The title “The Two Towers” makes it sound like this part of the adventure is especially ominous. The adventurers have to contend with two circumferences of evil influence, both linked. But the reader soon discovers that the towers are hardly in union. Saruman seeks claim of the Ring himself, and is not the least bit actually serving deferentially to Sauron. And Sauron knows this about him but finds him a useful enough agent nevertheless.

Saruman, though of course as old as the hills as Sauron is, is however reasonably new to the “being evil” game (though Treebeard suspects a longer tenure, passed notice by everyone for being contrived in hiding), while Sauron is old hat. The Two Towers ends up being as much about this, the rivalry between newly rising and long-established order, as it is about the two different threats imposed in the pathway of the Fellowship, a theme, a concern, which applies far beyond Saruman’s relationship vis-à-vis Sauron to include assembling allies of the good and members within the now disparate venturing parts of the Fellowship. It — that is, a concern that the old order not by breached; that people not start thinking things with perhaps destabilizing implications for the social order — seems concerned in this sense to protect both evil and good in this book. It’s an overriding, an overarching concern, making any act of bravery, initiative, or spirited intuition, just as often something to be dealt with and handled — i.e. subtly or starkly diminished — immediately, than something worth praise and support. An outpouring of an eager willingness to praise or to lend strong support, in fact, is more often to come out of expressions of doubt and admittance or clear evidence of failure, than from successfully accomplished feat — which is actually looked at warily if it can’t be immediately packaged as something as actually as demonstrative of one’s limitations as it is one’s potential.

The book begins with Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas full of doubt, each veering toward despondency. “Now the company is all in ruin,” Aragorn says. “It is I that has failed. Vain was Gandalf’s trust in me. [...] What shall I do now?” (404). He gets his answer to some extent by the particular direction his heart points him towards. But also seemingly in deciding for modesty, for the more modest of the two paths he needs to choose between. Grant the main course to Frodo and Sam, and take the path that is a “small deed in the great deeds of this time” (416) — somehow goodness lies therein. This I think is the last time one ever hears of Aragorn admonishing himself as a limited figure, and of his seeking to venture away from glory. In retrospect, it seems almost a ceremonial gesture, in that the one
who is about to serve as king over all of Middle-earth first begs himself as someone who
never forgets that his greatest deeds have been bested by ostensibly even greater kings
before him, and that he has known doubt, failure, and even moments of total lack of surety,
as much as any man. Hereafter he never intentionally reduces himself, even if others
mistakenly believe they’ve caught him out in reduced form — his wearing a mere grey cloak
into the halls of Meduseld, for example. And the key dramatic action concerning him is
infinitely more his rising, and into some form of greatness that daunts everyone in terms of
stature — “power and majesty of kings of stone” (423) — and presumed accessibility —
“none now of the land of the living can tell his purpose” (780). Henceforth, outside of
being momentarily spell-caught by Saruman, any change on his part involves making him
that much more evident as a “kingly man of high destiny” (780).

Aragorn is venturing on a path that will not actually have him rescue Merry and Pippen
— Treebeard and the Horse-lords do that — but rather establishing himself amongst other
denizens of Middle-earth as the great king returned. Ultimately it’s not by any means a path
that simply lends distinction to Frodo and Sam’s own journey, but his modestly undertaken
journey does work to highlight the outwardly bold presumption of those discussed next in
the text, Saruman and his servants, of whom one is deemed particularly vile. Note that bold
thought and action is by no means always due for criticism in the text. Much of Two Towers
is replete with it, bold action that goes un-criticized, in fact — or at least by anyone given
texual authority; by anyone who matters. Aragorn, after deciding finally on which course
to take, switches out of being momentarily fretful to simply announcing himself from out of
hiding upon a whole horde of Horse-lords, and in such a stark and unexpected manner —
“What news from the North, Riders of Rohan?” — that it’s no surprise the Rohanians
consider them possibly sorcerers, after having first thought them possibly even Orcs. The
path Frodo and Sam chose for themselves is not to be assessed as only a “strange deed,” as
Gimli initially judges it, but only as a “brave deed” (409). So states Aragorn. Pippen dares
drop his Elf-given (and so doubly daring) broach so his trail could be followed and so that
he and Merry can be known to their friends as not only alive but cognizant and alert as well.
Gandalf is identified as having stolen a horse from under Theoden’s — the Rohan’ king’s —
nose, cheating him of his hold’s greatest prize when he meant only to offer up a typical
sampling. Sam, at the finish of Two Towers, succeeds in stabbing the great monster spider
Shelob, something no one, not even great Gondor warriors — of whom, they’re may not
ever even have been but a few — had previously succeeded in doing. All of these bold
undertakings are conveyed as actions to be respected and celebrated, unreservedly. In not a
single case is anyone who undertakes such bold action meant to be seen as deserving the
punishment that might have nevertheless been dealt them for undertaking them; none of them qualifies as the sort of unwarranted claim of self-possession, the sort of sordid action, that should be judged so crossly it ends up amounting to a moral lesson for others to heed.

The harsh moral lesson, “the burned hand teaches best (584),” *is however* applied to any bold advance made even by someone in very good standing, if it might lend one to reconsider the righteousness of the social order that the returned king is set to restore. While held captive by the Orcs, Pippin decides that he shouldn’t have let himself be daunted by the fact that the company he’d be in would be composed of such high company and rather *himself* undertaken to learn some of the knowledge concerning geography that was available to them in Rivendale, so he wouldn’t have found himself so shortchanged of options when caught out alone. If this was simply his being involved in self-reprimand, his being involved in a turning against himself — *what a damnable fool you are, Pippin!* — the text would have found no trespass here. But it isn’t. He is arguing to himself that no company, no matter how high, should ever daunt; that you should make an assessment of your likely needs, and keep faith with it, even if others around you are of such stature that, without explicitly stating it, their presence seems to insist on your suddenly forsaking your volition. Pippen, informed by this act of self-correction, not self-reprimand, seems to be the one we meet subsequently while at the foot Saruman’s tower when he decides to make claim to a fallen object — namely, the palantir — even after just being successfully chastened by a spell-chanting Saruman as but a kid that didn’t deserve to be present at all, and which persists even after haughty white Gandalf reprimands him for independently making a grab at an object he hadn’t yet been instructed to retrieve. “Half” of this was supposed to be the will of the evil Ring. But really, the text accords that the half that was Pippin’s *was just as suspect.* For it’s a recognition of self-rule, everyone’s intrinsic right not to be intimidated away from an independent judgment they’d forced on their own that they judged sound, an expression of spirit antithetical to any social order headed by a supreme ruler, by a king, queen, or some such being ostensibly better aware of what a body public needs than any one or any grouping of its constituents. “Fortunately” the palantir takes Pippen for a horrid ride. And “fortunately” the palantir later is used successfully by one of the Fellowship — Aragorn, of course — who can demonstrate that this is a world, not of those who erroneously leach themselves of personal responsibility and the responsible who don’t, but rather one of legitimate claims and of illegitimate ones. And you don’t act so much to absolve oneself of passivity but so as to learn into which of these two groupings you belong — the one that should take act independently and that should lead, or the one that really ought just sit on its hands when betters are around, acting only if and when instructed. If it
“burns” you, and if someone of as unquestionable textual authority as Gandalf and Aragorn deems that you had it coming, then it’s evidence that next time you think yourself guilty for too much passivity and for too little initiative, you’re probably doing only what people of your limited capability are due for, so be rather, content; okay rather than upset with yourself. Don’t strive to do better, just deal with your accorded lot, for ostensibly, it was justly dealt.

Sam, while upheld in the text as — at least in a certain circumstance — superior to every other entity that ever challenged the might of a certain arachnid demigod, is not lent textual approval while he begins to have doubts concerning Frodo. The text takes humor in Sam’s inversion of social hierarchy when he addresses lord Faramir as if he was admonishing a young hobbit for his “sauce” (650), for it is a contained threat that works more to highlight his master’s superior manners as well as reinforce the conception of common-stock people as brave but without foresight, as lacking in self control, as requiring, as needing, to not ultimately go about absent others’ rule. The text is not however so casual with Sam beginning to think Frodo a bit soft on Gollum, for here there is a trespass which might be mistook by many as a righteous reason for taking command away from those given it; something which would of course have deep reverberations for the social order. There’s a sense in the text, not just that Sam but that many readers have been lured far along enough in a suspicion so that when quit, shown up for good, an arising doubt built on something implicitly weak-seeming about the right of a current hierarchy to its place, has been dealt with triumphantly after having been ventured extented rope, and therefore subsequently guaranteed a long interim, free of challenge. This something, alluded to at the beginning of the text by one of Sauron’s agents as the one trait not even their worst is “cursed with,” is “kindness” (445). Frodo is Sam’s “rightful master, not just because he is more wise and genteel, which are traits possessed by the like of Sauron, for instance, but because he is more intrinsically kind. Aragorn is Eomer’s rightful master, not just because he is wiser and more mighty than he, not just because he has better manners — “I spoke only as do all in men in my land, and I would gladly learn better” (427) — than he, but because he is kinder, substantially less harsh, than he. Kindness is not, however, something a simple person might mistake it for. It’s not intrinsically connected with weakness, with blindness to villainy, however much the two can be connected (read what happens to Theoden’s Rhodan when Theoden is too open and permissive — i.e., it makes itself fully open to the machinations of Wormtongue). It’s actually twinned with a larger degree of foresight than the simple are capable of conceiving — as for example, Gandalf’s instructing Frodo on what pity can lend in you in surprise — given their being accustomed to associate too much receptivity to
others’ pains only with a peculiar willingness to self-designate yourself open for plunder. And it requires a reminder, now and then, of how it is actually not at all that, that it’s actually informed out of full knowledge of the guiles of the weak, and is by no means a capitulation to any of them, so that those properly due respect not find themselves inadvertently held in poor regard by their much-shallower-in-perception servants.

Even an entity as great and important as Treebeard gets a hemming-in, a correction, when he advances on a dangerous conclusion built out of what the text needed to supply, but for another purpose. The great wizard Saruman must be soundly deflated in the text so that he doesn’t serve as an argument that the uppity do sometimes have good ground for thinking themselves superior to all who’ve gone before them, that sometimes they really are better. So we are instructed that though Saruman was a potent captain, he was, despite his pretensions, only ever but Sauron’s servant. So we are instructed that he was only creating only a copy of Sauron’s constructions, even as he saw himself as a bold originator, and that his awesome tower, Orthanc, indestructible even to Ents, was outside the building acumen of either of them. And Treebeard is accorded as correct by Aragorn in further assessing Saruman as fundamentally lacking in grit and raw courage as well (553). But after that, Treebeard’s denunciation of Saruman is stopped short by Aragorn because — it really does begin to seem — what is flawed concerning Saruman cannot be allowed to implicate all others possessed of previously agreed upon iron-clad claims on greatness, and that’s the territory Treebeard is stepping into. He ventures, “I wonder if his fame was not all along mainly due to his cleverness in settling at Isengard,” which implies that what he was actually foremost skilled at was pulling the wool over people’s eyes. He’s going in the same direction here that Boromir was when he wondered of Galadriel’s ultimate purposes, gauging her perhaps only ever a creature of deception and guile. And so Aragorn quickly jumps on Treebeards’ own venturing into “evil” considerations, expounding, “No[,] [...] [o]nce he was as great as his fame made him. His thoughts were deep, his knowledge was subtle, and his hands marvellously skilled” (553). Yes, of course be was, for otherwise Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel and Aragorn himself, are either thorough fools or agents of deliberate mischief for for so long assuming him otherwise! And of course be was, for otherwise these other three “great” individuals might perhaps be themselves revealed as being rendered of the same dubious make-up. Seditious thinking of the highest order! So even the great saviour Treebeard is made to suffer a burn of a kind here, by someone the text holds one of the very few worthy of administering it.

If Sam hadn’t realized that Frodo was so far beyond him in comprehension that it was really always wise to trust him implicitly in all matters, if Pippin hadn’t said that
subsequently after his own receiving of a “burning” lesson that a whole platter of tempting palantirs could be put before him and he couldn't be made to touch any of them, if Treebeard hadn't immediately stopped his denunciation of Saruman and left it where Aragorn would comfortably have had it, then their fates would not subsequently have gone as described, is what one comes to gather from the will at work in the text. If Sam had decided that Frodo was guilty of not sufficiently countenancing the extent of Gollum's threat and therefore had become himself a threat to the success of their mission — a conclusion which lead to his judging that less-foolish—he should properly be the one carrying the Ring — he wouldn't have been the recipient of so joyous an accounting of him in his defeat of Sherob that for a moment he was a triumph over every warrior in Middle-earth. But rather, instead, he'd be someone undermined in the text as being just lucky, and probably actually in fact, a battle-incompetent, not worth a tale at all in anyone's book, even the smallest and most pathetically written. Or, rather, he might just been victim to a sudden plot change, and found himself stabbed by Sherob and mercilessly eaten. And so Frodo proved capable of deposing of the Ring, the text would subsequently be amended to read, even without his Sam. Lesson learned — by all means, do take along for insurance purposes, but be prepared to do without the services of those you've known long but who aren't immediately obvious to a role, especially if they begin, fat rather than fit, and not just potato-ish in shape but potato-dumb as well, and of the dubious servile class. If Merry hadn't accepted that there was any legitimate difference between his bold dropping of his broach to inform his three friendly pursuers of his ongoing health and his quickly judged and quickly acted upon retrieval of the dropped artifact that was on its way to being lost to all, if he hadn't perhaps understood that his “rightful” claim to it was as half-baked a formulation as was Gollum's claim to the Ring as his own due “present” was, he wouldn't have found himself so kindly received by Gandalf and merely dropped a notch in a familiar way in being likened to a pawn in the company of greater pieces. But, instead, rather told that that's what he gets for proclaiming himself equal to all while actually so undeserving. And rather than being spared being forced to sing at Lord Denethor's court, he'd of found himself serving as its strained, never-ceasing songbird, with no end to his servitude portending. If Treebeard hadn't accepted Aragorn's assessment of Saruman and instead pursued his logic towards concluding him a total fraud, he wouldn't have been as warmly excused by Gandalf for his eventually letting Saruman go but informed more of the consequences of his clumsy mismanagement, including Saruman's subsequent ravaging of the tree-loving hobbit population — as well all the Shire's trees! — in his pursuit of making the Shire a haven for polluting factories. Thereby he'd have made Treebeard insane out of grief and guilt, longing for the Elves to return to numb him back into
stupidity before they left Middle-earth. An act of pity they would of course would deny him, for having recklessly pursued a line of thought that could have had all the commons doubting how well earned every one of their reputations was, and so potentially, rendered their whole benighted race, hoisted indecrous ourly of glory and onto their own petards!

All of them, in short, would have been made subject to the dark fate viciously inflicted upon Wormtongue. If you’re looking for the greatest losers in the text, the ones, not who die but who suffer humiliations no one could bear living with for long, you can skip both Saruman and Sauron; for Saruman’s preference that he always remain a master, even as it abandons him of Gandalf’s help and leaves him having to counter the might of nine Nazgul himself, is, what, but the typical stubbornness and pride of dignified wizards, and Sauron is one who is caught off guard but also one whose weaknesses are heavily qualified so that they are those that always accompany a certain particular kind of genuine genius. The ones to look to are Gollum, the Orc Grishnakh — who plays a Wormtongue to Ugluk’s Gandalf — the Messenger of Mordor, Merry and Pippin (especially Pippin), and most of all, Wormtongue. As a general rule, if the text starts likening one to a cornered animal or an insolent child, you can forget all its ostensibly fidelity to the worthiness of “pity” and be assured it wants you alive only so humiliations have more time to settle in. So if it described you like this — “His face was twisted with amazement and anger to the likeness of some wild beast that, as it crouches on its prey, is smitten not the muzzle with a stinging rod” (Return of the King 872) — as it does the Messenger of Mordor, then if Gandalf has to stop someone from smiting you in the name of second-chances and pity, it’s going to amount to a forced effort, to say the least. If it begins to describe you as a “greedy child stooping over a bowl of food” (The Two Towers 578), as it is applied to Pippin, you’d better in some way desist in what you’re doing, learn a moral lesson from doing it, real fast, or you’ll get the same. And if it describes you as, “In his eyes was the hunted look of a beast seeking some gap in the ring of his enemies” (The Two Towers, 508), and as “coming out of a hut [...] almost like a dog” (Return of the King 995), then you’re screwed no matter what you do. Because then you’re Wormtongue, and then you’re a snake, a kicked dog, and perhaps even a victim of an assault that verged on rape — what all does Saruman do to him behind closed doors, after his stupidity costs his boss the palantir, to make him so completely snap at the end? — and the world has to literally stop so that all your poisonous fluids can be cleared from all paths you might have trod upon, and so that the possibility that you could have mated with a treasured princess has its chance to be fumigated out of everyone’s brains.

What happens to Wormtongue is what you get in the text if you breech on someone else’s power when the text hasn’t already approved you as one qualified to do so: In anti-
Semitic lexicon, if you’re the Jew making advancements within the European court. To avoid his fate, you go the route of Hana when Gandalf runs off yet again, doing his thing of “ever [...] going and coming unlooked-for” (516), and take advantage of someone else’s doubting of Gandalf to highlight how henceforth you’re at least completely resolved never again to do so. Thus when presented with the proclamation, “Wormtongue, were he here, would not find it hard to explain,” you eagerly reply, “I will wait until I see Gandalf again” (516). Or of Eomer, after having formerly accosted Aragorn, admitting his comparative smallness to him and pledging to “gladly learn better” (427). In short, you have to in effect act pretty much like Gollum’s “whipped cur whose master has patted it” (604). It’s quite the grim way to own people, But such is The Two Tower’s Middle-earth. There’s always a pair of eyes on you. You can expect to be spotted, so you have to be careful. To eyes of the powerful but worried, a whole social order appears to be at stake.