One Ring to Rule Them All—Or Maybe Two?

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Most modern readers hear a reference to the Ring of Power and immediately think of J.R.R. Tolkien’s legendary *The Lord of the Rings*, originally published in 1954. This trilogy has become such an icon and fan favorite that Tolkien is hailed as a god of fantasy and fiction writing and praised for creating a beautifully robust world within his books. Despite his great influence, it turns out there is more than just Tolkien’s one ring to rule them all. As heretical as that may sound to a Middle Earth fan, Tolkien was not the first to center a story around a Ring of Power. Richard Wagner’s hugely successful *Ring cycle*, or *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, is an operatic work completed in 1874 also featuring a magic ring that corrupts its bearer and almost ruins the world. Of course, this necessitates discussing whether Tolkien may have drawn influence from Wagner’s *Ring cycle* when crafting his own story. Rumor has it that Tolkien emphatically rejected the idea of any similarity between his work and Wagner’s by saying, “Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases” (McGregor 133). It is debated whether Tolkien was actually referring to Wagner’s *Ring* or another work when he made the statement. What is for certain is that the German composer was one of many authors (including Shakespeare) whom Tolkien strongly despised and believed had messed up something very important (McGregor 344). Nevertheless, Wagner’s *Ring* cycle has been so influential and was so popular during Tolkien’s lifetime that it is virtually impossible for him to be unacquainted with the work. Although Wagner was not the first to ever write about a magical ring, his *Der Ring des Nibelungen* undoubtedly influenced Tolkien’s
writing, due to its monumental popularity and success. Studying the influence of
Wagner's work and comparing it to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* reveals similarities
in each narrative. It also explains how differences in each author's perspective alter his
approach to telling a story about a Ring of Power.

It may be no surprise to learn that Wagner did not invent the concept of a
magical ring. Earlier texts and legends feature rings with special powers. Both Plato's
*Republic* and the medieval Arthurian romance, "The Knight of the Lion," written by
Chrétien de Troyes, have invisibility rings. Other medieval romance stories have magical
rings that "grant protection or invulnerability." These include *Sir Perceval of Galles, Sir
Eglamour of Artois, Le Morte d'Arthur*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Witt).
Yet another story with similar ideas is one that would hit much closer to home for
Tolkien. As many know, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis cofounded The Inklings, an
informal literary discussion group at Oxford. Charles Williams, a fellow Inkling
member, published a novel titled *Many Dimensions* in 1931 that had a magic stone.
Although not exactly a ring, this stone bestows unparalleled powers that "tend to
corrupt and spin out of control, threatening the world" (Witt). This type of power
sounds exactly like the sort of strength and influence that Wagner and Tolkien's rings
impair to their bearers.

The idea that a Ring of Power is present in Wagner and Tolkien's storytelling
makes sense considering the historical events they lived through (especially for Tolkien,
who lived into the late twentieth century). Massive discoveries in science and technology
suddenly made things possible that were only dreamed of before. Prior to the modern
era, storytellers had a different understanding of power. In his article for *The New
Yorker*, Alex Ross explains that:
Power, for them, was not a baton that could be passed from one person to another; those with power were born with power, and those without, without. By Wagner’s time, it was clear that a marginal individual would soon be able to unleash terror with the flick of a wrist. Oscar Wilde issued a memorable prediction of the war of the future: “A chemist on each side will approach the frontier with a bottle.” Nor did the ring have to be understood only in terms of military science. Mass media now allowed for the worldwide destruction of an idea, a reputation, a belief system, a culture. In a hundred ways, men were forging things over which they had no control, and which ended up controlling them.

It is worth highlighting Ross’s comments on the various spheres in which men were creating powerful forces that could spin out of control. The world was experiencing major change and upheaval at the turn of the century—electricity, telephones, and cars were invented. Nuclear weapons were created. Two world wars were fought, and we considered the aftermath and the Holocaust. Information could travel faster than ever before, just as people could travel faster than ever before. A global economy and easy travel and communication—even world domination—were real possibilities. The world was diminishing in size, and many were confronted with the fear that one wrong move would cover it in darkness, much like the fear present in *The Lord of the Rings*. This historical context sets a backdrop against which both narratives explore the concepts of power and corruption, even though Wagner’s writing anticipates the future while Tolkien reacts to what is already happening during his lifetime.

As previously mentioned, Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, also known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, was completed in 1874, still several years before Tolkien was born (“A
Beginner’s Guide...”). This gave it ample time to rise to popularity before young Tolkien attended Oxford. Timothy Fisher, a member of the Wagner Society of New York who has been studying Wagner and Tolkien since the mid-'60s, writes about how Wagner’s Ring was just as popular to the “late Victorian and Edwardian and later inter-war generations” as The Lord of the Rings is today (10). Merely the mention of a “hobbit” is enough for a modern audience to know exactly what story is being referenced, whether they have read the books and seen the films or not. Although Fisher does acknowledge that “opera was always an upper crust night out,” he explains that “Oxford was the certain preserve of the English upper classes,” and therefore Wagner and his Ring must have been constantly discussed amongst the students (11). It is highly unlikely that Tolkien would have been ignorant concerning the Ring cycle.

Besides the general popularity of Wagner’s work, one of Tolkien’s best friends may have been slightly obsessed with the opera. As a young boy, C.S. Lewis discovered some paintings by Arthur Rackham for the Ring cycle (Fisher 11). Lewis later writes in his autobiography Surprised by Joy about how the experience of discovering these paintings marked him. He says,

Pure “Northernness” engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity...
And with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I had lacked for years, I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss...
One of my father’s many presents to us boys had been a gramophone... A magazine called *The Soundbox* was doing synopses of great operas week by week, and now it did the whole *Ring*...

From that moment Wagnerian records (principally from the *Ring*...) became the chief drain on my pocket money and the presents I invariably asked for... (72-76)

As seen through his own words, Lewis went on a personal journey of discovering and falling in love with Wagner’s works after coming across Rackham’s paintings. He was obsessed. For Lewis, the paintings were “the very music made visible” (76). He described how pure “Northernness” overwhelmed him. This most likely refers to the mythical aura that inspired “heroic resolution in the face of insurmountable odds” (Fisher 11). Undoubtedly, the music and story behind Wagner’s *Ring* awakened the fantasy-loving side of C.S. Lewis. It is almost certain that Lewis would have talked about Wagner’s work with his close friend and fellow Inkling member J.R.R. Tolkien. Therefore, any Wagnerian influences in Tolkien’s work may partially reflect Lewis’s influence on his friend (McGregor 133).

After looking at the historical context for Wagner’s *Ring* cycle and realizing how impossible it would have been for Tolkien to be oblivious of the work, it is interesting to examine similarities and differences between *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Road to Middle Earth*, Tom Shippey gives a broad-strokes overview of similarities between the two narratives: “The motifs of the riddle-contest, the cleansing fire, the broken weapon preserved for an heir, all occur in both works, as of course does the theme of ‘the lord of the ring as the slave of the ring’” (343-4). Many striking differences pop up throughout the stories, but the ring remains the pivot of each work
Because the ring is so all-consuming for both the plot and the characters, Tolkien presents it as the representation of Satanic evil (137). It goes beyond the wickedness that mere men are capable of. Jamie McGregor of Rhodes University writes about how Tolkien’s ring “works not through amassing worldly wealth, but through imparting its sinister influence on the very souls of those under its sway” (137). For Tolkien, the ring possesses a will and evil of its own. This leads to the main difference in how Wagner and Tolkien portray their rings: “Where Wagner portrays it as an independent power merely unleashed by Alberich,” Tolkien’s ring is clearly a “repository of Sauron’s own native power and evil will” (McGregor 138). By giving the ring a will of its own that is linked to the will of its evil master, Tolkien makes his ring more inherently wicked than Wagner’s.

This idea that Tolkien’s ring is more initially evil is seen by examining the role water plays in relation to the ring in each story. In Wagner’s tale, the ring is created in the Rhine. The first time anyone every picks it up, it is retrieved from water. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the ring is found at the bottom of a river after being lost for years. Tolkien’s implication is that the ring used its will to control events so that they happen this way (McGregor 140). It is as if Tolkien wishes that Wagner had clarified that the ring did not originally come from the water; instead, there is a more sinister backstory that should have been included (McGregor 140). At the end of Wagner’s tale, he has a character wear the ring so that it can pass through purifying flame and return to the Rhine. However, Tolkien makes Frodo become possessive and claim the ring instead of being willing to cast it into fire. This reveals how Tolkien’s ring cannot be overcome by “nobility of purpose, since there is nobody who is capable of resisting its allure” (McGregor 145). Tolkien’s insistence that the ring is inherently evil and tempting to
every living creature opposes Wagner’s ring, which becomes purified and cleansed in the end.

Looking at the similarities and differences in each story ultimately leads to an investigation of each author’s worldview, since perspective naturally has a big influence over work. According to McGregor, Wagner was a German socialist who believed in the apotheosis of man. His *Ring* cycle is “pagan, fatalistic, inescapably tragic... The world comes into being spontaneously, and even in its Edenic age there is inequality, suffering and cruelty” (McGregor 148). The gods in Wagner’s world are fallible and “destined to be superseded by an ideally free and (by conventional standards) amoral humanity” (McGregor 148). This results in blurring the lines between good and evil. Tolkien, on the other hand, was an English unconstitutional monarchist and a Roman Catholic who believed that Adam’s sin in the garden of Eden placed limitations on humans. Therefore, he rejected Wagner’s idea that the ring could become evil through an “understandable process of corruption” and was ultimately able to be reversed through purification (McGregor 148). Tolkien’s ring is set to crush the whole world under the weight of its power until it is cast into the fire from which it came, officially destroying it. There is no room for redeeming the ring in Tolkien’s story, since it is inherently evil.

In the end, these differences between *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *The Lord of the Rings* give a small window into Tolkien and Wagner’s thought processes. Although Tolkien avoided talking about similarities between his stories and Wagner’s work, it is almost unquestionable whether Wagner inspired some of Tolkien’s storytelling. Tolkien may have wished to avoid being associated with Wagner due to Wagner’s affiliation with the Nazis during World War II (McGregor 135). He may have been annoyed by “Hitler’s perversion of ‘Germanic’ mythology” (McGregor 134). No matter the reason, his
complex relationship with Wagner may best be summed up by the following observation: “Dislike does not preclude influence—indeed it can sometimes foster it—and an author is not always the most reliable authority on his work” (Fisher). Whatever connections between J.R.R. Tolkien and Richard Wagner may or may not exist, both Rings of Power continue to be sources of some of the most epic storytelling that Western art has known.

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Sarah first discovered the magic of imagination and storytelling as a young girl reading Beatrix Potter’s The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle. Since then, she has become passionate about exploring the power that words and music have to move the human heart. Sarah is currently working towards a double degree in English and music at UMKC. She has previously been published in the 2019 edition of UMKC’s The Sosland Journal and the 2021 edition of Number One Magazine.
Works Cited


