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Abstract

Considers Sam the true hero of *The Lord of the Rings*; shows him to be the “focal point of two main motifs [...]: friendship and gifts,” and suggests using the description of eucatastrophe from “On Fairy-stories” to judge Sam’s development as a hero.

SAMWISE--HALFWISE?
or
WHO IS THE HERO OF THE LORD OF THE RINGS?
by Jan Wojcik, S.J.

Clouds of an interesting controversy gather on the Tolkien horizon. In smoke-filled rooms nervous little men whisper that perhaps Samwise Gamgee is the true hero of The Lord of the Rings. The air crackles with pro-Frodo denials. The Samwise-Hero group refers to the subtle growth of Sam's character throughout the trilogy, from an early description of him kissing the beer barrel good-by in the cellar to the heroic heights the gardener reaches fulfilling the quest in the final moments before the Crack of Doom.

Sam accompanied Frodo down the river after the breakup of the Fellowship when Frodo was too bravely foolish to want companionship. Sam wears the Ring after Frodo is captured, and he is the only Ring-bearer in the book who is never seriously tempted to its power. Sam is given the privilege of reciting what many consider the eucatastrophic climax of the whole story: "What's happened to the world? Is everything sad going to come untrue?" Sam plants the Shire anew with the fertile dust of Galadriel and thus climaxes the recurrent desolation-fertility contrast that weaves its way throughout the story. In so doing, Sam symbolizes the final victory of rich good over evil sterility. Finally, Sam closes the history of the great war for us with the breathtakingly simple understatement to Rose: "Well, I'm back."

The nervous little men are pounced on by righteous orthodox, the upholders of the obvious: Frodo is Ringbearer, Aeneas, Hero, God. He is the literary quest-hero, brother to Ulysses and Don Quixote. He spares Gollum who saves the quest; of him Gandalf remarks more than once: "There is more to you than meets the eye." He it is who is honored by the multitudes with great praise after the battle, with buttons on contemporary lapels.

The most startling exegesis I have yet heard in defense of Frodo-as-the-hero is a theory of name derivation. According to one zealot, Frōd, the Old English word for "wise", is the source of Frodo's name, whereas the Old English sām-prefix that modifies adjectives with the sense of "half" gives the name Samwise the sense of Half-wise. Whatever you might think in the controversy, you admit that it is another example of the fascinating power of the work, and its unique complexity, that such a topic should ever come up for discussion. The argument is certainly possible on the bull-session level described above; Frodo and Sam can both be called hero: Sam with subtle, Frodo with obvious references. But our interest can delve deeper into the heart of the story and still thrive.

The guidelines for our delving will be Tolkien himself. In his essay on fairy stories Mr. Tolkien describes the heart of such a tale as a eucatastrophe, the turn for good that gives us a "catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart;" and he goes on to say that such a heart has the same pulse in it that the Divine Comedy has: that is, the pulse of joy that came into the world with the eucatastrophe of the human history--the incarnation--and bloomed in the eucatastrophe of the incarnation--the resurrection. The whole tale, if it is a good one, is a setting for the central event of the eucatastrophe; we judge the worth of fairy tales in proportion to the grace and beauty and fittingness of the setting to the eucatastrophe and of the eucatastrophe to the setting. So, a study of Sam's part in bringing about the central "~~turn~~" might make a little clearer the claims that acclaim him hero of The Lord of the Rings.

Sam, we can show, is the focal point of two main motifs in the work, those of friendship and gifts, the two things without which Frodo's quest would have died in the bowels of Old Man Willow or on the mithril-resisted spear-thrust in the Halls of Moria; and these two motifs blossom into the eucatastrophe. The choices of Frodo to accept cosmic responsibility despite the mystery and danger that surround it would not be enough for him to gain success for his quest without external and spiritual aids: things and fellows. Before going on to a study of Sam's role and giftbearer and friend, recall the extent of these two motifs.

Frodo gets the Ring, Sting, mail, rope, bread, cloak, a phial of light. All gifts are given to him in affection, and all become indispensable and all appear to be obviously more than mere "things". What is important is that the fated gift burden of the Ring is accompanied by the gifts of love along the way that make the burden bearable. The mithril causes Gandalf to cry twice: "There is more to you than meets the eye." Sting and the phial glow in the presence of evil; the courage that they reflect from the heart of Frodo is enough to fill Shelob with fright for the first time in her life. The lembas of the elven-folk "fed the will, and gave it strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind." This is just a partial list, yet it makes clear that the gifts of love alter and enrich the life of the receiver. Without them the quest would never have begun, proceeded, or succeeded.

The motif of friendship is so obvious to you that to labor the point would be to exasperate. Gandalf the Grey becomes white, Strider becomes king, Gimli and Legolas become heroes, Merry and Pippin, with whom we all like to identify because they are such simple children of light and music, through the power of friendship do heroic things beyond the strength of mortal beings. Even Boromir and Gollum are companions of great worth, for they alter the plans of the quest in a way that assures its success.

But let us look closely at Sam. He is the humblest in origin of the Fellowship, and has really only one virtue: love that gives birth to all his heroism. What could be more fitting in a tale told round a Christian eucatastrophe and that recovers for us a fresh wonder for the powers of gifts and friendship than to have a little man become a hero through his power to love?

"Come, Mr. Frodo," said Sam, "we can't stay here."

"All right," said Frodo in a remote voice, as of one speaking half asleep. "I will try." Wearily he got to his feet.

He never had any real hope in the affair from the beginning; but being a cheerful hobbit he had not needed hope, as long as despair could be postponed. Now they were come to a bitter end. But he had stuck to his master all the way; that was what he had chiefly come for, and he would still stick to him.

Sam becomes the body and legs of the exhausted Frodo on the final stage of the quest. Both their wills together accomplish the final task. He himself bears the Ring for a time, rages against foes, spares the hated Gollum himself after the manner of Frodo, literally carries Frodo up the mountain of Doom.

But it is two events--one before and one on the Plateau of Gorgoroth--and one event on the foot of the Crack of Doom that climax the motifs and underline strongly the place of Sam in the trilogy and give fuel to the fire celebrating his role as the true hero of the work.

Before a bridge-pass into the land, Frodo and Sam hid at the sudden appearance on the bridge of a Ringwraith, and Frodo felt a tremendous command to use the Ring. The lure took his hand slowly

and moved it forward to the ring hung around his neck. "Then his own will stirred; slowly it forced the hand back and set it to find another thing, a thing lying hidden near his breast...the phial of Galadriel, so long treasured, and almost forgotten until that hour. As he touched it, for a while all thought of the Ring was banished from his mind." The wealth here for study is overwhelming. All the magnificent power of Mr. Tolkien to create things, to uplift things, to sanctify things with meaning, lies before us. The gift of light and love can in simplicity resist the terrible complexity of evil. But for us now, unable to pursue it, this passage still throws great light on the significance of a future act of Sam when a parallel lure is felt by Frodo. For later, Frodo's will is again tempted to use the Ring and reveal himself in almost the same way. But this time he cries "Help me Sam, hold my hand! I can't stop it." Sam took his master's hands and laid them together palm to palm and kissed them; and then he held them gently between his own." Here we can say without exaggeration that the simplicity of Sam's love undoes the last attempt of the complex powers of evil to unravel the universe. The necessity of gifts and fellowship is intensified in the love of Sam for his master.

In the climactic scene of The Lord of the Rings these two patterns are woven together. Their presence reflects backward to all the things, events and choices in the story that have made the eucatastrophe of the happy ending possible. Frodo almost ritually strips himself of all the clothes and weapons and gifts and goes up the final distance to the crack without Sam. Sam has carried him here; gifts have won the way thus far; now it is only a hobbit and a ring and the universe. Frodo speaks in a clear voice, "I don't choose now to do what I came to do..." Now it is the fate that Frodo has chosen through his many acts of mercy to Gollum that ultimately tears the Ring away with a piece of the person of Frodo; gifts and friends have been used well; fate is kind.

The fading of emphasis on Frodo now blends for the rest of the tale with the increasing light around the person of Sam. Sam, as was said, sums up the eucatastrophe when he awakes before the risen Gandalf: "Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?" He plants the Shire. He is the man whose love and courage became indispensable complements to the courage and cosmic responsibility of his master and whose practical trade of a gardener refructifies the world furrowed into peace by war. He comes "back" from the quest as Frodo never does, and lives in the redeemed world meaningfully, while Frodo's lot is now mysteriously beyond the normal mortal ken.

When all is said, perhaps the beauty of Mr. Tolkien's complex creation of a world of heroes is too meaningful to abstract into the normal categories of quest myths which normally have a central hero. The Lord of the Rings is unique and so are Frodo and Sam, but maybe someone could print up another button to wear on the other lapel. When we see "Frodo Lives" we would be reminded that "Samwise Loves and Gardens".

* * * *

--We hear from Allen & Unwin that since a Green Beret translated LotR into Vietnamese for the benefit of the natives, a division of the South Vietnamese Army has adopted the Eye of Sauron for its emblem.