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Auratic Weapons, World War II, and Cultural Hegemony in The Lord of the Rings

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AURATIC WEAPONS, WORLD WAR II, AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN

*THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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BY

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ABSTRACT

Auratic Weapons, World War II, and Cultural Hegemony in

*The Lord of the Rings*

By Michelle Silverstein

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is suspended between the medieval and the modern world. In this thesis, I attempt to explore what makes this enormously popularly novel so indelibly relatable to modern audiences. To begin, I look at weapons as the crux between the medieval and the modern elements of the text through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura. By comparing the depiction of medieval weapons within the *Song of Roland* to similar weapons in *The Lord of the Rings*, I demonstrate that they differ in the level of aura they possess and their transferability between cultures. This difference indicates an impulse to preserve cultural distinctions. Within the context of the historical realities occurring while Tolkien was writing this novel, including World War II, fascism, and industrialization, the impulse to preserve cultural distinctions becomes a direct critique against cultural hegemony.
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Introduction

Ever since its publication between 1954 and 1955, *The Lord of the Rings* has been greeted with enormous popular success; in the critical sphere, the trilogy has received anywhere from glowingly positive to ruthlessly negative reviews. Regardless of its variable critical reception, the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* has not waned over the past fifty years, even acquiring a whole new host of devotees with the release of Peter Jackson’s massively successful film adaptations in the early 2000s. While sheer popularity does not equate literary quality, it nevertheless suggests the unavoidable truth that *The Lord of the Rings* offers something deeply compelling and relevant to modern audiences. Nevertheless, many critics continue to perceive *The Lord of the Rings* as anti-modern or outdated (Curry 11).

The world of Middle-earth does indeed bear a striking resemblance to the medieval world, but acknowledging this should not cause us to overlook the elements that make that world indisputably modern. Modern literature generally refers to writing that experimented with innovative styles and forms at the beginning of the 20th century, a period marked by the two World Wars (Chance, *Modern 3*). Ezra Pound’s oft-quoted dictum “make it new” became the anthem for this literary movement. Postmodern literature, a more nebulous category sometimes characterized by the “intentional questioning of strategies of representation,” generally applies to literature following the end of World War II (23). Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* between the extended period of 1937 to 1949, but the first seeds of his fictional world had already begun to sprout by 1916 (Carpenter 215). Because of the expansive time period in which Tolkien wrote, spanning across two World Wars and straddling the modern and postmodern literary periods, his works continually evade definitive categorization. While the novel does not necessarily fit comfortably in either the modern or postmodern literary periods, this paper argues
that it is indelibly attuned to the anxieties of the “modern” era of history, which for the purpose of this paper will be defined as the 20th and 21st centuries. This paper attempts to reconcile some of the medieval and modern elements in *The Lord of the Rings* to demonstrate how this work responds to the concerns of the modern world. Ultimately, I will argue that *The Lord of the Rings* depicts medieval weapons in a way that preserves cultural divisions, and this emphasis on cultural autonomy operates as a critique against the threat of cultural hegemony imposed by the historical circumstances surrounding World War II, fascism, and industrialization.

J.R.R. Tolkien was born in South Africa in 1892 and moved to England at the age of three. His father died when he was four and his mother died when he was twelve, leaving him in the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, a priest at the Birmingham Oratory, where he was raised Catholic (Garth 12). During his childhood, he cultivated a deep love for the English West Midlands and for the beauty of the natural world. He also became enchanted with the myths and legends that possessed what he referred to as “the North-western temper” (Carpenter 212). Tolkien completed his studies in English language and Literature at Oxford immediately before enlisting in the British Army in 1915, almost a year after the United Kingdom entered World War I (Shippey, *Author x*). By the end of his service, Tolkien had lost two of his closest friends and was himself incapacitated with trench fever. He then quickly joined the academic world, taking a position at Leeds University before receiving the Anglo-Saxon Chair at Pembroke College, Oxford in 1925 (x). He would remain at Oxford, later as a professor of English language and literature at Merton College, Oxford, until 1959. All the while, Tolkien indulged in “his hobby, his private amusement, his ruling passion,” the gradual creation of the world of Middle-earth (xi).
After the strong success of *The Hobbit* upon its publication in 1937, Tolkien almost immediately began working on a ‘sequel’ at the suggestion of his publishers (Carpenter 25-27). This sequel, after years of growth and evolution, would become *The Lord of the Rings*. On the surface, *The Lord of the Rings* exists in a world and time of its own. The story is now well known: opening in the Shire, a young hobbit named Frodo inherits a magic ring of mysterious origins from his guardian, Bilbo Baggins, of *Hobbit* fame. This ring turns out to be the One Ring, forged by the evil Lord Sauron thousands of years ago. If returned to his possession, the Ring would imbue Sauron with the power to dominate Middle-earth. Sauron’s desire to retrieve the Ring leads to an alliance of men, elves, dwarves, and hobbits, all devoted to preserving their cultural autonomy, to undertake a quest to destroy the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, in which it was first forged. The quest falls to Frodo, who bears the Ring and ultimately succeeds in the quest, but not without his share of obstacles along the way.

The fabricated world of *The Lord of the Rings* is suspended between the medieval and the modern world, and the elements of each of these worlds bounce off of each other in informative ways. Many literary reviewers who commented on *The Lord of the Rings* at the time of its publication posited that the text was a work of allegory, in which elements in Middle-earth corresponded directly and symbolically to features of the modern world. Tolkien adamantly and persistently denied that he wrote his work with any allegorical intentions (Carpenter 145). However, Tolkien did admit that, like all writers, he could not remain completely detached from his modern surroundings; indeed, his personal letters reveal not only an awareness of current events but also rather ardent opinions. If the text is not an allegory, how do its medieval and fantastical elements relate to the modern world, as they continue to delight readers even to this day? This paper approaches this question through the lens of medieval weapons, which
persistently appear at crucial moments within the text. In the text’s depiction of these weapons, the medieval and the modern collide. The weapons themselves are medieval resonances, yet when compared with the depictions of weapons in actual medieval texts, they differ in significantly modern ways.

Most literary scholars who have written on Tolkien seek, in one form or another, to answer why Tolkien’s supposedly antiquarian works resonate so deeply with modern audiences. They approach this question through a wide variety of perspectives. Some scholars focus on the way that Tolkien incorporates elements of medieval literature into the formation of his own mythological world. Others focus on the way that his works reflect many of the prevailing concerns characteristic of the modern world. Still others examine the interaction between the text’s medieval and modern elements. I pursue this last approach.

As a medievalist, Tolkien was deeply familiar with a wide range of medieval texts, and his own writing reflects their influence. A number of scholars have already done a great deal of research outlining the similarities between Tolkien’s writing and a variety of medieval texts. One such text, the *Song of Roland*, shares a lot of features in common with *The Lord of the Rings*: war on a grand scale, cultural groups colliding with each other, and an assemblage of many of the same kinds of weaponry and war gear. Most notably, however, the hero Roland wields the renowned sword named Durendal, while one of the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn, wields a similarly named sword, Andúril. The congruence of these two names almost encourages comparison. While both *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Song of Roland* depict medieval weapons in superficially similar ways, the cultural meanings of these weapons differ within each text. Primarily, the weapons differ in their level of aura.
By aura, I refer to the concept of aura put forth by the Marxist theorist Walter Benjamin. In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” which was published just one year before Tolkien published *The Hobbit*, Benjamin describes how the technological reproducibility of artwork causes it to lose its aura, or authenticity, which imbues it with a sense of meaning or power. Walter Benjamin’s critical works are profoundly relevant to *The Lord of the Rings* because both Benjamin and Tolkien were writing in response to the same contemporary issues surrounding World War II. While Tolkien’s “response” to the war may not have been as explicit, Benjamin’s work was very much a direct response to fascism, and more particularly to Adolf Hitler’s regime. Benjamin was born into a wealthy Jewish family in Germany in 1892. He was attracted to Marxism and joined the German Communist Party, eventually becoming peripherally associated with the Frankfurt School of Marxism. After the Nazi party took over Germany in 1933, Benjamin fled to France, where he wrote “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” When the Germans invaded France in 1940, he attempted to escape to Spain but, fearing he would be sent back to Germany, committed suicide (Leitch 1047).

The fascist Nazi regime was of both theoretical and personal significance to Benjamin’s works. He argues that as of the year 1900, the technological reproduction of artwork had advanced to such a point that nearly all known works could be reproduced, and that this reproducibility profoundly modifies the effects of these works. Most significantly, the reproduced piece loses its “here and now,” which makes up the core of its “authenticity” (Benjamin 1053). Benjamin explains that the “authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it” (1054). He then explains that the idea of aura, the artwork’s traditional
ritualistic value, encompasses this concept of authenticity. Benjamin argues that his historical moment was undergoing a “decay of aura” as a result of this reproducibility, and he blames this decay on two circumstances: “the desire of the present-day masses to ‘get closer’ to things spatially and humanly, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each thing’s uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction” (1055). Benjamin takes a mountain range as an example. To view the mountains in person is to “breathe the aura of those mountains,” whereas viewing a photograph of the mountains strips them of their permanent and unique aura. This desire for reproduced photographs reveals a modern perception “whose ‘sense for sameness in the world’ has so increased that, by means of reproduction, it extracts sameness even from what is unique” (1056). In other words, the viewing of the photograph strips the aura of experience from the mountains, substituting for it a uniform perception of the mountains, a facsimile that everyone can view in the same way. With technologically reproducible pieces of art, like film and photography, there is no original piece, only negatives from which innumerable copies can be made. This transformation in the production of artwork produces the decay of aura that Benjamin perceives.

Interestingly, Benjamin sees this stripping of aura as a positive development, particularly when considering the way in which fascism manipulates aura in the service of ritual. He argues that artwork originally served ritualistic purposes in the service of magic and religion. In the World War II era, however, the rituals that imbued artwork with auratic power were also manipulated by fascist governments, perhaps most evident in the way that Adolf Hitler manipulated aesthetics to promote his interests in unifying and disciplining the German people. Benjamin, however, was optimistic that the decay of the aura of artwork that he was witnessing in his time could diminish the capacity for art to be manipulated in this way: “for the first time in
world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” (1056-57). As a result, Benjamin believed that art could be used in the service of communism, in spreading the communist message and rallying action.

However, not all critics agreed with Benjamin’s hopeful vision of the potential for reproducible artwork to serve the communist mission by becoming more available to the masses. Marxist critics Adorno and Horkheimer argued that technology is irrevocably the product of capitalist expansion. Therefore, the culture industry functions to achieve dominance and mass deception in the service of capitalist ideology, such that art cannot escape that system to be repurposed in the service of communism or any other social movement (Horkheimer and Adorno 1111). Benjamin himself admitted that the decay of aura produced some rather negative results. While he envisioned film as having the most revolutionary potential, he conceded that the film industry in the West was presently too immersed in the capitalist system to be all that useful. In the epilogue of his essay, Benjamin laments that the fascist aestheticization of political life necessarily culminates in war, in which war becomes an aesthetic piece in of itself (Benjamin 1070). Benjamin worries that the technological means of society has progressed too fast for society to understand how to use it for good, and as a result, these technologies produce devastating effects in war (1071). Benjamin’s argument is by no means one-sided; in depicting the decay of aura in his time, he presents a hopeful view that this decay may benefit the goals of his social movement while also acknowledging the more dangerous results of these changing means of reproduction.

In a more literary arena, The Lord of the Rings plays off the changing conceptions of aura that were circulating in the World War II period. To begin, I will look at weapons as the crux between the medieval and the modern elements of the text through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s
concept of aura. By comparing the depiction of medieval weapons within the *Song of Roland* to similar weapons in *The Lord of the Rings*, I demonstrate that they differ in their transferability between cultures and the level of aura they possess. This difference indicates an impulse to preserve cultural distinctions. Within the context of the historical realities surrounding Tolkien as he wrote this novel, including World War II, fascism, and industrialization, the impulse to preserve cultural distinctions operates as a direct critique against cultural hegemony.

**Tolkien’s Medieval Sources: Differences in Cultural Transferability**

The influence of medieval literature on Tolkien’s writing is self-evident. The weapons in particular, including swords, axes, bows, and more, are distinctly medieval. A number of scholars have examined the resonances between medieval weapons in *The Lord of the Rings* and weapons as they were depicted in medieval texts. In his article “The Blade Against the Burden,” Michael Brisbois argues that weapons in *The Lord of the Rings* serve as indicators of identity and authority for those who wield them (94). Similarly, in their article “In the Hilt is Fame,” Whetter and McDonald argue that because of the weapons’ associations to heroic characters in both Tolkien’s work and in medieval literature, they serve as telling indicators of heroism (6). I attempt to investigate what medieval weaponry in *The Lord of the Rings* says about culture on a larger scale when compared to weapons in one particular medieval text, the *Song of Roland*. In both texts, weapons act as cultural indexes, signifying from which culture each weapon derives. In the *Song of Roland*, the distinctions between weapons, and consequently cultures, are somewhat eroded by the similarities that the French weapons bear to their enemy’s, the Saracens’, weapons. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, weapons mark differences between cultures in a much more obvious and divisive way.
The *Song of Roland* is a heroic poem likely written in the 11th century which recounts the Battle of Roncesvalles in 778. Charlemagne, having conquered vast lands, attempts to conquer the last stronghold in Muslim Spain, the city of Saragossa. The Spanish know they cannot withstand the force of the Franks so they strike a deal with Ganelon, a Frankish traitor, who helps them plan an ambush on the rearguard of the Frankish army in order to kill Roland, Charlemagne’s right-hand man. Roland and his vastly outnumbered rearguard are all killed by the large Saracen army, but not without a valiant fight in the face of certain death.

If Roland is the hero of *The Song of Roland*, then his sword Durendal is his sidekick. As Roland feels his life fading, he addresses his sword as a companion in arms: “Ah, Durendal, alas your sturdy edge, / for I must die and cannot serve it hence! / So many fights I’ve won with you, my friend” (Newth 2304-6). He not only humanly addresses his sword as a friend, but he also hinges his success in battle on the sword’s intrinsic qualities. Indeed, the very fact that swords have names reinforces their humanlike qualities. When combined, Roland and his sword enter into a symbiotic relationship that enables their success on the battlefield, neither being able to succeed without the other. Roland also despairs that he can no longer “serve it hence.” This subverts the idea that the sword is a tool for the warrior, suggesting instead that the warrior merely serves the sword’s purposes. This imbues the sword with a sense of aura beyond its physicality.

The presence of relics within the swords in the *Song of Roland* further elevates the sword from the physical to the spiritual state. We first learn about relics within swords when Ganelon brands himself as a traitor by swearing upon the relics in his sword, Marglave (607-8). The sword serves as a proxy for the Bible, holy enough to swear upon. This elevates the sword from a mere tool of man to a spiritual object that has the power to hold a man to his oath due to its
ritual value, or its auratic power. Relics are particularly imbued with the power of aura because they are attached to a specific moment of a saint’s sacrifice, meaning that the relic cannot be replicated without losing all of its power. Relics elevate the power of the original far beyond any work of art. Roland’s sword Durendal has the added power of containing numerous relics. The “golden hilt” of his sword contains

St. Peter’s tooth, St. Basil’s blood and wisps
Of hair from my lord St. Denis and strips
Of cloth itself that clad St. Mary’s skin:
No pagan hand has any right to this!
Your blade deserves the strength of Christian limbs. (2345-50)

The relics themselves are composed of the once-living matter of saints, and this human material not only makes the sword humanlike but also immortal. These religious materials embedded within the hilt take on an overtly religious meaning when Roland refuses to have his sword in the hands of a pagan, or Saracen. Perhaps the aura that the sword gains from the relics only benefits the hand of a Christian who can appreciate the power of the relics. The poem later explains that, not only does the sword contain relics, but that it was given to Charlemagne by God, who told him to give it to “his most brave” warrior, Roland (2320). Notably, the idea of relics within swords does not appear within The Lord of the Rings.

Roland’s fear that someone will take his sword is indicative of the practice, found within the Song of Roland as well as other medieval texts, in which warriors take the weapons and war gear of their fallen enemies as trophies of war. As Roland dies, his strength is revived when he feels a Saracen attempt to wrench his sword away so that he can show it off to “every eastern leader” (2282). To win a weapon from a renowned warrior is a source of pride, and the weapon
will have a certain aura attached to it that has developed from the legacy of its past owners. The tools of war in the *Song of Roland* have very complicated origins and transfer hands many times. One of the Saracen enemies has a shield that is

... famous for its make:

With amethyst and topaz stones it flames,

With beryls blue and garnets red ablaze –

A gift it was from Emir Galafes,

Who gained from some fiend in Metas Vale. (1499-1503)

The object is renowned by both the Franks and the Saracens, as well as the other cultures that previously possessed the shield. Weapons can easily change hands because both the Franks and the Saracens value similar objects, and the fluidity of weapons parallels the fluidity of the two cultures. The two cultures meld together so well that, at times within the poem, it is difficult to tell who is fighting whom.

In contrast, *The Lord of the Rings* depicts weapons as definitive signifiers of culture used to emphasize cultural difference rather than similarity. When Theoden, the King of Rohan, and his army plan to ride out to war, Aragorn assures him that they “will ride with them, axe, sword, and bow” (518). This show of alliance is all the more powerful because it is an alliance of different weapons, or in other words, an alliance of different cultures. Each culture uses certain types of weaponry that ultimately become symbols of cultural identity. Aragorn may well have said “we will ride with them, dwarf, man, and elf,” to relay the significance of their union. Unlike the *Song of Roland*, the weapons in *The Lord of the Rings* are strong indicators of culture, and each culture would be unlikely to adopt the weapons of another culture.
Indeed Tolkien makes such adoption impossible. After Frodo is stabbed by a wraith at Weathertop, Aragorn picks up the sword that pierced him as he and the hobbits “gazed in astonishment, for the blade seemed to melt, and vanished like a smoke in the air, leaving only the hilt in Strider’s hand” (198). The physical substance of the sword evaporates in Aragorn’s hand because it somehow recognizes that his touch is of the opposing side. This imposes an even sharper definition between the cultures that wield particular weapons. Aragorn could not wield that sword even after he took possession of it. This sort of reaction is not reserved to the enemy’s weapons; the reverse is true as well. When Merry and Pippin are abducted by the Orc army, one of the Orcs, Uglúk, takes their knives away from them. Merry fears that Uglúk will stab them with their own knives, but instead, “he threw the things away as if they burned him” (564). This suggests that an intense pain upon contact with the weapons causes the orc to cast them away. Once again, the physical substance of the weapon prevents the opposing side from wielding it. This instance with the orc, however, differs slightly from Aragorn’s experience with the wraith sword. The hobbits’ knives inflict physical pain upon the Orcs, as if the intrinsic good of the knives rebels against the intrinsically bad touch of the orc.

This introduces an intrinsic moral system that the The Lord of the Rings inscribes to justify the war and the “good” side’s cause. The Song of Roland uses a somewhat similar moral system to justify their war with the Saracens. The religious difference between the Christian Franks and the non-Christian Saracens separates the good from the bad, inscribing a moral compass within the poem. One significant difference between the Song of Roland and The Lord of the Rings is that, in the Song of Roland, the opposing sides can be converted to join each other, whereas the sides within The Lord of the Rings are, for the most part, eternally divided.
While both *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Song of Roland* depict weapons as having auralic powers, the *Song of Roland* seems to elevate the weapons to a comparatively higher degree by imbuing them with sacred relics. *The Lord of the Rings* does not, and the result is that most of the weapons in *The Lord of the Rings* lack that higher dimension of aura except, perhaps, the One Ring, an unorthodox weapon in its own right. After the Ring, one of the most exalted weapons within *The Lord of the Rings* is Aragorn’s sword, Andúril. Evidence for Andúril’s significance is best encapsulated by the number of epithets it possesses: Narsil, the sword of Elendil, the Sword that was Broken, and the Sword Reforged. Like swords within the *Song of Roland*, Andúril gains a great deal of its power from its heritage or the legacy of its past owners. The sword’s auralic power stems from its illustrious history: ages ago, Isildur took up the sword from his fallen father, Elendil, and used it to cut the Ring from Sauron’s finger. The sword passed through countless generations before finally falling into Aragorn’s hands.

Yet a sword like Andúril differs significantly from the very similarly named sword Durendal in that Andúril could be broken, and Durendal could not. Roland intentionally tries to destroy Durendal so that it can perish beside him, but even in his attempt to break it upon a stone, “his weapon grates – it neither breaks nor chips, / but in the air rebounds with every hit” (Newth 2340-41). When Roland sees that it will not break, he lists the many relics within his sword, perhaps associating Durendal’s sacred contents with the sword’s impermeability. The relics make the sword immortal and unbreakable, and therefore Roland’s human strength cannot destroy it. Why is it that the *Song of Roland* features an unbreakable sword yet *The Lord of the Rings* prominently demonstrates that its most auralic sword can be broken? The answer seems to lie in the distinctively modern historical moment in which Tolkien was writing. Tolkien wrote this story under the catastrophic shadow of the two World Wars, global events which uprooted
and destroyed nearly everything that people once considered certain or eternal. This sense of disillusionment manifested itself in the modern literary movement’s eagerness to brush aside old conventions and to experiment in new and often disarming ways. It seems to manifest here in Tolkien’s writing as well. For Tolkien, the idea that a weapon could be unbreakable through all of time is untenable, no matter how auratic that weapon may be. Everything and anything can and will be broken in due time. Yet out of the consciousness of catastrophe is born the possibility of the new. Just as the “sword that was broken” becomes the “sword reforged,” The Lord of the Rings retains a sense of optimism for regrowth even after destruction.

Nevertheless, the narratives of both the Song of Roland and The Lord of the Rings carry the threat of destruction through domination. In the Song of Roland, the morally ‘good’ side is also the aggressor seeking domination, while in The Lord of the Rings, the ‘good’ side is defending itself against an aggressive external force. The Song of Roland depicts the Frankish domination of the Saracens in a positive light particularly because of the Saracens’ potential conversion to Christianity. In their conversion and subjection to Frankish rule, they would effectively be subsumed within the Frankish empire, necessarily giving up their previous cultural associations. Culture is treated as fluid and convertible, evidenced by the fluid transfer of weapons in the world of the Song of Roland. Conversely, Tolkien’s 20th century text treats weapons differently, limiting their cultural transferability and their auratic powers. This avoidance of cultural blending reflects how the text favors cultural autonomy over cultural assimilation, a distinctly modern response to the threat of hegemony.
Modern Response: War, Fascism, and Cultural Hegemony

While the most obvious threat during the World War II period was the threat of destruction through military force, Tolkien’s world projects an alternative side of the danger, the more insidious threat of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony, as defined by Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, refers to the cultural domination by a ruling state that relies not only on force but also on a “combination of coercion and consent” by manufacturing and dispelling standard cultural norms as the universal ideology (Leitch 1000). Hitler’s fascist regime distinctly illustrates both of these forms of destruction. Fascism, first arising in the 1920s, is a movement that “exalts the nation above the individual and calls for a centralized government with a dictatorial leader, economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition” (Duiker and Spielvogel 890). Fascism requires a strong sense of national unity under a singular leader, and Hitler made this possible by appealing to Germany’s national patriotism and ethnic pride. He implemented a “new style of politics, mediated through symbols, myths, rites, spectacles and personal dramatics” to achieve such a level of control over the masses (Spotts xii). Walter Benjamin strongly opposed the manipulations dispelled by fascist regimes. He argues that fascism manipulates ideas of originality, creativity, and genius in order to mislead people into worshiping a regime and its leader, essentially by transforming politics into art (Benjamin 1071). Indeed, Hitler used his “instinctive understanding of the emotive power of symbols – flags, uniforms, standards, and so on” when designing the Nazi party’s iconography and organizing party conventions (Spotts 50). These aesthetic efforts were constructed to convey one simple message: “the Fuhrer is all, the individual exists only in the mass” (60).
As a citizen of Great Britain, Tolkien naturally opposed the Axis powers, but his antipathy towards Hitler’s fascist regime was of a more personal nature. As he writes in his letters:

I have spent most of my life . . . studying Germanic matters. . . . There is a great deal more force (and truth) than ignorant people imagine in the ‘Germanic’ ideal. . . . You have to understand the good in things, to detect the real evil. . . . Anyway, I have in this War a burning private grudge . . . against that ruddy little ignoramus Adolf Hitler. . . . Ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed, that noble northern spirit, a supreme contribution to Europe, which I have ever loved and tried to present in its true light. (Carpenter 55)

Tolkien’s academic work and his fictional writings were built upon the legacy of the Germanic ideal, of its history, art, and myth. Hitler’s misguided interpretation and application of race frustrated Tolkien not only as a scholar but also as a British citizen bearing a German name (Garth 42). Hitler anchored his aspirations for both unification and domination in his conviction in the superiority of the Aryan race. He used this conviction to justify two actions. The first was to conquer countries he considered to be part of the Aryan race. In Mein Kampf, he asserts that “people of the same blood should be in the same Reich,” and he uses this assertion to justify his push for “Lebenstraum,” or living space (Beevor 5). These goals served to extend Germany’s power by subjugating more people under one rule. The second action that Hitler’s notion of Aryan superiority justifies is the extermination of non-Aryan groups, primarily targeting Jews but also including other supposedly inferior groups including Roma (Gypsies), homosexuals, and still others (Duiker and Spielvogel 705).
Tolkien, as a philologist, opposed the nonobjective conviction of Aryan superiority that Hitler used to justify his quest for domination. When asked by a German publisher who was interested in publishing a German version of *The Hobbit* if he was of Aryan descent, Tolkien responded (in a letter that he never sent):

I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by arisch. I am not of *Aryan* extraction: that is Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware none of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of *Jewish* origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people. My great-great-grandfather came to England in the eighteenth century from Germany: the main part of my descent is therefore purely English, and I am an English subject—it should be sufficient. I have been accustomed, nonetheless, to regard my German name with pride, and continued to do so throughout the period of the late regrettable war, in which I served in the English army. (Carpenter 37)

To Tolkien, this question represented an affront on both a moral and an academic level, and it underscores the ideological manipulation required for the Nazi party to establish Aryanism as the superior race. As stated above, Hitler applies this concept to extend his rule over other ‘Aryan’ groups and to eliminate non-Aryan groups. Yet both of these goals serve the same function in the expansion of power; he sought to unify more people under one rule by forcing them to conform to that culture, and he wanted to eliminate the people who made this forceful unification difficult by being too divergent. In this way, Tolkien seems to have perceived the dangers of domination lurking under the guise of ‘unification.’ Present day audiences perceive unification as a positive symbol for multicultural coexistence, but to Tolkien, cultural unification was
inextricably linked with the unbridled desire for power and had much more sinister undertones of cultural homogeneity.

Hitler and the Nazi party notably applied aesthetic principles to architecture in order to convey a sense of control and subjugation. Hitler was intimately involved in the design of a wide number of the neo-classical buildings constructed during the Nazi party’s control of Germany, having sketched plans for many of them himself (Spotts 317). His involvement was to ensure that anyone encountering these buildings would feel that they are standing “before the lord of the world.” In other words, architecture fulfilled the purposes of “self-gratification, self-glorification, social indoctrination and nationalist self-assertion,” (311) all of which reiterate the idea of the domination of one over many. The aesthetics of architecture ultimately convey a great deal of information about a society because architecture physically organizes the way that people within that society carry out their daily lives. “Architects,” whether in reality or in fiction, reveal the kind of ideal society they wish to create through the design of public architecture. Interestingly, Hitler and Tolkien had a lot of architectural values in common. Hitler vehemently denounced the capitalist forces that transformed “cities from cultural sites to urban wastelands dominated by business interests” (Spotts 315). In his letters, Tolkien espoused a similar aesthetic, decrying the growth of “flat featureless modern buildings” and “ghastly multiple-store” complexes (Carpenter 70). Both men had powerfully negative feelings towards the changes that modernism had wrought on the architectural landscapes of their worlds, yet both had vastly different responses. Hitler dealt with the frenetic modern world by attempting to forcefully control it through physical and ideological strength. Tolkien, as the architect of his own mythological world, encoded an opposite response within his writing that passionately
resisted cultural domination and assimilation in favor of free, though divided, cultural expression.

Tolkien exhibits this fear of cultural hegemony by preserving the distinct separateness and sovereignty of individual cultures within *The Lord of the Rings*. The first culture that the book introduces is that of the hobbits of the Shire. The Shire is the very picture of a pre-modern, peaceful homeland in need of protection from malicious external forces. Very early on, the narrator explains that “at no time had Hobbits of any kind been warlike, and they had never fought among themselves” (Tolkien, *LOTR 5*). Indeed, the weapons they did possess were hung as decorations in the home or gathered into a museum. The architecture in the Shire reinforces this nonviolent ethos. Hobbits “did not go in for towers. Their houses were usually long, low, and comfortable” (7). Hobbit architecture is defined by *not* using towers, suggesting that other cultures do. Towers may be built for a number of reasons, but some common functions include watchtowers for spotting enemies; fortresses for stockpiling; or enormously tall structures meant to convey dominance. Writer and photojournalist John Reader suggests that towers were built in part to “reinforce the control ideology of the state” and to present a sense of “coercive centralized control” (Reader 237). He posits that the presence, or absence, of towers in a civilization says a lot about what sort of political system exists in that society. *The Lord of the Rings* appears to be operating intuitively within a similar mindset. The Shire’s lack of towers suggests that they lack a coercive centralized control or that they lack an urgent need to protect themselves against external forces. This is perhaps what makes the Shire so vulnerable and in need of protection as the story progresses.

The Shire’s architecture firmly contrasts with the architecture of other civilizations, particularly the architecture of the ‘antagonists.’ Both Sauron and Saruman, the two major
antagonists, operate their headquarters within massive and domineering towers; the second book of the trilogy reveals the importance of these towers as the loci of the enemies’ power through its title, *The Two Towers*. These towers symbolically reveal the organization of power within Sauron’s domain in Mordor and within Saruman’s lesser, imitative domain in Isengard. The tower is the point from which the ruler rules, often standing in for the ruler himself through synecdoche. In physical space, the tower literally towers over all other buildings; it can monitor the masses, and in turn, the masses can see the tower from almost any angle below. The tower is the perfect embodiment of a totalitarian ruler’s domination over others; aesthetically and across physical space, it effectively conveys that message. As towers heighten the power of the ruler, they simultaneously de-individualize the masses.

*The Lord of the Rings* appears to critique the domineering qualities of fascist architecture by reappropriating many of its structures in Mordor. At one point, the narrator describes the landscape of this dismal domain:

> The Dark Lord had built a rampart of stone. In it there was a single gate of iron, and upon its battlement sentinels paced unceasingly. Beneath the hills on either side the rock was bored into a hundred caves and maggot-holes; there a host of orcs lurked, ready at a signal to issue forth like black ants going to war. (636)

The Orcs in mass are described as ants, essentially undifferentiated black specks of minimal individual value. The unceasing sentinels on the battlements serve the dual purpose of monitoring for intruders and surveilling the Orcs within Mordor. Constant surveillance ensures obedience and uniformity, and it erases the sense of the individual in favor of the undifferentiated mass. Yet this perspective on Orc culture seems to issue from the narrator’s birds-eye-view of Mordor, and is by no means the only perspective. Sauron himself devalues the
Orcs even further. The narrator provides rare insight into Sauron’s interiority when discussing how he feels about Shelob the spider:

And as for Sauron: he knew where she lurked. It pleased him that she should dwell there hungry but unabated in malice, a more sure watch upon that ancient path into his land than any other that his skill could have devised. And Orcs, they were useful slaves, but he had them in plenty. (724)

Shelob pleases Sauron pragmatically because she is an effective guard despite the fact that she occasionally devours some of his Orcs. Interestingly, however, this passage provides insight into Sauron’s interior perspective through indirect discourse filtered through the narrator. Therefore, this passage suggests that Sauron very much views the Orcs as utterly replaceable servants devoid of individual value. This de-individualization parallels evidence of Hitler’s own “lack of feeling for humans” when he would architecturalize the participants at party conventions into “geometrical patterns,” reducing them to “noctambulent creatures” (Spotts 119). A totalitarian ruler’s total rule can only be sustained at the expense of the individuality of his subjects.

Yet Sauron’s perspective on the Orcs does not necessarily align with the text’s presentation of Orcs overall. Rather, Tolkien reveals that no form of hegemony is ever as total as it strives to be. While Sauron does not individualize the Orcs, the text does. Many times, the text offers up conversations between Orcs in which they are revealed to have individual names, personalities, and rankings within their different tribal divisions. Indeed, the text very frequently calls attention to the heterogeneity of Orc groups. When Aragorn searches through the remains of the Orc party that the men of Rohan slaughtered the previous night, he becomes puzzled when he recognizes that some of the “gear is not after the manner of Orcs at all;” some were armed with “short broad-bladed swords, not with the curved scimitars usual with Orcs; and they had
bows of yew, in length and shape like the bows of Men. Upon their shields they bore a strange device: a small white hand” and “an S-rune, wrought of some white metal” (415). Aragorn distinguishes between orc cultures based on their weapons and the symbols they bear; once again, weapons appear as major signifiers of differing cultures.

The narrator does not simply present the Orcs as faceless enemies, even though they may appear so to their master, Sauron. They have their own cultures, albeit distasteful, with their own cultural divisions. Interestingly, Sauron dismissively combines these different cultures into the same armies, and this intermingling often leads to conflicts with disastrously negative results. Some of the most memorable scenes with individualized orcs simultaneously represent moments of cultural conflict. After Frodo becomes paralyzed by Shelob, Sam overhears two orc leaders conversing. One orc, Gorbag, tells another, Shagrat, to quiet down, and Shagrat replies, “Go on, Gorbag! Yours are making more than half the noise” (736). Here, the Orcs have individual names with individual personalities, yet the content of their discussion is centered on a disagreement. Shagrat accuses Gorbag’s orcs of making most of the noise, referring to them as “yours.” These two orc captains do not seem to view themselves as part of the same cultural unit.

This cultural disunity within the Orc ranks, constantly hinted at throughout the trilogy, culminates to more destructive heights later on, ultimately weakening Sauron’s troops and providing an advantage for the protagonists. When Sam goes to rescue Frodo from a defensive tower, he would have found countless Orcs standing in the way. When he arrives, however, the Orcs are “at war among themselves[;] Shagrat and Gorbag had come to blows” (899). The hint of conflict Sam heard before has transformed into a full-fledged battle amongst the Orcs, fortuitously leaving the way clear for Sam to enter the complex. It could be argued that the Orcs
are depicted in times of conflict to reveal their innately evil and inharmonious natures and to mitigate any sympathy on their behalf. Yet these intimate depictions of Orc conversations seem to be doing more than that because their conflicts arise less from their ‘innate evil’ and more from strife between cultural groups. Indeed, the Orcs have their own charming lexicon of racial slurs to describe other Orc groups; “stinking Morgul-rats” is just one example (906). Ultimately, Sauron underestimates the cultural diversity of the Orcs, instead perceiving his armies as one obedient mass. This dangerously misguided oversight leads to his disadvantage. Sauron’s ultimate purpose, of course, depends upon both forceful domination and cultural hegemony, subjugating all of Middle-earth’s cultures under one rule. Tolkien depicts this forceful ‘unification’ as unsuccessful even at the most basic level of combining Orc groups, refuting any suggestion that distinct heterogeneous cultures can be successfully combined by erasing cultural differences in favor of a monocultural system.

The relationship between Benjamin’s aura and the seemingly heterogeneous race of the Orcs perhaps explains why Sauron erroneously views them as a fairly productive, homogenous fighting force. Orcs themselves are mass-reproductions of more beautiful and auratic originals, the Elves. In The Silmarillion, which outlines the more detailed mythological background of Middle-earth, Tolkien describes the origin of the Orcs:

All those of the Quendi who came into the hands of Melkor… were put there in prison, and by slow arts of cruelty were corrupted and enslaved; and thus did Melkor breed the hideous race of the Orcs in envy and mockery of the Elves, of whom they were afterwards the bitterest of foes… And deep in their dark hearts the Orcs loathed the Master whom they served in fear, the maker only of their misery. This it may be was the vilest deed of Melkor. (Tolkien, Silmarillion 50)
Melkor, a sort of evil demi-god whom Sauron serves, captured the Quendi, or Elves, and reproduced them into the Orc race. The Orc race is a bastardization of the Elf race, a copy meant to pervert and diminish the purer auratic power of the Elves. In this way, Melkor manipulates aura by attempting to reduce its power through the creation of mocking reproductions, yet these reproductions ultimately can never match the power of the originals. Interestingly, this passage points to the way that mass-production can be used as a form of control. Melkor can manipulate the way that Elves exhibit auratic power and, simultaneously, can create a race of reproductions that is now entirely dependent on its maker, whom they fear rather than love. This act of reproduction is depicted as a loathsome transgression, described as the “vilest deed of Melkor.”

This auratic corruption makes the Orc race a useful fighting force, a force made of fairly homogenized reproductions enslaved to a ruler. Yet even as homogenized and de-individualized as the Orcs may be, The Lord of the Rings resists the idea that even they can be successfully amalgamated through cultural hegemony. One way that totalitarian rulers, in their quest for utter domination, may attempt to force this amalgamation is through self-deification.

Tolkien’s description of Mordor projects one of Benjamin’s main critiques against fascism, the way that it aestheticized politics, manipulating ideas of originality, creativity, and genius to maintain an obedient mass population under a totalitarian rule (Benjamin 1070). This form of rule takes advantage of the ritual value connected to authentic and auratic art. Ultimately, this may lead to the deification of the totalitarian ruler, a phenomenon witnessed in Nazi Germany and also depicted within The Lord of the Rings. Cultural historian George Mosse suggests that Hitler applied the fascist aesthetic in such a way that he transformed “politics into a civic religion” (246). This instills an even greater sense of awe and obedience in the mass population. Similarly, The Lord of the Rings depicts Sauron as someone who is both worshipped
and feared by a variety of different cultures. The dead Men of the Mountains, for instance, broke an oath to fight against Sauron because “they had worshipped Sauron in the Dark Years” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 782). In this context, worshipping Sauron appears unholy and inappropriate, ultimately leading to this culture’s unnaturally prolonged existence in the mountains. Yet this reveals that Sauron’s auratic sway is not limited to the Orcs, who are bound to him as slaves due to their origins, but extends to other races. Sauron gains loyalty from a variety of groups, including the oft-mentioned Easterlings, a race of men who fight alongside Sauron’s armies. Indeed, Sauron gains the wizard Saruman’s loyalty as well, but Saruman serves Sauron’s purposes more out of a desire for self-preservation and power than through a subservient sense of worship.

Moreover, Tolkien shows that for his servants, the worship of Sauron comes at a great cost. The Mouth of Sauron is one provocative example of the corrupting effects of unholy worship. When the text first introduces him, he is:

> robed all in black, and black was his lofty helm; yet this was no Ringwraith but a living man. The Lieutenant of the Tower of Barad-dûr he was, and his name is remembered in no tale; for he himself had forgotten it, and he said: ‘I am the Mouth of Sauron.’ But it is told that he was a renegade, who came of the race of those that are named the Black Númenóreans; for they established their dwellings in Middle-earth, being enamoured of evil knowledge. And he entered the service of the Dark Tower when it first rose again . . . and he was more cruel than any orc. (888)

On his first appearance, the narrator describes him much like a Ringwraith but must clarify that he is indeed a human being. This comparison with a Ringwraith, the ultimate symbol for the
utter effacement of the self due to the power of the Ring, sets up a parallel between the
Ringwraiths’ losses of identity and the Mouth of Sauron’s. The fact that he has forgotten his
original name indicates the extent to which he has lost himself in service to Sauron. The loss of
his name parallels Gollum’s own forgetfulness as a ring bearer, losing the memory of his old
name, Sméagol, in exchange for his newer debased name, Gollum. The very implication of the
Mouth of Sauron’s name further erases his identity. He is merely a mouth of another being, an
appendage or vessel through which Sauron can speak. Because Sauron lacks corporeal
substance, he must enslave others as surrogate bodies. In his history, the Mouth of Sauron is said
to have descended from a race of men that worshipped Sauron, “enamoured” by his evil
knowledge. His worship came at the price of his own personal effacement. In these depictions
of worship, the text constantly suggests that this form of political deification is a transgressive
act, and that any attempt to garner worship is almost an act of hubris in attempting to mimic and
displace a higher power.

Worship of Sauron, as well as Saruman, leads to their near-deification in the way that
other characters invoke them. Both good and evil characters refer to Sauron as the “Dark Lord,”
an epithet that appears with greater frequency later on in the trilogy as the extent of Sauron’s
power is gradually revealed. While the term for the “Dark Lord” could partly refer to the
position of a feudal lord, the word “Lord” also introduces a religious element, as if his person
were worthy of worship. Saruman produces a similar effect. Uglúk, one of the Orcs transporting
Merry and Pippin, exclaims “By the White Hand!” as an evocation of exasperation (449). Uglúk
invokes the name of his master as if he were uttering “By God!” and refers to his master by his
symbol, the white hand. A symbol is a compact, mobile emblem of the master’s presence and
power over his subjects, even as he rules from a distance. The prevalence of symbols seems to elevate Saruman, and Sauron, to levels of god-like omniscience.

The threat of cultural hegemony and the erasure of cultural freedom ominously lurks over the entire novel particularly through the power of symbols. This threat is embodied by the antagonist Sauron whose distinct immateriality combined with his omnipresence makes his influence appear all the more sinister. Although the true nature of Sauron’s shape remains ambiguous throughout the trilogy, the most ubiquitous image signifying Sauron’s form is the Eye. During the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Eowyn guards King Theoden’s injured body against the Lord of the Nazgûl, who is the chief Ringwraith and one of Sauron’s most valuable servants. In retaliation, the Nazgûl threatens to imprison Eowyn where her “flesh shall be devoured, and [her] shriveled mind be left naked to the Lidless Eye” (841). The Nazgûl threatens both her body and her mind, but the intrusion of the Eye on her mind is particularly threatening. Possessing one’s own mind is not only a privately personal right but also the cornerstone of any sense of free will. Weapons may destroy the body, but the Eye can penetrate thoughts. The mind is left “naked” to the Eye, associating the mind with corporeality and suggesting that it can be destroyed just as the body can be destroyed by a sword. Sauron’s ability to invade minds extends his hegemonic reach.

While the Eye has the ability to literally peer into minds, the it also serves as a symbol of Sauron’s hegemonic force threatening the sovereignty of Middle-earth. Much earlier, while the Orcs hold Merry and Pippin captive, Pippin notices that one troop of Orcs “had a red eye painted on their shields” (451). This red eye distinguishes them as Orcs from Mordor, servants of Sauron. The symbol of the red eye contrasts with the symbol of the white hand that Saruman’s Orcs bear on their shields (415). Both Sauron and Saruman spread the range of their power by
marking their servants with their individual symbols. Saruman’s decision to mark his army with a symbol distinct from Sauron’s indicates disunity between the two, suggesting that Saruman desire of the Ring for himself. The markings represent a symbolic challenge, and the disagreements between Sauron and Saruman’s Orcs transporting Merry and Pippin microcosmically display the conflict between these two supposed allies.

Marking weaponry with symbols is clearly not reserved to the enemy, as the protagonists use a variety of their own symbols, ranging from the white tree of Gondor to the horse of Rohan. These symbols serve as indicators of cultural identity and cohesion. The antagonists, however, transfer and spread their symbols in an invasive and avaricious way. As Frodo and Sam travel through Ithilien, they find evidence of “the newer wounds made by the Orcs and other foul servants of the Dark Lord: a pit of uncovered filth and refuse; trees hewn down wantonly and left to die, with evil runes or the fell sign of the Eye cut in rude strokes on their bark” (651). Not only does this scene depict the needless destruction of nature by the hand of the enemy, but it also depicts the enemy’s territorial marking of the landscape with the symbols of their master. Here, the symbol is used as a tool for domination rather than as a rallying symbol for soldiers. The spreading of symbols represents the spreading of power. The white hand extends its reach and the Eye magnifies its gaze. This sort of defilement appears numerous times. Frodo and Sam later pass the statue of a king with its head removed and “in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, one large red eye in the midst of its forehead. Upon its knees and mighty chair, and all about the pedestal, were idle scrawls mixed with the foul symbols that the maggot-folk of Mordor used” (702). Once again, the ubiquity of a symbol increases the power of that which it represents. In this case, it appears that the symbol of the Eye supplants the symbol of the king of men, a symbolic usurpation of power. It is also interesting that the symbols that both
Sauron and Saruman designate for themselves are physical body parts. Although the symbol itself is an intangible reminder of the power that controls that symbol, the body parts cast the shadow of a physical threat. Once again, the threat of the antagonists’ power is both the threat of physical destruction as well as the threat of the less visible, yet undeniably potent, cultural hegemonic destruction.

The Eye’s symbolic presence takes a more violent turn as the trilogy progresses. During the siege of Gondor, the men watch from the city walls as the antagonists prepare their “great engines for the casting of missiles,” or catapults (822). This phrasing is uncharacteristically modern; catapults are not typically described as engines, and missiles conjure the idea of a modern missile, although “missile” may also refer to any thrown object. Catapults, ancient siege weapons, could be used to hurl any number of items against a city’s walls; Sauron’s army hurls his symbols. In particularly gruesome fashion, the enemy flings “into the City all the heads of those who had fallen fighting at Osgiliath, or on the Rammas, or in the fields… all were branded with the foul token of the Lidless Eye” (823). Sauron’s army marks the severed heads of men with the Eye of Sauron before casting them over the city’s walls. In this example, the catapults send weapons of fear rather than weapons that can cause any physical damage. Yet the presence of the Eye flung into the city increases the auratic power of the enemy bearing down upon the city of Gondor; even though Sauron’s army has not yet broken through the city’s defenses, the symbol has, and this presence produces fear of an inescapable and indomitable foe. Sauron repurposes the bodies of men into weapons by branding them with his symbol, cancerously reproducing his symbol of power by supplanting the symbols of others with his own, much like the Orcs who defiled the King’s statue with the Eye.
To this end, the Eye is a particularly effective symbol. The presence of the Eye throughout the land, spread by Sauron’s servants, increases Sauron’s symbolic presence while the image of the Eye itself elicits the idea that Sauron can now peer into all the physical spaces in which his symbol has now invaded. The red Eye even appears on the flies in Mordor (921). The fear of an ever-expanding range of surveillance, slowly suffocating the freedom of the people, was not an uncommon fear at the time that Tolkien was writing *The Lord of the Rings*. The Eye of Sauron resembles the now ubiquitous figure of Big Brother, the totalitarian dictator from George Orwell’s novel *1984*. Interestingly, Orwell’s novel was published in 1949, just a few years before *The Lord of the Rings* was published. Both the Eye and Big Brother represent omnipresent forces with ambiguous physical forms. Perhaps this fear of surveillance represented a larger fear in this period, a fear of uniformity and the erasure of freedom within a culturally uniform society, a fear which Tolkien more openly expressed within his personal letters, and a fear which *1984* very clearly explores.

Aura at this extreme produces fear, which *The Lord of the Rings* acknowledges to be one of the enemy’s most effective weapons. The most quintessential purveyors of fear within *The Lord of the Rings* are the Ringwraiths, led by the Lord of the Nazgûl, who Gandalf warns “wields a deadly fear” (257). The word “wield” designates fear as a weapon to be wielded much like a sword or axe, yet it is purely psychological. Much later in the trilogy, we see this production of fear in action. As the Nazgûl swoop down upon the city of Minas Tirith, men begin “flying wild and witless here and there, flinging away their weapons, crying out in fear, [and] falling to the ground” (820). Here, fear is such an effective weapon not because it physically injures men but rather because it destroys their will to fight. The fear paralyzes them, causing the soldiers to drop their own weapons. In this light, fear is much like the hegemonic
force that Sauron’s army wishes to implement: the gradual erosion and destruction of the opposing side’s will. Fear is a fascinating weapon because, instead of cutting off the hand of a person wielding their sword, that person drops it of their own accord, negating the sense that physical force was used but accomplishing the same end, the disarming and neutralizing of the enemy. In this way, fear operates in a hegemonic and gradual way, through what Gramsci calls “coercion and consent” (Leitch 1000).

The rather explicit discussion of fear as a weapon, a topic rarely discussed in medieval literature, seems to be a symptom of the modern world. In his service during World War I, Tolkien himself experienced what he called “the animal horror” of trench life (Carpenter 72). In the era of the World Wars, fear was no longer an acute feeling but rather a chronic, psychologically damaging one. The term “shell-shock” entered the English language after World War I to describe the poorly defined psychological reactions that soldiers experienced as a result of war trauma (Livingston 82). Today, we have a similar condition now commonly referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. *The Lord of the Rings* seems to depict its own version of this mysterious condition. After the siege of Gondor ends, the healers’ “art and knowledge were baffled; for there were many sick of a malady that would not be healed; and they called it the Black Shadow, for it came from the Nazgûl” (860). Just as modern medicine struggled, and continues to struggle, with these trauma-induced conditions, the healers of Middle-earth face a new and puzzling ailment to treat, one that has been induced by excessive fear from the Ringwraiths.

So what exactly are the protagonists so afraid of? It is not merely the fear of death in battle; that alone could not produce such heightened emotions. The answer lies in what would happen if they lost the war against Sauron. The text is not incredibly explicit about this, but it
does hint that the most likely result is enslavement. The image of slavery recurs persistently throughout the trilogy. When Denethor, the steward of Gondor, loses all hope and turns to madness during the Siege of Gondor, he makes his own predictions clear when he exclaims that “the West has failed. It is time for all to depart who would not be slaves” (853). Despite his extravagant despair, Denethor is actually a fairly reliable source of information regarding Sauron’s plans; before Denethor utters this statement, he reveals that he has been watching Sauron’s movements through one of the missing palantírs, ancient orbs once used to communicate across long distances. Another glimpse into the potential future of Middle-earth occurs after the Siege of Gondor, when Aragorn and Gandalf lead the troops to the Black Gate for one last stand. They are greeted by the Mouth of Sauron, who proposes a peace treaty demanding particular concessions if the protagonists yield. He says:

These are the terms… The rabble of Gondor and its deluded allies shall withdraw at once beyond the Anduin, first taking oaths never again to assail Sauron the Great in arms, open or secret. All lands east of the Anduin shall be Sauron’s for ever, solely. West of the Anduin as far as the Misty Mountains and the Gap of Rohan shall be tributary to Mordor, and men there shall bear no weapons, but shall have leave to govern their own affairs. But they shall help to rebuild Isengard which they have wantonly destroyed, and that shall be Sauron’s. (890)

This peace treaty is brimming with the suggestion that, in accepting these terms, the protagonists would be relegated to the status of slaves. They must vow never to attack Sauron again; to give up certain lands to him forever; to maintain tributary lands, which would inevitably be controlled by Sauron’s will, especially considering their inability to protect themselves with weapons; and to help rebuild Isengard, where Sauron may surveil Middle-earth from a more central location.
Gandalf instantly recognizes the deceit hidden behind the treaty’s diplomatic jargon, and he “reject[s] them utterly” (891). He proclaims that they “did not come here to waste words in treating with Sauron, faithless and accursed; still less with one of his slaves. Begone!” (891). In calling the Mouth of Sauron a slave, Gandalf is acknowledging what he already knows about anyone who subjects themselves to the power of Sauron, a singular, dictatorial ruler; that they are inevitably just slaves. The Mouth of Sauron is one of Sauron’s highest lieutenants, yet he is still no more than a slave, much as the Ringwraiths are mindless slaves to Sauron’s will. This would be the fate of all others who would bow to Sauron’s power.

The depiction of Sauron’s already-converted followers provides even more evidence for the inevitable enslavement if Sauron were to control all of Middle-earth. The text occasionally pauses to contemplate the pragmatic question of how Saruman and Sauron are able to feed and furnish such massive armies from a practical standpoint. The answer: slaves. Within the walls of Isengard, there are “acres tilled by the slaves of Saruman” (553) and an overcrowded city where “thousands could dwell . . . workers, servants, slaves, and warriors with great store of arms” (554). These details explain how the enemies can furnish a militaristic operation on such a grand scale. Saruman’s fortress at Isengard, however, is “only a little copy, a child’s model or a slave’s flattery, of that vast fortress, armoury, prison, furnace of great power, Barad-dûr, the Dark Tower, which suffered no rival” (555). In terms of aura, Isengard is a lesser imitation of Sauron’s fortress, failing to match up to the aura of the original. Even more alarming is the suggestion that Saruman, a powerful wizard, is himself but a slave of Sauron.

Sauron’s massive army almost prefigures the enslavement waiting for the protagonists if they fail, as Sauron’s warriors are themselves part of cultures which Sauron has enslaved. Because Sauron’s power is swollen to the point that he has Orcs in excess, each individual Orc is
less valuable, and their individual identities are erased in his eyes, or should I say, Eye. Sauron rules over his subjects not through benevolence but fear. As Sam seeks to rescue Frodo from the Orcs, he passes a stronghold which Sauron had found “useful; for he had few servants but many slaves of fear, and still its chief purpose as of old was to prevent escape from Mordor” (900). Once again, Sauron’s subjects are referred to as slaves lacking independent wills, but even more sinister is that Sauron uses this fortress to keep these slaves within Mordor rather than to keep intruders out. This fortress literalizes Sauron’s dominating power over his subjects, who could never be anything other than slaves.

The protagonists fight against this threat of slavery not only physically but also symbolically. When Sam goes to rescue Frodo from the tower in Mordor, he finds one of the Orcs, Snaga, whipping a naked Frodo for making noise. At the sound of the whip, a “rage blazed in Sam’s heart to a sudden fury.” The orc “raised a whip a second time, but the blow never fell,” because Sam “slashed its whip-hand from its arm” (909). Sam symbolically severs the arm that wields the whip, defying the slavery that such a weapon represents. Indeed, the Orcs themselves are whipped into obedience; Sam and Frodo later see an army of Orcs heading to battle, their files surrounded by “two of the large fierce uruks, racking lashes and shouting” (930). The Orcs have whips used upon them, and they in turn use the whips on others in a cascading series of abuses of authority. Sam’s action in severing the hand cuts off this cascade. As Tolkien asserts in a letter to his son Christopher, “the most improper job of any man, even saints . . . is bossing other men” (Carpenter 64). Sam removes the arm that wields the whip rather than, perhaps, taking the whip himself and using it against the Orc. This action has larger thematic significance, paralleling the protagonists’ decision to destroy the Ring rather than attempt to use it against Sauron.
The Ring as Cultural Hegemony

The threat of hegemonic power that looms over Middle-earth ultimately stems from a weapon that defies many of the categorizations that this paper previously established for other weapons in *The Lord of the Rings*: the One Ring. If traditional weapons like swords, axes, and arrows threaten bodily harm, the Ring threatens domination and subordination without necessarily employing physical force. Yet the Ring can undoubtedly be considered a weapon, perhaps the most valuable of all, as both sides explicitly refer to it as such. One way that the Ring differs from other weapons in *The Lord of the Rings* is that it is readily transferrable between different owners and cultural groups. It was once Sauron’s, but Isildur won it from him. Eventually it passed to Gollum, who murdered his friend for it, before it passed to Bilbo, who won it through a game of riddles. It finally passed to Frodo through inheritance. Except for Frodo’s acquisition of the ring, all of these transfers occur through an act of conquest, in which the old owner is defeated and the new owner takes possession of it. This sort of transfer more closely recalls the transfer of weapons within the *Song of Roland*. Why should the Ring be transferrable and fluid while other weapons are not? Perhaps because it is an object that lends itself to hegemonic domination. Rings are common to most of the cultures in Middle-earth; Sauron’s distribution of rings to the different races was part of his initial plan to control the world. Because rings are such a universal form of currency, and the power of the One Ring appears to exert influence on just about everybody (except for Tom Bombadil), it seems to represent the perfect hegemonizing force; a cultural symbol that can link all groups together.

Like the weapons in the *Song of Roland*, the Ring is not only a transferrable weapon but a weapon that contains an element similar to a Christian relic. When Sauron created the Ring, he
injected much of his own power into it so that it could rule over the other rings of power. This power, an intangible substance, ties Sauron’s life to the Ring, such that a part of him exists within it, and he can never truly die unless the Ring were destroyed. By inserting a substance from a living being into the Ring, the text imbues the Ring with a sort of life of its own and a humanlike power of aura. Sauron’s power within the Ring is not so different from St. Peter’s tooth embedded within the hilt of Durendal, lending these weapons an elevated level of aura attached to the life of a powerful living, or once-living, being. Where Tolkien was unwilling to portray the swords, axes, and arrows of the protagonists as possessing an aura tied to the living, he seems much more willing to attach this heightened level of aura to the Ring, a weapon which is intrinsically evil. What does this imply about the nature of aura? Perhaps attaching such intensely humanlike qualities to an object is somehow insidious.

The Ring’s power is not only amplified by Sauron’s power within it but also by the sense of independent agency that the Ring gains by being connected to his power. When Gandalf first describes the Ring to Frodo, he explains that “the Ring was trying to get back to its master. It had slipped from Isildur’s hand and betrayed him; then when a chance came it caught poor Deagol, and he was murdered; and after that Gollum, and it had devoured him,” after which it eventually “abandoned Gollum” (Tolkien, LOTR 55-56). The Ring is the actor and agent in Gandalf’s tale: it “slipped,” “betrayed,” “caught,” “devoured,” and “abandoned” a series of living beings. It has a will of its own, yet that will ultimately is a part of Sauron. These actions make the Ring even more human and auratic.

All of these considerations suggest that the Ring serves as a symbol of cultural hegemony itself. The Ring’s inscription is a fairly explicit signifier of its role as a hegemonic, dominating force: “One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the
darkness bind them” (50). The One Ring seems to be some sort of perversion of the power of aura, swollen beyond reason. An object typically gains aura when copies are made from it; the copies are less powerful than the original but the copies add to the aura of the one original. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, the one Ring is not the original. Sauron made it in secret after the other rings of power were made, yet the one Ring’s aura is increased by the existence of the other rings. In this light, the one Ring is a copy that usurped the power of the original rings, diverging from typical auratic power. The inscription on the Ring, moreover, emphasizes “one” unitary object dominating all others. Interestingly, however, the inscription is also very suggestive of combining and assimilating all beings: it wants to find them, bring them, and bind them together. All of this is to be done in the “darkness.” Darkness most obviously refers to the dark power of Sauron and the darkness he casts over Middle-earth. However, darkness could also suggest a lack of awareness, by which this binding process occurs without its subjects knowing that they are being bound together. The inscription contains the threat of both destructive physical war and a more gradual cultural hegemonic takeover, in which the illusion of ideology prevents participants from acknowledging the system in which they are subsumed.

The threat of a covert form of domination manifests itself through the way that characters describe Sauron’s threat through metaphors of consumption. As Faramir describes wraiths to Frodo, he explains that “to them the Enemy had given rings of power, and he had devoured them: living ghosts they were become, terrible and evil” (692). The men of old who received rings were devoured and consumed by the power of Sauron and, in exchange, their identities and their humanities were erased. Earlier on, Gollum suggests that Sauron presents a similar threat. When the hobbits reach the Black Gate, Gollum begs them not to go into Mordor because if Sauron captures the Ring, “He’ll eat us all, if He gets it, eat all the world” (637). Gollum’s
language indicates a threat similar to that which Faramir describes. The Ring gives the enemy the power to consume the world, and consumption is not only a very powerful metaphor for military domination but also for cultural hegemony.

The Ring’s hegemonizing force extends beyond its role as a weapon that transcends cultural difference; it also has the power to overcome linguistic differences. When Sam mistakenly believes that Frodo has been killed by Shelob, he takes the Ring from Frodo to complete the quest. Sam puts on the Ring in order to escape two parties of Orcs and is surprised that:

he understood what they said. Perhaps the Ring gave understanding of tongues, or simply understanding, especially of the servants of Sauron its maker, so that if he gave heed, he understood and translated the thought to himself. Certainly the Ring had grown greatly in power as it approached the places of its forging. (734)

The narrator seems uncertain as to what this newfound linguistic understanding means, but the narrator suggests that the Ring somehow allows the bearer to understand any language, especially the languages used by the servants of Sauron. Languages are powerful indicators of cultural difference, and the multitude of languages that exists in any given world establishes communicative barriers that prevent the assimilation of all those cultures into one unified culture. The Ring seemingly erases this barrier for its bearer. To Tolkien the philologist, the preservation of native languages around the world was immensely important. The fact that the readers learn about this additional power of the Ring so late in the novel amplifies not only the danger of this power but suggests that the Ring may have a number of other powers that remain unexplored, even remaining unknown to the narrator.
Cultural Hegemony and Modern Industry

The Ring is just one potent manifestation of the threat of cultural hegemony within The Lord of the Rings. The novel also continually decries the role of industrialism in the antagonists’ quest for domination. While critics argue that the text exists in an escapist world detached from the historical realities of the 20th century, The Lord of the Rings contains numerous references to modern industry that would never have appeared in medieval texts. Tolkien’s personal correspondence indicates that he felt very passionately about what he perceived to be the destructive forces of industrialization. Yet to Tolkien, the developments of industry were setbacks rather than advancements. Tolkien saw the “tragedy and despair of all machinery laid bare,” that “labour-saving machinery only creates endless and worse labour” until society progresses from “Daedalus and Icarus to the Giant Bomber. It is not an advance in wisdom! . . . it seems a world wide mental disease that only a tiny minority perceive it” (Carpenter 87-88).

Tolkien’s own negative perception of industrialization manifests in his association of industry with the enemy. Before the attack on Minas Tirith begins, Beregond tells Pippin that “here will the hammer-stroke fall hardest” (Tolkien, LOTR 765). Hammers are constantly linked with the enemy, a tool of industry rather than a typical weapon. Beregond, therefore, suggests that the attack will be an industrial one. Much earlier in the trilogy, after Frodo is stabbed by an Orc in Moria, Aragorn checks his wounds to “see what the hammer and anvil have done” to him (336). Once again, industry and war intersect. Interestingly, the Orcs do not actually fight with hammers and anvils; Aragorn’s language is figurative, suggesting that there is a relationship between warfare and the industrialization of the enemy.

For a text that deals within an ostensibly “non-modern” world, The Lord of the Rings constantly reveals an anxiety over the threat of technological advancement, often associated with
warfare and hegemonic domination. Different cultures within *The Lord of the Rings* represent a wide range of technological proficiency. The Shire, the first culture presented within the text, is an agriculture-based society seemingly untouched by any sort of “industrial revolution.” Indeed, from the very first page, the hobbits very specifically eschew machinery: “they do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skillful with tools” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 1). Yet this implies that they knew of technology beyond their own, and that other cultures within Middle-earth world do use more complicated technologies. The desire to protect the innocently pre-industrial Shire is part of what keeps Frodo and Sam from straying from their quest. The Shire functions as a sort of home-base from which to compare other societal systems depicted throughout the text, and while the text by no means argues that the Shire is the ideal society, it does hint that other systems are less ideal.

One contrasting system that reveals the destructive nature of technology is Saruman’s industrial complex of Isengard. Tolkien scholar T.A. Shippey argues that Saruman is “an image of one of the characteristic vices of modernity, though we still have no name for it – a kind of restless ingenuity, skill without purpose, bulldozing for the sake of change” (Shippey, *Author* 171). This appears to be true; once Saruman allies with Sauron, the domain of Isengard undergoes drastic changes: “A strong place and wonderful was Isengard, and long it had been beautiful… But Saruman had slowly shaped it to his shifting purposes, and made it better, as he thought, being deceived” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 555). Isengard as a fortress is not inherently evil, instead made evil by intention. Saruman, however, sees these changes as improvements, even as the narrator describes him as deceived; perhaps he suffers from the “world wide mental illness”
that Tolkien, and Shippey, describe in which people can only see new technology in a positive light.

Saruman uses technology and industry as tools through which to spread his power. Treebeard, a shepherd of the trees, tells Merry and Pippin that Saruman is “plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment” (473). In order to become a power, Saruman turns his mind to “metal and wheels,” or technology, in order to mass-produce an enormous and efficient fighting force that he can then deploy to conquer others. This focus on technology comes at the expense of nature. Indeed, *The Lord of the Rings* depicts technology as a direct threat to nature. Saruman decimates the surrounding forests in order to “feed the fires” of his tower, and Treebeard notes that “there is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days” (474).

Technological development is continually linked to the desire for domination; technology is not only used as a tool to dominate others but also a means to subdue and dominate the natural world.

Saruman’s industrial war complex at Isengard experiments with technology in ways that extend beyond mere destruction and into the realm of corruption of the natural order itself. Treebeard suggests that Saruman has begun to mass-produce the Orcs that will fight for him:

> Now it is clear that he is a black traitor. He has taken up with foul folk, with the Orcs . . . Worse than that: he has been doing something to them; something dangerous. For these Isengarders are more like wicked Men. It is a mark of evil things that came in the Great Darkness that they cannot abide the Sun; but Saruman’s Orcs can endure it, even if they hate it. I wonder what he has done?
Are they Men he has ruined, or has he blended the races of Orcs and Men? That would be a black evil! (473)

Here, Saruman is akin to a mad scientist experimenting in taboo realms, like Frankenstein’s creation of the monster, ultimately leading to tragic results. Treebeard indicates his own moral outrage at the mere rumors of what Saruman has been doing, deeming them a “black evil.”

Saruman as a wizard has the power to manipulate nature beyond the abilities of mere men, yet his actions in this instance are particularly transgressive. Saruman technologically reproduces living beings to fight for him. In this way, technology is consistently linked with domination and hegemonic control. Saruman’s industrial complex can not only produce identical weapons and armor, branded with his symbol of the white hand, for his homogenous army, but also can make the soldiers themselves as identical as possible. This reveals technology’s powerful homogenizing capacity to mass-produce not only products but also people. Reproducing artwork is one thing; reproducing living beings is an entirely different matter, with profound yet unexplored effects on the aura of those living reproductions. While technology provides the benefit of efficiency and convenience, and many forward thinking individuals like Saruman consider technological advancements as improvements, in Tolkien’s world it always bears the threat of hegemonic domination and the erasure of cultural difference.

Saruman’s technological experimentation, aside from the manipulation of living beings, includes the development of ever more potent weapons. Tolkien himself witnessed the development of increasingly destructive weapons, most notably in the development and detonation of the first atomic bomb. Some critics have suggested that the one Ring allegorically represents the atomic bomb, a suggestion that Tolkien had been quick to deny (Shippey, Author 163). Yet within The Lord of the Rings, Saruman, the character most associated with
industrialization, creates a device akin to a bomb, although without that name. At the battle of Helm’s Deep, the men of Rohan fortify themselves against Saruman’s onslaught behind Deeping Wall, the “high walls of ancient stone” built by “the men of old” (Tolkien, LOTR 528). This ancient defense, however, easily crumbles under the force of Saruman’s new device. During the battle, “there was a crash and a flash of flame and smoke. The waters of the Deeping-stream poured out hissing and foaming: they were choked no longer, a gaping hole was blasted in the wall” (537). The source of this explosion remains vague; Aragorn blames it on the “devilry of Saruman” through which the Orcs “lit the fire of Orthanc beneath [their] feet” (537). Saruman’s “devilry” is perhaps akin to dark magic, stretching the natural order beyond its normal bounds. Magic is in a way another version of technology, both being processes that produce results that seem beyond the realm of possibility. These new creations have the ability to destroy the foundations of the past. The explosion effortlessly obliterates the Deeping Wall which was built years ago; in The Lord of the Rings, technology decimates the foundations of the past, and unbridled technological innovations can have any number of negative, unexpected results.

The Lord of the Rings openly comments on the detrimental effects that Isengard’s industrialization has on the environment and hints that, if the process continues, Isengard could transform into its prototype, Mordor, the epitome of an environmental wasteland. The text initially establishes Isengard as an imitation or reproduction of Mordor, Saruman’s attempt to match Sauron’s strength. Whatever industrial might that Isengard possesses, it cannot compare to the power within Mordor. Sauron views Saruman’s attempt to reproduce Mordor through Isengard with disdain; the auratic power of the original dark tower cannot be replicated at Isengard. Sauron’s dark tower represents war and industry rolled into one indomitable package: a “fortress, armoury, prison, [and] furnace of great power” all in one (555). The furnace recalls
the image of smoke rising from Isengard due to the constant burning of trees. Industrialization, and its resulting environmental degradation, is linked to warfare and the quest to dominate other beings and nature itself.

Mordor is an environmental wasteland that appears beyond repair due to countless years of evil residence and abuse. When Frodo and Sam come across the Dead Marshes that lay before the entrance to Mordor, they witness a land in which “nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails. . . . A land defiled, diseased beyond all healing” (631-32). While Isengard has only recently begun to destroy the environment, it is not yet beyond repair. The lands surrounding Mordor, however, appear irrevocably damaged and utterly devoid of life. The text consistently associates vividly repulsive smells with Mordor as well. Of the many instances, Frodo and Sam pass lands that give off a “faint sickening charnel-smell” (704) and must avoid the “stench and vapours of the poisonous stream” (705). The charnel smell of death and the poison of the stream all represent thoroughly inhospitable environments. Technology, while supposedly facilitating efficiency and convenience, can make life an impossibility if extended too far. Isengard is in the early stages of this process, while Mordor is the image of its apocalyptic endpoint.

This destructive power of technology proves just as destructive even when it is not used for war. When the four hobbits finally return to the Shire at the end of the trilogy, they discover that the agrarian community has not remained entirely shielded from external corruption. Before they discover the full extent of the Shire’s alterations, one of the first foreboding differences that the hobbits notice is that “there seemed an unusual amount of burning going on, and smoke rose from many points” (1000). This ominous smoke recalls the images of the smoke filled lands of
Isengard and Mordor. The hobbits later learn that Lotho-Sackville Baggins, a generally disliked hobbit, first set the pieces in motion when he began to desire excessive power. As Farmer Cotton describes:

He wanted to own everything himself, and then order other folk about. It soon came out that he already did own a sight more than was good for him; and he was always grabbing more, though where he got the money was a mystery: mills and malt-houses and inns, and farms, and leaf-plantations. (1012)

The spirit of capitalism, with its quest for endless acquisition, expansion, and power, takes root in the Shire before quickly falling down the proverbial ‘slippery slope.’ Soon Saruman, known as Sharkey to the hobbits, obtains control over the Shire because of his business dealings with Lotho. Saruman introduces men, or ruffians, into the system to dominate and intimidate the hobbits. Now, Farmer Cotton says, “they’re always a-hammering and a-letting out a smoke and a stench, and there isn’t no peace even at night in Hobbiton. And they pour out filth a purpose . . . If they want to make the Shire into a desert, they’re going the right way about it” (1013). The fear that the Shire will turn into a “desert” immediately conjures images of the desert of Mordor and the ongoing process of desertification in Isengard. The Shire at this instant represents an incipient stage of this process. This cascading effect, all beginning with one hobbit’s quest for power beyond his measure, leads to even greater manifestations of power, which leads to the domination of not only individuals but also nature. The products of industry force the hobbits of the Shire and nature itself into submission.\textsuperscript{vi}

Fortunately, the four war-hardened hobbits returning to the Shire have the necessary experience and confidence to cast out these corrupting forces before any irreversible damage is done. Interestingly, they achieve this through seemingly necessary violence. In their decision to
fight the ruffians, however, Frodo above all insists there be “no killing; not even of the ruffians, unless it must be done, to prevent them from hurting hobbits” (1010). Despite Frodo’s extreme aversion to violence after completing his quest, violence nevertheless proves to be necessary when aggressive dominating forces threaten the freedom of others. This complicates the notion of violence within the text; violence appears admissible, and even glorified, when it is pursued in the service of preserving freedom against those who seek inordinate power. Weapons play a key role in this final battle between the hobbits and their ruffian invaders. When the four hobbits first return to the Shire, they are able to pass unimpeded primarily because of their impressively powerful and unfamiliar weapons. When one of the ruffians challenges the hobbits, Pippin “cast back his cloak, flashed out his sword, and the silver and sable of Gondor gleamed on him as he rode forward,” (1005) causing the ruffians to give way. This deliberate display of weaponry and gear reinforces the important representational power of weapons within the text, both in commanding respect and producing fear.

This final episode in the Shire, outlined above, depicts the hegemonic threat that persists even in peacetime through the economic, capitalistic system. While Tolkien openly feared the effect of technological advancements on warfare, he also feared the homogenizing effects of industrialization and mass-consumption in an era of increasing globalization. During the war, he wrote to his son Christopher about his anxieties:

I wonder (if we survive this war) if there will be any niche, even of sufferance, left for reactionary back numbers like me (and you). The bigger things get the smaller and duller or flatter the globe gets. It is getting to be all one blasted little provincial suburb. When they have introduced American sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass production throughout the Near East, Middle East, Far East,
U.S.S.R., the Pampas, el Gran Chaco . . . how happy we shall be. At any rate it ought to cut down on travel. There will be nowhere to go . . . Col. Knox says 1/8 of the world’s population speaks ‘English,’ and that is the biggest language group. If true, damn shame – say I. (Carpenter 65)

Tolkien’s worries extended beyond the immediate war at hand. What he appears to value above all else is the ability for independent cultures to coexist without external ideologies infiltrating and overtaking their systems of belief, even in the supposedly non-violent forms of “sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass-production.” What Tolkien says in his letter clarifies that his belief in the preservation of culture was not reserved for his own ‘English’ culture but extended to all cultures; the notion that the English language already encompassed so much of the globe disturbed him because ultimately, this domination comes at the loss of other languages. The Lord of the Rings delineates these two threats of physical and cultural domination. While Sauron mobilizes a catastrophic fighting force to physically subjugate Middle-earth, he does so in order to regain the Ring, the very symbol of hegemony. The Ring would give him full dominion over Middle-earth, a dominion not based solely on physical force but also cultural and mental force.

While the final episodes of the book reiterate the combined threats of physical and hegemonic domination, they also present a glimmer of optimism in the potential for cultural independence, rejuvenation, and coexistence. The conclusion of The Lord of the Rings is ultimately a happy one; Sauron is vanquished and a new king of men is crowned. If the hobbits’ return to a corrupted Shire is any indication, however, Tolkien does not present this victory as unambiguously resolved. Sauron’s defeat does not lead to a return to ‘normalcy,’ whatever that may be; indeed, the end of this epic marks an end of an age; as Gandalf tells Aragorn, “the Third
Age of the world is ended, and the new age is begun; and it is your task to order its beginning and to preserve what may be preserved” (971). Some traumas cannot be erased, but there is hope in the opportunity to rebuild.

Despite the text’s fear that domination under the guise of unification leads to assimilation and the erasure of cultural difference, it is ultimately optimistic and redemptive about the possibility of disparate cultures harmoniously interacting with each other. At the end of the novel, two of the largest realms of men, Gondor and Rohan, unite in bonds of friendship once Aragorn becomes the new king (977). While the king rules from Gondor, it is clear that Rohan will be able to maintain its cultural distinctiveness rather than be forcefully assimilated or converted into a mere tributary of Gondor. Harmonizing occurs even between different ‘races.’ Throughout the story, *The Lord of the Rings* frequently mentions the ongoing disharmony between the races of Elves and Dwarves. By the end, the friendship between Gimli, a dwarf, and Legolas, an elf, microcosmically projects hope that entire cultures can respect other groups without abandoning their own cultural identities. While *The Lord of the Rings* attempts to preserve boundaries in a way that may seem divisive, the ending ultimately depicts a world in which cultures can and should cooperate without conforming to one overwhelming majority.

**Conclusion:**

While this thesis primarily explores the way that Tolkien’s novel responds to the World War II period, the threat of cultural hegemony has certainly not dissipated in the subsequent years. Indeed, many of the text’s anxieties continue to plague the 21st century, though these anxieties may manifest in new forms. While the physical threat of domination is no longer knocking on our door, the cultural threat of hegemonic domination has already broken the door
off its hinges with a battering ram. If Tolkien was concerned about technology’s homogenizing influence while writing *The Lord of the Rings*, he may be rather horrified to hear details of the internet age. The internet is an incredibly wonderful, life-altering invention. Yet the internet provides people from cultures all around the world with the same information, feeding them particular ideologies and gradually erasing the last pockets of cultural diversity. In this age, media has more power than ever, such that people blame any number of social ills on the abstraction of the ‘media’ without ever being able to quantify what the media is. All the while, those in power who operate internet sites have the capacity to monitor and record what we do online. This in turn helps companies market new products that never existed before, but on which we soon become dependent.

While Tolkien seemed to think that people of his generation were blind to the unintended negative results of technological advancements, people today are more and more disenchanted with technology, which we love and hate, even as we are utterly dependent on it. More and more, we are made aware of the negative effects that technology has wrought on society and the world at large. Environmental degradation and climate change project a bleak future for the planet. We especially of the millennial generation feel this threat of cultural hegemony and the weight of the system that envelops us even if we lack the tools to verbalize that threat. Tolkien’s works obviously do not speak out of direct experience with this era, yet the disenchantment that the World Wars unleashed upon society has not evaporated, and the same issues crop up today in new forms. However, his work attracts so many devoted fans not because it wallows in despair but because of the redemptive hope that it offers at the end. Wars may be fought, swords may be broken, environments may be destroyed, but hope for regrowth always persists for those who are willing to start again.
Notes

i See Jane Chance’s _Tolkien the Medievalist_; T.A. Shippey’s _The Road to Middle Earth_; and Whetter and Mcdonald’s “In the Hilt is Fame.”

ii See John Garth’s _Tolkien and the Great War_; Michael Livingston’s “The Shell-Shocked Hobbit”; and Patrick Curry’s _Defending Middle Earth_.

iii See T.A. Shippey’s _Author of the Century_; and Chance and Siewer’s _Tolkien’s Modern Middle Ages_.

iv Some of the other medieval texts that may have inspired Tolkien include: The Kalevala, The Volsunga Saga, Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, etc.

v In reading about Hitler in conjunction with Tolkien, I could not help but notice that these two men, while completely divergent in their world views, had a great deal in common on a number of levels. Born just three years apart, they both fought in World War I; they both were deeply passionate about art and the production of aesthetics; both were inspired by the medieval period, Tolkien in his scholarly work and his mythological creation, Hitler in the (often erroneous) foundation of his race theories; and both were distrustful of modern technology. In fact, the two men had shockingly similar opinions about airplanes. Tolkien referred to planes as “Mordor-gadgets” (Carpenter 88), while Hitler thought aviation was “soulless” (Spotts 94).

vi Many of the hobbits are even drawn into the service of this new hegemonic system through “coercion and consent,” serving as “shirriffs” who enforced the rules of the new system (Tolkien, _LOTR_ 1001).
Works Cited


