

Modern Mythology and the hero's journey

by Joseph Campbell

places
and
forms of
power

spaces
and
exchanges

Sméagol's tale

Sméagol facing the ultimate power

5 'Long after, but still very long ago, there lived by the banks of the Great River on the edge of Wilderland a clever-handed and quiet-footed little people. I guess they were of hobbit-kind; akin to the fathers of the fathers of the Stoors, for they loved the River, and often swam in it, or made little boats of reeds.¹ There was among them a family of high repute, for it was large and wealthier than most, and it was ruled by a grandmother of the folk, stern² and wise in old lore³, such as they had. The most inquisitive⁴ and curious-minded of that family was called Sméagol. He was interested in roots and beginnings; he dived into deep pools; he burrowed⁵ under trees and growing plants; he tunneled into green mounds; and he ceased to look up at the hill-tops, or the leaves on trees, or the flowers opening in the air: his head and his eyes were downward.

20 'He had a friend called Déagol, of similar sort, sharper-eyed but not so quick and strong. On a time they took a boat and went down to the Gladden Fields, where there were great beds of iris and flowering reeds. There Sméagol got out and went nosing about the banks but Deal sat in the boat and fished. Suddenly a great fish took his hook, and before he knew where he was, he was dragged out and down into the water, to the bottom. Then he let go of his line, for he thought he saw something shining in the river-bed; and holding his breath he grabbed at it.

30 'Then up he came spluttering, with weeds in his hair and a handful of mud⁶; and he swam to the bank⁷. And behold! when he washed the mud away, there in his hand lay a beautiful golden ring; and it shone and glittered in the sun, so that his heart was glad. But Sméagol had been watching him from behind a tree, and as Deal gloated⁸ over the ring, Sméagol came softly up behind.

35 "'Give us that, Deal, my love," said Sméagol, over his friend's shoulder.

40 "'Why?" said Deal.
' "Because it's my birthday, my love, and I wants it," said Sméagol.

45 "'I don't care," said Deal. "I have given you a present already, more than I could afford. I found this, and I'm going to keep it."

50 ' "Oh, are you indeed, my love," said Sméagol; and he caught Deal by the throat and strangled⁹ him, because the gold looked so bright and beautiful. Then he put the ring on his finger.

55 'No one ever found out what had become of Deal; he was murdered far from home, and his body was cunningly hidden. But Sméagol returned alone; and he found that none of his family could see him, when he was wearing the ring. He was very pleased with his discovery and he concealed¹⁰ it; and he used it to find out secrets, and he put his knowledge to crooked¹¹ and malicious uses. He became sharp-eyed¹² and keen-eared¹³ for all that was hurtful. The ring had given him power according to his stature. It is not to be wondered at that he became very unpopular and was

shunned¹⁴ (when visible) by all his relations. They kicked him, and he bit their feet. He took to thieving, and going about muttering to himself, and gurgling in his throat. So they called him Gollum, and cursed him, and told him to go far away; and his grandmother, desiring peace, expelled¹⁵ him from the family and turned him out of her hole.

60 'He wandered in loneliness, weeping a little for the hardness of the world, and he journeyed up the River, till he came to a stream that flowed down from the mountains, and he went that way. He caught fish in deep pools with invisible fingers and ate them raw.

65 One day it was very hot, and as he was bending over a pool, he felt a burning on the back of his head and a dazzling light from the water pained his wet eyes. He wondered at it, for he had almost forgotten about the Sun. Then for the last time he looked up and shook his fist at her.

70 'But as he lowered his eyes, he saw far above the tops of the Misty Mountains, out of which the stream came. And he thought suddenly: "It would be cool and shady under those mountains. The Sun could not watch me there. The roots of those mountains must be roots indeed; there must be great secrets buried there which have not been discovered since the beginning. »

75 'So he journeyed by night up into the highlands, and he found a little cave out of which the dark stream ran; and he wormed his way like a maggot into the heart of the hills, and vanished out of all knowledge. The Ring went into the shadows with him, and even the maker, when his power had begun to grow again, could learn nothing of it.'

J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of The Rings, 1954

1. Introduce the document.
2. Who are the characters.
 - What is special about them?
 - Give all information you can about Sméagol.
3. What does Déagol find in the river?
4. Describe Sméagol's reaction and evolution.
 - Why does he change this way?
 - How can you link this tale with Tolkien's vision of power?

Answer the online quiz

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- 1 reed: roseau
- 2 stern: sévère, strict.
- 3 lore: tradition, coutumes, connaissances
- 4 inquisitive: curieux
- 5 to burrow: creuser
- 6 mud: boue
- 7 bank: rive
- 8 to gloat: jubiler, exulter

- 9 to strangle: étrangler
- 10 to conceal: cacher
- 11 crooked: malhonnête, corrompu
- 12 sharp-eyed: au regard perçant, à l'oeil vif
- 13 keen-eared: à l'ouïe fine
- 14 shunned: rejeté
- 15 to expel: renvoyer