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Why Do Villains Insist on a Ring? Greed and Fetishism from Sauron to Spike

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The twist of *Harry Potter's* Mirror of Erised is that the only person worthy enough to claim the Philosopher's Stone hidden within is one who doesn't desire to use it but is driven to protect it from the villain's dreams of eternal life and soaring power. This is also the key to Tolkien's epic: ringbearers Bilbo, Frodo, Sam and even Gollum are (somewhat) protected from the ring because they don't seek world domination. This theme is also heavily present in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. These fantasy creators, it seems, differentiate their heroes from villains through the defining trait of greed: resisting temptation or gleefully succumbing to it.

VILLAINS

The villains of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spinoff *Angel* spend episodes or sometimes entire seasons chasing after a mystic object possessed of great power. "There's always a talisman," Buffy comments wearily in the seventh-season premiere, "Lessons" (7.1).¹ As the undead invade her sister Dawn's school, Buffy and her friends destroy their doll-shaped fetish to banish them all, while Dawn makes herself a weapon by stuffing her purse with bricks. This is a typical pattern for the series. In many episodes, the villain has concentrated their power in a statue, magical weapon, or mystic tattoo, and destroying it cancels their power. In popular culture, the desperately sought single item that drives the plot is nicknamed the McGuffin, a term popularized by Hitchcock. Similarly, the episodes "Bad Eggs" (2.12) along with "Teacher's Pet" (1.4), "Forever" (5.17), and "As You Were" (6.15) all feature demon eggs, a symbolic seed of potential evil. Of course, each time, the eggs get smashed, just as, in other episodes, the talisman is shattered or the magic item is rescued. The central goal here is to keep the grasping villain from finding the treasure.

By contrast, the heroes never desire the magic items, and Angel passes a particular test in his show's "In the Dark" (1.3) when Buffy sends him the Ring of Amarra that will make him invulnerable. Angel decisively smashes it, telling his friend Doyle that if he walked in daylight he might lose his intuition for finding "the weak ones lost in the night – or the things that prey on them." As he adds, his duty and goodness preclude making the selfish choice: "I was brought back for a reason, Doyle, and as much as I would like to kid myself, I don't think it was for eighteen holes at Rancho."

This scene emphasizes Angel's selflessness, in contrast with his evil Angelus side, which steals the petrified demon Acatlha from a museum in "Becoming" (2.21-22) and seeks to use it to destroy the world. This event falls into a pattern shown especially by the season-long "Big Bads" or supervillains. They seek even more McGuffins than the single-episode evildoers. The Initiative collects and files everything it finds – even imprisoning intelligent beings like Oz. The Judge and Adam are even constructed of treasure-hunt pieces. The Mayor spends his entire season gathering

¹ *Buffy* villains seek these items in almost too many episodes to list or focus their power into a single item. These include a cursed book ("I Robot, You Jane" 1.8), holy seal ("Inca Mummy Girl" 2.4), sacred Janus figure ("Halloween" 2.6), Du Lac cross ("What's my Line" 2.9-10), African mask ("Dead Man's Party" 3.2), Glove of Myhnegon ("Revelations" 3.7), tribal knife ("Pangs" 4.8), box of stolen voices ("Hush" 4.10), talisman ("Doomed" 4.11), mystic tattoo ("Superstar" 4.17), troll hammer ("Triangle" 5.11), magic bone ("Life Serial" 6.5), summoning necklace ("Once More with Feeling" 6.7), massive diamond ("Smashed" 6.9), crystal ball ("Hell's Bells" 6.16), unnamed talisman ("Entropy" 6.18), Orbs of Nezzla'khan ("Seeing Red" 6.19), talisman ("Lessons" 7.1), magic letterman's jacket ("Him" 7.6), council staff ("Get it Done" 7.15), and sacrificial dagger ("Storyteller" 7.16) (Frankel 23).

tools for ascension. As groups of villains and heroes seek the Key in Season Five, it becomes the greatest hunt of all, with truly deadly stakes.

The show uses this device not only for convenience but to define its concept of evil. Vampires and demons are forces of greed, driven as they are to consume human life. Angel's selfless existence proves that vampires could subsist on animal blood, presumably like a human eating tofu instead of meat. However, vampires and demons take great pleasure in killing and feeding, despite (or often because of) the innocence of those they kill. In the first episode, Giles tells Buffy (and us), "A vampire appears to be completely normal until the Feed is upon them. Only then do they appear mad" ("Welcome to the Hellmouth" 1.1). In this moment of predatory devouring, their bumpy foreheads and elongated teeth appear, emphasizing that their hunger makes them monstrous.

A strange irony is that these vampires are symbolically no more solid or alive than Ringwraiths, Tolkien's shadowy personifications of evil. Just as these monsters are washed away and lose their cloaks that "give shape to their nothingness" (*LotR* II.1.222), forcing them to subsequently re-form, Joss Whedon's vampires, once staked, crumble into their true existence—corpses so definitively dead that they burst into clouds of dust. "The moment that they are staked reveals that the vampires only appear to have substance. They are a simulacrum, a costume. But this is not a costume that hides the real; the costume is the self—when it is removed the creature disappears," explains Jasmine Hall in her essay. The disembodied First Evil, who operates through persuasion, is an even clearer example: it has no power except to tempt the heroes into despair. In a sillier adaptation of this concept, there's Gachnar, the "actual size" demon of Season Four's Halloween episode "Fear, Itself" (4.4), dispatched when Buffy firmly stomps on it. In each case, the villains' incorporeality emphasizes that their threat is an illusion—the hero can easily conquer each one if not frozen by fear itself (similar imagery appears with the Dementors of *Harry Potter*). In place of physical strength, the Ringwraiths use a similar power on their victims: they stab Frodo with a Morgul-knife that seeks to take him over, much like a weaker version of one of their rings. Frodo's own toughness and determined resistance prove the key to resisting its power. Just as one could ignore the temptation of Tolkien's wraiths or the fear itself of the Dementors, one could refuse the vampire's seduction—it is no more than dust unaware it is dead. However, many characters succumb.

In several cases, the vampires' creation is shown, often in a moment suggestive of sin. By desiring something beyond their human lives, they are cursed eternally. Young Liam and William Pratt become Angel and Spike respectively while being seduced by alluring vampire women who promise them adventure. Drusilla, a true innocent in her youth, is specifically corrupted, scene by scene, as Angelus turns her into a wanton victim convinced God has abandoned her. On his own show, Angel tells Darla she "damned" him, and she retorts, "If it's such a punishment, take out your revenge, pay me back!" ("Darla" 2.7). This turning deprives the vampires of their souls and makes them eternally cursed. Further, becoming a vampire in *Buffy* involves drinking the vampire's blood as well as being drunk from, symbolizing a mutual, willing exchange. Each time, becoming a vampire involves choosing corruption, a sin of selfishness that leads to centuries of preying on the community.

Tolkien's Ringwraiths similarly chose their fates and are defined by the act of greed that created them. As *The Fellowship of the Ring* film condenses their history, Strider explains, "They were once men. Great kings of men. Then Sauron the deceiver gave to them nine rings of power. Blinded by their greed, they took them without question. One by one, they fell into darkness and now they're slaves to His will." In fact, Sauron corrupts this process by teaching the elves to make

their own rings, thus enslaving some of the people symbolically and others literally as the Ringwraiths are overcome by the lust for power. “Nine he gave to Mortal Men, proud and great, and so ensnared them,” Gandalf explains (*LotR* I.2.51). Of course, in the old sagas, accepting such a gift with nothing to reciprocate creates deep obligation akin to fealty. “Wouldn’t a king, of all people, understand the indebtedness incurred from such an action?” Jennifer Culver asks in an essay on the gifting economy of Middle-earth (166).

Centuries after its forging, Gollum clutches the Ring to himself in an image of pure avarice. “He hated and loved it, as he hated and loved himself,” Gandalf comments (*LotR* I.2.55). Gandalf describes the Ring as a focus of desire equal to and inflaming Gollum’s: the Ring has “devoured” Gollum, and when it could make “no further use” of him, it abandoned him to death (I.2.54). In fact, critic Verlyn Flieger describes Gollum as the “twisted, broken outcast hobbit” whose “dragonlike greed” destroys him (57). For both Gollum and Frodo, the “growing, overpowering desire for the Ring [...] becomes all-consuming and sweeps [them] away” (59). Gollum kills his cousin Déagol out of desire for the Ring, combined with his self-justification that he is entitled to do so as it is his birthday. “The parable of Sméagol’s fall illustrates the nature of evil as *cupiditas* or avarice in the classical and literal sense,” Jane Chance explains (Nitzsche 83). Like the Ringwraiths, he acquires the Ring through compromising himself, and it forever is tied to his sin.

Hoarding, as Gollum does, is a sign of overpowering greed in the ancient epics that inspired Tolkien’s work. “Keeping items out of circulation, hoarding them if you will, was very frowned upon,” Culver explains (167). In *The Hobbit*, Smaug is the visual representation of this sort of greed, gathering increasing piles of treasure and lying upon them until his body is coated with coins. As Thorin describes him: “There were lots of dragons in the North in those days, and gold was probably getting scarce up there, with the dwarves flying south or getting killed, and all the general waste and destruction that dragons make going from bad to worse. There was a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm called Smaug” (28). His desire, mixed with competition from the other dragons, inspires his attack. Further, Smaug is so greedy that he notices Bilbo’s theft of a single cup from his vast pile of treasure—Tolkien notes that his anger is that of a rich man who’s lost something that he never uses (205). No matter how much he has acquired, he will always seek more.

Sauron, too, seeks to rule all the land, expanding beyond possessions to controlling everything he sees. As Gandalf describes his avarice to a puzzled Frodo, “He does not need you – he has many more useful servants – but he won’t forget you again. And hobbits as miserable slaves would please him far more than hobbits happy and free” (*LotR* I.2.49). It is also notable that Sauron constructed a ring to house his power, thus creating his ultimate fetishized object.² This fits his character as desire originally launched him on his corrupted path: “He was filled with envy of the Creator’s power to create; disdain for all the other ‘godlike’ Valar; and hatred of the elves, the favored ones who had resisted his dominance for so long” (*Silmarillion* 301). Envy of their power, he quests for the same and this desire consumes him. As someone trapped by need, he is particularly vulnerable to it. To defeat him at the saga’s end, Gandalf proposes that they offer themselves as bait, thereby tempting Sauron to call out his remaining strength and forces “in hope and in greed” of crushing them in a final confrontation (*LotR* V.9.880) because his desire

² This is reflected in the final Harry Potter book, in which Voldemort creates his prized Horcruxes in order to gain unnatural power over death. Like the other fetishized objects, they prompt a treasure-hunt, in which the heroes must find and destroy them. Emphasizing their wickedness, the horcruxes lash out destructively but cannot be used by other characters, unlike the Deathly Hallows, a competing set of fetishized objects that severely tempt Dumbledore and Voldemort, though Harry passes the test.

overwhelms his reason. Gandalf's plan works, and Sauron is distracted from Frodo's desperate quest through his lust to destroy the most powerful of Middle-earth.

By contrast, the magic of the wizards and elves is framed as a natural gift that requires no particular tools or powers. Abanes notes (100) "Like Tolkien's Elves, the Maiar and Valar are just exercising their God-given (*Eru-given*) abilities when they practice 'magic', either for good or evil." Likewise, the dwarves' craft magic is described as trade secrets and talent, while the hobbits' skill at disappearing is wholly natural as well. Seeking powers beyond his innate ones, Sauron builds an artificial tool that not only concentrates his strength but commands other rings and people. Elrond describes the Ring, saying, "The very desire of it corrupts the heart" (*LotR* II.2.267). The chief word here is *desire*, emphasizing how it inspires people to want it (not just power but the Ring itself) and thus fall into corruption. Tolkien wrote in his notes on the Ring, while planning a *Hobbit* sequel, "Not very dangerous, when used to good purpose. But it exacts its penalty. You must either lose it, or yourself" (qtd. in C. Tolkien, *Return of the Shadow* 42).

Reflecting Sauron, his ally Shelob embodies his greed and gluttony. Tolkien describes her "huge swollen body" (*LotR* IV.9.725) as having grown "bloated" (725) and "fat" (725) with her gorging on other living beings, even her own children. "She served none but herself" in contrast with the selflessness of Frodo and Sam (724). With no restraint of morality, decency, familial love, or common empathy, she will continue gorging until she is so "swollen" the mountains will no longer be able to "hold her up" (723). She has savored every type of meat available, yet "she lusted for sweeter meat," emphasizing that her killing is based on desire, not simply the need to eat (IV.9.724). Beyond seeking food, she only desires death for others and "for herself a glut of life" (723). Sauron surrounds himself with such creatures, down to the petty orcs that fight over Frodo's mithril shirt or Grishnákh, who steals away with Merry and Pippin for the treasure he thinks they carry. All of his servants worship at his altar of greed even as they seek to dominate the innocents of Middle-earth.

HEROES

Of course, the heroes of both stories are set apart for their striking lack of greed. Buffy and her friends save people with no thought of reward, fighting vampires out of duty and heroism (and even losing valuable work time and study time in the process). Gregory J. Sakal explains, "Buffy gives up much of what life would be like for an attractive, talented young woman to dedicate herself to saving the world. Angel gives up the notion that he might somehow recover the kind of existence that he never had as a living man, as he seeks redemption from over two centuries of wanton cruelty and malice" (241).

Further emphasizing their selflessness, *Buffy* protagonists almost never have a talisman or even a special weapon. On his own show, Angel can be possessive about his favorites, but on Buffy's, everyone grabs handfuls from Buffy's communal chest or the stores in the library. Whether the issue is realizing there's no obvious gift for Tara's birthday, or discovering that Dawn's been stealing indiscriminately until her friends make her return it all, the Scoobies remain unconfined by their craving for possessions (Frankel 25).

The Magic Box's existence emphasizes how easily mystic ingredients can be bought in bulk from an ordinary store. In Season Two, the story subverts the epic quest to restore Angel's soul through a mystic talisman—Giles casually mentions that the Orb of Thesulah is easy to come by and he has been using one as a paperweight—the ultimate pointless piece of bric-a-brac. Continuing this tradition, Giles summons the First Slayer a few years later with a simple bundle

of sticks and plunges into the Initiative clutching a homemade “magic gourd” (“Primeval” 4.21). An exception to these interchangeable, disposable artifacts is the rare Urn of Osiris and chilling “Vino de Madre” Willow uses to bring back Buffy from the dead, an indicator that this path is skirting the edges of selfish immorality. In England, a season later, Willow learns to let go of earthly desires and let the magic flow through her rather than control it. This transformation is typical of former villains in the series: through Season Two, evil Angelus and Spike collect magical talismans. Once they have reformed, however, both live in minimalist spaces and give up on unique possessions. Similarly, Anyanka the demon uses a magical amulet and traps her former lover in a crystal. Once turned human, she joins Willow and Tara in using disposable spell ingredients.³

Echoing this message, Tolkien’s heroes have some precious items such as Aragorn’s sword, but these are often subverted in an image of lack of power. Aragorn’s sword, for instance, lies in pieces when he meets the hobbits, symbolizing how he lacks belligerence compared with typical “big folk.” Galadriel’s cloaks will not turn the heroes invisible or protect them from arrows, only subtly turn aside unfriendly eyes through natural elf magic. The three rings of the elves are likewise gentle, used to strengthen their forests and places of protection. Further, the elves are willing to see these rings’ power destroyed and thus surrender their power and fade away. This is particularly illustrated when Frodo offers Galadriel the One Ring. She confesses to him, “I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer” and fantasizes a world dominated by her beauty and majesty. However, she humbly concludes that she chooses morality over corruption: “I pass the test...I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel” (*LotR* II.7.365-366). Gandalf refuses it as well. “The way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good,” Gandalf explains, even as he knows accepting it would turn him villainous (*LotR* I.2.61).

In his own story, Bilbo enters the treasure chambers of Gollum and Smaug and disrupts the hoarding there, emphasizing the good the treasure can do if released—he performs acts of heroism with the Ring, and begs the dwarves to share Smaug’s hoard to rebuild Laketown. Instead, the dwarves succumb to their own greed and fight to keep all the treasure, perpetuating the cycle by keeping it all penned up in their mountain. As the story unfolds, however, Bilbo’s perspective is revealed as the moral course.

Though mostly humble in his actions, Bilbo shows moments of greed when he takes Gollum’s ring, refuses to return it upon learning its ownership, and lies about it to Gandalf and the dwarves, revealing his shame at his actions. Likewise, he cannot resist snatching the dazzling Arkenstone and keeping it, even knowing it is Thorin’s most prized possession. Ultimately, of course, he reluctantly gives up both treasures to serve the greater good. In his character, Tolkien models a flawed everyman who does the right thing in the end.

Bilbo ends his novel with two small chests of gold, clarifying that his lack of greed, even for treasure he has rightfully earned, is part of his homely heroism. On returning home, he actually buys back many of his own possessions at auction to settle everything expediently. He lives on, with the Ring displayed casually on the mantelpiece and the gold used as needed, rather than hoarded away . . . until matters change on his celebrated birthday.

Certainly, Bilbo throws a lavish party with carefully chosen gifts for everyone. In fact, the Baggins family are known for being generous. Sam’s gaffer comments, “There’s some not far

³ Terry Pratchett’s Discworld series, in itself a fantasy parody that often subverts Tolkien, follows this pattern in the witches Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg’s disdain for propping up their magic with occult jewelry and expensive tools; their protégé Tiffany must learn instead to make a traditional magic catalyst called a shamble from things in her pockets.

away that wouldn't offer a pint of beer to a friend, if they lived in a hole with golden walls. But they do things proper at Bag End" (*LotR* I.1. 24). Based as it is in old Nordic legends like *Beowulf* and the *Volsung Saga*, Tolkien's Middle-earth has an extensive tradition of gift-giving: "A lord's open-handedness was a measure of his worth and the more generous the gifts, the more prosperous the lord was seen to be" (Culver 160). Bilbo echoes this on a smaller scale. Gift-giving at one's birthday party is expected, but the text emphasizes how "unusually good" these are, with children's toys all the way from Dale that are "all beautiful and some obviously magical" (*LotR* I.1.27). When Bilbo departs the Shire, there's another round of helpful gifts to his friends and neighbors as a sign of his wealth and largess and friendship (as well as some biting satire). These range from a waste-paper basket for the relative who writes "reams of good advice" to more kindly gifts like two sacks of potatoes, ointment, a new spade, and a woolen waistcoat for Gaffer Gamgee (*LotR* I.1.37-38).

Further, in ancient epics around the world, granting gifts upon guests' departure or arrival tie the two communities together in friendship. Galadriel gives the heroes gifts, with the three golden hairs she offers Gimli creating an eternal bond between elves and dwarves. These gifts, particularly the concealing cloaks and the light of Eärendil, also save the heroes at significant moments. This indicates how much their world's proper order relies on such generosity. This act also allows her to send her symbolic protection and participate in their quest. Her gifts "aid them either physically or spiritually at times of crisis in their quest almost as Christian grace in material form" (Nitzsche 89), just as Arwen sends such support with her royal banner. She also very generously offers Frodo her passage on the elven ships and gives him a white gem that comforts him through "the memory of the fear and the darkness" (*LotR* VI.6.975). In a similar gesture of friendship and regard, Faramir gives Frodo and Sam walking staffs carved in Gondor. Culver reflects that "Here, the gift changes the relationship between the two groups, abolishes a boundary, and eases tensions" (159). As a statement of gratitude but also alliance, Théoden publicly offers Gandalf a mighty gift in return for his service to the realm. Gandalf requests Shadowfax, the king's finest horse, and Théoden gives him "gladly" even while adding, "Yet it is a great gift. There is none like to Shadowfax" (*LotR* III.6.522). His bestowing such an irreplaceable treasure shows Théoden's honor as well as his esteem. At the story's end, Aragorn tells Frodo that they are too close to attempt gifting but, like family, he and his companions can take what they wish: "If there were any gifts that I could give to match with your deeds you should have them; but whatever you desire you shall take with you, and you shall ride in honor and arrayed as princes of the land" (*LotR* VI.6.974). Likewise, he tells Éomer, "Between us there can be no word of giving or taking, nor of reward; for we are brethren" (*LotR* VI.5.969).

Sauron corrupts this process once again by requesting a "gift" of friendship from the dwarves—news of a ring, as Glóin discloses at the Council of Elrond. In return, Sauron offers what appears a far more generous bequest of three lost dwarf rings and the perished land of Moria. However, there is also a threat, that if they refuse, "things will not seem so well" (*LotR* II.2.254). This unequal giving when there is no preexisting friendship worries the dwarves a great deal. In an even more disturbing scene, Gollum also corrupts the process, offering Shelob Frodo and Sam as a meal and thus freeing himself from his vow to serve them.

The most important gift in the series is Bilbo's freely giving the Ring to Frodo (in contrast with the Ring's other movements, mostly directed by itself, as it slips off a finger to be found or is taken from a fallen foe). Bilbo gives this treasure reluctantly, with much prodding by Gandalf and all his instincts fighting against it, but he gives it. Likewise, his giving the Arkenstone to Bard has him stepping into King Thorin's place, acting on his behalf and offering his most beloved treasure

to bring peace between communities. Each time, this act of generosity is emphasized as the right choice, with consequences that reshape their world.

TEMPTATION

Tolkien's larger world is also tied to the sins of greed and ambition, so neutral, ordinary characters sometimes succumb. *The Silmarillion* details many characters' desire for three precious jewels, a greed so all-encompassing that it shatters the world. The final surviving Silmaril ends its story in the heavens, where all can see it but none can possess it as a reminder not to covet the forbidden.⁴

On a scale that's only slightly less epic, the drive for mithril and gold corrupts and dooms the dwarves throughout their history. In *The Silmarillion*, eventually "wrath and an overmastering greed of gold" spur the dwarfs to kill the King of Doriath (288-289). Likewise, their "lust" for the Silmarils overpowers their sound judgment and is "kindled to rage" and murder (233). As Appendix A of *LotR* confirms, the Seven Rings given to the dwarf lords were influenced by Sauron's Ring's malevolence to "inflame their hearts with a greed of gold and precious things, so that if they lacked them all other good things seemed profitless, and they were filled with wrath and desire for vengeance on all who deprived them" (*LotR*, App.A.1076). They become not only greedy but also vengeful against their neighbors, rather like their reflection and enemy Smaug. In fact, having received his family's ring, Thorin's father quests for their homeland not through nostalgia but greed. Thráin becomes restless and "the lust for gold was ever in his mind" (1077). He sets out for Erebor, but Sauron captures him and reclaims the final ring of the dwarves before the events of *The Hobbit*.

Prompting the quest of *The Hobbit*, the dwarves' frantic amassing of wealth is said to have lured Smaug who, terribly greedy himself, can thus acquire a massive pile of wealth with the least possible effort. When the dwarves recover their long-lost treasure, their love for it becomes almost as obsessive as Smaug's—they refuse to use their riches to rebuild the town, even though it is during its destruction that Bard kills Smaug, guaranteeing the dwarves their wealth. A generous king would offer gifts to the neighbors to build friendship, and Bard emphasizes this obligation. He voices his people's desperation and the dwarves' debt to him, but when they refuse he turns on them in an impulsive war, risking the last of his men. The wood-elves also seek a share. Whether or not they are justified, they don't need it, so the story frames their claim, and willingness to go to war over it, as greedy and opportunistic. Dwarves and wood-elves are presented as ordinary people, generally moral but also vulnerable to temptation. This is Tolkien's point—that while villains like Smaug are the pure embodiment of greed, his everyday characters are vulnerable to temptation and often fall. Entire populations succumb – while Thorin the king stands out as leader, by the point of the Battle of the Five Armies, wood-elves, dwarves, and men are all on the verge of slaughtering one another to claim the treasure hoard. Symbolically, it is the evil corrupting everyone's hearts.

It takes a horde of wolves and goblins threatening their lives to make them reassess. They ally together out of expediency, and Thorin only admits his foolishness on his deathbed. There, Thorin renounces his former greed, saying that, dying, he wishes to make amends "since I leave

⁴ *The Silmarillion* also describes the Fall of Númenor, brought about for their envy for the lifespan of the elves. It becomes an obsession, leading the people to attack Valinor, hoping to achieve immortality by attacking the Blessed Lands. Sauron, the evil impulse made manifest, tempts them on this path. Nonetheless, their Eden-like fall changes the structure of the world and splits Ilúvatar off from their world, as well as sinking their land below the sea.

now all gold and silver, and go where it is of little worth” (*H* 243). As Thorin realizes too late, “If more of us valued food and cheer, and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world” (243). Clearly, Tolkien is teaching young readers that a lifetime pursuit of treasure is futile and destructive. Simple pleasures and kindness are the goal.

Even after Bilbo’s thirteen companions complete their epic quest, the dwarves have failed to learn. They found a new dwarven colony in their ancient homeland of Moria and begin mining once again. Mining for mithril, as Gandalf notes, “was their destruction: they delved too greedily and too deep, and disturbed [...] Durin’s Bane” (*LotR* II.4.317). Moria, like Smaug’s lair, is thus a monument to greed that beguiles those who enter it. Contrasting all these paths to corruption is a single dwarf who learns to set aside materialism on his path to wisdom. After he politely declines a need for gifts, Lady Galadriel prophesizes that Gimli’s “hands shall flow with gold, and yet over [him] gold shall have no dominion” (*LotR* II.8.376).

Fellowship’s first book features physical danger, requiring strength of arms, while “the second book centers on the presentation of evil as internal and spiritual, requiring a spiritual heroism to combat it” (Nitzsche 82). The heroes’ growing maturity appears in this switch. As the Fellowship divides, each character faces a more personal challenge and torment. The title of *The Two Towers* particularly reflects the characters as it symbolizes doubling and the divided self: Frodo is increasingly tempted by the Ring as he faces the internal threat of becoming Gollum. Aragorn negotiates with kings and war leaders as well as facing Sauron himself, considering the kingly image he will present to the world. His temptation is not in the Ring but in an army of the undead, whom he can free in a king’s honorable gesture or keep in servitude long enough to win the war against Sauron. Though saving lives is a strong temptation, he frees the ghosts to find peace. As the temptations increase, the quest is growing more complex, as is the world they face.

Likewise, Buffy’s slaying of unredeemably evil vampires in Season One is later complicated as the amoral but appealing Spike joins their team, while the late season threats come from the characters’ despair, madness, and guilt. Dark Willow nearly destroys the world, while Buffy’s Season Six depression leaves her apathetic. Under this influence, Willow seeks more and more magic, in an addiction metaphor. Like young Sméagol, she and Buffy present one face in daylight and sneak around doing dark deeds at night, until the nighttime personality threatens to take over. Unlike Gollum, both characters are redeemed from their selfish behavior through their friends’ love.

The heroes of *Buffy* are nominally good for the most part, but even the sweetest and kindest can fall into temptation. This emphasizes how much they are fully formed characters, not heroic ideals like Aragorn or fairytale warriors. “Most major Buffy characters manifest both qualities—good and evil, bright and dark, cruelty and compassion. In doing so, they continue to surprise us, as real people do throughout our lives; and they thereby accurately reflect the confusing ambiguity of life in our own world, thus making the supernatural Buffyverse compelling and seemingly real because of its visceral truths,” notes Laura Resnick in her essay (56). Thanks to their demonic heritages, Anya and Spike are particularly grey, while Cordelia, Xander, Willow, and sometimes Buffy and Angel fall into sin – mostly because of temptation.⁵

⁵ The ongoing villains of *Angel* are corrupt lawyers, possibly the epitome of greed. Further, they end Season Four with quite a twist as they surrender their law firm to Angel’s team, inviting them to take over. Fascinatingly, every single character sells out. Angel warns his friends, “It’s not a decision I can make for you, for any of you, but know this: Before the ride’s even over, before you even cross through their doors, you’ll be corrupted” (“Home” 4.22). Despite these words, they accept fealty to the powers of darkness. Gunn covets respectability, while Fred and Wesley are

Willow in particular is kind but lacks experience with personal interaction, shy and marginalized as she is. “Given that much sheer brain power, how could Willow not have the easy social presence and confident manner that Buffy has? Because the product of her intellect (good grades, etc.) has never solved whatever emotional problem lurks at the depths of her personality” (Lichtenberg 128). Her parents are unsympathetic, and she has never experienced romance before her messy Xander-Oz triangle in high school, followed by painful fights and a sudden breakup.

According to Resnick (57), “All power comes hand in hand with danger as well as with temptations to misuse it, and Willow’s struggle with this is real to us, even if her immense magical power is clearly fictional.” Starting with Season Three’s “Lovers Walk” (3.8), she uses magic as a shortcut for dealing with interpersonal relations (in this case, to make herself stop loving Xander), and the backfiring of these spells emphasizes that this isn’t their intended purpose. In “Something Blue” (4.9), she once again tries to eliminate her feelings (this time, grief at her breakup) and nearly gets her friends killed. Even the praise of vengeance demons isn’t enough to teach her a lesson. She is increasingly addicted to magic and its power to control others – something she soon turns on her girlfriend Tara. When Tara worries she is overusing magic, Willow tries erasing their fight magically in “Tabula Rasa” (6.8) and nearly gets all her friends slaughtered by demons once more. She also sneaks out at night to gather magical ingredients, giving a physicality to her greed. “So down that slippery slope this character goes, until this kind of misuse of her power eventually combines with a moment of such terrible emotional rage, upon Tara’s death, that Willow becomes the big bad villain whom the Slayer must confront and defeat in the Season-six finale” (Resnick 57). This is a great surprise for viewers, as she is the gentlest of the original trio. However, her lack of experience facing her dark side, as Buffy periodically does, has left her vulnerable.

One lesson here is that power without judgement and wisdom quickly corrupts. “Lured, seduced by such rewards, she has reached for more and more power— and at last acquired more than she can handle,” Lichtenberg offers (127). This is the same lesson of Tolkien, in which Galadriel and Gandalf explain that they would try to use the Ring for good but that this is impossible. At the same time, they are archetypes of pure goodness and wisdom – neither falls victim to the Ring or even struggles long with the temptation.⁶ Likewise, Aragorn the perfect king is written as being above greed. Though he carries the burden of being Isildur’s heir, this legacy makes him more determined not to succumb but to put right his ancestor’s sin.⁷ Even Sam, who has a great deal of characterization, is too humble and devoted to his master to be seriously tempted by the Ring. Still, Sam’s particular internal struggle is depicted as the Ring shows him images of a garden-filled world of delights. Neither he nor the other ringbearers are seen fully claiming power and wielding the Ring in such a scenario, but Willow and her slippery slope into her Season Six magic addiction and near-destruction of the world reveals what this might look like.

While heroes can stumble into temptation, many of the Buffy characters are already rather amoral, giving them a shorter road. Cordelia in particular is the earliest protagonist consumed by superficiality. She begins as “a selfish, self-centered, bigoted rich girl who had everything, who believed she didn’t need anything from anybody,” as Sakal puts it (241). Playing up her spoiled rich girl angle, she describes her family vacation as “a total nightmare” because she was dragged

beguiled by the treasures of information. Angel sells out more selflessly—not for twelve cars, sunlight, an impressive apartment, or Buffy’s life, but to give his son a better future.

⁶ Saruman, once the wisest of their order, is corrupted by the Ring, but readers see little of him before this change, so he falls under a traitor archetype instead of being a fully realized character who grows and struggles.

⁷ Boromir is corrupted, but even this is not a substantial character change, as he is the one person at Elrond’s council insisting they wield the Ring in battle. Faramir later observes that he spent his youth wanting to be a hero and king.

to Tuscany instead of St. Croix. “I was totally beachless for a month and a half. No one has suffered like I have suffered,” she insists (“When She Was Bad” 2.1). She revels in the material – her car and dresses, her reputation, the status of being Homecoming Queen.

Her attitude changes, partly because of her association with the Scooby gang, which teaches her love and heroism, and partially because she loses the material possessions she so valued: in Season Three she is forced to work for a living because her parents are revealed as crooks. This teaches her a lesson—not only about the value of hard work but about the responsibility to not take short cuts (a lesson Willow could have used). At the same time, she spends a season saving for a prom dress – a glittering treasure whose only value is making her dazzle for a single night. After this, she moves to the show *Angel* as a struggling actress but also the practical side of Angel’s investigative business. While they devote themselves to “helping the helpless,” her care for their finances stresses her desire to amass wealth. She even loads up a dragon-sized pile of treasure in the dimension of Pylea, in a visual representation of her eager greed. At the same time, she fights to rid herself of the local talisman—a Pylean shock collar that demonstrates their cruelty. As such, she echoes Tolkien’s dwarves—craving the material but not the wicked. While she admires occasional talismans for their beauty, she draws the line at seeking evil magic, or letting herself fall into addiction as Willow does.

One moment of character growth appears when she gives up her judgmental side to show affection for her teammate Doyle—tragically, just as he perishes. “With the events of ‘Hero,’ [1.9] and her realization that the things she had once held to be essential (money, looks, status) weren’t the things that were maybe most important to her after all, Cordelia is showing us through her own realization that being human isn’t about being weak, or clueless, or a victim. It’s about the ability to learn and the ability to grow,” Laura Anne Gilman explains. She soon acquires visions that alert her to people in trouble, guiding her onto the path of heroism. While her acting career never takes off, she faces a few moments of pure temptation that force her to choose who she will become. These are her Ring test – the question of whether she will turn traitor to have all she has ever desired. “When she is sucked through the vortex into Pylea, her dreams of being a star are suddenly realized when she is made princess and ruler. In contrast to the humiliation of her last acting experience, now she is lavished with the kind of luxury associated with Hollywood’s golden age narratives: a gothic mansion-like home, exotic clothing, jewelry and servants,” comments Janet K. Halfyard. However, the price is giving up her visions and she balks, insisting, “You can’t take my visions. I need them. I use them to help my friends fight evil back home.... They’re a part of who I am now. They’re an honor” (“There’s No Place Like Plrtz Glrb” 2.22). Gilman adds: “She finds that the role of pampered princess no longer suits her: she is unable to not see the cost other people pay for her comfort. And with that realization, she knows that she must return home, her visions intact, to continue fighting.” She chooses heroism over temptation and rejects the material.

A similar test comes in “Birthday” (3.11). With her abilities killing her through painful headaches, the Powers that Be offer Cordelia a chance to live by rewriting history to make her a sitcom star who never got caught up in *Angel Investigations*. However, she retains her character growth. Thus, when she discovers *Angel* and Wesley’s fates without her aid, she reclaims her everyday duty of helping the hopeless. Halfyard concludes:

We are left in no doubt about her own transformation, and the utter sincerity of her decision, made not once but twice, to give up her dreams of being a star. Those dreams were based on a deep insecurity and a need for attention and validation. Through her participation in fighting the good fight, her forced transformation into the seer of the powers that be and

her voluntary transformation into their warrior, she learned to love herself and to serve the greater good. (Halfyard)

After this, her descent into evil in season four is especially shocking. The Beast, under orders from an admittedly possessed Cordelia, kills the holders of four of the five Ra-Tet Talismans, which have the power to block out the sun. Cordelia suddenly destroys the fifth and dooms the world, until the heroes can intervene. The link between talismans and evil (with murders added in) underscores the depth of her fall. In a redemption arc, she spends season five comatose—powerless and possessionless. In her final ghostly appearance, she takes the role of saint, advising Angel to stop compromising his ethics and reclaim his heroism. The birthday gift she gives him is comfort—a gift so spiritual that she proves she has finally abandoned the physical.

Anya is an interesting case in herself as a reformed demon struggling through unconventional morality. In his song in the musical episode, Xander defines her as “really greedy,” and this continues through the series as a running joke. Anya revels in working at the Magic Box and soon affords her own place to live. However, while Buffy and the others struggle with money problems and the show treats them sympathetically, Anya’s success is framed as unnatural and selfish. Jowett observes (33) “In ‘I Was Made to Love You’ [5.15] she tells Tara that she tripled her wages by speculating, but rather than presenting her money-making as a skill that could benefit the group (given Buffy’s dire financial situation in Season Six), Anya’s ‘greed’ makes her an object of ridicule.” When Xander chides her to be nicer to customers, Anya replies, “But I have their money. Who cares what kind of day they have?” (“No Place Like Home” 5.5). She also attempts to get “punitive damages” from Dawn after catching her shoplifting. Jowett further argues that “Anya’s ‘greed’ is also underlined and gendered by interactions with Xander: she pressures him to get his own apartment, seems set on a life of material comforts, and complains when she cannot show off her ring because he refuses to announce their engagement” (34).

Her early life, shown in the suggestively named episode “Selfless” (7.5), depicts her quest for identity but also a journey from generosity to gluttony to a life stuck in between. As the peasant Aud, she was strikingly generous, explaining, “The rapid reproductive rate of our rabbits has given me an idea. I can give the excess out to the townspeople, exchanging them not for goods or services, but for goodwill and the sense of accomplishment that stems from selflessly giving of yourself to others.” Her lover laughs and tells her, “Your logic is insane and happenstance, like that of a troll.” In this scene, she appears kind but naïve, contrasting shockingly with her upcoming transformation.

After her lover betrays her, she becomes a vengeance demon, whose power is centered in a talisman given by her patron D’Hoffryn. Beyond the talisman itself, the demon Anyanka devotes herself to enjoying life’s finer things. In one flashback, she lounges in a Saint Petersburg mansion, sipping wine after a massacre with her friend. Modern Anya is more like the demon than the kindly rabbit breeder—one might call her a recovering vengeance demon as Angel is a recovering vampire. Indeed, in “Selfless,” a betrayed Anya slips up and tries reclaiming her vengeance demon side, falling into the temptation of magic and corrupt power. Vengeance demons are arguably a moral force, only punishing those guilty of wrongdoing. However, the show emphasizes that these punishments can be disproportionate and harm the innocent. Succumbing to wrath is just as immoral as succumbing to avarice.

Anya finally gives her life protecting humanity as an ordinary woman, choosing duty over magic and power. As she tells Xander on the cusp of their destruction, “There was this other apocalypse, this one time, and I took off. But this time, I don’t know....When it’s something that

really matters, [people] fight. I mean, they're lame morons for fighting, but they do. They never... They never quit. So I guess I will keep fighting, too" ("End of Days" 7.21). She perishes committed to defending humanity as she definitively joins them at last.

The other fascinatingly greedy figure is Spike, who demands treats like onion blossoms and cocoa with mini marshmallows, subverting his vicious vampire image but also demonstrating how eager he is for life's pleasures. At the end of Season Two, on the run from the police, Buffy has become a bad girl, at least in society's eyes. Teaming up with Spike emphasizes his expedient usefulness and trains her in the same skills. He has a primitive, simplistic goal. As he tells her, "I want Dru back" ("Becoming, part 2" 2.22). hilariously, he also seeks to save the world, leaving Buffy quite nonplussed. As Spike explains it, there's pure destructive evil versus his pragmatic, selfish evil. As he adds, "The truth is, I like this world. You've got dog racing, Manchester United. And you've got people, billions of people walking around like Happy Meals with legs. It's all right here" ("Becoming part 2"). Thus, his greed to consume humanity ironically leads him to protect them all. He fights for food and entertainment rather than morality. In her essay on the character, Michele Boyette notes:

Granted, his desire is self-serving and disturbing, but his preference for the status quo, his love for Drusilla, and his willingness to ally with the enemy of vampires everywhere to maintain both shows us yet more evidence that this vampire is atypical, more human, perhaps, than we care to admit. As Angel is sent to hell and Spike rides out of Sunnydale with an abducted Dru, we wonder just where this idiosyncratic way will lead him—and us. To turn against evil and side with good even for a mix of reasons not themselves good nor interested in the promotion of good is still a profound action. (8)

After this, Buffy continues to use him as needed, or at least pummel him for information. Still, his inherent self-indulgence continues labeling him as a recovering villain, or sometimes, as Buffy calls him "a serial killer in prison," who has only ceased killing because the Initiative has put a controlling chip in his brain ("Crush" 5.14). In fact, Spike's chip, like the Ringwraiths' rings, is an object of control and enforced servitude that leaves him dependent. While the Ringwraiths were tricked into accepting, Spike's chip is compelled on him, making him a pitiable figure even as his bloodlust is forcibly taken from him. Just as the Ringwraiths have become shadows of their old selves forced to serve Sauron's will, Spike has become less than a vampire. Now he must comply with human behavior codes and refrain from feeding on people or hurting them. Instead of a talisman he pursues, the chip confines him as a symbol of technology's entrapment. Tormented, he exclaims, "It's the chip. Steel and wires and silicone. It won't let me be a monster and I can't be a man. I'm nothing" ("Seeing Red" 6.19).

Still, he is learning morality as he (in his eyes) valiantly refrains from feeding on bleeding disaster victims, controlling his greed to please his adored Buffy. This is even to some extent inspired by the chip, which offers new opportunities:

His brain implant has removed the pleasure he once derived from killing people—a sort of behavior modification that has provided him with additional incentive to become more human, or, more accurately, to behave, in a more human, and less destructive manner. Unlike the animal that he once was, where his primary motivation was his own pleasure and satisfaction, his behavior now takes into account the feelings and needs of others, despite his ability (and willingness) to cause trouble when it suits his purpose. (Sakal 247)

Ironically, he ends the series by accepting a magical talisman of evil origin in a gesture that appears one of fealty. Buffy bestows it on him and names him her “champion,” a title he humbly accepts (“Chosen” 7.22). As Angel describes it: “It’s very powerful and probably very dangerous. It has a purifying power, a cleansing power, possibly scrubbing bubbles. The translation is, uh...It bestows strength to the right person who wears it” (“Chosen”). This description actually echoes the One Ring (though a more benevolent version), and certainly it is the all-precious talisman Buffy’s heroes usually refuse. Despite the necklace’s origin at the evil law firm Wolfram & Hart, it actually saves the day in Sunnydale, giving Spike the necessary power to help the heroes win. Its claiming by Spike, the loyal but flawed hero, rather than shining Buffy, symbolizes his compromised status. However, this necklace, like the chip, takes him over and remakes him. Through the necklace’s power, Spike returns as a ghost confined within the law firm, emphasizing that accepting magical trinkets of unsavory origins always comes with a price. Here, once again he perseveres, beating his evil condition and triumphing as a hero a second time. The ending of *Angel*, even more than *Buffy*, shows how much heroes will never achieve peace on earth through a quick magical fix, or even a happy ending—all that exists is endless duty, and the path of the hero to accept it each time.

Buffy’s series finale battle against the forces of such great evil, especially the whispering impulse of despair and selfishness, seems a deliberate homage to Tolkien. Other moments in the series echo this. The creeping demon Gnarl in “Same Time, Same Place” (7.3) evokes Gollum, while the Turok-han, appearing in Buffy’s Season Seven, appear to be named for the Uruk-hai. They swarm in hordes of CGI evil in a similar manner to the scenes in the Mines of Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring* movie. All these emphasize the overwhelming force of malevolence.

Ironically, Buffy’s solution is not to destroy the precious object she has received, the scythe of the slayer, but to share its power with women throughout the world, multiplying its energy and creating an enormous force for good.⁸ In this scenario, the tool is designed for a single slayer (though temporarily, as each dies and passes on her tools). However, Buffy rejects this ancient legacy of being the only Chosen One, powerful wielder of the sacred artifact. She trades her exceptionality for a team. This of course contrasts with Tolkien’s vision, in which the rightful king inherits many talismans and ascends the throne.⁹ Certainly, ancient monarchy versus modern democracy are models here, but Buffy is also defying the Chosen One story pattern. While Aragorn the good king models generous gift-giving and righteous use of his precious talismans like the sword and palantír, Buffy symbolically tears down the throne she sits on. She leaves Sunnydale with no possessions but with her friends’ lives and with a world filled with shared female power. Clearly, she has understood the lesson that hoarding and even ruling corrupts but sharing through sisterhood redeems the world.

In the end, all these stories set their champions on a path to battle the greed and selfishness within themselves—part of the human condition a great hero must strive to surpass. As Sakal argues, “Taken together in the context of the Buffyverse, ‘salvation’ might be thought of as a process by which individuals, with the help of a ‘Greater Power’ (in *Angel*, the ‘Powers that Be’), turn from living only for the self to the exclusion of the needs of others, to a life by which all of humanity is helped to suffer less” (241). Redemption is thus achieved by turning from the selfish

⁸ This is so enormous that the balance of the world tilts in the sequel comics and must be put right, but that’s another story.

⁹ At which point Aragorn receives Elendil’s crown and the Sceptre of Annúminas and then finds the white tree, having already been given the shards of Narsil, the ring of Barahir, Arwen’s banner, Galadriel’s scabbard, and a palantír at various points. He also gets Arwen as his queen.

model to discovering one's true purpose. *The Hobbit*, too, is a tale in which Bilbo and the dwarves fall into self-interest but learn to rise beyond it and battle true evil. The sequel pits the heroes against a greater desire through the Ring, which represents ultimate power-lust. Boromir and Gollum fall to its seductive spell like the Ringwraiths do, but Frodo, Gandalf, Galadriel, Sam, Bilbo, and the other heroes withstand its whispers and finally triumph. While the villains of both series often embody greed, snatching talismans and trinkets and thus falling into darkness, the heroes must act with caution. Such talismans offer endless temptation, with a slippery slope into evil that it's all too easy to follow.

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