

Heroes and the hobbit



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The principal concern of a literature student is to try to infer what the author's intentions are. However, we often include our own perspectives and forget the author altogether. Take a look at *The Hobbit*. Many people assume Tolkien wanted Bilbo to be viewed as the hero and that the story is of his transformation. However, given Beowulf's influence on Tolkien, Bilbo is most likely not meant to be a hero. For those who think Bilbo is the hero, don't be too offended by my claim. The theory does make sense. When we first see Bilbo, he is as commonplace as can be. Every morning he sits down, smokes his pipe, and is a good housekeeper - never forgetting to dust the mantelpiece. However, one morning he is whisked away from his hobbit hole. He is taken on an adventure, where he proves himself to be above norm. He performs many daring feats. Bilbo certainly does change during the adventure. However, it takes more than performing heroic feats to be a hero. But then, what is a hero? The American Heritage Dictionary defines hero as, "the principal male character in a literary work." For all purposes, this definition is too broad - any protagonist (as long as they're male) could qualify for this distinction. How, then, do we define a hero? The hero, after all, has been a long literary tradition. Choosing then, which character or adventure is best fitted for the definition of hero can be tricky. What is the standard? Heroes from mythology? Should we turn to King Arthur or his nephew Gawain? Or maybe someone more modern - Harry Potter perhaps? Beowulf is a direct influence on Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. He studied it, wrote about it and taught it. The setting of Heorot is directly responsible for Rivendell. Both are viewed as havens and the food and drink are endless. Beowulf's dragon shows his face as Smaug. Both are wakened by the theft of a single cup. Both too meet their death by the sword of a King (There are other similarities, of course, but

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that isn't this paper's concern). Therefore, we will use the poem's titular character as the definition of a hero. Of course, a hero goes on a journey and in the process slays many monsters and helps rescue those in need. A hero, though, is more than a person with a sword. A hero, first and foremost, is a leader. They must also possess cunning and strength. Yet, s/he still has qualities, such as flaws that allow him (her) to be viewed as human. A hero also has God (or the fates on his side) and they intervene on his behalf and without his knowing. A hero must also make a quest to the Underworld, where s/he gains something of use. Beowulf is the leader of his comrades. He decides that they travel across the sea to help fight Grendal. He decides that they will use no weapons when battling the monster. He also decides that they must battle his mother. When he becomes King of the Geats, he decides when to fight the dragon and how. Bilbo is a hired burglar – not the leader. He often takes orders and allows himself to be tricked into dangerous jobs. A good example would be the trolls or Bilbo's job as scout in the Lonely Mountain. Nor does he really care if the quest succeeds. His main worry is being returned safely. Beowulf without a doubt is full of cunning. He thinks of quick replies to counter Unferth's insults. He thinks out his attacks before charging into the heat of battle. Beowulf also has much physical strength. His battles with Grendal and his mother prove that. Bilbo too has cunning. He thinks of plans to rescue the dwarves from spiders and elves. He also keeps a quick tongue with Gollum and Smaug. However, he lacks physical strength. Preferring to use his ring and brain, we never see Bilbo do battle. Beowulf also has a flaw. He has both a willingness to prove himself and is boastful—a dangerous combination. The swimming contest with Breca shows just how quickly he will risk life for fame. His boast that he will not use weapons when

battling Grendal almost leads to his death. However, God (or the fates) intervene. Intervention of higher beings and luck, of course is a must for a hero. After his sword fails when piercing Grendal's mother, he immediately finds another potent sword and slays her. Bilbo, like Beowulf, has a flaw. However, Bilbo has too many flaws. He often lacks caution. After discovering the trolls, instead of going to tell the dwarves, he tries to pick their pockets. Bilbo also suffers from critical complaining. Rather than try to help his condition, he dwells on how miserable it is. Bilbo is also guilty of cowardice. Rather than fight the spiders he distracts them and helps the dwarves flee. Critics will counter with "that's just quick thinking." Of course, it is. However, in the Battle of the Five Armies, rather than stand up and fight, he hides behind his ring. Bilbo doesn't seem to have the intervention of God or the fates. Rather, he has a great deal of luck. Waking up in time to see the mountain wall open, waking up to see the spider are all fine examples. This leads us to the final part of what a hero is. Beowulf makes a trip to the Underworld—not literally but figuratively. He travels under water and mountain to battle the vicious mother of Grendal. During this battle, he acquires his sword hilt. When he returns, he acquires the blessing of Hrothgar to be King of the Geats. Both of these things are useful, but do not overshadow Beowulf. The title and the sword are extensions of Beowulf. With Bilbo, it is the opposite. Bilbo does make his quest to the Underworld, where he meets Gollum. He then is faced with a Battle of Riddles and escapes with a magic ring. However, the ring is used too often. Rather than the ring being an extension of Bilbo, it becomes his only saving grace. The Hobbit, however, is not without its heroes. Bard and Thorin, both side characters, function as the true heroes. Thorin is the leader of dwarves. He has decided on their

quest to the Lonely Mountain. He also, is the one who hires Bilbo. Of course, the addition of Bilbo is from Gandalf, who serves as the higher intervention. Thorin also has a small flaw - stubbornness, which causes the Battle of the Five Armies. It is fair to assume Beowulf has had a great influence on Tolkien. Keeping this in mind, it is also safe to assume, Bilbo Baggins is not meant to be a hero. He is merely a comedic character who performs many heroic feats. To those still skeptical, I'll leave you with this last thought: Turn to *The Lord of the Rings* and answer this question: Whom does Tolkien choose as the ring-bearer—Frodo or Bilbo? Works Cited" Hero." *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 3rd Ed. 1994.