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### What Makes a Monster, and What Makes a Hobbit?

#### Gollum's Unifying Monstrosity in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy

Monster theory is one of the most complex medieval theories to explore and understand, particularly because authors create monsters with highly debated human identities. Frequent discourse explores what makes a monster and what makes a human across the realms of literature. Many scholars agree that monstrosity typically discriminates and provides exclusionary commentary on a group of people within a particular social class, culture, or ethnic group; however, there is a literary monster who challenges and recycles this medieval theory into a more contemporary argument. In this essay, I will argue that J.R.R. Tolkien uses Gollum's monstrosity in *The Lord of the Rings* as a unifying device to critique the folly of general human nature instead of discriminating a personal identity.

Before exploring Tolkien's definition of monstrosity, we must first examine how he defines civility. Medieval scholar and fantasy author J.R.R. Tolkien opens *The Hobbit*—the prelude to his trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*—with a popular depiction of Bilbo Baggins' hobbit hole. He immediately establishes that Bilbo's home isn't "a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it and nothing to eat" (*Hobbit* 1). The next few paragraphs explore the ins and outs of Bilbo's home—including kitchens, bedrooms, and wardrobes—instead of his individual personality. Bilbo certainly seems to be in want of nothing when it comes to basic human needs. He even has enough food and shelter to host fourteen surprise visitors later on in the chapter. Consequently, readers infer that

Tolkien initially defines civility through one's regular surroundings and material possessions instead of their character.

This sets the stage for how Tolkien constructs and executes monstrosity; that is, if some possessions validate civility, then other possessions—or the lack thereof—revoke civility and, in turn, initiate monstrosity. We see this process in the gradual downfall of another hobbit, Smeagol. Over the course of the series, Tolkien not-so-chronologically explains how Smeagol and his cousin discover the One Ring. In a desperate and feverish attempt to secure the Ring for himself, Smeagol murders his kin. Smeagol then undergoes a deteriorating process driven by his hunger to maintain “ownership” of the Ring and its power. In doing so, Gollum physically moves away from everything he owns and enters the caves in the mountains instead. He then steps into both a physical and mental state of monstrosity.

After Smeagol's descent into his monstrous identity, the ownership factor shifts: Gollum loses his original lifestyle in his search for power, while the Ring arguably seems to possess<sup>1</sup> *him* instead. He becomes a type of arguably unintentionally isolated hermit as a consequence. Why does this shift occur so dramatically and effectively? We can better understand the reasoning behind this behavior by seeing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's article, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” In his fifth thesis, “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible,” Cohen writes:

The monster prevents mobility (intellectual, geographic, or sexual), delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official

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<sup>1</sup> “Possess” is usually associated with a spiritual or metaphorical presence inhabiting a physical host. For clarification, “possess” is used here in terms of ownership, power, and authority.

geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself. (Cohen 12)

The shift from Smeagol to Gollum follows this pattern within the text. Not only do we see the effect of the Ring's influence on Gollum as an individual, but we also recognize the early stages of the same downfall on other characters within the story—namely Bilbo and Frodo<sup>2</sup>. Thus, Tolkien establishes a short and steep distance between hobbit and monster that readers can easily comprehend upon the revelation of Gollum's hobbit origin.

At first glance, this appears to be a type of hidden concept within the storyline, and it may even be nonchalant; yet I argue that Tolkien is actually more aware of this short descent into monstrosity than we initially think. In *The Hobbit*, he ever-so-descriptively introduces readers to Gollum in the goblin caves in the mountains. “Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum,” Tolkien writes (*Hobbit* 71). “He was looking out of his pale lamp-like eyes for blind fish, which he grabbed with his fingers as quick as thinking” (*Hobbit* 71). Here, Tolkien takes great care to introduce Gollum by once again describing environment before character. The vague and sickly language he uses to describe Gollum's lair portrays Gollum as monstrous and not comfortable to be around. This presents itself as a casual description to readers, but Tolkien proves himself to be doing a lot more work.

We initially read Gollum as a mere monster, period; however, even before Tolkien canonically reveals Smeagol's identity, he already puts in a lot of effort to work with this short gap into monstrosity by attempting to portray Smeagol as Bilbo's opposite. The narrator claims

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<sup>2</sup> There are other characters to examine under the Ring's influence within this argument. For the scope of this paper, the discussion is centered on Gollum/Smeagol and Bilbo.

not to know who or what Gollum is, nor where he came from (Tolkien 71). On the other hand, Bilbo—as the more “civilized” party—has an ample family tree and community of hobbits around him (*Hobbit* 1-2). Bilbo’s community of hobbits in the Shire seems to validate his (relatively) humane identity, whereas practically Gollum lives in solitude. Chronologically, Bilbo is first introduced in the text when he is sitting on his own before Gandalf arrives, while readers don’t learn of Gollum’s existence until just before his interaction with Bilbo in the mountains. This suggests that Gollum’s existence is confirmed by his “discovery” as a living being—a bold move on a character whose humane origins are later revealed.

This stark contrast between the humane and the civilized is nothing new to medieval literature. Faye Ringel offers an explanation in her article, “Medievalism and Imperialism in the American Gothic.” In this text, Ringel analyzes attempts to reincorporate medievalisms within American Gothic architecture, literature, and political movements, only to find that artists and governments cannot incorporate these factors without simultaneously imposing feudalism and imperialism. Ringel writes, “A longing to recreate the romance of the Middle Ages can also mean a longing to reinstate the full hierarchy of the feudal system—it’s hard to have heroic knights are absolute tyrants in a democracy” (12). What does this mean for Gollum?

We find Ringel’s observation to be true upon the revelation of Gollum’s original hobbit identity within the trilogy. If Tolkien puts so much effort into describing what a hobbit *is*, then we can expect him to put the same amount of effort into what a hobbit *is not*. Notice the intricate maneuvers in Tolkien’s language as he describes the cave where Gollum lives: “There are *strange things* living in the pools and lakes in the hearts of mountains . . . also there are *other things* more slimy than fish” (*Hobbit* 71, emphasis mine). This passage seems to be the opposite of the hobbit hole described earlier. The hobbit lives in a hole in the ground that he owns, while

the monster lives in a hole in the ground that he does not own. Tolkien tries as much as he can to portray Bilbo's familiar surroundings as a *home* and Gollum's familiar surroundings as a *habitat*; but try as he might, he ultimately cannot deny that both of these characters live within strikingly similar locations.

This intentional verbal distancing occurs in discussing ownership and possession between Bilbo and Gollum. Tolkien first tells readers that Bilbo lives in a hobbit hole, "and that means comfort" (*Hobbit* 1). Later, when discussing Gollum's environment, Tolkien explains that Gollum lives *on* an island, but not *his* island; additionally, the only thing that Tolkien identifies under Gollum's possession is *his* boat (*Hobbit* 71-72). Gollum uses the boat to hunt for fish, since he does not own food or a way to store it. He doesn't even use paddles for the boat, resorting to his own body instead. The boat is Gollum's way of traveling between the island and the shore in the cave's lake. Staying in a location so reminiscent of his former life indicates the hobbit-humanity that Gollum still carries. This is also a symbol for Gollum's ever-transitional place on the fence between human and monster.

Gollum seems to carry dual personalities throughout the story—but does he ever completely cross the line into monstrosity?<sup>3</sup> This, again, is not a new question for literary monsters. Cohen's third thesis, "The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis," claims that monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systemic structure . . . a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (Cohen 6). Gollum exhibits this lifestyle of straddling the border between human

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<sup>3</sup> This reference acknowledges a fictional division of personalities. This paper is not a critique or a connection to dissociative identity disorder or related illnesses.

(or, literally, hobbit) and monster as he struggles with which side of himself—Gollum or Smeagol, monster or hobbit—to follow throughout the storyline. He continuously pivots back and forth between his monstrosity and his humanity throughout the entire trilogy. Other characters (namely Frodo) even struggle with figuring out how to address him as “Gollum” or “Smeagol.”

The key factor in Gollum’s suspended identity is how he achieves his monstrosity in the first place. As discussed earlier, Smeagol was not monstrous by birthright; that is, he is not inherently monstrous because of his race, ethnicity, or culture. This immediately forfeits the traditional expectation of monstrosity as an othering device, reducing divisive critique against different cultures (at least in Gollum’s case). Instead, the transition begins once the One Ring reaches Smeagol. This catalyst for monstrosity speaks volumes for itself. Larry L. Burris, author of “Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring: The Reality of Tolkien’s Master Ring” explores the Ring’s connection and influence across the series. Burris acknowledges that even though the Ring can move independently, “it seems to be dependent on human action to move any significant distance from one place to another” (Burris 190). The Ring operates in this role as a saturated symbol of greed and power—abstract influences that have no power unless people “carry” and practice them, which eventually leads to corruption. This has an unsettling effect, especially when considering Gollum’s change to a more lanky body and paled appearance: monstrosity, according to Tolkien’s series, is just as contagious as an illness.

If Gollum shows the consequences of falling into monstrosity by way of greed, then we must understand the full weight he carries in such a literary role. J.R.R. Tolkien writes another essay, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” in which he studies the key elements of the monsters within the poem. Tolkien comments that “the dragon is a *potent creation* of men’s

imagination, *richer in significance* than his barrow is in gold” (*Beowulf* 113, emphasis mine). He goes on to define dragons as those creatures most commonly used as a representation of greed and power. Readers subconsciously recognize this claim themselves, considering that dragons are usually depicted with a hoard of treasure. The dragon imagery for greed, pride, and their effects is indeed potent. This is why Gollum represents these influences as such violently effective illnesses. An animalistic and fantastic dragon is our expectation for greed represented in literature; however, Tolkien uses a corrupted and ill humane figure to implement reality instead.

The metaphorical weight of this symbolism takes a toll on Gollum—and that is why he is such a striking and memorable monster to us. We are used to seeing mighty, fearsome dragons carry the burden of representing the consequences of pride, greed, and a hunger for power. To some, it is even exhilarating and calming to learn that the dragon is slain by the end of the story. Such an act can even take the focus off of the monster’s faults to hone in on the thrill and closure of the fight instead. But by placing the burden of a dragon’s symbolism on a humane figure, Tolkien forces us to address the weight of our own folly. This is certainly not a monster to divide and discriminate; rather, Gollum’s very existence shows us how easy it is for us to succumb to our own greed.

In conclusion, Tolkien closes the gap between human and monstrous by displaying how simple and common it is to fall into monstrosity ourselves. Literature usually keeps monsters at a distance from humanity to warn against unwanted or immoral behavior, or as an othering technique to condemn another race, ethnicity, or culture. Such a practice is usually used to demonize a different culture for the sake of promoting one’s own as the stable or better one in comparison. However, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien puts Gollum’s monstrosity to use as a unifier instead. He introduces Gollum to readers as his monstrous side, then eventually reveals

the hobbit-humane origins of Gollum's arguably former identity, Smeagol. This move causes readers to initially view Gollum as a disturbing monster before forcing them to acknowledge and accept his original human identity. In order to explore and accept Gollum's humane origins, we must also come to terms with how easy it is for others to fall into monstrosity themselves.

Tolkien's series—more specifically, his depiction and implementation of Gollum's monstrosity—is ultimately a critique of humanity's own folly. When we learn how Smeagol becomes Gollum, it does not take too long for us to see monstrosity in ourselves.

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