

# MY, WHAT STRONG HOBBITS YOU ARE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMON MAN HERO IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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In her essay titled "Frodo and Aragorn: The Concept of the Hero," Verlyn Flieger speaks of two distinct types of heroes in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The first, epitomized by the character Aragorn, is the "traditional epic/romance hero" who concerns himself with the "epic sweep of great events" (Flieger 124). The second, exemplified in Frodo, is that of the "common man. . . with whom the reader can identify" (124). Many of Tolkien's other characters can also be sorted into these two distinct roles, each of whom finds courage and heroism in his or her own way. In a letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien discusses a "motive (to become dominant in Hobbits) that the great policies of world history . . . are often turned not by the Lords and Governors . . . but by the seemingly unknown and weak" (*Silmarillion* xvii). If Tolkien speaks of these common man heroes when he says "unknown and weak," then the question must be asked: what drives these common men to action? As one begins to examine the reasons behind the great acts of courage performed by those most common and unknown characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, one sees that these actions are clearly not propelled by the "epic sweep of great events" or some grand ideological struggle; instead, Tolkien's common man heroes are compelled to act by the more basic drives of love, loyalty, and necessity until they have finally gained enough wisdom and experience to act out of a firmly established deontology of right and wrong.

Of these causes for action, that of necessity is one of the most fundamental for the common man hero. In *The Lord of the Rings*, this necessity consists either of the hero choosing to act because the hero is the only one capable of performing the task, or as a last resort when all other options have been weighed. These occasions provide the characters with little or no choice in what they must do; circumstances have called them to act. One such instance with Frodo provides the pivotal plot event that shapes all of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*.

After Gandalf explains why the Ring that has fallen into Frodo's possession must be destroyed, Frodo makes the crucial decision to take the task upon himself; however, in the fashion of the common hero, he does not accept the burden because he believes himself to be the most capable or because of a consciousness of the greater battle of Good and Evil, but rather because that which he loves is threatened and he is the only one who can help. Frodo's first reaction is one of self-doubt as he offers the Ring to Gandalf, who he views as a more suitable keeper, but Frodo is chosen, in Gandalf's words, "not for any merit that others do not possess" (*Fellowship* 60). As a common hobbit chosen for neither great power nor wisdom, Frodo's decision rests mainly on the fact that he knows he is somehow the one to carry this burden. One may argue that fate is in fact directing Frodo's courageous acceptance of the task, but Tolkien does not write as if Frodo's decision is fueled by a belief that he is fated to carry the Ring. The untraveled hobbit remarks merely "that [he is] a danger . . . to all that live near [him]" and that he cannot "keep the Ring and stay [in the Shire]" (61) – a rationale grounded on the basic emotion of love for the Shire and its hobbits and the realization that he alone can save his home from possible ruin.

Later in his journey, when the question of who shall bear the Ring is brought forth at the Council of Elrond, Frodo feels as though "a great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken" (264). However, Elrond makes it clear that the burden is too heavy for another to lay on him and that his choice must be freely made; and so, the doom Frodo feels can be assumed to be the knowledge that he is now the only one taking on this task. Once again, the reasons for Frodo's decision to act are based on the simple notion that the action should be done, and that he is the only one who can do it.

Likewise, a similar situation arises when Frodo makes his decision to leave the Fellowship. In this circumstance, however, the problem arises from immediate necessity as opposed to the previously discussed situations when time was not of the essence. After his encounter with Boromir, Frodo concludes that "[he] will do now what [he] must" because "the evil of the Ring is already at work in the Company," and that to protect his friends, "the Ring must leave" (392). Frodo is once again placed in a position where necessity demands him to act in order to help those that he cares about because he is the only one who can. The theme that the common man, driven by necessity and the simplest emotions, can find the courage to step forward and act for the better of the whole begins to emerge. While one might view the fact that Frodo needs to be pressed into these situations to act as unbecoming of a hero, one must remember that Frodo is not a hero like Aragorn. He is a common hobbit plucked from a gentle life, and because of this, his actions and reactions are driven by more simple emotions.

The fact that Frodo's courageous actions are triggered by necessity and a basic desire to help others makes his deeds more inspiring to the reader because they are those of a common man hero. While any reader is sure to admire Aragorn for his wisdom, courage, and strength, few readers can imagine themselves choosing to take the Paths of the Dead over a longer road. Average readers do not have their life directed by a higher destiny, and for this reason, it is hard to imagine oneself following in his footsteps. Frodo's actions, however, arise from the desire to protect his friends and country and, because in most of the situations he is the only one able to solve these problems, the situation is simplified. The readers want to believe that if they were put in a position where they were the only ones capable of saving the lives of their friends and country, that they would rise to the occasion: a thought made more believable by Frodo's initial self-doubt and overall commonness. As our fairy-tale hero rises to perform the deeds necessary to save his country, one hopes that one would act the same in this situation, that one could perform this great deed if necessity called, that one could be a hero. Frodo does not, however, claim the title of sole fairy-tale hero in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and one is able to find many instances of a common man hero propelled to action by necessity.

The common hero, while not usually a warrior, must in cases of dire need and desperate necessity stand and fight. Instances of this can be found frequently in the actions of the Fellowship's four hobbits, Tolkien's most obvious representations of the common hero. For instance, in Book IV when Sam and Frodo, hearing footsteps and voices approaching, decide to draw swords against their unknown assailants, they do so simply because "flight and hiding [are] no longer possible" (*Towers* 642). Though their blades are sharp, Frodo and Sam are still hobbits of the Shire with arms untrained to wield swords. This decision to fight is surely an act of courage and valor, but it arises from the simple case of being unable to flee and being caught, as one of the assailants fittingly describes, "like a coney in a trap" (642). Later in the story, we see Merry placed in a similar situation as Théoden's small escort is approached by unknown riders. Merry is quickly overcome by the feeling that he is "unneeded baggage" in a fight and the realization that escape would mean being lost and helpless in a foreign land. Merry weighs the options and decides that retreat is "No good!" and proceeds to "[draw] his sword and [tighten] his belt," choosing to act only after the option of retreat is taken away (*Return* 757). One could call Merry cowardly for thinking

first about how he might escape the battle, but one must keep in mind that Merry is a hero of the more common type. He is not imbued with the willpower to face death unflinchingly; instead, Merry experiences the normal emotion of fear. These fundamental emotions such as fear make the common hero easier to relate to, for the reader can relate more to experiencing the fear of death than to experiencing the absence of fear. In both of these events, however, it should not be forgotten that ultimately the hobbits do in fact choose to face their foes with sword drawn and belts tightened. For throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien hints at a latent power within the common man that can erupt in great feats of courage.

In Sam's battle with Shelob, Tolkien fully develops the idea that within the common man there lies untold strength needing only necessity to burst forth. When Sam sees his master incapacitated by Shelob, he charges without wondering "whether he was brave, or loyal, or filled with rage" (*Towers* 711). It is not some heroic notion for glory that drives Sam to act, but pure unpondered necessity. And Sam, the gardener from the Shire, unleashes "an onslaught more fierce [than] was ever seen in the savage world of beasts" (711). The animalistic description shows the depth to which this instinct lies within Sam: a depth that is penetrated by the desperateness of the situation, but that has probably always lied dormant within. Tolkien shows that within the common hero there lies a latent power of such potential as to rival the strength of such epic Tolkienian heroes as Beren and Túrin. This inner strength and courage does not arise purely in moments of crisis and necessity. In fact, dire situations and even the fear of death are not the most frequent catalysts of the common hero's courage, but rather it is loyalty and love that most often inspire Tolkien's common characters to act.

The emotion of love in Tolkien's works cannot be underestimated; as Marion Zimmer Bradley writes in the first sentence of her essay titled "Men, Halflings, and Hero Worship," "love is the dominant emotion in *The Lord of the Rings*" (76). Before continuing to analyze the bonds of love, friendship, and loyalty that propel many of Tolkien's common characters to act, it is important to separate the displays of love and affection in Tolkien's Middle-earth from those in modern society. Bradley writes that in *The Lord of the Rings*, "affectionate and emotional displays are permitted not alone to women and children, but to men" and that these actions, which can seem odd to the present-day reader, arise simply from "a pattern of manners" that exists in "Tolkien's self-consistent world" (77). This issue must be addressed because the cases of love examined will consist entirely of the love between men and of strong bonds of brotherhood and fellowship.

To begin examining how the emotion of love drives Tolkien's weaker characters to act, one must once again explore how it affects the choices and actions of the hobbits of the Fellowship. The first and possibly most important instance of love compelling the hobbits to make a courageous choice comes after the Council at Rivendell, when Elrond is choosing members for the Fellowship. Only moments after Frodo agrees to take the Ring to Mordor, Sam, who has been listening in secrecy, stands up and objects to the possibility of Frodo going alone. Sam's action, although responded to light-heartedly by Elrond, is one of great bravery. Despite overhearing the many dangers the Ring-bearer will face on his journey, Sam does not think twice about his desire to accompany Frodo. But once again, Sam's choice is not one made out of a desire to fight in the great struggle of Good and Evil or to fulfill a personal destiny, but instead, is a heroic decision rooted firmly on the foundations of friendship, love, and brotherhood. Similarly, Merry and Pippin are wronged by not originally being allowed to accompany Frodo. The bonds of friendship between the hobbits are so strong that it is "a punishment for any of [them] to be left behind" (*Fellowship* 265). Elrond later attributes Merry's and Pippin's desire to go to inexperience and the fact that they "cannot imagine what lies ahead," but Gandalf interjects that although this may be true, in this case, "it would be well to trust rather to their friendship than to great wisdom" (269). Coming from the mouth of Gandalf, this statement points to the importance Tolkien places on those actions taken

because of love and friendship, and says that on this quest into the heart of evil, deeds built on love and friendship may be of more use than those of great wisdom and strength.

Woven into these feelings of love and friendship is loyalty, which Tolkien tells us is in its truest form motivated by love. In *The Return of the King*, both Merry and Pippin pledge their loyalty and service to Théoden and Denethor respectively because of feelings of love, but Pippin's pledge to Denethor departs from this truest form. Merry's oath of loyalty is offered in the king's hall as he becomes "filled suddenly with love for [Théoden]" and is an extension of the love and friendship he already feels for the king (*Return* 760). In contrast, Pippin's fealty is given after recounting the tale of Boromir's fall. As Pippin retells the story, the love and fellowship he felt for Boromir is rekindled. This feeling of love for Boromir, however, is twisted into stirrings of pride by "the scorn and suspicion" in Denethor's voice (739). Because Pippin's pledge is provoked by a love for Boromir twisted by Denethor and not for Denethor himself, Pippin's loyalty is not of the truest quality. The ramifications of this can be seen later when Pippin works actively against the orders of Denethor. In these comparable situations, we see two common heroes driven to pledge themselves to their respective lords out of love. Necessity requires nothing in these situations; instead, the hobbit's decisions arise purely from the inward motivation provided by love and friendship. Tolkien, however, is careful to differentiate these two events, with Merry being motivated by love for the King of Rohan, and Pippin by a love for Boromir twisted to pride. We also see this combination of loyalty and love and its ability to inflame the spirit of the common hero outside of Tolkien's hobbits in the story of Beregond.

Beregond give us a glimpse into the life of an average soldier, a rare occurrence in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. At this point in the story, the hobbits, while still representing the common hero, are gaining renown and growing accustomed to being something more than average hobbits of the Shire. However, for the length of the story he is in, Beregond remains the common hero, extraordinary from the other guards only in his height. By examining why Beregond is moved to disobey his steward's orders in an act of courage, one can delve deeper into Tolkien's views on what causes these ordinary men to perform extraordinary acts of courage.

Although Beregond is a trained Guard of Gondor, his moments of unlooked-for courage are the result of the same emotions as the hobbits': love, loyalty, and necessity. As Pippin and Beregond watch Faramir and the rear guard fend off attacks from the Nazgûl, Beregond springs away, "[thinking] first of the captain whom he [loves]," while Pippin cowers "ashamed of his terror" (791). Beregond is able to quickly conquer the aura of fear disseminated by the Black Riders because of his deep love for his captain Faramir. While the difference in these two actions could be the result of Beregond's military experience, one must ask oneself whether or not Pippin would react the same way if it were Frodo being attacked by the Nazgûl. With this short scene, Tolkien establishes the poignant love Beregond feels for his captain only to test it as the battle rages on.

Tolkien chooses to test his common hero by forcing Beregond to choose between his love for Faramir and his sworn duty to the Steward of Gondor. Pippin lays the choice clearly before Beregond; as they meet in the confusion of the battle, Pippin asks Beregond to try to save his captain, but warns that to do so, he must "choose between orders and the life of Faramir" (809). Ultimately, Beregond chooses the side of love over that of unflinching duty, and Tolkien furthers the idea that it is love that lies at the heart of loyalty rather than some unbreakable oath of service. Gandalf later remarks to those servants who stood by "blind in [their] obedience, that but for the treason of Beregond Faramir, Captain of the White Tower, would now also be burned" (837). The decision is a difficult one for this common hero, but Beregond's choice to act on love proves to be the right one as are nearly all actions based on love found in *The Lord of the Rings*. As a common hero, Beregond's actions must derive from basic emotions. While Beregond might not be as easily related to as the hobbits, the reasons for his actions are. The reader can understand and relate to that force which urges Beregond to act, a deep love and loyalty for his heroic captain. One can truly

see the appreciation Tolkien has for these actions based on love and loyalty when one compares them with their corresponding opposites found in those under Sauron's dominion.

Never in those under the influence of Sauron does one see actions based on any sense of love or loyalty beyond fearful obedience. In Tolkien's world, one does not see great acts of courage and bravery from individual orcs, for they have not the love and loyalty that propels the actions of the weaker and are instead held together by thin threads of fear on the brink of breaking. Since the servants of Sauron rely on fear to command those beneath them, the threat of treachery is ever present. We do, however, see one individual act of courage by a man under the influence of Sauron in Wormtongue's treachery against Saruman. Even when Saruman has lost everything he possessed but his faithful servant Wormtongue, he still does not extend him any love; and, when the thread holding Wormtongue at bay eventually gives way to treachery, both Saruman and Wormtongue are lost. Love and loyalty serve as powerful weapons of action and unity for the forces of good, while the absence of them serves to undermine the efforts of evil, but Tolkien's common heroes are not forever subject to the whims of emotion and circumstance.

As Tolkien's common heroes experience the wonders and dangers of the world at large, they gain both the wisdom to identify injustice and the courage to do that which they believe is right. A clear example of this can be seen in the actions of Háma, the Doorward of Théoden. After all the present members of the Fellowship but Gandalf lay down their arms, Háma is forced to decide whether or not to take the wizard's staff. Háma is not a simple-minded or inexperienced Doorward, and he understands clearly that "the staff in the hand of a wizard may be more than a prop for age" (*Towers* 500). Yet he chooses to go against his duty on the pretense that "in doubt a man of worth will trust to his own wisdom" (500). On this occasion, Háma's wisdom serves him well and his belief that the members of the Fellowship are "friends and folk worthy of honor, who have no evil purpose" is in fact well-founded (500). One could argue that this is carelessness on Háma's part, but Tolkien stresses many times throughout *The Lord of the Rings* the importance of these gut feelings in directing the actions of the wise. Because of its small space in the story, the example of Háma fails to show when or how Háma gained the wisdom that directs his choice and gives him the courage to go against his duty as Doorward; however, with the four hobbits of the Fellowship, Tolkien is able to fully present this process of learning and provides the reader with an apparent difference in character before and after their journeys.

The change in the hobbits does not fully manifest itself until they return to the Shire and the reader is able to observe their changes in the same place that the reader first met them. As soon as the hobbits enter the Shire, Tolkien is quick to point out their physical differences. Merry and Pippin have grown so accustomed to wearing mail and shield that they seem to forget that they come from a land where one would never consider donning armor. These physical differences, however, serve mainly to highlight the internal ones. As the hobbits slowly realize that their peaceful Shire is being run by ruffians, they continue on without a second thought; gone is the initial desire to run from battle. Merry has fought with the Captain of the Black Riders, Pippin has experienced the depraved madness of a fallen steward, Sam has battled Shelob, an evil more ancient than he shall ever know, and Frodo has borne the Ring of Power and looked into the Eye wreathed in flames. As Pippin casually says in reference to his preferences on lodging, "Just give us a room to lie down in. It'll be better than many places I have seen" (*Return* 976).

In addition, the hobbits seem to have gained the ability to see right and wrong more clearly. As Merry bangs on the gate to the Shire, he flatly calls Bill Ferny "a ruffian and a highway-robber" (976). This almost black-and-white view of Bill Ferny seems to further motivate the hobbits to act in defense of the Shire. The hobbits' ability to quickly discern injustice, coupled with the fact that each one of them has faced trials surpassing anything a "ruffian" could put against them, creates hobbit heroes who know what must be done to save their homes and now possess the courage and ability to act – not because they are forced to, but because there is injustice that they can stop. One

could argue that, at the end of their journey, the hobbits have become more like Aragorn, more like the epic hero described by Flieger, and there may be some truth in this; but, that does not mean that the reader has lost his ability to relate to them. For the reader has traveled the road from fear and self-doubt to strength and wisdom alongside the hobbits. The reader sees the path that these common heroes take rather than being simply impressed by their heroic actions at the end.

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader is drawn naturally to those moments when the common heroes rise from obscurity to perform some courageous deed because they are motivated by the basic drives of love, loyalty, friendship, and dire necessity. At the same time, Tolkien develops themes around these basic emotions. Whether it be the latent power hidden in the common man or the inherent connection between love and loyalty, Tolkien ennobles the common heroes and, with them, his readers. For if one can relate to the basic emotions that urge Beregon to reject his duty, Sam to battle Shelob, or even Frodo to take the Ring, one is imbued with the hope that if placed in a similar situation, one could rise to the level of courage reached by Tolkien's common men.

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