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The Humanity of Sam Gamgee

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Abstract

A brief analysis of Sam's character and its realistic, human qualities. Argues that he provides the necessary "key to a commonplace reality which allows the reader to relate to the otherwise alien environment [...] and to identify with it."

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Sam Gamgee; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings, Bg Callahan

I was talking about -- the warrant that Williams had for pursuing the tale beyond the withdrawal of vision, out into the light of our plain life in history. Williams avoided three traps which he might easily have fallen into at the end. He might have left it at mere vision and the withdrawal thereof, which would have been sentimental; or he might have had the whole thing fall apart in merely sordid disintegration, which would have been modern; or he might have wrapped it all up tidily and reflected on it, which would have been moralistic.

But he did none of these, because none of these is true. Williams always has plain human life for his touchstone. How *does* life work? How *shall* we speak truly about our existence? If there is a worthy syllable in the whole of the *Arthuriad*, then we shall find that this final picture of Logres as being offered, as it were, to whomever will care to be one of the company, is very much of the essence. It is of the essence of plain life, and of Williams's handling of the materials, since all the images, splendid or small, rise to that point among the summer stars which so far from being remote from us, is, alas, the point where we must find ourselves or else choose Gomorrah. These images -- Bors, Percivale, and Galahad; Camelot, Caerleon, and Carbonek; Arthur, Lancelot, and Merlin; hazel, roses, and

gold-creamed flesh: is there a single one of them that is not in our laps right now, so to speak? Is there one of them that is otiose? One of them that beckons us *away* from the life we find in our offices and kitchens and along the freeways of California? If Logres is not to decide our attitude in a traffic jam, then of course Gomorrah will, and we will join the angry, honking imbroglio. If the Grail does not nourish us, then the bitter drink of P'o-l'u will, and we will find ourselves cutting into ticket lines and grabbing seats on subways and generally demanding our rights with a shrill and testy voice.

The final piquance about Williams's *Arthuriad* is, of course, that he would, with a wry twist at the corner of his mouth and a merry glint in his eye, tell us that the whole work is superfluous. The divine largesse didn't *have* to have Williams to tell us this story, any more than Arthur had to have Taliessin to command that charge at Mount Badon. Another would have served. But what a lovely thing it is that, in the plentitude of that largesse, Williams *was*, in fact, chosen to sing us these songs. We will miss that largesse wholly if we suppose that these songs are anything more than songs about Something Other and even more splendid than themselves.

THE HUMANITY OF SAM GAMGEE

by Jerome Rosenberg

In most successful works of fantasy there remains a key to commonplace reality which allows the reader to relate to the otherwise alien environment created by the writer and to identify with it. The recognition of such a key is vital to the teaching of works containing such a secondary universe remote from life as we know it. In J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, we relate to those themes which reveal and evaluate broad assumptions about the human condition -- man's sense of self-preservation, his patriotism and heroism, his innocence and provincialism, his intelligence and vision, his aggressiveness and apathy, his love of others, his goodness, and his capacity for evil. Tolkien's success in his trilogy, however, rests largely on his ability, not only to present, but to capture these human drives and transfer them emotionally to the average reader. Such a reader may be concerned less with the depth of the author's mythical insight and the scope of his grandiose panorama than with the intensity of human feeling portrayed by those characters faced with life in Middle Earth's chaotic world. For such a reader, Samwise Gamgee provides a guiding light in an otherwise dark and foreboding adventure.

Sam's reactions, really, are of the most mundane type. It is he who, on being made aware of Frodo's charge, says in effect, "Let's split!" Yet it is also he who, like most humans, puts down his own strongest feelings of self-preservation and marches headlong into the fray. Typical of Sam's reactions is his early comment upon being informed by the Wizard Gandalf that he may go with Frodo when the Ring-bearer leaves Bag End. Despite his eavesdropping, which clearly reveals the perilousness of Frodo's journey, Sam's initial reaction to his "good" fortune is, "Me, Sir! . . . Me go and see Elves and all! Hooray!" (I, 98, Ballantine edition.)¹ His is a typical human response to the prospect of adventure, however burdensome the reality of that adventure may prove to be.

Sam's early enthusiasm should not be taken as shallowness on his part. Indeed, a portion of

his humanity evolves from the fact that he is a rather well-developed and developing character. The depth of his personality is hinted at early in part I of the trilogy where he is depicted in a conversation with some fellow hobbits who, to be sure, are as convincingly human in their gossipy treatment of ideas as is Sam. Sam, however, is shown to be a cut above them in intellectual fibre. Having been told by his more skeptical fellows that the tales of strange creatures crossing the land are untrue, "Sam sat silent and said no more. 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 busy day tomorrow, if the weather cleared. The grass was growing fast. But Sam had more on his mind than gardening. After a while he sighed, and got up and went out . . . He walked home under the early stars through Hobbiton and up the Hill, whistling softly and thoughtfully" (I, 74-75). Though literally down-to-earth (it is he who, at the end of the War of the Rings, replants the defoliated Shire), Sam yet possesses the intellect that adds human complexity to his stature.

These two sides of Sam, his enthusiasm and his thoughtfulness, merge after he, Frodo, and the rest of their party leave Hobbiton and, early in their journey, spend the night with the Elves. Sam's blind enthusiasm for the Elves has cooled down somewhat, but what he has learned from them has increased his faithfulness to Frodo and his desire to see things through, whatever the consequences. Now, knowing the danger he might be placing himself in, he still wishes to continue the journey. Frodo has just asked Sam what he thinks of the Elves:

"They seem a bit above my likes and dislikes, so to speak," answered Sam slowly. "It don't seem to matter what I think about them. They are quite different from what I expected -- so old and young, and so gay and sad, as it were."

Frodo looked at Sam rather startled, half expecting to see some outward sign of the odd change that seemed to have come over him. It did not sound like the voice of the old Sam

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Gamgee that he thought he knew. But it looked like the old Sam Gamgee sitting there, except that his face was unusually thoughtful.

"Do you feel any need to leave the Shire now -- now that your wish to see them has come true already?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I don't know how to say it, but after last night I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back. It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want -- I don't rightly know what I want; but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it through, sir, if you understand me."

"I don't altogether. But I understand that Gandalf chose me a good companion. I am content. We will go together" (I, 126-27).

Sustaining his humble posture through his rather inarticulate explanation, Sam thus reveals a vision and strength of character that are both surprising and pleasing to Frodo.

Even with this new perspective on things, Sam retains his essential common touch; when Frodo decides that the travellers must take a hidden route off the main road and thus bypass a certain inn, Sam says he will go along with Frodo. But he does so, the narrator adds, "in spite of private misgiving and a deep regret for the best beer in the Eastfarthing" (I, 128). Even his ambitions are less than heroic, something more like humble; we learn that Sam will act bravely in pursuit of his service to Frodo and the others (including his pony, Bill), but when Frodo comments about Sam's talents and prophecies Sam's heroism, Sam's reaction is anything but proud: "'I am learning a lot about Sam Gamgee on the journey. First he was a conspirator, now he's a jester. He'll end up by becoming a wizard -- or a warrior!' 'I hope not,' said Sam. 'I don't want to be neither!'" (I, 278). As it turns out, Sam does become both advisor and warrior, though still not of his own choosing entirely. Having followed Frodo to a secret meeting and learned the dread secret of what was to have been Frodo's solitary and solemn mission, Sam cannot contain himself and jumps from his hiding place to protest the charge being given his master. As a result, Sam is directed to accompany Frodo: "Sam sat down, blushing and muttering. 'A nice pickle we have landed ourselves in, Mr. Frodo!' he said,

shaking his head" (I, 355). Sam will accept his role, but not without protest.

In the adventures that follow for two more volumes, Sam continually grows in character, always voicing a desire for the peace of home, but always responding heroically to the conditions that keep him from the comfort and security he so thoroughly desires. Throughout these adventures, Frodo's own dependence upon Sam suggests even more fully the stature and humanity of Sam's character. "'Where's Sam?'" -- a question asked by Frodo -- becomes a constant refrain as the hobbits move ever more closely toward Mordor. And it is at Mordor that Frodo's trust justifies itself, as Sam's courage and insight pull them through, even as his prior humanity for their enemy Gollum helps them to achieve success in their quest; for by allowing Gollum to live, Sam thereby also allows that creature to play the final role in the destruction of the Ring of Power that has brought so much evil into the world. It is only fitting that, at this climactic moment, Frodo says to Sam, "'I am so glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam'" (III, 277).

Sam's character, then, is a perhaps not-so-strange combination of village gossip, humble servant, able warrior, knowledgeable scout, faithful friend, merciful enemy, and hard-nosed skeptic who can be incorrect in judgment, as he is in his early mistrust of Strider. Lacking the nobility of Aragorn, the grandeur of the Elves, the harsh wisdom of Gandalf, the missionary zeal of Frodo, and the other utopian virtues of the more idealized members of the novel's community (many of whom leave Middle Earth for the fantasy realm beyond the Sea), Sam remains behind, in the real world of Middle Earth. Here he marries, prospers, and finally grows old,² helping all the while to bring the world, or at least his small part of it in the Shire, successfully into the Age of Men -- men whose virtues and flaws are so reflected in Sam's character. Sam remains with us, returning home at the end, where "there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected" (III, 385). His adventures over, Sam returns, sighing happily, to a common world of comfort and much-wished-for peace.

FOOTNOTES

¹ All citations, with volume and page numbers following in parentheses, are from the Ballantine edition of the J. R. R. Tolkien trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York, 1965), 3 vols.

² According to tradition, Sam does eventually pass over Sea, as the last of the Ring-bearers. But we learn this information only in the appendices (III, 472); within the narrative proper, Sam's commonplace humanity is sustained, and in fact emphasized by Tolkien, to the very end.



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