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Legends of Gondor and the Shire

“Only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero.”

– Gandalf, *LOTR*

J.R.R. Tolkien’s epic fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings*, has been a celebrated work surpassing the boundaries of generation and now medium, as it has gone to the glorified silver screen. The story is generally regarded as a brilliant example of heroism in mythology, but how do its characters compare to classical and modern definitions of a hero? In order to compare two things, namely the heroes in *The Lord of the Rings* and the classic or modern hero, we must first understand what each of the items represents, so we shall begin with the definition of a hero as asserted by the *American Heritage Dictionary*:

“1) In mythology and legend, a man, often born of one mortal and one divine parent, who is endowed with great courage or strength, celebrated for his bold exploits, and favored by the gods; 2) Any man noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his life; 3) A person prominent in some event, field, period, or cause by reason of his special achievements or contribution; 4) The principal character in a novel, poem, or dramatic presentation; 5) Any male regarded as a potential lover or protector.”

For the most part, we will not concern ourselves with definition three for its ambiguity and simplicity of circumstance; nor four for its obscurity, although it may fit the heroes we choose to discuss; nor five because it is very broad and typically only a colloquial definition in

the most trivial fashion. This leaves us with number one and number two. While number one may be a definition that describes a hero, number two actually defines what a hero is made of in some specific criteria, so we will start with that base, altering the definition to *require* a form of sacrifice rather than only making it a bonus. I will, additionally, assert that any hero in question must be unaware of whether or not his ends will be met before he sacrifices something, especially his life, for his cause; furthermore he must do so with no desire for his own recognition. If he knows the outcome beforehand will be positive, he must then be less of a hero since at that point it becomes a calculated risk, one that can be decided on without any sense of nobility, only logic. If he does so out of his own motivations for glory, however slight, this means his cause was not entirely “noble” and served only as a guise for his own exploits. This finished conglomerate should suffice as a good representation for modern heroism.

From *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, there are many characters which fit the above definition of the hero, some prominent ones (dually matching the criteria in definition four) being Sam, Frodo, Bilbo, Gandalf, Aragorn, and Arwen. I would assert at this point that Sam Gamgee, for his unconditional loyalty and sense of self-sacrifice at any cost alone, may make a better illustration of a hero than Frodo in many respects, but the criteria for this paper specifically will force us to disregard his impact. We must choose Aragorn and Frodo as examples of heroes in the work to analyze against our definition and criteria for the reasons above.

Setting aside our constructed definition for post-analysis, we still need a way to evaluate these characters' pertinence to the classic model of a hero. Since “classic” involves past-precedent, I can think of no better model than Lord Raglan's 22 criteria for the commonplace behavior and nature of a classic hero. In his categories, he outlines the similarities between the characters that their respective societies considered to be heroes in the broad history

of mythology. This in hand, we are ready to assess Aragorn and Frodo's worth as both a classic hero and against our constructed definition for a slightly more modern twist.

Lord Raglan's Criterion

Royal birth – Raglan's studies indicate that the common hero is typically of royal birth by his mother, a royal virgin, and his father, a king. Furthermore, he asserts that the hero's parents are closely related, the circumstances of his conception are unusual, and he is the reputed son of a god.

Frodo's birth is never mentioned specifically in either *The Hobbit*, or *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, so it is rather hard to speculate whether or not he fits this particular criteria for heroism. From some of Tolkein's other collected works, we can know with some distinction which family he descended from, and so we do know that Frodo neither has a royal virgin mother, nor a kingly father. We can also rule out that he was conceived by a god, but we don't know whether or not his conception was run-of-the-mill or a bit unusual.

Aragorn's family line is specifically royal, although we only know this approaching the end of the first book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. He was born of a virgin mother and a kingly father, both. The books, however, are indeterminate as to how he was conceived or the relation between his mother and father (although we can make a fair assumption that they were not abnormally close); nor is Aragorn the son of any god, as Tolkein makes it increasingly clear that he is a human, representative of his kind.

Childhood – Raglan's classic hero is found to have an interestingly remote childhood. He usually suffers an attempt on his life in early years, especially by a close paternal relative, then is whisked away to a far off land to be raised by a set of foster parents. While we know this much, we are not usually given the details of his childhood, and he typically resolves to return to his kingdom upon reaching adulthood.

Frodo splits halfway at this point. He never had an attempt on his life early-on, and while Bilbo Baggins does adopt Frodo, his nephew, it is hardly a far-off land, and Frodo never plays “little Moses in a basket” to get there. Frodo’s “kingdom” is nonexistent at this point, and so he cannot resolve to return to anything; rather his journey starts by leaving what he has known for his entire life.

From Aragorn, we see much more conforming behavior. He was an heir lost to the throne, so he may not have had a run on his life, but was certainly in a far off land from the throne and kingdom that was rightfully his. Aragorn’s childhood is never explicitly mentioned in the trilogy, although some of Tolkien’s other works do touch on the subject; he may have been raised by foster parents, but was most likely a loner for the greater part of his childhood, thus earning the title of a “ranger” later in life, similar to that of a mercenary or bounty hunter. In spite of this separation, he does eventually return to his rightful kingdom at the end of the story, allowing him to fairly well fit this portion of Raglan’s model.

Adventure – Raglan’s next assessment is primarily of the ascension of our hero to his throne. The formula requires that, after a victory over a king/giant/dragon/beast, he wins himself a princess and then ascends the throne. While there, he is set to prescribe law for his kingdom in a largely uneventful and peaceful reign for a lengthy period of time.

Frodo has no kingdom, nor does he ever acquire one. He does fight many beasts and/or kings on the way to his final destiny in the smog-filled caverns of the evil Mount Doom, but never gains, nor wishes to, any sort of kingdom or bride for his troubles. Sadly, it seems Frodo is falling in the polls.

Aragorn stands a much better trial against this portion of the criterion. He is victorious over most of his foes on the way to his throne, and catches Arwen as his “princess” in the process (although it was predisposed before his initial ascent, he does claim her as his queen in

Return of the King.). From what we can tell at the end of the book, his reign will be long and fairly peaceful, as the model asserts. The only thing in this section we are unsure about, actually, is whether or not Aragorn dictates any law during his reign. It does seem a fair bet, however, based on his willingness to be a good and faithful ruler while using his power to the advantages of his state and the further Middle-Earth.

Descent – Raglan describes his final criteria by saying that the model hero typically loses favor with the gods or his subjects later in his rule and is driven from his kingdom, after which he meets a mysterious death, often at the top of a hill. If he has any children at this point, it is commonplace for those not to succeed him as heirs to the throne. Finally his body is not buried, and he usually has a religious cult close behind to worship and sacrifice at his statue.

Frodo, again, cannot fit any of this criteria, save possibly the death on top of a hill. He does have a near-death experience in the heart of Mount Doom, where Smeagol eventually takes the ring and plunges headlong into burning lava, almost accosting Frodo to the same fate. If stretched, this would be the only criteria he could possibly fulfill.

Aragorn's descent is chronologically *post-mortem* of the work, therefore it is very hard to tell what would have happened based on what we know. Without further details, we will have to conclude that they are not part of the myth, and if they are not part of the myth, they cannot be considered criteria worthy of solicitation in our assessment.

Classic Conclusions

After careful consideration of the criterion set forth by Lord Raglan as a historical reference for commonplace heroic behavior and origins, we can easily see that a stretch of any of the rules is required to make either character fit such a tailored set of principles. Frodo simply because he was never in the right situation with the right background, and Aragorn primarily because we know so little about him from what was left out of the story. Should we then

conclude that neither one could really be considered a hero? That is certainly not the popular view. Why then, does this vast discrepancy exist? For a more modern approach, and one that should fit the times with more biting accuracy, we must evaluate based on a contemporary definition for a hero.

Modern Heroes

We established the following criteria: “Any man noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose, especially one who has risked or sacrificed his life; it is not only fitting for the hero to sacrifice something he values, but *required*; he must not seek personal glory in return for his deeds; any hero in question must also be unaware of whether or not his ends will be met before he sacrifices something, especially his life, for his cause.” So in this modern day and age, how do our Middle-Earth friends fare?

Frodo begins his journey unwittingly and almost unwillingly until Gandalf pushes him from his warm Hobbit hole into the cold, dark world. With a shallow glance here, we could dismiss him entirely as a hero, but his character changes over time, so we must follow him for the duration. Later we find him using his simpleton abilities for the better good of the ring party, carrying his heavy burden and realizing slowly what it all means. He understands at this point what he is set out to do, what the consequences are, and begins to help others – to make small sacrifices for nobility of cause: “It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.” (Frodo, Book III, Part 2, Chapter IX, pg. 1067) He has no idea how the story will turn out, but we see him through much of books I and II learn to deal with the destiny that he has been given, no matter what the cost. He certainly never wishes to be recognized for his help, which is something he makes clear throughout the story, as Bilbo did in *The Hobbit* (or, *There and Back Again: A Hobbit’s Holiday*). He shows many signs of a modern hero.

By the end of the tale, Frodo prepares to make the ultimate sacrifice (his life) at the center of Mount Doom, but by virtue of his tragic flaw, must allow Smeagol to accidentally take matters into his own hands and fall to his death with the “precious” ring. Frodo was not the perfect hero, as we can see here, but does that negate the rest of his heroic qualities? Surely not; most heroes come pre-packaged with a tragic flaw. While Frodo is not the most robust of examples, he is a very dynamic character who grows with the reading audience to unfold a small, homely sense of heroism.

Aragorn is a drastically different character. He is, of course, of royal descent, *ergo* his outlook on life and principal is largely derived from his duties as a royal. Unlike Frodo, he is called to a higher cause from the very beginning. He knows his destiny and strives to accomplish its goals to the best of his ability from day to day. Inherently he shows a sense of self-sacrifice for his kingly cause, which he asks no credit for in return: “Deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised.” (Aragorn, Book III, Part 1, Chapter II, pg. 816) He also shows great courage to face what obstacles stand in the path of his destiny and inherently is not sure whether he will finally succeed. He appears to meet every criteria with culminate accuracy.

Wrapping It Up

It seems that as we analyze the two characters, we find increasingly that Aragorn is a more close-fit than Frodo by any means, but both are rather poor examples of the classic hero, who blasts headstrong into battle for the glory of the situation rather than the nobility of his cause (most closely fit to definition four, above). The classic hero, as Lord Raglan has summarized, seems to be largely based on a lifestyle rather than a set of values or guidelines. In our culture today, we find that a hero is typically defined conversely as a noble character who gives of himself to better the situation of others.