**Regarding Frodo and Sam…**

Originally authored and posted by [**Mary Nikkel**](https://www.facebook.com/Elraen?__tn__=%2Cd%2AF%2AF-R&eid=ARDf6m6poZIApyEDj_XFj71w0GglJgV-LoRwYNdRKEVpqAJAGZj_WqdA4pCF_hVxqwzy2Vti__Ld3mA8&tn-str=%2AF) at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10216265435802345&set=a.1171502761525&type=3&theater>

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I remember when I was younger, I struggled to accept and understand why a lot of my peers found Frodo either forgettable or material for mocking. I understand it a little better now: the movies DO often make him not particularly likable or watchable. The book portrays him as someone who doesn’t seem to be experiencing a reasonable range of human expression/emotion, which admittedly can make him less compelling to read about. I understand that. But I also think it’s integral to the point of the character.

Frodo and Sam are necessary for understanding each other. Sam was a character cast from the mold that Tolkien learned on the frontlines of World War I. Tolkien saw Sam as the everyday hero, the embodiment of the simple good-hearted courage of the men he watched die in the trenches. Sam’s obstacles are exterior to himself: the geography. The threat of enemy soldiers (orcs), of Shelob, of his companion's physical and mental difficulties.

By contrast, Frodo’s obstacles are primarily internal. He endured a lot of those same exterior challenges as Sam, but Sam did much to absorb their impact (see the Cirith Ungol rescue). Frodo’s challenges are the slow, steady erosion of a soul being asked to carry a tremendous internal darkness without being consumed by it. Everything he was became laser-focused on that monolithic spiritual and emotional task.

This is why, at the end, Frodo had to sacrifice far more than Sam. Because Sam’s primary struggle was against external forces, once those external forces were alleviated, he could go home, marry, have children, live as a functional member of his community. For Frodo, the cessation of exterior pressure could do nothing to mend the way his soul had been burning from the inside out.

This is a hard thing to portray in movie form (the greatest weakness of the LotR movies is their inability to portray subtlety and spirituality, two traits the narrative Tolkien crafted requires). We see Frodo’s neck chapping from the actual physical weight of the Ring as a representation; well and good. But it’s hard to truly convey the immense mental weight, the crucible of enduring without utter collapse.

If Sam is a kind of patron saint for the good-hearted soldier, I would posit that Frodo is the patron saint of the depressed, the suicidal, the addicted, the ones living with trauma. We see it best maybe at Mount Doom, where Frodo’s very self has been ground down to nearly nothing: “No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in the dark, Sam, and there is no veil between me and the wheel of fire. I begin to see it even with my waking eyes, and all else fades.”

If you’d ever been deeply depressed, ever lived chained in the prison of PTSD, you will have experienced that exact same thing.

And of course that’s not always the most likable thing to read about or to watch. Mental anguish has a way of stripping away so many of the human details about you, even your personality itself.

"Frodo is a study of a hobbit broken by a burden of fear and horror— broken down, and in the end made into something quite different,” J.R.R. Tolkien himself wrote.

In another letter (#246, for the curious), Tolkien addressed the concern that had been posed to him that Frodo was a weak and failed hero, that his decision at Mount Doom proved it. “I do not think that Frodo's was a moral failure,” Tolkien clarified. “At the last moment the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum– impossible, I should have said, for any one to resist, certainly after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted… I do not myself see that the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment was any more a moral failure than the breaking of his body would have been– say, by being strangled by Gollum, or crushed by a falling rock.”

Tolkien built into Frodo a validation of the internal struggle, marking it not as weakness, but ultimately even as a special kind of strength. Through the character of Frodo, Tolkien displayed that internal anguish, fear, and pain were not moral failings. He might not have known it, but Tolkien was building an incredibly beautiful fictitious case study on the impact of trauma on the soul and the human ability to endure.

“Frodo undertook his quest out of love– to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could; and also in complete humility, acknowledging that he was wholly inadequate to the task,” Tolkien summarized. “His real contract was only to do what he could, to try to find a way, and to go as far on the road as his strength of mind and body allowed. He did that.”

And for any of us carrying a weight of horror, trauma, grief, dread, anxiety, depression, despair— maybe our hope is the same. To do what we can. To know that, even when our minds give out under the tremendous weight, we are still enough.