

Tolkien, heroism, and the human condition

Introduction

Heroes are and have always been important in explaining and confronting human issues. In ancient times were the “classic” heroes – those like Heracles and Odysseus, who braved very straightforward trials and defeated mighty monsters. These heroes were mainly characterized by physical feats. Now we have “super-heroes” – those like Batman and Spiderman that transformed over the years from merely specially endowed characters that fight specific villains into sacrificial soldiers of justice. Gifted with transcendent powers, they acknowledged their ability to make a world a better place and acted on that conviction though they longed for a normal life. Tolkien’s heroes also confront the human issues that arose in awareness due to the recent World Wars; and though his heroes live in a world different from ours, that world is the result of a merging of modern thought and old Northern sentiments, allowing the characters within to confront the problem of evil while fighting it in a tangible way. Tolkien does believe in heroes, and in a particular kind. His heroes illustrate the balance between hope and fallibility in the human condition, and thus, heroism in Tolkien’s works is primarily based on moral grounds.

The essence of the hero

Tolkien’s heroes are very complex because Tolkien does combine the traditional hero’s journey and goal with those aspects of hope and fallibility, adding a new tension to keeping faith in the hero; it is no longer just “will he live or die?” but also “will he turn back?” Joseph Campbell, in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, describes the standard path

of the mythological adventure of the hero in the basic formula of “separation-initiation-return”, where “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 30). Rico Marcel Abrahamsen, however, in his essay “Stages of Imagination”, claims Frodo’s journey in The Lord of the Rings to be an “anti-quest”, because “it is not a mission for power, or retrieval of lost artefacts, but a hopeless journey toward the destruction of the very artefact of power”, and that in fact, Frodo’s quest is not accomplished by the hero, but by other means – by Grace, or Fate. Tolkien, in his essay “On Fairy Stories”, coins the word “Eucatastrophe”, defining it as “that sudden joyous turn” and “a sudden and miraculous grace” (Tolkien, The Tolkien Reader, 86). Gollum’s appearance at that last moment at Mount Doom was by chance but undeniably some sort of deliverance of Frodo from himself. Thus, Tolkien, though in The Lord of the Rings he very much illustrates a tangible struggle between Good and Evil, also acknowledges the fallibility of the hero – in other words, the fallibility within the side of Good, depicting a motif of inner struggle in trying to overcome that fallibility that is very much tied to being a hero. Tolkien also makes it a point to portray the accomplishment of that overcoming to not depend just on the hero’s strength, but also on some outside grace.

Everyone is a hero

So how does Tolkien define heroism within the scope of his actual characters? If one has enough “heroic” characteristics, does that qualify one as a “hero”? Not at all. In Tolkien’s works, heroism is the process of drawing out the hero one has inside of oneself.

Heroes in Tolkien's works *develop*; they do not suddenly obtain hero status after some pivotal event or act. This process is linked with the notion of elevation – Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin are very much main characters but are not initially of high position or are even made out to have any special skills or strengths. Aragorn, even, though he is a king inherent, is gradually revealed; though he has heroic character from the beginning, he still develops from Strider to King – an elevation, and only by which he fully becomes the hero his capacity allows.

Thus, the argument “if everyone is a hero, then no one is” does not apply to Tolkien's world of heroes, for the Tolkien-world is not based on comparison (it is not, for example, centered around a single king-hero character) but on its peoples' internal struggles to overcome evil – both that of the dominion of power that threatens the world (the physical Enemy) and that in the people itself (the spiritual Enemy). Tolkien also says in one of his letters, “... without the high and noble the simple and vulgar is utterly mean; and without the simple and ordinary the noble and heroic is meaningless” (Tolkien, Letters 160). That is, an absence of heroes must mean there is nothing in their world that is worth protecting, and without an ordinary way of life there is nothing for heroic deeds to strive to protect. The fact that four hobbits rose to join the Fellowship attests to this; Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin leave the Shire as hobbits, and return as hobbits, though they have grown and changed, but it is that very experience with the greater workings of the world that makes to them the simple life of the Shire more beautiful. Sam, in all of his sorrow, returns from seeing Frodo off to the Gray Havens back to his happy ending, and that is where Tolkien chooses to leave us.

According to Tolkien, this development also requires sacrifice, which may even be given unknowingly. An often quoted example is that of Frodo, who, upon returning to the Shire, finds he is unable to fit back into the life he loved, permanently marred by the time he bore the Ring. Gandalf is an example of willing sacrifice, for he dies after the fight with the Balrong in the Mines of Moria. Though he indeed returns as Gandalf the White, he *did not know* that he would, and at that moment on the Bridge of Khazad-dum gave up not just his life but personal chance of success for the greater good. Finally, a defense of Merry and Pippin: many point out that they don't sacrifice much during the course of The Lord of the Rings and that they joined the Quest unknowingly and foolishly, and so aren't heroes. Yet, as Gandalf says when Elrond tries to prevent Merry and Pippin from joining the Fellowship, Frodo also, though he knew better the necessity of the Quest, did not truly know what he would have to sacrifice either – nor, as Gandalf also points out, did anyone else (Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring, 269). That moment of growth, when one realizes not just what must be sacrificed or even that sacrifice is required but that doing something for the greater good is more important than anything that could happen to the self, is essential to the Tolkien-hero, because of the fact that each moment of growing reflects a step by humanity towards hope, rather than towards moral failure.

As he and Frodo rest on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, Sam voices his opinion on adventures: “I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered” (Tolkien, The Two Towers, 696). Notice the diction in this passage –

that Sam calls the main characters in the tales he loves so much “folk”, not “heroes”, or even “adventurers”; there isn’t a special distinction between these heroes and other people, other than the fact that they had tales told about them. Instead, there is a distinction between stories that mattered and those that didn’t matter – an emphasis on the relevance the story had with respect to humanity.

What a hero is not

Tolkien also had very strong opinions on limiting heroism and making it distinct from just the performance of heroic feats. First of all, heroism in Tolkien’s works is not done alone, for that would limit the scope of heroism to an individual and thus ignore heroism as a necessity for humanity on the whole. Frodo is accompanied by Sam all the way to the fires of Mount Doom; Aragorn and Gandalf, for all their power and leadership needed the help – rather, depended on – the Ringbearer and the success of the Quest; and the Fellowship was made so that “the errand should not fail” (Tolkien, The Return of the King, 715). Beren and Luthien, even, went to the depths of Thangorodrim and together wrested a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown. From this we see that Tolkien’s idea of individual heroism is tied with a notion of combined effort, and is very much *not* based on a concept of personal gain or glory.

Tolkien also thought heroism to be gainsaid once a character fell away from the struggle between hope and fallibility and forgot its necessity. In “The Battle of Maldon”, the Old English word “ofermod” describes Beortnoth’s state of mind when allowing the Vikings free passage. The noun “mod” is usually translated as spirit – signifying a sort of bravery on Beortnoth’s part, and ofermod is usually considered to be a positive trait.

However, Abrahamsen says that Tolkien regarded the use of “ofer-” as central, so that “ofermod” in fact suggested “excess, and thus presents a serious indictment of Beornoth's character... His translation of *ofermod* clearly implies a distinction between the bold and the foolhardy, high spirit and excessive spirit” (Abrahamsen). Thus Tolkien writes in his The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth: “Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault, or so in Maldon this morning men were saying. Too proud, too princely! ... He let them cross the causeway, so keen was he to give minstrels matter for mighty songs. Needlessly noble” (Tolkien, The Tolkien Reader, 16). Characters with ofermod weren't necessarily *evil*, but their burning hearts – their ofermod – chose actions that drove them and those around to them to tragedy. In The Silmarillion, Feanor resists Morgoth, but for self-seeking reasons rather than for moral ones. And though Fate seems to bind him and his house to their Oath, there is at the base of Feanor's tragedy moments where he could have freely chosen for the good but didn't – for instance, when he refuses Yavanna the light of the Silmarils to heal the Trees, and also when he makes the Oath in the first place for his house only to forever possess the Silmarils. Turgon similarly refuses the counsel of Ulmo to leave Gondolin and take refuge by the sea after being warned of devastation of his city, for “Turgon was become proud, and Gondolin as beautiful as a memory of Elven Tirion, and he trusted still in its secret and impregnable strength, though even a Vala should gainsay it” (Tolkien, The Silmarillion, 288), leading to many deaths that could have been prevented. In other words, Turgon, and Feanor similarly, trusted and coveted the works of his hands more than the word of a Vala, not remembering that “the true hope of the Noldor lieth in the West, and cometh from the Sea” (Tolkien, The Silmarillion, 288). Thus, according to Tolkien, these moral flaws had to do with firstly

going against the natural state of things (in particular, not submitting to those naturally superior, and rejecting the well-being of others for self-preservation), and secondly becoming so preoccupied with the present world that one forgets about the hope that is present for humanity. These characters, though they may be mighty warriors and “poetically attractive” (Abrahamsen), if morally flawed in their choices, are not heroes in Tolkien’s eyes.

Heroism and the choice of will

Tolkien drew a distinction between heroic acts and the hero himself. In a response he wrote to W. H. Auden’s review of The Return of the King in 1956, Tolkien wrote: “...good actions by those on the wrong side will not justify their cause. There may be deeds on the wrong side of heroic courage, or some of a higher moral level: deeds of mercy and forbearance” (Tolkien, Letters 243). In other words, heroism is by Tolkien seen as separate from the hero, in that what is done doesn’t necessarily make a person more or less heroic. Rather, heroism is tightly bound to the hero in the sense that what defines heroism in a character is the character’s choices of will. Especially, heroism is characterized largely by the choice the hero makes of good over evil: “...with the tales that really mattered... Folk seem to have been just landed in them, 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” (Tolkien, The Two Towers, 696). The first notable thing in Sam’s conversation with Frodo about the nature of tales and adventures is that he observes that, in the good tales, “Folk seem to have been just landed in them”; that is, these heroes were placed on a path of hardship by Fate. However, secondly, these people had “lots of

chances... of turning back, only they didn't" – for even though Fate dealt to them what it did, there was the free choice open to them all along to go on or to go back. Frodo and Sam, though on the darkest path out of those of the entire Fellowship, continually chose to keep going to Mount Doom (not just chose to go there!) because they realized that Sauron *must* be defeated for the sake of Middle-earth.

That unflinching will against impossible odds is a major aspect of the Northern heroism that Tolkien loved, and so appears throughout The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion: Fingolfin challenging Morgoth (who could not be slain for he was one of the Valar) but finally hewing off the Enemy's foot; Hurin, who fought alongside Huor and the people of Hador, fighting until his battle-axe melted though all his allies had fled or were slain; Sam taking the One Ring, though he believed his beloved master lay dead and unburied, for otherwise "the Ring'll be found, and there'll be no more songs" (Tolkien, The Two Towers, 718). Indeed, Sam realizes that it is not whether or not the Ring is for him to bear; he is the only one who can and the deed simply must be done, and so he takes up the burden.

Furthermore this Northern heroism is connotated by Tolkien with "saving" and "restoration" rather than with a gain of power or glory. Hurin and Fingolfin fought against Morgoth because he was the center of a corrupting force and would continue to corrupt if not stopped, and Sam similarly continued with the Quest because he knew the Ring was a powerful evil of the same nature. And Tolkien makes a point to reveal Aragorn as king to the people of Gondor not by his physical prowess but by his healing hands. Notably, this connotation of "restoration" is not a simple defeating of evil or hurts, but is also in harmony with the natural flow of the world. The attempts toward restoration

by Tolkien's characters fight directly against the Fall – that is, they attempt to eradicate corruption by fighting or destroying a physical representation of the force that corrupted the people of Middle-earth in the Beginning. Also, the end of the Third Age marks the decline of the Elves and the rise of Men; Sauron, if not defeated, would have prevented that flow from happening – perhaps allowing Men to rise, but Men's kingdom would have been built on power and jealousy rather than on unification.

Finally there appears the problem best illustrated by Frodo in that infamous final moment at the crack of Mount Doom, where he refuses to destroy the Ring and claims it for his own. Does Frodo – heroic in every measure so far – *stop* being a hero because of his failure in conviction at the last moment? On this topic, Tolkien says:

Frodo undertook his quest out of love - to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could; and also in complete humility, acknowledging that he was wholly inadequate to the task. His real contract was only to do what he could, to try to find a way, and to go as far as his mind and body allowed. He did that. I do not myself see that the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment was any more a moral failure than the breaking of his body would have been - say, by being strangled by Gollum, or crushed by a falling rock (Tolkien, Letters, 327).

In other words, there is an inherent limit on each individual as to the amount of mental and moral pressure that he can endure, and there is a distinction between the event of failure and the conscious choice to fail. Yes, Frodo's failure was due to a fault of his own, being a hobbit – not strong in mind like, say, Aragorn, who could wrestle with the Dark Lord through the Palantiri – but his failure was not due to an intention to fail, and it

was obvious where his heart lay; Frodo truly and deeply wanted to do what he could to save his Shire, his world, and the people he loved. Thus heroism is based on morality – specifically, what you choose to do, regardless of what actually happens; heroism, according to Tolkien, is more tightly bound to the individual’s character rather than physical and mental strength.

Conclusion

Tolkien’s works are, to a great extent, about the Fall of humanity and hope that saves us from that Fall, so, as his story centers around a moral struggle in overcoming evil, he uses heroes in order to illustrate that struggle which we commonly bear as mankind. His heroes fight for a return to the original state of things, for a return from chaos to reason and peace, for Eru leaves us largely to ourselves, being seemingly invisible to the people of Arda. But Tolkien insists that Eru has given in ourselves the means to fight – the fire of heroism. Gandalf’s ring helps *kindle* Men’s and Elves’ spirits in fighting evil; that is, it helps ignite the fuel already present in our hearts, rather than building the fire.

There is something significant about the fact that, for all these definitions and investigations of text, Tolkien’s characters invoke a certain feeling a pride when one reads about them, and in turn, invoke a pride in what humanity can do not just because of love and friendship and a simple want to save what is good but also in what it does in face of mortal danger and hopelessness. The moments when Eowyn faces the Black Captain; when Merry rises in courage and comes to her aid; when Sam the gardener fights with passion and valiance the monster Shelob – all these rise up within the reader

an insuppressible emotion of joy because of the appearance of the Eucatastrophe latent within the self – the hero.

The hero must first be imagined by us, and then will appear to us in the narrative; for if we are incapable of imagining a hero, either we have not lived life long enough or our heart is dead, because the only way to not know a “hero” is to have lived life without seeing hope of such a person, which is impossible for two reasons: first, that we as fallen humans are always in need of hope, and second, that hope is never made invisible to us, always there to grasp by the hero we harbor within each of ourselves. And only after exhausting an unflinching determination will the Eagles come to save us, and hope finally come to fruition.

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