The Sins of Boromir

Representations of Sin in a Human Character in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*
Abstract

In this essay, Ralph C. Wood’s religious-philosophical interpretation of *LotR* has been analyzed, with emphasis upon his conclusions about evil and sin in *LotR*. Some of Wood’s claims about evil and sin in *LotR* have been applied upon the character Boromir, in order to analyze the representation of sin in a human character, and specifically to show how sin is manifested as truth-transgression, pride, avarice, and misdirected love. A theoretical section is presented in order to define the concepts sin, mimetic desire and evil. The literary analysis focuses upon the character Boromir; the relevant works of literary scholars Ralph C. Wood and René Girard have been chosen as points of reference in this analysis. Attention is also given to an article by the historian Stephen Morillo, in the analysis of Norse pagan and Christian interpretations. It has been argued that a Christian reading of *LotR*, contrary to Morillo’s standpoint, is possible.

Keywords: J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Sin, Mimetic Desire, Evil, Ralph C. Wood, René Girard.
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1. Introduction

In various polls carried out in Great Britain, *The Lord of the Rings* (henceforth *LotR*) by J.R.R. Tolkien has been declared to be the best book of the 20th century (Pearce 1-3). It is also one of the most successful novels, in terms of sales, in the history of literature (Wagner). Critics and professors of literature have not always been as impressed as the populace, however, and some members of the literary guild have dismissed *LotR* as childish or a flight from reality (Pearce 1-5). But insights into serious matters can be discerned upon investigation; if that is not the case, the amount of qualitative literary analysis of *LotR* would probably be hard to explain (Kerry 283-301). This essay will look deeper into one concept which is related to the battle between good and evil in *LotR*. The concept in question is *sin*. While this concept certainly belongs to Christianity and various other religions, it plays an integral part in the wider cultural tradition of the West, because Christianity is a cultural phenomenon. Sin is also related to questions of character, temptation, and the choice between good and evil. If the latter questions can be characterized as classical and universal, it can help explain *LotR*’s popularity and enable philosophical and religious interpretations.

The possible significance of religious elements in *LotR* has triggered considerable attention among scholars. It is well-known that Tolkien was a practicing Catholic throughout his life (Pearce 17). What impact his faith had on his writing is a delicate matter (Carpenter, “J.R.R Tolkien”, 16, Kerry 239). No Tolkien scholar denies outright that Tolkien’s Catholicism somehow influenced *LotR*, but it is contested precisely how his faith shaped this novel and also whether Catholic Christianity is the most important religious, or spiritual, influence in *LotR*. At least one Tolkien scholar emphasizes that Tolkien mixed pagan and Christian themes, in order “to produce a blend of both” (Hutton 68). Organized religion, however, is absent in *LotR* and faith is not really practiced by the characters, at least not in a typical religious fashion.¹ But it would probably be hard to deny, even for the most skeptical reader, that there is a dramatic battle against evil at the heart of the book. Some interpreters have identified this as a Christian theme, and also claimed that evil in *LotR* is depicted in a profoundly Christian manner (Wood 48, Bernthal 45). However, it has been argued that any

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¹ A few counter-examples to this absence may be mentioned: The prayer-like ceremony conducted by Faramir and his men (Tolkien 676), Frodo and Sam crying out to Elbereth (Elvish for Varda) in extreme cases (729, 912, 913), and a possible reference to God (“the One”) in Appendix A (1037).
supposedly Christian features in *LotR* do not properly belong to Christianity but to the category of spirituality (Morillo 112).

Since the categories of religion, as well as Christianity, are broad (one may compare with culture or politics, as these categories also are capable of encompassing quite a lot), certain specifications are necessary. The question of identifying religious representation in *LotR* is further complicated by an explanation from Tolkien himself, about his cordial “aversion to allegory” (Bofetti 193). It may be tempting to claim that Gandalf is Christ in thinly disguised allegorical form, that Sauron is Satan, and that the Ring is an unambiguous symbol of sin, but that would reduce *LotR* to allegory and thus rule out other interpretations. Even though an author’s opinions never should be allowed to dictate the understanding of his work, it would also be strange to totally disregard the explicit intentions of the author. Tolkien identified the religious element in *LotR* as “absorbed into the story and symbolism” (Carpenter “The Letters”, 172). If allegory is dismissed, another term may be mentioned, namely *applicability*. Tolkien did prefer the latter term over allegory (Tolkien xxiv). Applicability has the advantage of enabling more creative interpretations than a strict allegorical reading does.

One scholar that interprets *LotR* along the lines of applicability is Ralph C. Wood. This essay will investigate some claims he has put forth regarding evil and sin in *LotR*. These claims will be applied primarily upon the character Boromir, who is a key figure in the tenth chapter of *LotR*, which is called “The Breaking of the Fellowship.” Erstwhile friendships break down here and the unity of the fellowship comes to an end. That chapter was chosen for analysis for two reasons: first of all, because it (arguably) contains representations of sin in *LotR*, and secondly, because it focuses upon a character (Boromir) who is susceptible to temptation, a phenomenon that has been analyzed by Wood. Since sin usually is associated with human beings, it seems apt to relate this discussion to one of *LotR*’s human characters.

1.1. **Thesis and Procedure**

I have analyzed Wood’s religious-philosophical interpretation of *LotR*, with emphasis upon his conclusions about evil and sin in *LotR*. Some of Wood’s claims about evil and sin in *LotR* have been applied upon the character Boromir, in order to analyze the representation of sin in a human character, and specifically to show how sin is manifested as truth-transgression,
pride, avarice, and misdirected love. Although the scope of my investigation is limited, dealing almost exclusively with the single character Boromir, I will show that the literary term mimetic desire may be used in order to make sense of the specific sin envy, which is related to Boromir’s desire of the Ring. A Norse pagan interpretation of LotR, by Stephen Morillo, will also be discussed, and I will argue that a Christian reading of LotR, contrary to Morillo’s standpoint, is possible.

In order to achieve my aim a definition of sin will be presented, along with definitions of mimetic desire, and of evil. The question about the relationship between the author and his work will be given some attention in the Previous Research section. The literary discussion about sin and mimetic desire will be applied principally on the character Boromir. Finally, a comparison between a Norse pagan and a Christian interpretation of LotR will be made.

2. Previous Research

The research on Tolkien and religion, and also more specifically on LotR and religion, is extensive. Quite a few literary scholars, philosophers, historians, and theologians have written essays and books on religious issues related to LotR. It is not an exaggeration to say that scholarly interest has increased considerably in recent years, and that recent investigations into LotR have shown new creativity.

The scholars in the field usually present biographical information about Tolkien with a specific aim in mind: to support a particular understanding of his works. According to Joseph Pearce, for instance, “one cannot afford to ignore Tolkien’s philosophical and theological beliefs”, because of their key role within Tolkien’s conception of Middle Earth (100). On the other hand, Pearce acknowledges that one can certainly enjoy LotR without sharing the beliefs of the author (100). Pearce’s logic, and analytical method, seems to be that biographical information is key to the true meaning of the novel. Such a procedure, however, seems closely connected to the “Great Man Theory of Literature”, where literature is reduced to a “covert form of autobiography” (Eagleton 48). But the novel in itself should be sufficient as evidence, and the occurrence of symbols and representations should be possible to prove without recourse to the opinions of others, regarding the text, not even those of the author.
In the anthology *The Ring and the Cross. Christianity and the Lord of the Rings*, edited by Paul E. Kerry, several of the contributors discuss some of the challenges regarding the relationship between *LotR* and its author. Kerry reports on some of the academic debate concerning Catholic interpretations of *LotR*, in “Tracking Catholic Influence.” The problem with openly religious authors such as Tolkien (i.e., authors that practice their faith in a public manner), is that their faith may be given too much importance in some circles. Kerry suggests, however, that it is legitimate to argue that *LotR* is informed by a Catholic ethos, without necessarily imposing one’s own religious ideas upon the text in a naïve or willful manner (244). The distinction between careful and legitimate interpretations on the one hand, and more reckless and naïve ones on the other, will be used in the forthcoming literary analysis.

Ralph C. Wood has chosen to investigate philosophical and theological themes in *LotR*, chiefly by turning his attention to the novel itself. In *The Gospel According to Tolkien*, Wood devotes particular attention to the portrayals of evil in *LotR*, and he recognizes the similarities between evil in *LotR* and Augustine’s account of evil (Wood 51). Wood stresses the point that evil, unlike the good, is not created (51). Evil always lives parasitically off the good (56). Although Wood, on some occasions, may hint at a connection between evil and sin, he never elaborates upon this (49, 56). In the philosophical tradition of Augustine, evil is described as *privatio boni*, absence of good, a definition also discussed in John Kekes’ article in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (“Evil”). Wood asserts that “all love that is not ordered to the love of God turns into hatred” (57), but this statement is related almost exclusively to evil, not sin. Furthermore, the examples of misdirected love in *LotR* that Wood discusses concern Sméagol, and Saruman, primarily, but he never relates this inclination to any of the more ordinary characters, such as Boromir. Wood’s idea about misdirected love will be applied upon Boromir’s desire for the Ring, in order to identify how sin is represented in *LotR*.

In his article “The Entwives: Investigating the Spiritual Core of *The Lord of the Rings*”, Stephen Morillo compares Christian versus Norse pagan influences in *LotR*. This article is interesting for a number of reasons; chief among them is the fact that Morillo’s stance on matters religious in *LotR* is so thoroughly skeptical, with the effect that it forces oneself to be honest. Morillo argues that the spirituality of *LotR* is marked by its emphasis on “destiny, loss and sorrow”, and he relates these themes to Norse paganism, as opposed to Christian
influences in *LotR* (118). I will use Morillo’s article in my discussion about Christian versus Norse pagan influences in *LotR*.

To sum up the research on the subject for this essay: while some, like Pearce, have interpreted *LotR* by using biographical information about Tolkien, that method is problematic and should not be used if the intention is to demonstrate the manifestation of concepts in the novel. Wood has suggested a Christian interpretation of *LotR* based almost exclusively on textual analysis of the novel. His attempt appears, nevertheless, as somewhat insufficient because the meaning of some concepts are taken more or less for granted (cf. evil and sin). Another problem is that the examples of evil and sin primarily concerns the non-human characters of *LotR*, not the humans. Finally, the possible manifestations of sin in *LotR* has not been investigated thoroughly by Wood. This motivates my study.

3. Concepts and Definitions

Since I am analyzing the representation of sin in one of *LotR*’s human characters, and specifically showing how sin is manifested as truth-transgression, pride, avarice, and misdirected love, certain things should be clarified at an early stage, in order to set expectations correctly. First of all, the word sin never appears in *LotR*. Secondly, one would think that a certain religious or philosophical framework is necessary in order to fully make sense of sin. If this framework is absent, any talk about sin runs the risk of being more or less irrelevant. Since any God or gods are absent in *LotR* (with a possible exception mentioned in note 1), it is probably impossible to argue that sin, construed as an offense against God, appears in *LotR*. But with these restrictions in mind, one may search for descriptions of related phenomena that are congruent with prevailing notions about sin. Certain attitudes and behaviors of the characters in *LotR* may resemble particular sins, such as pride, avarice and envy. If the behaviors and attitudes of literary characters are compared with a religious tradition in which pride and envy, for instance, are construed as sins, a high degree of correspondence can perhaps be found. Such a correspondence does not require, I hasten to add, that sin must be acknowledged as an ontological reality. That question will not be discussed here, since my thesis is more modest: to show how sin is manifested as pride, avarice and envy, in a fictional character.
While sin is not a usual topic in modern literary discourse, there is another term that has gained some attention lately in literary and philosophical circles, with a meaning reminiscent of the Catholic notion of sin. The term *mimetic desire* was coined by the influential French American historian and literary theorist René Girard in the 1960’s. This term will be defined below, and later be of use in a literary discussion about the desire for the Ring. Finally, a brief definition of evil will be presented.

3.1 Sin

A broad definition of sin is as follows: “a human fault that offends a good God and results in human guilt” (“Sin”). This definition is congruent with the teachings of various monotheistic religions. In the Old and New Testament, three commonly used words for sin are *khatta’th*, *pasha*, and *hamarteia*, respectively. The first one simply means “sin” and the others “missing the mark”, or “transgression” (Attridge). I want to take a closer look, however, at a definition provided by a specific religious tradition, i.e. Roman Catholicism, and this choice can be justified for one reason. If the concept of sin can be proved to exist within *LotR*, it is likely that the suggested examples will share some degree of correspondence with a cultural context that *LotR*’s author participated in. The importance of this point should not be exaggerated; it is merely an assumption about the possibility of the influence of a particular religion, i.e. Roman Catholicism. The Catholic Church defines sin in the following way:

Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as an “utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, henceforth CCC)

Furthermore, the Catholic Church distinguishes between mortal and venial sins, and claims that mortal sin “destroys charity in the heart of man” (CCC). Mortal sin attacks “the vital principle within us – that is, charity.” This kind of sin is also described as “a radical possibility of human freedom” (CCC). In the Catholic tradition, there is a list of mortal sins: pride, avarice and envy come first in this account (CCC). If sin is understood as an example of human freedom that should be avoided, desire and temptation can be understood as the first
steps in a process potentially resulting in sin. This interpretation of sin, where desire and temptation is taken into consideration, makes it possible to describe sin in more exclusively human terms: although some people doubt or deny God’s existence, they may still have desires, and be subject to temptation, no less than believers.

Even though sin often manifests itself as acts, it can also be understood as an inclination. It is called an “inclination towards evil” and “the overwhelming misery which oppresses men” (CCC). The noun “men” is probably meant here to include all human beings; it then seems that sin is more or less unavoidable and all human beings are oppressed by it.

To conclude: according to Catholic Christianity, an offense against reason, truth and right conscience can be interpreted as an act of sin. Furthermore, mortal sin is related to human freedom, but this radical possibility should be avoided, because it destroys love within human beings. Catholic Christianity states that sin is a failure in genuine love for God and neighbor; however, even if God is taken out of the equation, at least two human elements remain: freedom and genuine love. It is thus possible to construe human shortcomings in genuine love, and improper use of human freedom, as examples of sins. Although the God-dimension is left out here, this idea of sin is in line with the Catholic idea of pride, avarice and envy being examples of so called mortal sins, as they destroy love within human beings. At least one of the deadly sins has a secular counterpart. Envy seems quite similar to the concept of mimetic desire, and it is to this latter term I will now turn my attention.

3.2 Mimetic Desire

It has been claimed that Girard’s literary theory of mimetic desire may be the most astute explanation of the mechanisms behind the human desire to acquire a position of privilege, at the expense of others (Andersson). I will use the term when discussing one character in LotR, in order to better make sense of his desire for the Ring. Below is an attempt to describe and define mimetic desire, and to compare it with the concept of sin.

According to Girard, human desire is mimetic, or imitative (3). This means that we acquire the objects of our desires in the same way we acquire other skills, for example language: we imitate someone else. In order to find out what we want, we are constantly looking beyond
ourselves, and we learn to desire the objects that are desired by others (Kirwan xiii). There is never a direct linear relationship between a desiring subject and the object of desire, but always a model in between, which means that there is a triangular geometry of desire: subject-model-object (xiii). Girard discovered this principle when he studied European novelists, such as Cervantes, Proust and Dostoyevsky, and he has applied it more recently upon the works of Shakespeare (xiii). Girard suggests that imitation “contaminates our urge to acquire and possess” because imitation does not only draw people closer to one another, it pulls them apart (3). “Individuals who desire the same thing are united by something so powerful that, as long as they can share whatever they desire, they remain the best of friends; as soon as they cannot, they become the worst of enemies” (3). Girard claims that mimetic desire is a “fundamental source of human conflict” (3). Like the notion of sin, mimetic desire can be used to explain human conflicts. If someone (A) openly desires someone else’s (B’s) house, dog, wife or car, it is easy to imagine a certain line that should not be crossed. If A is looking at B’s house a few minutes per day, for instance, it will probably be perceived as normal behavior by B, because B truly knows that his house is impressive. He desires it himself and A might simply be imitating, innocently at first, the desire of B. However, if A would stare, jealously, at B’s house three hours every day, some conflict may arise. B is not justified in his desire of A’s house – only A has the right to desire his own house passionately – so if B really imitates A’s passionate desire, it is easy to imagine a conflict between them. One may conclude, then, that mimetic (imitative) desire was the cause of the conflict. If A would happen to be a Christian, and willing to explain his own role in the conflict, his priest might name A’s behavior as envy – an example of sin. Thus, some similarity exists between mimetic desire and sin, regarding their potential use as explanations of human conflicts.

The most well-known biblical prohibitions against coveting can be found in the book of Exodus. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife … or anything that belongs to your neighbor” (New International Version, Exodus 20.17). Regarding envy as a specific religious concept, it may also be pointed out that the Catholic definition of sin includes desires that are “contrary to the eternal law” and envy is part of the list of so-called mortal sins. This indicates that desire has been treated in a serious manner in Christian tradition, and that some desires actually are regarded as sins (CCC). A short definition of mimetic desire, which will be used in this essay, is as follows: that all of our desires are borrowed from other people.
3.3 Evil

Evil has been defined as “serious unjustified harm inflicted on sentient beings” (“Evil”). Philosophers and theologians traditionally distinguish between two types of evil: natural evil, which is the result of non-human activity, and moral evil, which is the result of human activity (“Evil”). Some would be quick to question propositions about any moral uniqueness related to human beings. Although human and non-human agents may have different moral responsibilities, any such differences will not be discussed further.

4. Ralph C. Wood’s Interpretation of Evil and Sin

In the subsequent section, the interpretation put forth by Wood, concerning evil and sin, will be discussed. I will suggest that sin is manifested as a human phenomenon in the tenth chapter of *LotR*, with reference to Boromir, and that sin is exemplified as truth-transgression, pride, avarice, and misdirected love.

The representation of sin in a human character in *LotR* has, so far, been overlooked or only discussed briefly by Tolkien scholars. Wood, however, has described the effects of temptation in *LotR* (63). He also discusses evil in *LotR*, but he fails to fully articulate the connection between evil and sin in *LotR*. Such an interpretation is insufficient because it fails to fully recognize how sin is manifested in *LotR*.

4.1 Truth-transgression, Pride, Avarice, and Misdirected Love

In Gandalf’s absence, Aragorn is the new leader of the fellowship. At the beginning of the tenth chapter, Aragorn asks: “What shall now become of our Company that has travelled so far in fellowship?” (Tolkien 396). Frodo is granted one hour to reflect about the future and decide in solitude. “You shall have an hour, and you shall be alone” – this is an agreement that no-one objects to (396). Boromir, however, violates the agreement by taking off discretely in order to be with Frodo (397). By soft words and later by force, he tries to get his hands on Frodo’s ring. Despite the fact that Frodo informs him about the impossibility of
using the Ring, “what is done with it turns to evil” (398), Boromir justifies his desire by claiming that he wants to be able “to use the power of the Enemy against him” (398).

Boromir’s actions will now be interpreted with reference to some claims made by Wood. In a discussion about Sméagol and his false account of his acquisition of the Ring, Wood initially states that there is a “seductive power of evil to overwhelm the truth” (55). Secondly, it is claimed that “those who commit sins and crimes must always justify them” (55), and thirdly, that “all love that is not directed to the love of God turns into hatred” (57).

Boromir’s actions, in the tenth chapter, are described by Frodo as a fall “into evil” (401). Can Boromir’s violation of the agreement be interpreted not only as truth-transgression, but also as an evil act? Truth-transgression seems to be in line with the definition of sin as “an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience” (emphasis added, CCC). Evil was defined as “serious unjustified harm inflicted on sentient beings” (“Evil”). Although Boromir’s behavior may seem innocent at first, Frodo eventually suffers because of this. In order to escape Boromir, Frodo puts on the Ring, thus exposing himself to the searching Eye (401). Frodo had to do this, it seems. “There was only one thing he could do: trembling he pulled out the Ring upon its chain and quickly slipped it on his finger, even as Boromir sprang at him again” (399). A high degree of necessity seems evident (“only one thing he could do”) so although the Ring may have attracted Frodo, it was the erratic behavior of Boromir that prompted Frodo to use it. The power of the Eye is described accordingly, in relation to Frodo: “Very soon it would nail him down” (401). Since the Eye is described as being capable of nailing Frodo down, using the word evil here is probably not an exaggeration, as being “nailed down” seems tantamount to suffer serious unjustified harm (401). It is logical to claim, then, that Boromir’s decision to violate the agreement of the fellowship is a violation of the truth – he did not respect the agreement – and that this also is the first step, in the tenth chapter, in a chain of events that exposed Frodo to suffering. Wood’s statement about the “seductive power of evil to overwhelm the truth” can thus be used to describe both Boromir’s violation of the agreement and the consequences of his actions (55). However, Wood discusses truth-transgression and evil in relation to the non-human Sméagol (55), and Wood never makes the connection between truth-transgression and sin. I have shown that Boromir’s decision to violate the agreement can be interpreted as an evil act, and also as a sin: i.e. truth-transgression on behalf of Boromir. Sin is thus represented in LotR as a human phenomenon.
Furthermore, Wood fails to recognize the role of pride (another example of sin), in the context of truth violation. When Boromir is tempted to act upon his desire, trying to get hold of the Ring, it may be argued that he lacks humility and self-restraint. If pride is understood as a negative characteristic, associated with arrogance and dominance, it can be contrasted with humility. One definition of pride, from a dictionary, is “the belief that you are better or more important than other people” (“Pride”). Boromir choosing to go off in order to be alone with Frodo, can be interpreted as an example of Boromir’s pride; he thinks he knows better than the other members of the council.

May I stay now and talk for a while, since I have found you? It would comfort me. Where there are so many, all speech becomes a debate without end. But two together may perhaps find wisdom. (397).

Boromir tries to persuade Frodo that it is sufficient for him to listen to Boromir. In the company of the other Fellowship members, “all speech becomes a debate without end” (397). But this is something Boromir only tells Frodo; Boromir had not voiced any opposition to the agreement, made by all reaming fellowship members, that Frodo should be left alone (396). One could perhaps claim that Boromir had forgotten the agreement, or never understood it properly. These explanations are not convincing, as Boromir never is depicted as either whimsical or particularly dull. Another suggestion, though, would be to claim that Boromir is proud. That characterization seems appropriate, because in the tenth chapter, Boromir acts and speaks in a way that seems to indicate that he does indeed regard himself as more important than other people – in line with the definition of pride above. He even imagines himself as a wise king:

Boromir strode up and down, speaking ever more loudly. Almost he seemed to have forgotten Frodo, while his talk dwelt on walls and weapons, and the mustering of men; and he drew plans for great alliances and glorious victories to be; and he cast down Mordor, and became himself a mighty king, benevolent and wise (398).

Since Boromir evidently thinks so highly of himself, his attitude can be characterized as an example of the sin called pride. Boromir imagines himself as benevolent but his words and actions, towards Frodo, reveal quite the opposite: he calls a curse upon Frodo, for instance (399). Thus, Boromir has both transgressed truth and revealed himself as guilty of pride.
However, since Wood never makes the link between pride and the transgression of truth, he seems unable to fully recognize the representation of this sin in *LotR.*

Regarding Wood’s claim that “those who commit sins and crimes must always justify them” (55), it can also be applied upon Boromir. He associates the Ring with “the power to Command”, which would justify his possession of it (398). Boromir even encourages Frodo to lie: “You can say that I was too strong and took it by force” (399). These are examples of justifications for crimes and sins. The point is that sins are rarely committed for their own sake, but often with an allegedly good objective in mind. It is not the Ring in itself, then, that is interesting for Boromir. He desires the power associated with the Ring. The Ring can thus be construed as a symbol. Boromir seems greedy about power, so it seems apt to characterize Boromir’s desire for the Ring as avarice (greed) for more power. One may claim that the Ring is a symbol of evil that evokes the particular sin of avarice. Wood, however, never claims that the Ring symbolizes evil or sin in this manner.

Finally, it is quite evident that Boromir, when he is alone with Frodo, acts in an unpredictable manner. For instance, Boromir accuses Frodo of being unfriendly, saying that Frodo intends to take the Ring to Sauron and “sell us all” (Tolkien 399). Following these accusations, Boromir literally, as well as metaphorically, falls, but he quickly realizes his own folly, as he cries out “A madness took me, but it has passed” (400). Is it possible to apply Wood’s third claim upon the effects of sin in *LotR,* that “all love that is not directed to the love of God turns into hatred”? Admittedly, since organized religion and a God or gods seems absent in *LotR,* or only alluded to in passing (see note 1), it is difficult to fully accept Wood’s claim. Indeed, Wood may be guilty of imposing his own religious ideas upon the text in a naïve or willful manner, something which Kerry advised against (244). Nevertheless, if Wood’s claim is adjusted, it can be applied upon Boromir. For instance, one may say that there is a principle of brotherly love, to which love should be directed, lest it turn into hatred. According to the definition of so called mortal sins above, this particular sin destroys charity (love) “in the heart of man” (CCC).

Boromir’s desire for the Ring makes him hateful. He calls Frodo an “obstinate fool” and “miserable trickster” (399). One may argue that this is an example of misdirected love; since Boromir mostly loves himself, his own plans, and the power associated with the Ring, it becomes difficult for him to also love Frodo. By his own admission, Boromir was taken by “a madness”, and even if this is not synonymous with hate, some of Boromir’s words directed to
Frodo are certainly hateful: “Curse you and all halflings to death and darkness!” (399). If Wood’s third statement is modified, as suggested above, it can be applied upon Boromir regarding his behavior towards another member of the fellowship. Love should be directed towards brotherly love, lest it turns into hatred. One aspect of grave sin is that it, supposedly, destroys love in the heart of man. Since Boromir’s preoccupation with himself made him unable to love Frodo, although only momentarily, one may claim that sin is manifested in LotR as misdirected love.

To conclude: while I appreciate Wood’s perceptive account of evil, and his idea about a proper direction for love, he fails to articulate the connection between evil and sin. Wood also overlooks how sin is represented in LotR’s human characters. By focusing upon Boromir, I observed that sin is represented in LotR as a human phenomenon. Secondly, there is link between pride and transgression of truth, which also constitutes a manifestation of sin. However, since Wood never makes the link between pride and the transgression of truth, he seems unable to fully recognize the representation of this sin in LotR. I have also showed that the Ring can be interpreted as a symbol of evil that evokes the particular sin of avarice. Wood, however, never claims that the Ring symbolizes evil or sin in this manner. Finally, sin is also represented in LotR as misdirected love, exemplified by Boromir in his momentary inability to love Frodo.

5. The desire for the Ring

Certain pairs of characters in LotR are closely linked to one another, by kinship or calling for instance. This means, among other things, that the flaws of one particular character becomes all the more noticeable, as one is juxtaposed with another. René Girard’s concept of mimetic desire will be used here, to better make sense of Faramir and Boromir and their different ways of handling desire. The specific intention is to show that the literary term mimetic desire can be used in order to make sense of the specific sin envy, in LotR.

In a discussion about Collatine and Tarquin, two rivals in Shakespeare’s poem The Rape of Lucrece, René Girard makes the following observation:
The proudest men want to possess the most desirable objects; they cannot be certain that they have done so, as long as empty flattery alone glorify their choice; they need more tangible proof, the desire of other men, as numerous and prestigious as possible. They must recklessly expose their richest treasure to these desires. (Girard 22)

The desire of other men is of great significance, according to Girard. When Collatine praises his beautiful and chaste wife Lucrece, in front of his rival Tarquin, it results in Tarquin becoming contaminated with desire (21). This was very unwise, because Tarquin goes off to rape her (21). Girard claims that “envy is the aphrodisiac par excellence”, but desire evoked by envy becomes a false desire, because it is borrowed (23-24). Girard argues that this is what happens with Tarquin, in relation to Collatine; the former simply borrows, or imitates, the desire of the latter (24). The examples of mimetic desire, provided by Girard, are sometimes subtle, and sometimes striking (21). The textual evidence for mimetic desire in *LotR* requires a perceptive mind to be identified as such, because that desire may be expressed more implicitly, compared to the works of Shakespeare. Nevertheless, the desire of Boromir will be easier to make sense of, if mimetic desire is applied to it, as a tool of interpretation. Boromir can be interpreted as becoming contaminated with desire, so it will be argued in the following section, similarly to Tarquin.

5.1 The Desires of Boromir and Faramir

In the following section, I will argue that Tarquin and Boromir can be interpreted as quite similar, because their desire seems to awaken the moment they realize that someone of superior status is, or has been, in possession of a desirable object. Comparing a woman with a material thing may seem inappropriate, but focus will mostly be on desire as such, and how it is evoked in humans.

At the Council of Elrond, when the tale about the Ring is being told, Boromir suddenly becomes very excited. Boromir knows only a little about Sauron’s Great Ring and has assumed, up to that point, that the Ring “had perished from the world in the ruin of his first realm” (Tolkien 243). Upon hearing that Isildur had taken it, Boromir reveals a great deal of interest in the Ring (243). He is not only inquisitive, but also most eager to dispute the wisdom of others. He suggests, for instance, that the Ring could be used (267). Boromir’s lack
of knowledge about the perils of desiring the Ring is exposed when Elrond tells him about its true nature:

We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we 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 greater power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. (267)

That the Ring should not be used appears like an obvious truth to Elrond. It is important to understand and to respect that, but Boromir’s initial failure to do so is not his most serious error. Elrond’s words reveal that Boromir’s heart may well be corrupted already, because of his desire for the Ring. Elrond’s message that the Ring cannot be used, and that “the very desire of it corrupts the heart” are uttered as a direct response to Boromir’s suggestion that the Ring should in fact be used (243). The precise words of Boromir, that prompted Elrond’s sharp response, were the following: “Let the Ring be your weapon, if it has such a power as you say. Take it and go forth to victory!” (267). To be inquisitive about the Ring, and to suggest that it should be taken and used, can be interpreted as indications of precisely the kind of desire Elrond advises against. In this regard, Boromir reveals himself to be quite different than his brother Faramir, as will be discussed later. The most important point here, though, is that desire of the Ring is declared, by Elrond, as capable of corrupting the heart.

Another point is that the mere mentioning of Isildur’s name, along with the realization that this great king had been in possession of the Ring, can be interpreted as a partial explanation of Boromir’s desire. Up to that point, Boromir had not yet seen the Ring. The situation is similar to the one described by Girard, where Tarquin’s desire for Lucrece woke upon hearing his superior describing her beauty and chastity (21). Just like Boromir, Tarquin had at that point not seen the object of desire. If desire is understood as triangular, in line with Girard’s claim, there has to be a model in between the desiring subject and desired object. In the case with The Rape of Lucrece, Collatine perform this function as model. With Boromir, it seems that Isildur is a model in evoking desire, because the mentioning of Isildur’s name, along with the realization that the Ring still might exist, seems to trigger something in Boromir. Sauron is referred to, by Boromir, as “him that we do not name”, but Isildur is spoken about openly (Tolkien 243). Although described in LotR as mighty and great (242), Isildur is still a man; the realization that this man had been in possession of the Ring seems to make Boromir excited:
I have heard of the Great Ring of him that we do not name; but we believed that it had perished from the world in the ruin of his first realm. Isildur took it! That is tidings indeed. (243)

Isildur may thus be interpreted as a model of Boromir’s desire. When the Ring finally is shown at the Council, and termed as Isildur’s Bane, it made Boromir eyes glint. His reaction upon seeing it is telling: “The Halfling’ he muttered”, implying that Frodo (the halfling) is unqualified for the task of carrying the ring that once belonged to the mighty Isildur (247). The point is that Isildur can be interpreted as standing in between Boromir and the Ring, as a model evoking desire. Obviously, the mind of Boromir remains inaccessible for all readers of LotR. All one can do is argue for the possibility of particular interpretations; one may then object that the mere existence of the Ring is more important than the question of who is, or have been, in possession, of it. While acknowledging that the existence of the Ring is important, it is nevertheless possible to interpret Isildur as a model evoking Boromir’s desire. It is not meant to be a total explanation of Boromir’s desire, but only a partial explanation.

Regarding Faramir, the brother of Boromir, he is aware that some matters should not be “debated openly before many men” (669). He does not want to discuss “Isildur’s Bane” openly, knowing that “such things do not breed peace among confederates” (669). If not peace, then perhaps desire, as Sam later claims was the case with Boromir: “From the moment he first saw it he wanted the Enemy’s Ring!” (680). Faramir, on the other hand, claims to be quite different: “Even if I were such a man as to desire this thing…”, implying that he does not desire it (681). Faramir describes his brother’s desire for the Ring in the following way:

What in truth this Thing is I cannot guess; but some heirloom of power and peril it must be. A fell weapon, perchance, devised by the Dark Lord. If it were a thing that gave advantage in battle, I can well believe that Boromir, the proud and fearless, often rash, ever anxious for the victory of Minas Tirith (and his own glory therein), might desire such a thing and be allured by it. (671)

When talking about Isildur’s Bane, Faramir also claims that he “would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway” (671). If Faramir’s account of himself is to be trusted, he is quite different from his brother, i.e., not “proud, fearless, often rash” (671). Faramir’s lack of pride, as well as his legitimate fear, qualities which I interpret as a respect for boundaries, makes him different from his brother. The Ring does not really allure him. Faramir is simply not a
person that imitates the desire from others, neither from Isildur, Boromir or Frodo. Boromir, however, can be interpreted as imitating Isildur’s desire of the Ring. It means that Boromir’s desire can be interpreted as mimetic, in the sense that it was borrowed from someone else.

In conclusion: by using Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, it has been proposed that Isildur can be interpreted as standing in between Boromir and the Ring, as a model evoking desire. However, that interpretation is presented here as a partial explanation of Boromir’s desire, not meant to be a complete one. If Isildur is interpreted as a model evoking the desire of Boromir, mimetic desire can be used in order to explain Boromir’s desire for the Ring. Furthermore, the desire of the Ring is described as capable of corrupting the heart. If that indeed is what happens with Boromir, and Isildur functions as the model evoking Boromir’s desire, the latter can be interpreted as becoming contaminated with desire. The literary term mimetic desire may then be used in order to make sense of the specific sin envy, in LotR, since envy is closely related to desire.

6. Paganism or Christianity as a lens of interpretation

In this section, my previous claim that the Ring can be interpreted as a symbol of sinful desire will be used. Stephen Morillo’s claim that LotR “is not, in any significant or specific way, Christian”, and that the spirituality of LotR is “haunted by the inevitability of fate”, will be contrasted against a more Christian interpretation of LotR (106).

The character Boromir has been discussed at length in this essay. Wood’s claim, about “the seductive power of evil to overwhelm the truth”, was discussed and applied upon Boromir. I have claimed that Boromir has transgressed truth and also revealed himself as being guilty of pride. It has also been argued that mimetic desire can be used in order to make sense of Boromir’s desire for the Ring, because Boromir seems to imitate the desire of Isildur. These examples can be understood as representations of sin in LotR, and it has demonstrated that these representations are in line with line with the Catholic definition of sin; for instance, Catholic Christianity names pride as one of the mortal sins. While this conclusion about the possibility of reading LotR in a Christian manner – using specific Christian notions about sin as a lens of interpretation for instance – never should be understood as coercive or exclusive, it surely seems as a viable manner to interpret LotR.
These claims about the representation of sin in *LotR* are in sharp contradiction to some claims put forth by Morillo. He argues that *LotR* is not “is not, in any significant or specific way, Christian”, and that the spirituality of *LotR* is “haunted by the inevitability of fate” (Morillo 106). Morillo associates spirituality with “some combination of world view and emotional tone, the combination of which produces some sense of transcendent meaning” (108). To support his claim about the inevitability of fate, Morillo pays attention to the waning power of the Elves, the departure of Bilbo and Frodo after their labors, and Gondor’s circumscribed power, for instance (110). Morillo acknowledges that the plot of *LotR* is driven by “the conflict between good and evil” (110), and also that the characters are in possession of “free will” (111). However, to render a Christian reading of *LotR* possible, Morillo suggests that *LotR* really should be about a single character’s self-sacrifice:

Therefore we might ask, where in *Lord of the Rings* are the specifically Christian features beyond the commons of spirituality? Surely a central character whose self-sacrifice redeems the world should be part of such a scheme? Clearly no such single character exists in the work. (113)

Since this kind of character does not exist in *LotR*, according to Morillo, it is more apt, he suggests, to describe *LotR* as primarily influenced by pagan mythology, because of the novel’s emphasis upon the inevitability of fate (114). Morillo concludes “that the spirituality of *Lord of the Rings* cannot convincingly be taken as specifically Christian” (114).

However, since the representations of sin in *LotR* seems to be in line with Catholic notions about sin, it is difficult to accept Morillo’s’s blank denial of “Christian spirituality” in *LotR*. However, his use of words here, i.e. “specifically Christian”, are ambiguous. If “specifically” is meant to be understood as exclusively, then he may well be right, since the notion of sin appears in various religions. However, he expressed his claim differently in the introduction, that *LotR* is not, “in any significant or specific way, Christian” (emphasis added, 106). Against such a claim one may point out that the representations of sin in *LotR* do not command anyone to identify them as exclusively Christian phenomena, but a Christian interpretation of said representations may still be a plausible alternative (perhaps even the most plausible). Hence, it seems hard to accept Morillo’s claim that *LotR* is not Christian in any significant or specific way. Furthermore, Morillo’s proposal about the need of a single character’s self-sacrifice, in order to make a Christian interpretation possible, is not convincing. A single character sacrificing himself can perhaps be found, or perhaps not;
nevertheless, it may still be possible to argue that sin is represented in *LotR* in accordance with Christian notions. Since sin is represented in so many ways in *LotR*, and those representations were demonstrated to be in line with Catholic notions of sin, it is not inappropriate that the representation of sin is part of the novel’s spirituality.

To conclude: a proposal by Morillo was discussed, regarding the denial of *LotR* as being Christian “in any significant or specific way.” Morillo may be right, if specifically Christian must mean *exclusively* Christian. But he is probably wrong if the representations of sin in *LotR* are acknowledged to be in line with the Catholic definition of sin.

7. Conclusion

In the introduction to this essay, I stated that it might be tempting to look for thinly disguised allegories in *LotR*: Gandalf could thus be interpreted as Christ, or the Ring could perhaps be understood as an unambiguous symbol of sin. While such a temptation should be avoided, in large part because of the counsel provided by Tolkien himself, to be found the Foreword to the Second Edition of *LotR*, the temptation may still remain for some readers. When working on this essay, I often found occasion to contemplate the possible reasons Tolkien may have had for crafting *LotR* in a non-allegorical fashion. Perhaps he simply wanted to convey truths and general insights about the world in the most palpable fashion imaginable; to achieve this end he decided *not* to invite his readers to draw fast conclusions about who or what the characters represent? The readers’ imagination will probably be better stimulated if certain things are not spelled out, thus enabling applicability and the possibility of multiple interpretations.

While I have demonstrated that sin is represented in *LotR* as human phenomena, for instance as truth-transgression, pride and misdirected love, I never meant to suggest that everyone has to see things in the very same manner as I have done. Other readers may indeed focus on the lack of any God or gods in Middle Earth, and construe the whole novel along pre-Christian lines. Such a reading may cause a stumbling block for the acceptance of a religious concept. However, my intention has been to focus upon the human side of sin, and indeed to discuss sin as specific behaviors. The question about the existence of any God or gods, in Middle Earth or elsewhere, who is offended by sin, may be ignored here.
There is a seriousness in *LotR*, apparent, for instance, in Elrond’s sharp warning to Boromir that the very desire of the Ring will corrupt the heart. This severity seems in sharp contradiction to much of the general attitude often associated with “postmodernism” and “culture of relativity.” But one particular aspect of *LotR*’s message is quite counter cultural: certain things should not be played with lightly, and certain things should not even be desired, because they will destroy human nature. That is a conclusion I make after analyzing *LotR.* The Ring was crafted by the Enemy and it has the capacity to attract and destroy. In a sense, it would have been very boring if Tolkien had been explicit about what he imagined the Ring to be: the fact that he did not invites readers, regardless of religious persuasion or lack thereof, to think for themselves.

For a more mundane reading of the representation of sin in *LotR*, Girard’s theory of mimetic desire was used. Although this theory is in broad agreement with at least one specific aspect of the Catholic notion of sin, i.e. sin as desire, the theory is not dependent upon a Christian vision of reality at all. Basically, Girard claims that all human desire is imitated from others. I proposed that Isildur can be interpreted as standing in between Boromir and the Ring, a model of evoking Boromir’s desire, and that this is a partial explanation of Boromir’s desire. This is a completely non-religious way of making sense of sin in *LotR*.

Since the word “text” is derived from *textus*, meaning woven fabric, I hope this text is true to the word’s etymology. Hopefully, not too many loose ends can be found. For the future, an investigation of sin as part of *LotR*’s theme could be done. One may also imagine an investigation of another character than Boromir. Perhaps Sméagol is the most complete Christ figure of *LotR*, since his sacrificial death seems necessary in order to save the world?
Works Cited


Wagner, Vit. “Tolkien proves he’s still the king.”