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Frodo as the scapegoat child of Middle-earth

LYNN WHITAKER

On recently rereading the Ursula Le Guin short story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, I was struck by the possibility of using Le Guin's theme of the child scapegoat as a lens through which to examine the character of Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. While stopping short of terming this a 'queer reading' strategy (as I lack the counter-culture objective normally allied to such practice), I should stress that the reading offered here is, deliberately, at least partially oppositional or 'against the grain' of an ordinary construction of the text. I do not, therefore, suggest that this analysis in any way divines Tolkien's 'true' or unconscious meaning; instead, I hope that, by adopting an alternative reading strategy, additional insight may be gained into the power of the Frodo character.

First published in 1973 in the original fiction anthology journal *New Dimensions* and reprinted in 1976 in Le Guin's own collection of science-fiction stories, *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*[1], Le Guin's tale (or 'psychomyth' as she terms it) makes for very uncomfortable reading. It tells of the utopian city of Omelas and of its intelligent, joyous people. That the people are not, "simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians", is central to the moral and narrative impact of the condition of their ideal existence: the happiness of Omelas is dependent on the misery and suffering of one child kept imprisoned in a basement.

The description of the child is affective, gross in its abject nature and gross in its nearness to the mark of actual child poverty and abuse:

Perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition and neglect. … The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes … one of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. … "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining … and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin … its belly protrudes … It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually. (ref. 1, p. 281)

Most gross of all, perhaps, is the implication of the reader's complicity in this suffering, reinforced by Le Guin's use of direct address to the reader throughout:

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing. (ref. 1, p. 280)

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to tell, and this is quite incredible. (ref. 1, p. 283)

Like the citizens of Omelas (who each know of the child's existence), the reader also accepts — the story cannot be unread — the existence of the child and of its constituent role in the happiness of the state and its individuals:

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, … even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery. (ref. 1, p. 282)

commentary

That Le Guin chooses a child figure (and stresses that, in contrast to the urbane and knowing adults, it is an unwilling and unwitting participant in the 'bargain' by which Omelas thrives) is central to the power of her version of the scapegoat archetype. The original Biblical scapegoat — the goat to which Aaron transfers the sins of the Israelites and that is then execrated, ejected from society — imports the key notions of being helpless, unwitting, innocent, blameless and isolated: key notions that are all the more powerful when applied to a child figure. In many media texts the figure of the child stands as useful shorthand for innocence, and the abject child stands for the abuse of that innocence, a victim of the adult world. We are all familiar with this through images of war, disaster and tragedy wherein the lone child symbolizes collective suffering (and collective accountability). As journalism professor Susan Moeller writes, in her book *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sells Disease, Famine, War and Death*[2]:

> An emaciated child is not yet associated with the stereotypes attached to its color, its culture or its political environment. Skeletal children personify innocence abused. They bring moral clarity to the complex story of famine. Their images cut through the social, economic and political context to create an imperative statement.
>
> (ref. 2, p. 98)

I would argue that the "imperative statement" is that of 'Be guilty. Do something. Help me. Remember me.' It applies equally to the war child and the famine child (and easily attaches to the 'doomed youth' or 'lost boys' of Tolkien's First World War generation, especially those most tangibly scarred reminders, the lads who 'came back from the front but not from the war'). Omelas is not ignorant of such an imperative but remains a utopia precisely because its citizens feel compassion but not guilt: they wish to help but know they are powerless, so they either choose to accept, "the terrible justice of reality" (ref. 1, p. 283) or they choose to leave (the eponymous "ones who walk away from Omelas"). Le Guin's message of hope for humanity is that there are always some who choose to walk away.

The victimized, powerless child is not the Frodo offered by Tolkien — Frodo is middle-aged; he volunteers for the quest; he makes a willing sacrifice, and his choice (though arguably uninformed) would not have been otherwise — but nonetheless there is much additional poignancy and understanding to be gained in reading Frodo as a child figure. (And, indeed, Peter Jackson's casting of the child-like Elijah Wood in the role of Frodo in the film adaptation capitalized on this.) If anything, a more obvious candidate for the scapegoat child of Middle-earth might be Gollum, as I will discuss later.

To a certain extent, however, in constructing Frodo as an orphaned character, Tolkien himself (also an orphaned child) is exploiting the mythic power of a child archetype. Tolkien makes Frodo an orphan for mainly narrative reasons — a neat plot device by which Frodo is heir to Bilbo's estate (including, of course, the Ring) — but the figure of the orphaned (or homeless, estranged, abandoned, kidnapped or otherwise isolated from parental governance) child resonates at a deeper level. We do not describe adults as 'orphans' — it is applied only to the childhood state and carries with it notions of vulnerability and wretchedness along with liberation and autonomy. The trope of isolation from parents or of exclusion from the family unit or home — whether literal or metaphorical — is almost a prerequisite for a successful child protagonist in both children's and non-children's media (Harry Potter, the evacuated Pevensies, Lyra Belacqua, Lolita) and is a staple metaphor for the child's self-aware autonomy within the fairy tale, as Bettelheim writes[3]:

> As in many fairytales, being pushed out of the home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realisation requires leaving the orbit of the home … The development process is inescapable; the pain of it is symbolised in the children's unhappiness.
>
> (ref. 3, p. 79)

Jack Zipes would go still further, arguing[4] that the trope of (child) abandonment is a major motif in all literature, constituting a legitimation of child abuse (ref. 4, pp. 39-60). In Frodo the trope is doubled: he is an orphan, estranged from his first home, and then again left, this time by his adoptive parent, Bilbo, and forced from his second home, Bag End. (In fact the trope is more than doubled as Frodo can ultimately never remain with any 'family' or 'home'.) Thus Frodo is readily understood as a child figure.

It is easy to characterize all hobbits, in general, as 'child-like', (at least in that they are like the children of adult nostalgia and romanticized pastoral projection, not the 'feral' children of the ASBO and the hoodie) as suggested by Tolkien's description of their physical characteristics and personality traits in the prologue (all page references are to the 1995 single-volume HarperCollins UK paperback edition):

> For they are a little people, … . Their height is variable, ranging between two and four feet of our measure. … They dressed in bright colours … but they seldom wore shoes … Their faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times … They were hospitable and delighted in parties, and in presents, which they gave away freely and eagerly accepted … A love of learning was far from general among them.
>
> (Prologue, pp. 1–2)

Within the internal text, hobbits are easily mistaken for children, as illustrated by Aragorn's exchange with Eomer, "They would be small, only children to your eyes" (Book III, Ch. 2, p. 424) and they are frequently treated as such, especially by adult (male) authority figures (for example, Theoden's refusal to let Merry ride to war, Gandalf's rebukes of Pippin in Moria). Likewise, the term 'Halfling', accepted throughout as non-pejorative, connotes not only the physical size of hobbits but perhaps also their liminal status as something between adult and child. The Shire too, as a realm protected unbeknownst to the innocent hobbits, can

be read as an infantilized state, looked after and guarded by 'grown-ups' who collude to keep their real function hidden from their charges (like the magic of Santa Claus). Aragorn articulates this concept at the Council of Elrond:

"Strider" I am to one fat man who lives within a day's march of foes that would freeze his heart, or lay his little town in ruin, if he were not guarded ceaselessly. Yet we would not have it otherwise. If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be, and we must be secret to keep them so.   (Book II, Ch. 2, p. 242)

But it is Frodo's quest and his ensuing transformation to vulnerable, helpless, and innocent victim on which the fate of Middle-earth rests that make him bear closest comparison with Le Guin's scapegoat child figure, rather than his status as an orphan, a hobbit and a resident of the Shire. Throughout the quest, Frodo is increasingly infantilized, dependent on Sam to be fed, watered, clothed and sheltered. The title of Book IV, Chapter 10, 'The Choices of Master Samwise', signifies the point at which Frodo's reliance on Sam's choices and decisions is irreversible, so that by the time we reach Book VI, Chapter 3, 'Mount Doom', he is completely incapacitated. The scene is given additional emotive affect by Tolkien's contrasting images of the happy child (playing in the Shire) and the abject child (what Frodo has become):

Sam looked at him and wept in his heart … 'Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride. Just tell him where to go, and he'll go.' … Whether because Frodo was so worn by his long pains, wound of knife, and venomous sting, and sorrow, fear, and homeless wandering, or because some gift of final strength was given to him, Sam lifted Frodo with no more difficulty than if he were carrying a hobbit-child pig-a-back in some romp on the lawns or hayfields of the Shire.   (Book VI, Ch. 3, pp. 919–920)

Especially in this chapter, when Frodo and Sam are pushed to the limits of their endurance and are at their most vulnerable, Tolkien presents us with many instances of physical affection between Sam and Frodo: for example, sleeping side by side, hand in hand; Sam kissing Frodo's hands, caressing his brow. It is easy — perhaps necessary even — to read these actions as non-sexual (or perhaps pre-heterosexual would be a more accurate term for the dominant construction of the asexual child) and as signifiers of idealized and pure love. Here both hobbits are understood as children, perhaps siblings (a parent–child relationship could also be substantiated but at odds with the construction of Frodo as orphan adrift in the wild), and Tolkien thus iterates the conflation of innocence and childhood as an idealized state. This innocent and juvenile state is the corollary of the Judaeo-Christian mythos of expulsion from paradise wherein (sexual) knowledge = guilt = corruption. Although Le Guin subverts this mythos, in that it is not the lack of knowledge that upholds her paradise of Omelas but rather the lack of guilt at that knowledge, both elements — knowledge and non-guilt — must be present. As with the Judaeo-Christian

"stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks," read Elrond, "and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole"

When the thrush knocks
Becky Hitchin

version, 'knowledge' in Omelas still occurs as a precursor of adolescence, that is, at the time of sexual curiosity:

> This [the existence of the scapegoat child] is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young people. (ref. 1, p. 282)

> At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage. (ref. 1, p. 283)

Poignant contrast is therefore created between the new knowledge of the young people and the imbecile nature of the child. The scapegoat child can never properly come in to knowledge, can never fully mature: it is both the *a priori* and continuing condition of his imbecile scapegoat status — and this also is Frodo's fate.

I would argue that it is the irreversible and ineffable nature of Frodo's corrupting depredations that most align him with the unchanging and eternal scapegoat child archetype and it is this that seems the most cruel and terrible 'justice' of his sacrificial role. Sam, Merry and Pippin will all go on to enjoy home and family, to enjoy adulthood, but Frodo cannot. Middle-earth is saved by Frodo, but not for him, and it can only be thus, as explicitly stated in the final chapter when Frodo departs for the Undying Lands. It is not enough that he destroyed the Ring; he must give himself up, too:

> I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them. (Book VI, Ch. 9, p. 1006)

Sam's sense of loss here is heightened by the sense that his parting from Frodo is untimely, unfair, "I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done" (Book VI, Chapter 9, p. 1006), and this evokes the notion of child death, of an individual being cut down 'before his time'. Both Bilbo and Sam also leave for the undying lands, but it is not 'before their time'. This is the terrible paradox of Frodo's sacrifice: he remains forever 'a child' because he leaves 'before his time' and yet he must leave because he can no longer go back to the state of childlike innocence that was 'before'. The Ring has, as of fact, corrupted Frodo, and, as with Gollum, even its destruction could no longer recuperate him.

For the Gollum character, too, could easily be understood as a scapegoat child, his squalid, wasted physicality and abject condition bearing direct comparison to Le Guin's description. Gollum, too, is orphaned or estranged from his family and society, as Gandalf explains to Frodo:

> The ring had given him power according to his stature. It is not to be wondered at that he became very unpopular and was shunned (when visible) by all his relations. They kicked him, and he bit their feet. He took to thieving and to muttering to himself, and gurgling in his throat. So they called him Gollum, and cursed him, and told him to go far away; and his grandmother, desiring peace, expelled him from the family and turned him out of her hole. (Book I, Ch. 2, p. 52)

But where the comparison breaks down is in Gollum's accountability for his own situation: the seed of evil that is within him and that is acted upon to acquire the Ring by murder (and on which the ring confers power 'according to stature') distinguishes Gollum from the scapegoat child who starts from a position of innocence. Tolkien's creature is one whom we should pity but not one whom we consider an innocent victim.

This balance of pity and blame was, for me, problematic within the film trilogy's depiction of Gollum, the technical marvel of the achievement and the power of Andy Serkis's performance notwithstanding. In becoming a visible, material reality, Gollum was transformed to a creature deserving of even greater sympathy than Tolkien's more chilling, "ghost that drank blood" (Book I, Ch. 2, p. 57). Almost in the same way that the visible child of the charity ad evokes a stronger effect and response than the non-visible knowledge that such a child exists in the far off, 'other' somewhere, the film Gollum, visually evocative of both a holocaust survivor and an abandoned dog, was signified as a victim of evil and inhumanity more than a perpetrator: the film Gollum didn't seem like a creature who, "slipped through windows to find cradles" (Book I, Ch. 2, p. 57) as such an action would seem independent of the power of the Ring.

Our pity for the film Gollum is based mainly on our understanding that his situation is predicated on the irresistible force of the Ring rather than predicated on his own disposition towards evil that the ring amplifies: by negating personal choice this version of Gollum is neither blameworthy nor blame-free. And so, the film Gollum cannot be read as a scapegoat, despite the surface resemblance to the archetype.

Neither Tolkien's Gollum nor the film interpretation therefore have the initial state of innocence required for the scapegoat archetype to function (although for differing reasons) but Frodo (ultimately corruptible and so ultimately corrupted) starts from a position of innocence and pure heart, making the role of scapegoat possible — and utterly poignant, relying as it does on a perversion of that innocence. For the child scapegoat archetype works precisely because of that inexorably corrupted innocence.

This is the true and vile potency of the child scapegoat archetype (and where this reading is most against the grain of Tolkien's conception) as it brokers no element of redemption within its scope of 'blameless blame', depending, as it does, on a de facto paradoxical construction of both corruption and the idealized child state of innocence. Nothing that the scapegoat child can do can change that — the child's cry

Sam, Merry and Pippin will all go on to enjoy home and family, to enjoy adulthood, but Frodo cannot.

of "I will be good" is irrelevant to its incarcerated, castigated state. The child of Le Guin's tale could not be liberated on account of its own action or inaction, nor is it there as a punishment for anything that it has done or neglected, but, by being there, it is become — within the unique terms of the mythos, and under the terms of the unwitting sacrificial role — an abomination, a corruption, a creature of blame. And that blame or corruption is irreversible, as the citizens of Omelas come to accept:

> But as time goes on they begin to realise that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. (ref. 1, pp. 282–283)

The child is and must be 'blameless' in the ordinary sense (to engender our rightful and necessary compassion) but just as the child soldier — or the child victim of sexual abuse, or the child of original sin in pre-Enlightenment thought — must be considered innocent and blameless, lacking in the capacity to be accountable or responsible for their violated state, so too are they corrupted in having knowledge or guilt beyond the proper sphere of the child.

What, then, have I gained in looking at Frodo through the lens of this archetype, if it cannot ultimately be squared with Tolkien's message of the importance of choice, personal accountability and the infinite possibility of redemption? I think that my appreciation of and compassion for Frodo's bravery and suffering has been increased. This is because analysis of his sacrifice as unwitting or unwilling (in that it is unavoidable or inexorable, part of a greater archetype and

mythos) mitigates the potential reading of Frodo's actions as not fully brave or unselfish. By this I mean that, given the chance to save the world by one's sacrifice, who wouldn't volunteer? Who wouldn't give their life for the cause? Who wouldn't elect to be the scapegoat for humanity — and earn a place in the Undying Lands along the way? Faith in the volunteer scapegoat is the logical adjunct to Le Guin's faith (which she accredits to American philosopher William James in her introduction) that there will always be some who "walk away from Omelas" and reject the terms of its happiness; so is it really so brave of Frodo to sacrifice himself? The traditional reading mitigates such diminution of Frodo's role by building the true value of his sacrifice and heroism around the slim odds of its success, but the 'scapegoat reading' mitigates it by making Frodo the innocent and inescapable heir to the sacrificial role and thus his ensuing misery and castigation constitute inexorable and irreversible corruption. Now that sacrifice, which negates the possibility of personal redemption, is bravery indeed. �🇲

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The Stone of Erech and the Black Stone of the Ka'aba: meteorite or 'meteor-wrong'?

KRISTINE LARSEN

Among the distinctive qualities of Tolkien's writing is his ability to seamlessly interweave scientifically accurate descriptions of the natural world into his legendarium. Even when astronomical and geological events are couched in the language of myth, such as the catastrophic changes in the world that occur whenever the Valar and Melkor engage in battle, there is much that is clearly recognizable as 'natural' and 'scientific'. As such, Tolkien's writings parallel the 'real world' patterns of geomythology. According to geologist Dorothy Vitaliano, geomythology is the study of the scientific motivation behind

seemingly fantastical and mythological stories passed down from generation to generation[1]. By analogy, one can speak of 'astromythology', which searches for connections between mythic descriptions of heavenly battles and such phenomena as meteors, comets and auroras. A concrete example in the works of Tolkien is his use of meteors and meteorites. As recounted elsewhere[2,3], I have found no clear pattern to Tolkien's usage of meteors in the legendarium. In some instances they are clearly meant as metaphor, as in the case of the King and Queen of Númenor who "fell like stars into the dark" at the destruction of their land[4] or artistic licence (such as in