

Anna Hyla
anhyla@op.pl
University of Bielsko-Biala
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-9358-4740

THE IMAGE OF DRAGON IN LITERATURE. PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE BASIS OF JOHN RONALD REUEL TOLKIEN'S *HOBBIT*

Introduction

Scientism, a worldview employing the mechanistic paradigm, presents a concept of a depersonalised world which resembles a mathematical mechanism. Engineer, official, manager, and scientist become the dominant models of Persona, as they invent and operate devices, organise interpersonal relationships in industry and corporations, manage and create new scientific theoretical models. In such a world only humans still have a personality. Plants and inanimate elements of landscape are deprived of the mystic element – they are what they seem, and are no longer inhabited by transcendent spirits. The devil does not lead to temptation, biological mechanisms do. Even in modern Christianity his role as a character loses its meaning. Taboo disappears, replaced by the pursuit of maximum comfort of living (Wierciński, 2004, p. 33–34). We have lost the belief in myths and miraculous world filled with gods, magic, and fantastic creatures.

Importance of the antagonist

What is left, however, is the need to experience the supernatural and the symbolism that were represented by those illusionary images. Modern human fills this gap with fantasy genre works that revive the old myths. Although

fantasy genre has nothing to do with *sacrum* anymore, it provides us with substitutive satisfaction through experiencing similar sensations and emotions allowing us to deal with problems on the more comfortable symbolic ground¹. Many motifs and mythical characters, dragons included, survived and were able to evolve thanks to the fantasy genre. So mythical creatures – and dragons in particular – still exist, evolving and assimilating modern fears, even the technological ones, into their meaning. Fantasy as a literary genre is prospering and growing, and so do the monsters together with it. Confrontation with the beast, fighting it, victory, and even defeat are still popular forms of escapism enjoyed by both children and adults. In other worlds, in the eyes of the beast we see our own modern concerns and fears, we experience them, live through them, process them, and then return to the “real world” refreshed and ready to confront the contemporary reality. The dragon character is a mask for an archetype both natural and necessary to perceive the world. There is worth in focusing on antagonist characters during Polish lessons and in encouraging children to discuss and share their insights. Working through feelings that appeared during the encounter with such a fictional opponent is not only important and educational but also makes children aware of their own intuition and helps to develop a proper attitude towards dangers of the real world.

Ethical models and morality play an important role in shaping a child’s emotional intelligence. Once emotions were an indispensable part of the survival mechanism as they were sending specific stimulus, triggering behaviour that was most beneficial for surviving. The ability to process emotions in a healthy way and developing moral evaluation are not inborn features of a child. They need to be learned (Shapiro, 1999, p. 10–12). Children need to be taught that evil is not an autonomous being, but rather an imperfection defining some phenomenon and persons, giving bad results. The choice between good and evil depends on human ruling and judgement of conscience. Cooperation with conscience leads to developing a so called ethical personality (Grzybek, 2007, p. 32–41), and this development should be the principal goal of upbringing (p. 58–62). Among methods of forming

¹ C.G. Jung: “It is important to have a secret, a premonition of things unknown. It fills life with something impersonal, a *numinosum*. [...] He must sense that he lives in a world which in some respects is mysterious; that things happen and can be experienced which remain inexplicable; [...] The unexpected and the incredible belong in this world. Only then is life whole” (1989, p. 426).

morality at school, Grzybek lists the following examples: assessing a moral situation through voting, playing roles for a better understanding of one's own demeanour, or presenting moral dilemmas to create a hierarchy of values (p. 81). Each of those methods can be successfully applied during a Polish lesson when discussing the reading material.

It may be said that the antagonist is one of the most basic and primary elements of stories that show the struggle between good and evil. The antagonist triggers a conflict, is an obstacle to overcome. Thanks to them the hero has the opportunity to become a hero in the narrower meaning of this word. While reading the materials for school or of personal choice, many times children encounter fantastic monsters as antagonists. However, while discussing the material in class, the antagonist is often ignored and more conventional things are done, e.g. characteristics of the main characters or plot overviews. It is a pity, as the antagonist can become a convenient tool for teaching morals and attitudes towards life, and even the character itself is very entertaining for children.

Dragon is a particularly popular antagonist in fairy tales and fantasy; the hero-dragon confrontation is commonly interpreted as a classic representation of the fight between good and evil. In reality, however, it is not always a conflict of absolute values – the dragon frequently evokes admiration, respect, and even sympathy. The relationship between the dragon and the hero itself is not always purely adversarial – in many cases it is the beast that triggers the positive transformation of the hero.

Dragon as the antagonist in Tolkien's *Hobbit*

Without any doubt, the most widely known literary dragon today is Smaug from Tolkien's *Hobbit* (1997), which is now an obligatory reading in Polish primary schools. The core of the story is the dwarves' expedition to reclaim a treasure stolen by the dragon. Thirteen dwarves together with a hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, who was hired as a burglar (and as the fourteenth member helps to avoid the unlucky thirteen) head out to Erebor, the Lonely Mountain, which was once a dwarvish kingdom, their enormous treasury and gemstone mine. The company plans to enter the mount-fortress through a secret door. In the beginning, it is not known if the dragon is still alive, as nobody has seen him since he invaded Erebor, destroyed the area around the mountain, and exiled its inhabitants two centuries ago. Of course, it is the hired burglar who

is sent to do the reconnaissance. When Bilbo reaches the treasury, he takes a golden cup as a proof for his employers – what is a faithful reconstruction of events from *Beowulf* (2010) (in compliance with Tolkien's play with references to Celtic and Scandinavian myths and legends). As in the epic, stealing the cup brings terrible consequences. Smaug wakes up, notices the theft, runs amok and comes out from his lair to take revenge. Eventually, Smaug's fate is to die from the hand of the hero.

Bard the Bowman is the descendant of Lords of Dale which was destroyed by the dragon. He leads a simple life in Esgaroth, the Lake-town, without any privileges, commanding a small company of bowmen. During the dragon's raid, he is the last one of the town's defenders still fighting what makes him the last line of defence lying between the dragon and the lives of numerous inhabitants. Contrary to *Beowulf*, Bard kills the dragon using a bow. This does not by any means diminish his glory. The fight with a dragon is not an honourable duel, but a violent struggle for life and death. The dragon has a huge advantage over the man who until now has lived a rather simple life (unlike for example Turin, the hero and dragon killer from *The Children of Hurin*). Tolkien studies researcher, John D. Rateliff, suggest that while creating the Bard character, the author was inspired by a young warrior Wiglaf, not Beowulf. It is quite probable, considering the similarities between both characters. Just like Bard, Wiglaf appears and is introduced to the reader later in the story, and is the only one among his companions to stay at his post and have the courage to face the dragon (Rateliff, 2007, p. 557–558). Both are of noble birth, though they lead simple lives, not having nor wanting any important duties; both wield weapons inherited from their ancestors, and it is them who eventually deal the fatal blow to the beast. Bard manages to hit the single bare patch in Smaug's armour, killing him on the spot. This achievement proves his superhuman abilities. The magical Black Arrow, his family heirloom, is not without importance as well. In the past, after shooting it, he was always able to find it. This time, however, the Black Arrow disappears completely inside the beast's body and falls into the lake together with it. Bard also receives unexpected help from a thrush who tells him about the events in Erebor, and about the bare patch on Smaug's left underside which was found by Bilbo – without this knowledge he would not be able to kill the dragon with one shot. Bard himself is surprised with his ability to understand the bird's speech, but it is a legacy of people from Dale. This capability also brings to mind Sigurd who learned the bird's language after accidentally

tasting Fafnir's blood (*Edda Poetycka*, 1986). The difference is that in case of Sigurd this skill is learned, while Bard was born with it. Sigurd gains it after the fight with the dragon and thanks to it learns about Regin's evil plotting, while Bard is able to kill the dragon because of the information he got from the friendly thrust. The important question is – who, in Tolkien's work, can kill the dragon? According to the mythical tradition, only a hero, an ancestor or descendant of kings, one marked for a special purpose may become a dragon killer. In his works, Tolkien mentions only four dragons by name and all of them were killed by such characters. Ancalagon was killed by the Great Eagles (Valinor Manwe's sacred animals) and Earendil, a half-elven ancestor of the kings of Gondor, who commands a ship that sails the sky shining like a morning star (Tolkien, 2000, p. 235). Scatha dies at the hands of Fram, the king of Rohirrim – the Horse-lords (Tolkien, 2012b, p. 364, 365). Glaurung meets his fate in a fight with Turin Turambar, one of the most important human heroes (Tolkien, 2008). And finally, Smaug from *Hobbit* dies after being shot with a magic arrow by a man called Bard, descendant of the Lords of Dale, a city which was destroyed by the dragon himself.

Bard is a very unique character in Tolkien's works. He has all the skills and attributes a hero needs, but at the same time his role is quite limited – he kills the dragon, what automatically makes him the king, and establishes a new Dale. This is the beginning and the end of his accomplishments as the hero, as he does not have any further importance in the history of Middle-earth. In comparison with other dragon killers described by Tolkien, e.g. Turin or Earendil, his achievements are nonsignificant. Even in *Hobbit*, he stands in the shadow of other characters, like Thorin or Bilbo who did not kill the dragon themselves, but even without doing so played much more important roles in the events. This creates an impression, and a probable one, that Bard was introduced into the story for only one purpose: to kill the dragon. His existence is necessary as, for various reasons, no other character is capable of doing this. One obvious candidate for the post of the dragon killer is Thorin Oakenshield who possesses all the required traits, motivations and conditions: he has the right background and a personal grudge against Smaug, as he is the last prince of the most distinguished royal family, descending directly from one of the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves, the founders of the race; the domain ruined by the dragon is his very kingdom; he has earned his respect as an unrivalled warrior, he is wise, brave, honourable, and noble, respected and adored by his people. What is more, he owns a magic sword – a legendary

elven blade found in the troll's cave. He becomes a living legend and there are stories told about him, like the one about how he used an oaken tree branch as a shield what gained him his epithet. Still, Thorin is the *Hobbit's* fallen hero, representing the same sickness that first lured the dragon to the dwarves' treasure. Despite being absolutely worthy of the throne and love of the people, Thorin loses in the face of the treasure. Just like in *Beowulf* and in *Poetic Edda's* Fafnir storyline, the dragon's gold is cursed. What needs to be noticed is that, in contrast to those two works, in *Hobbit* there is no mention of any curse being cast on the treasure. The gold is cursed inherently. The more of it is gathered in one place, the stronger is the curse. Dwarves as a race were created by Valar Aule, the god of blacksmithing, and so they love metals and gemstones what makes them particularly prone to the negative influence of treasures. Everything is alright as long as they maintain moderation, but often the border of greed is crossed releasing a true horror that consumes thousands of lives of this already endangered race. The most explicit examples of tragedies caused by the dwarves' greed are the losses of Moria (Tolkien, 2012a) and Erebor. Moria, the true underground kingdom beneath the Misty Mountains, was rich with mithril – the most precious metal. Despite already having gathered a lot of wealth, the dwarves, driven by greed, dug deeper and deeper, finally unearthing the fire demon, Barlog, who remained in the depths, asleep and unbothered. This caused bloodshed and their priceless mine and safe home was lost forever, now inhabited by goblins and other heinous creatures. A similar story happened to Erebor, where the dwarves accumulated the unimaginable amount of wealth – just for the sake of having it, not caring about safety and relationships with neighbours. And the gold attracted a creature that loves treasured more than anything – a dragon. Smaug unleashed hell in Erebor and the nearby human city, Dale, suppressing all resistance without mercy. Only a few survived. The dwarves' attempt at reclaiming Erebor wakes the forgotten greed for gold. In the course of the story, the negative influence of the treasure becomes more and more apparent as greed and hatred strongly dominate dwarves, people of Esgaroth, and even the elven king himself. The supposedly laudable mission shows its darker face, eventually leading to death and war (Łagan, 2015, p. 104). Stealing the cup was like stirring up a hornet's nest. After years of inaction, angered Smaug comes out to take revenge and destroys Esgaroth, letting its citizens experience the same terrors their ancestors did years ago in Dale. After the dragon's death, those who managed to escape the burning city search for shelter and gold inside

the Lonely Mountain. They are not the only ones, as there are armies setting off for Erebor: elves from Mirkwood, dwarves from Iron Hills, and goblins of Moria and Gundabad, all of them driven by greed. Only those who are able to resist the treasure can prevent the calamity. It comes at no surprise that it is Bard and Bilbo who, having contributed to stopping the dragon, manage to calm down the situation so that internecine fight can be avoided (the war with goblins, however, is inevitable).

It was Thorin's grandfather whose greed attracted the dragon to Erebor. Thorin has the same flaw, his thirst for the treasure leads him to destruction and makes others suffer. This toxic relation between Thorin and the treasure brings to mind Fafnir's story. A good man, when dominated by greed, leaves the righteous path, commits a crime, and loses his humanity. Thorin does not go so far so to murder someone but openly threatens his opponents. We may wonder about what could have happened if Bilbo did not interfere. Gold causes the "dragon disease" which drives the dragon, making it gather more gold and lie on it. The dragon from *Beowulf*, Fafnir, Smaug, but also Thorin and his grandfather are all obvious victims of this sickness. Thorin desires the treasure irrationally and hysterically, taking more and more wicked measures to gain it. It may be wondered what would this story be if Tolkien decided to use in his work the events from *Edda* where a human is magically transformed into a dragon because of his thirst for gold. What if, after defeating Smaug, Thorin kept the treasure? When Bilbo takes the Arkenstone (to give it to Bard and Thranduil, the elven king, as a bargaining chip in negotiations with Thorin), Thorin behaves just like the previous owner of the treasure in his worst moments: suspicious to the level of paranoia, furious, and ready to turn against anyone he decides is a threat to his gold. Internally he is already a dragon. However, Thorin eventually is redeemed after he joins the war with goblins and honourably dies in a battle. What is interesting, Thorin is buried together with the Arkenstone (the most valuable jewel symbolically representing the whole treasury) and with his sword Orcrist lying on his tomb. The sword will shine every time orcs come near Erebor so that the Mountain cannot be attacked by surprise. Hereby Thorin, after death, receives another dragon attribute, this time a positive one, that is being the guardian of the treasure.

Bilbo is a character that truly stands out in *Hobbit*. He is not a trained warrior, nor a commander responsible for his people, he does not have any royal blood in his veins. Hobbits are the smallest and the least important race in

Middle-earth. While others take part in events where legends are born, hobbits lead a calm idyllic life far away from it. Even if they appeared in any historical events, their role was ignored, and no stories nor songs mention them, but hobbits are not bothered by this fact and quite satisfied with their simple lives without any adventures. Sometimes, however, an odd one appears, with an unhealthy inclination for travelling and adventures. Bilbo is a typical hobbit living in a comfortable hole, Bag End. Despite having troublemakers among his ancestors (one of them could even mount a real horse, took part in fights with goblins, and – according to rumours – during one of them accidentally invented golf), he lives peacefully enjoying food, drinks, and pipe-weed. Yet, one day everything changes and due to Gandalf's intrigue he joins the dwarves' expedition. This toughens him, challenging his persistence, courage, and cleverness. Paradoxically, being so different from others, he brings a fresh perspective what together with his innate common sense makes him the ace of the team. Again and again, Bilbo manages to save himself and his companions from troubles, and each adventure is a new, more difficult test, preparing him for the encounter with Smaug. Out of all characters, Bilbo is the most ordinary one, most resembling a "regular human". He is not able to face the dragon alone, not only because of physical reasons but also on the level of the narration itself – only a hero, a descendant or/and future progenitor of kings can kill a dragon. Bilbo is neither and has no chance to become anyone of this sort. Instead of a legendary magical sword, all he has is a children's toy (despite the exquisite workmanship and the spell that warns about orcs approaching, most likely Sting was simply a training sword of an elven child), and the magical ring is not able to make him invisible to the dragon's olfaction and flames. When Smaug wakes up and finds Bilbo in his treasury, it seems the hobbit is doomed to die in flames or in the dragon's jaws. But Bilbo proved many times that he is indeed the architect of his own fortune, and his witty mind can take advantage of every occasion. Luck is on his side as well. In the Misty Mountains' caves he has found the One Ring which provides him invisibility (and in the future will lead to saving the world and destroying the Dark Lord, though it would hugely inconvenience Bilbo and his inheritor), while the experience of playing riddles with Gollum taught him cunning and that it is possible to talk to a monster, or even deceive it, and save oneself only by using the right words. Travelling the Mirkwood, he is forced to act instead of only reacting to events, and naming his sword is the ultimate proof of that. Rather than inherit a legendary blade with a great name, Bilbo himself

gives it a name – Sting – as a remembrance of spiders’ terrified screams and builds its history. This is why, when faced with Smaug, he does something no one else would do – he starts a conversation with the dragon. Cleverly he plasters it with praise and answers questions with riddles what amuses the weary beast. Even though, in the end, Bilbo says one word too much and angers the dragon, by this time he had already localised the Arkenstone and – what is of huge importance – found the gap in Smaug’s armour, the bare patch on his underside. This information proves itself crucial. Later it is taken up by a thrust and passed to Bard in the critical moment. Without this knowledge, it would be impossible for Bard to kill the dragon even using a magical arrow, and all people from Esgaroth would perish.

Finally, a few words about Smaug. Tolkien wrote about the origins of his name in a letter addressed to an editor from the *Observer* magazine:

The dragon bears as name – a pseudonym – the past tense of the primitive Germanic verb Smugan, to squeeze through a hole: a low philological jest. (Tolkien, 1981, p. 39)

Smaug’s creation is based on the dragon from *Beowulf* and has features taken from Fafnir as well, like speech and additional armour. Similarly to his predecessors, Smaug is a victim of the treasure, and being chained to one place for two centuries, he certainly lost much of his power. It has to be noted that, just like the other two dragons, he was completely harmless. Once he claimed the treasury, he did not leave the mountain – until Bilbo invaded his space. After catching Bilbo on another escapade to the treasury, he is more curious about the unknown scent and prefers to talk to the intruder instead of simply killing him, though he still has rather bad intentions and does not engage in a conversation out of the goodness of his heart. It is worth mentioning that Smaug represents the end of mythical times in Middle-earth. Smaug may be threatening, but he is nothing compared to Glaurung or Ancalagon. He is much smaller, possesses only a fraction of power the old beasts had and is not able to use the dragon hypnosis, like Glaurung. What he has left is a “venomous tongue” – his words still have a toxic charm with which he tries to manipulate the hobbit and turn him against his friends. The dismay the dragon’s presence causes in nature is also important. Even though Smaug remains in his lair for centuries, around the mountain there is the only desolation without any signs of life. When shot with the arrow, he falls into a lake, covering it with ashes. Water in the lake boils in contact with his corpse, and

remains polluted, evoking disgust among the people living nearby. No one is capable of going near the dragon's remains that lie in the shallows to reclaim the precious gemstones from his armour.

Conclusions

Analysing the text from the dragon's perspective opens new areas for interpretation. In the face of a dragon as the antagonist, the first thing the hero needs to fight is his own flaws, for it is them, not the dragon, what can lead him to destruction. Only the victory over oneself can lead to the victory over the dragon. The dragon is a deeply-rooted symbol of the antagonist, of an ethical conflict to be confronted. The characters in the novel hover around this figure, representing various ethical attitudes. Bard is brave and faces the problem, Bilbo is clever and honest, while Thorin, though until now noble and righteous, shows a tremendous flaw and makes bad decisions burdened with terrible consequences. During the lesson, children can evaluate those characters, play their roles, consider their motivations, and eventually discuss the moral dilemmas and the hierarchy of values presented in the novel.

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Summary: This article focuses on the dragon character in literature, taking Tolkien's *Hobbit* as an example while employing a pedagogical perspective. The dragon, as the antagonist, is a recurring motif in literary fiction, especially in fantasy, and together with the hero represents the struggle between good and evil. Smaug the dragon and other characters, as well as their moral codes and motivations, are analysed in the context of other similar classic literary works, e.g. *Beowulf*. The author then proceeds to present how discussing the antagonist character in class, and using various methods for forming morality, may benefit the development of children's moral code and emotional intelligence.

Keywords: Hobbit, Tolkien, dragon, hero, morality development

OBRAZ SMOKA W LITERATURZE. PERSPEKTYWA PEDAGOGICZNA OPARTA NA ANALIZIE *HOBBITA* RONALDA REUELA TOLKIENA

Streszczenie: Artykuł koncentruje się na analizie literackiej postaci smoka, odnosząc się do *Hobbity* J.R.R. Tolkiena jako przykładu, przy wykorzystaniu perspektywy pedagogicznej. Smok jako antagonistą jest powracającym motywem literackim, zwłaszcza w literaturze fantastycznej, razem z bohaterem reprezentuje trudną i niejednoznaczną walkę dobra ze złem. Smok Smaug oraz stykające się

z nim postacie, wraz z ich kodami moralnymi i motywacjami, są analizowane w kontekście innych podobnych klasycznych dzieł literackich, np. *Beowulf*. Następnie autor przedstawia, jak dyskusja o postaci antagonisty w klasie, przy użyciu różnych metod kształtowania moralności, może korzystnie wpłynąć na rozwój kodeksu moralnego i inteligencji emocjonalnej dzieci.

Słowa kluczowe: Hobbit, Tolkien, smok, bohater, rozwój moralności