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**QUEER LODGINGS: THE QUEST TO FIND HOME THROUGH
LGBTQ+ READINGS OF MIDDLE-EARTH**

**A thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors**

by

Trinity Haydon

April 2023

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QUEER LODGINGS: THE QUEST TO FIND HOME THROUGH
LGBTQ+ READINGS OF MIDDLE-EARTH

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This thesis explores how LGBTQ+ people find joy and community in the world of Middle-earth despite there being no explicit queer representation in J.R.R. Tolkien's works. I will take readers through viewing Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* books through a queer lens to show what details LGBTQ+ people pick up on as they read the story. Then based on our knowledge of the books, I will bring readers along with me to view Peter Jackson's films for these same works to see the effects that adaptation had on the queer subtext present in the original stories. One of the main reasons for taking readers through this process is to encourage people to foreground queerness in their readings of media whether they are queer or not because not only will we understand the perspective of queer individuals more, we will learn more about the stories and the characters within them than we previously thought. Queer readings of Tolkien's works create home and community for LGBTQ+ individuals as well as create a roadmap for queer representation in future media that does not rely on stereotypes and trauma that follow queer people in the real world. This type of representation not only heals LGBTQ+ people but normalizes queerness in society as well.

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Middle-earth and these stories have been integral to my life for over 10 years now and it is an absolute blessing to round out my undergraduate education reflecting on them and how they have impacted my life for the better. I want to thank Dr. Narcisi and Dr. Schreier for working so hard to ensure that I could follow through with this project despite it having nothing to do with my majors. I also want to extend my gratitude to my advisor, CharLee, because this thesis truly would not be what it is without her insight and support. From teaching me about literary and film analysis to just chatting about whatever piece of media came to our minds that day, every second is cherished. I also want to say thank you to my reader, Dr. Trenary, for always being there for me whether I was struggling with this project or just life in general.

I am eternally grateful to my friends and family who have listened to me talk about Middle-earth for countless years before I even started working on this thesis. My family has always encouraged my love for every single piece of media I come in contact with and without that encouragement I would not have had the courage to pursue this project. I want to shout out all of my friends who have sat and watched *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* films with me and listened to my relentless “fun facts” when they were just trying to watch a movie. It’s such an incredible experience to be able to share something you love dearly with the people you care about.

Lastly, I want to thank my younger self for picking up that copy of *The Hobbit* in 6th grade because it has vastly improved my life. I haven’t always been kind to myself growing up but I know that 11 year old me would be proud of the person I am today. This project is a love letter to that fantasy-obsessed queer kid. You are enough and always have been.

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INTRODUCTION

To say my first introduction to Middle-earth was Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy would be giving my younger self way too much credit. I was the ripe age of 10 months old when *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* hit theaters in December 2001. Sure, my family had the movies on in the background while I was growing up the following years, but I couldn't remember much more than a fellow named Frodo, a really scary volcano, and a terribly important ring. My first real experience with Tolkien's work was back in 6th grade when my teacher assigned my reading group *The Hobbit*. When given the assignment, I didn't even recognize that the book was related to those movies that were nothing but a distant memory by the time I entered middle school. I got to start my journey with this world from square one. When my dad took me to Barnes & Noble to pick out my very own copy of the book, I opted for the brand new movie cover version as the first film was set to hit theaters later that year. I was beyond excited about the chance to read a book before the movies came out.

When we began reading *The Hobbit* for class, I immediately fell in love with the story and with Middle-earth. I had never read a fantasy story like this one before, full of hobbits and dwarves and wizards and elves. I was completely entranced, never wanting to put the book down. Unfortunately due to the constraints of a 6th grade reading assignment I had to, but that did not stop me from incessantly wondering what new problem Bilbo Baggins and the dwarves were going to encounter in the next chapter. I went to class every week anxiously waiting for when we got to discuss the book. As I was reading, I realized I adored Bilbo in a way I never had with any other book protagonist. I felt a deep connection and attachment to him and his journey. I loved the way he learned about himself and his capabilities, going from someone too scared to leave the Shire to someone who longed for adventure the moment he arrived home. After

finishing the book, I knew this story and this world were going to stick with me for the rest of my life.

That new love for Middle-earth and *The Hobbit* had no chance to slow down because as soon as Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* hit theaters that winter I dragged my family to go see it. This was my first time experiencing Middle-earth in theaters, and to this day it's still one of the most magical experiences of my life. I was on the edge of my seat the whole time even though the events of the story were still fresh in my mind. I was captivated by the scenery and the actors' performances. This was exactly how I pictured it to look on screen. Needless to say, I fell in love with Peter Jackson's take on *The Hobbit* and waited not-so-patiently for the next two films to come out. Because of the short time between reading the book for the first time and the first film coming out, the two mediums became so intertwined in my heart. Every time I would read the book, my love for the films would grow and vice versa. In a time where book-to-film adaptations were happening left and right, *The Hobbit* became the single most important piece of media I had ever consumed in my life.

Fast forward to the summer before high school and my passion for Middle-earth had died down a bit. It wasn't that I didn't love it anymore, it was just at that point my passion for everything in my life had dwindled. The middle school to high school transition can be rough for anyone, but I was dealing with the fact that I thought I was queer. This new revelation over the summer felt like the worst thing that could have ever happened to me. Growing up in a Christian household meant hearing homophobic and transphobic views at church and at home that were disguised as the word of God. Comments about queer people like "they've drifted away from God's light" and "God will judge them when their time comes" were burned into my brain. I had built up so much internalized homophobia by the age of 14 that every time I even entertained the

thought of being queer in some way, I was immediately thrown into a panic attack. I would torture myself by reading certain Bible verses over and over again crying and praying that God didn't make me this way. Going to church every Sunday became physically painful as I would have to bury my anxiety in order to not draw attention to myself. I felt suffocated by a community I grew up in just because I thought I might be gay. I was also terrified to bring it up to my parents because I had a feeling their ignorance of the LGBTQ+ community would lead to intolerance. I had no one to talk to and didn't even give myself the grace to figure it out without guilt. In order to "cope" with these emotions, I vowed to myself that I would never consider the possibility of being in a relationship. I never wanted to be in a position where I would have to talk about my queerness.

That all changed in the first few months of my freshman year of high school. I met new friends that were also a part of the LGBTQ+ community and they were comfortable in their queer identities. While I wasn't anywhere close to accepting who I was, I knew I had a comfortable environment to exist in now. Just being around them gave me the space to come to terms with my queer identity and eventually to love it. We formed a community around each other and for the first time in my life I felt like I belonged somewhere. I never fit in anywhere growing up and the only "community" I had ever known were the people in my church and youth group. Being around my queer friends taught me that community is supposed to foster support and care for one another. I felt loved and allowed myself to love others.

Existing in that space for four years was incredibly rewarding and helped me discover a lot about myself, but I was still terrified to let anyone outside of that space know that I was queer. I internalized this fear and compartmentalized every aspect of my life to the point I developed multiple personalities to match the different social settings I experienced throughout

the day. I was this confident lesbian around my queer friends, a straight daughter and a straight-A student my parents could be proud of, and the quiet “weird” nerd on my soccer and basketball teams. Even though I was making great strides dealing with my own internalized homophobia during my high school years, I wasn’t prepared to deal with any homophobia I might face from others outside of my safe circle. I wasn’t exactly ashamed of my queer identity but I didn’t want other people’s misconceptions of my community to isolate me further than I already was.

College offered me that fresh start I desperately needed. Tired of pretending to be a different person depending on who I was interacting with, I committed to being upfront with everyone from the start. If someone didn’t like my queerness it was no longer my responsibility to hide it from them; it was only a problem if they were going to make it a problem. While this was a great step for being more confident in my queerness, I needed to learn what it means to be a queer adult. I very much lived in a bubble in high school and college introduced me to so many LGBTQ+ people that were living fulfilling queer lives different than I was. I learned that as an adult, no one can stop me from exploring my sexuality and gender identity how I want to. The freedom of that realization was exciting but daunting. Scared about moving forward in life as a queer adult, I reverted back to the things that made me feel like a kid again.

That’s when I rediscovered my love for *The Hobbit*. I reread the book and rewatched the films whenever life got a bit too overwhelming to help ground myself. But as I engaged with the story again, I realized why I had such a connection to Bilbo all those years ago. We were the same person. Just like me, Bilbo didn’t feel at home with his extended biological family and needed to escape. He needed to figure out who he was outside of the constraints of the Shire, and ended up finding home in a group of people vastly different than who he thought he was. I went through the same self-discovery journey that Bilbo did. And in that moment of realization I felt

home again. Middle-earth was my home and had been since I was 11 years old. This rekindled love for *The Hobbit* led me to rewatch *The Lord of the Rings* films for the first time since I was a child. As a more mature adult, I was entranced by the story and what Frodo had to go through. I saw myself in him, but more importantly I saw love familiar to what I have experienced before between Frodo and Sam. I then quickly read through all the books, falling more and more in love with Middle-earth every day. The subtlety of Tolkien's storytelling and the importance placed on human connection felt like something I had not experienced with other stories. It felt like a safe place for me as a queer person despite it containing no explicit LGBTQ+ representation. The queer subtext I saw in these stories was so powerful because it just allows for the characters to exist and explore what it means to care for others and to be cared for by others. With this new love and appreciation for *The Lord of the Rings* and my decade long adoration for *The Hobbit*, I joined an online community full of other queer people who loved these stories in the same way I did and I was able to find home in Middle-earth with them too.

This concept of queer interpretations of seemingly non-queer stories puzzled me though. Why do we see ourselves in characters that are not designed for us? Why is there such a big queer following online for stories written by a Catholic man back in the 1950s that focus almost exclusively on the male perspective? On the surface level, the answer is that being queer is a human experience and we can relate to characters' experiences that are not necessarily queer. However, there are specific themes present in media that are so interconnected to the queer experience such as the self-discovery journey, the importance of found family, and the ability to think of relationships outside of what is expected of us that stand out to a queer reader. In order to highlight those connections, I will explore the way that queer people interpret fantasy stories that contain no explicit LGBTQ+ characters or storylines by analyzing J.R.R. Tolkien's *The*

Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings* books as well as Peter Jackson's films for these same works through a queer lens. Although we have plenty of openly queer books and films today, examining the subtle queerness of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* provides insight into how LGBTQ+ people use queer reading strategies in ways that challenge heteronormative understandings of stories and what queer representation can look like in mainstream media.

DITCHING THE DEFAULT: READING TEXTS THROUGH A QUEER LENS

To conduct a queer analysis of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, we first must define what queer means. In Bruce Henderson's *Queer Studies: Beyond Binaries*, he states that the original use of the word traces "back to the Middle High German word *twer*, which carries associations such as 'cross' or 'oblique,' suggesting qualities of 'differentness' or 'strangeness,'" but "the use of queer to mark nonheteronormative sexuality (as well as nonmonogamous heterosexual arrangements), began to develop in the early part of the twentieth century in the United States and the United Kingdom" (Henderson 13). This use of the word was often in a derogatory way towards LGBTQ+ people, but throughout the second half of the twentieth century members of the community worked to reclaim the word. During the 1990s, "*queer* began to include those who practice gender nonconformity and who inhabited trans identities" (Henderson 15), moving the word towards how we use it today as an all encompassing term for members of the community.

The way I will explore queer subtext in Tolkien's writings revolves around two definitions of the word. Queer will be used to refer to someone being a part of the LGBTQ+ community but it will also describe actions that do not fall under the heteronormative matrix. The heteronormative matrix, based on the "heterosexual matrix" originally coined by Judith Butler (5), refers to an understanding of gender that adheres strictly to the binary and a view of heterosexuality as the default and "natural" sexuality, which are then enforced in society. I also want to extend this definition of the heteronormative matrix to encompass the traditional ways that straight cisgender people interact with the world around them in the form of relationships, friendships, family, and community. Traditionally, society places restrictions on what life should be: a man and a woman should get married, have children, and place their values in family.

LGBTQ+ people cannot live by these “standards” because the model of life was never built with us in mind. So due to our sexuality and/or gender identity, we cannot and do not want to live a life that adheres to the heteronormative matrix. Based on the definition of queer I am proposing anyone can live queerly, just like the original use of the word suggests, but those life experiences are intrinsically tied to the LGBTQ+ experience as well. While the two definitions I am using are technically different, LGBTQ+ people by default have to live in a way that is queer because we were not built into the standard life model that society expects us to follow.

The heteronormative matrix follows us when we read literature because texts are also governed by the society they were written in. In Hanna Kubowitz’s “The Default Reader and a Model of Queer Reading and Writing Strategies Or: Obituary for the Implied Reader”, she states that the societal context surrounding pieces of literature also have an effect on the reader: “The assumption is that, unless indicated otherwise, a text shares these default settings with the surrounding overall matrix *and* expects the reader to do the same. It is significant in our context that this usually includes the reader’s complying with the heteronormative or ‘heterosexual matrix’” (Kubowitz 208). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, readers are expected to read texts from a point of view that doesn’t include queerness at all. However, we are not required to read texts from this default setting. Kubowitz introduces the idea that an “individual reading of a text may rank anywhere within a spectrum ranging from one extreme non-queer reading to the other extreme queer reading” based on textual signals (Kubowitz 211). This can be visualized in figure 1.

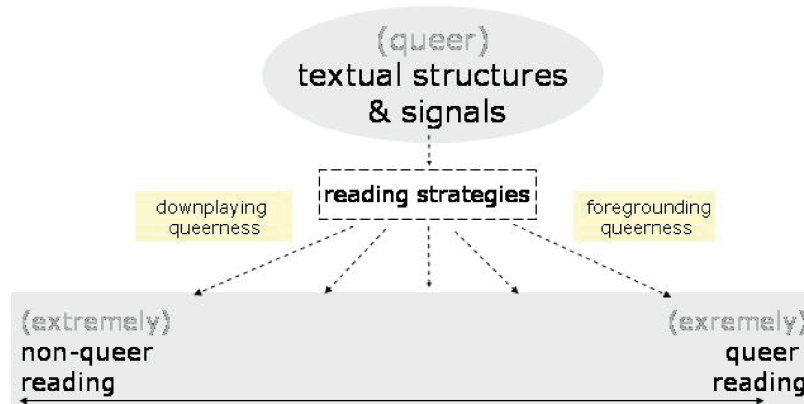


Figure 1. Queer Reading Strategies from Kubowitz.

Based on this spectrum, “a queer reader may be inclined to suspend default settings and pursue foregrounding queerness strategies because of [their] own *everyday experience* of being a *marginalized* reader” (Kubowitz 213). Since our lived realities lie outside of the default settings, we connect parts of stories to our own lives in ways that straight cisgender people may not.

In the case of Tolkien’s works, I will be deploying reading strategies that foreground queerness and largely depart from the heteronormative matrix. In David Craig’s “‘Queer Lodgings’: Gender and Sexuality in ‘The Lord of the Rings,’” he explores how some of Tolkien’s writing decisions may lead to queer subtext. Non-queer readings of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* may dismiss the inherent queerness present in Middle-earth like how “the definition of masculinity is necessarily shifted because of the absence of women” (Craig 15) in the stories. We see several different dynamics between male relationships explored throughout *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, two primarily being the Fellowship and Frodo and Sam. When we see the Fellowship set out from Rivendell, “a new all-male family structure is created. Gandalf and Aragorn are the parent figures. They are the guides through the quest of life and they offer knowledge and comfort” (Craig 16). The lack of women in the Fellowship dynamic

allows for a “found family” to form, a trope very familiar to queer readers. As for Frodo and Sam, they can be seen as “the lovers who leave the family, and the trajectory of their tale is a story of love in the face of adversity” (Craig 16). The dynamic between the two goes beyond that of master/servant as “the intimacy and love between Frodo and Sam is the moral and emotional heart of the story which is capable of saving the world from evil” (Craig 17). Using foregrounding queerness strategies leads us to different conclusions than downplaying queerness strategies do because it highlights how the heteronormative matrix holds us back from fully understanding human potential. The relationships and characters that Tolkien wrote break the bounds of conventional relationships and self-identity, so it is a disservice to his work to be satisfied reading it from only the default lens. Queer readings of stories like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* challenge our understanding of what humans are capable of and allow LGBTQ+ people to relate to stories that do not explicitly contain queer representation.

One might still say that if there are no queer characters or queer stories in a piece of literature, LGBTQ+ people should find stories that include them instead of projecting onto characters and stories not intended from them. However, LGBTQ+ people have not been granted that luxury: “The non-marginalized reader, who encounters a text that apparently excludes [them], may simply turn to another text better suited to [their] individual situation, the marginalized reader has no such option, or only rarely” (Kubowitz 206). Queer literature is scarce and in popular media it’s even more difficult to find, but literature including straight people and traditional views of gender is everywhere. Queer people should not be deprived of the stories they love and relate to just because the default reader chooses to not acknowledge the existence of queerness in texts that don’t explicitly label it as such. Reading stories from a heteronormative point of view limits what we gain from the text because that is what we have

been raised to do our entire lives. So I challenge the default reader to deploy queer reading strategies just like LGBTQ+ folk do even though it does not reflect who they are. There is more to learn from a story the more ways one approaches it. Viewing literature, especially Tolkien's works, from only the default setting downplays the beauty and complexity of human experiences that make us different from each other.

I want to show what it is like to navigate through *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as a LGBTQ+ person and point out the parts that feel inherently queer because they are similar to what many queer people have experienced in their lives. In order to do that, I will explore the queer self-discovery journey by looking at Bilbo's adventure, the importance of found family and community demonstrated by Bilbo and the dwarves, and the bounds of human connection through Frodo and Sam's relationship. We as queer people don't try to force ourselves on to these texts but rather see our human emotions and experiences in characters we like or relate to. According to Derek Pacheco, author of "'Funny Queer Fits': Masculinity and Desire in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*," queer interpretations are "not in a crusade to free texts from their histories, but rather to embed them within a continuing chronicle of readerly engagement and meaning-making" (Pacheco 264-265). Gender and sexuality are fundamentally human experiences and so is queerness in the broad sense of the word, so it is not absurd that the experiences characters go through remind us of what it is like to be queer. It is also possible that people who are not queer may relate to parts of the story that LGBTQ+ people do too which goes to show how natural the queer experience, broadly defined to include a spectrum of non-normativity, is to humans.

‘An Unexpected Party’: Self-discovery and Found Family in *The Hobbit*

Being a children’s book, *The Hobbit* provides a whimsical story still packed with key insights into the importance of self-confidence and a sense of belonging. To me as a queer person, the story is not about Bilbo proving to the dwarves that he is worthy and then they finally accept him. It’s about Bilbo being given opportunities to become his true adventurous self and a group of people recognizing it and appreciating that he is also like them. *The Hobbit* represents someone finally discovering who they are and feeling at home with a group of people who understand the difficulties of reaching that point of self-love. His journey is not one of “progression towards normative adulthood” but rather one of “growing sideways”, finding what makes him happy in a hobbit society far more concerned with traditional family and inheritance (Pacheco 275).

Bilbo starts off his journey in a place of comfort and contentment in the Shire but with a longing for something more. His family, “the Bagginses had lived in the neighbourhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and people considered them very respectable, not only because most of them were rich, but also because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected: you could tell what a Baggins would say on any question without the bother of asking him” (Tolkien 3-4). The Baggins name epitomizes what it means to be Shire folk: you follow exactly what is expected of you at any given moment and you live your life just as your parents did before you. And Bilbo followed suit with this. He inherited Bag End when his parents died and lived a quiet life. Despite Bilbo’s ability to act just as a Baggins should, he has “something a bit queer in his make-up from the Took side, something that only waited for a chance to come out” (Tolkien 5). Tolkien’s direct use of the word “queer” to describe how odd Bilbo’s behavior can be compared to his Baggins side hits home with queer people because it is very similar to our experience.

We grow up expected to live just as our parents did but part of us simply does not allow for that to happen, just like Bilbo's Took side. Often queer people do not discover who they are until later in their lives due to societal pressure to fit the heteronormative norm. Bilbo still has not discovered who he is before going on his journey and he has already reached the half-point of his life. But at some point, the part we have been suppressing cannot hide anymore. All we need is a catalyst to break out of the monotony of a life we do not want to live. For Bilbo, that is a life threatening journey with 13 dwarves and a wizard.

At the beginning of their journey, Bilbo has little self-confidence and the dwarves have little faith in him. When Bilbo first meets the dwarves, they are not too fond of him, often joking that he would be a terrible burglar and showing "mock-politeness" to him (Tolkien 21). Bilbo is inclined to agree with them at this point since he has no desire to go on an adventure that would uproot his very comfortable life. However, Gandalf stands up for Bilbo against the dwarves and himself saying that "there is a lot more in him than you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself" (Tolkien 19). Gandalf's intuition foreshadows the important role that Bilbo's presence on this journey will have on his growth and on the long-lasting relationship he forms with the dwarves.

The first time we see the dwarves really warm up to Bilbo's presence is after he returns to them on the other side of the goblin tunnels. The dwarves escaped before Bilbo did and "wanted to know why he had ever been brought at all, why he could not stick to his friends and come along with them, and why the wizard had not chosen someone with more sense. 'He has been more trouble than use so far,' said one. 'If we have got to go back now into those abominable tunnels to look for him, then drat him, I say'" (Tolkien 86). A third of the way through their journey, the Company still does not respect Bilbo in the slightest, doubting a great wizard of his

ability to pick out useful people for a quest this important to them. So far, Bilbo has not proven to the dwarves that he fully supports their cause and will selflessly follow them until the job is complete. However, their opinions change drastically as soon as Bilbo arrives:

“And here’s the burglar!” said Bilbo stepping down into the middle of them, and slipping off the ring.

Bless me, how they jumped! Then they shouted with surprise and delight... It is a fact that Bilbo’s reputation went up a very great deal with the dwarves after this. If they had still doubted he was really a first-class burglar, in spite of Gandalf’s words, they doubted no longer...

Indeed Bilbo was so pleased with their praise that he just chuckled inside.

(Tolkien 87)

Suddenly the dwarves are delighted to see Bilbo and respect him immensely more than they did before entering the goblin tunnels. They finally see that his presence is potentially beneficial to this quest and celebrate him with open arms. Dwarves are known to be fiercely loyal (almost to a fault) in Tolkien’s legendarium so it’s no small thing for them to accept him with such praise. However, Bilbo still has not fully entered the dwarven “circle”; multiple times following the goblin tunnels the dwarves forget Bilbo is there or do not listen to him when he speaks. Even though the dwarves have made some progress accepting Bilbo, they see him more as a burglar or a means to an end than a friend or a member of the Company.

Before the dwarves are able to fully acknowledge Bilbo as one of them, he first has to find it within himself that he is worthy of belonging. When the dwarves all get knocked unconscious and tied up by the spiders in Mirkwood, Bilbo is the only one awake to do anything

about the situation. While being wrapped up in the great spider's webbing, he breaks free and is able to pull out his sword to slay the creature:

The spider lay dead beside him, and his sword-blade was stained black. Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else, made a great difference to Mr.

Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into its sheath.

(Tolkien 144)

This passage is the most character development Bilbo has had up to this point in the story. Bilbo finally feels powerful, understands that he is capable of things that the hobbit back in the Shire was not, and knows he can protect himself without the help of the dwarves or Gandalf. It is important he has this moment of realization while he is alone because while the dwarves have warmed up to his presence, they still doubt his usefulness on the quest. From the start of the journey Bilbo had little to no confidence in his skills of surviving and relied purely on his adventurous Took side to keep him alive. Since he carried this self-doubt with him every step of the way and the dwarves never reassured him, the only way for him to overcome his feelings of uselessness is to prove to himself that he belongs on this journey. We are the most ourselves when nobody is looking and Bilbo is able to take advantage of the most difficult part of the journey so far to prove to himself that he is a strong and worthy hobbit.

This kind of realization moment Bilbo has is important to his self-discovery journey and to a queer person's self-discovery journey. Since our societal structure relies on heteronormativity and the gender binary, we often aren't exposed to queer people and the queer community especially at young ages. We know that there is something "strange" about us but

often it is not until we meet others that are a part of the community that we understand that there is a life outside of what we grew up knowing. This is similar to Bilbo's upbringing: while he has his Tookish side, he was content living a traditional hobbit life because he did not know the full extent of what was out there in the rest of Middle-earth. As soon as he steps out of the Shire, he experiences what life is like with the dwarves. But as queer people, just stepping outside of our bubble is not enough to truly figure out and accept who we are. We have to make the choice to either go back to living the life we are "supposed" to and ignore the part of us that wants to be free, or embrace our full selves knowing that decision dooms us to an "unconventional" life. Bilbo is faced with this decision when he discovers his potential killing the great spider, and he makes that decision with ease. He understands who he is more than he ever has and recognizes that he belongs with the dwarves even if that is a dangerous place to be at the current moment. Through wit and strength, Bilbo is able to rescue the dwarves from the rest of the spiders. The dwarves "knew only too well that they would soon all have been dead, if it had not been for the hobbit; and they thanked him many times. Some of them even got up and bowed right to the ground before him" (Tolkien 152-153). If the dwarves did not fully accept Bilbo after he came back from the goblin tunnels, they did now after he saved their lives. Due to the dwarves' loyal nature, the gesture of them bowing to Bilbo is not something to be taken lightly. Bilbo has cemented himself as a dwarf-friend for life, and is only able to do so after discovering his capabilities on his own.

After Bilbo discovers his potential and saves the dwarves' lives, their acceptance of Bilbo as a member of the Company reaches its peak. As the dwarves begin to arm themselves in Erebor for the fight against Smaug, Thorin gives Bilbo a gift:

“Mr. Baggins!” he cried. “Here is the first payment of your reward! Cast off your old coat and put on this!”

With that he put on Bilbo a small coat of mail, wrought for some young elf-prince long ago. It was of silver-steel, which the elves call *mithril*, and with it went a belt of pearls and crystals. (Tolkien 219)

Thorin mentions that the coat of mithril is the first part of Bilbo’s payment but as a dwarf he knows how precious of a metal it is. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf says that “its worth was greater than the value of the whole Shire and everything in it” and upon hearing about the gift, Gimli was shocked and described it as “a kingly gift” (Tolkien 309). This information reveals that mithril is one of if not the most valuable metal in all of Middle-earth and it is a high honor to be gifted such a piece. Thorin’s decision to give Bilbo a mithril shirt as part of his payment instead of a jewel he could just put in his pocket shows that Thorin not only wants to honor the contract that Bilbo signed, but he also wants to protect him from the dangers that still lie ahead in their journey. Thorin also gives Bilbo this gift while he is suffering from dragon-sickness, not an easy thing to give away when greed is consuming every fiber of his being. Despite suffering in this moment, Thorin is able to give Bilbo a gift that honors the contract and his trust in Bilbo. Dressing Bilbo in a piece of clothing so rich with dwarven history solidifies to Bilbo that he is a member of this Company. They are family.

The acts of kindness, acceptance, and love within a family or community must go both ways though. Bilbo gets to indirectly show how much he cares for the dwarves in return when he chooses to hand over the Arkenstone to Thranduil and Bard to stop the impending war:

“This is the Arkenstone of Thrain,” said Bilbo, “the Heart of the Mountain; and it is also the heart of Thorin. He values it above a river of gold. I give it to

you. It will aid you in your bargaining.” Then Bilbo, not without a shudder, not without a glance of longing, handed the marvellous stone to Bard, and he held it in his hand, as though dazed.

“But how is it yours to give?” he asked at last with an effort.

“O well!” said the hobbit uncomfortably. “It isn’t exactly; but, well, I am willing to let it stand against all my claim, don’t you know. I may be a burglar—or so they say: personally I never really felt like one—but I am an honest one, I hope, more or less. Anyway I am going back now, and the dwarves can do what they like to me. I hope you will find it useful.”

The Elvenking looked at Bilbo with a new wonder. “Bilbo Baggins!” he said. “You are more worthy to wear the armour of elf-princes than many that have looked more comely in it. But I wonder if Thorin Oakenshield will see it so. I have more knowledge of dwarves in general than you have perhaps. I advise you to remain with us, and here you shall be honoured and thrice welcome.”

“Thank you very much I am sure,” said Bilbo with a bow. “But I don’t think I ought to leave my friends like this, after all we have gone through together.”

(Tolkien 248-249)

Bilbo’s betrayal here is on behalf of the wellbeing of everyone else in the party. He takes the one stone he was hired to steal, the stone of Thorin’s heart and gives it away. He knows that this act will likely lose him his friends, especially Thorin, but he does not care what happens to himself. All Bilbo wants is to see Thorin not affected by the dragon-sickness and his friends safe while also trying to prevent a war. We can assume that this type of selfless and possibly reckless act does not come naturally to Bilbo since he never cared about anyone at home or had anyone care

about him before. This newfound family among the dwarves is a completely new experience for him and he wants to protect them and do right by them no matter what. This is his way of returning the love and respect that the dwarves have come to show him over the course of their journey. Unsurprisingly, this decision to hand the Arkenstone over to the elves and the men as a bargaining tactic momentarily results in the end of Thorin and Bilbo's relationship as Thorin, so blinded by his dragon-sickness, casts Bilbo away at the gate after finding out what he had done (Tolkien 252). The battle of the five armies ensues despite Bilbo's best efforts to prevent it.

Thorin eventually falls in battle and shares his last moments with Bilbo:

"Farewell, good thief," he said. "I go now to the halls of waiting to sit beside my fathers, until the world is renewed. Since I leave now all gold and silver, and go where it is of little worth, I wish to part in friendship from you, and I would take back my words and deeds at the Gate."

Bilbo knelt on one knee filled with sorrow. "Farewell, King under the Mountain!" he said. "This is a bitter adventure, if it must end so; and not a mountain of gold can amend it. Yet I am glad that I have shared in your perils—that has been more than any Baggins deserves."

"No!" said Thorin. "There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world.

But sad or merry, I must leave it now. Farewell!" (Tolkien 262-263)

This conversation at the end of Thorin's life allows for the two to mend the relationship that has taken months to cultivate. Thorin finally recognizes that gold means nothing at the end of his life and what really matters is the relationships he made along the way. He wishes to "part in

friendship from” Bilbo to which Bilbo replies “ I am glad that I have shared in your perils” to show him that he has no ill feelings towards him. It is important to both Bilbo and Thorin that the other knows they are happy to have shared moments together. Thorin’s last words highlight that he saw Bilbo as a friend because Bilbo taught him about the important things in life, not because of his feats on the journey. As soon as Thorin took his last breath, “Bilbo turned away, and he went by himself, and sat alone wrapped in a blanket, and, whether you believe it or not, he wept until his eyes were red and his voice was hoarse” (Tolkien 263). Bilbo’s decision to sit alone and weep reveals that Thorin meant more to him than he ever explicitly expressed. He has never had a person care about him and see his potential, so to lose that kind of friend after everything they have been through is devastating.

Throughout the course of the journey, Bilbo has learned what it means to be loved and respected for who he is and it is not an easy thing for him to let go of. After Thorin, Fili, and Kili’s funeral, Bilbo leaves Erebor and says goodbye to the rest of the dwarves. As he says farewell to them, “the dwarves bowed low before their Gate, but words stuck in their throats” (Tolkien 266). The dwarves do not know what to say as Bilbo leaves because what words could possibly encapsulate the feelings they’ve had throughout this entire journey. Balin finally finds something to say simply inviting Bilbo back to the Mountain whenever he’d like and Bilbo returns the favor saying, “If ever you are passing my way...don’t wait to knock! Teas is at four; but any of you are welcome at any time!” (Tolkien 206). Bilbo and the dwarves avoid saying goodbye to each other because it feels like it closes the book on their relationship. In order to invite the continuation of their friendship, Bilbo invites them to the very event they met at, except this time he welcomes them with open arms.

Bilbo has never really been a part of a group with such fierce loyalty and love before, so he has learned what it is like to have a family among the dwarves of the Company. This is a peculiar dynamic to have in Middle-earth because hobbits rarely mingle outside of their own kind, but the bond he forms with these dwarves is stronger than anything he could experience back at the Shire. This kind of friendship is very reminiscent of friendships among queer individuals and falls into the found family trope often seen in fiction. Like Bilbo, characters sometimes “disowned or rejected by their family members...build their own families with people they choose to care about” (*TVTropes*). Oftentimes with queer people, our family and others around us do not accept us or understand us on a level that makes us feel fully appreciated. However, once we have queer friends who have the same experiences as us and go through tough times along with us, we have friends for life, friends that fully understand the nuances of our existence and accept our every flaw. They fill in where family often falls short. Bilbo’s relationship with the Company is not that much different from an LGBTQ+ person finding their place among other queer people.

Belonging to an unconventional family comes with consequences but they rarely outweigh the positive effects of choosing to surround yourself with people who understand you. When Bilbo returned home from Erebor, “he had lost his reputation” and despite having the honor of elves, dwarves, and wizards “he was no longer quite respectable” in the Shire and Tolkien even goes as far to say that all of his neighbors now viewed him as “queer” (Tolkien 275). Bilbo’s “sudden” change as a person causing people to lose respect for him is not unlike the queer experience. People in our lives, especially ones who knew us before learning we’re queer, recoil and lose respect for us after finding out. They begin to view us differently, like something about us has changed dramatically and changed for the worse, when we’ve really

been like this all along. Our being explicit about our queerness doesn't mean that we've changed; the explicitness just makes other people uncomfortable. Bilbo had always been a little bit adventurous, especially when he was younger. He was aware of the expectations of the Shire, for him to be a respectable wealthy hobbit who cared about his mother's dishes and dad's furniture. And until he had the courage to take that leap of fate with Gandalf, he lived the life everybody else expected him to live. Queer people tend to do the same. We're taught from a young age that we're supposed to strive for the perfect heteronormative life and once we start straying away from that, we're cast aside because going against the grain of society makes others that adhere to it too uncomfortable. We lose our reputation and our standing among our family and community, but we would rather have that and find people who truly love us than cater to people who will never accept us for who we are. Bilbo has the same thought process at the end of his journey. The elders discouraged his nephews and nieces on the Took side from pursuing friendship with their uncle, but "he did not mind. He was quite content" (Tolkien 275). Bilbo knew now more than ever that his neighbors and relatives only liked him before his journey because of what he possessed. After escaping mountain trolls, elves, goblins, and a dragon while walking hundreds of miles to save a home that wasn't even his, Bilbo knew that the friends he made along the way cared about him and loved him in a way his blood relatives and community members never did. If being queer meant surrounding himself with people that made him happy then Bilbo was more than willing to accept that label for himself. Bilbo's ending is a happy one and his experiences have allowed him to "embrace his queerness as a positive trait" (Pacheco 276).

The most important parts of Bilbo's journey in *The Hobbit* are him finally discovering who he is and that it's okay to find fulfillment in people outside his family and neighbors. Bilbo starts out as a hobbit content living his life locked up in his house but with a repressed desire for

adventure and something more. Throughout his journey with the dwarves he learns that while he loves his maps, he loves seeing the world even if that involves danger along the way. He learns about the cultures of elves and dwarves from first-hand experience, not from his books. He learns what it's like to actually have people care about him through his friendships with Gandalf and the dwarves, something he never experienced back in the Shire, and when his journey is over and he has to return to his mundane life, he doesn't know what to do with himself. But he wouldn't change his experience at all. To a queer reader, Bilbo's self discovery journey can be seen as inherently queer. We are forced to make choices that our straight cisgender counterparts do not have to make in regards to how we navigate through the world. We have to unlearn what society tells us to do with our lives in order to live meaningful ones that celebrate every aspect of us. We often find family with people who have experienced the same things we have instead of relying on the familial love we may or may not get from blood relatives. What's so potent about Bilbo's found family in the Company is that it was not fully a matter of circumstance. A lot of the found families we see in media result from people's families being gone or dead, or they are put into extraneous situations that cause them to find family in others. However, Bilbo has a family in the Shire, they just don't care about him and find him too odd to associate with. He has to seek out a found family that makes him feel loved and respected for who he is, and when he does he is a much happier hobbit because of it.

'Whether or No': Bounds of Human Connection in *The Lord of the Rings*

When we foreground queerness in our reading of *The Lord of the Rings*, the most potent relationship unsurprisingly is Frodo and Sam. Their relationship blurs the lines between platonic and romantic but it's not jarring or out of place. Frodo and Sam are just two hobbits that choose to love and care for each other despite facing the end of Middle-earth as they know it. My goal

with analyzing Frodo and Sam's relationship is not to label them as gay but to allow their relationship to exist outside of labels. It does not matter whether they are friends or romantic partners because confining them to a traditional definition of a relationship downplays the intense but gentle connection they have with each other. The delicate ways they take care of each other and the balance they create for each other as they navigate a brutal and unforgiving world ultimately leads to a sense of belonging to and with one another. I want to shed the labels that surround these two to unveil the "queer" or unconventional relationship that lies underneath. If we open ourselves to see relationships outside what we expect of them, we can see that humans are much more capable of compassion and love for one another.

Tolkien establishes Frodo and Sam's preexisting relationship when Sam expresses how upset he is by the idea of Frodo leaving the Shire to take the Ring to Rivendell. Then "Frodo had suddenly realized that flying from the Shire would mean more painful partings than merely saying farewell to the familiar comforts of Bag End" (Tolkien 62). By including Frodo's internal monologue here, Tolkien establishes that Sam means something to Frodo and he will be saddened by having to leave him behind. The use of "parting" instead of "farewell" suggests more of a division in their relationship than just saying goodbye, so it is clear that these two care for each other a great deal before we see them go through the events of their journey.

Near the beginning of the story, we see Sam outwardly express his concern for Frodo's wellbeing multiple times. The first time the hobbits face serious fatal danger, Frodo is stabbed with a Morgul blade by the Witch-king. Sam is visibly distraught, "choked with tears", by this and Aragorn has to comfort him saying "Don't despair!...Your Frodo is made of sterner stuff than I had guessed" (Tolkien 193). Sam hates seeing Frodo hurt and thinking that he could possibly lose him. Aragorn reassuring Sam and referring to Frodo as "your Frodo" acknowledges the

mass amount of love Sam carries for him and that the bond between the two is palpable to those around them. We see that there is a sense of belonging that Frodo has to and with Sam. Once Frodo woke up days later in Rivendell and got used to his surroundings, he immediately asked Gandalf where Sam was (Tolkien 213). Gandalf reassures him that Sam and everyone else arrived at Rivendell safely, but tells him, “We have been terribly anxious, and Sam has hardly left your side, day or night, except to run messages” (Tolkien 215). During Sam’s resting time in Rivendell all he wanted to do was be near Frodo to make sure he was healing. Rivendell is a place Sam dreamed about visiting for years because he admires the elves and when presented with living out his dream or staying by Frodo’s side he chooses the latter. When Sam finds out Frodo has woken up, “he ran to Frodo and took his left hand, awkwardly and shyly. He stroked it gently and then blushed and turned hastily away” (Tolkien 219). After watching over Frodo for days not knowing if he was going to survive, Sam excitedly approaches him but treats him with tenderness gently grabbing his hand. A small touch like this means the world to Sam because he knows that Frodo’s hand “has felt so cold through the long nights” (Tolkien 219). The part of this scene that sticks out to queer readers is not that Sam cares so much about Frodo, it’s how he shows that he cares for him. Containing excitement as to not startle him, stroking his hand to feel its warmth when it’s previously been cold, and blushing are all nonverbal ways that Sam shows his love of Frodo. It shows a connection and dedication that Sam has to Frodo like no one else in the world matters to him except Frodo.

Despite Sam’s outward care for Frodo, Frodo finds small ways to show Sam he cares for him as well. As Sam tells Frodo all about Rivendell and the songs he has heard the elves sing, Frodo recognizes his excitement and tells him, “I know what you have been doing Sam... But you shall be merry tonight, and listen to your heart’s content. Come on, guide me round the

corners!” (Tolkien 219). In these two sentences alone, Frodo conveys to Sam that he appreciates how he cared for him while he was asleep and how he wants him to now enjoy the place he was so excited to see. He knows that if he tells Sam to go off and enjoy Rivendell while he still rests Sam will not leave his side, so asking him to guide him around acknowledges Sam’s feelings and concerns while prioritizing him getting to experience Rivendell. This shift of the conversation is as much a sign of love as Sam tending to him is. It also marks a slight shift in their dynamic because the agreement to navigate physical space together signifies that the two will never separate. Now that they have encountered a glimpse of danger and lived to see the other side, they still choose to move forward as an inseparable pair.

This is further highlighted when Sam crashes the Council of Elrond, which he was not invited to. While Elrond tells Frodo how perilous the journey may be ahead, Sam inserts himself into the conversation:

‘But you won’t send him off alone surely, Master?’ cried Sam, unable to contain himself any longer, and jumping up from the corner where he had been quietly sitting on the floor.

‘No indeed!’ said Elrond, turning towards him with a smile. ‘You at least shall go with him. It is hardly possible to separate you from him, even when he is summoned to a secret council and you are not.’

Sam sat down, blushing and muttering. ‘A nice pickle we have landed ourselves in, Mr. Frodo!’ he said, shaking his head. (Tolkien 264)

Based on Tolkien saying Sam got up from “where he had been quietly sitting” we can infer that Sam has been eavesdropping throughout the entire conversation. This means that he heard how important the task of destroying the Ring is as well as how dangerous it will be. Despite knowing

what lies ahead if Frodo becomes the Ringbearer, he does not try to convince Frodo not to go but rather volunteers to go with him. He very well could have said that this is not a job fit for a hobbit and that they held up their end of the deal getting the Ring to Rivendell, but he does not question Frodo's decision and wants to be with him so he does not have to face future perils alone. Even Elrond notices the pair's inability to part from each other which causes Sam to blush. This is only the second time Tolkien describes Sam blushing, the first time after he holds Frodo's hand. In these moments it seems Sam becomes very aware of how much he cares for Frodo and doesn't quite know how to process that.

The next time we see Sam and Frodo's loyalty to each other really tested is when Frodo tries to take the Ring to Mordor alone after being confronted by Boromir. Everyone in the Fellowship begins to search for him, and as Sam cannot keep up with the speed of the others he stops to think about where Frodo could have gone:

'He made up his mind at last - to go. Where to? Off East. Not without Sam? Yes, without even his Sam. That's hard, cruel hard.'

Sam passed his hand over his eyes, brushing away the tears. 'Steady, Gamgee!, he said. 'Think if you can! He can't fly across rivers, and he can't jump waterfalls. He's got no gear. So he's got to get back to the boats. Back to the boats! Back to the boats, Sam, like lightning!'

Sam turned and bolted back down the path. He fell and cut his knees. Up he got and ran on. (Tolkien 396)

While the rest of the Fellowship went searching for Frodo blindly, Sam knew exactly where he would be and where he was going. While Sam figures this out in a short period of time, we feel him go through anger, sadness, fear, and desperation. The thought of Frodo going on this

dangerous journey without “his Sam” is enough to bring him tears. Sam wants to be there with Frodo to make sure he is safe, but Frodo did not give him the opportunity to make that choice. Sam sees the two as a unit so even if Frodo left without him to protect him it still feels like a selfish decision. Despite being so upset by Frodo’s actions he presses on to find Frodo before he is too far gone. He starts sprinting back to the boats without any regard for his physical health, his mind and body going so fast that his feet cannot keep up. Once he reaches the bank of the river where the boats are, Sam throws himself at Frodo’s boat moving away from the shore and misses, causing him to start drowning. Frodo takes him by the hand and pulls him up on the side of the boat while steering it back to shore. Once Sam is safely back on his feet, Frodo confronts him:

‘Of all the confounded nuisances you are the worst, Sam!’ he said.

‘Oh, Mr. Frodo, that’s hard!’ said Sam shivering. ‘That’s hard, trying to go without me and all. If I hadn’t guessed right, where would you be now?’

‘Safely on my way.’

‘Safely!’ said Sam. ‘All alone and without me to help you? I couldn’t have a borne it, it’d have been the death of me.’

‘It would be the death of you to come with me, Sam,’ said Frodo, ‘and I could not have borne that.’

‘Not as certain as being left behind,’ said Sam.

‘But I am going to Mordor.’

‘I know that well enough, Mr. Frodo. Of course you are. And I’m coming with you.’ (Tolkien 397)

Often Tolkien describes Sam's point of view and his protective actions towards Frodo, but this back and forth between the two confirms that Frodo was thinking about Sam when making his decision to go to Mordor alone. Frodo tries to warn Sam that going with him surely means death along the way and he would not be able to bear it if Sam died while going on a journey that only he agreed to see out fully. Sam accepts the fact that their journey to Mordor might be the last thing they ever do, and he makes it clear to Frodo that he would rather follow him and deal with whatever unfortunate events occur than leave him to go through everything by himself. He even goes as far as to say he'll sink the boats before letting Frodo leave on his own:

‘I’m coming too, or neither of us isn’t going. I’ll knock holes in all the boats first.’

Frodo actually laughed. A sudden warmth and gladness touched his heart...

‘So all my plan is spoilt!’ said Frodo. ‘It is no good trying to escape you. But I’m glad, Sam. I cannot tell you how glad. Come along! It is plain that we were meant to go together.’ (Tolkien 397)

While Sam is being serious in his threat to sink the boats, Frodo finds the gesture heartwarming because he understands that Sam would go to great lengths to look after him. The “sudden warmth and gladness” touching Frodo's heart paired with him saying “it is plain that we were meant to go together” can be read literally and figuratively. Frodo now understands that perhaps they are destined to complete this journey together and for the sake of the success of their task, having selfless Sam by his side could be helpful. However, Frodo is also finally realizing the deep love Sam has for him and he knows he wants to have a person like Sam around in his life. Both of their desires to keep the other safe comes to a head in the scene to where the only logical

conclusion is for them to stay by each other's side no matter what happens, for the sake of the world and for the sake of their hearts.

As the two continue their journey to Mordor together Frodo becomes more corrupted by the Ring, but Sam never stops seeing the good in him. For example, after a long day of traveling on the outskirts of Mordor, Frodo and Sam take a rest:

Frodo after a few mouthfuls of *lembas* settled deep into the brown fern and went to sleep. Sam looked at him. The early daylight was only just creeping down into the shadows under the trees, but he saw his master's face very clearly, and his hands, too, lying at rest on the ground beside him. He was reminded suddenly of Frodo as he had lain, asleep in the house of Elrond, after his deadly wound. Then as he had kept watch Sam had noticed that at times a light seemed to be shining faintly within; but now the light was even clearer and stronger. (Tolkien 638)

Sam noticing that Frodo's light was clearer than it was in Rivendell seems to be a contradiction given Frodo's corruption grows the closer they are to their end goal. However, this is only a contradiction if we view Frodo's light as connected to his overall goodness or spirit. If we view it as more of a reflection of how Sam sees Frodo then we can infer that it represents how his love and care for Frodo has only grown since they left Rivendell. They have experienced incredible hardships since leaving Rivendell and almost separated at the banks of the river, but that never clouds Sam's feelings towards Frodo. As Sam continues to watch Frodo resting he takes in every possible detail he can:

Frodo's face was peaceful, the marks of fear and care had left it; but it looked old, old and beautiful, as if the chiselling of the shaping years was now revealed in many fine lines that had before been hidden, though the identity of the face was

not changed. Not that Sam Gamgee put it that way to himself. He shook his head, as if finding words useless, and murmured: 'I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no.' (Tolkien 638)

It is interesting to note here that Tolkien says that Sam has no words to express how he is feeling in the moment but gives us an entire paragraph on his observation of Frodo and his feelings towards him. Tolkien does the work for Sam to express how he is really feeling even though Sam could not find the words to do it himself. He simply shakes his head, taken aback by the peaceful light and old beauty in Frodo, and can't muster saying anything besides that he loves him. Sam has not been one to hide his affections for Frodo, holding and kissing his hand multiple times and constantly verbalizing the lengths he will go to to ensure Frodo's safety, but he only says "I love him" when Frodo cannot hear him. Because Sam usually shows his love to Frodo through actions, these words feel more intimate than anything he has done up to this point. Confessing his love in this way would not have the same effect if he had said it at the beginning of their journey because we would not have seen how Sam cares for Frodo yet. However, at this point in the journey we have seen Sam have so many opportunities to turn back and save himself, to let Frodo finish this quest on his own. He has suffered so much and even when the two are at their worst dealing with Gollum, running out of food, and barely able to walk anymore, he dedicates a moment of his time to take in Frodo's beauty and light and confess that he loves him no matter what. This is an incredibly romantic gesture in an incredibly dark time for the two.

Despite the growing hardships of their journey, Frodo and Sam still seek out ways to find comfort in one another physically and emotionally. The two share a delicate scene as they rest on the stairs of Cirith Ungol:

‘I’d be dearly glad to see you have a sleep. I’d keep watch over you; and anyway, if you lay near, with my arm round you, no one could come pawing you without your Sam knowing it.’

‘Sleep!’ said Frodo and sighed, as if out of a desert he had seen a mirage of cool green. ‘Yes, even here I could sleep.’

‘Sleep then, master! Lay your head in my lap.’

And so Gollum found them hours later... Sam sat propped against the stone, his head dropping sideways and his breathing heavy. In his lap lay Frodo’s head, drowned deep in sleep; upon his white forehead lay one of Sam’s brown hands, and the other lay softly upon his master’s breast. Peace was in both their faces.”

(Tolkien 698-699)

The sheer detail Tolkien provides about how they lay on one another followed by “peace was in both of their faces” makes this one of the most gentle scenes in the whole book. Sam’s hands cover Frodo’s head and heart as they peacefully sleep, showing that he will protect him in sleep the same way he does when awake. This is a rare moment where both of them are getting rest, and on the stairs of Cirith Ungol no less, completely calm and unguarded. Simply being together intertwined like this is enough to bring them a sense of tranquility. After Sam wakes up from their nap, he decides to wake up Frodo too so they can continue on:

Gently he smoothed the hair back from Frodo’s brow, and bending down spoke softly to him.

‘Wake up, Mr. Frodo! Wake up!’

Frodo stirred and opened his eyes, and smiled, seeing Sam’s face bending over him. (Tolkien 700)

Even though Frodo has been dragged down by the Ring for months and is right on Sauron's doorstep, he wakes up with a smile on his face seeing Sam there with him. It's as if nothing else exists in the world during this moment between the two of them. So much pain and darkness surrounds them at every waking moment, but Frodo and Sam are still able to steal little moments of time like this to find peace in each other.

As Sam's love for Frodo has grown throughout their journey, we see just how desperate Sam gets when he thinks he has lost Frodo. When Sam finds Frodo all wrapped up in Shelob's webs showing no signs of life he cries out, "Don't leave me here alone! It's your Sam calling. Don't go where I can't follow! Wake up, Mr. Frodo! O wake up, Frodo, me dear, me dear. Wake up!" (Tolkien 713). Sam's voice is dripping in pain and desperation not being able to cope with the fact that Frodo might be dead. He specifically tells Frodo "don't go where I can't follow" since he promised him he would follow him wherever he went. Sam very well knew that death was possible during this journey, but based on this phrasing he expected to die alongside Frodo, not to outlive him. He's in so much denial that he calls out to Frodo to wake up, but despite all the desperation he is still gentle calling him "me dear". He did not think he would have to continue this journey without Frodo. After collecting himself, Sam makes the difficult decision to take the Ring and continue without Frodo. This decision tears at him enough that he starts heading back to Frodo's lifeless body where he runs into some orcs. They had taken Frodo's body and said, "This fellow isn't dead!":

Sam reeled, clutching at the stone. He felt as if the whole dark world was turning upside down. So great was the shock that he almost swooned, but even as he fought to keep a hold on his senses, deep inside him he was aware of the comment: 'You fool, he isn't dead, and your heart knew it. Don't trust your head,

Samwise, it is not the best part of you. The trouble with you is that you never really had any hope.’ (Tolkien 723)

Now knowing Frodo is alive, Sam’s dark hopeless world is regaining its light. He has no plan for how to get Frodo back and does not know if he can survive fighting against orcs, but all that matters to Sam is that Frodo is still alive. In this moment, Sam also acknowledges that his heart is the better part of him, which he has shown time and time again with how gently he takes care of Frodo under no orders but his own. He acknowledges that one of his weaknesses is he has no hope, and that only ever gets restored when he sees Frodo. Frodo is not some hero who goes out saving the world all the time; he’s just a hobbit from the Shire with a naive will to carry out tasks requested by others. There is no particular reason Sam should stake all his hope in this quest on a corrupted broken Frodo, but he does. He sees a light in Frodo in a way that no one else does. His love for Frodo is what drives his hope. Without Frodo, Sam has no hope.

At the end of the world Sam is overjoyed that Frodo is back to his normal self and the burden of the Ring is gone. The two share a moment as they sit outside of Mount Doom:

‘Well, this is the end, Sam Gamgee,’ said a voice by his side. And there was Frodo, pale and worn, and yet himself again; and in his eyes there was peace now, neither strain of will, nor madness, nor any fear. His burden was taken away.

There was the dear master of the sweet days in the Shire.

‘Master!’ cried Sam, and fell upon his knees. In all that ruin of the world for the moment he felt only joy, great joy. The burden was gone. His master had been saved; he was himself again, he was free...

‘...[T]he quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.’ (Tolkien 926)

Even though the two believe they are about to die, they are happier than they have been in a long time. In this moment there is no mention of finally saving the world from the evils of Sauron; Sam is just glad that Frodo is free of the Ring and Frodo is glad to have Sam there with him. They don't have to feel despair anymore and have the quest weighing on their hearts any longer. It's just the two of them at the end of their journey and presumably at the end of their lives. They just saved the world yet all that matters is that they are at peace together. Gwaihir goes to rescue the "two small dark figures, forlorn, hand in hand upon a little hill, while the world shook under them" (Tolkien 930).

When the hobbits return home to the Shire, Sam starts to show romantic interest in Rose Cotton but not without straining his relationship with Frodo. He talks to Frodo about it telling him, "I feel torn in two" and Frodo replies, "You want to get married, and yet you want to live with me in Bag End too? But my dear Sam, how easy! Get married as soon as you can, and then move in with Rose. There's room enough in Bag End for as big a family as you could wish for" (Tolkien 1001). Sam is torn between his two loves Rose and Frodo, but he is also torn between having a traditional life that will give him contentment and a family of his own and a life full of the past trauma and deep bond he and Frodo share. Frodo, who will never fully recover from being a Ringbearer, does not have that choice but wants Sam to be happy, so he does his best to give him both lives by having him and Rose move into Bag End with him.

This works for a little while until Frodo cannot bear the pain he still feels any longer. Without telling Sam the reason, Frodo takes him to some of the places they went on their journey. They meet up with Bilbo, Elrond, and Galadriel who are set to travel to Valinor to live out the rest of their days. As a Ringbearer, Frodo is set to go along with them which comes as a surprise to Sam. Sam, shocked and distraught, asks if he can come along with Frodo:

‘No, Sam. Not yet anyway, not further than the Havens. Though you too were a Ring-bearer, if only for a little while. Your time may come. Do not be too sad, Sam. You cannot be always torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be, and to do.’

‘But,’ said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, ‘I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.’

‘So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.’ (Tolkien 1006)

Frodo knows that for as long as he still lives in the Shire, Sam will not be whole. Sam wants nothing more than for Frodo to be happy which is why he did his best to make the Shire and Bag End feel like home again for him, but Frodo sees that this wears on Sam even if Sam doesn’t think so. Frodo wants Sam to be able to enjoy life to the fullest without having to worry about him so he decides it’s best for him to leave without Sam. Frodo chooses to go to Valinor to seek some sort of peace that he can no longer obtain in Middle-earth but he also does it to give Sam a better life. While this devastates Sam, Frodo does tell him that there may be a day that they can see each other again. After Frodo broke the news to Sam that he could not come with him, “Sam was now sorrowful at heart, and it seemed to him that if the parting would be bitter, more grievous still would be the long road home alone” (Tolkien 1007). The word “parting” shows up again paralleling the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Frodo thought he was going to have to make the journey to Rivendell without Sam. But this time it’s Sam feeling that sense of parting, that part of him leaving for a very long time. Even though the parting of the two

would be bitter to Sam, he cannot even think about going home alone. He has lived with Frodo for years now and he has to return to their home without him. He has to give up whatever future he had planned with Frodo and return without one of his loves.

Ultimately Frodo and Sam's story ends with parting and Sam now has to navigate life without the one person he felt closest to. After the ships sailed out west, Sam returns home with Merry and Pippin:

At last they rode over the downs and took the East Road, and then Merry and Pippin rode on to Buckland; and already they were singing again as they went. But Sam turned to Bywater, and so came back up the Hill, as day was ending once more. And he went on, and there was yellow light, and fire within; and the evening meal was ready, and he was expected. And Rose drew him in, and set him in his chair, and put little Elanor upon his lap.

He drew a deep breath. 'Well, I'm back,' he said. (Tolkien 1008)

When the three of them return to the Shire without Frodo we get no indication of how Sam is feeling. Every detail Tolkien gives us is descriptive of the things and people around him with no internal monologue or dialogue from Sam. It creates this feeling of emptiness and numbness that does not need to be communicated directly to us. Sam just lost Frodo, the person closest to him and one of the people he thought he was going to spend the rest of his life with. Sam breaks the numbness of this scene with a simple "I'm back" and the book ends with the reader not knowing Sam's thoughts or feelings.

Throughout Frodo and Sam's journey, we see two people constantly faced with adversity who choose to love. They are so dedicated to one another in a way no modern terms can encapsulate. People may go through the story reading them as really close friends or see them in

a more romantic light but I would prefer to call them soulmates. The concept of soulmates is not inherently queer but it is hard to ignore that we are dealing with two male characters here. Their dedication and love for each other could easily be read as romantic by a more general audience if one was a man and one was a woman, but the gentle masculinity that Sam, Frodo, and the rest of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* display cannot be separated from their characters. Their gentleness is what makes their love so heartwarming. They are not meant to fall into a particular trope or fulfill some sort of role in the story. Frodo and Sam are just two characters that happen to have such a deep capacity for love for each other despite everything that is stacked against them. That's what their story is about. The fact that their relationship has no bounds makes it inherently queer. There are no labels that follow them, they are just perfectly intertwined with each other. And that is what makes their relationship so attractive to queer people. Queer relationships in media often fall into stereotypes or focus on our relationship to society rather than who we are. We see ourselves in Frodo and Sam because there is no societal baggage attached to their relationship. We just see subtle details of their relationship growing and changing as they deal with new issues. The only decision they have to make in terms of their relationship is how they choose to love each other. And that's a beautiful story to look up to.

QUEERING THE CAMERA LENS: ADAPTATIONS OF LGBTQ+ SUBTEXT

Rendering Textual into Physical: Visualizing Intimacy in *The Lord of the Rings*

The complexity of the characters Tolkien wrote in *The Lord of the Rings* are a fertile ground for adaptation into other forms of media like film, but with that complexity comes a difficult balancing act. According to Erick Neher, author of “The Perils of Adaptation,” an adaptation’s success “is not defined by fidelity to its source but by the rules of the adaptive form. In other words, an adaptation must work as a film and not just as a re-creation of the earlier source” (Neher 120). In the case of Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the filmmakers were tasked with taking one of the most dense fantasy stories written and creating a compelling high budget film franchise that could cater to book fans as well as a general audience. In the “From Book to Script: Finding the Story” section of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* extended edition appendices, screenwriter Philippa Boyens describes what it is like to take on an adaptation of such a beloved story: “The books are untouchable. They exist. They will always exist. And this is one group of fans’ version. We all love these books. We’re all fans of these books and this world. And this is our interpretation, our version, our attempt to bring it to life” (20:38-20:54). Much conversation about the success of adaptation gets boiled down to how accurate it is to the source material, but I would rather frame adaptations the way Boyens does, as a way to see how filmmakers view the story and how their decisions impact the audience and their interpretations of the story. In analyzing *The Lord of the Rings* films, we will see that in order to create a compelling story for film and capture the essence of Frodo and Sam’s delicate relationship, the filmmakers dramatized some of their interactions while focusing on Sam’s dedication to Frodo and the physical intimacy between the two. Their dedication to following the pair’s dynamic from the book so closely enables the queer reading of their relationship to transfer

to the films as well, which in turn allows for a new audience that has not read the books to see the queer themes embedded in Frodo and Sam.

One of the most important parts of Sam and Frodo's relationship they had to translate to screen is Sam's attentiveness to Frodo and his state of mind. One way they highlighted this early on in *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* film was in the scene where Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry are hiding from one of the Nazgul sent to track Frodo down (figure 2). In this scene, they all seem scared for their lives but Sam notices that Frodo is going to put on the Ring and stops him (54:00-54:49). It's remarkable that Sam is observant and protective enough to notice this especially when he is not sitting right next to Frodo.



Figure 2. "Hobbits hide under a tree from the Nazgul," *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001.

It's such a simple gesture but lays a foundation for their relationship early on in the films and establishes that the film will take advantage of its visual nature to portray the closeness of Frodo and Sam's relationship. This is further used in the scene where Sam goes to Frodo after he wakes up in Rivendell. In the film, we see Sam run up to Frodo excitedly and grab his hands just like in the book (1:26:19-1:26:34, figures 3 and 4).



Figures 3 and 4. “Sam holds Frodo’s hand,” *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001.

However, this little hand-holding detail might not have been included if Sir Ian McKellen, who plays Gandalf, had not suggested Sean Astin, who plays Sam, add it to the scene. In the DVD commentary for the extended edition of the film, McKellen says he suggested that Astin do this because he thought that the innocently physical nature of Sam and Frodo’s relationship “might be missed by two resolutely heterosexual actors who might not appreciate that gay people, like myself, saw in a touch something, perhaps, more meaningful than others might” (1:26:20-1:26:47). Not only does McKellen’s suggestion make the adaptation more faithful to the source material, it acknowledges that queer people’s interpretations of this story exist and are valid. We deserve to see the scenes we relate to most such as the physical intimacy between Frodo and Sam not watered down by Hollywood.

The visual cues representing Sam and Frodo’s closeness follow through all the way to the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring* film resulting in a climax of the film that leaves queer fans satisfied. As discussed in the literary analysis of the book, after Frodo saves Sam from drowning, he allows Sam to follow him on the next part of the quest, symbolizing him recognizing that Sam is meant to be with him till the end whether that results in death or not. In the film, they play up the drama of the drowning scene a bit more and specifically focus on the framing of their hands as Frodo pulls Sam out of the water (3:16:25-3:16:55; figures 5 and 6).



Figures 5 and 6. “Frodo pulls Sam out of the river,” *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001.

While Frodo does grab Sam’s hand in the book, he has Sam hold on to the boat while he takes them back to shore. In the film, they have Frodo pull Sam straight out of the water onto the boat and embrace him while the two cry in each other’s arms (figures 7 and 8). This portrayal gives us a much more emotional scene in terms of their body language towards each other (3:17:08-3:17:37).



Figures 7 and 8. “Frodo and Sam embrace on the boat,” *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 2001.

Instead of focusing on the dialogue the book uses, they dramatize the physical intimacy between the two to create a more fulfilling climax of their relationship arc for the film. Having such an emotional scene include so much physical contact makes it stick out to us as the viewer and carry it with us through the next two films. At this point through the story, a queer viewer, whether they have read the books or not, will appreciate the amount of physical intimacy between the two being displayed in a high budget film. In contrast, the subtlety the book relies on might get lost in “blink and you’ll miss it” moments in a fast-paced movie juggling nine main characters.

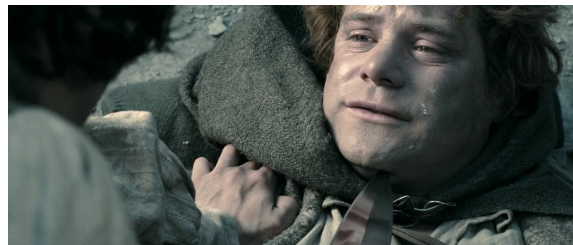
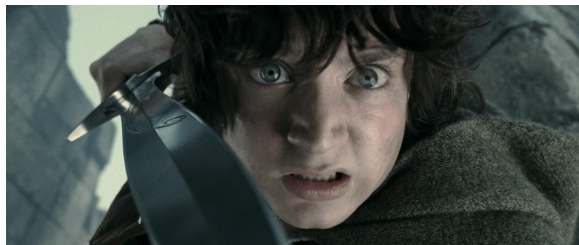
As Frodo becomes more corrupted by the Ring in *The Two Towers* film, the filmmakers continue to play with physical intimacy to show Sam's protectiveness of Frodo. As Gollum escorts the two closer to Mordor, a Ringwraith flies above on his Fellbeast causing Frodo to seize up feeling the pain of the Ring (50:06-50:28). Sam sees Frodo reach into his shirt trying to get the Ring and grabs his hand to hold it while telling him, "It's all right. I'm here" (figures 9 and 10).



Figures 9 and 10. "Sam holds Frodo's hand away from the Ring," *The Two Towers*, 2002.

The mixture of reassuring words and physical contact show that Sam is inclined to take care of Frodo when he begins to feel the effects of the Ring. This scene does not quite exist in the book but it still gets across these important themes occurring in the book. It also demonstrates that Sam continues to care more and more for Frodo as Frodo falls further and further. He sees hope and light in him no matter what happens to him.

The filmmakers once again needed a way to bring their relationship to a climax near the end of *The Two Towers* while showing that no matter how corrupted Frodo gets, Sam will always be by his side. In a scene created for the film, Frodo attempts to hand the Ring over to the Witch King when Sam stops him (3:20:12-3:21:33). Frodo, with a mind completely clouded by the Ring, tackles Sam to the ground putting a sword to his throat (figures 11 and 12). The only way Sam can get him to snap out of it is by saying "It's me. It's your Sam. Don't you know your Sam?"



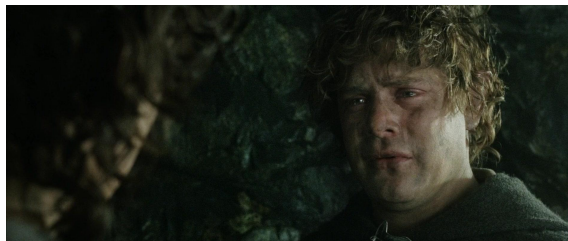
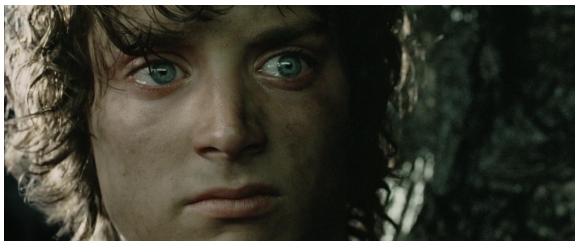
Figures 11 and 12. “Frodo holds his sword to Sam’s throat,” *The Two Towers*, 2002.

Frodo has not shown violent behavior towards Sam before, so this jarring image juxtaposed by Sam’s calm voice calling himself “your Sam” creates a sense of heartbreak in the viewer. We are watching our lead protagonist fall under the power of the Ring and lose control over how he treats the person he cares for the most and Sam only meets him with gentleness. Sam never gets angry at Frodo for his descent because he knows that there is still good in him. He indirectly lets Frodo know this later in this scene when Frodo asks him what they are still holding on to. In a monologue taken from the book in a different scene, Sam looks Frodo in his eyes and says “There’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it’s worth fighting for” (3:23:22-3:23:44). He went out of his way to pick Frodo up off the ground and ensure this eye contact, hinting that Sam means these words about Frodo too.

In *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* films, one of the more noticeable changes they make to Sam and Frodo’s dynamic is the added tension between Sam and Gollum and how it affects Frodo’s perception of Sam. This decision gives more dimension to their storyline in a film format, but also highlights how overprotective Sam can be towards Frodo. In *The Return of the King*, when Sam overhears Gollum say he was planning to murder the two, he tries to harm him but Frodo physically pulls him away to stop him (25:46-26:47). In the books, the majority of the interactions between Sam and Gollum are riddled with distrust and distaste for one another, but Sam usually tries to hold his tongue. In the film storyline, this is not the first time we see Sam act angry and violent towards Gollum but it is the first time we see Frodo physically hold

Sam away from him and get upset by his actions towards Gollum. As Frodo becomes more corrupted by the Ring he is more susceptible to Gollum's manipulation tactics, but he is also starting to understand what Gollum has gone through because of the Ring. This connection that Frodo and Gollum are fostering makes Sam jealous in a way because Gollum can provide Frodo comfort in a way that he can't. We can view this scene as a definitive fracture in Sam and Frodo's relationship as Frodo takes Gollum's hand and continues walking with Sam behind them. Not only does Sam dislike Gollum because of the things he has overheard him say, it also feels like he is losing his Frodo little by little.

Sam's overprotectiveness and Frodo's attachment to Gollum further escalates at the stairs of Cirith Ungol where the two's relationship seems to break beyond repair. In the book we never see Frodo and Sam depart one another besides when Frodo's presumably lifeless body is taken by orcs after Shelob stung him. However, due to Gollum's escalated manipulation being focused more around breaking the two apart rather than luring them both to Shelob's lair like in the books, their relationship naturally leads to this tipping point. In what reads as a breakup scene, Frodo yells at Sam to get away before saying "You can't help me anymore...Go home" (1:27:50-1:28:55). During these lines the camera cuts back and forth showing Frodo's dead eyes but calm and sure demeanor versus Sam sobbing (figures 13 and 14).

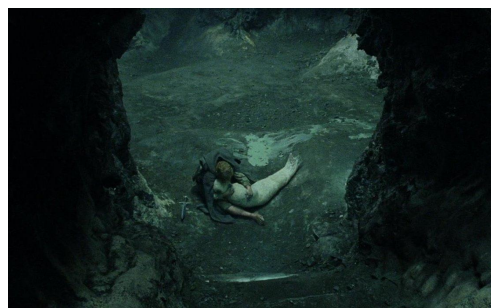
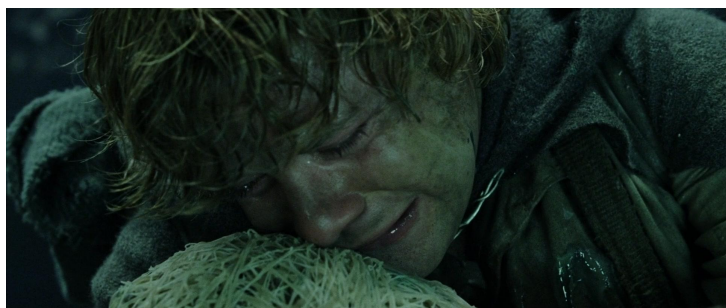


Figures 13 and 14. "Frodo sends Sam away," *The Return of the King*, 2003.

This behavior from Frodo shatters Sam because Sam still believes there is good in Frodo but Frodo no longer sees the good in Sam. Despite everything he has done to reassure Frodo along

the journey, he is ultimately defeated by Gollum's manipulation and the power of the Ring. Sam and Frodo have chosen time and time again to continue this quest together because they need each other to get through it, so to have Frodo break that trust without really having control over his decisions leaves Sam heartbroken. There is nothing more he can do to change Frodo's mind. The filmmakers' decision to stick Gollum between the two amplifies Sam's need for Frodo in a different and much more emotionally jarring way than the books do. This choice to split Sam and Frodo up before getting to Shelob's lair also creates an interesting way to show the audience that Frodo is not completely lost to the Ring yet and still cares about Sam. When Frodo reaches the other side of Shelob's lair without Sam, he softly says "I'm sorry Sam" before collapsing (2:16:17-2:16:42). Even if Sam does not get to hear these words yet, the audience knows that Frodo feels bad for the way he treated him on the stairs.

After their painful parting, the next time we see them reunite is full of heartbreak but also the physical intimacy that we have not seen in a while. In the film when Sam finds Frodo's almost lifeless body wrapped in Shelob's webs, he holds him crying and rocking back and forth (2:26:35-2:27:37; figures 15 and 16).

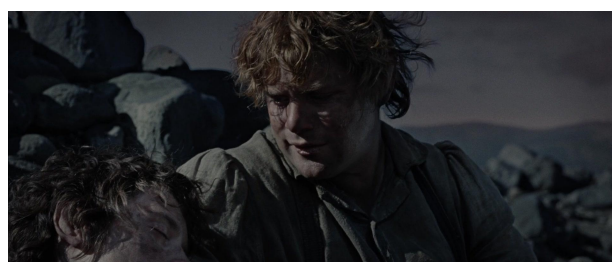
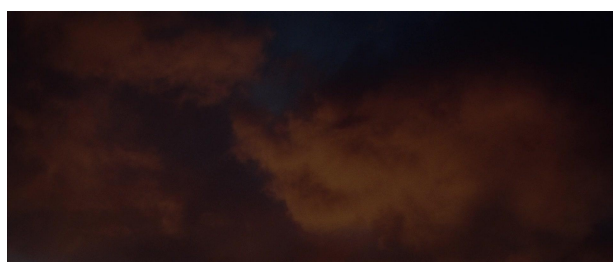


Figures 15 and 16. "Sam holds Frodo's lifeless body," *The Return of the King*, 2003.

While the dialogue Sam says in this scene is the same as in the book, Tolkien makes no mention of Sam holding Frodo's body in an embrace. He describes Sam touching his hands and feet to check body temperature, but afterwards Sam immediately gets angry and starts running around in

rage (Tolkien 713-714). To give the scene a different kind of emotional weight in the film we see Sam return to his gentle nature with Frodo. Shifting Sam's emotions from anger to heartbreak matches well with the decision to have the two part because now the scene reads as Sam being devastated he did not get to say goodbye to Frodo. Their relationship was left in a bad place and now Sam cannot fix that. He will never know that Frodo was sorry for his actions at the stairs of Cirith Ungol.

One downside of book to film adaptations is the difficulty of including internal monologues, so the film attempts to include the feelings encapsulated in them using visual cues. One example of this in *The Return of the King* was using ideas expressed in what I like to call Sam's famous "whether or no" internal monologue, which was discussed earlier, and presenting them in a different way. When Frodo and Sam are resting on their way to Mount Doom, Sam tells Frodo to look up at the beautiful sky with him: "There is light and beauty up there that no shadow can touch" (3:13:28-3:13:58). He then looks down at Frodo who has his eyes closed (figures 17 and 18).



Figures 17 and 18. "Sam looks at the sky and Frodo," *The Return of the King*, 2003.

The parallel between the two scenes becomes very clear if we think about Sam's description of the sky as his way of describing how he views Frodo in his internal monologue. It's a sweet visual representation of one of Sam's most iconic monologues in the books as well as a moment that means so much to queer people. But it also does its job to remind the audience that Sam still

sees that beauty and light in Frodo even when things continuously do not go their way near the end of their journey.

To call back to one of the most pivotal points in Frodo and Sam's relationship throughout the films, Peter Jackson mirrors Sam saving Frodo from falling into Mount Doom to Frodo saving Sam from drowning in the river. In the book, Frodo does not fall off the ledge with Gollum, but it was added to the film for dramatic effect and to make a point about Frodo's character. As Sam reaches down to take Frodo's hand he tells him, "Don't you let go" (3:33:35-3:34:23). This line partnered with Frodo finally giving that last effort to take Sam's hand shows that Frodo makes a choice to continue his journey. The quest was fulfilled and the Ring was destroyed so Frodo did not have to go on, seeing as there was no clear way for them to survive leaving Mount Doom and Mordor, but he makes the conscious decision to reach up for Sam's hand (figures 19 and 20).



Figures 19 and 20. "Frodo reaches up for Sam's hand," *The Return of the King*, 2003.

These shots mimic the boat scene back in *The Fellowship of the Ring* highlighting that the bond the two share with one another is what gives them the strength to go on. They need each other to survive and that never changes no matter what they go through along their journey.

Perhaps one of the most jarring changes from book to film to the queer viewer is addition to dialogue in what Sam and Frodo believe are their last moments. The films so far have done a

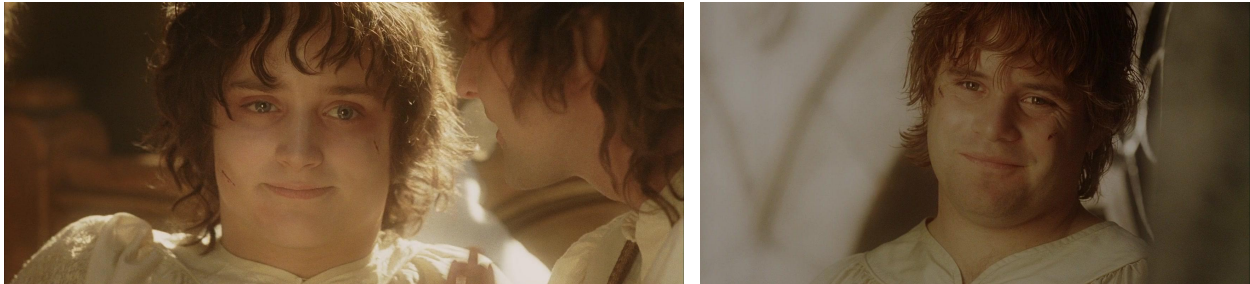
wonderful job getting to the essence of Frodo and Sam's relationship focusing on their need for each other and the gentleness with which they approach each other, but in their "last moments" on the side of Mount Doom, Sam, with tears in his eyes, longs for Rosie: "Rosie Cotton dancing. She had ribbon in her hair. If ever I was to marry someone, it would've been her" (3:38:16-3:38:36). It seems a little out of place from a queer person's perspective because while we know Sam does go on to marry Rosie, she has not been mentioned since the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* film and does not come up in this scene in the book. However, this change does showcase Frodo's concern about Sam's future we see near the end of *The Return of the King* book. In the scene after Sam talks about Rosie, Frodo's eyes start to fill with tears as if he is blaming himself for taking away that future for Sam. If Sam did not come on this journey with Frodo, he could be holding a beautiful woman in his arms instead of dying alongside someone so broken. Frodo tries to comfort him by embracing him and saying the famous line, "I'm glad to be with you, Samwise Gamgee...here at the end of all things" (3:38:37-3:39:12; figures 21 and 22).



Figures 21 and 22. "Sam and Frodo embrace on Mount Doom," *The Return of the King*, 2003. Even if Frodo cannot give Sam the life that he wanted, he still makes sure to give him as much comfort as he can while they still have time left.

To close off their relationship arc, the filmmakers chose to mirror a scene in *The Fellowship of the Rings* again, this time in Rivendell. When Frodo wakes up from being saved from Mount Doom, everyone from the Fellowship comes to visit him (3:40:30-3:42:35). While

Merry and Pippin jump on Frodo's bed to give him a hug and Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli go to his bedside, we see Sam stay in the doorway and exchange a smile with Frodo (figures 23 and 24).



Figures 23 and 24. "Frodo and Sam exchange smiles," *The Return of the King*, 2003.

In comparison to the first time Frodo wakes up in Rivendell, Sam is much more reserved. He does not feel the need to run up to him like he did the first time because he knows Frodo is truly safe now. While everyone excitedly goes up to Frodo since they have not seen him since he and Sam left at the river, Sam is the only person who understands even somewhat what Frodo has gone through visually represented by their similar scars (figures 23 and 24). The difference between Sam's reactions shows the growth in their relationship and reflects the hardships they have experienced together. However, the visual of Sam staying in the doorway foreshadows that the two will separate by the end of the film. There's a physical and metaphorical distance between them in this scene that reflects that Frodo will never be the same person he was before leaving the Shire and that their relationship will not be able to stay the same when they return home.

To portray the heartbreak Sam goes through after finding out he is going to lose Frodo possibility forever, the film has Sam find out Frodo's intentions when they have already reached the Grey Havens. Throughout the films they have focused on portraying Frodo and Sam's physical intimacy very similarly to the book, so they give us one more moment of affection

between the two before Frodo leaves. Frodo first hugs Merry and Pippin goodbye then circles back around to Sam to give him a more passionate hug (3:56:44-3:58:19; figures 25 and 26). As Frodo lets him go, he gives him one last kiss on the forehead before heading for the boat (figure 27).



Figures 25-27. “Frodo hugs and kisses Sam goodbye,” *The Return of the King*, 2003.

We can tell by Frodo’s facial expression alone that while he is sad to leave Sam, he seems more sad for Sam. Frodo has known for a while that he would be leaving but telling Sam in advance might have caused him to leave his family behind to be by Frodo’s side. Frodo’s departure is for the sake of his own internal peace but also for giving Sam the ability to live his life fully without worry. The book to film adaptation of the scene puts the perfect seal on their relationship as Frodo does one last thing to care for Sam.

The ability to bring the essence of such a subtle and complex relationship to screen was an incredible feat for a fantasy epic film trilogy. Their attention to detail while still needing to dramatize aspects of Sam and Frodo’s dynamic made it recognizable to queer people who are fans of the books and also made it impactful to a general audience. Anyone can see the love the

two hold for each other, and if we pay attention to the subtleties of their relationship we can see the queer subtext of the original books shine through in the films. The film trilogy's ability to capture the books' themes as well as its marketability to a wide audience cemented it into pop culture. Having such a highly popular and easily accessible cultural phenomenon contain beautiful queer subtext was highly impactful to queer people at the time and still is to this day.

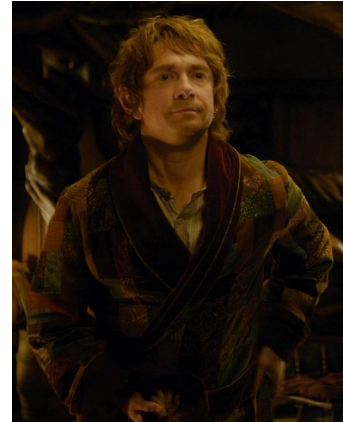
From Found Family to Romance: The Effects of Expansion in *The Hobbit*

Due to the worldwide success of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, expectations from fans and the studio encouraged *The Hobbit* movies to be made in a similar fashion. In Robert T. Tally's "Three Rings for the Elven-Kings: Trilogizing Tolkien in Print and Film," he states that while chronologically *The Hobbit* films operate "as a 'prequel' trilogy à la the *Star Wars* Episodes I-III," they had to be "built upon the latter's already well-known history and geography" (Tally 180). This made it difficult to make *The Hobbit* films their own story like the book is while living up to the expectations set by Jackson's first trilogy. *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy also drew strength from usual adaptation techniques such as "division, condensation, and carefully considered omissions" but due to *The Hobbit* book being a relatively short children's story, the film adaptation "required multiplication, extension, and ultimately some additional 'fan fiction' wholly unrelated to the narrative that unfolds in the novel itself to fill the hours" (Tally 175). Some of this expansion came in the form of additions like the White Council and their attack on Dol Guldur from the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* book, while some of it came from creating a completely original character with Tauriel, the captain of the Elven guard. In *The Lord of the Rings* adaptation, they were able to expand the roles of the female characters present in the original text like Arwen. Her increased presence in the films "had a dual purpose of creating an additional female hero and providing depth to Aragorn's love story" (Tally 184).

However, *The Hobbit* originally contains zero female characters. The creation of Tauriel did great work to attract a female audience but Tolkien scholar Janet Brennan Croft argues that “placing her in a love triangle with Legolas and Kili comes across as rather manipulative fan-service” (Croft 7). The dilution of her character for a romance storyline not present in the original text is also a great example of the heteronormative matrix gripping Hollywood. Despite this misstep with Tauriel’s character inviting heteronormativity into *The Hobbit* story, the filmmakers were still able to expand the queerness already present in the book through expanding the relationship between Bilbo and Thorin. The decision to spend more time between the two characters was likely a way to fill time and develop the main characters more than the book, but it pushed the found family trope from the book into romantic territory.

Before jumping into Bilbo and Thorin’s relationship, the filmmakers make sure to establish Bilbo as a “queer” character like he is in the book. Starting with *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, we have a scene that directly ties into *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* where Frodo is talking to Bilbo on the day of his 111th birthday party. Frodo tells Bilbo, “You know, some people are beginning to wonder about you, Uncle. They think you’re becoming odd...unsociable...” which is a callback to the end of *The Hobbit* book where Bilbo is characterized as queer and unrespected by his neighbors (11:38-11:49). The lack of the word queer in Frodo’s dialogue makes sense because the filmmakers would not put a slur in a high budget film released in the year 2012 even if that is what Tolkien wrote. This was the right call especially since the word queer was not as widely used and accepted as it is now but fans of the book would notice this nod to the original book. It also still gives the audience the sense that Bilbo is an outsider because of how he has changed. They follow closely to Bilbo’s characterization from the book one scene later when he describes himself as “always on time”

and “entirely respectable” before his journey with the dwarves (12:31-12:47). This fact is demonstrated visually in Bilbo’s costuming and home design. The first outfits Bilbo wears are a clean flowery yellow vest with a delicate blue scarf and a beautifully detailed patchwork dressing gown full of different fabrics (14:59; figure 28 and 17:19; figure 29).



Figures 28 and 29. “Bilbo’s first outfits,” *An Unexpected Journey*, 2012.

We also see his home is full of expensive trinkets and family heirlooms with a pantry that is fully stocked despite him being the only person that lives in Bag End (16:45; figure 30 and 19:08; figure 31).



Figures 30 and 31. “Bilbo’s overstocked pantries,” *An Unexpected Journey*, 2012.

These details indicate to the audience that Bilbo is well off and quite comfortable. But the fact that he does live alone and is not shown interacting with any of his neighbors shows that there is something off about him compared to how hobbits usually behave.

The filmmakers start Thorin and Bilbo off on a much rockier state than the book which creates more room for their relationship to develop throughout three films whereas the changes in their relationship in the book were much more subtle. Thorin, who arrives late to the dinner party, seems skeptical of bringing a hobbit with them on this dangerous adventure. He is very cold towards Bilbo when they first meet and immediately asks him “Axe or sword? What’s your weapon of choice?” while circling around him as if to assess his physical abilities (25:39-26:04). Thorin looks down at him and then looks back at the other dwarves to say “He looks more like a grocer than a burglar.” This line, originally said by Gloin in the book (Tolkien 18), was given to Thorin to further emphasize that he does not approve of Bilbo at the beginning of the journey.

After hearing about the details of the quest and the dangers attached to it, Bilbo decides that he will not go with them as his Tookish side is wearing off for the evening. When he wakes up in the morning, he goes around to see if everyone has left (38:50-40:10). The only sound the audience can hear is his footsteps creating a sense of emptiness in the house that did not exist before the dwarves came the night before. He finally breaks the silence calling out “Hello?” wondering if they’ve really gone. He frantically checks every room to make sure everything is in place and takes it as a victory that they are actually gone. But as he stares down the empty hallway of his house towards the door, wistful music starts to play in the background. The transition of no sound to this longing music tells the audience that even with the little time Bilbo had with the dwarves, they impacted him in a way that cannot be undone. Bilbo does not know what to do with himself now and looks down at the contract laying on the table. The scene then cuts to him frantically running out his door with nothing but a coat and a small bag on his back. This scene varies slightly from the book because Bilbo chose to go on the adventure without the influences of anyone else. In the book, Gandalf comes to remind him in the morning that he is

running late and if he does not leave soon the dwarves will leave him. By omitting Gandalf's visit, they were able to create a feeling of emptiness inside of Bilbo that could not be cured unless he decided to go join them on his own. This shift makes Bilbo's decision to go with the dwarves more about his own autonomy and personal drive while demonstrating to the audience how Bilbo yearns for more than the Shire offers him. This culminates in developing self-confidence and relationships with the dwarves just like in the book.

An important part to Bilbo's journey in the book is him proving his worth to the Company and also to himself, and the films change how events played out ever so slightly to capture the essence of that journey and to also move relationships along. When the Company is captured by the three trolls while trying to save Bilbo from an attempted burglary gone wrong, Bilbo had the idea to stall for time. He tells the trolls secrets to cooking dwarves and tells them that the dwarves are all infected which gives Gandalf enough time to turn them into stone with sunlight (1:05:08-1:07:37). Bilbo's stalling tactic was added to the film to prove earlier on in the journey that his presence is of worth to the Company and that he can come up with solutions to get them out of difficult situations. After this encounter with the trolls, Thorin is still upset at Bilbo for getting them in danger in the first place which now feels a little unwarranted from the audience's perspective because we know that Bilbo is witty and able.

The themes of self-confidence, home, and found family in the book are evident in the changes made when the Company leaves Rivendell to travel through the Misty Mountains. On their path, they run into stone giants battling each other. When they think they are finally safe, they find Bilbo hanging off a wet ledge unable to get back up himself. Thorin jumps down to pull him up without hesitation and almost falls himself trying to save him. After they've both been pulled up to safety Balin says "I thought we'd lost our burglar" to which Thorin replies

“He’s been lost ever since he left home. He should never have come. He has no place amongst us” (1:47:20-1:48:08). While Thorin says these words with anger in his voice, the camera cuts to Bilbo looking shocked that he almost lost his life but also upset he almost got Thorin killed too (figures 32 and 33).



Figures 32 and 33. “Bilbo after a near death experience,” *An Unexpected Journey*, 2012.

This scene does not appear in the book but its addition to the film creates even more tension between our two main characters. Bilbo’s lack of experience blinds him from the real dangers of this quest which bothers Thorin because ever since Smaug took Erebor away from him and his kin he has known nothing but struggle and pain. In Thorin’s eyes he cannot afford to have somebody like Bilbo on board because he is a liability and a danger to the success of this quest. When Thorin finally snaps at Bilbo after nothing but degrading comments towards him, the audience can see in Bilbo’s face that Thorin’s words reassure the parts of Bilbo’s mind and heart that tell him he is in way over his head being a part of this Company. A big part of the book that cannot be put in the films is Bilbo’s constant internal monologue surrounding his desire to come home. This scene nods at this and turns it into an insecurity.

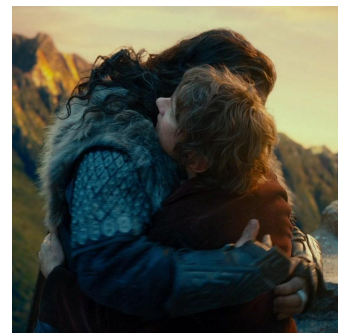
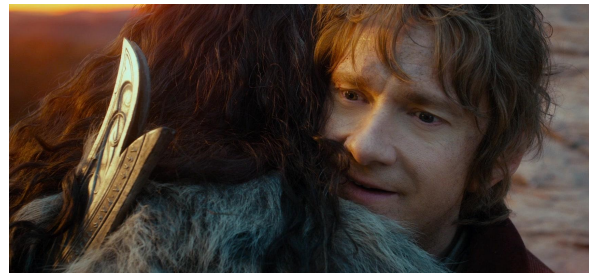
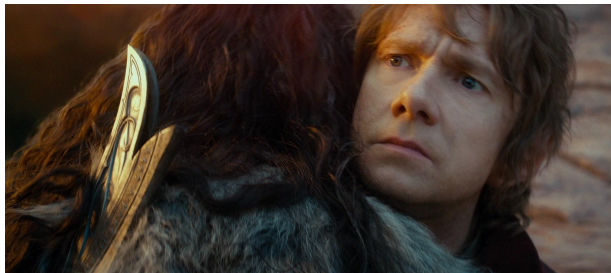
Bilbo’s longing for home and fear of not belonging reaches a climax when he attempts to leave the sleeping dwarves in the mountain cave and runs into Bofur on watch. Bofur asks Bilbo where he’s going and tells him, “You can’t turn back now, eh? You’re part of the Company.

You're one of us" (1:49:20-1:51:20). All Bilbo has wanted so far in the journey is to feel like he belongs amongst the dwarves and contributes to the Company. Bofur gives him that reassurance telling him he is a part of their family but Thorin's words have already convinced him that he is better at home in the Shire. He snaps back at Bofur, "I'm not though, am I? Thorin said I should never have come and he was right. I'm not a Took, I'm a Baggins. I don't know what I was thinking. I should never have run out my door." This scene, also not present in the book, expresses Bilbo's lack of self-confidence and that Thorin's attitude towards him impacts him tremendously. Bilbo has struggled his whole life with his "queer" Tookish side and when he is finally given a place to explore that, it terrifies him. And when the leader of the group he is trying to identify with doesn't accept him as one of them, it damages whatever progress he has made in accepting that he does not belong in the Shire. Bilbo fully believes that he is better off going back to his comfortable traditional life being a Baggins even though that life does not make him happy. Bofur tries to comfort Bilbo saying "You're homesick. I understand." but Bilbo says, "No, you don't. You don't understand. None of you do. You're dwarves. You're used to this life. To living on the road, never settling in one place, not belonging anywhere!" He immediately regrets saying this but the audience can see the hurt in Bofur's eyes. The dwarves have lived an unconventional and "queer" life, not having a place to call home but they have made do with finding home in who they have around them. Bilbo's insecurity in his own self and sense of belonging causes him to irrationally lash out at the very people who bring him a family and a home. During this scene, the camera cuts to Thorin multiple times overhearing this exchange and before the audience can get any resolution to this confrontation, the gate to the goblin tunnels opens up capturing the entire Company.

Thorin and Bilbo finally reach a level of understanding with each other as Bilbo realizes that he is dedicated to the Company and their quest to take back their home. When Bilbo finally has a chance to reunite with the Company outside of the goblin tunnels, he overhears Thorin tell Gandalf where he thinks Bilbo has gone: “Master Baggins saw his chance and he took it. He has thought of nothing but his soft bed and his warm hearth since he first stepped out of his door. We will not be seeing our hobbit again. He is long gone” (2:20:30-2:22:40). Before anyone can respond to Thorin, Bilbo reappears in front of the Company where he is warmly welcomed back by some of the dwarves. Thorin, still not convinced Bilbo will stay, asks him why he came back. Bilbo responds, “Look, I know you doubt me. I know you always have. And you’re right, I often think of Bag End. I miss my books. And my armchair and my garden. See, that’s where I belong. That’s home. And that’s why I came back, because you don’t have one. A home. It was taken from you. But I will help you take it back if I can.” The dialogue of this scene is vastly changed from the book because it serves as the end of a chapter in Bilbo’s character arc and Thorin and Bilbo’s relationship arc. In the conversation Bilbo had with Bofur in the cave he prioritizes his own home and safety over others, but now Bilbo uses how much he loves his home to propel him forward with his journey with the dwarves. Thorin overheard what Bilbo said in the cave, so Bilbo saying that he is fully committed to helping them take back Erebor shows Thorin that Bilbo really does care about this quest and will risk his comfort and safety if it means the dwarves will feel at home again. While Bilbo’s situation is different, deep down he knows what it feels like to not belong somewhere and does not want to see this new family he has come to care about continue to suffer. The parallels between the conversation in the cave and this conversation outside the tunnels signify the end of Bilbo’s doubt in his purpose on this journey and the start of Thorin being more receptive to Bilbo.

Now that the films have established the care and respect Bilbo and the Company have for each other, they focus on the slowly mending relationship between Bilbo and Thorin which results in romantic undertones from a queer perspective. When the Company encounters an orc pack shortly after escaping the goblin tunnels, Thorin recognizes Azog, the orc who killed his grandfather, and tries to kill him on his own (2:28:58-2:32:06). Thorin's judgment is so clouded by the rage he feels finding out Azog is not dead that Azog almost kills him in seconds. While the rest of the dwarves struggle to stay up in the tree they are hiding in, Bilbo takes it upon himself to walk out there and save Thorin despite not having the skills or strength to take on orcs of that caliber. He tackles the orc sent to behead Thorin causing the other dwarves to rally behind him and successfully ward off the rest of the orc pack until the eagles arrive. This scene creates more drama and gives our main character a moment to be more heroic than he has been the whole movie while also solidifying Bilbo's usefulness to the Company and his dedication to Thorin. This choice towards working on the relationship between these two characters gave queer people a reason for seeing them as something more. In many stories, it's often a romantic deed to save someone's life especially when there is not a solid friendship foundation established between the two characters. If we were to picture this scene between Bilbo and Thorin happening between a man and a woman respectively, people would have no problem labeling it as a romantic gesture. Since queer people are more inclined to "pursue foregrounding queerness strategies... because of [their] daily experience of *deviating* from the default reader" (Kubowitz 213), they are more accustomed to picking out romantic entanglement between same sex characters. In this case, this scene is an easy demonstration of the romantic potential between our two main characters.

Before the end of the first film, Thorin is able to return the romantic gesture which solidifies the pair's good standing with each other before the events of the quest become more challenging. When Thorin, previously unconscious due to his life threatening injuries, wakes up he immediately worries about Bilbo's safety. He simply asks Gandalf, "The Halfling?" to which Gandalf replies, "It's alright. Bilbo is here. He's quite safe" (2:35:47-2:36:44). Bilbo sighs in relief seeing Thorin is alive. Noticing Bilbo now, Thorin approaches Bilbo aggressively, "You! What were you doing? You nearly got yourself killed! Did I not say that you would be a burden? That you would not survive in the wild? That you had no place amongst us?" which causes Bilbo to look heartbroken. Before he can fully absorb what Thorin has said to him, Thorin's demeanor quickly changes and he says, "I have never been so wrong in all my life." He then embraces Bilbo in an emotional hug with a smile on his face which surprises but pleases Bilbo (figures 34-37).

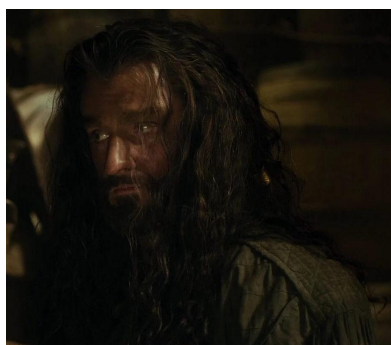


Figures 34-37. "Thorin embraces Bilbo," *An Unexpected Journey*, 2012.

This scene demonstrates the two's newfound companionship because Thorin, a stubborn hotheaded dwarf, finally admits his wrongs to Bilbo and displays physical affection towards him,

which is the only time physical affection is displayed between any characters in the entire film. Thorin shows Bilbo through words and action that he is glad he is alive and with them on this quest. While he was angry with Bilbo for putting his life on the line for him, he returns to a calm demeanor to show he has no ill feelings towards the hobbit anymore.

We can see how the focus of love and respect in the character dynamics with Bilbo has shifted from the other dwarves to Thorin when *The Desolation of Smaug* emphasizes showing the trust Thorin has developed in Bilbo. When Bilbo is trying to sneak the dwarves out of the Mirkwood dungeons, he takes them down to the cellars which is met with severe backlash from the dwarves because they do not trust his plan. Usually the other dwarves would have trusted him by now based on how the filmmakers have handled their dynamics so far in the films, but we do not see that here. Bilbo tries to convince them that his plan will work but no one listens to him. He looks up at Thorin hoping that he will believe him at least, to which Thorin returns the glance and firmly whispers, “Do as he says” (45:56-46:38; figures 38 and 39).



Figures 38 and 39. “Bilbo looks to Thorin for help,” *The Desolation of Smaug*, 2013.

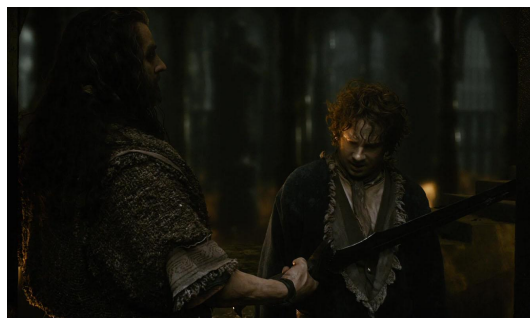
This is a big moment of trust in Bilbo and Thorin’s relationship because Thorin lets Bilbo take the lead on a plan. Thorin has been Bilbo’s biggest skeptic since the beginning of the journey so it is significant that he trusts him completely to get everyone out of a presumably well guarded Elven kingdom. Thorin even praises him once they have successfully escaped the elves with a voice not full of surprise but genuine compliment (47:55-48:00). For a dwarf that has no reason

to trust anyone outside of his own kin considering the amount of times other people have let him down, it's remarkable that he has let Bilbo in so much.

This is severely contrasted with Thorin's attitude as soon as the Company has entered Erebor because he begins to feel the effects of dragon-sickness. The dwarves, who are waiting outside the hallway at the door while Bilbo goes to find the Arkenstone, witness flames and dragon sounds coming out of the mountain. They ask if they should go down to help Bilbo and Thorin says angrily, "I will not risk the quest for the life of one burglar" (1:59:49-2:00:29). Thorin spits out the word burglar like he knows that he cares for Bilbo and his safety but the dragon-sickness is overwhelming him to the point that it overshadows his compassion with greed. The next scene with Smaug and Bilbo directly parallels Thorin's descent into dragon-sickness while showing that as Thorin is losing his grip on his relationships with Bilbo and others, Bilbo's care for Thorin is growing. Smaug guesses that it was Thorin's idea to send Bilbo down into the halls to steal the Arkenstone. Bilbo tries to dismiss this but Smaug replies, "Don't bother denying it. I guessed his foul purpose some time ago... You are being used, thief in the shadows. You were only ever a means to an end. The coward Oakenshield has weighed the value of your life and found it worth nothing" (2:00:32-2:02:12). In the book, Smaug does try to get in Bilbo's head saying the dwarves do not care about him but he never mentions Thorin specifically. This slight change keeps Thorin and Bilbo's relationship the center of the story but it also implies that Thorin means more to Bilbo than the rest of the dwarves do; there is something about Thorin that would make his betrayal hurt Bilbo more than the betrayal of the Company as a whole. Bilbo refuses to believe what Smaug is saying is true and continues to try and find the Arkenstone. As he finally reaches it Smaug says, "I am almost tempted to let you take it. If only to see Oakenshild suffer. Watch it destroy him. Watch it corrupt his heart and drive him mad"

(2:03:06-2:03:30). This is the first time Bilbo learns specifically about the terrible effects the Arkenstone can have on Thorin and the look on his face as Smaug says this tells the audience that he does not want this to happen to Thorin.

As Bilbo's care for Thorin continues to grow, we see Thorin's dragon-sickness completely cloud his feelings towards Bilbo. While the altercation between Bilbo and Smaug reaches its climax, Thorin sees the treasure hoard for the first time since he pulled his own grandfather out of it when he was also experiencing severe dragon-sickness. Thorin looks around in awe, almost seduced by the gold until Bilbo runs up to him in a hurry. Thorin immediately asks Bilbo if he found the Arkenstone and when Bilbo refuses to answer the question, favoring getting away from the dragon before having a conversation with Thorin, he puts his sword up against Bilbo's chest (2:08:10-2:09:00; figures 40 and 41).



Figures 40 and 41. "Thorin holds his sword to Bilbo's chest," *The Desolation of Smaug*, 2013. Bilbo does not know how to react to what has come over Thorin because he does not want to believe it, but he also does not want to hand the Arkenstone over to him because of what Smaug told him. Thorin's complete disregard for Bilbo's safety when it would be very easy for them to leave this immediate danger reveals that he is too far gone now. The Thorin that learned to like and respect Bilbo is nowhere to be found.

After the death of Smaug, Thorin distrust shifts from Bilbo to his fellow dwarves resulting in sweet moments between the two that isolate them from the rest of the Company.

During a moment of calmness in *The Battle of the Five Armies*, Bilbo pulls out an acorn he picked up in Beorn's garden. Thorin, on edge because he thinks the Arkenstone has not been found yet, approaches Bilbo aggressively asking him what he's holding in his hand. Bilbo shows him the acorn and tells Thorin he plans to plant it in Bag End when he gets home: "One day, it'll grow [chuckles]. And every time I look at it, I'll remember. Remember everything that happened. The good, the bad, and how lucky I am that I made it home" (37:08-38:10). The two share smiles and chuckles with each other (figures 42 and 43).

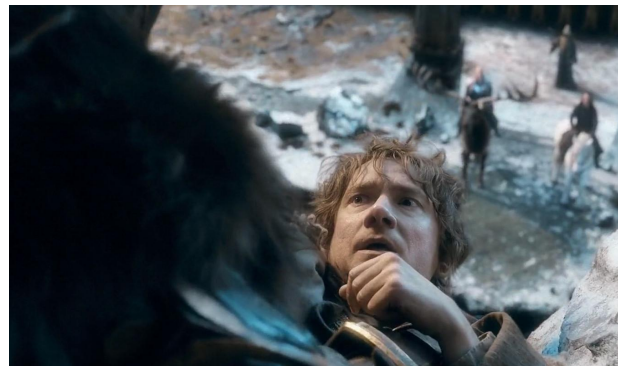


Figures 42 and 43. "Thorin and Bilbo exchange smiles," *The Battle of the Five Armies*, 2014.

This is the first time we have seen Thorin smile since they first got into Erebor. Just a small heartfelt gesture by Bilbo was enough to break him out of the dragon-sickness even if it was just for a moment. Thorin returns the gesture by later gifting Bilbo the famous mithril shirt. Bilbo puts it on thinking he looks ridiculous, but Thorin tells him "It is a gift. A token of our friendship" (49:44-51:29). In the book, the purpose of the gift was mostly to give Bilbo his first payment, but here in the film Thorin puts more emotional weight into the gift. Thorin is at the height of his dragon-sickness showing disdain and anger towards others but he gives Bilbo the most expensive gift he possibly could. If the gift's worth in any way reflects the importance of their relationship, Bilbo means a great deal to Thorin. He continues to say that "true friends are hard to come by" and tells Bilbo that he thinks someone has betrayed him and taken the

Arkenstone for themselves. Thorin is convinced that one of his own kin has taken the stone without having any proof of it, but he confides in Bilbo because he has no doubt that Bilbo was not involved in the theft despite him being hired to do just that. Even though Thorin is suffering severely from dragon-sickness, his relationship with Bilbo means so much to him that it did not even cross his mind that Bilbo would be the one to withhold the Arkenstone from him. This distrust that Thorin has in his own kin being added to the film when it is not present in the book perfectly showcases the intense bond Thorin has formed with Bilbo. He has isolated himself so far from his family in favor of a hobbit he could not stand to be around only a few months prior.

Due to the much more intense dynamic between the film versions of Bilbo and Thorin compared to the book, Bilbo's "betrayal" reads as much more emotional, almost like a break-up scene. Not too much later in the film, Bilbo tells Thorin that he gave the Arkenstone to Thranduil and Bard as a way to protect them and prevent the war from happening. Bilbo says, "I was going to give it to you. Many times I wanted to, but...you are changed, Thorin. The dwarf I met in Bag End would never have gone back on his word. Would never have doubted the loyalty of his kin!" (1:04:32-1:06:15). Thorin gets angry and teary eyed and attempts to throw Bilbo from the rampart (figures 44 and 45).



Figures 44 and 45. "An upset Thorin tries to kill Bilbo," *The Battle of the Five Armies*, 2014.

Bilbo's betrayal was an act of selflessness and care for Thorin, but because Thorin trusted Bilbo so much he cannot see it that way. He sees that Bilbo lied to him multiple times and allowed him to distrust his own kin and cannot forgive that. He is so driven by sadness, anger, and his dragon-sickness that trying to kill Bilbo is the only logical action forward for him. He let someone into his family and his heart, and his blindness to Bilbo's intentions causes him to take this incredibly hard.

Despite the terrible place their relationship was left in, Thorin tries to repair it at the end of his life. In "The Gathering Storm" section of *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* extended edition appendices, Boyen states that they moved Thorin's death from Dale to a more personal place on the battlefield so that it was just the two characters (17:32-17:44). The shift of location so they could have a private last moment together mimics the isolated relationship they had with each other before Bilbo's betrayal. When Bilbo finds Thorin dying, he frantically tries to stop his bleeding (figure 46).



Figure 46. "Bilbo tries to tend to Thorin's wound," *The Battle of the Five Armies*, 2014.

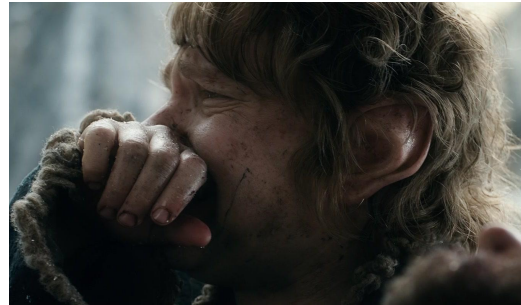
Thorin, completely calm, says to Bilbo, "I'm glad that you're here. I wish to part from you in friendship" (1:55:21-1:57:33). Bilbo continually shushes him telling him, "You are not going anywhere, Thorin. You're going to live." Bilbo does not want to believe that he is going to lose Thorin and tries to stop him from giving his final words, but Thorin continues: "I would take

back my words and my deeds at the gate. You did what only a true friend would do. Forgive me. I was too blind to see it. [voice breaking] I am so sorry that I have led you into such peril.” In the same appendices mentioned above, Richard Armitage, who plays Thorin, mentions that these are the most difficult words to say to Bilbo and that “it took me right back to the very first scene I shot with him in Bag End and the disdain with which Thorin held the hobbit” (19:24-19:37). To see how far the characters have come in terms of respecting, trusting, and caring for each other makes these words all that more important. Thorin cannot die without knowing that Bilbo sees him for how he was at their best and not how he acted at their worst. Bilbo, not wanting Thorin to think that he has caused him any harm, grabs Thorin’s hand and replies, “No, I’m—I’m glad to have shared in your perils, Thorin. Each and every one of them. It is far more than any Baggins deserves” which is almost the exact quote from the book. While Thorin smiles at Bilbo, Bilbo remains distraught but determined to not say goodbye to him yet (figures 47 and 48).



Figures 47 and 48. “Thorin and Bilbo share one last look,” *The Battle of the Five Armies*, 2014. Thorin says his last words to Bilbo that are almost identical to the book and passes away. Bilbo cries out saying things like “don’t you dare” and “hold on please” desperately hoping that Thorin has not left him. He even stutters saying “the eagles—eagles—the eagles are here” which is a direct callback to not only the eagles saving the Company at the end of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* but also the eagles saving Frodo and Sam from the cracks of Mount Doom in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. If we are familiar with the events of *The Lord of the Rings*

trilogy, this line evokes a different type of heartbreak because we know that Thorin cannot be saved like Frodo and Sam were. After realizing that Thorin is gone and he cannot save him, Bilbo holds his body and audibly sobs (figures 49 and 50).



Figures 49 and 50. “Bilbo cries over Thorin’s lifeless body,” *The Battle of the Five Armies*, 2014.

Now that Bilbo has lost the single most important person to him, he isolates himself instead of facing the pain. After the battle is over, Balin escorts Bilbo out of Erebor but tries to invite him to stay a little longer: “There is to be a great feast tonight. Songs will be sung. Tales will be told. And Thorin Oakenshield will pass into legend” (2:03:10-2:03:39). Bilbo appreciates the offer but tells Balin, “I know that’s how you must honor him. But to me he was never that. He was...[voice breaking] to me... he was...” and never finishes his thought. He just chokes up and tries to smile the pain away. He does not have the ability to put into words what Thorin meant to him and it pains him to even think about it. This small section of dialogue reminds me of a quote from “The Quest of Erebor” section of Tolkien’s *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* where Gandalf guesses that the reason Bilbo never married after returning home was because “he wanted to remain ‘unattached’ for some reason deep down which he did not understand himself – or would not acknowledge, for it alarmed him” (Tolkien 351). Thorin was the first person in Bilbo’s life that learned to love and appreciate him for what he could do and for who he was. He finally had someone in his life that cared for him the way he cared for them so he does not know how to process losing Thorin. And he never processes it. When Bilbo

finally returns home in the film, the auctioneer selling his belongings asks for proof that he is in fact Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo hands him the contract he signed at the beginning of his journey and the auctioneer asks him, “Who is this person you pledged your service to? Thorin Oakenshield?” (2:08:13-2:09:23). The mention of Thorin’s name gets Bilbo to stop and he replies, stuttering “He— he was my friend.” As the audience we know that not too long ago Bilbo was not able to say what Thorin was to him so it seems a bit odd to give a definitive answer now. But this line functions as a way of showing how disconnected Bilbo is from his community and his home in the Shire now; he says friend because the other hobbits will never understand what he and Thorin went through together and what he meant to him. Bilbo’s home lies with Thorin and the dwarves back in Erebor, not in Bag End. He steps into his now emptied house which reflects his mental state just as it did at the beginning of *An Unexpected Journey* (figures 51 and 52).



Figures 51 and 52. “Bilbo returns to his empty home,” *The Battle of the Five Armies*, 2014.

Back at the beginning Bilbo’s house was adorned with all of the material objects he adored, but now his house is stripped of them just as his old self was through the course of the quest of Erebor. Bilbo is not the same hobbit he once was, finding his old life to be hollow and almost meaningless now. He learned what it meant to live and love while away from the Shire, and now that he is home without the people he cares about, Bag End will never truly feel like home again.

This portrayal of Bilbo along with his expanded relationship with Thorin became a safe haven in the fantasy genre for queer people. Online communities formed around the two characters where people shared multitudes of fanart and fanfictions that described what their

lives would be like if Thorin hadn't died. Queer people have been carving out space in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* communities well before this trilogy hit the big screen, but the filmmakers' direction with Bilbo and Thorin brought in new queer fans like me into the world of Middle-earth. This interpretation of the source material had the ability to foster community for a group of marginalized people who rarely get to see themselves in media, let alone big budget fantasy films.

IMPORTANCE OF MIDDLE-EARTH TO QUEER PEOPLE

The bigger questions to answer now are what does Middle-earth do for queer people and why do queer readings of Tolkien matter? At the start of this project I wanted to explore why LGBTQ+ people latch on to queer readings of media that don't contain explicit representation, and the answer lies within how we are treated in society. Often our existence is politicized and whittled down to stereotypes, and this seeps into how we are treated in mainstream media. GLAAD, an American organization dedicated to promoting acceptance and equality for LGBTQ+ people through media, published a study that found "of the 77 films released theatrically by the seven major studios in 2021, 16 (20.8 percent) contained LGBTQ characters" which was a decrease of 1.9 percent from 2020. These are not incredibly high numbers and if we look deeper at these inclusive films, "the majority of LGBTQ characters fell under five minutes of total screen time at 17 of the 28 (60%), with six of those being under one minute (21% of total LGBTQ characters)" (GLAAD). The majority of queer characters we are seeing in mainstream films have so little screen time, often leaving queer people disappointed. We deserve to have complex queer characters that are integral to the stories being told and we deserve to see queer characters outside of a stereotypical or political context. This is what leads to our attachment to queer subtext. Sometimes queer subtext in a piece of media matters more to LGBTQ+ individuals than explicit representation because we can see characters as queer and still have them be main characters. There is no importance placed on sexuality or gender labels and characters' relationships and identities are allowed to exist without being construed by society's understanding of queer people. The stories explore the ways that humans connect with themselves and with each other; they don't need to fit a formula for queer representation, they just need to be real and honest. And that is exactly what queer readings of *The Hobbit* and *The*

Lord of the Rings do. Queer readings of Middle-earth allow for LGBTQ+ people to find joy and to find community while also creating a roadmap for what queer representation can look like in media moving forward.

Middle-earth as a Safe Space Without Queer Trauma

The fantasy genre has been known to be the home for “weird” or ostracized people and queer people are no exception to that. The real life queer experience is incredibly isolating because society is not built with LGBTQ+ people in mind. We experience homophobia and transphobia in a plethora of ways whether it be through legislation, hate speech, or microaggressions, and this constant trauma weighs on us. Fantasy gives us an escape from all of that. One of the most distinguishing aspects of the genre is its commitment to create worlds different than the one we experience. It also has the ability to write worlds that are in opposition to the world in which it is created. Daniel Baker, author of “Why We Need Dragons: The Progressive Potential of Fantasy,” states that “The secondary worlds of fantasy...portray radical extensions, extrapolations, dislocations and breaks from the real, implying dissatisfaction with realistic representations of daily life” (Baker 450). Often LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream media focuses on queer trauma rather than queer joy, but the fantasy genre offers a unique opportunity to create worlds free of homophobia and transphobia. That’s why the genre is a safe space for many queer people like myself. In addition, part of the queer experience doesn’t have to do explicitly with sexuality or gender identity. It has to do with the fact that we have to live a life completely different from the ones assigned to us by society in order to be our authentic selves, so the opportunities that fantasy provides to explore non-traditional lives is very attractive to us. We can see ourselves in these texts without the traumas of our queerness following us there.

While the fantasy genre in general is a logical place for queer people to exist in, when we view the books and films of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* through a queer lens, we see queer themes arise that naturally build a home for us in Middle-earth. On an individual level, Tolkien's various societal structures do not do much to progress past that of traditional society. Due to fighting in WWI and living through WWII, "Tolkien realized a vision of a world beyond (or behind) the mechanized, war-torn reality he knew" (Baker 439). We see this most in the Shire, where hobbits cared about the land around them and never meddled with people outside of their own. The Shire is also the epitome of a heteronormative society: everyone is expected to marry, have children, and to never do anything unexpected. However, if we foreground queerness in our understanding of Middle-earth like we have, the takeaway from the Shire is not that their societal structure is good but it is quite limiting. If we look at Bilbo's character, he actively goes against the Shire's expectations of him and does not find a more fulfilling life for himself until he leaves. The same case can be made for Frodo as well. He would have never experienced his relationship with Sam the way he did if they had never left. From a queer perspective, the traditional structure of the Shire actually confirms to us that living outside of those constraints is better than living in them. This is exactly what the genre is capable of doing: "fantasy can investigate limits...and undermine ideological structures" (Baker 450).

Despite some of the traditional structures built into Middle-earth, Tolkien's emphasis on love and hope in a world full of evil and despair makes these stories uplifting to the heart, especially for queer people. In the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, any existence of societal structures and power dynamics within Middle-earth breaks down in the shared experience of Sauron's evil. Because everyone in Middle-earth experiences the evil of Sauron and his forces the same way, cooperation and understanding among all different types of people is the only way

to defeat him. The uniformity of oppression nurtures a common bond among all people of Middle-earth making it easy to love and care for one another. It is beautiful that hope, love, and community save Middle-earth from evil at the end of the story rather than power and strength. In a place full of evil, Tolkien still carves time out of his stories to enjoy the beauty of nature, to experience comfort and joy between characters, and to foster community across Middle-earth. It's realistic but hopeful. These themes along with the queer subtext we've explored in the books and films make Middle-earth a safe place for queer people to feel at home. We see ourselves in a narrative engrossed in love and hope where our sexuality does not matter and our identity is not a political statement. We are just people finding joy in the human connection central to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Creation of Queer Community in Tolkien Fandom Spaces

Along with that joy we find in Middle-earth, queer people also find community within one another inside Tolkien fandom spaces. In general, the isolation LGBTQ+ people can feel due to many societal factors pushes us to find each other and rely on forming a community with others that understand what it is like to be queer. According to the authors of "Tumblr as a Space of Learning, Connecting, and Identity Formation for LGBTIQ+Young People," the internet has been "a valuable resource for LGBTIQ+ people to find connections, friendship, and a sense of belonging in heteronormative and sometimes hostile worlds" (Robards et al. 282). It has also been great for creating queer friendly spaces to talk about LGBTQ+ people's favorite media too. Fantasy and specifically mainstream fantasy have incredibly strong straight cisgender male fanbases that often create an unwelcoming environment for marginalized communities. However, LGBTQ+ people are able to forge their own subsections in these fanbases due to our shared experiences and our queer readings of the media. It can be lonely in these spaces if we do not

find each other and it's lonely not having well written stories about us, so that is why stories like *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* become so important to us even if they aren't explicitly "ours".

One of the ways that online queer communities around Tolkien's works manifested was through fanfiction. According to Tolkien scholar Dawn M. Walls Thumma, fanfiction can be described as "a work of fiction that employs details from and responds to an existing, published text" (Walls-Thumma 2). In the case of Tolkien fanfiction, sometimes referred to as Tolkienfic, many genres were common and popular from the beginning of the fandom including "slash stories [that] feature a same-sex relationship" (Walls-Thumma 3). While there was a queer following for Tolkien's works before Peter Jackson's films came out, "the film trilogies resulted in the injection of new fans at key points in the fandom's history, when technological changes opened unplowed soil ready to be planted with ideas and values brought by new fans" (Walls-Thumma 13). Figure 53, based on a survey conducted by Walls-Thumma, "shows when authors reported on the survey that they began writing Tolkienfic with clear spikes in fandom activity around film releases" (Walls-Thumma 13).

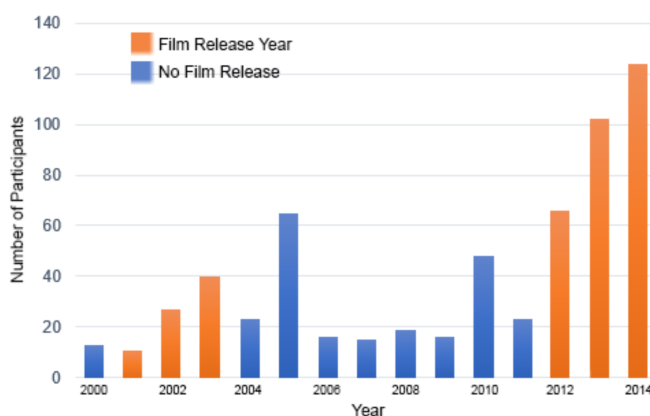


Figure 53. Initiation into writing Tolkien fanfiction by year from Walls-Thumma.

The injection of new queer fans into the Tolkien fandom can be seen best if we look at the amount of fanfiction written about the two main characters in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo and Thorin. As of March 2023, there are over 11,000 fanfictions published under the Bilbo Baggins/Thorin Oakenshield tag on Archive of Our Own, a nonprofit repository site for fanfiction published by users. All but one of these fanfictions were published to the site after the release of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Before the films came out, there was hardly any queer following for Thorin and Bilbo as a pair and there was not much content for an online community to center around. When viewers saw the expanded relationship between Bilbo and Thorin in the films, the queer fanbase exploded. It brought in people who had no exposure to Middle-earth before and made older fans think of the dynamic between the two in a new way. Online communities were much more expansive at this time compared to when *The Lord of the Rings* films came out, so it was very easy for people of all ages to engage with the queer content being discussed and produced due to the two characters. Now as I'm older and have grown with these stories, I still engage in online queer fandom spaces and fanfiction for Tolkien's works. As a person well versed in fandom culture, I have never felt more at home than I have with other queer Tolkien fans. We find home in Middle-earth and we find home in each other.

The queer community that surrounds Tolkien's works and Peter Jackson's films does not go unnoticed. In the same DVD commentary for *The Fellowship of the Ring* extended edition discussed earlier, Sean Astin talks about the Rivendell hand holding scene between Sam and Frodo and the impact it had on fans: "I got a fan letter the other day... and it said how much it meant to her that Sam holds Frodo's hand at that moment because it was one of the most important moments to her in the book" (1:27:06-1:27:19). While there is no confirmation that this fan is queer, it echoes a sentiment that a lot of LGBTQ+ fans have. A unique dynamic gets

created when actors and other people involved in the making of a piece of media engage with queer fans and validate their feelings despite explicit queer representation not being present. Sean Astin and Elijah Wood are not strangers to the queer fanbase around Sam and Frodo's relationship and embrace it fully. When I went to the Fan Expo held in Denver the summer of 2022, I had the pleasure of meeting Sean Astin and telling him how much his support of queer interpretations of Sam's character means to LGBTQ+ people like myself. He blew me a kiss of gratitude and reassured me that queer interpretations of Sam mean a lot to a lot of different people. I also got the opportunity to tell him that I was writing this thesis on queer interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, to which he responded with great enthusiasm. These kinds of interactions are so meaningful to queer people because it invites us into these spaces and validates what the stories mean to us. When we are integrated into fandom spaces and taken seriously, it has a positive impact on the queer subsection of the fandom and the fandom as a whole. We may experience the stories in different ways but we all share the same love for Middle-earth and that is such an incredible dynamic to have in a community.

Normalizing Queerness in Mainstream Media

Outside of fostering joy and community for LGBTQ+ people, queer interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* offer a unique way to include queer representation in mainstream media. Often in mainstream media, queer characters are either included to prove "diversity" or the queer aspect of their identity is only in conjunction with how society treats queer people. Michael Green, author of "Screenwriting Representation: Teaching Approaches to Writing Queer Characters," states that in films that don't rely on queer themes, "Hollywood mostly persists in its traditional representation of [queer people], who are vilified, stereotyped, marginalized, or absent altogether" (Green 32). When we do get the occasional queer-themed

film, sexuality is almost always the subject of the movie and is depicted as a social problem (Green 33). While media that accurately depicts what it is like to be a queer person in today's society is important, their "storylines are centered solely on a character's struggles, rather than presenting a queer character as a well-rounded depiction," according to the authors of "'It's just absolutely everywhere': understanding LGBTQ experiences of queerbaiting" (Woods and Hardman 588). This characterization of queer people reduces us down to our societal traumas and uses us as a way to inform or teach others about our experiences. For example, one of the few mainstream films we have gotten in the past five years that centers a queer character is *Love, Simon* in 2018. The main character Simon is trying to navigate high school and a new crush while keeping the fact that he is gay a secret from his friends and family. The whole film centers around a "coming out" narrative, which can be important to show in media, but it is often one of the only stories we see told about queer characters. What is so powerful about the queer subtext in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* is that it just allows characters to exist. If we were to treat queer characters in media like the relationships of Frodo and Sam and Bilbo and Thorin were treated in their film adaptations, we could do away with some of the "coming out" narrative that riddles queer representation now. Being queer is just as normal as anything else a human can be and to force coming out scenes every time a TV show or a film deals with a queer character perpetuates that being queer isn't "normal." In a society that has been so traumatized by sexuality and the perception of it, our media doesn't always have to match the world we live in. If we follow a model similar to the intimate male relationships explored in Middle-earth, we can detach from the societal trauma that gets attached to queer characters and let queer stories be as "pure" as possible. There still needs to be confirmation of the characters being queer, but the story can focus solely on being about the characters and the bond they form with one another

without weighing them down with the burden that our society places on the LGBTQ+ community. Since a place like Middle-earth does not have our same societal structure that is caked with homophobia and transphobia, it can explore those queer relationships in a more subtle, nuanced, and compelling way than a lot of mainstream media is currently doing.

The subtlety of the queer relationships and characters in Tolkien's books and Peter Jackson's films can also remedy a major problem currently occurring in mainstream media called "show don't tell" representation. The concept of "show don't tell" representation is that good queer representation explores how a character's queer identity is a part of who they are rather than just labeling them as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. One of the biggest culprits of this in mainstream media is Marvel Studios. In the 2019 film *Avengers: Endgame*, a male character briefly mentions going on a date with another man. We never see this character again. While there have been other LGBTQ+ characters to appear in Marvel films and shows after this, they marketed this movie as containing the Marvel Cinematic Universe's (MCU) first canonically gay character when it was a "blink and you'll miss it" moment. This kind of representation does nothing to normalize queerness in mainstream media in a way that matters: "Indeed, it feels very much like a token gesture, as though they thought they better include a gay person somewhere" (Fuller, *Screen Rant*). Another example within the MCU of a mishandled queer character is Loki. Loki has been canonically gender fluid and bisexual in the comics for a very long time, but his queer identity was never confirmed in the MCU until 10 years after the character made his debut in the film *Thor*. In season 1 of *Loki* that aired in 2021, he confirms himself to be bisexual in one scene and then his queerness is never touched in the series again. The show even goes as far to have him fall in love with the only female version of himself to exist in the MCU. His gender fluidity is also confirmed but only in a very small detail in the

credits. While it's great that his queerness has been canonized in one of the biggest film franchises in history, people that aren't looking for those details can simply ignore them. In GLAAD's 2021 TV study, they noted Loki as a bisexual character but reported that "Disney+ and Apple TV+ were the only streaming services tracked to not include a transgender character in this research period" (37). This means that GLAAD did not even count Loki's gender fluidity in their gender non-conforming characters for the year. We need queerness to be central to our LGBTQ+ characters without it being their whole personality. We deserve portrayals that show us to be fully nuanced and complex beings, and if we use the characterization of Bilbo and Frodo and Sam's relationship as examples of creating queer characters with depth we can achieve that.

All of these efforts to normalize queerness in media in a positive way do not just benefit the LGBTQ+ community, but also create a more loving and welcoming society. Mainstream films and TV shows contain a unique opportunity to spread good queer representation to the masses. They are the most easily accessible media to people so more queer people can see themselves on screen and more people not used to seeing queer individuals can become more understanding of LGBTQ+ community. In a red carpet interview with *Variety*, Maya Hawke, who plays Robin Buckley (a canon lesbian) in the smash hit show *Stranger Things*, talks about the impact queer characters can have on society:

Anyone can go on TV and find a show that's "about them". But when you have a really mainstream show that's in everybody's living room, it's in people's living rooms in the middle of America, in other countries, the coasts, it's everywhere.

And the wonderful thing about telling stories is that sometimes we can have empathy for people on screen that we wouldn't normally have empathy for in life.

And so if I can hope for anything it's that maybe some people fell in love with

Robin and that helped them fall in love with girls who love girls and boys who love boys. (2:17-2:47)

When mainstream media presents queer characters to a large population, it allows people to expand their understanding of human beings that are different than themselves. This is important because understanding of others leads to compassion for others. So I encourage big studios that have the opportunity to display queer characters to do it in a way that will create a positive impact on society at large. If we start to see more mainstream high budget films and shows like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* trilogies tackle queer representation where the relationships and character building are handled with such a high level of care and detail and subtlety, the world will be a much better place.

Foregrounding Queerness in Action

Just like with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* films, I believe we should be open to adaptations that foreground the queerness present in the original piece of media. This is already being explored in two recent shows: *Good Omens* and *The Last of Us*. The show *Good Omens* is an adaptation of the book by the same name written by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman that expands on the queer subtext between two main characters Aziraphale and Crowley. The encouragement from Neil Gaiman and Aziraphale actor Michael Sheen to view the characters' relationship as a love story creates a wonderful environment for queer individuals to view their dynamic in a multitude of ways (*Digital Spy* and *Comicbook.com*). The show also allows for asexual and aromantic representation to exist since there is no importance placed on physical intimacy between Aziraphale and Crowley. They are just an angel and demon that have fallen in

love with each other over the span of 6,000 years. This queer story is able to be recognized as one, but does not need to be labeled as a “gay show” to get its queerness across.

We can also see that adaptations from video games to television can be successful for queer representation as demonstrated by the first season of HBO’s *The Last of Us*. In the video games, the main character Ellie was not confirmed to be a lesbian until the *Left Behind* DLC (downloadable content) was released after the first game came out. In the HBO show, they hint at Ellie’s queerness and relationship with her best friend Riley immediately from the first episode and they dedicate the majority of the seventh episode to exploring the story told in the DLC. The story shows what it is like to be a young lesbian falling in love with their best friend, a story a lot of lesbians, including myself, are all too familiar with. Ellie’s queer identity is integral to her story and it was beautifully told in the first season of the show. However the showrunners did not stop with queer representation here. The video game *The Last of Us: Part I* hinted that the character Bill is gay and had a rough relationship with his partner Frank. This is only mentioned in a couple lines of dialogue and a letter left behind by Frank, but the showrunners decided to dedicate an entire episode of the show to exploring the romantic relationship between Bill and Frank. This decision resulted in some of the best queer representation we have seen in media in a very long time. In an interview with *Gay Times*, the director of the episode, Peter Hoar, says he “wants the gamers and viewers who aren’t accustomed to seeing positive queer narratives on-screen to ‘open their minds’ in regards to ‘non-traditional’ identities, and he says doing so within shows that aren’t explicitly marketed as ‘queer’ is a ‘clever way’ to educate them.” This way of approaching queer representation normalizes LGBTQ+ people to a wide audience while still telling compelling and complex stories.

We see that adaptations are currently doing the work to normalize queerness in a positive way, but the future of Tolkien adaptations is not taking this same leap. Amazon Studios' *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* has corrected some of the diversity issues present in Peter Jackson's films by casting people of color in major roles across all races of Middle-earth, but has made no strides in queer representation. The queer subtext and queer following of Tolkien's stories are no secret, and the showrunners have had the opportunity to learn from the reception of previous adaptations but they have not put any of that knowledge to use. There is still queer subtext present in the first season of the show like with Nori and Poppy's characters, but it relies on too much subtlety that could be entirely missed by a person not accustomed to looking for queerness in the media they engage with. With the show being the most expensive show of all time and one of the most anticipated shows in recent years, it has the opportunity to embrace the inherent queerness of Middle-earth, give LGBTQ+ people canon queer characters, and present compelling queer stories to a massive audience. As much as I encourage people to use the tools presented to view media through a queer lens, we need showrunners and writers to put it into their work as well. Through *Good Omens* and *The Last of Us*, we see that it's possible. Now we just need others to follow their lead. Queer subtext exists in pieces of media and queer people are not going anywhere so if we do the work to embrace queer interpretations of stories and encourage studios to do the same, we can create a better place for LGBTQ+ people and society as a whole.

After exploring the queer subtext present in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as well as in Jackson's film adaptations and the positive impact it has had on the queer community, I want to encourage people to move forward in their lives looking for queer subtext in their favorite pieces of media. I also wish for people to be more accepting of queer individuals

in fandom spaces who read stories in different ways than their straight cisgender counterparts.

We have much to learn from viewing stories through different perspectives and viewing media through a queer lens is a wonderful way to explore that.

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