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Honors Project

The Power of Writing: How Home can be Found After Exile and War

“I feel like I've never had a home, you know? I feel related to the country, to this country, and yet I don't know exactly where I fit in... There's always this kind of nostalgia for a place, a place where you can reckon with yourself” (King). Here American actor and playwright Sam Shepard describes perfectly the situation of an exile that may long for a home, yet feels like it is difficult to find. He also shows that the concept of home is multi-faceted. Home defines everything that is comfort, security, and the very place that creates a person, yet not everyone is privileged to have this. Some people are wanderers and must seek out comfort and security in another way. They are in essence marked to be more enlightened thinkers, because they are forced to reevaluate everything. As Edward Said says, “For exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (51). The exile must therefore re-evaluate everything and come to different conclusions about home: that it is something more than just a place where their forefathers lived. As these wanderers find, home is more than the land in which a person is born, or the dwelling in which that person lives; home stands for everything that has shaped and defined what a person is: friends, family, and cherished memories. These things are a part of the person and cannot be taken from them even when their physical home is destroyed. In *The Lord of the Rings* and *Die Blechtrommel*, JRR Tolkien and Günter Grass show us that war destroys physical homelands, yet through the characters of Frodo Baggins and Oskar Matzerath, we do find that there is one thing war cannot destroy: memory. Salman Rushdie says,

“But human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (216). Although memory should be treated with skepticism as we only remember things in fragments and never remember full sequences, yet we still can find healing from these fragments that are left behind. Both Tolkien and Grass show us that after so much evil and destruction from war, writing and recollecting memories is a form of healing from the wars and dealing with the guilt that surviving a war causes. Writing can be used to force a moral, but simply writing for the sake of remembering is shown to be the better way to cope with a world that seems to have forgotten morals, and this is shown through the characters of Frodo Baggins and Oskar Matzerath.

Before we can begin to understand writing as a form of healing and recalling the memories of peace and comfort, it is important to understand what home is. Shelley Mallett in her article “Understanding Home” gives us a definition of home. “The birth family house holds symbolic power as a formative dwelling place, a place of origin and return, a place from which to embark upon a journey” (63). We see this in both *Die Blechtrommel* and *The Lord of the Rings*: the Shire serves as the starting point for the Frodo’s journey and the safety of Oskar’s grandma, particularly hiding under her four dresses, serves as the safe and familiar for which Oskar longs after he is gone. Yet eventually upon Frodo’s return and when Oskar is forced to leave his home, we see that home was not these places, but rather what they represent. Mallett also says, “Home can be an expression of one’s (possibly fluid) identity and sense of self and/or one’s body might be home to the self. It can constitute belonging and/or create a sense of marginalization and estrangement” (84). Thus, home is more than a place, more than a

Shire or the safety of a grandma, it is about what a person carries with them, the memories. Thus home is not a static place, but an ever-changing ideal as a person obtains more memories and experiences. This sense of marginalization though is something that comes along when one does not feel as if they belong to the community in which they were born, a feeling that both Frodo and Oskar can relate to.

Both Frodo and Oskar show that they are estranged from their communities. Frodo from the start shows a great love for his home, the simple, pastoral Shire inhabited by simple creatures, hobbits, who love feasting, drinking, smoking, and community ties. The hobbits lead a simple life, a life almost of children, in relative peace. As Tolkien writes, “[Hobbits] love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favorite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a handloom...” (*Fellowship* 20). Yet Frodo, although very much a hobbit in every respect, is marked for something different, like Oskar, and this difference is apparent from the start.

Both Frodo and Oskar are marked by being set apart from the community, a part of it, yet isolated. Devin Brown, in his article “From Isolation to Community: Frodo’s Incomplete Personal Quest in *The Lord of the Rings*” shows us perfectly how Frodo is a special hobbit, marked for something different, to be the voice for all hobbits. Brown draws attention to Lobelia (a disliked relative of Frodo) when she has a conversation with Frodo regarding Bilbo’s (Frodo’s Uncle) sudden departure from the Shire. Brown says, “In Lobelia’s final words to her relative, she says to Frodo ‘Why didn’t you go too? You don’t belong here’ (38), a comment which again says more than she knows. In fact, Frodo does not really belong at Bag End, or in Hobbiton, or in Buckland, for he does not

really ‘belong’ anywhere” (165). Brown then goes on to show how Frodo wanders by himself throughout the Shire, both showing his love for the Shire, but also his love of being alone. We also see Frodo’s difference from other hobbits when he says to Gandalf:

I should like to save the Shire, if I could—though there have been times when I thought the inhabitants too stupid and dull for words, and have felt that an earthquake or an invasion of dragons might be good for them. But I don’t feel like that now. I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again. (*Fellowship* 96)

Frodo is thus different from the average hobbit because he longs for adventure, yet the adventure of war which he goes through ultimately destroys his illusion of adventure and home. Frodo is a defender of the ideal of home and community, yet the ideal he saves, ultimately destroys him and reveals that home is just that: an ideal and an illusion that the reality of war and suffering destroys. Yet, having traveled outside of his home and having suffered has ultimately made Frodo the most enlightened of hobbits. Oskar too is set apart from those around him, most notably in the fact that we start his story in a mental institution, perhaps the only place of peace for one who has watched their ideals ruined. Oskar grows up not knowing which of two possible men is his father, has no real sense of a good home life, and as a result tries to keep his innocence by remaining three years old in appearance, yet not in the way he thinks. The war destroys Oskar, and his ideal home is destroyed. He must wander with Bebra and his circus followers, never

finding a place to truly call home. Thus, both Oskar and Frodo leave their physical homes and become wanderers and exiles because they see that they do not belong.

Furthermore, both Oskar and Frodo have seen a world outside of their home and were forced to live homeless. This wandering exile helped them create a more mature understanding of what home means. As Edward Said says:

Regard experiences *as if* they were about to disappear. What is it that anchors them in reality? What would you save of them? What would you give up? Only someone who has achieved independence and detachment, someone whose homeland is “sweet” but whose circumstances make it impossible to recapture that sweetness, can answer those questions. (Such a person would also find it impossible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma.) (55)

Thus, Frodo and Oskar leave their homelands and must determine what it is that they want to remember of their pasts as they write their experiences after the war.

Furthermore, after Frodo returns to the Shire he is no longer satisfied with the illusion of comfort that the hobbits create. Oskar too is not satisfied with where he was born and never returns. Frodo and Oskar thus, through estrangement from their respective communities, become more enlightened thinkers by leaving their physical homes behind. Through their enlightenment, they learn to write about their experiences in their respective wars, and in so doing they find some peace from the guilt they feel in surviving the war.

This idea of exile is a common theme of war literature, this sense of loss and finding what has been destroyed. Frodo and Oskar leave their homes and by doing so

escape what Salman Rushdie describes as “internal exile.” Rushdie says, “To forget there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined cultural frontiers, would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the ‘homeland’” (222). Thus, regardless of the reasons that both characters leave, they are showing that they are willing to recognize that there is a world beyond where they were born, an idea that grew as a counter idea to nationalism, which was popular leading up to the wars. Frodo and Oskar are set apart because they not only choose external exile by physically leaving their homelands, but they also in so doing avoid internal exile in which they never expand their view of home in their minds to include the world outside. The other hobbits and those around Oskar never think of what goes on in the world outside. However, Frodo and Oskar see the world outside and thus know that there is more to the world than their small corner. This helps them to write in a more enlightened way because they can draw on experiences and places they have seen in their external exile.

Although, as Rushdie shows us, memory can be separate from reality: “Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved” (216). Thus, memory draws on more than just reality: it pieces together everything one has seen, heard, or experienced, creating a new reality in the mind that may never have existed through actual events. Yet, it is exactly this understanding that all of these things have affected memory that allows Frodo and Oskar to know that they must write everything and not omit or try to add things to create meaning. The meaning comes by seeing everything written out, not by creating a false meaning by forcing a plot. Both characters

can look back to their childhood or time in the Shire and understand that good experiences couple with the bad experiences. This allows them to heal by finding that home is not always good, but has bad experiences too, but one must deal with the bad experiences and not feel guilty because they happened. To find this comfort Oskar and Frodo had to first detach themselves from their homeland. As Edward W. Said says, "For exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past" (51). Both Frodo and Oskar left their homelands behind and became cut off from everything, a state they had always been in, yet now more explicitly so. By doing so they were eventually able to heal.

Frodo and Oskar find their healing through writing and searching for home. As Said says, "This search can lead exiles to reconstitute their broken lives in narrative form, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. Such a story is designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole" (51). Frodo and Oskar go from a time of peace, live through a time of war, and then later after the war use writing as a form of healing. While Said shows us that the narratives of exiles can create a problematic view, perhaps one of nationalism much the same as the Nazi ideology, yet for Frodo and Oskar, they do not write with a strict purpose, they write merely for writing's sake. They use their narratives to heal, but unlike the ordinary exile, Oskar and Frodo do not try to create a "triumphant ideology" for themselves. They simply write their story and by the end we as readers can see that exile has changed these characters, and they have become comfortable with dealing with the past, rather than suppressing it.

Furthermore we see that Oskar hates when writers try to create their own purpose. Oskar admits to readers that there are times when Bruno, his caretaker, takes over the narrative, yet he always attempts to write and create clear connections, something that Oskar detests because it is a false way of creating meaning: the meaning exists in all of the fragmented parts and it is for the reader to find this meaning, not for the author to create it. Many bibliographies and national narratives try to portray themselves in a positive light and show why they are right, but we see where this mindset leads: to a fierce nationalism that gave birth to the Nazi regime and ultimately caused more harm than good. Oskar and Frodo write their memories, even when they are fragmented, because writing helps them cope with what they have been through: losing their idea of home and living through war. Thus both Frodo and Oskar turn to writing to reconstruct what they experienced and try to make sense of what their home means to them in a time when most were trying to find ways to prove why they were right and other nations and people were wrong.

Frodo finds that his home was never a set place, a set Shire, when he finally returns. When Frodo returns from completing his quest and destroying the ring, he comes back to his home only to find that Saruman has corrupted the pristine, pastoral Shire and turned it into an industrial wasteland, much the way that the industry of war destroyed Europe. David M. Waito in his essay “The Shire Quest: The ‘Scouring of the Shire’ as the Narrative and Thematic Focus of *The Lord of the Rings*” helps us understand this scene by shifting the focus of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy away from a quest to destroy a ring to a quest to save a homeland. As Waito says, “...Tolkien provides this detailed backdrop of the Shire because there is another quest, a quest to save

the Shire (the Shire Quest), which overarches the Ring Quest in the narrative” (155). Waito is referring here to the expansive description given to the Shire, which occupies almost 100 pages of the first installment of the trilogy. From this we see the importance of the home of the hobbits, and from this we also see how devastating it is for the hobbits to return to a Shire that has been destroyed by Saruman and the last breaths of the War of the Ring. In *Die Blechtrommel* we also see this idea of how important home is: the German people were recreating a pride in their country, but the National Socialists abused this pride to create a regime that destroyed Germany, like Saruman destroyed the Shire, and left future generations to clean up the mess. Ultimately both Frodo and Oskar must rely on future generations to carry on the narrative of redefining the importance of home, as Frodo does with Sam, and Oskar does with those who read his narrative.

Furthermore, the significance of final chapter in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is that it brings together all of the points that were made throughout the story and shows us the true effects of war and the idea of home. Nicholas Birns in his article ““You have Grown Very Much” : The Scouring of the Shire and the Novelistic Aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*” agrees with Waito’s claim that the Shire Quest is the most important quest in the novels but also goes on to show how Frodo has changed since he left the Shire. The other hobbits are better after their experiences in the War of the Ring and have learned how to save the homeland they love, but Frodo cannot see his home the same way. As Birns writes, “Frodo faces the same problem of reintegration encountered in many First World War poems and narratives, albeit his is very differently treated in mode and style and in a narrative universe that is, in Tolkien’s vision, much more integrated and harmonious” (85). Frodo is different than the other hobbits because he chose his

exile. He saw that there is a world beyond the Shire and he made himself at home in the world outside, unlike the other hobbits who did not choose exile and rather simply followed Frodo and never truly escaped the internal exile to understand that there is a world outside the Shire. Thus they were better able to reintegrate, whereas Frodo could not. Frodo has become a permanent exile and therefore has a different idea of home than just a peaceful place like the Shire: home is every experience he had and the friends he made in the world outside, and thus he cannot be at peace in one solitary home.

We also see that Frodo realizes his home is not the Shire when he makes ready to depart to the undying lands by means of the Grey Havens. We see this in the exchange between Sam and Frodo:

“But,” said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, “I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.”

“So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.” (*Return* 382).

Thus, for Frodo, he saved the ideal of home for those who would come after. He suffered and lost his peace, contentment, and ultimately his friends. Frodo ends the story like Oskar: alone, yet with a clearer understanding of himself after writing everything down and sorting through the memories. Oskar has these same moments of losing friends and ultimately finding that he is marked to be a more enlightened person in the society in which he lives. He loses his mother, both his fathers, and Maria, his first love. He never can bond with his alleged son Kurt. The majority of Oskar’s friends end up dying, and

by the end of the story Oskar feels truly like an exile: alone and far away from the land in which he was born. But through this solitude, Oskar finds some sense of peace by writing down everything that happened to him during the war. He ends his story and we as readers have a sense that we are to continue the tradition Oskar has started and write down our experiences to sift through them and find out what home truly means to us.

This brings the question, if war destroys home and creates exiles, can one ever find home again? We hear this same question from Sam in *The Lord of the Rings* films: how can the world go back to the way it was after so much bad has happened? That is the question that it appears Oskar and Frodo seek to find. Frodo uses writing as a way of coping, but eventually he finishes his story and must pass it on to a new generation, embodied by Sam. Tolkien writes:

“Why, you have nearly finished it, Mr. Frodo!” Sam exclaimed. “Well, you have kept at it, I must say.”

“I have quite finished, Sam,” said Frodo. “The last pages are for you.”

(Return 380)

Thus Sam is there to take over and write his experiences too. This is more than a simple passing of a journal, it is a request: Sam is to not only continue writing, but to become more enlightened by his temporary exile. Sam must not let himself go back to thinking the Shire is independent of the world, Sam must remember that the Shire is a part of the world too. Thus, Frodo is trying to recreate a pride in one's homeland, without the false thinking the world outside is the enemy. Frodo would have a more harmonious world, and he leaves Sam with the last request that as Mayor of the Shire he do his part to bring about a more peaceful, enlightened pride in one's home.

Oskar too is told to write as a form of therapy. As Grass writes, “Bruno Münsterberg – ich meine jetzt meinen Pfleger, lasse das Wortspiel hinter mir – kaufte auf meine Rechnung fünfhundert Blatt Schreibpapier...etwas so Gefährliches wie unbeschriebenes Papier...” (10-11). Bruno, Oskar’s caretaker, gives Oskar five hundred blank pages, something Oskar deems dangerous. But why would it be dangerous? With blank paper, one can write whatever one wants, and in doing so put thoughts to paper, reliving memories, both good and bad, and truly discovering what resides in the home of the mind. The danger of writing is that when one writes, one can use one’s words to whatever end one deems necessary or favorable. Thus, it is always difficult to decipher if writing out one’s experience is a form of therapy or if it is a further form of psychologically breaking an individual by making them relive experiences that destroyed all of their ideals and beliefs. By the end of both stories, while both still seem broken, they both find some sort of peace. Frodo is going to the Undying Lands and has written through every horror, but also every good experience of friendship, during his time in the War of the Ring. It has relieved him of some guilt he might have felt by living through such a terrible event when so many heroes died, such as Boromir. Oskar too is able to relieve some of his guilt by writing everything that happened, showing us as readers, and himself too, that he is willing to deal with the guilt of the deaths of those around him when most Germans were content to repress the memories rather than deal with them. Thus, by writing their experiences down, both Frodo and Oskar deal with their guilt and what has happened rather than repressing everything.

Furthermore, in the stories of Frodo and Oskar, we see that these two small, normal characters are able to survive and heal through writing. They survive when many

heroes and strong men and women died. Janice Mouton in her article, “Gnomes, Fairy-Tale Heroes, and Oskar Matzerath” describes well such protagonists. She writes:

Other fairy-tale heroes belonging to this group of “*Mangelwesen*,” are those who, temporarily at least, are too young, too simple, too small, or otherwise inadequate to cope with life’s challenges. These are people needy and alone, who stand for all mankind: though they are isolated, they are nonetheless able to enter into human relationships, and though helpless, yet they are potentially capable of being helped and of helping others. (29).

Mouton here describes perfectly not only Oskar, but also the hobbits and more importantly Frodo of the Shire. Both these characters are overlooked as unlikely heroes, living too simple a life. Both isolate themselves from their communities, yet also help the very communities they isolated themselves from: Frodo saves the Shire and Oskar shows the people at the Onion how to cry again and show that it is okay to process and talk about what the war has done to them. Oskar drums and allows the people to truly cry, without the artificial aid of an onion. Thus, the unlikely heroes of Frodo and Oskar use writing to show that the bravest thing one can do is to deal with one’s problems, whether it be guilt or otherwise, rather than allow oneself to repress what has happened.

These unlikely heroes do survive, yet at a cost, the reason for which writing is needed to heal them. As Mouton writes, “And as we hear [Oskar] speak of these conflicting senses, we understand the extent to which, though he does survive, he is a psychically damaged survivor” (30). Thus Oskar, like Frodo, survives during a time of great stress, yet they survive damaged and long for a home in which they can be whole

again. Oskar, like Frodo, is forced to deal with the conflict of wanting to return to a home, yet being enlightened and knowing that home is not a set place: it is everything is learned in life to help create someone to be the person one is today. Furthermore, Michael Livingston in his article on Frodo and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, describes Frodo's situation well when he writes, "As bearer of the One Ring, the Ring of Power that is ever-leeching upon his mind and upon which the fate of Middle-earth itself rests, Frodo exists in psychological state that is unnaturally tenuous: for him, even small moments of trauma carry substantial weight and make substantial impact" (83). This shows that Frodo is damaged by his ordeal with the Ring, yet this also shows that Frodo is incredibly strong to have undergone this ordeal and still to have survived, like Oskar. Yet survival came at a cost. After their respective ordeals we see Frodo safely arrive in the Undying Lands, a place of peace and we see Oskar arrives in a mental institution, peaceful too yet also more realistic. Thus both fail to find their ideal home again. The world cannot go back to the way it was because the violence of war destroyed every ideal and belief in mankind that was developed the century before during a time of pride and nationalism. Frodo leaves for grand adventures only to find, like Oskar, that real adventures are challenging and sobering. It is difficult to lose friends, communities, and peace, yet despite all this, writing can begin to heal these wounds by dealing with the problems and guilt caused by war, rather than repressing the emotions.

Yet there are some who look down on simple writing without the grandeur of connecting plots, themes and motifs. Some believe that writing as a way of healing is not as important as writing with a point in mind. In his article, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs," Edmund Wilson says:

...Mr. Louis J. Halle...says... "...You ask for its meaning—as you ask for the meaning of the *Odyssey*, of *Genesis*, of *Faust*—in a word? In a word, then, its meaning is 'heroism.' It makes our own world, once more, heroic. What higher meaning than this is to be found in any literature?"

But if one goes from these eulogies to the book itself, one is likely to be let down, astonished, baffled. The reviewer has just read the whole thing aloud to his seven-year-old daughter, who has been through *The Hobbit* countless times...One is puzzled to know why the author should have supposed he was writing for adults. There are to be sure, some details that are a little unpleasant for a children's book, but except when he is being pedantic and also boring the adult reader, there is little in *The Lord of the Rings* over the head of a seven-year-old child" (*Tolkien Treasury* 51).

Here Wilson seems to have found the point and missed it both at the same time. It is true that reading through *The Lord of the Rings* one enjoys a very simple story, one of hope, a little bit of danger, but then good wins out and the world is saved. Yes this is simple, but yes it is also meant for adults. The recording of Frodo's experiences give us an intimate look at one who has lived through war. While many only focus on who wins and who loses, by looking deeper into Frodo's story we can begin to see that the story is about Frodo finding peace writing down his adventure and the focus is not the fact the Sauron is destroyed. That becomes background information in a story that starts and ends with Frodo in the Shire. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Die Blechtrommel* are not important for the stories they tell, but for showing us that writing is a cathartic experience that can heal

wounds caused by loss and suffering and they both refuse to do so by forcing plots to connect and for themes and motifs to be obviously evident.

Thus, Tolkien and Grass show us the power of writing in sifting through terrible experiences like war. Frodo and Oskar write to find peace and healing and regain a sense of home, something that can be a physical place as well as the ideas and memories that reside in a person's mind. Through Frodo and Oskar, we see that writing to create a clear moral or to get a point across is not as effective as simply writing for the sake of writing and to deal with guilt. During war, one's nation and one's homeland can be destroyed, but one's memories and experiences safely reside in one's mind, albeit fragmented. Thus, to overcome war, one must write for therapy and piece together these fragments. By doing so one can deal with the guilt caused by surviving when so many lost their lives and by dealing with these emotions rather than repressing them, writing is shown to be a powerful medium for change.

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