

Worlds made of Heroes

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Keynote Conference

Heroes in The Lord of the Rings: Tradition and Modernity

First, I wish to express my profound gratitude and deep honour for having been invited to speak for a little while about the *Lord of the Rings*, its heroes and wanderings. I thank the organizing committee for all the commodities so kindly placed at my disposal, and a special mention is due to Prof. Filomena for the kind emails exchanged between us in the past months, her prompt reply and relentless patience. Thank you.

Now, before starting the analysis of some of Tolkien's heroes from my point of view, I would suggest trying to start on a smoother path, before attempting to climb the mountainous and labyrinthine shores of Middle-earth, following an odd company of fellow travellers. I would like to share with you what would be a joke if it had not been actual:



This pile of now old and battered books you see here, they were my companions during long sleepless nights over eight years, while I was struggling with my PhD thesis. However, to tell you the truth, they found their way to my desk after I stumbled

on them,



one winter afternoon, at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, in the far and forgotten 80s, while listening to a lecture on Alchemy by Professor Paul-Georges Sansonetti. Talking about alchemical symbolism, Prof. Sansonetti, in an off the record comment, made a reference to the symbolic meaning of the fireplace in the Hall of Fire, at Rivendell, commenting that maybe it would be worthwhile to study the symbolism present in *Le Seigneur des anneaux*, of an English writer. *Le Seigneur des anneaux*? *Lord of the Rings*? I asked myself, never heard of it. Better take a look, I decided, thinking I would find a portable book to read on the train, every morning on the way to school, to teach English to uncaring teenagers.

For sure, fate does move in mysterious ways. I fell in love with those two and a half thousand pages and, shortly after, when demanded to present a title for the thesis I decided it would be in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Earthsea*. Now, back in the eighties, Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings* were literally unknown in Portuguese Academia (and the same goes to Le Guin's works). They were not even banned because that would reveal some kind of knowledge, but simply ignored. Surely only someone with a kind of "death wish" would write a thesis on these books.

Well, I am still alive, though maybe not wiser. During my academic life, I followed different routes and found different texts to study, but I confess that not many narratives have ever left on me such a strong impact on my curiosity. Those are the ones that keep on leaving me with the feeling that whenever I pick them up, I will find

different angles for analysis, different problems to try to solve. The study completed and the results written in black on a white page, there is always the annoying, persistent feeling that there is more to it than what I have found, or reasoned, or said.

This annoying feeling shadows also the paper I prepared for you. I can always say that there just is not enough time to say it all, and so blame some else (the organising committee, for instance) for the nagging questions that will remain unanswered or for those that will not even get the chance of being verbalised.

I am here to talk about the heroes in the *Fellowship of the Ring*. That should be simple: after all, they are just NINE though I will only talk about eight of them. Moreover, since Tolkien was devoted to myth, probably these nine heroes can be analysed using the same method and the same bibliography.

Sorry, that will not do. The complexity of these nine heroes is the result of their different personal stories, of the different races they belong to, of the roles they are supposed to perform. Nevertheless, most of all, behind them there always lurks the spell of *The Silmarillion* that starts with an extraordinary Cosmogonic Myth, based on the ever-eternal game/sound of harmony/disharmony until Ilúvatar puts an end to it... one day, eventually.

Tolkien had the clear notion that part of *The Lord of The Rings* appeal resides in this complex background:

Part of the attraction of *The Lord of the Ring* is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist (Tolkien, *Letters*, p. 333)

However, Tolkien's plan was quite an ambitious one:

... once upon a time [...] I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legends, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-tale — the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloth... [...] The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. (*Letters*, 144-145)

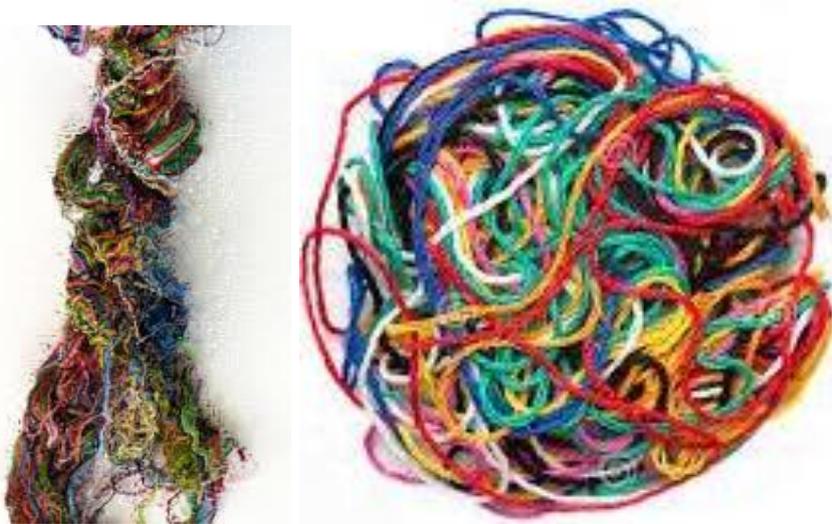
It was also lifelong struggle:

The mere stories were the thing. They arose in my mind as 'given' things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew. An absorbing, though continually

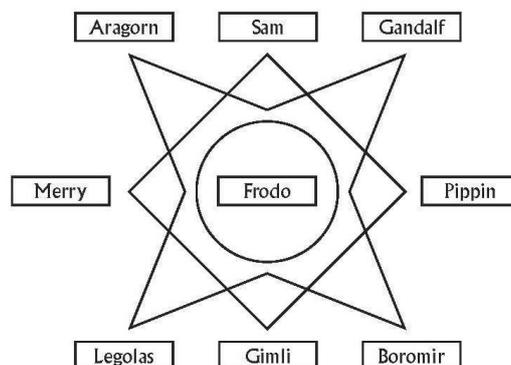
labour [...] always I had the sense of recording what was already ‘there’, somewhere: not of ‘inventing’. (*Letters*, 145)

This lifelong exercise led him to confess that the narratives were “written in [his] lifeblood”.

When we start studying *The Lord of the Rings*, we are asked to follow a multitude of threads that seem to multiply exponentially, to cross and intertwine, to tangle and untangle themselves, and defy any attempt of simplification and revealing a coherent whole.



Taking a closer look at the nine heroes of the Fellowship, we find some of those threads, and we may try to chart them. That is what we are about to do following Tolkien’s suggestion: looking at “the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloth”. Our fellowship is composed of a wizard (part-time guide), a king to be, a knight, an elf, a dwarf and four hobbits. The Hobbits are the only beings invented by Tolkien, not to be found in any mythology, and that is, after all, a bunch of uncomplicated people that do not meddle in other people’s affairs because that is neither polite nor worthwhile.

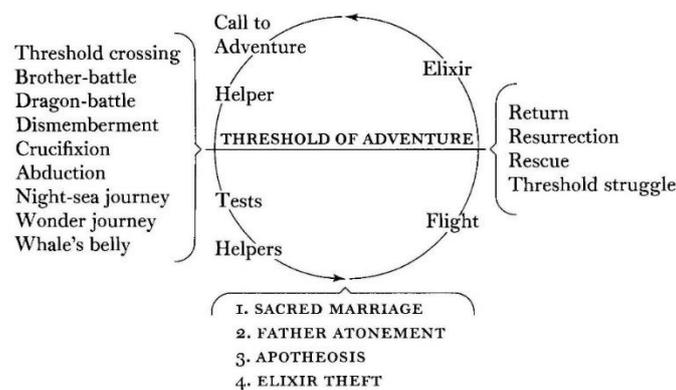


It is the heterogeneity of this fellowship that we will try to find the traces of tradition and modernity. In addition, I must stress that we are dealing with a fellowship, not a brotherhood and this will be relevant for a correct analysis further on.

Starting with tradition, I do agree with Anne C Petty when she suggests that Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1st ed. 1949) and Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1st ed. 1957) are our best guides to deal with the traditional heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*. (I will consider here only Campbell study, for lack of time). Neither authors could have had any influence on Tolkien's narratives since they were written long before, even if they were continually rewritten. Tolkien's view and opinions on mythology started gaining form at the beginning of the 20th century and, reveal a marked exposition to a romantic view of the past, corrected by a rigorous and substantial formation on philology. We also must take into consideration Tolkien's social, political and cultural milieu. Not to know more about Tolkien as a person, but to better understand the choices and literary activities of the "ideal author" to use Umberto Eco's terminology, and so trying to become "ideal readers" (Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, 1994).

Literature is a cultural artefact with peculiar characteristics that no single theory will ever wholly explain. The anthropological views followed by Campbell are a solid ground to help to map Tolkien's heroes in general, and some in particular, but they do not account for the aesthetic art involving the narratives, nor some of the entanglements we find uniting this fellowship.

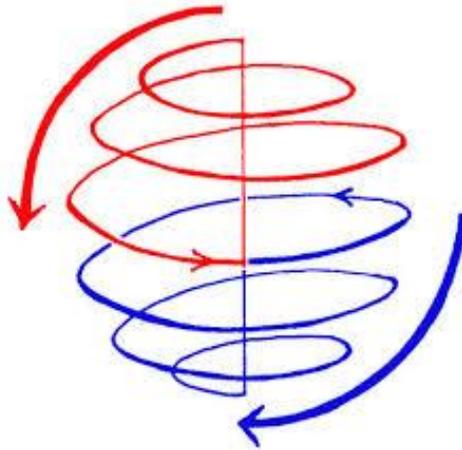
In what regards *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a quest of universal dimension; therefore considered mythic, in which some characters are fundamental participants, while others will be called in as repositories of memories from ancient times, providers of knowledge or dangers.



(Campbell, p. 227)

Following Campbell's diagram, we are invited, as readers, to a voyage of "there and back again", a circular wandering through different realms with different physical and supernatural features.

Though geographically we are facing a circular route, psychologically this heroes' travels should be represented as a spiral, a mental growth and development that each hero must face, and, if he succeeds he will return transformed, different, wiser.



His acquaintances will notice this change, eventually will determine his acceptance or rejection by the community, and he will become either a leader or an outcast:

[Gandalf talking with Bilbo at the end of the travel]

"My dear Bilbo! [...] Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were." (The Hobbit, p. 281)

The same happens to the nine heroes of the fellowship, even though one (Boromir) will not end the voyage, but redeems himself following the long tradition of the sagas: dying honourably, fight until his last breath against superior forces. Of the other eight, seven will accomplish their travels, will be transformed and accepted by their communities. Only one will become an eternal outcast. We will come back to this matter further on.

Then you might ask where the differences from Campbell's scheme are? The first significant difference resides precisely in the fact that we are dealing with a **fellowship** organised for a specific goal: to help the carrier of the ring to reach Mount Doom, but only as far as possible. Their common task ends in this tiny detail: Frodo has eight companions that will help him just up to certain (or uncertain) point in the quest. When the time comes, each will follow his personal path/quest, leaving Frodo to handle

the heavy task of saving the world, of being an instrument of Ilúvatar. Frodo's quest, if successful, will create the conditions for the beginning of the fourth theme of the cosmogonic myth, the one that Ilúvatar develops alone and that remains unknown

Therefore, we must conclude that we are not dealing with one single hero as Campbell defines. We are to travel in the company of nine heroes with nine different quests to perform. That is the meaning of a fellowship of the Ring. In addition, here we have the first departure from the traditional hero myth that Campbell justly defines as a monomyth.

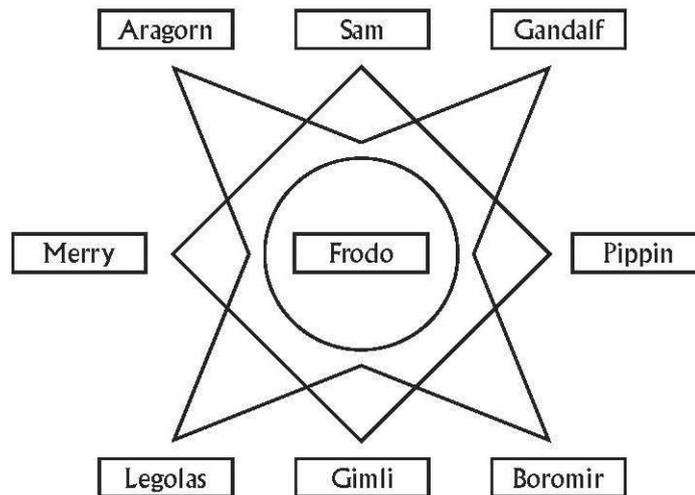
The traditional quest requires one and only one hero who, in the right critical moment of finishing the quest will face it all alone, left with his courage and the necessary knowledge acquired during the voyage, through numerous conflicts, the conversations with elder and more experienced companions, and with the help of some magical tool or weapon. Completing the quest is a solitary act, like being born or dying. We are born alone, and we die alone. In that crucial moment when the hero is called to finish the quest, he is the most solitary being in the world. No helper will come to add him; no substitute will do it for him. At that moment, he either rises or falls alone.

Unlike the northern sagas, that Tolkien knew and admired, *The Lord of the Rings* develops different quests all dependent on the one given to a strange, humble, insecure creature whose existence is a mystery for most of the free peoples.

In the northern sagas, we have, for instance, those belonging to a royal or knightly family's quest, passing from father to son. Only Aragorn's quest fills this profile. He is the King to be, who must avenge and redeem his ancestors' mistakes, namely Isildur's inability to destroy the One Ring, and so putting an end to the long Númenóreans' lineage started with Elros, Elrond's brother.

Legolas' quest is a kind of community redemption for having failed in the task of keeping Sméagol in custody, but also a way of representing the elves in the fight for freedom. Boromir's quest is the result of an individual decision to try to find a way of saving his father's domains threatened by Mordor, a short-sighted initiative of a man who cannot see or understand the bigger picture. Gimli is trying to find out what happened to Balin and his group, who re-entered in Khazad-dûm in a foolish attempt to restore Durin's empire under the mountain, a place dominated by the Balrog the dwarves had released ages ago.

This fellowship, partly organised by Elrond in Rivendell, is a bizarre one, never foreseen even by the Lords of Knowledge, the immortal elves.



This is, in my opinion, one of Tolkien’s major achievements and innovation in the fantasy genre as it stood in the mid-fifties. Never, to my knowledge, any other writer tried before the entanglement of several simultaneous mythic quests under the “umbrella” of an apparently simple one, consisting on a voyage of “there and back” again”. Furthermore, Frodo’s quest is a kind of a “no quest”, in the sense that he is not trying to gain or steal an object, as is the goal of all major mythic quests. He is going through all kind of troubles precisely to get rid of one single item: a ring, an apparently simple round golden ring, similar to any ring exchanged between married couples every day for “aeons”.



Here, we have one mark of modernity. In the mid-fifties, Europe was recovering from two World Wars caused by the thirst of power of some European leaders, by the wish to conquer by whatever means necessary and effective. After the death of 95 million of anonymous human beings as the price to be paid for the stupidity of some and the eagerness of others, it makes every sense *The Lord of the Rings’* main quest being about giving up power. Power, any kind of power, corrupts, especially when the will is weak or when humanism is considered obsolete, and all that matters are the needs of technological and mercantile societies.

Some critics tend to see this choice of creating a quest to lose a golden ring as an unquestionable mark of Tolkien's Catholicism. I must confess I feel this kind of analysis most dissatisfying. It rather takes me back to the 20th-century when the dispute was between the defenders of the author's opinions as unquestionable laws and those that declared that the author was dead.

We all know that Tolkien was a Catholic, living in. We know he idolised his mother considering her a martyr. But all this concerns only the man named John Ronald Tolkien, not the "ideal author", that character created by the text that demands from us, readers, to have an open mind, a solid formation on European culture and to understand that we are reading a product of European literature. This "author" would undoubtedly fail to understand that Europe does not have a constitution that states its roots as being Greek, Roman, Judaic, and Christian, only because it is politically uncomfortable. Neither do I!

However, let us return to the theme that has brought us all here; tradition and modernity in *The Lord of the Rings*. All the nine heroes go through some of the major stages summarised by Campbell, though only two follow all the steps: Aragorn and Frodo. These are marked from birth to become heroes. Aragorn is the last of a long lineage of kings; he is brought up in anonymity, educated by elves, living in Elrond's estate. All his life he trained to claim the lost title. Even his lonely wanderings are part of his initiation: a king must know his people, how they live, what they need, how to make justice, how to choose wisely. You can find all this in the humanist code in the transition from Middle Ages to the modern era. He prepares himself not to be as his ancestors, because the times have changed, but to be the king of the new era, the fourth age. Aragorn does not fail in his quest: in defying Sauron, what he does using the palantír, and later by conjuring the Dead forcing them to fulfil their broken vow to Isildur. The arrival of his strange army turns the tide of the Battle of the Pelennor Fields. Later he marched in front of his army to defy Sauron at the gates of Mordor, giving Frodo time to fulfil his quest.

Aragorn is, definitely, a mythic hero, and his marriage with Arwen is but a replica of another famous couple: Beren and Lúthien (one of the shadows from later ages that will haunt this paper due to the lack of time).

Is Frodo a mythical hero too? Yes, but... He has almost all that it takes except one thing: belief.

The Lord of the Rings begins *in media res*. We are at the end of the third age, in

Hobbiton, where Bilbo is preparing a party, many years after his voyage with a bunch of dwarves and a wizard. He has grown old and restless. He needs to see the mountains again. Celebrating his birthday and that of his adopted heir (who is coming to adulthood), Bilbo leaves the Shire and gives Frodo the Ring.

The choice is not exactly Bilbo's, but one imposed by Gandalf. Because, Bilbo's time as a hero had passed, and Frodo is the chosen one. It is much later in the narrative that we find on Frodo the marks that usually characterise the mythic hero: he is an orphan, raised outside of his parent's family by Bilbo, his education is exquisite, or eccentric if we choose to follow hobbits standards, and he was:

A stout little fellow with red cheeks [...]. That won't help you much; it goes for most hobbits. [...] But this one is taller than some and fairer than most, and he has a cleft in his chin: perking chap with a bright eye. (FoR, p. 226)

Gandalf summarises for Frodo the long story of the Ring, and asks the question every hero must answer: "Have you decided what to do?" (FoR, 92)

And Frodo gives the wrong/right answer:

"No! [...] Or perhaps yes. As far as I understand what you have said, I suppose I must keep the Ring and guard it, at least for the present, whatever it may do to me. [...] **But I hope that you may find some other better keeper soon.** [...] I cannot keep the Ring and stay here. I ought to leave Bag End, leave the Shire, leave everything and go away." He sighed. (FoR, 92)

Frodo never outgrows these doubts. He never sees himself as the hero, the one destined for an extraordinary act of courage. All along, he nourishes the secret hope that, at the last possible moment, someone will come along and release him from that burden that becomes heavier by the minute.

Even at Elrond's Council, where the story of the Ring is told in full detail, and everyone is looking for the bearer, Frodo says yes, obeying an abstract notion of duty. (What you are about to read now will undoubtedly remind you all, students and teachers, of a widespread action performed in every school or university lecture, whenever the teacher asks a question addressed to the whole class)

No one answered. The noon-bell rang. Still no one spoke. Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might

after all never be spoken. [...] At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.

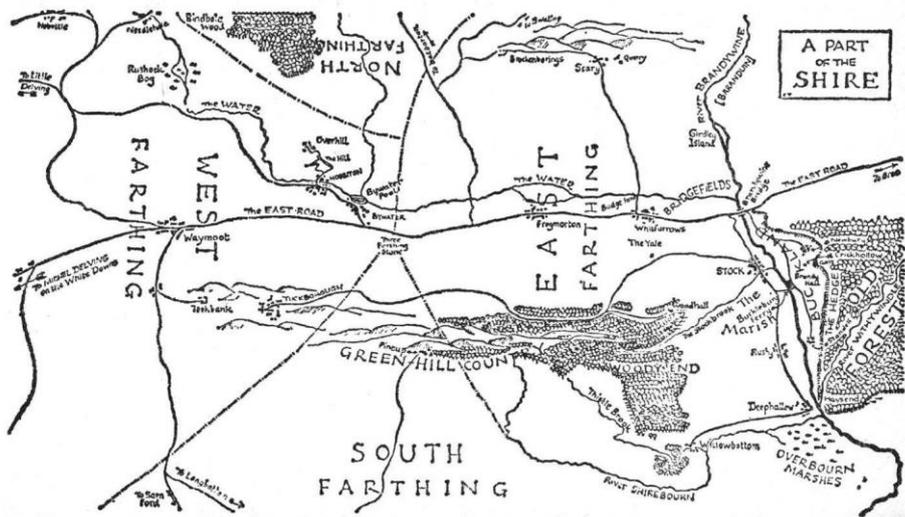
“I will take the Ring,” he said, “though I do not know the way.” (FoR, 354)

Well, the question was not about who would carry the ring. It was only Bilbo pointing out that lunchtime had passed and that he had lost his meal, so why didn't the Council just put the question off until after dinner?

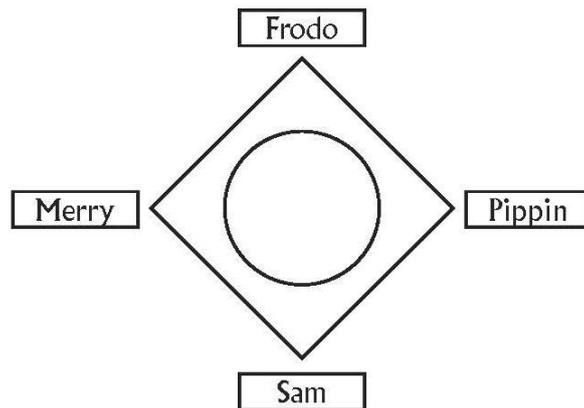
Then Elrond just comes along and puts some more stress on the poor hobbit:

“If I understand aright all that I have heard, [...] **I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will.** This is the hour of the Shire-folk, when they arise from their quiet fields to shake the towers and counsels of the Great. [...] But it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. **I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right.** (FoR, 354)

This episode resumes the second element of modernity we find in Tolkien's heroes. The heroes that play a central role in the quest of the ring are the hobbits, the small community that only maps the Shire and ignores everything around it, leaving only vast blank spaces.



We may consider that these four hobbits are not the traditional folk. Frodo was raised by the strangest hobbit, the only one that one day dared to wander outside the known borders. Sam admires Bilbo, loves listening to his stories, but most of all, he loves hearing about dragons, something not serious enough for wasting time and a fine beer, according to hobbits. Merry and Pippin are teenagers according to hobbits standards, and like all teenagers, they naturally defy the rules.



They follow Frodo to danger out of pure and unquestionable friendship, a central issue in *The Lord of the Rings*. For Merry and Pippin, the quest turns out to become a *bildungsroman*. They return transformed both physically and psychologically, ready to assume positions of leadership in a Shire that needs to be restored and transformed. In what regards Sam, he is the only hero in the whole Fellowship who never doubts that he belongs in that group and in that quest.

“If you don’t come back, sir, then I shan’t, that’s certain. [...] *Don’t leave him!* they said to me. *Leave him!* I said. *I never mean to. I am going with him, if he climbs to the moon; and if any of those Black Riders try to stop him, they’ll have Sam Gamgee to reckon with,* I said. (FoR, 123)

Further on, when asked if he felt the need to leave the Shire, Sam replies:

Yes, sir. I don’t know how to say it, but after last night I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can’t turn back. It isn’t to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want — **I don’t rightly know what I want: but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it through,** sir, if you understand me. (FoR, 124)

Sam is, at the hobbit’s level, the same that Aragorn is for the Dúnedain, a confident being not in the outcome of the quest, but in their strength and determination. Both, in their own way, will be pillars of the new society to come out of the final victory. They do not have special abilities, only faith in themselves, and the tranquillity that comes with that faith. To do what must be done, recognising their limitations as mortal beings.

In the end, Frodo turns out to be the most modern hero, the unbeliever, the one unable to transcend himself because he never thinks of the quest as “something to do

before the end". Frodo is subjected to all kinds of tests, and he only succeeds in one: in the Barrows, right at the beginning of the journey. All the other tests result in as many failures. When he is alone, at the top of Mount Doom, with no helpers, with no guidance, he descends to the level of Sméagol: he sins.

He is not alone in the long list of heroes that fail their quests because of the sin of pride. Many have travelled the same road and were forever marked. However, not for the same reasons. To err is to be human, but to failure because of lack of convictions, that is to be modern.

The end of *The Lord of the Rings* shows clearly, who the winners were: Men, led by Aragorn, the hobbits, led by Merry, Pippin and Sam, the dwarves, led by Gimli, and Bilbo for his part played in *The Hobbit* and because he was able to renounce the power of the ring. This earned him the immortality. The losers are the Elves, partly because their time in Middle-earth had come to an end (they were not meant to be there in the first place, they had disobeyed the gods), and partly because they were responsible for the creation of all the rings, including the One Ring (since they shared their knowledge with Sauron). Finally, Frodo of the nine fingers, incomplete, the most gifted of all the hobbits, the wiser and symbol of selflessness saved the world by accident and discovered neither Middle-Earth nor the Shire could ever be his home again. He belonged to the Third Age, and that was over. He did not belong in the land of the immortals either, but that would be his destiny.

Thank you.