

J.R.R. Tolkien Needed a Copy Editor

Excerpt from *The Return of the King*, Book VI, near the end of Chapter 3

The light sprang up again, and there on the brink of the chasm, at the very Crack of Doom, stood Frodo, black against the glare, tense, erect, but still as if he had been **turned to stone**.

‘Master!’ cried Sam.

Then Frodo stirred and spoke with a clear voice, indeed with a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use, and it rose above the throb and turmoil of Mount Doom, ringing in the roof and walls.

‘I have come,’ he said, ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The ring is mine!’ And suddenly, as he set it on his finger, he vanished from Sam’s sight. Sam gasped, but he had no chance to cry out, for at that moment many **things** happened.

Something struck Sam violently in the back, his legs were knocked from under him and he was flung aside, striking his head against the stony floor, as a dark shape sprang over him. He lay still and for a moment all went black.

And far away, as Frodo put on the Ring and claimed it for his own, even in Sammath Naur the very heart of his realm, the power in Barad-dûr was shaken, and the Tower trembled from its foundations to its proud and bitter crown. The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash, and all the devices of his enemies were at last laid bare. Then his wrath blazed in consuming flame, but his fear rose like a vast black smoke to choke him. For he knew his deadly peril and the thread upon which his doom now hung.

From all his policies and webs of fear and treachery, from all his stratagems and wars his mind shook free; and throughout his realm a tremor ran, his slaves quailed, and his armies halted, and his captains suddenly steerless, bereft of will, wavered and despaired. For they were forgotten. The whole mind and purpose of the Power that wielded them was now bent with overwhelming force upon the Mountain. At his summons, wheeling with a rending cry, in a last desperate race there flew, faster than the winds, the Nazgûl, the Ringwraiths, and with a storm of wings they hurtled southwards to Mount Doom.

Sam got up. He was dazed and blood streaming from his head dripped in his eyes. He groped forward, and then he saw a strange and terrible **thing**. Gollum on the edge of the abyss was fighting like a **mad thing** with an unseen foe. To and fro he swayed, now so near the brink that almost

he tumbled in, now dragging back, falling to the ground, rising, and falling again. And all the while he hissed but spoke no words.

The fires below awoke in anger, the red light blazed, and all the cavern was filled with a great glare and heat. Suddenly Sam saw Gollum's long hands draw upwards to his mouth; his white fangs gleamed, and then snapped as they bit. Frodo gave a cry, and there he was, fallen upon his knees at the chasm's edge. But Gollum, dancing like a **mad thing**, held aloft the ring, a finger still thrust within the circle. It shone now as if verily it was wrought of living fire.

'Precious, precious, precious!' Gollum cried. 'My Precious! O my Precious!' And with that even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat on his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *precious*, and he was gone.

There was a roar and a great confusion of noise. Fires leaped up and licked the roof. The throbbing grew to a great tumult, and the Mountain shook. Sam ran to Frodo and picked him up and carried him out to the door. And there upon the dark threshold of the Sammath Naur, high above the plains of Mordor, such wonder and terror came on him that he stood still forgetting all else, and gazed as one **turned to stone**.

Comments: Let me be clear that I regard Tolkien's Ring trilogy as a tremendous accomplishment: a great tale with the bonus of whole invented languages using distinctive styles of poetry. I enjoyed reading it.

Nevertheless, Tolkien's writing could have used the services of a copy editor, as the above excerpt illustrates. This excerpt is contiguous and unedited. Two problematic faults are shown in **red**.

1. Tolkien used the word "thing" four times in this short segment. This word is usually avoided by writers. (He also used "something" once.)

In the first use ("many things happened"), these three words could be omitted and the sentence continued: "... for at that moment something struck Sam"

In two successive paragraphs he described Gollum's actions (fighting and dancing) as being "like a mad thing."

2. He used the phrase "as ... turned to stone" twice in this excerpt, with six paragraphs between the two uses. I guess it's a judgement call, but I can't imagine careful writers supporting this repetition.