

Evil in Fantasy Literature

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Abstract - The concept of evil and the demon have not only been a crucial element in fantasy literature but one that has transcended cultural and religious boundaries to create stereotypes that define man's limitations and his urge to defeat them, liberating him by providing him no easy escape routes. We try to analyze the various definitions proposed for evil and whether any of them can be accepted universally, tracing back the roots of various religious beliefs to understand the beginning of human understanding on this topic. We also aim to establish a link between the proposed definitions of evil and how this is used as a trope in modern fantasy works. Secondly, we debate on bucket categories of evil, reflecting on each discussion in reference to some popular fantasy texts, focussing primarily on the trendsetter of the fantasy genre, The Works of JRR Tolkien while also throwing light upon a slightly different portrayal of evil in High Fantasy works from authors such as JK Rowling, Brandon Sanderson, Sarah J Maas etc.

Keywords – Fantastic; Evil; Mythology; High Fantasy; Religion; Morality; Tolkien.

I. What is evil?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Evil as something profoundly immoral, unpleasant and wicked. Christianity preaches all evil acts as being divided into two broad categories – deadly and venial. Moral and religious teachers come up with their own teachings to extol about their beliefs on the 'should' and 'should not's' for all humans to anyone and everyone willing to listen. The scope of explaining an evil act spreads not only over the range of individuals but also over time and cultures and as we humans try to justify all of our actions, using God when faced with the unjustifiable, this plethora of beliefs continues to find an audience. Our education system, throughout our childhood, objectively classifies some acts as acts against God and hence not good. We are taught never to lie, never to cheat, never to oppose our elders and so on. We leave no room for circumstantial detours. So, does the breaking of school rules by Harry make him evil? And for that matter, is any protagonist who opposes the prevalent social norms through the course of his quest evil?

To answer the above questions, one must first understand as to what differentiates wrong from evil? Most

people would believe that inflicting harm to others intentionally is one act that can be clearly seen as beyond wrong and classified as evil. The doer's knowledge about the outcomes of his actions as well his intention to perform the act in order to create unpleasantness is what provides evil intensity over the wrong. Evil both qualitatively and quantitatively is considered an extension or exaggeration of a wrong act.

The largely unopposed acceptance of God as pure good, which too has come under debate recently, motivates one to look for a parallelism of pure evil too. So how does one define pure evil? Some would feel that a purely evil task is a wrongdoing which causes considerable harm to others, has no plausible reason or motive and is detested by most individuals like the holocaust and American slavery of Africans. This theory has two major flaws. The main point of conflict is as to who judges the motives and reasons behind acts considering that the presence of such scenarios in itself is an evidence towards presence of belief in the underlying intentions. Holocaust and Slavery both provide examples of acts where the doer was at ease with his actions and reasons and the prolonged periods of existence of such

practices have shown that the societies too had come to find no abnormality or wrongdoing in the prevalent ways which provides our second major contradiction. Also, what if at some point of time in future we do find an agreeable reason behind all that was done? Does this mean that the act is or was never evil? Does the evil status change with time and people? Clearly, such a fickle approach cannot be accepted. We analyze the various debates on this definition in later sections.

Apart from the notion of pure evil, one encounters the smaller and more numerous examples of ambition, pride, lust, greed, selfishness, jealousy, corruption and several others. While historically agreed upon largely as anti-social activities, the modern era has seen an inclination towards justifying some levels of each too. Personal ambition and selfishness to a certain extent are no longer considered as being opposed to the principles of humanity or religion. But again the benchmarks for acceptable levels are defined by each one individually.

Another important aspect of the topic is the debate on whether being the doer of such an act is the only source of evil? Throughout literature, all acts of promoting, observing, ignoring as well as tolerating evil have been considered equally hideous. But isn't categorizing any such action objectively bringing us back to square one? Shouldn't we be looking at the net positive or negative value of any action? This would include considering the positivity or negativity of the circumstances, reasons and outcomes/ victims. Consider the much-cited example of lying to avoid some unpleasantness given the lie itself does not cause any. Is not the positive value of the situation avoided higher than the negative value of the action itself? This is what makes us support our protagonists too. The net positive outcome of their ends is always projected as to be much higher than the negativity of their means.

It is not my objective to arrive at a universally coherent definition or thumb rule to classify all actions. We merely try to reflect on the notion of evil through human evolution by beginning through the religious norms, passing on to the points of conflict and finally analyzing the current scenario.

II. Evil and Mythology: Tracing the roots of cultural definitions

There has always been a complex relationship between mythology and evil, with each one being incomplete without the other across cultures, societies and periods of time. The concept of evil in this context has often been linked to man's ability to distinguish between the forces that work

with or against him and making him look out for and threaten his existence. With the growing consciousness of the individual psychic life, the concept of evil in mythology has changed with time, from being natural forces at work to balance the nature of life to a mathematical concept of karma and the evil by conscious effort, with some religions considering it a "necessary evil" as a counter to the good and making it a part of the powers of a larger force that interacts with the physical world while other religions a tangible force to reckon with, one that can and must be defeated. For the post-modern man, evil has become a manifestation of his own loss of meaning and his inability to control both inwardly and outwardly plagues.

The one common motif always has been about the hero and his conquest and victory against evil. Historically, Gods used to be ambivalent or polyvalent, like Lord Shiva, who was both the protector and the destroyer while the Greeks had among them, Dionysius who brought both inspiration and madness. The Old Testament is also ambiguous as it tries to justify experiences and not actions and has its fair share of discordant notes.

Zoroaster's understanding added a new flavor by making evil, and good in its stead, spiritual forces that interact with the same physical entities and allowed man to deal with them from a participative point of view. In the New Testament, however, there seems to be a conscious deniability that God had anything to do with the creation of evil, creating a distinct division between the forces that have come from Jesus and the demonic forces that man must conquer each day, in his quest for true Faith.

In more recent writings by Lewis, Elliot and Tolkien the point that has been driven is that spirituality does mean the acceptance of all good and that the conscious recognition of the good and the evil is important to protect oneself from suffering. Jung also talks about the same acceptance in his theories in which he preaches that Evil cannot be intellectually dismissed or removed. It can only be confronted; for the devil is the empirical truth that can no more be removed by looking away than can the chair in which I sit.

III. What kind of evil?

A) Objective vs. Subjective Evil

As discussed in the beginning, the extent of evilness/ goodness can be judged both objectively as well as subjectively. Moral lessons, as well as school teachings, are inevitably inclined towards an objective judgment of evil. Teachers and religious institutions preach against any kind

of treachery or the slightest wrongdoing in trying to bring up children to become pro-social rather than good. Only those virtues and morals are taught as good, which have essentially no disagreement among any community of people. However, according to me, objective morality is an oxymoron. Most hideous acts of the past have been committed with the notion of benefiting humanity. The holocaust was claimed to be an attempt to eradicate dirt from the face of the earth. Each individual tends to judge good or evil by the effect of the act on his own self. Whatever satisfies our desire and expectations is good for us and anything undesirable, evil. So, can an act ever be objectively good? One would say that anything done towards a defined good end without any intention of inflicting harm can be termed as good objectively. But then again we face the issue of conflicting interests, personal glory, and hidden ambitions which bring back the judgment to one's own opinion.

Fantasy novels or any work of literature, in general, tend to provide a narrator's viewpoint of facts and situations and hence a very subjective picture of good or evil. Most Western literature is coherent with the idealistic definitions of evil defined by Christianity, but writers like Pullman oppose the most fundamental of such notions through their writings.

B) Action vs. Character

Another debated issue is that of categorizing the action or the character evil. Does even one act of wrongdoing classify us as a devil? If no, then what is the threshold for a human to be termed demonic? How much wrong are we allowed to do before being summoned for the boiling oil pots of Lucifer?

An idealist would argue that the tiniest spot of oil would contaminate the entire water bowl. But wouldn't it be wrong to judge a man by one act. Our general tendency remains a very fickle one. People appear good or evil to us as per their recent communications and interactions with us. One would say that a person who performs an action under complete knowledge of the harm he is inflicting and the intention to do the same as his primary motive is definitely evil. What about actions then? And how does one judge the willingness or knowledge/ignorance of an individual?

These questions can only be answered subjectively, and hence, one can never find a clear answer. Any conscious act of evil is definitely evil, and as for character I would definitely go with one of the most popular quotes in fantasy literature, "It is our actions that define who we really are."

Fantasy does not limit itself to any stereotypical definitions or notions of the absence of any shades in the eye of God. Authors project both the absolute good and absolute evil along with a plethora of grey characters who could with have committed an act of evil and repented later or who could be inherently evil and yet end up serving our hero's interests.

C) Ends vs. Means?

"With composure towards happiness and sorrow, gain and loss, victory and defeat, fight."

These words are the opening lines of inarguably the greatest teachings in Hinduism, The Bhagwad Gita. Here, Lord Krishna not only persuades Arjuna to wage war against his fellow brethren but also uses various forms of deceit to emerge victorious. And yet Krishna remains the beloved idol and Bhagwad Gita the guiding light for millions across the globe simply because modern Hindu mythology preaches that it is the consequences of our actions, not our ideals that decide our righteousness and evil.

Children's Fables glorify Robin Hood as a great philanthropist and leave a favorable impression upon young minds of the hero who amassed wealth from looting the filthy rich because he did so not for personal gratification but rather for the welfare of his brethren. The karma theory preaches that our fate rests on the consequences of our actions, and our destiny is the extended expression of the results of our natural acts. The various ethics defined are nothing but the ever-changing understanding of the universe by humankind. Gautam Buddha continues to be one of the prime examples of consequentialists with the theory of kamma-niyamma guiding his followers towards the consequences of their deeds. Most fantasy tales preach the same ideology, where predestined fates and evil as a black and white idea is pushed across and then withdrawn to make it evident that it not only what we do, but why we chose to do it that ultimately decides the bucket that we classify the action into.

IV. What is evil, today?: The context of modern time

Evil in the modern era is an abstract idea. It lies somewhere between mass murders and your servant, forgetting to add sugar to your tea. Evil nowadays is anything that one dislikes or disapproves. While pure good may be termed as someone aiming to achieve positive life goals as well as helping others do the same, such an ideal situation fails to exist.

On a similar note, pure evil is no longer believed to be present. Satan and witchcraft are considered obsolete terms from Biblical times. Every wrong action is just termed as some shade of gray from the spectrum with each having its own whiteness. The fall of Eve from grace or the gain of consciousness too is no longer a sin. Awareness and education is the modernist's main agenda.

The major reason for this liquidation of the definition is the absence of any set of defined rules of behavior for an individual. The notion of a pro-social person working for the well being of his nation and people has been replaced with individual goals and ambition. And since this transformation is not limited to a particular group of humans, our understanding of evil too has changed in parallel. No longer do we believe in an ideal world full of virtues. Shortcuts and vices are now recognized as faster and easier ways for bigger rewards, and thus, crimes are a justified path to satisfy our materialism.

While religious beliefs and theism still stick to the idealist definition, we have moved on to the psychological explanations which take individual moral beliefs and reasoning into account. Morality is now an even lesser objective concept. Each individual is expected to create his own moral life and rules. While on one side, this is probably for the best, but on the other, this gives space for one to surrender to temptation and alter his rules. Apart from individual beliefs, the ones in power tend to influence what is good or evil in this modern era in their attempt to ensure that their own methods are termed as the former in turn ensuring continuation of their dominion.

Modernization has introduced rewards like money, power, and status in a much higher light than it ever was. We now have words like common and plain, which are looked down upon. In this struggle for superiority is where enter ambition, selfishness, bureaucracy, corruption, and treachery. One definitely cannot wave off all such acts as anti-social. Individual aspirations are no longer an anti-social activity. The presence of higher free will in decision making has made each individual realize his greater accessibility to good and evil, and the outcomes henceforth. It is thus no longer a question of being pronounced demonic but one of the individual choices to practice goodness, realize goodness as well as to be intolerant towards wrongdoings.

V. Evil stereotypes in Modern Fantasy

A) *The works of JRR Tolkien*

Tolkien, accused of being anti-modern, in reacting to aspects of modernity that he found alarming, gathered them around a narrative of evil that was also infused with a Catholic's conception of Satan. His background in myth and his belief in the British medievalist tradition helped to lend weight and texture to his trilogy, and the heroic struggle therein. It is instrumental to analyze the characteristics of evil exhibited.

• *Evil is Tempting*

There is nothing appealing or alluring about Sauron or Mordor, but Sauron's entry into the world of the Shire is the Ring, which makes the wearer invisible to everyone--other than Sauron and the Ringwraiths. Beyond being pretty and useful, the ring exerts some kind of influence over the bearer, indicating that it possesses some sentient qualities. Gollum who committed murder to get the ring and was transformed and twisted by his long exposure to it. Bilbo Baggins, finds himself curiously reluctant to give it up, a reluctance that changes to belligerence and anger when Gandalf insists. Both Gandalf and Galadriel, two of the most powerful characters, exercise restraint only through refusing to touch the ring. Gandalf recoils from it, saying:

'With that power, I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. [...] Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me.' ^[1]

When Frodo offers Galadriel the Ring, she briefly entertains the notion, as a test of her own strength:

'I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp. The evil that was devised long ago works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls. Would not that have been a noble deed to set to the credit of his Ring, if I had taken it by force or fear from my guest?

'And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning

and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!’

She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. ‘I pass the test,’ she said. ‘I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.’^[1]

Boromir, does not fare so well, attacking Frodo in hopes of obtaining the Ring to use against Sauron, telling Frodo, “*It is a gift, I say; a gift to the foes of Mordor. It is mad not to use it, to use the power of the Enemy against him. The fearless, the ruthless, these alone will achieve victory.*”^[1] But Boromir’s fearlessness and ruthlessness end up breaking the Fellowship, driving Frodo away, and killing Boromir himself.

Even steadfast Frodo, who knows what the Ring is, finds himself unable to fling it into the hottest part of the fire at first; and he fails in the end, as well, and decides to keep it. It is only the intervention of Gollum that ensures that his mission is carried out. It thus can be said that The temptation associated with the Ring is not merely the temptation of power, but a component of the evil itself.

- *Evil Pollutes*

His depictions of Mordor evoke, the ruins of the battlefield and the bleakness of a landscape damaged by industry:

All was ominously quiet. The light was no more than that of dusk on a dark day’s end. The vast vapors that arose in Mordor and went streaming westward passed low overhead, a great welter of cloud and smoke now lit again beneath a sullen glow of red.

The water was cool but not icy, and it had an unpleasant taste, at once bitter and oily, or so they would have said at home.

Mordor was a dying land, but it was not yet dead. And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai on the other side of the valley low scrubby trees lurked and clung, coarse grey grass-tussocks fought with the stones, and withered mosses crawled on them; and everywhere great writhing, tangled brambles

sprawled. Some had long stabbing thorns, some hooked barbs that rent like knives. The sullen shriveled leaves of a past year hung on them, grating and rattling in the sad airs, but their maggot-ridden buds were only just opening. Flies, dun or grey, or black, marked like orcs with a red eye-shaped blotch, buzzed and stung; and above the briar-thickets clouds of hungry midges danced and reeled.

[...][D]own on the stones behind the fences of the Black Land the air seemed almost dead, chill, and yet stifling. Sam looked up out of the hollow. The land all about was dreary, flat and drab-hued. [...] South-eastward, far off like a dark standing shadow, loomed the Mountain. Smokes were pouring from it, and while those that rose into the upper air trailed away eastward, great rolling clouds floated down its sides and spread over the land.

It remained dark, not only because of the smokes of the Mountain: there seemed to be a storm coming up, and away to the south-east there was a shimmer of lightnings under the black skies. Worst of all, the air was full of fumes; breathing was painful and difficult, and a dizziness came on them, so that they staggered and often fell.^[1]

Evil, then, acts ecologically in Tolkien’s books, corrupting and devastating the natural world as well as the souls of the Free Peoples of Middle Earth. For Tolkien, who revered nature, its destruction is wrong in and of itself, focuses on what can be termed as “the abomination of desolation.”

- *Evil is Palpable*

Another feature of evil in Tolkien’s work is that it is easily, instinctively detectable, and produces strong feelings of revulsion—even, sometimes, as it tempts. Before he has left the Shire, Frodo twice encounters Sauron’s Black Riders and twice fights the compulsion to put on the Ring. Later, Frodo’s first intimation that the Ringwraiths are approaching is “a cold dread creeping over his heart.” *It is not just the Ringbearer who is affected; however; outside of Bree, Aragorn tells the hobbits, “Senses, too, there are other than sight or smell. We can feel their presence--it troubled our hearts, as soon as we came here, and before we saw them; they feel ours more keenly.”*^[1] And Gandalf, when he seeks advice from Saruman, is on his guard because, he says, when the door closes behind him, “suddenly I was afraid, though I knew no reason for it” and “in [Saruman’s] eyes there seemed to be a white light, as if a cold laughter was in his heart.”^[1]

The representation of evil as something palpable removes the possibility that one can serve it by being deceived or mistaken; if evil can be felt, then serving it is a deliberate choice. And who would choose to serve the palpably evil except for those who are evil themselves?

- *Evil is Viciously Competitive*

The evil characters in Tolkien's works don't trust each other or work with each other effectively. Saruman's rivalry with Sauron gives an advantage to the fellowship of the ring. Sauron's inability to believe that the fellowship aims to destroy the ring, seeing them as rivals to his power plays an important role in his downfall. In Mordor, Sam and an unconscious Frodo are held captive by orcs, but Sam is able to take advantage of their infighting and escape. Shortly after, the Ring influences Frodo to orcish behavior: when he wakes, he thinks he has lost the Ring, and must abandon the quest as a failure; but Sam has it, and Frodo's relief quickly changes to avarice and hostility, making him see in Sam's place "a foul little creature with greedy eyes and slobbering mouth."^[1] A moment later, he returns to himself, and is stricken with remorse. And in the end, it is not Frodo's good, but the vicious competitiveness of evil, that is evil's undoing, as the ring is lost in the struggle with Gollum. The Ring's tendency to turn its bearers into grasping paranoiacs, and villainous characters' inability to cooperate, are indications--as is the decision to embrace an obvious, palpable evil--that Tolkien's conception of evil is founded on the notion of complete depravity. One cannot serve Sauron and be a good leader, or a steadfast friend, or an animal lover, or a dedicated parent.

- *Sempiternal Evil and Evil in nature*

The evil in Lord of the Rings manifests itself in forms other than Sauron and Mordor. It provides us with an evil that is much older than Sauron or any other living beings, such as Shelob and Balrog. Evil also manifests itself in the representation of nature by Tolkien. The great mountain Caradhras and the old tree in the forest next to the Shire are examples how nature is perceived as evil on the account it hinders the progress of the fellowship. Even the forest of Lothlorien and Fanghorn are initially seen as evil by the creatures of the middle earth.

B) High Fantasy After Tolkien

Evil in the Harry Potter books has continuity in the personage of Voldemort, but the degree to which it resembles Sauron changes as the series progresses. In earlier books, evil is attractive to those without power. In the later ones, evil is never alluring, precisely, but as it acquires

control over the world's systems, it becomes the easier, safer choice. It pollutes, not the landscape, but human relationships. To Harry, who is sensitive to his connection with Voldemort, it is palpable, but it can catch others unawares. The members of Voldemort's inner circle tend to be contemptible people in most respects, but in later books, it is revealed that they still care deeply for family members; and while in the earlier books, the members of Slytherin House are uniformly terrible, this too becomes more complicated as the series progresses. And evil is disembodied in the earlier books but gains a body in the later ones.

More subtle forms of evil have also been introduced in the modern texts, which become important as it seems easier to relate members of our world with lesser evil, without the imposing stature of the grand. The servile or petty evil or people who give into the qualms of the grand evil, like Peter Pettigrew, can be found around us going about their lives serving corrupt notions, contributing pettily to the grand evil in the end. The ill effects of a modern capitalistic ideology are best manifested through the servile, with the Grand hiding behind large corporations.

Good and Evil are complex in Philip Pullman's Dark Material with no clear distinctions. Virtually all of the characters act in good faith, doing what they believe to be right; however, Pullman argues that good faith can make for bad behavior, as when scientists remove essential components of children's souls in an effort to keep them morally pure; or when a priest is entrusted to carry out Lyra's assassination. The result of this inversion is that the moral status of many characters seems designed to subvert reader expectations. The angel Metatron is a deadly enemy of Lyra, while the witch queen is a dear friend. Evil here carries virtually none of the characteristics which can be termed as Tolkienesque. In fact, the only thing that makes it tempting is that it looks so very much like good.

Brandon Sanderson in his Mistborn series provides us with another innovation in the genre with his use of successive evil characters, the defeat of the first evil, Lord Ruler, giving rise to a second evil which then must be defeated to save the world, Ruin. It casts a positive light on the first evil by providing certain hints that it was Lord Ruler who was keeping the greater evil in check. Sarah J Mass, with her Throne of Glass Series, borrows the typical comic book fantasy evil and themes from pre-modern fantasies and mythologies, by pitting the human world against invaders from another world. Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter series also brings agents of the dark from the

other world, but not merely as characters to put children to sleep, but differentiating between this world and the other one. Dementors kiss the soul out of the person, while the Nazguls are a stark reminder of what remains when one loses one's true identity to the grand evil.

Sometimes evil manifests itself in the form of an Immoral Entity which aims to suppress or destroy the protagonist whether to attain power or revenge or just because the protagonist belongs to a particular group of people. Various examples from fantasy literature are – The Capitol in *The Hunger Games* by Susanne Collins, The Chandrian in *The Kingkiller Chronicles* by Patrick Rothfuss and The Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. Sometimes this immoral entity isn't necessarily evil but plays a role standby in the struggle between good and evil, like The Ministry of Magic, in the Harry Potter series.

VI. Conquering Evil: The Conclusion

What people, in general, mean when they talk about evil, and what fantasy authors mean when they write about evil, are overlapping but not identical concepts.

I have discussed the basic understanding of what is evil, how our human knowledge of evil is based on religion and morality, and the concept of 'Karma' behind evil. I have also tried to establish a relation between Evil and Mythology or in other words, between Moral Evil and Mythical Evil, through various religions such as Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. Simply put, It is not the case that moral and mythical evil are always distinct from each other, and it is very possible to talk about moral evil in mythical terms.

I have also tried to debate between different viewpoints between various kinds of evil; Objective vs. Subjective Evil, how the act of an evil impacts the character of the perpetrator and the conundrum towards the morality of an evil deed done with a good thought in mind and vice-versa.

Finally, I have discussed several fantasy series, including The Works of JRR Tolkien, considered by many to be the pioneer of the genre and the famous Harry Potter series among many others. To conclude, I would like to quote from *The Anthropology of Evil*, a collection of essays:

“Evil is not anything: it denotes rather an area of discourse concerning human suffering, human existential predicaments and the attempted resolution of these through other humans and through non-human agencies, including a God or gods. In asking whether evil can be eliminated, people are also led into considering the possibility that good may in fact sometimes come out of evil; that it may even be

necessary, and that it can be personified, perhaps among people known to them.”

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