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The Humanity of Sam Gamgee

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The Humanity of Sam Gamgee

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, Bonnie GoodKnight
I was talking about -- the warrant that Williams had for pursuing the tale beyond the withdrawal of vision, out of 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 made the whole thing sacred, by an effort to produce a purely moralistic, idealistic vision of what is good in life, or the light of the human spirit, 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 lags 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 end the story, all the angry, honking, imbecile. If the Grail does not nourish us, then the bitter drink of P'o-1'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's sly way of doing it, 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.
want to be neither!" (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 human pity 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 more idealized 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, 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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