



Fathers of Fantasy: An Appreciation of the Creativity of J.R.R. Tolkien and Peter Jackson

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My initial reason for writing this piece was that I was tired of having to verbally defend Peter Jackson's decisions over and over to any skeptic of the recent *Hobbit* films. But in doing the research for this project, I discovered the intimate details that make both the books and the films so endearing. Calling this a comparison would not truly justify my goal because I do not want to simply compare and contrast but rather blend the two art forms together. *The Lord of the Rings* was the top selling fiction book in the 20th century.¹ While not the first fantasy writer, Tolkien certainly set a high precedence from which others would follow. "Books are better than movies" is a favorite quote among avid readers and book-to-movie conversions are always open to traditionalist criticism. The most important point to make here is that films are inherently different than books and therefore must be treated differently in their execution, and in their appreciation. Using Tolkien's narrative we truly can provide a solid defense for most of Jackson's cinematic decisions.

¹ Charles Dickens' classic "A Tale of Two Cities" remains the top selling fiction book of all time according to Wikipedia, Goodreads, and other various sources, but Tolkien's work sits in the second slot.

Jackson's first film trilogy accumulatively won seventeen Academy Awards, more than any other film in Oscar history.² In the film industry, he revolutionized the use of CGI, motion-capture, 3D, and high speed technology. Obviously he was not the first director to incorporate this level of computer-generated technology, but he expanded upon it. Jackson has an eye for detail and because of this, the movies reinforce the books.

This article is only concerning the first film in the *Hobbit* trilogy and the book up to where the first movie ends, but in that short amount of time there is much to discuss. I want to focus, first, on two main themes presented by Tolkien and demonstrated in Jackson's adaptations. These themes are "An Unexpected Beginning" and "Self-Reflection." As we all know, Tolkien began his work on *The Hobbit* while grading papers where he wrote the infamous line, "In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit" on a blank page. Though unintended, the professor was embarking on his own unexpected, yet remarkable saga. The style in which the book is written is also unique in that Tolkien used a parenthetical structure in his writing. Look at the first chapters of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* respectively, "An Unexpected Party" and "A Long-expected Party." This was, of course, because the original intent of the *Fellowship* was to be a sequel to *The Hobbit* not its own story, but also look at how he chooses to begin and end each story; a hobbit sets out on an adventure with new friends and returns to find chaos at home. This may seem like a simple concept, and it is simple but it is in no way accidental. There is also the unintended mood change. Tolkien added the plot of the Necromancer and the White Council, darker and deeper players in the plot game, behind the scenes of the main child-like and whimsical storyline as seen through Bilbo's eyes. Of course these are just links to his later trilogy.

² James Cameron's *Titanic* holds the record in statues winning eleven Oscars in 1997 which tied with *The Return of the King*, but cumulatively Peter Jackson's films won seventeen making the trilogy the winningest project in Oscar history. These statistics can be found through the Academy Awards website.

The road to production of Peter Jackson's *An Unexpected Journey* was also an unexpected one. The Tolkien Estate had sold the rights to *The Hobbit* so everyone wondered if Jackson would take on the project, but it was Guillermo del Toro who took the reins. After eighteen months of pre-production and financial issues that plagued progress, del Toro passed the torch to Jackson who, though he had once been apprehensive of doing such a movie, went into making *The Hobbit* in the same manner he made his first Tolkien trilogy twelve years earlier. Jackson continues Tolkien's tradition of creating a parenthetical structure for the storyline. The director brought Elijah Wood and Ian Holm back to reprise their roles as Frodo and Old Bilbo, respectively and some wondered, why? Opening this movie with Bilbo telling Frodo the story was not only appropriate but necessary. It had been twelve years since audiences entered Middle-earth and Jackson had a duty to transition them back. Unlike Tolkien who told the story in chronological order, Jackson had already opened with the *Lord of the Rings* and therefore had to tell the story reminiscently. This decision, combined with the use of the Appendices in the *Lord of the Rings*, created a fuller story, not fabricated, but expanded from Tolkien's own creativity.

In regard to the theme of self-reflection, it is no secret that the children's story took place through the eyes of a hobbit. The impersonal narrator describes events as Bilbo would have seen them. We also confront the internal battle between Bilbo's Took and Baggins natures. He feels out of place among the dwarves but also feels the sudden longing for adventure after hearing the dwarves' song in his hobbit hole. Then of course, there is the meeting between Bilbo and Gollum. In 1937 this was not visible, but after reading the *Lord of the Rings* we understand the foreshadowing and that Gollum is what Bilbo could become after being under the oppression of the Ring for so long. This moment is also the first time Bilbo is left to fend for himself. He has

no help from the dwarves or Gandalf. He is left with Sting and his own clever devices to get himself out alive. This is also the first time we see Bilbo as a burglar. Though that was the primary reason the dwarves brought him along, up to this point he has yet to prove himself worthy of the title. Here he takes the Ring, and once Gollum realizes it is missing, Bilbo too realizes how significant the object is and makes his escape with it.

Bilbo is also not the only one going through self-reflection up to this point in the story. In the first chapter we hear Gandalf and Thorin talking about the failure of his father Thrain and grandfather Thrór to reestablish the kingdom under the mountain. It is a failure that haunts Thorin, a burden for him to carry along the journey, and a key element to the story that Tolkien clearly does not want his readers to forget.

I mentioned the singular perspective of a narrator in the book but in the movies, Bilbo is not the only perspective we see, and that is the glory of cinema. Each dwarf has been developed into a unique character, the White Council only includes the wisest members of Middle-earth, and the scenes with Radagast give us insight into the enclosed world on the edge of Mirkwood through the eyes of an ancient wizard other than Gandalf. This is the magic of movie-making and the greater scope it allows. When Thorin blatantly tells him he does not belong among the company, it pushes Bilbo to want to prove himself even more to the group. Bilbo saving Thorin at the end of the film is redemption for Bilbo and a reawakening for Thorin, something that we do not get to see in the book until much later. Films, even in a trilogy, must have a beginning, a climax, and something that loosely resembles an ending, even if it is a cliffhanger. For *An Unexpected Journey*, we follow the evolution of Bilbo's relationship with the company, primarily Thorin, and watch it play out. However, knowing this is a trilogy, viewers can expect to see these relationships flourish more throughout the series.

We also see Bilbo and his chance to rid the world of Gollum's villainy. In the movie it is the music of Howard Shore's score, not a narrator, which describes Bilbo's intentions and the weight and repercussions of that decision. Using hindsight again, we know that destroying Gollum would have drastically changed the outcome of not only this story but *The Lord of the Rings*. In that small fleeting moment when Bilbo has the opportunity to slay the wicked creature, we hear the theme of the Shire playing and you can almost hear Gandalf whisper from earlier, "True courage comes from not knowing when to take a life, but when to spare one."³ The purpose of film scores is to tell the story without pictures. If you play the soundtrack from start to finish, you should be able to visualize the progression of the story and this scene is a prime example of this.

While we are on the topic of music, Howard Shore continues his tradition from the first trilogy of creating music for each race of Middle-earth. He has now composed over twenty hours of score for the sole purpose of bringing these cultures to life. There is also the credit music which plays after each Jackson film. For *An Unexpected Journey*, Neil Finn wrote the "Song of the Lonely Mountain" which not only maintained Shore's dwarvish motif, but also incorporated the sounds of chanting men and clanging iron to resemble the sounds which would have been heard during the glory days of Erebor. There is no doubt that Thorin and Company were remembering this when they sang a simpler version of this song at the beginning of the film.

As far as Thorin's personal journey, the Extended Edition features a scene in which Thorin and Bilbo overhear a conversation between Elrond and Gandalf. Elrond reminds Gandalf that madness runs in Thorin's family and they are very susceptible to dragon-sickness. This puts a heavy pressure on Thorin to succeed in his quest and makes it much more personal than the

³ *An Unexpected Journey*, 1:11:35

quest depicted in Tolkien's story. Although this conversation is not in the book, it is vital to the theme of self-reflection in the film and is beautifully executed by the actors.

In addressing specific criticism against Peter Jackson we have already talked about the length of the movie and his decision to make a trilogy, but there is also the subject of tone. Many people anticipated that the movie could have gone one of two ways. Either Jackson would make the movie in the same tone as book, therefore losing the epic feeling that made the *Lord of the Rings* so popular and successful. Or he would create the movie in the same tone as his first trilogy and strip the book of the children's story that Tolkien wrote to begin with. Lucky for us, he did the latter but it did not destroy the tone of the book. The tone changes but the themes did not and that is what is important to maintain and Jackson knew this going into production.

Many people were upset to learn that Jackson was making a trilogy. Plain and simple. Many thought it was a tactic to make more profit and that there was very little regard to the original work of J.R.R. Tolkien. Then there was the issue of Jackson releasing Extended Editions on top of all that. I cannot tell you how many times I heard the argument, "That scene wasn't even in the books at all;" referring to the stone giants sequence. I keep saying, "Yes it is!" It's only two sentences, but it is totally in there. Lo and behold, Jackson gives us a ten minute scene out of two brief sentences. Again, this is the magic of the movies. In regards to the added or extended material, let me put it this way because it is the best possible way to describe this: *Empire Magazine* referred to Jackson's films as a 6-part saga of which Bilbo's story is only a small part.⁴ Look at the whole picture, as Tolkien intended or he would never have written his histories of Middle-earth. Everyone understands how vast Tolkien's work actually is and that it goes way beyond *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. We need to stop looking at this trilogy as such and start viewing it as the conclusion to a 6-part story Jackson

⁴ Ian Nathan, "Into the Woods," *Empire Magazine*, August 2013, pg. 68

started twelve years ago. The "behind the scenes" material I referred to earlier, such as the White Council and the issue of the Necromancer, were loose ends of Tolkien's and those loose ends were Peter Jackson's original masterpiece which won seventeen Academy Awards. It was essential to Jackson to add them into this trilogy because they were dealing with the same problems which were addressed and solved in *The Lord of the Rings*. Jackson's work of art has now come full circle.

Now let us explore a specific character whose evolution both in the books and the films is fascinating. Everyone's favorite almost-bald, big-eyed, creepy little villain Gollum is an enormously important character and has undergone several changes since 1937. First of all, consider that Andy Serkis' return to the screen as Gollum was Jackson's first shot for *An Unexpected Journey*. It was a superb opportunity for him to reacquaint himself with the character after over a decade and it was Martin Freeman's chance to embrace a pivoting point in his character's role. The scene is almost verbatim from the book so it really allowed both actors to fully immerse themselves into the very core of what both this story and *The Lord of the Rings* were about. This scene changed how Bilbo saw the rest of his journey and his decisions during this chapter in the book affected all the events in the later trilogy. Second, Tolkien revised his 1937 version of *The Hobbit* because he knew that the Gollum of his *Lord of the Rings* would never have given Bilbo the Ring willingly. Therefore, Tolkien's famous version of Gollum is actually based on his later trilogy. Likewise, Jackson's Gollum is also based on *The Lord of the Rings* since that movie was produced first. In a way, Andy Serkis' Gollum from *An Unexpected Journey*, the first scene shot for the whole trilogy, is the most accurate character of the entire film series. When you take into account the fact that Serkis and the use of motion-capture twelve years ago revolutionized CGI the cycle is complete. It just makes you appreciate that much more

the ability of Jackson to put an idea on screen and execute it exactly as it was described in the books.

Another character who went through a major transformation between stories is Thorin Oakenshield who Tolkien himself acknowledged was an "enormously important dwarf." In 1937 readers saw a cantankerous old dwarf with a huge ego and a swelling head full of pride. At the young age of 24, Thorin witnesses the destruction of his home, but from a distance. Perhaps he feels guilty for not being there. Perhaps, though foolishly, he feels he could have done more if he had been there. Whatever his feelings, he harbors the hope of his father and grandfather that one day his people will rule under the mountain and reclaim their lost kingdom. It is this fire and passion which persuades Gandalf to aid in his quest. Gandalf, who always sees the big picture rather than just one small story, is determined that the dwarves' reestablishing the Lonely Mountain kingdom will not only be beneficial for them but for the whole north region and Middle-earth. In 2012, we see a much different concept for a dwarf. Tolkien gives some physical description, and sure we can probably assume he visualized a hairy, scruffy, and older character, contrary to what Richard Armitage portrays. But the new, handsome look for Thorin, is not entirely implausible. This Thorin is more pitiable and sympathetic. In Jackson's version, he experiences the destruction first hand and is personally involved in his people's escape. Armitage brings a level of quiet intensity to a role that is so submissive in the books but still very important. He is an avid Tolkien fan and purist when it comes to his works. He was determined to play the part to perfection and did his own research on the character months before production, committing to the films long before they were 100% green lit, showing a deep passion for the subject and understanding for how critical his part was to the rest of the film.⁵ Up

⁵ *The Hobbit Chronicles II: Creatures and Characters*, Daniel Falconer, Quote from Amy Hubbard (UK Casting Director), pg. 60

to this point in the book there are very few, if any, examples of leadership from Thorin but in the movie, Thorin demonstrates leadership qualities. The conversation he has with Balin at Bag End shows the immense amount of weight he feels on his shoulders and that there was no choice but for him to go on this mission. When the company is escaping from the wargs halfway through the film and Gandalf calls for them to follow him, Thorin waits until all of his men, including his nephews, are safely in before following them. There is also the scene in Goblin Town when he steps forward to speak as leader for the group. In the Extended Edition, this is after Bofur and Oin attempt to take the spotlight away from him, but ultimately he claims responsibility for the company. Again, none of this is to imply that Jackson created any of this information but merely expanded upon what Tolkien had already established.

Going back to how Tolkien began this adventure, on a blank sheet of paper, even he did not know what a hobbit was, though I am sure he had an inkling (no pun intended). Bilbo, a reserved hobbit who has become reclusive to the Shire over time, is the center of the story and one of Tolkien's main objectives is to let the Took side take over and for Bilbo to discover what he is fully capable of. Tolkien admits in a 1958 letter to a fan, "I am in fact a *Hobbit* (in all but size). I like gardens, trees, and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food".⁶ Incidentally, in many interviews, Peter Jackson also admitted to being a hobbit. He even said in the fifth production video for *An Unexpected Journey* that he wished he could retire to his Shire set.⁷ So if anyone could portray hobbits in the closest likeness to what Tolkien had visualized in his mind, it would be Jackson. I think what we see on screen is very near what Tolkien himself saw as he was writing.

⁶ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Edited by Humphrey Carpenter, No. 213, pg. 288

⁷ Production Blog No. 5, found on Special Extended Edition DVD for *An Unexpected Journey*, 2013

The greatest risk of making a movie from a book is always purist criticism. There will always be scenes in the book left out of a film and vice versa. Peter Jackson had several goals when he set out to make his trilogy twelve years ago and again in 2010. He admitted when filming his last trilogy that his primary goal was to advance the story which meant sacrificing certain characters and other elements, but it never once deterred him from his main focal point; telling Tolkien's tale. He had to preserve Tolkien's imagination and the fantasy spirit with which the books were originally written. He also had to convey the same messages and basic plot structure to those who had not read the original material. He also had to bring to life a world which millions of people had grown to love and to not disappoint those who HAD read the books. This was a big job and I again stand firm in my opinion that anyone else with an interest for this project would not have done what Jackson has done for these films. Anyone else would have made these films exclusively for the profit they were bound to produce but Jackson, from the beginning, has made these movies for fans such as himself. He has posted production blogs online and on social media and has hosted live fan events in preparation for the release of each film, something unmatched by other directors. He truly wants to keep the spirit of Tolkien alive and he has done just that with these films.

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This is only an excerpt from a greater work. Feel free to contact the author or follow her on her blog for more.

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