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A Light When All Other Lights Go Out

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*“When there’s life there’s hope, as my Gaffer used to say.
...and need of vittles.” – Samwise Gamgee, The Two Towers*

The battle has been going on endlessly, and it no longer seems like victory is possible. Countless have died already, and the enemy keeps charging with increasing numbers in their army. Defeat seems inevitable, and the characters we have followed along with this entire journey appear to give up, because there is no way to win now. Just as it seems to be the end, something changes. Someone somewhere exclaims “The Eagles are coming! The Eagles are coming!”

A theme that repeatedly appears in J. R. R. Tolkien’s works is that of the eucatastrophe. A word coined by Tolkien that basically refers to an unraveling or conclusion of a plot that leads to a positive outcome. In practice, it occurs when there appears to be no hope for the main character to escape from peril, but then something happens that suddenly changes that. This most notably occurs in Tolkien’s work, often referred to as the legendarium, when the Eagles appear and essentially save the day for the characters. These moments are easy to find and latch onto since they are some pretty big moments that shift the narrative to a better ending than what would have happened if the characters met their demise then and there. But something that Tolkien appears to emphasize in his work, although typically in a less extravagant fashion, are the smaller moments of hope. There are less conspicuous scenes and moments that do themselves provide a kind of hope that is at least as important, if not more, than those larger

moments of eucatastrophe. This is because those smaller things are what keeps characters going in their journeys each day. Tolkien may not have realized how important these moments truly are because of the apparent focus on those eucatastrophic moments, especially since he even came up with a word to describe them. However, it is evident that others have noticed the importance of these smaller moments and how they are able to shift the tone from dark and gloomy into something a little lighter.

Peter Jackson made numerous changes to what Tolkien appears to be saying in his books when he adapted them for film in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* movies, and has shifted his overall messages in some parts of the story by including or neglecting to include certain things. But the importance of the little things is something that was kept and is maybe even further emphasized. A prime example of this is in the first in the Hobbit trilogy, when Gandalf is given a scene where he has a chance to explain why Bilbo was chosen for the quest with the dwarves to the Lonely Mountain. This quote concisely portrays what is different about the hobbits that leads them to greater success in keeping evil away.

“Saruman believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. It is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love. Why Bilbo Baggins? Perhaps because I am afraid, and he gives me courage.”

– Gandalf, The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey

Tolkien’s incorporation of eucatastrophe appears to be noticeably influenced by his Christian faith and can even seem to be a sort of proof that he uses to justify his faith, to others as well as himself. A kind of symbol representative of God and miracles. While these moments are grand and are turning points in his stories, they really are not the main source of faith in those

stories. The point of the eucatastrophe is that these are the moments where there is a huge turnaround after those primary characters have accepted their defeat. That is when something happens that changes what seems to be the inevitable outcome. But that is not what keeps the characters going throughout their journey. There is not a hope that when all else fails, there will be some surprise development that will save them if they get in a tight spot where there is no way out for them. That is not something that one expects because it is never a guarantee, and you may never do anything for yourself if you always expect some external source to constantly be there to save the day. What keeps people going is an everyday kind of faith that is better described as hope. It is a word that often appears to be used synonymously with naivety, but is really not always a sign of ignorance. On the contrary, having some degree of hope is what really ends up driving one to continue even when there are great hardships. In the Lord of the Rings, Pippin and Sam are both characters that hold on the most to feelings of hope, and perhaps because of this, they both often appear to be less conscious of what is going on around them.

Despair, on the other hand, is usually associated with intelligence because it appears to show an understanding of the bad things that exist in the world, what the “reality” is, as opposed to a more optimistic and “naïve” point of view. Submitting to despair of what has already happened or the bad things that could happen can bring pause to one’s plans or actions, or even a paralysis, preventing any action to be taken. No one truly bears the same kind of burden as another, even if subjected to the same circumstances, because even if put in the same situations or the similar types of situations, how those are interpreted and how the person ends up reacting to those can vary greatly. Frodo and Denethor are subjected to particularly grim circumstances in their own respective situations. It is understandable how they feel that they have vastly limited options for moving forward. The problem with this doomist mindset is that once you have fallen

into it, it can be increasingly difficult to pull yourself out of it, and one instead falls into a continuous cycle of despair where the only change is sinking further into depression. Breaking that cycle requires a shift in perspective. When that is particularly challenging for one to do that on their own, obtaining help from an outside party less prone to those negative inclinations has the potential to change the bleak and seemingly inevitable outcome. Both Sam and Pippin serve as these more optimistic and hopeful forces to juxtapose the sorrowful dispositions of Frodo and Denethor respectively. Both also change the course of the story. In a large way for Sam, and a more subtle, but still significant way, for Pippin.

DESPAIR

THE FATE OF THE RINGBEARER

'Look! The king has got his crown again!'

The eyes were hollow and the carven beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed.

'They cannot conquer forever!' said Frodo. And then suddenly the brief glimpse was gone. The Sun dipped and vanished, and as if at the shuttering of a lamp, black night fell. – The Two Towers

When it comes to the characters in the Lord of the Rings, Frodo is about as melancholy as they come. He is aware early on just how bleak his future seems after he is first given the duty as ringbearer when he inherits it from Bilbo. He sees how it drastically affected Gollum of the many years he has held onto it, and the detrimental toll it has taken on his mind and body. Some similar, although relatively muted transformations are also evident in Bilbo, who has held the

Ring for many years as well. Frodo himself has been in possession of the Ring for years before he has to flee the Shire to Rivendell.

Before leaving the Shire, Frodo spent time making arrangements that involved coming up with a fake plan for what he was doing, where he was going when he left, and selling Bag End. This is a stark difference to when Bilbo left for his journey. He had the Shire to return to. Frodo instead knows the kind of fate that the Ring has trapped him with, and although he had put it off for as long as he possibly could, the time has come to take the Ring to be dealt with. That includes essentially making arrangements for his death. More and more as he continues on his journey and puts himself forward as the Ringbearer on the quest to destroy the Ring, he sees less of a chance that he will even survive on the journey to Mordor, much less have a way to return home. His quest is essentially a suicide mission, and that is the only outcome that makes sense to him. Really, the only version of the story he is able to let himself believe. In this respect he is not too dissimilar from Denethor. Denethor was more set on his suicide than Frodo, who only saw his death as a byproduct of a necessary quest. A heavy burden for him to bear that only increased as he went on.

“For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.” – Frodo, The Return of the King

THE FALL OF THE STEWARD OF GONDOR

“Pride and despair! Didst thou think that the eyes of the White Tower were blind? Nay, I have seen more than thou knowest, Grey Fool. For thy hope is but ignorance.” – Denethor, The Return of the King

Although seemingly an atypical character to compare with Frodo, Sam, and Pippin, Denethor is a character that is subjected to his own kinds of grief, just as Frodo is, but due to different circumstances. Denethor is similarly disillusioned with how the direction of the world is going, with Sauron rising to power, the continuing battles with his army that leads to major losses of his people, and the loss of his eldest son, Boromir. His younger son, Faramir also mimics this despair for the future when he encounters Sam and Frodo, so Gondor has clearly been struggling for some time, even before the reader is able to see this when Pippin and Gandalf arrive. It really is not surprising that to him, things are looking very bleak. It would make sense to question the viability of victory. The fact that his son has died and he seems to be losing his people and home causes him significant anguish. This sends him into a spiral of madness which inspires him to take his demise into his own hands by setting out to kill his other son along with himself. To him, this would happen anyway because in his mind they have already lost to Sauron and evil has already prevailed. With no ability to change an outcome with fighting Sauron's armies, this is what remains for him to do himself, and to him, it is the only thing left he can control and choose for himself and his family. If he is to die in flames, it should at least be under his terms.

It is clear that his despair blinds him from considering an outcome where they could win. This is similar to Frodo because Frodo also does not see a way he can complete his quest and also survive to make it back to the Shire. They both are victim to depression that tunnels their vision to only see the worst outcome. That is all they are able to see, so they can only make decisions with that in mind. If they were able to process a different point of view showing an alternative reality where things do not turn out so terribly, they would be better able to combat

their hopeless sense of doom. Unfortunately, even though different people can be more or less prone to giving in to despair, sometimes the amount of grief ends up too much for a person to bear, and there is not always a way to prevent this. Pippin does what he can to prevent Denethor from killing both himself and Faramir, but in the end they are only able to save Faramir. Denethor had been set on his own suicide already, and that was the last thing he succeeded in.

“Such counsels will make the Enemy’s victory certain indeed.”
– Gandalf, The Return of the King

HOPE

FOOL OF A TOOK

“Fool of a Took! This is a serious journey, not a hobbit-walking party. Throw yourself in next time, and then you will be no further nuisance. Now be quiet!” – Gandalf, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

Although a less obvious choice than Sam, Peregrin Took, often called Pippin, is really a prime example of a character that represents hope in the face of adversity. Pippin is the youngest of the four hobbits in the Fellowship and has proven to be one of the more light-hearted of the group. He has even explicitly stated that he is just a few years shy of being “of age” in Hobbit years. Perhaps because of this, others such as Gandalf and Elrond were hesitant to let him join the quest. His youth and innocence are no doubt contributing factors to his more hopeful outlook compared to some other characters. It has already been noted that hope is a trait often associated with naivety, which in turn is typically found in youth. As one gets older and sees more of the world is when one starts to realize that everything is not as good as it seems to a child. There are a lot of bad things in the world that one only really starts to realize as they grow older and

experience that for themselves. To get older and not become jaded leads to the assumption that one is naïve to reality.

Pippin has a somewhat similar relationship to Denethor that Sam has to Frodo in the sense that one is a sort of master to the other. But Frodo and Sam's bond has taken place over a longer period of time during the quest, and no matter the type of reading one chooses when interpreting their relationship, it is clear that they are very fond of each other. Pippin is loyal to Denethor and cares about helping him in any way he can because of the loss of his son, Boromir. Boromir died protecting both Merry and Pippin from orcs. Thus, Pippin offers his servitude to Denethor as his way of showing his gratitude for what his son had done. It was rather unfortunate, however, that following the news of his son's death and the increasingly desperate situation with Sauron's rise to power, Denethor had fallen into a madness. This madness led to his attempted murder-suicide with his son, who was incapacitated, but still alive, nonetheless. If Pippin did not warn Beregon and Gandalf of this plot, it is likely he would have succeeded as it appears that no one else seemed willing or able to try and talk him out of it. Pippin was able to help save Faramir from being killed with his father, but they were not able to save Denethor himself. He was set on dying, and that cannot be at the fault of Pippin since he did what he could to try and help them both. He himself could not necessarily be sure of an inevitable victory against Sauron, but he was still able to avoid being blinded by the despair of the possibility of failure.

SAM THE STOUTHEARTED

“Why, Sam, to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written. But you've left out one of the chief

characters: Samwise the stouthearted. 'I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad?'" – Frodo, The Two Towers

Pippin is a good example of how the importance of hope shows itself in the legendarium, but perhaps the best example is Samwise Gamgee. Sam is a major reason why the Ring was ultimately able to be destroyed. He saves Frodo, makes sure he keeps going, and literally carries him up Mount Doom. Sam and Pippin are both prime examples of hope in the legendarium, but that is not to say that they never lose hope or are never subject to negative thoughts. Sam thinks to himself numerous times just in Book Six alone about how hopeless the situation he is in looks. He is unable to find Frodo after he was taken by orcs and feels utterly hopeless then. They repeatedly run into some obstacle that appears to make the continuation of their journey impossible. They find a way to keep going, but then something else gets in their way. But these feelings of hopelessness undoubtedly happen to everyone at some point, and the fact that he feels stuck or at odds does not mean that his character does not ultimately represent hope. Every time that he ends up doubtful of how he will get out of a tight spot, it is apparent that he had to get up from the last time he was knocked down to get where he is now. He gets knocked down again, but still manages to get up again, to try again. There is something that tells him that there is still hope, and with that motivation he is able to continue. This can be a change in the surroundings, like discovering that Frodo is still nearby and he was just not able to reach him without a ladder. It could even be a conversation with himself with one side arguing about the situation being too dire, and the other insisting that there is still reason to go on. Regardless of what exactly it is, something changes that shifts the narrative from a bleak one to one where things may just end up in his favor.

“There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.” – The Return of the King

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT HOPE VS. DESPAIR

This comparison of Denethor and Pippin with Frodo and Sam shows how having even a bit of hope that things could turn out for the better can have a significant impact on the ultimate result. Denethor still died, but without Pippin’s intervention, it is likely that Faramir would have perished with him. It can seem a small thing when compared to the quest with the Ring, but saving a life is always a meaningful contribution, even if it was just one. It is a little clearer that Sam’s influence impacted the destruction of the Ring, because Sam was a driving force that pushed Frodo to carry the Ring to Mount Doom. He did so by ensuring that he ate, slept, and drank water, even at the detriment of his own health and wellbeing. He did not carry the Ring until the end, and even then, it was not for very long compared to Frodo. However, he did understand the burden it put on Frodo because it was something he saw affecting him every day. As a result of this, it seems safe to say that Frodo would not have made it as far as he did without Sam there, something even Frodo knew to be true before the end of the journey was even in sight. Sam was able to keep going, not because he never felt at a loss for what to do or because he never felt like it was impossible that they would successfully destroy the ring, but because he was able to shift his thoughts away from those that discouraged him. It was not always easy to do so, and he had appeared to give up multiple times. What is crucial is that he was able to get back up again and keep going. Frodo was not always able to keep that up himself. Sam was often

motivated by the need to help Frodo, and Frodo was motivated by Sam's encouragement. Neither would have been able to complete the quest by themselves, but together, even though just barely, they were able to do so.

It is hard to put characters such as Denethor and Frodo entirely "at fault" for not always being able to keep going. Both were put into difficult situations and had heavy burdens to bear. Different people react to and interpret situations differently. This contributes to how much a person is able to handle their limits being tested before their yield limit has been reached. This is also a meaningful factor in how Pippin and Sam are able to provide the help and support that they did, as the positions that they were in were not the same and Denethor and Frodo respectively, although they were put in situations with each other.

Both pairs of character examples are largely an accumulation of smaller moments that work to represent a whole, but they drive the journeys within the story. It is often said that what is important is the journey rather than the destination. In that case, Tolkien's moments of eucatastrophe are really not the most critical sources of hope, and ultimately for Tolkien, faith. It is instead those smaller moments for the characters, where something small happens that lifts their spirits, that gives them a reason to move on. These are small but frequent throughout the *Lord of the Rings* and allow the readers to see characters struggle and grow and triumph. The eucatastrophic moments may be major turning points in the story, but they fail to provide much substance to the story or insight into the characters which is why they are not used extensively throughout Tolkien's work. If it is always an option for the Eagles to show up and save the day, everything would be a lot easier, and there would not be much of a story. It may have been important to Tolkien and his faith that those eucatastrophes provided visions of a saving grace and assurance of some sort of victory for those who would do good, but they are ultimately only

able to occur as a result of maintaining hope when faced with discouraging circumstances. The real source of hope, and ultimately faith, is within each person when they are able to overcome despair or the dread of something unfortunate happening. It is about finding that reason to continue and ensuring that when someone else is unable to do so anymore, they are provided help to rest from the weight on their shoulders and motivation to lift themselves back up again when they are ready. After all, even though continuing with the odds against you is hardly ever an easy thing to do, to give up altogether is to guarantee defeat.

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