

Abstract: A King must be willing to first lower himself and live the life of a common man, before rising once more to his full stature. Boromir fails this test (he who should have realized that he was a Steward, not a King), but finally redeems himself in death. Strider/Aragorn fully passes his test and, unlike Boromir, does not die but instead triumphs over death, actually raising the Army of the Dead to help him in a great battle. After the Quest is completed, the ring destroyed, Strider fully becomes Aragorn, reunites Gondor and Arnor, and is crowned King. This is the classic path of the hero, one that can teach all of us many lessons about our own individuation.

Chapter Four: The Path of the King

Of all the major figures in *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn comes closest to presenting the classic Path of the hero. The hero is born to his destiny, yet has to first lower himself and serve others before he can gradually come to claim his crown. Often the story begins with the dethronement or death of the old king, followed by some great task which only the greatest hero can perform. Finally, having accomplished this task, the hero is not only crowned as the new king, but also often marries the princess, who becomes his queen.

This story, in all its many variants, has appeared over and over across time because it reflects an inner journey: the growth that must occur inside each of us in order to find our essential identity. We all contain greatness within, but we must first lower ourselves and perform menial tasks which teach us values that we could never otherwise learn. Then we must face a series of increasingly difficult challenges. With each success, we gain confidence. With each failure, we learn our limitations. Finally we face some ultimate challenge, which at base is always the same: the need for the reconciliation of the opposition between the two sides of our identity: the transient, physical being we normally consider to be who we are, with the transcendent being within, who is everything we might be. Following this path and solving that final challenge is what transforms a hero into a king.

In Aragorn's case, that opposition is emphasized. Though he is the heir of the great kings of old, when put to the test of the Ring, his ancestor Isildur failed his test of character. Aragorn fears that

he—who carries Isildur's blood inside him—may also fail. In following Aragorn's story, we learn what it takes to be a hero, what we need to do to become a king.

MEETING STRIDER AT THE PRANCING PONY

We first encounter Aragorn sitting in a dark corner at the Inn of the Prancing Pony in Bree, closely watching Frodo and his companions. He's described as a "strange-looking weather-beaten" (I,177) man, wearing good clothes that fit him well, but which show hard use. Hardly a portrait we associate with a king. When Frodo, going under the name of Underhill, asks the innkeeper, Butterbur, about this stranger who is eying him, he is told that he is a Ranger known as Strider. The Rangers are a group of tough wandering men who the villagers mistrust. The villagers don't realize that the Rangers are actually their protectors, the reason why the residents of Bree can live quiet lives in safe homes. Butterbur says that Strider keeps to himself and rarely talks, but when he does talk, he can tell some very interesting tales.

Though it's hard to believe, given how perfectly Strider evolves before our eyes into Aragorn and finally into king Elessar, when Tolkien first wrote this description of Strider, he did not know himself who this dark stranger was and what he would become. Tolkien was not even sure yet whether he was friend or foe. The unconscious produced this image for him, and in the unconscious Strider was already a king.

When Frodo foolishly slips on the Ring and vanishes in the inn, Strider is the first person he sees when he reappears. He immediately bawls Frodo out for his foolishness, then says that he wants a word with him later in private. Frodo doesn't know what to make of Strider. When later the Hobbits return to their room, Strider is already sitting there, smoking a pipe and waiting for them. They are upset to find that he already knows both Frodo's true identity and, even more significantly, his errand. Strider

warns them about the Black Riders and says that he wants to accompany them on their journey.

Sam is suspicious of this hard-looking, dark man, and wants nothing to do with him, but Frodo is already seeing beneath the surface to the quality beneath. Still he remains unsure until Butterbur pops into the room; he's suddenly remembered a letter from Gandalf for Mr. Underhill that he had forgotten to send to the Shire. In the letter, Gandalf tells Frodo that a friend named Strider can help them, but to make sure it's the real Strider, whose true name is Aragorn. Then he adds this poem:

All that is gold does not glitter,

Not all those who wander are lost;

The old that is strong does not wither,

Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,

A light from the shadows shall spring;

Renewed shall be blade that was broken,

The crownless again shall be king (I,192).

The poem was written many years earlier by Bilbo when he first came to know Aragorn and his story. Every line is significant. "All that is gold does not glitter" turns the famous aphorism "all that glitters is not gold"¹ on its head in order to indicate that true greatness doesn't necessarily show itself to the casual eye. "Not all those who wander are lost" is a reference to the Rangers, who wander near and far in order to protect the region from those who would do it harm. "The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost" is more ambiguous and refers to the long blood line that connects Aragorn to the great kings of old. "From the ashes a fire shall be woken, A light from the shadows shall spring" describes his destiny. "Renewed shall be blade that was broken" tells of the

sword he carries, the sword once used by his ancestor King Elendil, which broke when he fell at Sauron's feet. "The crownless again shall be king" explicitly describes Aragorn's state: believing his line cursed by Isildur's greed for the Ring, Aragorn has turned aside from his destiny to be king of all the lands, and instead elected to lead his men as simple Rangers. But this king without a crown will yet be king.

Even after hearing the letter, Sam still doubts him. When Sam asks how they know he's the real Strider, he laughs and tells them that they will just have to trust him. "If I was after the Ring, I could have it - NOW!" (I,194). And at that, he suddenly grows taller and more menacing, much as Gandalf does several times in the book. Then, again like Gandalf, he returns to normal and smiles, assuring them that he is indeed Strider. Then for the first time in the book, we see intimations that he is the king-to-be when he adds with quiet dignity: "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn; and if by life or death I can save you, I will" (I,194). Then, to Frodo's surprise, he quotes from the poem in the letter, which Frodo has not yet read aloud to the others, and tells Frodo that the poem is about him. He draws forth his sword and shows that it is broken, as in the poem. "Not much use, is it, Sam?" (I,194). At that, they finally all accept him as their guide, though Sam is still suspicious.

As we saw with Gandalf, and will see again with Frodo, greatness cannot readily be recognized by most. In order to make itself manifest, it has to take some symbolic form we are all familiar with, such as size. The fact that Frodo sees so quickly beneath the veneer is simply an example of quality knowing quality.

The first thing Strider does is to move them from their room, since he knows the Black Riders will be coming. And, in fact, when the Hobbits wake in the morning and return to their room, they find it torn to pieces! Not only that, but their ponies are gone from the stable, as is every other horse in the

inn. Though Frodo is despondent, Strider points out that they were hardly going to escape the Black Riders on their little ponies, and that they are probably better off going on foot and taking back ways not readily accessible to the Riders. His only worry is being able to carry enough food for their trip to Rivendell.

WEATHERTOP

In an effort to make it more difficult for the Black Riders to follow, Strider leads the company through marshy areas filled with flies and midges, much to the discomfort of the Hobbits. Each night, as the Hobbits sleep, Strider stands watch over them. Five days out they leave the marshes and can now see the Western Hills ahead of them. The tallest and most southerly of the hills is Weathertop, where they hoped to meet Gandalf, since he wasn't in Bree. Strider has mixed feelings about going there, as it is also likely to attract the Black Riders. But since he can't overlook any chance at meeting Gandalf, he decides to take a circuitous route in order to approach Weathertop from the North, rather than directly from the West.

Aragorn is familiar with the territory because he has long before left the well-traveled roads that most take and explored every part of the territory. No one can find who they are unless they leave the main roads and explore the areas overlooked by others.

Along the way, Strider shares ancient lore of the region with the Hobbits, making them wonder just who this strange man actually is. As they get closer to Weathertop, Strider becomes edgier, almost as irritable as Gandalf would be. Only he knows just how perilous their situation is. When Frodo jokes that's he's in danger of losing so much weight that he'll become a wraith, Strider blurts out "do not speak of such things!" (I,207). Later, when Pippin merely mentions Mordor, Strider cautions "do not speak that name so *loudly*" (I,209).

We see early that Strider has actual experience of evil, while the Hobbits have been able to live protected lives. Again there is no way to advance without coming to know evil and its consequences.

When they reach the base of Weathertop, they immediately begin to climb, since there is no longer any way to conceal themselves if the enemy is about. Partway up, they find a hollow where Sam and Pippin stay with the provisions. Another half-hour's hard climbing brings Strider to the top, to be followed a little later by an exhausted Merry and Frodo. Weathertop, like Stonehenge, is ringed by large stones, with a cairn of broken stones piled in the middle. Everything on the hilltop has been burned to the ground, seemingly recently, leaving only blackened stones. From their position, they have a birds-eye view for miles around on all sides happily, they see no movement anywhere around them.

Strider looks carefully for any sign that Gandalf might have left them. On top of the cairn he finds a single stone, which is both whiter and flatter than any of the others. It has some ambiguous scratches on it, which he thinks might be a glyph for G—Gandalf—followed by three vertical lines. He speculates that if this was a signal Gandalf left for them, it might mean that he was there on the 3rd of October, which was three days earlier. And, further, if Gandalf had to leave such a quickly inscribed, highly ambiguous message, he must have been in danger. Extrapolating from these small clues, Strider guesses that Gandalf might have fought on Weathertop, and the burnt condition was a reminder of what had occurred. Throughout the book, we have many such examples of Strider's incredible ability to interpret the meaning of small signs. For example, when much later, he, Legolas and Gimli examine the site where the riders of Rohan killed the band of Orcs, Strider is able to use the few signs available to correctly guess not only that at least one of Merry or Pippin escaped, but the circumstances that led to their escape.

This ability to read the essence of a situation from tiny clues is one that has to be developed by anyone who follows the path of individuation, which invariably leads us deep within ourselves into unexplored territory. It is easy to get lost in the unconscious, where symbols take the place of words and normal time and space have no meaning. We have to learn to read the symbols we find within if we are to keep advancing toward our destiny. Eventually we come to see that our outer lives are equally filled with symbolic meaning, so that we can both live life and observe it at the same time.

With no Gandalf to guide them, they are now clearly on their own. Almost immediately they feel the presence of the Black Riders. When Merry and Frodo look again, now they see vague black shapes in the near distance. Aragorn, whose eyesight is almost uncanny (though even he can't match Legolas), can see the Black Riders clearly. The three hasten to join Sam and Pippin, who have found water, firewood, and footprints. Strider examines the signs there as well. Though he can't be sure, because much of the evidence has been trampled over by Sam and Pippin, he concludes that his fellow Rangers have left the firewood, but that there were other, more recent, heavily-booted tracks. It seems like a good time to leave, but Strider can think of no better place to hide before nightfall, so they settle down in the hollow for the night.

When Merry asks if the Black Riders can actually *see* them, Strider explains that while they can't see in the sense that we see, people and objects leave traces in their minds. And their horses can see, and they can sense the reactions of the horses. The Rider's keenest sense is that of smell: they smell—with disgust—the blood of anything living. But, above all, they are pulled by the Ring, as if there were a living connection between them and it. And so there is, for the Ring and Sauron are one, and the Black Riders are but appendages of Sauron.

Some critics have criticized Tolkien's story of a battle between good and evil as simplistic, but anyone who follows an inner path learns to discriminate between two versions of evil. Initially, since everything we encounter in the unconscious is just that—not conscious—all seems evil. But as we become more familiar with the inner territory, we learn to discriminate. We find that all the possibilities for our growth are hidden within the darkness. In the struggle between our conscious beliefs and the prompts we receive from the unconscious, our personalities grow larger. But even though we integrate much that was previously dismissed as evil into our personality, we also encounter values that can never be integrated without destroying our essential being.

There is real evil, as the twentieth-century has learned all too well. Ultimate evil can never be fully represented, any more than divinity can. Tolkien is wise enough never to show us Sauron, except through his representatives like Saruman or the Black Riders.

And they are terrible enough.

THE SONG OF BEREN & TINÚVIEL

As night falls and fear grows, Strider tells the Hobbits tales of old to lighten their minds. Pressed by Sam to hear more about Elves, Strider chants the story of Beren, son of Barahir and Tinúviel. Though it is a long song, and he only sings part of it, the story line is clear. Beren, a mortal man, sees the Elf-maiden Lúthien dancing in the forest and, enchanted by her beauty, names her Tinúviel (Nightingale in his tongue). The two fall in love and have many adventures. Several times she saves him from danger, but Beren is mortal, and, finally, inevitably, he is murdered and dies in her arms. Grief stricken, Tinúviel rejects her Elven immortality and elects to be mortal, so that eventually she may die and rejoin him. She is the first Elf ever to make this choice and is deeply mourned by the other Elves. But she leaves behind

children, who in turn have children, and so on, becoming over time the line of Elves who live among men, though no other rejects their immortality.

Lúthien Tinúviel is the ancestor of Elrond, the father of Arwen Evenstar. And Arwen, like Tinúviel, falls in love with a mortal, and gives up her immortality for that love. And her lover is Aragorn! Thus Aragorn is telling the Hobbits his own tale, a tale that still has hundreds of years to go before its own completion with his death and the later death of his wife and Queen, Arwen Evenstar. And, finally, to close the circle of the tale tightly, it is Arwen who gives up her own passage across the Sea, from Middle Earth to the Havens, to Frodo!

THE BLACK RIDERS REAPPEAR

Soon after Strider finishes telling of Beren and Tinúviel, the Black Riders attack. Strider drives them off, but not before one stabs Frodo in the shoulder, leaving him deathly ill, not merely from the cut, but more from the poison that is part of the knife. At this point in the story, it is beyond Strider's healing abilities to heal Frodo, a marked contrast with what will come later, when he has the healing hands of a king. Strider does what he can with healing herbs, but he knows that they must get Frodo to Elrond in Rivendell if he is to be saved. Unfortunately, Rivendell is still a long way off.

They continue on, with Frodo's condition growing steadily worse. After walking on for another a week, they encounter the Elf Glorfindel, who has been sent from Rivendell to look for them. When he sees the evil markings on the knife that stabbed Frodo, he, too, acknowledges that it is beyond his skill to heal Frodo. In order to save Frodo's strength, he puts him on his own horse, and they advance for another day that way. But then suddenly the Black Riders show up again. Glorfindel tells both Frodo and the horse (who knows better than Frodo what to do) to ride as fast as they can toward Rivendell.

As Frodo clings to the horse in terror, the great horse somehow manages to outdistance the

Black Riders and beat them to the Ford that marks the entrance to Rivendell. They cross the Ford ahead of the Riders, but three of the Black Riders enter the stream to follow. When they reach the middle, however, suddenly the river rises and dashes them and their horses off to oblivion.

STRIDER'S TRUE IDENTITY REVEALED

When Frodo awakens, he finds himself in a comfortable bed in Rivendell with Gandalf by his side. They have a long conversation about all that has happened to both since last they met. Since Frodo is most interested in what happened at the Ford to save him, Gandalf explains that Elrond brought off this little piece of magic, though Gandalf admits proudly that he added a little touch: he made the waves take the form of white riders on white steeds (which prefigures Gandalf's own later transformation from Gandalf the Grey into Gandalf the White). He says that Elrond, who is a master healer, was finally able to find a sliver of the poisoned blade buried deep inside Frodo's wound. After that, Frodo began to heal, though as we will later find, he will never fully heal.

Once touched by evil, we can never again be totally free of darkness.

In the course of their talk, Gandalf speaks casually of Aragorn as perhaps the last of the race of the kings who came over the sea as Elf-friends. When Frodo exclaims that "I thought he was only a Ranger," (I,209), Gandalf explains that the Rangers are what remains of the Great Men of old, the descendants of Isildur, those who were Elf friends and lived three times as long as normal men. Once Frodo is once again up and about, he learns still more about Aragorn when he overhears Bilbo call Aragorn "Dúnadan." When Frodo asks him what that name means, Bilbo explains that he is "The Dúnadan," which is Elvish for "Man of the West," another reference to his ancestry. And still later, when Frodo sees Aragorn standing deep in conversation with Lady Arwen, he realizes that he is seeing a great lord with his lady, though he has no idea how such a thing can be between a mortal and an Elf.

This is perhaps the time to retreat from the book proper and tell some of the story of Aragorn and Arwen, which Tolkien tells in Appendix A. When Aragorn was two, his father Arathorn was killed by an Orc's arrow at the young age of sixty (well, young for men of his lineage, who normally lived more than two hundred years). Since Aragorn was the Heir of Isildur, he went with his mother to live under the protection of Elrond, who loved him like a son. Since his true identity needed to be concealed for his own protection, he was given still another name, Estel, meaning "hope," for he was the last hope for the line of Men. When he was twenty, Elrond told him his true identity and thereafter called him Aragorn.

Aragorn's story has many of the characteristics associated with the birth of the hero in myth and legend. Compare it, e.g., with the story of Moses. At the time of his birth, the Pharaoh had insisted that all male Hebrew babies be killed. In order to protect him, his mother places him in a watertight container and releases him on the Nile. He is found by the Pharaoh's daughter and raised as her son. He is even given a new symbolic name. He only gradually comes to know his real identity. The story of Oedipus in Greek myth has many of the same elements, as do many other stories of heros (tragic in the case of Oedipus). This is everyone's story. We are all born great heros, future kings, but we are each raised under names that others give us. Only gradually do we come to learn our real name, which, as Treebeard explained to Merry and Pippin, is an accumulation of our full life's experience.

Having found his true identity, Aragorn then found the love of his life. One day, while walking through the woods at sunset, he, like Beren, saw a maiden so beautiful that he thought he was dreaming. He had been singing the song of Lúthien and Beren, and now here Lúthien appeared. So, like

Beren, he calls out Tinúiel (nightingale) to her. She laughs and tells him that she is actually Elrond's daughter Arwen, who herself has still another name: Undómiel. When he wonders that he has not seen her in all the years he has lived in Imladris [i.e., Elrond's home], she says that she's been living with her mother and it has been many years since she's lived here. At that, he realizes fully that she is not the young woman she appears, but an Elf princess who has already lived what would be many of his lifetimes. But nevertheless he has fallen in love.

Elrond, who misses little, sees the love in Aragorn's eyes, and with the foreknowledge granted him, tells Aragorn that he is destined to either rise above his ancestors or to fall to the depths. And until he has fulfilled his destiny, he will have no wife. Beyond that, he hopes that Aragorn will not seek Arwen's love, for the line of Elves is greater than that of Men, and someday she must return with her father over the sea to the Havens.

So we see that for heros, there is no halfway measure of success—one must fully fulfill one's destiny. Once we receive a call from within, there is no going back. If we try, we gradually die to life. We have all seen such people.

Accepting his fate, Aragorn leaves to begin the arduous path that leads him toward his fate. Over the next thirty years he conducts his secret battles against Sauron. During those years, he becomes friends with Gandalf, he rides with the Riders of Rohan, fights for the Lord of Gondor, then goes off on his own into the East and the South, looking deep into the souls of men to find those things he needs to find within himself.

There is no quick way to find our fate. Each of us has to take the slow, hard path that leads us ineluctably to the discovery of who we are. That is because the person who we are destined to be has to be chipped gradually out of the hard rock inside us, much as a

sculptor creates a work of art.

When he is almost fifty, he wishes to return to Rivendell, but stops first at Lórien, where he finds Arwen visiting Galadriel. Out of his worn Ranger gear and clad in Elven clothing appropriate for the Heir of Isildur, he now appears to Arwen not as the boy she saw previously, but as a man among men, a throwback to greater days, or perhaps a step beyond them into the future of men. And she, too, falls in love, and vows to become his wife, even if it means giving up her immortality.

Many men are satisfied to stay boys all their lives. They attract women who want to mother them. Those women mirror the undeveloped feminine quality within the men. As a man grows and develops, so too does the type of woman who responds to him change.

This change reflects the development of the feminine within him, which grows in the unconscious as his masculinity grows consciously. Some men are satisfied to stay at this stage, with their feminine fully carried by a woman without. Only a few men grow still further and integrate both masculine and feminine within.

Though, since Aragorn is the classic male hero, this is described in terms of a man's development, it is no less true for a woman. She, too, can be satisfied to stay at the stage where she never fully separates from her mother (or father). Or she can grow into a woman who can leave the bonds of her parents and relate fully to a man. But only a few go past that point and learn to integrate the masculine within.

Arwen's decision hurts Elrond deeply, but since he still loves Aragorn like a son, he tells him that if this must be, he will accept it—but only if Aragorn fulfills his destiny and becomes the king of both Gondor and Arnor. Only such a man deserves an Elven Queen. After that, they speak no more, and Aragorn returns to his life of wandering and danger. Now many years more have passed, as we

return to the chronology of our story at the Council of Elrond.

At the Council, Boromir rises proudly to tell first of the dire situation in Minas Tirith, the capital city of Gondor. He then reveals that he was driven to seek Imladris because of a dream. His younger, but wiser, brother Faramir had the dream first, and it reoccurred to him many times. But it came also once to Boromir. In the dream, a great black storm is coming from the East, while in the West there is still a faint light shining. A voice comes from the West crying "seek for the Sword that was broken" (I,272). The dream says that the Sword will be found in Imladris, where a great council will take place, and proof will be given of the approaching doom. Finally the voice concludes: "For Isildur's Bane shall waken. And the Halfling forth shall stand" (I,273). "Isildur's Bane" is the name given by the Men of the West to the Ring cut from Sauron's finger, and the Halfling, is, of course, Frodo.

After having this dream, Faramir wanted to come to Imladris, but typically, the arrogant Boromir thought that the journey would be dangerous and went himself. When he stops speaking, Aragorn stands and throws his sword on the table, identifying it as the Sword that was Broken! Boromir has no idea what to make of this hard, dark man in worn clothing (for Aragorn is once more dressed as Strider), and asks what this has to do with Minas Tirith. Elrond then explains just who Aragorn is, including the fact that he is Isildur's descendent. This is still one more revelation for Frodo, who jumps up and tells Aragorn that, therefore, the Ring should be his. Aragorn gently explains that the Ring belongs to no one, but it is Frodo's to carry for a time. At that, Frodo brings out the Ring for all to see.

Upon seeing the Halfling (Frodo) and Isildur's Bane (the Ring), Boromir, who can never think any further than his beloved Minas Tirith, immediately interprets the dream to mean that Gondor's doom is at hand. Aragorn points out that the world is bigger than Minas Tirith, and that while dark times

approach, those are the times when heroes can accomplish great deeds. He explains further that "The Sword that was Broken" is that of king Elendil, which was broken when he fell at Sauron's feet, just before his son Isildur cut the Ring from Sauron's hand. And he asks Boromir if he wants the "House of Elendil" (hence Aragorn) to return to Gondor (i.e., to return with the Sword to help defend Gondor.) Boromir is too proud to accept any help, and certainly too proud to admit that perhaps Aragorn might be the king that the Stewards of Gondor have awaited for so long.

Originally "Steward" was an honorary title given to the chief counselor of the king of Gondor. But after the last king died, the Stewards came to rule Gondor. Though their role was to simply hold the kingdom in trust for the king, no matter how long that might take, over time they came to regard themselves as kings. By the time our story takes place, neither Denethor nor Boromir has any intention of recognizing the real king, even if he does appear, as Aragorn has now appeared before Boromir.

Aragorn, as always, is quiet and modest in response to Boromir's doubts. He tells Boromir that he knows that his appearance belies his claim to be a king, but that's because his life has been hard and filled with wandering. He and his Rangers have played every bit as important a part in the defense against the enemy, as has Gondor. And, while those who defend Minas Tirith have been accorded the grandeur that such heroism deserves, the Rangers have been feared and avoided by the very people they help. Yet Aragorn feels that even this is as it should be, since simple people need to live simple lives, free from the worries they would have if they knew the extent of evil in the world. But now he knows that the Cold War has ended and the real War has begun. It is time for him to take on his appointed role: he will, indeed come to Gondor.

But there is a long way to go before he and Boromir must part from the rest of the Company of the Ring. Until then, he will serve as the second-in-command behind Gandalf. Before he leaves, the

Elves use their skills as blacksmiths to reforge the Sword that was Broken. Aragorn names the newly joined sword Andúril, Flame of the West. But other than that piece of majesty, he leaves Imladris as he came, clad only as a Ranger.

In the contrast between Boromir and Aragorn, we see the difference between one who deserves to be king and one who, though strong and brave, never develops the wisdom and humility which are indispensable attributes of a king.

A LEADER GROWS TOWARD HIS DESTINY

Though we see many of Aragorn abilities displayed as the Company proceeds forward under Gandalf's direction, it is only when Gandalf falls from the bridge of Khazad-Dûm that he begins to slowly take on the mantle of the leader he will become. Sick at heart over Gandalf's death, he nevertheless takes immediate charge of the company, which is badly in need of leadership. Though there is little hope without Gandalf, he says grimly: "we must do without hope" (I,364). He then leads the company to Lothlórien, where they find succor for a time.

When they leave Galadriel's kingdom, Aragorn is unsure which direction to take. He had originally planned to go with the Company until they came to a place where he and Boromir must part from them and go to Minis Tirith. But, with Gandalf dead, he is torn between his vow to help defend Minis Tirith and his need to provide leadership for the rest of the Company. Yet there is still a way to go before the two roads must necessarily part. So they board Elvish boats and go down the Great River until they come to the Argonath: two great stone statues of kings that loom over the river like gods. The sight is so impressive that all, save Aragorn (and of course Legolas, who fears nothing), are cowed and look away in fear. Aragorn tells them not to be afraid, for these great statues are his ancestors: Isildur and Anárion. When Frodo looks over at his friend, he no longer sees the tired, rough

figure of the Strider he has come to know so well, but instead "a king returning from exile to his own land" (I,429).

Often those on the path toward self-realization are given moments of grace when they see their destiny before them. The path is long and hard and such glimpses of the light help sustain us on our journey.

What happens when they leave their boats and come ashore has already been discussed from other points of view in earlier chapters: Boromir tries to steal the Ring, lies to Aragorn about what has happened, then, on his death bed, Boromir confesses and asks for forgiveness. As is so characteristic of Aragorn the leader, he has no words of criticism for Boromir, only praise for the victory he has accomplished. Since there is no physical victory that has occurred—Frodo and Sam off on their own, Merry and Pippin captured by Orcs—Aragorn is praising Boromir for his victory over his own limitations. Aragorn blames himself for what has happened to split the company. He is desperately afraid that he has failed, and Gandalf was wrong to trust him as the leader.

This is the low point for Aragorn because he struggles with the fear that he, like Isildur, will not rise to the level of what a leader must be. And now he feels that already he has failed. Yet, typical of a great man, while most would have placed the blame on Boromir, Aragorn blames only himself.

Aragorn is a leader, and leaders must take charge, regardless of the depths of their despair. First must come as dignified a funeral as is possible for Boromir under the circumstances. Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli place Boromir in one of the Elven boats, then push it out into the river, where it sails over the Falls of Rauros, to be lost forever. Lost but not unnoticed; later we find that his funeral journey is seen in a vision by his prescient brother Faramir. Afterwards, there are two possible paths open

before the company: attempt to follow Frodo and Sam, or try to rescue Merry and Pippin from the Orcs. Aragorn once more makes the decision. He realizes that Frodo's path has diverged from the rest of the company, and that they cannot help him further. Though the chances are slim, perhaps they can still save Merry and Pippin. So he leads Legolas and Gimli on their legendary run after the young Hobbits.

Despite his self-doubts, Aragorn takes command and makes a choice. Leaders don't run away from decisions.

When after nearly four days of running, they are confronted by the Riders of Rohan, under the leadership of Éomer, Aragorn's tact gets them past a sticky initial situation. Then, knowing time is short, Aragorn for the first time proclaims his full majesty. He pulls forth his newly forged sword, Andúril, and declares proudly: "I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!" (II,36).

Frodo was the first of the company to see the king in Aragorn: a glimpse when he stood with Arwen in Rivendell, then again when they sailed past the Argonath. Now Legolas and Gimli see their companion transformed from the Strider they know into someone far greater. His majesty is too much for Éomer, who steps back in confusion, then gives them the horses they need and allows them to go on about their business.

Here we have a foreshadowing of greatness. Again, in each of our lives, if we are willing to do the slow, hard work it takes to find our myth, such intimations of greatness occur. And others around us are awed by the person who is thus revealed. for we all have such majesty inside.

Later, when Gandalf appears, transmogrified into Gandalf the White, he tells Aragorn not to regret his choice of following Merry and Pippin rather than Frodo and Sam. Though the cunning of the young Hobbits and the protection of Treebeard means the Hobbits are no longer in danger, this path brought him to Gandalf, who now asks him to accompany him to Rohan. The two face each other, one a king awakened to his calling, the other a wizard now without equal in the world. And the king is wise enough to recognize that it is not yet time for him to command. He bows graciously to Gandalf's request and once more becomes second-in-command.

We see still another glimpse of Aragorn's greatness during the defense of Helm's Deep. While Legolas and Gimli are having their grisly contest to see who can kill the most Orcs, Aragorn rushes from one weak defensive position to another, always arriving just in time to help save the day. But they seem to be fighting a losing battle against superior forces. At dawn, Aragorn stands above the gates and addresses the enemy, who jibe at him, confident in their victory-to-come. But, though everything to this point has gone the Orcs' way, and defeat seems imminent, Aragorn warns them to "Depart, or not one of you will be spared. Not one will be left alive to take back tidings to the North. You do not know your peril" (II,145). And, for a moment, they are silenced.

As the story develops, Aragorn increasingly is able to awe those around him by the sheer force of his personality. As we develop, we must never run away from our own strength, and confuse it with arrogance. Boromir is arrogant, Aragorn is strong.

Then they laugh and once more bombard the gate. As the gate falls, out from the fortress ride King Théoden and Aragorn, leading their forces, and their joint presence is so overwhelming that the Orcs break and run. But there is no escape, for at that propitious time, Gandalf appears again, leading a thousand foot soldiers. Caught between the pincers, the Orcs die, as Aragorn had warned. And those

who manage to flee into the trees of Fangorn die there, for Treebeard and the Ents also have no love of Orcs.

THE KING GATHERS HIS ARMY

The next step in Aragorn's rise to his destiny occurs in the period after Gandalf deals summarily with Saruman at Orthanc, then rides off to Gondor with Pippin. Aragorn, together with Legolas, Gimli, Merry, Théoden and a small company of Théoden's men are on the road back to Rohan when they encounter more than thirty mounted warriors. Fearing still another trick of Saruman's, they are relieved to find instead that the men are Rangers who say that they were summoned by Aragorn! In actuality, the summons was sent by Galadriel, wise Galadriel, who knew that Aragorn needed his kinsmen. She sent word to Rivendell, where Elrond's two sons, Elladan and Elrohir, heard it, rode off to notify the Rangers, then accompanied them. They bring Aragorn two messages, one from Elrond, one from Arwen, each reminding him that little time remains. Elrond, drawing on his foreknowledge of things to come, tells him further: "remember the Paths of the Dead" (III,46). Along with Arwen's message, which includes an endearment, she has also sent him a tall staff, with a black cloth wrapped around it. Aragorn knows what the black cloth is and leaves it furled for the present.

Aragorn broods over the two messages, then decides what he must do: he looks into the Palantir of Orthanc. This is the seeing stone that Wormtongue injudiciously threw at Gandalf; the stone into which Pippin, with his insatiable curiosity, gazed, there to be trapped by Sauron's frightening eye. But Aragorn, as the descendent of the kings of old, is the proper owner of the Stone, and is too strong for Sauron to capture (though just barely). He uses the Palantir to gather information, but also to let Sauron see that the rightful king has returned; Aragorn even holds forth his newly forged sword, which Sauron recognizes as the sword that, Elendil bore millennia before. In the stone, Aragorn sees terrible

trouble approaching Gondor from the South; unless he gets there soon with an army, Gondor will fall.

And so his fate is decided: there is no quicker way East than through the Paths of the Dead, and the only army he can raise quickly enough is the Army of the Dead who lie along that Path.

Now a legend begins to come to life. Aragorn is able to look at ultimate evil in the person of Sauron, and survive. But note that he can't face Sauron directly. He has to do so through the seeing stone, and still he barely survives. As we grow in our moral development, we must be willing to face deep moral conflicts, but we must also remember that there are powers beyond our own.

The story of the Army of the Dead is one of betrayed trust. Long ago, when Gondor was first built, the Men of the Mountains swore an oath to Isildur to help defend their joint territories against Sauron if an attack ever came. Yet, by the time of the great battle that ended the Second Age, the Men of the Mountains had fallen under Sauron's sway, and refused to fight against him. Because of their treachery, Isildur put a curse on them: not even death would provide them rest until they fulfilled the oath they had broken. The Men of the Mountains fled to caves beneath the earth and eventually their line died there.

In the three thousand years since, the Dead have lain inside the caverns still bound by the curse. A door remains cut into a mountain in Dunharrow; the nearby villagers say that sometimes the Dead inside the caverns drift like fog through the door and pass down the road. At such times, the villagers hide in their homes. Those foolish enough to force their way inside that door are never seen again, for the Dead will not let anyone living pass through their realm.

Aragorn tells King Théoden his decision, then they part, Théoden to join the troops he left behind in the hills, Aragorn and his companions toward Dunharrow and the entrance to the Paths of the

Dead. Meanwhile, Théoden's niece Éowyn has been left in charge of the outpost at Dunharrow. She has fallen in love with Aragorn and so is elated when she sees Aragorn arrive. But her excitement is quickly chilled when he tells her his mission. Still, despite her fear that he is going to his death, she begs Aragorn to let her accompany him. When he reminds her that her duty is to remain behind and guard the home front, she says bitterly: "All your words are but to say: you are a woman and your part is in the house" (III,56). And when he insists that this is not her path, she says that neither is it the path of the rest of his companions, who accompany him only because they love him. She does not need to add that she, too, loves him. When they part, she will not meet him again until Aragorn appears as king in the Halls of Healing to help heal the wound she suffered in killing the Lord of the Nazgûls.

Though Tolkien understands men better than women and usually regards women only from a man's point-of-view, he has glimpses into aspects of women not commonly seen in literature. Though men rarely acknowledge it, a woman such as Éowyn is not that uncommon; there is an Éowyn or a Joan of Arc inside every woman ready to respond to the call.

The next day, Aragorn leads his company to the dark door that opens into the caves that are the Paths of the Dead. We have already spoken of how even Gimli the Dwarf is uneasy in these dread caves. But not Aragorn (and not Legolas the Elf). After marching in fear for many miles, the company comes to a space so empty that there are no longer walls to be seen on any side. There Aragorn calls forth the dead, summoning them to follow him into battle. Suddenly all the company's torches go out; while the company had been frightened before, now they are terrified. The rest of their journey is made in total darkness, with the dead rising from their graves and following behind.

Aragorn is able to pass through the caves of the dead because he has faced the darkness

within his own soul. Legolas, as an Elf, as an immortal, has no fear of death. Gimli, though now set on the right path through Galadriel's love, has not yet progressed as far as Aragorn.

Once out of the caves, Aragorn urges them all, both living and dead, on to greater speed, racing to reach before day's end the Stone of Erech: a huge black stone buried in the earth. The part that remains above ground is perfectly round and as tall as a man. The fields about it are where the Dead gather for council among themselves once they have emerged from their caves. When Aragorn's company arrives at the Stone, he blows upon a silver horn, then cries out to the Dead, asking why they have come. A voice answers: "To fulfil our oath and have peace" (III,61). Aragorn then tells him that their time has finally come. If they follow him and rid the land of Sauron's men, their oath will be fulfilled and they can rest in peace. Then he leads them forth, following the living.

For five days, they ride through lands under Sauron's rule. As they pass, the Dead grow stronger and more substantial, until, though still clearly dead, they look more like warriors ready for battle. Any of Sauron's men they encounter along the way flee in terror. Most of those they meet who are not allied with Sauron also flee at the sight of the Army of the Dead, but some brave ones agree to follow Aragorn, but only once the Dead have passed. Aragorn knows that Minas Tirith is already under attack and pushes his army mercilessly. For if they arrive too late, it would be just as well that they had come not at all.

Finally they arrive at the harbor in Pelargir, where fifty great ships are anchored, the largest part of the fleet of the black pirates of Umbar. Once at the harbor, those who have fled ahead to escape the Dead can go no farther on land and are forced to board the ships. Aragorn calls the host of the Dead into action and they sweep over the enemy, whether on land or sea. They have no need to kill with their

swords for the enemy is so terrified that they leap from the ships, leaving only chained slaves behind.

Aragorn then puts one of his Rangers in command of each ship. They free the slaves and offer them a chance to fight as free men against the enemy who has enslaved them.

Finally, Aragorn turns to the Dead and tells them that their oath is fulfilled; they may now go in peace. At that command, they seem to melt away, as if they had never been there.

If we are brave enough to take the journey within, ultimately the darkness inside us does dissolve and fade away in the light.

With the Dead gone and the enemy routed, many men, both those just freed and other from the nearby territories, gather around Aragorn, ready to fight against Sauron. They board the ships and Aragorn sails forth with his fleet, hoping he will arrive before Minas Tirith falls.

The greatest single battle that occurs in *The Lord of the Rings* is the battle of Pelennor Fields, which surround Minas Tirith, the capital of Gondor. As we saw in earlier chapters, while the battle rages, Denethor, the Steward of Gondor, ignores the needs of his people and instead tries to immolate himself and his son Faramir. In order to prevent this, Gandalf, who has taken charge of the defense in the absence of Denethor and Faramir, is diverted from the battle at a crucial time. The forces of Rohan, under the leadership of King Théoden, have come to Gondor's aid and are fighting in the fields. When Théoden is slain by the Lord of the Nazgûls, his niece Éowyn and Merry together manage to kill the seemingly invincible Black Rider, thus putting fear into the hearts of his men. But still the battle would have been lost; Sauron's forces are simply too numerous and too powerful.

At this critical point, Aragorn arrives from over the sea with his flotilla of ships. Since each ship carries a black pirate flag, initially the enemy cheers and the forces of Gondor and Rohan fall silent. But then all see, on the lead ship, a great black banner waving—the banner Arwen created for Aragorn.

Centered on the banner is a White Tree, representing Gondor's ties to past greatness. Once, for many years such a tree bloomed in the fountain in the center of Minas Tirith, but the tree has stood barren for many years. Around the tree are sewn jewels representing the stars in the black sky, and a crown fashioned of mithril and gold looms above the tree. These symbols have neither been worn nor displayed by anyone since the days of Elendil, Isildur's father, the last king to unite both the kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor.

When one fully takes on one's destiny, often some symbolic gesture is necessary. Our new identity has to have an outer expression. And what more appropriate that a White tree on a black background, showing the light that emerges out of the darkness.

The forces of Gondor and Rohan are revitalized by this unexpected aid, and the enemy is disheartened; it is as if, in the blink of an eye, friend has turned into foe. Still the enemy stands and fights, and the battle rages hotly for many hours. But they are now fighting a losing battle; at the end of the day, Minas Tirith still stands, and there is no enemy left alive.

THE HEALING HANDS OF THE KING

After the battle is won, it is time to deal with the dead and wounded. Among the wounded are Faramir and Éowyn and Merry, as we saw in the chapter on the Path of Curiosity. Though the healers of Gondor are well versed in leechcraft, they have no idea how to help these three, since they are afflicted with the Black Shadow, an illness caused by the Black Riders. Those affected invariably fade into an ever deeper coma, then into catatonia, and finally death. The eldest of the women who serve in the House of Healing weeps and cries out that if only there were a king in Gondor they could be healed, for it is written that "the hands of the king are the hands of a healer" (III,136). At that, Gandalf goes out to find Aragorn, the rightful king of Gondor.

But Aragorn is not yet ready to proclaim his kingship; that time will come only when Sauron has been defeated. Though they have won a major battle at great cost, it is but a skirmish when one considers Sauron's massive forces. Nevertheless, at Gandalf's urging he comes to the hospital, wearing no trappings of majesty save the green stone given him by Galadriel. The first person who greets him there is Pippin, for whom Aragorn is still simply old friend Strider. When others who have fought beside Aragorn as their leader are upset that he is called by such a common name, Aragorn tells them that, when he is king, he will make Telcontar—Elvish for Strider—the name of his house.

A reminder that, though Aragorn now seems great and powerful, he is still the same friend that the Hobbits knew as Strider. This is only possible if we have fully integrated all the aspects of our life into a single inviolable whole.

He goes to the rooms of Faramir, Éowyn, and Merry and examines each in turn. Their condition looks grave and he says that he wishes that Elrond was there, for his is the greatest healing power. But Elrond is not there, only Aragorn, whose healing powers we saw earlier were not enough to help Frodo when afflicted by the Black Shadow. But times have changed. Aragorn asks those present in the hospital if among the herbs of healing they have any athelas, which is also called kingsfoil. Though the nurses have none available, they know which herb he means and go to seek it in the fields. While they are off, the herbmaster of the house arrives and tries to display his erudition, giving all the learned terms for kingsfoil, then adding that the herb has no use, unless you believe old wive's tales. Gandalf loses his patience and tells him then to find someone less erudite who still keeps the herb.

Meanwhile, Aragorn holds his hand on Faramir's forehead and calls him gently to return to life. Those in the room can see a great strain upon Aragorn as he does this. Someone rushes into the room carrying leaves of athelas, but fears that they might not serve as they were plucked more than two

weeks earlier. Aragorn smiles and reassures him; he has already managed to pull Faramir back from the dead. He crushes the leaves, then throws them into waiting bowls of steaming water. The fragrance fills the air and lightens the mood of those in the room. When Aragorn holds the steam before Faramir's face, Faramir stirs, then wakens. He gazes up at Aragorn and says: "My lord, you have called me. I come. What does the king command" (III,142). Aragorn tells him to rest more, but to stay awake, then eat when he feels up to it. When Aragorn leaves the room, the others realize, if they hadn't already, that the king has at last returned to Gondor.

Aragorn goes next to Éowyn. He feels the cold in the arm that struck the Nazgûl down. But he also sees that there is a coldness in Éowyn that predates this encounter. When he turns to her brother Éomer to ask about this, Éomer says that he was not aware of any such coldness until Aragorn arrived in their kingdom the first time. Gandalf will have none of this, and reminds Éomer that she was a warrior borne into the body of a woman. While he had battles to fight and freedom to roam, she was forced to perform a woman's duties for a king caught under the spell of Wormtongue. At this, Éomer grows silent.

But Aragorn knows what Éomer meant. He tells him that it is a terrible thing for a man to feel a woman's love and not be able to return it. He can heal her body, but not her heart, which is what is keeping her in the darkness. At that, he leans down, kisses her on the forehead, and calls for her to waken. She begins to breathe more deeply. Then he crushes two more leaves of kingsfoil into steaming water, and uses the water to bathe her forehead and her cold arm. Then, once again he calls for Éowyn to wake. He asks Éomer to hold her hand and wake her. As Aragorn leaves the room, Éowyn finally wakes.

By the time Gandalf and Pippin come to Merry's room, Aragorn has already called him back

from the dead, though he has not yet woken him. When once more he crushes the leaves and calls his name, Merry awakens. Typical of a Hobbit, the first thing he says is that he's hungry.

Though the concept of the king as healer has precedent in myth and legend, it has probably never had better expression. Jungian psychology talks of the "wounded healer" who is able to heal others because he has already faced the same problems within himself. Aragorn could not heal the black shadow within Frodo when he was stabbed by the Black Riders because he had not yet progressed far enough in his own development. Now he has.

ARAGORN THE KING

In the previous chapter, we told of how Aragorn and Gandalf came to the Black Gate outside Mordor with their small body of men, and of Gandalf's defiance of Sauron. But this was a battle to be won not by force or arms, but by Frodo's completion of his task (with help from Sam and even Gollum). Since this chapter concerns Aragorn and the Path of the king, let us pass on to when he finally becomes king of the reunited kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor.

You will recall the history of Gondor: the Stewards had given up hope that the king would ever return and had themselves usurped the powers of a king. With Denethor now dead by his own hand, and Faramir healed, Faramir is now the Steward of Gondor. But Faramir, both wiser and humbler than Denethor or Boromir, recognizes Aragorn as the king for whom the Stewards have waited so long. It is time for Aragorn to be crowned king.

The people of Minas Tirith line the streets on the day of his coronation. The flag of the Stewards flies over the city for one last time. Though the great gate of the city has been destroyed during the battle of Pelennor, a temporary, symbolic barrier has been erected, before which stands

Faramir the Steward. The remaining forces of the West, those who fought so bravely with Aragorn, march to the city, then line up outside it, leaving a space for their leaders to pass. Aragorn comes forth, dressed simply but as a king, no longer Strider the Ranger. He is accompanied by Éomer of Rohan, Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth (who fought with Aragorn, but who we have not discussed), Gandalf, and the four Hobbits.

The crowd buzzes at the sight of these great figures, and perhaps even more at the Hobbits. Already Frodo's tale has been told and distorted into a form that can be understood by all: the rumors are that, tiny as he is, he fought with Sauron himself. And, of course, in a way that they would find hard to understand, so Frodo did fight with Sauron. But it is Aragorn above all that their eyes are upon, and their name for him is that given by Galadriel: Lord Elfstone. Word of both his success in arms and his healing hands has spread widely.

Faramir comes forth, kneels before Aragorn, holds out the white rod symbolic of his office and says: "The last Steward of Gondor begs leave to surrender his office" (III,249). Aragorn takes the rod, then hands it back. Though the king has returned, he still needs a Steward, as did his ancestors before him. Faramir and his heirs are to remain Stewards of Gondor, as long as Aragorn and his heirs rule. Faramir then stands and announces Aragorn's lineage and titles, and asks the symbolic question of the crowd: should he be allowed to enter the city and become king. And there are no dissenters in the cheer that rises up around them.

Though in olden days, the king would crown his successor before he died, that is, of course, impossible in this case. So Faramir takes the crown out of its case and hands it to Aragorn, who holds it up for all to see. He then replaces it and asks Frodo to bring the crown to Gandalf, then Gandalf to place it on his head. And so they do. And when he stands, now crowned as the king, King Elessar, he

looks so magnificent that Faramir cries "Behold the king" (III,250).

And so his reign begins. But in the court of the fountain in the middle of Minas Tirith the symbolic White Tree is still dead. A new symbol is needed for a new age, so one day Gandalf comes and takes Aragorn up to a high place on Mount Mindolluin overlooking the city, a place where traditionally only kings have gone before. There, amidst the snow, where all else is barren, Aragorn sees a small sapling that bears flowers as white as the snow. He carefully removes the little tree from the earth, and brings it back to the city, where it is planted in the place of the dead tree. And once planted, it soon begins to grow and blossom.

In order to be recognized as the king in battle, Aragorn needed the symbolic banner Arwen had created for him. Now, in order to once more start a line of kings that will far outlast him, he needs a living symbol. A tree is a the great traditional symbol of the fully developed personality, which is rooted in the earth of our unconscious instincts, lives in the everyday world, yet stretches up to the heavens for light. The tree that had previously grown in Gondor died long before, symbolizing the death of the line of Gondor's kings.

Now a new living tree stands to symbolize a new line of Kings, beginning with Aragorn .

Only one thing more remains for Aragorn: to wed Arwen Evenstar as his Queen. Each of the two great Elven kingdoms comes in force for the wedding, led by their leaders, Galadriel and Celeborn from Lothlórien, Elrond and his two sons Elrohir and Elladan from Rivendell. With both joy and sadness, Elrond gives his daughter's hand in marriage to Aragorn, knowing that in doing so, he is fated to lose her forever.

For one hundred twenty years, they live together as king and Queen. But even for so long-lived a man as Aragorn, long life is not immortality. And so there comes a day when he knows it is his time to

die. He goes to the House of the kings and lies there on a bed. He hands his son Eldarion his crown and scepter, then asks to be left alone with Arwen. Arwen, who has lived many human lifetimes before she ever saw Aragorn, asks if he can't stay a little longer with her, but they both know his time has come. He reminds her that she still has a choice: she can go to the Havens and live with her kindred forever. If so, their life together will remain as a memory, bittersweet, but eternal. Or she can stay on earth and suffer the same fate as mortals.

But Arwen's choice has been made long before this. Like Lúthien Tinúviel, she has chosen the love of a mortal and now, even if she would choose to go, there are no ships to take her over the Great Sea. Aragorn has one last promise for her "we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell" (III,348). And then he dies.

With her love gone, Arwen has nothing left to keep her in Minas Tirith. She leaves Gondor and goes to Lórien, empty now these many years since Galadriel and Celeborn and the other wood Elves left over the sea. There she lives alone through the winter. Just before spring comes, she lies down in the green grove where she and Aragorn first pledged their love...and then dies.

And thus truly ends Aragorn's path, for his path is inseparable from the woman he loved, the immortal who chose her love for him over eternity.

1. Originally "hit is not al gold, that glareth" in Chaucer's *The House of Fame*; "all that glisters is not gold" in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*; "All, as they say, that glitters is not gold" in Dryden's *The Hind and the Panther* (first to use "glitters").