

THE HEROISM OF THE ORDINARY IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Zak Schmoll on the character of Samwise
Gamgee

G.K. Chesterton defended the value of fairy tales as he wrote *Orthodoxy*. Specifically, he wrote, "Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticized Elfland, but Elfland that criticized the earth."¹ Even though some may dismiss these fantasy stories as childish, fairyland can be used as an effective tool to illustrate truths about the world we inhabit. Those stories can illuminate our story. In *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R.

¹ G.K Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2009), 76, Kindle Edition.

Tolkien used his own personal fairyland to show the true heroism in the ordinary.

Samwise Gamgee, a gardener by trade, was thrust into an adventure he was not looking for. Interestingly, he was referred to by Tolkien in a letter to publisher Milton Waldman as, “the chief hero.”² In a story of epic proportions full of good and evil, this may be a somewhat surprising admission from Tolkien. Gandalf, Aragorn, or Frodo might seem to be more reasonable choices for this most prominent position given their centrality to the narrative at large. In fact, these three characters have been highlighted by scholars such as Donald Williams who points out in his book *An Encouraging Thought*, that each one can be seen as symbolic of the different offices of Jesus Christ. Gandalf seems to represent the role of the priest, Aragorn points to the role of King, and Frodo qualifies as the suffering servant. “Gandalf; Frodo; Aragorn: None of these characters is exactly a Christ figure in the full sense of that phrase, though perhaps cumulatively they add up to one.”³

²J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), Kindle Location 3391, Kindle Edition.

³Donald Williams, *An Encouraging Thought: The Christian Worldview in the Writings of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Cambridge, Ohio:

However, one of the most powerful, yet surprisingly hidden, themes in *The Lord of the Rings* emerges because of this authorial decision to make the humble the “chief hero” rather than any of these three. Tolkien is showing that it is indeed heroic to be an ordinary person in an ordinary town who does whatever he or she can to make a small corner of the world a better place. It is Tolkien's entrance into fairyland that invites us to follow and discover why the ordinary can be heroic in his world. In our world, that almost seems to be a contradiction in terms as we become numb to our typical environment. However, in this fantastical environment, we learn the truth, and we realize it makes sense not only in Middle Earth where we see it, but in our own world as well where we want to see it.

The destruction of the Ring might seem to be the most important event in this story, the ultimate heroic act. It is seemingly the entire purpose of the quest that caused Frodo and Sam to leave the Shire in the first place. The main problem with that hypothesis is that evil is not destroyed when the Ring fell into the fire with Gollum. The four hobbits

Christian Publishing House, 2018), Kindle Locations 415-416, Kindle Edition.

return with Gandalf to find their hometown in disrepair and under the thumb of the evil wizard Saruman.

Gandalf then provides a tantalizing hint towards the true purpose of *The Lord of the Rings* right before he leaves the hobbits at the entrance to this Shire that is no longer recognizable. Merry laments that Gandalf cannot join them and help them free their homeland, but Gandalf encourages them in their own ability. “I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for.”⁴

This is a highly significant revelation because Gandalf is implying that the entire journey to destroy the Ring has only been preparation for this, the real mission facing the hobbits. The hobbits need to become the heroes that rescue their ordinary homeland. Stratford Caldecott hypothesizes that this training is vital for the hobbits to be able to handle what they now have to face in the reclamation of their homeland.

The success of the hobbits in dealing with this final peril would not have been possible—would certainly not have been

⁴J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: One Volume* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002), 996, Kindle Edition.

believable—if they had not experienced the epic adventure as a whole, and if we had not seen them transformed into heroes of song and legend; so that when they are plunged back into the banality of the Shire they are able to defeat the evil that they find with the grace—the gifts—that they have received in their travels.⁵

We must always keep in mind who specifically the Shire was saved for because it certainly was not saved for all four hobbits. They do not all return to ordinary lives. Frodo, because of his injuries, realizes that Middle Earth is no longer his home. He tells Sam before his departure from Middle Earth, “I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me.”⁶ The Shire is similarly not saved for Merry and Pippin. With the former having pledged service to the kingdom of Rohan and the latter to the kingdom of Gondor, their destinies also stretch beyond the borders of their natural home. The only one to return to his hometown and remain was Sam who finishes the tale with the line, “Well, I’m

⁵ Stratford Caldecott, *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind the Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012), Kindle Locations 907-911, Kindle Edition.

⁶ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, 1029, Kindle Edition.

back.”⁷ The Shire was saved, and it was saved for Sam, the author’s chief hero.

If that is true and the true purpose of the story was to save the Shire specifically for the hero, Sam, then the inevitable question is, “What makes Sam specifically heroic?” What about his character makes him worthy of such an extraordinary position as “chief hero” among a group of mighty warriors from around Middle Earth? Why is Sam the hero when there are heavy Christlike references made to multiple other characters as shown by Williams? Sam begins the story as ordinary, and he finishes the story as ordinary.

In the first dialogue of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Sam’s father Hamfast shares some advice with his friends that he claims to have told Sam. “Elves and Dragons! I says to him. Cabbages and potatoes are better for me and you. Don’t go getting mixed up in the business of your betters, or you’ll land in trouble too big for you, I says to him.”⁸ This attitude is somewhat apparent in Sam, but there is some other desire embedded as well. “He had a good deal to think about. For one thing, there was a lot to do up in the Bag End garden, and he would have a

⁷ Ibid., 1032.

⁸ Ibid., 24.

busy day tomorrow, if the weather cleared. The grass was growing fast. But Sam had more on his mind than gardening.”⁹ Immediately before this passage, Sam had been having a conversation with a fellow hobbit about dragons and elves. He is attentive to the mundane, just like his father advised he ought to be to avoid trouble, but he also has his mind set on things beyond the Shire. What other people write off as foolishness, he desires to encounter and experience.

Sam returns to his home alone at the end of the book to settle down with his family. In one of his final lines, Frodo says, “It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. But you are my heir: all that I had and might have had I leave to you.”¹⁰ Not only does this provide further support to the idea that this entire mission was really about saving the Shire for Sam, but it also provides a type of theodicy. All of the evil that Frodo had to go through contributed to this end. Frodo had to suffer in order for the Shire to be saved. All of the evil that Aragorn, Gandalf, Eowyn,

⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1029.

and even Boromir went through contributed to the saving of the Shire for the hero, Sam.

Danger looms at the beginning of the journey, and if the mission had never taken place, the forces of evil would have eventually triumphed. Eventually the Ring would have been found, and evil would have claimed victory once and for all. It was mentioned many times that they could not simply hide the Ring and hope it was never found. It had to be destroyed. Therefore, the evil that each of these people had to face had meaning. Evil things were allowed to happen in the lives of these characters because they provided the training that brought the triumph of the hero. Evil brought Sam, the hero, to the place where he belonged, the ordinary. Being secure in that place indeed is what made him the hero.

This entrance into fairyland allows us to see an ordinary gardener become the hero after overcoming great evil. On earth, each one of us may be that simple person who wonders whether or not we can ever do anything significant in the face of adversity. We may wonder if we can do anything great or heroic. That is the power of story. It gives us the ability to take a story like Sam's and realize that we can make a difference. We see it happen, and it appears real for Sam, so we realize it can be

real in our lives as well. Fairy tales and stories are far from useless; they tell us the truth about what can be in our world as well.

The triumph of returning to one's own hometown perhaps does not quite look like the ultimate victory over evil. It does not appear overly heroic. Watching the Ring fall into the fire seems like a much more appropriate climax. However, as Gandalf said, the entire reason that these hobbits, including the Ring-bearer, went on this journey was to prepare them to save their homeland. They did not save their homeland for all four of them though. Three of them were meant to go elsewhere. It was only saved for the hero of the story, Samwise Gamgee, who is the hero, not because of his great deeds, but rather because he was able to truly fulfill his purpose and fit into his place in the world. This helps ordinary people like you and I remember that our everyday lives can be heroic as well because we are right where we are meant to be.

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