

The Psychological Journey of Bilbo Baggins

—Tolkien's *The Hobbit* from a psychoanalytic perspective

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Abstract: Bilbo's story has surprising depths that can be plumbed by the reader who is receptive to psychoanalytic interpretations. This thesis is to discuss Tolkien's *The Hobbit* from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Introduction

The Hobbit has not been recognized by people until the novel of *Lord of Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien has been made into a film. It has usually been praised as a good introduction to the trilogy, and as W. H. Auden's "one of the best children's books of this century", but anyone familiar with psychoanalysis cannot avoid being tantalized by recurrent themes and motifs in the three stories. Bilbo's story has surprising depths that can be plumbed by the reader who is receptive to psychoanalytic interpretations.

The central pattern of *The Hobbit* is, quite obviously, a quest. Like so many heroes before him, Bilbo sets out on a risky journey, encounters and overcomes many obstacles (including a confrontation with a dragon) and returns victorious after he has restored a kingdom and righted ancient wrongs. However, this pattern is so commonplace in literature that it is not a very helpful sign. But it may help in other ways.

The Folk Ingredients

Let us first look briefly at *The Hobbit* for its folk ingredients, that is, the common motifs or story elements which it shares with folk narratives. There are the creatures themselves: dwarves, elves, trolls, animal servants, helpful birds and, the most frequently recurring of all folk adversaries, the treasure-guarding dragon. There are magic objects in abundance: a ring of invisibility, secret entrances into the underworld, magic swords, and doors into mountains. Dreams foretell and taboos admonish, the violation of which could bring dire results.

There are tasks to be performed, riddles to solve, and foes to be outwitted or outfought. Folk motifs form the very plot in the texture of this tale, which is not surprising since Tolkien, as a medievalist, is immersed in folk tradition, a tradition that gives substance not only to the best known epics but to most medieval narratives and to fairy tales. In fact, it is probably its resemblance to what today's readers see as the nursery tale that has resulted in *The Hobbit* being relegated to elementary school shelves. But even if *The Hobbit* is only a children's story, it should be analyzed more closely for deeper levels of meaning, for it is the kind of story that has provided the most profound insights into the human psyche.

Metaphor for the Individuation Process

Bilbo Baggins' journey is a metaphor for the individuation process, his quest -- a search for maturity and wholeness, and his adventures symbolically detailed rites of maturation.

At the beginning of the tale, Bilbo's personality is out of balance and far from integrated. His masculinity, or one may say his Tookish aggressiveness, is being repressed so that he is clinging rather immaturely to a childish way of life. He has not even begun to realize his full potential. The womblike peace and security of his home is disturbed with the arrival of Gandalf, who may be seen as a projection of the Jungian archetype of the wise old man since he resembles the magic helper of countless stories.

At the outset of their adventure, Bilbo, like a typical young adolescent, is uncertain of his role, or persona, to use a Jungian term.

One of the most crucial incidents of the story takes place when Bilbo finds himself unconscious and separated from the dwarves within the mountain domain of the goblins. In this underground scene he must face an important trial; he must make a decision whose outcome will be a measure of his maturity. With unprecedented courage he decides to face life rather than to withdraw from it. This decision marks an important step in his psychological journey. The danger he decides to face at this time, of course, is Gollum, the vaguely sensed but monstrous inhabitant of the underground lake. The association of this adversary with water and the attention given to his long grasping fingers and voracious appetite suggest a similarity to Jung's Devouring-Mother archetype, that predatory monster which must be faced and slain by every individual in the depths of his unconscious if he is to develop as a self-reliant individual. The fact that the talisman is a ring is even more suggestive of Jungian symbology since the circle is a Jungian archetype of the self, the indicator of possible psychic wholeness. The psychological importance of this confrontation is further supported by the imagery of the womb and of rebirth which marks the details of Bilbo's escape.

Whether the spider with whom Bilbo battles is interpreted as a Jungian shadow figure, embodying evil, or as the Devouring-Mother facet of the anima is immaterial. The symbolism is clear without specific terms: a lone protagonist must free himself from a menacing opponent that has the power to cripple him forever. With the aid of a miraculously acquired sword and a magic talisman, he is able to face the danger and overcome it. From this point on, Bilbo has the self-esteem needed to fulfill his responsibilities as a mature and trustworthy leader. It is through his ingenuity that they escape from the dungeon prisons in the subterranean halls of the wood-elves. This last episode also reveals telling symbolic details in that the imprisonment is underground and the escape through a narrow outlet into the water is yet another birth image.

The climactic adventures of Bilbo are of course the episodes with Smaug, who, like the traditional dragon of folklore, has laid waste the land and is guarding a treasure. If viewed in the light of Jungian symbology, the contested treasure can be seen as the archetype of the self, of psychic wholeness. Thus this last series of events marks the final stages of Bilbo's quest of maturation.

A truly critical question arises in considering the incident where Bilbo acquires the Arkenstone and the remainder of the story. Why does Bilbo keep the Arkenstone without telling the dwarves and then use it as a pawn in dealing with their enemies? Why did Tolkien have a rather uninteresting character, rather than Bilbo, kill Smaug? Why is Bilbo knocked unconscious so that he is useless during the last Battle of Five Armies? Isn't it a fault in artistic structure to allow the protagonist to fade from the picture during episodes when the normal expectation would be to have him demonstrate even more impressive heroism?

Conclusion

Answers to these questions are clear if the story is interpreted as the psychological journey of Bilbo Baggins. It stands to reason that Tolkien does not have Bilbo kill the dragon because that would be more the deed of a savior or culture hero, such as St. George, or the Red Cross Knight, or Beowulf. The significance of this tale lies in fact in the very obviously anti-heroic manner in which Tolkien chooses to bring Bilbo's adventures to a conclusion. As a result, Bilbo emerges as a symbol of a very average individual, not as a figure of epic proportion. Bilbo has not found eternal glory, but, rather, the self-knowledge that a willingness to meet challenge is not necessarily incompatible with a love of home. At the conclusion of his adventures Bilbo finds the greatest prize of all: a knowledge of his own identity. In maturing psychologically, he has learned to think for himself and to have the courage to follow a course he knows to be right in spite of possible consequences.

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