

COMING OF AGE: CHANGES OF HEART

Growth and enlightenment in *The Lord of the Rings*

Thinking about this year's Seminar subject, [*the year was 2000, the theme The Change of Ages. Ed*] and also about Patrick Curry's excellent speech at the AGM, it occurred to me that we all encounter changes as we go through our lives, either significant or subtle; and so do many of the characters in the Lord of the Rings. I thought it might be interesting to look at some of these - and I hope you think so too.

I propose to cover the nine characters of the Fellowship, some more briefly than others. Of course there are other major characters whose lives change profoundly as a result of the War of the Ring: for example both Eowyn and Arwen have their lives irrevocably changed when they marry, and the Elves, Galadriel and Elrond, leave Middle-earth behind them for ever when they cross the Sea.¹ But for now I will confine myself to the Fellowship, trying to hold back on my tendency to run on at far too much length when discussing Tolkien's work. I shall look at each of these characters in turn, noting some of the external changes they encounter, and examining how these serve to develop their characters. For many, one particular change will mark a "coming of age" where they attain their mature powers. Some, without such a watershed, learn to modify their beliefs; while for others, the "coming of age" is twisted into evil, or too late.

Gandalf, *de facto* the leader of the Fellowship, is not human; he is a *maia*, an angelic spirit sent to Middle-earth to aid its peoples against the Enemy. For many authors, this would go far to circumscribe, even prohibit character development. Gandalf, however, while certainly

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possessed of supernatural powers, is at first all too human in many ways, since he is incarnated in human form in order to understand the hearts and minds of those with whom he must deal. Though his outward appearance of age is in many ways deceptive, the weariness of his long labours has brought him many of the faults of old age: irascibility, impatience, forgetfulness. He does his best, but he works almost alone at a monumental task; not for him the luxury of quiet contemplation in an ivory (or basalt) tower, with minions to do his bidding and bring tidings from every quarter. Gandalf, like Saruman, might have had these things, if he had been prepared to give a little flattery and service to powerful rulers. But Gandalf Stormcrow² these call him, as he goes about the business of learning and telling what they are loth to hear. Prepared to give pleasure to simple folk with his fireworks, he has no time to spend massaging the egos of such as Denethor. Gandalf may be pardoned for leaving this to Saruman, obviously far more suited to the task, since he believes Saruman to be working on his side. After narrowly escaping the traitor's clutches, he knows he must work by himself: two Istari are lost in the East, one become an enemy, and the remaining one withdrawn into the Wild, reclusive and virtually useless in the struggle. It is, frankly, rather too much for Gandalf alone to cope with, and he is lucky not to lose the Ringbearer before he reaches Rivendell.

It is at Khazad-dûm that Gandalf reaches his consuming change: he dies. Standing alone before the Balrog, his strength fails; not his mental power, which is enough to cast down his supernatural foe, but his human vigour. *I am spent,* he says, after his efforts to close the door of the Chamber of Mazarbul, vying even then with the Balrog, although he did not know it. Not strong enough either to leap back in time or to resist the pull of the Balrog's whip, he falls and is lost in the abyss.

Later we learn that he continues to pursue the Balrog throughout the mountain, hanging on by will alone through thick and thin, and slays it at last. But with that final effort his frail mortal body is broken, and his spirit leaves it to fly back whence he came.

But Gandalf is not human, and those even more powerful than he decide to send him back. Presumably they give him another body, similar yet not exactly like his former one; a reason why even his good friends do not at first recognise him. It seems, in Fangorn, as though Gandalf himself has some trouble adjusting, finding difficulty even in remembering his name; like someone waking from amnesia or coma, he is at this point truly *born again*. And while still the same old wizard in many ways, for example his abrupt methods and caustic speech, he is changed. Merry says, "He has grown, or something",³ and he does possess more authority, more power, more compassion even. We do not learn if the Valar have given him these things in some way, or if they are entirely the product of his mortal struggle with the Balrog. There is a hint that some of Saruman's attributes have become his, but whether because he has

Mallorn XXXVIII

literally taken them over, or simply that, growing in stature himself, he is worthy of Saruman's former place, is not clear. If he were human, it could be explained thus: he has been through the fire, facing death, and seemed to die. Such an experience often changes a person, and gives them greater insight and purpose in life. Then he is given the accolade of heading the White Council in Saruman's place; despite all his mistakes, those in authority over him recognise his efforts and his worth. He is sent back with enormous responsibilities, and no assurances, yet he carries the trust and belief of the great. No wonder he rises to greater heights, no wonder he is now able to challenge the Witch-King himself. But Gandalf, even resurrected, is no *deus ex machina*. His powers have been won by his own supreme efforts, and though enlarged sufficiently to complete his task, the quintessential Gandalf remains the same.

BOROMIR'S PRIDE

Boromir is stiff and proud, arrogant even, and change does not come to him easily. He needs to change, however, for the sake of the Fellowship and for his own soul, and in the end he does, though he has fought so long against it that the consequences are dire, most of all for himself. There are, however, several landmarks along the road to his final change of heart. He begins as a man who knows his own prowess, believes his own worth as heir to Minas Tirith, the last bastion of an ancient and honourable race against darkness and chaos. But at Rivendell he discovers he must be subordinate to another heir with higher claims. Not unnaturally, he needs to be convinced that these claims are not false, and even when his intellect is satisfied he finds the fact difficult to accept. Struggling to come to terms with this change in his circumstances, he is then faced with Galadriel, who looks into his heart and creates further disturbance. Boromir blames her for this, though what she has done, as with the other member of the

Fellowship, is simply to bring to his conscious attention thoughts and desires that were already there. Boromir desires power, and this is something he now finds incompatible with his position. Believing Galadriel has tempted him with the Ring, he rejects the thought. Again, it is his upbringing which prompts him to the right course, not his own inner conscience. Instead of recognising his temptation and striving in humility to overcome it, as the others do, he refuses to acknowledge it until, matured and armed with plausible arguments, it conquers him utterly.

It takes peril and the loss of the Ringbearer to bring him understanding of what he has done. His defence of the other hobbits, leading to his death, springs this time from true selflessness rather than his hitherto somewhat superficial 'honour'. Up to now, all Boromir's actions have been something of a sham, starting with the journey to Rivendell itself; his brother, a more suitable candidate for a mission to the House of Elrond in many ways, had the prompting dream three times, Boromir himself only once. The reader is strongly tempted to wonder if Boromir in fact had the dream at all, but lied in order to go, feeling it was due his position as the Steward's heir. I think that here we should give Boromir the benefit of the doubt; his honour, that he sets great store by, would forbid him to stoop to such a lie. There is good in Boromir, attested by his having the dream once at least, though it is Faramir who has more comprehension of the spiritual realm of the Elves, and so has it three times. Through shame and remorse Boromir learns the true meaning of honour at last, though his change of heart has for him dire consequences: the Heir of Minas Tirith gives his life—many, such as his father, would judge he throws it away—to save two apparently inconsequential members of the Fellowship, and he does not even succeed. Yet his action is crucial to victory at Isengard, and even though Merry and Pippin are captured, the

very fact of their defence to the death by a man of stature no doubt impresses the Uruk-hai with their importance, and helps to keep them alive.

Boromir's final scene contains much of the penitence, confession and final absolution found in the Roman Catholic faith, Aragorn acting in the role of priest. The changes that this incident promotes have ripples that spread far, certainly to every later turn of the story, and it is Boromir's own change of heart that prompts one of the most major. Aragorn has been uncertain of his path, torn between further assisting the Ringbearer and going to Minas Tirith, where lies his power and his inheritance. Boromir's last example of sacrifice shows him his way and he does neither, but chooses similarly to protect the weak, to 'do the right thing' rather than the strategically obvious one. Aragorn himself has learned to think of Middle-earth in its entirety, not only of his own lands and people.

ARAGORN'S ACCESSION

The chief change that comes to mind when considering Aragorn is his accession to the Kingship, which naturally alters his life for ever; from wandering, unacknowledged Ranger to supreme ruler of an ancient and powerful kingdom, and in addition changing his lonely single state to that of husband and father. Such radical changes of circumstance might well overwhelm a man, except that Aragorn has been preparing for them all his long life. Nevertheless he does change when his goal is achieved, gaining in power—the right kind—and fitting himself to the mantle of kingship. He daunts with his authority when necessary, in order to save Merry and the others wounded by the Black Breath; and he surrounds his coronation with dazzling pomp, because he knows his people need such symbolic panoply to mark their hopes of a new beginning. Yet he is still, as the hobbits divine, still the old Strider at heart. Never puffed up by riches or power, he appreciates the simple fundamentals of life, and

this is perhaps something his hobbit friends have helped to teach him.

Though his accession is his greatest change, Aragorn comes to it by way of many lesser, but important, milestones along his path. All his adult life he has been honing himself, pitting his skills and his courage against his enemies, but until he meets Frodo Baggins all this has been essentially repetitive; probably the only major landmark of this period has been the winning of Arwen, something he has also been striving for all his adult life. At Cerin Amroth he wins her pledge, and so knows that if he succeeds in his ordained task he will gain not only his inheritance, but also the most fervent wish of his heart. If ever a man had an incentive to do well, it was Aragorn Elessar.

But the event which marks the beginning of the final stage of Aragorn's road to the Kingship, is his meeting with the hobbits at Bree; because here he comes into contact with the Ring. Strider, as he names himself there, could easily take the Ring from Frodo. He seems never to be tempted, unlike Boromir, no doubt because he has learned all that Elrond and Gandalf had to teach of Sauron, the Ring and its perils, and has also taken to heart lessons of humility and service, many of them from Gandalf's example. But he knows that this marks the crucial period of his life, and while confident in his own abilities, he does not find the task an easy one. From the first, when they are unable to slip away from the inn because the ponies have been stolen and they need to find a replacement, he is forced to take decisions that could make or break the success of his mission. At the summit of Weathertop, surrounded by Nazgûl, it surely must seem to him that his path has been wrong. Yet he does what he can, defending the terrified hobbits with fair odds that they will all die, and is quite puzzled afterwards that their unbeatable enemies have withdrawn. So he learns more of

the Nazgûl: that terrible as they are, invoking the power of the Valar brings fear to them. Certain of their eventual superiority, they are not prepared, as he was, to risk all, and so for the time being, he conquered. Their confidence is misplaced; not knowing who Aragorn is, they have left him to counteract the expected effects of Frodo's poisoned wound, and left Isildur's true heir alive. Had they been less arrogant, more prepared to endure an unpleasant conflict, they could have put an end to him then and there, and made sure of Frodo's compliance by taking him prisoner. The Nazgûl are at one and the same time contemptuous of their foes, and too careful of their own incorporeal existence; mistakes their royal but unassuming adversary has learned not to make.

So it continues, Aragorn coming step by step to ever greater

*'A king both represents
his people, and sacrifices
himself for their benefit'*

commands, always leading from the front, as at Helm's Deep, the Paths of the Dead, the expedition to the Black Gate; and his decisions likewise become ever harder. Could he have chosen the last wild throw of the Black Gate, without the vindication of his other seemingly hazardous decisions behind him? With each victory, his strength and stature grow. Yet the greatest change within him comes in Lórien, again.⁴ Gandalf has been lost, who led the company, and has been Aragorn's mentor since he first left Elrond's care and began his task. In Lórien, under Galadriel's penetrating eye, he has to come to terms with that loss, and realise that now he stands alone to lead, not only the Fellowship, but all men of Middle-earth in the conflict against Sauron. This is Aragorn's final 'Coming of Age'. So before they leave, he walks again on Cerin

Amroth, remembering his joy with Arwen, and bids a final farewell to all that went before. "He... never again came there as living man", the narrative tells us.⁵ Aragorn came to Lórien still in part Estel, a Ranger, Hope of the Dunedain. He leaves it Isildur's heir, to rally all who will follow him against the darkness that seeks to swallow Middle-earth, or else to fight alone; victory may bring him his inheritance, but that is not the chief reason he seeks victory. A king both represents his people, and sacrifices himself for their weal. Aragorn leaves Lórien in the knowledge he may have to do both.

LEGOLAS AND GIMLI

Legolas and Gimli are the two characters for whom change is least likely, given that one is an Elf, whose very nature is unchanging, and the other a Dwarf, his being crafted from enduring stone. Nevertheless, without infringing these concepts, it is these two characters who perhaps change most radically, due to their friendship with one another. The first manifestation of this is at Helm's Deep, when each learns to respect the other's prowess at killing Orcs, finding common ground in defeating their common enemy, and turning their previous racial dislike to a more friendly rivalry. But the seeds of this have been planted already; in the reminder (in Moria) that Elves and dwarves once were friends, in the comradeship of their hard road. One cannot live day and night for weeks in the company of others without coming to know them intimately, as people rather than racial, or other, stereotypes. This can lead to fiercer hatred, since there is nothing worse than having to endure the company of one whose habits or attitudes are abhorrent. But Legolas and Gimli both discover that these are not so bad, and begin at least to respect one another.

Galadriel is the catalyst that speeds and fuses their friendship. Before they enter Lórien, there is

Mallorn XXXVIII

still enough antagonism between them for both to stand on their dignity over the blindfolding of Gimli, Legolas even becoming angry with Aragorn over the suggestion that he, too, should have his eyes covered. Later, it would be he who would vouch with his life for the dwarf; but they still have a long way to go. Gimli's eyes are opened, however, by the compassion of Galadriel, and by his request for her golden hair he shows that he has come to value personal interaction over the cold metal normally dearest to Dwarvish hearts. This in turn shows Legolas a new side to Gimli, and Galadriel's sympathy for the beauty of underground treasures comes home to him after Helmís Deep,⁶ when he listens, sympathetically, to Gimli's lyrical description of the caves. From this point on their friendship can only grow. After the war, like the rest of the Company, they have their homes and tasks to return to; but their friendship endures, and leads at last to the unprecedented event of their leaving Middle-earth together. The gulls woke sea-longing in Legolas; but this is only a symptom of his need. Content for aeons in his life in Mirkwood, after the things he has learned outside he can be no longer satisfied with his former existence. Truly, the Elves of Mirkwood are as narrow and intolerant as hobbits. He seeks for higher things, and Gimli, perhaps the only Dwarf ever to understand, chooses to go with him; wrench though it must be for one who still must love the things of Earth, he chooses in the end not to be parted from the two souls he most loves, Legolas and Galadriel. These are changes indeed, and the wonder and the telling of them yeast to leaven the understanding of their respective peoples.

PIPPIN'S JOURNEY

Of all the hobbits, Pippin is the most irresponsible. When they begin their journey from the Shire none of them understand the true magnitude of their task, but Pippin, the youngest, least of all; it is he

who, their second morning on the road, runs singing on the grass, despite the already encountered threat of the Black Rider. His very presence as Frodo's companion lacks responsibility, since he is in effect the Crown Prince of the Shire; this does not prevent him 'running away' as many of Tookish blood have done before him. At first, of course, it is simply seen as a not particularly dangerous adventure, an excursion to see Bilbo at Rivendell. Once the task has been explained, and the deadly dangers, it might be expected that the Thain's heir would see his place was back in the Shire. Not a bit of it, of course.⁷ Such a thing never occurs to Pippin, filled as he is with a restless desire for travel, and to prove himself as equal to the other hobbits who are going on the quest. No doubt Pippin himself would say, and genuinely believe it, that he only wishes to go in order to assist Frodo. Certainly his friendship is real, and this is a part of his reason. But Pippin is not Fredegar Bolger, and his desire for the quest is largely prompted by typical—though less so among hobbits—youthful exuberance and wanderlust, or else he would never consider it.

Pippin is really something of a spoilt child, always getting his own way. As heir to the richest and most influential hobbit clan, he has plainly been allowed to do pretty much as he liked. This has not apparently led to any bad consequences, due to his generally pleasant and sunny personality; masked by this, the effects are more insidious. Pippin shows lack of self-restraint more than once, as when he drops a stone down the well in Moria. Perhaps not chastened enough for this, he appears to have learned no lesson from it. He does not begin to recognise his fault, and so mend it, until his attempt to look in the stolen *palantir*. The encounter with Sauron rocks him to his furry toes, but as with many self-willed folk, it takes this near-disaster to effect any change, and he is lucky to

survive it. Gandalf, who with all his many cares may be forgiven for not having taken the headstrong youngster in hand before, wisely whisks him away to the one place where a high-born hobbit can be shown his place, the court at Minas Tirith. *Ernil i Pheriannath* the citizens call him, Prince of Halflings, and so indeed he is, but it is here among both the ancient aristocracy and the more common folk that Peregrine Took comes to understand his own worth. For the first time he sees how much smaller is the Shire, and his place in it, than the ancient civilisation of the Numenoreans. But having been humbled, though not daunted, he also learns that even here pride and pettiness can lead to downfall, and finds reserves within himself to save the day. The experience of the pyre of Denethor, and his part in saving Faramir, do not restore his former unthinking arrogance. Though he seems much the same, for hobbits keep their surface calm even when their depths have been stirred, he has truly 'come of age'. His treatment of Merry, suffering from the Black Breath of the Nazg'l Lord, is sensitive and just right. Of course he would always have wanted to help his friend, but he can do it better now he has gone through emotional turmoil himself. (At the inn in Bree, Merry had a very nasty encounter with a Black Rider. Granted he prefers not to talk about it, but the Pippin of Minas Tirith would surely have given his friend more support and sympathy, rather than totally ignoring the matter as he does at the time.)

MERRY MATURES

Merry, having attained his majority and thus several years older than Pippin, is from the beginning a more mature character. This makes him an ideal companion for Frodo, who has retained his own youthful zest and attitudes to a remarkable degree. Frodo does indeed depend greatly on Merry, who organises the move from Bag End for him, and incidentally masterminds the

Coming of Age ...

conspiracy that uncovers his plans to leave the Shire.⁸ Merry is in many ways the most capable of the hobbits, taking charge when he meets the others at the Ferry after their encounters with the Black Riders. At this point, of course, he has not felt the horror of their emanations for himself, and it is interesting that it is in fact Merry who later has the definitive encounter with the Witch-King. This is something he is marked out for early on; from the beginning his experiences with the Nazgûl are different from those of the others. He is not with them when they are pursued by Black Riders within the Shire, and catches only one brief glimpse across water which does not affect him; it is the "queer sound" in Farmer Maggot's voice,⁹ and the assurances of the others, that convince him the Riders are perilous. (It is another interesting twist that at one point the others mistake Merry for a Black Rider himself.) It would seem that the young Master

Brandybuck has a certain resistance to the Riders, through his affinity with the Old Forest. This place is also perilous, but holds no terrors for Merry who has grown up in its shadow, and he instinctively leads the others into its shade knowing that no other power will trouble them there. They do get into trouble, so Merry has perhaps been over-confident, yet his instincts have in the end been sound, and Tom Bombadil whose domain this is comes to rescue them.

If Merry's confidence is shaken by this, it is further shaken by what happens on the Barrow Downs, and at Bree. On the Barrow-downs he is last in line, and so probably first to be taken by the Barrow-wight, thus remaining longest in his clutches. After their rescue, it is Merry who has most trouble coming to himself, plagued by memories belonging to the prince originally buried in the tomb: "The men of Carn Dum came on us by night."¹⁰ From this moment he

carries within him a knowledge of the Witch-King no other living being can match. It must be this that prompts him, at Bree, first to go out of the inn for a walk, and then to follow the Nazgûl searching for Frodo. "I seemed to be drawn somehow," he says¹¹. Was it in part the desire of the dead prince for vengeance, working within him? But the experience is a terrible one for Merry, overcome as he is by the Black Breath, and extremely lucky to be rescued. He tries to make light of it at the time, but this second failure in the face of paralysing fear has left its mark. Normally the organiser among the hobbits, when in the morning they discover their ponies stolen Merry is the only one who makes no contribution to the discussion of what is to be done, except to voice his pleasure at the prospect of a more substantial breakfast. Merry is trying to banish his fear and disorientation in the best way a hobbit knows, with food.



The summoning of the Dead. *John Ellison*

Mallorn XXXVIII

Many times after, Merry's courage is severely tested. But he comes through each event, brave and resourceful, perhaps because he has already faced the Ultimate beside which nothing is as bad. In Fangorn Forest his encounter with its Master Ent has a far different conclusion from the fiasco in the Old Forest. There, he was overconfident in his ability to defy the trees. In Fangorn he treads warily and is courteous, thankful to be among the living trees after his captivity by Orcs, sensing their "otherness" and respecting it. By the end of the destruction of Isengard Merry has thoroughly learned the lesson of working with nature, rather than against it; and it is the power of the earth come to full flower within himself that finally enables him to defeat the Witch-King, enemy of Life. It is fertility that defeats the Nazgûl Lord: in a woman, young, her senses just awakened; and in a hobbit, simple child of Earth.

This is the most profound change for Merry. Wounded severely by the Black Breath, the powers of nature invoked by Aragorn restore him, and it is Merry who takes command for Frodo at the Scouring of the Shire. His confidence is no longer the over-confidence of youth, but the self-assurance of a battle-hardened man. "Lordly" the Shire-folk call him, "meaning nothing but good"¹²; both he and Pippin have grown into their positions as heads of their respective folk-groups within the Shire. Merry moreover has learned to be less insular, concerned with all the Shire-folk rather than just the Buckland group to which he belongs. Much of this learning must stem from his time with Theoden, King of the Mark. "As a father you shall be to me,"¹³ Merry says, and so it is, the old King being revered by the hobbit possibly more than his true father. Merry's final "coming of age" occurs when Theoden dies, and from then on he does his best to emulate the mentor who won both his respect and affection.

SAM'S STEADFASTNESS

Sam is probably the character who, of all the fellowship, changes least. Beginning with the sterling values of friendship, work and service, he returns with these unaltered, only deepened, by his journey. Among the hobbits he always appears the most 'grown up', always practical and sensible (except for moments like the one where he shies an apple at Bill Ferny)¹⁴. This maturity is quite surprising considering he is far closer in age to the young hobbits, Merry and Pippin, than he is to Frodo, and he looks after his master quite paternally from the beginning. This suggests a certain kind of arrested development in Frodo, due perhaps in part to his aristocracy—i.e. he is a hobbit of high status who does not have to work for his living; but also a mark of his early possession of (even by

Merry ... has learned to be less insular, concerned with all the Shire-folk rather than just the Buckland [people]'

the Ring, which has held him within the stage of life at which he got it, without the natural progression of a healthy hobbit to marriage and family life. Sam's brief assumption of the ring does not have these dire effects, in fact it would seem to have had no real effect at all. Perhaps this is because, though he took it and even wore it, he did not do so from any desire but still to serve his beloved master and do what he wished. Sam never has the slightest desire for personal power, except in the cause of others; witness his anger when he looks in the Mirror of Galadriel, and sees the devastation of the Shire. Service is Sam's temptation, and so he takes the Ring; but fortunately he learns in time that Frodo is not dead, and having rescued him, hands back the burden willingly. One wonders

how many hundred years it would take with the Ring, for Sam to learn to enjoy dominion over others. Perhaps the greatest change we see in him, is that he has learned to fight; Farmer Cotton dislikes his 'Ironmongery', and Sam can certainly give a good account of himself with his sword. But even this is not a substantial change in the old Samwise. Before leaving the Shire he was a normal, down-to-earth, male hobbit, with the characteristics this implies: earthy, strong, given to pleasures such as drinking with his mates and not above getting belligerent with them if he thinks they are trying to push him around.¹⁵ Sam is even more capable and mature when he returns, yet not appreciably different.

"You were meant to be solid and whole, Sam,"¹⁶ Frodo says to him at Bag End, realising now that he himself never will be, and hoping the same will not be true for his faithful companion. Sam is indeed whole, and this is quite a feat considering the contradiction that lies at the heart of his nature. For he does love the Shire and the ordinary life with Rose he leads in it, something he put on hold to go with Frodo. And why did he go? To see Elves. Deep within Sam Gamgee is a romantic soul. He did see Elves, and was not disappointed. His deep attachment to Frodo has something of that enchantment in it, for Frodo almost becomes Elvish himself as the Ring works on his nature. For a few years Sam has the best of both worlds, settling down with Rose at Bag End, and still looking after the master he loves. But Frodo leaves, and so Sam is indeed 'torn in two'¹⁷. Yet it is told, that when his other loves and responsibilities are dead, or can do without him, he too crosses the Sea. For Frodo, and Bilbo, are over there, still alive; and it is his last chance to see Elves. Sam Gamgee has scarcely changed at all.

FRODO'S TRANSFORMATION

Frodo is the character who experiences the greatest change:

from plain hobbit to selfless hero; from a well-meaning man with unplumbed depths of courage and strength of will, to one overborne at last by temptation, yet saved at the brink, and allowed to return. "There and Back Again" in truth. Such a gamut of transformation is to be expected, since it is Frodo who, as Bearer, has closest contact with the Ring. Yet at first, the Ring would seem to prevent change. Bilbo is reckoned "well-preserved" and the same would appear to be true of Frodo after he has inherited the ring: at 50 he retains all the youthful appearance and zest of a hobbit on the brink of manhood at 33. Some of the changes wrought in Frodo are similar to those experienced by the other hobbits, as he meets and overcomes the hardships and challenges of his quest. Yet for Frodo there is another dimension. He has always been in a position of authority; he is leader among his friends, while to Sam, his servant, he is master. Possession of the Ring itself puts him in a unique position, recognised by others: "On [the Ringbearer] alone is any charge laid"¹⁸, Elrond says at the Company's setting forth. Boromir tries to coerce him, but even so early in the quest Frodo is more than a match for him, escaping by means of his hobbit skills of stealth and by using the Ring. But Boromir has precipitated the very thing Frodo needs to avoid, use of the Ring's power, which little by little corrupts all, even, at last, a truly decent hobbit like Frodo.

There is a foreshadowing of this at Rivendell, when Bilbo asks Frodo if he may see the Ring. But Frodo is reluctant, and suddenly sees Bilbo as "a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands"¹⁹. The vision distresses Frodo, he puts the Ring away and it passes. But there is truth in it. Bilbo is some way down the road to becoming what Gollum has become, a hollow creature possessed by craving for the Ring; and Frodo is now the Ring's master. Hobbits are a people whose concerns are of the earth,

their desire only for peace and the good things of life, not domination over others, and so Frodo, best of hobbits, is as the Wise see, slow to be corrupted. But hobbits are not angels, as Tolkien shows us²⁰. They can be petty, intolerant, even grasping and arrogant like Lobelia and her son. Domination is forced upon Frodo by Gollum, whom he has to master by any means he can; and only his command of the Ring will serve his turn "We can bide our time... deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose"²¹, Saruman says to Gandalf, who fiercely rejects the principle. Yet Frodo has in the end to use doubtful means to accomplish his ends, and pays the price. As he crawls up Mount Doom he too has become like Gollum, consumed and beaten down by the Ring, except that he keeps still a small tenacious flame of will alive to achieve his purpose. Until he stands by the Cracks of Doom, and conceives that all he was and could be lies now within the Ring, and if he casts it away, he casts himself with it. In that moment of final temptation he falls and fails. It is Gollum who saves Middle-earth, and seems to have saved Frodo. But it is not so: "Here [we stand] at the end of all things, Sam,"²² Frodo says thankfully to his faithful servant. Sam is as glad to see his dear master restored, as he believes, as to be rescued. But for Frodo, it is indeed the end of all things. The Ring took from him at last everything, every scrap of courage, decency, determination, the tiny remaining piece of what he had believed to be his true self, and Frodo is not, as the innocent Sam believes, healed; he is broken, broken beyond even Aragorn fully to mend.

Why does Frodo take no part in leading the Scouring of the Shire? What holds him back is fear, fear of himself. His young colleagues have grown into self-assurance; 'lordly', the Shire-folk later call them, but it is a genial, caring lordliness. Frodo has been to the darker side of power, understands

and loathes what he found lurking in the depths of his own hobbit nature. He dares not command with such ruthlessness as his still innocent friends, lest he unleash the fiend that almost possessed him by the edge of the Cracks of Doom. His sorrow is not only for the oppressed Shire-folk, but for those hobbits, and men, seduced by power over their fellows: They know not what they do²³. And 'There but for the grace of the Valar go I', is in his mind. A saint is seldom a good ruler, too concerned for his own soul, too compassionate of the sins of others to do what needs to be done.

But if Frodo is a saint, it is not by choice. Up until his assumption of the Ring Frodo has been a perfectly normal young hobbit—any anomalies, the Shire-folk no doubt would say, could be laid fairly and squarely at his adopted uncle Bilbo's door. In this they would be quite right, though less because Bilbo stirred him up with strange tales, than because he gave him the Ring. After this, as already mentioned, Frodo suffers from arrested development. This is manifest particularly in the fact that, at the age of fifty, he is still unmarried²⁴. But he is not, as Bilbo apparently is, immune to the attractions of women, and one imagines that his wistful visions of home include the normal hobbit pattern of family life. When he takes on the burden of the Quest he does not realise that the dangers are not all of death and capture; the final peril, which he does not escape, is the leaching away of all that made him truly human. Mirroring Gollum, he has come to care for nothing that once meant so much to him. In all his journey, he held to the simple hope that when his task was done, he might go home; but when at long last he does so, he finds no joy, only emptiness. His comfortable home, his good-hearted neighbours, the fields and trees he once loved—all have lost their savour²⁵. So has the thought of wife and family, though he clutches at Sam in an effort to experience these at second hand.

Mallorn XXXVIII

But it is not enough. His dream, the impossible dream that he clung to under the horror of Sauron, has proved false, and for Frodo, “thin and stretched”²⁶ by the devouring Ring, wracked with guilt, robbed of the warm emotions once so much a part of him, it is too much. He cannot change, he cannot grow, or only so slowly that it cannot be in this world. He goes to the haven of the Elves, who know much of Healing, but he takes his pain with him. Spiritual contemplation may help him; it is all he has left. Frodo is not going, as the Elves are, home. Frodo is going to where they can help him to die.

All the characters of the Fellowship in LotR change and grow as a result of their experience with the Ring. Even Sam Gamgee, whose essential sturdiness and loyalty does not change, attains the position of master rather than that of servant when Frodo leaves him Bag End; though his later position of Mayor remains, as he operates it, still one of service to his community.

The other young hobbits grow up, grow into self-awareness and into their positions as responsible leaders of their people. Aragorn comes into his kingship. Legolas and Gimli grow away from the

prejudices of their past and into friendship with one another. Boromir learns that his place in the world is not as he perceived it, but acceptance of his true rôle comes too late to prevent his death. Death, with resurrection, also figures in the growth encompassed by the two chief protagonists in the War of the Ring. Gandalf and Frodo are both Christ-figures; but it is Frodo who most embodies the Lamb of Christian myth. For others to gain Middle-earth, he must lose it; for his people to live, he must die. And yet he does not die, but is condemned to everlasting life.

REFERENCES

Note: all references except no. 17 are from The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1966

¹ Saruman goes through an even more profound change; the subject of another paper, perhaps?

² TT 117

³ TT 195

⁴ The first change there being his pledge with Arwen.

⁵ FotR 367

⁶ TT 152

⁷ Merry is not quite in the same position as the Brandybuck heir, since his father is not titular head of the whole Shire, and Brandybucks are generally less conservative, more adventurous and more tolerant than most hobbits. Even so, one wonders whether the Shire might have fared better under Sharkey's men if these two young men of courage, intelligence and status had stayed at home.

⁸ FotR 114: “We can usually guess what you are thinking... To tell you the truth, I had been watching you rather closely... I thought you would go after [Bilbo] sooner or later.” It is Merry who is the perspicacious and sensitive one.

⁹ FotR 112

¹⁰ FotR 154

¹¹ FotR 185

¹² RotK 305

¹³ TT 51

¹⁴ FotR 193

¹⁵ e.g. FotR 378: “I wish I could get at Ted, and I'd fell him!”

¹⁶ RotK 306

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ FotR 294

¹⁹ FotR 244

²⁰ See FotR 31,39,46-48,77-78.

²¹ FotR272

²² RotK 225

²³ The Bible, Gospel According to Saint Luke, Ch 23 v 34

²⁴ So of course was Bilbo, but Bilbo is not a similar case; Frodo does not at any time exhibit the fussy, almost womanish ways of the confirmed bachelor, as Bilbo does. No, he is a convivial young fellow, approved of by the other hobbits, and once he inherited Bag End would inevitably be the target of a bevy of hopeful mothers and their marriageable daughters. This in itself might be enough to

put off a sensitive young man whose dreams were probably of Elf-maidens; but that in almost twenty years he would fail to succumb to natural desires is incredible, without the influence of the Ring. After all, his two young kinsmen, Merry and Pippin, very similar to Frodo in many ways, settle down with suitable wives on returning from their adventures—no doubt the pick of their respective neighbourhoods, but one suspects that Merry at least may have had his eye on his future wife before he left the Shire. Much younger than Frodo, he simply was not ready, at that point, to be courting seriously.

But Frodo, nearly twenty years older, seems to be stuck at an even earlier stage of adolescence—and now comes the point at which I air one of my pet theories, namely that Frodo falls in love with Goldberry. “‘Fair lady Goldberry!’ said Frodo at last, feeling his heart moved with a joy that he did not understand. ...the spell that was now laid on him was different; less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart”. Then, when he has been hurried off on his journey, he is devastated when he remembers he has not said goodbye to her. Nor has he said goodbye to Tom, who has been of much greater service to him; but does he cry, ‘Good gracious! We never said goodbye to good old Tom’? No, what he exclaims is ‘Goldberry!... My fair lady!’ I rest my case. Of course this is all quite hopeless, since she is married to Tom Bombadil, and this is really the point. Frodo is ready for romance, but it still needs to be of the adolescent kind where the object is unattainable. He shows similar yearnings later toward Arwen. Freed of the Ring at this point, he might well have come in a few more years to a satisfying relationship with a real, down-to-earth hobbit woman.

²⁵ He has lost his belief in the unalloyed goodness of people, even his own Shire-folk, but this is not the chief reason for his disillusion. To see that humanity is imperfect is a mark of maturity, and a further mark is to accept it. Surely Frodo has seen enough of the sterling qualities of his fellow-hobbits to forgive some lapses in his frightened and bewildered countrymen, and indeed he does forgive, even Lotho.

²⁶ FotR 56: what Bilbo said of the effect of the Ring on himself.