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The theme of Heroism in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

In the world of J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, his first novel, is set in a fantastic world called Middle-Earth. *The Hobbit* explores a variety of themes, based on the political, social, and economic climate of the time. It comes from Tolkien's personal experiences: fighting in World War I, losing one of his best friends in war, sending off his sons to World War II, and losing his pastoral childhood home to the industrial revolution. *The Hobbit* asks the questions, "What is the highest form of freedom?"; "Does power inevitably corrupt?"; and "What sort of action can be sustained in the face of human evil?" (Witt & Richards 20) The actions done by various characters from *The Hobbit*, particularly its lead character Bilbo Baggins categorizes them into being individuals whose actions either led to corruption of power or a supporter of freedom.

Tolkien was a lifelong enemy of tyranny and big government in any form (Richards & Witt 16). In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, he made it explicitly clear through his heroes and villains that he doesn't believe that tyranny will ultimately rule. Through his unlikely heroes Bilbo and Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee, he showed what he thinks real heroism is like. However, Richards & Witt writes that Tolkien hates didacticism in storytelling, so you won't find his political opinions shouting at you from the pages of his books (19).

The Oxford dictionary defines a hero as "the chief...character in a book...who is typically identified with good qualities and with whom the reader is expected to sympathize..." Allison and Goethals, in an attempt to define heroism as a general trait,

found that people have a tendency to follow a systematic pattern in choosing heroic traits. In a poll that they conducted, people often perceive heroes to be highly moral, competent, smart, strong, resilient, selfless, reliable, and charismatic. These two rather simplistic, general, and straightforward definitions of hero and heroism is expanded and put in context as a major theme in J.R.R. Tolkien's first novel, *The Hobbit*.

Perhaps Scheidhauer's description of heroism best describes Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*. He is not an in-your-face hero, obvious hero at the beginning of the story. According to Scheidhauer, no companion would ever confirm that someone else than himself or herself is the Hero. This explains why people rarely claim the status of Hero. But as the story progresses, Bilbo himself transforms to become a hero. The complex set of changes that Bilbo's character undergoes will be one of the central and most intricate stories of the entire book.

Bilbo Baggins When We First Meet Him

In "An Unexpected Party", we first meet the hero of the story, Bilbo Baggins. The very first mention of Bilbo's name, he was described as, "This hobbit was a very well-to-do hobbit, and his name is Baggins" (Tolkien 12). The Baggins family is considered highly respectable by all the neighbors. Bilbo's nature is described in chapter 1 of the *The Hobbit*, and the duality of his two sides – Baggins from his father's side, and Took from his mother's side is pulling him into two different directions. The Took clan was described as people who have a tendency to go off on adventures, which was something that was un-hobbit-like. The interaction between Bilbo's "Tookish" and "Baggins" sides is one of the central realities of his character (Olsen 6). While Bilbo's Baggins side is businesslike and plain, his Took heritage gives him a tendency to also

lean towards a more adventurous life. This tendency was tested when Bilbo meets Gandalf and the dwarves.

When the tea party with Gandalf and the dwarves in Chapter 1 ceases to become a quiet affair, the effect on Bilbo was instantaneous: he was “positively flummoxed”, but then came to accept the fact that “a most wretched adventure” has come right into his house. When Bilbo allowed the dwarves and Gandalf into his life, his house and his life was transformed forever. Mr. Baggins will soon be swept away from his comfortable home and into various uncomfortable adventures involving dwarves, elves, dragons, and various other creatures, pleasant and unpleasant (Richards & Witt 24). In opening up his home, Bilbo Baggins shows courage and the possibility that there is more to life than what he is enjoying at the moment. The turning point was when, after hearing Gloom the dwarf’s not-so-flattering assessment of him, he says, “...tell me what you want done, and I will try it...”(32).

Bilbo’s Choices

In *The Hobbit*, there are several moments in Bilbo’s journey when he comes to a crucial decision point – where he needs to make an important decision on his own that would not only affect him, but the rest of the group. We saw it in the goblin tunnels and when he went out into the dark tunnel to confront a dragon in his lair. In “Riddles in the Dark” when Bilbo was left alone in the goblin tunnel and found the ring, he contemplated on which way he should go:

“‘Go back?’ he thought. ‘No good at all! Go sideways! Impossible! Go forward? Only thing to do! On we go!’ So up he got, and trotted along

with his little sword held in front of him and one hand feeling the wall,
and his heart all of a patter and a pitter (Tolkien 92).”

In “Not at Home”, Bilbo decides to go down the tunnel where Smaug the dragon is, and persuades the dwarves to go with him. He says:

“...I am going down the tunnel once again. I have been that way twice,
when I knew there was a dragon at the other end, so I will risk a third visit
when I am no longer sure...(Tolkien 283).”

These particular choices that he makes, which the narrator lays great emphasis in the story, define the progression of Bilbo’s character and his path towards “heroism.”

Perhaps the most interesting choice that Bilbo made was one of his last choices, and the reason why he had agreed to this adventure in the first place: to part with the treasures from the Mountain. In “The Return Journey”, they have succeeded in getting the treasure from the Mountain, but at such a high price. In fact, all that had happened gave Bilbo “more sorrow than joy, and he was now very weary of his adventure” (Tolkien 347). When offered a fourteenth share of the treasure, which was “wealth exceedingly great, greater than that of many mortal kings (Tolkien 350), he refuses to take it. This particular choice, I would think, ranks Bilbo as heroic, more than anything else. After leaving your beloved home, risking your life, and fighting a war, he decides not to take the spoils of war that would make him the richest hobbit that Hobbiton has ever seen. He says,

“...But really it is a relief to me. How on earth should I have got all that
treasure home without war and murder all along the way, I don’t know.

And I don't know what I should have done with it when I got home. I am sure it is better in your hands" (Tolkien 350-351).

The Journey to Being a Hero

Let us make it clear: Tolkien does not portray Bilbo and the rest of the main characters of *The Hobbit* as naturally "good" in any way. What Tolkien is trying to present here is the idea that Bilbo, the dwarves, elves, and men of Middle-Earth are not perfect. They are all flawed, struggling with temptation and corruption. What *The Hobbit* partially showed, and which was seen in the succeeding *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, is that when these characters overcame these temptations, it sets forth in motion unprecedented and unexpected acts of heroism that results in good triumphing over evil. The struggles that Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield experienced are the same way that human beings of our world struggles (Richards & Witt 38). According to Tolkien, "I have not made any of the peoples on the 'right side', Hobbits, Rohirrim, Men of Dale or of Gondor, any better than men have been or are, or can be."

The idea that there is no "right side" is surely a result of Tolkien's experience as a fighting soldier in World War I. As a second lieutenant, Tolkien spent many days and nights on the Western Front, often under fire. He fought at the Battle of Somme, one of the fiercest history of killing in the history of human conflict (Loconte xiii).

Curiously, the way that Bilbo got hold of *The Ring of Power* is treated as almost an embarrassment to his ledger of deeds. It is implied that Bilbo was being a little wily and "tricksy" (Gollum's word) when he got hold of the ring, and the author Tolkien, being raised in Victorian propriety and honor, is not comfortable with it. In fact Tolkien found a need to justify and explain Bilbo's possession of the ring. When Bilbo had won

the contest over Gollum, Tolkien explains that "...the riddle game was sacred and of immense antiquity, and even wicked creatures were afraid to cheat when they play at it" (Tolkien 104). It shows that in this instance, Bilbo has in some measure lowered himself to Gollum's level.

Tolkien makes Bilbo's increasing courage plausible and believable in more ways than one throughout the book. Bilbo Baggins is an accessible hero, an everyman who happens to stumble upon greatness. Tolkien often reminds the reader of Bilbo's limitations – his empty stomach and a little later his loneliness without his companions (Bloom & Hobby, editors 111).

According to Scheidhauer, the quest for heroism is the movement of the mind that no other idea can impair or suppress. In Tolkien's depiction of Bilbo Baggins' quest for heroism, once he got into the gradual realization that he can be the hero of the quest that they are on, there was really no stopping him. There was no evident external force that coerced Bilbo to be a hero; it was just something that he decided to do. The way that it was depicted in the story was very subtle and gradual – and before the reader even realizes, the story is finished.

Bilbo's Acts of Heroism

Bilbo is not an idealized hero, as far as classical heroes of mythology and fantasy novels go. Heroes in stories do not worry about such 'mundane' issues like hunger and loneliness. His ordinariness reminds readers that heroes are ordinary people who do extraordinary deeds.

In "Flies and Spiders", Bilbo rescues the Dwarves with the use of his sword *Sting* and the magic ring. He also used his wits and skills at aiming and throwing stones, which

he learned as a child hobbit. He rescues the dwarves not through sheer strength and unabashed courage but through the use of the ring to confuse their prey:

“I am going to disappear...I shall draw the spiders off, if I can’...he suddenly slipped on his ring, and to the great astonishment of the dwarves, he vanished.” (Tolkien 202).

Bilbo willingly goes down the dragon’s lair for the first time, emboldened by his magic ring. However, he was described as trembling with fear. He was sent down by the dwarves to take some treasure:

Then the hobbit slipped on his ring, then warned by the echoes to take more than the hobbit’s care to make no sound, he crept noiselessly down, down, down into the dark. He was trembling with fear, but his little face was set and grim. (Tolkien 259).

The next description describes the transformation of Bilbo Baggins from the hobbit that left Hobbiton:

Already he was a very different hobbit from the one that had run out without a pocket-handkerchief from Bag-End long ago. He had not had a pocket handkerchief for ages. He loosened his dagger in its sheath, tightened his belt, and went on. (Tolkien 259)

The most extraordinary act of courage shown by Bilbo is when he decided to use the Arkenstone, the most beloved treasure of the dwarves, as a bargaining point to the Elves and Men. He risked the ire of Thorin and the dwarves, and it was only through Gandalf’s intervention that he was not executed. Bilbo had to make a moral decision, weighing rights and wrongs, and place himself in the line of fire. He risked his own life,

devised a plan on his own without the support of his friends, and decided to execute it all by himself. When he faced the rage of the dwarves, he showed a sense of honor and obligation that is almost quixotic (Bloom & Hobby 113). Bilbo speaks of what he owes his friends, a friendship that involves giving even if you do not receive anything in return. In the end, he is reconciled with Thorin and the dwarves. Thorin pays tribute to Bilbo's heroic deeds and humane qualities in his final words:

“There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West.
Some courage and some wisdom blended in measure. If more of us valued
food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.
But sad or merry, I must leave it now. Farewell!” (Tolkien 346-347)

Heroism: Supporting Freedom

In the introduction we pointed out that the actions of Bilbo Baggins and other characters in *The Hobbit* either led to corruption of power or support of freedom. Richards and Witt (20) established that those who support freedom in the book, as Tolkien supported freedom, were considered the heroes of the book.

Let us take, for example the skin-changer Beorn, who appeared in *The Hobbit* as someone who was a bit of a curmudgeon, and someone that Gandalf and company don't want to offend. In the end, Beorn, despite his gruff exterior, welcomed the dwarves and Bilbo Baggins into his estate and showed them great hospitality. Beorn made a decision to welcome the party of dwarves and hobbit, which led to goodwill for everyone concerned.

Thorin Oakenshield, though his morality faltered in the story, regretted his actions, admitted his mistakes, and apologized to Bilbo as he lay dying:

“I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed. Since I leave now all gold and silver, and go where it is of little worth, I wish to part in friendship from you, and I would take back my words and deeds at the Gate.” (Tolkien 346).

Bilbo at the End of the Book

The Hobbit shows that Bilbo, despite his small stature and seemingly weak constitution, is made of deceptively sturdy stuff. His morality and even his physical condition prevailed up to a certain point. He is not portrayed as a perfect human being, because the ring also worked its influence on him. However, at the end of *The Hobbit* we see that he was able to rise to acts of magnanimity and courage that we wouldn't have expected of him.

Conclusion

In *The Hobbit*, heroism wasn't in-your-face and evident right away. It crept up on the reader, and it was created and woven through the story not through words and dialogue, but through concrete actions. These small actions, as little as they may seem, contributed to the wholeness of the story, and how heroism is depicted in this tale. The actions of the courageous heroes in the story eventually led to freedom. The fabric of heroism and courage is also woven by Tolkien from his moral and theological compass. As a devout Catholic, we can see that the morality that guided the most courageous and heroic figures of *The Hobbit* have their source from how Tolkien's theological beliefs, interspersed with his personal tragedies and experiences. Tolkien has been accused of escapism from the realities of war through his work. Yet, the struggles in *The Hobbit*

reveal the moral struggles and dilemma of man, and the weapons he uses to overcome these: naked will and courage.

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