A Hero in the Body of a Woman: Discussing the Self-discovery of Éowyn in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*

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I. Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (January 3, 1892-September 2, 1973) was an English writer, poet, linguist, and university professor, who is best known as the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

*The Lord of the Rings* is one of the most renowned fantasy novels of J.R.R. Tolkien, which tells a story of the war of The One Ring between good and evil. Being as a classic fantasy novel with wars, there are few female characters (of every race, which can be of elves, of men etc.) in *The Lord of the Rings* and even fewer women (female human) in the story. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, which is the first part of *The Lord of the Rings*, the author had already introducing female characters like Arwen and Galadriel to the readers, but both of them are elves instead of human. It is until the story continues in *The Two Towers*, which is the second part of the trilogy, that the reader may take a look into the life of women: Éowyn is the first women the author introduced to the reader. In *The Lord of the Rings*, her most renowned deeds is that she once defeats the Nazgûl to save her king, which is said to be unbeatable by men. Yet, Éowyn faces internal struggle before she is known for her bravery and noble. Since Éowyn is so distinguishing a woman in a story full of male characters, this essay is going to focus on the personality and discuss the self-discovery of Éowyn in chronological order according to the story.

II. Thesis

1. Introducing the Character

1.1 The Background of Éowyn

Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, sister of Éomer, niece of King Théoden was born in the Third Age 2995. She faces The War of the Ring in 3019 when she was twenty-four years old. After the War, she is married to Faramir Prince of Ithilien.

There are several reasons that have caused the personality of Éowyn different from traditional women, such as staying at home and taking care of the family. First, growing up in a patriarchy society that emphasizes heroism, Éowyn believes that people will only be remembered after passing away because they have done something courageous, such as winning the battle. Second, she grows up in a society that men as well as women ride and use swords, she does not thinks that she is a
woman because she can wield swords and ride well. Third, she is independent and strong in will because her parents died when she was young. Last but not least, she witnesses her country fallen into putrefaction under the ruling of the deputy of King Théoden, Wormtongue, who is latter proved as a spy from the enemy Saruman, but she cannot do anything other than waiting on an old and sick king. Therefore, the personality of Éowyn is different from traditional women, which in turn leads to the internal struggle and self-discovery of her.

1.2 The First Appearance of Éowyn: A Hint Foreshadowing Éowyn’s Personality

The first appearance of Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is when the wizard Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli comes to Rohan to warn the king of the attack of Saruman. In the hall of King Théoden, the author introduces Éowyn to the reader through the words of Aragorn:

“Grave and thoughtful was her glance, as she looked on the king with cool pity in her eyes. Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings. Thus Aragorn for the first time in the full light of day beheld Éowyn, Lady of Rohan, and thought her fair, fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood.”

The above quotation that refers to the first appearance of Éowyn gives the reader the follow impressions. First, she is grave and thoughtful in heart. Second, she is strong in both will and appearance. Third, she is cold and fair but yet reaches womanhood in appearance. However, the author describes her equivocally as “fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood.” Since Éowyn is twenty-four years old then and has already reaches womanhood, what refers in the quotation cannot be a fact, but a hint that foreshadowing the revealing of her personality latter.

2. Éowyn’s Personality and Internal Struggle

Soon after introducing the character Éowyn, with the coming of the wizard Gandalf comes the exposure of the malice of Saruman and the battle. There is a time when Éowyn struggles to choose between going to battle to win her renown and staying to lead the country while the ruler is away to battle.
“...I [King Théoden] must now entrust my people that I leave behind, to rule them in my place. Which of you will say?”

No man spoke.

“Is there none whom you would name? In whom do my people trust?”

“In the house of Eorl, “answered Háma.

“But Éomer I cannot spare, nor would he stay, “said the king;”and he is the last of that House,“

“I said not Éomer, “answered Háma. “And he is not the last. There is Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, his sister. She is fearless and high-hearted. All love her. Let her be as lord to the Eorlingas, while we are gone.”

...  

“Farewell sister-daughter!” he [King Théoden] said.” Dark is the hour, yet maybe we shall return to the Golden Hall. But in Dunharrow the people may long be defend themselves, and if the battle go ill, thither will come all who escape.”

“Speak not so!” she answered.” A year shall I endure for every day that passes until your return.”

Under the order of King Théoden, Éowyn has to stay to lead the people. Therefore, what she can only say is that she will endure everyday when she is left behind the battle. What she cannot say is that why she has to be chosen to be the one left at home, since she especially wants to go to battle to fight for her country.

 Alone Éowyn stood before the doors of the house at the stair’s head; the sword was set upright before her, and her hands were laid upon the hilt. She was clad in mail and shone like silver in the sun.3

Seeing off the army, she is dressed in the formal attire of a soldier with her mind wondering away with the army to the battle. Here Éowyn has not yet reveal her personality completely under the pressure from the society and the expectations from her beloved king.

3. After the battle at Helm’s Deep: The First Step of Self-discovery

3.1 Éowyn Reveals her Wishes and Fears for the First Time

After the battle at Helm’s Deep, before King Théoden returns to go on another battle to aid their ally Gondor, Éowyn has a talk with Aragorn, an honorable man comes along with Gandalf, about her reason wishing to go to battle. First, she
appreciate that Aragorn is stern and resolute, and that he is therefore able to do great deeds, which in turn makes him an honorable man. Deep in her heart she knows that she also wants to be an honorable man. Therefore, the second part of her theory to become an honorable man is that “to face peril and battle courageously and directly.” However, what Aragorn replied is just in the traditional ways of thinking, “Your duty is with your people.” She then protests that she is also of the House of Eorl, the royal house of Rohan, does that still mean her duty is to be a woman staying behind to take care of everything trivial, spending her life against her will and eventually died obscurely? She wonders why she has to be chosen to lead the rest of the people of Rohan while others go to battle to win their renown. But Aragorn answers that the deeds of taking care of home is not less valiant than those from winning the battles. Yet, Êowyn cannot see the truth in Aragorn’s words and she insists that she can only win her renown from going to battle.

3.2 The Fear of Êowyn

“What do you fear, lady?” he [Aragorn] asked.
“A cage,” she said. “To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire.”

When the dialogue with Aragorn comes to an end, Êowyn reveals that she fears neither pain nor death, but a cage instead. What she is afraid of is that when she becomes old, she cannot and will not do great deeds, which in turn makes herself obscured. On one hand, she cannot do great deed because she will be too cold and weak to do so. On the other hand, she will not do great deeds because she will be accustomed to live in a normal life, tiring of doing something other than daily routines.

3.3 The Inferiority Complex of Êowyn

An inferiority complex, which is a feeling that you are not as good, as intelligent, as attractive, etc. as other people.

There are several reasons to the question why Êowyn is stuck in an inferiority complex. On one hand, Êowyn is good rider and swordsman, but she cannot show her ability because she cannot do anything other than waiting on an old king and was hindered from going to battle. On the other hand, she does not know that she is chosen to stay to lead the people of Rohan because she is a good leader. Instead, she wonders
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whether she is capable or not and she therefore thinks herself as a normal, obscure woman, who will eventually die, forgotten by others. But deep in her heart she knows that she does not want to be a woman like this. Therefore, when she meets Aragorn, the future king of Gondor, she immediately falls in love with him because she thinks that getting the love of a puissant man can change her into a woman of higher status, and maybe she will do greater deeds in far-away Gondor than in Rohan, which in turn will not make her fallen in to obscure woman.

4. Take action: Éowyn Disguised as Dernhelm to Go to Battle, the First Step of Self-discovery

Éowyn wishes to show her ability by going to battle. Therefore, when the Eorlingas—army of King Théoden—marches out again, she then disguised as Dernhelm to go to battle with them. The scene points out that Éowyn no longer follows the social expectations for her, but begins to pursue her dream: to show her ability and win her renown from winning the battle.

5. Fight with the Nazgûl on the Battle: the Second Step and the Turing Point of Self-discovery

Fortunately, Éowyn—or Dernhelm now—has a chance to show her ability on the battle. She comes across the Nazgûl, the fearsome king of Ring wraith, who tries to kill King Théoden to defeat the Eorlingas, and in turn beats the people of Gondor, which will be unaided of the Eorlingas is defeated. But the malice is hindered by Éowyn:

_A cold voice answered: “Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey!...”_  
_A sword rang as it was drawn. “Do what you will; but I will hinder it, if I may.”_  
_“Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!”_  
_“But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund’s daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Be gone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him.”_  

On the battle field of Pelenor Éowyn announces that although she is a woman, she can create great deeds as well, which may be even more significant than those done by men because she defeats the most difficult enemy in the world—the Nazgûl, which no man has ever overcome. This scene signifies the second step in the self-discovery of Éowyn because she now finds herself as capable as other men. The scene also
foreshadows the turning point in her self-discovery because she still unhappy at the winning of her long-desired renown for the first time: she has not solved her inferiority complex completely, because she has not get to the core of the problem.

6. In the House of Healing: The Internal Struggle of Éowyn is Made Known to Others

The great success of Éowyn costs much more than she has imagined. After she killed the Nazgûl, she is wounded to death. While Aragorn is healing her, those who know her begin to wonder what brings her to battle: Gandalf finds out more secrets to the reason why Éowyn has come to battle. First, he points out that Éowyn suffers more than people sees. Long ago she has to take care of her old king. Also, her youth is wasted to watch him fall into a mean dishonored dotage. It is because of love that would she waits on an aged king with a failing ruling. Second, when she meets Aragorn, the future king of Gondor, she immediately falls in love with him. However, what Aragorn can give her is understanding and pity instead of the love she seeks. In Aragorn she loves is latter found to be a thought to seek glory and great deeds in a foreign land far away from the fields of Rohan where she can eventually show her ability.

7. Meeting her Future Spouse Faramir: The Last Step of Self-discovery

7.1 Solving the Inferiority Complex: Discussing Éowyn’s Love for Aragorn

While Éowyn is confined to bed in the House of Healing due to her serious wound from the battle on the Pelenor field, she meets another patient Faramir, the son of late Denethor, Steward of Gondor and the Lord who takes in charge of Gondor before the King returns. On one hand, they wait the doom of being defeated by the Dark Lord behind the battle. On the other hand, they fall in love with each other as they gradually know each other. Also, Éowyn solves her inferiority complex by understanding her love of Aragorn is just a reflection of her subconscious: she looks up to Aragorn as a soldier to a great captain. When she can only receive understanding and pity, instead of love from him, she desires to have nothing, unless a brave death in battle. At last Éowyn understands that a brave death in battle is not the only way to win renown, let alone the only way to show her quality.

7.2 Solving the Ultimate Complex: Discussing Éowyn’s True Love
“...Do not scorn pity that is the gift of a gentle heart, Éowyn! But I [Faramir] do not offer you my pity. For me you are a lady high and valiant and have yourself won renown that shall not be forgotten; and you are a lady beautiful, I deem, beyond even the words of the Elven-tongue to tell. ...Once I pitied your sorrow. But now, were you the blissful Queen of Gondor, still I would love you.”

Although Éowyn has solved her inferiority complex, she still stuck in being too proud to accept Faramir’s love for her. The love that is once misunderstood as pity by her turns out to be an appreciation of her true quality. Faramir confesses to her that what he loves for is for her being a noble and valiant woman, and that neither she needs pity nor she receives it. At last, the self-discovery of Éowyn completes. She finds her true personal qualities lies in being valiant and noble and she needs not win them by having a brave death in battle. Instead of receiving the love of a higher birth and puissant man, such as Aragorn, Éowyn will be remembered because of her quality and great deeds such as fighting against the Nazgûl to protect her beloved king and lead the people through the upheavals and battles while the ruler is away.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, from the first appearance of Éowyn in The Lord of the Rings trilogy unfolds her self-discovery. First, by describing her as “fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood.” the author hints that she is not a normal woman and she needs to go through challenges before she reaches womanhood. Second, instead of following the social expectations to do something against her will, such as to take care of the rest of the people when the king is way to battle, Éowyn determines to go to battle to win her renown. Third, she defeats the Nazgûl to protect her beloved king, which in turn proved that she is as capable as any man and she has won her renown. Fourth, when she is confined to bed in the House of Healing after the fight with the Nazgûl, she solves her inferiority complex by understanding what she desires, which is to show her quality in order to be remembered by the others; and which cannot be achieved simply by getting the love of a puissant man. At last, by receiving the love, the appreciation from a man with a gentle heart, Éowyn truly understand that her quality lies in being noble and valiant in heart and deeds.

Through discussing the self-discovery of Éowyn, we may find out that the author puts great effort into creating this character by giving her a different kind of duty. First, she has to go through internal struggles to find out her true meaning of life and
her true quality. Second, she has to fight the discrimination against women in the patriarchy society to show her ability. Last but not least, she has to beat the ultimate enemy—her inferiority complex. In a story full of male characters, Éowyn is able to stand out from them and be remembered as a hero in a body of a woman because she overcomes the Nazgûl and most important of all, she is a noble, brave and capable woman who is proud of herself.

IV. References

1. The definition of self-discovery: a general term means that when you learn about yourself and your beliefs
   http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=71446&dict=CALD
5. The definition of an inferiority complex: a feeling that you are not as good, as intelligent, as attractive, etc. as other people
   http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=40583&dict=CALD