



The Hobbit:

The Enchanting Prelude to The Lord of the Rings

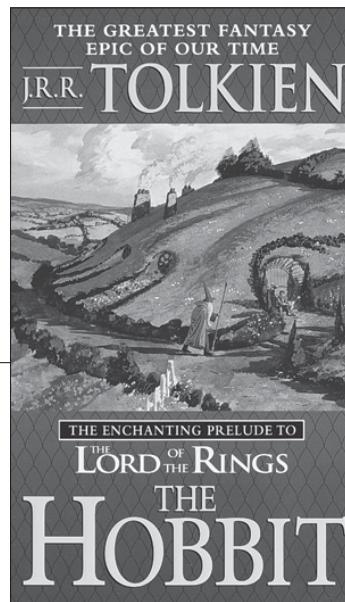
by J.R.R. Tolkien

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READING LEVEL: 6th Grade



• introduction: teaching *The Hobbit* •

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* is a classic book, both because it is a simply written and fast-paced adventure story and because it is set in Middle-earth, one of the great fantasy worlds in English literature. The success of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and other fantasy epics, such as George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* novels (which have also been made into an acclaimed HBO television series), has renewed student interest in the high fantasy of Tolkien's works. Peter Jackson's cinematic interpretation of *The Hobbit* will be divided into two films with scheduled release dates of December 2012 and December 2013.

Teachers are encouraged to teach *The Hobbit* as the cornerstone text in a standards-based unit examining how myths, legends, and folktales influence world building in works of fantasy, and how the motifs of the hero and the quest are developed in great literature. Tolkien's work pairs well with both classics of antiquity (for example, *The Odyssey*) as well as contemporary epics (for example, the Harry Potter novels, *Star Wars*, and *The Hunger Games*) for comparison and analysis.

The Hobbit's chapters are each between seven and twenty-five pages long. Dividing the book into the following eight sections provides reading assignments that are fairly uniform in length and correspond to natural divisions in the story:

- **Chapter 1:** 27 pages
- **Chapters 2–4:** 26 pages
- **Chapters 5–6:** 43 pages
- **Chapters 7–8:** 58 pages
- **Chapters 9–10:** 30 pages
- **Chapters 11–13:** 44 pages
- **Chapters 14–16:** 28 pages
- **Chapters 17–19:** 30 pages

This teacher's guide provides a resource for integrating *The Hobbit* within Common Core State Standards-based curriculum. The guide includes biographical and critical backgrounds on Tolkien's work, suggested writing and research prompts that link the text to source materials, and four or five sections that provide a comprehensive framework for understanding each chapter, including:

- plot summary,
- comprehension and open-ended topics for class discussion (many of these topics can be extended beyond one chapter),
- vocabulary items,
- at selected places, critical essays explaining literary conventions and major themes.

• about the author

J. R. R. Tolkien and Middle-earth

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, South Africa, where his father was a bank manager. At the age of three, Ronald's poor health led his mother to move with him and his brother, Hilary, back to England, where they settled in Sarehole, a county village on the outskirts of Birmingham. His father died soon after, and his mother died when he was twelve. His early education was at King Edward's School in Birmingham, where he showed promise in languages and Old English literature. During his last years at St. Edward's, Tolkien fell in love with Edith Bratt, also an orphan, and formed close friendships—and an informal literary society—with several of his schoolfellows.

In 1911, he entered Exeter College, Oxford, and received a First Class Honours degree in English in 1915. Immediately after graduation he entered the army. In 1916, he married Edith and was shipped to France as World War I raged. After four months on the front lines he was stricken with trench fever and sent home.

After the war, he joined the staff of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (writing entries in the Ws), taught at Leeds University, and was elected to a chair in Anglo-Saxon at Oxford.

"And after this, you might say, nothing else really happened. Tolkien came back to Oxford, was Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon for twenty-years, was then elected Merton Professor of English Language and Literature, went to live in a conventional Oxford suburb where he spent the first part of his retirement, moved to a nondescript seaside resort, came back to Oxford after his wife died, and himself died a peaceful death at the age of eighty-one. . . . And that would be that—apart from the strange fact that during these years when 'nothing happened' he wrote two books which have become world best-sellers, books that have captured the imagination and influenced the thinking of several million readers."¹

The creation of Middle-earth, which occupied Tolkien for sixty years, can be divided into three stages. The first stage, begun at the St. Edward's School, involved first the creation of languages and then the development of a series of legends that could give these languages a social context in which to develop. These legends soon became important in their own right, a mythic cycle that combined Christian and pagan (especially Germanic and Celtic) sources to provide England with a national mythology that would express the English spirit as the *Edda* does for Scandinavia and the *Kalevala* does for Finland. As Tolkien put it:

"I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendor from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country. . . . I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama."²

The death in World War I of most of his St. Edward's friends apparently firmed Tolkien's resolution, and after twenty years, he had elaborated several languages, a cosmology, and large parts of *The Silmarillion*, high heroic tales (written in verse and prose, English and Elvish) of the fall of the angelic Melkor and the futile struggles of men and elves against him.

As a diversion from these weighty labors, Tolkien composed stories and sketches for his own children. About 1930, one of these beginning with the idle sentence "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," became more and more involved as Tolkien defined hobbits and created adventure for one particular hobbit. Gradually it became clear to Tolkien that Bilbo

1 Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p.124.

2 Carpenter, pp.100–101.

Baggins's adventures took place in the same Middle-earth as his high heroic tales, but during a much later era. After six years of intermittent composition, *The Hobbit* was published as a children's book to critical and popular acclaim. Immediately Tolkien began work on *The Lord of the Rings*, published in 1954–55 after years of painstaking revision. In many ways a reworking of the plot of *The Hobbit*, the length, intensity, and complex theses of the *Rings* trilogy make it the adult epic Tolkien desired to create. Although its reputation was slow to grow, the paperback publication of the trilogy in the mid-sixties established the enormous fame of Middle-earth and its creator.

There can be no question that the great popular success of Middle-earth is due to the labors and spirit of its creator. The creation of an accomplished storyteller, linguist, poet, and painter, Middle-earth's depths and plausibility are unmatched in modern fantasy; its reworking of the common ground of Norse, Celtic, and Judeo-Christian tradition is based in Tolkien's belief in the importance and perfectibility of man.

Although its most striking creatures are noble elves, evil goblins, proud dwarves, cunning dragons, wizards, Eagles, and demons, the most important race in Middle-earth is men, for whose creation and salvation Middle-earth is prepared. The men of Middle-earth, free to choose their own destinies, run the full gamut from demonic evil and goblin-like depravity to a purity and integrity equaling that of the noblest elves. The contrast between goblins and elves provides one of the most important measures of good and evil in Middle-earth. *The Silmarillion* tells that elves, the Elder Children of God, were created to guide men, the Younger Children, on the long journey to spiritual wisdom and love of God. Goblins, in contrast, are corrupted elves, bred in mockery of Morgoth, the Necromancer's master, whose revolt against God brings evil to Middle-earth. Thus Bard's ability to learn restraint from the Elvenking is an important sign of his virtue, and Bilbo's love of elves indicates his spiritual grace.

Where the elves serve as a model for men's aspirations, hobbits provide a touchstone. Their lives display a basic goodness, a conservative, pastoral simplicity. Close to Nature and free from personal ambition and greed, hobbits need no government and are generally anti-technology. Rarely corrupted, they never corrupt others. The hobbits' Shire is a quiet backwater, removed both from the agonies and the high destiny of men, whether in Middle-earth or the twentieth century. The Shire is, for Tolkien, a mirror in which we can see reflected the simple peace at the center of our hearts.

before you read

Ask students to generate a list of science fiction, fantasy, and paranormal works with which they are familiar. Allow them to include books, video games, movies, and television shows. Discuss the following questions as a class:

- Out of the three, do you have a favorite genre? Why do you think it appeals to you?
- How are works of fantasy similar to works of science fiction and the paranormal? What elements make the genre of fantasy unique?
- What kind of source materials do you think authors of fantasy might draw upon to create their imagined worlds?
- Over the past decade there has been an explosion in the popularity of nonrealistic genres. Why do you think fantasy has such a strong appeal for students of your generation?

Depending on the reading level of students, teachers may wish to assign Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories." (A link is provided in the "For Further Reading/Helpful Links" section at the end of this guide.) A critical essay summarizing Tolkien's essay is included for your convenience:

• critical essay: The Uses of Fantasy

Good fantasy offers the possibility of active, serious participation by the reader in an imagined world, which heightens one's sense of Self and Other. This participation depends not only on the reader's intentions but also on the moral plausibility of the fantasy world. The reward for this participation is a sense of wonder that enables the reader to return to the "real" world with enhanced understanding and appreciation—either of the world itself or of his relation to it.

In Tolkien's view, expressed in his influential essay "On Fairy Stories" (written in 1939 as he was beginning *The Lord of The Rings*), fantasy has an important positive function. In this subtle and somewhat diffuse essay, Tolkien asserts that this can be an escape to a serious Secondary World (or "sub-creation") as much as an escape from the Primary World of reality.

For a Secondary World to be serious, it must first arouse enchantment, or Secondary Belief. Where Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" is an exercise in which the critical intellect is made passive while the emotions are given free play, Secondary Belief is an active and integrative process by which the audience perceives the Secondary World to possess "the inner consistency of reality," to be as true—on its own terms—as the Primary World. The Secondary World must be created for Art, not Magic—as a wonder in itself, not with the pretense of altering the Primary World or the reader's status in it. Any type of wonder is acceptable, but Tolkien asserts that the act of serious sub-creation inevitably reflects the primary creation, so that even when its objects and inhabitants are marvelous, the values and aspirations of a Secondary World are familiar.

Thus, a fantasy world is inevitably a mirror of our own world, and Tolkien explains the nature of this mirror using four terms: *Recovery*, *Escape*, *Consolation*, and *Eucatastrophe*. The sense of wonder aroused by Secondary Belief is not a discovering of the exotic but a Recovery of the familiar, the "regaining of a clear view" of the objects of the Primary World freed from the taints of anxiety, triteness, and above all, possessiveness. In a Secondary World, our sense of wonder should extend not only to "the centaur and the dragon" but also "like the ancient shepherds," to "sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves,"³ and on our return to the Primary World, we may retain some of that wonder and appreciation. At the same time as it offers an Escape to renewed significance, fantasy offers Escape from things worth fleeing: the petty evils of tawdriness and ugliness; the "grim and terrible" evils of "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death"; and, on a more positive note, the "ancient limitations" on worthy desires such as "the desire to converse with other living things."⁴ The fulfillment of these Escapes is one of the Consolations of the Happy Ending. In its best form, the happy ending is a Eucatastrophe, an unexpected turning of the plot, "sudden and miraculous . . . never to be counted on to recur." Fantasy admits the possibility of failure, sorrow, and death, but "it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat . . . giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."⁵

A complementary view of fantasy is offered by the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Bettelheim accepts Tolkien's view, and indeed, borrows much of his terminology. But where Tolkien as author stresses the art of sub-creation and the recovery of wonder, Bettelheim as therapist emphasizes the use of fantasy to teach children about the Primary World and to encourage personal development. For Bettelheim, "the fairy-tale is future oriented and guides the child—in terms he can understand in both his conscious and his unconscious mind—to relinquish his infantile dependency wishes and achieve a more stratifying independent existence."⁶ The wish-

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," in *Tree and Leaf*, reprinted in *The Tolkien Reader*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), p. 57.

4 Tolkien, pp. 57–58.

5 Tolkien, p. 68.

6 Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.11.

fulfillment element of fantasy both relieves anxiety and shows the child that personal success can be obtained, although at a certain price. At the heart of this lesson is the fact that the hero must work for his success. Magic accessories and good advice may be given to him, but he must use these aids actively and appropriately, and success often comes only after years of obscure labor or initial failure. Thus, the development of the hero is less a matter of change than of self-discovery.

• discussion and writing

Chapter Guides

Chapter One: “An Unexpected Party”

Summary

We are introduced to hobbits and to Bilbo Baggins, a stay-at-home, highly respectable hobbit with a secret desire for adventure. Bilbo receives a visit from Gandalf the wizard. The next Wednesday Gandalf returns for tea, bringing with him a party of thirteen dwarves led by Thorin Oakenshield. Despite misgivings on both sides, on Gandalf’s recommendation the dwarves hire Bilbo as Burglar on an expedition to the Lonely Mountain, where they plan to recover their ancestral treasure from the dragon Smaug.

Comprehension Questions

- What is Gandalf’s reputation? How involved do you expect him to be during the adventure?
- What kind of mark does Gandalf put on Bilbo’s door?
- How many dwarves come to tea?
- What does Thorin wear to distinguish himself from the other dwarves?
- What two things does Gandalf give Thorin?
- How did the dwarves lose their treasure and kingdom?

Vocabulary

audacious (p. 16)	legendary (p. 22)	remuneration (p. 22)
rune (p. 20)	obstinately (p. 22)	necromancer (p. 26)
abreast (p. 20)	prudent (p. 22)	

Discussion and Essay Topics

What does the word *hobbit* make you think of? (Note: The possibilities include *rabbit*, *hobby*, *Babbit*, *habit*, and *hob*. The word is probably best seen as a blend of *rabbit* and *hob*, an obsolete British word meaning “a rustic, peasant” or “sprite, elf.”) How does Bilbo resemble a rabbit in this chapter? When you finish the book, ask yourself if he still reminds you of one.

What is an adventure? Is it something that happens, or is it the way we react to what happens? Can we live without adventures? What is “magic”? Is there any “magic” in this book? (Return to these questions as the book progresses.)

Explain all the meanings of *good morning* (pp. 4–5).

What about adventures awakens Bilbo’s Tookish side (pp. 15–16)? What causes his Baggins side to reemerge (pp. 16, 27)? Explain the difference between Bilbo’s Tookish side and his Baggins side. Can you relate to Bilbo’s feelings of ambivalence? Do you think everyone has similar “Tookish” and “Baggins” sides to their personalities?

Even this early in the book, we can see some of the characteristics of dwarves, wizards, and dragons. Begin generating a list of the characteristics—both physical and character traits—

• discussion and writing continued

of each of the magical creatures in *The Hobbit*. After you finish the book, you'll have an opportunity to compare Tolkien's descriptions with similar magical beings in other works of literature.

Critical Commentary: Entering a Fantasy World

A fantasy novel must offer two things: an attractive fantasy world and a point of contact between the fantasy world and our own. What readers find attractive is a matter of personal taste, but they are likely to discard a fantasy as irrelevant unless they can find a common perspective from which to assess the attractiveness. In general, these common perspectives are established in one of three ways: the main character is transported from our world into the fantasy world (like *Alice in Wonderland*); the main character is a native of the fantasy world with whom the reader can easily identify; or the fantasy world is fundamentally like ours, differing only in specific details. American teenagers will not automatically identify with a fussy English country squire like Bilbo, so the success of *The Hobbit* depends on a tension between familiar and exotic things, which must be established in the first few pages.

The opening of the first sentence, "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit," introduces a strange creature and an apparently unattractive setting. But the next paragraphs belie this initial reaction. Hobbits love comfort in much the same way we do: they are fond of visitors, food, and clothing; they have families and relatives; some are richer than others—in short, they are very human. By the fourth paragraph hobbits seem normal, and other folk—dwarves, fairies, and Big People—are strange. From here on, adventures take place in a world beyond Bilbo's doorstep, a world that seems as strange to him as it does to us. We share not only his sense of wonder, but also the values that make him love his home.

Chapter 2: "Roast Mutton"

Summary

Thorin and company set off on their expedition, and Bilbo joins them. Initially things go well, but on the first rainy night they seek shelter and blunder into three trolls. Bilbo and the dwarves are captured by the trolls, but Gandalf outwits them and they turn to stone at daybreak. The expedition plunders the trolls' hoard. Gandalf and Thorin take swords, Bilbo takes a small knife, and they bury the trolls' gold.

Comprehension Questions

What are the terms of Bilbo's contract? Do you think they are fair terms?

How does Bilbo know that the three people are trolls? Can you think of any other stories (especially children's stories and fairy tales) you know about trolls? How are Tolkien's trolls similar to trolls in other stories? How are they different? Add trolls to the list of magical creatures that you started after the first chapter.

How is Bilbo caught? What lesson do you think he should learn as a result of his capture?

How does Gandalf rescue Bilbo and the dwarves?

What do they take from the trolls' hoard?

Vocabulary

esteemed (p. 29)

paraphernalia (p. 30)

applicable (p. 37)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Begin paying close attention to the way that Tolkien uses the presence and absence of the character of Gandalf to develop both the plot and the character of Bilbo Baggins. Why is it important that Gandalf is not present when the expedition meets the trolls?

Myths, legends, and folktales often reflect the values of a given culture. At this point in the story, what can you infer about the character traits that Tolkien considers positive? What character traits are viewed in a negative light? What is more important at this point: intelligence or physical strength?

Critical Commentary: Quests and the Development of the Hero

The Hobbit follows the typical pattern of the quest in many ways. Like most quest heroes, Bilbo begins the story ignorant and untried, and he undergoes a series of preliminary adventures, which help him in two ways. First, they give him the opportunity to learn about the world and the extent and proper use of his own powers. Second, they bring him the friends and talismans that he will need to prevail in his greatest adventure: the culmination of his quest.

Because in a well-constructed quest story the development of wisdom and self-restraint is equally as important as the growth of physical prowess, the quest story (as Bettelheim points out in *The Uses of Enchantment*) is often concerned with maturation, and the lessons it teaches are those of adulthood. The specific moral of an individual quest story can usually be found by examining two areas: the hero's motivation for acting, and the final reward he achieves. The most obvious indication of a hero's development—the skills he acquires—can be misleading, for most quest stories are concerned more with virtue (which can be defined as the proper application of whatever skills or powers are available) than with the skills themselves. Bilbo, for example, never becomes a “hero” in the conventional sense. In part this is because he accepts the fact that he is too small to become a warrior, but more importantly it is because he deplores violence and lacks ambition for power.

While the ending of *The Hobbit*—in which Bilbo finds that each assumed culminating adventure in fact leads to further complications—is a variation on the typical quest pattern, Bilbo's journey to Erebor is a skillful realization of this pattern. Throughout the story, the best way to evaluate Bilbo's development is by comparing him to the dwarves. At this point (Chapter 2), Bilbo's only skill is his stealth. He is as easily disheartened by rain and discomfort as the dwarves, and his attempt to steal the troll's purse, like his original decision to come on the expedition, is motivated by an irrational pride. Still, as a reward for surviving the adventure and finding the trolls' key, Bilbo receives the first of two talismans: his short sword.

Gandalf's role in all this is crucial. As Bilbo's mentor, he reserves his power for situations that Bilbo cannot yet—or ever—deal with. Rescue by Gandalf is therefore a sign of Bilbo's lack of skill or knowledge. Bilbo's conduct during later adventures, when Gandalf is not present, will show how much he has progressed.

Chapter 3: “A Short Rest”

Summary

The expedition comes to Rivendell, where Elrond and his elves live in the Last Homely House. Elrond explains Thrór's Map to the dwarves and identifies Gandalf's and Thorin's swords as the famous blades Orcrist and Glamdring, made by elves for the ancient goblin wars.

Comprehension Questions

Why is Rivendell hard to find?

Read pages 46–48. Based on the imagery that Tolkien uses to describe the forest, what sort of creatures do you think live there?

Who are the enemies of the elves?

What important discovery does Elrond make regarding Thorin's map? What does it suggest about Thorin that he owns the map for years and never notices what Elrond notices right away?

When is Durin's Day? What is significant about this day as it relates to Bilbo's quest?

• discussion and writing continued

Bilbo notices that it “smells like elves” when they are near the Last Homely House. Based on Bilbo’s experience with Elrond and the other elves, what do you think elves might smell like?

Vocabulary

drear (p. 45)
glade (p. 48)

faggot (p. 48)
bannock (p. 48)

palpitating (p. 51)
cleave (p. 52)

Discussion and Essay Topics

What is the difference between the ways Bilbo and the dwarves react to Rivendell? How does Elrond feel about the expedition, and what does he say about the dwarves’ love of gold and the wickedness of dragons? What values are important to the elves?

Elrond plays a significant role in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. How does the way that Tolkien introduces him help set up his importance in later stories? How does this sort of backstory contribute to Tolkien’s world building?

Research the tradition of naming weapons in classical myths and legends. Why might it be significant for Tolkien to have given the elves named swords? What message do you think is conveyed by the names given to the swords?

Chapter 4: “Over Hill and Under Hill”

Summary

As they cross the Misty Mountains, a storm drives the expedition into a cave, where they are attacked by goblins. Bilbo and the dwarves are captured and driven into the goblins’ underground halls. There Gandalf rescues them and slays the Great Goblin, but as they flee from the goblins, Bilbo is knocked unconscious.

Comprehension Questions

Why does the expedition take shelter in the cave?

Why isn’t Gandalf captured?

What do goblins usually do with their prisoners?

How does Gandalf rescue Bilbo and the dwarves?

Vocabulary

deception (p. 55)
shirk (p. 61)

quaff (p. 61)
ingenious (p. 62)

inconveniencing (p. 63)
gnash (p. 63)

Discussion and Essay Topics

What does Tolkien tell us about goblins? Why do you think he does not give specific details about their appearance? Discuss what you think goblins look like, and explain which details in the book give you that idea.

Discuss the role that music plays in the development of the different magical beings. Compare the songs sung by the dwarves (pp. 14–15), the elves (pp. 48–49), and the goblins (pp. 60–61). How do the songs differ in tone, content, and structure? What do the tone, content, and structure of their songs reveal about the creatures that sing them?

Consider the following quote: “It is not unlikely that they [goblins] invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once” (p. 62). Can you take this statement seriously? What is Tolkien suggesting by linking his fantasy world to the reader’s modern world? What commentary is he making about the use of military technology?

Chapter 5: “Riddles in the Dark”

Summary

Lost and alone in the Misty Mountains, Bilbo gathers his courage. He finds a ring and puts it in his pocket. Then he encounters Gollum, a loathsome but pathetic creature. They play a riddle-game to determine if Gollum will show Bilbo the way out or eat him instead. Bilbo wins the contest, but Gollum then realizes that Bilbo has his ring, which confers invisibility. Bilbo follows Gollum to the surface and evades the goblins guarding the gate.

Comprehension Questions

How does Bilbo know his sword was made by elves?

Why is it good that Bilbo lost his matches?

How does Gollum guess that Bilbo has his ring?

How do the goblins know that someone is at the gate?

Which of the dwarves is the most surprised to see Bilbo?

Vocabulary

subterranean (p. 70)

unbeknown (p. 71)

flummoxed (p. 72)

chestnut (p. 74)

antiquity (p. 80)

Discussion and Essay Topics

How are Bilbo and Gollum alike? Can you call Gollum evil? Discuss the concept that Gollum is the negative side of Bilbo, with which Bilbo must come to terms before he can achieve his identity. (Suggestion: To bring home the concept of the negative side, compare this chapter and Luke Skywalker’s descent into the cave during his training by Yoda, in *The Empire Strikes Back*.)

What effect did the ring seem to have on Gollum? How did the loss of the ring affect him? (Note: Because of the enormous popularity of Peter Jackson’s films, students may be familiar with the role of the ring in *The Lord of the Rings*. If so, you may choose to discuss how the events of this chapter foreshadow the role the ring eventually plays.)

What skills does Bilbo show in dealing with Gollum?

“No great leap for a man, but a leap in the dark” (p. 39). Is “a leap in the dark” actually a “great leap”? Explain your answer. Discuss this quotation with respect to Bilbo’s decision not to kill Gollum, and his newfound courage.

Should Gollum be considered a sympathetic character? Defend your answer.

Critical Commentary:

Plot Structure, Repetition of Motifs, and the Development of the Hero

Chapter 5, in which Bilbo successfully crosses the Misty Mountains by his own efforts, marks the turning point in his development. Up to now he’s been little more than baggage, as the dwarves often point out; his only accomplishments—finding the key to the trolls’ caves and warning Gandalf of the goblin attack—are useful but trivial.

The first three pages of Chapter 5 detail Bilbo’s transformation. First, he finds the ring, his second and greatest talisman. Slowly he shakes off his initial self-pity and despair, regains his common sense (which includes realizing that his customary means of self-comfort, such as smoking, are inappropriate for this situation), and finally is comforted by the presence of his first talisman, the elvish sword. Facing up to his plight, his final decision—if you can’t go back or sideways, then go forward—is typical of the determination and essential optimism that constitute hobbit courage. Tolkien’s catalog of Bilbo’s skills stresses a hobbit’s innate abilities—familiarity with tunnels, good sense of direction, stealth, toughness, and “a fund of wisdom and wise sayings”—with the implication that Bilbo has developed to the point where he can use these skills effectively.

• discussion and writing continued

The extent of Bilbo's growth is marked by the repetition of motifs between Bilbo's adventures west (Chapters 2 to 5) and east (Chapters 6 to 9) of the Misty Mountains. The dominant event or setting of each chapter is parallel (attack by enemies; hospitality at an important male's house; attack by enemies; underground capture and escape) and in every case we see Bilbo acting with confidence and effectiveness east of the mountains, but ineptly west of the mountains. In Chapter 2, Bilbo is captured while sneaking around the trolls' campfire and is easily rescued by Gandalf; in Chapter 6, he sneaks into the dwarves' camp undetected and is later rescued from a situation in which even Gandalf is helpless. In Chapter 3, Bilbo relies heavily on Gandalf's advice; in Chapter 7, he behaves prudently and Gandalf names him head of the expedition. In Chapter 4, Bilbo is as imprudent as the dwarves and once more must be rescued by Gandalf and protected by the swords Beater and Biter; in Chapter 8, he is never captured, rescues the dwarves single-handedly, and names his own sword Sting. Finally, Bilbo's ability in Chapter 5 to win the riddle-contest and rescue himself foreshadows his ability in Chapter 9 to outwit a palace full of elves and execute a complex escape plan involving the entire expedition.

The third part of the book, the adventures at the Lonely Mountain, repeats many of these motifs, but in a less schematic fashion, as befits the growing complexity of Bilbo's adventure. For example, Bilbo's first trip down the tunnel recalls his actions in the tunnels of the goblins and the Elvenking. Gandalf's outwitting of the trolls and Bilbo's riddle-game with Gollum prepare Bilbo to confront Smaug. His decision to go down the tunnel the third time (p. 223) recalls his determination to go forward in the goblin tunnels (p. 77). These varied experiences prepare Bilbo to deal with increasingly complex moral issues. West of the mountains, Bilbo encounters beings that are purely good (Elrond) or purely evil (goblins and trolls). East of the mountains, the characters are more complicated: Beorn is good but brutish, and the Elvenking is good but overly harsh. Finally, at the Lonely Mountain Bilbo must deal with Smaug's attractive malice, Thorn's intractable greed and pride, and Bard's grim integrity.

The larger plot structure of *The Hobbit* is, much like traditional fantasy, cyclical. As the subtitle *There and Back Again* suggests, the most common structure for a developmental fantasy is for the hero to begin at home, develop skills during the course of a journey, fulfill his quest, and return home with his understanding increased by his adventures. *The Hobbit* begins and ends in Bilbo's home with a conversation between Bilbo and Gandalf, and the contrast between these two scenes displays Bilbo's development.

Chapter 6: “Out of the Frying-Pan into the Fire”

Summary

Bilbo finds that he is on the east side of the mountains. Using his ring, he enters the dwarves' camp undetected. Bilbo and his group flee down the mountainside but are overtaken at night by goblins and Wargs and trapped in five fir trees in a clearing. The goblins set fire to the trees, but the Eagles of the Misty Mountains rescue the expedition, although as usual Bilbo is almost left behind.

Comprehension Questions

How does Bilbo know he is on the east side of the Misty Mountains?

What is the proverb that Bilbo invents? Try to create a modern proverb with a similar meaning.

Why does the Lord of the Eagles notice the expedition?

Why won't the Eagles fly near where men live? What do you think Tolkien is suggesting about mankind's place in his imagined world? Are men the wisest, noblest, or most powerful beings? If not, who is?

Vocabulary

sorrel (p. 97)
marjoram (p. 97)

bracken (p. 98)
larch (p. 100)

proverb (p. 99)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Do you think Bilbo would try to rescue the dwarves if they were still inside the mountains? Explain what might motivate his actions. Would they try to rescue him? What does this suggest about the character traits of dwarves?

Why doesn't Bilbo tell the dwarves about his ring? Do you consider this lying? What would you have done in the same situation? What do you think might have happened if he had told them about the ring?

At this point in the story, how much of an asset does Gandalf seem to be? Do his actions seem consistent with the way you think wizards operate? Why doesn't Gandalf do more to "save the day"? Are his powers limited, or is he intentionally refraining from using them? Defend your answer.

Chapter 7: "Queer Lodgings"

Summary

The Eagles carry the expedition to the *Carrock*, a rock in the middle of the Great River. From there the expedition heads to the house of Beorn, a skin-changer fierce toward his enemies but gentle with animals. Gandalf wins Beorn's hospitality by introducing the dwarves in small groups while he tells the story of their adventures. After two nights at Beorn's house, the expedition receives his advice and departs for Mirkwood. At the forest-gate, Gandalf leaves the expedition.

Comprehension Questions

What is a skin-changer?

What does Beorn eat (p. 116)? Why do you think he chooses to eat this way? What does it suggest about his inherent character traits?

How does Gandalf get Beorn to shelter thirteen dwarves?

What eventually interests Beorn about the dwarves' tales? What group(s) of creatures does Beorn seem to dislike?

What is the most important advice that Beorn and Gandalf give about Mirkwood? Do you think this advice will be followed? Defend your answer.

Vocabulary

carrock (p. 115)
appalling (p. 115)
tippet (p. 116)

dale (p. 117)
trestle (p. 125)
mead (p. 126)

withered (p. 126)
stark (p. 127)
hart (p. 135)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Compare the expedition's arrival at Beorn's house with the Unexpected Party of the first chapter. Note that now Bilbo is in on Gandalf's plot. While both hosts have to be cajoled into accepting the arrival of the travelling party, it is for very different reasons. What are they?

Discuss Beorn's character. What are his virtues? Why is he suspicious of strangers? What about him seems vicious? In what ways is he gentle? How does Bilbo come to understand him?

Compare the descriptions of Beorn and his house with various classic versions of the story of Beauty and the Beast. How is Beorn similar to this archetype? How is he different?

Why is it necessary to the story that Gandalf leave the expedition?

• discussion and writing continued

Chapter 8: “Flies and Spider”

Summary

Mirkwood is dark and unpleasant. The expedition runs low on food, water, and hope. Bombur falls into the enchanted stream and sleeps for four days. When Balin sees firelight off the path, the dwarves and Bilbo go toward it. They are scattered when they interrupt the elven feast. Giant spiders capture the dwarves. Bilbo rescues them and slays many spiders, but Thorin is captured by the Wood-elves.

Comprehension Questions

What do the dwarves shoot with their bows?

When Bilbo climbs the tree, why doesn’t he see an end to the forest?

What does Bombur dream of?

What does Bilbo name his sword? What does his decision to name his sword reveal about the heroic qualities he is developing?

How does Bilbo rescue the dwarves? What skills does he use to defeat the spiders?

Vocabulary

inquisitive (p. 140)

hind (p. 146)

vexed (p. 146)

accursed (p. 148)

disquieting (p. 147)

commons (p. 150)

sawn (p. 152)

loathsome (p. 157)

warrant (p. 157)

quoits (p. 158)

gloaming (p. 168)

thongs (p. 169)

Discussion and Essay Topics

What are the unattractive features of Mirkwood? Do you think the forest is evil?
Explain your answer.

Discuss the enchanted stream. Does it remind you of objects in other myths, legends, or folktales? Why are they to be avoided? Why do characters tend to fall victim to the objects in spite of being warned against them? What symbolic purpose do you think these sorts of enchanted objects might serve?

After Gandalf leaves, who becomes the leader of the expedition? Who do you think should have become the leader? Defend your answer.

What makes the expedition lose hope? Why is their despair unjustified?

What heroic acts does Bilbo perform?

Why does Bilbo tell the dwarves about his magic ring? What does his reluctance to do so tell us?

Discuss the ancient feud between dwarves and elves. Whose fault is it? If neither side is in the right, how can you tell the difference between good and evil? Why do you think Tolkien creates this sort of ambiguity? What does it reveal about the author’s purpose?

Chapter 9: “Barrels Out of Bond”

Summary

Lost in Mirkwood, the dwarves are captured by the Wood-elves and imprisoned because they will not explain their mission. Bilbo, invisible, follows them into the underground palace of the Elvenking. He finds Thorin and later discovers the water-gate, the palace’s delivery entrance. When the chief guard becomes drunk, Bilbo steals his keys, releases the dwarves, and hides the dwarves in empty barrels. The barrels are thrown into the river to float to Lake-town; Bilbo rides atop one barrel.

Comprehension Questions

- Why, where, and how are the dwarves imprisoned? Why wasn't Bilbo imprisoned as well?
- How does Bilbo get in and out of the palace?
- How many entrances does the palace have?
- Where is the elves' wine made?

Vocabulary

<i>portcullis</i> (p. 171)	<i>potent</i> (p. 173)	<i>toss-pot</i> (p. 177)
<i>flagon</i> (p. 173)	<i>vintage</i> (p. 173)	<i>kine</i> (p. 178)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Why does the Elvenking imprison the dwarves? Why won't Thorin tell the Elvenking what his mission is? What characteristics does his refusal reveal about him? Do you think these characteristics are true for all dwarves, or are they just true for Thorin?

Is Bilbo a burglar now? Throughout the book, does he have any ethical dilemmas about stealing? How is the connotation or the word *burglar* different from the connotation of *thief*? Is Bilbo's type of burglary different from stealing? Explain your answer.

The escape plan is completely Bilbo's. How good is it? Can you think of an alternate plan? How much does it depend on luck? Does he deserve this luck?

At this point in the book do you think the dwarves have treated Bilbo fairly? Why do you think Bilbo is loyal to them? What does his loyalty reveal about his character?

Chapter 10: "A Warm Welcome"

Summary

Wet and bedraggled, the expedition arrives at Lake-town, a trading town of men. They are welcomed by the Master, and the townspeople recall prophecies of the downfall of the dragon and the consequent enrichment of the town. After two weeks of rest the expedition departs for the Lonely Mountain.

Comprehension Questions

- What are the connotations of the word *master*? What does the fact that the town's leader is called "Master" rather than "King" or "Mayor" or "Governor" suggest about the way he rules?
- Why does the Master welcome the expedition?
- What is the history of the relationship between the dwarves and the men?
- Why are the dwarves happy? Why is Bilbo unhappy?
- What does the Elvenking think will happen to the dwarves?
- What is the Master's reaction when Thorin announces his departure?

Vocabulary

<i>ominous</i> (p. 190)	<i>gammer</i> (p. 194)	<i>enmity</i> (p. 197)
<i>promontory</i> (p. 191)	<i>vagabond</i> (p. 196)	

Discussion and Essay Topics

"Some sang too that Thrór and Thráin would come back one day and gold would flow in rivers through mountain gates, and all that land would be filled with new song and new laughter. But this pleasant legend did not much affect their daily business" (p. 192). Discuss the history of Lake-town and the beliefs of its inhabitants. What does it mean that they do not take their legends seriously?

• discussion and writing continued

Compare the attitudes of the men of Lake-town, the Master, and the Elvenking to Thorin's mission. Who is reasonable? Who is silly? Then consider Bilbo's attitude. Keeping in mind that elves are renowned for wisdom, how wise is Bilbo?

Does Thorin seem to be changing as he gets closer and closer to the mountain? How?

Chapter 11: "On the Doorstep"

Summary

The expedition finds the Side-door but cannot open it, and they all become gloomy. One evening Bilbo hears a thrush cracking snails and realizes that this is the sign that the door will open. He calls the dwarves, and Thorin opens the door with his key.

Comprehension Questions

Why won't the men of Lake-town stay with the dwarves?

Where does the expedition make each of their three camps?

What causes the door to appear? Should the dwarves have predicted this event?
Why didn't they?

Vocabulary

disembarked (p. 202)

waning (p. 203)

lintel (p. 206)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Create a detailed map (or model) of the Lonely Mountain. Mark the appearance, vegetation, etc., of each area and the events that occur there.

In what way does Bilbo show that he has more spirit left than the dwarves?

Chapter 12: "Inside Information"

Summary

Bilbo enters the Side-door and, overcoming his fear, goes down a tunnel to Smaug's lair. Overwhelmed by the splendor of the dragon-hoard, he steals a large cup and escapes. The theft arouses Smaug, who goes through the Front Gate, attacks the expedition on the mountainside, and drives them into the tunnel. Bilbo volunteers to explore the lair again. This time he has a perilous conversation with Smaug, during which he sees an unarmored patch on the dragon's breast. Smaug later attacks their camp, but thanks to Bilbo's forewarning the dwarves are safe, although trapped, inside the tunnel.

Comprehension Questions

Who goes partway down the tunnel with Bilbo?

What does Bilbo take from the hoard?

Bilbo quotes two of his father's sayings. What are they?

Who is the real leader of the expedition?

What about Bilbo puzzles Smaug?

What is the most important thing Bilbo learns from Smaug?

What proverb does Bilbo invent?

What is the Arkenstone?

Vocabulary

<i>smouldering</i> (p. 220)	<i>impenetrable</i> (p. 226)	<i>stealth</i> (p. 232)
<i>grievous</i> (p. 224)	<i>waistcoat</i> (p. 226)	
<i>cartage</i> (p. 225)	<i>foreboding</i> (p. 229)	

Discussion and Essay Topics

“Some [dwarves] are decent enough people like Thorin and Company, if you don’t expect too much” (p. 213). What can Bilbo expect from the dwarves? What shouldn’t he expect?

“Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did . . . he fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait” (p. 215). According to this passage, what is true courage? What abilities and character traits has Bilbo demonstrated so far? How do his earlier adventures prepare him for his confrontation with Smaug? Can you relate this quote to your own life?

Is it wise to steal the cup? Why does Bilbo do it?

Describe the characteristics of dragons. (Note: Begin with terms such as *greedy*, *wily*, *hostile*, and *riddle-loving*, and build to more severe terms such as *vengeful*, *treacherous*, *fond of flattery*, and *breeders of distrust and dissension*.) What is the dragon-spell? Why are dwarves so susceptible to it? (Note: In *The Hobbit* the traditional motif of the cursed dragon-hoard is reimagined as the idea that the curse is not so much inherent to the objects, but rather treasure brings out the evil and foolish side of dwarves, elves, and men.) In this and the following chapters, trace the changing effects of the treasure on the dwarves and on Bilbo.

Explain the names that Bilbo gives himself when speaking with Smaug: “I come from under the hill . . . am the clue finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I was chosen for the lucky number,” etc. (p. 223). How does each name relate to the story of his adventure?

The use of epithets is a characteristic of epic poetry. Explain what Tolkien may be trying to convey by Bilbo’s use of epithets to “name” himself. In what other ways does Bilbo remind you of Odysseus in Homer’s *The Odyssey*?

Examine the possible etymology of the name “Arkenstone.” What associations and connotations do you think Tolkien intended when he named the stone?

Chapter 13: “Not at Home”

Summary

Encouraged by Bilbo, the dwarves go down into the hall and find Smaug gone. Bilbo finds and hides the Arkenstone. The dwarves celebrate their recovery of the treasure. Bilbo reminds them that Smaug is still a peril, and they move to a watchtower on a spur of the mountain.

Comprehension Questions

What does Thorin give Bilbo?

Which hall leads to the Front Gate?

Why do the dwarves leave the underground halls?

Vocabulary

<i>pallid</i> (p. 237)	<i>dominion</i> (p. 245)
<i>figured</i> (p. 240)	<i>perpetually</i> (p. 245)

Discussion and Essay Topics

“Anyway the only way out is down” (p. 235). What earlier statement by Bilbo does this echo? When does Bilbo’s courage assert itself most?

• discussion and writing continued

Why does Bilbo keep the Arkenstone? How does he justify his decision to withhold its discovery from Thorin? Do you agree that Bilbo has a right to the stone? What does the fact that Bilbo is willing to give up gold and jewels to have it suggest about the worth of the Arkenstone? Can you think of any traditional myths or parables about similar objects that Tolkien may be alluding to? What might be the symbolic importance of the stone?

Chapter 14: “Fire and Water”

Summary

Smaug flies to avenge himself on the men of Lake-town. He is destroying the town when the thrush tells Bard the Bowman, a descendant of the former Lords of Dale, about the bare, vulnerable spot on Smaug's breast. Bard slays Smaug and directs his people's efforts to feed and shelter themselves, although he plans eventually to seize Smaug's hoard. When the Elvenking hears of Smaug's death, he sets out to seize the hoard himself, but goes instead to Lake-town when he hears of its distress. Eleven days after Smaug's death, a combined army of men and elves marches on the Lonely Mountain.

Comprehension Questions

Why does Smaug decide to destroy Lake-town? Whose “fault” is it that he decides to seek revenge on the Lake-men?

Who is the guard “with a grim voice” (p. 247)?

Why do the men of Esgaroth destroy the bridges?

Why can Bard understand the thrush (see pp. 250–51)?

Why are the people of Esgaroth angry with Thorin? Do you think they have a right to be angry? Do you think Thorin owes them anything?

Vocabulary

drear (p. 247)

foiled (p. 248)

quench (p. 249)

laden (p. 249)

prophesying (p. 250)

gledes (p. 251)

eminent (p. 253)

benefactor (p. 253)

recompense (pp. 253–54)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Characterize Bard and the Master. Who speaks more convincingly? What does their appearance suggest about them? Explain the reason for Bard's pessimism. Who has more courage? Who displays more leadership? Do you believe that some people are natural leaders? Can this ability be inherited?

Explain the significance of Bard's name. What could Tolkien be alluding to? What is Tolkien showing he values by naming such a noble and heroic character “Bard”?

Why does the Elvenking set out from his halls? Why does he go to Esgaroth? What does this tell you about the value he places on treasure?

Chapter 15: “The Gathering of the Clouds”

Summary

Summoned by the thrush, Roac, a raven of an ancient family friendly to the dwarves, tells the dwarves of the death of Smaug and the gathering of men and elves. Roac advises Thorin to deal with Bard, but Thorin sends for aid from his cousin Dain and fortifies the Front Gate. Thorin denies that Bard has a right to any of the treasure, and Bard declares the mountain besieged. Bilbo is sick of the whole business.

Comprehension Questions

How did Ravenhill get its name?

How old is Roac?

When does Thorin first name himself King under the Mountain?

Vocabulary

carrion (p. 257)
coveted (p. 258)

decrepit (p. 258)
amends (p. 259)

fells (p. 263)

Discussion and Essay Topics

From the very beginning, Bilbo has assumed that the climax of the adventure would be the recovery of the treasure. Then he realizes that Smaug must also be dealt with. Now he finds that even Smaug's death does not end the adventure. If Bilbo had known from the beginning what would happen, do you think he would have still agreed to the adventure? Have the complications made him more or less enthusiastic and confident? What do you think Tolkien is trying to say about the purpose of trials and tribulations in a person's life?

Why won't Thorin deal with Bard and the Elvenking? Evaluate Bard's three topics for discussion (p. 265) and Thorin's answer. Do you think Bard's requests are fair and just? Is Thorin's answer fair and just?

How has the treasure changed Thorin?

Chapter 16: "A Thief in the Night"

Summary

Despite Roac's counsel, Thorin prepares for war. To break the impasse, Bilbo gives the Arkenstone to Bard and the Elvenking. He meets Gandalf in their camp. Bilbo returns to the mountain despite the Elvenking's warning about Thorin's anger.

Comprehension Questions

How does Bilbo leave the mountain without being caught?

What is Bilbo's plan to avoid war? Is it a good plan?

What old friend does Bilbo meet in the camp?

Vocabulary

bade (p. 268)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Why does Thorin reject Roac's advice?

Just as the moment in the tunnel (p. 215) is Bilbo's bravest, giving up the Arkenstone is his noblest. Why does he do it? Would any other character in the story be capable of this? What does it say about Bilbo's values and ethics? Why does he return to the Mountain? Would you have returned to the dwarves or stayed with Bard and the elves?

Chapter 17: "The Clouds Burst"

Summary

Thorin promises to give to Bard Bilbo's share of the treasure in exchange for the Arkenstone. Dain's army arrives before the exchange is made, and Bard refuses to let it pass into the Lonely Mountain. The two sides are about to battle when a vast army of goblins and Wargs attacks both. Dwarves, elves, and men unite in the face of their common enemy, and the Battle of Five Armies begins. At first the good forces trap the goblins and Wargs between two shoulders of the mountain, but they in turn are attacked from above by goblins climbing

• discussion and writing continued

over the mountain. Thorin sallies forth from the Front Gate and rallies his side, but the bodyguard of Bolg, the goblin leader, blocks his advance and Thorin is surrounded. Bilbo does not fight, but stays, invisible, near the Elvenking. He mourns the coming defeat and death of his friends, but then he sees that the Eagles are coming. At that moment he is knocked unconscious by a stone.

Comprehension Questions

What terms do Thorin and Bard come to?

What army makes the first attack?

Name the armies in the Battle of Five Armies.

What stops Thorin's advance?

Where does Bilbo take his final stand? Why?

Vocabulary

hauberk (p. 278)

mattocks (p. 279)

reconciliation (p. 280)

precipice (p. 284)

scimitar (p. 284)

eyries (p. 287)

smote (p. 287)

Discussion and Essay Topics

Consider the Elvenking's statement: "Long will I tarry, ere I begin this war for gold." Do you think these are wise words? Is gold worth fighting over? Defend your answer.

Trace Thorin's moral degeneration. What causes him to change? In what ways does he end up being similar to Smaug? Why do you think he is so easily corrupted?

Before the arrival of the goblins and wargs, who are the "good guys" and who are the "bad guys" in the standoff around the mountain? How does your opinion change when the goblins arrive?

Which would be a greater tragedy: the killing of the armies of men, elves, and dwarves by the goblins, or a war between men, elves, and dwarves? Explain your answer.

Chapter 18: "The Return Journey"

Summary

Bilbo comes to his senses the next day and is brought to the camp. On his deathbed, Thorin makes amends with Bilbo. The outcome of the battle is retold: Beorn rescued the wounded Thorin and then killed Bolg, but the battle was not won until the Eagles cleared the mountainside of goblins. Dain, the new King under the Mountain, makes a generous settlement with Bard. Bilbo and Gandalf begin the return journey and part, in turn, from the dwarves, the Elvenking, and Beorn.

Comprehension Questions

Why isn't Bilbo found until the day after the battle?

Who turned the tide of the battle?

What gifts does Dain give?

What becomes of Beorn in later years?

Vocabulary

literally (p. 288)

amend (p. 290)

mustering (p. 291)

trackless (p. 292)

Discussion and Essay Topics

"There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage . . . and some wisdom, blended in measure. If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world" (p. 290). Discuss Bilbo's character now that his adventure is completed. Why does he refuse the treasure? Why is he weary of his adventure? How has he proven himself to be a hero in spite of his lack of traditionally "heroic" attributes like strength and assertiveness?

Examine the final views we get of Thorin on his deathbed and in his tomb. Is his quest fulfilled? Why is his death necessary? What lesson does he learn? Does he deserve our respect or admiration? Is it right to bury him with the Arkenstone?

Examine in detail the various demands and offers made by Bard and the dwarves (and the elves). How does the final solution match what each party wants and deserves? What is the difference between Dain's gift and Thorin's promises?

Chapter 19: "The Last Stage"

Summary

Bilbo and Gandalf arrive at Rivendell, where Gandalf confers with Elrond. Bilbo takes the treasure from the troll hoard. Finally Bilbo returns home just in time to save his hole and belongings from being auctioned off. He settles down contentedly, although he finds that he is no longer considered respectable. In an epilogue, Balin and Gandalf visit him several years later.

Comprehension Questions

Where was Gandalf while the expedition crossed Mirkwood?

How long do Bilbo and Gandalf stay at Rivendell?

Why do they walk at the end of their journey?

Why are Bilbo's goods being auctioned?

What changes does Balin notice in Bilbo?

What happened to the old Master of Lake-town?

Vocabulary

lore (p. 299)

effects (p. 303)

Discussion and Essay Topic

Look at the elves' last songs (pp. 297–98, 299–300). What can you infer about the character traits and values of elves from their song?

"My dear Bilbo!" [Gandalf] said, 'Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were" (p. 302). What does Bilbo gain from his adventure? (Don't forget to include the ability and desire to make poetry.) What is the difference in the way his home is dear to him now compared to the way it was dear to him at the beginning of the book? Is it necessary to leave a place before you can truly appreciate it? Can you relate Bilbo's experience to your own life in any way?

At the end of the book, Gandalf makes the following comment: "You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?" (p. 305). Do you agree with Bilbo or with Gandalf? If "mere luck" is not responsible for Bilbo's success, what is?

Bilbo is pleased that he is "only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!" (p. 305). Why is this a comforting perspective? How does viewing oneself as a small part of a larger whole impact the way a person interacts with the world around him?

• discussion and writing continued

Why didn't Tolkien just end the book after the battle? What is the purpose of devoting two chapters to Bilbo's return? How do these chapters help develop the character and/or important themes?

Critical Commentary: Bilbo's Luck

Bilbo is originally chosen as the "lucky number," so that Thorin and Company will not be an unlucky thirteen. During the course of the expedition, Gandalf remarks several times that Bilbo is extraordinarily lucky. Some of his luck seems to be the deserved reward for Bilbo's courage and determination. For example, after attempting to find his own way out of the goblins' tunnel, confronting Gollum, and evading the orc-guard, Bilbo certainly deserves to come out on the east side of the mountains. Similarly, after escaping from the spiders, the expedition needs the luck of being captured by the elves, especially since it turns out that their straying from the path was necessary, because the east end of the road was abandoned. Other lucky events, notably Bilbo's finding of the troll's key and the ring, are necessary to give Bilbo talismans that enable him to confront enemies who are larger, more powerful, and more numerous than himself. In general, then, Bilbo's luck should be seen as a plot device that reinforces the theme of Bilbo's growing self-awareness and self-confidence.

However, some of the fortunate events in *The Hobbit* seem to involve much more than one hobbit's personal luck. Four events in particular should be considered. First is the expedition's rescue from the burning fir trees by the Eagles at a point when even Gandalf expects to die. Second is the expedition's arrival at the Side-door in one of the very few years when Durin's Day occurs. Third, although Bilbo deserves the credit for discovering Smaug's bare spot, the combination of the bare spot itself, the talking thrush, and a heroic descendant of Girion of Dale extends far beyond Bilbo's own luck. Finally, after Bilbo's attempt at mediation fails and Dain attacks Bard and the Elvenking, only the extraordinary event of the goblin attack restores moral harmony.

Where Bilbo's personal luck is related to the uses of the fantasy presented by Bettelheim, the larger luck that surrounds him can best be explained, in Tolkien's term, as a series of eucatastrophes that illustrate the workings of Providence. Gandalf's final comments about prophecies and luck, ending with his comment that Bilbo is "only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all" (p. 305), are the closest Tolkien comes to disclosing this providential structure in *The Hobbit*. Bilbo's joyous and pragmatic acceptance of this structure—his recognition that he is capable of great deeds but nonetheless dependent on the protection of God—is one of the two spiritual insights required of dwellers in Middle-earth. (The other, a selfless love of the Creator and the Creation, is usually measured in terms of "elvishness." Bilbo, attracted to elves from the very beginning and eventually named elf-friend, achieves this insight very easily.)

The proof of this providential pattern lies outside *The Hobbit*. The identity of the Eagles as messengers of God (as well as the significance of their coming out of the west in the Battle of Five Armies) is made clear in *The Silmarillion*; the importance of Bilbo's decision not to kill Gollum is a major motif of *The Lord of The Rings*; and the geopolitical consequences of the death of Smaug are best explained in "The Quest of Erebor," one of the fragments in *Unfinished Tales*. Yet the basic principle can be seen quite clearly within *The Hobbit*. Although on the surface it is stronger than good, evil always provides the means of its own defeat: Gollum's ring aids Bilbo, and Smaug, in his arrogance, reveals his bare patch. Triumphing over evil requires not prowess but fortitude, humility, hope, and unshakable virtue. Gollum is corrupted by malice, and the dragon-spell turns Thorin's pride to arrogance, deceit, and greed. But Bilbo and Bard, tutored by Gandalf, the Elvenking, and their own hearts, learn the true value of treasure and hatred, and joining together against evil, they destroy it.

• beyond the book

Research Questions

Tolkien includes traditional creatures such as elves, dwarves, dragons, trolls, goblins, and wizards in his story. Choose one of these creatures and research its appearance in world myths, legends, and folktales. Create a multimedia presentation that answers the following questions: What specific tales do you think inspired Tolkien when he created his creatures? In what ways did he transform the source material of the traditional stories and legends? What characteristics of the creatures did Tolkien emphasize and what did he omit? What do his changes reveal about his values and his purpose in creating Middle-earth?

Explore the significance of birds in *The Hobbit*. What specific types of birds play a role in the story? Specific birds (for example, the Eagles) have heavy symbolic significance in world legends and mythology. Research the source materials that Tolkien may have used to create this story. Why do you think he chose these specific birds to play the roles that they did? Explain the historical and symbolic significance behind Tolkien's use of birds.

Analyze the role of Gandalf in *The Hobbit*. Pay particular attention to his presence in terms of the way the book is structured. What is particularly significant about his presence at the beginning and end of the story? At what points does he leave? At what points does he reappear? How powerful is Gandalf? Research the source materials (especially Norse mythology and Western theology) that Tolkien may have used to create Gandalf.

Examine *The Hobbit* as a “prequel” to the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. How does reading *The Hobbit* enrich your understanding and experience of the trilogy? In what specific ways does Tolkien use *The Hobbit* to “set up” later events? Which story is more satisfying? Explain your answer.

Analyze the motif of the hero’s journey in *The Hobbit*. In what ways does Bilbo Baggins experience the steps of an archetypal hero journey? Does Bilbo fit the description of an archetypal hero? Compare this story to another classical or modern quest narrative. How is Bilbo similar to other heroes in literature? How is he different?

Examine the treatment of race in *The Hobbit*. Is it fair to suggest that all members of a certain group (dwarves, trolls, goblins, elves, etc.) share the same characteristics? How does this treatment of ethnic groups reflect the cultural perspective of the first half of the twentieth century? How might the book be different if it were written today?

Analyze the book in relation to film adaptations of *The Hobbit* (the Bass/Rankin 1977 animated version and Peter Jackson’s 2012 live-action release). How do the film adaptations compare to the book? What do each of the directors choose to emphasize? What do they omit? How do their directorial decisions impact the story? Which version did you find more “faithful” to Tolkien’s vision? Which version did you enjoy more?

• for further reading

The following books represent the best critical works about Tolkien and fantasy, as well as related works by Tolkien.

Books by Tolkien:

The Lord of the Rings, 3 volumes (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*; Ballantine Books), relates the adventures of Frodo Baggins, Bilbo’s nephew and heir, and focuses on Bilbo’s Ring, which is revealed to be the source of the power of the Necromancer. In many ways a reworking of the plot and themes of *The Hobbit*, the trilogy is Tolkien’s masterpiece and one of the greatest literary fantasies, although the first three hundred pages are rather slow reading. *The Silmarillion* (Ballantine Books) presents the creation of the world and the early history of the Middle-earth.

Unfinished Tales (Ballantine Books) contains posthumous fragments. The largest, the “Narn I Hin Hurin,” when read in conjunction with “Of Turin Turambar” (in *The Silmarillion*), is a compelling tale of steadfastness in the face of evil, the dooming of rash pride, and the cunning of dragons.

Books About Tolkien:

Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Ballantine Books) is a sensitive study that traces the personal development of Tolkien’s mythic creation and suggests the emotional commitment required to make it a masterpiece.

Robert Foster, *The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth* (Ballantine Books) is the authoritative reference work for Tolkien’s fiction.

Paul Kocher, *Master of the Middle-Earth* (Ballantine Books) provides a graceful and insightful critical view of Tolkien’s fiction. Kocher’s chapter on *The Hobbit* is well worth reading.

Ruth Noel, *The Mythology of Middle-Earth* (Houghton Mifflin) is a convenient summary of the characteristics of key themes, races, places, and things in Middle-earth, suggesting their relation to (and origins in) European mythology.

Books About Fantasy:

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Vintage) is a profound and compassionate testimonial to the value of fairy tales for child development.

J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” (in *The Tolkien Reader*) is the seminal literary study of fantasy, stressing its emotional validity and spiritual rewards.

• books by and about Tolkien published by Random House, Inc.:

The Hobbit (0-345-33968-1)

The Fellowship of the Ring (0-345-33970-3)

The Two Towers (0-345-33971-1)

The Return of the King (0-345-33973-8)

The Silmarillion (0-345-32581-8)

The Tolkien Reader (0-345-34506-1)

Smith of Wootton Major & Farmer Giles of Ham (0-345-33606-2)

The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth by Robert Foster (0-345-32436-6)

Unfinished Tales (0-345-35711-6)

• helpful links:

Full text of Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy Stories”:

http://bjorn.kiev.ua/librae/Tolkien_Tolkien_On_Fairy_Stories.html

The Tolkien Society: <http://www.tolkiensociety.org/>

A comprehensive list of links to various versions of the Beauty and the Beast story:

<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0425c.html>

A basic introduction to Norse Mythology: <http://www.viking-mythology.com/>

Interactive Hero’s Journey tool from Read Write Think:

<http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/herosjourney/>

• common core state standards

The Hobbit meets the standard for text complexity for grades 9 and 10. A list of standards used to create this guide are listed below:

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas—Anchor Standard

- Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the author's take.

Key Ideas and Details

- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

Craft and Structure

- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone)
- Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.
- Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

- Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.
- Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work.

Writing

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

- Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
- Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.
- Use appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.
- Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.
- Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the usefulness of each source in answering the research question; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.
- Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- Apply grades 9–10 reading standards to literature (e.g., “Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work”).

• about this guide's authors

This guide was written in 1981 by Robert Foster. It has been updated and revised by Amy Jurskis to now include the Common Core State Standards.

Robert Foster is the author of *The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth*. Foster has taught Tolkien, science fiction, and fantasy at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Foster holds a BA in Linguistics from Columbia University and an MA and a PhD in English and Medieval Literature from the University of Pennsylvania.

Amy Jurskis is the author of several teaching guides. A former department chair for language arts in a title-one public school in Atlanta, she currently teaches English at Oxbridge Academy of the Palm Beaches in West Palm Beach, Florida.



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