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Jan Prewitt

Kendall College of Art and Design

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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM ON C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

and

THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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Hidden Heroes in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

Jan Prewitt

Kendall College of Art and Design

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The trilogy of books known as *The Lord of the Rings* inspires much popular discussion as well as critical inquiry. Perhaps part of the charm as well as the continued fascination popular and critical culture has with the trilogy stems from the very breadth of J.R.R. Tolkien's imagination in creating such a detailed secondary world. What other modern author has given students of literature so much to examine with its multiples of heroes, villains and significant themes? One of Tolkien's desires was to revive fantasy as a genre through which to examine and draw conclusions about contemporary life.¹ He lived in an era that celebrated the anti-hero, the man who fails (as illustrated in Kafka's fiction), who cannot face the powerful oppositional forces of a system, a universe, bent on his annihilation. Tolkien felt this was a false vision of the world, that there were people willing to face formidable enemies and conquer, not through cleverness and super-weapons, but through simple virtues, celebrated throughout time in the poetry and fiction around the world. Joseph Campbell, in his seminal work *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, describes the character and journey of such heroes as they appear in the literary works from every culture and language group. There is no compelling evidence to suggest that Campbell and Tolkien ever met or exchanged ideas; the chronology of their writing and publishing suggests that they were writing their most significant works

independent of the other. Remarkably, however, Tolkien's adventure seems to follow the Campbell paradigm. Briefly, Campbell identifies three major phases in the journey of the hero: departure, initiation, and return. Within each of these phases, there are several specific elements that appear in various combinations in heroic literature, so not every hero encounters all of these elements. Applying Campbell's theories to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy reveals several heroic characters, at least one from each people group, but this paper will detail only those elements that apply to Sam and Gimli.

Departure

Every epic tale has to start somewhere, and in Campbell's system, the first element of the heroic journey is the "Call to Adventure." This call does not have to be dramatic or sensational, but it is a moment at which the heroic figure chooses to break out of the known and familiar into the unknown: "But whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration—a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand"

(Campbell 42-3). The opposite also happens, where the character, faced with the decisive moment, chooses self-interest rather than self-sacrifice. Neither of the heroes under consideration makes that choice. Both Sam and Gimli choose the path of the unknown.

Gimli's call to adventure occurs at the council of Elrond in Book One. After Elrond names Legolas and Gimli as two of the nine walkers, he states, "They are willing to go at least to the passes of the Mountains, and maybe beyond" (*FR* 330). This statement implies that he has already spoken to both figures and indicates that Gimli has chosen to accept Elrond's appointment to go with a group of characters he does not know on an impossible mission. There is no fanfare or supernatural intervention in Gimli's call; it is the simple acceptance of a task set before him. He has, of course, the option to refuse, but he moves forward. While some people might question Gimli's heroic or significance in the story, he is, nevertheless the heroic figure for the dwarves. The number of times Tolkien gives him dialogue or references his character is actually quite significant. From the time of his introduction onward, he is mentioned on nearly every page. While this might just be good fiction writing—keeping the audience's interests by varying the narrative focus—it is suggestive that Gimli was a significant character to Tolkien. Not only does Tolkien take time to develop this character (instead of keeping him as a type or flat character), Tolkien makes his transformation impressive. The Gimli who returns from the quest is not the Gimli who began it, as later discussion will reveal.

Sam's call to adventure is a bit more noteworthy than Gimli's. It occurs at the same point as does Frodo's—when Gandalf reveals the nature of the ring and the necessity of getting it safely out of the Shire. Gandalf finds Sam eavesdropping on his conversation with Frodo and is

immediately conscripted into service. His response—"Me, sir!" cried Sam, springing up like a dog invited for a walk. 'Me go and see the Elves and all! Hooray!' he shouted, and then burst into tears" (*FR* 91)—at this point seems more the decision of a curious child. The audience later learns that Sam has conspired with their other friends to assist Frodo in leaving quietly. After their flight from the dark riders and Frodo's injury, Sam recognizes more fully the seriousness of the situation, and yet Sam's love for Frodo makes his call to adventure irresistible. He cannot let his friend face the adventure alone although it forces Sam to leave behind all that he has ever known and reveals him to be a person of far greater complexity than anyone ever guessed. This call drops Sam into a world beyond his imagination and beyond his curiosity. He discovers more about the world than just the nature of Elves.

Another element in the heroic journey is "Supernatural Aid," which, according to Campbell, comes in the form of an older person (of either gender) "who provides the adventurer with amulets against the . . . forces he is about to pass" (57). This figure for both Gimli and Sam, and indeed for the entire company of walkers, is Gandalf. It is Gandalf's wisdom and magic that gets them through the first several challenges on their quest until his fall in Moria. When he rejoins the quest in *The Two Towers*, he more directly aids Gimli and company by going to Minis Tirith, but indirectly he assists Sam and Frodo by misdirecting Sauron's eye to Gondor.

After the initial crossing of the threshold into adventure, the heroic figure enters the "Belly of the Whale," an early episode in which the character passes "the magical threshold . . . into a sphere of rebirth . . . symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would

appear to have died" (Campbell 74). For Gimli and Sam, the episode at Moria could easily be interpreted as this critical passage. The "burial" facet of this element comes in their underground passage through the mines and rebirth at their exit. The loss of Gandalf is a loss of dependency. They must go on without his aid and face their trials with increasing independence. But while both Gimli and Sam go through this passage together, to each of them another such passage occurs.

Gimli meets another death when he travels with Aragorn on the Paths of the Dead. It is a terrifying journey, and Gimli comments, "It is a fell name . . . Can the living use such a road and not perish?" (RK 58). It is such a choice of extremity that Aragorn will take others with him only if they choose of their own will. While Gimli asserts, "I will go with you even on the Paths of the Dead, and to whatever end they may lead," said Gimli" (RK 59), he is the last to enter the door. He summons his courage and goes in, but "at once a blindness came upon him, even upon Gimli Gloin's son who had walked unafraid in many deep places of the world" (RK 64). Tremendous fear and loathing oppresses Gimli as the group makes it way through this passage, requiring all his fortitude to complete the journey. "Aragorn rose in haste . . . and only his will held them to go on. No other mortal Men could have endured it, none but the Dunedain of the North, and with them Gimli the Dwarf and Legolas of the Elves" (RK 68). In this dreadful passage Gimli's heroic spirit is tested to its limits, and he emerges an even more fearless figure.

Sam's second round occurs as he is separated from Frodo in Shelob's Lair. Thinking Frodo dead, Sam ponders what to do. It is a heart-wrenching moment for the loyal hobbit. He remembers his words at the beginning of their journey: "*I have something to do before the end. I must see it through, sir, if you understand*" (TT 402),

and he chooses, reluctantly, in that moment to finish the quest, to take the ring to the mountain fire. He has no desire to do the thing, but the thing must be done. He reasons through the possibilities and ultimately takes the ring and departs, promising Frodo that he will return to bury him properly once the quest is accomplished. While this is a trial of short duration, it is Sam's action that actually does save the quest from disaster. Had the ring been on Frodo when the Orcs found him, the ring would have been returned to Sauron, and all would be lost. Because Sam had the ring and used it to be invisible, he learned the very thing that enabled the quest to continue. He is reborn as one of the figures in the tales he loves.

Initiation

The initiation phase of Campbell's theory helps distinguish the companions of the hero from a true heroic character. The first of these, the "Road of Trials," is one that all the "Nine Walkers" experience, but not all to the same extent. For the hero, these trials test his decision and where he learns that his success is dependent on outside forces. "The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage" (Campbell 81). For Gimli, this aid comes primarily in the person of Gandalf. Later in the story, however, the dead themselves come to the company's aid as they help to defeat the forces on the black ships attempting to conquer Gondor. Sam, however, when he and Frodo separate from the company, discovers the "benign power" is supporting their quest. There is no one particular agent that supplies their various needs at critical moments. It is destiny. Sam says near the end of their

quest, "Folk seem to have been just landed in them [adventures] usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten" (*TT* 378).

A part of this testing journey includes a "Meeting with the Goddess." Both Gimli and Sam meet the only possible Goddess-figure in the series: Galadriel. While both characters are changed by this encounter, the more dramatic transformation occurs to Gimli. When Gimli experiences the genuine welcome of Galadriel, he is changed forever:

She looked upon Gimli, who sat glowering and sad, and she smiled. And the Dwarf, hearing the names given in his own ancient tongue, looked up and met her eyes; and it seemed to him that he looked suddenly into the heart of an enemy and saw there love and understanding. Wonder came into his face, and then he smiled in answer.

He rose clumsily and bowed in dwarf-fashion, saying, "Yet more fair is the living land of Lorien, and the Lady Galadriel is above all the jewels that lie beneath the earth!" (*FR* 421)

To show that this moment is more than a mark of courtesy, we find that Gimli later defends Galadriel's honor to a suspicious Éomer: "You speak evil of that which is fair beyond the reach of your thought, and only little wit can excuse you," (*TT* 41). Because Gimli experiences understanding and genuine love from Galadriel, he becomes open to yet more change and love to come. From this point on Gimli sees elves differently and develops a close friendship with Legolas. The two companions agree to visit Fangorn and Helm's Deep together. After the

coronation of the king, the two fulfill their oath without reluctance.

Sam's meeting with Galadriel reflects the simplicity of his nature. He is not reluctant to share his thoughts, and she understands not only his deepest desires, but the depth of his character. He freely admits what it is that she silently asks him during her gaze: "She seemed to be looking inside me and asking me what I would do if she gave me the chance of flying back home to the Shire to a nice little hole with—with a bit of garden of my own" (*FR* 422). As he later looks into Galadriel's mirror Sam is tempted a second time to leave the quest. He sees that things are all wrong in the Shire and feels compelled to do something about it. But once again, Sam chooses to stay on course, to fulfill his promise to stay with Frodo.

In their meeting with Galadriel, both Sam and Gimli are given "The Ultimate Boon," which in Campbell's system is an inexhaustible supply of nourishment. Both are given *lembas*, which serves both characters on the long and arduous journey they take. For Sam, this simple food sustains them far longer than expected and keeps them going until the end of their quest. But Galadriel gives each a second boon, a gift selected specifically for them, one that sustains them in a different way by providing hope. To Gimli Galadriel gives a lock of her hair, a symbol of their mutual esteem. To Sam she gives a small box of earth with one mallorn seed. This boon Sam preserves to take back to the Shire to restore it from the rape and pillaging done by Saruman and others.

Return

The final phase of the heroic journey is the return, which, like all the other phases, is composed of several parts. The whole purpose of the quest can be defeated if the hero refuses the return and holds back the "life-transmuting"

(Campbell 167) boon from the community. Campbell tells us, "the responsibility has been frequently refused" (167). If, on the other hand, the hero chooses to return, he "is then explicitly commissioned to return to the world with some elixir for the restoration of society, the final stage of his adventure is supported by all the powers of his supernatural patron" (170). This journey homeward may likely prove as perilous as the journey into the adventure. "The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come and get him" (178). When the hero returns from the journey, the community recognizes his transformation. The character is now "Master of the Two Worlds." He has gone to the "other" world and survived, bringing back knowledge and gifts that benefit his community. He has learned "through prolonged psychological disciplines, [and] gives up completely all attachment to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth in the realization of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last" (Campbell 204-05). Because his worldview has been transformed, the heroic figure now has "Freedom to Live." Campbell writes: "Man in the world of action loses his centering in the principle of eternity if he is anxious for the outcome of his deeds, but resting them and their fruits on the knees of the Living God he is released by them, as by sacrifice, from the bondages of the sea of death" (206).

In the cases of Gimli and Sam, both choose to fulfill the cycle. Gimli returns to his people after the end of the war. Appendix A shares that his return effected a revival among his people:

After the fall of Sauron, Gimli brought south a part of the Dwarf-folk of Erebor, and he became Lord of the Glittering Caves. He and his

people did great works in Gondor and Rohan. For Minas Tirith they forged gates of mithril and steel to replace those broken by the Witch-king. (RK 411)

Gimli's return helps to restore not only the fortunes of his people but to aid the kingdom of his former companion, Aragorn, King of Gondor. The appendix indicates that after Aragorn's passing,

We have heard tell that Legolas took Gimli Gloin's son with him because of their great friendship, greater than any that has been between Elf and Dwarf. If this is true, then it is strange indeed: that a Dwarf should be willing to leave Middle-earth for any love, or that the Eldar should receive him, or that the Lords of the West should permit it. But it is said that Gimli went also out of desire to see again the beauty of Galadriel; and it may be that she, being mighty among the Eldar, obtained this grace for him. (RK 412)

Gimli, with Gandalf, Frodo, Legolas, and Sam, receives a hero's welcome and a hero's reward.

Like Gimli, Sam gladly returns to his people, and heals the land. One of his first acts, however, is to marry Rose. In Campbell's system this marriage signifies "the hero's total mastery of life; for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master" (101). This marriage distinguishes Sam from Frodo as a heroic figure. Whereas Frodo (shamed from his failure to chose the ring's destruction) cannot adjust back into his old world, Sam re-assimilates into his culture after his return, ultimately becoming Hobbiton's Mayor. He uses what he has learned from his adventure to the good of the community, planting the Mallorn tree and enriching the crops with his gift. Sam is no longer the quiet, shy gardener for the wealthy Baggins family. It is through Sam

that order is restored. In her chapter on "Knowledge, Language and Power: *The Two Towers*," Jane Chance comments that "Power, so Tolkien insists, must be shared with those individuals and peoples who are different in gender, nature, history and temperament" (62). Campbell's system underscores this same sentiment—the value of the heroic is in the sharing with the community.

Tolkien's characters Sam and Gimli demonstrate that heroes come from all classes and vocations. Heroicism does not exclude the ordinary person. Campbell writes, "The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale. Therefore it is formulated in the broadest terms. The individual has only to discover his own position with reference to this general human formula, and let it then assist him past his restricting walls" (101). Through these two characters Tolkien reveals the possibility of the heroic among all of us.

Notes

¹In his book on Tolkien's work, Randel Helms interprets Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories" as an argument for the use of myth as a vehicle of moral education. Jane Chance Nitzsche in her book *Tolkien's Art: A 'Mythology for England'*, comments on selfishness as the underlying cause of evil: "But as the root of all evil (in the words of Chaucer's Pardoner, alluding to St. Paul's letter to Timothy), *cupiditas* more generally and mediievally represents that Augustinian selfishness" (101). For a discussion of Tolkien's use of the seven deadly sins see Charles W. Nelson's article "The Sins of Middle-earth: Tolkien's Use of Medieval Allegory."

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