Fellowship and the Ring: Character Traits, Motivations and Class in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Novel Versus the Film Trilogy
Abstract:

In this essay, I analyse the characters of Frodo and Aragorn in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and Peter Jackson’s film trilogy in order to see if traits and relationships are consistent between the novel and the films. Any changes in characters and the ways they interact in relationships entail changes not only to the overarching narrative, but potentially to the most important themes of the story: friendship and heroism. This is important for the general discourse on the films as adaptations, since they have been accused of not being true to the thematic core of the source material. Peter Jackson’s claim that the intention was to always remain true to the spirit of Tolkien’s novel, then necessitates a closer comparison of the two works. Therefore, in investigating the characters I look not only for differences and similarities, but also for the repercussions these have on the story and the potential reasons behind them. By examining the characters from the perspective of the novel, the films and the filmmakers’ commentaries, I discuss how the removal of social class in the films changes the actions of the characters and consequently affects the themes of friendship and heroism. I also bring up the effects of changing from a novel to film as well as the symbiotic relationship between the character traits and the narrative as a whole. This essay shows that though the social class, character traits and the narrative flow are changed in a circular pattern. A closer look at the films reveals that the story’s core themes of friendship and heroism not only remain consistent, but are given more emphasis than in the novel.
You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin – to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours – closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone. … We are horribly afraid – but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.

- J.R.R. Tolkien

The process of adapting a novel into a screenplay is not an uncomplicated one, if only for the reason that a film is a decidedly more visual medium than a text. Consequently, changes would be inevitable in any adaptation, in order to better fit into the confines of its chosen medium. However, the added dimensions of the new medium are not the only factors at play when a work is adapted. As noted by film theorist Linda Hutcheon, when looking at the source material “[the adapters] not only interpret that work, but in so doing they also take a position on it” (92). The temporal and cultural context of the adapter informs this position, thus it is arguably never just a matter of committing words to the screen, regardless of the desire for fidelity on the part of the adapter. Of all adaptations from novel into film, there is probably none greater in scope than that of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien’s books (or book, it was originally conceived as one /Tolkien xi/) and the Peter Jackson’s film adaptations (as a trilogy) occupy a firm place in the popular cultural consciousness; the novel has repeatedly been voted “the book of the century” and the Jackson trilogy places amongst the highest rated films at sites such as IMDb. The financial success of the film trilogy, with a combined box office gross of over $3 billion, and the way it
has almost grown into its very own entity with a canon of its own suggests that there is something in the adaptation that deeply connects with audiences. Furthermore, the Jackson adaptation of *The Return of the King* received an Oscar for both Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay. At the same time, critics such as Ross Smith raise the question in a series of articles whether or not the films “betray both the letter and the spirit of Tolkien's novel” and criticise them of being without “any art or subtlety, with no respect to the nuances of the original” (1, 5). It is a well-argued point, albeit one with a fair amount of personal bias. He mainly focuses on the book originals, without a more in-depth look at the reasoning from a filmmaking perspective.

Therefore, the purpose of my article is to examine *The Lord of the Rings* and the film trilogy\(^1\) in relation to the characters, to see if they truly are changed in the adaptation and to what extent this affects the story’s main themes, friendship and unlikely heroism. These two themes are intertwined, to varying degrees, with the main parts of the narrative, concerning Aragorn’s quest to reclaim his throne as well as Frodo and Sam’s journey to destroy the Ring. If certain traits of characters are expanded or diminished, it could potentially reverberate through the story and shape the tone of these storylines as a whole. As well as finding answers to these questions, this article will also discuss the possible reasoning behind changes in order to evaluate the nature of this phenomenon of adaptation.

The authors of the films’ screenplays have made statements on the scriptwriting process, which are available in the extra material on the DVDs and must be taken into consideration when analysing the characters. However, that only accounts for premeditated changes on the part of the filmmakers. Therefore, my method will, to an extent, be circular: In order to understand the effects of any changes in the film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, one needs to understand the reasons behind making those alterations. The reasons behind any alterations can be understood by looking at the effects those very changes have.

The two main protagonists, Frodo and Aragorn, are dissimilar in many ways but they share common ground in that neither of them is truly ordinary: Aragorn is a

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\(^1\) The primary material used in this essay consists of: Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. London: HarperCollins, 2007 – a collection of the previously separated novels, henceforth referred to as *LotR*, with the abbreviations *FR*, *TT* and *RK* before page references to aid readers with the separated editions; the extended versions of the film trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* (New Line, 2002, 2003, 2004), henceforth *Fellowship*, *Towers* and *Return*. 
Aragorn: Sacred Kingship, Unwilling King

In the novel, Aragorn, also known as Strider, is the heir to the throne of Gondor and it has always been his destiny to claim it as king. For many years, he has worn the guise of a woodlands ranger, biding his time. Albeit mostly soft spoken, Aragorn has the innate qualities of a mythical hero, blessed with powers by ancestry. This is clear for all to see when Aragorn is facing down Éomer and his riders and “in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown” (Tolkien TT 433-434). Aragorn’s supernaturally commanding presence signifies his divine right to the throne, the “kings of stone” is a reference to the Argonath, massive statues of the kings from beyond the sea, ancestors of Aragorn.

In “Councils and Kings”, Judy Ann Ford and Robin Anne Reid claim that the Aragorn of the novel is an extension of the Germanic idea of sacral kingship that depended on more than blood, and that the novel “traces his attempts to prove his luck and his supernatural qualities in order to be recognized as king” (75). This assertion, that he knows the divine right is his, but he must show others – not himself – that he is worthy, can be seen from his introduction: “I look foul and feel fair… All that is gold does not glitter,” he says whilst explaining his dual identity of Aragorn and Strider to the hobbits. Strider is a mere part he plays: “…the time is near when it shall be forged anew” he says of his broken sword, the reforging of which is a step to take so that
“the crownless again shall be king” (Tolkien FR 171). However, for all his deeds, in the end Aragorn is just a diversion to lure out Sauron’s forces to give the Ring-bearer a chance at destroying the Ring (RK 880). Loren Wilkinson writes that “[t]he real hero ... is not Aragorn the king .... It is not even Frodo the Ring-bearer” (75). She argues that the true hero is Sam the gardener, who wishes to stay put and mend the land; that “battle, heroes … such things are empty without homes and gardens to return to” (78). In my view, Aragorn is both a grander and subtler hero than Wilkinson gives him credit for. Indeed, Tolkien writes: “[t]he hands of the King are the hands of healing” (RK 956). There are many variations thereupon in the book. Not only does Aragorn literally heal wounds, Frodo’s stab wound at Weathertop and Éowyn’s arm after the battle of Pelennor Fields (FR 199, RK 866), but his becoming king restores the civilisation of Men from its slow decay and his divine heritage restores the connection to the Edenic past. It also serves to infuse the land and its people with a divine connection, making Aragorn a gardener and caretaker of sorts. In Aragorn even the humble gardener takes on a mythical aspect, making him, on reflection, a character so epic in scope that it almost becomes overdone. Yet, it is an event that not only fits in with the Germanic belief in sacral kingship, but the Messianic archetype of Tolkien’s own deeply Christian views. Considering Tolkien’s fascination for ancient myths, that is very likely deliberate.

In contrast, the Aragorn of the films is a reluctant hero, uncertain and unwilling to follow his destiny. He is afraid that he will ultimately fail, like his ancestors: “The same blood flows in my veins. The same weakness” (Fellowship sc 25). Whilst Strider is just a guise Aragorn adapts in the novel, mocking his own “rascally look” (Tolkien FR 164), it could be argued that in the film version he is Strider. He is not a king in disguise, but a ranger not wishing to be king. This attitude is recurrent in the films.

Lianne McLarty argues in “Masculinity, Whiteness and Social Class in The Lord of the Rings”: “The males endorsed in The Lord of the Rings do not exert a will to power over social or natural landscapes” (182), and this reticence towards wanting to rule is integral to Jackson's Aragorn and perhaps to the trilogy as a whole. The belief in one’s innate sovereignty is repeatedly presented as a flaw by Jackson; apart from the more obvious evils of Sauron and Saruman it can be seen in Boromir's pride, equating himself with all of Gondor (“Gondor has no king. Gondor needs no king”, “If this is indeed the will of the council, Gondor will see it done” /Fellowship sc 27/)
as well as Denethor's refusal to give up power ("The rule of Gondor is mine and no others!") /Return sc 11/). With this in mind, Aragorn's humility and self-doubt appears in a positive light. In a sense, the noblest characters in the films seem to reject being born into a certain social class, democratically only taking command because others want it. As Sharon D. McCoy writes: “Jackson’s main characters do not accept the role of either master or servant, nor do they accept the essential rightness of social class or status” (57). In fact, instead of Aragorn carrying the shards of his ancestral sword, the token of his heritage, as a talisman and reforging it before setting out on the quest, Aragorn carries a regular sword whilst the shards remain in Rivendell until Elrond reforges them and brings the reforged blade to Aragorn. He urges Aragorn to both see himself as king as well as face the challenges that will prove him king to others: “Put aside the Ranger. Become who you were born to be.” Even though Aragorn agrees, he still does so reluctantly, “I have kept no hope for myself” he says (Return sc 30). Earlier, at the Council of Elrond, the novel has Boromir speak of seeking Isildur’s bane (the Ring) and “the Sword that was broken”, whereupon Aragorn casts his sword onto the table before proclaiming his lineage. Though doubtful, Boromir concedes that the Sword of Elendil, the sign of the king’s return, “would be a help beyond our hope” (FR 247). In the film, Boromir has already shown his contempt by calling the sword “no more than a broken heirloom”, and it is Legolas who explicitly states that Aragorn is the true lord of Gondor. Aragorn, made awkward and uncomfortable, just humbly asks Legolas to sit down (Fellowship sc 25, 27). It is as if Jackson wants to make sure that the viewer can relate to him and, as Gwendolyn A. Morgan puts it, not view him as a “heroic, larger-than-life king” but as “the angst-ridden, sensitive, existential ’90s male” (Morgan, 22).

The lack of an inherent right to rule is what makes Aragorn doubt his own status as heir apparent, but the diminishing of social class status brings him closer to those around him as comrades. He bickers jokingly with Legolas, they argue and forgive one another in scenes that have no counterparts in the novel (Towers sc 43, 45, 48). Whilst Legolas is no commoner, being both an elf and a prince, the casual nature between him and Aragorn is not the novel. His relationship to Boromir, whose family has ruled Gondor in the King’s absence, starts out much more confrontational in the film. However, Aragorn manages to connect to Boromir, who comes across as much more self-doubting and well-meaning than in the novel, struggling to live up to the responsibilities of his lineage just like Aragorn. With his dying breaths, Boromir
urges Aragorn, “My brother, my captain, my king”, to save Gondor whilst at the same time acknowledging him as a ruler, providing further examples of the needs of others pushing Aragorn towards accepting his throne instead of claiming it (*Fellowship* sc 44).

Despite these democratic ideas, Jackson's Aragorn *does* become king in the end anyway. However, the differences between the versions are striking. As Jackson's Aragorn receives his crown, he faces the crowd, and says: “This day does not belong to one man, but to all of us. Let us together rebuild this world that we may share in the days of peace.” Then, upon seeing the four hobbits in the crowd, he tells them: “My friends ... you bow to no-one” and kneels himself, causing the crowd to follow suite (*Return* sc 74). Though arguments could be made that this is just rhetoric on Aragorn's part, it arguably shows a much more democratic sentiment where the king pays homage to the common folk, literally kneeling before the little man. Not just Frodo and Sam, who performed the impossible deed of destroying the Ring, but also the, comparatively, far less important Merry and Pippin. In comparison, in the book Aragorn makes no speech, instead he puts Frodo and Sam on his throne and commands his people to “[p]raise them with great praise!” (Tolkien *RK* 954). Even though it is still an act of deference, there is no mention of friendship; Aragorn honours a monumental achievement, giving them a war hero's welcome, with unsheathed swords and waving spears (955). Jackson's Aragorn thanks his friends, whilst Tolkien's commends his subjects.

After a surface glance at Aragorn’s actions, any great important differences between the versions may not be discernible; he walks many of the same paths and braves many of the same encounters. However, his reasons and motivations are, as detailed above, vastly different. Whilst the Aragorn of *LotR* fights to realise his destiny and prove himself worthy of it in the eyes of others, Jackson’s Aragorn struggles with living up to the expectations placed upon him by those around him. He is uncomfortable with lording over others and questions the validity of his ancestors doing so as well. These doubts make for a character that is less epic, more vulnerable and more of an everyman of the modern age. That the films have such a character overcome his obstacles in spite of the great odds stacked against him is a celebration of the idea that courage can be found in the unlikeliest of places. This theme is important in the novel as well, but does not apply to Tolkien’s Aragorn. Jackson’s
Aragorn is a humble man, who through his closer interactions with others comes to recognise their need that he realises his destiny, and finds his inner strength.

Frodo: Master Without Servants

As for Frodo, it could be said that he is something of an everyman character, especially in comparison to the mythical Aragorn. He is swept up in events beyond his comprehension, he openly expresses doubt in himself and in the end he actually falls to temptation. He appears to be decidedly more un-heroic than Aragorn, but perhaps only at first glance. Tolkien seems to make the case that it is because of his shortcomings that Frodo is heroic, that his deeds become all the larger. However, Frodo is not just a common hobbit, like the others of the fellowship. He is in his fifties, yet he looks of an age with his younger friends due to the Ring's influence (FR 43). He finds that being “the Mr Baggins of Bag End [is] rather pleasant” (43). Sam, though a great friend, always refers to Frodo as “Mr” or “master”, even to the point where he cannot just call Frodo by name when he believes him to be dead (TT 731). Frodo is not only treated as something of an authority, he acts like it as well. He is capable of being wise and perceptive, clearly seeing the danger Gollum poses despite his promises of helping; making both Sam and Gollum recognise their mistake of confusing kindness for blindness (640); he can be stern and commanding, appearing to Sam as “a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud” (618); he is even courageous enough in a more typically heroic sense, in that he faces down the monstrous Shelob and drives her away (albeit momentarily) instead of outright escaping from her (721). Though a humble hobbit, Frodo of LotR is someone of higher status, who is cared for by those below him whilst he looks after them in return – a slightly feudal relationship that is very much indicative of a society with clear class differences. Frodo, though brave and responsible in nature, tackles the journey with a sense of duty derived from his higher social status. After the breaking of the fellowship, he takes the role of leader because someone of his position is expected to.

Conversely, Jackson's Frodo is someone who is not separate from the other hobbits and whatever it is that sets him apart is due to personality rather than class. For instance, Sam switches between addressing him as “Mr Frodo” and just using his first name, which has a diminishing effect on Frodo's status and changes the
relationship. Not to say that *LotR*'s Frodo and Sam are not very dear friends, but the films reduce the formality of their relationship, putting them on more equal ground. This more informal relationship can be seen in their first appearance together at Bilbo's party, where Frodo jokingly sets Sam up for a dance with Rose Cotton or later, when they share a drink at the tavern The Green Dragon (*Fellowship sc 5, 9*). Through Sam, arguably the fellowship member of lowest class, the differences in Frodo’s own status are made more evident, small changes in how the characters interact, making for great changes in what actually takes place. In the scenes where all four of the main hobbits come together for the trip to Rivendell, Sam speaks only when spoken to, calls Pippin “sir” and prepares his breakfast and bathwater, acting awkwardly and embarrassed when he is dragged into conversations between his master and friends (*FR 86 – 108*). The films show almost the complete opposite picture, he acts annoyed with Merry and Pippin’s antics, more like a responsible older brother (*Fellowship sc 13*). When Gandalf and Frodo discuss the Ring and Gandalf catches Sam eavesdropping he, as McCoy has also noted, immediately begs Frodo for help, pleading “[d]on't let him hurt me, sir!” (*McCoy 57, FR 63*), whereas in the film he addresses Gandalf directly instead of his master (sc 10), further diminishing whatever barriers of status surrounding Frodo.

Sam and Frodo are more comfortable with sharing their feelings with one another as friends, instead of keeping their thoughts to themselves. One particular scene that highlights this is when Frodo and Sam set out to leave the Shire: in *LotR*, Sam stands silent, “[h]is round eyes were wide open – for he was looking across lands he had never seen to a new horizon” (*FR 73*). Meanwhile, Frodo is lost in his own thoughts, spontaneously quoting Bilbo: “You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to” (74), before sitting down for a rest. In *Fellowship*, Sam stops in a cornfield, saying “[i]f I take one more step, it'll be the farthest away from home I've ever been.” “Come on, Sam,” Frodo gently replies, but he waits for Sam to resume walking and reassuringly pats him on the back before telling him of the Road (sc 10). McCoy writes that “this small moment is crucial” to the idea of classlessness, in that it has Sam choosing to follow Frodo purely out of love, without any sense of a servant’s duty informing his decision, affecting his morals (58). Another instance of this more open relationship can be observed at the end of *Towers*: Sam wonders about the possibility of their quest turning up in a story book, of how people will talk of the courageous Frodo, “the most
famousest [sic] of hobbits” (sc 65). “Well, you've left out one of the chief characters:
'Samwise the Brave. I want to hear more about Sam,’” Frodo says, laughing, before
stopping and turning to face his friend. “‘Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam,’”
he says, no longer grinning. When Sam says that he was being serious, Frodo replies
with “[s]o was I”, and they share a long, tender look before they resume walking. This
is an abbreviated version of a conversation the two hobbits have in the book, whilst
resting on the stairs of Cirith Ungol below Shelob's lair (TT 711-713). Though what is
said is much the same, the film focuses on how Frodo truly appreciates Sam's
companionship and even ends the conversation on that note, whereas the book does
not linger on it. The way the emphasis is placed in the film makes is clear that Frodo
and Sam’s relationship is one between friends, where they both depend on one
another equally, that Frodo finds Sam more important than he could imagine. In the
novel there is nothing more to the scene but what the reader can ascribe to the words
being spoken. The subject quickly turns to Gollum and then the moment is gone.

As for Gollum, his status as a foil and doppelganger for Frodo, and their
relationship, shows further subtle differences in Frodo's character. As mentioned
previously, LotR's Frodo exhibits a clear authority over Gollum. Take the taming of
Sméagol, where he chastises Gollum for swearing his allegiance on the Ring:

Frodo drew himself up, and again Sam was startled by his words and

“It will hold you. But it is more treacherous than you are. It may
twist your words. Beware!” (TT 618).

Frodo clearly knows the dangers both of the Ring and of Gollum, so he forces Gollum
into submission and forces him to speak his promises before telling Sam to untie the
ropes binding the creature. Jackson's Frodo, on the other hand, merely cautions
Gollum: “The Ring is treacherous. It will hold you to your word” whilst Sam is the
one who, instead of standing to the side in awe of his master, attacks Gollum in
disbelief (Towers sc 3). Like McCoy, I find that this and many other scenes show that
the Frodo of the film, lacking the personal distance to those in his service, identifies
more closely with Gollum and sympathises more with him. When Sam expresses his
contempt for Gollum, Frodo chastises him, telling Sam he does not know what he is
talking about before saying “I want to help him, Sam …. Because I have to believe he
can come back.” The Ring is eating away at him, and when Sam tells him “[y]ou have
to fight it,” Frodo snaps, shouting that the task is “[m]ine! My own!” (Towers sc 28),
bringing to mind Gollum’s way of speaking about the Ring. He knows what he is
becoming and if there is no hope for Gollum, there is none for him. This is echoed when Gollum’s betrayal becomes apparent after Shelob attacks and Frodo gasps: “I have to destroy it, Sméagol. I have to destroy it … for both our sakes” (Return, sc 38). Since there never was a, more or less, explicit boundary between Frodo and Gollum, they both have a greater influence on each other. Gollum’s nicer side, whom Sam dubs “Slinker”, briefly takes over after arguing with the meaner, “Stinker”-side (sc 29). The same argument takes place in the novel, but it is not as heated and the two sides almost reach an agreement before Sam interrupts them (TT 632-634).

Film Frodo lacks a higher social standing than his companions and, consequently, he also lacks a forceful personality. Because of this, he has no sense of mastery over Sam and Gollum like in the novel, and this more vulnerable and gentle personality given to Jackson’s Frodo translates into a greater dependence on the Ring. In turn, this clouds his judgement and brings him closer to succumbing as Gollum once did. However, it also means that through sheer virtue of friendship and compassion, Frodo comes much closer to redeeming Sméagol than in the novel. The Frodo of the films has an innocence to him that is partly absent in the novel, where his age and his responsibilities as something of a nobleman give him strengths missing in the film, whilst keeping him at a distance from others. The diminished class markers allow him to interact on a more personal level with others, in a way not predicated on duty related to social class. In this way the films emphasise the power of unconditional love and friendship, as that is all the reason Sam needs to stand by Frodo and it is through their relationship the quest succeeds.

The Filmmakers: Multiple Interpreters

So far, I have looked at the changes and differences between novel and films in the source material itself. This approach was very insightful and illuminating, where my conclusions were supported by other independent research. However, one thing not featured very prominently in existing articles was the words of the adapters. There is potential, I feel, for an interesting comparison between what can be intuited from the work itself and the opinions and thoughts of the adapters about any explicit reasoning behind some of the alterations.
One important aspect when considering adapters is the multiplicity of viewpoints. Whilst Tolkien was the solitary author of *LotR*, the scripts of the films had three writers, with what could be assumed to be three slightly diverging views on what *LotR* is. This means that there could be different agendas behind choices made and differing readings of what is important to the story, possibly leading to both compromises as well as conflicting ideas, resulting in further non-premeditated changes. Hutcheon asks whether the script-writer and director are the only adapters, or if the composer, editor, set designers and actors can be considered adapters as well, fragmenting the vision with multiple interpretations. She gives no straight answer, supposing instead that they all could be adapters but of different import, as “in a more literal sense, what actors actually adapt… is the screenplay” (82). In the end, the screenplay is a tool, and the ultimate creative vision ought to be that of the director. Film theorist Peter Wollen (as quoted by Hutcheon) has argued that the director “does not subordinate himself to another author”, that all other input are mere catalysts “which use his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work” (82). I agree in the sense that the director has the final say on what is included, yet Jackson’s approach is arguably far less authoritative in imposing his own will as definitive. Despite his dual roles as writer and director, his wish, as expressed in the documentary series *From Book to Script* included in the supplementary material for each film, was to “be as accurate as possible in putting [Tolkien’s] thematic material into the film” (*Script: Fellowship*). This, as well as the involvement of the actors and other crew members, makes the process more democratic in shaping the final product. In the writers’ commentaries and *From Book to Script*, this often-overlooked facet of adaptations is clearly visible. The script was constantly being rewritten during filming, with a lot of actor input during the readings.

ELIJAH WOOD: There’s a lot of plotlines that we sort of fleshed out, had ideas about. Certain specific characteristics more than anything, the idea of Frodo kind of playing with the Ring and what would happen to him. (*Script: Fellowship*)

This casual playing with and stroking of the Ring appears several times over the course of the trilogy and is something expanded upon from the novel, where the context is usually more akin to a nervous fidgeting than an addiction, compared to the

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2 References are written as *Script: Fellowship, Script: Towers* and *Script: Return* to elucidate from which supplementary DVD the quote has been lifted.
films where the Ring makes Frodo drift off into an almost trancelike state (Tolkien *FR* 157, *Fellowship* sc 15, *Towers* sc 14). What this particular idea brings to the films is an increase in the power of the Ring, in Frodo’s susceptibility to it and consequently, an increase in threat and tension. This manifests itself in the moment where Bilbo reluctantly drops it on the floor of Bag End and Gandalf recoils as if burned when he tries to pick it up. Compared to the same scene in the novel, where Bilbo puts the Ring in an envelope, which Gandalf then places on the mantelpiece, there is a sense of dread and terrible desire connected to the Ring (Tolkien *FR* 35, *Fellowship* sc 7). “We basically wanted to make the film a little more tense, I guess,” Jackson says, “to keep the pressure on, more so than in the book. And we concentrated on making the Ring and the threat of the Ring foremost in how these scenes play themselves out” (*Fellowship* commentary sc 7). The decision to play up the power of the Ring this early in the story sets a precedent that has repercussions and effects on the actions of the characters and therefore also on the themes throughout all the films.

The desire for power and the lure that the Ring exhibits is shown in the ways it repeatedly tests the characters that come into contact with it. Due to the difficulty of translating inner thoughts and feelings to screen, the writers took every opportunity to make the threat more explicit and “play up the power of the Ring and the presence of Sauron” (*Fellowship* commentary sc 10). For some characters, such as Galadriel, the temptation is portrayed in much the same way in the novel as in the films, but when looking at others, this change in the Ring is more pronounced. When the hobbits meet Aragorn in the novel, he frightens them by brandishing his sword, saying that if “I was after the Ring, I could have it – NOW!” After scaring them with his aura, “keen and commanding”, he smiles at his prank and introduces himself (*FR* 179). At the Council of Elrond, when Frodo offers the Ring to Aragorn he declines, calmly stating that it belongs to neither of them, but Frodo must hold it for a while (247). In the films, Aragorn seems reluctant to even think too much about the Ring, remaining serious and merely referring to it as a “trinket” (*Fellowship* sc 15); at Elrond’s council, though not offered the Ring, he simply states that none but Sauron can wield it; and finally at the breaking of the fellowship, Aragorn actually runs into Frodo, something which does not happen at all in the novel. Frodo holds out the Ring and asks Aragorn if he would destroy it, whereupon Aragorn’s gaze fixes on it and he extends his hand. After a tense moment, he swallows hard and gently closes Frodo’s
hand before sending him on his way. The reasons for this added scene lie, in part, on the macro level concerned with the whole narrative, as Philippa Boyens explains: “…these two characters, who go on to carry the main story bits for the rest of the films, needed this moment together” (Fellowship commentary sc 43). From a greater perspective, the two principal characters had to be given the chance to interact one last time before being separated for hours of screen time, but Jackson has yet another argument for adding the scene.

It juxtaposes exactly what happens to Boromir in the sense that there’s one man who is tempted by the Ring and couldn’t resist and here is another man who is tempted by the Ring at this moment and he does resist it, he has got the strength to push it away. It’s also important for Aragorn because in a way this actually proves something to Aragorn himself. That Aragorn can see that he does have the power to reject the Ring … and that leads Aragorn to believe that there is some strength in his own race. (Fellowship commentary sc 43)

On a character level, the scene serves to address both the heightened threat of the Ring, as well as once more bring forth the doubt within Aragorn. The aforementioned juxtaposition with Boromir, as well as Aragorn’s expressed doubts of the weakness in his blood, makes his refusal of the Ring more heroic. He mastered the desire for the Ring, but unlike in the novel, there was a struggle.

The greater influence of the Ring and the closer bond between Frodo and Gollum leads to Gollum successfully separating Sam and Frodo before entering Shelob’s lair. This change was predicated on the fact that the writers “knew [they] wanted Frodo to enter the tunnel alone,” that “it is all about the tension” (Script: Return): the sequence would be all the more terrifying without Sam and alterations were made to facilitate the change in an organic way. Because he is less forceful, the Ring has a greater hold on Frodo. This, coupled with his closer relationship to Gollum, makes Frodo trust him over Sam, whom he sends away. Whilst this might be seen as weakening Frodo and Sam’s relationship, it does the opposite, as Sam returns to save Frodo despite his betrayal. Thus, the changes the filmmakers required for the Shelob sequence to have more tension had the added effect of showing off the strength of Frodo and Sam’s friendship.

Much of what is said in the commentaries concerns the general aspects of shooting, the technical side of how different shots and environments were created. The fact that the filmmakers are not speaking on a specific subject, merely
commenting on the films whilst watching, makes it difficult to acquire a sense of the thought process behind the minutiae of character traits. Lacking prompting on the character level, the premeditated effects of the alterations seem to mostly be on a macro-scale, the decisions to change things being done for the sake of the flow of the whole narrative rather than character motivations. It is obvious that a lot of thought went into that aspect, though it is not amongst the main topics discussed. In *Return*, Aragorn, who reforges Narsil in the novel before setting out on the quest, is handed the sword by Elrond and then told to grasp his destiny (sc 30). The filmmakers, both in the commentaries and in interviews with film scholar Kristin Thompson in *The Frodo Franchise*, motivate the scene without commenting on the micro level of the characters:

PHILIPPA BOYENS: The problem with [reforging Narsil earlier] is, it doesn’t get *used*, really, symbolically for ages. It gets buried. You can’t, in good storytelling, forge a sword in the first film and then bring it back into play. Always if you can embed an event in character and make it, as we did – hopefully – a decision Elrond must make, to reforge that sword, it carries more dramatic tension... So we decided that the forging of the sword and the giving of the sword to Aragorn would go into the moment when it would be most symbolic for him to use it.

Boyens goes on to say that they were inspired by the novel, where Elrond sends his sons with word to “remember the Paths of the Dead” (Tolkien 775), that they “just took it further and made it a much more interesting, I think, conflict and choice for Aragorn” (Thompson 70). How Aragorn’s uncertain attitude towards his right to the throne, which the reforged sword represents, might resonate better in a time of arguably less rigid class hierarchies than Tolkien’s own is not touched upon, though the implications are there\(^3\). Still, Boyens stating that this was a change for the more interesting corroborates the notion, put forth by Morgan and Ford & Reid amongst others, of modern audiences connecting more with a doubting, fretful character like Aragorn of the films.

The increase in tension is also present throughout the films as a way to continually keep the audience engaged, but this change, albeit necessitated by the translation between media, pushes the major themes of friendship and heroism in the

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\(^3\) Whilst it is touched upon in the aforementioned essays as well as this one, I will not conduct any further investigation into why a certain type of character is more relatable in a certain time period. This would undoubtedly lead to further questions as to what constitutes the zeitgeist of the era, moving too far away from the topic of this essay.
same direction as the changes in class awareness. Indeed, in their explanations for more overall changes in the narrative, the filmmakers posit that many things work in the novel but not on screen, purely because of the differences between the telling and showing media. For example, the long opening chapters in the Shire take place over the span of years, whereas in the film it has been condensed into, in Jackson’s estimation, a few months (*Fellowship* commentary sc 10). The quicker progress of the plot to scenes where the larger scope of the actual quest and goal can start to develop is a “deliberate contrast to the book”, implicitly explained in the story as the heightened threat of the Ring accelerating events; a sense that “evil has awoken and that the Ring, almost like a machine, has been activated” (*Fellowship* commentary sc 7). Gone are the long preparations for the journey, instead Frodo is sent off in the night by Gandalf and only meets Merry and Pippin by accident instead of them investigating his strange behaviour (*Fellowship* sc 10, 13; *FR* 103-107); there are no elves on the road to protect them from the Black Riders and instead the hobbits are hounded, only narrowly escaping (*FR* 78-85, *Fellowship* sc 14). Without any of them fully grasping the situation, the hobbits band together to help Frodo against the Ringwraiths. Thus, the events put in motion by the Ring force the characters into confrontations where their courage and their friendship are put to the test with greater urgency and frequency.

In Fran Walsh’s opinion, the novel is “far too leisurely” in its plot progression to work on film, arguing that the slow pace “tends to undermine any sense of dramatic storytelling” (*Fellowship* commentary sc 10). This change is also rooted in more dramaturgically related dimensions tied to the very nature of the medium. As noted by Hutcheon, time is experienced differently by audiences of different media. The reader can choose to stop reading at any time, has the ability to re-read passages, skip ahead in the story as well as having an idea of how the story might progress by looking at the remaining pages. On the contrary, the viewing audience is more passive, “caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story” (23). This is mirrored in the journey of the characters. The greater threats drive the heroes onward with a pace that minimises the safe zones and serves to make the heroes smaller compared to their task, as the danger never quite lets up.

Furthermore, the increase in suspense is also a tool for the filmmakers to hold the attention of the passive audience on many levels; it adds a greater sense of conflict to scenes and propels the narrative to move at a quicker pace. This not only keeps the
audience’s interest by continually introducing new elements, but also keeps down the lengths of the films. This difference in pacing is intrinsic to the media as “films must be shorter [than novels], in part because of the audience’s inability to halt the process, except by leaving the theatre” (Hutcheon 133, emphasis added). Watching the films on DVD is closer to the way one experiences a novel, with the ability to pause and rewatch scenes. This viewing mode lends itself better to a slower paced film with more material from the novel like the extended versions. However, as the films were arguably not primarily made with this in mind, the alterations made to enhance the cinema experience colour any version of the films.

In the end, the result of the greater threat and faster pace is that the characters become comparatively more vulnerable. They become smaller as the danger of the quest before them increases, creating more tension as the obstacles to be surmounted grow in scale. The hobbits, Frodo in particular, are more quickly thrust into danger with less cause to personally see the quest through. Aragorn must not only rally the armies of Men, but he must also confront his inner doubts, all under greater pressure than in the novel. Still, the more defenceless characters manage to remain true to each other and stand up against greater odds. It shows perfectly how changes made for practical reasons have repercussions on a more thematic scale that may not be apparent immediately.

Conclusion: Fealty and Fellowship

The factors that affect film adaptations are many, and rooted in variegated elements of the filmmaking process that are not constrained by the minutiae of the story. The filmmakers behind *LotR* seem mostly concerned with the expectations and limitations of the medium and the whole of the narrative flow. However, not only does the way characters behave and interact with one another affect the plot, that is, how events are presented, but the reverse is true as well. Changes made to the narrative need to be supported by the characters in order to make sense. It is by looking at *LotR* in this way that the class-based social structures become more apparent as character traits change the entire narrative whilst they are simultaneously changed by it. From this perspective, both contrasts and similarities between Tolkien’s novel and Jackson’s interpretation become clear.
Tolkien’s world is one that has an ancient history, where cultures of myth still exist, albeit in a degraded state compared to the more glorious past. Thus, Aragorn’s function is to re-establish the connection to that past. As a descendant from the great kings of Númenor, his literally divine blood marks him as the rightful ruler of Men and his reclamation of the throne rejuvenates the entire land. The divine right of rule informs all his decisions and lends a certainty to his actions. The journey he travels is one of proving himself, not worthy of the throne *per se*, but as the true heir of the ancient bloodline. In Aragorn the subject of class is taken to the extreme, his mystical connection to the divine making him a character right out of myth. The elves are leaving Middle Earth, heralding the age of Men, with Aragorn as the king of mortals.

Aragorn represents what could be called the acme of a class based society, but all cultures of Middle Earth share these notions of social classes, with class differences and subservience as a natural component in interactions amongst all characters. Frodo and Sam’s relationship exhibits these traits very clearly, with Frodo naturally taking command and Sam following, supporting his master. The way their personalities make them act arguably has a circular relationship to their respective classes. Frodo is likely more assertive and commanding by nature, but these traits are reinforced by them being expected from someone of his status as an upper class hobbit, making them an ingrained part of his personality. Samwise, on the other hand, is a mere gardener, an occupation which arguably both draws on his caring nature and reinforces those traits in him. There is no doubt as to the strength of their friendship, but it has arisen from the positions of master and employee, and that fact is always present as the foundation for the relationship.

In Jackson’s films, class is not something that defines the characters to the same extent. Without it as a foundation to stand on, the characters are left to doubt themselves because they do not believe in the rights and the responsibilities that follow with being of higher class. Aragorn is reluctant to become king because he does not believe that his royal blood makes him fit for the position. It is only after being continually asked to do it that he accepts his destiny. Frodo and Sam, lacking the loyalty created by lordship and servitude, build their trust on mutual friendship without any sense of obligation and duty. The lack of class distinctions makes Frodo sympathise more with Gollum and send Sam away, but it also serves to make the love and the friendship between the characters all the greater since Sam is not duty-bound to return for Frodo, yet does so anyway. The lack of the class foundation makes the
characters more vulnerable and diminishes their typically heroic qualities whilst at the same time pitting them against the increased power and threat of the Ring. This is a symbiotic pattern of changes, because the power of the Ring and the urgency to destroy it requires less heroic characters in order for its threat to become apparent to audiences. This need for less heroic characters translates into a reduction of the obvious heroic traits. In turn this reduces the prominence of class, that is, the foundations the characters draw their strengths from. In this way, changes on the macro scale of the narrative, rooted in dramaturgy and media-related logistics, alter the micro scale of characters and vice versa. To organically accommodate the mandated changes of increased pace and danger, the social statuses of the characters have been diminished. This gesture robs them of a source of comfort and puts the success of the quest in further jeopardy.

This complex relationship of cause and effect makes it all the more astounding that the films still carry the same pathos of friendship and heroism as the novel. The increase in doubt and susceptibility in the face of the Ring’s evil paradoxically enough serves to elevate the characters to greater heroes. The odds are stacked higher against them, yet they succeed by virtue of the bonds to each other – bonds that are not predicated on duty, but friendship. In this, the films are a departure from, but still in keeping with, the novel; the theme of loyalty and friendship is there, as is that of heroism from unlikely sources. In fact, the films seem to push this pathos a step further to another, perhaps more ideal position. Jackson’s trilogy seems to posit that a man, or hobbit, cannot only find courage despite fear, but that it is the only time he can truly be brave. It is, as Elrond says, “oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere” (Tolkien 269). Despite the notion of the divinely ordained heroism, of class hierarchy, Middle Earth is not saved by a sacred king, but through the efforts of a small hobbit. Due to the changes to the class relations between characters, the films both stay faithful to the “true spirit” of the novel whilst changing it: They expound the same core themes of friendship and heroism, but in an even more prominent way. The fellowship are a group of characters who are more mundane and less typically heroic than in the novel, more like the casual viewer, but they accomplish tasks that are even more monumental. As Galadriel explicitly tells Frodo, and the audience as well, even “the smallest person can change the course of the future”.
Works Cited


