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Maturing From The Shire to The Lonely Mountains

At first glance, J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* may seem like a simple tale of a man going on an adventure, a fairy tale almost. But further analysis into Bilbo’s actions throughout the story will show that he is aging mentally, maturing into a responsible hobbit: “[Tolkien] had first to learn that a serious and important theme could be dealt with in a mythological narrative---in this case the theme was maturation” (Helms). Bilbo’s journey to and from the Lonely Mountain is symbolic of growing up as can be seen from his initial meeting of the dwarves, the encounter with the Trolls, the journey through High Pass and the meeting of Gollum, the battle with the Great Spider in Mirkwood and imprisonment by the Wood Elves, Bilbo’s meeting with Smaug and the Battle of Five Armies, and even in Tolkien’s writing style.

Early in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is very reluctant to ever leave his hobbit hole to go on a journey due to his immature state of mind. This is because “he is clinging rather immaturely to a childish way of life” (Matthews). He is also content with the average instead of trying to make things better as Bilbo’s home is mediocre: “Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole […] nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole” (Tolkien 3). During the meeting with Thorin and company, Bilbo also refuses to acknowledge that he may have any kind of skill as a burglar despite Gandalf’s trusting his abilities. As mentioned in “’The Inner Consistency of Reality’: Intermediacy in *The Hobbit*”:“Bilbo […] lost the spark Gandalf once saw in him. He has let his Baggins side overcome his Took. He is in a rut, has gone to waste” (Birns); this Took side being the more curious and adventurous side as opposed to Bilbo’s Baggins side which was the opposite. The morning after the meeting Bilbo even seems to convince himself that the meeting never happened and goes about his morning as normal until Gandalf somewhat forces him out. His actions throughout this early part of the book are similar to a child or teenager who has no responsibilities. Gandalf and the dwarves can be seen as either parents or guardians, and the journey they are asking him to go on is similar to a parent trying to get the teenager to go out and work or go to college. In a way, Gandalf and company are asking Bilbo to “grow up.”

In the beginning of their journey, Bilbo is sent to investigate a fire in the distance; this would soon prove to be step in his aging process. Upon reaching the large fire, Bilbo finds three Trolls cooking their dinner over the fire the dwarves saw. Instead of returning to the group and informing them of the Trolls so they could work together, Bilbo is reckless and attempts to steal from them. He wants to surprise the group and show he has what it takes: “He wished himself a hundred miles away […] yet somehow he could not go straight back to Thorin and Company empty-handed” (Tolkien 34). This, of course, ends up with Bilbo, Thorin, and Company nearly getting killed. They survive only because Gandalf intervenes. This is another instance of Gandalf acting as a sort of parent figure for Bilbo and even the dwarves this time. Bilbo’s recklessness is comparable to how a young adult might try something well above his capabilities and end up in trouble. Then a parent, such as Gandalf, would come to “rescue” him from whatever problem he has gotten himself into. Soon after Gandalf rescues Bilbo, Thorin, and Company, they stumble on the Troll’s cave full of all sorts of bits, bobs, and even weapons. This is where Bilbo acquires his sword Sting. To Bilbo, Sting is symbolic of the knowledge a young adult would gain by knowing what he is capable of and what he is not.

After leaving Rivendell, Bilbo and the dwarves travel through the Misty Mountains on a path called “High Pass” where Bilbo will face yet another trial. When the group takes shelter from the storm, Bilbo constantly wishes to return to his hobbit hole, just as a young adult would wish to return to living with his parents and having no responsibilities. Bilbo is unaware of the very important decision he will soon have to make: “In this underground scene he must face an important trial; he must make a decision whose outcome will be a measure of his maturity… With unprecedented courage he decides to face life rather than to withdraw from it” (Matthews). After the goblins has captured the dwarves, Bilbo wakes up in a dark cave after being unconscious. Despite being in this awful situation, Bilbo still continues to think like he did before the goblins ambushed them. As stated in *The Hobbit: A Journey into* Maturity:

His Baggins personality dominant, he sits down to think about bacon and eggs and is about to foolishly light his pipe when he discovers the elvish knife hidden under his clothes. The blade awakens something Tookish in him, and the hobbit becomes a reluctant warrior and explorer, a sword-boy trotting along with one hand gripping his weapon, the other feeling his way along the dark wall. (Green 64)

Here is where Bilbo meets Gollum. Gollum is possibly the most important character in Bilbo’s quest to maturity and self-knowledge because he is almost a shadow of Bilbo. Gollum can represent the lingering thoughts of failure while a young person is trying to achieve his goals. He also represents inner conflict as can be seen from his riddle game with Bilbo. This conflict is fear of failure (Gollum) and the desire to succeed (Bilbo). Just as Bilbo thwarts Gollum and leaves unharmed and with much more confidence in himself, so too do young adults that successfully “defeat” the shadow of failure. This entire scene clearly demonstrates Tolkien’s moral; “Be brave, enter life’s dark secret places; there may be golden treasure hid within.” (Helms). This “golden treasure” is literally the Ring and figuratively means that Bilbo is gaining his confidence.

During the journey through Mirkwood, Bilbo once again becomes separated from Thorin and Company. He then comes across a great spider that he must face: “A lone protagonist must free himself from a menacing opponent that has the power to cripple him forever” (Matthews). Using his newfound knowledge and confidence, which take the form of a sword and the Ring, he is able to overcome this danger and once again bolster his confidence in himself and in his leadership ability. After defeating the great spider, Thorin and Company are captured by the Wood Elves. Due to the Ring’s ability to make him invisible, Bilbo is able to escape imprisonment and follows the Elves into their city. Once again he uses the knowledge and confidence he has gained to break Thorin and Company out and flee from the Elvenking’s Halls through a trapdoor in a storage room that leads to a stream going out of the dark pass through a small outlet. Thorin even acknowledges Bilbo’s efforts, “Gandalf spoke true, as usual! A pretty fine burglar you make, it seems, when the time comes” (Tolkien 165). Bilbo leaves the halls as a new man; one could say he was born again due to their escaping through a dark narrow outlet which is a birth image. Finally, that young adult becomes a more mature adult after conquering the troubles in his journey. Now all that remains is to achieve his life goals.

Now that Bilbo has reached the Lonely Mountain, his final hurdle to fully knowing himself and being confident stands before him. Bilbo, Thorin, and Company have finally reached the Lonely Mountain and enter through the side passage. Bilbo’s purpose for being on this journey has come. Once Bilbo enters the main chamber of the dwarven city he finds the whole area covered in gold and treasure. Somewhere in this room is The Arkenstone, but it sits where Bilbo will have to confront Smaug, who is obscured by all the gold and treasure, to get to it. Like the sword and the Ring symbolize his knowledge and confidence, the Arkenstone symbolizes his sense of self or wholeness. Bilbo does acquire the Arkenstone, but as he said to himself after his encounter with Smaug, “You aren’t nearly through this adventure yet” (Tolkien 209). He still has much to go through before his journey is complete. The fact he does not give the Arkenstone to Thorin and instead hides it shows that he has learned to think for himself and do what he feels to be the right choice. In not being the one to slay Smaug and being unconscious for most of The Battle of Five Armies, Bilbo is revealed to just be an average man as mentioned in “The Psychological Journey of Bilbo Baggins”: “Bilbo has not found eternal glory, but, rather the self-knowledge that a willingness to meet challenge is not necessarily incompatible with the love of home” (Matthews). After Bilbo has awakened, he feels relief. As The Battle of Five Armies was over, Smaug is dead, and all seems to be at peace. This is similar to the way a person would feel once he has completed or reached his life goal, and all that is left is to simply enjoy life with their newfound knowledge and experience.

Not only does Bilbo mature throughout his journey, the book itself matures as it goes along. In the beginning of the story, Tolkien writes in a manner that would not be out of place in a bedtime story. It is stated in *Tolkien’s World*: “This first page, and indeed much of the book, is marred for the adult reader by a set of tonal quirks, perhaps the worst being the excessive number of modifiers: ‘perfectly,’ ‘lots and lots,’ ‘on and on,’ ‘many,’ ‘little’ (all from the first page)” (Helms). Tolkien also changes your perception of the Trolls by giving them a comical Cockney accent that makes you laugh at them instead of finding them scary even though they are bloodthirsty creatures. Later in the story, Tolkien’s writing is much more serious to where it is almost similar to the way he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. The authorial intrusions that frequent the beginning of the book are replaced with direct comments that show how the story has gone from being comical and playful to mature and focused.

While *The Hobbit* may be considered a children’s book, people of all ages can enjoy this story as Bilbo’s journey to and from the Lonely Mountain is symbolic of growing up: “Then at the end of *The Hobbit,* he learned one more lesson as he imaginatively explored the final growth and greatness of Thorin and Bilbo” (Helms). This can be seen from his initial meeting of the dwarves to the encounter with the Trolls, to Bilbo’s journey through High Pass and the meeting of Gollum. Even the battle with the Great Spider in Mirkwood and imprisonment by the Wood Elves, Bilbo’s meeting with Smaug, The Battle of Five Armies, and even the way Tolkien writes is full of symbolism of Bilbo maturing.

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