



At the center of a good story lies a key action that defines the whole work and that depends on a specific value and worldview. Like an onion, it has many layers that have to be peeled away so

we can get to the center where everything intersects, the story's crux. Once you understand the crux, you can see and better understand the rest of the story in relation to it.

In this article we will trace the acts of mercy that lead to the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*: the Ring's destruction at Mount Doom. But to examine the crux of the tale, we must go back to a scene many years before our story.

When the Ring first comes into Bilbo's possession in *The Hobbit*, he invisibly follows Gollum to the exit leading out of an underground labyrinth. He must get by Gollum, who blocks the passage, to survive. His prudence tells him that killing Gollum would be the surest thing, but Bilbo somehow understands Gollum's misery and chooses to spare the life of a creature who would very much have liked to eat him. He takes a literal leap of faith over Gollum and makes his running escape down the tunnel: "No great leap for a man, but a leap in the dark." (*The Hobbit*, p.80)

Decades later, Frodo realizes that he must destroy the Ring, and hears that Gollum has likely betrayed the name of Baggins to Sauron.

'What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!'

'Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.'

'I am sorry,' said Frodo. 'But I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum.'

'You have not seen him,' Gandalf broke in.

'No, and I don't want to,' said Frodo. 'I can't understand you. Do you mean to say that you, and the Elves, have let him live on after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death.'

'Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in

judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or for ill, before the end...' (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.58)

Frodo begins by pitying himself. He regrets that Bilbo didn't kill Gollum—now Sauron knows who to look for! Self-pity and self-centeredness. Gandalf tries to get Frodo to feel the same pity that Bilbo felt. Why? What is the value of sparing a life that constantly threatens mine?

So Frodo, Sam and fellowship are off on a journey that began because of one insignificant hobbit's "leap in the dark." They don't meet Gollum until over halfway through the story, yet after they capture Gollum trailing them in the night, Frodo's conversation with Gandalf goes through his mind again: "Even the wise cannot see all ends." Frodo thinks to himself: "Very well...But I am still afraid. And yet, as you see, I will not touch the creature. For now that I see him, I do pity him." (*The Lord of the Rings*, p. 601)

Thus Gollum (after being forced to swear on the Ring itself to be faithful) becomes the newest member of the remains of the fellowship of the Ring. Frodo allows this knowing that a free Gollum means a failed quest, but also in the very slim hope that somehow Gollum could be cured. Sam is less than happy about the situation.

Why does Frodo change his attitude from before? He sees Gollum, touches a misery that before was only a conversation topic.

Moving ahead several chapters, Frodo and Sam have been taken by friendly captors and separated from Gollum, who wanders too close to the hidden fort where he is in danger of being shot. A dead Gollum would certainly be one problem less on the quest. When Faramir asks Gandalf says that Frodo must see Gollum in order to be able to take pity on him. Bilbo had truly seen Gollum through empathizing with his miserable life "of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering." (*The Hobbit*, p.80)

We learn that Gandalf and the elves had also taken pity on Gollum, and while not freeing him, had treated him with kindness. Gandalf's pity, in this case towards Gollum, has two deeper causes: (1) humility—Gandalf will not judge another, will not play God over anyone's life; (2) hope—he recognizes the evil in Gollum yet hopes for his cure. Gandalf's pity is other-centered, not regret, not even sparing punishment, but a real form of love. Pity is love that seeks the best for the other person, and, while not resigning to being a victim, is willing to risk being hurt for the possible betterment of the other.

At this point, we should take a step back and see the background of the one directing this conversation with Frodo. Who is Gandalf and why is he in Middle-

earth? We know that Gandalf has been sent from the West as emissary of higher powers. In *The Silmarillion* he is associated especially with Nienna, a Valar who weeps for the evil in the world. Tolkien tells us that Gandalf learned from her pity and patience and then gives a one- sentence summary of his whole purpose in Middle-earth saying that “he was the friend of all the Children of Ilúvatar, and took pity on their sorrows; and those who listened to him awoke from despair and put away the imaginations of darkness.” (*The Silmarillion*, p.31) Gandalf’s whole mission in Middle-earth is one of pity, and his pity takes the form of giving others hope and strength to overcome darkness.

Frodo what they should do, we see Frodo’s growing pity for Gollum contrasted with Sam’s less-than-benevolent thoughts.

‘Shall we shoot?’ said Faramir, turning quickly to Frodo.

Frodo did not answer for a moment. Then ‘No!’ he said. ‘No! I beg you not to.’ If Sam had dared, he would have said ‘Yes,’ quicker and louder.

...

‘Let me go down quietly to him,’ said Frodo. ‘You may keep your bows bent, and shoot me at least, if I fail. I shall not run away.’ (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.669,671)

Frodo is actually willing to lay down his life to save Gollum!

Later in the story, Gollum has just arranged the hobbits’ death, and returns to and them both peacefully asleep. In this scene, Tolkien gives us a glimpse of Gollum’s soul and invites us to take pity on him as well:

Gollum looked at them. A strange expression passed over his lean hungry face. The gleam faded from his eyes, and they went dim and grey, old and tired. A spasm of pain seemed to twist him, and he turned away, peering back up towards the pass, shaking his head, as if engaged in some interior debate. Then he came back, and slowly putting out a trembling hand, very cautiously he touched Frodo’s knee – but almost the touch was a caress. For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing.

But at that touch Frodo stirred and cried out softly in his sleep, and immediately Sam was wide awake. The first thing he saw was Gollum – ‘pawing at master,’ as he thought.

‘Hey you!’ he said roughly. ‘What are you up to?’

‘Nothing, nothing,’ said Gollum softly. ‘Nice Master!’

‘I daresay,’ said Sam. ‘But where have you been to – sneaking off and sneaking back, you old villain?’

Gollum withdrew himself, and a green glint flickered under his heavy lids. Almost spider-like he looked now, crouched back on his bent limbs, with his protruding eyes. The fleeting moment had passed, beyond recall. (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.699)

Unfortunately, Sam has not yet learned to “see”, even if he was right about Gollum’s sneaking off. And the chance for Gollum to change, already so slim, has definitively been lost. Writing about this scene in letter 246, Tolkien says, “For me perhaps the most tragic moment in the Tale comes... when Sam fails to note the complete change in Gollum’s tone and aspect ‘Nothing, nothing,’ said Gollum softly. ‘Nice Master!’ His repentance is blighted and all Frodo’s pity is (in a sense) wasted.” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p.330) Failing to show pity also has its consequences.

Sam only learns to have pity on Gollum at the very end of the quest when Gollum ambushes them as they struggle up Mount Doom. Sam easily overpowers Gollum and sends Frodo on ahead while he deals with Gollum. In his anger, he knows it would be justified to slay Gollum, but he actually sees Gollum’s misery for the first time. And since the story has always given us more from Sam’s point of view, we see the deeper reasons for mercy. “He himself, though only for a little while, had borne the Ring, and now dimly he guessed the agony of Gollum’s shrivelled mind and body, enslaved to that Ring, unable to find peace or relief ever in life again.” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p. 923)

Sam, and likely Frodo before him, took pity on Gollum because, deep down, he saw himself in that slimy almost- toothless other. They realized how easy it would be to take a wrong step down the slippery slope and end up just like Gollum. Gandalf himself is humble enough to realize that he would not be able to resist the Ring: “I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength.” (*The Lord of the Rings*, p. 60) The humble can be merciful because they know that they have not the strength to resist evil alone and that the fact they still stand is itself a mercy.

And we know that this chain of mercy ends up being the key to the destruction of the Ring. Frodo’s pity on Gollum didn’t save Gollum in the end. But it saved *him*. As Tolkien wrote, “[Frodo’s] exercise of patience and mercy towards Gollum gained him Mercy: his failure was redressed.” (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p.326)

Right before mentioning mercy, Tolkien says in the same letter quoted above (246) that Frodo not being able to destroy the Ring of his own will was central to his theory of nobility and heroism: “Frodo indeed ‘failed’ as a hero, as conceived by

simple minds: he did not endure to the end..." (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p.326) He then goes on to clarify we must have mercy in judging others' strength against the weight of circumstances. Frodo's task was to do what he could. He did that, and thus, there was no moral failure.

The final chapters show us how Frodo has grown and how he has become a hero: he and the other hobbits return to the Shire and drive out a now much-diminished Saruman. On the way out, Saruman tries to stab Frodo, but his knife is turned aside by the mithril mail shirt Frodo wears under his coat. Sam and some of the other hobbits are about to kill Saruman.

'No, Sam!' said Frodo. 'Do not kill him even now. For he has not hurt me. And in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil mood. He was great once, of a noble kind that we should not dare to raise our hands against. He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it.' Saruman rose to his feet, and stared at Frodo. There was a strange look in his eyes of mingled wonder and respect and hatred. 'You have grown, Halfling,' he said. 'Yes, you have grown very much. You are wise, and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness, and now I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy.' (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.996)

So Saruman recognizes Frodo's growth and wisdom as expressed through his mercy. Frodo spares him in the hope that he might be cured of his evil, however slim the chance might be.

Frodo himself is then sent from Middle-earth to the land of the Valar to be cured of his wounds and receive the mercy he had given and the healing for which he had hoped for others. "Frodo was sent or allowed to pass over Sea to heal him - if that could be done, *before he died*... he went both to a purgatory and to a reward, for a while." (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, p.328) Gandalf's purpose in Middle-earth is accomplished, and his last act of mercy is to arrange Frodo's journey into the West so Frodo might be cured.

And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that... the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (*The Lord of the Rings*, p.1007)