7-15-1987

Rites of Passage in *The Hobbit*

J. R. Wytenbroek

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol13/iss4/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm
Rites of Passage in *The Hobbit*

**Abstract**
Analyses the initiation phase of Campbell’s journey of the hero as represented by Bilbo’s journey through the Misty Mountains, interlude with the goblins, and battle with the spiders of Mirkwood.

**Additional Keywords**
Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces; Initiation of the hero in The Hobbit; Jungian analysis of Irish mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit
Rites of Passage in The Hobbit

J.R. Wytenbroek

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit."
Thus begins one of the great children's fantasy classics of all time. It is a tale full of wonderful things that children love openly, adults, covertly. It has all the right ingredients: magic, wizards, invisibility, a magic ring, exotic imaginary people such as dwarves and elves, dark places full of mystery and horror, bright places full of flowers and song, homey places for resting in between. And, of course, it has a dragon, and his treasure. It also introduces one of the most delightful races of creatures ever discovered in literature -- a race of creatures very much like us. It has hobbits.

It has all the right ingredients of a good fairy tale. It offers adventure, mystery, a quest, excitement. But like any good fairy tale, or fantasy, or myth, it offers more than simply these wonderful elements. The dragons, wizards, magic rings and the like are, as so often they are in such tales, symbols: symbols that touch the deepest part of the child, or the adult, and reveal to us all something new, or forgotten about ourselves and our world. Like so many children's stories about journeys or adventures, this is a story about the movement of a person from childhood into adulthood. Like so many myths, this story is about the journey of the hero from his obscure beginnings, through his initiating journey in which he finds himself and his place in his world, to the final end of his quest, its successful completion and his return. It is a story about maturation. It is the story of a hobbit who is given the chance to discover himself and his potential to the fullest. It is a story about life.

This article concentrates on just one part of The Hobbit, the part that relates most directly to the initiation of the hero, Bilbo the hobbit, into fully realized, potentiated and individuated hobbithood. Consequently we shall concentrate on Bilbo's journey through the Misty Mountains, after he is captured by, and escapes from, the goblins. We shall also consider carefully his battle with the spiders of Mirkwood.

In many myths the development of the hero appears in four stages. First there is the call to the quest, which often includes a revelation of who the hero really is. This call may be resisted at first, but it is always finally accepted. That stage is followed by the journey towards the goal, which usually includes some sort of initiating and purifying experience. Then there is the achievement of the quest, and finally, the return. Although we are primarily concerned with the second part of the hero's development, we must place it in context to fully understand it.

The first stage of development is the call. The call comes when Gandalf first appears before Bilbo, on the fourth page of the book, announcing that his is looking for someone who is interested in an adventure. Bilbo, of course, is not. At this point, Bilbo is the ignorant hero, hidden away in obscurity. To be more precise, he is a well-to-do, respectable hobbit who enjoys all the gentle pleasures of a comfortable home and full table, and who has never had the slightest inclination to experience anything beyond these simple pleasures. He is, indeed, a most unpossessing hero. However, despite his initial refusal, the call is renewed with the arrival of the dwarves, and even Bilbo feels the stirring of his blood when the old ballad is chanted. Thus, only half aware of what he is doing, he answers the call and sets out on his quest.

What Bilbo's quest really is, is not clearly explained, either to him or to the reader. He is to be the burglar of the group, which is a most unheroic task. Furthermore, the treasure that he is supposed to steal is not his nor has it anything to do with his
past, his ancestors or his people, as it does with the dwarves. Therefore stealing the treasure is not really Bilbo’s own quest. Thus we can assume that his own quest lies elsewhere, but within the parameters of the dwarves quest for treasure. The true purpose of Bilbo’s quest seems to be finding himself. Gandalf says several times, in the early chapters, that “there is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea himself” (p. 28). He himself has chosen Bilbo as the fourteenth member of the group, although a small dwarf would seem to have been just as suited for the task of burglarly, and would have a more vested interest in the successful completion of the enterprise. It would seem, then, that Gandalf, the wise old man figure of so many fairy adventure myths, wants Bilbo to discover exactly what it is that is in him, and this would seem to be his real quest, not the adventure for which he is chosen.

The dwarves themselves have a rather low opinion of Bilbo after they first meet him. The only one who both believes in and seems to be aware of Bilbo’s true potential is Gandalf, who gives the hero and often a gift or gifts which will help the hero achieve his quest. Through his belief in Bilbo, Gandalf gives him the first gift he needs to accomplish his quest -- confidence. But Bilbo does not show much promise at first of being a good burglar, let alone a hero. In his first exploit, he tries to steal the troll’s purse, and gets himself and all the dwarves captured and almost murdered. Bilbo continues to bumble along in this manner, feeling wretched and very out of place on a quest that he is really not interested in, until the group is captured by goblins in the Misty Mountains. He becomes separated from the others, and his own adventure truly begins.

Bilbo’s journey down into the prehistoric darkness of the roots of the mountains is a type which appears again and again in heroic myths throughout the ages and races of man. The descent into darkness is essential before a true understanding of the self can be obtained. For the journey into darkness and the underworld represents the journey into the self. The hero must face himself, discovering and recognizing both his strengths and weaknesses, conscious and unconscious selves, before he can move back into the light, reborn, stronger, better than he was before, integrated and whole. Joseph Campbell says in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, “...the adventure truly begins when the hero normally follows the pattern... described: a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (p. 35). This pattern can be traced through the whole novel, and appears in its entirety in different sections of the story. When he is separated from the others, Bilbo is alone in the darkness under the mountain. He is literally as well as figuratively cut off from the rest of the world. He is forced, for the first time in the novel, to be completely reliant upon his own resources. He is forced to face and come to terms with himself, his abilities, weaknesses and strengths in a way he has never had to before. And during this dark journey into himself, he must meet his shadow, the deep, lurking unconscious that resides with all of us, according to Jung, which is a receptacle of all that we are but do not recognize ourselves to be before our first encounter with that unconscious self. And so it is, for Bilbo. Deeper and deeper he travels into the darkness until, at last, he finds himself at the roots of the great mountains, the roots of his own being. There, waiting for him, is his shadow: Gollum. The encounter with Gollum is frightening, horrifying, as any encounter with our shadow self must be. But it is also enlightening. For example, Bilbo learns a certain shrewdness from Gollum that he applies advantageously in several later situations, a quality that was not present in him before this encounter. Bilbo learns to be shrewd, but does not take on the negative side of that shrewdness which Gollum so blatantly displays in his treacherous deceptions. Thus the qualities of the shadow are accepted and used by the hero who is intelligent and open enough to see their value, but their negative tendencies are tightly controlled by the fully awakened consciousness.

Here, in the depths of the mountain, Bilbo finds a thing of great worth. He finds, of course, the ring, the talisman that is the external aid which will help give him the confidence and skill he needs for the rest of his journey. However, he finds not only the ring at the mountain’s roots but also pity and compassion, when he decides not to kill Gollum using his new-found powers of invisibility, but to let him live:

Bilbo almost stopped breathing, and went stiff himself. He was desperate. He must get away out of his horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo’s heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in a flash of a second. He trembled. And then quite suddenly in another flash, as if lifted by a new strength and resolve, he leaped. No great leap for a man, but a leap in the dark. Straight over Gollum’s head he jumped, seven feet forward and three in the air; indeed, had he known it, he only just missed cracking his skull on the low arch of the passage.

Gollum threw himself backwards, and grabbed as the hobbit flew over him, but too late... (p. 97).

He risks himself and his own life rather than kill this miserable creature on whom he has taken pity. This act marks the true release of the power latent within the hero, and his first step towards integration and wholeness. Campbell states that for true selfhood to be achieved, the ego must be laid aside. Bilbo sets his ego aside when he reaches out in compassion and pity to the undesirable and unlovable other, risking his own life rather than taking the life of that other. This action is truly heroic, and through it Bilbo is reborn from a lowly, unconfident, safety- and comfort-loving hobbit into a leader of men (or in this case, dwarves), who not only will but can do what he must to achieve their quest, as well as his own.

Initiation rites symbolize death to the old life and rebirth to the new. Bilbo is initiated into adulthood and psychic wholeness when he enters the dark depths of the mountains (symbolic, simultaneously, of both womb and tomb), and issues out into the light again from the gateway between darkness and light, the secret interior world and the broad, open, exterior world. He is a new person, for he has met with and assimilated his shadow, partly through his act of com-
passion, and partly through the medium of the ring. For the ring had been Gollum's, and much of who Gollum now is, the ring has made him. Therefore by taking the ring with him and wearing it, Bilbo symbolically merges with his shadow and thus becomes integrated, whole and realized. For he will not become deformed and depraved through either the influence of the ring or his association with Gollum, simply because he is a strong and positive character, and the positive conscious self was in control at the time of the meeting between the hobbit and his shadow. The ascendency of the positive conscious is shown through Bilbo's pity and compassion for his shadow self. He is a much stronger character and personality than is Gollum, eaten away as he has been for so many years by both the ring and the darkness in which he lives. Therefore, because the conscious self is stronger than the shadow here, it remains transcendent when the symbolic merging takes place. Furthermore, because of the deep moral strength which sees Bilbo through this intense testing and proving experience, the ring cannot harm him or lessen him in any way.

However, the experience in the mountain is only part of the initiation process of this hero. Even as initiation rites may include several stages, so Bilbo is not completely mature and whole until he has passed through Mirkwood. In this story, then, the wholeness and maturity achieved through the recognition, tapping and amalgamation/overcoming of the unconscious are presented in two stages. The second stage is separated from the first by a period of time during which the new knowledge and maturity attained during the first stage incubates before it can be fully realized and brought into the conscious self. For just as Bilbo did not initially recognize the value of the ring he had found until he had discovered it through use, neither does he realize the value or strength given him through his encounter with his shadow. Thus, for a couple of chapters, he remains apparently as he was before his experience in the Misty Mountains; voluble but relatively meek Bilbo Baggins, showing no great change in personality or leadership qualities, and still submitting to the guidance of the wise old man, Gandalf. Therefore both parts of the initiation process are absolutely essential before the fully mature and realized hero can emerge from the timid, home-loving hobbit.

Mirkwood is important in the novel because it is here that the second stage of Bilbo's rites of passage takes place. It is in Mirkwood that full maturation is achieved. The wild wood or forest is frequently an obstacle the hero must pass in mythopoetic literature, but it is particularly symbolic in children's literature as a place of maturation, which the child enters and from which the man or woman emerges. It is perhaps this part of Bilbo's journey, more than any other, that locks him most noticeably into the great pattern so predominant in children's literature throughout the ages.

The opening into the forest is much like the openings into and out of the mountains. In the Misty Mountains, the dwarves and Bilbo are captured when goblins issue out of a crack that has opened up in the back of the cave in which the group has taken shelter from a storm. When Bilbo leaves the mountains, he pushes himself through the crack between the stone door and the side of the mountain, and issues from the darkness into the bright light of day. The transition from darkness into light is very evident here, with all its symbolic overtones. The journey into Mirkwood reverses this experience:

The entrance to the path was like a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel made by two great trees that leaned together, too old and strangled with ivy and hung with lichen to bear more than a few blackened leaves. The path itself was narrow and wound in and out among the trunks. Soon the light at the gate was like a little bright hole far behind, and the quiet was so deep that their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened. (p. 151)

The trip through Mirkwood is fraught with peril. Not only is the darkness unremitting and oppressive, but the air is stuffy, and hard to breathe. The forest is populated with dark and unwholesome creatures such as black squirrels and creatures with large, luminous eyes that glow in the dark, "horrible pale bulbous sort of eyes. 'Insect eyes,' [Bilbo] thought, 'not animal eyes, only they are much too big'" (p. 152). The luminescent eyes are reminiscent of Gollum who was "as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes in his face" (p. 82). These eyes bring particular fear to Bilbo, because, although he does not know it yet, the owners of those large "insect" eyes will be the source of the second stage of his initiation process.

Hungry, weary, disheartened and heavily burdened with the fat Bombur who had slipped into the enchanted stream and fallen fast asleep, the group finally breaks the major taboo Gandalf invoked before he left them at the entrance to the forest, which was never to leave the path under any circumstances. In desperation and despair they break the taboo and immediately trouble comes of it as they find themselves lost in the dark, separated from each other and finally captured by gigantic spiders who intend to eat them. However Bilbo, far more wary and alert since his trip underground, is not completely caught off-guard as his companions are. He wakes up in time to free himself from the cocoon the spider is weaving around him, and he kills the spider with his Elven sword, Sting. The fact that his blade is Elven-made indicates that it is a power for good and right. Bilbo is emboldened by his triumph, for he has not fled from evil this time, but he has confronted it and triumphed over it, enabled by the new strength gained from his encounter with his shadow:

Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else, made a great difference to Mr. Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into its sheath. (p. 167)

It is not enough that he defeats his own demons, however. He must go the rescue of his friends, who, not having gone through the same initiation process in the mountains as his, are much more easily entrapped by their enemies.

He finds his friends just before they become dinners for the hideous spiders. He draws the spiders away, at some risk to himself, releases his friends and then has to battle the returning spiders almost single-handedly, because the dwarves are too weak from
their mistreatment to be of much help. At much greater risk to himself than before, he draws the spiders away again, and then charges them all alone, while the others try to run off. This is a very different hobbit from the one we met before the Misty Mountains, the hobbit who worried about starting a journey without a pocket-handkerchief, who trembled and stuttered before the trolls, and who needed to be saved from the wargs. This hobbit has confidence, strength, and a selfless courage that places the good of his friends above his own good, even as he returns to kill Gollum earlier, despite the risk to himself. Here, during the actual confrontation of evil (Gollum is more wretched and desperate than evil), Bilbo comes into his own, and becomes truly adult and whole, becomes a hero. He is able to fight the spiders, always symbols of great evil in Tolkien's novels, because of the wholeness achieved unconsciously in his meeting with his shadow. But until that confrontation occurs, the wholeness is not brought from the unconscious into the conscious and the hero is, therefore, not truly integrated or strong. He must have his new strength revealed to him and tested before that transition from ordinary man to hero, or from childhood to adulthood, can be achieved.

In a sense, therefore, Bilbo completes his personal quest for wholeness and self-realization in Mirkwood. In The Uses of Enchantment, Bruno Bettelheim says "The forest... symbolizes the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be" (p. 93). Just as Bilbo confronted and merged with his shadow through pity and compassion in the darkness of the womb/tomb under the mountains, so in Mirkwood he faces the most intensely negative aspect of his shadow, the true evil within himself, in the shape of spiders. Gollum was malicious, spiteful and treacherous. He could murder without thought or feeling. However, Gollum was a victim of the ring and his own misery and self-absorption, and was pitiable in his wretchedness. There is, in that misery, some remnant of humanity that reaches out and touches Bilbo's heart, and the heart of the reader.

The spiders are different. They have no humanity, they are creations and embodiments of the darkness itself, a primordial darkness that lingers in the impenetrable, unexplored parts of the world, and the psyche. They are the incarnation of nightmare. There can be no meeting with them, no true contract, for there is no common ground. They are the demons of the soul, and they must be routed and conquered, unlike the shadow who can be met and amalgamated with the conscious individual into one whole being. They are messengers of the deepest fear that has inhabited the world since the earliest times, and as such can never be accepted, only conquered. And Bilbo confronts them, resolutely, steadily if warily, until they are all either dead or fled. So he gains, at that moment of weary victory, complete mastery of himself, a complete wholeness, as he drives out the demons of primeval darkness from his soul, and becomes a receptacle for light.

From the maturity and wholeness achieved by successfully completing both stages of initiation, Bilbo can go on to rescue his friends from the Elven dungeons, to face the dragon Smaug in his own lair, and to right the great wrong committed by the dwarves against the people of Laketown. Although these are all instances of setting ego aside in service to others, thereby potentially achieving wholeness of self, these later acts are contingent on the changes and developments brought about by Bilbo's earlier rites of passage. They are now simply in keeping with the reborn character of the hero, rather than being part of the initiation rites themselves. In one sense, Bilbo leaves his experience in Mirkwood to return, as do the heroes of so many myths, to bring healing and salvation to his people or, in this case, his adopted people, both the dwarves and the men of Laketown. (His own kin, the hobbits, do not need him, and therefore he does not physically return to them until he has performed all the necessary heroic and redemptive tasks he must perform, as hero, for those who need him. It is his nephew Frodo, in The Lord of the Rings, who must return to his own people, after saving the rest of Middle-earth, to bring help and healing to his own land, stricken as it is by the remnant of the evil that lurks in the shire after Sauron's defeat.)

One of the most frequent arguments offered against an interpretation of Bilbo as hero in The Hobbit is that he achieves much of his future successes through trickery rather than strength, and that he does not kill the dragon himself, lacking the strength. The answer to the first accusation should be self-evident. Many of the heroes of ancient myth have won their freedom, their lives or their knowledge through trickery. Cleverness of mind is as important in myths and fairy tales as strength of body. The mark of the true hero is that he knows himself truly, and that he can master any situation that he must, in any way he can. Even the great Odysseus, warrior that he was, won his way back to Ithaca not through strength but through cleverness. Thus the hero recognizes his limitations, and uses the facilities with which he has been most fully endowed, and which are appropriate to the situation he is in. Bilbo is not, nor ever can, a warrior. He has learned shrewdness from his shadow, and he uses it whenever necessary. It achieves the same ends, and it is no less heroic just because it is more subtle than physical strength. The courage to use it and the knowledge of when and how to use it are the important factors.

The second allegation that Bilbo does not himself kill the dragon is answered partly by my answer to the first argument, i.e., it is not possible for him to kill the dragon, although he does lure it out of its cave so that a true warrior can kill it. But more importantly here is the fact that Bilbo does not need to kill the dragon. The dragon represents many things in mythology, but almost all of them are negative. It stands in the way, very often, of the hero achieving his quest and, thereby, achieving wholeness. Bilbo achieved these things largely through his meeting with Gollum, and they were substantiated, confirmed and completed in his confrontation and defeat of the spiders in Mirkwood. The dragon is not Bilbo's enemy and therefore there is no need for him to kill it, as he has won through to maturity and heroism in Mirkwood. The dwarves cannot kill it, even as they could not properly confront the spiders, or even evade them in the first place. They have gone through no process of self-realization or maturation. They are not ready and therefore not able to confront evil in any form, either internally or externally, as shown when they cannot even conquer their own greed enough to repay the townspeople who were so generous to them, and who have suffered because of them. They cannot kill the dragon because it is too much like them — consumed with greed. Only Bard, needing to prove himself perhaps not so much to himself but to his townfolk, a man who is pure in...
Ms. Nicolson says of Perelandra is also true of it, that "the Christian apologist has temporarily eclipsed the poet and the artist." (Ibid., p. 251n)

The similarities and differences between Lewis and Orwell as persons, between their responses to totalitarianism, and between their uses and attitudes toward myth come to focus, finally, on the degree of optimism each projects. Orwell, in Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-Four seems to offer little hope. The last man in Europe succumbs; at the end of the book Winston Smith is a pathetic figure -- an alcoholic, broken in body, mind, and spirit. With that the Party's victory seems complete; no one can or will escape the tyranny. Yet Orwell himself was not without hope. The book is warning, not prediction. He apparently had faith that the solid, old English traits he discussed in The Lion and the Unicorn [11] would see his country through this threat, if only it were on guard against the danger. That hideous Strength, on the contrary, has a fairy-tale ending: the Good overcomes the Evil and all is well. But the victory is too easy to be convincing and satisfying realistically. If an organization like the N.I.C.E actually began to gain a foothold, one wants to protest, clairvoyant dreams and Arthurian figures are not going to come along and sweep it away. Lewis is less optimistic when he treats the same topics in an essay entitled "Is Progress Possible?" It concludes by asking "whether we can discover any way of submitting to the world-wide paternalism of a technocracy [which seems best able to handle the desperate problems of the world faces] without losing all personal privacy and independence." (God in the Dock, p. 316) He supplies no answer to the question. The most that can be said, perhaps, is that the hope for both lies in myth: so long as the kind of myth Animal Farm and Nineteen Eighty-four are can be created and circulated, and so long as respect for, and even minimal adherence to, the Old Western myth remains, we can have confidence that the danger represented by totalitarianism will be held at bay.

NOTES


[11] The Lion and the Unicorn (1941) is reprinted in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, op. cit. The opening section, "England Your England," is available in The Orwell Reader (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956) and George Orwell, A Collection of Essays (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954) and thus is comparatively well known; the latter two sections, "Shopkeepers at War" and "The English Revolution," important to a full understanding of Orwell's thought, have unfortunately been neglected.

Rites of Passage in The Hobbit, continued from page 8