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*Towards the Centre of the Self  
by Getting Inside the Belly of the Dragon:  
Levels of Initiation in Tolkien's Works\**

The attentive reader of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's stories cannot skip a very important detail within these texts: the mysterious transformation experienced by the most significant of his heroes by means of innumerable happenings and adventures that they have to face. For instance, if one analyses the evolution of each of the hobbits who wage war against the evil represented by the dark Mordor, one may easily notice some obvious mutations at the level of their personalities. The author himself – preoccupied with the metamorphosis of his own heroes – describes briefly but very carefully the evolution of characters like Bilbo and Frodo Baggins or Sam Gamgee. The most important figure within all Tolkien's stories, Gandalf, underlined, at the end of *The Hobbit or There and Back Again* the great transformation experienced by his little friend: “ ‘My dear Bilbo!’ he said. ‘Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were’ ” (*Hb*:253).

The metamorphosis to which Bilbo is subject between the initial and the final stages of the story can also be perceived or even seen in the case of all the other characters, especially those illustrating some everlasting chivalrous values. Following complex and complicated roads endowed with a very obvious element of initiation, the major figures of Tolkien's legends perfectly illustrate some kind of an ‘alchemic’ principle, to put it this way, the one placed at the very heart of any of these narratives: *by going through certain extreme situations or experiences, the Hero acquires a new status, a ‘sacred’ one from the ontological point of view, fundamentally different from the ‘profane’ one, specific to ordinary human beings.* In other words, ‘the initiate’ acquires some kind of a transmuted human condition, and this allows him to defeat the hostile forces, no matter what they might be. The most important aspect to pay attention to is the hero's impossibility to acquire this final victory without having got a heroic human nature previously. Therefore, the wish to defeat evil is not enough, human being has to become, by means of initiation, capable of such an action. This is the fundamental principle, the one that represents a basis for each and every religious ritual of initiation; and it gets to its completely expressed value through the final synthesis of all these symbols that express a transmutation in the field of human condition: *the Christian act of baptism.*

There are three main levels of initiation experienced by the heroes of Middle Earth: 1) fighting with the dragon; 2) ritual undressing; 3) ritual death and mystical rebirth. In this article I intend to discuss only the first of the above mentioned levels or stages of initiation, deeply rooted in all Tolkien's stories.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter dated December the 2<sup>nd</sup> 1953, addressed to the Jesuit scholar Robert Murray,

## I. THE TRANSMUTATION OF TOLKIEN'S HEROES

### The real hero: Sam Gamgee

In a letter addressed to Milton Waltman, probably written in 1951 (*Letters*:143-161), Tolkien stated – as Stratford Caldecott pointed out in his monography *Secret Fire. The Spiritual Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Caldecott:100) – that neither Aragorn nor Frodo Baggins is the main hero of the epic construction in *The Lord of the Rings*. Who is, then, the main hero? Although at the first reading this may seem strange enough, ‘the chief hero’ is no one but Sam Gamgee – the little gardener in the Shire. Indeed, without the heroic support of Sam Gamgee, that readers would better keep in mind carrying Frodo on his back to the final step of their quest and adventure, the ring would have not been destroyed and the great enemy of free people would have not been defeated. But who is this so very discreet hero, Sam Gamgee?

In front of the orcs living in the cursed tower Cirith Ungol, Sam appears in all his spiritual grandeur, invisible in everyday life, and the result is that these creatures are terrified: he is, therefore, a great warrior, probably an elf, wearing a mortal sword. Confronted with such a merciless figure, the orcs are overwhelmed by surprise:

... an orc came clattering down... It stopped short aghast. For what it saw was not a small frightened hobbit trying to hold a steady sword: it saw a great silent shape, cloaked in a grey shadow, looming against the wavering light behind (*RK*:14); there's a great fighter about, one of those bloody-handed Elves (*RK*:17).

From the moment of his encounter with the monstrous Shelob, Sam Gamgee reveals in front of his enemies his character of perfect warrior, hidden under the appearance of a gentle and humble servant of Frodo. Even the commanders of those wicked and evil armies will be shocked and impressed by his terrifying figure and presence: “By all the signs, Captain Shagrat, I'd say there's a large warrior loose, Elf most likely, with an elf-sword anyway, and an axe as well maybe; ... Sam smiled grimly at this description of himself.” (*RGE*:185)

But how could be explained the way orcs see Sam? The answer is the same as in the case of all Tolkien's heroes. Facing some awful monsters, which he has to defeat courageously precisely because his great love for life, liberty and friendship, Sam experienced a profound transformation that made him comparable to Bilbo, Frodo, Aragorn or Gandalf the Grey. The vital principle that prompts him into action is, above any other reason, love: “In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm; but also deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense.” (*RK*:10)

None of all his fights has had a greater role in his transformation than the one, on life and death, with the huge descendant of Ungoliant, Shelob. The description of this battle is made with such a force and plasticity, that it makes us feel the

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Tolkien himself confessed that “*The Lord of the Rings* is, of course, a fundamentally religious and Catholic work.” (*Letters*:72). This statement, often commented on by scholars, does not contradict Tolkien's saying that he did not introduce in his work any specific reference to rites or religious rituals; “the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (*ibidem*).

despair and altogether the determination of this little hobbit and the scene represents, most probably, one of the best and among the most impressive within the whole trilogy:

Sam did not wait to wonder what was to be done, or whether he was brave, or loyal, or filled with rage. He sprang forward with a yell, and seized his master's sword in his left hand. Then he charged. No onslaught more fierce was ever seen in the savage world of beasts, where some desperate small creature armed with little teeth, alone, will spring upon a tower of horn and hide that stands above its fallen mate (*RGE*:170).

What follows goes beyond imagination. In spite of the obvious disproportion, Sam succeeds in cutting off one of the monster's claws and to stab one of its eyes and then, at the climax of their fight, when he is almost crushed down, he finally penetrates the hideous belly of Shelob with the legendary sword Sting, avoiding therefore being killed by the monster's huge weight (see *RGE*:171). Like the great warriors in the ancient world, protected by the magic incantation of the name of the queen of elfs – “Gilthoniel A Elbereth!” – Sam Gamgee comes to accomplish one of his greatest acts of courage, one that is meant to contribute essentially to the achievement of the purpose of Frodo's mission. Prepared for the decisive confrontation in the tower Cirth Ungol and also for the passing through the infernal plains of Mordor towards the Mountain of Doom, he is going to be the character who has the greatest contribution to the destruction of evil forces in the Third Age.

**Frodo: “a jewel among hobbits”<sup>2</sup>**

In one of the most moving moments in the entire epic *The Lord of the Rings*, occurring on the great plane Cormallen, Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee are greeted with exceptional esteem and honors. Everything happening there after these two characters' wakening seems to be a dream almost too beautiful to be true. The knights honor them and bow in front of them in token of worship, the king himself, Aragorn Elessar, kneels before them and places the two heroes on the right and left sides of his throne; and then, after the minstrel completes his masterly designed music about the legend dedicated to Frodo Nine Fingers, Gandalf himself crowns the two of them with a silver circle meant to underline their rank and also their merits. And above the heads of everyone participating to this celebration the echo of a triple cry is heard: “Praise them with great praise, Frodo and Samwise!” (*RK*:80)

In fact, if one thinks again of all the adventures experienced by Frodo, Drogo's son, Bilbo Baggins' nephew, one can clearly understand how a mere dwarf could achieve such a dignity. In spite of all appearances, deceiving, as always, he becomes a great hero, ready to risk his own life for his loved ones. Sam himself, his ever trustful servant, has the chance to contemplate and admire his master in his secret grandeur: “For a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown...: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in gray cloud...” (*RGE*:25)

Still, this grandeur was known to the wise. Able to see the unseen and to perceive the courageous essence hidden under every hobbit's humble appearance, Gandalf clearly understood – the very moment Frodo was recovering in Rivendell

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<sup>2</sup> See *RSO*:109.

after his terrible fight of Amon-Sul with the head of the Nazguls – the metamorphosis he was about to experience.

Gandalf moved his chair to the beside, and took a good look at Frodo. The colour had come back to his face, and his eyes were clear, and fully awake and aware. He was smiling, and there seemed to be little wrong with him. But to the wizard's eye there was a faint change, just a hint as it were of transparency, about him, and especially about the left hand that lay outside upon the coverlet.

“Still that must be expected”, said Gandalf to himself. “He is not half through yet, and to what he will come in the end not even Elrond can foretell. Not to evil, I think. He may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can.” (RGS:10-11).

At the end of his adventures, Frodo truly became “like a glass filled with a clear light”. Elrond was perfectly right to have placed him among the legendary heroes of Ardei, among other great heroes, known as such: Hador, Hurin, Turin and Beren. Nevertheless, such a grandeur represents the measure of light and even holiness of his own actions, the one that produced such amazing transformation within himself, very similar to those experienced by his beloved uncle, Bilbo. But what are these heroic acts and adventures?

First of all, one cannot forget Frodo's courage and dedication on Weathertop, where he faced the master of Nazguls, the Witch King of Angmar. Here, in this very place, and for the very first time he discovers the secret forces in the sacred name of stars' queen, the wonderful Varda: “At that moment Frodo threw himself forward on the ground, and he heard himself crying aloud: *O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!* At the same time, he struck at the feet of his enemy.” (RSO:258).

Incessantly followed by Sauron's servants as well as by Saruman's scouts, Frodo will be tested repeatedly, having to face not only fear, but also the changes produced by the flame of courage within his own heart. Therefore, when in the room Mazarbul, placed in the dwarves' underworld fortress known as Moria, he suddenly feels the *furor* of great warriors:

Suddenly, and to his own surprise, Frodo felt a hot wrath blaze up in his heart. “The Shire!” he cried, and springing beside Boromir, he stooped, and stabbed with Sting at the hideous foot...

“One for the Shire!” cried Aragorn. “The hobbit's bite is deep! You gave a good blade, Frodo son of Drogo!” (RSO:144).

Later on, when almost prisoner in the maze of the tunnels crossing the whole Mordor kingdom, tunnels reigned by the cruel Shelob, the same flame of heroism is going to brighten even stronger in order to enforce him on his final journey, on the road towards the Mount Doom:

Then Frodo's heart flamed within him, and without thinking what he did, whether it was folly or despair or courage, he took the Phial in his left hand, and with his right hand drew his sword. Sting flashed out, and the sharp elven-blade sparkled in the silver light, but at its edges a blue fire flicked. Then holding the star aloft and the bright sword advanced, Frodo, hobbit of the Shire, walked steadily down to meet the eyes. (RGE:161-162)

Giving him the real strength of a pure diamond, all these heroic deeds – doubled by the humility proper to all hobbits – fully justify the metaphor that the elves, led by Gildor, use in order to characterize Frodo Baggins: “a jewel among hobbits”.

### **Bilbo the renowned**

Entitled *The Council of Elrond*, the second chapter in the second book (*The Ring goes South*) of *The Lord of the Rings* epic stands for a sort of climax of the entire story. Gathered from all over Middle Earth, the participants are confronted with a dramatic problem: the fate of that malefic ring so eagerly looked for by Sauron. In the midst of the pensive silence of those present there, Bilbo proves an unusual courage:

“Very well, very well, Master Elrond!” said Bilbo suddenly. “Say no more! It is plain enough what are you pointing at. Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself... It is a frightful nuisance. When ought I to start?” (RGS:72)

Not knowing who this old hobbit might be, Boromir, the knight come from the East, bursts out laughing, showing lack of trust in the capacity of a mere dwarf to face immense risks in a desperate attempt to destroy the ring of such a great and cruel enemy. Nevertheless, those who happen to know the hobbit in question can say there’s nothing to laugh at...

Boromir looked in surprise at Bilbo, but the laughter died on his lips when he saw that all the others regarded the old hobbit with grave respect. Only Glóin smiled, but his smile came from old memories. (RGS:72)

Out of this episode, underlined by Gandalf’s words (“we do not doubt that under jest you are making a valiant offer”, RGS:72) comes, with perfect clarity, the feature that had transformed Bilbo into a great hero of the Third Age. Courage, that urges him to risk his own life for the friends he cares so much about, is a valuable quality that he is always ready to put to a test. Nobody is allowed to laugh at him. Gandalf, Elrond, the gnom Glóin know this very well. In fact, the first important character who notices and praised Bilbo’s human and heroic qualities was the great Thorin Oakenshield. In unforgettable words, he caught all virtues of this child of the kindly West: “Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure.” (Hb:243) Almost in the same way, The King of Elves admits the hobbit’s virtues: “more worthy to wear the armour of elf-princes than many that have looked more comely at it.” (Hb:230) But how this high appreciation of a dwarf, made by such important characters, can be explained? How did a simple inhabitant of the Shire become one of the heroes of Middle Earth, how did Bilbo the hobbit become “the renowned” (RGS:17)?

Wearing the distinctive sign of duality embedded in his own personality (he has one adventurous side, inherited from his Took ancestors, and also a tame and calm side, in love with comfort, running in the Baggins branch of his family tree), Bilbo is going to live some unique moments of profound transformation. His fight with the dark creatures beyond the last bridge of the Shire, crossing over the precipices of the orcs under the Misty Mountains (where he finds the Ring of Power lost by Gollum), the journey through Mirkwood and the encounter with the huge spiders; among all these, the last one is of an incredible importance, giving Bilbo the courage and the power that he needed in order to be capable to defeat the

dragon Smaug, that he annoys in order to find its vulnerable spot, a spot finally and fatally struck by the warrior Bard. In the most important moments of each of these adventures, Tolkien expressively describes the deep transformation of the little hobbit. Therefore, after the first fight on life and death with a huge spider, ‘he felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder.’(*Hb*:135) The same enduring courage, as difficult to guess as it is powerful, will be felt again, contributing to the going on of the process of our little hero’s transformation as far as the ultimate test is concerned – the encounter with the dragon – for which he had been prepared by all his beforehand adventures. The fragment that follows illustrates the ritualistic value of this initiating confrontation:

It was a red light steadily getting redder and redder. Also it was now undoubtedly hot in the tunnel. Wisps of vapour floated up and past him and he began to sweat. A sound, too, began to throb in his ears, a sort of bubbling like the noise of a large pot galloping on the fire, mixed with a rumble as of a gigantic tom-cat purring. This grew to the unmistakable gurgling noise of some vast animal snoring in its sleep down there in the red glow in front of him.

It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait. (*Hb*:184)

By steadily pursuing his own way, in a quest that takes all his courage to repeat, Bilbo will finally accomplish the process that changes him from a humble hobbit living in the Shire into an authentic knight, just like Smaug is warned by “an uneasy dream (in which a warrior, altogether insignificant in size but provided with a bitter sword and great courage, figured most unpleasantly)”. (*Hb*:186)

Without lingering on the details that make us constantly keep in the courage of Tolkien’s heroes, one should remember, for the moment, one single aspect that may be useful for any research meant to uncover the possible meanings so specific to Tolkien’s novels. The metamorphosis experienced by these Middle Earth heroes is, almost always, closely related to one of the episodes common to most archaic religious traditions: the encounter and fight with the dragon. Although – as seen in the above mentioned examples – in Tolkien’s stories the confrontation with the dragon described as a huge ofidian appears with a great force of suggestion in the case of Bilbo and some other characters in *Silmarilion*, I consider that every encounter with any kind of monster or even more, with a demonic creature, could be included into the same scenario, no matter what the exterior form or appearance of this creature might be: huge spider, gigantic wolf, troll, balrog and so on and so forth. Well-known in every significant ancient religious tradition, once and forever symbolically caught in the ritual of confrontation with the demon in the form of exorcism endured by enigmumens before having been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, this type of confrontation represents an absolutely essential stage to be experienced by each and every servant of the idea of Good. For it is not enough for anybody to simply wish to defeat the dragon, but one has to become, by means of an authentic act or process of initiation, capable of doing this. In order to be fully

convinced of the everlastingness of this rite regarding the confrontation with the dragon, I can make references to some classical descriptions of such experiences, well-known in the history of religious ideas.

## II. THE IMAGE OF THE BATTLE WITH THE DRAGON IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

The ancient cosmogony presented in the Sumerian poem *Enūma Eliš* includes one of the oldest descriptions of a battle with the Dragon, in the form of a overwhelming and profound drama regarding – as some other mythological texts – the wars waged by gods against one another. During a conflict among several gods, Anu, Ea and Marduk, Tiamat<sup>3</sup> – the primordial mate of Apsu – finally decides to revenge the death of her husband, who had been killed by younger gods. For this definite purpose, she gives birth to several different monsters, such as snakes and demons, but also to the great Kingu, on whose chest she places the table of destinies. Frightened by these monstrous armies, the young gods retreat. Only one of them, Marduk, faces the beasts, and in the long run he has to meet Tiamat, too, in a decisive fight.

87. When Tiamat heard these words,
88. She was like one possessed, she lost her reason.
89. Tiamat uttered wild, piercing cries,
90. She trembled and shook to her very foundations.
91. She recited an incantation, she pronounced her spell,
92. And the gods of the battle cried out for their weapons.
93. Then advanced Tiamat and Marduk, the counsellor of the gods;
94. To the fight they came on, to the battle they drew nigh.
95. The lord spread out his net and caught her,
96. And the evil wind that was behind (him) he let loose in her face.
97. As Tiamat opened her mouth to its full extent,
98. He drove in the evil wind, while as yet she had not shut her lips.
99. The terrible winds filled her belly,
100. And her courage was taken from her, and her mouth she opened wide.
101. He seized the spear and burst her belly,
102. He severed her inward parts, he pierced (her) heart.
103. He overcame her and cut off her life;
104. He cast down her body and stood upon it. (*The Seven Tablets of Creation:71-77*)

This fragment of *Enūma Elish* contains all the elements that are going to appear later on in each and every epic describing the battle with the dragon. First of all, is obvious the trick that may bring victory to a hero-god: when Tiamat opens her mouth, Marduk throws those furious cubits that will not allow her to close this huge mouth anymore. It is only by means like these that the victory is to be got, a victory gained only after the furious goddess is finally hit directly into her heart and belly through her open mouth. The battle with the dragon, an action tprevious to the creation of the entire

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<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of the scholar Thorkild Jacobsen (see Jacobsen:104-108) the name “Tiamat” had a Sumerian origin, being made up from “Ti”, meaning “life” and “Ama”, that could be translated by “mother”. Therefore the conclusion is that the most appropriate translation of the name “Tiamat” would be “the mother of all life”.

world, may be therefore considered as one of the main myths of creation of the ancient world. Some other Babylonian texts present and describe the image of Tiamat using many cosmic terms, Tiamat becoming thus a dragon of colossal proportions:

5. Who was the dragon [ . . . . . ] ?
6. Tiamat was the dragon [ . . . . . ] !
7. Bel in heaven hath formed [ . . . . . ].
8. Fifty kaspu in his length, one liaspu [his height],
9. Six cubits is his mouth, twelve cubits [his . . . . ],
10. Twelve cubits is the circuit of his [ears . . . . ] ;
11. For the space of sixty cubits he [ . . . . ] a bird ;
12. In water nine cubits deep he draggeth [ . . . . ].
13. He raiseth his tail on high [ . . . . . ] ;
14. All the gods of heaven [ . . . . . ] (*The Seven Tablets of Creation*:117-119)

The huge size of this cosmic monster is also proved by the fact that, after having been killed, his blood flows without ceasing for three years and three month, one day and one night:

8. For three years and three months, one day and [one night]
9. The blood of the dragon flowed [ . . . . ]. (*The Seven Tablets of Creation*:122)

The war waged against a huge ophidian monster appears also in some other texts of the ancient East, such as that between the Sumerian god Ninurta and Azag, or the one between the Hittite god of the sky and tempests, Tarhum, and the dragon Illuyankas. Of course, the encounter with the dragon couldn't be absent in the Egyptian mythology; it appears in the shape of the huge snake Apep (Apophis in Greek) that was hidden in the waters of the Nile, threatening the Pharaoh's kingdom and authority, while the Pharaoh represented the divine order itself, as it is suggested by the term Ma'at. Generally speaking, the whole scenario is almost the same, as one can see from the confrontation between Tarhum and Illuyankas<sup>4</sup>. Helped by the great hero Hupasiays, Tarhum fights against a snake-shaped demon called Illuyankas. Nevertheless, the victory is not to be got without a trick: at first, the dragon has to get drunk by ingurgitating an immense amount of liquor offered by Hupasiays. The monster can be killed only when asleep, and only by god Tarhum himself, with the help of a destructive lightening (see various versions of the myth in Pritchard:125-126).

If "travelling" on the religious map of Antiquity from the Middle East to the Far East, one may also encounter many facts related to the confrontation of some gods with the dragons. Perhaps one of the most impressive examples is Rig-Veda, where, in the 32<sup>nd</sup> hymn in the first book, the reader discovers the fight of the god Indra against the dragon Vritra. Guilty of having hidden the waters in the depths of a mountain, Vritra was a serious threat to the world itself, that would have thus lacked the vital liquid. First of all, the furious Indra has to force himself to drink the gods' sacred juice, *soma*, and only after that he succeeds in killing the monster, by being helped by his famous *vajra*, the lightening made by Tvastar:

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<sup>4</sup> The name of the monster comes from the radicals *illu-* și *anka-* and literally means 'dragon' or 'snake'.



1. I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder wielder. He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents.
2. He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain: his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvastar fashioned. Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending the waters glided downward to the ocean.
3. Impetuous as a bull, he chose the Soma and in three sacred beakers drank the juices. Maghavan grasped the thunder for his weapon, and smote to death this firstborn of the dragons.
4. When, Indra, thou hadst slain the dragon's firstborn, and overcome the charms of the enchanters, Then, giving life to Sun and Dawn and Heaven, thou foundest not one foe to stand against thee.
5. Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vrtra, worst of Vrtras. As trunks of trees, what time the axe hath felled them, low on the earth so lies the prostrate Dragon.
6. He, like a mad weak warrior, challenged Indra, the great impetuous many slaying Hero. He, brooking not the clashing of the weapons, crushed – Indra's foe – the shattered forts in falling.
7. Footless and handless still he challenged Indra, who smote him with his bolt between the shoulders. Emasculate yet claiming manly vigour, thus Vrtra lay with scattered limbs dissevered.
8. There as he lies like a bank-bursting river, the waters taking courage flow above him. The Dragon lies beneath the feet of torrents which Vrtra with his greatness had encompassed.
9. Then humbled was the strength of Vrtra's mother: Indra hath cast his deadly bolt against her. The mother was above, the son was under and like a cow beside her calf lay Danu.
10. Rolled in the midst of never-ceasing currents flowing without a rest for ever onward. The waters bear off Vrtra's nameless body: the foe of Indra sank to during darkness.
11. Guarded by Ahi stood the thralls of Dasas, the waters stayed like kine held by the robber. But he, when he had smitten Vrtra, opened the cave wherein the floods had been imprisoned.
12. A horse's tail wast thou when he, O Indra, smote on thy bolt; thou, God without a second, Thou hast won back the kine, hast won the Soma; thou hast let loose to flow the Seven Rivers.
13. Nothing availed him lightning, nothing thunder, hailstorm or mist which had spread around him: When Indra and the Dragon strove in battle, Maghavan gained the victory for ever.
14. Whom sawest thou to avenge the Dragon, Indra, that fear possessed thy heart when thou hadst slain him. That, like a hawk affrighted through the regions, thou crossedst nine-and-ninety flowing rivers?
15. Indra is King of all that moves and moves not, of creatures tame and horned, the Thunder-wielder. Over all living men he rules as Sovran, containing all as spokes within the fell. (*Rig Veda*)

Coming back to those traditions the Christian world has its roots in, there may be also discovered various examples regarding the battle with the dragon. In

ancient Greece, there are at least three myths of this particular kind. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, the youngest of Gaia's sons, the monstrous Typhon ("But when Zeus had driven the Titans from heaven, huge Earth bare her youngest child Typhoeus of the love of Tartarus, by the aid of golden Aphrodite"), is described in one of the most impressive malefic images ever to be found:

From his shoulders grew an hundred heads of a snake, a fearful dragon, with dark, flickering tongues, and from under the brows of his eyes in his marvellous heads flashed fire, and fire burned from his heads as he glared. And there were voices in all his dreadful heads which uttered every kind of sound unspeakable; for at one time they made sounds such that the gods understood, but at another, the noise of a bull bellowing aloud in proud ungovernable fury; and at another, the sound of a lion, relentless of heart; and at another, sounds like whelps, wonderful to hear; and again, at another, he would hiss, so that the high mountains re-echoed. (*Theogony*:ll. 820-868)

Reminding of the myth of the confrontation between the Hittite god of tempest, Tarhum, and the dragon Illuyankas, the battle taking place between Zeus and the one hundred-headed monster Typhon is described by means of a magic weapon: the divine lightning. After having defeated him with this invincible weapon, Zeus throws Typhon in the most profound depths of Hades.

Yet, not only gods have to face frightening dragons. Greek mythology includes several battles between monsters and some famous heroes. Among them, the most important is Herakles. One of the twelve tasks he has to fulfill implies a direct confrontation with a dragon. When he has to steal the golden apples in the Garden of the Hesperides, he has to fight with a dragon in order to reach his goal. The dragon has one hundred heads, its name is Ladon and his duty (by orders of the jealous goddess Hera) is to guard the tree with golden apples. Knowing the destructive force of the dragon, Herakles calls Atlas to help him to steal some of these so valuable fruit. In a different version of the same legend, Herakles kills Ladon in order to be able to accomplish the task he has been assigned.

The Christian world assimilated the initiatory theme of the battle with the dragon, present in all ancient religions. The most famous story – that caused interminable debates on the subject of its origins – is that of Saint George. A martyr of the third century of the Christian epoch, George was a soldier of The Roman Empire who inspired many legends. All evidence proves that George faced a dragon feeding on young virgins. Without insisting further on this particular legend that fully deserves a whole volume of scientific studies analyzing its sources and its significance, suffice it to say for now that the entire Christian world has preserved among its legends and myths several similar stories. One of these recounts how Dieuonné de Gozon, the third Great Master of the Ioannites Knights (the Knights of the Order of Saint John) of Rhodos, killed the dragon of Malpasso. The French hagiography also enlists some names of saints who defeated many-headed dragons: Samson, Marguerite, Bié<sup>5</sup>.

Before coming back to Tolkien's stories, I should say a few words about the famous epic *Beowulf*, well-known, frequently studied and analyzed by Tolkien with

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<sup>5</sup> Discussing these legends, Mircea Eliade also enlists the sources (see *Eliade*:40, note 70).

kean interest. The title hero has to fight a monstrous demon with a face of a man, Grendel. Although unarmed, Beowulf succeeds in hurting the beast, by cutting off one of his arms, that will be hung later as a trophy on the wall of the castle. Overwhelmed with joy at this victory, Beowulf's knights could not foresee the terrible encounter that would follow. Furious at the news of her son's death, the monster's mother attacks the castle at nighttime killing one of the king Hrothgar's beloved servants. Having been given the sword of the cavalier Unferth as a gift, Beowulf follows the demon to its den, in the midst of the mire. A terrible fight follows. Although he is on the verge of death, Beowulf finally finds among the armors inside the cave a legendary sword made by the giants in the ancient times; with this sword, he cuts off the head of the beast. Grendel's mother's venomous blood melts the metal and only the head of the sword is preserved in the long run. Bringing the head of the monster and the remains of the sword to the king, Beowulf is rewarded generously and then he returns to his country, with a huge amount of gifts and honors. Afterwards, becoming himself a king, Beowulf will reign for fifty years. But, towards the end of his life, he has to face a final test. A dragon that used to guard a great treasure on a hill decides to attack Beowulf's fortress willing to revenge after a soldier stole from him a valuable cup. On the battlefield, Beowulf is deserted by almost all his soldiers, who run away in dismay, terrified by the dragon's flames. Only one of the soldiers, Wigalf, helps Beowulf, by giving a fatal blow to the beast. With the last breath, Beowulf kills the dragon ensuring his people a long-lived peace. But in the battle the great hero has been fatally bitten by the beast and, subsequently, dies.

### III. DRAGONS IN MIDDLE-EARTH

#### **The Monsters & the Professor**

Anxious to discover the perfect way to get the treasure stolen by Smaug, Thorin Oakenshield's gnoms – always listened to during their dialogues by a very impressed and respectful Bilbo Baggins – finally understand that they would not be able to reach their goal by entering the main gate of their old palace whose underground tunnels the wicked worm used to live in. Nevertheless, from Gandalf's words, meant to underline the gnoms' own conclusion, one can learn that some characters' presence would have brought a decisive victory on Smaug:

“That would be no good,” said the wizard, “not without a mighty Warrior, even a Hero. I tried to find one; but warriors are busy fighting one another in distant lands, and in this neighborhood heroes are scarce, or simply not to be found.” (*Hb:27*).

During its long and not at all calm history, Middle Earth had plenty of Warriors and Heroes who faced the awful monsters or even the seemingly invincible dragons. Passionate with the dragons' presence within old myths and legends, Tolkien never kept secret his attraction towards these fantastic creatures that he often included in his own stories. For example, in 1964, in a letter to Christopher Bretherton, he clearly confesses: “I was also interested in traditional tales (especially those concerning dragons).” (*Letters: 345*). I said “old passion” and this detail is not at all spoken at random. In two letters – one addressed to W.H. Auden, dated 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1955 (*Letters: 214*), and the other to Houghton Mifflin Co., also

written in the year 1955 (*Letters*: 221) – the author remembers that at the very early age of six or seven years he tried to write a story or a poem on “a green great dragon”. His celebrated exhortation on *Beowulf, The Monsters & the Critics*<sup>6</sup> (*Monsters*:5-48), or his conference for children *On Dragons*<sup>7</sup>, show and prove undoubtedly the deep passion of professor Tolkien as well as that of Tolkien the writer himself for this rather unknown chapter in the history of the old myths and religions. All these seem to explain the regret that can be perceived in another letter, dated 1949, where, after declaring “I find ‘dragons’ a fascinating product of imagination”, he modestly admits that “the whole problem of the intrusion of the ‘dragon’ into northern imagination and its transformation there is one I do not know enough about” (*Letters*:134). These monstrous creatures are really fascinating, in spite of the fact that all attempt to discover the historical truth about them is not an easy task at all. For now suffice it to say that I personally do not share any opinion of the kind of those expressed by the distinguished scholar Adrienne Mayor, who, in her monographic study (*The First Fossil Hunters*), assessed that all these myths and old histories regarding dragons (or giants) are but the result of a confusion between the remains of some huge animals – the dinosaurs – and some products that are specific to mythical-religious imagination. If the research in the domain of paleontology may reveal some very interesting evidence, it is true, nevertheless, that a correct interpretation must be placed at a different epistemic level and not at the empiric one, trying to take into account a kind of interdisciplinary approach within which the history of religions, folklore, comparative mythology and theology have necessarily to merge. Postponing this argument for some other studies and books, let us return to the episode where Tolkien’s heroes fight with the dragons of Middle Earth.

### **Heroes and Dragons**

The legends of the First Age speak of several warriors who dared to fight with some frightening monsters. For instance, *The Silmarillion* presents the glorious deeds of Fingon, the eldest son of Fingolfin. In that specific context, the reader witnesses the appearance of the dragons, among them the famous Glaurung, also known as “The Great Worm” or Morgoth’s Worm, the very first of all the dragons of Middle Earth. Come to life in the underworld of the Angband fortress,

Glaurung, the first of the Urulóki, the fire-drakes of the North, issued from Angband’s gates by night. He was yet young and scarce half-grown, for long and slow is the life of the dragons, but the Elves fled before him to Ered Wethrin and Dorthonion in dismay; and he defiled the fields of Ard-galen. (*Silm*:137)

Strongly wishing to express and show his destructive force, Glaurung hurries to destroy the plain of Ard-galen, giving Fingon a chance to prove his skills on the battlefield: in front of an army of mounted bowmen, he humiliates the monster, by forcing him to withdraw in his den:

<sup>6</sup> Held at British Academy on 25<sup>th</sup> of November 1936.

<sup>7</sup> Held at the Natural History Museum in 1938 (according to Humphrey Carpenter – see *Letters*:27, 435).

Fingon prince of Hithlum rode against him with archers on horseback, and hemmed him round with a ring of swift riders; and Glaurung could not endure their darts, being not yet come to his full armoury, and he fled back to Angband, and came not forth again for many years. (*Silm*:137)

A similar way to defeat a dragon, by arrow, is the one adopted by Bard the Bowman, who killed Smaug. Still, it is not Fingon the one who will succeed in defeating Glaurung for good. This victory belongs to one of the most unhappy heroes in all Tolkien's work, a hero whose fate, owed to the curse put by Morgoth on his entire family, cannot be compensated by this great victory over Morgoth's Worm. Following his example, Turin Turambar, the courageous man who stands against Glaurung is to experience a merciless destiny, provoked by his own choices but also by one of the magic powers of Tolkien's dragons: the ability to put a spell on any creature catching their malefic look. As far as Turambar's own mistake is concerned, it is very similar to the fatal error of those wishing to possess only for themselves the Supreme Ring created by Sauron. Having been given by the kind King Thingol the chance to choose a gift, he wanted to have the legendary sword Anglachel "made of iron that fell from heaven as a blazing star" (*Silm*:247). Capable to stab any metal on the face of earth, this sword, later also known under the name 'The Black Sword of Brethil', had a malefic origin. Created by Eol, the dark elf, the sword had the power to keep within its own metal the wickedness of the heart of the blacksmith who had made it. Ignoring this particular detail, Turambar will pay dearly his desire to possess one of the most lethal weapons on Middle Earth, weapon that is going to influence his actions in a completely negative way. During a dark, moonless night, he kills by mistake the elf Beleg Cuthalion, his best friend, the very one who saved him from Morgoth's orcs. The same sword is going to put an end to his own master's life, but not before killing Glaurung.

Wishing for some new plunders and disasters, Glaurung came close to the forest Brethil and waited for the best moment to attack the villagers. Turambar in search of the beast, took with him two companions only: Dorlas and Hunthor. Neither of them will be able to help him. Frightened by the perspective of a fight with a winged monster, Dorlas left the battlefield in a shameful retreat. Hunthor, in spite of his courage, was crushed by a huge stone moved by the gigantic creature's body. Fearful, Turambar will venture – now counting only on his right arm – in a fight as desperate as full of grandeur:

Now Gurthang had been wrested from Turambar's hand in the throes of Glaurung, and it clave to the belly of the dragon. Turambar therefore crossed the water once more, desiring to recover his sword and to look upon his foe; and he found him stretched at his length, and rolled upon one side, and the hilts of Gurthang stood in his belly. Then Turambar seized the hilts and set his foot upon the belly, and cried in mockery of the dragon and his words at Nargothrond: 'Hail, Worm of Morgoth! Well met again! Die now and the darkness have thee! Thus is Túrin son of Húrin avenged.

Then he wrenched out the sword, but a spout of black blood followed it, and fell on his hand, and the venom burned it. And thereupon Glaurung opened his eyes and looked upon Turambar with such malice that it smote him as a blow; and by that stroke and the anguish of the venom he fell into a dark swoon, and lay as one dead, and his sword was beneath him. (*Silm*:273-274)

This terrifying and compelling scene masterly presents one of the main features of the dragons: the magic power to influence their victims by means of their look, in order to offer them a distorted view over the surrounding world and life itself. Come out of the wickedness of the one who had raised them, Morgoth, the prince of darkness, all these creatures are able to transmit by their magic look their own destructive spirit. Continuing an old Jewish-Christian tradition talking of the capacity of fascination the fallen angels or demons are endowed with, the purpose of which is to influence in a bad way people's mind, the author always has in mind the obvious polarity *Good – Evil*, forces that meet on this battlefield of Arda.

Among all encounters with dragons in *Silmarillion*, none is as overwhelming as that in which Ancalagon the Black is killed together with his entire army. Placed during the so called War of Wrath, this fight has as the main protagonist the famous mariner Earendil, the one who opposed the most powerful monster of that age, Ancalagon. The intervention of the legendary warrior took place in one of the key-moments of the fight between valars' army and that of Morgoth. Feeling that defeat is close, the master of Angband risked even this real 'secret weapon' represented by an entire escadrille of dragons (see *Silm*:311-312). This very moment, a crucial one for the entire battle, the great Earendil himself makes his appearance, invincible and majestic:

But Eärendil came, shining with white flame, and about Vingilot were gathered all the great birds of heaven and Thorondor was their captain, and there was battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt. Before the rising of the sun Eärendil slew Ancalagon the Black, the mightiest of the dragon-host, and cast him from the sky; and he fell upon the towers of Thangorodrim, and they were broken in his ruin. Then the sun rose, and the host of the Valar prevailed, and well-nigh all the dragons were destroyed. (*Silm*:312)

In spite of the incredible victory over Morgoth, a victory that led to the destruction of the majority of dragons in the Angband's underworld, the heroes of Middle Earth will have again the chance to face this kind of dark creatures. Although not as spectacular as the fight between Turin Turambar and Glaurung or the one between Earendil and Ancalagon, the confrontation of little Bilbo and the cunning Smaug is well-known to all admirers of Tolkien, the Master of the Faerie Genre. No matter how indirect this may seem, the defeat of Smaug is owed to the courageous hobbit, because he happened to know the vulnerable spot of the monster. Still, the one who uses this piece of information and performs the final strike is Bard, the bowman, the last one among those skilful at using the Black Arrow (*Hb*:212).

### **Swallowed by the Dragon**

No matter how many stories about a confrontation with a dragon one might read, one could never answer a question inspired by Mircea Eliade's observation concerning the old rituals of initiation: "it was *impossible* to omit combat with a reptilian monster" (Eliade:39). But why? And why is this episode present in almost all great religious traditions of mankind? Why do Tolkien's stories include such fragments, sometimes directly inspired by these mythical and folkloric tales? Why is this motif included in so many initiation rites?

In order to give or to find an answer, at least hypothetical, to a really difficult question, I will follow, together with one of the greatest scholars of folklore in the twentieth century, V.I. Propp, the way suggested by Georges Dumézil: “It is highly probable... that the hero’s combat with a three-headed monster is the transformation into myth of an archaic initiation ritual” (*apud* Eliade:39). Adopting as a starting point Dumézil’s conclusion, in order to elaborate a personal interpretation of the motif, Propp managed to prove that the origin of this often used literary theme is to be found in one of the oldest initiatory practices: the ritual of the swallowing by a dragon. Putting together some evidence from different old religions, the Russian scholar also finds some of the forms this ritual used to have:

One of its forms consists in the particular fact that the neophyte should creep, crawling through a construction having the appearance of a monstrous animal. In the places where there were definite constructions of the kind, this monstrous animal was represented by a hut or a cabin or even by a house of a particular and different kind. The novice was believed to have been digested and then regurgitated in the form of a totally new man, a brand new person. In the regions where there’s no construction whatsoever, people used a different kind of building. For example, in Australia, the snake was represented by some complicated hole, an opening made in the ground or some other times by the bed of a river that had run dry; or, people used to build a small shelter and in front of this shelter they placed the trunk of a fallen tree, cut in the form of the large mouth of a beast. (See Propp :281; my English translation)

The history of religions registers many other possibilities of representing the ritual swallowing by a monster. In the mountain area, for example, the dragon is symbolized by the forest where the neophyte has to enter in order to kill some totemic animal (a wolf, a fox, a bear etc.), a proof of his virtues and abilities as a warrior. In the same way, each and every grotto or cavern represents the ideal form to be acknowledged as a representation of the monster itself. Some other times, the unexplored waters of certain rivers or lakes may symbolize the belly of the beast that is going to swallow the one aspiring to the condition of a perfectly accomplished man (see Propp:285). In my opinion, V.I. Propp gives a good interpretation to such rites: “the time spent inside the belly of an animal bestowed upon the person to be subsequently regurgitated magic powers, namely the power over the animal itself” (Propp:283; my English translation).

After all, achieving the ultimate goal of any initiatory adventure is possible only after the hero has assimilated the magic power of the monster itself, becoming thus capable to face great dangers and other monsters, otherwise impossible to defeat. Seen from the perspective of this ritual of swallowing by the dragon, Tolkien’s stories appear as initiatory epic constructions.

The story of Beren “One Hand” includes many confrontations with different monsters, confrontations that may be identified with the ritual act of the swallowing by the dragon: the long journey through terrifying mountains and the lands inhabited by the huge spiders; the captivity in a deep well or fountain full of wolves, the fight with Carcharoth. All these adventures end up with the great battle with Morgoth – the monster from whom the courageous hero finally manages to take out a magic gem from his crown. All the other heroes in Tolkien’s work have

to experience more or less similar rites of initiation, that, in spite of the fact that do not always include the strictly expressed motive of a fight with the dragon, still refer explicitly to the confrontation with some other monstrous creatures. Aragorn, “the Hidden King”, will have to face, accompanied by the elf Legolas and the gnom Gimli the test of darkness, when crossing those terrifying “roads of the dead” under the Haunted Mountain, after having been travelling, together with the other members of The Fellowship of the Ring, through the tunnels of the underground kingdom of the gnom, Moria. Gandalf fought with a demon of terror, the huge balrog living in the underworld territory of Moria.

Nevertheless, the most beautiful and also the most subtle instance of the swallowing by the monster is represented by the crossing of some strange woods. If Professor Shipperly assessed in 2005, in a conference held at Arizona State University and entitled *Trees Chainsaw and the Visions of Paradise in Tolkien*, that the forests frequently appearing in Tolkien’s stories represent the world, I could add a detail to this interpretation: namely, that the same literary image may also signify the belly of the monster who sometimes swallows the heroes of Middle Earth. For example, Frodo Baggins accompanied by Sam, Merry and Pippin enter the Old Forest, described by Tolkien exactly as a huge creature having evil intentions at each moment:

There was no sound, except an occasional drip of moisture falling through the still leaves. For the moment there was no whispering or movement among the branches; but they all got an uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity. The feeling steadily grew, until they found themselves looking up quickly, or glancing back over their shoulders, as if they expected a sudden blow.

There was not as yet any sign of a path, and the trees seemed constantly to bar their way. Pippin suddenly felt that he could not bear it any longer, and without warning let out a shout. “Oi! Oi!” he cried. “I am not going to do anything. Just let me pass through, will you!”

The others halted startled; but the cry fell as if muffled by a heavy curtain. There was no echo or answer though the wood seemed to become more crowded and more watchful than before. (*RSO*:147)

Identical properties of a dark and monstrous creature may also be found in the case of some other woods crossed by the hobbits, for example the Old Forest that seem to be a colossal stomach full of many eyes that spy each and every step of those uninvited travellers (see *Hb*:123-124). Escaped from the orc Uruk-hai’s claws, Merry and Pippin will face the Fangorn Forest, similar to the one described before, a forest that will also be crossed by Gimli, Legolas and Gandalf the Grey. The description of the woods confirms once more the fact that, for Tolkien, all forest is a huge monster and by crossing it the human being enters the belly of the beast:

The Riders came to the wood, and they halted; horse and man, they were unwilling to pass in. The trees were grey and menacing, and a shadow or a mist was about them. The ends of their long sweeping boughs hung down like searching fingers, their roots stood up from the ground like the limbs of strange monsters, and dark caverns opened beneath them... But on either side the great aisles of the wood were already wrapped in dusk, stretching away into impenetrable shadows; and there they heard the creaking and groaning of boughs, and far cries, and a rumour of wordless voices, murmuring angrily. (*TI*:180)



The author feels the need to describe the forests his heroes have to cross by giving them qualities that make them similar to some enormous monsters. All these prove the fact that, even without intending this, he offers a symbolic and initiatory dimension to some episodes of the epic journey of his heroes; all these episodes may be assimilated to the ritual of the swallowing by a dragon, also present in the old religious tradition of the ancient world. Inspired doubtlessly by *Beowulf* saga, Tolkien included the mythical theme of the encounter with the dragon in the history of a character admired and loved by his readers, despite his physical fragility.

Bilbo Baggins has to experience some tests meant to fully transform him into a real hero: the confrontation with the monsters beyond the last bridge of the Shire, the passing through the orcs' precipices under The Misty Mountains, the crossing of the Dark Forest and his encounter with the huge spiders. All this gives the little hobbit the power and the courage necessary to prevail in his final fight with Smaug. After all, it is precisely this confrontation with the dragon that would transform Bilbo once and for good into one of the Middle Earth heroes.

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### **Summary**

The methodology used in this paper is that of mythologic analysis (or “mythanalysis”). Established and perfected by historians of religions and literary critics, this method allows a good degree of interdisciplinarity. Thus, fields as far apart as theology, history of religions and comparative literature can be fruitfully brought together, and the topic of religious symbolism (usually associated with creations of classical mythology and the corpus of Jewish and Christian traditions) can be also discussed in terms of a discreet continuity in modern works such as those of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The paper focuses on one recurring symbolic theme in Tolkien’s works: the process of initiation of the hero, who is confronted with the dragon. Analysed before by some important scholars of folklore and historians of religions, such as V.I. Propp, M. Eliade, W. Bölsche, G.E. Smith, A.R. Radcliff-Brown or E.A.W. Budge, the theme of the hero confronting the monster represents one of the key-stones in the process of initiation underwent by each and every hero of Tolkien’s stories: Beren, Aragorn, Gandalf or even the little hobbit Bilbo Baggins. Following this hermeneutic path does result (in our opinion) into realizing that religious symbolism is a powerful element in Tolkien’s work, indeed.