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Explication Paper: *The Hobbit* - Chapter Five

Chapter five of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* marks a major turning point in the novel. For the very first time, Bilbo is not only just in peril, but is entirely alone. He no longer has his newfound dwarf companions, nor Gandalf to guide the way for him. Instead, we receive keen insight on Bilbo's solo decision-making process, as well as an account of how he stumbles on the titular One Ring of the sequels and first encounters what will eventually become a central character, Gollum. The chapter itself is exceedingly clever: Bilbo and Gollum, after a brief introduction, commence in a game of riddles to try and better understand the other. One side would like to see if the creature before him would make a tasty snack, while the other would like to see if a tasty snack would be made out of him. This exchange is distinctly dichotomous—everything from the riddles themselves to the evaluations of one another and the individual justifications to play the game are told by the narrator in third-person limited. The narrator selectively employs a tight perspective from either Bilbo or Gollum, but never both, though their thoughts often overlap with one another. It creates a back-and-forth struggle beyond what is simply described on the page, and even has application beyond the scope of *The Hobbit* in demonstrating how like minded these two individuals are—the Ring and their different levels of exposure seems to be the root cause of all their differences. This is a vital distinction to be made, but the polarity between the two perspectives is so great that without a seamless transition,

one wouldn't be able to fluidly read the rest of the novel prior and continue on to this scene and its odd format without being disconnected from the experience.

Thankfully, there exists something of a 'buffer zone' early on in chapter five to introduce the sharp dichotomy maintained through the remainder. It details Bilbo's descent into the caves, his initial misdirection, and eventually his first encounter with Gollum, but does so in such a way that the reader is gradually acclimated to the dark and dank setting of the chapter and just as lost and confused as Bilbo. Then, only afterwards are they introduced (before Bilbo is, in fact) to Gollum from *his own* perspective. This passage only lasts for about a page and a half, but from a close reading we can understand how Tolkien intentionally uses aspects of language in order to more seamlessly mask the narrator's transition from describing the unilateral perils of the previous chapter to the two-faced game that lies ahead by giving the reader a slow transition into the mindset of the creature Gollum.

There exists an apparent progression in the narrator's perspective throughout the passage. We begin with the point-of-view of a poor Bilbo, lost in the dark. Though he is more comfortable than a human would be due to the underground affinities of Hobbits, he is still very much at the mercy of where the cave takes him. "Go back?" he thought. 'No good at all! Go sideways? Impossible! Go forward? Only thing to do! On we go!'," (Tolkien 69). The narrator's vagueness in description from Bilbo's perspective is exemplified by the ambiguity in such phrases as, "There were passages leading off to the side every now and then," and, "I do not know how long he kept on like this," (Tolkien 70). As we reach a certain point in the passage, however (the paragraph beginning with "Suddenly without any warning" (Tolkien 70)) the words with which the narrator describes Bilbo's situation become vividly descriptive. The alliteration of "sh" sounds used while describing the pool Bilbo steps in mirrors the "ss" sound we will soon hear

often in Gollum's lines later in the chapter, as well as demonstrates the accuracy with which the narrator is suddenly endowed: "Ugh! It was icy cold. That pulled him up sharp and short," (Tolkien 70). After this 'enlightenment', the prose is thrust into as close a first-person point of view as can be managed by the narrator as we meet Gollum. "Deep down here by the dark water lived old Gollum ... as dark as darkness," (Tolkien 71). Again, the use of alliteration exemplifies the shift in paradigm from the beginning of the passage, but presently it appears much more profound. Now, we see the narrator almost mimic the sing-song voice with which Gollum speaks later in the chapter.

Repetition and rhyme are very common themes in Gollum's dialogue. It's often limited to his actual ramblings, though it can also be found in the narrator's prose while presenting Gollum's perspective. During the paragraph in which the reader is first introduced to Gollum, the above alliteration is present as well as some of these elements of repetition and interruption. "Sometimes he took a fancy for fish from the lake, and sometimes neither goblin nor fish came back," (Tolkien 71), for example, is an intentional use of anaphora to conclude the paragraph and create an ominous atmosphere about this new character. "Not he," additionally, is a recursive modifier of the phrase, "never a ripple did he make," (Tolkien 71) meant to distinguish Gollum as an especially stealthy threat compared to goblins or other creatures of the dark. Powerful, but simple simile is also employed by the narrator in this paragraph, seemingly almost straight out of Gollum's own vocabulary: "as dark as darkness," and "as quick as thinking," (Tolkien 71). Using these elements gives an almost personal introduction to Gollum, and we as readers get a very quick impression of him separate from the darkness of the cave, where Bilbo has much less idea of this creature's nefariousness.

The narrator's use of the same literary elements Gollum himself employs helps the reader to transition into the dark, corrupt mind of the character we're meeting. Instead of being thrown off by the sudden paradigm shift, the reader is instead drawn into the thought process of this strange, but intimidating foe. Now that the reader and Gollum have been more personally acquainted, the rest of the chapter is able to play out in its back-and-forth nature, with neither side having the upper hand. Both perspectives are treated as equal throughout the remainder of their conversation, and such a sudden change in how the story is told could not have been accomplished without a significant but natural transition. This way, reader immersion is fulfilled throughout, the integrity of the rest of the chapter is upheld, and a successful introduction of a central character in Tolkien's repertoire is accomplished.

Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. HarperCollins, 2012, pp. 69-71.