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Tom Bombadil: A Critical Essay

Abstract

An examination of Bombadil's appearances in *The Lord of the Rings*; primarily an appreciation.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Tom Bombadil

Tom Bombadil



A Critical Essay by Keith Masson

If Tolkien were available for questioning, I would like to ask him the same question Frodo asked Goldberry: 'Tell me, if my asking does not seem foolish, who is Tom Bombadil?' I would avoid asking what he represents, for that would probably seem foolish in view of Tolkien's prejudice against allegory, but I would hope for a clearer explanation than Frodo got. At first Goldberry almost seems to be describing Bombadil as an Incarnation of God. She simply says, 'He is.' It sounds something like the theophany in the burning bush. She does not exactly say, 'He is that he is,' but she does say, 'He is, as you have seen him.' Furthermore, 'he is the Master of wood, water, and hill.'

On the other hand, neither the land nor its inhabitants belong to him. 'All things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves.' But if such a good hearty fellow is really their master, why is his domain — a much-shrunken domain, apparently — so sinister?

His mastery seems to be connected with the fact that 'he has no fear.' But what good is a character in a story who has (literally) no fear — unless he is a warrior inspired by Ares, or a pathetic innocent unaware of danger, or a self-anesthetized man like Frost in *That Hideous Strength*? Bombadil is none of these; that is, it seems clear that we are not meant to suppose him blind to his real situation. But if he has no grounds for fear — if he is the Immutably and impassable — can he sensibly appear as a character in a story?

Bombadil's function is obvious enough at his first appearance in the story, but that is part of the trouble about him: he may not be God, but surely he is a *deus ex machina*? Frodo cries for help (prays?) and along comes Bombadil just in time to pull the hobbits feet first out of an impossible situation.

Whatever he is, we are apparently meant to regard him with some sort of awe. But how can we, when he comes on bellowing like a drunken half-witted clodhopper? His 'merry doles' and 'ding a dillies' are downright embarrassing. What is all this vociferous cheerfulness about?

I am willing to suppose that my reaction to Bombadil's jollity is at least partly to be blamed on my own glum inhibitions. Very likely a right-minded person would have no objection to kicking off heels on occasion, and might not even cringe at a 'hey nonny nonny.' But occasion seems to make no difference to Tom Bombadil, and even the hobbits thought his songs sounded like nonsense.

Even if he is invincible and has no griefs of his own, yet if he is to be a sympathetic character, as the author clearly intends, must he not be sympathetic in the other sense — touched by the sorrows of others? But evidently his happiness is imperturbable.

Having saved the hobbits from their desperate plight ('Naught worse for that, eh?') he wastes no time in commiseration but goes hopping off down the trail singing and leaves them to struggle after him as best they can. Later he tells them of the malice that fills the Old Forest, of the Barrow-wights walking in the ancient tombs in the hills under which his house is nestled, and much more of this sort; and 'often his voice would turn to song, and he would get out of his chair and dance about.' In the same mood he played with the terrible Ring ('Frodo was perhaps a trifle annoyed with Tom for seeming to make light of what even Gandalf thought so perilously important'); and finally, sending them off into mortal danger, he returned home singing and tossing his hat in the air.

Well, whoever he is, he takes his merry-making seriously. In fact, he seems to regard it as his business. He refuses to accompany the hobbits because he has his singing to do.

At this point one may recall that joy is one of the primary Christian graces, and is the ultimate end of existence. 'Joy is the serious business of heaven.' Can we put up with imperturbable joy — allow the blessed to be unshaken in their bliss by the misery of the damned? Of course to take such questions seriously is to be troubled by thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis makes George MacDonald say that to give the negative answer would be to make a dog in the manger the tyrant of the universe, and give hell a veto over heaven.

But Tolkien keeps theology pretty well in the background; the more immediate question is Bombadil's success as an imaginative creation. It seems to me that as we continue reading he does, in fact, more and more conquer our imagination. He is so solid a figure, and at the same time becomes more mysterious the more we learn of him.

We come to accept his fearlessness and invincible joy partly because he is neither one of the Big People nor one of the Little People, nor is he apparently of any other group: he is the Eldest and 'knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless.' One of the most persuasive moments (to give a mere impressionistic reaction) is when he took the Ring and slipped it on his finger without becoming invisible, and 'suddenly he put it to his eye and laughed. For a second the hobbits had a vision, both comical and alarming, of his bright blue eyes gleaming through a circle of gold.'

Of course, such a creature can be proper only to a world in which good is the ultimate reality and laughter is at the heart of things. But the world (the one he is in, as well as the one we are in) does not seem so. Riding from the Downs back to the Road, 'Tom sang most of the time, but it was chiefly nonsense, or else

perhaps a strange language unknown to the hobbits, an ancient language whose words were mainly those of wonder and delight'. The author gives us no examples; presumably he does not know that language either and cannot say how joy is at the center of things. But if this is not true — if good is not ultimate — why say anything? I suppose it must be the case that if there is no cause for singing, there is no cause for speaking either.

The theology in the background is also involved in the coincidences in the book. Bombadil did not hear Frodo calling: he was busy singing. 'Just chance brought me then, if chance you call it. It was no plan of mine, though I was waiting for you.' A novelist (or even a philosopher) seems to have only three possible worlds to choose from: a world in which good is the basic reality and must finally triumph; an evil world; and a meaningless world. Most modern fiction (along with most modern philosophy) is about the last. Tolkien wrote about the first, which he believed to be the real world. We may find it hard to suspend our disbelief in a novel in which good is a reality, since in our age we can hardly help being positivists or existentialists. It is fairly hard to avoid believing (or feeling) that the universe finally boils down to atoms (or less) buzzing in a void, with no place for real values. But again, if this is the basic truth, why bother to say anything? If we are meaningless entities in a meaningless universe, what is the point of saying so? And how can the very saying of it fail to be entangled in the meaninglessness? If we spring from the irrational, then all that we say and think is irrational. But we cannot, without self-contradiction, think that all our thought is irrational. And so far as this point is concerned, the evil universe and the irrational universe seem to be one. If so, then logically we must believe that the real universe is good. But to believe this with heart and nerves is often hard enough — which is one reason why a book such as *The Lord of the Rings* is worthwhile. From this point of view, it is the opposite of escapism.

Meanwhile my question remains unanswered. Who is Tom Bombadil? 'Well who are you?' he replies when Frodo asks him — and the reader is suddenly confronted with the fact that he himself is a mystery. In Christian terms, to be a self is to be a little image of the ultimate mystery.

But still, what kind of thing is he? — if he belongs to a kind. In some respects he is a revelling woodland deity of pagan myth. The dwarves call him Forn: if dwarves speak with an English accent, this will sound like Faun. As the hobbits listened to his tales, 'they began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things were at home.' Is he one aspect of the quality of 'nature' and Goldberry the other? We are told that 'the hobbits sat in wonder and half in laughter: so fair was the grace of Goldberry and so merry and odd the caperings of Tom. Yet in some fashion they seemed to weave a single dance.'

His mastery of wood and water and hill seems to be something like Adam's was meant to be: a mastery which depends on self-mastery and in which the subjects still have freedom. Goldberry's smile fades when Frodo asks her if the land belongs to him: 'That would indeed be a burden.' That is the kind of mastery

Sauron lusts after, power to absorb all other things into himself. Bombadil is immune to this temptation: he rejoices in things being themselves. The Ring has no power over him because he has no desire for the kind of power it offers — cannot even understand why others would want it. He is secure in the power of joy, and the power of darkness can get no hold in his mind.

But I am assailed by the fear that much of what I have said is too allegorical for a Tolkienian creature, that there is too much 'message,' and I end in doubts. Is his saving of the hobbits from the Barrows a resurrection?

How is it that he can exorcise the Barrow-wight and consign him to 'outer darkness? And why does he not do the same to the rest of them? And what is the significance of his being the oldest person in Middle-earth?

Well, even the council of Elrond seemed puzzled and uncertain about him. Elrond had forgotten about him, and felt unsure whether this was 'the same that walked the woods and hills long ago, and even then was older than the old.' They doubt that he would be absolutely invincible: Glorfindel says, 'I think that in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come.'

I can only agree with Sam: 'He's a caution and no mistake. I reckon we may go a good deal further and see naught better, nor queerer.'

World of Fanzines

by Your Ubiquitous Editor

GWYNYSTORM

I think it is appropriate that I should review *Gwynystorm*, since there was an elaborate plot sustained to keep its existence secret until the first issue was presented to me in a surprise ceremony at Mythcon. *Gwynystorm* is a kind of friendly underground parody of *Mythlore*, *Underground*, since it was planned, written, illustrated, and put together by Mythopoeic Society members. It was first thought of by its two editors, David Ring and Bruce McMenomy, around October 1969. They managed to keep the whole thing unknown to me, although they paid Bernie Zuber, the Mythcon Program Book editor, to include the then-mysterious word "GWYNYSTORM" in the Program Book. In helping Bernie prepare the book, I asked what that ad was for. He said he was sworn to secrecy, and pumping as much as I could, I couldn't discover what it was. I was thinking it might be some mysterious entry in the *Masquerade*.

I found out at the first night of Mythcon. Suddenly, into the large darkened room where Bernie was showing color slides of past Mythopoeic events, came this double row of guards, barefoot, wearing white tunics and carrying eight-foot spears in hand. These were the Imperial Formenorian Guards. Formenor (Formen + North in *Loth*) is a land north of Middle-earth, on the other side of the North Pole. If you want to know more about this extension of Middle-earth, you must ask Bruce McMenomy, who created (discovered?) Formenor. Anyway, I was called forth in the darkness to discover my fate. At that point I didn't know what was going to happen. Then, as the lights came on, there stood Bruce and David, in tunics also, carrying the first issue of *Gwynystorm* on a tray. I was then presented with the first copy, while David explained what it was to the assembled multitude. Phil Heiple remarked that I looked "dumb-founded" at the founding of this new fanzine. I replied that this was indeed a very "dumb-founding experience."

The issue, if not dumbfounding, certainly has much to make it in a class by itself. It is an unusual mixture of humorous material with serious, with a good amount of worthy artwork besides. The cover is of *Gwynystorm*, the city in George MacDonald's "Curdie" books, by Tim Kirk. The back cover is of the Balrog and Gandalf by Bonnie Bergstrom. Other art in the issue is by Bonnie, Phil Heiple, and Bruce McMenomy.

Humorous material includes "The Council of Orion," a mad-lib version of one of my editorials in *Mythlore*, a blank page listed as "The Emperor's New Clothes," and Letters to the Editor, with the spoof of writers commenting on the two previous issues. Excellent serious articles by Hulan, Sadler, McGraham, and Sewell. Original fiction by Ring. Poetry by Trimble, DeLahoye, and Whitaker. And blessed by the Emperor of Formenor!

Gwynystorm is available for \$1.00 by writing to Bruce McMenomy, 112 E. Alhambra Road, Alhambra, Ca. 91801.

