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The Power of Mercy in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

Bryana Fern

J. R. R. Tolkien has been a renowned and respected figure in fantasy writing since his publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937, and then *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954 and 1955. Begun while writing on the back of a student's empty exam paper, the famous first line has become synonymous with his work: "In a hole in the ground, there lived a hobbit." While the main plot of *The Hobbit* is a quest with Bilbo, Gandalf, and the 13 dwarves of Thorin Oakenshield & Co. to reclaim the kingdom of Erebor and its treasure, stolen by the dragon Smaug, it is a smaller encounter along the way that defines one of the most significant aspects of the story—one that extends into the themes of *The Lord of the Rings*. When Bilbo meets Gollum, a returning character in both texts, he shows mercy toward the creature that his nephew, Frodo, would repeat. These acts of mercy reflect a larger message of sparing judgment to those who deserve condemnation.

Bilbo's Bravery

While traveling through the Misty Mountains in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo becomes separated from the rest of his party and finds himself in a cavern far below the myriad of passageways. Lost and trying to find his way, he discovers what readers would come to know was the One Ring of Power. After pocketing it as a curious token, he encounters Gollum, the small, pitiful creature who lives in the cavern. Gollum is an emaciated, twisted version of who he once was: a creature very similar to a hobbit. They decide to

strike a deal through a game of riddles: if Bilbo wins, Gollum will show him the way out, and if Gollum wins, he will eat him. Thankfully, Bilbo narrowly wins, and along the way realizes that the Ring he found belonged to Gollum. Bilbo slips the Ring on in a nervous panic and realizes its secret: it has turned him invisible and given him an advantage. Gollum races for the exit, thinking Bilbo has escaped, and Bilbo quietly follows him to find the way out himself. While still invisible, he considers killing the creature to escape. And this is where he hesitates:

He was desperate. He must get away, out of this horrible darkness, while he had any strength left. He must fight. He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it. It meant to kill him. No, not a fair fight. He was invisible now. Gollum had no sword. Gollum had not actually threatened to kill him, or tried to yet. And he was miserable, alone, lost. A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering.

Notice the switch in mindset that overtakes Bilbo: he was able to see Gollum as a sad and pitiful creature. He chose mercy. And by letting Gollum live, he shaped the future in ways he could not have realized.

Frodo's Fear

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo is now on his own quest to destroy the very "precious" Bilbo had stolen from Gollum. Gandalf tells Frodo the story of how Bilbo acquired the Ring, and Frodo is disgusted with the thing that nearly killed his uncle, saying, "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had the chance!" Gandalf, surprised at him, replies, "It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need." Frodo recognizes the truth in this, but still says that he feels no pity for Gollum because he "deserves death." Bilbo set an example, though, and chose to show mercy simply because he could, because he was in a position to do so. Note how Tolkien capitalizes concepts such as Pity

and Mercy. These terms are crucial and carry power of their own. “The pity of Bilbo,” as Gandalf says, “may rule the fate of many.”

In *The Two Towers*, Frodo eventually gets his chance to show Gollum the same mercy Bilbo did when he and Sam encounter him in the pass of Eryn Muil on their journey to Mordor. Like Bilbo, they find themselves lost, going the wrong way again and again. Gollum has been tracking them the whole time, and Frodo is ready now to kill him, to do what Bilbo did not. But he remembers the conversation he had with Gandalf, and he looks at Gollum and says, “Poor wretch! He has done us no harm. . . . For now that I see him, I do pity him.” Frodo’s heart is changed, just as Bilbo’s was, and it is Frodo who comes to learn about Gollum, talk with him and understand his past, as a fellow Ringbearer. He is the first one to call Gollum by his old name: Smeagol. He even begs Captain Faramir to show mercy when they are intercepted by the Ithilien Rangers near Osgiliath in Gondor. He has a second chance to hand out judgment to Gollum and still, he declines. “The creature is wretched and hungry, and unaware of his danger,” he tells Faramir. “And Gandalf, your Mithrandir, he would have bidden you not to slay him for that reason, and for others.” Frodo defends the helpless and advocates for his safety, even if Gollum is still undeserving.

Samwise the Brave—and Just

Even Sam, the character Tolkien listed as the greatest hero of the story, struggles with showing Gollum mercy in *The Return of the King*. In the end, however, he also achieves a change of heart. While before, he was unable to recognize the bond between Frodo and Gollum through their shared experience of the Ring’s hold, now he understands how his original lack of mercy toward the creature endangered them all:

Sam’s hand wavered. His mind was hot with wrath and the memory of evil. It would be just to slay this treacherous, murderous creature, just and many times deserved; and also it seemed the only safe thing to do. But deep in his heart there was something that restrained him: he could

not strike this thing lying in the dust, forlorn, ruinous, utterly wretched. He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum's twisted mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief in life ever again.

Sam realizes how pitiful Gollum truly is, and he spares the creature even though he would be justified in killing him. In the end, the decision proves to be vital since Gollum is the one who inadvertently destroys the Ring and completes the quest for them. Without Gollum, the Ring would have continued to exist. If Bilbo had killed him back in the Misty Mountains, or if Frodo or Sam had killed him along their quest, they would have inadvertently sealed the fate of the whole world.

It is not difficult to look at this story and see the parallels to Christianity. Tolkien was heavily influenced by his faith, and however aesthetically unappealing a concept, it is an apt comparison to see ourselves as Gollum in our pitiful, twisted nature of sin. We do not deserve life, but rather death, and yet the Lord looked on us with mercy and spared us because he had the ability and power to do so. David tells us in the Psalms that “the LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Psalm 103:8). Grace refers to freely-given goodwill, while mercy is a far more conscious decision; mercy is the act of withholding judgment that is deserved and that you have every right to deliver. Of the two, mercy is arguably the hardest to extend—it requires one to disregard justice, something we are very eager to demand as humans. All throughout the Gospels, we see people approaching Jesus and begging Him to “have mercy” on them. Paul tells us that “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:4-5). It is our responsibility then, to treat others with the same mercy we have been shown, whether or not it serves our sense of justice. When we see others and pity them, it allows us to empathize with them, and then encourages us to reconsider the judgment we want to enact. It is an incredible act of bravery in faith.