

## **Satan, Sauron, and Sundry Dark Lords: Evil Incarnate in Fantasy**

Fantasy, especially epic fantasy, deals with ultimate evil. The very goal of the epic quest is often to thwart the machinations of the Dark Lord, of evil incarnate, in order to prevent him from becoming ruler of the entire world. These Dark Lords, be they called Sauron, Lord Foul, or simply the Dark One, have a large number of features in common. Their strategies to achieve world domination are similar, as are the ways in which they, their servants, and their domains are portrayed. It seems that many writers of mainstream fantasy have been inspired by an original Dark Lord.

Brian Attebery suggests that *The Lord of the Rings* is the centre from which the fuzzy set of fantasy radiates (13-14). Authors who want to place themselves firmly in the centre of the fantasy genre therefore make use of Tolkien's ideas in constructing their own fantasies. In this paper, I will discuss Satan as the source of many of the Tolkienian Dark Lord's main traits, and proceed to demonstrate how Tolkien's Dark Lord has become a powerful model which later authors of high fantasy have used and re-used. I will begin by discussing what similarities and differences there are between, on the one hand, Melkor and Sauron, and, on the other, the most prominent Lord of Evil in the Christian tradition.

In *The Mythologies of Tolkien's Middle-earth*, Ruth Noel compares Sauron to a number of "dark and baleful gods: Pluto, Balar, and, primarily, Odin" (96) but only mentions, in passing, that Sauron is similar to the orthodox Satan in being incapable of material creation (97). It seems reasonable, however, that one of the larger bones that Tolkien put into his Cauldron of Stories ("On Fairy-Stories" 26) to give the 'soup' a flavour of ultimate evil, was Satan. The comparison between Satan and Tolkien's Dark Lord is complicated by two factors.

Firstly, Tolkien actually includes two Dark Lords: Melkor, the Vala who turns to evil and works to destroy what the other Valar create; and Sauron, who is only a servant of Melkor until the Vala is banished and Sauron can claim the position of Dark Lord for himself. He never quite manages to

replaces Malkor, though, and even in the *LOTR*, Gandalf refers to Sauron as but a “servant or emissary” (*RK* 861). My comparison will focus on descriptions of Sauron, though, as he is the Lord of the Rings.

Secondly, the Christian devil cannot be said to be a homogenous entity. Instead, he is an amalgamation of elements from various sources, based on the Scriptures only to a certain extent (Delbanco 24). Some of the European lore about Satan is derived from pagan traditions, relating, for instance, to Wotan (Delbanco 26), the Teutonic aspect of Odin. In this study, the biblical Satan and some of the general traits of the traditional Satan will be used.

A reasonable point of departure in a comparison is the roles of Sauron and Satan in their respective narratives. They are both the embodiment of all evil, the focal point if not the source of evil. The Dark Lords’ main purpose is to “shape the narrative,” to push the story-line along, which makes them, principally, *actants* (using A. J. Greimas’s terminology as explained by Attebery (73)). Throughout literary history, there have been other stories where Satan has been an *actor* (*acteur*), someone whose individual qualities have been of more interest (for example, Anne Rice’s *Memnoch the Devil* and Milton’s “Paradise Lost”), but in the Bible, the devil has been given precious little personality and a major part to play, which is true for Sauron as well.

Generally, Satan and Sauron are most often associated with fire and darkness. Satan has power of darkness (Colossians 1:13), and hell is a rather fiery place, burning with fire that gives off darkness rather than light (Milton). Bearing that in mind, we may then consider the description of Sauron as seen in Galadriel’s Mirror:

But suddenly the Mirror went altogether dark, as dark as if a hole had opened in the world of sight, and Frodo looked into emptiness. In the black abyss there appeared a single Eye that slowly grew, until it filled nearly all the Mirror. ... The Eye was rimmed with fire, but was itself glazed, yellow as a cat’s, watchful and intent, and the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing. (*FR* 355)

Sauron is fire burning in the darkness, just as Mount Doom with its heart of fire lies in the centre of Mordor, the Dark Country. His shape is “black and hideous” (*RK* App A 1013) after his lies caused the fall of Numenor. Lying is

another common trait: Satan has been given the sobriquet ‘father of lies’ (John 8:44), and Sauron is called “the Base Master of Treachery” by Gandalf (*RK* 872). For instance, Sauron’s deceit ensnared the Elven-smiths of Eregion long enough to let him forge the One Ring (*FR* 236; “Of the Rings of Power” 287-288).

In the Book of Revelations, it is said that Satan is a fallen angel, banished from Heaven after leading a rebellion (Revelations 12:7) and that a vast number of angels fell with him (Revelations 12:4, 9). Sauron, too, falls from grace (*FR* 261). In his prelapsarian state, he is a Maia of Aulë, the craftsman of the Valar (“Valaquenta” 32), but later becomes Melkor’s lieutenant (*Silmarillion* 47). Sauron’s fall is thus connected to Melkor’s, who already before the creation of Arda rebels by introducing discord into Ilúvatar’s music. After his rebellion, Melkor turns to evil, enticing several of the Ainur to join and serve him. In this way, Melkor becomes, like Satan, the first sinner (as described in 1 John 3:8). (A more thorough discussion of Melkor’s rebellion can be found in Elisabeth Wittingham’s article “The Mythology of the Ainulindalë: Tolkien’s Creation of Hope”.)

Furthermore, “Ainulindalë” describes how Melkor and Sauron are created by Ilúvatar and must operate within the bounds set by him. This is evident in Melkor’s search for the Flame Imperishable in order to create things of his own. According to Wittingham, “[e]ven in this endeavour, Ilúvatar’s greater power is evident since Melkor never finds what he seeks; the Flame Imperishable resides with Ilúvatar and is in his control” (215). The same limits apply to Satan, who is created by God, is incapable of material creation, and can only do what God allows him to do (Job 1:6 to 2:10). Melkor and Sauron only have the power to corrupt and pervert that which is already created. The most notable example is when Melkor captures elves and, through “slow arts of cruelty”, breeds the orcs (*Silmarillion* 50). Not even the One Ring is an example of true creation, because what power went into the Ring was originally Sauron’s own, and the power inherent in him diminished when he gave it up to the Ring (*RK* 861).

There are also some interesting differences between Satan and Sauron, in relation to their powers over the dead, their relationship to their realms, and the strategy they employ to conquer the world. It is also worth noting that

Sauron, unlike Satan, has a distinct group of henchmen, the Nazgûls, to do his bidding.

When sinners die, they go to Hell to be tormented (at least according to some), falling under Satan's power. Unlike Satan, neither Melkor nor Sauron have any power over the dead, even though Noel claims that Sauron has supernatural powers concerning the dead (126). Her argument is not very convincing, however, resting on the fact that "Mordor" means "murder" in Old English, that Sauron rules demons and wraiths, and that he is described as black (128). Even though he was known as the Necromancer in Dol Goldur (*FR* 244), it seems that Sauron's power lies in the postponement of death. The Ring causes Gollum to live many times his normal life, and seems to have the same effect on Bilbo. Gandalf explains to Frodo that "[a] mortal ... who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues" (*FR* 46). When Frodo is wounded by the Morgul-knife, he does not die, but starts to fade into a realm of shadows, just as the Ringwraiths once faded into undead life, falling under the thralldom of the One Ring ("Of the Rings of Power" 289; Noel 131). This makes sense if we consider that Sauron's power is limited to Middle-earth, and death (the Gift of Men) takes men away from Arda and elves and dwarves end up in the Halls of Mandos when they die (*Silmarillion* 44; Nelson 206). By keeping his servants from dying, Sauron retains power over them. His power over life and death is thus but a vague shadow of Ilúvatar's power. Sauron cannot bestow more life upon his subjects. The deliverance from evil, Ilúvatar's Gift of Men – dying – is only corrupted by the pain that so often accompanies it, making it the object of fear instead of hope (*Silmarillion* 42; *RK* 1011; Nelson 206).

The domains of the Devil and of Sauron, while sharing a general unpleasantness, are also different. The exact nature of Hell is not very clear, but is generally imagined as being filled with brimstone, darkness, and fire. The fire in Mordor is confined to Mount Doom, and while the land is broken and barren around it, a cold, black, dry, torturous place, where nothing grows save the occasional thicket of thorns and briars, this is not true of all of Mordor. During their journey towards the Mountain of Fire, the hobbits also walk through the glens of the Morgai where vegetation still fought for life; dying but not yet dead (*RK* 900) and in the southern parts of Mordor, great slav-worked fields provided food for Sauron's armies (*RK* 902). According to

Oppenheimer, evil is accompanied by “a personified, stiff atmosphere and geography” (6) and Mordor is indeed a personification of Sauron. The evil of Sauron changes the land under his control, as Sam and Frodo notice when they first come to Ithilien, “a land that had only been for a few years under the dominion of the Dark Lord and was not yet fallen wholly into decay” (*TT* 635). Also, Mordor is directly connected to Sauron’s state of mind, so when he is suddenly aware of Frodo and the Ring in Mount Doom, a tremor runs throughout his realm (*RK* 925) and when the Ring is destroyed and Sauron with it, the land of Mordor is torn asunder as well. While Satan does not seem to be connected in a similar manner to his domain, such connections do occur in other belief systems. In *The Golden Bough* Frazer gives an account of a tribe who believes in a strong tie between the well-being of the king and the prosperity of the land (267-8) and the reverse applies to the Fisher King, who bears the ills of the land (Ashley 353).

Finally, the major difference between Satan and Sauron is their strategies in the war to conquer the world. While Satan seems content with working in the background, tempting a god-fearing vicar here, seducing a witch there, and generally acting on a small scale (and leaving the acts of great evil and mass-destruction to humankind), Sauron is more active. He amasses armies, sends out spies, and is very much prepared to go to war in order to conquer, not only once, but several times. The only time Satan goes to war is reputed to be at the final battle of Armageddon, and we have been told, in the Book of Revelations, that he will lose and in a sense has already lost. There are no such prophecies in Middle-earth. This strategy of precipitating warfare could partly be due to the fact that Sauron reappears again after a long absence and has grown impatient. Satan, of course, is around all the time.

The Tolkienian Dark Lord can thus be described as the source of evil and as an actant, whose purpose is to shape the narrative. He is associated with darkness and treachery, and with a fall from grace, and he is incapable of creating, capable only of perverting and corrupting that which already exists. He is assisted by a group of powerful henchmen, and has no real power over the dead. He is actively striving to rule the world, and his domain is inhospitable and reflects, as well as is affected by, his evil nature.

There are conspicuous similarities to other Dark Lords, and I will briefly run through some of the most noteworthy of these. I have looked at Stephen Donaldson’s Lord Foul, Robert Jordan’s Dark One, the Dragonlance

Chronicle's Takhisis, and Terry Brook's Warlock Lord, and although partly being an ironic reversal of the Tolkienian Dark Lord, the evil Lady in Glen Cook's *The Black Company* has also been included.

Even though not all of the Dark Lords above signify the ultimate source of evil, Lord Foul, the Dark One, and Takhisis certainly do. And all of them are ultimately actants, characters whose *raison d'être* is to provide the final threat. In the battle for world domination, they finally lose because, just as in *LOTR*, they are basically stupid and greedy, full of petty malice, petty jealousy, and "the petty desire to establish [themselves] and [their] wishes as pre-eminent to those of all other creatures as well as the environment itself" (Elgin 47). Only Cook's Lady can be allowed a certain brilliance and magnificence in that she is, allegedly, fighting the greater evil of her husband, the Dominator.

A notable similarity between Sauron and these other Dark Lords is the henchmen with which they surround themselves. The nine Ringwraiths, Sauron's most powerful servants, seem to appear in other stories, serving other Dark Lords. Lord Foul's highest servants are the three Ravens that can take over other beings' bodies, allowing them to appear as any creature (Donaldson *LFB* 98). The Dark One has enticed thirteen of the most powerful wielders of magic to serve him; they are known as the Forsaken (Jordan 791), and the Lady is served by the Ten Who Were Taken (Cook 46). The Skull Bearers who serve the Warlock Lord, and the Dragon Highlords who serve Takhisis, may not be as mighty as the Ringwraiths, but they are also certainly powerful servants of their respective Dark Lords.

Furthermore, all the Dark Lords return after a prolonged absence, an interbellum during which most people have had a chance to forget about them. Only in Donaldson do we find the people of the Land anticipating the return of Lord Foul. In the other cases, the Dark Lord has more or less become the stuff of legend, something not quite real, something that is frightening but distant in time and space. They are 'malign sleepers' (Kaveny 621) in that they have been involuntarily absent from the world. As they finally return, however, these Dark Lords, like Sauron, muster their armies and prepare to take over the world.

A final interesting similarity is the connection between the Dark Lord and his domain. The landscape is invariably inhospitable. Foul's Creche stands on a "cracked, bare lowland of dead soil and rock, a place which has lain wrecked

and riven for so long that it had forgotten even the possibility of life” (Donaldson *PTP* 431), and the Dark One’s domain is bordered by the Blight, a tract of rotten, decaying, hellishly corrupted land. Takhisis dwells in the bleak, barren landscape of the Abyss (Weis&Hickman 292), and the landscape around the Warlock Lord’s Skull Kingdom is arid and barren, shrouded in clouds and mist, turned to dust and rock, where nothing can live (Brooks 14). Cook comments on what we expect the Dark Lord’s domain to be like:

Emotion demanded a surround of fiery waste, or at best a land perpetually locked in winter. Instead, this country was a vast green pasture, gentle hills with small farms dotting their southern hips. Trees lined the deep, slow brooks snaking between.

Nearer the Tower the land became less pastoral, but never reflected the gloom [her enemy’s propagandists] placed around the Lady’s stronghold. No brimstone and barren, broken plains. No bizarre, evil creatures strutting over scattered human bones. No dark clouds ever rolling and grumbling in the sky. (240)

With this example of total awareness of the traditional Dark Lord, I would like to conclude by saying that Tolkien borrowed from many sources in his creation of the Dark Lord, with no single source providing a wholesale solution. While Satan certainly provided much inspiration, Tolkien himself created a prototype which has come to dominate the genre’s conception of what the Lord of Evil ought to be like, what his servants are like, and what his country should look like. Through novel after epic fantasy novel, Sauron is defeated, over and over again.

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