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The Desolation of *The Hobbit*

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“The Desolation of *The Hobbit*” by William Keating

Instructor’s Notes

For this essay, William Keating needed to write an example of textual analysis. William chose to analyze a classic novel. What do you think about the assertions he makes about Tolkien’s classical text? Does he provide sufficient support for his assertions? How does he structure his essay so he can both analyze and evaluate as opposed to just summarizing and describing?

Writer’s Biography

William Keating is a chemistry major from Missouri who plans to graduate in 2016. He enjoys playing basketball and watching the Cardinals play baseball. William also loves reading Tolkien’s works set in Middle Earth.

*The Desolation of *The Hobbit**

“If An Unexpected Journey was a galumphing orc, smashing its way through the plot, The Desolation of Smaug is a fleet-footed elf, leaping through the trees,” says Chris Barsanti in his article “The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug” (par. 8). In his article he suggests that Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* is an improvement from the first movie of Jackson’s trilogy of movies being produced to depict J.R.R. Tolkien’s famous novel, *The Hobbit*. Barsanti suggests the improvement is due to the liberties Jackson took that left out much of Tolkien’s descriptive scenes and to the many new characters that Jackson brings from the book and from his own embellishment of *The Hobbit* (pars. 3-6). Barsanti is not the only one who commends Jackson’s second hobbit movie; many are claiming *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* outshines its predecessor. Todd McCarthy’s article “The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug” agrees with Barsanti and the majority of reviewers that Jackson’s second movie was exceptional because of its addition of characters, and he adds that the fast pace increases

the movie's quality (pars. 2-5). While all these voices praise *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, I disagree and insist that the movie was disappointing.

As I sat through the showing of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, I could almost hear the *snip, snip, snip* of Peter Jackson's scissors as he cut apart Tolkien's masterful work. The first reason Jackson's production disappointed viewers was its poor rendering of the book it supposedly portrayed. He made his first mistake by changing the plot. Sometimes producers may find it necessary to adapt a plot when they illustrate a book as movie, but Jackson made changes in terrible places. He removed several of the most exciting and character-developing scenes in the story. For example in Tolkien's novel, the main character, Bilbo, is alone when his companions are caught by spiders, and he must combat the spiders and rescue his friends. This is a key moment in Bilbo's character development because throughout the book he learns to become independent and courageous, but Jackson condensed Bilbo's role in defeating the spiders through cunning tactics and replaced it with unimportant characters driving away the spiders and saving the dwarves. Jackson cut meaning from *The Hobbit*. Another major plot change Jackson introduced to his version of *The Hobbit* included the group of dwarves with whom Bilbo is traveling entering their old mountain home which is inhabited by a dragon named Smaug. Apparently Jackson did not think logically when he shredded *The Hobbit* because the point of Bilbo going on the journey with the dwarves was to be the burglar to sneak into the dragon's lair and steal back the coveted treasure of the dwarves. In the Tolkien's novel Bilbo is the only one who can slip past the dragon because he discovers a ring that makes him invisible, and even then he barely escapes Smaug's lair alive. Jackson clipped out logic from *The Hobbit*. These were just a few of the changes made to the original tale which made the plot illogical and shallow.

Peter Jackson not only drastically changed the plot, he also added bland characters. Owen Gleiberman in the article "The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug" published in *Entertainment Weekly* explains that Jackson risked the quality of the movie by adding his own character, Tauriel, but also declares that by infusing romance into the story the risk yielded reward (par. 3). I agree that Jackson's move was a risk, but I do not think that his decision

improved the movie or can be justified. Adding characters might not always be detrimental to a movie, but the characters Jackson added deadened the movie. Tales inspire readers and viewers when the author or producer introduces fresh ideas, but Jackson's added characters accomplished the opposite. An elf named Tauriel was added as a love-interest for one of the dwarves, Kili, in the journeying company, but all the other dwarves and elves are very disdainful of the other respective group. Tauriel and Kili are "star-crossed lovers," and their relationship is stale and predictable. Jackson also gives the elf, Legolas, who is not mentioned in *The Hobbit*, a cameo appearance. Legolas was a prominent character in *The Lord of the Rings* and is related in Tolkien's books to one of the characters who is in *The Hobbit*. A short appearance would have been fine, but Jackson alters the plotline again to simply incorporate a character from one of his older movies. Jackson could have spent the screen time on important scenes from *The Hobbit* rather than making time just to add an unoriginal character and point to his previous trilogy. Jackson crops out portions of *The Hobbit* to make room for an overused character.

The second reason I argue others overrated *The Hobbit: the Desolation of Smaug* is that it incorporated ridiculous impossibilities to add thrill. Perhaps if Jackson had left Tolkien's original piece more intact, he would not have needed to add his own impractical action scenes to fill the gaps he created. While the setting of the movie is a mythical place, Middle Earth, it does not justify the mindless action Jackson threw into the plot. At first the movie did not have too many implausible happenings, but as the movie progressed, the impossible action sequences multiplied. Midway through the story the dwarves escape the dungeons of the elves in barrels floating down a river, but they are pursued by orcs and their previous captors. A battle ensues between the three groups. The scene includes an elf balancing on one leg on a dwarf's head sticking out of a barrel which is bobbing through the rapids of a river. If that were not outrageous enough, the elf is simultaneously picking off orcs with his well-aimed arrows. A few scenes later, Bilbo enters the fearsome dragon's lair and proceeds to remove his ring. The dragon can see him several times, and yet never catches him. The dwarves also enter the mountain and are seen by the dragon who fails to dispatch them as well. The whole company dashes madly around the mountain passages

narrowly escaping death multiple times. At one point Jackson even includes the preposterous scene of a dwarf riding through a molten metal river in a metal wheelbarrow to escape the clumsily portrayed dragon. As I mentioned before, the dwarves brought Bilbo on the journey to stealthily steal back their treasure from the dragon because no one could survive any other way, yet Jackson ignored this fact and instead saturated the movie with ludicrous occurrences. Most reviews of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* praise the movie for being full of action. Richard Corliss in the article “The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug: It Lives!” heralds the production as an energetic, lively sequel (pars. 1-5). I reject such claims because the action is so unbelievable and repetitive that it becomes tiring to watch. Jackson cut out logical action from *The Hobbit* to replace it with thoughtless, melodramatic action.

The biggest problem with Peter Jackson’s production of *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* was his infidelity to the theme of Tolkien’s novel. Ultimately, Jackson could have altered the characters, the plot, and the action in the movie and not ruined it. He strayed when he changed the theme of the story. Tolkien’s original work emphasized the development of the hobbit Bilbo. Tolkien’s story throws Bilbo into a mix of circumstances that force him to become independent and to develop courage. This is proven by the climax of the book where Bilbo musters the courage to act alone and against his companions to ultimately save them from their own greed. Jackson missed the point and created different unfocused themes. He removed the spotlight from Bilbo’s development. Instead of keeping the theme, the heart of Tolkien’s book, Jackson created trite themes through the addition of characters and the deletion of key scenes that contained Tolkien’s theme. Then Jackson glossed over the unfocused movie by filling the film with senseless action that bored viewers. When Jackson or any movie producer adapts a story to be film, he should always remain faithful to the theme of the tale because that is the heart of a tale.

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