

WARRIOR, HEALER, SAVIOR, KING: THE COMPLEX NATURE OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S HEROES

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In the essay “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” J.R.R. Tolkien writes that Beowulf is “Something more significant than a standard hero, a man faced with a foe more evil than any human enemy of house or realm” (17). This description is also applicable to many of the characters in Tolkien’s heroic epic *The Lord of the Rings*. Of the many significant themes that pervade *The Lord of the Rings*, the role of the hero is one of the most complex. Many types of heroes are portrayed within the books, each having his or her particular strengths and (more obvious in certain characters) specific weaknesses. The underlying traits of nobility, honesty, courage, and loyalty all are relevant and present in Tolkien’s portrayal of heroes and heroism, but the true nature of heroism is far greater than the sum of those parts. The multifaceted nature of heroism that Tolkien presents is far too expansive a topic to analyze adequately in a single paper. Therefore, the focus of this paper shall be one specific aspect of the heroism depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*: namely, the struggle against death and reaffirmation of life as necessary attributes of heroism.

Tolkien’s heroes are more than simple warriors who achieve great feats on the field of battle. They also must know when to act and when to show restraint. Paired with the ability to stand in opposition to the forces of evil, which would willingly loose unrestrained chaos and destruction on the world, must be the wisdom to know when to show temperance and mercy. To struggle against death does not mean that the hero defies, or is unwilling to accept the inevitability of, death, but is rather a struggle against the destructive nature of evil which manifests through beings that seek to bring death to others. Death is not evil in itself as it is the natural conclusion of life. It is, however, embodied in the forces of entropy and decay. A proper balance between these forces and the regenerative properties of life is essential. When the opposing forces of life and death are not in balance, or when they are unnaturally and intentionally manipulated, the result is a potent force for evil. Yet acceptance of death with poise and grace when it is inevitable is not incompatible with this aspect of heroism.

With the exception of the elves and a few other beings who, barring death by violence or accident, are immortal, the inevitability of death is one trait that almost all the peoples of Middle-earth share. *The Lord of the Rings* displays many instances of the struggle between lovers of life and seekers of death. The most powerful of these are the moments where life’s triumph is embodied in resurrection or transformation. These moments serve to define the nature of the specific characters and illuminate their heroic qualities. The most important instances of death and resurrection (both literal and symbolic) are those experienced by Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo.

The reappearance of Gandalf after his battle with the Balrog in Moria is the most obvious example of the theme of death and resurrection. Gandalf falls from the bridge in Moria while doing battle with the Balrog. In contrast to the Balrog, a demon of fire and darkness that exists only to bring pain and death, Gandalf is concerned with “all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands” (*Return* 742). His concern for the well being of all living things in Middle-earth in the face of ever-growing evil is what makes Gandalf truly heroic.

In describing his resurrection, Gandalf does not explicitly state that he died; however, his death is implicit in the statements “I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads

that I will not tell" and "Naked was I sent back – for a brief time, until my task is done" (*Towers* 491). Furthermore, in a conversation with Saruman, Gandalf quite unambiguously states that he "has returned from death" (569). Gandalf's return from the dead is representative of a triumph of life over death. It is also necessary to balance Saruman's evil and the abandonment of his duty to protect Middle-earth.

Gandalf the Grey's return to life is in the form of Gandalf the White. Adopting the color formerly worn by Saruman allows him to become, as he says, "Saruman as he should have been" (484). The contrast between Gandalf, a hero who serves the power of life, and Saruman, a fallen and corrupted wizard, could not be more pronounced than in the manner in which they relate to other living beings. As Gandalf defies the Balrog in Moria, he describes himself as "a servant of the Secret Fire" (*Fellowship* 322). The Secret Fire is synonymous with the power of life and creation. In contrast, Saruman "does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment" (*Towers* 462).

The second significant incident containing the characteristics of a journey through death and resurrection is Aragorn's ride through the Paths of the Dead in order to summon the dead army. When Aragorn chooses to take the Paths of the Dead, the Rohirrim despair and believe he has gone to his doom. Aragorn's return from this venture unscathed serves as a metaphor of resurrection and literally gives Aragorn control over the dead. Though he does not actually die, this experience places Aragorn in the same category as Gandalf: a hero who has successfully undergone a trial of death and resurrection. When Aragorn returns from his journey he returns not only to the world of Men, but, like Gandalf, as an enhanced version of his former self. Prior to his journey on the Paths of the Dead, Aragorn is simply a descendent of Isildur; but, through his command of the dead army and appearance at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields under the symbols of Gondor and Elendil, he becomes a King whose arrival heralds salvation for friends and death for enemies. His sudden and unexpected appearance results in "joy and wonder" in Minas Tirith and "black dread" among the host of Mordor who know "their doom [is] at hand" (*Return* 829).

Aragorn's apparent resurrection and command over the dead are not the most important of his heroic attributes or to his status as an embodiment of heroism in *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn truly demonstrates that he is a hero in service of life and a bulwark against the power of death, not on the battlefield, but in the Houses of Healing in Minas Tirith. Proving the truth contained in the "rhymes of old days which women . . . still repeat," Aragorn heals first Faramir and then Éowyn, demonstrating that the King truly has "The hands of a healer" (847, 848).

Opposite to the power of healing is the power to corrupt the balance and relationship between life and death that Sauron wields and with which he imbued the rings of power. The evil that arises from the unnatural suppression of life and the evil that results from the unnatural prolonging of life (or, more specifically, the prevention of natural death) are two of the most significant types of this power. An example of the former is the evil counsel and influence which Saruman inflicts upon Théoden by way of Wormtongue. Wormtongue's influence and ill-counsel saps the king's strength and creates the appearance of extreme age and infirmity. Upon the first appearance of Théoden in *The Two Towers*, Tolkien describes him as "a man so bent with age that he seemed almost a dwarf" (501). This initial description stands in sharp contrast to the image of Théoden after he has been disenthralled of Wormtongue's manipulations. As Théoden casts off the noxious influence of Wormtongue, he begins to transform; first, "He drew himself up, slowly, as a man that is stiff from bending over some dull toil. [Then] tall and straight he stood" (504) and, upon placing his hand on the hilt of Éomer's sword, "firmness and strength returned to his thin arm" (506).

The sapping of Théoden's life and vitality is akin to the other great evil perpetrated against the balance between life and death. The Nazgûl epitomize the evil that results from the unnatural prevention of death. Formerly men, these victims of Sauron are now something not entirely alive nor dead, but undying and separated from the natural balance. The result is a creature ruled by

Sauron and entirely consumed by evil. Gollum has been affected by this same evil manipulation of life, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent as he is not transformed into a wraith. Instead, through the power of the Ring, Gollum's life is extended several centuries while he is transformed into a creature consumed by malice. Bilbo begins to experience this same phenomenon, finding his life extended without any appearance of aging and simultaneously feeling himself "thin, sort of stretched" (*Fellowship* 32).

The third significant occurrence of journey through death to resurrection concerns Frodo and Sam. The incident of most importance is not when Frodo appears to have been killed by Shelob, but instead only after the Ring has been destroyed. Though after Shelob's sting Frodo lays as if dead, ultimately he awakens and must complete his task. This apparent resurrection does not affirm the power of life over death. Unlike Aragorn, Frodo's descent into the dark and encounter with an ancient terror does not cause any apparent renewal of his heroic spirit. Only when Gollum, clutching the Ring, has fallen into the fire is Frodo released from his burden. The release allows Frodo to regain his sense of self that had been wholly eclipsed by the power of the Ring, and thus, on the slopes of Mount Doom, as Sam observed, he is "himself again; and in his eyes there [is] peace ... neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear" (*Return* 926). This release, rather than his previous trials, allows Frodo to accept his seemingly inevitable death with grace, nobility, and honor. The acceptance of this apparently imminent doom without regret or sorrow contrasts Sam who, though accepting of their fate, retains hope of salvation, stating, "Yes, I am here with you, Master . . . And you're with me. And the journey's finished. But after coming all that way I don't want to give up yet. It's not like me, somehow, if you understand" (929). This final moment on the slopes of Mount Doom is the symbolic death that both hobbits experience before their awakening and resurrection in Ithilien and, ultimately, their liberation of the Shire.

The hobbit's return to the Shire and their discovery of the evils that have befallen their home in their absence serve to illustrate not only the ways in which war has unexpectedly affected the Shire, but also emphasizes the transformation the hobbits have undergone. At the beginning of the journey all four hobbits are relatively naïve, childlike, and know little of the world outside the Shire; but, upon their return, Gandalf observes that they "are grown up now. Grown indeed very high" (974). In addition to Gandalf's observation, the reaction of the ruffians to "Fearless hobbits with bright swords and grim faces" illustrates how much the hobbits have changed in appearance and demeanor (982). Most important, however, is how the hobbits behave when they undertake the liberation of the Shire.

Frodo – who once says, "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!" (*Fellowship* 58) – insists upon as little violence as possible in the chapter "The Scouring of the Shire," choosing to show mercy even to Saruman after the villainous fallen wizard attempts to stab him. Saruman says to Frodo, all the while echoing Gandalf and again showing his corruption to be the antithesis of Gandalf's heroism, "You have grown, Halfling ... Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel" (*Return* 996). Throughout the "Scouring," the mercy and restraint the hobbits show in the treatment of prisoners and dealings with their enemies are evidence that they are heroes of the same quality and character as Gandalf and Aragorn; the hobbits are now to be counted among the wisest and most just heroes in Middle-earth. Their refusal to shed unnecessary blood, even when the enemy in question is deserving of extreme punishment, is rooted in the respect for life that all true heroes must eventually gain. Despite Frodo's desire for Saruman and Wormtongue to be unharmed, both inevitably meet their doom. Wormtongue's murder of Saruman provides the final moment of contrast between Saruman and Gandalf. Gandalf is reincarnated as "Saruman should have been;" contrastingly, when Saruman falls, his corruption is such that as his essence rises from his corpse, it disperses utterly in a wind out of the west, the direction of the Undying Lands, rather than traveling on the roads of which Gandalf previously speaks (997).

Sam's attempt at correcting the damage Saruman inflicts upon the Shire is emblematic of his heroic spirit. Sam's love for gardening and nature is deeply rooted within his character and, as a result, Sam demonstrates that, though he is not a king like Aragorn, he too has healing power in his hands. Furthermore, mirroring Aragorn's planting of a new tree in Gondor, Sam plants the *mallorn* nut he received from Galadriel to replace the dead Party Tree.

Gandalf's wisdom and protection of all worthy beings in Middle-earth, Aragorn's healing hands and benevolent kingship, Frodo's mercy, and Sam's love for nature and sensitivity are the most admirable traits of these Tolkienian heroes. In *The Lord of the Rings*, these life-affirming characteristics stand as major impediments to the forces of evil.

Works Cited

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