

*An Essay on The Hobbit's Symbolism*

# BILBO'S VENTURE



Moon Shadow

Esoteric Nation

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# Bilbo's Departure

Throughout the course of human history, there are many tales that are told. Some of these stories stay private within the family from which they came, while others are written down for a general audience to become aware of important events in history. Although the current archive of published stories is enormous, there come along folks whose stories become classics and are told generation after generation. Stories, in any shape, form, or genre, serve a vital function in society: they inspire, enchant, guide, and form communities. Many folks in society feel lost, which propels the search for valuable insights and discovering truths that reveal a more effective way of navigating our lives. During this search for meaning, one will come across many good stories that open the doors of possibility and connect us to stronger roots. One such tale which narrates the timeless quest for adventure is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Originally a children's fairy story, which serves more than just mere entertainment, as it's embedded with an Elvish craft of connecting the reader to an alternate state of reality hidden within the imagination that Tolkien calls Faerie. This hobbit's tale illustrates in symbolic form the quest towards the discovery of hidden psychological treasures and maps a route along that great journey.

In this essay, I'll present Bilbo's journey across the world of Middle-earth in three parts: departure, initiation, and return. I'll present an overview of some key concepts and major themes in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. We'll explore Tolkien's legacy and tradition, cover topics like the awakening effect of music, and the encounters with the hidden dimensions of our imagination. We'll explore Tolkienian terms like the Shire and Faerie. We'll also get a clearer understanding of the imagination's role in fantasy and how it functions in the Elvish craft of worldbuilding—either in literature or motion pictures. I'll primarily draw examples from *The Hobbit* tale that illustrate in symbolic form a deeper meaning such as crossing bridges, entering caves, fighting trolls and goblins, and finding magical items like swords and jewels. We'll cover concepts that connect the reader to an underlying stream within Tolkien's genre of fantasy—the story

within the story—which leads to the land of Faerie, the birthplace of all fairy tales. And from this point of departure is where our long-awaited journey begins.

## **The Road Begins**

The world of myth, fairytales, philosophy, psychology, and science is wide and deep; they can be explored endlessly, uncovering new bits of interesting information. One can easily get lost in this world if one does not have a center of focus to use as a navigation device. In literature, the protagonist aids the reader in staying focused and guides them along the adventure, quest, exploration, and mythical landscape imagery. The surface level of a story, its words and syntax, are kept simple enough to immerse the reader deeper into the meaning of these words and terms—what academics call semantics. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien doesn't deviate much from keeping Bilbo Baggins the center of focus. But in *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR), the primary protagonist (Frodo Baggins) shares center stage with other characters along the story. Before going too deep into LOTR, let's first build a foundation by following just one character in a story, Bilbo Baggins. Following the trajectory of the main character—the protagonist—will guide the reader along the journey which maps a basic set of steps and stages of mythic and fairy tale world-building, one can then move on to more complicated worldbuilding structures, as found in LOTR, and study more complex systems as in Tolkien's later unfinished works. So, let's first start with the basics as presented in *The Hobbit*. But before we begin our hobbit exploration, let's get an overview of the purpose of stories, tales, and myths.

Different genres of storytelling employ unique approaches to guiding a reader towards understanding the tales, stories become relevant when they are presented in compatible forms or structures to the generation in which they're introduced to; that's the purpose of recycling fairytale themes, concepts, and ideas. Depending on the openness and taste of the reader, each group will gravitate towards their particular flavor or genre of myth and fairytale. The concept of "magic" is a craft which one is called to explore, not by enforcing ideas but evoking enchantment and appealing to the imagination; teachers or scholars may make practical suggestions and provide starting points, but each reader or

traveler must find their “secret door” that opens in a unique fashion within their imagination. Literature is a time-tested format of delivering information—either in story form or a philosophical structure of words, language, and terms. There are many genres to explore on the quest to finding that one story that “calls” the reader to adventure and further explore the deeper elements of myths and fairytales. There are vast options on the market from the world of psychology, philosophy, mythology, spirituality, religion, and fairy stories. All one needs to do is begin the process of exploration, which inevitably leads to a process of adventure. Modern classics like Harry Potter, Wizard of Oz, and Lion King have grown popular enough to be adapted to Broadway musicals and motion picture films which lead the spectators to their next stage of solving the riddles presented in various introductory forms—such as Broadway theater.

## **Magic on Broadway**

Many writers, philosophers, and theorists develop different structural formats to pass on “magical” ideas onto a general public. Broadway theater is one of these methods, which makes accessible at a consumer level, the magic of fairy stories. *Wicked on Broadway* is one of these tales.

The Broadway musical *Wicked* is one of the top 5 shows on Broadway in terms of years of production and revenue; the show has been running for over twenty years. It is one of the most successful stage dramas on the planet. The origins of *Wicked* is rooted in the classic fairy story of *The Wizard of Oz*. The author and novelist Gregory McGuire, who wrote the *Wicked* novel, adapted the classic *Wizard of Oz* tale into a modern telling of the villain character of the wicked Witch of the West. However, in order for the story to work on a Broadway stage for mass consumers it had to be re-edited, or repurposed as a stage drama; this was the role of Winnie Holzman, the writer that edited the story for the Broadway stage musical. An of course, the original music score, composed by Stephen Schwartz, was a major contribution to its mass appeal.

According to Gregory McGuire who wrote the original *Wicked* novel, the Broadway show and the original book are different. The Broadway version of Winnie Holzman is written to captivate a commercial audience with spectacular

theatrics and singing. The original novel by Gregory McGuire is much darker and mysterious, for its intended to captivate a reader from the inside out, rather than the outside in. The wonders and magic of the imagination can be triggered in multiple ways, stage drama has the strongest charge to stimulate the imagination, but a written tale in book format forces the reader to imagine the scenes, characters, and places—guiding and developing the imagination’s power of creation and wonder. Magic works in stages, both physical and psychological. Most folks first discover stories through the magic of television and cinema; Broadway theaters may come next, and eventually, spectators transition their focus into becoming readers of great tales and fairy stories. Which then leads the curious reader to more theoretical works found in the genres of philosophy and psychology.

## Legacy and Tradition

Genres of literature typically revolve around a historical figure’s body of work or legacy. To illustrate this idea, let’s compare it to the orbit of planets, stars, and solar systems. The Moon revolves around the Earth, which revolves around the Sun, which revolves the center of the Milky Way galaxy. Science does not yet have the tools to verify gravitational fields beyond the galaxy. However, using simple logic, we can observe a consistent reoccurring pattern of objects revolving other objects or forces. Therefore, we can hypothesize that the Milky Way galaxy orbits a greater force field, and even further speculate that a central universal force exists in which all galaxies of the universe orbit.

In the same manner, modern genres of literature orbit classical genres. Authors don’t create bodies of work *ex nihilo* (from nothing). There’s always at least one genre central to an author’s work. J.R.R Tolkien studied various myths and fairy stories which influenced and inspired his craft and writing style. Classical stories can be traced back in history, and that’s how lineages and traditions are established, which modern writers develop and advance onto the future. Tolkien not only followed the tradition of fairy stories, he re-invented the genre. Stories too revolve around a force of gravity, a magic star. *The Lord of the Rings* was the masterwork that changed the genre of fairy stories, *The Hobbit* was

the prequel. Once in a few centuries, one or two figures arise with tales that become the “myths” of their era, many scholars believe Tolkien’s tales to be the *myth for our time*. Once in a generation, a figure ventures into the depths of their mind and arrive directly to the source of all myths and fairy tales—Tolkien was one of these figures.

Our exploration of fairy tale themes will orbit the magic star and solar system of Middle-earth, as presented in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. We’ll analyze events and symbols found along the plot of Bilbo’s journey. Tolkien’s mythological world has generated great interest amongst academic scholars, independent scholars, artists and writers; a field of study has been established called Tolkien Studies.

One of the great functions of an established tradition, or field of study, is that current generations don’t need to figure things out *ex nihilo* (from zero). There are many great writers in history who left behind their masterworks that anyone may reference, borrow, and adapt to their lifestyle; there’s no need to walk around in circles, darkness, or ignorance. The purpose of tradition is for a modern generation to continue developing the works which previous generations developed—like following a trail and making the path smoother for others, and with style. What’s great about the field of Tolkien Studies is that there’s a vast library of ideas, concepts, proposals, and commentaries from which our current generation may adapt and put to practical use—especially in the creative arts and storytelling. Tolkien is considered a true genius, and through studying his concepts and ideas we may discover the next step in our path, and eventually arrive to that field where all great ideas arise from—the land of Faerie.

Tolkien provides two maps in *The Hobbit* which cover the terrain traveled throughout the journey: Thrór’s Map and the map of Wilderland. Fairy tale maps are not just for amusement, for they also contain profound meaning that’s brought forth into the light of awareness through a guide or teacher—like Elrond at Rivendell. Those who understand the esoteric language can read and interpret the symbolism which reveals the next steps and stages of *the way*. An author’s aim in any great tale is to reveal vital insights within a style that an audience finds engaging and meaningful. A natural impulse of a reader’s discovery of esoteric themes is to find a school designed to further explain, explore, and reveal those

mystery worlds—often called a Mystery School, Wisdom School, or Esoteric Academy. A fairy tale map is for the imagination to begin mapping these ideas in narrative form. The map of Wilderland in *The Hobbit* will be our guiding roadmap. The symbols of mountains, dragons, forests, and rivers will gradually be revealed as the trail is explored further. And the role of a quest's guide—like Gandalf or Elrond—is to reveal the symbols along the way which lead to the next stage of the journey.

## **The Shire**

To embark into a new world, we must first learn a new language, a mythopoetic style of expression. Every author has their own set of words, terms, and definitions. Tolkien's vast array of terms is illustrated throughout his masterful storytelling, which paints a clear image of the new terms discovered along the hobbit's tale.

Every journey has a beginning, middle, and end; our point of departure begins in a region known as The Shire, in the small town of Hobbiton. The Shire is comfortable and quiet, not much happens around those towns. Stories of dragons, elves, and wizards are only mentioned, but they're simply far-off "myths" that never occur in the comforts and safety of everyday affairs at Hobbiton, the region of the hobbits. The Shire represents a safe ordered life, where there are no adventures or quests, just the habits and patterns of day-to-day activities; the habitual patterns of daily routines and the comfort zone. This isn't just a fairy tale concept, for the majority of people in America live in some version of the Shire. An American scholar of myth, Joseph Campbell, calls this stage the Ordinary World.

A theme which occurs in the first chapter of *The Hobbit* is the concept of *intrusion*. Gandalf's visit to Bilbo's home begins the process, which aims to compel and convince Bilbo to embark on a quest. Since Bilbo wasn't convinced or interested in any adventures, Gandalf departs his house and marks his front door with a symbol. The symbol on Bilbo's door attracts the company of thirteen dwarf warriors who arrive at Bilbo's house one set at a time, thus creating a gradual *intrusion*. We can relate this sequence of events as symbolizing the thought

process and concepts which arises in the imagination, which creative people know very well. Writers like Tolkien, for example, get inspired by though “intrusions” which carry a strong grip on the imagination, propelling them to write, develop, and discover the story. For creative writers, these intrusions propel the writing process. From the perspective of the general reader, the new themes which are gradually introduced provide a gradual psychological framework that prepares the reader for their adventure. And just like Gandalf prepared Bilbo for a quest, Tolkien’s tale prepares the reader for adventure—which first begins by leaving the Shire.

Bilbo Baggins, although initially denying the call for adventure, is still interested in the story Thorin, the leader, tells the Company of dwarfs—in which he talks about slaying dragons and recapturing a great treasure. Just like in the ordinary world where people enjoy listening to stories about vacations people take, in hopes that one day the listener too may embark on a similar adventure. Bilbo entertains the story, but refuses the “call to adventure.” The impulse of adventure is dormant in every human being—including hobbits. And by getting acquainted with tales people have embarked on, the reader will eventually build enough interest, momentum, strength, and encourage to embark on their unique calling for adventure. The point of separation between the known world of the Shire and unknown lands is symbolized by *crossing over a river*, the point which officially begins the adventure. The Shire is the point of departure of every quest, and where all great tales begin. It all begins with a skillful intrusion, a fairy tale, which takes a reader far beyond the limits of their imagination.

## **Shadowy Figures**

In an essay by the esoteric author William R. Mistele, he mentions the concept of “shadowy figures.” These are “culturally sanctioned guardians,” and leaders that have not broken the spell of fear and superstition; therefore, they’re not the perfect role models for the upcoming generations of “travelers.” Those who grow up in fear-based environments and scarcity mentality will not be able to guide others out of these dark spells—a prisoner cannot guide another prisoner out of jail, for they have not yet found the escape; in popular terms, we call it living in

“the matrix.” As pointed out in the movie *The Matrix*, starring Keanu Reeves (Neo), those who are trapped in “the matrix” are afraid of breaking out from that system of mind control. The leaders in those toxic systems are by design “shadowy figures” for they’re still trapped in a fear-based system, thereby, they cannot be agents of progress or development in our society.

Our first encounter with shadowy figures came at home during early child development. Most folks in society come from families and traditions that were brought up with a scarcity mentality and fear-based living, due to the wicked effects of mainstream media. Shadowy figures come in many shapes and forms: parents, friends, and mainstream media control. Shadowy figures arise out of toxic systems in politics, or toxic religions. One cannot judge an entire group of people on the bad actions of a few; there are toxic churches and healthy churches. It’s not within the scope of this essay to define or categorize a toxic religious system from a healthy church—each must evaluate carefully the options on the market.

In modern American culture, we have high school teachers and college professors who can’t challenge outdated academic structures for fear of losing their jobs. One easily gets cancelled in one form or another when speaking in behalf of truth or justice. For the most part, public school systems and society at large have not prepared us for breaking out of “the matrix.” But all it takes is for one wizard figure like Morpheus from *The Matrix*, or Gandalf’s arrival in the Shire of Middle-earth to appear on the scene to get folks back on track, at least one at a time. That’s why our modern society desperately need as many Gandalf figures to appear at the Shire of our local towns or cities. There are many ways to evoke the impulse for venturing outside the Shire, music is one of them.

## **Awakening Effect of Music**

Music has always played a vital role in society. Its function isn’t just “for entertainment purposes only,” for it also serves as healing medicine for the mind, body, and soul, and awakens a deeper psychological or spiritual calling. Music’s effect as an awakening force is demonstrated in the opening chapter of *The Hobbit*, “An Unexpected Party.” After the dwarfs settle in Bilbo’s home, they begin

singing a song with a deep tone and slow rhythm. The song speaks of mountains, caves, a dragon, and gold. As the dwarfs sing in harmony, something *unexpected* happens to Bilbo: a strong sense of curiosity, and an impulse of adventure awakens within him. A Tookish trait arises from within him, the character trait which Bilbo Baggins got from his mother Belladonna Took.

Music evokes a deeper calling beyond the comfort zones of the imagination. Every genre of music evokes this effect. The whispers of the underlying messages of music enters the mind like a gentle breeze through an open window, offering a breath of fresh air that reaches the depths of imagination—the soul. The scene of the singing dwarves offers three important things: 1) it creates a contrasting atmosphere (serious and somber) compared to the initial comic entrance by the dwarfs, 2) it establishes the purpose of the quest in song format, and 3) it awakens the Tookish impulse of adventure in Bilbo’s spirit.

Music plays a profound effect in any scenario, for it uplifts the atmosphere and raises the mood of the room or environment. Music also offers an opportunity for group identity, as when a group of strangers in a concert hall sing the chorus of a song as one harmonic voice; unity of sound and spirit are clearly established. Music also evokes a sense of nostalgia that takes people back to their “better days.” From a mythic perspective, nostalgia is a call to rediscover and explore the impulse of adventure, which gradually awakens what many people call “the soul.” Eventually, the impulse for adventure builds up with enough intensity that it propels an individual on embarking on a path or quest. Which the first major step is crossing the initial threshold beyond the Shire.

## **Fantasy and Imagination**

Theories of creativity vary depending on the school from which they originate from, which is usually centered on a few great figures within its genre’s legacy. To understand the imagination, I’m going to reference Tolkien’s essay *On Fairy-stories*,<sup>1</sup> in which I’ll extract the basic principles of fantasy and the role of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tolkien, J. R. R. 2014. *On Fairy-Stories*, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson. London: HarperCollins

imagination, according to Tolkien. Using this frame of reference, we can generally define the genre of Tolkienian Fantasy.

Tolkien states that “The human mind is capable of forming mental images of things not actually present. The faculty of conceiving the images is naturally called Imagination.” But throughout history, mainstream culture has forgotten the power and function of the imagination, for its now considered a pastime rather than a central pillar in our lives. What we aim to establish is that the imagination is the factory from which every great innovation has emerged. The factory of our imagination isn’t just for fancy or mere entertainment; its function far reaches entertainment, for it can transform the way one sees the world, thereby transforming the manner in which we operate in culture.

Let’s properly define a few terms. The “mental power of image-making” is what we define as Imagination. The degree in vividness, or detail, in which one forms these images is not a difference of kind, but of degree. For example, a simple drawing by a novice painter or illustrator—such as Tolkien’s illustrations—are only different in degree compared to a master illustrator like William Blake. For they both—Tolkien and Blake—are attempting to describe a form beyond the limits of the simple imagination. The expression given to these imaginative forms is what we call Art; whether created by a novice or master. The final results of creating or forming images is what Tolkien called Sub-created Art, in which Art is the process of creation. We must point out that Tolkien was trying to find terms which made sense to him in his time, which may seem confusing to us in our time, or may seem to contradict his previous concepts. The reason for contradictions or confusion is for the simple reason that words or images are to be used symbolically, for they merely try to point out what’s beyond the limits of imagination. We’ll proceed forward with these two foundational terms: Imagination (the faculty of image-making) and Art (the results of the imaginative process). So then, how do we define the term, Fantasy?

The word “fantasy” is generally understood as images that do not exist in the concrete space or room in which one is present in, or images that are not concrete realities anywhere in the world—like dragons, wizards, or hobbits. Modern culture has a negative interpretation of fantasy, for it’s often seen as mere

entertainment only. But for great artist like Tolkien, he elevates the term and even the entire genre, adding more value to the art and craft of fantasy, and serving as an example for others to follow and learn from. In the Tolkienian sense, Fantasy is regarded as a high form of art, vital to human society and civilization.

Fantasy, if done correctly, has the effect of “arresting strangeness.” For example, when a reader discovers a genre of fantasy like Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, or Batman, these stories captivate and bring a reader or audience into its world; the strangeness of these fantastic tales has an “arresting strangeness” effect on the audience’s imagination, which in mainstream culture we call entertainment. These tales are not different in kind, but of degree, for every audience member experience a different degree of “vividness” in its symbolical meaning. But for most of mainstream culture, “Fantasy has remained undeveloped; it is and has been used frivolously, or only half-seriously, or merely for decoration,” states Tolkien, “it remains fanciful.” Let us establish at this point that pure Fantasy is not meant to be used as mere Fancy, but for higher purposes, like transforming people’s imagination and world outlook.

There’re two worlds which Tolkien differentiates: the Primary World and Secondary World. The Primary World is our starting point, the manner in which we normally see our surroundings of everyday appearances and experiences. A Secondary World is the effect of Fantasy, as when an audience is captivated by a great story, movie, or book. Every great artistic person aims to create their own world, either through words, poems, images, or songs. Creative types with years of experience find it easier to enter these inner worlds (Secondary Worlds) through the use of their magical instruments, such as magic wand, magic sword, writing pen, or musical instrument.

Tolkien does state in his essay, *On Fairy-stories*, that “Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature.” Being a writer, Tolkien has a preference for his craft over other crafts, like painting or stage drama, for he states that visual representations take away from the imaginations capacity for creating vivid images. Hence the reason you want children to spend their time reading and creating art than to simply allow them to play video games and watch television all day; for the imagination needs to be put to use by creating things of value

rather than consuming television “programming.” However, rules are meant to be broken, and if properly understood and employed, visual representations—like the internet or movies—may be put to use in a positive and much less degenerate manner than what they currently are being used for in mainstream culture.

So far, we’ve defined some foundational terms: Imagination, Art, Fantasy, Primary World and Secondary World. We’ve established that Imagination isn’t to be used for mere Fancy but for meaningful Fantasy. There’re many more terms that Tolkien uses, but for the purpose introducing and establishing the foundations of Tolkienian Fantasy, I’ll keep the terms to a manageable degree. And of course, anyone may reference the vast literature in Tolkien Studies to learn more in-depth concepts and theories. There’s one more important term to explore: Faerie.

Fairy stories are not stories about fairies; they’re stories about Faerie—the realm from which fairies have their origins. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* is a tale of his personal quest into these inner worlds of the imagination—the world of Middle-earth. The unknown lands of Faerie are “a perilous realm,” says Tolkien; they’re extraordinary, fantastical, imaginative, and dangerous. To embark into Faerie is similar to the craft of cooking or baking, for it not only involves learning recipes and theories, it also involves the baking process and the results of enjoying the cake. Similarly, Faerie involves three parts: theory, a process, and the results which leads to a transformation of consciousness—initiation.

As when learning a new art or craft—like playing a musical instrument—the more one practices, the more skilled one becomes. Similarly, the more one engages with Faerie, the more one gets initiated into it. Through diligent practice, this imaginative process leads to seeing reality from another side. The *Hobbit*’s subtitle is “there and back again,” which foreshadows the return from the “beyond.” The effect of reading fantasy tales is that they prime the imagination and invites the reader to get closer to the realm of Faerie. Many people think fantasy tales are primarily for children, but fairy stories are for everyone—men, women, and children. The Secondary World of Faerie is “a reservoir of power,” says Tolkien, from which if one were to “drive a well down,” one would “tap a

power that can not only change the visible forms of things already existent, but spout up with a boundless wealth of forms of things never before known.”

## Bilbo's Initiation

Bilbo lived on top of a hill at Bag End in the village of Hobbiton, and upon his initial departure from home, he travelled down the hill when he began to embark on his adventure. A descent into the unknown realms of imagination is symbolized in this scenario. Even though this initial descent is within the borders of the known world—ordinary world—it's inspired by Bilbo's Tookish sense of adventure and exploration, which he inherited from his mother Belladonna Took.

The further he gets from Bag End, the weirder and stranger the surroundings become, for he is beginning to explore unknown territories. Traveling past familiar hobbit lands, Bilbo and Company encounter villages where the language is different; traveling further, they find themselves in isolated areas where no people dwell. It then begins to rain and the sun begins to set, adding weight to the atmosphere of a descent. Fairytale departures are not a vacation departure, for one is embarking on a new road which many other folks have travelled before, leaving a trail or path. Awkwardness and discomfort are part of the adventure, represented by the rain.

Every hero's quest begins by travelling a road, trail, or path which pilgrims, voyagers, and pioneers have travelled in previous generations. The difference between generations is the circumstances and conditions—like time, place, and social economic conditions. The journey unfolds differently at the cultural level in every generation, but the underlying themes are similar. Joseph Campbell's theory of a Hero's Journey proposes that there's an archetypal trail—a map—which outlines the path, which makes every story different at the surface level, but similar at the root level, hence the theory of the Monomyth.

In the hobbit's version of the quest, the company of warrior dwarves recruit a simple hobbit, since that was Gandalf's counsel. Thorin, the Company commander, didn't think much of Bilbo Baggins, for this hobbit didn't possess any special skills or abilities. Not only was he inexperienced, but he also lacked courage. This character trait makes Bilbo relevant to the reader, for readers too have a sense of lacking courage and skill. But as the adventure develops, the protagonist grows at various levels—physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

As the company travels further away from the Shire, they cross a river over a bridge; crossing any waters represents the stepping into new worlds. A river is an imaginary line between the known worlds and the Wilderland of the unknown. Some stories use the crossing of an ocean as a metaphor for discovering new territories within the imagination. Tolkien is known for crossing the great ocean of imagination and discovering the land of Faerie.

Bilbo and Company continue traveling east, and after crossing the first bridge, they spot a strange, distant light. The Company decides to send Bilbo on his first solo mission to investigate the mysterious light. He discovers a group of giant trolls gathered around a campfire roasting food. This is his first major trial, which he fails instantly. Bilbo, in an effort to prove himself to Thorin—the leader of the Company—decides to demonstrate his “burglar” abilities by attempting to steal a purse from the trolls. Bilbo fails in his mission and gets captured. Which leads to the capture of the dwarves when they come to investigate Bilbo’s delay. First major trials are difficult to navigate alone, which is why a mentor figure is required in order to walk through a travelling company along their initial stages of the journey. Gandalf represents the mentor figure, who arrives just at the nick of time to defeat the trolls and rescue Bilbo and Company. Although this was a simple challenge, for trolls aren’t very smart, Bilbo has not yet grown in intellect to weigh out his options. He did develop a bit of courage by approaching the trolls, but wasn’t clever enough to outsmart the creatures. Real-life trials are difficult and challenging to navigate alone, hence the value of consulting a mentor, teacher, or guide.

In chapter two, “Roast Mutton,” Bilbo faced his first real challenge, which taught him that dangers are real and must be approached with skill and caution. Character development—in fiction and real life—is developed through facing challenges and facing the fire. This process continues with gradual degrees of increased intensity, which travelers learn to overcome one step at a time—as represented in the hobbit’s development along the journey. Initially, one overcomes small challenges, then gradually develops skill and courage to overcome greater challenges.

One must try new things in the world in order to learn and grow, and even if one fails on the first attempt, one can be proud that something new was attempted, which maybe next time, one can do better.

Often, at the beginning of a quest, we may require assistance from individuals who have progressed further along the journey— a mentor or guide, like Gandalf. Basic guidance is sufficient to navigate basic initial trials; similar to someone providing guidance at a gym without lifting the weights for the trainee. Gandalf offers similar help, offering assistance when necessary and knowing when to stay back to allow for character development opportunities; like a parent or guardian that allows a child to learn by doing, stepping in to guide when necessary.

Before we move on to the next theme, let's explore the symbolism of Trolls. Often, in the theater of our imagination, we project a distorted image onto other folks in general. If one isn't aware of this effect, it will lead to demonizing people or groups. This is what leads to fear and hate in our society. These dark shadows of the imagination take form and shape around the folks we come into contact with on a daily basis. The mainstream media, especially in news coverage and politics, often capitalize and weaponize this effect on its viewers. Trolls are generated in our imagination and projected onto our culture if we allow mainstream media to "program" our imagination. But just like Gandalf's wisdom outsmarts the trolls, turning them into stone by the power of the sun's light, we too can dissolve the trolls through the power of wisdom arising from our imagination. As the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated: "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

## **Liminal Space**

Bilbo and company later find themselves at a town called Rivendell, where Elrond and other elves live. Rivendell is a place that's in harmony with nature— sun, moon, stars, seasons, and cycles. Bilbo finds Rivendell pleasant, wishing he could stay there, for it reminds him of the comforts and beauty of the Shire. These types of experiences are often called liminal spaces: a safe place in between challenges along a quest, which offer a brief period of peace and quiet. For even in the midst of a battle and epic journey, there's always an opportunity to find

that eternal sense of peace—either in meditation or prayer. Since the quest is already underway, Bilbo and Company may only briefly stay there before the journey must continue. Tolkien made this chapter short in length, which reflects the plot of chapter three, “A Short Rest.”

At this point of Bilbo’s journey—from Bag End to Rivendell—he has only faced small challenges and discomforts. Even though he wasn’t able to manage most of them very well, the experience itself is part of the growing and development of character. After the departure from Rivendell, it’s when the journey begins to get more intense. Just as fairy stories intensify in action and challenges, so too is the journey of our lives. These tales are intended to mirror in mythical form, the real scenarios which await us in the real world. For those beginning the first cycle of their quest, the terrain covered from Bag End to Rivendell is the most relevant, for it prepares a group of adventurers for greater quests.

An experience related to the brief rest at Rivendell is to that of a local park. For instance, in New York City, there’s Bryant Park and Central Park, which clearly express a sense of beauty, enchantment, and harmony with nature. Liminal spaces, or places of rest and tranquility, are vital; that’s why people go to church on Sunday. These places offer opportunities to connect with nature or the divine world. New York has retreat Buddhist centers which host weekend events for spiritual renewal—activities like yoga and meditation. Some people may find peace in a museum, and others in church environments. Regardless of retreat genre or preference, it’s important for people to have at least one place that offers a similar experience as Bilbo at Rivendell. A place where one can recharge and regain clarity in the often-confusing challenges of this world.

At this short rest, Elrond reveals to Thorin the news of a secret entrance on the side of the Lonely Mountain, which the Company must arrive by a specific time in order for the door to be revealed on Durin’s Day, the dwarf’s New Year. A mystical idea which this scene presents is that, often, astrological circumstances must be in alignment—“when the stars align” is a common phrase in modern culture. There are many instances along the quest where “chance” doesn’t just happen by accident. Some things are meant to occur when the circumstances and

conditions are aligned—as in human psychological development. For example, children aren't ready to understand what adults understand, and adults aren't ready to understand what advanced initiates (wizards) understand, for everything “has a time and a season” to properly manifest.

Along the path of any quest genre, one will encounter allies, guides, teachers, and mentors. It's at Rivendell that Bilbo meets Elrond, the lord of the elves. He offers his wisdom by reading the hidden layers of the map that Thorin carries. Every story, at some point, introduces a mentor figure who guides the travelers along their quest. Elrond represents the keeper of wisdom who does not join the quest but equips them with sufficient tools to advance to their next stage of the journey. Elrond also reveals that the swords they found back at the goblins' cave are of elven heritage; Bilbo's sword now holds deeper significance. Spiritual weapons have a long legacy and are part of a long tradition.

A short rest is sometimes necessary in order to recharge and learn about the journey's mystery ahead. Some traditions offer this type of spiritual retreat at least once a week, in order to recharge, nourish, and uplift beings traveling on a trail, path, or journey.

## **Encounters with the Shadow**

The elements of nature aren't always enchanting, beautiful, and serene like the scene in Rivendell. Nature is also mysterious and dangerous, as observed when Bilbo and company travel across Misty Mountains; and as embodied by the character of Beorn—a half-man, and half-beast. The journey along the mountain trail was becoming hazardous, for not only was it raining hard, but rocks were flying around like a football, which giant creatures from the distance were throwing for sport. So, the company was forced to seek refuge inside a cave. Entering a dark unknown cave is safer than getting hit by a rock in the slippery mountains and heavy rain.

In mythology, the theme of “entering the cave” symbolizes the stage where the “hero” enters the deepest, darkest part of themselves—into the depths of their mind.

Encounters inside a cave occur twice in *The Hobbit*; first, inside Misty Mountains with Gollum, and then at The Loney Mountain with the dragon Smaug. One must venture with caution when entering the inner depths of the mind, for there are many hidden dangers which must be approached and disarmed gently and skillfully. The hidden depths of our mind, and imagination, are symbolized by darkness, which leads one to think there's nothing beyond the borders of imagination. However, there's an entire energetic field of subconscious energy lying beneath like an ocean. It's in the "dark night of the soul" that challenges are encountered, which offer the opportunity to develop human character. Fictional characters like Bilbo are relatable because we too encounter similar scenarios.

Chapter 5, *Riddles in the Dark*, is a key chapter in Tolkien's mythology, it's when Bilbo finds the One Ring, the central theme of the entire legendarium. In earlier editions of *The Hobbit*, the ring didn't carry much weight in the story. In fact, Gollum had willingly given the ring to Bilbo in the first edition of the book. But as Tolkien developed his mythology further, especially when writing *The Lord of the Rings*, the One Ring gained a strong center of gravity. Tolkien eventually had to rewrite Chapter 5 for the second edition of *The Hobbit* in order to keep it consistent with the *Lord of the Rings*. Creativity develops and unfolds unexpectedly, which causes the reorientation of a project in any creative endeavor, as well as real-life. For example, folks who encounter Tolkien's work for the first time, and if the stars align, as if by "chance," it then begins to change or reorient the readers imagination.

In *The Hobbit* as well as *Lord of the Rings*, there are characters that contrast one another, mirroring the opposite sides of imagination. Gollum represents a contrast to Bilbo—the shadow. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf's contrast is Saruman. Tolkien uses contrasting character types in order to demonstrate the wide range of human personality types. Gollum represents the extreme end of dark human traits: greed, addiction, malevolence.

Bilbo survives the encounter with Gollum, and Thorin's Company manages to escape their encounter with the goblins—with a little help from Gandalf once again. Everyone eventually escapes out of the caves of Misty Mountain, but they

immediately run into more obstacles and challenges outside the door. They encounter the Wargs (wolves) who chase Bilbo and the dwarves. The Company had to climb up the trees in order to find safety—for wolves can't climb trees. So, the Wargs decide to set the trees on fire in an effort to defeat the dwarves that climbed them. At this point, it seemed like the end, for there was nowhere to escape as the fire was rising up the trees.

In this scene, the concept of Eucatastrophe is demonstrated, where a sudden joyous turn occurs in a situation that seems fatal. Eagles arrive unexpectedly and swoop the Company away from danger. Eagles are very symbolic, they represent mighty beings that can see from a higher perspective, like wise teachers, or angels. However, the eagles don't fly them all the way to their ultimate destination, for great powers assist only when necessary and will not do all the work for us. For example, a parent will guide their children in early development and only intervenes when truly necessary. Or, in the music industry, when a major artist supports local artists by offering them a platform as an opening act, which gives the local artist a lift in exposure and propels their career forward. It's interesting to note that acts of grace come by way of other people, often by those who see life from a higher perspective and are connected to higher values, and understand their role as leaders in their community—who serve as angels of their communities. In myth, Joseph Campbell calls this "supernatural aid."

The first step in changing human behavior is to encounter oneself in the darkness of the inner cave—the depths of our mind. Us the reader are both Bilbo and Gollum, and in order to transform our darker human characteristics, we must transmute and purify our vices in order to reveal the gems of virtue, knowledge, and wisdom which "the shadow" likes to keep hidden.

Bilbo's challenges grow in scale and intensity throughout the story. First, he encounters trolls, then meets Gollum, and finally encounters the great dragon Smaug. Each phase prepares the hero for the next level of challenges. Human psychological development occurs in similar stages, which gradually increases in complexity and intensity. This epic journey of our lives is to be discovered page by page, and chapter by chapter.

As Bilbo's journey unfolds, he begins to establish himself as a worthy member of Thorin's Company. He proved himself in times of trial and is now seen as a skillful courageous hobbit, for the dwarves are impressed that he survived the trials at Misty Mountains. Trust and comradery are developed amongst the fellowship after overcoming these set of challenges. Character development isn't just about physical strength and courage, but also consists of an emotional and psychological growth; as demonstrated when Bilbo had the chance to slay Gollum but chose to spare his life—which demonstrates compassion.

The genius of any author of fiction is to create characters that are relatable, who demonstrate a path forward in human development. That's how myth and fairytales are passed along the arc of human history.

An example of the importance of good storytelling is demonstrated by Gandalf in Beorn's house. Beorn is a half-man, half-beast, which means that diplomacy must be delivered in order to establish trust and form an alliance with the traveling group of dwarves. Gandalf doesn't overpower Beorn or force the dwarves into his house, instead, he tells stories and gradually introduces the dwarves a pair at a time, until eventually all fourteen members of the Company have skillfully "intruded" Beorn's house. This scene mirrors the opening chapter "An Unexpected Party," for Gandalf performed the same strategy at Bilbo's house when introducing the dwarves at the Shire. Through skillful diplomatic talks and storytelling, people can form fellowships and alliances in a polarized society.

In chapter 7, the company begins preparing for their greatest challenge yet, entering the wilderness of Mirkwood where giant spiders dwell. The greatest piece of advice Beorn offers the company is to not stray from the path. There's a path that cuts right through the forest, which if followed without distractions, will make the journey less difficult than it ought to be. But of course, things don't always go as planned.

As the traveler begins exploring these inner worlds, they will grow in courage and resilience. But at a certain point, the mentor must disappear for a while so that the traveler can discover for themselves the magic and capabilities that lie

hidden and waiting to be discovered within the imagination or psyche. For this reason, Gandalf does not accompany Bilbo into Mirkwood forest.

Up to this point, we've covered mostly the themes from Bag End to Rivendell to the gate of Mirkwood forest. It is highly recommended to read *The Hobbit* in its entirety, for it's a great exercise in awakening the imagination. In the next part of this essay, we'll cover the return journey.

## Bilbo's Return

All epic tales have a beginning, and eventually, they come to an end. The end is also known as the return back home, back to the ordinary world we left behind and now return to as a changed person. The traveler now returns home with a different mindset, with the lessons learned after enduring and overcoming trials and challenges. He now speaks words of magic, so that others may find their way “back home.” The inner change and transformation of the hero will cause him to operate differently in society—with more skill and understanding of the current situations in the world. After settling back into the ordinary world, one must learn to act in extraordinary fashion, but in subtle ways, for many folks are still under the “dragon spell” of the fear of unknown and strange worlds. Many folks upon the return from adventure pick up the hobby of a writer, for it's the best form of communicating ideas and thinking them thoroughly for others to engage without direct intervention into someone's life. Blogs, journals, video content, books, and websites are the many formats in which ideas are transmitted to those who come by “chance” into these tales. Other formats of expressions of visionary experiences are depicted in art, poetry, and music, which apart from writing, can be an additional creative outlet. A magical community is formed as folks return back from adventure and share their stories, which inspire and illuminate those who are receiving the call for a great quest. This naturally arising change slowly leads to communities forming very organically formed mythological or magical communities.

A concept proposed by the popular American mythologist Joseph Campbell is that of becoming a “master of two worlds.” I personally find this term too exaggerated or sensationalized, but it serves the purpose of getting the main point across—that the hero is now able to travel and operate between two worlds: the inner and outer dimensions of reality. The returned hero now walks without fear or shame, and he is now able to manage his life's trajectory more effectively. The “mysterious” realms of the imagination are now overlaid onto the ordinary world, opening up new avenues and possibilities that weren't possible before the awakening journey. The return back is where the fun begins; that's when we

begin to experiment with reality and worldbuilding, what Tolkien would call sub-creation and enchantment.

A few lucky folks are able to turn their creative impulses into their professions. Creative folks like J.K. Rowling, author of Harry Potter, are able to venture into creative storytelling as their profession. Some musicians who “make it” into their industry are blessed with the financial support of their fanbase, which allows those musicians to live in those worlds as a way of life. Cases of creative folks “making it” into an industry are rare, for the majority of creative folks who become “enlightened” or “awake” will have to come to terms with the reality of the ordinary world—that general folks don’t care much for noble aspirations, for they have not yet awakened to the higher worlds. Humility is a vital character trait for the returned hero, for ordinary folks will not understand or honor higher aspirations, since they are yet to experience the quest. The figure of Jesus is a good example of the humble shepherd whose “kingdom is not of this world.” Musicians and creative folks can easily relate to this concept, for not everyone in mainstream culture understands the finer things in life like art, poetry, and great literature.

Artists, writers, and musicians study their artistic heroes, deconstructing techniques, methods, and style. Artists learn from their mentors and then make art that’s progressive and new. Similarly, students of magical traditions learn from the great writers, which then inspires the contemporary writer to develop his own style unique for his time and place. Initiates of the mysteries will reverse engineer a magical or spiritual path in order to develop a modern method of presenting the main themes in a more relevant and clearer fashion to modern folks. Taking classical works of literature and making them new again is the craft of the wizard, magician, or initiate. Hence, there are many options on the market of New Age books—spiritual guides, manuals, techniques, strategies, courses. There’s a genre for everyone to explore in order to grasp the basics of the journey.

A student of the mysteries has collected various notes and sketch ideas along his initial adventure cycle, and those are great sources of inspiration for developing works of literature and other forms of art; that’s what inspires new fairy stories or an academic analysis of creative works. Tolkien, by the time of

publishing *The Hobbit* in 1937, had already been researching the background of the Hobbits for over two decades. A collection of notes and sketches will eventually turn into an essay or blog, which may be developed into a formal academic paper, which can then be further developed into an outline for a book. All one needs to begin is a spark of creativity and a muse or collection of inspirational themes to keep the flow of creativity flowing and growing.

Another characteristic of folks who've returned from adventure is that they now speak (and write) in poetic fashion. Many initiates come back as musicians, poets, painters, writers, philosophers, and many other forms of creative expression. Bilbo, for example, wrote a poem on his return home about "the Road" of life:

*Roads go ever ever on,  
Over rock and under tree,  
By caves where never sun has shone  
By streams that never find the sea  
Over snow by winter sown,  
And through the merry flowers of June  
Over grass and over stone  
And under mountains in the moon*

One of the main objectives on the return home is figuring out how to be a beacon of light for folks who have not begun their hero cycles of adventure. Some classical traditions have an approach already in place so folks don't need to be reinventing the wheel all the time. The Buddhist tradition has an array of methods, schools, and academically structured learning, training, and taking action in the world. The hermetic traditions have authors whose work is an example and guide to readers not looking for an institutional style learning, but a self-paced self-initiation method. In hermetic philosophy, a "path of service" is the format or genre in which one contributes to the healing and illumination of the world. The standard approach to teaching is writing in order to simplify esoteric philosophy, depth psychology, and fairytale symbolism. For symbols are found everywhere: films, television, superheroes, and fairytales; we just need

someone to explain them and point them out to us. The story of *The Hobbit* is a classic great example of narrative themes and symbols that depict developmental growth in one's own life's journey.

The esoteric philosopher, Rudolf Steiner, proposed that for an individual to establish themselves as a teacher, they must have at least two decades of experience. Now these are the common requirements for the great initiates of each genre; I think a decade of experience is sufficient for our modern times for someone to establish themselves as a teacher of the mysteries. But for the purpose of establishing the basics amongst our society, a three-year journey is sufficient for anyone to begin teaching the basics of their particular genre. In my opinion, three to seven years is enough for us to appear back in the ordinary world as transformed beings; we'll learn the advanced skills along the next cycles of our journey—for the “great tales never end” as Samwise said to Frodo on the way to Mordor in *Lord of the Rings*.

One of the main things we learn from studying Tolkien's creative process is that the process of creativity does not happen by the individual alone, but comes from a higher sphere of forces; this is the process of sub-creation in Tolkien's terminology. Whether one is creating a work of fiction or non-fiction literature, or one is manifesting a project on the world stage, the principles work the same—one does not work alone or independently from other forces. For example, a musician will become inspired by an idea that simply “came into their head,” and in the development process, this concept gets fine-tuned and produced but without allowing the overproduction of the track to drown out the original essence of the idea. When a person makes the project more about their personal ego's desires, that's when we begin to lose the plot and get lost in confusion. In other projects, like a small business, one begins with a need within the community, which the project managers build according to their vision but also aligned within the energy of the project as it unfolds, which will be full of surprises that will require changes and adjustments. Whether in small business ventures or writing ventures, the basic principle of sub-creation and co-creation with the community is at play. For example, as Tolkien developed his mythology, old ideas took on a new meaning, which meant that certain things needed to be

changed. "I have long ceased to invent," stated Tolkien in a draft letter, "I wait till I seem to know what really happened... or till it writes itself." An author can make as many changes as they want in the writing process, but when a work gets officially published, it becomes a part of the legendarium at large. Tolkien did make one major change in a later edition of *The Hobbit*, which related to the ring, which made the narrative more consistent with the story of Middle-earth, by the time Tolkien finished *The Lord of the Rings*. So, whether in literature or small business ventures, as Gandalf states: "there are other forces at work in this world."

Upon our return home, we now become the archetypal magician Gandalf, that cleverly introduces and facilitates the initiation process to those that are called to embark on a magical quest. Just like Gandalf used skill at Bag End when initially convincing Bilbo to go on an adventure, the initiate is to develop the skill of teaching and transmitting tales of enchantment to the next class of students or seekers. Every person is different, so everyone will require a unique approach. Fairytale stories may not be for everyone, but for those that have a taste for its magic, there's plenty of genres to choose from—there's the Disneyfied version of the tales, and the academic, psychological, or philosophical presentations. It's all a matter of discovering one's taste for stories.

In conclusion, we followed the hobbit's journey, familiarizing ourselves with some of the major themes, and exploring the psychological significance of the stages of the path. The hardest thing in any new quest is taking that first step. It's by way of myths and fairy stories that adventures are introduced which inspire and call upon new travelers to explore. *The Hobbit*, although a children's story, serves as one of the many tales that offer a way into these magical worlds of magic, enchantment, quest, and the discovery of treasures.

In life's journey, there are many paths to choose from, but regardless of the genre preferred, the underlying principles are similar. In this essay, I've presented one version of this timeless tale of treasure seeking and adventure. And by staying focused on the path and advancing one step at a time, gradual results will amount to great distances travelled. As the wise sages from the Oriental traditions say, "the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." The

world of Middle-earth is wide and deep. There are various regions that offer riddles and challenges, which upon successfully overcoming, grant a traveler access to their next phase of the Quest.

There are many who wonder what the future of humanity holds. One thing is sure: that life is always full of surprises. New ideas are always emerging in the background of society, which gradually arise to the forefront of mainstream culture in many forms and shapes. Tolkien's magic is that these new worlds emerged on the world stage in the form of a fairytale story, which general folks will initially underestimate, but as one grows older and wiser, the roots of these stories begin to emerge in our awareness. One does not know what direction the Tolkienian genre of fantasy will inspire, for there are many worlds to explore. Studying the symbolic meaning of the main themes of *The Hobbit* enables us to embark on a journey of deeper exploration of these fairy stories and of our own imaginative skill of "conjuring" up new ideas, as if by "chance" or "luck," which Tolkien hints that it does not occur by mere coincidence.

Upon entering through the doors of the inner creative forces of the imagination, a whole realm and world of existence is gradually developed and discovered. There are many treasures hidden in the depths of imagination, as well as many forces which aid and guide each individual. Every person who's ever gone on a quest has reported back similar ideas: that one is not alone in these inner journeys. For as Gandalf says to Bilbo: "You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck... you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"