
How Children's Story Becomes a Myth

"Mr. Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent fairy-tale dwarves, and got drawn into the edge of it - so that even Sauron the terrible peeped over the edge."

-J.R.R Tolkien, letter to his publisher (quoted in Carpenter 1977, 182).

The Hobbit started as little more than a bedtime story for Tolkien's children. Like most of his fellow academics, Tolkien viewed fantasy as limited to childhood. The result was a book written in a chatty, informal style that contrasts sharply with that of its serious successors. The narrator makes frequent patronising and intrusive asides, such as "And what would you do, if an uninvited dwarf came and hung his things up in your hall without a word of explanation?" (H, 18). The language approximates baby-talk at times (nasty, dirty wet hole oozy smell"), and modifiers ("terribly", "lots and lots") abound.

Many critics, including Tolkien himself, have viewed this as the chief weakness of the book. Although the tone does evoke the oral tradition through which myths were originally created, it detracts from the power of the book. It renders villains are more comic than truly threatening, its heroes more endearing than awe-inspiring. One commentator feels that The Hobbit "lacks a certain intellectual weight" and "deserves little serious, purely literary criticism" (Helms 1974: 53).

The important words here are "purely literary". The novel cannot be studied in isolation, but must be seen against the broader backdrop of Tolkien's literary philosophy and the entire mythic tradition. For the writing of The Hobbit both influenced and was influenced by the profound intellectual change its author was undergoing, namely the development of the philosophy of mythopoeia, or myth-making.

In his lecture "On Fairy Stories", delivered only a few months after The Hobbit was published, Tolkien expressed the view that myth represents truth about humanity and its environment far better than the crude factuality of science is able to. It allows people to see in a new light what has become commonplace and drab. Although Elves, for instance, do not "exist" in a scientific sense, they embody the creative skill and immortality of the human spirit, and therefore do exist.

As Tolkien put it, the storyteller "makes a Secondary World in which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside". He called this process sub-creation: by creating a parallel world, the myth-maker emulates God, the supreme creator. The Bible is the ultimate, divine fairy story

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because it reconciles historic with mythic truth, and all man-made myth will reflect this. Tolkien famously disliked allegory, and saw myth as an entirely different art form.

In addition, Tolkien believed, fairy stories offer an escape from the gloom of modern life and, through eucatastrophe, or the happy ending, provide a joy similar to religious ecstasy. However, he could find no mythology indigenous to his native country, and so, in his own words, set out to create "a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogenic to the level of the romantic fairy story which I could dedicate simply to England" (quoted in Rogers & Rogers 1980: 30).

In true mythopoetic tradition, *The Hobbit* borrows extensively from the ancient and medieval, only a few of which can be detailed in this essay. The Old English poem *Beowulf* inspired, among others, its chief villain, Smaug. In his other well-known lecture, entitled *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, Tolkien rebuffed scholars critical of the central theme monsters occupy in the poem, and argues that "they are essential [and] give it its lofty tone and high seriousness". They embody radical evil, he argues, and make true heroism possible. Thus when Bilbo encounters the dragon's hoard, he takes a cup, just as the nameless servant in *Beowulf* does. Both works end in a dragon-slaying, but even more interestingly, they begin in the defeat of quite similar creatures: Grendel in *Beowulf*, Gollum in *Hobbit*.

Smaug is a creation of several other sources, some that the author himself would dispute. His name is derived from the Germanic verb *smugan* meaning "to squeeze through a hole". He is a fusion of serpent and bird, symbolising the union of earth and sky, or, in psychoanalytical terms, id and superego. Therefore, his death brings about the equilibrium of both slayer and community. The dragon also reminds of the Biblical serpent, and with great skill tempts Bilbo into doubting his party (Nitsche 1979: 44). There are even echoes of parable when Smaug's vanity and greed causes him to reveal his weak spot and thereby brings about his downfall.

Tolkien was also heavily influenced by Norse mythology. *The Hobbit's* elves, trolls and especially dwarves, which forge beautiful and valuable treasures deep inside mountains, are Nordic creations. The name of the head dwarf, Thorin Oakenshield, is found in the *Prose Edda*, and is derived from the Icelandic words *Thorin*, meaning "bold one" and *Eikinskjaldi*, meaning "with oak-shield". Another uniquely Nordic feature is the importance of luck in the composition of a hero, although in Tolkien the Catholic "luck" definitely contains elements of divine providence.

The riddle-contest, which has been called the pivot of the story and which the narrator assures us is "sacred and of immense antiquity" (H, 84), mirrors *The Saga of King Hedin the Wise*, where Odin disguises himself and wins a riddle contest by asking a question that is not a riddle. As in fairy tales the world over, rhymes and music play an important role throughout *The Hobbit* in mirroring the order or disorder in nature. Rituals, in general, and especially feasting, signify

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fellowship and equilibrium. This explains why a period of intense danger and suffering in the company's journey is always followed by a feast provided by a hospitable representative of Middle Earth.

The character of Beorn has a rich mythic heritage. Bears are revered by the Celts and respected by the Norse for their primitive power. Beorn derives his name from the Nordic words for warrior, beorn and bear, bjorn. He is perhaps modelled on the legendary berserkers, warriors who went into such a frenzy during battle that they performed extraordinary feats. As both man and bear, he represents the unity of nature and society, much long-for by humanity since the fall. He embodies both the cruelty and honesty of nature. For this reason, shamans often assumed animalistic qualities during rituals (O'Neill 1979: 118). The fact that both Bear (earth) and Eagles (sky) offer their assistance on more than one occasion again symbolises the unity between all aspects of nature and of the human psyche once evil is defeated.

However, "one learns little by raking through a compost heap to see what dead plants originally went into it. Far better to observe its effect on the new and growing plants which it is enriching" (Carpenter 1977: 182). Despite the above-mentioned influences, and many others, Tolkien was not interested in merely rehashing other people's stories, but in mythopoeia. Although Tolkien did not begin *The Hobbit* with this intention, he soon found himself, quite unexpectedly "discovering" a world with its own scientific laws, races and even proverbs, such as "escaping goblins to be caught by wolves" (H, 101).

If there is a specific point where *The Hobbit* first begins to transcend its modest beginnings, it is surely with Bilbo's discovery of the ring. The importance of this part of the book makes for an odd, unconventional structure, one surely unplanned by the author himself. The sentence "It was a turning point in his career, but he did not know it" marks the beginning of a change in tone - it remains simple and informal, but begins to deepen and mature.

The enchanted talisman is a potent mythical symbol, and with the words "it quietly slipped on to his groping forefinger", Tolkien already implies that the ring has a will of its own. It is Bilbo's (and the reader's) first experience of real magical power, as opposed to Gandalf's earlier fireworks. The ring is the link between *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and its discovery is as much a turning point in Tolkien's career as in his protagonist's.

Another link is the troglodyte Gollum, the first embodiment of real, adult evil. He is the age-old figure of the "unhuman", made even more disconcerting because he was once a hobbit and thus, in Jungian terms, represents Bilbo's shadow side. It is fitting the Bilbo should discover this aspect of himself at the edge of a deep, murky lake, after a physical descent into the mountain. This is representative of the descent into his psyche. The hero's journey into the underworld, of which Orpheus' is the most well-known, has always been accompanied by his isolation,

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entrapment and loss of control over enchantment. His quest is to emerge with certain powerful symbols that will mark his initiation into manhood. To keep the ring, Bilbo has to confront his long-suppressed Took side, a side he does not fully embrace until he has descended once more, into Smaug's mountain.

The dragon's death is another turning point in *The Hobbit* for both thematic and character development. The hitherto clear-cut lines between good and evil begin to blur, and the theme of the nature of heroism is developed. Thorin, until now the character closest to the conventional fairy tale hero, becomes stubborn and greedy. Although he remains firmly on the side of good, his position is usurped by Bard, who epitomises the courage and selflessness required by the hero of a fairy tale.

Of course, neither of these traditional heroes are *The Hobbit's* most important hero. That title belongs to Bilbo, the "unhero" with his many flaws. Because he is all too human, his growth gives hope and inspiration to ordinary people. Tolkien certainly identified with him, writing "I am in fact a hobbit (in all but size)" and equating hobbits, in their lack of imagination but potential for courage, with the English in general (quoted in Rogers & Rogers 1980: 126).

Bilbo's sacrifice of the Arkenstone, his most noble act, develops the very Christian theme that renunciation can be a more powerful act than acquisition. The approval of Gandalf, the guide and teacher that is in this world but not quite of it, reinforces the religious undertones. It is he who reminds Bilbo at the end of his journey that he was merely a small player in a divine plan:

Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies just because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? [Y]ou are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all! (H, 285).

Because Tolkien wanted to retain a remoteness and fantastical quality, there is not explicit mention of a Christian God in *The Hobbit*. However, God is present - by creating a world both like and unlike his own, the author believed he was paying tribute to God. By awakening humanity's imagination, he would thereby waken its spirituality and religious inclination.

The Lord of the Rings would have been impossible of not for its predecessor. "Tolkien learned so much in writing *The Hobbit* that he had to do the whole thing again, differently" (Helms 1974: 53). The book played a vital role in teaching its author the immense possibilities of fantasy. It itself does not exhaust these possibilities, but merely begins to explore them. It starts unambitiously, but in drawing from the rich store of world folklore and the author's imagination, soon develops into a myth that, like all good fantasy, speaks as clearly to the mythopoetic imagination today as it did in Tolkien's time.

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