

Tom Bombadil and the Journey for Middle-earth

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Tolkien was a very meticulous writer. Everything he created has its place in his legendarium, so when readers become lost along with the hobbits in the Old Forest and are found by the seemingly random Tom Bombadil, it's no wonder we feel confused. In a lot of ways, it seems like Tom doesn't fit into the wider story of *The Lord of the Rings*. In a world of things with explanations and histories so complex that it's easy to forget they aren't real, Tom is mysterious and highly fantasized. To name only his oddest characteristics: he dresses in bright colors, appears to be of an unknown race, talks in a sing-song rhythm, and brings with him an air that seems to send the hobbits into a trance. Whereas many aspects of Tolkien's world maintain humanistic features, Bombadil seems to have stepped

however, just because Tom is an *anomaly* doesn't mean he is *unimportant*. Tolkien would not have liked to hear his character discussed as an allegory, so I suggest we broaden our view and realize that Tom plays a crucial role within the book. He should be examined as a character who opposes the Ring's power and also guides the hobbits in a critical time, remaining immensely important throughout the story.

When examining Tom Bombadil, it is crucial to remember that he not only guides the hobbits on their journey but initiates the adventure that ultimately saves Middle-earth. He is single-handedly responsible for the continuation of the Ring quest, and thus is related to all the events that transpire afterwards. He saves Frodo and his companions on more than one occasion. Usually these occasions are initiated by



out of a children's tale. He's oddly discordant with the rest of the story, yet Tolkien chose to keep him there. In fact, the encounter with Tom Bombadil is one of the few things that remains original to Tolkien's first drafts of the books. Although it may not seem so at first, Bombadil can be seen as a figure intertwined with the entire story. He provides a doorway between the hobbits' past and the journey that lies ahead, as well as functioning as a figurehead for power which is enlightening and kind. His relationship to goodness as well as to the future of Frodo's journey reveals the future of Middle-earth as a place in which benevolence reigns.

Previous critics on this topic – including Klaus Jensen, Liam Campbell, and David Gay – have treated Tom as an isolated character and therefore pulled him out of context to analyze him. Many of their answers to the questions of Bombadil's identity involve other characters in mythologies or histories outside of Tolkien's universe. Although these are valid and interesting interpretations, there is a wealth of information which can be gained by analyzing Bombadil fully within the context of the world he was written into. Tom Bombadil and his companion Goldberry are radically different from other components of Tolkien's realm;

moments of sleep: they are coaxed to sleep and nearly killed by Old Man Willow, face nightmares during their dreams at Bombadil's house, fall asleep on the Barrow-downs, and are subsequently captured by a Barrow-wight who also puts them to sleep. Bombadil saves them from Old Man Willow, eases their nightmares, and destroys the Barrow-wight who was hunting them. Sleep represents a state of inactivity, in which the hobbits are not moving forward or advancing on their quest. However, each time this sleep occurs, Bombadil is there to wake them up and set them on the right path. Although the hobbits tried to protect themselves, there is little doubt that without Bombadil's strength, they would have been doomed. The Ring would have fallen into the hands of evil, and Middle-earth would have been destroyed.

Hobbits and Swords

Tom also allows the quest to continue by providing the hobbits with swords. Doing this not only gives the hobbits a means to protect themselves but also prepares them for the journey ahead of them in a figurative sense. He forces them to realize that this will be much harder, and much more dangerous, than they had originally thought. These swords

prove to be a symbol of hope throughout the story, perpetuating the continual role Tom plays. Merry's sword helps to defeat the Witch-King of Angmar, eliminating one force of evil from the world. Sam also experiences a moment of darkness which is alleviated by the memory of Bombadil. Alone in Shelob's lair, he reaches for the sword which was given to him by Bombadil on the Barrow-downs:

"[A]nd he laid his hand upon the hilt of his sword; and as he did so, he thought of the darkness of the barrow whence it came. 'I wish old Tom was near us now!' he thought. Then, as he stood, darkness about him and a blackness of despair and anger in his heart, it seemed to him that he saw a light."¹

Tom also provides hope while the hobbits still reside in his home. When Frodo awakens after what seems to be his first night in the house of Bombadil, he runs to the Eastern window and opens it: "In the East... the sky spoke of rain to come; but the light was broadening quickly, and the red flowers on the beans began to glow against the wet green leaves."² The East is the direction in which Mordor lies and is symbolic of the future. The fact that the "sky spoke of rain to come" alludes to the troubles that lie ahead. They must endure many difficulties in order to destroy the Ring. However, "the light was broadening quickly," meaning that hope lies beyond all the strife. Tom is often associated with light imagery as he battles back the darkness, most clearly seen in his appearance at the Barrow-downs: "A low door-like opening appeared at the end of the chamber beyond Frodo's feet; and there was Tom's head (hat, feather, and all) framed against the light of the sun rising red behind him."³ This connects the light of the hope Tom embodies with the light that Frodo saw on the horizon. Tom *is* that hope beyond the strife. As Frodo gazed towards the east, "Pippin looked out of the western window, down into a pool of mist. The Forest was hidden under a fog. It was like looking down on to a sloping cloud-roof from above."² This shows that the past, where the hobbits came from, is mysterious and not accessible. They will never be able to fully assimilate back into their past ways if they try to return to them. Because the hobbits are able to see both their past and future from Bombadil's house, readers may view him as a doorway between those two places in the lives of Frodo

and his friends; additionally, he provides them with the hope they need to succeed.

It cannot be denied that Tom Bombadil appears at a time and a place which serve liminal roles in *The Lord of the Rings*. The hobbits are just leaving their home and embarking on their adventure. He happens to stumble upon the hobbits just when they are overwhelmed, and it seems that they will not be able to complete the task they were given by Gandalf. Michael Treschow and Mark Duckworth aptly describe that the hobbits "are shown to be unable to take care of themselves in the wide world and so unequal to the terrible quest that they have undertaken."⁴ Bombadil comes to the hobbits' aid by saving their lives and pushing them forward, and serves as a transitional character by preparing them for the journey that lies ahead. He provides them with hope and a sense of purpose, a bridge in the journey between where they come from and where they are going.



He unveils to them the gravity of their mission, initiating the journey that will ultimately destroy the Ring. His house is a segue, and a safe place for them to rest and collect themselves as the reality of how dangerous and difficult their quest will be sinks in. This time with Bombadil also allows them to face what lies ahead.

The hope Tom provides opposes the despair and evil embodied in the Ring. Although the help Bombadil gives the hobbits shows his clear sympathy with our protagonists, he has an unusual relationship with the Ring, one that differs from all the other characters'. Many of the story's characters are, at one point, confronted with the Ring and find themselves tempted. As Liam Campbell aptly writes: "the One Ring becomes a gauge; an object which when dealt with, considered or handled by a given character, betrays that character's true nature and his or her susceptibility

to the seduction of power.”⁵ Generally, we find that those whom we view as our protagonists reject the power of the Ring, while those whom we view as antagonists seek this power. There are certainly exceptions to this, with characters such as Boromir and Gollum, and at some points even Frodo, finding themselves warped by desire for the Ring even though they did not have evil intentions; however, the good characters’ choice to actively resist the power of the One Ring largely separates them from the evil characters in the story.

Tom’s morality, however, cannot be gauged simply by using the Ring. Although he is not the only character to appear in a “grey” area which challenges clear categories of good and evil, he is the only character who expresses absolutely no longing for the power of the Ring when confronted with it. Thus, even though he helps our protagonists, he cannot be branded as a simply “good” character, because this lowers him to the level of characters who must actively resist this corrupting power. It cannot be said that Tom refuses this power, because he is not tempted by it. This complete separation from the Ring raises Tom Bombadil above even Gandalf and Galadriel and places him as an opposite of the Ring. Even though the Ring is an object instead of a character, we see very clearly that it has autonomy. It takes the help of a powerful being such as Bombadil, and other powerful “good guys” such as Gandalf, Galadriel and Aragorn, to destroy it and oppose it. Tom not only sympathizes with Frodo, but seems to embody the higher level of “goodness” that they hope to gain by destroying the Ring.

Tom and the Ring

But what exactly is the source of this ethereal “goodness” which allows Tom to disregard any power the Ring promises him? Bombadil is never said to be a Maia or a Vala, so why is he such a strong figure? Why does he care so little for the Ring? Tolkien wrote in one of his letters that Tom is able to repudiate the Ring’s power because “the story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side . . . but if you have, as it were . . . renounced control . . . then the questions of rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you.”⁶ Although it seems instinctual to take the author’s view as the final answer, it can’t help but seem odd that Tolkien would say this when Tom clearly has so *much* power, and clearly has not renounced control. He destroys the Barrow-wight and fights off Old Man Willow, and we see in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* that he commands other parts of nature as well. Perhaps it is not that Tom rejects the Ring because he does not need power, but because he has his own power, a clean and pure power. This is why the Ring seems such a trifle to Bombadil. As the symbol of the kind of power which twists the mind with longing, it holds no sway over Bombadil, who represents power which fills the mind with knowledge. Thus, when confronted with the Ring, Tom merely plays with it, and in fact he *looks through it*. Campbell once again makes a good insight when he suggests that Tom does this to “expose the trick; to break the illusion rather than create one.”⁷ By

holding the Ring before him like an insubstantial trinket, he undermines its power.

Tom Bombadil’s influence on the entire story of *The Lord of the Rings* culminates in his role as a liminal character. He sends the hobbits from their past into their future and provides the source of hope which shows them the direction Middle-earth must take. *The Lord of the Rings* closes at the end of an Age, and Tom Bombadil helps usher this in. Frodo thinks of Bombadil in that beautiful, goose-bump-inducing passage at the end of the book, when the characters we have come to love sail West:

“[O]n a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.”⁷

As Frodo and other wardens of good, such as Gandalf, leave Middle-earth, they leave it in Bombadil’s protection. Without the Ring, kindness and goodness are able to fully reign over the world, ushered into existence with Tom’s influence pushing Frodo and his companions forward. Tom Bombadil’s powers were able to oppose the Ring and ensure its destruction and, in the end, the citizens of Middle-earth have him to thank for their freedom. Tom Bombadil is the green country and the sunrise, the light broadening quickly on the horizon, the hope and goodness, which defeated the varying evils and corrupting power of Sauron and his Ring.

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