

LHSP English  
Paper #4  
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“The Ring: An object of many meanings beyond true human understanding”

In our society, the ring is associated with important life events. With no beginning and no end, they come in all shapes and sizes; some with diamonds, some with animals on top. We commonly use rings as common symbols for promises. When we're little, we sing “A ring is round, it has no end, that's how long I want to be your friend” and make friends hoping that our friendships never end. When we graduate from high school, we are given graduation rings. We propose with engagements rings and get married with wedding rings that symbolize our hope in everlasting marital bliss. I've always wondered why our society used the ring to symbolize marriage and other important events. I've always assumed that people used rings for these events because they were a standard piece of jewelry. Why did people use rings as representations for oaths or promises instead of other types jewelry? And did other cultures value the ring just as much as the American culture did? After thinking about rings as symbols for promises, it made more sense to me. Many cultures use rings in order to represent marriage because a ring is in the shape of a circle, which is the symbol for infinity, union, and everything perfect and holy. This is why many major relationships and events such as friendships and marriages are celebrated with the exchange of rings

(<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~matc/math5.geometry/unit9/unit9.html#Symbolism>).

Personally, I don't like wearing rings. I don't like how I can feel them on my fingers; like I am being prevented from using my hands. Although rings are very pretty, I just can't get

over the binding feeling that they give my fingers. With bracelets and necklaces, I don't mind as much because they are very loose and light. But the binding characteristic of rings makes it hard for me to ignore them on my fingers. I was always jealous of other girls that were able to wear multiple rings with ease. They told me that they couldn't feel the rings on their fingers at all. Watching their fingers made me wonder how they could maneuver their fingers so well. In retrospect, I saw that my inability to wear rings represented a greater inability to have intimate relationships with other people. When I was little, I always thought that having a relationship meant that I would be "tied down". For middle school and high school dances, I would never bring dates, and I would only have close guy friends. If any guy friend showed signs of wanting to be more than friends, I fled. I wasn't ready to be tied down in a relationship. Even though I knew that adolescent relationships didn't require a big commitment, I still couldn't bring myself to having one. Thinking about it now, I couldn't wear a ring because I wasn't comfortable being tied down or bound to something. Like relationships, rings made me feel tied down and bound, and because I wasn't ready for relationships, I wasn't ready to wear something that made me feel the same way as rings did. Rings were something that I really wanted to wear, but could not bring myself to wear one, just like I liked the idea of having a boyfriend, but could not bring myself to have one. I was not ready for both things. Interestingly enough, I only recently started wearing rings during my senior year of high school. It was the same time when I started wondering that maybe having a boyfriend wasn't something that would tie me down. My fear of being bound to a relationship was psychologically reflected in my avoidance of wearing rings because I didn't like the way both things made me feel; tied and bound.

But for many other girls, rings are not just symbols of marriage and relationships. They represent a promise. I

Last year during my last year of choir camp, I met a girl named Blaire. When I complimented the ring on her finger, I noticed that her ring had the word “wait” and “love” inscribed on the outside. She told me that it was a purity ring which represented her promise to stay pure and not have sex until she found real love or until she got married. Blaire also told me that when she started relationships with guys, she never failed to share with them her purity ring and the promise that she made to herself. The ring and its symbolism made the boys really think about whether they wanted to have a real relationship with her. Culturally, many girls wear virtue or purity rings as just for decorative jewelry. Maybe its also because they made promise to themselves to be truthful, hopeful, or pure.

To others, rings aren't so much a promise, but more of a status symbol. When women get married, they compare their diamond sizes to other women's rings in order to assert their status as being upper-class. Single people stay away from those wearing wedding rings because the rings represent the person's status as married. When we graduate high school, we are suggested to buy graduation rings in order to show others our status as being graduated. Friends give each other friendship rings to show the world that they are best friends. Girls wear rings to show their experience and understanding with fashion. Instead of being used to represent an important promise, rings are slowly becoming more and more of a status symbol. They are losing their meaningful touch as our society becomes more materialistic.

But maybe rings do not have a great importance to people because its just not part of their culture. To them, it might be just a formality. My parents have been married for the past 24 years with no fights or signs of potential divorce. Although my parents are still happily married, neither of them wears a wedding ring. In fact, my mother lost her wedding ring a few years after they got married. It had fallen down the sink in their apartment. They contacted the plumber to

try and retrieve it, but nothing was found. Instead of getting a new ring to symbolize their marriage, they simply didn't get one. Even now, my mother wears other rings like pearl rings or decorative rings on her ring finger, but she never wears one long enough to be considered the "wedding ring" substitute. She told me that historically wedding rings weren't a big deal in Korea. They only really started wearing wedding rings after the country was introduced to Western culture. Also, because both my parents grew up right around the end of the Korean war, people were too poor to even afford rings. My parents both just didn't feel the need for new wedding rings because they both grew up in a culture where rings were not necessary to symbolize marriage. I'd like to think the real reason my parents don't have wedding rings is because they do not need something materialistic in order to represent their love for each other.

Although wedding rings weren't common in Korea, my mother said that Korean children were given gold rings on their 1st birthdays as presents from relatives and friends. Historically, during the Korean War, it was very easy for young babies to die before reaching their first birthdays due to a lack of a healthy environment. So when a baby turned one, Koreans celebrated with huge parties with hopes that the child would grow up to live a long, healthy life. The golden rings were given by people that wished for the child's happiness and prosperity. Instead of giving importance on the relationship between spouses, Korean families placed more importance on the relationship between the parents and their children. This is why Koreans gave gold rings to their children, but did not really feel the need to buy gold rings for their marriages.

In order to understand why rings were more important in some places than others, I delved into the ring's historical background. The first wedding rings were originated from Africa in ancient Egypt. They utilized sedges, rushes, and reeds that grew by the Nile to create bracelets and rings. Only the plants that grew by the Nile were used because the

Egyptian people believed that the Nile was the source of all life and fortune. To them, the ring was shaped like a circle, which was known as the symbol for eternity in their culture. The hole in the ring was known as the “the symbol of the gateway, or door; leading to things and events both known and unknown”. They placed the ring on the fourth finger of the left hand because the Egyptians believed that the vein located in that finger was closest to the heart. When the Greek Empire took over Egypt, the importance of the ring integrated into Greek culture. The Greeks called the vein “vena amoris” or “the vein of love” in Latin. Because the materials used for rings wore off in time, they later made rings out of bone and ivory to last longer.

As the practice of rings immersed into other ancient cultures, it soon came to the Romans, who decided to use stronger materials that would symbolize “the strength of love a man felt for his chosen woman”. They used gold and silver to show their wealth and in some cases, the rings were shaped as keys to show that a woman was bound to her marriage. In medieval Europe, they began putting jewels on their rings. They picked rubies for love, sapphires for the sky, and diamonds for their strength. Soon, in Renaissance Italy, they started the culture of using silver rings as engagement rings and using gold rings for marriage. In Ireland, it was bad luck if it wasn't made out of gold, and the rings had to be perfectly fit. If they were too tight or too loose, it meant jealousy and carelessness for the future couple

(<http://www.thehistoryof.net/history-of-the-wedding-ring.html>).

It was interesting to see how each country took their own spin on the ring. The culture of using rings spread throughout the world and evolved as countries changed or added meanings to the ring. After learning about the history, I realized that they used rings as a symbol for eternal love because rings had no beginning and no end. With bracelets and necklaces, we are able to take them off by unlocking the clasp of the necklace or bracelet. But with rings, there is no way

to separate or break the ring. We can only take rings off, which symbolize the release of the oath or promise. And bracelets and necklaces are usually loose, which historically represented carelessness. People wanted a type of jewelry that would remind them of their oath and the importance of the promise of marriage. I like to think that people use rings because we are always aware of rings when we wear them. Because bracelets and necklaces are loose, we often forget that we have them on, but we always know when we're wearing rings because they surround our fingers and are located on our hands where we can see them constantly.

But historically, rings do not just symbolize marriage and love. They were also used as a symbol for power. In the bible, there is a story about a man named Joseph. Joseph was his father's favorite, which made the other brothers' jealous of him. So they sold Joseph to slave traders and proclaimed him dead to the family. The slave traders sold Joseph to Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials. Joseph managed to get into Potiphar's good graces, but was sent to jail due to the false accusation of seducing Potiphar's wife. In jail, Joseph became known for being able to accurately interpret people's dreams. When the Pharaoh begins to have disturbing dreams, he sends for Joseph to interpret the dreams for him. When Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams as a warning for famine, the Pharaoh trusts Joseph and puts him in charge of Egypt. "So Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'I hereby put you in charge of the whole land of Egypt.' Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger." The ring is the symbol that represents Pharaoh's power. Signet rings are like signatures in modern society. They represent the authority that the person has. So when Pharaoh gave power to Joseph, he naturally gave him the signet ring as well (Genesis 41 NIV).

Like signet rings in history, the media also uses the ring to symbolize power. In film *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins and the fellowship of the ring go off on a grand adventure to destroy

the “One Ring”, the evil ring that controls all the other rings. This ring offers the promise of eternal power to the person that owns the ring. In fact, the “One Ring” binds all the other powerful rings with its power. The beginning of the film describes the ring in a poem from the book as “Three rings for the Elven-Kings under the sky, Seven for the Dwarf-Lords in their halls of stone, Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die, One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne, in the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie. One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them, In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.” In the book, the One Ring contains the ultimate endless power, which Frodo Baggins receives through his uncle. The ring is almost indestructible and can only be destroyed in Mount Mordor where it was created. J.R.R Tolkien used the “One ring” as a symbol of ultimate power because a ring is a symbol of eternity. Eternity is something beyond human control, which gives rings a mysterious and almost magical quality. It is for this reason that many fantasy authors in modern society use rings as sources of infinite power and magic

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3s5KGRp\\_OY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3s5KGRp_OY).

Although fantasy authors use rings to represent a power that is infinite, the concept of infinity is something that goes beyond our imagination and understanding. After researching about the ring, instead of finding the one real representation of the ring, I found endless representations and meanings. Each representation led me with thoughts about another possible representation. There is no one set real representation of the ring. There are common representations such as the ring as a union of marriage. But it is not the only symbol of the ring. If we took each representation of the ring and put it together, we would find all aspects of a person’s life. Individually, our lives are not infinite. We all have our beginnings and our ends. But the ring represents more than just individual lives. The ring is a symbol for the infinity of

time and the universe. We cannot understand it or imagine it. We can only acknowledge that it exists. We use rings for important life events because whether the thoughts are unconscious or conscious, we still admit that life is one giant mystery that we cannot solve.

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