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Tolkien's Heroic Philosophy: How Failure Creates True Heroes

Heroism is often defined by one's strength of mind and body, traits that are common amongst the greatest heroes of lore – larger-than-life champions such as Achilles, Hercules, Odysseus, and Aeneas – however, this definition hardly applies to Frodo and Sam from the beloved *Lord of the Rings* saga, by J.R.R Tolkien, who are by nearly all accounts wholly unremarkable and unequivocally down-to-earth. This does not, by the estimation of most who read the novels, make the hobbits of the stories any less heroic; rather, their mundane fallibility provides a foundation upon which Tolkien's brand of heroism can be understood and uncovered. How can it be that these heroes, who ultimately fail at the end of the story, still manage to win? It is, in no small part, due to the large degree of mercy and compassion with which they underwent their long quest – this is the true nature of Tolkien's heroic philosophy, and it is through this lens that we can finally understand how Frodo and Sam make such remarkable heroes.

Heroism has many potential definitions: some people may think of Superman or Batman – muscular, noble, behemoths capable of fighting off enemies with nothing but sheer will and idealism; others perhaps consider Harry Potter or Luke Skywalker – individuals born into greatness and destined for grandeur. These are the so-called capital-H Heroes, who exist as larger-than-life ideals within the definition of "Heroism" that the champions of lore subside in.

These characters, whom so many people revere and identify with, are indeed Heroes. Their very existence reminds humanity everywhere that goodness will overcome villainy and that Heroism will always triumph and be rewarded. Their stories are potent, and they are not famous through coincidence alone; however, their brand of Heroism is also drastically different from that which can be seen in *Lord of the Rings*. There are still Heroes in *Lord of the Rings*: powerful individuals such as Gandalf or Aragorn who seem incapable of mistakes and are bestowed great prominence as secondary protagonists. The important distinction is that they are not the characters with whom readers are meant to associate. Rather, readers are meant to see the world through the eyes of a smaller, less significant creature: “Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt” (Fellowship 1). These are the characters that the story is introduced through and, as is shown by the first description given in the prologue, they are an incredibly simple people. They are “lowercase-h heroes” who exemplify a less bombastic and much more philosophical form of heroism. This contrast is confirmed within the epic itself when Gandalf acknowledges the difference between Heroes and heroes: “I tried to find one; but warriors are busy fighting one another in distant lands, and in this neighborhood heroes are scarce, or simply not to be found” (Hobbit 21). Not only does this acknowledge the reality that the hobbits are not Heroes, but it also shows the way that Gandalf (and, by extension, Tolkien) view Heroes in general: that too often their love of courage and honor cloud their actual ability to fight for the greater good – that they are busy fighting one another rather than unifying into one force against the evil of the world. None of these problems ring true for the hobbits, who

are much more concerned with leisure and peace than honor or glory. In fact, unlike the Heroes mentioned previously, the hobbits' heroism is defined by their very fallibility – one of the most important traits that makes them heroes. It is not a lesser form of greatness, but a more grounded and realistic representation. They don't succeed because they are able to overcome evil with brute force or some grand idealistic gesture – no, their heroism can be found exclusively in the subtle and quiet considerations with which they undergo their journey towards Mount Doom.

The best way to understand the framework of heroism in the narrative is through the examination and analysis of the many letters of correspondence that Tolkien partook in with his fans. This allows for deeper insight into how Tolkien himself saw his characters and provides a much clearer lens for how heroism, and the shortcomings of our heroes, can be best understood within these stories. Specifically for the purpose of understanding his view of failure, it will be important to observe letter 246 (and later 181). In this letter he begins to lay the foundation of what he considers to be moral failure: "We are finite creatures with absolute limitations upon the powers of our soul-body structure in either action or endurance. *Moral* failure can only be asserted, I think, when a man's effort or endurance falls *short* of his limits, and the blame decreases as that limit is closer approached" (Tolkien Letter 246). In short, Tolkien views failure in two different ways: the first is the generally understood sense of failure in which one fails the task or ideal that they set out to accomplish and the second is the more specific form of moral failure in which one is rendered incapable of completing a task through no fault of their own. These definitions are not mutually exclusive – it is possible to fail generally while not failing morally; conversely, it is possible to fail morally but succeed

generally; and it is even possible to succeed or fail in both simultaneously. It is these distinctions that separate hero from villain: Heroes often fail generally – in fact, it is their fallibility that makes them great – but they do not fail morally because they always intend to do the right thing. On the other hand, villains often succeed generally, but they fail morally because their shortcomings are not created through the shattering of their physical and mental limitations but through a selfish desire to achieve their goals at any cost. These are the definitions of failure that allow us to understand how Tolkien viewed heroism and it is through this lens of failure that it becomes possible to better understand what makes Sam and Frodo such compelling heroes.

Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's best friend and arguably the true hero of the story, is the moral compass and steady hand that prevented the journey to Mount Doom from ever faltering, even in so far as he carried Frodo to the precipice. Sam's loving and nurturing nature are things that anyone who has read the book will observe and there is little reason to dwell on them here. The more interesting action of Sam, and the part that ironically makes him a true hero, is a very small moment in which he seemingly *fails* to be the simple paragon of virtue that so many have come to love. A moment in which he fails to offer what the noble and virtuous should always offer: acceptance and forgiveness. It is a small moment, one that is quite easy to overlook, that ultimately defines the ending of the story. Near the end of Book Four, Gollum returns to find Sam and Frodo sleeping peacefully, and, despite his evil tendencies, he has a genuine moment of kind contemplation:

Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo's knee – but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing. (Return 699)

As is easily seen in this peculiar scene, Gollum is having a moment of repentance – he hasn't fully returned to the light nor has he come close, but his hardened, resentful shell does begin to crack. It doesn't portray him as the same slinking, creepy villain that he has been described as so many times previously. It doesn't make him seem like an irredeemable force of selfishness. In a lesser story, with less well-written heroes, Sam would have awakened and noticed this softened exterior. He would have allowed Gollum a moment of quiet compassion; and, perhaps, given this additional chance, Gollum could have been rescued from himself. This does not happen here.

Sam awakes to find Gollum with his hands on Frodo and, without the context of Gollum's seemingly somber moment, condescendingly berates and questions him. Through this understandable, justified action, Sam steals away any hope that Gollum had of repenting: "Gollum withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids. Almost spider-like

he looked now, crouched back on his bent limbs, with protruding eyes. The fleeting moment had passed beyond recall” (Return 699). These descriptions are important because they show how Gollum has been doomed – he transforms from quiet consideration and sorrow into the eerie, spider-like creature who has spent years tormenting himself. Any hope of redemption is taken from Gollum in this moment. Tolkien even echoed the sentiment that this action by Sam is, in a way, sad and tragic: “If he had understood better what was going on between Frodo and Gollum, things might have turned out differently in the end... His repentance is blighted and all Frodo’s pity is (in a sense) wasted” (Tolkien Letter 246). Sam’s immense distrust of Gollum is remarkably justified (after all, Gollum has spent much of the journey scheming to get the ring back) and this is a not moral failure on Sam’s part – he does not allow Gollum the chance to redeem himself, but it is with the best possible intentions at heart. This action was executed out of love for Frodo and Middle Earth rather than out of anger or hatred towards Gollum. This is what makes Sam such a realistic, grounded hero. He unknowingly prevented Gollum from repenting in his best effort to keep his friend, and by extension the entirety of Middle Earth, safe from harm. It is these intentions that are so critical. Sam, even despite his shortcomings, always attempted to do what he believed to be right while continuing to stare down an impossibly hopeless challenge.

Frodo Baggins, the ring-bearer who took on the impossible task of carrying the Ring to Mount Doom and destroying it, is the other candidate for true hero of the story. Frodo always felt a bit different than the other hobbits – he seemed like a far more deeply saddened character. Perhaps it is for this reason that he decided to step forward and take on the role of ring-bearer in the first place. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Frodo was the one who should

carry the ring to Mount Doom, even if there was no chance of him ultimately succeeding in a general sense (because he does succeed morally). The impossibility of this task is confirmed at the end of the story when Frodo finds himself unable to dispose of the ring and save the world: “I have come,’ he said. ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!” (Return 924). In this moment, the toll that the Ring takes – on someone even so merciful and resistant as Frodo – becomes perfectly clear: its potent manipulation towards desire for power and decomposition of morality reach their apex at the precipice of Mount Doom. In letter 181, Tolkien lays out that sometimes the fate of the world hangs in the balance of the actions of a single person, even if those demands far exceed what that individual is capable of enduring. Essentially, they are doomed to fail their quest because their strength is simply too lacking to overcome the obstacles that remain in the way: “Frodo was in such a position: an apparently complete trap: a person of greater native power could probably never have resisted the Ring’s lure to power for so long; a person of less power could not hope to resist it in the final decision” (Tolkien Letter 181). In this way, Frodo is destined to fail in his quest: as Tolkien has explained, there would have been no greater individual for the task because anyone else would have failed all the same or even more spectacularly. However, this does not take away from the immense heroism that he has displayed throughout the rest of the journey – after all, his failing is not a moral one. Tolkien even continues to explain how Frodo’s failing was no more condemnable than if he had failed by sheer accident or misfortune: “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 Letter 246). As explored

previously, it is moral failures that turn someone from a hero into a villain; Frodo's was by no means a moral failure. In the final estimation, Frodo is deemed a hero by all of those who matter most (i.e., Gandalf, Aragorn, etc.). So, how can it be that if Frodo failed in his ultimate quest to save the world, they still manage to win the war and succeed in banishing Sauron from power? The answer can only be found in the most peculiar of places: Gollum.

As has been shown throughout, both Frodo and Sam have failed in some way throughout the story; however, neither of their failures were moral shortcomings, which is what allows them to remain such excellent, grounded heroes. What ultimately saves them, and all Middle Earth is the fact that both of their failures (and their greatest moral successes) are also related to Gollum. Sam did interrupt Gollum during a critical moment of reflection and regret, but because it was done with morality in mind – and a deep sense of devotion and love towards Frodo – fate deemed Sam's actions not damnable: "He did not think of himself as heroic or even brave, or in any way admirable – except in his service and loyalty to his master" (Tolkien Letter 246). Furthermore, Sam's moment of general failure may have been to prevent Gollum from returning to the good, but his moment of true heroism and moral success comes when things look most dire. Approaching the peak of Mount Doom Sam had another confrontation with Gollum – one in which he could have easily killed him: "Sam's hand wavered. His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched" (Return 923). Like the previous moment, Sam's anger and rage towards Gollum are incredibly justified, but it is his

unwillingness to harm Gollum despite his depravity that saves all Middle Earth. This is Sam's ultimate moral success, and his mercy – like Frodo's – culminates in the victory of an impossible quest. No one could have expected Sam to confront Gollum in these moments with anything but contempt and suspicion, but his unwavering mercy and compassion for Frodo, whom he loved, and Gollum, whom he pitied, are what sculpt Sam into a true hero.

Similarly, it is Frodo's love and compassion for Gollum that save him from moral failure. All of the moments of compassion and mercy that have been given to Gollum throughout the journey reach their purpose when Gollum bites the ring from Frodo's finger and finally receives what Frodo and Sam's forgiveness had ordained: "And with that, even as his eyes were lifted up to gloat upon his prize, he stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail *Precious*, and he was gone" (Return 925). In that moment, despite succumbing to the temptation of the Ring, Frodo is saved by Gollum's warped desire to regain possession of his precious. Ultimately, the only reason that their moral quest was won – even despite Frodo and Sam's failings – was on account of the forgiveness that they were willing to extend to Gollum:

But at this point the 'salvation' of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury. At any point any prudent person would have told Frodo that Gollum would certainly betray him, and could rob him in the end. To 'pity' him, to forbear to kill him, was a piece of folly, or a mystical belief in the ultimate value-in-itself of pity and generosity even if disastrous in the world of time. He did rob him and injure him in the end – but by a 'grace', that last betrayal was at a precise

juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one could have done for Frodo! (Tolkien Letter 181)

It was only because of their willingness to forgive and let live that Frodo's general failure at the end of the story was saved. Furthermore, as with any true hero, it was only through their moral successes – pitying Gollum and allowing him to live – that Frodo's ultimate failure is forgiven. In the final judgement, it is impossible to see Frodo as anything other than a miraculous hero who risked everything he had to try and save the world. His inability to throw the Ring into Mount Doom was something that anyone would have succumbed to at that moment in the story, and few would have made it there in the first place. Rather, it was out of the holiest and most esoteric action that Frodo succeeded: his boundless compassion and forgiveness are what ultimately saved him and all Middle Earth. This is the distinction that is often overlooked, and it is one that is critical to the understanding of Tolkien's message. Frodo did fail, but he did not fail morally, and the ultimate victory of their quest was born out of the moral successes that Frodo displayed throughout his journey.

This is the true meaning of heroism. Despite the odds being stacked insurmountably against him and the fact that he was inarguably and wholly inadequate, Frodo dedicated himself – even, most likely, at the cost of his own life and humanity – to the quest laid out before him. There is no nobler possible response to such a call to action especially when the survival of everything good in the world hangs in the balance. It is this harsh reality that makes Frodo so different from the Heroes of lore – rather than being destined for greatness or born into immense power, he was doomed to failure; however, he did everything he could in the

most compassionate and morally righteous way, and in the end was saved by the very thing that made him so unique: his love and mercy. Ultimately both Frodo and Sam fail along their quest, but both failings were saved by their immense love and compassion for each other and Middle Earth. In a sense, this is the very reason that Gandalf was so drawn to the hobbits in the first place: he selected them for this quest because he knew that their humility and love for life would shine through in the end, even if their shortcomings slowed them along the way. Gandalf was wise enough to know that it is not power which will ultimately end evil and corruption – for if he hadn't, he would've have taken the Ring for himself – but that the absolute refusal to give up one's morality and compassion is what will ultimately be rewarded. The hobbits did not succeed on account of their strength of mind or body, they succeeded because their simple nature and love for others is more powerful than power itself.

Lord of the Rings is a story that has stood the test of time, and it is due largely to the complex nuances with which Tolkien approaches heroism. It would be easy to look at the heroes of the story and imagine them as perfect paragons of morality, but that would be to the detriment of the story. The most relatable and grounded heroes are those that have flaws, that make mistakes, but keep pushing forward and with all their might attempt to do the right thing. This is what Tolkien has given the world in the form of Sam and Frodo – and they exist to show humanity that one does not have to be perfect to be a hero; in fact, they need not even succeed. All that one must do to be a hero is the best they can with what they have.

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