

Riddles, fate, and darkness: analysis of the hobbit and "tom tit tot"



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A riddle, unlike a common question, contains its own solution, and cleverly using word play and double meanings, it both exposes as well as obscures the answer. This type of mental puzzle requires creative thinking to solve. One must see past the obvious, the mundane, and look deep into the realm of the mysterious. It is not surprising that riddles in literature are often associated with magic and power such as in the story of *The Hobbit* and the fairy tale “Tom Tit Tot”. There are common threads running through both stories that bind together not only the importance of riddles in creating an altered way of thinking but also the implication of magic, luck, or the Divine, which manifests immediately before, during, or after, these altered states. Riddles bring to the surface what is hidden deep in the unconscious mind. They both invoke and provoke, summon and stimulate, calling forth the unseen: the psychological, the emotional, and the magical.

In the story *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, the unlikely hero Bilbo goes on a quest and journeys far from his homeland, and, as is common in questing tales, his character develops both internally as well as externally by the challenges he meets, and defeats, along the way. Bilbo is hired as a burglar to steal Smaug’s golden treasure but his first victory is that he wins the game of riddles with Gollum and takes a small gold ring as his prize. The ring itself represents magical power and the unknown as it both mysteriously, as well as literally, turns its wearer into the “unseen” by making him invisible. This ring has been placed directly in Bilbo’s path, by luck, or by design, before the game of riddles begins. The ring comes to play the most important role in Bilbo defeating Gollum and escaping from the underworld.

As Tolkien writes, the ring becomes the “ turning point in [Bilbo’s] career... [even though he] does not know it [yet]” (p. 81).

When Bilbo falls down into this dark place, alone, he is entering into his own deep unconscious where he must face his fears. The game of riddles he plays with Gollum are for very high stakes: Bilbo’s life hangs in the balance. During the contest Gollum starts to win but fortune is on Bilbo’s side. It is the force of fate, his hand having met the ring on the dark tunnel floor, as well as Bilbo’s altered state of mind, caused by the riddling, which work in tandem and provide him the victory. Again, pure luck, or perhaps Providence, is on Bilbo’s side when he tries to answer Gollum’s last riddle; he wants “ to shout out: ‘ Give me more time!’...But all that [comes] out with a sudden squeal [is] ‘ Time!’” and this happens to be the correct answer (p. 92). Then when Bilbo can no longer even think of another riddle he coincidentally puts his hand into his pocket and his awareness touches upon the forgotten ring. He asks a question aloud, “ What have I got in my pocket?”, talking to himself, but again by luck Gollum takes this to be a riddle and is defeated. This shift in power is not caused by Bilbo’s superiority but by a force which is beyond himself. The game of riddles, a touch of magic, and the danger of loss of life, set the stage for the unseen forces to play out.

Similar to this scenario in *The Hobbit* is the fairy tale of “ Tom Tit Tot”. In this tale a girl has her life on the line. If she is unable to perform an impossible task, spinning five skeins, she will be put to death by her own husband. Like Bilbo, she also has been put into isolation and must face her fears alone. To save her own life she enters into a riddling game with “ a small little black thing with a long tail” (p. 3). In the same way that Bilbo riddles for his life so <https://assignbuster.com/riddles-fate-and-darkness-analysis-of-the-hobbit-and-tom-tit-tot/>

too does this young woman, and in the same way that the reader does not feel empathy for Gollum so too is the black thing something to be despised. Both dark and vile creatures are associated with magic. Even though these other-world creatures have the power to save the protagonists they represent a malevolent force and are life threatening. It is the combination of dealing with magic and dark forces, along with the threat of death, which creates the space for the manifestation of pure luck to intervene and tip the scales in favor of the girl. Coincidentally it is her husband, the very same man who is threatening to take off her head if she does not complete her spinning, who provides the answer to the riddle of the black thing's name. In the same way that benevolent forces put the words into Bilbo's mouth, and the ring into his path, they also put the girl's husband into the forest at the exact right time to over hear the goblin speaking his own name and then to convey the information to her directly, and, in the best moment. The riddling, which is a metaphor for mystery and magic, also represents trickery and ingenuity. In both cases, for the girl and for Bilbo, the riddling talk provides the foundation for the idea of another way of thinking, it takes the players under the surface of the ordinary, and opens the opportunity for forces outside of the normal realm to be expressed and revealed.

The riddle can be said to represent the heroic journey, or a quest, by taking the hero deep into the labyrinth of the unconscious mind, into the world of the unknown and the unseen, to search for the answer which lies at the center of the question. Without a choice, the seeker enters the darkness and is forced to face his own death. The riddle opens the door to the other worlds and takes the seeker on a journey which spirals into a connected circle:

there is a ring of Truth, the serpent bites his own tale, and the Divine makes itself felt. What had been associated with death is transformed into what will save: it is Gollum's own ring which saves Bilbo and it is the girl's husband who provides the name of the creature. Through the psychological process of delving deep into the underworld of magic and the unconscious, profound connections are made and the hero returns to the mortal world enlightened.

Works Cited

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