

Bilbo Baggins: An (Un)expected Hero

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Bravery, loyalty, strength, eloquence and shrewdness. These are some of the main characteristics we hope to find in a hero of an epic narrative. This idea of epic, originally introduced by the Homeric works, presents us to a hero who has superior virtues than the common man, to someone who is a natural leader, and is respected by his group not only for being so, but also because the group feels as well he is the one who deserves to lead them; the Homeric hero is someone that despite not being very humble among the ones of his race, knows that all he achieves is a gift of the Gods, so he must always serve them. *The Hobbit of There and Back Again*, a novella by J.R.R. Tolkien, can be certainly considered as an epic, but Bilbo Baggins is certainly not the classic hero...

Bilbo Baggins is, in fact, sometimes considered as an anti-hero, so many are the differences between his nature and the classic hero's. Throughout the story, Bilbo goes through many changes, being at the end of the narrative closer to the epic hero than he was on the beginning. This way, the biggest opposition that can be made between Bilbo and characters as Homer's Ulysses or Achilles happens on the first chapters of *The Hobbit*. On these first chapters we can easily realize that this Hobbit is not as "heroic" as we might originally think: right away we notice that though curious, he's not willing to embark on an adventure that might be dangerous. In fact, his origins are also a factor that influences him not to go – we are told that his Baggins side (his father's family) is made of quiet and domestic people. Eventually, Bilbo "decides" to join the quest and though this journey will reveal itself as an initiating travel to Bilbo, soon we realize how this Hobbit is different from the classic hero. Since very soon, Bilbo longs for his home, happening this not only when he is in danger, tired and afraid, but also in moments when he is physically fit, as in Beorn's house. Bilbo's not especially strong or courageous; in fact, when the first problems emerge, Bilbo needs to be saved by the other members of the group, as happens in the confrontation with the Trolls, when is Gandalf that saves them. Moreover, the biggest signs of bravery Bilbo gives the reader happen when he finds the ring can make him invisible – Bilbo Baggins need to disappear in order to be daring enough to overcome the boundaries that eventually come out in his way. Like so, as he does not have superior qualities than the others, Bilbo's certainly not in a leadership position among this group (Thorin is the one closest to being the leader).

But Bilbo knows that that is not his natural territory, and even when he starts becoming useful for the group, he always has a defensive posture, what can be seen, for instance, in the fact that he is humble; Bilbo doesn't mock on those he defeats, as the classic hero tended to do (remember Ulysses mocking Polyphemus in *Odyssey*). As opposed to the classic epic hero, Bilbo does not also fight great wars; he tends to be protected by chance and luck, what can be confirmed in the biggest brawl in *The Hobbit*, The Battle of the Five Armies, where Bilbo doesn't take a direct part in because he was knocked out.

This also happens for the reason that Bilbo doesn't have heroic intrinsic qualities, he grows as a hero as he overcomes the dangers, and even when his "heroic qualities" are in the highest level, he always seems very unsure about it, what gets to be proved in the very ending of the story, when Bilbo returns to be a domestic Hobbit – his character proved to be "round": originally he is domestic, then adventurous, then domestic again, what confirms that, even in a now different way, Bilbo's more comfortable in being a quiet Hobbit, than a risky one.

Another issue that clearly separates Bilbo Baggins from the classic hero's concept is the fact that he "betrays" his group. By giving the Arkenstone to Bard, knowing that was one of the items the Dwarves wanted the most, Bilbo is accused of treason, something that was unthinkable for the classic hero. But this "treason" is directly connected with other difference between Bilbo and the classic hero – the fact that he is fair, rather than greedy. In the classic epics, the most the characters had, the better, bigger and powerful they were; this way, they didn't think on fairness, because to them fair was to the best, to have the most, they weren't as much concerned with issues regarding with fairness or justice as they were with power or status. But Bilbo is not like this, and he gives the Arkenstone to Bard, because he believed that that was the right thing to do.

But not only of differences is the connection between Bilbo Baggins and the classic hero made; in order to be considered a hero, the Hobbit certainly shares some features of the epic hero, characteristics those who become quite clearer after the moment in which Bilbo kills the Spider all by himself. If the Baggins side of Bilbo's family made him fear the adventure, his Took side (his mother's) impelled him to go into the quest, what can be seen in the temptation he feels to say "yes" to the quest, temptation that that he had to fight back, when he remembered the possibility of a dangerous journey. But is after killing the spider that the hero in Bilbo reveals himself; from this point on, Bilbo's bravery gradually increases.

Another feature that Bilbo shares with the classic hero is the fact that he is very astute. Both Bilbo and the classic hero are not especially intelligent, erudite, but they think fast enough to get out of the situations they are in; Bilbo is clever enough to survive to Gollum's game and to wait for the right moment to escape from the Elves, when they imprison the Dwarves (in a quite similar way to the *Odyssey* moment in which Ulysses escapes from the Polyphemus' cave). Also to take into account is the fact that even though Bilbo didn't want to have responsibilities in that group, he always performs his duties, and he is always able to get out of the situations he is involved in, no matter how hard they are, being this factor connected with the fact that Bilbo (just like the classic hero) is protected by his heroic fate, that is to say, Bilbo is destined to perform great duties, so luck and chance are always protecting him.

As in the classic epic narrative, in *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* all the secondary characters are placed in a position of helping or disturbing Bilbo's quest. It's quite clear that despite the existence of some fluctuations, there are no in between characters, every one is either good or bad. This division becomes quite clear in the Battle of the Five Armies, where we can easily see who is on each side; but on a deeper analysis of the main characters of the book, we can see that on the helpers side (those who will assist Bilbo in his quest) are Bard, Beorn, the Dwarves, the Eagles, the Elves, Elrond, Gandalf, Men and Roac. On the other hand, we have characters who will try to

avoid the goals Bilbo has to achieve - the opponents (the Goblins, Gollum, Smaug, the Spiders, the Trolls and the Wargs). In a more extensive view, we could also consider Bilbo's mother and father as, respectively, helper and opponent, once that according to the origins of each side of the family, his Took side made him feel the urge to go to the adventure, and his Baggins side made him not want to leave his home.

Since very early it becomes clear that every character is either good or bad, and that the fluctuations that there are, are usually provoked by some kind of external interference: Thorin's evil attitude is due to his thirst for gold; Gollum's positive one is (though unintentionally) providing the ring, which will help Bilbo throughout the story. The fact that Gandalf puts Bilbo in a quest he didn't want to be in, can also be considered as a fluctuation from helper to opponent, especially when Gandalf leaves the group, leaving them in a position of almost no knowledge of what's to come. The same happens with the Elves, when afraid of what the Dwarves might be up to, imprison them, making their quest harder and longer. Thorin's obsession with gold, also puts Bilbo's group in a rough situation, and shows the Dwarves' selfish, mean and unfair side. By defeating the Trolls, the Bilbo's fellowship also obtains weapons and the key to enter in Smaug's cavern, so in an indirect way, the Trolls also help Bilbo's quest. The same logic can be applied to the Spider, which, by dying, marks a changing point on Bilbo's personality, converting him in a quite more courageous and decided character from that point on (in other words, the fact that Bilbo kills this spider, makes him quite closer to the classic hero's conventions). This ambiguity of some characters can also be applied to Gollum, who, despite wanting to eat Bilbo, does not effectively harm the Hobbit's quest and even provides him the (so useful in the rest of the story) ring.

These fluctuations, however, should not make us doubt about the character's classification as "helpers" or "opponents", once that their natural intentions are quite obvious and revealing of in which side they are. The characters who fluctuate from one side to another show very clearly what they were up to: Thorin has a similar goal in this quest as Bilbo, and fights by his side; Gollum only unintentionally helps the Hobbit, and his main purpose was to eat him; Gandalf is the one who puts Bilbo in the quest, and often assists the group (he even saves their life in the Trolls episode); the Elves only imprison the group because they feared them; and obviously, neither the Trolls or the Spider wanted to be killed in order to help Bilbo and his group.

All these parallelisms of *The Hobbit of There and Back Again* and the classic epic are sustained by a quite unique narration. *The Hobbit* is a story which is close not only to the classic epic, but also to the tale and subsequently to the oral tradition. These narrative strategies can be proved by both linguistic and aesthetical strategies. On the linguistic side, we have, for instance, the words written in accordance to the way the characters speak; by doing this, Tolkien emphasises the language and consequently the character of he who is speaking. As examples of this, we should take into account the Trolls' accent, emphasising their arrogance and foolishness, or the Gollum's sibilants, stressing his gloomy character (the fact that the words spoken for these characters are written in the way they pronounced them is another oral marker). Another narrative resource of *The Hobbit* is the fact that many places' names are given after its physical characteristics, or to identify the peoples that live in

that same place. This happens with (for instance) Hobbiton, Long Lake and Lonely Mountain.

Also important are the aesthetical strategies introduced by J.R.R. Tolkien in this narrative. Throughout the story we find oral markers and typical elements of the tale and children's literature, such as songs (that the Dwarves are constantly performing), riddles (as in Gollum's cave), many repetitions (as the sentence "It was not the last time he wished that"), enumerations (as the constant references to the Dwarves name, and usually for a certain order "Thorin, Dori, Nori, Ori, Balin, Dwalin, Fili, Kili, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur") or the listing of actions (as happens in the conversation with Smaug, when the things Bilbo made are listed in an attempt to show that Bilbo was not as inoffensive as Smaug might think, and, at the same time, remind the reader of the heroic attitudes the Hobbit had already performed). Another examples of aesthetic strategies are the use of "interrogatio" (a sequence of rethorical questions), as happens in the first time Bilbo sees Gandalf, and the use of epithets, such as "Thorin Oakenshield", "son of Thrain, son of Thror" and "King under the Mountain" all applied to Thorin and that are another feature that approximates *The Hobbit of There and Back Again* to the classic epic, once that it was extremely usual in works such as Homer's *Iliad* (think on the phrases "Son of Peleus", "Swif-footed" or "God-like" applied to Achilles).

Another central issue to take into account is the narrator itself. This narrator is an omniscient one, which means, that despite the fact that he is not a direct participant in the story, he knows both everything what happened, and what's to come. In fact, he uses his knowledge of the future of the story to give hints on its development (remember the so many times repeated sentence "It was not the last time he wished that"). This hints the narrator gives are an element of comparison with Gandalf – the wizard shows himself as being the character with more knowledge of the future ("You will thank me before all is over"), and knowing so, he presents himself as being the wiser element of the group – as the same happens with the narrator, his words win credibility and the reader becomes eager to rely on what he relates. By knowing the whole story, the narrator has the freedom to control the times of the narration. He seems to give the more importance to the quest itself and to the defeating of Smaug (chapter 14), moment when the narration pace increases and the action speeds up, as if the main boundary was left behind. The returning home is only mentioned in telegraphic terms, despite the (more than probable) problems the group had to overcome, especially if we consider that they took a very similar way to the (so hard) route they took when they made the trip the other way round.

By all these reasons, the approximation between *The Hobbit of There and Back Again* and the classic epic is inevitable, and subsequently the comparison between Bilbo Baggins and the classic hero becomes unavoidable. This way, the main, and only character with his story closed at the end of the book, can be seen as a kind of "self-made-hero", once that despite not being intrinsically heroic, Bilbo Baggins overcomes all the troubles that he has to fight, and works his way as a hero throughout the story. Bilbo Baggins is then the most heroic character and the only possible hero in an epic where are no... heroes...