**TOLKIEN SHOWS US OURSELVES**

By [Joseph Pearce](https://theimaginativeconservative.org/author/joseph-pearce)|October 26th, 2021

*J.R.R. Tolkien was right: Fairy-stories do hold up a mirror to man. They show us ourselves: who we are, who we might become, and who we are called to be. To gaze into such a mirror is perilous; to fail to do so, is more perilous still.*



In his famous lecture and essay “On Fairy-Stories”, Tolkien claims that fairy-stories hold up a mirror to man, that they show us ourselves. One way of testing the veracity of Tolkien’s claim is to see how his own fairy-stories, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, hold up a mirror to humanity. Do we see ourselves in Tolkien’s stories? Do we see our neighbours?

Let’s work our way through the various anthropological labels that we have appended to ourselves to see whether these various facets of humanity are present in Middle-earth.

The “scientific” label that we’ve given to ourselves, *homo sapiens* (“wise-man”), is evidently a misnomer. Nobody in their right mind would consider the defining characteristic of humanity to be wisdom. Failing to distinguish between cleverness and wisdom, the children of the superciliously self-named “Enlightenment”, did not really mean that humanity was wise but merely that we are clever. They didn’t really mean that we are *homo sapiens* but that we are *homo technologicus*. It is interesting, therefore, that Tolkien makes the distinction between wisdom and cleverness in *The Hobbit*. He tells us that “goblins … make no beautiful things, but … many clever ones”:

It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once … but in those days and those wild parts they had not advanced (as it is called) so far.

Lacking wisdom, and admiring technology over virtue, latter-day orcs, as *homo technologicus*, had invented weapons of mass destruction, capable of killing millions of people, such as nuclear bombs and man-made viruses.

Another label that modernity has appended to man is *homo economicus*, whose role in life is to serve as a producer and consumer of marketable products. *Homo economicus* has no telos, no purpose, merely a marketable function. The danger of this materialist and consumerist way of seeing ourselves is described in *The Hobbit* as the “dragon sickness”, which afflicts those who are so attached to their material possessions that they become possessed by them. Bilbo Baggins suffers from the dragon sickness at the beginning of the story. He is a creature of comfort addicted to the creature comforts who refuses to leave his hobbit hole comfort zone. This is why Gandalf tells him that embarking on the dangerous quest with the dwarfs will be good for him. He needs to learn the art of self-sacrifice, the art of laying down his life for others, which is the art of love itself, in order to free himself from his attachment to “stuff” and his addiction to comfort. The fact that the mission is successful in healing him of the dragon sickness is evident in the dying words of Thorin, whose own dragon sickness proves fatal. “If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold,” Thorin confesses to Bilbo, “it would be a merrier world.”

“My dear Bilbo!” Gandalf exclaims at journey’s end. “Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were.” Gandalf is right. Bilbo is not the hobbit that he was. He has discovered that he is much more than merely *homo economicus*. He has grown in wisdom and love. He has attained that ultimate sanity which the wise call sanctity. This makes him an object of suspicion to his worldly neighbours, who are afflicted by the dragon sickness of which he has been healed. “Bilbo found … he had lost his reputation … he was no longer quite respectable”. Nor does he care. “I am sorry to say he did not mind. He was quite content; and the sound of the kettle on his hearth was ever after more musical….” The kettle sounds more sweet because he now possesses it and is not possessed by it. He has attained that detachment from material possessions which enables him to cast off the shackles which *homo economicus* wears.

Another face of humanity which Tolkien shows us is *homo viator*. This is the Christian understanding of the human person as one whose life is not merely a journey, but a quest, and not merely a quest but a pilgrimage. The purpose of life is to grow in holiness that we might get to heaven. There is no other purpose. There is no other goal. We either succeed in this quest for heaven or we fail. There’s no other end to human life. We will either live happily ever after or we will not. This aspect of humanity is evident in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in the sense that the call to self-sacrifice takes the form of a perilous journey through enemy territory. Success on the journey is only possible if *homo viator* is also *anthropos*, one who looks up in humble and hopeful wonder at the light that transcends and illumines all darkness. “Above all shadows rides the sun,” says Samwise Gamgee in his darkest hour. The one who refuses to look up in wonder can see nothing but shadows and the darkness beyond the shadows. This is *homo superbus*, proud man, who refuses the self-sacrifice necessary for the quest, forsaking the journey and the joy at journey’s end so that he can gratify addictive desires. *Homo superbus* is possessed by his possession of the Ring of Power or by his desire to possess it. In selfishly seeking self-empowerment, he gollumizes himself in his pride, seeking that which gratifies but never satisfies.

Tolkien is right. Fairy-stories do hold up a mirror to man. They show us ourselves. As for the Mirror of Middle-earth, it has an elvish magic about it, much like the Mirror of Galadriel. Whereas the magical or mystical mirror of the elven queen shows “things that were, and things that are, and things that yet might be”, the Mirror of Tolkien shows us who we are, who we might become, and who we are called to be. To gaze into such a mirror is perilous; to fail to do so, is more perilous still.

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