

Here at the End of All Things: In Defense of The Return of the King's Five Separate Endings

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The Return of the King doesn't need to be three-and-a-half hours long. Nothing needs to be three and a half hours long. But in a world where I feel guilty for not answering emails and texts five minutes after receiving them, it is satisfying to sit down and engage with a story on its own terms, in its own time, with no distractions. I'd rather have to wait a few more minutes for a satisfying conclusion than feel cheated by a movie that sped through the set-up.

Long movies are an exercise in patience and delayed gratification. As a long movie, *The Return of the King* is an object lesson in satisfying endings. Each one is necessary, a coda for an important story thread; each one folds in on the others like the pages of a book. Each would be a good ending for its own movie, if *Lord of the Rings* were only about destroying a Ring of Power, or only about a king reclaiming his long-forsaken birthright, or only about a traumatic journey into dark and cruel places, and the difficulty that comes with trying to rebuild a normal life on the other side. [The Lord of the Rings](#) is more than the sum of its parts. "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future," Galadriel tells Frodo in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The movie respects each of its smaller threads enough to see each one through to the very end. Even the smallest story matters, and in the telling, becomes great.

1.

"I'm glad to be with you, Samwise Gamgee, here at the end of all things."

Tolkien built the world of Middle-earth from intricately detailed bedtime stories for his children into a vast collection of histories, geographies, and tales that could just as well have been told by court singers time out of mind. His books are even more astonishing in that they've captured the imaginations of so many. Every character has a language, a culture, a family tree, a list of

descendants. Every place has a history and a geography. The detail and sense of scale are both staggering, and yet, rather than overwhelming readers with the sheer amount of information, Tolkien's stories are engaging. When they adapted the story to film, Peter Jackson, Fran Walsh, and Philippa Boyens faced the task of telling a complex, rich story in a complex, rich way that was also clear. Tolkien's books are meant to read like historical documents and epic poetry at the same time. Movies don't behave the same way as the written page does, nor should they try to. But telling a high fantasy tale in the wrong tone, with the wrong amount of detail, would be unfaithful to the spirit of Tolkien's world.

In terms of cinematic storytelling, ending *The Return of the King* on the slopes of Mount Doom would have been appropriate. The Ring is destroyed and the world is on fire, reduced to a small rock in the middle of a lava flow. Two little hobbits drape themselves over the rock, physically and emotionally spent; they cannot survive in this place for much longer, and they both know it. It's an apocalyptic end for an apocalyptic story.

Ending the film here would have been a daring choice for Jackson, Walsh, and Boyens, but it wouldn't have been true to Tolkien's intentions or to the spirit of the story. *The Lord of the Rings* is about picking up the pieces after failure, about trying even when there is no hope of success; the Fellowship of the Ring left on their journey knowing their odds were bad, and Frodo volunteered to carry the Ring with them even though he did not know the way. Here at the volcano there is no hope of success. Frodo and Sam have achieved their impossible goal. The Ring is gone. But so is their food, their clothing, their friends. They can hardly breathe in the heat. All they have are their memories of home, and tears to shed over what might have been: the green of grass, strawberries and cream, a beautiful woman that Sam knows he will never now be able to marry. Frodo and Sam huddle together, glad to be with each other; their relief at achieving their goal mixing with their grief over reaching the end of their journey and their lives.

To end with Frodo and Sam on the slopes of Mount Doom, where the Ring was forged and the saga first began, would have been a denial of the hope that springs defiant in the face of fear. And a denial of the light that shines in the darkness. We feel the despair that blankets Frodo and Sam as they sit, relieved of their burden and certain that they will never see home ever again. There's a breath of relief, but not a sense of closure, as the screen fades to black and the first ending flickers out.

2.

"Now count the days of the King!"

The end is not the end. Time passes, and the sun breaks through the clouds to light two prone figures stretched out on volcanic rock. Life and rescue come in the form of Gandalf and a trio of giant eagles, searching for the two people who'd saved the world. This scene is brief—an eagle swoops down and picks up each hobbit, and then they turn and go, making the journey away from catastrophe seem effortless.

The scene echoes Gandalf's rescue from Saruman's clutches in *Fellowship* and his resurrection in *The Two Towers*. In the first, he throws himself off a tower onto the back of a giant eagle that carries him away. In the second, he'd fought a fire demon and died in the

attempt, but his death was not the end for him either; in one of *The Two Towers*' most surreal scenes, Gandalf spins through time and space, appearing to float over a nondescript white ground, gasping for breath as he comes back to life. He'd been "sent back" by some higher power until he could complete his purpose and see the War of the Ring through.

To Frodo, the eagles' rescue must feel like a dream. He floats over the lava that had threatened to engulf him, sent back to the world of the living after he'd completed his own task to destroy the Ring. Light envelops him, and he wakes up in a big bed in a large, bright room in the Houses of Healing, greeted by Gandalf. The Houses recall another awakening after a near-death experience, when Frodo comes to himself in Rivendell after being stabbed by a wraith in *Fellowship*. In both scenes, everything is light and laughter, and we can't help but feel as though Frodo is in heaven; the relief of accomplishing his task is stronger now than it had been on the volcano's side, when it had been tempered with weariness and despair. There is no despair here, and no sadness either; the Fellowship reunites around Frodo's bed with no mention of the pain and fear they've all endured.

The first time these characters all met each other was at the Council, and they were about to set off on their journey; here their journey is complete, and it is the first time they have been together in months. In the first film, the hobbits wander Rivendell in a dreamy, slow state; the future members of the Fellowship arrive for council with looks of grim seriousness, certain that the fate of the world rests on their shoulders, but not understanding just how heavy that burden will prove to be. Now, in *Return of the King*, the Fellowship is reunited. The war is over, the battles are done, and they do not come together as strangers but as friends, happy to be alive, and happy to see each other, and happy to fulfill their roles as rebuilders rather than warriors in the new world they're now tasked to create.

Here, finally, Aragorn takes his place as King of Gondor. He'd rejected the title long before the events of *Fellowship*, electing instead to wander the wilds as an anonymous ranger until Frodo and the other hobbits needed a guide to take them to Rivendell. The white tree of the king, once thought dead, is in bloom again. The city is rebuilt, and the battlefield just a field now, green and growing. Other small threads from the saga are neatly tied off here: Éomer has assumed his uncle's place as king of the horse lords; his sister Éowyn has found love in the arms of Faramir, the second-born and second-favorite son of the steward of Gondor. Aragorn's own love Arwen has returned from the edge of death, dressed in the soft green of new leaves. Their reunion is unexpected and welcome, a passionate kiss after a long and uncertain separation.

The world is all as it should be, with four small exceptions: the hobbits are still far from home, uncomfortable in a strange land. Aragorn refuses to let them bow to him, even though he's just been crowned king. Instead, he bows to them, and the rest of the crowd follows suit. For a moment, the hobbits stand over everyone else. They have not looked for or expected to be given this honor, and it's clear that they are uncomfortable, Frodo most of all. We don't know if Frodo has told anyone about his inability to destroy the Ring at the last moment, back at Mount Doom. We don't know if anyone else knows how the Ring was destroyed. We don't know if the Fellowship knows, and doesn't care, or if Frodo's failure is a secret he and Sam will carry to their graves, another heavy burden to replace the burden of the One Ring. We watch as a

series of reactions flicker across Frodo's eyes when Aragorn bows to him: surprise, and joy, and discomfort, all so quickly that they might as well be the same emotion. The Ring is gone, destroyed in spite of Frodo's final failure, and for the first time, Frodo knows that nothing will ever be the same.

3.

"We were home."

The camera pulls away from Aragorn's coronation and the perspective shifts to a view of a map, tracing its way westward back across Middle-Earth. The path follows the Fellowship's own journey in reverse, finally landing on the Shire. The map scene of *Return of the King* is the twin of the opening of *Fellowship*, in which Frodo's uncle Bilbo pores over old maps and documents, discussing the Shire and hobbits' place in the world, laughing about how simple hobbits are, and how content they are to be forgotten by outsiders and left to live in peace.

Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin return home to the Shire where they belong, a year after they'd left, and nothing has changed. The Shire has been forgotten by the outside world, and has forgotten the outside in return. Its rolling hills and winding paths are small and tame after their journey; the country seems so plain and ordinary. Homecoming is sweet, but it is almost as though they have never left. The other hobbits don't seem to know what to do with travelers, so they act as though Frodo and company never left. No one knows where they've been, or what they've done, and no one seems to care. When the four return to their favorite tavern, the fuss is not over them, but over a giant pumpkin one of the locals grew while they were away. Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin share a silent toast; Sam proposes to Rosie, the woman he'd resolved to marry when he and Frodo waited for death on the slopes of the volcano. They're home. There's laughter and love and a chance to create a life here. The world is somewhat normal in its disappointing ordinariness. The hobbits re-assimilate into their home country.

4.

"There's room for a little more."

Except for Frodo, who walks through life in the Shire with a smile on his face and pain in his eyes. He wonders to himself, "How do you pick up the threads of an old life, when in your heart, you know there is no going back?" He wanders Bilbo's old house, finds the book Bilbo wrote about his own adventures years ago, and begins adding to it. There are no night terrors, no waking up in a cold sweat in the dark, but the trauma still lurks in the corners of Frodo's brain, a deep-tissue bruise that won't go away. The stab wound he received from the wraith never fully heals. He doesn't seem to settle in the same way that Sam and Merry and Pippin do. He knows he can't stay.

So he doesn't. Frodo leaves Middle-Earth with the last of the elves. The world is changed, scrubbed clean of the evil of the Ring, made new; but Frodo cannot share in this new world. His wounds and his trauma are too great. "We set out to save the Shire...and it has been saved... but not for me," he tells a disconsolate Sam.

Earlier in *The Return of the King*, in a moment of abject despair, Sam had cradled Frodo's nearly lifeless body and whispered, "Don't leave me alone. Don't go where I can't follow." He's followed Frodo everywhere, ever since Gandalf caught him eavesdropping under Frodo's window and sent him off as Frodo's traveling companion, with a warning to never lose him or leave him. Sam never left Frodo's side, never lost faith in him, never left him behind. Now Frodo is leaving him for good, and he can never follow; Frodo's pain is too great for him to stay, and Sam's roots are too deep for him to go. The departure of Frodo is the true breaking of the Fellowship, the final step in a journey Frodo never expected nor asked to take.

5.

"Well, I'm back."

In the end, the true final scene of *Return of the King* is not an ending. It's hardly even a scene. Sam walks home, turning Frodo's words over and over in his mind. "Your part in the story will go on....you will have to be one and whole for many years." There is so much more in store for Sam, for him to grow into and to become. His wife Rosie greets him at the gate with their children, next to a dusty lane leading to an ordinary home bursting with flowers, an appropriate home for a gardener and a family, and for the threads of a new life to be picked up. Sam kisses his wife and his children, and tells them he's back. He's never leaving again. He'll never need to; he's done enough traveling, and now it's time to live.

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Even long movies end. Eventually, the credits run, the theme plays, and it's time to pick up the remains of popcorn bags and head for the exit. As much as I'd love to stay in the theater all day, there are other parts of life that are necessary and hard and good that can't be escaped.

A 90-minute movie is the perfect length to ruin your life. It hands you a story and a few characters, and if the strange alchemy of writing, direction, and editing work together in just the right way, you'll finish the movie both satisfied and eager for more. If it's bad, you only spent 90 minutes on it. A three-hour movie is far more dangerous. If it's bad, it's infuriating, because it's a waste of time. In a world where time is money and there are thousands of other movies clamoring for attention in your queue, bad long movies are an insult. Investing in a long movie is risky, making good long movies even more precious and potent. Three hours is the perfect length of time to ruin your life, then give you the space to put the pieces back together again while you're still watching the film. There's room to breathe that a shorter movie just doesn't allow. If you're lucky, and the long movie is a good one, it will take you on a journey and leave you forever changed.