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# The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* (2013), directed by Peter Jackson.

*The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* is the second installment of director Peter Jackson's prequel franchise to the Oscar-winning 'Lord of the Rings' (*LOTR*) movie trilogy. *Smaug* is the fifth film released in the series overall. All six planned films are based on the books penned by acclaimed Oxford scholar and fantasy writer, J.R.R. Tolkien. The sixth and final film, *The Hobbit: Battle of the Five Armies* is set for release in December of 2014.

This film opens with a flashback featuring deposed dwarf-king Thorin Oakenshield (Richard Armitage) and iconic wizard, Gandalf the Grey (Sir Ian McKellen). The flashback serves to remind audiences of the quest begun in the first Hobbit film (i.e., *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*), where Thorin and company, along with Gandalf and 'the hobbit,' Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman), journey to the Lonely Mountain to confront the dragon Smaug (voiced by Benedict Cumberbatch). Smaug inhabits a fallen dwarven hall, called Erebor, and guards a vast treasure-horde belonging to Thorin's ancestors. The most precious jewel of this treasure-horde is the 'Arkenstone,' a relic upon which all the dwarf-kings of Middle Earth have pledged their allegiance. To possess the Arkenstone is Thorin's thwarted birthright, and it would bestow upon him the lost mantle of leadership of the now divided dwarf houses. With the help of Gandalf and a skilled 'burglar,' Gandalf believes the stone can be retrieved, and Thorin can thereby unite the dwarf houses and collectively destroy the menace of Smaug for good. We learn from the first prequel that the burglar is none other than the reluctant but dexterous hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, whose skills at sneaking become positively incredible after secretly discovering a magic ring that makes him invisible. Fans of the series will immediately recognize the ring as the very one forged by the Dark Lord Sauron and which is destined to be destroyed by Bilbo's nephew, Frodo Baggins, in *LOTR: The Return of the King*.

Escaping from a pack of vicious orcs led by Azog the Defiler (Manu Bennett), Bilbo and company find uneasy refuge in the home of the shape-changer, Beorn (Mikael Persbrandt). Beorn is no great lover of dwarves, but even less so of orcs, and so he lends the company horses so that they can escape quickly the cover of Greenwood Forest and its protected Elven Road. Upon arriving there, however, Gandalf senses the growing darkness that has transformed the Greenwood into the now dreaded ‘Mirkwood.’ Moved by a dire warning from the Lady Galadriel (Kate Blanchett), Gandalf feels a duty to leave the company to explore the High Fells of Rhudaur, which are the graves of the nine Nazgûl, that is, the dreaded Black Riders from the *LOTR* trilogy. He summons Radagast the Brown (Sylvester McCoy) to aid him in the exploration, and they discover what seems impossible, that the graves of the nine are now empty.

Meanwhile, Bilbo and the dwarves travel through the treacherous ‘Mirkwood,’ where they succumb to an illusion, lose their path, and are attacked by giant spiders. Nearly overwhelmed, the dwarven company is rescued by the woodland elves, including Legolas (Orlando Bloom) and Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly). The dwarves are imprisoned by the wood-elves and taken before their majestic king, Thranduil (Lee Pace). Bilbo escapes imprisonment by using the ring to become invisible, and he further steals the prison key, allowing the dwarves to escape down a river in elven wine barrels. A riotous, and at times hilarious, battle breaks out between the dwarven escapees, the woodland elves, and the late-arriving orcs. The use of such humor raises questions about whether Jackson’s film adaptations conforms with the spirit of Tolkien’s intentions.

In his famous essay “*On Fairy-Stories*,” Tolkien sternly warns that, “...Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature.”<sup>1</sup> He specifically mentions paintings, dramas, and pantomime as art-forms inimical to the fantasy genre.<sup>2</sup> He further warns against the danger of

“silliness” and “buffoonery,” as fairy-stories are translated into other mediums. Of course, he could not have foreseen the advances and realism in special effects we enjoy in today’s cinema. Tolkien sternly warns against seeing fairy stories as merely childrens’ stories, saying “If fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and by adults. They will, of course, put more in and get more out than children can.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Tolkien seems especially concerned that the dramas of fantasy literature be presented with as much seriousness, realism, and poignancy (without morbidity) as is possible. He writes, “A real taste for fairy-stories was wakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to true life by war.”<sup>4</sup> Such comments could be legitimately interpreted as criticisms of Jackson’s lightheartedness.

My take is that Jackson has flirted with, but ultimately dodged, Tolkien’s criticisms. Even as the film moves beyond Tolkien’s writings, the humor here is genuinely marvelous, but seems a far cry from the silly buffoonery Tolkien would have scorned. It is well within Tolkien’s arsenal to use charm and muted humor to enchant a wondrous moment, and his mythos includes the idea that each race has its especial flaws, but also its own magic. Balanced by a deep sense of real risk and threat, the delightful magic of the elves and dwarves sparkles here like the Arkenstone itself. Not all of Jackson’s expansions upon Tolkien can claim such success, but as Tolkien himself asserts, “The essential face of Faërie is...the Magical.”<sup>5</sup>

Against all odds, the dwarves and company escape to Laketown, aided by the boatman and archer, Bard (Luke Evans). Now in a race against time, the dwarves rush to find the secret and magical passage that will allow them to enter the Lonely Mountain and reclaim the Arkenstone.

The especially religious scenes of the film occur while Gandalf seeks to further explore the rumor that a Necromancer with the power to summon the dead lives in the abandoned

fortress of Dol Guldur in Mirkwood Forest.<sup>6</sup> Gandalf strongly suspects that the Necromancer is actually Sauron, the fallen Dark Lord of Middle Earth's Second Age, to whom the nine Nazgûl are enslaved. Believing Sauron to be vulnerable, Gandalf enters Dol Guldur with the intention of forcing the enemy's hand in revealing himself more fully.

In the Tolkien legendarium, both Gandalf and Sauron are Maiar, members of a powerful and immortal angelic order. However powerful Gandalf and the other wizards are, their incarnation as human wizards is a limitation upon them.<sup>7</sup> If the Necromancer is indeed Sauron, Gandalf knows he is walking into a dangerous trap and will likely be overpowered, which is exactly what happens. In a dazzling scene, Gandalf uses his staff to conjure a sphere of protective light, while Sauron attacks with some smoky and black malevolence. Twice, Sauron extinguishes Gandalf's radiance, but the second time proves decisive. Gandalf is unable to recast the broken spell a third time, and his magic staff burns to smoking ash in his hands as the spirit of Sauron appears as the pupil of the fiery and lidless eye so familiar from *LOTR*. Trapped by the will of evil and defenseless, Gandalf is thrown down violently upon the ground, and then lifted and pinned against a stone wall with his arms and legs in the shape of a cross. The last we see him, he is burned and caged while armies of orcs flow out of the fortress and into the Greenwood forest ruled by Galadriel and Thranduil.

The scene foreshadows the possibility in the final film of a "Euchatastrophe," which Tolkien, a devout Catholic, describes as "a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. ...it denies universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."<sup>8</sup> The audience already knows that Gandalf has sent Radagast the Brown (another Maiar) to Lady Galadriel with news of the resurrected nine and of Gandalf's plan to enter Dol Guldur alone. With Gandalf's self-sacrifice,

the enemy's hand has been forced prematurely, and the elves have forewarning of the threat marching through the Greenwood.

The religious import of this scene is reminiscent of Gandalf's confrontation with the demonic Balrog while in the mines of Moria, in *LOTR: The Fellowship of the Ring*. In both movies, there is a contest of good and evil between immortal, spiritual beings. In both cases, Gandalf risks self-sacrifice and a courageous death to assure some hope of overcoming the threat. Also, in both scenes, Tolkien's subtle Catholicism is acknowledged by Jackson in having Gandalf's body form the shape of a Cross in the final moments of the confrontation. What remains to be seen in the final of the prequels is how Gandalf might snatch some victory from the jaws of defeat, in the true spirit of the Christian *evangelium* Tolkien evokes above.

Meanwhile, Bilbo and the dwarves try sneaking into the Lonely Mountain, but they inadvertently awaken Smaug when Bilbo picks up a golden cup from the treasure horde, creating a noisy avalanche of gold coins.<sup>9</sup> In a far less successful extension of Tolkien's rather brief written confrontation between Smaug and Bilbo, the movie version devotes considerable extra time and action to Smaug's interaction with the dwarves and their burglar. I generally consider myself tolerant of Jackson's extensions and adaptations of Tolkien, but these final scenes, however action-packed, strained credulity and without quite enough of the compensatory 'magic' of fairy. Even if too indulgent, the awakening of Smaug, and the threat to hapless Laketown, feels both epic and truly dire, for now *two* great enemies of hobbits, dwarves, elves, and men are unleashed upon the world, Sauron *and* Smaug. Will Middle Earth utterly fall to shadow and death? Many of us know the answer already, but even so, with Tolkien and Jackson lighting the path to fairy "there and back again," we can yet expect the spectacle to enchant all the more.

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories,' in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Tolkien enjoyed drawing, and himself sketched certain scenes from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The most notable of his fantasy drawings can be found in Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> 'On Fairy-Stories,' p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> 'On Fairy-Stories,' p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> 'On Fairy-Stories,' p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Jackson has radically revised Tolkien's timeline here, but the appendices of *The Hobbit* do reveal a confrontation between Gandalf and Sauron at Dol Guldur. I consider this to be another interesting and successful adaptation/interpretation on Jackson's part.

<sup>7</sup> '[The wizard] emissaries were forbidden to reveal themselves in forms of majesty, or to seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but coming in shapes weak and humble were bidden to advise and persuade Men and Elves to good, and to seek to unite in love and understanding all those whom Sauron, should he come again, would endeavour to dominate and corrupt.' J.R. R. Tolkien, 'The Istari,' in *Unfinished Tales* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1980), p. 389.

<sup>8</sup> 'On Fairy-Stories,' p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> This fiery awakening of the dragon is clearly inspired by one of Tolkien's favorite poems, *Beowulf*. Tolkien's own translation of *Beowulf*, along with the translator's commentary, was published in May of 2014.

### References

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