Darkseid's Ring: Images of Anti-Life in Kirby and Tolkien[1]

Charles F. Huber
Davidson Library
University of California
Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9010
cfhuber@ucsb.edu

Abstract:

What is the nature of ultimate evil? Answers will vary, but it is logical to say that they will depend on what one considers to be the core of humanity: that which attacks that core is the ultimate evil. Evidence in Jack Kirby's "Fourth World" mythos and J. R. R. Tolkien's "Middle-earth" mythos suggests that they both saw free will at the core of humanity, and that ultimate evil lies in the domination and subjugation of the will of others. Kirby symbolized this evil in the "Anti-Life Equation"; Tolkien in the One Ring of Sauron. This paper will compare the images of evil in the two authors' works.

Visionaries of Cosmic Struggle

It can hardly be disputed that J.R.R. Tolkien and Jack Kirby were two of the most influential figures in fantasy from the mid-20th century to this day. The immense worldwide popularity of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* gave new life to the genres of children's and adult epic fantasy. Kirby's works, both in artistic style and the characters he created have been cornerstones of entire comic book universes, and inspired numerous creators, not only in American comics, but in fantasy in other media as well.

In many respects, no two figures could be more different than the reclusive English scholar and the pugnacious product of Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is unlikely that Tolkien was familiar with Kirby's work, though Kirby was at least aware of *The Lord of the Rings* [2], though it is not clear whether he ever read it. Tolkien came to fantasy as a scholar of language who perceived the deep inter-relationship between myth and language and created whole worlds to serve as a backdrop for his invented languages. Though he had some artistic ability, and often illustrated scenes from his own stories, he told his stories in prose and poetry. Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzburg) was first and foremost an artist. Most of the triumphs of his early career were in collaboration with others who provided the dialogue for his characters, most notably Joe Simon and Stan Lee. Eventually, he broke away to become the sole creative force on his comics work, with a dialogue style as idiosyncratic in its own way as Tolkien's artistic style was in its.

The two masters of fantasy also could not be more different in their working styles. Kirby was one of the most prolific artists of his day, turning out multiple pages of finished comic art in a day. In a 1990 interview[3] , he said of his leaving art

school as a teenager: ”They wanted people who would work on something forever. I didn't want to work on any project forever. I intended to get things done." His prodigious imagination and work ethic produced untold thousands of pages of comics for many companies. Beginning in the mid-Sixties, he produced ever more cosmic concepts, greatly expanding the boundaries of the comic-book universes he contributed to. At Marvel, Thor and the gods of Asgard were joined by Hercules and the Olympian pantheon. The shape-shifting Skrulls came to share the Marvel Universe with the Rigellian Colonizers and their sentient robots, the Recorders; Ego, the Living Planet, the Inhumans, the Silver Surfer, planet-devouring Galactus, and the Supreme Intelligence of the Kree Empire. At DC, the Seventies saw the worlds of New Genesis and Apokolips, Etrigan the Demon, Kamandi and the Earth of the Great Disaster, and OMAC the One Man Army Corps. He returned to Marvel to introduce the Eternals, the Deviants and the Celestials. All are concepts which later writers and artists have built upon at great length. Still later, on his own, he launched *Captain Victory and the Galactic Rangers*, *Silver Star* and many more. At his death in 1994, he left notebooks full of concepts that he never had the chance to develop, some of which are now being brought to life by his daughter, Lisa Kirby, with collaborator Steve Robertson and artist Mike Thibodeaux (*Jack Kirby's Galactic Bounty Hunters*).

Tolkien, on the other hand, was an almost-obsessive perfectionist, laboring over his major works for years, revising and revising, as can be seen in the posthumous twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth*, compiled from his notes by his son, Christopher Tolkien. What Tolkien may have lacked in the volume of his publications, he made up for in the richness of detail of his invented universe. The background of languages, peoples, geography, history and genealogy of Middle-earth gives it a richness and depth unrivaled in modern fantasy literature.

Yet for all their differences, both Tolkien and Kirby's imaginations were strongly informed by Biblical and European (especially Norse) mythologies, producing tales of a struggle between good and evil on a cosmic scale. While many parallels could be drawn, perhaps the most striking is between their respective inanimate embodiments of evil, the One Ring of Sauron in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and the Anti-Life Equation in Kirby's Fourth World mythos. The rest of this paper is devoted to exploring these two concepts.

First Glimpses: Bilbo and Gollum; Beautiful Dreamer and Glorious Godfrey

In both cases, when the reader first hears of the Ring or the Equation, we really don't get a full idea of what they are about. In Tolkien's case, the Ring first appears in *The Hobbit*, in the chapter, "Riddles in the Dark", when Bilbo Baggins, lost in the goblin-caves of the Misty Mountains, is groping to find his way:

> He guessed as well as he could and crawled along for a good way, till suddenly his hand met what felt like a tiny ring of cold metal lying on the floor of the tunnel. It was a turning point in his career, but he did not know it. (*The Hobbit*, Chapter 5).

Shortly thereafter, he encounters the slimy, web-footed Gollum, engages in a contest of riddles with the creature, and discovers that the ring he has found renders him invisible when he puts it on. In *The Hobbit* as originally written (1937), the ring was simply a talisman of invisibility. It proved very useful to Bilbo in his adventures, evading the goblins, battling the spiders of Mirkwood, escaping the dungeons of the Elvenking and having conversations with Smaug the Dragon. But any greater power than invisibility is never hinted at, and only the dwarves who were his companions and a few others (most importantly, Gandalf) learned that he had it.

> His magic ring he kept a great secret, for he chiefly used it when unpleasant callers came. (*The Hobbit*, Chapter 19)

As for Gollum, he is described as a wretched creature, who had long had the Ring; his "birthday present" and "his precious", he called it. There is, however, no hint, even in the version of the chapter which Tolkien revised to bring it in line with *The Lord of the Rings*, that the Ring was in any way responsible for his miserable condition. Only a cryptic reference in the revised text to "the Master who ruled (the rings)" hints at a greater importance.

Similarly, in Kirby's Fourth World comics, the reader first hears of the Anti-Life Equation in *Forever People #1* (Feb.-Mar. 1971). The "family unit" of young gods from Supertown (their name for the chief city of New Genesis) have come to Earth in pursuit of the evil Darkseid, who has captured and brought to Earth the female member of their group, Beautiful Dreamer. We don't learn why Darkseid has done this until the four male "Forever People" unleash the vastly-powerful Infinity Man to aid Superman against some of Darkseid's minions. After driving them off, the Infinity Man tells Superman:

> "Holocaust and Death is (sic) what he (Darkseid) serves. That is why he abducted the girl – she is one of the few whose mind can fathom the Anti-Life Equation! The ultimate weapon!"

He then calls out Darkseid, saying: "Release the girl! Her mind will resist enslavement by your machines."

Darkseid replies: "…You are right! The girl's mind is unique! It will NOT interpret the equation!" He brings the sleeping Dreamer to the surface and adds, "There are OTHERS who can solve the equation! One of them shall yield to me! – And when the secret is mine, I shall test it here – snuff out all life on Earth – with a word!"

We learn the phrase "Anti-Life Equation", that it is a terrible weapon, and that only certain minds can interpret it. However, at this point, it sounds like it is some sort of agent of mass destruction. Its deeper significance is still hidden. *Forever People #2* adds little to our understanding of the Equation itself, but it does clarify

Darkseid's goals on Earth. He unleashes the powerful insect/humanoid Mantis, giving the latter free rein to enslave humanity if he desires, an opportunity which Mantis eagerly accepts. But Darkseid's motive is more subtle. He explains to his second-in-command, Desaad, that, "Mantis is inspiring GREAT results! He'll shake evey mind in that city to its very ROOTS! ESPECIALLY the mind we seek to contact – the one that must be made to yield the secret – the Anti-Life Equation!" This statement casts light on a curious fact about Kirby's Fourth World epic, namely, that though the Anti-Life Equation is supposed to be central to Darkseid's ambition, it is rarely mentioned outside of the pages of *Forever People*. On the basis of this, however, we may assume that all the activities of Darkseid and his minions in *New Gods, Mister Miracle* and *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen* have as their underlying goal shaking loose the mind or minds that can give Darkseid the Equation.

In *Forever People #3*, "Life vs. Anti-Life, we meet a new servant of Darkseid, Glorious Godfrey. Godfrey is described as a "revelationist". He's a tent-show preacher in the gaudy garb of a super-villain. According to Godfrey, "Anti-Life" is a philosophy that provides justification for any act, no matter how evil, when it is done by "us" against "them". Godfrey's helmeted Justifiers clearly echo the Nazi brownshirts and stormtroopers of the Thirties and Forties. We see them seizing men, women and children for the torture camps, burning books and painting store windows with "S" for "scapegoat". In case their tactics are too subtle, Kirby leads off the issue with a quote from Adolf Hitler.

When the Forever People encounter a Justifier, they recognize the armor immediately…and flee. Beautiful Dreamer says, "There is no stopping a Justifier! He can justify his own death!", to which Mark Moonrider adds, "The Anti-Life principle is now part of him!" The Justifier then blows himself up in an attempt to destroy them – an expression of fanaticism that resonates even more strongly today than it did in the Seventies. So, then, it seems that Anti-Life is a newer, more powerful iteration of the kind of allegiance to naked power that characterized Nazi Germany. Or is it? Both the Equation and the Ring are far more insidious than the reader's first exposure to them would suggest.

Expert Opinion: Highfather, Darkseid, the Forever People; Gandalf and Elrond

The first reference to the Anti-Life Equation outside of *Forever People* appears in *New Gods #1*, where the leader of New Genesis, Highfather, the warrior god, Orion, and the enigmatic seeker of knowledge, Metron, gather before the wall of the Source:

> Orion: "The moving hand appears! The Source gives us the irrevocable counsel!"
>
> Highfather: "But it does not decide! The right of choice is OURS! That is the Life Equation!"

Metron: “The Anti-Life Equation was undiscovered until these days! It means the outside control of all living thought!”

Following the counsel of the Source, Orion travels to Apokolips, where he is joined by Metron. Metron urges Orion to finish his work on Apokolips, for the real battle is on Earth, saying, “Darkseid’s minions are busily at work on a Mass-Director Unit that will monitor the mind of EVERY human! One of those minds holds the secret of the Anti-Life Equation! If he contacts that mind –“

In *New Gods #2,* “O’ Deadly Darkseid”. Darkseid confirms Metron’s statements. There, after a brief encounter with Orion on Earth, Darkseid returns to Apokolips for a demonstation of Desaad’s sonic fear-stimulator. When the device successfully terrorizes a group of subjects, Darkseid comments, “Emotional turmoil breaks the dikes of the mind – and releases the flood in which we must fish, Desaad! Perhaps in this very city is the mind which will yield the Anti-Life Equation! The ability to control all free will!”

Later, in *Forever People #3,* Darkseid appears, to confront and defeat the Infinity Man and deliver the Forever People into Desaad’s hands. We learn that even a servant of Darkseid like Glorious Godfrey may be ignorant of the true nature of Anti-Life:

Darkseid to Desaad: “I trust this camp of yours is serving the purpose that overrides all others, Desaad!”

Desaad: “If the mind you seek to contact is among those in my camp, it will soon give up the secret, great Darkseid!”

Godfrey: “But surely you can’t mean -- Surely not even the great Darkseid believes in the existence of the Anti-Life Equation! Why, if one could master such an equation – he could control the minds of ALL living things in the universe – with a mere word! I – I believe in Anti-Life, great Darkseid – but it can only be induced in others by the means of inventive selling!”

Darkseid: “…The Anti-Life Equation exists! Locked in the mind of someone here on Earth! – And only I dare reach for it! I shall create chaos here! Shake up the planet!—Shake up that mind!”

These passages reveal the true nature of the Equation. It is not a weapon of death, but rather of enslavement, the power to eliminate all free thought, or so Darkseid claims. But as yet, we haven’t seen the Equation in action. Later (*FP #4*), while Desaad torments the Forever People, he also attempts to torture their mysterious, somehow living computer, Mother Box. The Box teleports away (though apparently not far) to the locker room of the Asian (presumably Japanese) martial artist/showman, Sonny Sumo. Besides being physically powerful and a skilled

fighter, the young human also practices mystic disciplines, and it is apparently this that has drawn Mother Box to him. Mother Box (always referred to as "she") heals his wounds and teleports him to the rescue of the Forever People. All are indeed freed (*FP#5,*"Sonny Sumo"), but they are surrounded by Desaad's troops. Suddenly, Mother Box erupts with energy and Sonny shouts, "Lower your weapons! SLEEP!:" And the soldiers drop to the ground unconscious. What follows is the most complete discussion of the Anti-Life Equation in any of Kirby's books:

Serifan: "The outside control of the mind!"

Vykin: "And we've just seen it happen! He has the POWER!"

Big Bear: "Yes! The Mother Box sought out and found the man with the power! This man knows the Anti-Life Equation! This man can control ALL living beings!"

Sonny Sumo: "I don't know what you're talking about! What's Anti-Life?"

Beautiful Dreamer: "Why, the very OPPOSITE of living! If someone possesses ABSOLUTE control over you – you're not really alive!"

Mark Moonrider: "Without INDEPENDENT will – you may just as well be a ROBOT! Yes, you know the equation, but it's HIDDEN – deep within your mind! Mother Box HELPED bring it to the surface!"

As expected, Sonny Sumo becomes the object of Darkseid's search, but we'll follow that thread below.

Shortly thereafter, Moonrider makes the curious remark, "Aw, where we come from the Anti-Life Equation is just one of many others—almost as awesome! But they merely EXIST!", as opposed to humans (and gods) who live. This notion of other "equations" is never followed up by Kirby. Though Highfather referred to the Life Equation, there is never a sense that it is a true opposite to the Anti-Life Equation. A power that could *free* all living thought with a single word would have made life too easy for the heroes. More recently other writers have played with the concept using Kirby's characters, about which more below.

Just as the Anti-Life Equation grows from its unimaginative beginnings to become a force of dread, so, too, does the Ring as it moves from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*. It reappears in the first chapter, "A long-Expected Party", as Bilbo uses it to make a dramatic exit from his 111th birthday party. When Gandalf persuades him to leave the Ring behind, we see the first inkling (no pun intended) of it's having exerted a power over Bilbo more than that of a trinket of invisibility.

It is in the second chapter, "The Shadow of the Past" that Gandalf first reveals to Bilbo's cousin and heir, Frodo, and to the reader, where the Ring comes from and what it is. Seventeen years after Bilbo's party, Gandalf returns with ominous news:

> Gandalf: "[The Ring] is far more powerful than I ever dared to think at first, so powerful that in the end it would utterly consume anyone of mortal race who possessed it. It would possess him. … A mortal, Frodo, who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness. And if he often uses the Ring to make himself invisible, he *fades*, he becomes in the end invisible permanently, and walks in the twilight under the eye of the dark power that rules the Rings. Yes, sooner or later – later if he is strong or well-meaning to begin with, but neither strength nor good purpose will last – sooner or later the dark power will devour him."

It is clear that Gandalf believes the Ring dangerous in its side effects on the wielder, but its purpose is not revealed until he tests the Ring in the fire, and the Ring-inscription is revealed:

> One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them.

Gandalf further explains, "[Sauron] only needs the One; for he made that Ring himself, it is his, and he let a great part of his own former power pass into it, so that he could rule all the others." Gandalf then explains that the Ring must be destroyed to save Middle-earth from Sauron's rule, and that that can only be done in the fires in which it was forged, in Mount Doom, in Mordor, and that Frodo has been chosen to do so. Unsurprisingly, Frodo is fearful of the prospect, leading to this exchange:

> Frodo; "You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?"
>
> Gandalf: "No! With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. 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! I dare not take it, even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me."

In a letter to a reader drafted in 1963 (*Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, #246), Tolkien says, "Gandalf as Ring-Lord would have been far worse than Sauron. He would have remained 'righteous', but self-righteous. He would have continued to rule and order things for 'good', and for the good of his subjects according to his wisdom (which was and would have remained great)… Thus while Sauron multiplied…evil, he left

'good' clearly distinguishable from it. Gandalf would have made good detestable and seem evil."

Gandalf's fear of the corrupting power of the Ring is echoed later at the Council of Elrond, by the mighty half-Elven Lord of Rivendell himself:

> "We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength, Boromir, is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, using his own arts, he would then set himself on Sauron's throne, and yet another Dark Lord would appear. And that is another reason why the Ring should be destroyed: as long as it is in the world it will be a danger even to the Wise. For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so. I fear to take the Ring to hide it. I will not take the Ring to wield it."

It is clear, at this point in the respective stories, that both the Ring and the Equation are tools for the domination of the wills of others, and that the "wise" and "good" characters (Gandalf, Elrond, Highfather, the Forever People) regard such domination as supremely evil. But is it clear that these particular forms of "absolute power" do, as Lord Acton's phrase would have it, "corrupt absolutely"? For that, we need a closer look at two characters who seem immune to the power.

Touching the Power but Not Touched by It: Tom Bombadil and Sonny Sumo

Early in Frodo's journey from the Shire to Rivendell (*LOTR*, Chapter 6, "The Old Forest"), he and his companions encounter Tom Bombadil, apparently a short, gaudily-clad man, who rescues Merry and Pippin from the malice of an ancient willow tree. Soon thereafter, they accept the jolly fellow's hospitality, staying the night and the rainy day that followed. On the second night, as Frodo told the story of his travels, Bombadil asks to see the Ring. In short order, to Frodo's astonishment, he not only hands over the Ring, but Tom tries it on and does not vanish. Then when he returns it to Frodo and the latter puts it on, Frodo finds that he is not invisible to Bombadil, though he is to the other hobbits. Who and what is this Bombadil that he appears more powerful than the Ring? At Elrond's Council, we gain some insight:

> Elrond: "But I had forgotten Bombadil, if indeed this is still the same that walked the woods and hills long ago, and even then was older than the old. That was not then his name. Iarwain Ben-adar we called him, oldest and fatherless. But many another name he has since been given by eother folk: Forn by the Dwarves, Orald by Northern Men and other names beside. He is a strange creature, but maybe I should have summoned him to our Council."

> Gandalf: "He would not have come."
>
> Erestor: "Could we not still send messages to him and obtain his help? It seems that he has a power even over the Ring."
>
> Gandalf: "No, I should not put it so. Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter thre Ring itself, nor break its power over others. .."

In another letter (*Letters*, #153, Sept. 1954), Tolkien clarifies Bombadil's situation:

> …He is *master* in a peculiar way: he has no fear and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges, and as far as can be seen, makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow."

So, Tom Bombadil is immune to the Ring, not by virtue of superior power, but because he has absolutely no interest in adding to his power or dominions. There is nothing in his nature for the Ring to latch onto, either to tempt or to deceive.

Unlike Bombadil, Sonny Sumo, with the help of the Forever People's Mother Box, actually does wield the power of domination over others. As he and the Forever People continue to attempt to escape from Desaad's Happyland, (*FP #6*, "The Omega Effect!!"), he sends a command via the park's communication system, reducing all of Desaad's troops to a zombie-like state. The Forever People's remarks show that they consider this horrible, but evidently accept it as the only way to release Desaad's human prisoners from their captivity. At this point, internal logic bends to story-telling necessity. Darkseid sends his Omega Effect beams after the Forever People and Sonny, banishing them to remote eras. But why? He was searching for a mind capable of wielding the Anti-Life Equation, and there he was. Why not simple banish the Mother Box so that Sumo couldn't use his power and capture him? And why, when Highfather rescues the Forever People (*FP #7*, "I'll Find You in Yesterday"), does he leave Sonny Sumo in the past? It seems likely that Kirby realized that a functioning user of the Anti-Life Equation in the hands of either side of the war would end the Fourth World epic all too soon.

All we know of Sonny Sumo's fate is that he was sent to Honshu, Japan, several centuries ago, where he lived out the rest of his life as a revered teacher and defender of the poor. Did he ever use the Anti-Life Equation again? Probably not, since he needed the active assistance of Mother Box to do so, "she" probably would not have let him do so, even in the unlikely event that he wanted to. So, the question of whether the Anti-Life Equation is as inevitably corrupting as the Ring remains unanswered, at least for now.

The Wielders of the Power: "Billion Dollar Bates", Galadriel, Frodo, Sam, Sauron

In *Forever People #8*, "The Power!", we finally meet a human who is in full control of the Anti-Life Equation. "Billion Dollar" Bates is a fabulously successful businessman, who apparently made his fortune through unconscious, low-level, use of the Anti-Life Equation to make his deals go through. Eventually he fell under investigation and fled the United States. Somewhere in his travels, he encountered "The Sect", a group of sinister mystics who had been searching for a "vessel" like Bates for centuries. Like Sonny Sumo, Bates apparently required outside assistance to use the full power of the Equation – in his case, the Sect's "Stimulus Hat". By the time we see him in action, he apparently is wielding the power, and only needs the hat to assert domination of the entire world at once.

It is interesting to note that the effects of the Equation differ as used by Bates, versus its use by Sumo. Sumo's victims enter a zombie-like state—they obey orders, but exhibit no independent thought. Bates's victims, on the other hand (including a committee sent to investigate him, and the Forever People) obey orders, but retain full awareness otherwise, and can perform actions not specifically forbidden by Bates or his intermediaries. We can only speculate as to why this might be. Possibly the Equation as brought forth by Mother Box behaves differently, or Mother Box realized that the zombie-state was a safer one for controlling Desaad's soldiers. Perhaps most likely, Bates allowed his victims to retain their awareness out of a sadistic desire to see their horror at becoming his puppets. He certainly tormented the committee members, forcing one to smoke a cigar that choked him, another to play Russian roulette, and implying to a female member of the group that he could have his way with her sexually and she would be unable to resist.

Bates is denied his chance at world regency by Darkseid and Desaad, who take the place of the Sect members and replace the Stimulus Hat with a duplicate rigged to shock Bates into insensibility. The Forever People, able to escape captivity by invoking Mother Bos, use Beautiful Dreamer's illusion-crafting powers to steal Bates away, and Bates is inadvertently gunned down by one of Darkseid's soldiers. This is the last we see of the Anti-Life Equation in Kirby's own work. However, it (and Bates) will reappear years later, as discussed below.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, we never see the Ring used at its full power of domination at all. However, we are shown one vision of a possible Ring-wielder, Galadriel. In the chapter "The Mirror of Galadriel", Frodo is permitted to see visions in the Mirror, then sees that Galadriel is wearing one of the three Elven Rings of Power, an ability resulting from his exposure to the One Ring. He then offers the Ring to Galadriel, and she replies:

> "And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! 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 me and despair!"

Her Elven-ring then shines, creating a vision of her as the Queen of the Ring…but she rejects the temptation, though it means accepting the end of Lothlorien and her life in Middle-earth. As in Tolkien's references to Gandalf and the Ring, it is apparent that the specific manifestation of the Ring's power depends on the nature of the wielder. Gandalf as Ring-lord or Galadriel as Queen would be very different outwardly than Sauron, but the end result is always the same: all other peoples of Middle-earth enslaved to the will of the Ring wielder. The Ring was created to bind and to rule; it can do no other.

Frodo then asks why he has not been able to exercise the greater powers of the Ring when he wears it. She replies:

"You have not tried. Only thrice have you set the Ring upon your finger since you knew what you possessed. Do not try! It would destroy you. Did not Gandalf tell you that the rings give power according to the measure of each possessor? Before you could use that power you would need to become far stronger, and to rain your will to the domination of others. Yet even so, as Ring-bearer and as one that has borne it on finger and seen that which is hidden, your sight is grown keener. You have perceived my thought more clearly than many that are accounted wise. You saw the Eye of him that holds the Seven and the Nine. And did you not see and recognize the ring upon my finger?"

Frodo himself, is, of course, the most important wielder of the Ring as depicted in the story. However, for Frodo, the key interaction with the Ring is its progressive breaking of his will as he suffers on the road to Mount Doom, until he finally claims the Ring for his own at the Cracks of Doom. Frodo rarely uses the Ring to do more than become invisible. But its power of domination does come into play in his interaction with Gollum, whose will had been enslaved to the Ring for hundreds of years. In the chapter, "The Taming of Sméagol", Frodo and Sam capture Gollum, and bind him with rope from Lorien. The Elvish rope causes Gollum pain and he pleads to be released:

"We will swear to do what he wants, yes, yess, " said Gollum, still twisting and grabbling at his ankle. "It hurts us."

"Swear?" said Frodo.

:"Sméagol, " said Gollum suddenly and clearly, opening his eyes wide and staring at Frodo with a strange light. "Sméagol will swear on the Precious."

…"No! not on it," said Frodo, looking down on him with stern pity. "All you wish is to see it and touch it, if you can though you know it

would drive you mad. Not on it. Swear by it, if you will. For you know where it is. Yes, you know, Sméagol. It is before you."

For a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown and Gollum had shrunk: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud, and at his feet, a little whining dog. Yet the two were in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another's minds. Gollum raised himself and began pawing at Frodo, fawning at his knees.

Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's faithful servant and friend, briefly wields the Ring, after Frodo apparently dies from the poisonous bite of the giant spider, Shelob. He had never wanted the Ring, but took it to continue their quest. After beholding Mount Doom in the distance, he is tempted by its power, but, like Bombadil (and Scott Free), he has no real desire for power: "The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command." ("The Tower of Cirith Ungol")

One question which frequently arises to thoughtful readers of *The Lord of the Rings* is: just how powerful was the Ring as wielded by Sauron himself? After all, he created the Ring and his will was supremely trained for domination. Gandalf, Elrond and others frequently claim that should Sauron reclaim the Ring, he will conquer all of Middle-earth and one could not imagine an end to his reign. Yet we know, from the histories related by Elrond that Sauron was defeated while wearing the Ring, not once but twice! How can this be reconciled with the claims made about the power of the Ring?

Sauron's first "defeat" following the forging of the One Ring was by the mighty forces of the arrogant Numenorean king, Ar-Pharazôn. Tolkien explains in one of his letters (*Letters*, #211):

"Ar-Pharazôn, as is told in the "Downfall" or *Akallabêth*, conquered and terrified Sauron's *subjects*, not Sauron. Sauron's personal 'surrender' was voluntary and cunning: he got free transport to Númenor! He naturally had the One Ring and very soon dominated the minds and wills of most of the Numenóreans."

So this "defeat" was no defeat at all, but rather a stratagem to gain access to his hated enemies and corrupt them to his will. He was only defeated when, at the moment of his greatest triumph, the attack of Ar-Pharazôn on the Undying Lands, Eru (the One, God himself) intervened and hurled Númenor into the sea. Sauron's bodily form was crushed, but he escaped in spirit form (with the Ring) back to Middle-earth. There his second defeat occurred, at the hands of Gil-galad and Elendil and the armies of the Last Alliance. Unlike the courtiers of Númenor, these were powerful wills, fully aware of Sauron's evil. In any event, domination by the Ring was never portrayed as an instant process, like domination by the Anti-Life Equation.

In open battle, a Sauron who was still recovering his strength from the Downfall, could be defeated by force of arms. Sauron at the end of the Third Age, having rebuilt his strength for three thousand years would have indeed been unconquerable with the Ring in his possession, especially given how much the strength of his foes had declined.

The Visions in Other's Hands

Though the longest-lived of Kirby's Fourth World titles, *Mr. Miracle*, lasted only 18 issues, the characters and concepts he introduced became mainstays at DC Comics ever since. The Anti-Life Equation itself reappeared in various forms, with greater and lesser degrees of success.

In 1988, Jim Starlin and Mike Mignola collaborated on the four-issue series, *Cosmic Odyssey*, which teamed an array of Earth's heroes with the New Gods against the Anti-Life Equation, depicted as an extra-dimensional destructive entity. This portrayal had nothing to do with Kirby's interpretation and Starlin's concept has been virtually ignored since.

Writer-artist Walt Simonson, widely acclaimed for his run on another title co-created by Kirby, Marvel's *Thor*, launched a new *Orion* series. In issue #4, we learn that Darkseid and Desaad have managed to clone the late "Billion-Dollar" Bates, and are testing its powers on Earth. In #5, Darkseid is apparently killed, and Orion goes to Apokolips to assume control. In #11, Orion receives control of the Anti-Life Equation from the Bates clones, and subjugates Apokolips. Some of Earth's heroes are uneasy about Orion wielding the Equation; he solves the problem in #13 by using it to take control of Earth, all in the name of peace and order. The cosmos as a whole is unruly, so Orion is about to move on to subjugate the universe. A plan by Darkseid and Metron fails to stop him, but Orion is thwarted by Mr. Miracle, whom we learn eventually has always been able to wield the Anti-Life Equation, rendering him immune to Orion's control. But Mr. Miracle is the one being in the universe who is not tempted by the power of Anti-Life, so complete is his dedication to freedom for all. This expansion on the Kirby concept had the "feel" of Kirby's creation and seemed a logical development. The notion that the Equation inevitably tempts (almost) anyone who possesses it to use its power over others is also very much akin to the corrupting power of the Ring, with Scott Free (Mr. Miracle) occupying a position like Tom Bombadil in that he lacks any desire for domination over others, and so stands immune.

The wildly imaginative Grant Morrison introduced yet another take on the Equation in his 2005-2006 four-issue series, *Mr. Miracle*. This series starred Shilo Norman, a young man introduced in the waning days of Kirby's *Mr. Miracle* run, who has since, in part, taken over the mantle of Mr. Miracle from Scott Free. In this series, the Equation is projected into the minds of its victims to instill a sense of futility and despair. However, Morrison's whole portrayal of the New Gods and

Darkseid is so radically different from Kirby's that it is not clear exactly how this can fit in with the mainstream DC Universe.

Most recently, in *Firestorm, the Nuclear Man #33-35* (2007), writer Dwayne McDuffie introduced the concept that the Firestorm Matrix, the extra-dimensional complex that gives Firestorm his matter-manipulating powers, is just one quarter of a greater construct – the Life Equation. Professor Martin Stein, normally one half of the shared consciousness that is Firestorm, had begun to unravel this equation, bringing him to the attention of Darkseid and his minions. Darkseid managed to rip Stein free of Firestorm, leaving the other half of Firestorm, Jason Rusch, to fuse with a new partner, the girl named Gehenna, to try to rescue Stein. Unfortunately, #35 was the last issue of the current Firestorm series, so the fate of the characters and of the Life Equation, remains to be seen.

Tolkien's work, while subject to a vast amount of scholarly and fan analysis, has not had to deal with much in the way of official fictional enlargement (leaving aside the wide world of "fan fiction".) The major exception is Peter Jackson's three film treatment of *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers,* and *The Return of the King.* Jackson (who co-wrote the screenplay with Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens) generally hews fairly closely to Tolkien's story in his treatment of the Ring itself. One scene where the Ring gives off sparks as Gandalf attempts to touch it is wholly new, but his depiction of the corrupting power of the Ring holds true. His visualization of the battle between Sauron and the armies of the Last Alliance portrays Sauron as a warrior of greater-than-human stature, and far greater power. Though there is nothing in Tolkien's description of the battle to suggest that particular image, it may have been inspired in part by Tolkien's description in *The Silmarillion* of Sauron's master, Morgoth, appearing as a gigantic warrior to battle the Elf lord, Fingolfin, wielding the giant mace Grond, his every blow digging a crater on the battlefield.

Destiny, Freedom and Enslavement

Both Kirby's Fourth World and Tolkien's Middle-earth display a mixture of destiny and human freedom. Some characters are the subject of prophecy (Orion, Aragorn) but the when, where and how of prophecy's fulfillment are decided by the free choices of the participants.

The most important prophecy in Kirby's work is that which says that Orion will meet his father, Darkseid, in final battle. This apocalyptic vision comes up time and again, but is never truly resolved - mainly because the post-Kirby handlers of the characters don't want to wrap-up the Fourth World mythos. Most of the Fourth World prophecies emanate from the Source. The mysterious entity communicates with the New Gods of New Genesis, and is linked in some fashion with their Mother Boxes. It is said to have survived the destruction of the Old Gods. Highfather at one point identifies it with the Life Equation. It seems, at least at times, to act as a God to

the gods. Yet, as noted above, Highfather and his allies regard the "orders" of the Source to be ones which may be freely accepted or rejected.

The Source occupies a position in Kirby's world similar to that of Eru Iluvatar (the One, All-father) in Tolkien's mythos. Both are apparently aloof and unknowable by mortals, but ultimately hold dominion oven over the gods (in Tolkien, the Valar.) In Tolkien, however, the tension between divine plan and mortal freedom is more frequently in evidence. In discussing the Ring, Gandalf tells Frodo that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker (Sauron). Gandalf and others refer to certain events happening by chance "if chance you call it", suggesting that the hand of destiny may be behind what on the surface appear to be coincidences.

Many commentators on Tolkien have discussed the relationship of fate and freedom in his work. One, Fleming Rutledge, in his book, *The Battle for Middle-earth : Tolkien's divine design in The Lord of the Rings*, comes down hard on the side of divine plan. Being a Calvinist predestinarian himself, Rutledge wishes to see Tolkien in the same light, but making Tolkien fit this scheme is a rather Procrustean process. Most others, however, accept that there is a give-and-take between destiny and choice, with the greater emphasis on freedom. For example, the Wizards (Istari in Elvish) are sent to Middle-earth to lead the resistance to Sauron, but are expressly forbidden to use their power to dominate or cow others. Saruman turned to evil when he began to desire the power to dominate. Or consider the creation myth of the Dwarves from *The Silmarillion*: Aule, the smith of the Valar, knows that the Children of Eru, Elves and humans are coming, but is over-eager to have such beings to instruct in the skills that he loves. So he fashions the Dwarves. But they are not truly independent beings; they are only living puppets of Aule's will, for only Eru has the power to create independent beings. But when Aule regretfully offers to destroy them, Eru grants them independent being. Treebeard, the Ent, refers to "the four, the Free Peoples", Elves, Men, Dwarves and Ents (and, he later appends, Hobbits). Tolkien refers to "The supremely bad motive (for this tale, since it is specially about it) domination of other 'free' wills." (*Letters*, #155) However, Tolkien somewhat contradicts this in later letter (*Letters* #183) , in which he says, "In *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is not basically about 'freedom', though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honour. The Eldar and the Númenoreans believed in The One, the true God, and held worship of any other person an abomination. Sauron desired to be a God-King, and was held to be so by his servants; if he had been victorious, he would have demanded divine honour from all rational creatures and absolute temporal power over the whole world." Still later, he says (*Letters*, #186), "I do not think that even Power or Domination is the real centre of my story…The real theme for me is about something more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality…" But as Tolkien says in the same letter:, "…all that is 'after-thought'." We can safely say that Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth hold many themes, and that of freedom versus domination is prominent among them.

Kirby, too, strongly weighs in on the importance of freedom, not only with regard to the Anti-Life Equation, but in devoting an entire series to Scott Free, Mr. Miracle,

the greatest escape artist of three worlds. All his escapes from traps and constraints against seemingly-impossible odds, are metaphors for human freedom in defiance of tyranny. It should be noted though, that Kirby showed one curious blind spot in this regard. In *Superman's Pal, Jimmy Olsen*, many of the stories revolve around the creation of human clones, both by Darkseid's servants at the "Evil Factory", but also by the "good guys" of the DNA Project. The unique creations of the Project, such as the Golden Guardian and Dubbilex are treated with respect. But the Project also creates vast numbers of clones to be pressed into service around the Project – dozens of Jimmy Olsens, of "Gabby" communications officers, of "Scrapper" troopers (including inch-tall miniatures.) Kirby never seemed to realize that this was perilously close to manufacturing a race of human slaves.

Conclusion

For concepts which are "on stage" as little as the Anti-Life Equation and the Ring are in their respective epics, their centrality to the main stories and their link to profound issues of freedom and domination has made them powerful images of evil which resonate for readers in the reality of the 21st Century as much as they do for the characters in the Third Age of Middle-earth or the boundless cosmos of the DC Universe. Their creators, Jack Kirby and J.R.R. Tolkien, shared the powerful mythic imaginations needed to make them iconic.

Footnotes

(1) This essay is an expansion of a presentation given at the Comic Arts Conference, Comic-Con International, San Diego, CA, July 29, 2007.

(2) Evanier, Mark "Afterword" Jack Kirby's Fourth World Omnibus, Volume One Ed. Anton Kawasaki. New York: DC Comics. 2007

Evanier says: "There was at the time [Kirby's arrival at DC Comics] a mass rediscovery of the fantasy novels of J.R.R. Tolkien. A young adult audience was snatching them up, especially the trilogy of books that comprised the *Lord of the Rings* saga. 'Why are we neglecting that audience?' Jack asked over and over."

(3) Kirby, Jack "Interview" *The Comics Journal* #134 (Feb. 1990), reprinted in *The Comics Journal Library, Volume One: Jack Kirby* Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books 2002 , p. 22

Bibliography

Bassman, Gregory and Eric Bronson, eds. The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Co. 2003

Kirby, Jack The Forever People #1-11, New York: DC Comics, 1971-1972

“ , Mr. Miracle #1-18, New York: DC Comics, 1971-1974

“ , The New Gods #1-11, New York: DC Comics, 1971-1972

“ , Superman’s Pal Jimmy Olsen #123-139, 140-148, New York: DC Comics, 1971-1973

Rutledge, Fleming, The Battle for Middle-earth, Grand Rapids, Mich. : William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004.

Shippey, Thomas, The Road to Middle-earth, (revised and expanded edition), Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003

Tolkien, J.R.R (John Ronald Reuel), The Annotated Hobbit :: The Hobbit, or, There and back again (revised and expanded edition, annotated by Douglas A. Anderson) Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002

“ Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: a selection ed. by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981

“ The Lord of the Rings, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1991 (one volume edition, illustrated by Alan Lee)

“ The Silmarillion, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1977

© 2007, 2018 Charles F. Huber



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.