

Sting and bilbo: significance of the small in the hobbit



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Bilbo's sword, Sting, plays a large role in *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien — a role that almost appears to be incongruous for its size. Through each one of its appearances, Sting's increased significance as a plot element simultaneously symbolizes steps forward in Bilbo's journey in becoming a true hero. The roles of the weapon with overlooked potentials and the hobbit with underestimated abilities eventually are revealed to be more significant than imagined.

Bilbo's encounter with the trolls is what leads to the discovery of Sting. Because his experience with the trolls is his first encounter with the true perils of the world outside the Shire, Bilbo's actions reflect those of a typical hobbit with an easy, sheltered life. Although he escapes the trolls alive, he is painted as a character of extreme cowardice in this part of the novel, as he hides in a bush while his dwarf-friends take on the statuses of future troll-fodder. Nevertheless, after the trolls are turned into stone, his success in overcoming his first taste of danger is rewarded with the discovery of Sting in the troll's cave. Compared to the other precious elvin-made swords found in the cave, Sting appears insignificant, as it "would have made only a tiny pocket-knife for a troll, but it was as good as a short sword for the hobbit" (Tolkien 42). Like Sting, Bilbo appears useless and incapable of any great deed at this point in the novel. For a stretch of time afterwards, during which the dwarves regard Bilbo as a burden due to his useless presence, the hobbit forgets about his sword.

However, when Bilbo is abandoned in the goblin tunnels, he remembers the dagger he keeps in his possession. During this time of despair, Sting brings a ray of hope to Bilbo. As he goes on to meet Gollum, Bilbo finds that his hope

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is justified when Gollum puts on a polite exterior, “ anxious to appear friendly, at any rate for the moment, and until he found out more about the sword and the hobbit” (73). The presence of Sting, combined with Bilbo’s composed demeanor, makes Gollum wary long enough for Bilbo to plot his escape.

After this episode, in which Sting plays a small but vital part by bestowing hope to Bilbo and apprehension to Gollum, the idea of Bilbo being a capable hero becomes less ludicrous to the dwarves. As Bilbo proudly boasts of his adventures to them, they regard him in an awe that he previously did not receive. Although Bilbo obtains Sting early on in the novel, it is not until he kills the giant spider in the forest that he gives his sword a name: “ Somehow, the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or anyone else, made a great difference to Mr Baggins. He felt like a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into its sheath. ‘ I will give you a name,’ he said to it, ‘ and I shall call you Sting!’” (156). The scene that follows, in which Bilbo’s first impulse upon seeing his friends trapped by spiders is to rescue them by himself, contrasts sharply with the inept way in which he handled the imprisonment of his friends by the trolls as a greenhorn adventurer earlier on in the novel. Such exponential growth in bravery and selflessness reflects Bilbo’s extreme growth in terms of heroism. Even though Bilbo has already successfully escaped Gollum on his own, the virtue of saving one’s own life pales in comparison to the chivalry present in the desire to rescue others, especially if one may be put at risk as a result. As he fearlessly slashes apart the

spiderwebs that imprison the dwarves, Bilbo demonstrates that he has not only acquired knowledge and wisdom in dealing with the evils of the world, but has also achieved a level of undeniable heroism.

In this manner, the naming of Bilbo's sword foreshadows the last test Bilbo must, and does, overcome in order to gain the status of a true hero. The significance of Sting in the plot of *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien is made obvious at the same rate in which Bilbo's heroism develops to its full potential. Both Sting and Bilbo have the potential to attain a greatness even those regarded with great esteem cannot achieve.