

## On J.R.R. Tolkien's Epic Masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings*.

I first read the works of J.R.R. Tolkien in the summer of 1967, when, as an undergraduate of Lund University I borrowed the first volume of the Swedish translation at the City Library. I read it through in no time and rushed to the library to borrow the sequels. The complete trilogy was available in English, not in Swedish, so I borrowed the lot and started again from the beginning. That summer I read the whole work at least two more times (which did not do my studies of Ancient Greek any good), and during more than fifty subsequent years I have read all of Tolkien's works many times over — *The Lord of the Rings* at least thirty times, and the minor works, particularly *The Silmarillion*, a dozen times or so.

All the way from my very first reading I have made it a point of not reading anything about the author and his works — no pundit's theories, no learned competition was permitted to influence my own conception of it. Nor did I write anything of my own in that genre. Until now. The summer of 2017 marked the 50th anniversary of my being a dedicated Ring fan, I started on a renewed re-reading of the entire series, from *The Silmarillion*, *Akallabêth*, *Bilbo*, *The Lord of the Rings* to *Unfinished Tales*. My enduring interest in the Great War (the First World War) keeps intruding on this scheme. But, while re-reading the whole *opus magnum*, I shall also change my restrictive habits and write down a number of observations and theories I can formulate and believe to be pertinent for my understanding. If others have made the same observations before me, I shall stay happily ignorant.

### Instalment No. 1: Epic Mysteries

One very important quality expected from an epic work is that it is consistent within itself — anything happening for no ostensible reason at the beginning of the work should turn out to be of crucial importance for the happy ending, when the various threads of the narrative run together to form a beautiful and artful knot. It is this — not the war scenes nor the love scenes — that keeps the reader spell-bound to the end even at the second, third or thirty-first reading.

*The Lord of the Rings* is a very consistent epic and almost all episodes and characters follow a pre-ordained path that the reader can appreciate, but as I have consistently found, twice it fails (albeit to a small degree), meaning that two episodes fail to answer to this requirement. I shall treat them in the reverse order of their chronology in the narrative. They both belong to the early part of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which is the first book of the Trilogy.

#### The Flying Shadow

On page 299 in my bound second edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (printing of 1966) the Ring Bearer and his companions are walking along to the west of the Misty Mountains. Just before dawn, Frodo observes something happening:

Suddenly he saw or felt a shadow pass over the high stars, as if for a moment they faded and then flashed out again. He shivered.

'Did you see anything pass over?' he whispered to Gandalf, who was just ahead.

'No, but I felt it, whatever it was,' he answered. 'It may be nothing, only a wisp of thin cloud.'

'It was moving fast then,' muttered Aragorn, 'and not with the wind.'

Very suggestive, indeed — but of what? The episode is never explained or followed up by any event in the story, leaving the reader eventually to theorize that this was a first appearance of that Balrog that was hiding in the mountains and was also the Watcher in the Water outside the western door to Moria. This Balrog was killed in a hand-to-hand battle with Gandalf; actually, they were both destroyed in their fall from the pinnacle of the highest mountain, but Gandalf only lost his physical shape and returned to Elvenhome to the west of Middle Earth, now in his true form as a Maia (a god-like spirit who could assume any shape that he wished).

At this time, the Nazgûls (the other obvious suspects) had not yet been permitted by Sauron to cross the Anduin in a visible shape, so none of them could have been seen by the Company of the Ring at that time, on the west side of the Misty Mountains.

This episode illustrates the annoying character of things that are not properly followed up: the Flying Shadow remains a tantalizing enigma. If the Balrog had been permitted to mention that he had seen the Company from above and was therefore forewarned of their arriving in Moria, the reader would have felt that the episode served a useful purpose, as not even Balrogs can be omniscient and have to receive their information from some source, such as direct observation.

### **Tom Bombadil**

The other mysterious episode precedes the Shadow episode by one hundred and seventy pages, starting on page 130 and covering precisely thirty pages. It forms a substantial part of the story of the hobbits' journey from The Shire to Rivendell. And, although it has no head — no previous mention, that is —, it does have a tail, for it is owing to the hobbits' imprisonment by a Barrow-wight and their subsequent release by Bombadil, who lays bare the barrow and exposes the treasures hidden there, that Merry and Pippin find their swords, or rather long daggers, that had been forged by a smith of the Northern Kingdom of the Dunedain long before the Company of the Ring was formed. The blades of these two swords were inscribed with runes dedicated to the downfall of the Sorcerer King, that is, the chief Nazgûl. Merry's blade does, indeed, come to fulfil its ancient purpose: Merry stabs the King through his knee, surprising him no end (as he thought that he was safe from any hurt from a mortal hand) and giving Éowyn her chance to behead and destroy her ghostly adversary. The swords thus answer to our requirement: they have a beginning and an end in the story.

Tolkien probably could have arranged for the finding of these swords by some other means, but he chose to use Bombadil. We shall now discuss his reasons.

Old Tom Bombadil was a merry fellow, according to the song he sang about himself — all right, so he was, merry and careless and incredibly powerful for such fat and jolly character, living in a cottage by an otherwise unknown little river named The Withywindle, and married to Goldberry, a woman in human shape who was not human but the daughter of that same river. A supernatural character who does not fall into any of the existing categories, and therefore mysterious and alluring. But

who was Tom Bombadil, really? Where did his seemingly unlimited power come from? What purpose does he serve in J.R.R. Tolkien's grand epic?

He describes himself as older than the oldest:

Eldest, that's what I am. (...) Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving. He was here before the Kings and the graves and the Barrow-wights. When the Elves passed westwards, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless — before the Dark Lord came from Outside (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 142).

In this statement, after his mention of the first raindrop and the first acorn, Bombadil moves backwards in time, spanning over many ages of the world. The Elves passed westwards in two separate waves: the first time occurred rather soon after their first appearance, when they were encouraged and led on by Oromë — this is described in *The Silmarillion*, in the chapter named "Of the coming of the Elves". Their second major passing to Westergesse occurred considerably later, after the Great Battle and fall of Morgoth, when the lands in the west of Middle-Earth foundered under the sea and Eönwë summoned the Elves to depart (*The Silmarillion* p. 251f.). The seas were definitely bent even later, after the Downfall of Númenor (*The Silmarillion* p. 279ff.) when the Undying Lands were finally hidden from the mortals. The Dark Lord whom Bombadil names must be Melkor, the Vala, who later changed his name into Morgoth and became the Dark Lord. He was not Sauron, because he was merely Melkor's follower.

Tom Bombadil was thus present and living on Earth right after it had been created by Ilúvatar. "Eldest", he was indeed, but he was content to observe and avoid being observed. Elrond states:

But I had forgotten Bombadil, if indeed this is still the same that walked the woods and hills long ago, and even then was older than the old. That was not then his name. Iarwain Ben-adar we called him, oldest and fatherless. (...) He is a strange creature, but maybe I should have summoned him to our Council.

In the ensuing discussion, Erestor proposes: "It seems that he has power even over the Ring." Gandalf contradicts this:

Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others. (...) And if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind.

Glorfindel strikes a more pessimistic note:

I think that in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come.

Galdor concurs, even more pessimistically:

I know little of Iarwain save the name (...) but Glorfindel, I think, is right. Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth

itself. And yet we see that Sauron can torture and destroy the very hills. (All four quotations from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 278f.)

To this Gandalf offers no comment on these statements, and the discussion turns to other possibilities.

It seems fairly clear that the Elves do not really know anything about Bombadil's true nature (never having bothered about him); Gandalf, on the other hand, does possess full knowledge, but he also knows that Bombadil is not bothered by or concerned with the artefacts of power that impress the inhabitants of Middle-earth. It is also significant that Gandalf does not enter into a discussion concerning Bombadil's real powers and his ability to resist Sauron's final attack, if it should eventually come to pass.

The nature of Bombadil's powers is, nonetheless, interesting and worthy of comment. All other mighty creatures described by Tolkien have physical attributes or tools to use when exercising their powers: claws, a fiery breath, a mighty sword, a wizard's staff or a Ring of Power.

Bombadil had his silly songs. We are offered a couple of demonstrations, first when he sings to Old Man Willow and compels him to release Merry and Pippin from his traps. The second occasion is when he rescues the whole hobbit company from the Barrow Wight. In both cases, his opponents just yield to his songs: the Willow obediently falls asleep, the Barrow Wight flies off screaming; neither offers any resistance. (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 131 and 153).

Where does this lead us? It is my belief that worldly power is usually demonstrated by attributes that grow in number and splendour up to a certain point. A general officer wears a much more splendid uniform than does a lieutenant, more medals, more gold braid. But a supreme commander, who holds all the power in his hand, is dressed in a plain civilian suit or, like General Eisenhower, in a plain and nearly unadorned uniform. King Charles XII of Sweden (ruled 1697 to 1718) is another very good example: all his generals and field-marshal (and they were many) enjoyed splendid attires with plenty of gold decorations — you could see at a glance that they held high commands; the King himself, one of Sweden's very few absolute monarchs, wore a plain blue coat, yellow elk-skin breeches, big infantry boots, yellow skin gloves and a plain blue hat. And, yet, every soldier, officer, and civilian instantly recognised their King.

The same, I think, is true of Tom Bombadil. After the creation of the physical world, which was done by solemn music performed by Eru, the One, and his host of god-like beings, the Valar and the Maiar, most of these spiritual beings without physical bodies became wildly fascinated by this green and blue world that they could see there, swimming in the middle of the void. Down they went, having donned an appropriate shape, to inhabit the earth and shape it to their liking.

Their ambitions gave them different directions: Melkor, who had already tried to alter Eru's music to his liking, started to give the world a shape he liked. He only managed to pervert it. The other Valar and their followers created an ideal world, separate from Middle-Earth of the mortals whom they mostly left alone to be tortured by Melkor. This is a splendid description of the allure of the physical world and how it may work on a spiritual being.

Who is to say that Eru Ilúvatar remained unaffected? I believe that, after falling in love with his creation, he himself came down to Middle-Earth, took the shape of Tom Bombadil, married Goldberry, the River-Daughter and off-spring of his own creativity, and settled in a small, insignificant and well-hidden country where he pretended to be an innocuous clown. Being all-powerful he had no need of attributes of power; the solemn music of the great days of creation he transformed into the simple ditties suitable to his humdrum life on earth. Except, of course, if something or someone threatened him or his friends: on these occasions, the songs expressed his true powers. And everybody obeyed, in jest or in fear.

This demonstrates another truth: unless the Creator wishes to direct every single action of his creatures, he must respect their individuality and leave them to follow their separate fortunes.

Contrary to the beliefs expressed by the Elves I am convinced that if Sauron had actually recovered his Ring and defeated all his known enemies, he would have been very much surprised on encountering Tom Bombadil. Their meeting would have been a very brief one — one song from Bombadil's repertoire, and Sauron and his minions would have frozen and then been gone forever.

## Questions

So, finally, why are these two episodes there at all? Neither is necessary to the story as we know it — it could have done without them and the plot could have been expressed in another, just as satisfactory way.

The probable answer is that Tolkien, when writing *The Fellowship of the Ring* during the years 1937 to its first publication in 1954, was not quite sure how his epic would end, or even how the story would evolve along the way. Although I have never written any work — short or long — of literature, I have written monographs and papers on scholarly subjects, and I do not believe that works of the pen consistently move to a predetermined pattern. The author will find that any episode and detail he has written demands a logical follow-up and his story will very soon assume command over its author leading him to an unforeseen ending.

The French author, Marcel Aymé (1902-1907), actually wrote a short story in which a fictional author had the bad habit of terminating his main characters by illness or violence. His publisher protested, arguing that the reading public did not appreciate this mass murder. And one day, one of the characters in his work in progress turned up to protest against her impending fate. Failing to impress the author (who found her appearance to be a splendid confirmation of his genius in creating lifelike characters), she found a solution of her own that left him helpless. He could not kill her as she had left the logic of the narrative. "Le Romancier Martin" in: *Derrière chez Martin*, Paris 1938. Aymé commented on his short story: "Je ne crois pas qu'on ait encore écrit sur un thème aussi réaliste" (Pol Vandromme, *Aymé*, Paris 1960 p. 164: "I do not think anyone had yet written about a theme so realistic"), a statement that leaves the reader speechless.

In Tolkien's epic saga, there are many major showdowns between the forces of good and evil: The First War occurred even before the awakening of the Elves; Melkor was then taken captive but eventually escaped and returned to his fastness of Utulmo; the second was begun by the Valar in order to protect the Quendi from

Melkor, who was captured once more and was placed in the fastness of Mandos, until he was released and pardoned but fell once again into evil and sought the aid of Ungoliant, the evil and giant spider (of Maiar origins): together they escaped to Middle Earth, Melkor carrying the stolen Silmarils. Melkor or Morgoth was finally overthrown after Eärendil's voyage to the West and was imprisoned forever (*The Silmarillion* p. 22, 36, 50f., 73ff., 251f.). Then Sauron took over the role as the Dark Lord and chief of evil. His first defeat came with the downfall of the Kings of Númenor (*The Silmarillion*, p. 278ff.). His second defeat marked the end of the Second Age of Middle Earth and was the consequence of the Last Alliance between Elves and Men under Gil-Galad and Elendil. He was then deprived of his Ring (*The Silmarillion* p. 293f.).

Six gigantic clashes there were, thus, between Good and Evil, and the good triumphed every time. In the troubled times when Tolkien wrote *The Fellowship of the Ring* it might have been tempting to let the seventh battle end with the triumph of Evil and the domination of Sauron against his enemies. This domination — as I believe — was destined by Tolkien to come to an abrupt end, caused by Tom Bombadil's singing a cheerful song of enchantment.

Obviously, during the time of writing the story wandered off along a different path and found a more fitting end: not by the Almighty but by the humble hobbits was Middle Earth saved.

## Instalment No. 2. An Illogical Ending.

I have always found the way that *The Lord of the Rings* ends rather irritating. It lacks logic, given the nature of the whole epic. Tolkien's stated ambition was to write a true epic, where everything that happens is part of a chain of actions running from beginning to end, but he disregarded this rule by permitting the three hobbits Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam to escape their true fate as mortals by sailing across the sea to Elvenhome. The stated reason for this was their status as Ring-Bearers and the purpose was to allow them to forget the pains caused by the Ring. Even if Tolkien did not intend his hobbits to become immortal, the very nature of Elvenhome requires that anyone who is permitted to enter will become immortal. This was the belief of Ar-Pharazôn the Golden when he landed on the western shores, and the Valar could only respond by creating a giant tsunami that washed him and his mighty fleet off to sea to founder in the Middle-Earth of the mortals.

My objection against Tolkien's plan is that the Ruling Rings were forged in Middle-Earth and had nothing whatever to do with Elvenhome. The bearers of the three Elvish Rings, Elrond, Galadriel, and Gandalf, were only permitted to cross the Sea because they had been born there and therefore followed their individual, true fates. Whether the three Elvenrings were acceptable to those on the other side is another question that the epic does not answer. Really: why should they be?

Those evil creatures who were born on the other side but betrayed their true natures, Morgoth, Sauron, Saruman, and others, were not permitted to return to their birthplace. They perished in Middle-Earth, and when Saruman's shadowy ghost looked to the West, a wind arose from that direction and blew it away.

The Gifts of Ilúvatar, as Tolkien expressly stated, were equal in worth but different in effect: the Elves were immortal on Middle-Earth but bound to stay there; Men (and Hobbits) were mortal on Middle-Earth but permitted to leave it completely after death for some other, undefined place. The Dwarves were created by Aulë without Ilúvatar's knowledge and had their own peculiar qualities and fates. Good heroes stayed true to their given qualities. Thus Elros elected to remain a Man and therefore stayed a mortal, and so did a long line of his descendants, until they lost sight of this basic rule. Elrond, his brother, elected to remain an Elf and, although he was born in Middle-Earth, was permitted to leave it and cross the Sea.

A third question, that Tolkien never answers, is the eventual fate of all those Orcs who died in battle. They were Elves in origin but had been perverted by Sauron, either at the very beginning of Middle-Earth or by being born to elves already perverted. They were driven by Melkor's and Sauron's evil wills and powerless to oppose them, but, however evil they were, they were so very much against their true natures and real will.

Aragorn and Arwen, finally, both understood the rules of their different kinds and both resisted any temptation to break their promises. They followed their chosen paths to the very end by dying from the world. For Arwen, Elrond's daughter and born to be immortal, Death, although the Gift of Ilúvatar, then appeared as a very cruel gift, but she did accept it.

So, what is the point of Bilbo's, Frodo's, and Samwise's cheating their fate? Samwise actually deserted his wife and children, leaving Earth long after Bilbo and Frodo. Why, why, why? Did Tolkien become sentimental at the end of his story, forgetting the rules he had created for his epic? For the critical reader, this is a very unsatisfactory ending.

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