

The Black Riders and Frodo's Loss of Innocence

ENGL 283: The Tolkien Legendarium

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In Book I of *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is introduced little by little to the Black Riders. Throughout the book, the process of Frodo learning more about them parallels and reflects his more general loss of innocence due to the Ring and the journey he is undertaking. When he first encounters the Riders, he feels uneasy, but naively believes he is largely safe in the confines of the Shire. After Gildor hints at the power of the Riders, Frodo becomes more afraid and cautious, but he still underestimates them at times and makes foolish decisions as a result. Once Strider reveals more about the Riders and the company sets off to Weathertop, Frodo focuses all his energy on escaping them, but places his hope in the ability and knowledge of Strider to protect him. However, when he is attacked and injured by the Riders, it becomes clear to him that he cannot be fully protected by others, and the end of his journey to Rivendell is marked by pain and at times despair. Thus, the Black Riders are a spiritual danger to Frodo as well as a physical one: while they are unsuccessful in killing him or retrieving the Ring, Frodo's knowledge of and encounters with them mars his innocence and irreversibly changes the way he views the world.

Before Frodo learns the identity of the Black Riders, he is aware of abstract danger but is largely unworried about his and his company's safety while they are in the Shire. Because of the danger Gandalf explains, he decides he must leave the Shire, but does so leisurely: while Merry drives to Crickhollow, Frodo, Sam, and Pippin's "plan—for pleasure and a last look at the Shire as much as any other reason—[is] to walk from Hobbiton to Buckleberry Ferry, taking it fairly easy" (67). The first night of this journey, "they set no watch; even Frodo feared no danger yet, for they were still in the heart of the Shire" (71). Before leaving, Frodo is at one point mere feet away from a Black Rider, and thinks that its voice is "strange, and somehow unpleasant" and once it is gone Frodo "wonder[s] vaguely why the fact that they did not come on up the Hill

seemed a great relief" (68). This feeling parallels his feelings about the Ring in general—he is instinctively apprehensive, but does not yet realize the extent or the urgency of the problem.

It is only when Gildor warns them that they begin taking the threat more seriously, which marks a turning point in Frodo's sense of comfort and security in the Shire and his behavior going forward. Even so, Gildor does not reveal everything, saying "I think it is not for me to say more—lest terror should keep you from your journey" (82). When pressed for details, he asks:

Is it not enough to know that they are servants of the Enemy? [...] Fear them! Speak no words to them! They are deadly. Ask no more of me! But my heart forebodes that, ere all is ended, you, Frodo son of Drogo, will know more of these fell things than Gildor Inglorion. May Elebereth protect you! (83)

Gildor is protecting what he sees as the remainder of Frodo's innocence by not revealing more information for the time being. As a result, Frodo is more afraid and cautious, but not sufficiently so. The next day, they are riding through the open fields in the sunlight, and "their fear left them, though they still felt uneasy [...] their spirits rose with every step [...] the Black Riders began to seem like phantoms of the woods now left far behind" (89). At this point, Frodo is still innocent and hopeful enough to have his spirits lifted by nature and light. Conversely, he becomes fearful without the light, dreaming of the "sound of creatures crawling and snuffling. He felt sure they would sniff him out sooner or later" (106). This mix of fear and hope, paralleled by Frodo's partial understanding of the Riders, causes the company to behave erratically—for example, they are careful not to give too much information to the gatekeeper at Bree, but then foolishly give far too much information away once they feel safe at the Prancing Pony.

After Strider chides the company for this and generally being "much too careless so far" (160), he offers to accompany them to Rivendell. When they are skeptical of his offer, he warns that the Black Riders "will come on you in the wild, in some dark place where there is no help. Do you wish them to find you? They are terrible!" (162). After visibly remembering traumatic

encounters with them, he says, "Perhaps I know more about these pursuers than you do. You fear them, but you do not fear them enough, yet. Tomorrow you will have to escape, if you can. Strider can take you by paths that are seldom trodden. Will you have him?" (162). They do, and at this point Frodo is very afraid and focuses all his energy on escaping the Riders. He begins to trust Strider more at the same time he begins to trust the rest of the world less, which represents the narrowing of his trust of and dependence, previously on the land of the Shire, to only a few trusted allies. As they are standing on Weathertop, we are told that "in that lonely place Frodo for the first time fully realized his homelessness and danger. He wished bitterly that his fortune had left him in the quiet and beloved Shire" (184). In the very next moment, he looks down at the road and sees five Riders approaching, which supports the notion that the process of Frodo learning more and getting closer to the Riders symbolizes and also causes him to lose his innocence and hope. However, Strider takes the lead in the situation and quickly leads them away, and Frodo continues to trust he is mostly safe with him. Unfortunately, this turns out not to be fully true.

Perhaps the most significant turning point in Book I is the fight at Weathertop, and specifically when Frodo puts on the Ring. When he does this, the Riders' appearances are revealed, and they become more real and solid to him in that moment than his allies. Frodo also vanishes from his friends: Sam recounts later that during the fight, "he heard Frodo's voice, but it seemed to come from a great distance, or from under the earth, crying out strange words. They saw nothing more, until they stumbled over the body of Frodo, lying as if dead" (192). While Frodo has the Ring on, no one can help him, and this is not fully reversible once he takes it off—Frodo's trust in Strider and others to help him in general is shaken when neither Strider nor Glorfindel can heal the wound from the Riders that symbolizes his physical and spiritual loss. In

stark contrast to Frodo's spirits being lifted in the sunlight earlier in the book, we are now told that "during the day things about him faded to shadows of ghostly grey. He almost welcomed the coming of night, for then the world seemed less pale and empty" (207). During Frodo's last encounter with the Riders as he is nearing Rivendell, he hears their voices for the first time, and he nearly dies soon after. Thus, Frodo gains near full knowledge of the Riders at the same time as his hope is nearly gone, and as his circle of trust has dwindled until he realizes that he is largely alone in carrying his burden. This is consistent with the connection throughout the book between Frodo's loss of innocence and his understanding of and proximity to the Black Riders, and how his view of the world concurrently becomes more bleak.

Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. HarperCollins Publishers, 2007.

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