

The Batman and Tolkien's Batman

While we continue to marvel at the steady stream of superheroes being pumped out in comics and movies, I am more interested in ordinary heroes. The ordinary hero is the man or woman behind the scenes. They are the ones who play the steady, supporting role. Natural second fiddles, they are the loyal retainers who stand by their man through thick and thicker. The ordinary hero is one of the stock characters in the hero's quest. Don Quixote has his Sancho Panza. Holmes has Watson. Skywalker has R2D2; Poirot, Hastings; Wooster, his Jeeves; and Batman, the faithful Butler Alfred.

Speaking of Batman brings me to batmen. For those not in the know the "batman" in English parlance is a fellow from a bygone age. He was a soldier who not only fought, but was also assigned to a commissioned officer as his personal servant.

J.R.R. Tolkien said the real hero of *The Lord of the Rings* was Samwise Gamgee, and that his creation of Sam was inspired by the batmen he knew during his service in the First World War. In a letter to Cotton Minchin in 1956, Tolkien wrote, "My 'Samwise' is indeed (as you note) largely a reflexion of the English soldier-grafted on the village-boys of early days, the memory of the privates and my batmen that I knew in the 1914 War, and recognized as so far superior to myself."

Compare then The Batman to a batman. The first is the quintessential superhero. He is a tortured genius, an outsider, a man of mystery. The superhero has a special destiny, a solitary battle against the forces of evil. He endures an inner battle that reflects the battles he endures in the outer world. He is an orphan, alone in the world. Batman is a creature of the night, a conundrum, a man with a mask, a dweller in caverns—an agonized introvert—a man who

does not fear the underworld or the monsters that lurk within.

While watching Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* one is struck with how much Frodo Baggins echoes the traits of the classic superhero. He too is an orphan hero, having been adopted by Bilbo. Frodo is an introvert and a loner, always examining his own heart and motivations as he faces the battle. Like Batman, Frodo enters the underworld in the Mines of Moria, Shelob's lair, and finally in the Cracks of Doom. Like Batman, he is a reluctant hero, a brooding warrior, and an uncertain champion.

The batman—the sidekick, the butler—on the other hand has no such complexities. He wears no mask. He needs no cloak. He has no secret identity. What you see is what you get. He is not an orphan or a loner. He may follow his officer into the cave, but he doesn't dwell in the recesses of his psyche, getting lost in the labyrinth of self-examination. Not for the batman the paralysis of analysis.

It is therefore the batman, not The Batman, who is the real hero.

Tolkien, who was himself a humble hero, understood the little man especially well. He knew it was the ordinary hero who was the real central character. He knew the common man carried not only the bucket but the burden of the whole story. The character traits of the batman balance the eccentricities of the caped crusader. The batman is steady and predictable, if somewhat dull. The masked man is mercurial, moody, and complex. The batman is graced with normality. The Dark Knight is not. The batman Samwise longs for his Rosie, his garden, and his pint of ale. Frodo and Batman walk alone.

There is a delightful subversion in Tolkien's championing of Sam. He gave the world superheroes in Gandalf, Aragorn, and Frodo, but in Sam, Tolkien is not only paying homage to the batmen he knew in the war, he is also honoring all the

ordinary men and women who plod away at tedious jobs day in and day out. He is honoring the faithful working classes, devout men and women with simple human values who do their duty day by day on the local level.

The Shire is Tolkien's homeland, and hobbits are his heroes. It's not a mistake or a literary curiosity that they are little people. With his little hairy heroes Tolkien glorifies the common man. Not only is Sam the unremarkable hero of the story, but the whole salvation of Middle-earth was for people like Sam. Frodo admits as much when he says the Shire needed to be saved, but not for him.

In a world where celebrities loom large and success seems to be measured by superhuman standards, we do well to stop, observe, and treasure all the Samwise Gamgees in our world.

Why should we observe and honor the Samwise Gamgees? Because in real life, as in the epic tale, the Samwise Gamgees not only serve the hero, but they also provide the turning point of the plot and the crucial assistance on the quest. It is Sam who fights off Shelob, Sam who guards Frodo from the perfidious Gollum, Sam who rescues Frodo from the Tower of Cirith Ungol, and Sam who carries Frodo up the final ascent of Mount Doom.

Finally, Sam is the only ring bearer who resists the fatal attraction of the Ring. Only a man who marvels at the oliphant and cooks rabbit stew at the gates of Mordor could carry that off.

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