There and Back Again: A Tale of Why He Left Home

_The Hobbit_ by J.R.R. Tolkien is considered one of the classic pieces of fantasy literature in the last century, and as such has inspired people of all ages and places with tales of lofty adventure and danger. As the prequel to _The Lord of the Rings_, Tolkien’s greatest work and masterpiece, _The Hobbit_ tells the story before _The Lord of the Rings_ and Frodo’s perilous quest, and before the events in that trilogy of books. _The Hobbit_ instead tells us the tale of how a young hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins “runs off into the blue” in search of adventure and excitement (Jackson, 2012). It’s a plot that involves Bilbo helping a refugee band of dwarves to reclaim their homeland from a villainous and hateful dragon. It’s an explanation to the origins of how the “one ring” ends up in The Shire under Bilbo’s possession, and how it eventually comes to Frodo to set up the plotline of _The Lord of the Rings_. All the events that took place in Bilbo’s stirring expedition were spurred by one simple, and yet profoundly difficult action: Bilbo leaving his home and voyaging into the danger of an unknown world. This raises the question, why did Bilbo leave his home of The Shire in the first place? Before analyzing this question though, let’s take a look at some recent media involving Middle Earth.

If one has been following movie trends lately, one might also know that the newest addition to _The Hobbit_ film trilogy, directed by Peter Jackson, came out in December of 2014. With this in mind, it would be interesting to analyze the question of Bilbo’s voyage in the context of one of the recent films. Since the question is about Bilbo
leaving The Shire and going on an adventure, it would be most fitting to use the film in which his departure occurs. Therefore, in this analysis, the film titled *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* will be used. This film was released in 2012, was directed by Peter Jackson (the same director of the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy), and starred Martin Freeman as “Bilbo Baggins,” and Ian McKellen as “Gandalf” (Jackson, 2012). Since the question we want to answer involves motivation of a specific action, we will analyze the question with the method of criticism know as the “Dramatistic Perspective.”

The Dramatistic method refers to the “study of human motivation by viewing events as dramas” (Sellnow, 2014). This method looks at how and why characters are motivated to perform certain actions, and how that can be explained through the many elements of a dramatic narrative (Sellnow, 2014). For most people, the stories that are told to them form the basis for their interpretation of the world around them. These stories can be mundane and everyday accounts of someone’s weekend, or they can be gripping epics that span over hundreds of pages, and anywhere in between. The term “drama,” in this case, is a series of action based events which form a plot with motivations behind it (Sellnow, 2014). Likewise, plot has characters that perform the actions, and as such are the ones who carry certain motivations for what they do. The main purpose of a Dramatistic Perspective is to determine what the character’s motive for performing an action is, and the factors which influenced that motivated decision (Sellnow, 2014).

In a Dramatistic method, the most important action performed in a drama is usually one that breaks some kind of social-norm law (Sellnow, 2014). This initial rule-breaking action is what begins the character’s plotline, and the rest of the character’s
deeds are aimed at redeeming themselves somehow for this initial action, or the situation which caused the beginning act (Sellnow, 2014). This can be explained by the Dramatistic life cycle, which is a series of steps which explain the effect a rule-breaking action has upon the story of a character (Sellnow, 2014).

The Dramatistic life cycle begins with the idea that people want to be able to identify with others who live in the world around them (Sellnow, 2014). It’s an inherent quality of the human condition to want to belong somewhere, and to be away from places where someone feels they don’t belong. This is known as consubstantiality, which is just a fancy and complicated way of saying “the idea of identifying with others” (Sellnow, 2014). Conversely, the opposite of consubstantiality, or belonging, is division. Division is the feeling of disharmony experienced by a character who perceives that they are different, or in conflict with the characters around them (Sellnow, 2014). This results in the character’s feelings of being out of place. Most drama plots have a background of division which produces the conflict within or around a character in a drama. This division results in guilt, which is described as “any feeling of tension within a person such as anxiety, angst, disgust, or embarrassment” (Sellnow, 2014). It is part of human nature to desire a purging of any guilt accrued. As a result, the actions within a drama mostly deal with the ways in which characters relieve themselves of this guilt-produced tension.

This cycle is effectively described in five stages. The first is order, which is following social norms or other rules which govern how people should live (Sellnow, 2014). The second is pollution, which is when a person/character rejects the social order or rules that are laid out by the person’s society (Sellnow, 2014). This rejection of society
produces inner turmoil and struggles for the character to endure, which in turn produces
the third stage: “guilt” (mentioned above) (Sellnow, 2014). The fourth stage is
purification, or the dissolving of guilt (Sellnow, 2014). Guilt can be dealt with in three
ways: victimage (blaming others), mortification (punishment on oneself), or
transcendence (pursuing a “higher calling”) (Sellnow, 2014). Transcendence is a very
popular method to absolve guilt in hero stories, and other epics which involve grand
quests and tales of amazement. Finally, the fifth stage is known as redemption.
Redemption is the character’s metaphorical rebirth with new knowledge or skills attained
during the mission to absolve the guilt that was derived from the original division in the
beginning of the cycle (Sellnow, 2014).

The action which sets off this cycle is done by a character, and therefore has a
motivation. For one reason or another, the person who breaks a rule/norm has a
motivation for doing so. Figuring out this motivation is one of the chief responsibilities of
the Dramatistic method, as this motivation is vital to the character’s justification for
performing the action which serves as the beginning to a drama (Sellnow, 2014). In other
words, it is the single reason and catalyst for the formation of a plotline within a story,
and is imperative for deriving meaning from that story’s message.

To determine the underlying motivation which influences the actions of a
character, the Dramatistic method lays out a series of comparative “tests” known as the
“Pentad” (Sellnow, 2014). The Pentad uses the “five elements of the drama,” which are
act, agents, agency, scene, and purpose (Sellnow, 2014). Act refers to the behavior which
broke the rule/norm (Sellnow, 2014). Agent refers to the character that carried out the act
(Sellnow, 2014). Agency refers to the means and tools that a character used in order to
perform the act (Sellnow, 2014). Scene refers to the setting of the story, and where and when the act took place (Sellnow, 2014). And finally, the purpose refers to “the explanation offered as to why the agent(s) engaged in the rule-breaking behavior” (Sellnow, 2014). A side-by-side comparison with each of these elements will reveal the dominant element, and in turn will explain which force caused the character’s decision. This in turn determines the motive, which is the justification for an action, why the character’s act was necessary, and how it is made understandable (Sellnow, 2014).

Now that we have the tools laid out for a Dramatistic method of criticism, we are almost ready to answer the question pertaining to the film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. But before we do that, a few things about J.R.R. Tolkien’s universe of Middle Earth have to be explained, namely things concerning hobbits and their society (most elements of J.R.R. Tolkien’s “Middle Earth” are also prevalent in all the movie adaptations of his original work). Additionally some background information regarding the plot of the movie, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, needs to be divulged so we can put the motivations of Bilbo in the context of the story. The unique setting that Bilbo lives in is a critical component, and as such influences the rules that are in place and how Bilbo is constructed as a character.

The larger setting of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* takes place in what is known as “Middle Earth,” the fantasy world created by J.R.R. Tolkien (Jackson, 2012). Middle Earth has many races and peoples, and monsters which have inspired or influenced later works of fantasy. For instance, elves, dwarves, halflings (hobbits), wizards, dragons, orcs (and goblins), giants, trolls, and humans (like us) are all present in the world of Middle Earth (Jackson, 2012). This land that these people live in is a harsh
and dangerous one, with monsters and evil constantly lurking just beyond sight, hidden in the shadows waiting for an opportunity to sweep the land in darkness. In this particular movie, the races that are most involved are the dwarves and hobbits. The dwarves essentially were attacked by a dragon, and lost their homeland, and now need to reclaim it. Hobbits are a different matter altogether and a very important one at that, since Bilbo happens to be one (Jackson, 2012).

A hobbit is a lot like a human, but much shorter and nimbler. They are around half the size of a full grown man in Middle Earth, and live in a very secluded and unusually quiet part of the world known as “The Shire.” Since The Shire is so secluded, the hobbits have not had nearly as many wars or great struggles that the rest of Middle Earth has had. The hobbits are a somewhat sheltered people who know very little to nothing about the world outside their borders (except for a very few who do, of course). One result of this sheltered lifestyle is that the hobbit society has become quite docile, and almost everybody in their lands lives peaceful days without danger. As a result, anyone that does pursue danger or goes on any “adventures” is seen as against the norm, a rascal and trouble maker, and garners a reckless reputation from their neighbors. This is opposite of the rest of the inhabitants of Middle Earth (such as elves, men, and dwarves), who exalt great deeds and honorable quests, and who have many heroes who have taken on adventures. For hobbits however, simple and unadventurous endeavors are seen as most respectable, so any hobbit that doesn’t go by this example is made into a slight outcast and referred to as strange (Jackson, 2012).

Our friend Bilbo Baggins, being one of these hobbits, seems to be a lot like his fellow neighbors. At the beginning of the movie, he is an affluent hobbit who lives a very
comfortable life and never does anything reckless (Jackson, 2012). This seems just fine to him, as he has accrued no discernable “guilt” because he fits in with the societal norms of The Shire. However, in the opening part of the movie, the wizard known as Gandalf approaches Bilbo and asks him if he wants to go on an adventure with him and his company. Of course, Bilbo refuses stoutly at first because that would be going against the unwritten rules of being a respectable hobbit. In fact, Bilbo replies to Gandalf, “No, I don’t imagine anyone…would have much interest in adventures. Nasty, disturbing, uncomfortable things. They make you late for dinner!” (Jackson, 2012). Soon after that encounter though, Gandalf returns with a company of dwarves who want to reclaim their homeland from a terrifying and deadly dragon. Gandalf and the company enter Bilbo’s home and pillage his food stores in a great feast where they reveal to Bilbo that he would be an important part of the quest should he accept it: Bilbo would be the “burglar” that they need (Jackson, 2012). Bilbo is understandably shocked and scared by this offer, but he is also slightly curious of it, and actually reads over the contract they give him to take part in the quest. At the end of the night though, Bilbo still refuses the contract and the adventure, despite thinking over it for the majority of the night. At this refusal Gandalf refutes his decision, and tries to sway him into accepting by saying,

“Tell me, when did doilies and your mother's dishes become so important to you? I remember a young hobbit who was always running off in search of Elves in the woods. He'd stay out late, come home after dark, trailing mud and twigs and fireflies. A young hobbit who would've liked nothing better than to find out what was beyond the borders of The Shire. The world is not in your books and maps. It's out there” (Jackson, 2012).
In this one piece of dialogue we as the viewers can piece together a few things about Bilbo’s character which seem interesting. First, he hasn’t always wanted to be the sheltered hobbit that he is at the beginning of the movie. In fact, according to Gandalf, Bilbo used to dream of going on adventures when he was younger, and would run off pretending to have them. Next, Gandalf makes a remark about all of Bilbo’s maps that he keeps. If Bilbo wasn’t interested in going on adventures ever (as he tried to tell Gandalf in the beginning), why would he keep so many maps to look at that describe the world outside of The Shire? These details seem to suggest that Bilbo has a desire somewhere in himself to go on an adventure, which would go against his society’s norms and his current life. Even after Gandalf’s speech, Bilbo still refuses to go on the adventure. It’s not until the next morning that Bilbo decides that he will sign the contract, and go on the quest with the dwarves and Gandalf, despite his previous dispositions with it. In fact, once he finally accepts the adventure contract, he seems freer and more excited than ever.

Throughout the movie, Bilbo reinvents himself as an adventurous, clever, and brave hero who takes on the struggles and challenges of the quest with determination. This transformation was ultimately represented in the beginning by him signing the contract, abandoning his old life, and joining Gandalf and the dwarf company (Jackson, 2012). That was the most pivotal moment of the movie, and the decision which went against the rules and norms of his society. So now, that brings us to the main question: What was Bilbo’s motive in leaving The Shire and his home when he had wealth and a comfortable life? Why did he break the “rules” and norms of hobbit society, and put that guilt on himself? And finally how did he absolve that guilt accrued? What does this tell us about life and taking chances? These are all questions which can also be answered.
The first thing we must determine when we analyze Bilbo’s journey is to decide which action it is that breaks the rules and social norms and begins the Dramatistic life cycle. In *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* the rule-breaking action was Bilbo “running off into the blue” and joining the adventure company of Gandalf and the dwarves despite it being against what “respectable” hobbits do (Jackson, 2012). This action is brought about by the division that Bilbo is feeling within himself before finally accepting the offer to join the quest. When Gandalf made his speech about Bilbo’s past and his maps, he revealed that Bilbo has always wanted to go on adventures. This would mean that the “docile” Bilbo in the beginning of the movie was only a way for him to fit into the societal norms of The Shire, and didn’t reflect Bilbo’s true nature. Bilbo’s true nature was an adventurous one that was never allowed to reveal itself fully and also never had the opportunity to. This created division within Bilbo as he felt like he didn’t really belong in the hobbit society, no matter how hard he tried, as he always wanted run off and have adventures when he was younger. That side of him is still clearly present in some way, as seen by all the Middle Earth maps he kept around at the beginning of the movie (Jackson, 2012). This division he felt within himself led to his decision of joining the adventure company, which was the very act which broke society norms of The Shire. Those norms included doing nothing “adventurous” or reckless, and being a respectable hobbit by doing nothing unexpected. Bilbo broke all of those social rules when he ran off with the dwarf company, and this act of defiance against his former home also produced “dramatic guilt” inside of him in the form of anxiousness to have adventures and to identify with people who *did* go on adventures. The people he wished to identify with, or
have consubstantiality with were the dwarves and Gandalf because they were his example of adventure seeking folk.

While Bilbo is pursuing this adventure with the dwarves and Gandalf, he is caught in a sort of no-mans land between his old and “new” self. By taking up the contract and joining the quest for the dwarves’ homeland, he has abandoned his old way of life, and as a result cannot find consubstantiality with it. At the same time though, at the moment of accepting the adventure, although he has changed into a “new” Bilbo, he is still hardly “the stuff of legends” yet. Therefore, he cannot fully identify with his fellow adventurers in the beginning when he initially accepts the adventure and runs off into the blue (Jackson, 2012). This is what creates the pollution in Bilbo, when he rejected the social order of The Shire, and instead replaced it with the “dramatic guilt” of going on the adventure and looking to identify with the adventurers.

Following Bilbo’s guilt and pollution surrounding his abandonment of his home in The Shire, and joining the adventure company to try to identify with them, was his purification. Bilbo is able to absolve his guilt by the method of transcendence, as he realizes that he is pursuing a higher calling. The joining of the dwarves and Gandalf’s company to reclaim the dwarves’ homeland from an evil dragon is definitely an example of a “higher calling.” By agreeing to take part in this great deed, Bilbo is reinventing himself and following the purification method of transcendence. Once he signs the contract, runs off with the dwarves’ company, and tells them that he agrees to help, he is accepted into the company. This represents a sort of redemption in Bilbo’s character, in which he redeems his action of leaving his home and abandoning The Shire with finding his new belonging in the company of fellow adventurers like Gandalf and the dwarves.
By doing this, “old Bilbo” has achieved metaphorical “rebirth” as a more adventurous and braver “new Bilbo” that is absolved of his previous “guilt.”

It would seem that the motive for Bilbo leaving his comfortable life in The Shire and his home was that he wanted to reinvent himself as an adventurer. This is supported by his character traits revealed in dialogue with Gandalf at the beginning of the movie, and also by his decision to accept the call to adventure. In addition, his curiosity in the outside world (which is strange for hobbits) is another supporting piece of evidence that he wished to go on adventures, and subsequently, leave behind his home and be “reborn” as a hero and adventurer.

Bilbo’s motive is now clear, but what factor of the drama forced him to develop this motive? In other words, which element of drama was responsible for him taking flight from his home and journeying into the unknown of Middle Earth? If we use the Pentad we can determine if it was it the act, agent, agency, scene, or purpose (Sellnow, 2014). To figure this out we will have to do a little bit of reasoning and comparing based on what we know about the setting of Middle Earth, the characters involved, and the events surrounding the quest which Bilbo is undertaking.

Let’s begin with the act, which is Bilbo leaving The Shire and his home and going against the norms of Shire society by going on an adventure. If Bilbo’s motive was rooted solely in the action of leaving his home, and all the other elements were just additions, then Bilbo probably would have left his home long ago. It’s clear here that the act itself was not the motivating element of drama in this story. Although the action of leaving The Shire was important, it depended on other aspects of the Pentad to occur.
Next, let’s look at agency, which is the company of dwarves and Gandalf that Bilbo would tag along with on the adventure. This, at first, might seem like a promising candidate for the motivating factor of the Pentad behind Bilbo’s journey. After all, Bilbo doesn’t make the journey away from The Shire until Gandalf and the Dwarves show up at his doorstep. Wouldn’t that mean that they were the responsible factor which made Bilbo’s motive clear? It might seem so; however, there is one very important detail which shows this isn’t quite the case. Even though Bilbo’s quest isn’t taken until after the arrival of the Dwarves and Gandalf, they aren’t the ones who successfully convince him to take the journey (Jackson, 2012). If we’ll remember back to the movie, Bilbo actually refused every offer the Dwarves and Gandalf gave him, and continued to refuse the idea of an adventure even after great effort was put in from Gandalf and the Dwarves to get him to agree (Jackson, 2012). If the agency were truly the motivating factor behind the motive, and that all other factors depended on it, then Bilbo surely would have agreed immediately or at least within the night that he was asked. However, he did not agree as a result of their arguments, and instead found himself going on the adventure as a result of something else.

The next element of the Pentad, scene (setting), is definitely an important one. One of Bilbo’s desires and reasons for wanting to go on an adventure is to see the rest of Middle Earth that lies outside The Shire. His maps and books display images and descriptions of the dangerous world outside his green-pastured homeland (Jackson, 2012). However, despite his desire to go out and see the world, he never did until the beginning of the movie, at which point he was well into adulthood. The setting of Middle Earth had always been around, and if Bilbo’s motivation was forced strongest by the
scene then Bilbo would have wandered off into the wild long before the dwarf company ever showed up to his door. Therefore, scene is also dependent on something else, which means that yet another element of the Pentad is responsible for Bilbo’s motivation to re-shape himself as an adventurer.

The fourth element of the Pentad that we have to examine is the purpose. In *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* the purpose of the adventure is for Bilbo to help the dwarves reclaim their homeland from a dragon (Jackson, 2012). Although this is a strong factor in Bilbo deciding to run off into the distance away from his home, it is not the deciding force behind his motive. If Bilbo’s main motive was to help the dwarves in their plight, he certainly would have done so on his own accord without having to be asked. Furthermore, if Bilbo’s main motivation to become an adventurer was to help reclaim the dwarves’ homeland he would have agreed to that task the first time that Gandalf asked him to.

This just leaves one last element of the Pentad: agent. In *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* the agent is Bilbo Baggins, a character who feels out of place in the quiet Shire and who wants to go out on adventures and *reinvent* himself while seeing the world. This is the major force behind Bilbo’s motivation to go out and become an adventurer, because there is a piece of Bilbo’s character that will only be fulfilled by taking that chance and charging into the unknown on a quest. Not only that, but if we observe carefully, it was solely Bilbo’s decision to go on the adventure with Gandalf and the Dwarves’ company (Jackson, 2012). When Bilbo woke up the next morning after refusing the group’s offers, it was Bilbo who changed his mind without any outside arguments (Jackson, 2012). Bilbo could have just ignored the quest at the point of the
next morning, the dwarves were gone and not pestering him anymore, and Gandalf had also stopped asking him. But since Bilbo’s major element of drama that forced him to act on his motive was agent, he ended up having his own epiphany to follow his dream of re-inventing himself as the adventurer he once pictured himself as.

With these two things in mind, one can construct the message that *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* is trying to send through the character of Bilbo. Bilbo is someone many of us can identity with, a character who is confronted with making an enormous choice: stay with the life of comfort, or take a leap of faith into the unknown. Many of us will face a choice that’s metaphorically similar to Bilbo’s, even though most of us probably won’t be fighting dragons or hanging out with wizards and dwarves anytime soon. Bilbo’s decision that he makes himself to pursue the higher calling and accept the quest to find transcendence also has a message that is communicated to us the viewers. We are told that we can reinvent ourselves and experience amazing things if we just take that leap of faith and walk those first few steps outside our door into the world of the unknown.

So why did Bilbo leave The Shire and his home when he already had wealth and a comfortable life? He did it because he wanted to find what was out there in the world, and not just read about it in his books. He did it because he wanted to help the dwarves reclaim their homeland because he knew it was the right thing to do. Most of all though, he did it because there was always a part of him that wanted to run off and have strange, daring, and amazing experiences that he could not have inside The Shire. That piece inside of Bilbo that needed to have adventure was just waiting for a moment to spring forth and run out the door and over the hills into a world of danger and uncertainty. And
once that opportunity was there, he took it because he knew that if he didn’t, he would never know what adventure was like, and he would regret that for the rest of his days. This is much like a metaphor for life, and the monumental choice that Bilbo faced can represent some of the more down-to-earth choices that we face in our own lives. I believe that the story of *The Hobbit* is about taking the opportunity to do something different and incredible when that chance arises, otherwise one can find themselves stuck wishing they had when they look back on their lives. It’s often been said that when we look back on our experiences we regret more of what we didn’t do in life, rather than what we did do, and Bilbo’s quest is a metaphor for that sentiment. What we can all learn from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* and from Bilbo is that we must realize the opportunities we are given and to be brave enough to seize them while we still have the chance. Obviously the opportunities for our own “adventures” will have sacrifices, as no good things come without having to give something else up along the way. But those things that we give up to pursue our true calling are necessary sacrifices, and giving those things of comfort up to find adventure in life may be what shapes our true identity in the end. For Bilbo, his quest to help the dwarves reclaim their homeland would take him all over Middle Earth, and to do that he had to sacrifice the comfort of his home for a long time. But by doing that, Bilbo lived a life of true bravery and adventure, and found his true spirit along the way in the form of a clever and heroic hobbit that was waiting to shine. When our own opportunity to fight a dragon or join an expedition to the yonder of Middle Earth arrives, Bilbo would probably tell us to take those first few steps out the door and allow ourselves to be swept away into a tale larger than ourselves, because in
that tale our story is told. And that is how we define our life: our great stories that we bring home from the unknown.

“It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to.” ~Bilbo Baggins (Jackson, 2001).
References

