

Wanderer of the



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The characters of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" can be placed into two character groups: that pertaining to the ordinary characters, chiefly the hobbits with whom children and the children within us can easily identify because of their childlike personalities and physical appearance; and the super-characters who possess the extraordinary powers or knowledge which sets them above the rest. Throughout Tolkien's trilogy, however, both character groups tend to blend together somewhat. The ordinary mortals - if one could dare to apply that term to a hobbit - attain super-mortal characteristics while the loftier characters acquire some of the humanity of their lesser comrades. There is a similarity to Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" in as much that certain of the characters are personifications of human qualities: Gandalf is good, Sam is faithful, Frodo is persevering and so on; but Tolkien never lets the characters become mere caricatures. He always tries to add something to make each stand out as a character in his own right, but one of those who stands out the most is Aragorn, the Strider.

Aragorn is first mentioned in the trilogy in context with the search for Gollum. Gandalf describes him as "the greatest traveller and huntsman of this age of the world", and we are told that he came out of "great perils" to give his information. Thus he is established immediately as an heroic figure. Although most of the trilogy's characters undergo transmutations of one sort or another, Aragorn's are the greatest: from the sinister, lowly Strider to the noble Aragorn, King of Gondor. He is certainly one of the most developed characters of the book, with an ever-present aura of despair that surrounds him and which disappears only

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in the final stages of the trilogy. This despair is explained in the appendix about Aragorn by the fact that he is in love with the Lady Arwen, an elf-lady who must relinquish her immortality if she is to wed him: "His face was sad and stern because of the doom that was laid upon him"; in asking her to marry him he is asking her to die.

Aragorn is, it is later revealed, one of a strange folk called the Rangers, who "were believed to have strange powers of sight and hearing, and to understand the languages of beasts and birds", quite extraordinary people, in fact. His first actual appearance in the story, in the Prancing Pony inn, is very sinister. He is described as "a strange-looking, weather-beaten man sitting in the shadows", and, we are told, "he wore a hood that overshadowed his face, but the gleam of his eyes could still be seen as he watched the hobbits". This shroud of hostility around Strider adds to the general dark atmosphere of menace that Tolkien had built up at that stage of the story. To have immediately introduced Strider as a path-finding friend would have greatly reduced the tension, perhaps ruined it. Also, his misleading introduction adds to Strider's general intrigue. Frodo himself reckons Strider to be a rogue, as do Sam and Mr. Butterbur, the innkeeper, both of whom advise Frodo against him. However, Gandalf's letter clears his name and then some of the power of Aragorn is revealed: "He stood up and seemed to grow taller. In his eyes gleamed a light, keen and commanding". This is a hint of the true Aragorn, future king, dignified, noble and powerful, who contrasts strongly, thus emphasising his nobility, with the sinister and rather shabby Strider. Gandalf's rhyme about Strider sums up his character and his role in the saga admirably:

"All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost,
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost,
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring,
Renewed shall be the blade that was broken,
The crownless shall again be king."

At first everything about Strider was ominous. He had a formidable appearance and he obviously had a certain amount of knowledge about the dangers which had to be faced, and so was full of grim portends of doom for the coming journey, and sometimes for the world. Nevertheless, after the initial uneasiness around him is dissipated he manages to instil in Frodo and the others a quiet confidence in his own abilities which reassures them and makes the reader feel that he is one



of the more competent and resourceful persons in the story, though at first this is almost entirely through his connections with Gandalf and the latter's recommendations of him. Strider gives the group the direction and purpose it lacked before and it is he who plans their best paths because of his deeper knowledge. Whereas the hobbits were obviously and hopelessly outmatched by the Dark Forces, we are made to feel that Strider has more than a chance against them.

He also has a deep and intimate knowledge of the lore of Middle-Earth as evidenced first by his tale of Tinuviel, a tale which is more than slightly connected to Aragorn's own story. Some more of Strider's power is revealed in his attempts to heal Frodo's wound. He has a thorough knowledge of the properties of the weapon that made the wound and he shows himself to be somewhat of a scientist with his knowledge of the healing herbs. Strider is almost a universal man; that is to say, he is knowledgeable and skilful in all arts and sciences which, of course, places him as one of the 'super-characters' of the trilogy. He has knowledge that the ordinary characters do not have and can do that which they cannot. In fact, his power as an agent of good is possibly second only to that of Gandalf himself. Frodo, when talking to Gandalf about Strider says that, "he reminds me often of you". He respects him, although, "he is strange and grim at times", and he was "afraid of him at first". Aragorn is portrayed as he truly ought to be on the night of the feast at Rivendell; "his dark hood was thrown back and he seemed to be clad in elven mail, and a stone shone upon his breast". This is a hint of the majesty of the Aragorn who is of a race of kings, "the last remnant in the North of the great people, the Men of the West, Chief of the Dunedain".

It is also during this episode that the Lady Arwen is first mentioned. Earlier Aragorn had said that Rivendell was "where my heart is" (although, unfortunately, he later says that his heart is at Lothlorien). At this stage, Aragorn was actually betrothed to Arwen, but the betrothal probably happened only a short time before he met Frodo and his company. Hence, he would still no doubt be anguished that he is indirectly causing the death of the one he loves.

It seems that the part Aragorn plays in the war against Sauron was predestined. He himself often refers to his fate, and Boromir, the warrior from Gondor who became a member of the Fellowship, said he had a dream in which he heard the words, "Seek for the sword that was broken", and that sword, which once belonged to Elindil, one of the principle fighters in the first battle against Sauron, is now Aragorn's. Thus, Aragorn accepts that he is destined to go to Minas Tirith: "It is not my fate to sit in peace."

Aragorn contrasts strongly with Boromir. Both are warriors, yet one is all humility whereas the other is proud and sometimes arrogant. Compare, "and those who shelter behind us give us praise. By our valour the wild folk of the East are still restrained", with, "Travellers scowl at us, and countrymen give us scornful names", yet Aragorn still performed his duties as a Ranger. Aragorn departed from Rivendell "clad only in rusty green and brown", but Boromir sounds his war-horn and goes forth with a flourish instead of with the secrecy desired. He refuses to "go forth as a thief in the night". His pomposity serves to emphasise Aragorn's humility, which is proved much later when he refuses to reclaim his kingship of Gondor.

There is no doubt that Aragorn is co-leader of the Fellowship with Gandalf. He takes an active part in the planning and direction and is often the one who sees or senses the danger in a situation. When Gandalf 'dies' at Khazad-Dum - later to be 'resurrected', the religious imagery stressing his goodness and godliness - Aragorn assumes leadership immediately: "I will lead you now". Although he is not as powerful as Gandalf, Aragorn obviously has many capabilities and his right to leadership is unquestionable. It is almost as though he is a disciple of Gandalf's, yet the gap between them is not so great as disciple-master, so perhaps it would be truer to compare Aragorn to Jesus and Gandalf to God. There is also the obvious fact that the first letters of Gandalf's and Sauron's names are the same as those of their counterparts - God and Satan - which emphasises the nature of the trilogy as an expression of the battle between good and evil, light and dark. The war against Sauron is reminiscent of God's battle against Satan and his rebellious angels when he was first cast out of heaven.

Aragorn, however, is far from all-powerful and at Lorien he is troubled and doubtful because of the decisions he must make; "I am not Gandalf, though I have tried to bear his part". In fact, from the passing of Gandalf until his return, Aragorn does not lead the Fellowship, but guides them. He freely acknowledges that his council may be wrong and is always prepared to listen and accede to the advice of the others. It is almost with relief more than gladness, that he

greeted Gandalf on his return: "Beyond all hope you return to us in our need". The burden of leadership has passed from his shoulders back to the more sturdy ones of Gandalf.

At Edoras another problem confronts Aragorn, that of the Lady Eowyn. Despite the fact that he and Lady Arwen are betrothed, something deeper than a mere affection definitely seems to develop between him and Eowyn. Perhaps Tolkien



felt that his leading man needed a leading lady to complete the picture of the dashing hero and, since Arwen was too distant in time and place to be associated with Aragorn at that point, he brought in Eowyn. Eowyn does complement Aragorn to a certain extent in that they are the male and female principles united. In any case, something akin to love does develop in them both: "Aragorn, for the first time in the full light of day, beheld Eowyn, Lady of Rohan, and thought her fair, fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that

has not yet come to womanhood. And now she was suddenly aware of him: tall heir of kings, wise with many winters, grey-cloaked, hiding a power that yet she felt", and later, "as she stood before Aragorn she paused suddenly and looked upon him, and her eyes were shining. And he looked down upon her fair face and smiled". Later, however, he appears to remember Arwen and his duty towards her. He makes it obvious whom he would choose if, in fact, it did come to making a decision: "Were I to go where my heart dwells, far in the North I would now be wandering, in the fair valley of Rivendell". Eowyn's love for Aragorn must have been quite temporary for she later falls in love with Faramir, the brother of Boromir.

During the parts of the trilogy where two stories are being told concurrently, Aragorn is undoubtedly the hero of the parts featuring him and his comrades. He has all the qualities of the traditional, conventional, Arthurian hero; the love of a fair lady, bravery, daring, regality and chivalry. In fact, Tolkien has admitted his indebtedness to Malory and his Arthurian legends. It is Aragorn and Eomer whose fighting prowess appears most impressive at Helm's Deep. "So great a power and royalty was revealed in Aragorn, as he stood there alone above the ruined gates, before the host of his enemies." Aragorn's fighting skill does seem exaggerated at times, to add colour and excitement, and he also appears to possess

invulnerability, for once or twice he is overcome with Orcs, yet escapes unscathed.

At various intervals in the trilogy Aragorn hints, or states outright, that he is slowly but surely progressing towards his destiny. This progress seems to build and double on itself until the final climatic events, namely the battle of the Pelennor Fields and Aragorn's coronation. During the period of revelations we are made more and more aware of Aragorn's true stature, both through his own self-realisation, when he claims the Palantir, for example, and through others' changing attitudes towards him. Gandalf, in his wisdom and perception, is the first to realise what heights of grandeur Aragorn has reached and will reach and is thus the first to accord him the due honour; he bows to him as he hands him the Palantir. That this honour is justly merited is perhaps shown most of all by the fact that the title of the third volume, "The Return of the King" - more religious symbolism - refers to Aragorn's reclaiming of the kingship of Gondor.



Throughout the first two volumes of the trilogy it is made clear that Aragorn's future is preordained by fate and that his fate as Isildur's heir is bound up with the war against Sauron: "The light of Anduril must now be uncovered in the battle for which it has so long waited" - Anduril being Aragorn's sword, - which seems to have embodied within itself much of its owner's being. That Sauron fears Aragorn is clear by several remarks from Aragorn: "Sauron has not forgotten Isildur and the sword of Elindil", and later, "To know that he lived and walked the earth was a blow to his heart". Also, it is notable that Aragorn's existence was kept secret for many years, as revealed in the appendix: "But he was called Estel, that is 'Hope', and his true name and lineage were kept secret at the bidding of Elrond, for the Wise then knew that the enemy was seeking to discover the Heir of Isildur, if any remained upon earth".

Aragorn does indeed play an important part in the battle against the Dark Lord. He leads the Dunedain, of course, but also it is only he who has the power to summon the Men of the Mountain to fulfil their oath to his ancestor, Isildur, even though they have been dead for many years. He is featured prominently in one of

the most dramatic parts of the trilogy, that is when his ships appear on the horizon and he leads the relief, which is almost a rescue, of Pelennor: "Before all went Aragorn, with the Flame of the West, Anduril, like a new fire rekindled". The 'new fire rekindled' did not only apply to Anduril, but also to Aragorn himself. This dashing, heroic figure was a far cry from the Strider of old. Yet, even in his hour of triumph, Aragorn shows the humility which is an ever-present aspect of his character, when he refuses to take back the kingship of Gondor until bidden to do so by the Lord Stewart of the city. The coronation itself is essentially extremely humble, although the descriptive picture of Aragorn is the quintessence of nobility. Gandalf hails him as the "King of Gondor and Lord of the Western Lands" who "has taken back all his ancient realm".

Another facet of Aragorn is shown at the Houses of Healing in Gondor, when he is the only person who has the ability to save Faramir, Merry and Eowyn. The miraculous way in which he virtually wills the three of them back to life is extremely symbolic of Christ's miracles.

The supreme climax in the saga of Aragorn is his marriage to the Lady Arwen. Its great importance to Aragorn is shown in his words, "A day draws near that I have looked for in all the years of my manhood"; words which contain some of the heartaching yearning he had to undergo because he dared to fall in love with the Elf-Queen. Although the atmosphere at the coronation is one of noble restraint, Aragorn appears to forget his regality for the wedding and gives way to the pure unrestrained joy of a man on his wedding day: "And Aragorn, the King Elissar, wedded Undomiel in the City of the King upon the day of Midsummer; and the tale of their long waiting and labours was come to fulfilment."

Aragorn does not die during the story of "The Lord of the Rings", but his eventual death, which is the doom of all men, is referred to: "I shall die", "...and when those who are now in the wombs of women are born and grown old, I too shall be old". In fact, in the story he is allowed a poetically romantic farewell. There is an aura of sadness around the various departures in any case, but Aragorn's is particularly touching, yet majestic, as befits his role of the heroic king: "and when after a while they turned and looked back they saw the King of the West sitting on his horse with his knights about him. Then Aragorn took the green stone and held it up; and there came a green fire from his hand". The manner of Aragorn's death is, in fact, recounted in the appendix. It is dignified and majestic, as his life. The last of Aragorn's powers is his ability to "go at my will", and this he chooses to do before he reaches senility. In fact, in death some of his past greatness returns to him: "the grace of his youth

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and the valour of his manhood and the wisdom and majesty of his age were blended together".

Thus, Aragorn progressed through various stages, identities almost, from Strider to King of Gondor. He is perhaps most interesting in his role as Strider because of the sinister element he has at that point. Aragorn the heroic swashbuckler is rather conventional, but our interest is still maintained by the various references to the mysterious fate towards which he is hastening. He eventually emerges as the noblest character of the book, but unfortunately becomes somewhat too noble and thus suffers from being flat and two-dimensional. However, just as the hobbits give the story much of its charm and reader identification, so Aragorn and the other loftier characters give the story its high heroic significance and emphasise the theme of the struggle between good and evil. Finally, as well as comparing Aragorn to Christ, one can also compare him to King Arthur. Aragorn has his Guinevere, his Excalibur and his league of knights. Unfortunately, Aragorn, like Arthur, is too noble and, therefore, unconvincing. At the end he has no faults or shortcomings whatsoever. When he took over from Gandalf one could sympathise with him because of his self-doubts, but Aragorn the King does not need sympathy. Also, Aragorn lacks the dry humour and warmth of Gandalf who, though more powerful, is much more human. Even Aragorn's speech is cold and formal at the end, all of which leads to the conclusion that as Aragorn gradually gains in status he loses in humanity.



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