

Doing a PhD in Middle-earth

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Abstract

In this paper, I show how The Hobbit by JRR Tolkien can be viewed as an extended allegory for any challenging and arduous human endeavour, and in particular for tackling and completing a PhD.

Introduction

The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1966) depicts the adventures of Bilbo Baggins and a group of dwarves to reclaim treasure held by the nasty dragon Smaug. After being tricked into taking part in the mission by the wily wizard Gandalf, the hero hardly seems to enjoy the adventure at all.

Tolkien's purpose with *The Hobbit* is to tell a story in an imaginary and fantastical land, providing a realm for his scholarship into old English culture, language and folklore, and Norse mythology. It is a forerunner to his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In his Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* (1966) Tolkien writes: "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence." Nevertheless, I make so bold as to consider *The Hobbit* as an allegory of any human endeavour, and then consider how this applies to tackling a PhD. Admitting that it was not Tolkien's purpose, I use his license when he writes: "I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author."

Disclaimer

Since it was clearly not Tolkien's purpose to write an allegory of a PhD, it is not my purpose to try to interpret every part of *The Hobbit* in terms of a PhD. I have only taken certain aspects that suggest a parallel and have made a connection. Conversely it would be a mistake to look for parallels for all aspects in the process of completing a PhD in *The Hobbit*. In fact, the reader may find many of the connections I make tenuous and contrived.

Basic interpretation

In this discussion, I take the liberty of interpreting the adventure as the process of completing a PhD. Other aspects of the story are interpreted as follows:

- Gandalf can be seen as the supervisor or promoter. He is the essential mentor, the instigator, the expert who has the map.
- Bilbo is the student; the real "you".
- The thirteen dwarves can be seen as companions working in the same field, or a support group. In any endeavour it is good to have others for assistance and support; a one-person crusade is never a good idea.

However, the interpretation of the dwarves as a support group falls down somewhat in the story, since the dwarves are not particularly supportive of Bilbo. In fact, he helps them out far more than they help him. An alternative interpretation is to see the dwarves as the primitive reason and driving force for the adventure. One theory of motivation talks about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, i.e. the internal and external factors that get us to do things (Reeve, 1992). If we see Bilbo as the intrinsic motivation and the dwarves as the extrinsic motivation of a student for doing a PhD, then determination and singleness of purpose, although essential, are not sufficient to complete the project. Another persona within the student must be engaged; a burglar, a problem solver, a different point of view, a Bilbo Baggins. It is essential to recruit him, but not necessarily an easy task.

The adventure is seen through Bilbo's eyes because for the dwarves it is not an adventure, it is a mission. If a PhD is merely seen as a mission, as a task to be fulfilled for certain external gains, there is little chance of success no matter how strong the motivation. Some of the dwarves might be expendable, but he isn't.

Conversely, only being a problem solver, a lover of maps and riddles and secret writing, is not good enough either. The student also needs plenty of primitive motivation (13 to 1?) to succeed.

- The troubles encountered along the way represent the many struggles in doing a PhD, not just research problems that must be solved and obstacles that must be overcome, but also problems of a more personal nature, eg. motivation, fear, loneliness, interpersonal problems, distractions, etc.
- The dangers during the adventure represent the possibility of failure. If death is the end of the adventure, so failure to complete the PhD is the worst possible outcome.

Fears of failure, of not being able to cope with the problems and to complete the PhD, are often enough to prevent a student from even starting. They can also immobilise the student when the enormity of the task becomes apparent. The student can also suffer psychologically - people have been known to have nervous breakdowns from the burden of completing a PhD!

- The ring and other objects collected along the way (eg. the swords) represent nothing more than tricks, techniques, skills, insights and ways of looking at things, that are gained during the process of doing a PhD. They are useful for attacking problems and getting out of trouble.

The decision to start

Bilbo has good reasons for not joining the adventure. Firstly, there are the comforts of home: "We are plain quiet folk in these parts and have no use for adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner. I can't think what anyone sees in them." Another is the possibility of failure, not just of not attaining the goal but of being destroyed in the process, "... a journey from which some of us, or perhaps all of us ... may never return."

One reason for undertaking the adventure is profit: "... very good for you - and profitable too, very likely". This, however, is hardly ever Bilbo's motivation, even though the dwarves' singing does make him "feel the love of beautiful things made by hand and by cunning and by magic". More importantly, their music and singing change his attitude to the adventure. Before, it was one of total disgust, now his imagination is stirred.

Interestingly enough, injured pride is what actually makes Bilbo decide to join the expedition. He overhears the dwarves voicing their doubts about his suitability and competence ("more like a grocer than a burglar") and his ire is raised. "I think I am right in believing that you think I am no good. I will show you ... Tell me what you want done and I will try."

When Gandalf hauls out the map of the mountain, Thorin, the leader of the dwarves, takes one look at it and says "I don't see that this will help us much ... I remember the mountain well enough and the lands around it." Gandalf has to point out that it indicates a secret entrance. Bilbo loves maps, and becomes "excited and interested again" and "[forgets] to keep his mouth shut".

Gandalf knows something about Bilbo's powers and gifts that he doesn't know

himself: "There is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself."

Gandalf uses a bit of magic and trickery in the form of the secret mark on Bilbo's door to get him involved.

Bilbo almost has second thoughts the morning after the first meeting. Gandalf literally has to chase Bilbo and prevent him from thinking, worrying and preparing to much by bundling him off to the Green Dragon Inn to join up with the others.

Intrinsic/internal motivation is often difficult to arouse in a PhD student. It can be the art, the puzzle or the challenge that tickles the imagination and encourages the first steps towards commitment. The supervisor's belief and confidence in the student's abilities, especially one lacking self-confidence, can be a powerful motivator.

Supervisors are also often tricky, managing to bamboozle their students into starting a PhD. If we accept *The Hobbit* as an allegory of great human endeavor, this is not necessarily bad. In any case, having a bit of magic at your disposal can be very useful later on in keeping a PhD on track, especially when the going gets tough.

Beginning the adventure

The group travel a long way into the Lone-lands before they discover that Gandalf is missing. Without his guidance and protection, they almost get themselves squashed, minced and cooked by trolls. They are not yet experienced enough with the perils of the path. In particular, Bilbo foolishly attempts to practise his burgling skills on a troll and gets caught. However, some important things for the future are gained from the encounter, in particular three swords.

The trolls are the only real danger encountered on the way to the Misty Mountains. However, the group have to persevere for days on end without provisions, in miserable weather, and all are despondent. No progress seems to be made until they ford a river and find that they are at the foothills of the Misty Mountains. This gives little comfort however, because the mountains look quite impenetrable.

It is at this stage that they find the entrance to Rivendell of the elves, where they can refresh themselves and rest. The dwarves don't want to stop, but Bilbo enjoys the rest so much that they have trouble getting him going again when they have to leave. The group don't get any closer to their goal while spending time here, but the break is essential. It is

important, not only for gathering their strength and motivation, but for gaining important clues to the success of their mission: Elrond, the leader of the elves, can read the elven runes and moon letters on the map that explain how to get in by the secret entrance to the Lonely Mountain. He tells them the names and explains the significance of the swords they captured from the trolls: Orcrist the Goblin-cleaver and Glamdring the Foe-hammer. Bilbo calls his small sword Sting.

The incident with the trolls shows that the whole enterprise can be ruined early in the adventure. The distance from The Shire to Rivendell reminds us that hard slog is almost unavoidable in doing a PhD. The disheartening aspect is that so much time is spent and so little progress seems to be made.

Rest and recuperation when doing a PhD are important. They give time for reflection from which new insights can be gained, even though no effort is being put into "making progress".

The Misty Mountains

The Misty Mountains are the first great barrier that has to be crossed. The group travel on, "going up and up and up". The only sign of progress is to "look back, over the lands they had left, laid out behind them far below." Then the mountain becomes more sinister. Rocks start tumbling down and a massive thunderstorm terrifies them, making them aware of their smallness and weakness.

The whole team (including Gandalf) makes a mistake of taking shelter in a back entrance to the goblins' underground lair. Separated from Gandalf, Bilbo and the dwarves are captured. Gandalf follows at a distance, intervenes in the nick of time and kills the king of the goblins. But in their flight, Bilbo becomes separated from the rest and finds himself completely lost inside the mountain. After finding a magic ring, he meets Gollum and engages in a battle of wits (i.e. solving riddles) with him. By cunning, a bit of luck and the use of the ring, he manages to trick Gollum into showing him the way out.

Although Bilbo gains the ring from this episode, the group lose all their provisions, time is wasted, and they end up with more problems than are solved ("Out of the frying-pan into the fire").

The furious goblins are determined to pursue them, and join forces with their Warg allies (the wolves) as the whole group are stranded up in some trees. Even Gandalf begins "to

be dreadfully afraid ... and to feel that they were in a very bad place, and had not escaped at all." Fortunately, the Lord of the Eagles notices the fires that Gandalf uses to chase off the wolves, and the eagles come and rescue them by carrying them off.

Mistakes are often made in the research effort for a PhD, and the supervisor cannot always prevent this. Time and effort are wasted, and the whole project can be jeopardised. More work can be created due to unavoidable changes of plans. Solving one problem can lead the student into a mass of worse problems. Outside help is sometimes needed. But hopefully there are positive aspects too in the form of lessons learnt and techniques gained.

Beorn

The stay at Beorn's long-house is once again a time of rest and recuperation. I suggest there is more to the episode with Beorn than meets the eye. He is the wild and hairy man, the non-conformist outsider. He is someone to be wary of but who can be of great assistance if he can be engaged. (Anyone interested in pursuing the idea of discovering your inner wild man should read the book *Iron John* by Robert Blythe (1990). The similarities between Beorn and Iron John are remarkable.)

Mirkwood

Gandalf has to leave the dwarves and Bilbo; they are on their own. He gives strict instructions that they are not to leave the forest path. They travel for days on end and feel they have made no progress, even when they are quite close to the end of the forest. In their desperation for sustenance, they head off the path after lights lit by wood-elves and get captured by giant spiders. Bilbo once again has to use all his ingenuity and bravery (and his ring and sword) to escape from the spiders and rescue his dwarf friends, only to have them captured by the wood-elves. Patience and perseverance are needed before a way of escape is found.

Here we see distraction from the research path set by the supervisor. This often occurs out of desperation for progress, and can lead to disaster. Nevertheless, all need not be lost. Bravery and ingenuity can save the day, even though much time is wasted in the process of getting back on track.

Lake-town

The real goal of the adventure, namely the treasure in the Lonely Mountain, is now in view, and the purpose of their mission is no longer a secret. Thorin speaks to the people of Lake-town with new power and conviction. In the general excitement, everyone believes that they will succeed. The dwarves revel in the adulation of the Lake-folk. They have come to claim what is theirs, and are oblivious to the perils and problems that lie ahead. Bilbo is the only one "not feeling particularly cheerful" when thinking of the mountain and the dragon and is "thoroughly unhappy" when they set off from the town.

The groundwork of research is now completed. The task of writing the thesis lies ahead. The adulation and encouragement from colleagues, friends and family can revitalise primitive motivation, but deep down, the student knows how much lies ahead and trembles in fear.

Burglary

As they approach the Lonely Mountain, the dwarves' spirits sink. The task ahead seems impossible. Bilbo ends up having more determination than the rest, and borrows Thorin's map, "pondering over the runes and the message of the moon letters". He "[makes] the dwarves begin the dangerous search on the western slopes for the secret door". He is a member of most of the search parties, and is eventually the one to spot the path going up to it.

They all hammer at and attack the door with all their might, forgetting the message written in moon-letters that Elrond had read: "Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole." A thrush pecking at a snail shell makes Bilbo remember, and at the last moment a ray of the setting sun shines through the clouds and the key-hole opens. Even Thorin forgets that he has the key, and just in time they manage to unlock the door.

The dwarves immediately turn to Bilbo to show what he can do. He has "begun to trust [his] luck more than [he] used to in the old days" and sets off down the tunnel with one of the dwarves. On the way down he thinks to himself "Dear me, what a fool I was and am! 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." Nevertheless he continues down.

As he approaches the red glow of the dragon, he has a crisis of confidence. He has to muster all his courage to go on. "Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. ... He fought the real battle in that tunnel alone, before he saw the vast danger that lay in wait."

After marvelling at the enormous pile of treasure on which the dragon is sleeping, Bilbo steals a golden cup and runs back up the tunnel with it. Although this act has serious consequences (when the dragon discovers that the cup is missing) it is an important step. It proves his worth and ability; it affirms his identity as the burglar.

On his second visit down the tunnel he has to employ all his wits not to be destroyed by the dragon who immediately smells him when he approaches. But, as his father said, "Every worm has his weak spot" and by flattery Bilbo manages to discover the chink in Smaug's armour. Nevertheless, he only survives by his wits and the skin of his teeth and in the process Smaug plants seeds of doubt in Bilbo's mind, particularly w.r.t. the integrity of the dwarves. Bilbo has to confront this doubt by verbalising it with them. By his intuition and pleading, he manages to get the dwarves inside the tunnel and close the door a moment before the dragon attacks with such fury that they are closed in permanently.

Bilbo and the dwarves spend days in fear and despondency waiting for the dragon to return. Bilbo's common-sense of "While there's life there's hope!" and "Third time pays for all" spurs them into action and they head down the tunnel together.

Bilbo finds and hides the Arkenstone of Thrain, whose worth is "beyond price" to Thorin, before the dwarves are brave enough to venture into the great hall. When they see the treasure, the dwarves lose all fear of the dragon. Their ancient gold-lust is awakened: "When the heart of a dwarf is awakened by gold and by jewels, he becomes bold, and he may become fierce."

Here we see the entire plan coming together. Success is not guaranteed, but things are falling into place. Bravery and careful thinking are required - the primitive motivations start becoming more of a problem than a help. Doubts arise, not just of success, but in the integrity of the primitive motivations. This is the start of dangerous inner conflict.

Death of the dragon

It is a remarkable part of the story that neither Bilbo, the dwarves or even Gandalf actually kill the dragon themselves - it is grim-voiced Bard, one of the Lake-men. It is a thrush (which Bilbo tries to chase off by throwing a stone) that hears of the weak spot and flies off and tells

Bard and he shoots the arrow that pierces the dragon's armour.

Smaug is dead, but Bilbo and the dwarves don't know it. Neither do they realise the suffering they have inadvertently caused others. When they do find out, there is great rejoicing by the dwarves. Bilbo "felt that the adventure ... was over with the death of the dragon. ... He would have given most of his share of the profits for the peaceful winding up of these affairs." But they all soon realise that there is an even bigger battle looming now, namely to guard the treasure.

Great envy and spite is roused in the Lake-men and wood-elves. They want a share of the spoils; a recompense for the trouble they have suffered. The dwarves see this as wanting something that doesn't belong to them and they don't deserve.

A clutching and selfish madness for the gold possesses Thorin. He becomes totally unreasonable, causing a rift between Bilbo and the dwarves. Bilbo tries to force Thorin to come to his senses by smuggling the Arkenstone to Bard, the leader of the men and elves, so that he can bargain with Thorin and avoid confrontation, but even this strategy fails. Thorin turns bitterly on Bilbo as a traitor, and is on the point of throwing him from the walls when Gandalf reveals himself and intervenes.

In doing a PhD, often the problem that seemed to be the main task becomes no problem at all. Either someone else solves it for you, or another problem overshadows it completely.

Inter- and intrapersonal problems are typical of this stage of doing a PhD. The envy and spite of others can often bedevil matters, as can the ruthless manipulation of self and others. The student is also wracked with inner turmoil.

The Battle of Five Armies

Gandalf previously had word of the gathering and mustering of goblins and Wargs, and had hurried to the scene. The personal quest of 14 characters now becomes a battle of cosmic proportions. An army of other dwarves, lead by a relative of Thorin, arrive on the scene, and in order to fight off the goblins and Wargs, all the dwarves join forces with the wood elves and men. It is like the end of the world. It is light versus darkness; good versus evil. And Bilbo has very little to do with it. He slips the ring on his finger and finds a safe place out of the way of the main slaughter. Just before being knocked unconscious, he sees the eagles coming who once again together with Beorn save the day.

Three dwarves (including Thorin) are killed in the action and even Gandalf is injured.

Nevertheless, victory is secured and the spoils are shared. Bilbo is quite happy to take much less than the original share agreed on. The experience of the adventure is of far more value.

The battle of the five armies can be seen as the final throes of getting the final document prepared or as the examination of the thesis. Whatever interpretation one wants to place on it, the main work of the PhD (at least for the Bilbo part of the student) is over. The fact that it is in the hands of others, is no comfort at all. Loss of interest or withdrawal for self-preservation is a common reaction. It is interesting to note that problems and dangers that seem to have been dealt with (goblins and wolves) return in greater force at this stage. Also, what was a problem previously (the wood-elves) now becomes a source of help.

Conclusion

In one sense, doing a PhD is a very specialised activity. In another sense, it shares the challenges and ups and downs of any substantial human endeavour. I believe that the main appeal of fantasy literature, and *The Hobbit* in particular, is that it presents our experiences of life in another form. It comments on and analyses the human condition from a different perspective. If this is true, then the adventures of Bilbo has something to say about doing a PhD.

Personally, I found the motivation for starting, and the trauma of completion, the most interesting. I hope the reader will be inspired to read *The Hobbit* again (or for the first time) and see what other parallels they can find.

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