

# Invisibility in Middle-Earth: A Tentative Theory

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In the production/post production commentary for the prologue to the extended version of the Fellowship of the Ring (5:00), John Gilbert, the editor of the film, recounts that he initially did not include Isildur becoming invisible during the attack at the Gladden Fields in the film because he felt doing so would involve a complication that would be too difficult to explain, having just shown Sauron wearing the ring without becoming invisible. Mark Ordesky, the executive producer, continues in chapter five (24:44) that the ring turning people invisible, but not Sauron, was a feature of the ring that Tolkien was stuck with because of its function in *The Hobbit*, and that the studio was afraid that non-fans would be so distracted by this inconsistency that it would ruin the movie. Happily, he adds, people got so caught up in the movie that they bought into the logic without questioning it. He does not, however, explain what the logic they bought was.

While it is possible that Tolkien clumsily left a glaring inconsistency in the story, it seems to me to be unlikely that he wouldn't have accounted for this problem in some way. A possible answer seems to be that invisibility is not an intended feature of the ring in normal use by appropriate beings (Valar, Maiar, and Elves), and is an unanticipated effect when used by inappropriate beings (humans and Hobbits).

There is one powerful being, Tom Bombadil, who puts on the ring and does not turn invisible. Tom's ability with regard to the ring parallels Sauron's. All of the other beings who put on the ring, humans and Hobbits, however, do become invisible--Isildur, Gollum, Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam.

If we consider the other rings of power, we come close to the same result. Nonhumans (Elves and Dwarves) seem to remain visible when wearing the three and the seven. Humans (Ringwraiths) became invisible when wearing the nine.

There is no claim that an Elven ring can make an Elf invisible and no event recorded in which an Elf turned invisible by using a ring. Galadriel was wearing Narya during her meeting with Frodo in "The Mirror of Galadriel" and Frodo (but not Sam) saw both her and the ring on her finger. Gandalf presumably was wearing Narya when he fought the Balrog ("I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor") and was visible to the rest of the Fellowship. Vilya was presumably worn by Elrond in Rivendell, without him becoming invisible. Gandalf, Galadriel, and Elrond were each wearing their rings at the Grey Havens and both they and the rings were visible.

Although we do know that the nine kings of men when they put on their rings did become invisible, invisibility was not a feature of their rings that they usually benefited from, once they became Ringwraiths. In the *Silmarillion* in "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age," it is written that "They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun, and they could see things in worlds invisible to mortal men," suggesting that they took advantage of invisibility in the early years as ring bearers. In the Third Age, the Nazgul did use their invisibility on one occasion: when they disrobed to walk across the bridge at Osgiliath, before Boromir and

Faramir retook the bridge. Upon getting clear of the bridge, however, the Nazgul once again put on clothing so that they could be seen. In general, because they needed to be seen to some degree in order to invoke terror, invisibility was usually a problem, not a help. Similarly, invisibility would not have been a benefit to Sauron in the Second Age, when he was wearing the ring. When using (wearing) the ring, being seen, in terms of the fear factor produced, would also have been useful to him. Because Sauron did not need invisibility as a feature of his ring, it is therefore unlikely that it was a designed feature. It would have been pointless to create a power in the ring that Sauron would then have to overcome in some manner.

How invisibility relates to the One Ring (and the three, seven, and nine) depends a lot on what being invisible means. It is clear that mere possession of the ring does not make one permanently invisible. Bilbo had the ring for a very long time and used it without becoming invisible (other than when he wore it). Rather it kept him young and stretched. Gollum possessed and used the ring for centuries without becoming invisible except when wearing the ring, whatever other effects it had on him. Frodo himself was becoming invisible not because of the ring but because of the tip of the Morgul-knife moving toward his heart. Yet, as Gandalf states, when wearing the ring, Frodo was "in gravest peril" because the ring made him visible in the wraith-world.

Just before reaching Rivendell, Frodo starts to fade, nearly becoming invisible like the wraiths. As Gandalf explains in "Many Meetings," Frodo was moving from the real world to the wraith world, from the Seen to the Unseen. Gandalf states that Elves are "at once in both worlds." Glorfindel (or Arwen in the movie) appears as a bright light in the wraith-world. The wraiths live primarily in the wraith-world and wear "real robes" to "give shape to their nothingness when they have dealings with the living." Frodo, however, is not visible in both worlds at once. Frodo becomes visible to the wraiths and to Sauron only when he puts on the ring, thereby becoming visible in the wraith world.

My tentative theory depends heavily on the words "at once." If it is not possible for Frodo to be visible in both worlds at once, then invisibility in the real world may be the price paid for visibility in the wraith-world. When Frodo, another Hobbit, or a human put the ring on, the situation was reversed. When doing so, a person became visible in the wraith-world, but not visible (invisible) in the real world. The reason for this transformation might be that Hobbits and humans could not maintain their appearance simultaneously in both worlds, while Elves (and higher beings such as Maiar and Valar) could appear in both worlds at once. The connection with the Valar and the Maiar is stressed in Gandalf's remark that "those who have dwelt in the Blessed Realm live in both worlds." This remark includes all Valar and Maiar and the Elves who have seen the Light of the Two Trees, but not humans and Hobbits, who were not permitted in the Blessed Realm, and therefore presumably could not live (or appear) in more than one world at a time.

Seen in this way, invisibility is not a feature of the power of any of the rings, but rather a sign of the weakness of a ring bearer who can appear in only one world at a time, rather than both at once. Normally humans and Hobbits appear in the real or Seen world and are invisible in the wraith or Unseen world. The ring reverses the situation, making them visible in the Unseen world and invisible in the Seen world.

Concerning the Dwarves, there is no claim that any of the rings given to the Dwarves made any of them invisible. The *Silmarillion* ("Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age") states that "Dwarves indeed proved tough and hard to tame; they ill endure the domination of others, and the thoughts of their hearts are hard to fathom, nor can they be turned to shadows." The claim that they cannot be turned to shadows could mean that they cannot become invisible

in the sense that they cannot pass over to the world of shadow as humans and Hobbits do. If so, then the Dwarves could not become invisible in the Seen world because they could not become visible in the Unseen world.

In accordance with this tentative theory, assuming that all rings relate to invisibility in the same way, with regard to any ring, invisibility depends on whether the wearer always appears in both worlds "at once," appears in only one world at a time, or can only appear in the Seen world, but not the Unseen world. Valar, Maiar, and Elves who have been to the Uttermost West, would remain visible because they are visible in both worlds "at once." Dwarves would always be visible because they cannot move from one world to the other (technically, one could also say that they are always invisible in the Unseen world). Humans, Hobbits, and Elves who have not been to the Uttermost West would disappear in the real world because they cannot appear in both worlds "at once." They are invisible in the Unseen world when they are not wearing a ring and become invisible in the Seen world and visible in the Unseen world when they are wearing a ring. Presumably, such was the case with the Ringwraiths when they first wore their rings, for according to *The Silmarillion* ("Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age"), "They could walk, if they would, unseen by all eyes in this world beneath the sun. . . . Nevertheless, "one by one, sooner or later, according to their native strength and to the good or evil of their wills in the beginning, they fell under the thralldom of the ring that they bore and under the domination of the One, which was Sauron's. And they became for ever invisible save to him that wore the Ruling Ring, and they entered into the realm of shadows." According to appendix B, the nine rings were forged sometime between S.A. 1500 (when Celebrimbor started forging rings) and 1600 (when Sauron forged the One Ring). The Ringwraiths first appeared in S.A. 2251, roughly 650 to 750 years later. Gollum found the ring in T.A. 2463 and possessed it until 2949 or 2950, a period of about 487 years. Perhaps the slightly longer times of possession of the rings by the Ringwraiths caused them to become permanently invisible, unlike Gollum, who remained visible when not wearing the ring. More likely, however, some additional cause, similar to the Morgul-knife tip in Frodo, brought permanent invisibility to them in the real world.

In reaction to the first draft of this essay, Nancy Martsch commented that the rings were normally invisible when worn. At the end of "The Mirror of Galadriel," as she noted, Frodo saw her ring on her finger, but Sam did not. Galadriel says that Frodo is able to see her ring because his "sight is grown keener" as a result of having worn the One Ring "on finger." Galadriel, however, is somewhat uncertain about whether Sam has seen the ring, since she inquires rather than simply stating it as a fact.

Two issues arise if the rings are normally invisible: why is the ring visible when Tom Bombadil puts it on and why are the three Elven rings visible at the Grey Havens. One possibility with regard to Tom is that he somehow makes the ring remain visible. One possibility with regard to the Grey Havens incident, suggested by Nancy in response to my first draft, is that the rings became visible when worn after the destruction of the master ring.

Another possibility is that the rings were invisible to ordinary people but not to Frodo in the house of Tom Bombadil and to Sam at the Grey Havens. Paul Kocher perceptively notes in his book *Master of Middle-Earth* that every event in the *Lord of the Rings* is told from the perspective of the smallest person. In every case, that person is a Hobbit except for the the chapter on the Paths of the Dead, when everything is told from the perspective of Gimli. Taking this point into consideration, it may be that the ring was invisible to the other three Hobbits in Tom's house but not to Frodo for the same reason that Galadriel's ring was not invisible to Frodo but was to Sam. Frodo

as the author of the book relates that the ring was visible because he saw it, and because he did not consult with the other three Hobbits on the matter. Then at the Grey Havens the three rings might have been visible to Sam, who was also a ring bearer, but not to Merry and Pippin, but the account presents them as visible because Sam, rather than Frodo, has now become the author of the book, and he reports that the three are visible without consulting Merry and Pippin.

Finally, as Nancy also noted in reaction to my first draft, the inconsistency brought up by the filmmakers was probably was not in the book but in the film: it was not that Sauron remains visible while wearing the ring and Isildur becomes invisible but rather that the ring remains visible while Sauron wore it. Upon reflection, I would agree.