

SEMESTER IV 2020

GE II

A Reading of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

Tolkien composed *The Hobbit* [1937] for his children while correcting examination papers. He was a remarkable scholar and teacher, who created the popular genre of Fantasy literature, along with a few like-minded people. The enchanting tale that has Bilbo Baggins or a 'hobbit' at the centre, is of course, a tale of grand adventure and a quest involving dragons and treasure.

It begins, as we all know, when a Wizard called Gandalf comes calling at Bilbo's home, Bag-End, the hobbit-hole under the Hill, with thirteen Dwarves out to recover their stolen wealth. Bilbo [who is fifty years old but has the outlook of a five-year old] is enlisted, in the capacity of a burglar, but ends up as a great hero in his own right. I am not going to summarize the tale, leave alone analyzing it. But, at the grave risk of meddling with the fun of reading [please read the text first, if you haven't already done so], I will attempt to draw up a scheme of the main themes by utilizing the lead provided by the author in his essay, 'Of Fairy Stories' that was delivered as a lecture in 1939. In this essay, Tolkien discussed what are fairy stories, what are their origins and what is the use of them. Fairy stories are not just stories about small and pretty creatures [though our childhood reading of Enid Blyton does give that impression] but rather is about a state or being in which faerie or magic resides with the ordinary, even mortal men. They originate when human imagination interacts with human language to 'subcreate' a Secondary world.

The Hobbit is episodic in nature and the pattern of adventure is to move into greater and greater danger. But the tale may be fitted into the three-fold structure I'm giving below, inspired by Tolkien.

- I. Finding of the ring: I relate this to Tolkien's notion that fairy stories are useful in that they provide a sense of 'Recovery'. What is recovered is a fresh view of things as if you are viewing for the first time. You might say when in *The Hobbit*, we discover hobbits, elves, dwarves, goblins, trolls etc, these are imaginary magical beings not present in the primary world. But notice, we also discover afresh, the delights of feasting, the camaraderie of friends on a journey, the noble attributes of loyalty and courage, the enjoyment of a well-earned reward or having a conversation with a dragon. How is this freshness obtained? By creating the Secondary world, initially the Shire but then the entire land of Rivendell, the Mirkwood, the Lonely Mountain, Dale, and the Running river as beautifully represented in the map that Gandalf gives Thorin. Remember that a key to unlock the door that leads to the dragon's hoard also comes with it. Tolkien recreates ordinary everyday things like maps and keys to bring out dimensions that we never knew existed. The culmination is when Bilbo finds the magic ring under the mountain which is Recovery in both literal and metaphorical sense. It is the ruling Ring, of course and later, Tolkien will build the entire fantasy of *The Lord of the Rings* around it.
- II. Fear and Escape: Another use of fairy stories is to let us escape into a different world [not like a prisoner escaping but perhaps like a wanderer discovering]. By escaping, we also conquer the fear of evil things, symbolized in *The Hobbit* by goblins and wargs, nasty spiders and Smaug, the archvillain. Add to this, human vices like greed or disloyalty. According to Tolkien it is this notion of Escape that makes the impossible possible in Fantasy fiction, or lets us fight with dragons and dwarves to escape in barrels.
- III. The Final Happy Ending: Tolkien had talked of 'Consolation' brought about by the sudden upward turn in the fairy story. He coined a word

for it--‘eucatastrophe’. This is made possible by the threat of real danger and disaster, in deed by Smaug and the Battle of the Five Armies. When Smaug is killed and when the battle is won by Bilbo’s friends, Good wins over Evil. This fight takes place in Bilbo’s heart as well, in relation with the Arkenstone. The reversal of tragedy and the replacing of tragic catharsis with the happy ending, the return home with bags of treasure and a magic ring, is the essence of the fairy story structure. Death of Bilbo is averted and most of his friends survive, while the fallen brave like Thorin Oakenshield receive a fitting fond farewell. As the thrill of magical adventure draws to its end, we are left pondering over grey areas—was it luck that made Bilbo outwit Gollum and win the riddle-game? Why are we so fascinated by the magnificent worm or bat, huge as he is and jewel encrusted? [by the way, he is voiced so well by Benedict Cumberbatch in the film, have you watched Peter Jackson’s three-part version of *The Hobbit*?]. I will end here since it is quite impossible to exhaust that sense of wonder that Tolkien’s work arouses in the reader’s mind.

[A Note: Please read *The Hobbit* carefully, preferably an annotated edition. Also read J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘Of Fairy Stories’. Sites like tolkienestate.com are helpful and the further interested may read other works by Tolkien like *The Lord of the Rings* and the Old English epic *Beowulf*, in modern version.]

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