

BEYOND THE SOMME: WAR, SACRIFICE AND HEROISM IN THE WRITING OF JRR TOLKIEN

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ABSTRACT

JRR Tolkien's traumatic First World War experiences have been perceived as central to the literary development of his fantasy works, particularly *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1956). Tolkien scholars have also provided a wider context for the effects of the First World War on his writing and a significant debate on Tolkien's place within the context of twentieth-century modernism and modernity has developed in recent years. Peter Jackson's film trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) has provoked a discussion on the philosophy of Tolkien's experience and literary explorations of war. Central to the debate are the issues of 'relative' sacrifice and heroism embodied in Tolkien's two major narratives *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as well as the potentialities for the extension of narrative heroism offered by the recent film trilogy of *The Hobbit* (2012-2014).

Keywords: fantasy, twentieth-century modernism, philosophy of war, sacrifice, heroism, trauma, Tolkien studies, *Lord of the Rings*, film narrative

Lev Grossman noted that, 'Good and evil are fixed stars in the skies of Middle-earth even as they're starting to look wobbly in ours. Tolkien, a veteran of the British

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nightmare at the Somme in World War I, is a poet of war, and we are a nation in need of a good, clear war story. At a time when Americans are wandering deeper into a nebulous conflict against a faceless enemy, Tolkien gives us the war we wish we were fighting – a struggle with a foe whose face we can see, who fights out in the open battlefield, far removed from innocent civilians... Sometimes fantasies tell us less about who we are than who we wish we were..¹ Grossman points out however that ‘If the *Lord of the Rings* is a fantasy, it’s ultimately a fantasy about growing up and putting childish things aside ... it’s a tale about temptation, Frodo isn’t a knight in shining armour, ... And as hard as he fights against that temptation, in the end he fails.’ Writing nearly a decade later, Adam Gopnik re-examines Tolkien’s work in the context of the ongoing appetite for high fantasy among young adults: ‘Of all the unexpected things in contemporary literature, this is among the oddest: that kids have an inordinate appetite for very long, very tricky, very strange books about places that don’t exist, fights that never happened, all set against the sort of medieval background that Mark Twain had discredited with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.² Gopnik asks why the ‘Tolkien formula’ has been so potent and finds his answers in the centrality of the hobbit characters who are cast in ‘loveable detail’. He points out that ‘modernist ambiguity, or realist emotional ambivalence is unknown to Tolkien – the good people are very good, the bad people very bad’.³

Michael Livingstone pinpoints the five-month long Battle of the Somme in 1916 as a turning-point in the First World War which had such a dramatic effect on Tolkien as a young writer. ‘Thus the battle proper began when roughly 100,000 men rose up out of the Allied trenches and marched across the crater-torn and razorwire-strewn waste of what was called No-Man’s Land. The official opening day casualties for the British army alone have gone down to history as 57,470 of which 19,420 were fatal. Both numbers still stand as gruesome world records for loss of life in one day’s fighting.’ He goes on to add, ‘The addition of another 200,000 casualties among Allied forces by the time the campaign ended in November brings the total Allied losses to nearly 600,000 men – all in order to press the lines 10 kilometers closer to Germany.’⁴ Livingstone notes the centrality of both John Garth’s and Brian Rosebury’s work in linking Tolkien’s war experiences to his writing and quotes Verlyn Flieger who argues that ‘the literature of the post war period in which Tolkien, like many others, began to write, spoke with the voice of the “lost generation” trying to come to terms with incommunicable experience’.⁵ Livingstone notes that, ‘Tolkien

1 L Grossman, ‘Feeding on Fantasy’, in *Time Magazine*, 12 February 2002.

2 A Gopnik, ‘The Dragon’s Egg High Fantasy for Young Adults’ in *The New Yorker*, 5 December 2011.

3 Ibid.

4 M Livingstone, ‘The Shell-Shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien’s Trauma of the Ring’ in *Mythlore*, September 2006. On the Battle of the Somme see M M Evans, *Over the Top: Great Battles of the First World War*. London: Arcturus Publishing, pp 133-151.

5 V Flieger, *A Question of Time: J R R Tolkien’s Road to Faerie*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, p. 219.

realized that the horrors he witnessed at the Somme were a sign that something had gone terribly wrong in the world'.⁶

Livingstone also makes a convincing argument that Tolkien's hero in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins, was suffering from what the First World War called 'shell shock' – first diagnosed in February 1915 - and what has later been identified as 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder', based on Tolkien's experiences of battle. 'That Frodo is characterized by shock, sadness, and an unwillingness to participate in violence is ... evidence of shell shock'. As a survivor he is like one of 'Europe's Lost Generation' who survived the Great War. Time cannot heal Frodo's psychological scars of trauma and he enters that 'vicious cycle of rejection and recrimination' that is so common with victims of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder; he cannot escape the incommunicable fear and trembling of his past and the inexplicable guilt of living.⁷

The impact of the First World War went far beyond that of the individual soldier. Commenting on Paul Fussell's classic work *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Michael Alexander describes how Fussell viewed English literature as claiming the war as a phenomenon absolutely unprecedented, uniquely senseless and an experience without the possibility of redeeming sense.⁸ Long argues that, despite the war's firm association with modernism 'the literature of the fantastic and the experience of war share a fundamental bond. In each maps are redrawn, new worlds are created, and the given is dismantled. An unlearning takes place'.⁹ He goes on to explain further that, 'The reader of fantasy and the soldier find themselves inhabiting an in-between twilight space, a No-Man's land of linguistic disintegration'.¹⁰ Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* then is not an allegory of the First World War (or any war) but rather 'a recollection of it – a literary work, like Owen's *Strange Meeting* and David Jones' *In Parenthesis*, which investigates the creative work of memory in reply to the trauma of war. Fantasy, conceived in Tolkien's novel as a dialogic process of invention and remembrance, allows for a return to the war that is not documentary or allegorical in approach but *memorial*.¹¹

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* reflects clearly the kinds of landscape depicted by First World War writers. In Tolkien's narrative we find places like Mordor that Hynes describes as 'a world rendered beyond landscape where sunrise and sunset are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man'.¹² Jones describes Tolkien's depiction of

6 Livingstone, 'The Shell-Shocked Hobbit'.

7 Ibid.

8 M Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, p. 242.

9 R Long, 'Fantastic Medievalism and the Great War in J R R Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*' in J Chance and K Siewers (eds), *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 124.

10 Ibid., p 125.

11 Ibid., p. 126. My italics.

12 S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. New York: Atheneum, p 196.

uninhabited lands and wastelands as ‘the medieval wasteland of the grail romances with the wasteland of the battlefields of the First World War and the environmental wreckage of the industrial revolution’.¹³ This places Tolkien firmly in a modernist context as recent scholars such as Attebury have argued: ‘Tolkien was born in the very middle of the modernist generation and, like other writers of his time, was shaped by war and disillusionment’.¹⁴ Fliieger has pointed out that, ‘Tolkien’s work could only have been written in and for the twentieth century’¹⁵ and we should set Tolkien ‘solidly in the context of the twentieth century that shaped him and produced his work’.¹⁶ For Baltasar, Tolkien’s work might ‘as a modern work, be studied as part of the literary movement in the thirties to the fifties in which TS Eliot, Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene, among others turned to, or fled from Catholicism or religious faith’.¹⁷ Vanninskaya argues that Tolkien was ‘a man of his time’ in that he drew on the fantasy traditions of Haggard, Chesterton and Morris, while also invoking the twentieth-century rural nostalgia of the Edwardian and inter-war years, the patriotic writing of the First World War and the ideas of national character, little Englandism and the anti-statism of Orwelism.¹⁸ Mortimer provides a strong argument in favour of Tolkien and modernism, stating that: ‘It is naïve... to assert that Tolkien, born in 1892 and educated in the first decade of the twentieth century would have emerged in some kind of aesthetic vacuum ... Yet his work is constantly critiqued and catalogued in a fashion that divorces him from his contemporaries’.¹⁹ Central to the modernist stance was the experience of the First World War. As Nicolay points out the ‘wide scale violence and devastation of World War I ... for the modernists represented an abrupt break in the ostensibly smooth progression of Western history’. Hence ‘much of this (modernist) literature depicts the world as a wasteland and its inhabitants as marked by a sense of existential despair as well as feelings of alienation, dislocation and loss’.²⁰ It was what Brian Rosebury called in his book on Tolkien’s twentieth-century context, a cultural assumption of unbelief.²¹ Nicolay points out that although

13 L. E. Jones, *Myth and Middle-Earth: Exploring Beyond the Legend Behind J R R Tolkien, The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings*. Cold Harbor: Cold Spring Press. 2002. P. 84.

14 B Attebury, *Strategies of Fantasy*. Bloomington: Indianapolis University Press, pp 41-2.

15 V. Fliieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdman’s Publishing, p. 183.

16 V. Fliieger, *Green Suns and Faerie: Essays on Tolkien*. Kent: Kent State University Press. 2011, p. 260.

17 M. Baltasar, ‘Tolkien and the Rediscovery of Myth’ in J. Chance (ed.), *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth: A Reader*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, p. 19.

18 A. Vanninskaya, ‘Tolkien: A Man of His Time?’ in T. Honnegger and F. Weinreich (eds), *Tolkien and Modernity*. Zurich and Berne: Walking Tree Publishers, p. 34.

19 P. Mortimer, ‘Tolkien and Modernism’, in *Tolkien Studies*, vol 2, 2005.

20 C.F. Nicolay, *Tolkien and the Modernists: Literary Responses to the Dark New Days of the twentieth-century*. Jefferson and London: McFarland Publishing, 2014, (kindle edition, pagination irregular).

21 B. Rosebury, *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

The Lord of the Rings was published 'as the modern period was evolving into post-modernism Tolkien, however composed the book between 1936 and 1949 that is, during the modern period contemporary with Eliot, Woolf, Frost and emerged from the same intellectual atmosphere and cataclysmic events', and concludes that although Tolkien 'certainly addresses themes of loss and despair, many of the characters he created are not self-absorbed but selfless, sometimes to the point of complete self-sacrifice. Unlike his contemporaries, so many of who seem to be trapped in the present moment (of modernity), Tolkien appears not to have felt disconnected from the past and its values, for those values were to him enduring'.²²

Courage and heroism were two of the traditional values that Tolkien cherished. Burns looks for the origins of Tolkien's work in the northern courage of the Nordic landscapes of cliffs, mountains and the surviving forests of North-west Europe.²³ An earlier Tolkien scholar, Helms, notes that Tolkien found in the Old English *Beowulf* text the victory of northern heroism but no honour - a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage.²⁴ For Roger Sale it is Anglo-Saxon heroism with honour that makes *The Lord of the Rings* exciting to a literary history of modern heroism: In Tolkien's Middle-earth the riders of Rohan were, for Sale, 'Anglo-Saxon' in their love of lore, their simple and great strength, and their belief that brave men die well in defence of their lord and their honour.²⁵ But Tolkien, unlike the Old English literature he drew on, did not glorify war and saw instead sorrow, blind sick horror, tears and death.²⁶ He stressed instead the *mod* or inward goodness when overwhelmed or defeated,²⁷ and the *ofermod* emphasized in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* in which overbearing pride led to the lamentable advent of chivalry driving a man beyond bleak heroic necessity to excess and inevitable death and despair.²⁸ Tolkien can be viewed in this context as a social critic when he develops his own heroic literary aesthetic.²⁹

One critic noted recently that in his first major work, *The Hobbit*, 'Tolkien found it impossible simply to tell a story from the heroic world of the North. The

22 Nicolay, *Tolkien and the Modernists*.

23 M. Burns, *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-Earth*. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005, pp. 21-22.

24 R. Helms, *Myth, Magic and Meaning in Tolkien's World*. London: Panther Books, 1976, p. 13.

25 R. Sale, *Modern Heroism: Essays on D.H. Lawrence, William Empson and J R R Tolkien*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1973.

26 M. Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in The Lord of the Rings*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003, pp. 31-33

27 J.L. Blumberg, 'The Literary Background of *The Lord of the Rings*' in J.G. West (ed). *Celebrating Middle-earth: The Lord of the Rings as a Defense of Western Civilisation*. Seattle: Inkling Books, 2002, p. 66.

28 J. Chance, 'Tolkien and the Other: Race and Gender in Middle-earth', in Chance and Siewers (eds), *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages*, p. 176.

29 For a recent analysis on this theme see R. Rorabeck, *Tolkien's Heroic Quest*. Maidstone: Crescent Moon Publishing, 2008.

narrative itself required the irony of Bilbo Baggins, a bourgeois hobbit'. While the 'dwarves are on a high and noble quest, straight out of the age of ancient epic. Bilbo is on an adventure, straight out of the age of the Victorian novel'.³⁰ Tolkien's work would seem to owe much to the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Edwardian adventure story.³¹ In examining Tolkien's influences, many scholars have placed him in a carefully delineated Edwardian world, a context which, as I have outlined above, denies his involvement in the world of literary modernism. Following the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy it was increasingly difficult to divorce the work from the contemporary world. As fantasy was a new genre, critics did not know how to catalogue Tolkien's writing.³² Shippey has described Tolkien as a 'post-war writer' and included him in the same category as William Golding, CS Lewis, George Orwell and TH White all of whom were born before the First World War and all of whom published their major works after the Second World War, all dealing with the 'nature and origin of evil'³³.

While arguing vigorously that *The Lord of the Rings* was not in any way an allegory for the events of the 1930s or 1940s, Tolkien did not deny that his narrative was a response to the 'darkness of the present days'.³⁴ Nor would it be appropriate to downplay his experiences of the Second World War against his first-hand participation in the First World War as the disruption to his family life was considerable. As Croft has argued, Tolkien's experience of war must be seen in the context of both conflicts as it was war as a whole that influenced his writing.³⁵ Chance notes that, 'Tolkien's own comments about *The Lord of the Rings* reflect aspects of his own – and every Englishman's – day-to-day life during wartime as heroic, or that his hobbit protagonist represents an unlikely antihero. Tolkien's definition of the hero in the twentieth century refers back to the ordinary man living on the small island of Great Britain during World War II.'³⁶ For McAleer, Tolkien's philosophy of war is simple. While Tolkien's experiences in the First World War reflected the impact of its conflict on British culture, McAleer also suggests that Tolkien, as an English Catholic was influenced by the ideas of Carl Schmitt, Hilaire Belloc and GK Chesterton and that he tied these to 'English ideas of land, solidarity and home'. Each of Tolkien's heroes, argues McAleer is strengthened by coming from a fixed community and has an

30 D. Kennelly, 'Making Middle-earth: From *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* in *The Weekly Standard*, 15 December 2003.

31 As defined for instance in D. Butts, 'The Adventure Story' in D. Butts, *Stories and Society: Children's Literature in Social Context*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. 1992.

32 See for instance, J Clute and J. Grant, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. London: Orbit Books, 1997; S. Rahn, 'J R R Tolkien' in J. Zipes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

33 T.A. Shippey, 'Tolkien as Post-War Writer' in C. Goodknight and P. Reynolds (eds), *Proceedings of the J R R Tolkien Centenary Conference*. Altadena: Mythpoeic Press, 1995, p. 86.

34 H. Carpenter, *The Letters of J R R Tolkien*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981, p. 41.

35 J.B. Croft, *War and the Works of J R R Tolkien*. London and Westport: Praeger. 2004.

36 Chance, 'Tolkien and the Other', p 178.

identity framed by the things they love. Such links make it rational for the hobbits to defend the Shire.³⁷

Tolkien's literary project contained from the outset the themes of great heroism and the triumph of the human spirit at a number of levels.³⁸ Garth suggests that his earliest conception of *The Silmarillion* as an epic 'presents versions of old-style heroism side-by-side with new versions that show the impact of the Great War'.³⁹ Garth argues that in *The Book of Lost Tales*, begun straight after his return from the Battle of the Somme, the warriors Beren, Turin, and Tuor each appear to trace Tolkien's own growth as a young man thrust unwillingly into war. 'But they are figures at one with their epic world, like the knights who loom as large as castle walls in a medieval picture... Larger than life, they stood between Tolkien's writing and his own experiences as a fairly ordinary soldier. Thankfully, his need to devise stories for his children serendipitously broke down the barrier. The demolition was carried out by someone distinctly less than hero-sized: Bilbo Baggins. In the course of composing Bilbo's story in the early 1930s, I suggest, experience welled up again more freely, so that *The Hobbit* described the transformation of a fairly ordinary figure during a far-flung journey past the jaws of death and into battle.'⁴⁰ Flieger argues that the Silmarils represent humankind's relationship to light and is a continuing history of great deeds and great heroes more surely than the combination in the *Lord of the Rings* of a great task and a little person. Hobbits as small heroes became a necessary part of this myth.⁴¹ The Tolkien hero is no Achilles or Beowulf or Siegfried. One must do his duty not only freely but also humbly. One's limitations are not to be transcended by heroic passions but humbly accepted. This also ... makes possible an even more difficult response: to endure the real loss which comes as a result of the wholesale struggle against evil.⁴²

The Quest of Erebor which forms the plot of *The Hobbit* is essential for hobbits, as represented by Bilbo Baggins to learn, through sacrifice, their true role in the wider world. Gandalf later points out that hobbits 'had begun to forget: forget their own beginnings and legends, forget what little they had known about the greatness of the world. It was not yet gone, but it was getting buried: the memory of the high

37 G. McAleer, *Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings: Philosophy of War*. 2014. Kindle edition. Pagination irregular.

38 A. Petty, *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes: Discovering the Human Spirit*. Cold Harbour: Cold Spring Press, 2003.

39 J. Garth, 'Tolkien and the Great War' in W.G. Hammond and C. Scull (eds), *The Lord of the Rings 1954-2004: Scholarship in Honor of Richard E Blackwelder*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2006, p. 42.

40 Ibid.

41 Flieger, *Splintered Light*, p 134.

42 C. Urang, *Shadows of Heaven: Religion and Fantasy in the Writing of C S Lewis, Charles Williams and J R R Tolkien*. Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971, p 111.

and the perilous'.⁴³ It is however, only exceptional hobbits like Bilbo and Frodo who have the opportunity to experience the 'high and the perilous' kind of quest.⁴⁴ To return again to an early Tolkien critic, Helms: 'We cannot take *The Hobbit* by itself, for it stands at the threshold of one of the most immense and satisfying imaginative creations of our time, *The Lord of the Rings*. The real importance of *The Hobbit* is what its creator learned in the writing. As Bilbo Baggins grew up, so did Tolkien's imagination. The childlike evocations of shivery evil in Bilbo's adventures awoke in Tolkien a sudden and disturbing perception of genuine evil and of the heroism it must elicit.'⁴⁵ If *The Hobbit* is 'more lighthearted and less deeply heroic' than *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo's sense of heroic duty is, as the story progresses 'developed further' and is no less than that of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴⁶ Dickerson cites the major example of Aragorn's 'choice of doom' as the most important character in Tolkien's works 'in whom, and for whom, the importance and difficulty of free choice is captured', and points out that Bilbo's sacrifices in following his choices are equally important.⁴⁷ While Bilbo's initial sacrifices of comfort seem to operate at a simple level and include good pipe-weed, a well-stocked cellar and six meals a day, he does experience cold, hunger, sleeplessness, fear and fatigue and slowly grows in self-confidence to discover hidden strength and an unexpected talent for leadership. Ultimately he sacrifices his respectability for the higher values of heroism, self-sacrifice, ancient wisdom and a knowledge of great beauty.⁴⁸ Starting out as an 'unlikely hero', Bilbo later exhibits an indifference to glory in battle and great wealth which enable him to be keenly aware of the unacceptable price of the sacrifices made at the end of the book.⁴⁹

An early Tolkien scholar, Kocher, favours Aragorn as the main hero of the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* above Frodo or Gandalf. His heroism is focused on the ultimate sacrifice of Arwen which is intolerable as she has to accept old age and death and the separation of her soul from her immortal kinfolk.⁵⁰ Simpson has more recently suggested a sacral and sacrificial role for Aragorn as a king pre-dating Celtic myth in the oldest fertility rites such as those outlined by Eliade 'whereby the substance of the king must be returned to its source to ensure the earth's continuing

43 J.R.R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-earth*. London: HarperCollins, 1999 (1980), p. 428.

44 J. Chance, *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*. Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 2001, pp. 34-5.

45 Helms, *Myth, Magic and Meaning*, p. 53.

46 Dickerson, *Following Gandalf*, p. 86.

47 Ibid., p. 88.

48 G. Bassham 'The Adventurous Hobbit' in G. Bassham and F. Bronson (eds), *The Hobbit and Philosophy*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2012, pp 11-13.

49 A. Lurie, *Don't Tell the GrownUps: Subversive Childrens' Literature*. London: Bloomsbury. 1990, p. 158.

50 P. Kocher, *Master of Middle-earth: The Achievement of J R R Tolkien*. London: Pimlico. 2002 (1972), p. 138.

vitality'. In choosing the manner and time of his own death and in his healing powers he illustrates the most potent sacrificial elements of the sacral King.⁵¹ The sacrifices made by Aragorn and Arwen are, for, so great that they leave Middle-earth a sadder place and one of the enduring enigmas of the end of *The Lord of the Rings* is its sense of unbearable sacrifice and loss.⁵² Forty years after Kocher, Elizabeth Stephen has re-argued the case for Aragorn being Tolkien's main hero in *The Lord of the Rings* and, using the extended legendarium provided by *The History of Middle-earth* she examines the evidence for the development of the hobbit 'Trotter' to the Numenorean king who fulfilled a central function in Tolkien's mythology.⁵³

Recently there has been a growing interest in masculinity in Tolkien's writing. It would seem strange if Tolkien's text was *not* based on traditional nineteenth-century masculine heroism given the context of Tolkien's childhood and youth and even more importantly the literature he read during that time, for instance the works of colonial writers such as Rider Haggard. It is crucial however, to note that Tolkien's heroes were never the great men of late Victorian and early Edwardian hero worship. Tolkien's writing on war, in so far as it focused on the First World War, found a way to express a belief in the true heroism of war not in the deeds of great men leading their troops into battle but in the disillusionment of ordinary soldiers. In the development of the friendship between Frodo and Sam, Tolkien explores the ways in which heroes can accomplish great deeds through mutual emotion and physical intimacy.⁵⁴ It is the First World War which separates Tolkien's heroes from the adventure heroes of the Victorians and Edwardians and makes *The Lord of the Rings* a twentieth-century text with twentieth-century questions about masculinity, heroism and hero-worship.

It is possible to identify three heroes in the film trilogy of the *Lord of the Rings* : Frodo, Aragorn and Sam.⁵⁵ As it is Aragorn's destiny to become king; so it is Frodo's destiny to be the Ringbearer. Neither Aragorn nor Frodo really have any choice in the matter – they have to be heroes thanks to these obligations having been placed upon them by Fate; others are now relying on them to fulfil their duty. Aragorn and Frodo are at home with their responsibilities. Aragorn is prepared to sacrifice his one chance of happiness despite the pain he knows it will cause him, and is unafraid of death. Frodo also becomes unafraid of death.⁵⁶ Sam on the other hand is, unlike Frodo not a 'natural' hero and is furthermore never under any obligation to take part in the quest.

51 N.K. Simpson, 'Sacral Kingship: Aragorn as the Rightful and Sacrificial King in *The Lord of the Rings*' in *Mythlore*, September 2007.

52 R.C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2003, p. 156.

53 E. Stephen, *Hobbit to Hero: The Making of Tolkien's King*. London: ADC Publications. 2012.

54 A. Smol, 'Readings of Male Intimacy in *The Lord of the Rings*' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Winter 2004.

55 J. Smith and J.C. Matthews, *The Lord of the Rings: The Books, the Films, the Radio Series*. London: Virgin Books, 2004, p. 166.

56 Ibid.

But by the end of the narrative, Sam is as much a hero as either Frodo or Aragorn. He has been a ringbearer and passed through innumerable dangers. Like Frodo and Aragorn, he has accepted the possibility of death, and carried on regardless. Like Aragorn, he has met in battle with foes that seem to have a far greater advantage than him in both size and strength. Also like Aragorn, he has given up his chance for love and happiness to fulfil what he sees as his duty.⁵⁷

Lynette Porter has examined how the film trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings* is ‘man-centric’ and violent, centring on battle heroics in keeping with the needs of a contemporary audience. She explains: ‘Although Tolkien also chose Aragorn as the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*, (Peter) Jackson increases the emphasis on Aragorn at the expense of other characters’ development to make the trilogy more marketable ... Aragorn must be portrayed as a manly action hero and a sensitive love interest’.⁵⁸ At the same time she makes a convincing argument for the heroism of the hobbits, and specifically Sam: ‘many fans believe that Sam is the true hero of this adaptation, and (Sean) Astin’s emotion-laden performance makes audiences want to identify with Sam throughout the trilogy. His dedication is not only to Frodo but to the quest and never wavers’.⁵⁹ Nevertheless the films do emphasise Frodo’s role as the sacrificial hero who, although ultimately not the person to dispose of the Ring had carried the burden of it for all Middle-earth. Porter comments that, ‘Although the symbolism of the scene when he is removed from the remnants of Mount Doom may stretch the Frodo-as-Martyr metaphor a bit far, audiences can understand the depth of Frodo’s sacrifice’.⁶⁰

McAlier noted that Tolkien set out to write a ‘mythology for England’ but that the film trilogies ‘are an astonishing global phenomenon’ expressing ‘ideas with which we have some sympathy’, particularly those relating to war.⁶¹ Certainly they have encouraged a reassessment of our ideas on Tolkien’s experiences of war and the influences of both world wars on his writing. And, in the context of the centenary of the First World War, this can only have provocative results.

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57 Ibid., p. 167.

58 L. Porter, *The Hobbits: The Many Lives of Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin*. London and New York: I B Tauris. 2012, p. 128.

59 Ibid, pp. 120-21.

60 Ibid. p. 123.

61 McAlier, *Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings: the Philosophy of War*, Kindle edition, pagination irregular.

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