www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/wagner\\_tolkien\\_1.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/wagner_tolkien_1.html) (2009-02-11).

Tolkien, J. R. R. *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien: A Selection*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1981.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_. "On Fairy-Stories." *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again*. London: Harper Collins, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Lord of the Rings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.

Shippey, Tom. "The Problem of the Rings: Tolkien and Wagner." Ed. Tom Shippey, *Roots and Branches. Selected Papers on Tolkien*. Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2007.

Wagner, Richard. "Die Revolution". <http://www.trell.org/wagner.revde.html>, no date [1849]

\_\_\_\_\_. "Die Kunst und die Revolution." *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*. Leipzig: S.W. Fritsch, 1887a [1849].

\_\_\_\_\_. "Oper und Drama, erster theil." *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*. Leipzig. S.W. Fritsch, 1887b [1851].

\_\_\_\_\_. "Oper und Drama, zweiter und dritter Theil." *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*. Leipzig: S.W. Fritsch, 1888 [1851].

\_\_\_\_\_. *Der Ring des Nibelungen: Nach seinem mythologischen, theologischen und philosophischen Gehalt Vers für Vers erklärt von Herbert Huber*. Weinheim: Acta Humaniora, 1988.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung": A Companion*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1993.

Zipes, Jack David. *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. Revised and expanded edn. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Åke Ohlmark, "John Tolkien och hans fantasivärld" (foreword to the first Swedish translation and edition) in J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sagan om ringen*, 14 (Uppsala: Geber, 1959). Ohlmark wrote: "Ringens är på visst sätt 'der Nibelungen Ring'" (literally: "His ring, in a way, is 'der Nibelungen Ring'").

<sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 306-7.

<sup>3</sup> For an anti-Wagnerian history of reception, see for example Bradley J. Birzer, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-Earth* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), whose book is one of the best interpretations of Tolkien. He describes the sources of inspiration for Tolkien as including *The Poetic Edda*, Lönnroth's translation of the *Kalevala* and the novels of James Fenimore Cooper (32). Not once, however, does he mention Wagner! Cf. Stratford Caldecott and Thomas Honegger, eds., *Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: Sources of Inspiration* (Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2008). Shippey's article on the influence of Wagner on Tolkien (2007) follows this anti-Wagner tendency in Tolkien studies.

<sup>4</sup> The sources of this information are Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their Friends* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1978), 5, 56; Andrew Lazo, "Gathered Round Northern Fires: The Imaginative Impact of the Kolbítar" in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*, ed. Jane Chance (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 197; and Christine Chism, "Middle-Earth, the Middle Ages, and the Aryan Nation: Myth and History in World War II" in *Tolkien the medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003), 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> Despite this formulation I do not, however, find the parallels drawn by Robert A. Hall, "Tolkien's Hobbit tetralogy as 'Anti-Nibelungen'" , *Western Humanities Review* 32 (1978), and others, between the four sections of each particularly revealing (*The Rhinegold/The Hobbit*; *The Valkyrie/The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Siegfried/The Two Towers* and *Götterdämmerung/The Return of the King*).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed argument, see Stefan Arvidsson, *Draksjukan: mytiska fantasier hos Tolkien, Wagner och de Vries* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> There are many studies of Tolkien's perception of the Nordic, and its literary sources. A recent example is Caldecott and Honegger (2008).

<sup>8</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories." In J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 25-26. In his well-known article on Beowulf from which this quotation comes, Tolkien mentioned a number of times that "the great contribution of Northern literature" is "the Northern courage," or "the theory of courage" (20). Regarding *The Lord of the Rings* as a Nordic/Germanic narrative, as early as 1969, Charles Moorman, "The Shire, Mordor, and Minas Tirith" in *Tolkien and The Critics: Essays On J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord Of The Rings*, ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969) emphasized that "*The Lord of the Rings* is essentially a Nordic Myth and its distinctive qualities become clear only when it is approached as a myth rather than as a novel or as a children's book or even as a fantasy" (201). Chism (72) considers Tolkien's creativity as at least partly in conscious opposition to National Socialist reception and rewriting, as if Tolkien saw himself as a self-nominated defender of the true Nordic-Germanic legacy.

<sup>9</sup> "I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by *arisch*. I am not of *Aryan* extraction: that is Indo-iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of *Jewish* origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have *no* ancestors of that gifted people" (Tolkien 1981, 37). I should be noted that this is only a draft and that it is not clear whether this text was identical with the letter actually sent to the German publisher in 1938.

<sup>10</sup> For the learned, English view of race and Aryans, see Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe* (London: Chatto, 1974).

<sup>11</sup> Tolkien (1981), 55-56. Tolkien wrote in the same letter that he was also envious of the Germans for their "obedience and patriotism," the very same virtues the Nazis held so high. Also, as an anti-modernist Catholic he was not, for instance against Franco, who defended the church and tradition against the socialists (see Birzer 2002, 116-17).

<sup>12</sup> On the subject of children and imagination, Tolkien wrote "On Fairy-Stories": "I had no desire to have either dreams or adventures like *Alice*, and the amount of them merely amused me. I had very little desire to look for buried treasure or fight pirates, and *Treasure Island* left me cool. Red Indians were better: there were bows and arrows (I had and have a wholly unsatisfied desire to shoot well with a bow), and strange languages, and glimpses of an archaic mode of life, and, above all, forests in such stories. But the land of Merlin and Arthur was better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd of the *Völsungs*, and the prince of all dragons. Such lands were pre-eminently desirable. I never imagined that the dragon was of the same order as the horse. And that was not solely because I saw horses daily, but never even the footprint of a worm. The dragon had the trade-mark *Of Faërie* written plain upon him" (134-35).

---

<sup>13</sup> I am in this article only occupied with *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The libretto of the *Ring* was written during the 1840s and '50s at which time Wagner became famous thanks to his revolutionary writings on art and politics. The most important of these, for the interpretation of the *Ring*, is *Oper und Drama* (1851), *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849) and, the most overtly socialist text, *Die Revolution* (1849).

<sup>14</sup> See Jane Susanna Ennis, "A Comparison of Richard Wagner's *Ring* and William Morris' Sigurd the Volungus" (PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Bradley J. Birzer, Roland Hein and Ralph C. Wood are among the scholars wishing to classify Tolkien as a Christian author. For a critical discussion of *The Lord of the Rings* as a Christian narrative, see Arvidsson (2007).

<sup>16</sup> Wagner 1887a, 29.

<sup>17</sup> For the role of the dwarves in the Nibelungen cycle, see Stefan Arvidsson, "Drudgery Dwarf. On the Absence of Labour in the Nibelungen Tradition," in *Old Norse Religion in Long-Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes, and Interactions: An International Conference in Lund, Sweden, June 3-7, 2004*, ed. Anders Andrén, Kristina Jennbert and Catharina Raudvere (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> In *The Poetic Edda*, the origins of the gold are ambiguous. In *Reginmál* it is said to have belonged to a certain Gust.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Wagner, *Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung": A Companion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 67-69.

<sup>20</sup> See also, for example, Herbert Huber's concluding assessment in the 1988 edition of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and, of course, the Jungians: Robert Donington, *Wagner's 'Ring' and its symbols: The Music and the Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974) and Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Ring of Power: The Abandoned Child, the Authoritarian Father, and the Disempowered Feminine: A Jungian Understanding of Wagner's Ring Cycle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Deryck Cooke, *I Saw The World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 271. On the subject of Alberich as *Big Brother* Cooke quotes Alberich's words in Nibelheim: "Nibelungs all, bow down to Alberich! Everywhere now he lies in wait in order to keep you under guard; rest and repose have melted away: for him you must toil where you cannot see him; where you don't expect him there you shall find him: Hoho! Hoho! Hear him he nears: the Nibelungs' lord! Even an excellent scholar like Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's Ring* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), sometimes stresses the depth of the motif of evil in comparison with the motif of concrete greed. Comparing Wagner and Marx, he writes: "The crucial difference is that, for Marx, economic relations remain primary, but for Wagner a more wide-ranging will-to-power is fundamental" (89).

<sup>22</sup> Cooke 1979, 273.

<sup>23</sup> Alex Ross, "The Ring and the Rings: Wagner/Tolkien," *The New Yorker*, December 22 and 29, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit: or There and Back Again* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 249. Also: "Dwarves are not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money; some are tricky and treacherous and pretty bad lots; some are not, but are decent enough people like Thorin and Company, if you don't expect too much" (204).

<sup>25</sup> Jack David Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*, 171 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Tolkien *The Hobbit*, 32.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>29</sup> Tolkien 1981, 63.

<sup>30</sup> This is not the whole truth, since in Tolkien there are also enemies within the ranks (although from the point of view of the Hobbits they are alien): Boromir is not an enemy, but as a human being he finds it difficult to resist the temptation of the ring and therefore betrays the fellowship. There are authentic enemies within the ranks in human settlements such as Bree (Bert Färne) and Edoras (Wormtongue).

<sup>31</sup> Tolkien 1981, 178. Tolkien's picture of the enemy is typical of conservative values. The "bestial" goblins in *The Hobbit* love all that is hard and violent, machines and explosions (see the chapter entitled "Over Hill and Under Hill"), in the same way as the Orcs in *The Lord of Rings* combat trees and vegetation. The leader of the goblins during the battle of the five armies is given the Slavic sounding name of Bolg which, like the names of the Orcs who live to the east in *The Lord of Rings*, has connotations of the same kind. Naturally, the goblins hate everyone who is "orderly and prosperous" ("Over Hill and Under Hill")—the lower classes are always envious. Wolves, bats, scimitars and, somewhat surprisingly, whistles, are among the properties of the enemies ("The Clouds Burst" and "Riddles in the Dark"). Seen in conjunction with the red and black banners and the "Mongolian" physiognomy of the Orcs, the picture Tolkien gives of the enemy is a blueprint of the horrifying image of the communist of his day, with a few German-Nazi extra accoutrements. "If he hated fascism, he really hated communism", as Birzer points out in *Sanctifying Myth* (116).

---

<sup>32</sup> Tolkien 1981, 94. Bakunin: “Nothing is more dangerous for man's private morality than the habit of command. The best man, the most intelligent, disinterested, generous, pure, will infallibly and always be spoiled at this trade” (see <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1867/power-corrupts.htm>).

<sup>33</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 71.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>35</sup> On Sauron's shape and appearance, see “Sauron” at [www.glyphweb.com/ARDA](http://www.glyphweb.com/ARDA).

<sup>36</sup> Hall 1978, 351-359.

<sup>37</sup> William Morris, *The Collected Works of William Morris. Vol. 12: The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (London: Longmans Green, 1911), 80-81.