



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

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**The Theme of Friendship in J.R.R.  
Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings***

**B.A. Essay**

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**May 2012**

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## Abstract

There are numerous interesting factors to be explored in J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*. One of these interesting factors is the theme of friendship, which is an important underlying theme throughout the books. In order to explore the theme, it is vital to examine what characteristics different friendships have in common in Tolkien's books. Tolkien himself seems to have valued friendship very highly, and there are certain elements which he seems to have emphasised as important factors in such relationships throughout his life. Thus by comparing Tolkien's own views regarding friendship to the relationships in the books these factors are revealed.

All of Tolkien's friendships in *The Lord of the Rings* are grounded in honesty, loyalty and mutual respect, but are also quite diverse and complicated. Therefore it is important to consider how these friendships relate to male-bonding and homoeroticism, master-servant relationships and the shared quest. Firstly, Tolkien's past seems to have influenced the friendships in his books, as there are definitely some similarities between relationships and incidents in Tolkien's life, and certain scenarios in the books. Secondly, as critics have sometimes been apt to interpret relationships in *The Lord of the Rings* in homoerotic ways, it is interesting to examine their arguments and the possible explanations for intimate behaviour, made by other critics. Thirdly, some master-servant relationships in the books are extraordinary and involve friendship based on loyalty and mutual respect. Finally, there are examples of relationships in the books, such as Gimli and Legolas' relationship, that seem to fit almost perfectly to C.S. Lewis' description of friendship in *The Four Loves*, as the members become friends through their shared quest.

All the main friendships in the books, no matter how diverse and complicated they are, share the fact that they are based on love, loyalty and mutual respect. Therefore the theme of friendship in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is quite interesting to explore in relation to these elements.

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## 1. Introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, was initially published in three volumes in 1954 and 1955. At first, the story was supposed to be a sequel to Tolkien's earlier fantasy novel, *The Hobbit*, but eventually developed into a much larger work, meant for adults rather than children. It is, without a shred of doubt, one of the most explored novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as countless books, criticisms, essays and articles have been written about the novel. There are numerous interesting factors to be explored in *The Lord of the Rings*, be it linguistic material, characters or general themes in the novel. One of the most interesting themes in the books is the theme of friendship, as it is in many ways the characters' love for one another that seems to move the plot of the novel forward, and furthermore, Tolkien himself seems to have valued friendship very highly.

In order to explore the theme of friendship in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, it is important to define what consists in the concept of friendship. When seeking definitions it is customary to look them up in a dictionary, but it turns out that such simple definitions are totally inadequate for the purpose of defining the complex concept of friendship. According to the *MacMillan English Dictionary* friendship is defined as "a relationship between people who are friends" ("Friendship"), which is obviously quite insufficient, as it leaves the concept of friends open to interpretation. Furthermore, the definition does not explain what is distinctive about friendships in any other way. Therefore it is important to also look into the definition of friends, and according to the dictionary a friend is "someone that you know well and like that is not a member of your family" ("Friend"), which indicates that friendship is a relationship between people who know and like each other well. However, this definition does not include an explanation of why people grow to like and know one another and eventually become friends. Therefore, as these definitions seem quite inadequate for the purpose of exploring the meaning of the complex concept of friendship, it is vital to explore Tolkien's own feelings of friendship and what the concept means for him.

It is evident in *The Lord of the Rings* that the concept of loyalty means a lot to Tolkien, as can for example be seen in Frodo and Sam's relationship and in the

relationship between Merry and Théoden. Furthermore, mutual respect seems to be an important factor, as all the characters that are involved in a friendship of any kind, seem to respect one another immensely. These are both factors that Tolkien seems to have valued in real life, as he got to know loyalty through his war experience, and mutual respect was most definitely apparent in his relationships with his friends in the TCBS and his fellows in the Inklings. Another factor Tolkien seems to value highly in a friendship is honesty, which becomes especially apparent in how he and his friends, both in the TCBS and in the Inklings, loved to criticize each others' work. Of Tolkien's friendship with Christopher Wiseman, John Garth states: "They discovered that they could argue with an incandescence few friendships could survive, and their disputes only served to seal the intensely strong bond between them" (5). Thus honesty, although it can trigger an argument, strengthens the bond between friends. Moreover, Tolkien wrote in his diary in October in 1933 that honesty was one of the things he valued the most in his friend C.S. Lewis (Carpenter, *The Inklings* 52). Finally, Tolkien seems to agree with his old friend C.S. Lewis, that in a friendship "no one cares twopence about anyone else's family, profession, class, income, race or previous history" (Lewis 83), which is quite understandable as Tolkien himself comes from a lower class family. This becomes quite apparent in his admiration for the batmen of World War I (Carpenter, *J.R.R.* 89), and, of course, in the relationships in *The Lord of the Rings*. Thus it seems that loyalty, honesty, mutual respect and disregard of social class or previous history, are among the things that Tolkien values in a friendship, and the friendships in *The Lord of the Rings* are grounded on those factors.

There are many factors to explore when discussing the theme of friendship in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Firstly, it may be interesting to look for similarities between Tolkien's personal friendships and those in the books, although Tolkien himself was against digging too deep into authors' personal experiences in order to give meaning to their work (Tolkien, *Letters* 288). However, there are definitely some similarities between relationships and incidents in Tolkien's life, and certain scenarios in the books. These similarities have partially been confirmed by Tolkien, as he has admitted basing certain characters on people from his life. Furthermore, and more concerning the theme of friendship, there are definite similarities between how the characters of the books deal with the loss of friends, and how Tolkien himself dealt with

losing some of his friends in World War I. Thus, it can certainly be interesting to explore Tolkien's experience in regards to the theme of friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Secondly, as numerous critics believe they have found evidence of homoeroticism, primarily in Sam and Frodo's relationship, in Tolkien's books, it is important to explore the matter in order to find out whether some of the friendships in the books are in fact love affairs. There is no denying the fact that Frodo and Sam's relationship seems to be an extremely intimate one, as they often embrace, stroke and kiss each other, and is therefore open to homoerotic interpretation. Nevertheless, intimacy between friends is not necessarily evidence of homosexuality, and many critics have found other explanations for their intimate behaviour. Therefore, it is of importance to explore their relationship and consider the so-called evidence for homoeroticism and the arguments of those who aim to explain their behaviour by non-homoerotic means.

Thirdly, master-servant relationships are definitely at the forefront of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, but many of them seem to include something more than a regular relationship between a master and his subordinate. Masters and servants are able to become friends through the medium of mutual love, loyalty and respect, as is particularly evident in the relationships between Frodo and Sam on the one hand, and Merry and Théoden on the other. Tolkien forces the reader "to confront the breakdown of social hierarchies by imagining a form of subordination without exploitation" (Kleinman 145), and thus a friendship between a master and his subordinate becomes a realistic possibility. Both parties certainly have a part to play in their relationship, but they are united in the love they share for each other. Therefore, it is extremely interesting to explore those relationships, and find out what it is that makes them extraordinary.

Finally, C.S. Lewis has discussed, in his book *The Four Loves*, how a common quest brings friends together and allows their friendship to develop while they concentrate on a common interest. This seems to be exactly the case with Legolas and Gimli's friendship in Tolkien's books, and what makes their relationship even more extraordinary is the fact that they do not only make the shift from strangers to friends, but rather from foes to best friends. Therefore their development is perhaps even clearer



as they challenge ancient conventions of distrust between their races and come to admire and love each other. In their relationship mutual respect becomes very apparent, and the loyalty between the two means that they are prepared to do anything to protect one another. Their friendship is thus an example of how the horrors of war can produce some positive results. Hence it is of importance to examine how their relationship develops and how they are able to challenge old conventions as they grow to love one another through their common quest.

Thus, all of Tolkien's friendships in *The Lord of the Rings* are grounded in honesty, loyalty and mutual respect, but are also quite diverse and complicated. Therefore it is important to consider how these friendships relate to male-bonding and homoeroticism, master-servant relationships and the shared quest. In section 2, it is considered how friendships in the books draw on Tolkien's own friendship, in section 3, evidence of homoeroticism in the books is explored, in section 4, the complexity of master-servant relationships is examined, and finally in section five, it is discussed how a common quest can bring friends together.

## 2. Tolkien's experience

J.R.R. Tolkien disliked the fact that critics seemed to have an immense interest in the details of authors' lives, when criticising their work. In fact he believed that "they only distract attention from an author's work . . . and end, as one now often sees, in becoming the main interest" (Tolkien, *Letters* 288). Nevertheless, there is no way of denying the fact that Tolkien's own experience, especially his war experience, unsurprisingly had an enormous impact on his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*. In spite of his dislike of peering too closely into an author's life in order to give meaning to his work, Tolkien has, of course, never denied that certain elements in the books are based on his own experience. In relations to the theme of friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*, he has for example said that the character of Sam Gamgee, who is a part of arguably the strongest friendship in the books, is indeed based on the privates and batmen he got to know in the First World War (Carpenter, *J.R.R.* 89), as many critics and readers had already guessed. However, there are certainly more similarities between Tolkien's life and scenarios from his books which are interesting to examine in regards

to the theme of friendship. One worth mentioning is how the inner structure of the fellowship seems to be akin to the inner structure of the Inklings, a literary group in which Tolkien participated at Oxford. Another is the loss of friends, which Tolkien regrettably became very familiar with in World War I. Although the main characters of the books survive their endeavour, this type of loss becomes apparent when Frodo departs from the Grey Havens and leaves Sam behind (Smol 961-962). Thus, in spite of Tolkien's disapproval of looking too closely at an author's life in order to understand his work and giving it meaning, there are most definitely some factors from his own experience of friendship that are mirrored in his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*.

First of all, the fact that the character of Sam is based on the privates and batmen who Tolkien fought with in World War I, must be of great importance when talking about the theme of friendship in the books, as Sam and Frodo's relationship is arguably the strongest and most important friendship in *The Lord of the Rings*. The attributes which Tolkien gives to Sam are extremely admirable: he is certainly a great servant, but more importantly he is a true friend, as is displayed in his loyalty and the love he bears for Frodo throughout the novel. These attributes can easily be explained by looking at how Tolkien talked about the soldiers he fought with in the First World War. "My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflexion of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognised as so far superior to myself" (Carpenter, *J.R.R.* 89). Therefore, it is apparent that Tolkien respects and admires his subordinates, not unlike Frodo who seems to respect and admire Sam, and although Tolkien was an officer and thus supposed to be superior to the privates and the batmen, he did not feel superior to them at all.

Nevertheless, Tolkien did not share a close friendship with the batmen or the privates in the war, at least nowhere near as close as Frodo and Sam's friendship is in the books. Therefore it is probably impossible to argue that the hobbits' close relationship is based on Tolkien's own experience in the war, although Sam's character definitely is. However, it can be argued that Frodo and Sam's type of friendship is perhaps an example of something Tolkien believed he missed out on during the war, as Tolkien was not permitted to socialise or make friends with men from lower ranks in the army (Garth 149), and as a result he never experienced a close war-time friendship, based on loyalty and mutual respect, with his subordinates. On the contrary, Frodo

never has these kinds of restrictions in the books, as he has no superiors ordering him with whom to socialise and is therefore able to make a great friend, who is in fact his subordinate as his gardener, of a lower social class. Therefore it is quite clear that Tolkien built the character of Sam on the privates and batmen he admired so much in World War I, and it is also entirely possible that at least some part of perhaps the most important friendship in *The Lord of the Rings* is structured after a relationship that Tolkien could imagine but never experience, due to the restrictions of military protocol.

Secondly, the friendships in the books and the friendships shared by members of the Inklings seem, in some way, to be based on similar principles. Carpenter describes how C.S. Lewis, who was without a doubt the centre of the Inklings, disliked groups which are held together by lust for power rather than friendship. He goes on to say that the Inklings was in no way such a group “for friendship was the foundation upon which the group rested” (*The Inklings* 163). Similarly, desire for power has no place in the fellowship, as lust for power would quite obviously be the very thing that would tear the fellowship apart and make their objective impossible to accomplish. That is exactly what happens when Boromir has a brief moment of weakness and tries to take the ring from Frodo (Tolkien, *The Lord* 390), and the fellowship is eventually dissolved. However it seems quite clear, that the Inklings and the fellowship share the trait, that desire for power is not the foundation on which the groups are built. Furthermore, it is interesting that the members of the Inklings never seemed to discuss their personal matters with each other and Carpenter even states that Lewis “felt that it was not the done thing for male friends to discuss their domestic or personal problems” (*The Inklings* 164). This surely seems to be the case in many of the friendships in *The Lord of the Rings*, especially in Legolas and Gimli’s relationship, as they rarely discuss personal matters, but focus instead on their common quest. Thus the friendships in *The Lord of the Rings* have much in common with Tolkien’s friendships with his fellow members of the Inklings.

Thirdly, Tolkien’s experience of the loss of friends has many similarities with Sam’s experience when Frodo departs from the Grey Havens (Smol 960-961). Tolkien lost two of his best friends, G.B. Smith and Rob Gilson, in the war, and therefore only Tolkien himself and Christopher Wiseman were left of the old TCBS (Tolkien, *The Lord* xvii). Although Frodo does not die in *The Lord of the Rings*, it can certainly be

stated that Sam loses a friend, though not in the exact same way as Tolkien. When Rob Gilson died, Tolkien reported on having spent two nights in a row, alone in the woods thinking about his lost friend and Anna Smol finds similarities in Sam's reaction when Frodo leaves, as he also needs time to think about his lost friend (961).

But to Sam the evening deepened to darkness as he stood at the Haven; and as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West. There still he stood far into the night, hearing only the sigh and murmur of the waves on the shores of middle earth, and the sound of them sank deep into his heart. (Tolkien, *The Lord* 1007)

Thus Sam stares at the sea to grieve and think about his lost friend, similar to how Tolkien spent his nights in the woods, thinking about Gilson. Moreover, both Sam and Tolkien are left a task by their lost friends. On the one hand, Frodo gives Sam his book to finish, while on the other hand Tolkien is left the task of fulfilling the TCBSian dream "of kindling 'a new light' at the world at large" (Garth 254), by his lost friends. Therefore it seems clear that the loss of Frodo to Sam in the books, shares some similarities with how Tolkien lost his friends in the First World War.

Therefore it seems quite clear, that although Tolkien was against scrutinizing an author's past in order to give meaning to his work, many similarities can be found in Tolkien's experience and certain scenarios in *The Lord of the Rings*. He has openly admitted building the character of Sam on his fellow privates and batmen in World War I, and the same character seems to deal with similar scenarios as Tolkien was forced to deal with in the war. Furthermore, Tolkien's friendships at Oxford seem to share some traits with certain friendships in his books. Thus, Tolkien's experience and past can definitely be scrutinized in order to reach a better understanding of his epic masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*.

### **3. Homoeroticism**

There is almost no physical tenderness between men and women in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the love relationships that are introduced, such as the one between Aragorn and Arwen on the one hand, and Faramir and Éowyn on the other hand, do not seem to be based on intimacy. This lack of physical intimacy between the sexes is perhaps one

of the reasons why critics have investigated whether there is any trace of homosexuality in the books. Some critics, such as David M. Craig and Brenda Partridge, believe they have found evidence of homoeroticism in Tolkien's books, primarily in Frodo and Sam's relationship, which is undeniably a very intimate friendship, as they repeatedly embrace, stroke and kiss each other. In contrast, Partridge, along with other critics, such as Saxey and Bradley, also states that a close and intimate male relationship need not necessarily be a homosexual one. However, if these homoerotic interpretations are to be refuted, some explanations are in order, as there are certainly some examples of male behaviour in the books that at first sight, might definitely be interpreted as homoerotic. C.S. Lewis states that "kisses, tears and embraces are not in themselves evidence of homosexuality" (75), to which most people, except for perhaps the enormously homophobic, would probably agree. However, Sam and Frodo's relationship seems to be different from many other relationships in the books in this way. Strokes and kisses are for example not common in Gimli and Legolas' friendship, which does not seem to be as physically intimate as Frodo and Sam's relationship. Moreover, Lewis also states that "lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest" (73), and while that description of friendship seems to fit perfectly to Legolas and Gimli's relationship and most of the other examples of friendship in the books, it does not quite seem to mirror the complex and intimate relationship that Frodo and Sam share. Although they are certainly absorbed in the common interest of journeying to Mordor, they also seem to be quite absorbed in each other, which according to Lewis is the behavioural pattern of lovers. Therefore it seems important to explore their relationship further, in order to see if their relationship can be classified as anything else than homoerotic.

As mentioned before, there are certainly many passages, involving Frodo and Sam that are apt to be interpreted as homoerotic. The description of Frodo's sleeping arrangements at the Stairs of Cirith Ungol is a great example: "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" (Tolkien, *The Lord* 699). There are surely many other instances in the books where the hobbits share such intimacy, but some critics have offered the overall surroundings and the ongoing war in the story as an explanation of behaviour that others might interpret as homoerotic. Esther Saxey

points out, that traditions in Tolkien's fictional world, such as Merry kissing Théoden's hand when he pledges his allegiance, may account for and give "context for Sam's continual holding, kissing and stroking of Frodo's hand" (132), as Frodo is, after all, Sam's master. Furthermore, "affectionate and emotional displays are permitted, not alone to women and children, but to men" (Bradley 109) in Tolkien's world, which can be seen in multiple examples when the main characters wail, weep or embrace each other. Thus, Sam's behaviour towards Frodo can at least partially be explained as customary and fitting for a servant paying homage to his master.

On a similar note, Brenda Partridge offers the ongoing war as a possible explanation for the shared intimacy between Frodo and Sam. She states:

War provides a context in which men can be acceptably intimate because they are at the same time being seen to live up to the socially desirable stereotype image of the aggressive male. Similarly, aggression on a smaller scale in games, particularly rugby, is another means of promoting socially acceptable physical contact between males. (184)

Frodo and Sam are certainly fighting a war, although they are not in the middle of the actual fighting, as the other main characters. However, their fight is arguably the most dangerous one, as they seek to enter the stronghold of the dark lord himself, and as they get closer to their goal, and consequently closer to peril, they get even more intimate. Partridge's explanation that the war allows for more intimate relationships between men, would suggest that Sam and Frodo's intimacy would reduce when the war is over. That is exactly what happens, for when the war is over, there is at least no trace of physical intimacy between them that can be compared to their close relationship during the peak of the war. Thus, the fact that war changes relationships and allows for more intimacy, is a possible partial explanation for the intimate male bonding in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Finally, it is worth mentioning, that Peter Jackson's film adaptations may have contributed to a more homoerotic view of Tolkien's books, which may come as a surprise, as the films certainly downplay Sam and Frodo's intimate physical relationship. Nevertheless, the films make the viewers question the male-to-male relationships more than the readers of the books, as the films draw romantic relationships to the forefront of the action. However, the male-to-male relationships

still of the most importance in the film adaptations, and therefore “the viewer may notice how flimsy the heterosexual relationships are in contrast with the male-male bonds, how much more the men admire and owe one another” (Saxey 135). Thus, by reducing the physical intimacy between males, and introducing heterosexual relationships, the film adaptations may have made *The Lord of the Rings* more apt to homoerotic interpretation.

In the main, there are many definite examples of behaviour that in some context can be classified as homoerotic in Tolkien’s books, but there are also numerous explanations that can perhaps account for the close and intimate relationships in other terms. It is at least highly unlikely that Tolkien, the devout catholic, would consciously represent homosexuality in his works (Smol 967). Whether he did so unconsciously remains unsaid, because it is irrelevant to the central meaning of the books, as “sex is not central to the narrative; a sexual reading is made optional” (Saxey 133). It is at least certain, that Frodo and Sam’s relationship includes factors that Tolkien valued highly in a friendship, mainly honesty, respect and loyalty. It is likely that Frodo and Sam love each other simply as friends, although there is a possibility that they are in love.

#### **4. Master-Servant Relationships**

Relationships between a master and a subordinate or a servant are quite common in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. First of all there are numerous examples of men (or other living beings of Middle-Earth) fighting for their king or lord, and Merry is one of those that experiences that first hand in his service to Théoden. Secondly, there is the extraordinary master-servant relationship between Frodo and Sam, where Sam certainly acts the role of the unselfish servant and Frodo the role of the kind master. However, many of these relationships seem to be based on more than social hierarchies, as they seem to be inspired by love and loyalty, and perhaps even friendship. It is, for example, difficult to deny the fact that Frodo and Sam’s relationship seems to have become something more than a classic relationship between a master and a servant. Moreover, Théoden and Merry’s relationship, although it is a short one, might also be interpreted as more complicated than ordinary relationships between a king and his subordinate. In

order for a master and his subordinate to become friends, it is vital that the master treats his subordinate in an extremely kind and fair way, which seems to be the case with both Frodo and Théoden. Therefore, Scott Kleinman states that Tolkien “constructs a scenario in which the reader is forced to confront the breakdown of social hierarchies by imagining a form of subordination without exploitation” (145), which is exactly what makes a friendships between a master and his subordinate possible. On the other hand, the subordinate will also need to treat his master well and serve him loyally in order for their relationship to become a friendship. Tolkien defines a subordinate in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son* as “a man for whom the object of his will was decided by another, who had no responsibility downwards, only loyalty upwards. Personal pride was therefore in him at its lowest, and love and loyalty highest” (14). This definition seems to fit quite well to Merry, and almost perfectly to Sam, who seems to be the ideal subordinate. Therefore, Tolkien makes friendships between masters and their subordinate quite possible, by bridging the gap between different social classes with mutual love, loyalty and respect.

Both Merry and Pippin enter the services of mighty men, the King of Rohan and the Steward of Gondor, but for entirely different reasons. Whereas Merry is “filled suddenly with love for this old man [referring to Théoden]” (Tolkien, *The Lord* 760), “Pippin’s own motives for offering his service are feelings of pride and indebtedness, rather than affection for the recipient of his service” (Kleinman 142). Therefore Pippin does not quite seem to fit into Tolkien’s definition of a subordinate in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son*, and unsurprisingly Pippin and Denethor’s relationship does not resemble a friendship in any way. Merry, on the other hand, enters his service because of the affection he feels for Théoden, and is therefore somewhat closer to Tolkien’s definition of a subordinate, and moreover, Théoden inspires love in his subordinates, unlike Denethor, by showing his affection to them.

Théoden and Merry’s relationship seems to include something more than a regular relationship between a king and his serviceman, and resembles a friendship in many ways. Théoden expresses his wish to converse with Merry on matters, that do neither concern Rohan nor Merry’s service to him, when the war is over, when he invites Merry and Pippin to meet him in Meduseld and says: “There shall you sit beside me and tell me all that your hearts desire” (Tolkien, *The Lord* 545). It is surely an



honour to be invited to sit beside the king and converse with him, and it is definitely a friendly gesture from Théoden. Nevertheless it has to be kept in mind that Merry and Pippin have done a great service to the realm, and perhaps this is only Théoden's way of rewarding them. However, Théoden's kind gestures towards Merry continue, resulting in Merry offering him his service, which Théoden gladly accepts. "As a father you shall be to me" (Tolkien, *The Lord* 760), says Merry and the love between the two is established.

Furthermore, the love that Merry bears for Théoden is clearly displayed as "together Éowyn and Merry face and slay the Nazgûl, both striking an enemy far beyond their strength for the love of a father, Théoden" (Bradley 114). At this point it may be uncertain whether Merry bears this love for Théoden as a friend or as the king and a father-figure. Théoden was certainly a father-figure to Merry, as he states himself, and Merry surely loves him as his king, but Merry's reaction when Théoden dies displays that he was also his friend. "He said he was sorry he had never had a chance of talking herb-lore with me. Almost the last thing he ever said. I shan't ever be able to smoke again without thinking of him" (Tolkien, *The Lord* 825). If Merry had just loved Théoden as a king, it is likely that he would mainly think of the loss that Rohan has suffered, but he loves him as a friend and therefore grieves for the times they never got to share at Meduseld. Similarly, Théoden's last words display that their relationship was based on more than social hierarchies and subordination:

Grieve not! It is forgiven. Great heart will not be denied. Live now in blessedness; and when you sit in peace with your pipe, think of me. For never now shall I sit with you in Meduseld, as I promised, or listen to your herb-lore.  
(Tolkien, *The Lord* 824)

He immediately forgives Merry for breaking his commands, and like Merry, he grieves for their friendship that never got to blossom to its fullest. Thus, it is quite clear that although Merry and Théoden's relationship is a master-servant relationship, it is based on love, loyalty and mutual affection, which makes it possible for them to become friends, despite their extremely different roles in life.

Frodo and Sam's relationship is the most prominent master-servant relationship in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, and perhaps a paradigm of how a master and a servant should treat each other. In *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*, John

Chancer discusses how Bilbo and Frodo liked to converse and surround themselves with other hobbits, regardless of their social class. They were considered queer because of their interaction with ‘lesser’ hobbits, but Chancer states, that “the birthday party, in the Shire, represents a symbolic paradigm for the ideal relationship between master and servant, wealthy aristocrat and members of the populace” (29). Thus Frodo’s disregard for social class builds a foundation on which he can enter a friendship with his gardener, Samwise Gamgee.

Therefore, the friendship between the pair becomes possible, just as Théoden and Merry’s friendship became a possibility because of the kindness Théoden showed Merry. Nevertheless, there are important differences between those two master-servant relationships, as Scott Kleinman discusses in his essay “Service”.

The bond that ties Sam to Frodo is ‘queer’ in that, unlike the Germanic model in which service is inspired by love, Sam comes to love Frodo through his service to him. At the same time, Sam’s subordination to Frodo is not based on any formal oath of fealty or homage; ultimately, he is Frodo’s ‘man’ because he admires him and he admires him because he is his ‘man’. (148)

Thus, whereas Merry offers his service because of the sudden love he feels for the king, Sam probably does not love Frodo when he enters his service, but grows to love him through his service. However, Sam always seems to look at himself as inferior to Frodo, and although he loves Frodo, he seems to feel that his responsibility towards Frodo is first and foremost as a servant. This is clearly displayed in how Sam frequently addresses his master as “Mr. Frodo” and Marion Zimmer Bradley points out the fact that the first time he drops his formalities is when he believes Frodo is dead, “although after rescuing him he returns to the old deferential speech” (120). When Sam believes Frodo to be dead, Sam is no longer in his service, and therefore allows himself to address him as his friend, instead of his master.

Although, Sam thinks of himself first and foremost as Frodo’s loyal servant, it is evident that his actions display something more than regular devotion towards his master. Frodo, certainly has a terrible burden to bear and “has known torment and agony and terror, but Sam has endured them voluntarily, with no great cause to strengthen his will; rather it was only for the sake of one he loves beyond everything else” (Bradley 124). This is clearly not the type of love that a regular gardener bears for his master, this

is something much more, as Sam surely loves Frodo as a master, but foremost as his friend. Thus Frodo's disregard for social class, and his kindness and love towards Sam, have strengthened Sam in his service to his master, and more importantly allowed them to love each other and share a strong friendship. Frodo and Sam's relationship is therefore not only a master-servant relationship, but rather a rare and true friendship between a master and his servant, based on loyalty, trust and mutual affection, not unlike the relationships Tolkien experienced in the First World War, between the officers and their batmen (Carpenter, *J.R.R.* 89).

All in all, there certainly seems to be something more than meets the eye in some of the master-servant relationships in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The reader is made to imagine "a form of subordination without exploitation" (Kleinman 145), and thus friendships between masters and their subordinates become a possibility. The elements needed for such a friendship are, in the main, mutual love, loyalty and respect. Therefore friendships between a master and his subordinates are not possible, when their relationship is ruled by social hierarchies, as in Denethor's case. On the contrary, Théoden and Frodo are the ideal masters, who both respect and love their subordinates, who in turn love them back. Thus the foundation for a friendship between a master and his servant is built, which results in two great friendships, between Merry and Théoden on the one hand, and Sam and Frodo on the other hand.

## 5. The Common Quest

A number of friendships in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* are formed partly, or even entirely, because of the common quest the characters share. In no other friendship is this more evident than in Legolas and Gimli's case, as they not only grow from being strangers into friends, but rather from being foes into great friends, which makes the development of their friendship more obvious. Unlike Frodo and Sam's friendship in the books, Legolas and Gimli's friendship seems to fit almost perfectly to C.S. Lewis' definition in *The Four Loves*, as they are certainly more absorbed in their common interest than in each other (Lewis 73). Through their shared endeavour a close friendship is formed, as "the common quest or vision which unites Friends does not

absorb them in such a way that they remain ignorant or oblivious of one another. On the contrary it is the very medium in which their mutual love and knowledge exist” (Lewis 84). Thus their common quest allows their friendship to grow, as they get to know each other better through their shared endeavours. In order to see how exactly Gimli and Legolas make the remarkable shift from foes to friends, it is important to explore how their relationship develops through J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

It is evident, first in *The Hobbit* and then in *The Lord of the Rings* that Elves and Dwarves have not been on friendly terms for many years, which makes Legolas and Gimli’s friendship a very remarkable one. This becomes apparent at the Council of Elrond when Glóin remembers his imprisonment by the Elves of Mirkwood and Gandalf says to him: “If all the grievances that stand between Elves and Dwarves are to be brought up here, we may as well abandon this Council” (Tolkien, *The Lord* 249). Therefore it is quite clear that past encounters between Elves and Dwarves are not at all likely to bring Legolas and Gimli together in friendship. It is interesting to note, that there are perhaps certain similarities here with Tolkien and Lewis’ friendship, as Tolkien had disliked Protestants since his child-hood and “Lewis retained more than a trace of the Belfast Protestant attitude to Catholics” (Carpenter, *The Inklings* 51), and thus Tolkien and Lewis also had to overcome their prejudices in order to become friends.

In the beginning of the fellowship’s quest, Gimli and Legolas are quite wary of each other, and it is clear that there is little love between them. Gimli does for example demand that Legolas will also be blindfolded in Lothlórien, which makes Legolas angry, as he has long yearned to see the wonders of the forest with his own eyes (Tolkien, *The Lord* 339). However, Gimli’s attitude towards Elves seems to change after his stay with them in Lothlórien. “You are kindly hosts!” (Tolkien, *The Lord* 360), he declares at his departure, which exhibits the diminishing of his distrust towards the Elves. Furthermore, the parting gift Gimli received from Galadriel, of three golden hairs from her head, reveals his admiration for Galadriel and the Elves. In fact, Ármann Jakobsson states that Galadriel’s gift to Gimli is symbolic for a new hope of friendship between Elves and Dwarves (115), which seems to be the case, as Gimli and Legolas’ relationship begins to develop into a close friendship after their departure from Lórien.

As their friendship grows, it becomes apparent that their affection for each other is largely based on their admiration for each other as warriors, as is often displayed when they compete in Orc-slaying. When C.S. Lewis defines friendship, he states that it is impossible to “find the warrior, the poet, the philosopher or the Christian by staring in his eyes as if he were your mistress: better fight beside him, read with him, argue with him, pray with him” (84-85), and as warriors Gimli and Legolas get to know each other better by fighting beside each other. That is not to say that their relationship is solely based on fighting together, for then they would hardly be more than allies rather than friends, although “a Friend will, to be sure, prove himself to be also an ally when alliance becomes necessary” (Lewis 82). On the contrary, other factors of their relationship are allowed to grow through their common quest, and eventually it becomes evident that they love each other’s company and like to converse with one another on matters beyond wars and fighting. Ármann Jakobsson even states that their friendship is in many parts akin to typical friendships between men in the northern hemisphere, largely based on clever conversations, perhaps even akin, in some ways, to Tolkien’s relationship with his friends at Oxford (227).

The fact that Gimli and Legolas are friends, but not mere allies, is crystallized after the war, when they journey together to Fangorn Forest and the Glittering Caves of Helm’s Deep to enjoy the wonders these places have to offer. Through their common quest they have grown to love each other against all odds, and after the fellowship breaks down they choose to stay in each other’s company. Their friendship is indeed a strange one, as is displayed repeatedly in the books by the amazement others have for it. A great example of how surprised others are by their friendship occurs when Legolas asks Treebeard leave to journey into Fangorn with Gimli:

‘Hoom, hm! Ah now,’ said Treebeard, looking dark-eyed at him. ‘A dwarf and an axe-bearer! Hoom! I have good will to Elves; but you ask much. This is a strange friendship!’

‘Strange it may seem,’ said Legolas; ‘but while Gimli lives I shall not come to Fangorn alone. (Tolkien, *The Lord* 571)

Thus the terrors of war can sometimes produce positive results, as Gimli and Legolas have overcome the strained relations between their races, and truly become friends. This fits well with what C.S. Lewis has said about friendship, that in such a relationship “no

one cares twopence about anyone else's family, profession, class, income, race or previous history" (83). Gimli and Legolas have therefore overcome the racism and other difficulties that have been evident in the relations between their races.

In the main, Legolas and Gimli's friendship is remarkable, mainly because of how strange and unlikely it seems. They have completely shunned old conventions, as becomes clear in how others react to their friendship, and made an extraordinary shift from foes to great friends. Moreover, they reach their friendship through their common quest, and as they begin to admire one another while fighting side by side, a close friendship, based on honesty, mutual respect and loyalty, is formed and they move from being foes to allies, and then from being allies to friends. Therefore, unlike Frodo and Sam's friendship, Legolas and Gimli's friendship seems to mirror C.S. Lewis' ideas about friendship very well, as it is their focus on their common quest that brings them together and allows them to cultivate their friendship.

## 6. Conclusion

All in all, it is evident that the theme of friendship in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has many interesting aspects to it, and is of great importance when exploring the novel. It is one of the most prominent themes in the books, as examples of great, and often quite unexpected friendships, are widespread throughout the novel. In order to explore these friendships, it is of importance to take Tolkien's beliefs about what designates a friendship into consideration. He seems to value factors such as loyalty and honesty very highly, which is mirrored in the friendships in *The Lord of the Rings*. Moreover, there seems to be evidence from Tolkien's own life that he also valued mutual respect and disregard for social class, as is apparent in his friendships in real life. These values of Tolkien are evident in his books, and thus allow for a number of great friendships, which are often quite diverse and complicated, which makes exploring the theme of friendship in the novel very interesting.

As *The Lord of the Rings* is such a large work, it is unsurprising that there are multiple different types of friendship displayed in the books. Firstly it is evident that Tolkien has used examples of friendship from his own life in his masterpiece, where his

great friendships with the members of the old TCBS and the members of the Inklings are of particular importance. Although Tolkien disapproved of peering too closely into an author's past to give meaning to his work, it is quite clear that the loss of friends has greatly affected him, and there are some definite similarities between how Tolkien deals with loss on the one hand, and how his characters in *The Lord of the Rings* do so on the other hand. Furthermore, some friendships in the books seem to share certain characteristics with Tolkien's own friendships. Therefore Tolkien's past can be a vital source of insight when exploring the theme of friendship in his books.

Secondly, it is interesting to explore the claims of critics that believe they have found evidence of homoeroticism in Tolkien's novel, as such claims are certainly relevant when examining the theme of friendship. Although it is extremely unlikely that Tolkien, the devout catholic, would consciously represent homosexuality in his works (Smol 967), it is quite possible that he may have done so unconsciously. There are at least multiple examples of male behaviour, especially between Frodo and Sam, that seem to be open to homoerotic interpretation, as they repeatedly embrace, stroke and kiss each other. However, critics such as Saxey, Bradley and Partridge have offered the conventions of Tolkien's fictional world and the ongoing war as possible explanations for the hobbits' intimate relationship. Whether Frodo and Sam's friendship has erotic aspects to it, or is purely platonic remains unsaid, and there are compelling arguments on both sides. Nevertheless, it is certain that their relationship is based on factors that Tolkien values highly, as it is based on mutual love, loyalty and respect.

Thirdly, there are extraordinary master-servant relationships in Tolkien's books that break conventions and thus construct the possibility of a friendship between a master and his subordinate. In order for this type of friendship to be possible, it is of great importance that both parties respect one another enormously in spite of class difference. This disregard for social class seems to be something that Tolkien valued, which comes as no surprise as he himself came from a lower class upbringing. Another important factor in these friendships is loyalty, as the subordinate needs of course be loyal to his master, but similarly the master has to be loyal to his subordinates in his commitments. Both Frodo and Sam's friendship and Théoden and Merry's friendship are examples of this type of relationship based on mutual love, loyalty and respect. However, they differ in development, as Frodo and Sam's friendship was born out of

their master-servant relationship, while both relationships seem to have started almost simultaneously for Merry and Théoden. Thus Tolkien has created a world where friendships between masters and servants are not just an unlikely possibility.

Finally, the common quest of the members of the fellowship plays its part in developing great friendships in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. According to C.S. Lewis the common quest or a common interest allows friendships to grow and friends to get to know one another better as "it is the very medium in which their mutual love and knowledge exist" (84). This seems to be the case with Gimli and Legolas, who have little in common in the beginning of the story except for their quest. Through their quest they come to admire each other and eventually overcome the strained relations between their races and become great friends. The fact that they do become true friends but not mere allies is crystallized in their decision to continue to keep each other company when their quest is over. Their strange friendship is definitely an example of how something good can come of a terrible thing such as war, as they have overcome racism and ancient conventions and formed a friendship based on honesty, loyalty and mutual respect.

Therefore it seems that Tolkien's views about friendship are mirrored in his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*, as the friendships in the books seem to be mainly based on love, loyalty, honesty and mutual respect, which are factors that Tolkien seems to have valued highly in his own relationships. It is typical for the friends in the books, to value each other higher than they value themselves, and John Bunyan's description of Christina's friendship in *The Pilgrim's Progress* seems to fit almost perfectly to most of the friendship in Tolkien's novel:

They seemed to be a terror one to the other; for that they could not see that glory each one on herself which they could see in each other. Now, therefore, they began to esteem each other better than themselves. (170)



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