

Community, and When It is Not: Reflections in literature

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There is no more ceaseless or tormenting care for man, as long as he remains free, than to find someone to bow down to as soon as possible. But man seeks to bow down before that which is indisputable, so indisputable that all men at once would agree to the universal worship of it. For the care of these pitiful creatures is not just to find something before which I or some other man can bow down, but to find something all together. And this need for communality of worship is the chief torment of each man individually, and of mankind as a whole, from the beginning of the ages.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, «The Grand Inquisitor,» *The Brothers Karamazov* (254)

It seems to me that a person can be a member in two types of associations. In the first type, which I will call a «community,» being a member is beneficial to the person. In the second type, which I will call a «mob,» being a member is harmful to the person. In a community, 1) the members are thoughtful of, careful for, and mutually considerate of each other; 2) they have the shared goals of mutual peace and happiness; and 3) they make unique, individual contributions, and use teamwork to achieve their goals. In a mob, there is an unequal consideration of the members for one another, so that at least one, if not all, of the elements that make up a community are lacking. These definitions were culled from readings of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and the chapter entitled «The Grand Inquisitor» in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The purpose of this paper is not to defend the definitions of community and mob with any great philosophical rigor, but to delineate how these definitions were formed from narratives that describe associations that are either beneficial or harmful to their members.

Before any actions take place in a story, a good author will often use descriptions to clue the reader in as to whether or not a person or an association is good or bad. Tolkien's prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, «Concerning Hobbits,» is a prime example:

Hobbits are an unobtrusive hut very ancient people, more numerous formerly than they are today; for they love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well farmed countryside was their favorite haunt... As for the Hobbits of the Shire, ...in the days of their peace and prosperity they were

*a merry folk... Their faces were as a rule good-natured rather than beautiful, broad, bright-eyed, red-cheeked, with mouths apt to laughter, and to eating and drinking. And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often and heartily, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them). They were hospitable and delighted in parties, and in presents, which they gave away freely and eagerly accepted. (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, 19-20)*

Another noble class of beings in the Rings trilogy are the *Ents*, a wise, ancient, and benevolent race of sentient and mobile trees. «They are the caretakers of the trees and forests of Middle Earth, and are first described by the Ent named Treebeard: «...We do what we can. We keep off strangers and the foolhardy; and we train and we teach, we walk and we weed. We are tree-herds, we old Ents» (Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 84).

Elves, as well, are described in sympathetic terms, as a race «high and fair,» immortal, with a strong «appetite for music and poetry and tales,» and as likely to laugh or sing as to talk (Tolkien, *Fellowship*, 286). Hobbits, Ents, Elves, and several other races and persons in the *Rings* trilogy are all depicted in a similar vein. Descriptions aside, as a people, they are characterized by mutual consideration, they share goals that may be broadly defined as peace and happiness, and they make individual contributions and utilize teamwork as ways to express their consideration and achieve their goals.

The Fellowship of the Ring perfectly exemplifies the characteristics, tactics, and goals of a community. In an attempt to overthrow the one, great, dark power that threatens to destroy nearly all the true races of Middle Earth, an elf, a dwarf, two men, four hobbits, and a wizard of uncertain stock combine their unique abilities and gifts. A camouflaging elven cloak; a virtually indestructible, dwarven-smithed coat of mithril armor; an ancient blade forged by the great, elder stock of Men; and a hobbit to take them all on to help in his task as ring-bearer n all come together for the sake of the community (Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 184).

In the *Harry Potter* series, Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and a host of others make up the community, whose recurring goal is to secure life and peace from the widespread death and panic that Lord Voldemort threatens with his attempts to regain his power. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, it takes the invisibility cloak of Harry's father, the broom-riding talent of Harry, the chess-playing skill of Ron, the mental acumen of Hermione, and the love of Harry's mother, to find and vanquish Lord Voldemort in his scheme to achieve immortality. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry wins the final showdown against Voldemort with the help of Fawkes the Phoenix, the Sorting Hat, and the Sword of Gryffindor. Indeed, Harry and his friends are able to figure out, face, and conquer most everything that comes their way due to the tutelage, care, intervention, and special gifts of friends, family members, and teachers.

Already in these few examples, we've seen the characteristics, tactics, and goals of a community. Let's now turn our attention to the mob.

Again, before any action takes place, description is often a reader's first glimpse into the nature of a newly introduced figure. Dostoevsky brings his Cardinal Grand Inquisitor on the scene

with all due foreboding. He sets his scene «in the most horrible time of the Inquisition, when fires blazed every day to the glory of God» (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 248). In the midst of the crackling of «the fires of the heretics» appears Jesus, come again «to visit his children if only for a moment,» and «in his infinite mercy [to walk] once again among men» (248). Jesus heals many who begin to flock to him, and he interrupts a funeral to bring a little girl back to life. And here enters the Grand Inquisitor:

He is an old man, almost ninety, tall and straight, with a gaunt face and sunken eyes, from which a glitter still shines like a fiery spark... He is followed at a certain distance by his grim assistants and slaves, and by the 'holy' guard. [...] He has seen everything, seen the coffin set down at his feet, seen the girl rise, and his face darkens. He scowls with his thick, gray eyebrows, and his eyes shine with a sinister fire. He stretches forth his finger and orders the guard to take him. And such is his power, so tamed, submissive, and tremblingly obedient to his will are the people, that the crowd immediately parts before the guard. (249)

The Grand Inquisitor is certainly a powerful leader, but his «sinister fire,» and the way his followers are «tremblingly obedient to his will,» are hints that point to something darker than mere strong-arm leadership.

The leaders of mobs always seem to have this kind of undeniable sway over the members of their mobs (perhaps «their subjects» would be a more accurate term). And in a mob, there is always this strict delineation between the «member» who is the leader, and the members who are the subjects. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort returns and calls together his flock, the Death Eaters. A man with a cold, mirthless laugh, with a look of cruel satisfaction on his face, and with a sadistic propensity to cause his followers to suffer for their past breaches of loyalty, Voldemort lords his presence over his subjects with impunity, and they respond with total obedience: «...One of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort, and kissed the hem of his black robes... The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on his knees and kissing his robes» (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 647).

And Sauron, the all-mighty terror of the *Rings* trilogy, is *the* sole Power that drives his hordes on to battle, «fill[s] them with hate and fury...» and wills them to do as he wishes (Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 252).

The leaders of mobs always have ulterior motives. These motives aren't always necessarily intended to be harmful to the members of the mob, but one attitude is clear for every mob leader: they do not see their subjects as their equals, but as lesser beings, who either are to be taken advantage of, or who are in need of an overly paternal master. This attitude is the cause behind «bad leadership.» Hand in hand with the problem of «bad leadership» is «bad membership.» The problems seem inherently linked, for just as a mob leader will see himself as more important, or «better,» than his subjects, subjects who practice bad membership will see themselves as less than that to which they are bowing down.

The Grand Inquisitor at first appears to be a complicated figure, for he seems to have many qualities that would be attributed to a good leader. He believes that he is doing great work for the sake

of humankind. He uses teamwork by working together with other lofty souls who have discerned the secret curse of freedom, and have taken upon themselves the knowledge of good and evil. He offers bread, mystery, and the promise of power to his followers. But for all this, he still exhibits bad leadership, and so he is still no part of a community, because he views his followers as less than he, and leads them with a lie in his heart. Thus he speaks:

[We/ preach mystery and... teach them that it is not the free choice of the heart that matters, and not love, but the mystery, which they must blindly obey, even setting aside their own conscience... We corrected your (Jesus] deed and based it on miracle, mystery, and authority. And mankind rejoiced that they were once more led like sheep... We shall give them quiet, humble happiness, the happiness of feeble creatures, such as they were created... Peacefully they will die, peacefully they will expire in your name, and beyond the grave they will find only death. But we will keep the secret, and for their own happiness we will entice them with a heavenly and eternal reward. For even if there were anything in the next world, it would not, of course, be for such as they. (Dostoevsky, 2 57-9)

The Inquisitor's secret is merely that he doesn't believe in God, but because he still feels pity in his heart for «the unfinished, trial creatures created in mockery,» he «accept[s] lies and deceit, and lead[s] people, consciously..., to death and destruction, deceiving them, moreover, all along the way, so that they somehow do not notice where they are being led, so that at least on the way these pitiful, blind men consider themselves happy» (261). For all his «compassion,» he remains a bad leader in a mob of bad members, and nothing more.

In the *Rings* trilogy, Sauron and his hordes are the very essence of bad leadership and bad membership for his subjects are not just mockeries in his sight but are actual races created in mockery, as the Ent Quickbeam tells Pippin, «Maybe you have heard of Trolls? They are mighty strong. But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves» (Tolkien, *Two Towers*, 105). Sauron is inherently the sole focus of a cult, and those beneath him are inherently fodder to be consumed for his ends.

In the *Harry Potter* series, all the Death Eaters get in return for their slavish devotion is abuse and torture, and Voldemort's dark counterparts to the teamwork of community are parasitic schemes for himself. Just as communities require teamwork to achieve their goals, so do mob leaders require outside help to carry out their plots. In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, Voldemort must kill a unicorn to drink its blood, and usurp the body of Professor Quirrel in order to maintain a corporeal state and steal the Sorcerer's stone. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Voldemort needs the remains of his dead father (whom he long ago murdered), the severed hand of his servant Wormtail, and the blood of Harry Potter, to regain his body. These are not individual contributions going toward a common good (i.e. a good for all), but demanded sacrifices going toward a single person's goals. In these examples, one can't help but see the harm in being a member in a mob. In all the fiction being dealt with, bad membership, which is characterized by unthinking loyalty to some power or mystery, is always self-destructive.

Now, though the distinction between a community and a mob may be clear, it is not the case that a community will always be a community, and a mob will always be a mob. That is to say,

a community is threatened with becoming a mob when its members act contrary to the tenets of community. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boromir threatens to turn the Fellowship into a mob when, though he has noble intentions (the defense of Gondor and all other lands), he fails to utilize or see the value in teamwork, and tries instead to achieve their goals by himself with the ring, something from which no good can be wrought, according to the shared judgement of everyone else in the Fellowship. Depending on the ways in which members of an association see themselves, their leaders, their goals, and the ways in which they wish to achieve those goals, a community or a mob will result.

To summarize, the requisites for a community are 1) right purpose, which would be mutual peace and happiness; 2) right behavior, which would include mutual consideration, individual contribution to the whole, and teamwork; 3) and right membership, which makes no clear and permanent distinctions between how members and leaders view themselves, and one another.

A final note I must add is that community is an ideal. It is almost never the case that every member in an association is living up to the tenets of community. But as long as members recognize problems in their group, and are willing to work on them, community remains. It is only when people are complacent in their bad membership, or people don't care about it, or people are unwilling to address the problem, that community is lost, and mob mentality reigns.

NOTES

1. There may be a third type of association in which being a member is neither beneficial nor harmful to the person, but I will not be dealing with this.

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