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Tolkien's Monsters: Concept and Function in *The Lord of the Rings* (Part II): Shelob the Great

Abstract

Three-part examination of "how Tolkien's theory of the centrality of the monsters in *Beowulf* influenced his own concept of 'monster' and what function that concept should fulfill within" *The Lord of the Rings*. Part II considers the characteristics of Shelob (and Ungoliant) as monsters, traces the sources and development of these characteristics, and analyzes the importance of the confrontation with Shelob in the overall plot, especially in the character development of Sam.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Shelob; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Shelob—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*

Tolkien's Monsters:

Concept and Function in The Lord of the Rings

(PART II) Shelob the Great

Joe Abbott

PART I: Evolution of the Concept

"Do you think Shelob is a good name for a monstrous spider creature?" (Let. 81)

Tolkien directed this question — with the subsequent comment explaining that "It is of course only 'she + lob' (= spider), but written as one, it seems to be quite noisome" (Let. 81) — to his son Christopher in a letter dated May 21, 1944. Ten days later Tolkien wrote that he had read both "Shelob's Lair" and "The Choices of Master Samwise" (the 2 chapters containing Shelob's introduction into the tale and her defeat at the hands of Sam) to C. S. Lewis, so the birth of Shelob can be placed accurately in late May of 1944. The combination of the modern English nominative feminine personal pronoun with the Old English feminine noun *lob* (derived from *lobbe*: "spider") provides — as does *Balrog* — a typical example of Tolkien's creative and sensitive application of the Old English art of compounding. Unlike the Balrog of Khazad-dûm, however, Shelob does not immediately suggest Germanic character-parallels (although parallels are present); neither does she exemplify any significant "evolution" from earlier stages of Tolkien's fiction. She is, in fact, very much the same monster that we see in Ungoliant, Tolkien's earlier "monstrous spider creature" who makes her first appearance c. 1920 in "The Theft of Melk" the original rendition of what would later become chapter 8 ("Of the Darkening of Valinor") of *The Silmarillion*. Because numerous similarities between Shelob and Ungoliant will inevitably occur to even the casual reader, I will not attempt a list of those similarities here; however, it does seem best to me, in considering the monster at Cirith Ungol, to examine both creatures as products of a singular concept. Also, because the purpose of this study is to take into account the various ideas that suggest themselves as contributors to Tolkien's creative processes, I will examine first the concept of the monster and second the concept of the battle in which she is defeated.

First then, and in the broadest sense, we have in Shelob a giant. Giants are common enough figures in the literatures with which Tolkien was familiar, and though these monsters usually appear as ogres of more or less human shape, such is not always the case. (In her *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, Inger Boberg cites numerous examples of ogres appearing in other-than-human forms. See, for example, listings under G350 "Animal Ogres.") Second, however, and narrowing the concept somewhat, Tolkien's giant is a female. Female giants, too, appear in numerous Northern tales and folklore, but Tolkien's giant

tess takes on added significance when we note the position of her appearance in the structure of the narrative. Third, and to note undoubtedly the most curious aspect of Tolkien's creature, we find a concept that is virtually non-existent in traditional Germanic folklore: a giantess appearing in the form of a spider. (It should be noted, however, that in early Icelandic literature a case occurs — See G303.3.3.4.2 in Boberg's *Motif-Index* — in which the Devil appears as a spider and has his leg cut off.)

Much has been conjectured concerning Tolkien's aversion to spiders. Tolkien himself, however, in a letter to W. H. Auden, claimed not to "dislike spiders particularly" (Let. 217), and Humphrey Carpenter, in *Tolkien: A Biography*, relates that "... when Tolkien was beginning to walk,"

he stumbled on a tarantula. It bit him and he ran in terror across the garden until the nurse snatched him up and sucked out the poison. When he grew up he could remember a hot day and running in fear through long, dead grass, but the memory of the tarantula itself faded, and he said that the incident left him with no especial dislike of spiders. Nevertheless, in his stories he wrote more than once of monstrous spiders with venomous bites. (13-14)

Whether or not Tolkien had an unusually strong antipathy for spiders, Carpenter's "Nevertheless" is well-taken. Certainly, in the mind of a child such a spider would appear as a monster of terrifying proportions, and notably, the older and more mature Tolkien chose the most childlike of his story's heroes to confront bravely and defeat the "monstrous spider creature." It thus seems most probable that the unlikely choosing of a giant arachnid to fulfil an otherwise typically Germanic monster role — that of a malevolent giantess — resulted from memories of this childhood incident rather than from any literatures that Tolkien may have been familiar with.

And such an assessment may indeed be as far as we need look if we were considering the monsters of Mirkwood — huge yet inept, fierce but comic — encountered by Bilbo and Thorin's company in *The Hobbit*, for their terror lies chiefly in their size and physical grotesqueness. But in Shelob we find a deeper terror, a combination of the physical and spiritual that indicates she is more than simply a voracious spider of immense size:

"There along she had dwelt, an evil thing in spider-form, . . . bloated and grown fat with endless brooding on her feasts, . . . for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness. . . . Shelob the Great, last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world." (2: 332)

Although Tolkien does not make clear whether she is "eternal" in nature, there is significant evidence that Shelob descends from one of the Eternals. We are told that she is the "last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world," and though Tolkien never states explicitly that Ungoliant is a Maia, textual evidence strongly suggests that such is the case. In "The Theft of Melko" we read the following of Ungoliant:

Mayhap she was bred of mists and darkness on the confines of the Shadowy seas, in the utter dark that came between the overthrow of the Lamps and the kindling of the Trees, but more like she has always been; and she it is who loveth still to dwell in that black place taking the guise of an unlovely spider. (HME 1: 152, italics mine)

That Ungoliant takes on herself the "guise" of a spider indicates that her essence is a spiritual one running much deeper than her physical body. Christopher Tolkien notes that "she was a being from 'before the world'" (HME 1: 160), and we read in *The Silmarillion* that "she descended from the darkness that lies about Arda,"

when Melkor first looked down in envy upon the Kingdom of Manwe, and that in the beginning she was one of those that he corrupted to his service. But she had disowned her Master. . . . (73)

Her existence "before the world" indicates that Ungoliant is one of a race of supernatural beings, and the fact that Melkor — a Vala — had been her "Master" indicates that she is one of those beings of the same nature as the Valar though of a lesser degree — that is, a Maia. This becomes even more evident when we consider Tolkien's own explanation — regarding "the Valar, and their lesser attendants" (Let. 284) — that "their forms were . . . expressions of their persons, powers, and loves. They need not be anthropomorphic" (Let. 285, italics mine). Tolkien, too, carefully describes Shelob not as a "giant spider" but as "an evil thing in spider-form" (2: 332); thus, the thing is the essence of the "being," the spider-form constituting only the physical embodiment of that essence.

By separating the *essential* from the *physical*, then, we can more easily see the influence of Tolkien's knowledge of traditional literature and folklore on his development and characterization of the initial concept. Perhaps the most notable parallel occurs in the Icelandic giantess "Nott." The Old Norse word for "night," *Nott* is alternately glossed as "mythical, Nott, the giantess Night, daughter of Norfi" (Cleasby), and she is briefly described in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* in the "Gilfaginning":

Norvi-œða Narfi het jotun, er bygoði Jotunheimum; hann atti dottur, er Nott het, hon var svort ok dokk, sem hon atti ætt til. (54)

(A giant was called Norvi or Narfi, who lived in Giant-land; he had a daughter who was called Night, she was swart and dark, like [those] to whom she was related [lit. "as she possessed kindred to"].)

Tolkien's spiders are consistently associated with darkness, as indeed are all of his monsters; but more than simply dwelling in darkness, the Spiders, like the mythical

giantess Nott, *personify* it. We can see this if we look again to Shelob's progenitor, Ungoliant. We read that Ungoliant is a weaver of darkness, of "Unlight" (*Silm.* 74); but she appears in Tolkien's earlier writings as a monster with many names, the first of which is "Moru":

. . . for here dwelt the primeval spirit Moru whom even the Valar know not whence or when she came, and the folk of Earth have given her many names. . . . Ungwe Lianti the great spider who enmeshes did the Eldar call her, naming her also Wirilome or Gloomweaver, whence still do the Noldoli speak of her as Ungoliant the spider or as Gwerlum the Black. (HME 1: 151-2)

(For an explanation of elements composing the various names of the Great Spider, see Appendix.) Thus Tolkien, in his *Goldogrin* (Gnomish Lexicon), entered beside the name "Moru" the following gloss: "a name of the Primeval Night personified as Gwerlum or Gunglont" (HME 1: 261).

"Ungoliant," then, is this creature's *later* name, and although the best-known, it is only one of the many by which she is called. The multiplicity of names that Tolkien gave to her in the early stages of her existence indicates the importance that he must have foreseen for her; however, *Ungoliant* must have had a particularly satisfying appeal for Tolkien as it — like *Shelob* — provides a strikingly successful example of the union of word-form with denotation. The sense of enormity is easily discernible as even the casual eye detects the presence of the word *giant* within the larger word — a presence which no doubt contributes to the equally effective mispronunciation "Ungo-li-ant." (For a discussion of the correct pronunciation of this name, see entry #8 in Appendix.) This visual suggestion of immensity, coupled with the Sindarin word *ungol* ("spider") (Allan 90), results in perhaps Tolkien's most successful attempt at what he called the "linguistic aesthetic," the desired combination of word-form with word-function.

We find nothing in the *Edda*'s account that describes Nott's habitation, but in the lesser-known *Ala Flekkis Saga*, the hero encounters the ogress in an environment much like that of Shelob:

Hann ser þar helli storan; þottist hann þa vita, að Nott trollkona mundi fyrir þeim raða eiga. Snýr hann þa að hellinum, og skjotlega gengur hann inn. Þar var bæði fult og kalt. (Riddarasögur 132)

(There he saw a great cave; then he thought he knew [lit. "thought he then to know"] that the troll-woman Night might rule over it. He turns then for the cave and he went swiftly inside. There [it] was both foul and cold.)

Similarly, we are told at Frodo's and Sam's approach to Shelob's Lair that "they saw the opening of a cave. . . . Out of it came a stench, . . . a foul reek, as if filth unnameable were piled and hoarded in the dark within" (2: 326). We have, then, the parallel themes of the personification of Night in the person (or "being") of a nefarious giantess who lives in a "foul" cave; and once Frodo and Sam enter the monster's environment, we begin to note many motifs

that are common to both Anglo-Saxon and early Icelandic folklores.

First, Shelob's gender and position in the structure of the narrative invite her comparison to the Water-witch of Grendel's mere, who is also a female and the second of three principal monsters encountered in the course of that tale:

ides aglaecwif	Grendles modor
se þe waetergean	ymþe gemunde,
cealde streamas	wunian scolde
to ecgbanan	sifðan Cain wearð
faedermage;	angan broþer
	(Beowulf 1258b-63a)

(Grendel's mother, [a] monster-woman, [s]he who must inhabit the dreadful water, cold streams, remembered misery since Cain became [a] slayer-with-sword [to his] only brother, his father-kin.)

Thus, in *Beowulf* — as in *LotR* — the giantess is introduced as a member of an ancient race of monsters and as one who lives in a "nīosele" (1513) (hostile hall) in which she engages in combat with the hero. This initial impression of general similarity prompts a closer look at these monsters, and a further structural comparison of the two works reveals other parallels as well. A listing of the corresponding motifs (cited with line numbers from *Beowulf*) follows:

- 1) Giantess is introduced (1258b-63a)
- 2) Hero enters her environment (1512b-16a)
- 3) Hero attempts to use his sword but finds it useless (1519b-25a)
- 4) Hero subdued by giantess (1541-47a)
- 5) Hero finds "enchanted" or special sword (1557-62)
- 6) Giantess is defeated (1567b-68)
- 7) Hero severs monster's limb/head (1588-90)
- 8) Companions think hero dead and leave him (1591-1602a)

The motifs are listed here in the order of their occurrence in *Beowulf*; however, though each is common in heroic folklore — occurring in various tales throughout traditional literature — the order is by no means limited to the one exemplified here. We find, for instance, in the Icelandic *Grettis saga* many of these same motifs; they are, however, arranged differently and contain variations. Tolkien, as is common in traditional folklore practice, employs each of these motifs in the Shelob episode but rearranges sequence and enhances individual motifs freely. If we plot the pattern of events from *LotR*, for example, using the numbers shown above, the sequence is altered slightly:

- 2) Hero enters giantess' environment (2: 326)
- 1) Giantess is introduced (2: 329)
- 3) Hero attempts to use his sword but finds it useless (2: 331)
- 4) Hero subdued by giantess (2: 337)
- 5) Hero finds "enchanted" or special sword (2: 337)
- 7) Hero severs monster's limb (2: 337)
- 6) Giantess is defeated (2: 339)

- 8) Companion thinks hero dead and leaves him (2: 342)

We also see an effective adaptation of the useless-sword motif (#3) and the subsequent finding of the special sword (#5). After Frodo's and Sam's initial encounter with Shelob in the darkness of her Lair, they reach the opening of the cave but find the way obstructed by a giant web. Sam attempts to cut the web with his sword, but his sword fails. Not of the special quality of Frodo's sword, it is all but useless. Frodo steps up and swipes the web with his sword. Sting, because, as he says, "It is an elven-blade. There were webs of horror in the dark ravines of Beleriand where it was forged" (2: 331). The blade cuts smoothly "like a scythe through grass," and "A great rent was made" (2: 331); thus the supernatural blade succeeds where the ordinary blade cannot, even though the bearer of the ordinary blade "struck with all his force" (2: 331). This useless-sword motif occurs twice in *Beowulf*: in the battle with the Water-witch (below) and in the battle with the dragon (See *Beowulf* ll. 2575b-80a, 2584b-86a, 2677b-84a). In the first of the two encounters, we read that Beowulf

hildebille,	... macgenraes forgeaf
oæt hire on hafelan	hond sweng ne ofteah,
graeddigguðleoð.	hringmael agol
se beadoleoma	Ða se giest onfand, þaet
sceþðan,	bitan nolde, aldre
aet þearfe;	ac seo ecg geswac ðeodne
	(1519b-25a)

(... gave mighty impetus with battle-sword, hand withheld not [the] blow, so that on her head the ring-sword sang [its] fierce war-song. Then the visitor [i.e. Beowulf] found that the flashing-sword [lit. "battle-light"] would not bite, harm life, but the edge failed the prince at need.)

Likewise, in his battle with the dragon, *Beowulf*'s "gu ð bill geswac" (2584b) (war-sword failed), and specifically, it "bat unswi ð or, / þonne his ð iodycning þearfe haefde" (2578b-79) (bit less strongly than its lord had need) in much the same way that Sam's blade cuts the web less effectively than does Frodo's.

Tolkien introduces the useless-sword motif with greater subtlety than does the *Beowulf* poet, however. By drawing our attention to the ineffectual nature of Sam's sword in the web-slashing episode, Tolkien incorporates the motif smoothly into the narrative while he simultaneously prepares us for what will occur when Sam later engages in actual combat with the monster. In *Beowulf*'s encounter with the Water-witch, the problem of the ineffectual sword is introduced and conveniently solved all in the course of the struggle; for after his own blade fails him, Beowulf

Geseah ða on searwum	sigeceadig bil,
ealdsweord eotenisc;	ecgum þyhtig,
wigena weorðmynd;	þaet [waes] waepna cyst, —
buton hit waes mare	ðonne aenig mon oðfer to
beadulace	aetheran meahthe,
god ond geatolic,	giganta geweorc.
He gefeng þa fetelhilt, freca Scyldinga	

hreo ond heoogrim,	hringmael gebraegd
aldres orwena,	yrninga
sloh,
..... bil ea! þurhwod
faegne flaeschoman;	(1557-68a)

[[He] then saw amid the battle-gear a victory-blessed sword, [an] ancient sword made by giants [and] with strong edges, [the] glory of warriors; that was best of weapons,—but it was more than any other man might carry to battle, good and adorned, work of giants. He seized the linked-hilt, [the] warrior of the Scyldings fierce and battle-savage, drew the ring-sword despairing of life, angrily struck, ... [the] sword completely penetrated the fated body.)

Just how this “ancient sword made by giants” happens to be present at the hero’s greatest time of need is a question that probably would not have greatly concerned an Anglo-Saxon audience. Tolkien, on the other hand, in writing for an audience more oriented towards criticism, would necessarily have been concerned with avoiding a *deus ex machina* effect caused by the obvious factor of improbability. By using the web-slashing episode to remind us of Sting’s special quality, Tolkien is able to incorporate into the plot the *Beowulf* poet’s motif without violating his own principle of maintaining an “inner consistency of reality.” We know exactly how this special sword comes to be at the hero’s disposal, for we have been subtly reminded that it has been present all along. Thus, just as *Beowulf* spies a special “(victory-blessed”) sword lying amid the battle-gear at just the crucial moment of battle, so Sam, as he rushes towards Frodo, notices that “On the near side of [Frodo] lay, gleaming on the ground, his elven-blade. . . . He sprang forward with a yell, and seized his master’s sword in his left hand. Then he charged” (2: 337). We have in both situations, then, a sword other than the hero’s own, an “enchanted” blade (or certainly a blade of special quality), that must perform the task at hand. In Sam’s case it is Frodo’s “elven-blade”; in *Beowulf*’s case it is the “ealdsweord eotenic.”

The fact that each of these motifs occurs in the second encounter with a monster in both *Beowulf* and *LotR* does not mean that Tolkien simply used *Beowulf*’s encounter with the Water-witch as an outline for the final two chapters of the second volume of *LotR*. The adaptation and variation of universal concepts was an honored practice among his Anglo-Saxon ancestors, and Tolkien would certainly have considered the use of their methods not only an artistic endeavor and a creative challenge, but also the most appropriate and effective means of achieving and communicating the heroic atmosphere characteristic of their literature. He thus created, in the concluding chapters of *The Two Towers*, a heroic encounter inspired by an actual childhood incident, embellishing that account with fabulous elements, many of which are recognizable motifs common to Anglo-Saxon and early Icelandic folklore. Also, by projecting Shelob as something more than simply a huge and loathsome spider — specifically as a Maia: an ancient and nefarious will — he strengthens her ties of

kinship with the more readily recognizable Germanic figure of the Balrog of Khazad-dum as well as with Sauron — the most powerful Maia of Third-Age Middle-earth — and provides another example of the special unity of these three monsters in the structure of the overall work.

Part 2: Function of the Episode

“He did not think of himself as heroic or even brave, or in any way admirable — except in his service and loyalty to his master.” (*Let. 329*)

The primary function of the hobbits’ encounter with Shelob is to move Sam into the role of Ringbearer, a role that will have a far-reaching effect on the outcome of the story and the future of the Shire; however, because the major consequences of Sam’s brief possession of the Ring do not become evident until the conclusion of *LotR*, I will reserve the latter portion of this section for examination of that aspect of the episode. More important to the immediate plot is that the placing of Sam in the forefront enables Tolkien to explore and develop the character more fully than in any episode preceding the encounter with Shelob; thus, the episode is a pivotal one, shifting the principal focus from Frodo to Sam. To this point in the Ring saga, our primary concern (and attention) has been directed towards Frodo, and rightly so, for he is the character with whom the success or failure of the quest lies. Sam’s character has provided encouragement for the Ringbearer and comedic relief for the reader; but his role has certainly been secondary, and we have not seen much real development or growth in his character. As he and Frodo reach the outlands of Mordor, however, and prepare to enter Sauron’s realm, we hear Sam offer some very personal and imaginative perspectives on his and his master’s place in the ageless and eternal Tale in which they have found themselves. In one of the most beautiful and aesthetically satisfying passages in *LotR* (2: 320-22), Tolkien begins to reveal a surprising depth in the character of Sam, who is to become for us in the succeeding chapters much more than a humorous “sidekick” figure. Indeed, the point at which Tolkien begins to hint that Samwise Gamgee possesses far more insight than his name suggests — “Samwise (the Old E. for Half-wit)” (*Let. 83*) — strategically precedes the portion of the narrative in which Sam ascends to the primary role — the role of Ringbearer.

As Sam and Frodo approach Shelob’s Lair, then, we begin to sense that Sam has perhaps a more important purpose in the scheme of their endeavor than he (or we) might have heretofore suspected. Ironically, we are left to wonder if in fact he is partially to blame for the tragedy that ensues, for at the end of chapter 8, “The Stairs of Cirith Ungol,” just before the hobbits enter Shelob’s Lair, Gollum appears to reconsider taking the hobbits by that route:

The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, *peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head*, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and very slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo’s knee —

but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing. (2: 324, italics mine)

Although we have anticipated Gollum's treachery from his earliest appearance, we have noticed, as the trio progresses towards Mordor, a growing closeness between Gollum and Frodo introducing the possibility of Gollum's actually redeeming himself by deciding not to follow through with his original intent. The entire tone of the above passage — the "trembling hand" that "almost . . . caress[es]" Frodo, the depiction of Gollum as "an old weary hobbit" and as a "starved pitiable thing" — indicates that Gollum is in a state of tormented indecision and, at this point at least, entirely capable of becoming a voluntary helper in the destruction of the Ring. The following scene, though, seems to settle the issue when, a moment later Sam wakes and, startled, reprimands Gollum for "pawing at master," as he thought" (2: 324). Sam's action decides any "interior debate" that Gollum may have been experiencing, and though we cannot know all that this debate had entailed — as yet there has been no mention of Shelob in the tale — clearly it is at this point that Gollum decides to proceed with his original plan. The horrible specifics of his debate will become clear later in the catacombs of Cirith Ungol; however, Tolkien provides a blatant foreshadowing when he describes Gollum's reaction to Sam's harsh accusations:

Gollum withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids. Almost spider-like he looked now, crouched back on his bent limbs, with his protruding eyes. The fleeting moment had passed, beyond recall. "Sneaking, sneaking!" he hissed. (2: 324)

Gollum's "spider-like" appearance — enhanced by his "bent limbs" and "protruding eyes" — together with the fact that "he hissed" serves as a graphic indication of what awaits the hobbits in Shelob's Lair. It also strongly suggests, because of its specific location in the progression of the narrative, that Sam's understandable yet tragic misreading of the circumstances is, if not the only cause, certainly a major factor in Gollum's ultimate decision to betray Frodo.

Tolkien later said of Sam that "if he had understood better what was going on between Frodo and Gollum, things might have turned out differently in the end. . . . The course of the entry into Mordor and the struggle to reach Mount Doom would have been different, and so would the ending" (Let. 330). The remark is typical of many recorded in Tolkien's letters, ambiguous and conjectural; but when Tolkien says that "things might have turned out differently in the end," he can only mean "things" as they refer to Sam and "the end" as it refers to the end of the story, not the end of the Quest. It is precisely for this reason that Sam's action here and Gollum's response are exactly right. If, for instance, Gollum had taken the hobbits by a different route and all three had arrived at the Crack of Doom together,

the episode on the precipice would have necessarily remained the same, for Gollum, at that point, did not attempt to take the ring because he *wanted* it; he attempted to take it because his will was completely dominated by it, and no matter how much he may have grown to love Frodo, he simply did not have the capacity to resist the possession of (or perhaps more accurately by) the Ring: "[Gollum] hated it and loved it, as he hated and loved himself. He could not get rid of it. *He had no will left in the matter. . . . It was not Gollum, Frodo, but the Ring itself that decided things*" (1: 64, italics mine). Tolkien postulated: "But 'possession' satisfied, I think [Gollum] would then have sacrificed himself for Frodo's sake and have voluntarily cast himself into the fiery abyss" (Let. 330).

This may be so but it is highly unlikely. If we pursue Tolkien's hypothetical scenario further, it quickly becomes evident that such a denouement would contain a serious flaw: How could Gollum, a devastated creature exposed and consequently subjected to the Power of the Ring, far longer than either Frodo or Bilbo, achieve the heroic action that, in fact, proves to be beyond the power of the much more conscientious Frodo (Smeagol committed murder before he even owned the Ring), a previously "untainted" — in the sense of being ruled by the Ring — and extremely strong-willed character whose unyielding resolve has been from the start to *destroy* the Ring? Although such an episode might have been conceived, it is difficult to see how it could have worked as the unavoidable result would have been the transforming of Gollum's character from villain to hero, indeed, the principal hero of the saga — the character who brings the Quest to a successful conclusion. Such an advancement of events would have been completely at odds with the fabric of Tolkien's structural concept which he claimed "to be 'hobbit-centric', that is, primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble" (Let. 237). Yet even with such an unsatisfactory progression of events, the *end of the Quest would have been the same*: the destruction of the Ring. The end of the story, however, would have been altered drastically, and certainly Tolkien, whether he wrote the conclusion of "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol" instinctively or with the distant end of his story already well in mind, must have realized that the actions of Sam and Gollum here are *essential* to that ending.

I say "essential" because Sam could not have become the Ringbearer apart from Frodo's apparent death, for "Frodo . . . was incapable of surrendering [the Ring] to Sam" (Let. 234), and for Sam to attempt to take it from Frodo would have been inconceivable, a violation of every character-trait we have come to recognize in the younger hobbit. As the most humble individual of the most humble race we encounter in Tolkien's Middle-earth, Sam has proven himself worthy of "ennoblement" and "sanctification" by consistently showing himself faithful — even, at times, to the point of complete self-abandon — to the master he has pledged to serve. At the conclusion of volume 1, we saw Sam plunge into the swift waters of the

River Anduin in pursuit of Frodo when he discovers his master attempting to continue the Quest on his own; and now at the conclusion of volume 2, Sam again acts instinctively, heedless of the odds or possible consequences, when he sees Shelob trying to drag Frodo away:

Sam did not wait to wonder what was to be done, or whether he was brave, or loyal, or filled with rage. He sprang forward with a yell, and seized his master's sword in his left hand. Then he charged. (2: 337)

Sam is thus dramatically catapulted into the heroic role, achieving his "ennoblement" by his act of courage in attacking the monster. He will achieve his "sanctification," as we will see shortly, by willfully taking the Burden and resolving to continue the Quest.

The battle that follows his initial charge reveals in Sam many of the qualities characteristic of traditional Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian heroes. Perhaps the most notable aspect of Sam Gamgee here is his immediate and savage rage, a battle-fury that recalls the "berserks" found in numerous accounts of Old Norse battles. Cleasby, in his definition of these man-creatures, says the following:

In battle the berserks were subject to fits of frenzy . . . when they howled like wild beasts, foamed at the mouth and gnawed the iron rim on their shields; during these fits they were . . . proof against steel and fire, and made great havoc in the ranks of the enemy; but when the fever abated they were weak and tame. The berserks were often depicted as literal shape-shifters, being actually transformed into savage animals by their own battle-fury.

That such a battle-fury should overcome the lachrymose Sam, who, at his entrance into the story "shouted, and then burst into tears" on learning that he would be accompanying Frodo to "... go and see Elves and all" (1: 73) is, indeed, a "transformation," yet certainly not an inconceivable one. We have come to recognize, over the course of the chapters that fall between his introduction into the tale and his confrontation with Shelob, a "fierce" resolve in Sam, a resolve based on his unconditional commitment to Frodo. When that resolve is challenged, an insane rage very like that characteristic of the berserks seems right in character, while at the same time it "transforms" the character by revealing in him an unexpected, or at least a heretofore unexplored, capacity for heroism:

No onslaught more fierce was ever seen in the savage world of beasts. . . . [Shelob] was aware that a fury was upon her greater than any she had known in countless years. . . . Not the doughtiest soldier of old Gondor, nor the most savage Orc entrapped, had ever thus endured her. . . . And then [Sam's] tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know:

A Elbereth Gilthoniel . . .

Sam came on. He was reeling like a drunken man, but he came on. And Shelob cowed at last. . . . even as Sam hewed a last stroke at her dragging legs. Then he fell to the ground. . . . (2: 337-9)

We are left to wonder whether or not Sam has actually killed Shelob, for "this tale does not tell" (2: 339), and the ambiguity here is perfectly contrived. It instructs us to direct our attention away from the monster who, having served admirably her purpose in the tale, is no longer a part of the narrative advance. Whether or not Shelob dies as a result of Sam's actions is inconsequential; what we are to realize here is that Sam, by performing those actions — actions motivated by devotion and courage — has proven himself to be of heroic caliber and therefore worthy to undertake the task with which he is about to be confronted.

After Shelob's exit Sam rushes to Frodo, "but no stir of life could he find, nor feel the faintest flutter of the heart" (2: 339), and "Sam was convinced at last that Frodo had died and laid aside the Quest" (2: 342). With Frodo's apparent death from Shelob's sting, Sam's heretofore predictable behavior loses the principle on which its predictability has been based: the unconditional protection of and service to his master. An immediate increase in dimension results as we see his characteristic undaunted devotion and unwavering optimism replaced by the reality of indecision and potential despair: "What shall I do, what shall I do?" he said. . . . Then at last he began to weep" (2: 340). Sam's indulgence in self-debate corresponds to Gollum's similar argument which took place before the Shelob episode, and just as Gollum had ultimately decided — as a result of Sam's accusations coupled with the Ring's domination — on a plan of action that, if successful, would have resulted in the failure of the Quest, so Sam appears to already be coming under the power of the Ring as his voice reflects a Gollumish tendency towards disagreement of subject and verb: "... it's sit here till they come and kill me over master's body, and gets it; or take it and go." He drew a deep breath. "Then take it, it is!" (2: 341-2). Tolkien thus, by allowing Sam to subtly lapse into a dialect that we have to this point recognized as unique to Gollum, reminds us that even Sam's devotion, dramatized in his reluctance to take the Ring from Frodo, is subject to its subtle yet powerful influence.

Sam's entire debate with himself (2: 340-1) acts as a mirror image of Gollum's earlier ambivalence. As Gollum's decision resulted in major consequences — it in fact destroyed any small hope of his potential redemption, resulting in his *damnation* and separating him forever from Frodo — so Sam's decision here will separate him from all who have never borne the Ring, resulting in his *sanctification* (though he cannot know it at this point) forever with Frodo. Tolkien has thus created a beautiful symmetry in the closing chapters of *The Two Towers*, placing the confrontation with Shelob directly in the center as the result of one crucial decision (Gollum's) and as the cause of another (Sam's).

The encounter with Shelob, then, performs a crucial function in the overall story, laying the foundation for what Tolkien, in his 1938 Andrew Lang lecture "On Fairy-Stories," had called the "Consolation of the Happy Ending":

Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairy-story. (M&C 153)

The reader, of course, perceives this happy ending as a compilation of various fulfillments dealing with the resolutions of those particular conflicts encountered by the various characters. For Aragorn this fulfillment involves ascension to kingship and the wedding of Arwen; for Gandalf it is the journey home to the true West; for Frodo and Bilbo it is a period of peace after the grueling task of bearing the burden of the Ring. But for Sam the consolation is something far less grand yet no less fulfilling:

'And then we can have some rest and some sleep,' said Sam. He laughed grimly. 'And I mean just that, Mr. Frodo. I mean plain ordinary rest, and sleep, and waking up to a morning's work in the garden. I'm afraid that's all I'm hoping for all the time. All the big important plans are not for my sort.' (2: 321)

Ironically, Sam speaks these words just before his meeting with Shelob, after which he will become the principal force in the continuation of "the big important plans" that will, in fact, result in the simple uninterrupted fellowship with "Mr. Frodo" that he has longed for all along.

For his role in the completion of the Quest — and we must assume this to be *specifically* his role as Ringbearer since, like Sam, Merry and Pippin both play extremely important roles in the defeat of Sauron, yet unlike Sam, they never bear the Burden and neither do they pass over Sea (3: 378) — Sam is granted his greatest desire. The "passage over Sea" is simply the means by which the reward is obtained; it is not, at least in Sam's typically limited hobbit-view, the reward itself. We can hear this in the tone of the dialogue between Frodo and Sam at Frodo's parting:

"Where are you going, Master?" cried Sam, though at last he understood what was happening.

"To the Havens, Sam," said Frodo.

"And I can't come."

"No Sam. Not yet anyway, not further than the Havens. Though you too were a Ring-bearer, if only for a little while. Your time may come. Do not be too sad Sam. You cannot be always torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be, and to do."

"But," said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, "I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done." (3: 309)

Sam's concern is as always for the good of his master; thus, his previous hopes that "we can have some rest and some sleep" seem momentarily shattered, for Sam cannot conceive of a likelier place for Frodo to achieve a well-earned rest "after all you have done" than the Shire. Frodo, of course, realizes that Sam's service to him is ended, that the duple role of servant and husband would only cause Sam to "be always torn in two." Frodo implies that they will, in time, be reunited in friendship — "Your time may come.

Do not be too sad Sam." — but that time must lie in the distant future.

It is indeed "many years" later that Sam's passage over Sea, his actual sanctification, does in fact take place, bringing to fruition the consolation of his own happy ending; for "The Tale of Years" confirms that in the year 1482 by the Shire Reckoning (i.e. FA 60) — 61 years after Frodo's departure over Sea on September 21, 1421 (i.e. TA 3021) —

On September 22 Master Samwise rides out from Bag End. He comes to the Tower Hills, and is last seen by Elanor, to whom he gives the Red Book afterwards kept by the Fairbairns. Among them the tradition is handed down from Elanor that Samwise passed the Towers, and went to the Grey Havens, and passed over Sea, last of the Ring-bearers. (3: 378)

Tolkien never makes clear just what kind of place lies "over Sea" except that it is not a place of eternal dwelling but a place where those who performed a particularly vital role in the defeat of Sauron may experience rest and healing before death. "Frodo was sent or allowed to pass over Sea to heal him if that could be done, *before he died*. He would have eventually to 'pass away'" (Let. 328). For Sam then, as for Frodo, "The passage over Sea is not Death" (Let. 237), but a well-earned period of repose and fellowship to be experienced before inevitable death and whatever lies beyond. ♣

Appendix

Conceptualization of Nomenclature for the Great Spider

1. *Moru*: The first name given to the Great Spider found in the first rendition of "The Theft of Melko" (c. 1917). In his Gnomish Lexicon (*Goldogrin*) Tolkien glossed *Muru* as "a name of the Primeval Night personified as Gwerlum or Gunglont" (HME 1: 160). The root "... MOR 'dark, black' . . . (technically MOR: **mori* 'dark(ness)' . . ." (Let. 382) is Sindarin (Allan 84).
2. *Gwerlum*: Also Gwerlum the Black. Sindarin "*gwer* 'wind, turn, bend', but also used in the sense of the root *gwidh* 'plait, weave'" (HME 1: 254). Also, the Quenya root *GWERE* 'whirl, twirl, twist' (HME 1: 255). The second element, *-lum*, derives from LOMO 'gloom, shade' (HME 1: 255); thus, "Gwerlum" means "Weaver of Gloom."
3. *Gloomweaver*: see above (#2) and below (#5)
4. *Gunglont*: Christopher Tolkien notes that GUNGU was recorded in his father's Quenya Lexicon as a "queried root" (HME 1: 270). In the early versions of "The Theft of Melko," "the name *Gunglont* was originally written, but was emended to *Unglont*" (HME 1: 160).
5. *Wirilome*: *wiri-* derives from the Quenya root *GWIDI* 'to weave' (HME 1: 254); *-lome* (like *-lum*) derives from LOMO 'dusk, gloom, darkness' (HME 1: 255); thus *Gloomweaver*.
6. *Ungue*: This element is the name of the eighth member of the Tengwar runic system (✧). Tolkien translates it as "spider's web" (3: 401); consequently, Jim Allan glosses it as such in his Quenya dictionary (41). Christopher Tolkien, however, glosses *ungue* as "spider" (HME 1: 271) in keeping with

his father's two references in the text of "The Theft of Melko" to Melko's accomplice as "Ungwe" (See HME 1: 152 and 154).

7. *Ungwe Lianti*: *Ungwe* (see above #6). The second element derives from the root *LI* + *ya* 'entwine' (HME 1: 271) to form *liante* 'tendril' (HME 1: 271). -i is the regular plural ending for Quenya nouns using the second (of the possible two) declension(s). "In the second declension are found nouns whose singular (nominative and accusative) end in a consonant . . . or in a consonant + e" (Allan 14); thus, *lianti* is the regular plural of *liante* so that *Ungwe Lianti* translates literally as "Spider Tendrils."

8. *Ungoliont*: *Ungol* is the Sindarin derivative of the Quenya *ungwe*. In Third Age Quenya the *ngw* cluster was one of several consonant clusters including *nqu*, *ng*, *gw*, "all of which were frequent" (3: 399); however, in Sindarin we find "*gw* only initially" (Allan 59) so that *ngw* cannot occur; thus, *Ungwe Lianti* > *Ungweliant(e)* > *Ungweliont* > "*Ungoliont*" > *Ungoliont*. -*liont* would be a regular development in Sindarin

from the Quenya -*liante* as Quenya was the older language, and "older a had changed to *au/o*" (Allan 52) — *au* in stressed syllables, e.g. Quenya *nar* "red fire" > Sindarin *naur* "fire"; *o* in unstressed syllables, e.g. Quenya *Anar* "Sun" > Sindarin *Anor* "Sun." Final *e* must have disappeared before the change of *a* to *o*; otherwise, according to the rule of penultimate syllabic stress in the Eldarin tongues, *a* would have become *au* resulting in the pronunciation "Un-go-li-'aunt-te," not "Un-gol-'yent." We know, also, that pronunciation is "Un-'gol-yent" and not "Ungo-'li-oni" because of the only occurrence of the monster's name in Tolkien's Old English meter. In the alliterative poem "The Flight of the Noldoli from Valinor" (HME 3: 132), line 8 scans thus:

x x / x x / x / / x
and Ungoliont the grim the Gloomweaver

Tolkien's reasons for later changing *Ungoliont* to *Ungoliant* must have been not linguistically inspired but the result of visual suggestion (as discussed in the text of the present study).

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Editorial (continued from page 4)

implications for both the near future and future generations. What it means to be human is now both a philosophical and scientific issue. Things are being done at this time or may soon be done in the foreseeable future to redefine what it means to be human. This should cause us great concern. Man, previously defined by nature, is attempting to divorce himself from this on a physical level through genetic manipulation and control. The clear warning of C.S. Lewis' *The Abolition of Man* is taking on an ever increasingly prophetic voice.

The kind of "Secular" Humanism, which has been in vogue for many decades, is sadly proven in the end to be based on relative values that lack real foundation or connection with the world of actual practice. The Humanism that the Inklings (among many others) shared both in their lives and fantasy, based on spiritual and permanent values, gives us refreshing hope to bring revitalization and a new perspective both to our own lives and to a new and challenging world emerging around us. —GG



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