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HOW FRODO BAGGINS BECAME A HERO: AN ANALYSIS OF A HOBBIT'S HEROIC TRANSFORMATION

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"All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

~J.R.R. Tolkien

Gandalf reveals both his fatalism and his heroism in this conversation with Frodo in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Gandalf explains the truth behind the ring -- that it is the "one ring to rule them all," and that the dark lord Sauron hunts it with ringwraiths. He is saying that even though men cannot control the problems or opportunities that are given them, everyone has the choice to take action, for good or for evil. Anyone can be a hero if they seize the day and choose to perform heroic actions. Frodo's transformation is important because he represents the ordinary person -- the everyman. Frodo is surrounded by characters who are immortal, are great warriors, have unimaginable power, or are descended from kings -- all qualities of the traditional epic hero -- while he is a sheltered

hobbit and is about the size of a human nine-year-old. Nevertheless, Frodo is the hero of *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien chooses a hobbit due to their small stature and sheltered lives to show that anyone can become a hero if they wish to do good and are able to endure whatever hardships they face. This is consistent with Franco and Zimbardo's (2006) seminal analysis of heroism which argues that everyone is capable of performing small acts of everyday heroism.

The mission statement of Zimbardo's *Heroic Imagination Project* is: "To encourage and empower individuals to take heroic action during crucial moments in their lives. We prepare them to act with integrity, compassion, and moral courage, heightened by an understanding of the power of situational forces." The banality of heroism concept, as the name suggests, emphasizes the everyday aspects of heroism. It removes two basic tendencies that people have to resist heroic action. One is the belief that only special people, the "heroic elite," can do heroic things. The other is the "bystander effect," a phenomenon that occurs when many people witness an event that requires action, but each person assumes that someone else will perform it. Franco and Zimbardo (2006) aspire to discover what spurs people out of inactivity and into heroism, which they refer to as the "high watermark" of human behavior. Franco and Zimbardo also ask if it is "possible to foster what we term 'heroic imagination,' or the development of a personal heroic ideal" which will provide moral clarity in times of trouble.

In addition to possessing a considerable amount of heroic imagination, Frodo Baggins is a worldwide hero who transcends cultural influence and who possesses many universal qualities, even if he is fictional. As a character, he touches many people at some point in both the books and the movies in the *Lord of the Rings* franchise. Analyzing Frodo's heroic journey and transformation, as well as his characteristics that allow him to complete his journey, reveal that ordinary beings are capable of acquiring the traits of a hero, and that choosing to act heroically and embark on the journey can bring about significant heroic transformation.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) found that most myths follow a common archetypal pattern which he called the hero's journey. This quest contains three parts: initiation, departure, and return. Most heroes who follow this journey are traditional heroes. Traditional heroes are a hero subtype proposed by Goethals and Allison (2012) along with transforming, transfigured, transparent, transposed, tragic, transitional, transitory, and trending. These nine hero subtypes display different types of heroism at different times and for different people. They can range from epic heroes, to sports figures, and to political activists, depending on the time, place, and situation.

Frodo Baggins is a traditional hero, indicating that he follows the archetypal hero monomyth very closely. During the hero's journey, there are "three distinct transformations: A transformation of setting, a transformation of self, and a transformation of society" (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Frodo's story begins in the Shire, a peaceful farmland where the hobbits live. Frodo departure stage of the journey involves leaving the shire and visiting many faraway places, each with its own trials. This transformation of setting and these many trials lead to a transformation of self. The Shire is disconnected from the wars and dealings of Middle-earth. It is so far removed that many of the characters in *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* (the Ents, the people of Rohan, and the people of Gondor) have never even heard of hobbits or have thought them to be myths. Frodo experiences his call to adventure when Bilbo passes on his ring to Frodo. Later, Gandalf tells Frodo that his ring will lead to the destruction of Middle Earth if it is not destroyed. Not only is Frodo called to adventure by this threat, but he is also chased by ringwraiths, or Black Riders, who are hunting the ring. When Frodo and his companions cross into Bree, they cross the first threshold by leaving behind their homeland. Frodo must abandon the safety of the Shire to transform into the kind of person who can save Middle-earth by climbing Mount Doom.

Frodo and his friends cross the threshold again when they leave Rivendell with the rest of the fellowship of the ring. Along the way, Frodo has many helpers and mentors. Gandalf, Aragorn, and the Fellowship are all helpers in his journey. Once the Black Riders are following Frodo, he has to fight the will

of the ring to resist wearing it. The ring wants to be found and not destroyed. At times, Frodo does give into this temptation and he almost dies in most of these instances. Frodo also has to fight the temptation to put the burden of the ring on someone else -- someone who is stronger, more powerful, and worldlier (like Aragorn, Gandalf, or Galadriel). After Gandalf first tells Frodo that he owns the ring, Frodo says to Gandalf, "But I have so little use of these things! You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?" (Tolkien, 1954). At this point Frodo learns that those who are more powerful than he is will be far too tempted to wield the power of the ring. Only a humble being can carry the weight of the ring and not wield it.

Frodo experiences another transformation with several near-death experiences. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo gets stabbed by a ring wraith and when he wakes up, he notices how he has changed physically and mentally since he left the shire. Another death-like event serves as the death phase for the trilogy as a whole is when the members of the fellowship are underground in Shelob's lair and Frodo is poisoned. Again, after destroying the ring he falls into a death-like sleep and awakens transformed. In the end, Frodo saves Middle-earth and returns to the Shire profoundly changed by his journey.

The transformation of society is the natural consequence of the hero's own personal transformation, and it is aimed at augmenting the well-being of the hero's larger community (Efthimiou, Allison, & Franco, 2018). For Frodo, society transformation occurs at two different points: when the fellowship is created and when Frodo destroys the ring. By eliminating the ring, Sauron falls and the age of men begins. Frodo's mentor and friend Aragorn claims his birthright to the throne of Gondor, and Frodo returns to the shire and writes his story in Bilbo's book -- the story that we have been discussing. These societal changes are the restoration of order and the reward part of the journey. After he finishes his portion of the book, Frodo leaves the Shire and sails with Bilbo to the Haven across the sea. Frodo's transformation is so great that he cannot remain in the Shire. He is experiencing the apotheosis -- by sailing away, Frodo will experience eternal peace. It is a place where the elves, who are immortal, go. Frodo's heroism has earned this elixir.

DIMENSIONS OF TRANSFORMATION

There are ten main dimensions of transformation, according to Allison and Goethals (2017). These dimensions are subject, scale, speed, duration, timing, direction, type, depth, openness, and source. Each of the dimensions of transformation as they relate to Frodo Baggins are listed below.

Subject

The subject as a dimension of transformation refers to who is transformed by the heroic action. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo Baggins is the primary beneficiary of transformation; however, his actions do lead to a change in society by his act of saving Middle-earth from the wrath of Sauron, marking the beginning of the age of men. Frodo becomes strong and brave, but he also is deeply wounded by his journey. When Frodo makes the decision to leave the Shire, he says to Sam, “But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me” (Tolkien, 1956).

Scale

The number of heroic actors who are transformed represent a measurement of scale. Frodo is one of the most transformed characters in the franchise because he is the ring bearer; however, he was surrounded by other heroic actors throughout his journey. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo is always part of a group, including the other hobbits from the shire and the fellowship. In *The Two Towers* and *Return of the King*, Frodo and Sam form a dyad that undergoes transformation. Sam even carries Frodo up mount Doom when the ring is too much for Frodo to bear. “Come, Mr. Frodo!’ he cried. ‘I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well’” (Tolkien, 1955).

Speed

Heroic transformations vary along the dimension of the speed of the transformation. Frodo is able to instantly transform when he puts on the ring because the wearer of the ring is rendered invisible. In a bar in Bree, Frodo accidentally slips on the ring which causes him to “simply vanish” (Tolkien,

1954). This heroic transformation occurs instantaneously. Frodo also undergoes much slower transformations that take the length of the journey to transpire. These transformations were intellectual, emotional, and physical in nature. Frodo learned more about Middle-earth outside of the Shire. He becomes more empathetic towards Smeagol while being the ring bearer, and he is changed physically by walking to Mordor and by his various injuries.

Duration

The effects of heroic transformations can last from anywhere between a very short amount of time to a very long amount of time. Most of the heroic transformations that Frodo experiences are long-lasting, except for his physical transformation of becoming invisible when he wears the ring; as soon as Frodo removes the ring he becomes visible again. Frodo is so transformed by his journey that he feels that he cannot even remain in the Shire after he has saved it and written his book. This leads him to the decision to sail across the sea to live with the elves in the Haven.

Timing

Timing refers to when in one's life the heroic transformation occurs. Heroic transformations may occur at any point during the hero's lifetime. Frodo does not experience any heroic transformations until after he has reached adulthood. Bilbo passes on the ring to Frodo on Frodo's thirty-third birthday, which is the Hobbits' coming of age. Because Frodo is an adult when he receives the ring he is more prepared to handle these heroic transformations than someone who is still a child. This developmental element is demonstrated by other characters of the book as we see how much Pippin, a much younger hobbit, struggles on the journey. While the Fellowship is traveling through the mines of Moria, Pippin causes a disturbance by dropping a stone down a well. Gandalf growls at him, "Fool of a Took! This is a serious journey, not a Hobbit waling-party. Throw yourself in next time, and then you will be no further nuisance. Now be quiet!" (Tolkien, 1954).

Direction

Heroic transformations usually follow one of four arcs. Allison and Smith (2015) identified and distinguished among these four heroic transformational arcs, which include the classic hero arc, the enlightened hero arc, the redeemed hero arc, and the non-transformational hero arc. Frodo Baggins follows the classic hero arc during which an ordinary person traverses the classic journey and emerges as a hero at the end. Frodo was an ordinary hobbit with no exceptional powers and he blossoms into a hero because he was able to carry the ring to Mount Doom where it was destroyed.

Type

Allison and Smith (2015) also identified five types of transformations that heroes undergo. These five transformations are a moral transformation, an emotional transformation, a spiritual transformation, an intellectual transformation, and a physical transformation. Allison, Goethals, and Kramer (2017) added a sixth transformation which they called a motivational transformation. Frodo Baggins experiences emotional, intellectual, and physical transformations. Throughout his journey to destroy the ring, Frodo becomes brave and resilient out of necessity. He also learns to feel empathy for Sméagol. Frodo undergoes an intellectual transformation when he acquires important insights about the world outside of the shire. Frodo experiences his first physical transformation on his journey to Rivendell. “Looking in a mirror he was startled to see a much thinner reflection of himself than he remembered: it looked remarkably like the young nephew of Bilbo who used to go tramping with his uncle in the Shire; but the eyes looked out at him thoughtfully” (Tolkien, 1954).

Gollum follows Frodo to the edge of Mount Doom where Gollum bites off Frodo’s finger with the ring on it. “Gollum, dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the ring, a finger still thrust within its circle. It shone now as if verily it was wrought of living fire” (Tolkien, 1955). Frodo never fully recovers from the Black Rider’s stab wound so he always feels the pain in his shoulder at the spot he was stabbed. After his journey, Frodo is unable to live out the rest of his life in the shire because he is never fully healed; in fact, it causes him to get

sick on the anniversary of the injury. Frodo tells Sam after informing him of his decision to leave, “It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them” (Tolkien, 1955). This leads to Frodo to sail off to the Haven with Bilbo and the elves.

Depth

Heroic transformations can be either shallow or deep. Frodo’s invisibility is a shallow transformation, but the wounds that he receives while wearing the ring cause deep transformations. Frodo Baggins undergoes mostly deep transformations from his journey. He is willing to risk his life to destroy the ring, exclaiming to Sam, “I must carry the burden to the end. It can't be altered. You can't come between me and this doom” (Tolkien, 1955). Frodo is never able to fully recover from this injury, although he is psychologically transformed by it.

Openness

A subject must be open to transformation to undergo heroic transformation. Being open means having the ability and motivation to change. Frodo accepts the burden of the ring, but at first he is pushed into initiating his journey because of the ringwraiths. One of the Black Riders questions Sam’s grandfather-the-Gaffer and he describes it like this: “I told him Mr. Baggins had left his home for good. Hissed at me, he did. It gave me quite a shudder. I don't know (what sort of fellow he was), says he; but he wasn't a Hobbit. He was tall and black like, and he stooped over me. I reckon it was one of the Big Folk from foreign parts. He spoke funny.” The appearance of a ringwraith in the Shire is enough to spur Frodo to action. In Rivendell, Frodo decides to be the ring bearer and a member of the Fellowship saying, “I will take the Ring, [. . .] though I do not know the way” (Tolkien, 1954). Frodo’s openness to change and willingness to take heroic action is key to his heroic transformation.

Source

Frodo experiences both internal and external sources of transformative change. The internal source that he feels represents his intrinsic motivation to change

and “an enlightened dawning of responsibility” (Allison & Goethals, 2017; Davis et al., 2011). Frodo feels that the ring is his responsibility and that therefore it is his responsibility to be the ring bearer. Frodo also experiences external sources of transformation, one of which is a series of trials by which he is transformed through suffering as a result of dealing with arduous outside forces. Another, less obvious external source of transformation that the experiences are the influence of being raised by Bilbo and hearing of his adventures.

Social Sources of Transformation

Frodo has other people helping him through every step in his journey. At the beginning, he has the other hobbits and Aragorn. Then Frodo benefits from travelling with the Fellowship and Gandalf. Along the way, they encounter many helpful characters who take care of them and gift them. First, they meet Tom Bombadil, and Elrond in Rivendell. Later, the lady Galadriel gives them gifts that are crucial to the success of the quest. She presents him with a “small crystal phial” and said to him, “May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out” (Tolkien, 1954).

The Great Eight: How Frodo Acquires These Qualities

Allison and Goethals (2011) conducted research into people’s perceptions of heroes and uncovered eight major trait categories of heroes: smart, strong, caring, selfless, charismatic, resilient, reliable, and inspiring. Below I describe how Frodo Baggins possesses each of the “Great Eight” traits and how he acquires them throughout his journey.

1. **Smart:** Frodo is often acknowledged as being intelligent by his companions before and during the journey. He is more bookish than the other hobbits and his knowledge of the Elvish language earns the respect of the Elves. Frodo thanks Gildor Inglorion and the other elves in the high-elven speech at the beginning of his journey, and in turn they call him “Elf-friend” and “a jewel among hobbits” (Tolkien, 1954).

2. **Strong:** Frodo is very brave before his heroic transformation and his bravery only increases from his journey. He first demonstrates his bravery by

choosing to be the ring bearer, saying to Gandalf, “But this would mean exile, a flight from danger to danger, drawing it after me. And I suppose I must go alone, if I am to do that and save the Shire. But I feel very small, and very uprooted, and well-- desperate. The Enemy is so strong and so terrible” (Tolkien, 1954). Throughout the series, Frodo faces many trials head on, such as entering Moria and fighting Shelob.

3. **Selfless:** Frodo was selfless before embarking on his quest. Indeed, he leaves his home and life behind in the Shire to go on his heroic quest. He also knows that he will most likely die, even if he succeeds in his task. When he and Sam are discussing the amount of food that they have left, Frodo says to Sam, “If the One goes into the fire, and we are at hand? I ask you, Sam, are we ever likely to need bread again? I think not” (Tolkien, 1955). Frodo acknowledges that they most likely won’t survive even if they succeed, showing that Frodo is so selfless that he is willing to die to save Middle-earth.

4. **Caring:** Frodo always shows love for his companions -- especially Sam, whom he calls his “dearest hobbit, friend of friends” (Tolkien, 1955). Frodo learns to show empathy for Sméagol, a cruel little creature that found and held the ring for many years until Bilbo stole it from him. Frodo and Sam capture Sméagol, who had been following them, and Frodo says, “For now that I see him, I do pity him” (Tolkien, 1955).

5. **Charismatic:** Frodo is very eloquent and almost poetic before his journey even begins. He randomly sings and recites poetry throughout his journey. Frodo is also described as being “taller than some and fairer than most” hobbits (Tolkien, 1954).

6. **Resilient:** Frodo has to become resilient while on his journey. Before he left the Shire, his resilience was never tested. Frodo keeps on pushing through the quest, even though he faces many obstacles. Some of the most notable obstacles are being chased and stabbed by Black Riders, the Balrog in Moria, Boromir’s attack, and Shelob poisoning him. In addition, he has to carry the ring and fight it will constantly. Frodo becomes more resilient emotionally and physically with every trial he overcomes.

7. **Reliable:** Frodo's reliability was never tested before he began his transformation, however he is very loyal to Gandalf, Bilbo, and the rest of the fellowship. Frodo proves his reliability by succeeding in his mission of destroying the ring.

8. **Inspiring:** Frodo is inspiring before, during, and after his transformation. Before his transformation, Frodo inspires Sam, Merry, and Pippin to join him on his journey. During his transformation he motivates the rest of the fellowship to keep fighting Sauron and his forces, even when all hope seemed lost. He also remains humble throughout his journey (Worthington & Allison, 2018).

CONCLUSION

By completing his journey and achieving his heroic transformation, Frodo integrates both what fate has given him and what he could achieve through his own heroic efforts and imagination. He acknowledges that he has been presented with an impossible task, yet he maintains the courage and the friendships to complete the cycle and bring the elixir to himself, his friends, and society at large. He has many strikes against him; for example, his diminutive size and his sheltered existence. Frodo knows nothing of the world or danger or evil. Hobbits are generally fun-loving and somewhat lazy, and while Frodo is smarter than most, he is still young and inexperienced. Not only that, but his mission is a near impossible one and would be impossible to do alone. He is an everyday hero who achieves a great success by doing his part and allowing the heroic journey to unfold organically. In this way, Frodo inspires us all.

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