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**‘There and Back Again’: The Quest and Self-Discovery  
in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

J.R.R. Tolkien contributed a lot to English fantasy and children’s literature. In his novel called *The Hobbit*, he presents the adventure of the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins and thirteen dwarves who crave for getting their homeland back. Throughout their journey, they experience many dangerous situations. However, it is observed that the novel can be considered as a Bildungsroman. The main character, Bilbo Baggins has his own self-discovery through this journey. At the beginning of the novel, he is a domestic character who hesitates to show courage and gets afraid easily. Later, he not only challenges the outside world but also the inner self whose Baggins side is dominant and prevents him to have an active character. When he is back again in his hobbit-hole, he is not the same person anymore. My paper will be on the main character’s change throughout the novel and exemplify his challenge both physically and metaphorically.

**Keywords:** Fantastic Literature, Children's Literature.

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J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which is one of the most popular children's novels, is also included in the category of fantasy literature. Simply, the novel is about the adventures of a hobbit who helps thirteen dwarves to get back their rightful kingdom and treasure from the ferocious dragon, Smaug. Yet, when analysed in a deeper sense, it is observed that it is a *bildungsroman* in which the main character Bilbo Baggins is in the quest of his own identity and gains self-discovery in the end.

The term "*bildungsroman*" comes from German and it means "education". In the literary terms, it is the development of the protagonist and as J.A. Cuddon defines, it "describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life" (Cuddon 77). Likewise, *the Hobbit* is all about the adventures of the protagonist Bilbo Baggins and his maturation through these adventures. Using the theme of the quest in that sense is quite symbolic now that Bilbo is also in search of his own identity and potential strength.

The beginning of the novel is extremely important for the initiation of this process and the background of the main character. The novel starts with the depiction of Bilbo's serene lifestyle and the setting of the Hill. It is essential that Tolkien chooses a "hole in the ground" as the house of Bilbo. The narrator describes Bilbo's house as a hobbit-hole which naturally means comfort. This hole, which is full of comfort, symbolises the comfort in mother's womb. For that reason, his journey will require his getting out of that hole and beginning his development.

Bilbo's family background is also significant in his maturation. Bilbo has the name of Baggins on his father's side and the Bagginses are respectable not only because most of them are wealthy but also they have never done anything unexpected. The mother of Bilbo Baggins is Belladonna Took, who is the daughter of "one of the three remarkable daughters of the Old Took, head of the hobbits" (5). By contrast with the Bagginses, the Tookes would go on adventures. So at the beginning of the novel, it is observed that Bilbo has the mixture of genes and this clash between Bilbo's two sides is explicitly put forward.

As Dorothy Matthews explains, Bilbo prefers to live "a somewhat withdrawn, self-centered life" (Matthews 33). When Gandalf the wizard appears at his door one day, Bilbo's peaceful and self-indulgent life comes into a halt and he gets quite uncomfortable and cross, because the Wizard talks about some possible and an unexpected deeds for Bilbo.

Things get even more complicated when thirteen dwarves show up in his house respectively and they discuss their upcoming adventure in a feast-like dinner. Bilbo, unaware

of anything going around him, has a child-like position and he is even in a clueless childhood period. And when the dwarves sing their song telling the story of how their wealthy kingdom has been usurped by Smaug, Bilbo's inner conflict is represented right after the song:

“Then something Tookish woke up inside him, and he wished to go and see the great mountains, and hear the pine-trees and the waterfalls, and explore the caves, and wear a sword instead of a walking-stick. He looked out of the window. [...] Suddenly in the wood beyond The Water a flame leapt up – probably somebody lighting a wood-fire – and he thought of plundering dragons settling on his quiet Hill and kindling it all to flames. He shuddered; and very quickly he was plain Mr. Baggins of Bag-End, Under-Hill, again” (19-20).

This clash of sides depicts Bilbo's inner conflict. In fact, there is no measure between these sides. Because it is obvious that Bilbo's Tookish side, which needs to come to the surface, is almost in a slumber. In order to get aware of himself and discover his potential power, he needs to have a measure between these two sides. Margery Hourihan argues that this is “the outward journey of the ego” in Jungian terms and the later task is “the inward journey, in search of the self of wholeness and harmony” (Hourihan 49). Hence, Bilbo needs to get on this journey to attain both the treasure of the dragons and this harmony between these two sides.

In the conversation related to Bilbo's being the fourteenth man for the dwarves' expedition, Gandalf says “If I say he is a Burglar, a Burglar he is, or will be when the time comes. There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself” (24). He mentions the potential strength which will grow when the time comes. Yet, Bilbo goes on his dilemma and can not decide whether he should go with them or not. After these inner conflicts, he sleeps and wakes up to a day on which the dwarves and Gandalf are gone. Yet, after the dwarves' note and Gandalf's talk, he finds himself on a journey “without a hat, a walking-stick or any money” (36). These are items that resemble his ordered and self-centered life. Dwalin, one of the dwarves offer him his spare hood and cloak. Physically, Bilbo wears clothes belonging to someone else. Yet metaphorically, Bilbo leaves his previous Baggins-centered identity and starts his quest both in search of treasure and identity.

Though he sets on a journey like a real Took, his Baggins side still yearns for his hobbit-hole. He wishes being at home “by the fire, with the kettle beginning to sing” (38). But in order to gain his self-confidence, he needs to get away from the idea of the hobbit-hole, namely safety and comfort. For that reason, it is not coincidental that Gandalf leaves the

group. This is necessary for the plot now that Bilbo's dependency and comfort disappear with Gandalf.

The change in Bilbo does not happen immediately. Though he is not aware of it in the beginning, his development happens little by little. The first incident happens when he tries to behave like a real "burglar" and steal a Troll's purse in the pocket. Though he is not willing to do it and he hesitates, he feels an urge to do it deep inside:

"He wished himself a hundred miles away, and yet – and yet somehow he could not go straight back to Thorin and Company emptyhanded. So he stood and hesitated in the shadows. Of the various burglarious proceedings he had heard of picking the trolls' pockets seemed the least difficult, so at last he crept behind a tree just behind William. [...] Then Bilbo plucked up courage and put his little hand in William's enormous pocket. There was a purse in it, as big as a bag to Bilbo. "Ha!" thought he, warming to his new work as he lifted it carefully out, "this is a beginning!" (42-3).

Though he fails in his deed and they are saved by Gandalf, this is just the beginning of Bilbo's maturation. Yet, the next time will be a bigger challenge for him now that he will be depending on his wit. This happens when he and the dwarves are captured by the goblins in the cave. While being carried, he falls down and loses his consciousness. He opens his eyes in a cave where he encounters Gollum. This fierce creature who is obsessed with himself and plans to eat Bilbo, is another obstacle in Bilbo's maturation. Accidentally, he finds and steals Gollum's precious ring in the passage. When noticed by Gollum, he starts a game of riddle with him in order to gain time and to survive. If he wins, Gollum will lead him to the back door. The last question / riddle that Bilbo asks is "What have I got in my pocket?" (92). Here Bilbo uses his intelligence and tricks the creature in a sense. Gollum notices his ring is lost, and enrages after suspecting Bilbo of burglary. Yet, Bilbo wears the ring and gets invisible. This is his second trick on Gollum because the creature thinks that Bilbo has gone to the back door and he leads Bilbo there indeed. Hence, Bilbo can run away from Gollum while it is screaming "Thief, thief, thief! Baggins" (102). After his physical awakening, Bilbo also gains his conscience metaphorically. Jane Chance puts forward that this theft is quite essential because it "provides Bilbo with the means to perform the burglary of the dragon's hoard – the invisibility caused by the ring. In addition, it heightens Bilbo's confidence in his new vocation" (Chance 67). For that reason, it can be understood that Bilbo gains not only

Gollum's precious ring but also his precious self-confidence. Yet, it takes a little time for him to realise his potential and this happens while they are passing through the dangerous forest, Mirkwood. In the forest, they are allured by the spell of the Elves and find themselves captured by giant spiders. Yet, the narration presents the change in Bilbo:

“The spider lay dead beside him, and his sword-blade was stained black. Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else, made a great difference to Mr. Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into its sheath. ‘I will give you a name,’ he said to it, ‘and I shall call you Sting.’” (181).

Bilbo, who is too afraid to do anything unexpected at the beginning of the novel, kills the giant spider by sticking his sword in the eye. The change in himself is visible not only to the readers but also to himself. As Matthew Grenby suggests, Bilbo understands that he does not need somebody else's help and he does not need the comfort of his house to survive outside (Grenby 162). Besides, his sword kills a giant spider. The sword is considered to be a phallic symbol which elevates his Tookish side and Bilbo turns into a gallant person. After this gallantry, he unties his friends and saves them, which causes the rest of the group to notice the change in him and grow a respect for him. Yet, this is not enough for Bilbo to acquire “a stronger sense of his identity” (Grenby 162). The narrator explains, “in fact they praised him so much that Bilbo began to feel there really was something of a bold adventurer about himself after all, though he would have felt a lot bolder still, if there had been anything to eat” (192). However there is another mission and obstacle for him, which happens in the Elvenking's Castle.

The dwarves are captivated by the Elves of Mirkwood. Since Bilbo wears the ring during the captivity, he has a near miss. He follows them to the prison and starts to make a plan to save his friends. At this moment, it must be noticed that Bilbo does not depend on his ring of invisibility. According to Steve Walker, all these “isolating events” are his Bilbo's “mature independence” (Walker 96). Not having his friends or Gandalf around, Bilbo uses the ring, his wit and courage. He gets the keys to the prison cells and releases the dwarves. Yet, he plots his escape plan and finds out that the only way to get out is by getting into barrels and floating on the stream. It is observed that like a real leader, Bilbo directs all the dwarves, puts them in the barrels and saves them. Dorothy Matthews supports this idea of Bilbo's leadership

by saying “from this point on, Bilbo has the self-esteem needed to fulfil his responsibilities as a mature and trustworthy leader. It is through his ingenuity that they escape from the dungeon prisons in the subterranean halls of wood-elves” (Matthews 38).

With regards to Bilbo’s maturation, the climax happens when they reach the Lonely Mountain. Not knowing how to enter the Mountain, Bilbo figures out the puzzle on the map and finds the way into it. Later, the dwarves ask Bilbo to take a glance in the dragon’s lair because he is the official burglar. But Bilbo knows that this will be the most dangerous task he will do. Notwithstanding, his inner sides are in conflict. As Matthews supports, Tolkien explicitly depicts Bilbo’s challenge which requires physical courage and he has that inner conflict while descending into the dragon’s lair all alone (Matthews 39). This can be observed when Bilbo says “I have absolutely no use for dragon-guarded treasures, and the whole lot could stay here forever, if only I could wake up and find this beastly tunnel was my own front-hall at home” (248). This is his Baggins side talking, who wishes to be back to the safety. When he comes close to the dragon, he finds him asleep and manages to steal a two-handled cup. At that moment, he feels success and self-confidence. However, this is just a temporary joy now that Smaug wakes up and enrages to find that his cup is stolen. Despite Bilbo’s efforts to keep them safe like a leader, they get stuck in the Mountain. When the Dwarves blame Bilbo for stirring up Smaug’s fury by stealing the cup, Bilbo exclaims “I was not engaged to kill dragons, that is warrior’s work, but to steal treasure. I made the best beginning I could. Did you expect me to trot back with the whole hoard of Thrór on my back?” (255). This summarises why Bilbo is not the one who kills the dragon at the end of the novel. He is the burglar and he is the one who helps the dwarves get back their usurped treasure.

Nevertheless, he offers to creep down with his invisibility ring and find the dragon’s weak spot now that “Every worm has his weak spot” (256). This is a saying by Bilbo’s father and Bilbo remembers it at that moment. Bilbo uses not only his mother’s side but also his father’s side, so he comes closer to the wholeness. He can go on adventures, he can save people, he can summon courage and make plans. He begins “to have ideas and plans of his own” (256).

When he arrives, Smaug can not see him but he can smell him. For that reason, he tries to lure Bilbo so that he can come closer. But Bilbo is not uneducated in dragons. He knows how to talk and keep the balance in his words. He praises the dragon; yet, he does not reveal his own identity. This shows how he turns into a careful person. When the dragon asks who he is, he names himself as “the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly” , “the friend of

bears and the guest of eagles”, “Ringwinner and Luckwearer” and “Barrel-rider”(258). In a sense, he glorifies his deeds and names himself, gives himself an identity of which he is quite sure. The dragon shows off that he is armoured with iron scales and gems. However, Bilbo finds the weak spot, which is a large patch on his left breast. Infuriating the dragon, Bilbo runs away from the dragon’s lair. Yet, he ponders on his mistake, which gives him a better sense of his actions.

As Bilbo says previously, he is not the one who kills the dragon. From Bilbo’s riddles, the dragon thinks that Lake-men are involved in their burglary. And the dragon is killed by Bard from the Lake-men. Though Bilbo can gain heroic skills and courage, Tolkien does not draw him as the hero. As Dorothy Matthews claims, killing the dragon is a deed that a cultural hero can do such as The Red Cross Knight or Beowulf (Matthews 41).

With the dragon’s death, the quest of treasure comes to an end. Metaphorically, Bilbo gains a balance between his two sides, as well. But since he is a mature being who can give his own decisions, he gives the Arkenstone, the heart of the mountain to the Elvenking and Bard so that the Elvenking can have something to bargain and stop the war. While giving the jewel, Bilbo says “I may be a burglar – or so they say: personally I never felt like one – but I am an honest one, I hope, more or less” (314). Here, Bilbo is depicted as a person who follows the right path even at the expense of losing his friends. While leaving the camp of Elvenking, Gandalf appears and says “There is always more about you than anyone expects!” (315). This is a remark referring to Bilbo’s Tookish side and perfect harmony he creates after all these adventures.

At the end of the novel, the battle is inevitable and won with the help of the Eagles and Beorn the Bear. While Thorin the leader of the Dwarves is about to die, he points out the wholeness Bilbo gains at the end of this journey “There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure” (333). Bilbo has this measure between his two sides and discovers his potential in the end.

While going back home, Bilbo is not the same person anymore. He is not the Baggins whose Tookish side is suppressed and who is against adventures and unexpected events. Gandalf tells “My dear Bilbo! You are not the hobbit that you were!” (347). As the under title presents, “there and back again” refers to Bilbo’s discovering his potential through adventures and coming back as a person whose inner conflict comes to a wholeness and harmony. Throughout the novel, it is observed that Bilbo passes through many obstacles gradually and each one of them raises his Tookish side and he gains a perfect harmony as an individual. For

that reason the novel, which is written in the form of a *bildungsroman*, is an excellent example of personal development and self-discovery.

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