

# Tolkien's Odd Alternate Ending to 'The Lord of the Rings'

There are many reasons J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy epic [\*The Lord of the Rings\*](#) is considered one of the greatest stories of all-time. (It was voted [the best book of the 20th century](#) in a UK readers' poll a decade and a half ago, and not for the first time.)

I'm convinced that one of the primary reasons for the story's popularity is its delicious conclusion, a difficult thing to pull off in story-telling. (Just ask the creators of *Lost*.) As creative writing instructor Robert McKee famously said in the Oscar-winning film *Adaptation*, a story "can have flaws, problems, but wow them in the end, and you've got a hit."

Few epic stories have had a conclusion equal to that of *The Lord of the Rings*. (Among recent screen stories, only AMC's *Breaking Bad* comes to mind.) Frodo Baggins arrives at Mount Doom to destroy the One Ring after a long and bitter struggle—only to fall victim himself to the seductive power of the Ring. Our hero fails, but is redeemed by Grace—which appears through the pathetic, wretched creature Gollum.

The theological implications of Frodo's failure are profound, and the ending has a poetic irony. Because of this, one would suspect Tolkien knew from the beginning precisely how his story would end. Indeed, Gandalf's Cassandra-like foretelling—"My heart tells me that Gollum has some part to play yet, for good or ill before this is over"—would seem to confirm such suspicions.

Alas, that doesn't seem to be the case. We know this from a letter Tolkien sent to his son, Christopher Tolkien, in November 1944 before his work was published.

In the letter, Tolkien references a couple chapters of the story he had completed, which he was sending to his son for review (a standard practice between Tolkien and his son). Tolkien then describes the conclusion of his epic, which was outlined but not complete:

*“Book Five and Last opens with the ride of Gandalf to Minas Tirith, with which the Palantir, last chapter of Book Three, closed. Some of this is written or sketched. Then should follow the raising of the siege of Minas Tirith by the onset of the Riders of Rohan, in which King Theoden falls; the driving back of the enemy, by Gandalf and Aragorn to the Black Gate; the parley in which Sauron shows various tokens (such as the mithril coat) to prove that he has captured Frodo, but Gandalf refuses to treat (a horrible dilemma, all the same, even for a wizard). Then we shift to Frodo, and his rescue by Sam.”*

All of this will sound quite familiar to fans of [The Lord of the Rings](#). But Tolkien’s next words are telling:

***“With the destruction of the Ring, the exact manner of which is not certain—all these last bits were written ages ago, but no longer fit in detail, nor in elevation (for the whole thing has become much larger and loftier)—Baraddur crashes, and the forces of Gandalf sweep into Mordor. Frodo and Sam, fighting with the last Nazgul on an island of rock surrounded by the fire of the erupting Mount Doom ....”***

Tolkien’s letter goes on at great length (you can read it in its entirety [here](#)), but on two points he’s clear: 1. He was not sure precisely how the Ring would be destroyed, and; 2. The conclusion involved Sam and Frodo fighting Nazgul on Mount Doom.

Now, regarding the former, part of me wonders if Tolkien was being coy, and he did know precisely how the One Ring would be

destroyed, but he wanted to withhold that piece of information from his son for dramatic purposes. We'll likely never know for certain, of course.

Regarding the latter, we know that no fight between the hobbits and Ringwraiths occurs on Mount Doom. However, the choice to scrap this part of the story—whether it came from Tolkien or an editor—seems like a good one to me.

Frodo by this time had fought his battle. He had failed to resist the Ring, but ultimately succeeded in his quest through a Grace that had nothing to do with his own strength or courage.

A fight with a Nazgul at this stage of the story would have felt contrived and detracted from the primary story arc. Instead of two terrified hobbits crossing swords with a Nazgul, we see that, after Gollum had done his work, Frodo was “pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear. His burden was taken away.” Before their unlikely rescue by the Windlord Gwaihir, Sam and Frodo spend what they believe to be their final moments on Middle-Earth in tender embrace and stoic reflection.

The precise way in which Tolkien arrived at the ending he did is unclear (at least from the letters and sources I've reviewed), but ultimately he got it right.

He “wowed us in the end,” and that's all that matters, I suppose.