

# The heroic journey of samwise gamgee



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J. R. R. Tolkien's epic fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings* is one of the bestselling books of all time and has captured the imaginations of readers for decades. The story became even more popular when in 2001 director Peter Jackson released his highly successful film trilogy adaptation. The movies quickly became some of the top grossing of all time and were critically acclaimed for their masterful transition from book to screen. Part of the major attraction to the story is Tolkien's ability to create exciting and complex characters along with action-packed scenes and a knack for subtly illuminating truths of the human condition. It can be argued that there are a number of heroes within the story, including Frodo, Aragon, and Gandalf as they all contribute to defeating the evil forces and destroying the ring. While characters like Aragon and Frodo seem like the more obvious choice if you had to single out one key heroic figure, some viewers would argue that the story's hero could be Samwise Gamgee. While at first Sam does not appear to exactly fit the traditional model of a hero, many would be surprised to find that several aspects of Sam's story fit nicely within Joseph Campbell's famous hero journey paradigm found in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In light of Campbell's work Sam could be described in some ways as a traditional hero like those found in many medieval texts such as *Beowulf*, or *The Song of Roland*. However what makes Sam truly special is the ways he differs from these traditional hero types. Unlike traditional heroes, Sam is not a hero for what he does, but rather for who he is. It is the unquestionable qualities of loyalty, love, ordinariness, optimism, and courageousness within Sam that define him and make him a hero as opposed to any specific heroic action. To truly understand the heroic nature of Sam we must understand both the ways he fits the traditional hero role as well as the way he differs.

Similarly we will also need to have a solid understanding of Sam's background.

In the beginning of the story Sam is a rather ordinary hobbit with a passion for gardening and stories of heroes and dragons. He lives in the Shire, a peaceful and quite agrarian society, where he works on a farm, desperately tries to gain the attention of his beloved Rosie Cotton and at night goes out drinking with his friends Frodo, Merry and Pippin. In many ways Sam's life in the Shire is not too different from the lives of many ordinary people and this is perhaps the first reason why he stands out from other characters, he is ordinary and relatable to readers and viewers. He has never held a sword or even thought about leaving the Shire when he rather quickly and unexplainably finds himself thrust into the midst of something much bigger than himself which at first he does not even realize. Yet despite his seeming lack of qualification for such a quest, he proves himself time and time again as an indispensable companion to Frodo and saves the day more than just once. Writer Richard Roos in his article titled " Middle-Earth in the Classroom: Studying J. R. R. Tolkien, describes Sam as,

" Of all the characters, the most lovable is Sam Gamgee. He seems at first to be thrown in for comic relief, but as the work progresses he grows in importance until, in the last book, he is indispensable. He appears to be a bit dull-witted, but his love for Frodo sharpens his presence of mind. Sam's attractiveness comes from the simplicity of his total motivation: loving dedication to his Master."

If we look at Sam through the lens of the traditional hero as found in Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, we can say that his journey begins when he overhears Gandalf telling Frodo of the Ring and entrusting Frodo with the quest to destroy it. Gandalf realizes that Sam is eavesdropping and confronts him and tasks him with protecting Frodo on his journey and this is essentially Sam's "Call to Adventure" moment. Campbell in his book describes this stage as "A blunder – apparently the merest chance – reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn in to a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (42). In this way Sam precisely fits this stage of the hero, as he seemingly by chance hears the discussion about the ring and is then propelled into a journey in which he hardly understands what is at stake. Similarly Sam also "Crosses the First Threshold" when he reaches the edge of the Shire. Campbell describes the Crossing of the First Threshold stage by saying "With the personification of his destiny to guide and aid him, the hero goes forward in his adventure until he comes to the threshold guardian at the entrance to the zone of magnified power" (64). In this scene Sam realizes he is about to officially leave the Shire for the first time, he hesitates and states "If I take one more step, it will be the farthest away from home I've ever been." The world outside of the Shire is very much the "zone of magnified power" as it is the place where the fate of Middle-Earth will be decided. While Sam momentarily hesitates he continues upon his journey successfully crossing the first threshold and matching another one of Campbell's stages.

The beginning of Sam's story is one that matches nicely within the conventional hero journey. However it does not stop there. Perhaps the most

defining feature of the traditional hero is their undaunted courage while in the midst of a mighty physical struggle. In the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf the main character, Beowulf, faces off against several frightening and powerful monsters including Grendel, Grendel's mother, as well as a dragon. Similarly Roland in The Song of Roland faces off against the seemingly endless hordes of Muslim soldiers. Both heroes fearlessly and openly enter into these conflicts and it is this lack of concern for their own lives that is a defining feature of the traditional hero journey and it often takes place within the Campbell stage known as "The Belly of the Whale". Campbell describes this stage as the point in which "The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died" (74). Sam has his "Belly of the Whale" stage and displays his undaunted courage when he fights the giant spider Shelob in order to save Frodo. In this scene after being cast away by Frodo, Sam realizes the treachery of Gollum and returns to save Frodo. He is alone and quickly comes face to face with Shelob who is preparing to eat the unconscious Frodo. At the sight of the horrendous beast and his fallen companion Sam cries, "Now come, you filth! You've hurt my master, you brute, and you'll pay for it. We're going on; but we'll settle with you first. Come on, and taste it again!" (730). He then proceeds to defeat the beast and save Frodo. Like Roland and Beowulf, Sam is up against insurmountable odds, isolated from all help, and alone. And like Beowulf and Roland, Sam succeeds in beating all odds in physical battle. Similarly Sam fights against many other monsters in his journey including the monster in the lake outside of Moria, the Orcs inside the mines of Moria, and he also rescues Frodo from the Tower of Cirith Ungol. His undaunted courage in the face of battle and danger along with all the

stages to match allows us to contend that Sam is indeed a hero in the traditional sense.

While Sam's character can be considered heroic in a traditional sense, many find this traditional interpretation to be lacking and not providing a complete understanding of his character. To many including Tolkien, Sam represents the everyday man as he enjoys the simpler things like being home, gardening and being with friends. By nature, Sam is an extremely peaceful if rather ordinary creature. While in some ways because of his physical actions Sam could be considered heroic in a traditional sense this understanding of the Sam does not go deep enough. It is important to realize that this perceived heroism of Sam is simply a result of his love for Frodo and his never ceasing commitment to his duty and that is in fact where the true heroism lies. Characters like Beowulf are considered heroic because of their physical abilities and actions which often involve fighting. Sam, however is no great fighter (although he has his moments) and is physically limited by his short hobbit stature. In Lord Ragan's famous work *The Hero; A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* he describes 22 aspects which are common in the lives of countless traditional heroes and out of 22 Sam perhaps has about 4. This gives more credence to the argument that Sam cannot be simply defined by traditional hero standards but rather requires his own heroic evaluation based on new standards. Sam is a hero because of what he represents and who he is. It is not his ability with a sword that allows him to beat Shelob and countless other foes, but rather his love for Frodo and the bravery it awakens in him and this is a key difference between the heroic natures of Sam and Beowulf. While Beowulf and other traditional heroes fight

for pride and honor, Sam fights for love and the greater good. Sam is the everyday man who, when called upon by duty to fight evil, rises to the occasion despite his own desires to be home.

In a letter published in the book *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Tolkien compares Sam to the common English soldier whom he fought alongside with in the First World War stating, “ My Sam Gamgee is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself,”. Sam is indeed heroic because despite his shortcomings and ordinariness, he rises to the task and faces evil constantly and consistently refuses to leave Frodo despite his many opportunities to do so. Sam’s promise to protect Frodo as well as his loyalty and love for Frodo prove to be loyalty and love of the rarest form. Writer William Taylor writes in his essay titled “ Frodo Lives” that “ no one has ever counted the protagonists in fiction who are supported by a loyal friend, but of them all, few are more winning than the lovable, plain-spoken Sam Gamgee, and few illustrate the structural function of the role so clearly” (821). This loyalty is witnessed at the end of “ The Fellowship of the Ring” when Frodo attempts to leave the rest of the fellowship and continue the journey alone. Sam sees him rowing away and wades out into the water and attempts to swim to Frodo despite his inability to swim. Frodo tries to dissuade him by reminding him that he is going to Mordor, however Sam is undaunted and responds, “ I know that well enough, Mr. Frodo. Of course you are. And I’m coming with you” (406). Here we see that Sam is willing to go to extreme lengths, even death, for Frodo. Sam is a true friend to Frodo and consistently puts his own well-being aside for Frodo’s and the success of the

quest. Brian Murphy in his article, “ Samwise the Brave: Examining the central hero of The Lord of the Rings” sums of the character of Sam well stating,

“ Certainly Sam can’t compare with a Conan or a Fafhrd in terms of skill-at-arms. Like all hobbits he’s small in stature, possesses no skill with a blade, and is much more at home in a garden than on a battlefield. But Sam possesses undaunted courage when pressed, optimism in the face of impossible odds, and above all else an unshakeable call to duty to serve his master...His decision to remain and sacrifice his personal desire to return home in order to serve the greater good (the destruction of the Ring) is the very essence of heroism.”

As Murphy points out, Sam’s ability to stay optimistic and aware of the greater meaning in the midst of suffering and darkness is another reason why Sam is considered heroic. Sam displays this optimism and wisdom when Frodo is nearly killed in Osgiliath by the Nazgul and questions the point of the whole journey and his own resolve to continue. Sam responds by saying,

“ It’s like the great stories Mr. Frodo, the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn’t want to know the end because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end it’s only a passing thing this shadow, even darkness must pass. A new day will come, and when the sun shines it’ll shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you, that meant something even if you were too small to understand why. But I think Mr. Frodo, I do understand, I know now folk in



those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going because they were holding on to something”

Here we see that Sam, despite all the bad things happening around him and in the world is capable of finding the motivation to push on. This quote is also significant because in many ways it is the same reason why The Lord of the Rings stays with readers and viewers; it illuminates the human condition in a way that we can relate to. When Frodo questions what they are holding on to Sam replies with one of his finest quotes proclaiming, “ That there's some good in the world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for.” This quote truly encapsulates Sam's noble character as it acknowledges his ability to find the light and goodness in a world seemingly filled with only darkness.

Another reason why Sam can be considered a hero is his ability to resist the power and the temptation of the ring. After Sam believes Frodo has been killed by Shelob he takes the ring with the intent to finish the quest and destroy the ring and immediately he feels its power and temptation. In the book we are told,

“ Already the Ring tempted him, gnawing at his will and reason. Wild fantasies arose in his mind; and he saw Samwise the Strong, Hero of the Age, striding with a flaming sword across the darkened land, and armies flocking to his call as he marched to the overthrow of Barad-dur. And then all the clouds rolled away, and the white sun shone, and at his command the vale of Gorgoroth became a garden of flowers and trees and brought forth fruit. He had only to put on the Ring and claim it for his own, and all this could be. In that hour of trial it was his love of his master that helped most to

hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden, even if such visions were not a mere cheat to betray him. The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command. ‘ And anyway all these notions are only a trick, he said to himself’ (900).

This passage is one of the most telling of the character of Sam. The Ring tries to work upon Sam’s own particular interests specifically his love of gardening, but the common sense of the common man prevails and Sam’s self-realization of his own limits and his place in the world as well as his love for Frodo triumphs over temptation. When Sam finally reunites with Frodo, Sam willingly gives the ring back to him. This action is often overlooked however it has tremendous importance to the heroic journey of Sam. Unlike Aragon, Frodo, and countless others Sam is never corrupted by the ring. Sam’s power and heroism lies in his ability to let power go, as he realizes that power is not something that he desires or needs.

Sam is not a hero because of his feats in combat or his ability to win glory for himself. Rather Sam is a hero in the fact that he personifies loyalty, love, optimism, and courage. While some of these characteristics don’t match up to those characteristics attributed to the traditional hero described by Campbell and others, they represent a more realistic and modern interpretation of what defines a hero and this has just as much if not more legitimate. These characteristics don’t make Sam a flashy hero, the type that are popular in modern movies and television, but they do make him a more

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true to life hero in that it is not his actions that define him but rather his character. In this way Tolkien uses Sam to illuminate truths of the world. Often heroism is the small everyday acts of courage and love which one does in pursuit of a goal. Similarly heroism can be found in the most unlikely and ordinary of places and may not always be displayed on the battlefield. Sam is very special because he is the most like us because his struggles and underlying motivations are very human and admirable. In many ways Sam is an unconventional literary hero, but in the eyes of many observant readers and film viewers he is the chief hero of *The Lord of the Rings*. We are told, “The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all the lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.” Sam personifies this love and is evidence of the power of love to overcome evil more than any other character and that is why he is the main hero of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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