

Medieval Fantasy and the Tolkien Touch

Margaret

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Professor of Anglo Saxon Literature at Oxford from 1925, and Merton Professor of English Language from 1945, is perhaps better known as the author of the famed Lord of the Rings trilogy. Whilst still a student, he started to create a language and mythology, which grew into his fantasy novels. Tolkien draws on medieval literature for his fiction, using traditional fantasy creatures as characters-- elves, dwarves, trolls -- and depicting quests and struggles of light versus dark forces, all features of much medieval legend. One of his most well known works, *The Hobbit*, is an appealing fantasy novel, telling the story of a very special creature and his thrilling magical journey and adventures. While, on one level, as a clear representation of the timeless fantasy theme -- the triumph of good over evil -- *The Hobbit* draws together a multitude of adventure tales in one quest, on another, it embraces very real and human themes. The fantasy format is a tool used skilfully by Tolkien for the communication of themes which speak of human emotions and experiences.

From the very beginning, when Bilbo Baggins is "settled down immovably in a beautiful hobbit hole" (p.15), Tolkien explores some fascinating questions of self-understanding and inner conflict, which confront nearly all of us at some point. The peace and security of Bilbo's comfortable, respectable life is shattered by the arrival of Gandalf, a wizard, who has selected him as "a Burglar" to participate in a quest for the recovery of stolen gold with a group of dwarves. The plot of *The Hobbit* centers around this quest, the group encountering numerous adventures and evil forces, which ends with a resolution greater than merely the retrieval of treasure.

The reader's initially negative perception of Bilbo as a fussy, self-centered little creature soon changes. We are told early of Bilbo's potential:

"Bilbo, although he looked and behaved exactly like a second edition of his solid and comfortable father, got something a bit queer in his make-up from the Took side, something that only waited for a chance to come out." (p.15)

It is in embarking on the quest that Bilbo is challenged to a new understanding of himself. The fantasy format of *The Hobbit* is an ideal tool here for displaying Bilbo's personal journey. As Bilbo finds himself in numerous tight corners and performs various deeds in the fantastic challenging world of Wilderland, the reader sees him change. He discovers, as humans do, that he must live with the "two people" inside us who sometimes refuse to be reconciled: "The Took side had won. Many times afterward the Baggins part regretted what he did now..."(p.28). While, at the beginning, the Baggins "side" is presented negatively, later the positive aspects are portrayed; a gentleness and kindness strongly linked to a sense of justice balancing his Tookish daredevilry, pride and "fierceness":

"Bilbo kindheartedly put the keys back on his [the Chief Guard's] belt. "That will save some of the trouble he is in for." said Mr Baggins to himself. "He wasn't a bad fellow and quite decent to the prisoners..." (p.174)

The theme of physical or magical conflict is a common one in fantasy stories but Tolkien enriches it with another dimension. While none of the usual excitement and action is lost in the battles typical of fantasy adventure, deeper questions are addressed by Tolkien through Bilbo. As Bilbo searches within himself for the courage and wisdom to perform the deeds expected of him, Tolkien suggests that the most courageous are those who can both overcome their fear and respond, understanding when force or violence is necessary. Bilbo finds the strength to slay, in self-defence a giant spider. Through this brave action, he gains a new confidence in himself and a fresh determination to surmount the challenges ahead:

"Somehow the killing of the great spider, all alone by himself in the dark, without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else made a great difference to Mr Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder..." (p.152)

Bilbo learns, however, that "discretion is the better part of valour". When confronting the eerie Gollum, Bilbo refuses to give in to the impulses arising from his fear and horror: "He must stab this foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him." Because of his sense of "fair play" and a certain compassion, Bilbo finds a means of escape without resorting to destruction:

"No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked day without light or hope of betterment..." (p.90)

The fantasy character of the Hobbit, with Bilbo and the dwarves constantly battling evil and magical foes and struggling with hunger and discomfort, means plenty of scope to explore the themes of teamwork, friendship, trust and loyalty.

The dwarves' initial reluctance to admit Bilbo to the group is strongly sketched; they see him as a burden, someone weaker and different to themselves. Instead of helping Bilbo to learn and belong, they display a very human tendency towards "outsiders" in their impatient treatment of "the wretched little hobbit." (p.73)

Despite his plaintive murmurings -- "why, oh why, did I ever leave my hobbit hole" becomes a refrain -- the hobbit's strong sense of "fair play" leads him to give his group a loyalty that initially, at least, it refuses to reciprocate. Bilbo decides that it is his "duty to go back into the horrible, horrible tunnels and look for his friends." (p.94) It is a striking parallel to what happens earlier, when he himself goes missing and the dwarves grumble and nearly refuse to look for him. They do not feel a responsibility to him as one of their group; the old theme of "am I my brother's keeper?" is freshly explored by Tolkien. One episode sees a dwarf refusing to carry Bilbo as they make an escape: "What do you think I am? A porter?" (p.102)

Perhaps the most powerful theme of the Hobbit is one which becomes fully apparent in the final chapters through the typical fantasy battles between forces of darkness and light; a timeless theme relating to ourselves and our own world. Having finally reached its destination, the group steal the gold from Smaug, the dragon, -- Bilbo taking on the sly the great Arkenstone that to Thorin, is "beyond price". The dragon's evil reign is ended, as he devastates the lake's surroundings, by an archer in a battle which follows. The anger of the lake-men and elves towards the dwarves, over their

responsibility in stirring the dragon, leads to a demand for some of the plunder. The choice is made clear to Thorin:

"We would see peace once more among dwarves and men and elves after the long desolation but it may cost you dear in gold."(p.244)

Bilbo makes a crucial decision; to achieve this peace and avoid conflict and bloodshed that may arise from Thorin's single-minded and perhaps even obsessive attitude towards the treasure. He yields the Arkenstone to the other side, for use in bargaining. He has the courage to face Thorin afterwards, bolstered by Gandalf's approval of his actions -- "Well Done, Mr Baggins!" -- and is blasted as a "traitor". For this deed Bilbo is exiled from the group of dwarves in which he has grown in friendship, learning and achieving so much. "More than one of the dwarves, in their hearts, felt shame and pity at his going." (p.260)

A war begins but soon the sides unite against a new, common foe of evil goblins. As good triumphs, peace is finally brought to the land. Through Bilbo, the reader learns that heroism is not always about physical daring or aggression. Bilbo's brand of heroism is one of overcoming fear, self doubt and temptation, of refusing to be dazzled by material goods, and of a willingness to sacrifice much to perform what he believes, in his heart, to be right. As Thorin lies dying, he voices his realisation of this:

"...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."
"...I am glad that I have shared in your perils -- that has been more than any Baggins deserves." [said Bilbo]

No!" said Thorin. "There is more in you of gold 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." (p. 270-271)

Good over evil, encompassing all themes, is superbly portrayed by Tolkien in the happy resolution at the end: "The dragons were dead and the goblins overthrown, and their hearts looked forward after winter to a spring of joy." (p.274) Tolkien illuminates the truth that achieving lasting peace and happiness -- good winning out -- will always involve sacrifice and struggle.

The fantasy format of *The Hobbit* has in a sense been manipulated by Tolkien to powerfully and convincingly communicate theme and create character. Possibly his ultimate achievement in theme is showing the hobbit's achievements, in light of all his human frailty, particularly his frequent desire to succumb to apathy and "run away and hide" in his hole. Here lies a positive and enriching message for all readers. Perhaps if a humble little hobbit -- and a Baggins at that -- can become a hero and assist in the triumph of good over evil in the fantasy Wilderland, then so can we ourselves, as humans, in reality.