

The weight of the ring

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [January 11, 2003](#) issue

Even those who fell in love with last year's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* may find themselves staggered by the sequel, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. It is even wider in scope than the first movie, the filmmaking more thrilling, the emotions higher.

The end of *Fellowship* saw the breaking up of the band of adventurers whose mission is to deliver the dread ring of power to the fire where it was forged. The remaining warriors, with the noble Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) at their head, were separated from the hobbits, two of whom were captured by Orcs (creatures not far evolved from the primordial ooze, trained by the treacherous sorcerer Saruman to make war). Frodo (Elijah Wood), the "halfling" entrusted with the ring, elected to journey on alone, accompanied only by Sam (Sean Astin), who defines his own life by the task of ensuring his master's safety.

Tolkien made the transitional volume of the trilogy episodic, handling the fates of these groups separately. But director Peter Jackson and his co-writers, Fran Walsh, Philippa Boyens and Stephen Sinclair, have chosen to intercut the three plots, culminating in a triple climax involving the battle of Helm's Deep; the attack on Saruman's realm, Isengard, by the benevolent tree spirits, the Ents, who are driven to a rare fury by the destruction of the ancient wooded land; and Frodo and Sam's efforts to persuade Faramir (David Wenham), the warrior prince who has captured them and views the ring as a prize that can restore his beleaguered homeland's glory, that the ring is actually an evil token and can bring only destruction.

Dramatically this reconfiguration is brilliant. Wound together in this fashion, the stories tug us over one cliff after another. The three hours are kinetic, physically compelling. At the end we're breathless. (Jackson's fondness for crane shots that swing out over panoramas of the immense New Zealand landscape helps create that experience.)

Emotionally, too, the structure is powerful: the themes play back and forth across the narrative, linking displays of courage, loyalty and selflessness while giving glints

of temptation and treachery. It feels like one story, an essential story that the ages haven't eroded: the story of the fight for humanity to keep alive the sacred spark. And it's a complex story, because it illustrates that both that spark and the shadow of darkness lie in every heart.

The emblem of that darkness in the heart is Gollum (played by the remarkable Andy Serkis), a hunched, diminutive being with crooked teeth and a spine like a fish scale and huge, clear eyes like jewels. Tolkien based Gollum on a character out of Teutonic mythology--the gold-lusting dwarf Wagner called Alberich in *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. But in *The Two Towers*, where he trails Frodo with the aim of reclaiming the ring, his "precious," Gollum speaks in two voices. Sometime he is the subservient guide who leads Frodo and Sam across the tricky, swamp-infested regions, and at other times he is dominated by the evil tempter, urging Gollum to kill the hobbits and retreat with the ring into his loneliness. (In a particularly creepy scene, he huddles against a rock, one hand reaching out to rub the opposite shoulder, like a mother cradling a frightened child.)

Sam is repelled by Gollum. He thinks he's a leech and immune to soft feelings, and he insults him. Frodo insists on calling him by the name he was born with, Sméagol. To Frodo, who can feel the weight of the ring with every step, who fears his soul is being eaten away by it, this misbegotten creature is a tragic figure, the victim of a power it could not withstand.

The way character after character in these movies is beset by temptation--including Faramir and his brother Boramir (whose heroic death at the end of *Fellowship* symbolized his triumph over his lust for the ring's power) and Saruman (Christopher Lee), once a good wizard--bear out Frodo's vision. Jackson shepherds a magnificent cast (including Ian McKellen, Bernard Hill, John Rhys-Davies, Liv Tyler, Brad Dourif and Miranda Otto) through sequences that pay tribute to Fritz Lang and Akira Kurosawa (the battle in the rain recalls both *Seven Samurai* and *Ran*). By the end of *The Two Towers* you feel he's standing shoulder to shoulder with those directors.