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What Sam Said

Abstract

Interpreting the meaning and significance of Sam Gamgee's final words in *The Lord of the Rings*.

WHAT SAM SAID¹

DAVID BRATMAN

“WELL, I’D BACK.” They’re the final words of *The Lord of the Rings*.

And [Sam] went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap.

He drew a deep breath. “Well, I’m back,” he said. (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] VI.9.1031)

Surely a moment that strikes all readers in the heart; and yet, readers seem to have a difficult time figuring out exactly why Sam says this, and what he means by it. Tom Shippey finds it baffling: he calls it “this apparently non-committal and even pointless remark” (Foreword 1) and “the most noncommittal final words in modern literature” (“From Page to Screen” 72). Others have, in the absence of perceived clarity, given what seem flagrant over-interpretations. Michael Swanwick, who calls this “the most heartbreaking line in all of modern fantasy,” thinks it refers to the bittersweet ending that had just come: that Frodo has gone on from the Grey Havens but Sam has had to turn *back* (45). Verlyn Flieger suggests that the line refers to the there-and-back-again structure of the story, or to those who have been lost during the war and will never come back (85-86). Patrice Hannon finds that the words show Sam ignoring the “quotidian comforts” he is being offered, “seemingly numb with grief” (41).²

All of these are enriching ideas for the reader to contemplate, and who’s to say if Tolkien might not have had some of them in his conscious or unconscious mind? But none of them, it seems to me, explain why Sam is addressing these words to Rose, and what he means by it. There is a clear answer, but it requires context, and the context is about five pages back, so readers may have forgotten it. It occurs when Frodo asks Sam to come along with him on a little journey. He doesn’t tell Sam what’s going to happen, though he himself knows (LotR VI.6.988). Sam thinks Frodo is going to Rivendell to see Bilbo, and he’ll accompany just the opening stage. Frodo says,

¹ This paper is an expansion of a point previously made in Bratman 206.

² Some scholars have fastened more precisely on what I propose is the meaning. Daniel Timmons compares Sam’s return home to his wife to that of Ulysses, though the situations are different (79). Jan Wojcik hits the point exactly in calling Sam’s words a “breathtakingly simple understatement” (16).

I want you to see Rose and find out if she can spare you, so that you and I can go off together. [...] You can see me on my way. Tell Rose that you won't be away very long, not more than a fortnight, and you'll come back quite safe. (*LotR* VI.9.1026)

And so Sam goes on this journey, and it takes exactly as long as predicted. Note that "the evening meal was ready, *and he was expected.*" How can he be expected if Rose didn't know, and know accurately, how long he'd be gone? Well, he was gone, and now he's back. Nothing more to it than that.

Except that . . . on this trip Sam was surprised to learn that the purpose of the journey was to enact the End of the Third Age. Frodo, and Bilbo, and Gandalf, and Galadriel, and Elrond, and many other high-elven folk, have sailed off into the West never to return. It's an event of tremendous moment. "[A]nd the Days of the Rings were passed, and an end was come of the story and song of those times" (*LotR* VI.9.1029). And Sam witnessed it. The world has changed right before his eyes . . . and now he's back at his welcoming, unchanged home.

This sharp juxtaposition of the static and the epic, the ordinary and the profound, is a deep irony, the same type of irony that Sam experiences back in "The Scouring of the Shire" when he rides to the Cottons and Rose asks, "If you've been looking after Mr. Frodo all this while, what d'you want to leave him for, as soon as things look dangerous?"

"This was too much for Sam," the narrative tells us. This little dust-up,³ after a thousand pages of dire adventure culminating in Cirith Ungol and Mount Doom? "It needed a week's answer, or none." It gets none (*LotR* VI.8.1008).

The same is true of this final journey. What have you been doing on your little outing, Sam? It needs a week's answer, or none. It gets none. "Well, I'm back," he said.

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³ Gandalf had said, "I have no longer any fear at all for any of you" (*LotR* VI.7.996).