

## **Tolkien: Creative Genius and Astute Scholar** **Stephen DiGiorgio**

J.R.R. Tolkien is held in high regard among people who appreciate fantasy fiction, and rightfully so, but what is it that makes his fantasy so exceptional and how was he able to consistently enthrall his readers? Robert Foster, a scholar of English and Medieval Studies, explains that Tolkien's novels are good fantasy because, “Good fantasy offers the possibility of active, serious participation by the reader in an imagined world, which heightens one's sense of Self and Other” (Foster). Tolkien certainly actively, and seriously, engages his audience throughout *The Hobbit*, but how exactly is he able to accomplish this?

Tolkien's own expansive imagination certainly helped him achieve this goal, but credit also must be given to Tolkien's exceptionally vast knowledge of literature, which he constantly looked to for inspiration. For example, Tolkien's familiarity with classical Greek Literature becomes evident when one compares *The Hobbit* with Homer's *The Odyssey*. By comparing the overall structure of both books, specific similar scenes that take place, and the characteristics of Bilbo and Odysseus, it will become apparent that not only did Tolkien look to *The Odyssey* for inspiration while writing *The Hobbit*, but also that his respect and knowledge of literature is part of the reason he has been able to achieve such great renown.

Perhaps the most basic similarity between *The Hobbit* and *The Odyssey* is the overall structure that both stories share. Both stories are about the main character's quest to achieve something, but before fully accomplishing their goal, they both must undergo a Bildungsroman, or maturation process, in which they overcome character flaws that have previously held them back from being complete characters. For Odysseus, his quest is the long and arduous journey to be reunited with his wife on Ithaca, but before accomplishing this he has to overcome his hubris that gets him side tracked, and his infidelity to Penelope that prolongs his journey even further. For Bilbo, his quest is to go on an adventure with the dwarves in an attempt regain treasure from the evil dragon Smaug, but before Bilbo is able to

accomplish this goal, he has to overcome his cowardice and resistance to adventure that he displays at the beginning of the tale: “Poor Bilbo couldn't bear it any longer. At *may never return* he began to feel a shriek coming up inside. [...] the poor little hobbit could be seen kneeling on the hearth-rug, shaking like a jelly that was melting” (Tolkien 17). Although both quests are not identical, both protagonists go through a similar process in which they must mature to overcome their deficiencies of character in order to realize their final goals.

Another similarity the books share in structure is that they are driven by the protagonist's interaction with the various monsters they encounter along their journeys. All of these encounters with monsters serve the purpose of showing development within the characters by highlighting either what they did wrong or what they were able to correct and do right. Whether it be Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus where he lets hubris get the best of him, or Bilbo's encounter with the trolls where he is desperate to make a name for himself as a burglar, both early instances serve to show where the character begins on his journey. Later monster encounters, by contrast, show growth within the characters, such as Bilbo rescuing the dwarves from the giant spiders or Odysseus overcoming the desire to be lured astray by the tempting Sirens.

Specific scenes that occur in *The Hobbit* are also extremely similar to scenes that take place within *The*

*Odyssey*. For instance, when Bilbo and the dwarves are fighting the trolls, Thorin “jumped forward to the fire, [...] He caught up a big branch all on fire at one end; and Bert got that end in his eye before he could step aside” (Tolkien 37). This seems particularly similar to the scene in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus defeats Polyphemus: “Now, at last, I thrust our stake in a bed of embers/ to get it red-hot [...] Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point,/ straight into the monster's eye they rammed it hard” (Homer 9.420-428). Neither scene is exactly identical but it seems that Tolkien may have been inspired here by *The Odyssey* to have his smaller character overcome a much larger threat by stabbing it in the eye with a burning piece of wood.

Another scene from *The Hobbit* that is glaringly similar to a scene from *The Odyssey* takes place within the chapter “Barrels Out of Bond.” This chapter, in which Bilbo smuggles his dwarf friends out of the Wood Elf stronghold in empty barrels, bears a striking resemblance to the encounter that Odysseus has with Polyphemus, in which he smuggles his soldiers out of Polyphemus’ cave tied underneath sheep. These scenes are very alike for a few reasons. First, both scenes have the main character stuck behind a door which they have no power to move by themselves. For Bilbo, “Magic shut the gates” (Tolkien 157), making it possible for him to slip out with the ring on, but never able to sneak out with all of the dwarves behind him. In the case of Odysseus, a humongous boulder blocks the entrance to

Polyphemus' cave that only the Cyclops is strong enough to move: "no twenty wagons, rugged and four wheeled,/ could budge that boulder off the ground, I tell you,/ such an immense stone the monster wedged to block his cave!" (Homer 9.273-275). The predicament of being trapped behind doors they cannot move requires both protagonists to think their way out of a tough situation that they cannot force their way out of. This leads to both characters devising similar plans to sneak their friends out.

For Odysseus, his plan is to take advantage of Polyphemus' need to let his sheep out of the cave. For Bilbo, his plan is to take advantage of the gate on the river that the Wood Elves have to raise in order to send and receive supplies from the next town. The last thing that makes both scenes so alike is how both Bilbo and Odysseus are so worried about getting their friends out of a sticky situation that they almost forget to make provisions for themselves to escape. In Bilbo's case, he forgets that he has no one to help him get into one of the barrels and is forced to hold onto the side of a barrel all the way down the river. For Odysseus, he runs out of sheep after ensuring all of his friends escape, and is forced to sneak out underneath a ram instead of a sheep. This distinction sets Odysseus apart from the rest of his soldiers, just as Bilbo distinguishes himself from the dwarves by being the only one to escape without being inside a barrel.

The similarities of character Odysseus and Bilbo share may not seem apparent at first glance because Odysseus is obviously not a small hobbit just as Bilbo is certainly not a powerful Greek warrior. However, although neither main character is exactly like the other, they both share a certain characteristic that makes them similar. The characteristic in question is of course their wit. In crunch time situations, both Odysseus and Bilbo call upon their intellect to bail them out. This is very different from other heroes like Beowulf, Achilles, and Gilgamesh who all primarily rely on their outstanding strength to fight their way out of tough situations. Some examples of Bilbo and Odysseus making use of their quick wit would be the instance in which Bilbo encounters Gollum, and the instance in which Odysseus tricks Polyphemus into believing his name is “Nobody.” When Bilbo first meets Gollum, instead of trying to kill him with his dagger (he would probably fail), Bilbo relies on his wit to save him and accepts Gollum’s challenge to a game of riddles: “Very well, said Bilbo, who was anxious to agree, until he found out more about the creature, whether he was quite alone, whether he was fierce or hungry, and whether he was a friend of the goblins” (Tolkien 68). Bilbo is smart enough to take all of these things into account before trying to attack Gollum with his dagger, and understands that if he defeats Gollum in the game of riddles he might have a chance to find a way out of the goblin’s stronghold.

Similarly, when Odysseus employs his wit to trick Polyphemus, he demonstrates that he is able to think on his feet and avoids giving away any crucial information to Polyphemus (even though he is about to ruin this great idea in a few pages when he hurls insults at the Cyclops from the boat). Although both characters do not use their wit in the same exact ways, they both seem to rely upon it most in their moments of need.

Both *The Odyssey* and *The Hobbit* share a great deal of things in common, and it is highly probable that J.R.R. Tolkien gains some of the ideas for his own work from Homer. However, just because *The Hobbit* can be seen as inspired by *The Odyssey* does not take anything away from Tolkien's ability to write phenomenal fantasy. In fact, Tolkien's respect, knowledge, and appreciation for classic literature has only served to strengthen his ability to write great fantasy by drawing upon an already tried and true formula. Tolkien is able to achieve the "serious participation by the reader in an imagined world" that Robert Foster was talking about because he is working from a knowledge base that has already been proven to be able to accomplish this goal. By working with this framework in his mind, Tolkien has to simply add his own imagination to the mix in order to produce fantasy fiction worthy of praise.

## Works Cited

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