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From Isolation to Community: Frodo's Incomplete Personal Quest in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Studies the inner quest that takes Frodo from isolation to community in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Frodo

From Isolation to Community: Frodo's Incomplete Personal Quest in *The Lord of the Rings*

Devin Brown

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes a common protagonist found in the myths of all the world's cultures down through time. These universal heroes, under many different guises and many different names, all undertake a similar journey regardless of the time or place in which they appear. The protagonist begins at home in what may be described as an immature state, goes on some kind of quest, and in the final stage comes home changed. This journey involves a departure from a safe and familiar place, initiation into a larger unknown world where there are trials and testing, some form of death and rebirth, and then finally return and reinvigoration. Campbell argues that this story of the hero with a thousand faces is essential to a culture because it contains the fundamental truths about the growth and maturation that each individual must undergo. He points out that in all of these stories, the hero goes on a quest to save the kingdom, and *in doing so he also saves himself* (Campbell, *Power* 149).

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo's external quest is to help the dwarves regain their treasure, and in the process—by saying yes to the adventure—he also saves himself from a life which up until then has largely been bounded by a concern for his own safety and comfort in his snug little hobbit-hole. So what could we say is Frodo's personal quest in *The Lord of the Rings*? Frodo goes on a mission to destroy the ring and save Middle-earth, and in doing so, it can be argued, he saves himself from a life of seclusion. Frodo's external journey takes him from the Shire to Mount Doom and back. The personal journey that Frodo makes in *The Lord of the Rings* is the journey from isolation to community, a journey which is only partially complete at the end of the story.

In the first chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, we are told that Bilbo had "no close friends, until some of his younger cousins began to grow up" (21), and Frodo, as Bilbo's heir, will resemble him in this respect. It is interesting to note that while Tolkien's narrator tells us about the many

friends that Bilbo and Frodo supposedly have among the younger hobbits, we never see much evidence of these friendships, and in fact what we really see is the absence of any close relationships. At his farewell party Bilbo tells the twelve dozen friends, neighbors, and relatives he has invited, "I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve" (29). He then leaves without a personal goodbye to anyone, not even Frodo.

At the end of Bilbo's parting speech, he claims, "eleventy-one years is far too short a time to spend among you" (30), but we are not at all convinced that Bilbo means what he says here because two pages later he tells Gandalf the exact opposite, stating that his goal in leaving is to find a place where he can rest "In peace and quiet, without a lot of relatives prying around, and a string of confounded visitors hanging on the bell" (32). What is significant here is that later Frodo will use some of these same words. His last complaint before leaving Bag End will be "Too many ears pricking and eyes prying" (69). When Sam jumps into the river forcing Frodo to take him, Frodo will call him a "confounded nuisance" (397).

Frodo is said to be a lot like Bilbo, and of course one of the greatest resemblances is the life of seclusion which they share. Speaking of Bilbo's decision to leave by himself without any individual farewells, Gandalf tells Frodo, "I think really he preferred slipping off quietly in the end" (35). This pattern, of slipping off quietly, alone, and without saying goodbye to anyone personally, will also be something that Frodo prefers.

On one hand Bilbo's and Frodo's isolation may be understandable. Neither has any close relatives, and the relatives they do have, the Sackville-Bagginses, are as Tolkien's narrator explains, "rather offensive" (38). The day after Bilbo leaves, Lobelia and Otho descend upon Bag End to find out what he has left to them. When Otho "loudly" demands to see Frodo, Merry makes the excuse that Frodo is resting. "Hiding, you mean," Lobelia replies (38), and her perceptions are actually more correct than she knows, for it will be Frodo's way to live a life of concealment, a life filled with hiding, just like Bilbo. After it becomes clear that all the Sackville-Bagginses will receive is a case of silver spoons, Frodo has to escort Lobelia off the premises and to relieve her of a number of additional items which she has stolen. In Lobelia's final words to her relative, she says to Frodo "Why didn't you go too? You don't belong here" (38), a comment which again says more than she knows. In fact, Frodo does not really belong at Bag End,

or in Hobbiton, or in Buckland, for he does not really “belong” anywhere.

In the years that follow, Frodo establishes himself as the new master of Bag End. We are told that “He lived alone, as Bilbo had done; but he had a good many friends, especially among the younger hobbits” (41). Readers should be careful to read this claim as a “good many friends” and not as “many good friends,” and perhaps Tolkien intended to evoke this contrast in his choice of words here. The narrator goes on to claim that “Frodo went tramping all over the Shire with them” but then contradicts himself with the phrase that follows, “but more often he wandered by himself” (41). On the following page this pattern of a solitary life is further intensified as Frodo takes to “wandering further afield” and going out even “more often by himself” (42).

Where exactly he goes and what he does on these walks, Frodo does not share with even his closest friends, a secrecy which at this point in the story seems totally unwarranted and serves to reinforce his isolation. We are told that Merry and Pippin “suspected” that Frodo was visiting Elves at times (41), but why Frodo cannot tell his two closest friends where he has been is never explained, other than by his characteristic reticence. We read that Frodo’s pattern of keeping to himself causes Merry and Frodo’s “other friends” (whoever they may be—presumably Folco Boffin and Freddy Bolger) to watch him “anxiously” (42). Even at this point, before the Ring is a factor, they are perhaps worried that like Bilbo, Frodo will slip away without saying anything.

Having looked at Frodo’s few relatives, who are distant in more ways than one, and at his close friends with whom he is, in fact, not very close, the remaining piece in Frodo’s isolation is his relationship with his neighbors, or rather his characteristic lack of relationship. Ted Sandyman voices what the narrator states is the “common opinion” at the Ivy Bush tavern, when he declares, “Bag End’s a queer place, and its folk are queerer” (24). If most of Frodo’s neighbors have a less than positive opinion about him, his attitude toward them is not much different. Frodo tells Gandalf, “I should like to save the Shire, if I could—though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words, and have felt that an earthquake or an invasion of dragons might be good for them” (61).

The great ring of power, which comes first to Gollum, then to Bilbo, and finally to Frodo, has as its primary force the ability to dominate others—it is, as we are told many times, the One Ring to rule them all.

Gollum, Bilbo, and Frodo never tap into its primary power; they all, however, do access its secondary power, the gift of invisibility. Why did Tolkien include this seemingly unrelated secondary power? Why associate invisibility with the One Ring? One answer might be that when he connected invisibility with the Ring during his writing of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien had not yet envisioned the Ring becoming an object of great power. Another answer might be that the Ring's gift of invisibility is related to the isolation that both Gollum and Bilbo and then finally Frodo all crave. It is significant that Merry discovers Bilbo's secret when the older hobbit is using the Ring's gift of invisibility in order to avoid the Sackville-Bagginses (102), and that Bilbo's very last action in the Shire is to use the Ring to vanish from the community. It is also significant that on the very first day Frodo possesses the Ring, he is described as "fidgeting with something in his pocket" during his encounter with the Sackville-Bagginses (38), obviously wishing that he could also just disappear and avoid his unpleasant visitors. Clearly Frodo is following in Bilbo's isolationist footsteps. Gandalf tells Frodo that a mortal who uses the Ring often to make himself invisible "becomes in the end invisible permanently" (46). Frodo, if he were to possess the Ring long enough and use it often enough to avoid unwanted encounters, risks becoming like Gollum, cut off from all those around him and living completely alone in his hole deep beneath the ground.

There is one other secondary power which the Ring transfers to its bearer: the power of apparent longevity. Again the question might be asked: why did Tolkien choose to link this particular power with the Ring? Unlike the gift of invisibility, this time we can not turn to *The Hobbit* for a partial explanation, for the arrested growth of the Ring-bearer is an aspect which is first mentioned in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. On the opening page of chapter one, we are told that at ninety years old, Bilbo "was much the same as at fifty" (21). Gandalf tells Frodo that a mortal who possesses the Ring "does not grow" (46). Readers might take Gandalf's words to mean that a Ring-bearer does not grow *older*, but Gandalf has not said this. Certainly we see little of what might be called *growth* in Bilbo over the sixty years that he keeps the Ring. During the seventeen years that Frodo has the Ring—the years between Bilbo's farewell feast and Frodo's small farewell dinner—his life becomes more reclusive, not more connected. If Frodo is to grow from his condition of isolation to the more mature condition of community, he will have to give up the Ring and his pattern of seclusion. His increasing

lack of inter-connectedness shows that his growth has indeed been stopped.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien takes great care to distinguish the powers for good from the powers for evil, and one of the greatest distinctions between the two forces is that great care is taken by the good powers not to force their wishes on others. The focus—by Gandalf, by Elrond, by Galadriel, and by Aragorn—is always on personal choice, rather than on domination, and each of them resists the temptation of taking the One Ring to rule them all. In the Appendix we are told, for example, that the Wizards were explicitly forbidden to “seek to dominate Elves or Men by force and fear” (1059). The forces for good go to great lengths to avoid even advising Frodo what he should do. Instead they are always careful to let Frodo make his own decisions, except in one area. Frodo is given the same instructions by three wise advisers—advice which seeks to reverse his state of isolation.

After detailing the history of the Ring, Gandalf tells Frodo, “The decision lies with you” (60). But after Frodo makes his decision to bear the Ring out of the Shire, Gandalf then advises him, “I don’t think you need go alone. Not if you know of anyone you can trust, and who would be willing to go by your side” (61). When Gandalf catches Sam listening outside the window, he does not leave the choice up to Frodo, or to Sam, but makes the decision for them, declaring to Sam, “You shall go away with Mr. Frodo!” (63).

One chapter later Frodo meets up with Gildor and asks him for advice about what to do. The elf’s noncommittal response is to tell him, “The choice is yours: to go or wait” (82). When Frodo complains about this non-answer, Gildor explains, “Elves seldom give unguarded advice, for advice is a dangerous gift” (83), dangerous indeed, for it may unduly influence free will. Gildor finally, reluctantly, counsels Frodo to “go now at once, without delay,” and then with words that mirror Gandalf’s, he adds this unsolicited extra: “Take such friends as are trusty and willing” (83). Within twenty pages, both Gandalf and Gildor, Tolkien’s two wisest characters thus far, have each deliberately tried to avoid telling Frodo what he should do, but then in spite of this restraint have also strongly urged him to not act alone, as Bilbo has done and as Frodo is inclined to do.

If this advice from Gandalf and Gildor can be seen as two steps in Frodo’s journey from isolation to community, his encounter with Farmer Maggot can be seen as a third. Instead of being eaten by Farmer Maggot’s

dogs as he had been fearing, Frodo is invited in to supper and later given a basket of mushrooms as a parting gift. Frodo confesses, "I've been in terror of you and your dogs for over thirty years, Farmer Maggot, though you may laugh to hear it. It's a pity: for I've missed a good friend. And now I'm sorry to leave so soon. But I'll come back, perhaps, one day—if I get a chance" (93). Here Frodo has indeed found a new friend, but Tolkien does not record whether he ever keeps this promise to return; and in a story where Tolkien is especially careful to tie up all the loose ends and to revisit nearly every character on the way back, this may be a significant omission.

Despite his advice from Gandalf and Gildor, and in spite of this positive encounter with Farmer Maggot, Frodo's tendency towards isolation runs deep, making him especially resistant to the lesson about his need for community. In the following chapter the hobbits arrive at Crickhollow, and Sam—who at this point early in the story is not one to be telling his master what to do—has to firmly remind him about the advice which Frodo has either forgotten or is choosing to ignore. First Sam brings up Gandalf's instruction: "*He has some sense, mind you; and when you said go alone, he said no! take some as you can trust*" (103). As Frodo continues to be unwilling to accept his friends' assistance, Sam then must further remind him of Gildor's words. "And after all, sir," Sam says, "You did ought to take the Elves' advice. Gildor said you should take them as was willing, and you can't deny it" (103). At this point Frodo finally relents, or appears to relent, telling the hobbits, "I give in. I will take Gildor's advice" (103). As readers will discover, Frodo only partially keeps the pledge he makes here.

Gandalf, Gildor, and Sam are not the only ones who attempt to correct Frodo's misconceptions about community. Merry, the wisest and most insightful of Frodo's circle, complains to Frodo about his characteristic pattern of isolation and secrecy from his friends, telling him, "You are not a very easy nut to crack" (103). When Frodo complains, "But it does not seem that I can trust anyone" (103), he may be stating the basic problem at the root of his isolation: a fundamental unwillingness to trust others. Merry points out the flaw in Frodo's perception in no uncertain terms, telling Frodo,

"It all depends on what you want. [...] You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep

any secret of yours—closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word.” (103)

Merry concludes his lecture about community with a point which Frodo has never fully understood, explaining: “We are your friends” (103).

Pippin, usually the most talkative of the four hobbits, speaks only once during this discussion. In a few words, he makes clear the point that Frodo has been unable to grasp, telling him, “You do not understand. [...] You must go—and therefore we must, too” (102).

Just before the Nine Walkers are about to set out from Rivendell—after Gandalf, Gildor, Merry, Pippin, and Sam all have intervened with their advice and instruction about friendship—Elrond makes a prophecy which has particular significance for Frodo, saying, “you may find friends upon your way when you least look for it” (268). Elrond’s statement here sums up the relationship of Frodo’s external and internal quests. As Frodo seeks for Mount Doom where the One Ring was forged, along the way when he is least looking for it, he also finds friendship—in saving Middle-earth, he will also save himself.

At this point in the story Elrond gives Frodo no choice of traveling alone, saying, “I will choose you companions to go with you” (268). Frodo will travel with the fellowship which has been imposed upon him until they reach Amon Hen. There Aragorn tells him, “Your own way you alone can choose. In this matter I cannot advise you” (387). Here ignoring all of the advice given to him on the importance of companions, Frodo, the first time he is given the choice, reverts to his same old pattern. After his encounter with Boromir, Frodo climbs to the Seat of Seeing where he makes up his mind, declaring, “I will go alone” (392). And with this he puts on the Ring and vanishes, just like Bilbo, without any explanation or goodbyes.

Fortunately, Frodo’s friends know his ways and quickly figure out what he is up to. Pippin points out, “he doesn’t like to ask anyone to go with him, poor old fellow” (394). Sam, who best understands Frodo, tells the group, “If he screws himself up to go, he’ll want to go alone” (394). Boromir returns with the news that he and Frodo have argued and that Frodo then put on the Ring. Merry points out that this is just the pattern that Bilbo used to follow in order to escape “the unwelcome visitor” (395). As the group splits up to look for Frodo, Sam guesses correctly that his master has gone against all of the advice he has received up to now, that he

has reverted to his old ways of isolation and seclusion and has taken a boat by himself. Throwing himself in the river, Sam literally forces Frodo to take him, saying, "I'm coming too, or neither of us isn't going" (397). Only when given no choice does Frodo reluctantly agree to take Sam with him, but only Sam.

It is in his journeys through Mordor that Frodo gradually comes to learn the lesson which he has been so resistant to, the lesson about community and the importance of not always trying to go it alone. One catalyst for his growing awareness is that for the first time he comes face to face with what a life of complete isolation looks like, in the form of Gollum. Frodo had heard the story of Gollum from Gandalf, of how Gollum was expelled from his community and how he "wandered in loneliness" until he found a cave and "wormed his way like a maggot into the heart of the hills" and "vanished out of all knowledge" (53). Gandalf has told Frodo this same fate "might have happened to others, even to some hobbits that I have known" (53). As Frodo travels day after day with Gollum, he can see for himself the final outcome of his pattern of seclusion: he sees that in the end, if he keeps on this path, he *will* become like Gollum.

A second factor which helps contribute to Frodo's growing awareness may be the expectation of his own death, a realization that leads Frodo to a greater reflection on what his life has been so far. When Frodo admits that he has little hope for their survival after destroying the Ring, he uses relational terms he has not used before, calling Sam, his "dearest hobbit" and his "friend of friends" (610).

As they near Cirith Ungol, Sam and Frodo rest for a moment, and Sam wonders whether their own story will ever be made into a song or a tale. Frodo responds, "But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted." Then taking the part of the imagined audience, he adds, "I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad?" When Sam complains, "Now, Mr. Frodo [...] you shouldn't make fun. I was serious," Frodo replies, "So was I [...] and so I am" (697). Frodo has finally at this point learned something about interdependence: he knows with certainty that he would not have gotten far without help from Sam, and that he was mistaken in ever thinking he should go alone.

After the Ring is destroyed, the final words Frodo will utter before lying down for what he believes to be his death will be words about community and connectedness. With his last bit of strength Frodo will declare, "I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam." (926).

In the end, Frodo and Sam succeed together in their quest, and as they are about to return to the Shire, Gandalf comments on how the hobbits have matured from their experience. He tells them, "I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for. Do you not yet understand? [...] you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now" (974). Later Saruman comments on Frodo's growth, stating, "You have grown, Halfling [...] Yes, you have grown very much" (996). Of course another aspect of Frodo's journey from isolation has been his lessons in compassion and pity, pity which he shows Gollum, Saruman, and Gríma.

Further evidence of Frodo's growth from isolation to community can be found in his final encounter with his only surviving relative. The last time Frodo had seen Lobelia was the day before he left the Shire. At that point in the story, Frodo made sure to drink up the last drop of Old Winyards, least the Sackville-Bagginses "get their claws on it" (67). When Lobelia came over to pick up the spare key, the narrator makes it a point to tell us that "Frodo did not offer her any tea" and that after their last meal at Bag End, the hobbits "left the washing up for Lobelia" (68). Frodo's interaction with her on his return is the very reverse. Frodo rides to Michel Delving to release Lobelia from the Lockholes where she has been held prisoner, and when she comes hobbling out of her dark and narrow cell, she is leaning on Frodo's arm (998). Lobelia, in evidence of their reconciliation, gives Bag End back to Frodo along with all that remains of her money with the request that Frodo use it to help "hobbits made homeless by the troubles." The narrator concludes, "So that feud was ended" (998).

While Bag End is being restored, Frodo stays at the Cottons, another indication of his movement from avoidance to community. When everything is ready, Merry and Pippin come from Crickhollow with Frodo's furniture, so that Bag End looks "very much as it always had" (1001), except that Frodo himself is older and wiser than he was a year before. Rather than returning to living all alone as he did before the quest, Frodo now asks Sam to move in with him and to bring Rosie with him, claiming, "There's room

enough in Bag End for as big a family as you could wish for" (1001). Another influence in bringing about the change we see in Frodo here may have been his visit to the house of Tom Bombadil. There he saw two very different people living together in harmony, two people who "in some fashion" seemed "to weave a single dance, neither hindering the other" (129).

A question which always arises in any analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* is to what extent we can say that Frodo was successful in his quest to destroy the Ring. Yes, the Ring is ultimately destroyed, but in the end, Frodo himself was not able to destroy it. A similar qualified response could be made for the question about to what extent Frodo was successful in his internal quest: to what extent can we say he was able to complete his personal journey from a life of isolation to a life of community? In most ways, Frodo has learned the lesson which has been put before him. This is evident in the details already mentioned as well as in the fact that at the end of the story when Frodo leaves the Shire for the Havens, he does not try to leave alone, but this time includes Sam. It is significant that the final line of dialogue that Tolkien gives Frodo in the story is the invitation to Sam, "Come now, ride with me!" (1006).

At the same time it must be noted that once again Frodo has failed to invite his other two good friends, Merry and Pippin; and now that the danger is over, there seems to be no reason for this omission. At the Gray Havens when Merry and Pippin ride up at the last minute, Pippin says, "You tried to give us the slip once before and failed, Frodo" (1007). Pippin might have said more accurately that, counting the time at Amon Hen, Frodo has tried to leave without them *twice* before. This instance makes a third time, suggesting that Frodo still has something to learn, still has further to go on his personal quest. And as before, Gandalf is there to correct Frodo's mistake.

Why must Frodo go on one more journey at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, this time to the Uttermost West? The reason we are given in the story is that the injuries he has received are too deep to be fully healed in this world. At their parting Arwen says to Frodo, "If your hurts grieve you still and the memory of your burden is heavy, then you may pass into the West, until all your wounds and weariness are healed" (953). Perhaps another reason why Frodo's external journey has not ended is because his inner quest is not quite finished. Frodo has one last step to take on his

journey from isolation to community, and the implication here, it could be argued, is that he will take this final personal step through this final voyage.

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MYTHIC CIRCLE

The Mythic Circle is a small literary magazine published annually by the Mythopoeic Society which celebrates the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. These adventuresome writers saw themselves as contributors to a rich imaginative tradition encompassing authors as different as Homer and H. G. Wells. *The Mythic Circle* is on the lookout for original stories and poems. We are also looking for artists interested in illustrating poems and stories.

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