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### **Tolkien's Representation of the Monstrous in The Hobbit**

The Hobbit is considered one of the most famous children's fiction works, notable for its portrayal of characters and adventures. At its most obvious level, The Hobbit presents readers with a host of physically monstrous creatures inhabiting Middle-earth. From towering dragons to grotesque trolls and goblins, Tolkien populates his world with beings embodying traditional notions of monstrosity. However, the depiction of these monsters is not straightforward. Tolkien seems to blur the line between monsters and heroes to some extent. As Catherine Hall puts it, "the blurring of the distinctions between the monsters and the heroes makes this claim (a story concerned with good versus evil) infinitely more complex" (Hall). His depiction of the monstrous is not confined to fearsome beasts and malevolent creatures but extends to the inner struggles and moral dilemmas faced by the inhabitants of his fantastical realm. Through a diverse cast of characters, each with their flaws, fears, and desires, Tolkien invites readers to confront the darker aspects of the self and wrestle with timeless questions of power, greed, and the nature of good and evil.

Tolkien's depiction of the monsters differs greatly from that of other texts in children's literature. The characters aren't simply portrayed as black or white but rather as grey. Despite their negative qualities, the monsters possess unique abilities that even the heroes lack. For example, the goblins demonstrate the ability to create advanced mechanisms and are proficient in tunnel construction, although they often employ these skills to cause chaos. Tolkien writes, "They can tunnel and mine as well as any but the most skilled dwarves... Hammers, axes, swords, daggers, pickaxes, tongs, and also instruments of torture..." This creative capacity is unusual for monsters, as they're typically not associated with such abilities. It's their destructive nature that traditionally defines them as monsters. However, their savage and impulsive behavior, their inclination to attack and kill, presents a distinctly different image. Tolkien penned this text during the war years, and his portrayal of the

goblins bears a striking resemblance to the various warring factions. Despite possessing ample resources and ingenuity to create marvels, their instinct to plunder, loot, and conquer others reveals their monstrous traits.

The most formidable monster in the entire novel is the dragon, Smaug. Elaborate descriptions are given of his power and the misery he has caused, though he doesn't appear in the scene until the end. Thorin described him as a "most specially greedy, strong, and wicked worm..." (Tolkien). His characteristics make him one of a kind, as he is shown to have great communicative skills to trap his enemy. However, the dragon's character bears a high resemblance to Beowulf's dragon, as Tolkien drew inspiration from the Old English poems. Christensen, in his essay, says, "Tolkien in *The Hobbit* patterns Smaug's behavior on that of Beowulf's dragon, but with a simpler and tidier chronology." However, it is very interesting to see that the intimidating and petrifying dragon is not killed by any of the central characters but by one of the previous natives of Dale.

Gollum, though having a brief episode with Bilbo in the novel, becomes one of the central characters in the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. Initially depicted as an ugly, nasty, hissing creature, Gollum slowly captivates the readers with his witty riddles. At some point, he appears as a poor, deserted creature living all alone, with nothing or no one to call his own except his "precious" ring, in a dark place, constantly in fear of being discovered by the goblins. As Bilbo also thought, "And he was miserable, alone, lost... a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking, and whispering." (Tolkien) And thus, Bilbo decides to leave him instead of killing him. Still, his monstrous nature, attempting to be wicked to outwit Bilbo, makes him a villain instead of a hero.

Thorin Oakenshield's character offers valuable insight into the monstrosity depicted in the text. Thorin is a strong and assertive character; he also exhibits similarities to Smaug. Hall employs the term "dragon sickness" to describe Thorin's greed and lust for gold, akin to Smaug's. She further argues for the disparity between the characters of Beowulf and Thorin as heroes. While Thorin succumbs to his greed and the wealth he is poised to inherit after Smaug's demise, Beowulf prioritizes protecting his people. Eventually, Thorin loses control over his senses, stating, "But none of our gold shall thieves take or the violent carry off while we are alive" (Tolkien). Thus, Thorin's character assumes significance in understanding the monstrous aspects, despite being otherwise revered and hailed as a hero.

Thus, Tolkien's characters in the text are nuanced and complex. Unlike other children's fiction, there is no single villain. It is evident from his portrayal of the monstrous characters that they are depicted in shades of grey. They possess both good and bad qualities, which renders them human-like to some extent. It is typically the negative side that manifests in the form of evil deeds. His exploration of monstrosity serves as a mirror to the world around us, prompting reflection on the darker aspects of human nature and society. In a world where power struggles and moral ambiguity are all too real, "The Hobbit" offers valuable insights into the consequences of unchecked greed, the importance of empathy and understanding, and the enduring power of hope in the face of adversity.

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