



Similarities between *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *Dune* by Frank Herbert

N. Trevor Brierly

The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien and *Dune* by Frank Herbert are often regarded as the pinnacles of their respective genres of fantasy and science fiction. They are sometimes compared to each other in terms of size, scope and breadth of world-building. Arthur C. Clarke, for example, wrote about *Dune*:

DUNE seems to me unique among modern sf novels in the depth of characterization and the extraordinary detail of the world it creates. I know nothing comparable to it except THE LORD OF THE RINGS. (*Dune* back cover)

Do these two works share more than superficial similarities? They are very different books, in many ways photo-negatives of each other. But they do have important similarities that are worth exploring.

Both *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings* are basically stories of good versus evil, where the characters on the side of good are largely admirable. They struggle to defeat enemies who rule by oppression, cruelty and injustice. Good does win over evil in the end, although ultimately not permanently. At a very high level then, both books have the same broad shape. However, once you focus in closer, the differences between the two become much clearer and the similarities also become more interesting.

Both novels feature young heroes who are forced to leave a paradisiacal home and survive in harsh wildernesses. Frodo must flee the Edenic Shire he loves and go first into the wilderness of desolate, depopulated Eriador, then through mountain tunnels, through shade-infested marshes and then finally into the barren horror of Mordor, which even Gollum describes in fear as "Ashes, ashes, and dust, and thirst there is; and pits, pits, pits, and Orcses, thousands of Orcses" (*Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* [TT], IV, i, 601). Paul Atreides is similarly forced out

of his well-watered home of Caladan, which he describes later to Chani: "Where I was born, water fell from the sky and ran over the land in wide rivers...There were oceans of it so broad you could not see the other shore" (*Dune* 291). After a brief period of rule over Arrakis, the Atreides are all but destroyed by their archenemies the Harkonnen, and by an Emperor who fears and betrays them. Only Paul and his mother Jessica are left, and they flee into the desperately dry deserts of Arrakis, where rain has never fallen and strangers are killed for the water in their bodies. However, wildernesses turn out to be very good places to hide in. Jessica and Paul are believed by their enemies to have been killed in a desert storm. They find a place among the Fremen, a people who eke out a living on Arrakis. Similarly, Mordor with all its darkness, pits and crevices, allows Frodo and Sam to hide literally under the nose of Sauron and make their way to Mount Doom unnoticed.

Barren wildernesses also have a more symbolic role to play in *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings*. Paul is quoted as saying "God created Arrakis to train the faithful" (*Dune* 301). Harsh, extreme environments can transform characters. Paul and Lady Jessica are already formidable because of Jessica's Bene Gesserit training, but the desert provides the perfect environment to bring out Paul's extraordinary abilities of leadership and prescience. His understanding of the ways of the desert enable him to find the lever that he can use to move the Imperium. Frodo and Sam are transformed also by their own journeys through the wilderness. The primary change in them is a self-confidence rooted in the knowledge that they have "done the impossible". An example of this is found when they return to the Shire and find it ruled and partly ruined by a band of Big People ruffians. This chapter near the end of *Lord of the Rings* is sometimes seen as an unnecessary extension of the book, but Tolkien saw it as an essential part of the novel. In this chapter we see the ultimate result of the transformation that Sam, Frodo and the other hobbits have undergone. They now quite naturally and quickly "take charge" and deal with this local evil with confidence and humor. Frodo has undergone an additional transformation, he is tired of violence and understands deeply the value of mercy. During the Scouring of the Shire he tries to avoid violence as much as possible. He commands that no hobbits be killed by other hobbits, and that mercy is to be shown to the human invaders if they leave peacefully.

Both Paul and Frodo carry an unwanted burden throughout much of the novels that places great constraints upon them and tests their integrity. In the case of Frodo it is the Ring which weighs heavily upon him, both physically, as the Ring seems to get heavier later in the book, but spiritually also, depressing him and continually pressuring him to use it. The Ring is portrayed as a character in itself, full of malice, desiring to be used, trying to return to its master Sauron. This is what Frodo must contend with as he travels through Middle-earth. Sam experiences this also as he bears the Ring for a short time while Frodo is captured. But neither bows to Ring, until the very end at Mount Doom when Frodo puts on the Ring and refuses to throw it away.

Paul also carries a burden, what he repeatedly calls "terrible purpose". This refers to his incipient messiahship and the bloodthirsty religious war called the Jihad that will be triggered by his actions. With his frustratingly-limited prescience he searches for a way to avoid the "terrible purpose", the Jihad, but realizes that even knowing the future doesn't mean he can control it. The Jihad is already set in motion, and the Fremen will sweep over the universe seeking vengeance for centuries of oppression, and become oppressors themselves. Paul earnestly desires to avoid this, but reluctantly accepts that he cannot. If he wishes to reclaim Arrakis, revive House Atreides and destroy a great evil, then the Jihad is unavoidable. Paul chooses to accept his messiahship and defeats the Harkonnen and the Emperor. The novel *Dune Messiah* continues the story as House Atreides rises to rule the Empire, and the Fremen are unleashed on the universe. Herbert always meant for *Dune* and *Dune Messiah* to be read together as a single story, and while *Dune* ends on a positive note, with the defeat of the evil Harkonnen and the corrupt Imperium, *Dune Messiah* is much less clear, and describes Paul's anguished reaction to the bloody Jihad and the religious structure that has grown up around him. The Jihad has resulted in the deaths of 61 billion people, and Paul realizes through his ability to see into possible futures that even worse may happen to humanity. As the Bene Gesserit, the Guild Navigators, the Tleilaxu and Princess Irulan plot against him, he comes up with a plan to avoid this.

Both Frodo and Paul have to deal with the incomplete nature of their heroism. Their respective failures have a personal aspect, but are largely beyond their fault. Frodo shows great endurance and integrity getting to Mount Doom, but he fails at the end of the quest, and only chance and pity shown long ago (when Bilbo decided to spare Gollum's life) resulted in the Ring being destroyed. However, Frodo's failure probably says more about the immense power of the Ring than it does about his own flaws or weaknesses. Tolkien is making a point that the Ring cannot but corrupt any who bear it. Ultimately no one is strong enough to destroy it, be they wizard, elf, man or hobbit. Even Gandalf knows from the beginning that he should not have it. When Frodo attempts to give him the Ring he says: "No!...With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly....Do not tempt me!" (*Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* [FR], I, ii, 70-1) The Ring is destroyed in the end, but it is through providence and through mercy shown long ago. Providence is one of the primary themes of *Lord of the Rings*. Gandalf tells Frodo: "Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it, and that may be an encouraging thought" (FR, I, ii, 65). It is clear that Tolkien is referring here to a higher power than Sauron, that is Iluvatar the Creator, who is actively involved with his creation and ultimately works out all to the good.

Paul also has failed, though his failure is far larger than Frodo's in its scope. While he has restored House Atreides to power and destroyed a great evil, his regime is now responsible for mass murder and reviled by many because of the brutality of the Jihad. Despite being Emperor of the Known Universe and revered as a god, he is unable to stop the excesses of the religion that has formed around him. He actually believes he is just a figurehead (*Dune Messiah* 37). His failure is perhaps less a personal failure than the reality that systems of power such as religions and governments are extraordinarily difficult to control, even by those who are theoretically in charge. Tolkien and Herbert might agree that history has shown that power will corrupt those who hold it. Tolkien wrote in a letter to his son Christopher: "...the most improper job of any man, even saints (who at any rate were at least unwilling to take it on), is bossing other men. Not one in a million is fit for it, and least of all those who seek the opportunity" (*Letters* 64). Herbert seems to be saying that governments, religions, organizations, any part of the power structure cannot help becoming corrupt. He might agree with Lord Acton's axiom that "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." It is important to realize that Herbert does not want readers to see Paul as a wholly positive figure. According to Herbert, one of the primary themes of *Dune* is the danger of messiahs and supermen. He writes:

I conceived of a long novel, the whole trilogy as one book about the messianic convulsions that periodically overtake us....This grows from my theory that superheroes are disastrous for humankind, that even if we find a real hero (whatever that may be), eventually fallible mortals take over the power structure that always comes in being around such a leader. (*Maker* 97)

Paul might qualify as a "real hero", at least at first, but he is trapped within a corrupt and corrupting system. In *Dune Messiah*, Paul is able to see with his prescience that something even worse than the Jihad awaits humanity. He sets in motion a plan to set the universe on a new path and thus redeems himself to an extent.

Perhaps one of the most significant similarities between *Lord of the Rings* and *Dune* is the role that addiction plays in both. The substance found on Arrakis known as "spice" or "melange" has amazing powers. It extends life and prevents aging. It prevents illness and provides immunity to many poisons. It enhances and activates psychic powers. Guild Navigators use it to find a safe path for space travel. The Bene Gesserit use it to enhance their own powers. Not only is it desirable for these reasons, Herbert makes it quite clear that the substance itself is addictive, especially at high doses (*Dune* 507).

Tolkien never actually uses the term "addiction" or any of its forms, but he portrays the Ring and its interaction with those who bear it in very similar terms. The Ring itself is extraordinarily powerful. Like the spice, it extends life. It makes the user invisible and gives the power of

command and many other abilities. Gandalf describes Gollum as being "bound by desire of it" (*FR*, I, ii, 66) and he is tormented and maddened by his desire for it. In his turn, Bilbo finds himself very reluctant to give it up, to pass it on to Frodo. Gandalf encourages him to let it go, but he says: "Now it comes to it, I don't like parting with it at all, I may say. And I don't really see why I should. Why do you want me to?" (*FR*, I, i, 41). Frodo first experiences the power of the Ring as he is hiding from the Black Rider on the road out of the Shire: "Once more the desire to slip on the Ring came over Frodo; but this time it was stronger than before. So strong that, almost before he realized what he was doing, his hand was groping in his pocket" (*FR*, I, iii, 88). As Frodo approaches Mount Doom, its hold on him grows, until at the end he is unable to give it up. The Ring has a mind of its own and the ability to create a strong desire to keep it and use it.

Addictions are about free will, and the loss of it. Actions become increasingly constrained toward obtaining or retaining, and using what is causing the addiction. The Ring and the Spice are both powerful things, sought by the powerful to increase their power, but resulting in addiction and corruption. They drive the action of their respective novels. Who will control the Ring, who will be its true Lord, is the question at the center of *Lord of the Rings*. The Ring is why Frodo and the Fellowship pass from "danger into danger". *Dune* is similarly concerned with the question of who will be in control of Arrakis and therefore the spice. The spice as an addictive and highly desirable substance drives the powerful to seek control of Arrakis, at great price to those who are in their way.

A complex similarity between *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings* is the theme of the environment and how it is treated by the characters. In both novels the realms of the evil characters are characterized as aesthetically repugnant, used up by resource extraction and antipathic to life. Giedi Prime, the homeworld of the Harkonnens is a polluted, heavily-industrialized and heavily-mined world, described as having "low photosynthetic potential" to begin with (*Dune* 502), and ill-treated ever since. Visitors to Giedi Prime notice the "rubbish heaps, the scabrous brown walls reflected in the dark puddles of the streets, and the furtive scurrying of the people" (*Dune* 313). Similarly, in *Lord of the Rings* there are two examples of realms which have been abused. Saruman, with his "mind of metal and wheels" (*TT*, III, iv, 76) has turned Isengard into a nightmarish realm. Gandalf describes what he saw during his captivity at the pinnacle of the tower Orthanc: "I looked on it and saw that, whereas it had once been green and fair, it was now filled with pits and forges....Over all his works a dark smoke hung and wrapped itself about the sides of Orthanc" (*FR*, II, ii, 274). Saruman himself is only an imitator of Sauron, who has turned the entire land of Mordor into a barren horror. Frodo and Sam are deeply affected by its ugliness and barrenness:

Frodo and Sam gazed out in mingled loathing and wonder at this hateful land. Between them and the smoking mountain, all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked. They wondered how the Lord of this realm maintained and fed his slaves and his armies...Neither [Sam] nor Frodo knew anything of the great slave-worked fields away south in this wide realm, beyond the fumes of the mountain by the dark sad waters of Lake Núrnenn...Here in the northern regions were the mines and forges, and the musterings of long-planned war. (*The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* [RK], VI, ii, 902)

In both novels evil is associated with a mindset which views the environment as merely a resource to be used and used up. In contrast, good is associated more often with a mindset that views the environment as something to be nurtured and conserved. Over many years the Shire has been made into a green and productive land which has supported generations of Hobbits in plenty. The elves who crafted Rivendell and Lothlorien have similar attitudes, though with a somewhat stronger emphasis on the aesthetic.

The original homeworld of the Atreides family is the lush water-world of Caladan, kept that way, it appears, over at least 26 generations of history of the Atreides (*Dune* 3). Their new homeworld of Arrakis is much less hospitable, with the constant pressure of lack of moisture. A desert world, the spice is all that makes it worth inhabiting, and most of its people live in grubby settlements away from the sand, where the sandworms dwell. But the Fremen people roam freely, and have learned how to "live in harmony" with its deadly nature, making the most of what little it has to offer in the way of life-supporting resources. Their culture is harsh and brutal at times, but out of necessity, given the reality of their environment.

Despite the vast aridity of their world, the Fremen have a dream, to eventually make their desert world a pleasant and beautiful place to live. In this they are similar to the hobbits and the elves, who also worked to create realms of green fruitfulness. The Fremen have been given this hope by the offworlder Pardot Kynes, the Imperial Planetologist, who believed that such a thing could be done, given enough time and effort. Herbert describes Kynes's vision:

To Pardot Kynes, the planet was merely an expression of energy, a machine being driven by the sun. What it needed was reshaping to fit it to man's needs. His mind went directly to the free-moving human population, the Fremen. What a challenge! What a tool they could be! Fremen: an ecological and geological force of almost unlimited potential. (*Dune* 477)

He talked to the Fremen about water, about dunes anchored by grass, about palmaries filled with date palms, about open qanats flowing across the desert. (*Dune* 478)

The Fremen accept his ideas, which Kynes forms into an ecological religion. They understand that it will be hundreds of years before it happens, but they still work towards it, slowly accumulating water and planting hardy desert species.

In answer to the question asked at the beginning, *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings* do share significant similarities, which can only be covered briefly here. Why compare them to begin with? So we can come to know each better and gain insights we wouldn't have from looking at each in isolation. Both novels are about transformation and awakening to self-awareness, about mastering inevitable change, and about dealing with corrupting power as it is used by the inhumane. These are subjects of interest to all of us, and both *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings* are alike in that there is a lot we can learn from them.

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N. TREVOR BRIERLY tells computers what to do for a living, but his true love is reading, particularly in literature, science, history and religion. He has a BA in English from George Mason University and an MLIS from University of Texas–Austin. He is currently working on a book of meditations for people who are recovering from spiritual abuse and aspires to write a definitive monograph on *Dune* by Frank Herbert. He lives in Northern Virginia with 6 miniature tigers, 3,000 books and his beloved spouse.