

Lucia Opreanu*

***THE INESCAPABLE OTHER – IDENTITY TRANSITIONS
AND MUTATIONS IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF
TOLKIEN’S GOLLUM / SMÉAGOL***

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Abstract: *Explorations of the complex relationship between the other and the self, a central element of identity studies, can result in new and often paradoxical revelations concerning certain fictional characters, in this particular case revealing the underlying complexity of texts and protagonists previously relegated to a limited cult following and regarded as not entirely conducive to academic research. Prompted by the renewed interest in Tolkien’s work following the release of the film trilogy, this paper aims to analyse the various identity mechanisms at work in the development of one of his less glamorous protagonists as they emerge from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. This will involve references to the always problematic but in this case downright deranged interaction between the other and the self and to the ‘doppelgänger’ concept, applied to Gollum’s relationship with the other ring-bearers, with his almost forgotten hobbit origins and above all with his still recognizable former self (Sméagol). After focusing on the significance of binary oppositions in all Tolkien’s texts, the paper will go on to explore the devolution undergone by Sméagol’s personality once under the spell of the Ring, the role played by cultural heritage in the process of identity formation, the often volatile combination of good and evil characterising Tolkien’s protagonists, the motif of the divided self, the influence of names and labels on the recipient’s personality, the use of language for the purposes of self-reference, the balance of power between the other and the self, and finally the contribution of the protagonist’s uncontrollable possessiveness and obsessive personality to his unexpected popularity.*

The last few years have witnessed a renewed interest in Tolkien’s writings, undoubtedly triggered by the release of the three motion pictures based on *The Lord of the Rings* and quite reminiscent of the enthusiastic responses accompanying the book’s initial publication. There is of course no denying Tolkien’s constant appeal to readers and critics alike even in the decades preceding the making of the films, yet it is also true that they not only brought his work to the attention of an even wider audience but also provided those already familiar with his books with alternative ways of reading them. One of their most significant effects resides in the new possibilities of relating to the various protagonists, to the point of seeing even an apparently unsympathetic protagonist such as Gollum in quite a different light. The contemporary fascination with this

* Ovidius University Constanța, România; luciaopreanu@yahoo.com

particular character might seem surprising, yet a close reading reveals an extremely complex figure, whose identity eludes the simple categorizations usually applied to Tolkien's protagonists

Indeed, very few analyses of Tolkien's writings seem to avoid references to what can be considered the most persistent argument against his fiction, its moral simplicity, its tendency to follow rigidly delineated lines of value and respectability. Most critics choose to consider Tolkien's characters as mere types with no authentic identity of their own and to argue that the complexity of human nature is invariably projected onto the external world surrounding them (Thomson 51-2), a notable example being the way in which the forces of darkness and inner conflict are concentrated in the Ring of Power. His world has moreover been regarded as one governed by firmly specified social and cultural roles, inhabited by creatures too often presented as either irredeemably evil or unwaveringly good (Burns 49) in the tradition of the timeless myth of good versus evil reduced to "black and white issues with no murky middle ground" (Whissen 149). As a result it is almost invariably perceived by the reader in terms of hierarchical extremes: light and dark, violent and gentle, ugly and fair, high and low, up and down.

It must be however noted that although the emphasis on opposition and dissimilarity is a defining feature of Tolkien's texts, not all his protagonists can be divided into easily recognizable good and evil. And, understandably enough, the readers' preferences tend to incline towards those of his characters who appear to be exceptions to this rule, those who reveal traces of moral complexity either by falling on the side of good yet continually exhibiting a certain aura of risk (Burns 50) or by allowing themselves to be seduced by power (as is the case with Isildur and Boromir) and ultimately drawn towards evil. Even at the level of the binary structure underpinning the entire narrative and identifiable in the contrast between the two towers, the Shire and Mordor, Lothlórien and the Dead Marshes, the Elves and the Orcs, there are to be found emblems not simply of good and evil but also of the corruption of the fair into the foul.

The narrative systematically focuses on paired characters that share a common ground of moral choices and challenges yet react in opposite ways (Mosely 57) and thus function as foils to each other. Almost all Tolkien's protagonists are characterised by self-containment, separateness, alienation, but their personalities are only revealed through their interactions with others. It could be indeed argued that Tolkien's work is an inexhaustible source of arguments supporting the view that identities are constructed through, not outside, difference (Hall 17) and that the relation to the other is crucial to the definition of the self. The similarities and differences are in most cases so obvious that the reader encounters virtually no difficulties in identifying the members of the various pairs: the brothers Faramir and Boromir, Gandalf and Saruman, Aragorn and the Lord of the Nazgûl, Galadriel and Sauron, Bilbo and Gollum in *The Hobbit*, but also Frodo and Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Historically, Gollum is the first creature that comes to possess the One Ring centuries after it leads Isildur to his peril and is thus lost by the race of men. Like all Tolkien's characters, he defines himself within three frames: the transcendent supernatural or spiritual universe with its moral dimension, the social order of tribe or

nation and the finite and contained universe of individual consciousness, with its “complex matrix of internal realities, conflicts between subject and object, self and other, thought and action” (Mathews 87). However, in his case the natural process of identity formation seems to be reversed as the combined influence of the Ring, the nether world of darkness and water he chooses to inhabit and his own innate character make him undergo a process of physical and moral devolution (Clark and Timmons 127) and thus depart from the features of his hobbit kind and lose ethical and altruistic capacities. In spite of the repulsive aspect and the indeterminate presentation that make him quite difficult to place in any distinct category he nevertheless remains a Ring-bearer (to be followed by Bilbo Baggins and then by Bilbo’s nephew Frodo, but incidentally the only one meant to become the Ring-destroyer) as well as a member of the same race.

Bilbo and Gollum’s common ground can be first observed in *The Hobbit*, their familiarity with the rules of the riddle game being a clear indication of a shared culture. Identification is usually constructed by means of the “recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group” (Hall 16) and in Gollum’s case riddles clearly represent the only vestiges of his former nature, his one connection with his hobbit self, Sméagol:

Riddles were all he could think of. Asking them, and sometimes guessing them, had been the only game he had ever played with other funny creatures sitting in their holes in the long, long ago, before he lost all his friends and was driven away, alone, and crept down, down, into the dark under the mountains. (73)

The hobbit identity of these creatures and of Gollum himself can thus be easily established and the accuracy of this guess is confirmed in *The Lord of the Rings*, as Gandalf starts his account of Gollum’s life with the supposition that the “clever-handed and quiet-footed little people” he lived among “were of hobbit-kind” (51). He moreover emphasises the importance of a shared cultural heritage and of a similar outlook in the construction of identity by referring to the very riddle-game already mentioned as well as to the successful communication between Bilbo and Gollum:

There was a great deal in the background of their minds and memories that was very similar. They understood one another remarkably well, very much better than a hobbit would understand, say, a Dwarf, or an Orc, or even an Elf. Think of the riddles they both knew, for one thing. (53)

It would thus appear that while readers find out enough details concerning Gollum’s identity from *The Lord of the Rings*, the earlier book provides them with a clearer picture of a significant period in the life of this character, incidentally one of the few protagonists to figure in both texts, each time establishing an important connection with a Baggins.

The relationship formed between Gollum and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* is however characterised by a greater complexity than his brief encounter with Bilbo and indeed than all the other binary oppositions present in the text: “the two were in some way akin and not alien: they could reach one another’s minds” (604). From the very first

moment of becoming aware of Frodo's identity as the new bearer of the Ring, Gollum's only goal entails following him, to the point of turning into his shadow and of being perceived by a large number of readers as representing some darkness in Frodo's own character. The strength of the bond between the two, as well as the impossibility of definitely placing Gollum among the evil characters in the story, emerges with particular clarity from the lack of any sense of triumph following his death. Unlike all the villains who have to be destroyed for good to prevail, Gollum stands in such an individual relationship with the hero that his overthrow is the outcome of a terrible personal struggle (Thomson 53) and an eradication not just of an enemy but also of a part of the hero's own nature. The loss of his finger can be thus seen to symbolize the destruction of an aspect of Frodo's personality which under less extraordinary circumstances might have had quite a different potential. The main problem that might occur in the case of this otherwise convincing interpretation consists in the tendency of some critics to dismiss Gollum as a mere parody of another protagonist, as "the anti-Frodo" that "completes our picture of the book's courageous hero" (Hughes 86) rather than the individualised character he actually is. In fact, the most lucid analyses are the ones that stress the similarities and differences between the two figures while also emphasizing the importance of both and the ways in which they interact and define one another.

One of the most interesting approaches to the two characters is based on the 'doppelgänger' concept, most frequently discussed in the context of German literature but equally familiar to readers of English from works such as Poe's *William Wilson*, Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* and most notably Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Even if Gollum's shrunken spirit and physical and moral degeneration might make it difficult for some readers to notice any similarity between Frodo and him, the existence of a certain connection can be sensed from their first encounter. Not only are they both members of the same race and bearers of the Ring, but they are also curiously attracted to each other, one by a sense of pity and compassion that eventually overcomes the initial feelings of hatred and repulsion, the other by the nearest he can get to love (Moseley 58). Yet, the 'doppelgänger' analysis should not be applied to their relationship alone, as the same concept can be used to discuss a duality present at the level of Gollum's own identity. The motif of the divided self occupies a prominent place in Tolkien's work and as far as this aspect is concerned Gollum can be considered one of the great imaginative triumphs of the book.

The study of names occupies a significant place in most analyses of Tolkien's works and becomes particularly important in Gollum's case, as the complex nature of his identity best emerges from the number of labels that accompany him throughout the two texts. His first appearance in *The Hobbit* coincides with the revelation of only two such masks: Gollum and 'Precious'. The reader becomes familiar with "old Gollum, a small slimy creature" (71) and is also provided with information regarding the origin of this name and the existence of an alternative marker of his identity: "And when he said *gollum* he made a horrible swallowing noise in his throat. That is how he got his name, though he always called himself 'my precious'" (72). The necessity of this affectionate form of address becomes quite understandable after the additional revelation of this

creature's solitary conversations: "Gollum [...] always spoke to himself through never having anyone else to speak to" (72).

The sense of confusion first emerges from the awareness that Gollum uses the same term to refer to the Ring, yet the fact that his will is inextricably bound to it justifies this apparently surprising choice. The contradictory feelings present in Gandalf's remark that he "hated it and loved it, as he hated and loved himself" (Tolkien 54) moreover reveal the narcissistic nature of his obsession, capable not only of making love turn back to the self as hatred but also of blurring the boundaries between the self and the world of objects (Lasch 222-3). The extent of this identification with the object of his desire best emerges from his own contention that the destruction of the Ring would be synonymous with his own death: "We're lost. And when Precious goes, we'll die, yes, die into the dust" (Tolkien 923).

His real identity remains unknown for quite a long time and it is only in the first book of *The Lord of the Rings* that his true name is revealed, in the course of a detailed account of his origins. The hobbit name Sméagol, presumably derived from the Anglo-Saxon verb *sméagan* meaning to scrutinize, investigate, penetrate, examine, and its adjectival form *sméah*, that is sagacious, sharp, crafty, subtle (Chism 83), perfectly mirrors the fascination with the secrets hidden beneath the ground that characterises him even before falling under the spell of the Ring: "He was interested in roots and beginnings; he dived into deep pools; he burrowed under trees and growing plants; he tunnelled into green mounds; and he ceased to look up at the hill-tops, or the leaves on trees, or the flowers opening in the air: his head and his eyes were downward" (Tolkien 51-2). The significant darkness that can thus be discovered within the seemingly innocent name can constitute the basis of a psychoanalytical interpretation, with the downward journey and disappearance from the visible world alternatively interpretable as a process of devolution and as a descent into the unconscious: "So he journeyed by night up into the highlands, and he found a little cave out of which the dark stream ran; and he wormed his way like a maggot into the heart of the hills, and vanished out of all knowledge" (Tolkien 53).

The next significant appearance of this protagonist in the text is marked by a division into "the Sméagol and Gollum halves", also identified by means of the pejorative labels suggested by Sam, "Slinker and Stinker" (Tolkien 624). It is quite interesting to observe how each of these names is associated with a different aspect of his identity and the way in which Frodo and Sam choose to refer to him as Sméagol and Gollum respectively, thus emphasizing their different approaches to their companion. As far as Frodo is concerned, he not only insists on using Gollum's hobbit name, but also encourages him to reject the names imposed by others and the alternative identities they entail: "Don't take names to yourself, Sméagol [...] It's unwise, whether they are true or false." Gollum's answer, although ironical, contains a clear proof of his inability to resist external influences: "Sméagol has to take what's given to him" (Tolkien 700). Finally, in addition to all these labels there are the titles Gollum imagines for himself once he claimed the Ring, in one of the rare instances in which he contemplates the power that might come to him in the process. These titles significantly incorporate all the names

under which he is commonly known, accompanied by various markers of prestige: “Lord Sméagol”, “Gollum the Great,” “*The Gollum*,” “Most Precious Gollum” (Tolkien 619).

Gollum’s use of language for the purposes of self-reference has an equally significant contribution to the delineation of his identity, one of the most interesting aspects consisting in the gradual replacement of singular personal pronouns by the plurals that more adequately fit his split personality. If his initial discourse contains both singular and plural forms, as in “Give us that, Déagol, my love [...] Because it’s my birthday, my love, and I wants it” (Tolkien 52), his degeneration into the creature Gollum is accompanied by the inability or unwillingness to utter the pronoun ‘I’, a crucial element in the assertion of identity that only reappears in his speech with the awakening of the suppressed Sméagol: “I, we, I don’t want to come back” (Tolkien 602). It can be noted however that Sméagol never succeeds in referring to himself by means of this pronoun alone, his prevalent strategy involving the use of the third person and a consequent detachment from his own self: “Sméagol promised” (Tolkien 618), “Sméagol said he would be very good” (Tolkien 619).

A potential risk of applying the ‘doppelgänger’ concept to this challenging protagonist concerns the temptation to use the simple binary model suggested by Stevenson’s *Jeekyll / Hyde*. Describing Gollum and Sméagol as irremediably different selves which cohabit only in alternation and hence are never subject to confrontation (Webber 6) would be however out of the question, even if Gollum’s first words to Frodo seem to support such an interpretation: “Don’t ask Sméagol. Poor, poor Sméagol, he went away long ago. They took his Precious, and he’s lost now” (Tolkien 602). After this first reference to Sméagol’s replacement by Gollum, the text goes on with a reverse process, resulting in the emergence of what Sam calls “the new Gollum, the Sméagol”, characterised by a different language and outlook: “a change, which lasted for some time, came over him. He spoke with less hissing and whining, and he spoke to his companions direct, not to his precious self” (Tolkien 604).

Nevertheless, Gollum and Sméagol are not only aware of one another but are almost constantly engaged in conversation. In the case of one of their most representative dialogues they are presented as two opposed lines of thought competing at the level of a single mind, two creatures trapped in a single body, the distinction between the two identities being made by means of different uses of the same voice and gaze, as well as of more aggressive gestures:

Gollum was talking to himself. Sméagol was holding a debate with some other thought that used the same voice but made it squeak and hiss. A pale and a green light alternated in his eyes as he spoke [...] Each time that the second thought spoke, Gollum’s long hand crept out slowly, pawing towards Frodo, and then was drawn back with a jerk as Sméagol spoke again. (Tolkien 618-619)

The cinematic strategy employed in Peter Jackson’s version of *The Return of the King* relies on the potential of any mirror to mediate the encounter between the other and the self and makes this particular dialogue even more vivid by enabling Sméagol to behold his other self as another, to actually see Gollum as his own reflection in the water.

No discussion of the ‘doppelgänger’ can avoid various references to the idea of power, which is always seen as caught up in exchange, never to be simply possessed as mastery of the self, of the other or of the other self (Webber 4). An important feature of the ‘doppelgänger’ consists in its tendency to recurrently serve but also master its host subject and this ambivalent relation of servitude and mastery (Webber 5) characterises all Sméagol’s interactions. He is bound to Frodo by his promise “to help the master of the Precious” (Tolkien 618) yet the Gollum side of his mind keeps reminding him of the possibility of reversing this power relation by taking the ring: “‘Then take it,’ said the other, ‘and let’s hold it ourselves! Then we shall be master, *gollum!*’” His power fantasy is the more remarkable as it has little to do with the desire to master an entire world shared by all the other characters lured by the Ring and is instead confined to the simple wish to “eat fish every day, three times a day, fresh from the sea” (Tolkien 619).

The tension that defines his relationship with Frodo is even more salient as far as his own split identity is concerned, with Sméagol constantly trying and occasionally succeeding in silencing Gollum, but never managing to fully overcome and destroy him, just as Gollum never completely succeeds in replacing Sméagol: “There was a little corner of his mind that was still his own, and light came through it, as through a chink out of the dark: light out of the past” (Tolkien 53). Sam’s thoughts after witnessing one of their confrontations quite sensibly focus on the unlikelihood of such an outcome: “But Sam [...] found it hard to believe that the long submerged Sméagol had come out on top: that voice at any rate had not had the last word in the debate” (Tolkien 624).

Tolkien’s strategies of adding complexity to his characters do not exclusively consist of split personalities or hints of a darker side (Burns 50), but also involve a constant tendency of intermingling elements drawn from several literary and cultural traditions in a text practically “packed with references” (Coren 94). Gollum himself is no exception, and any analysis of his evolution throughout the text is bound to reveal a large number of intertextual echoes. One of the crucial moments in the construction of his identity consists in the murder of Déagol, a primal crime followed by his rejection by his family and wandering as an outcast: “So they called him *Gollum*, and cursed him, and told him to go far away; and his grandmother, desiring peace, expelled him from the family and turned him out of her hole” (Tolkien 52). Cain is by no means the only model incorporated in the identity of this protagonist, whose bestial appearance and distorted use of language also owes something to Shakespeare’s Caliban, to Browning’s version of the same figure in ‘Caliban upon Setebos’ (Clausen 10), as well as to Haggard’s degenerate Gagool in *King Solomon’s Mines*.

It must be noted however that most of Gollum’s appeal is due to a feature he does not inherit from any particular literary ancestor, that is his ‘possessiveness’. This is arguably the greatest evil in Tolkien’s view, strongly criticized in his theoretical works and characterising numerous protagonists in *The Lord of the Rings*, where it ranges from simple materialism to domination, enslavement, and arbitrary control (Burns 50). The suggestion is that identity springs from direct personal confrontation with the clashing forces of light and dark powers and is created in the choices that result from this confrontation. The Ring is capable of conferring absolute power if the owner is willing to

put it on and assume this force, and the hero can truly define himself only by resisting this temptation and renouncing power and possessiveness (Mathews 90) as well as by being capable of struggling to survive and to recover from loss. As far as Gollum is concerned, the Ring exerts a terrible attraction simply as possession, fostering an all-consuming and wholly selfish personal indulgence (Thomson 52) and contributing to the creation of one of the most convincing pictures of obsession in literature. Although he does not remain a complete stranger to the wish for power, his involvement with the Ring is most frequently conveyed in terms of compulsive ownership, so familiar to the victims of contemporary consumerism: “Must take it,” “Must have it. We wants it, we wants it, we wants it!” (Tolkien 619).

It could be indeed argued that Gollum’s obsession is distinctly of the 20th century rather than of the Middle Ages, notwithstanding the fact that his duality is often discussed in relation to the medieval understanding of man as a creature at the border between the world of sense and spirit, in an “isthmus of a middle state” (Moseley 58-59). The psychological split into conflicting, even opposing selves is an instance of the kind of division that the Middle Ages regularly treated allegorically, often personifying the two as Soul and Body, but in Tolkien’s writings it can be seen as a paradigm of the present, the age of anxiety (Flieger 103). Gollum can be ultimately perceived as an example of what the psychoanalytic terminology of the mid-20th century called a split personality, a schizophrenic. There is no denying the fact that the excessive reliance on such arid clinical terms would lead to an oversimplification of a highly complex protagonist, yet they are worth mentioning as additional proofs of Tolkien’s success in using the paradox of unity in division in the creation of a psychologically convincing character.

It has been noted that hobbits are the only inhabitants of Tolkien’s Middle-earth that not only introduce an element of realism into the narrative, but also act as mediators between the ancient world of heroic legend and the ironic sensibility of the contemporary reader (Mathews 59). It could be added that among them it is precisely Gollum that is most engagingly human and likely to serve the reader as a point of contact and a figure to identify with. It is indeed by no means difficult to understand the enthusiastic responses to this protagonist, whose complex identity is particularly appealing to present-day audiences, inviting multiple readings and interpretations and bearing considerable relevance to contemporary discussions of identity.

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