**J. R. R. Tolkien**

**Biography**

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, on January 3, 1892, to British parents. In 1896 his father died, and the family—J.R.R. and his brother Hilary, along with mother Mabel—moved back to England.

Tolkien spent the rest of his childhood in the West Midlands of England, spending time in the urban area of Birmingham as well as quaint, rural Sarehole. These experiences allowed him to see, firsthand, the effects of industrialization and to consider the significant differences between big-city and small-town life. This tension is reflected in The Lord of the Rings, which moves from the peaceful Shire to cities both grand and forbidding.

In 1900 Tolkien's mother converted to Roman Catholicism, causing her family to shun her. This created a dark childhood memory for Tolkien, which he attributed to his mother's early death. When she died of diabetes in 1904, their priest, Father Francis Xavier Morgan, took an active role in making sure the two boys were cared for. Tolkien remained a member of the Catholic Church throughout his life, and its rituals, stories, and doctrines provided inspiration for the spiritual backstory of Middle-earth, as well as the underpinnings of its ethics.

As a teenager Tolkien lived for some time in a boarding house; at age 16 he met and fell in love with a fellow lodger, Edith Mary Bratt, who was 19. Father Francis told Tolkien to wait until he turned 21 to initiate a romantic relationship with Edith; with much reluctance Tolkien agreed. He gained his education in the years until his 21st birthday, earning a degree in English Language and Literature (Comparative Philology, the study of changes in a language or language family over time, being his strongest area) from Oxford University. It was then Tolkien reignited his romance with Edith. They married in 1916, just before Tolkien went off to war. The couple would go on to have four children.

Tolkien's months in the trenches of World War I were dirty and full of violence and grief. His company participated in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, where, because of a general's tactical error, some 19,000 British soldiers were killed in a single day. Most of his close friends died, and Tolkien himself became so sick with "trench fever," he spent weeks in the hospital before being sent home. He suffered from the effects of trench fever for a period of nearly 18 months. Close on the heels of these wartime griefs, Tolkien translated his experiences into stories set in Middle-earth—a translation of the Old English word Middangeard, which he had encountered in his university studies. Tolkien was aware that, unlike some countries of Central and Northern Europe, England had no prominent legends that formed a complete cosmology. Therefore, he set out to create a "mythology for England."

After the war, Tolkien returned to the workforce as a philologist for The New English Dictionary. He became a tutor in 1919, and a year later, he became Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds. He gained full professorship in 1924 when he joined the Leeds English Department. In 1925 he was appointed Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford University. Tolkien spent his time teaching and writing stories and the occasional scholarly paper. He wrote many of the stories for his own children's entertainment. He helped to found the Inklings, a group of writers—including C.S. Lewis—who would meet to share and discuss their work. During this time, he first had the impulse to write about hobbits. According to Tolkien, he was grading papers when suddenly, on a blank page and for no real reason, he wrote the line: In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Later he says, he had to write more about hobbits so he could find out about them. He wrote a hobbit story for his children, and it was published as The Hobbit in 1937. The book became surprisingly successful, and the publisher asked Tolkien for a second book about hobbits.

Tolkien took on this challenge, but he now believed the hobbit story line should become part of the larger history he had been developing of Middle-earth, complete with its own languages, epic heroes, and terrible villains. It took him more than 10 years to incorporate these materials into The Lord of the Rings, which was published in three parts between 1954 and 1955. When it was published, some critics loved it, while others thought it silly, but over time—and partly due to its paperback release in the United States—it became a best seller. Today it is considered a classic of the fantasy genre, with copies sold in the hundreds of millions. During his lifetime Tolkien also published many scholarly essays and labored over a translation of the Old English classic Beowulf. Tolkien died on September 2, 1973, but his publishing career did not end then. Five years later his son Christopher, Tolkien's literary executor, oversaw publication of The Silmarillion, a history of the First Age of Middle-earth, which Tolkien had continuously redrafted for decades.

**The Lord of the Rings**

**Summary**

J. R. R. Tolkien’s modern fantasy classic The Lord of the Rings is a massive novel, often called epic both for its size and scope and for its heroic theme. At half a million words, balancing scores of main characters and hundreds of minor ones (the index lists more than seven hundred personal names) and interweaving several plot strands, The Lord of the Rings was too big for one volume in its first publication, resulting in a three-volume version that was (inaccurately) dubbed a trilogy. The setting is Middle-earth, conceived vaguely as Northern Europe before the recorded history of humankind and before geological forces changed the shape of the land.

The unlikely hero of the story is a little hobbit named Frodo Baggins, nephew of Bilbo Baggins, the hero of Tolkien’s earlier and more child-oriented novel, The Hobbit (1937). The story opens with a party at which Bilbo hands over his estate to his nephew and leaves the Shire for good. With his estate, Bilbo leaves Frodo the magic ring that makes the wearer invisible. As Frodo receives it, however, the wizard Gandalf discovers this and reveals to Frodo, that the ring is in reality the One Ring that controls a host of other rings of power dispersed among the races of Middle-earth (three to the elves, seven to the dwarves, and nine to humans). Sauron, a mysterious power who has sought for millennia to control all people, now seeks the ring from his stronghold in Mordor. Holding the ring endangers Frodo and all around him: He must leave the Shire he loves.

Frodo attempts to sneak off alone, but his loyal hobbit friends—his gardener Sam Gamgee, and younger cousins Merry and Pippin—guess Frodo’s secret and willingly share his danger. Pursued by the shadowy Black Riders—cloaked figures so shadowy that they seem to have no substance—the four hobbits are trapped between the Riders, menacing Barrow Wights, and malicious willows that enclose the hobbits until the kindly Tom Bombadil rescues them. Moving on, the hobbits seem lost without Gandalf until they fall in with a scruffy character, a Ranger named Strider, who looks disreputable, but whom Frodo decides to trust. Strider fends off the Black Riders, but not before Frodo is wounded by a Morgul Blade, a magic sword whose wound can be cured only by elvish healing. Strider rushes Frodo to the Halfelven King Elrond at Rivendell, while Gildor calls down a flood that vanquishes the Black Riders.

Recovering at Rivendell, Frodo is called to a council where the greatest minds—elf, dwarf, human, hobbit, and wizard—debate how to answer the threat of the ring. The inescapable conclusion is that the ring must be destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom, in the heart of Mordor where the evil power resides. Frodo agrees to the dangerous mission, supported by the Fellowship of the Ring: Gandalf, Strider, Sam, Pippin, Merry, an elf named Legolas, a dwarf named Gimli, and a man named Boromir.

Unable to cross the treacherous Mount Caradhras, the company goes beneath it, into the Mines of Moria, an underground city of the dwarves. There they are attacked by the monstrous orcs, and Gandalf is killed by a fiery monster known as a balrog. After a healing rest in the elvish retreat of Lórien, Frodo runs off when Boromir tries to seize the ring. Repentant, Boromir dies defending the hobbits, but the fellowship has been divided by his momentary treachery.

Searching for the scattered hobbits, Legolas, Gimli, and Strider meet the Riders of Rohan, fierce mounted warriors who defend the frontiers of Gondor. Meanwhile, Pippin and Merry narrowly escape the orcs and run into the kindly ents, giant treelike creatures who care for the forests. When they learn from the hobbits the danger they face from an evil white-clad wizard named Saruman, the peaceful ents go to war. Meanwhile, a mysterious white-robed figure appears to Gimli and Legolas; they poise to strike him down, only to discover it is the resurrected form of Gandalf, now in glistening white. He rides with them to Edoras, releases Théoden, king of Rohan, from the spell of Grima Wormtongue (who in turn serves Saruman), and leads the Riders of Rohan into battle against the army of orcs. The orcs prove too strong, and the Riders must retreat to their stronghold at Helm’s Deep, where they hold off the orcs until the White Rider Gandalf appears, and the ents destroy Saruman’s citadel at Isengard.

At the same time, Sam and Frodo are being pursued by Gollum, a creature who seems a wretched monster, but in reality is the remains of a hobbit who had once held Frodo’s ring and is in its power. Frodo uses that power to bind Gollum to serve his quest, but Sam does not trust the creature. Wandering into domains patrolled by Faramir, Boromir’s younger brother, Frodo learns of Boromir’s death. As they continue toward Mordor, Sam and Frodo are betrayed again as Gollum leads them to the lair of a giant (and hungry) spider named Shelob.

Rescued from the flooded ruins of Isengard, Pippin rides with Gandalf to the fortified capital of Gondor, the splendid city of Minas Tirith. Meeting the steward of Gondor, and father of Boromir, Denethor (not “king”; the kings are in exile until the sword of their ancestor can be reforged), Pippin solemnly offers him service. Back in Rohan, Merry offers the same to King Théoden. Strider rides into the Paths of the Dead to summon the spirits who had broken an oath to Strider’s ancestor, the king of Gondor—for Strider is the exiled king, his real name being Aragorn. The spirits join

the fight. In Rohan, Théoden’s niece Éowyn takes command while her uncle leads the armies; disguising herself in armor, she grabs Merry and rides into battle.

In the siege of Gondor, Pippin enlists Gandalf’s aid when the steward despairs, seeking only suicide. The three armies (Aragorn’s Dead Hosts, Denethor’s army bolstered by Gandalf, and the Rohirrim under Théoden) converge on the Orcish Hosts at Pelennor Fields, where the least likely warriors—the woman Éowyn and the hobbit Merry—defeat the king of the Nazgûl (the resurrected Black Riders).

In Mordor, Sam rescues Frodo, gives him back the ring, and leads him to the summit of Mount Doom, an active volcano. Poised on the fiery brink, Frodo suddenly refuses to destroy the ring and announces his intention to use its power himself. However, Gollum jumps Frodo, bites off his ring finger, and dances in triumph with the ring—only to topple into the volcano and fulfill the quest by accident.

In Gondor, Aragorn reclaims his ancestral throne. The hobbits return to the Shire only to find it overrun by exploiters who oppressed the Shire folk. The Fellows of the Ring easily defeat the bullies, but the Shire is scorched by the war. The last of the elves depart for the Undying Lands, and Frodo and Bilbo join them, leaving the Shire forever. Sam, however, stays, marries Rosie Cotton, and becomes a prominent citizen of the Shire.

**Characters**

**Frodo**

The lead of the story, Frodo was the heir to Bag End and nephew to Bilbo Baggins. A more reserved Hobbit, Frodo lead a life before his journey yearning for an adventure like his uncle, but also craving the safety and security of the Shire.

In terms of physical appearance, he is actually not often described in the books. Gandalf, in his letter to Barliman Butterbur, states that Frodo was a "stout fellow with red cheeks, taller than some, and fairer than most" He is also said to have a cleft chin and bright hopeful eyes.

**Sam**

Sam is often seen as the real hero of the story. He is the sidekick that every hero needs. Through his many heroic acts, Sam becomes the greater protagonist of the story, standing as the sole survivor of the legacy of Bag End.

In terms of appearance, Sam's is often the most consistent in adaptations. He is said to be shorter and rounder than most hobbits (which is saying something) with curly brown hair and worn hands from working in his garden. The live-action Samwise is far more accurate than the animated versions.

**Merry**

Merry was one of the four hobbits that made up the Fellowship of the Ring. Alongside his friend Pippin, the pair were often found getting into trouble and pranking friends. Like their companions though, the two become exceedingly more heroic and mature.

Merry's description is often lacking from the novels. Obviously, like most hobbits, he is shorter than most humans. But, compared to others of his kind, Merry is actually taller. He is a rare Hobbit who could've surpassed the 4ft mark.

**Pippin**

Pippin might be one of the more naive Hobbits in the party. Clinging to the innocence of childhood, the realities of the world come as a rude awakening to Pippin. But he soon finds his place among his fellow heroes of Middle Earth.

Sadly, Pippin is also rarely described outside the usual hobbit description. He is short, with flat feet and fair hair. But, one defining factor of his appearance is his hair. Tolkien describes him as having nearly golden locks, more fair than the brown hair of other Hobbits.

**Gandalf**

Few characters of Lord of the Rings are more iconic than Gandalf. Perhaps the greatest fictional wizard of all time, Gandalf is an icon not only of this series but of the entire fantasy genre. He is the pinch point for nearly any quest in Middle Earth.

In terms of book appearance, Gandalf is described as being strongly built, but somewhat shorter than mortal men, considering his stooped back. His hair was long and white, with a silver beard to match. In silhouette, his wide-brimmed hat marked the top of his head with a thick rough staff in hand.

**Aragorn**

Aragorn is the representative of the race of men, standing as the solitary figure after Boromir's death. Aragorn comes from a long line of noble leaders, heir to the line of Gondor. But, outside of this role, he also plays the figure of Strider, a hooded man of the road.

His appearance is described as lean and tall, with dark shaggy hair speckled with gray strands. His eyes match that of these strands, piercingly silver. The books describe him as the tallest member of the company standing at over 6 1/2 feet tall.

**Gimli**

Gimli is a joke in Lord of the Rings

Gimili is the sole dwarf of the Fellowship. Son of Gloin, Gimili comes from a respectable line in Dwarf society. Standing shorter than half of the fellowship, Gimili only towers over the halflings. His height is made up by his courage though, as he is always ready to rush into battle.

Gimli in the films might be the most accurate representation of a character from page to screen. Described as being "as stout as any dwarf," with brown hair and beard, topped off with a helmet. When it comes to Dwarves, Gimili is picture-perfect.

**Legolas**

Legolas is the only elf in the Fellowship. Hailing from the woodland realm, Legolas is one of the rare members of his race to travel alongside dwarves and men. His stark contrast in comparison to Gimili provides tactical diversity in the Fellowship.

**Themes**

**Friendship**

Friendship was a theme of The Lord of the Rings and was something that Tolkien was very influenced by. A Fellowship is created, consisting of all the Free Peoples of Middle-earth, including elves and dwarves, setting aside their differences against the common enemy of Sauron. Frodo Baggins, the Ringbearer, makes a huge sacrifice in saving Middle-earth from evil, as the One Ring takes its toll on him.

Aragorn decides to make a suicidal bid for Frodo by taking the armies of Rohan and Gondor to the Black Gate at the final battle of The Return of the King. Samwise Gamgee is always loyal to his master and friend, Frodo, even as they journey through Mordor. In The Lord of the Rings, friendships feature prominently, both between individuals and between races. The absolute loyalty of the friendship between Sam and Frodo is instrumental in furthering the plot. The friendly camaraderie of the hobbits—Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin—provides a casual and heartwarming counterpoint to the lofty, and more formal, alliances between Elrond, Galadriel, Gandalf, and other important players in the War of the Ring. Legolas and Gimli, beyond having their own bonds, also show that old rifts between races or nations can be healed through friendship. The nations of Rohan and Gondor, and the races of Elves and Men, also can be described as friendly, and bear witness to a long history of alliance between these groups.

**Christ figures**

Frodo, Gandalf, Aragorn: Priest, Prophet, King

In fact, Frodo Baggins, Gandalf the Grey, and Aragorn each in a remote way embody one of the three aspects of Jesus Christ's ministry as priest, prophet, and king. Each also undergoes a kind of sacrificial "death" and rebirth.

The priestly role belongs to Frodo, and he is the sacrificial lamb of Middle-earth who bears a burden of terrible evil on behalf of the whole world, like Christ carrying his cross. Frodo's Via Dolorosa (or way of sorrows) is at the very heart of Tolkien’s story, just as the crucifixion narratives are at the heart of the gospels accounts. As Christ descended into the grave, Frodo journeys into Mordor, the Land of Death, and there suffers a deathlike state in the lair of the giant spider Shelob before awakening to complete his task. And, as Christ ascended into heaven, Frodo’s life in Middle-earth comes to an end when he departs over the sea into the mythical West with the Elves, which is as much to say, into paradise. Frodo walks his Via Dolorosa or "way of sorrows" to Mount Doom like Jesus making his way to Calvary. As Jesus bore the sins of mankind, Frodo bears a great burden of evil on behalf of the world, and as he approaches the Cracks of Doom the Ring becomes as much a crushing weight as the wood of the cross.

Frodo, the Ring Bearer, is Christ the Sin Bearer. He carries the burden of the Ring as Christ carried the burden of sin. He too is a living sacrifice. Frodo's wound on Weathertop is a figurative of Christ's spear wound on the Cross. Note that the wound on Weathertop is inflicted by the Witch-king, another Satan figure. Frodo's voyage to the west, like Gandalf's, is also symbolic of the Ascension. It doesn't take a biblical scholar to feel some similarity between Frodo's struggle to carry the Ring up Mount Doom and Christ's struggle to carry his cross to Calvary. By the time Frodo reaches Mount Doom, he is so weighed down by the power of the Ring and despair over its destruction that Sam carries him and the Ring up the path to the Crack of Doom — shades of Simon of Cyrene bearing Jesus' cross to Golgotha. Any parallel, intentional or not, between Frodo and Christ ends when Gollum attacks Frodo on the path in their second-to-last encounter. Gollum's effort to wrest the Ring from him re-ignites Frodo's will, showing how stern and powerful he has become under the Ring's influence. In prophetic and commanding words, Frodo fends off Gollum, warning that if he ever touches him again, he will be cast into the Fire of Doom. Unlike Christ, who at the height of his trial on the cross submits his will to God's and commends his spirit into His hands, Frodo, at the climax of his ordeal with the Ring, exerts his own will first by choosing not to complete the quest, saying, "I will not do this deed." With this declaration of will, Frodo claims the One Ring as his own and puts it on to openly reveal himself to the Eye of Sauron. One can only surmise that at that point Frodo is prepared to directly challenge the Dark Lord for the title of Lord of the Ring.

The idea that Frodo could best Sauron in a contest of evil, even wearing the Ring, is hard to believe. More likely than not, the Ring is simply using Frodo to get back to its master by revealing its whereabouts. The great irony of this situation is that the moment Frodo feels as though he's finally mastered the Ring by claiming it and deciding against its destruction is precisely when the Ring takes completely mastery of him and turns his will into its will. Frodo's failure at Mount Doom is the polar opposite of Christ's victory on the cross, wherein Christ masters his suffering and death by submitting his will to this fate. When Jesus died, an earthquake occurred and did destroy things, same as Frodo, when he destroyed the ring; all the lands in Mordor did shake then finally destroyed including Mount Doom and the Eye of Sauron.

Samwise Gamgee is representative of Christ the servant. He is the "friend that sticks closer than a brother". He makes himself a living sacrifice as he aids Frodo. He is the meek one who inherits the earth (in this case, the Shire).

Gandalf is representative of the prophet, revealing hidden knowledge, working wonders, teaching others the way. Evoking the saving death and resurrection of Christ, Gandalf does battle with the powers of hell to save his friends, sacrificing himself and descending into the nether regions before being triumphantly reborn in greater power and glory as Gandalf the White. As with Frodo, Gandalf's sojourn in Middle-earth ends with his final voyage over the sea into the West.

The One Ring is a symbol of sin. It is the Forbidden Fruit that everyone wants; the "Precious" thing that no one who has it wants to give up, yet it enslaves and destroys anyone who has it. It is no coincidence that the Ring was made by Sauron, the main Satan figure. The Bible tells that sin began in Satan. The Hebrew word usually translated "found" in Ezekiel 28:15, "Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee", can mean "began" or "was made". Though Sauron made the Ring, he himself lost control of it, and in the end, it indirectly destroys him, just as sin will indirectly destroy Satan.

Lastly, Aragorn is a crownless man of the wilderness destined to be king. Besides being a messianic king of prophecy, Aragorn also dimly reflects the saving work of Christ by walking the Paths of the Dead and offering peace to the spirits there imprisoned, anticipating in a way the Harrowing of Hell. (The oath-breaking spirits Aragorn encounters on the Paths of the Dead, who cannot rest in peace until they expiate their treason, suggest a kind of purgatorial state.)

**Alternate reality and Myths**

In Tolkien's legendarium, Middle-earth is depicted as the world before humans. J.R.R. Tolkien wrote, "The Lord of the Rings is, of course, a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision." As Tolkien is a Catholic, he believed that he should not create a completely alternate reality. By design The Lord of the Rings is not a Christian allegory but rather an invented myth about Christian and Catholic truths. In this way, he created a world without being disrespectful to his own beliefs as a Catholic and as a person.

To Tolkien, myths are true because they are part of our God-created imagination, and because they bring us "such joy [that] has the very taste of primary truth." To Tolkien the story of Jesus Christ is a "true myth." He intended his stories to be told as myths of the events that took place before human history. When Tolkien shared this concept with C.S. Lewis during an afternoon walk, Lewis felt "a rush of wind that came so suddenly," and within days proclaimed his belief in Christ, becoming one of Christianity's most effective apologists. (See also Tolkien's essay, On Fairy-Stories.)

**Forgiveness**

Frodo spares Gollum, thus fulfilling the Quest in the long run. Gandalf, Théoden and Aragorn also do not wish to kill Gríma, despite betraying Rohan safety, insofar as they allowed him to flee back to Saruman. Even when they encounter him again, after Isengard's defeat, they spare him.

Peace after wars applies to all men. Théoden pardons the Dunlendings and Aragorn pardons the Haradrim and Easterlings following their defeats.

**Power**

The One Ring is an object of power and desire, tempting all who wield it. Isildur, Gollum, the Nazgûl, Boromir and Saruman are all characters who fall to the temptation of power that Sauron offers. Characters like Isildur and Boromir have good intentions with the power but are nevertheless corrupted by it.

The goodness of men, such as Aragorn and Faramir is illustrated by their refusal to take the Ring.

The Ring itself is symbolic of the devil's third temptation of Christ. "If you bow to me, I will give you dominion over all you see." All other Rings, aside from the elf rings, pertain to this idea, and the One Ring, still makes the wearer a near-helpless victim to its corruption.

**Death and immortality**

Death is prominent, with the Rings of Power promising immortality to Men, yet eventually sucking away their lives.

The Elves have the gift and the curse of immortality. Their Rings are created for a desire to prevent the waning of their world. Arwen must choose between immortality and the love of Aragorn.

Tolkien wrote about The Lord of the Rings and death in his Letters:

"But I should say if asked, the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness, which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a Man!" (Letter 203, 1957)

"It is mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory." (Letter 211, 1958)

Indeed, the fall of Númenor is caused by an attempt from the King Ar-Pharazôn to seize immortality from the Valar.

**Fathers and sons**

Frodo and Aragorn are orphans, yet raised by figures like Gandalf, Bilbo and Elrond. Théoden is pushed into action following the death of his son, and Denethor is blinded by the death of Boromir whilst Faramir defends Gondor from the coming onslaught.

**War**

War was something Tolkien knew well and felt strongly about, considering he lost many friends in the trenches of World War I. War is shown as a necessary defence with huge costs in his story, and many characters look forward to the return of the King of Gondor and Arnor, which will herald the Fourth Age of peace.

**Nature versus technology**

Tolkien allegedly loved the beauty of nature. The villains in the story are often described as mechanical with Saruman having "a mind like metal and wheels". His destruction of Fangorn Forest shocks Treebeard and other Ents into action. The Elves of Lórien live amongst enormous, ancient trees. Through the continued reference of industry and war as synonymous, especially in relation to Saruman and the production of his Uruk-hai army, Tolkien presents a very negative image of industry and technological advancement "we will drive the industry of war". This is expressed throughout the trilogy. When looking into Galadriel's mirror Frodo witnesses a polluted world of industry and factories, adding to the negative view expressed towards industry and technology.

**Growing up**

The Hobbits are small simple creatures who don't like to go out for adventures. The Shire is an idyllic place of peace that the Hobbits such as Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin journey out of into the dangers of the war.

The story can be seen as a coming of age story: at the start, the hobbits are like 'babes in the wood', and have to be rescued by Tom Bombadil both from Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wights. Through their journeys around Middle-earth they grow up (sometimes literally due to the Ent-draughts ). The culmination of the growing up process is in the Scouring of the Shire, when the hobbits defeat Saruman and his forces without the help of elves or men.

**Fate**

Gandalf in one scene discusses the possibility that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and that Gollum has an important part to play. Much of the story goes the way it does because of events or decisions influencing other events, such as Gollum destroying the Ring, at length due to Bilbo and Frodo sparing him in the first place, and the Witch-king being weakened and ultimately killed due to Merry's barrow-blade, which was enchanted with spells against him long ago.

**Loss and farewell**

From the beginning of Tolkien's mythos, there has been a consistent theme of great beauty and joy failing and disappearing before the passage of time and the onslaught of the powers of evil. In The Silmarillion, Melkor uses his powers first to destroy the works of his fellow Valar and as this ultimately fails he uses his ally Ungoliant to destroy the Two Trees that gave the blessed land of Aman its light.

Fëanor, prince of the Noldor, first loses his father and then his greatest creations, the Silmarils, through the machinations of the evil Morgoth. By his fault elven blood is for the first time spilled on the ground of Eldamar and the Noldor give away both their home and their innocence. Mandos, the Doomsayer himself, proclaims judgment over the Noldor and reveals to them that none of them shall find peace or rest until their oath has been fulfilled or their souls come to the House of Spirits.

Over the course of Middle-earth history, great countries are created but are doomed to fail, before the eyes of the immortal elves who have to learn that nothing good will ever last to them. Gondolin and Nargothrond as well as Khazad-dûm and Númenor ultimately are destroyed or deserted, either through the intervention of evil from the outside or by the growing evil within.

At the end of The Lord of the Rings, most of the Elves have left Middle-earth, taking with them all their wonders and the beauty they have created. Lothlórien withers as the protecting powers of Galadriel and her ring Nenya leave for the Undying Lands. Frodo has returned to the Shire, but because of the injury ,he sustained at Weathertop he cannot ever live there peacefully and free of pain. He finally leaves for the Undying Lands himself.

Finally, in one of the appendices to The Return of the King, after nearly two hundred years of life Aragorn dies in his deathbed, leaving behind a lonely and now-mortal Arwen, who travels to what is left of Lothlórien to herself die on a flat stone next to the river Nimrodel, having returned to one of the few places of true happiness she knew in her life.

The theme of loss is reinforced by some of the songs given throughout Tolkien's book, one of the more prominent being the poem recited by the Dwarf Gimli near the exit of Moria (reproduced in part):

The world was fair, the mountains tall,

In Elder Days before the fall.

Of mighty kings of Nargothrond

And Gondolin, who now beyond

The Western Seas have passed away;

The world was fair in Durin's Day.

The world is grey, the mountains old,

The forge's fire is ashen cold;

No harp is wrung, no hammer falls,

The darkness dwells in Durin's halls;

The shadow lies upon his tomb

In Moria, in Khazad-dûm.

**Evil**

The Ring, being thoroughly evil, cannot be used to achieve any good end. This point is made over and over: the Ring will corrupt the one who wields it, no matter what the wielder's initial purpose is. Galadriel points this out when Frodo offers her the Ring, noting she would, if she were to accept it, start out by fixing the things that are wrong in the world. However, even her great power and goodness would not be able to resist the temptation of the power it would offer; eventually she would claim it as her own and all her good intentions would be for nothing. Gandalf, too, refuses the Ring, for the same reason. The nature of evil is to undermine and destroy, to corrupt and exploit. This theme is underscored by the fact that Bilbo is said to have escaped relatively free from the Ring's corrupting influence because he did not seek to use the Ring to gain power.

**The Good Fight**

It is not necessary to be great and powerful, or even successful, to overcome evil. Fighting evil happens one step at a time, choice by choice. And no act of goodness, mercy, or bravery is too small to make a dent in the armor of evil. Bilbo's simple act of refraining from killing Gollum—motivated by pity—is ultimately shown to be an incredibly important choice. Frodo makes a similar choice. Merry's attack on the Lord of the Nazgûl doesn't kill the evil creature, but serves to set up the killing blow. Thus, the importance of making the right choice in the moment—no matter how seemingly insignificant—is emphasized time and time again.

There is also a sense that some tasks are appointed to certain people. Elrond perceives the task of taking the Ring to Mordor was meant for Frodo. Gandalf also has a specific task to complete—and he is even sent back from the dead to achieve it. The moral of the story is, when providence sets a task for someone, that person must try his best to complete it, even if he deems the task too big.

Ultimately, as Frodo's quest reveals, moral choices have a cumulative effect. A single bad choice, like Frodo's, does not counteract the string of good choices he had made prior to that moment. Therefore, Frodo's quest is successful, even if his final act is one of failure.

**Storymaking**

Stories—most often in the form of songs and poems—abound in the novel. While there are written records (Gandalf reading the writings of Isildur in Gondor, for example), important tales of those who lived long ago are passed down through oral tradition. The Elves know many of these songs, as does Aragorn. In addition, smaller stories, such as one hobbit's quest to destroy a dangerous ring, are just one part of a much longer and more complex story going back to the beginning of creation. As Sam says, "We're in the same tale still! It's going on." All actions, small or large—Sam's, Frodo's, anyone's—are woven into the never-ending story of history. When we are called on to act, we must answer and become part of the story.

**Symbols**

**The One Ring**

The One Ring, forged by the Dark Lord Sauron, symbolizes the corrupting influence of power, especially when used for self-serving ends. Tolkien wrote of it, "I should say that it was a mythical way of representing the truth that potency (or perhaps potentiality) if it is to be exercised, and produce results, has to be externalized and so as it were passes, to a greater or lesser degree, out of one's direct control." (Letter #211, 1958).

Those who take the One Ring out of a desire for power are corrupted more quickly, but even those who would use it to achieve good are in danger of becoming corrupt over time, which is why Faramir, Galadriel, and Gandalf all refuse to take it. Gandalf warns,

We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we now know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength ... is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier power. The very desire of it corrupts the heart.

**Andúril**

Aragorn's sword is forged from the shards of Narsil, which had once belonged to Elendil. The sword broke beneath Elendil when he fell, slain by Sauron, and then Elendil's son Isildur used its pieces to cut the Ring from Sauron's hand. Andúril, meaning Flame of the West, symbolizes Aragorn's claim to kingship and, with its reforging, his ability to restore the kingdom and his family line. Aragorn must use Andúril when he faces Sauron, just as Elendil wielded Narsil in battle with Sauron. Andúril thus symbolizes a history of heroic battles won or lost, a history of which Aragorn will now become a part.

I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!

**Wizards' Robes**

Radagast wears brown robes, signifying his connection to nature and the woods. Saruman begins with white robes, symbolizing the power of light, goodness, and moral and spiritual purity, but he gives them up for rainbow-colored robes when he becomes corrupt:

His robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered.

Gandalf the Grey becomes Gandalf the White, wearing white robes as a symbol of his new status as leader of the Wise and as a powerful force for goodness, light, and purity.

**Motifs**

Character Pairs

Characters often occur in pairs in the story. Pairs of friends, such as Sam and Frodo, or Legolas and Gimli, show the comfort to be found in friendship, even a bond between unlikely friends such as a Dwarf and an Elf. Pairs of characters also show the effect of good versus evil choices: Gollum is a hobbit-like creature who gave in to the Ring's corruption, while Frodo shows what the same type of person looks like if he resists evil. Saruman shows what a wizard is like when he makes evil choices and becomes corrupt, while Gandalf shows what the influence of good can do. Boromir shows how the Ring can corrupt a man, while Faramir shows what happens to a man when he resists its evil.

**Parting Ways**

Farewells play a large role in the plot and set the bittersweet mood of The Lord of the Rings. The Third Age is passing away, and the Age of Men begins with the destruction of the One Ring and the restoration of the line of kings to Gondor. The Elves, who are strongly connected to nature, are leaving Middle-earth—crossing the sea in large ships. In helping to destroy the Ring, they hasten their own departure, as Galadriel points out. Therefore, the partings that take place in the book—the initial breaking of the Fellowship at Amon Hen, the parting at Lothlórien, the final parting of Frodo and Bilbo from the Shire, among others—echo this overall parting of ways that provides the backdrop of the story.

**Cities**

The quest moves from city to city, and the cities reflect important aspects of those who live in them. For example, Caras Galadhon, the city of Lothlórien, has dwelling places built on platforms in tall trees, showing the Elves' preference for living in harmony with nature, and with trees especially. Minas Tirith, in contrast, though built into the side of a mountain, rises imposingly out of the landscape and is a large, complex city. It is fashioned in seven levels, the uppermost being the level on which the king's residence and throne room are located. This structure reflects the way Men stand strong and proud in opposition to Mordor.

**The Hobbit**

**Summary**

Chapter 1 opens as the wizard Gandalf visits the hobbit Bilbo Baggins and invites him to join in an adventure. Bilbo declines, reluctant to leave the safety and comfort of his hobbit-hole. The next day, he is visited by dwarves who believe Bilbo can be of use to them in their journey to the Lonely Mountain to reclaim their ancestral treasure, now in the possession of Smaug the dragon. Bilbo realizes that Gandalf had represented him to the dwarves as a burglar. He reluctantly agrees to go, but he changes his mind the next morning. Gandalf urges him to join them, however, and they depart — a band of fourteen.

Chapters 2 through 10 depict Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarves traveling out of the hobbit-lands toward the Lonely Mountain far to the east. As the landscape becomes less hospitable and the group faces hunger, bad weather, and attacks from hostile creatures, Bilbo often thinks fondly of home and questions his decision to come on this journey. In the Lone-lands, the travelers encounter trolls who capture the dwarves and tie them up in sacks, planning to roast and eat them later. They are rescued by Gandalf and Bilbo, who produces a key he found nearby. The key unlocks the trolls' secret cave, where the travelers find gold and weapons, to which they help themselves. They travel on to the valley of Rivendell at the edge of the Wild, and stay at the home of Elrond, a hospitable elf leader. Elrond translates the runes on the swords that Gandalf and Thorin Oakenshield, king of the dwarves, took from the trolls' cave; they are ancient swords called Orcrist and Glamdring that come from dragon plunder or the Goblin-wars. Elrond also translates Thorin's map, which clarifies the importance of Durin's Day, the first day of the dwarves' New Year.. After two weeks, Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarves resume their journey. Approaching the Misty Mountains, they take shelter from a storm in a cave that turns out to be the Great Goblin's cavern. The Goblins capture Bilbo and his companions and take their ponies. Using Glamdring, Gandalf kills the Great Goblin and frees Bilbo and the dwarves. The travelers try to find their way out of the cave as the Goblins retreat, but Bilbo falls on his way out and loses consciousness.

When Bilbo regains consciousness and tries to make his way out of the cave, he finds a ring that he absentmindedly pockets. This incident, in Chapter 5, marks a dramatic moment in his adventures, for the ring confers powers of invisibility on whomever wears it. Bilbo encounters old Gollum, a slimy, murderous creature who kills and eats Goblins and others who stray into the cave. They exchange riddles, and Gollum discovers that Bilbo has the ring, which is Gollum's favorite possession. At the same time, Bilbo puts on the ring and discovers its magical power. Pursuing the invisible Bilbo, Gollum inadvertently shows him the way out of the cave. Bilbo has the opportunity to kill Gollum, but decides his invisibility is an unfair advantage and, instead, leaps over his head through the mouth of the cave.

After he is outside, Bilbo plans to go back and rescue his friends but finds they have escaped, too. He tells his tale and gains their respect. Then they all run away from the Mountains, fearful of the Goblins. They are chased up into trees by Wargs, menacing wild wolves. Gandalf chases the Wargs away, but the Wargs soon return with Goblins and try to smoke Bilbo and the dwarves out of the trees by setting fire to the forest. Bilbo and the dwarves are rescued by eagles, who fly them to their nest. After spending the night in safety, they resume their travels east and Gandalf takes them to the house of Beorn, the skin-changer, who outfits them for the next leg of their journey, through the forest of Mirkwood. At the end of Chapter 7, Gandalf leaves them at the edge of Mirkwood, warning them not to stray from the path. Gandalf does not reappear until the Battle of Five Armies near the end of the book.

Bilbo and the dwarves travel through the forest and use a boat to cross an enchanted lake. They rescue Bombur, one of the thirteen dwarves, from a fall into the lake. Hungry, they approach a party of feasting elves, but to no avail. Bilbo is captured by a spider, but fights his way free with the sword he took from the trolls; he names it Sting. Wearing the ring of invisibility, he frees the dwarves who have been bound in spiders' webs and reveals to them the secret of the ring. At the end of Chapter 8, Bilbo and the dwarves find that Thorin has been captured by elves, and in Chapter 9, all the dwarves are captured and thrown into the dungeon under the palace of the Elvenking. Bilbo escapes this fate because he is wearing the ring that makes him invisible, and he wanders around the Elvenking's palace until he has developed a plan to free the dwarves. He hides them in empty wine barrels that are dropped through the floor of the palace and float down the river to Esgaroth or Lake-town. Bilbo and the dwarves spend some time in Lake-town, a town of men, but then move on and disembark near the Lonely Mountain.

Chapter 11 depicts the encounter with Smaug the dragon, the object of the journey. The travelers can see the door to Smaug's lair in the side of the Lonely Mountain, but they can't open it until Bilbo suddenly understands the clues in Thorin's map. On Durin's Day, using the key from Thorin's grandfather, Bilbo enters the Lonely Mountain. He sees Smaug the dragon sitting on the treasure hoard and, despite great fear, engages him in conversation and emerges with a cup he has stolen from the hoard. At this point, Bilbo becomes, in effect, the leader of the group. He re-enters Smaug's lair and steals the Arkenstone, the precious gem of the hoard. In a vengeful rage, Smaug comes out of his lair and destroys the town of Esgaroth. Bard, a Lake-town archer, kills Smaug.

At this point, in Chapter 14, various groups begin to converge on the Lonely Mountain, because the treasure Smaug had guarded is now up for grabs. Thorin refuses to ally with Bard or the elves, and Bilbo gives Bard the Arkenstone to use in bargaining with Thorin. Gandalf reappears. The Battle of Five Armies ensues — dwarves, men, and elves fighting against Goblins and Wargs. After the battle, Bilbo is taken to see Thorin, who is dying. He is buried with Orcrist and the Arkenstone; his inheritance, the hoard, is divided. Bilbo leaves with Gandalf, Elvenking, and Beorn to go back to the hobbit-lands. They stay with Beorn over Yule-tide and return to Elrond in the spring. When Bilbo arrives home, he finds that his house and its contents are being auctioned, because he is presumed dead. He recovers most of his possessions and leads an eccentric life, sometimes visited by his travel companions.

**Characters**

**Bilbo Baggins**

Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist of The Hobbit, is one of a race of creatures about half the size of humans, beardless and with hairy feet. He lives in an unspecified time that is at once ancient and also very like the Victorian age, with its cozy domestic routines. Like most hobbits, Bilbo is fond of the comforts of home and hearth: He loves good, simple food in abundance, and he loves his pipe and well-furnished hobbit-hole. The book opens, in fact, with Bilbo's smoking a pipe one morning just outside his home; shortly afterward, he finds himself serving high tea — including coffee, cakes, scones, jam, tart, and pies — to thirteen dwarves. Memories of this kind of plain English food follow Bilbo throughout his hardships on his journey, when he is often hungry, and represent what home means to him. Bilbo is also fastidious: He does not like the mess the dwarves create in his home and, although he has been invited by Gandalf to join a dramatic adventure, in Chapter 2 he almost returns home because he has forgotten his handkerchiefs and his pipe.

Bilbo is called upon to do more than he imagines himself capable of. He does not like to travel, preferring the safety of his hobbit-hole, but he has inherited a streak of adventurousness from his mother's side, the Tooks. His adventurous Took side and his comfort-loving Baggins side are in conflict throughout much of the story. For the first half of the book, he is often hapless and rather cowardly. He begins by falling into a fit when he feels prevailed upon to join Gandalf and the dwarves, and later he must be carried by Dori when they are escaping the Goblins. In the face of difficulties, he is often afraid and constantly daydreams of bacon and eggs and wishes himself back home. In Chapter 2, he is caught trying to pickpocket the trolls.

And yet Bilbo soon shows signs of ingenuity. He picks up the key to the trolls' secret cave, thereby providing himself with a sword from the cache inside the cave. Although Gandalf must rescue him and the dwarves from the Goblins in Chapter 4, in the very next chapter, Bilbo finds the ring of invisibility and proves the equal of Gollum in the exchange of riddles. It is important to note that Bilbo resists the impulse to kill Gollum in Chapter 5 because he thinks it would be unfair: Gollum is unarmed, while Bilbo is invisible and armed. Bilbo is thus depicted as not only clever, but ethical. This is reflected in the dwarves' growing respect for him in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 8, when Bilbo uses his sword to free himself from the spider web, he is described as feeling differently about himself, an indication that he is growing in self-awareness. At this point, he names his sword, as many legendary heroes have done, and it is clear that he is developing qualities of heroism and leadership. In Chapter 9, he displays both bravery and intelligence in devising a plan for the escape of the dwarves to Esgaroth; Gandalf has departed and their fate is in Bilbo's hands. Finally, in Chapter 12, it is Bilbo alone who descends into Smaug the dragon's lair — having first been the one to discover how to use Thorin's key to open the door to the Lonely Mountain — and steals a cup and the Arkenstone from the hoard. He exhibits extreme bravery because he really does not want to confront Smaug, but he goes anyway. He also discerns Smaug's vulnerable spot, where he will eventually be shot by Bard's arrow.

After the Battle of Five Armies, however, Bilbo returns to his hobbit hole and to a life very much like the one he left — with some important differences. He has more money, having been given a share of Smaug's hoard, and his life after he returns home is rather more eccentric than before, a much more Tookish life

**Gandalf**

Gandalf is a good wizard who has powers beyond those of other characters: He sometimes uses a magic wand and he seems able to appear and disappear at will. He guides the travelers and rescues them from trolls, Goblins, and Wargs. He is old (he was a friend of Bilbo's grandfather on the Took side) and respected for his wisdom. The map and key to the Lonely Mountain have been entrusted to him for safekeeping by Thorin's grandfather. He also introduces Bilbo and the dwarves to useful friends like Elrond and Beorn.

Gandalf's most important role in The Hobbit is as a tutelary or wisdom figure to Bilbo. He persuades Bilbo to go on the adventurous journey with the dwarves because he knows that Bilbo, without realizing it, is an essential player in the drama that will result in the death of Smaug. He also knows that the challenges of the journey are necessary to Bilbo's further development; Bilbo has been safe and comfortable for too long. Thus Gandalf makes the secret mark on Bilbo's front door that causes the dwarves to visit him in Chapter 1, and he supplies Bilbo with handkerchiefs and tobacco at the start of his journey so he will not have an excuse to turn back.

Gandalf is depicted at times observing Bilbo; you can infer that he is judging his behavior. When Bilbo emerges from Gollum's cave, he does not tell the dwarves about the ring of invisibility, but he catches Gandalf looking at him knowingly. It is shortly after Gandalf leaves the group at the edge of Mirkwood in Chapter 7 that Bilbo begins to experience his newfound courage and cleverness; he even assumes Gandalf's function of rescuer when he frees the dwarves from the dungeon of the Elvenking. Gandalf has functioned as a parent and teacher to Bilbo, and an indication of Bilbo's growth is that he does not need the physical presence of Gandalf to guide him in the palace of the Elvenking or in Smaug's lair.

After the Battle of Five Armies, Gandalf accompanies Bilbo back to the hobbit-lands. The very last scene depicts Gandalf and Balin visiting Bilbo some time later in his hobbit-hole. Gandalf is represented in all his wisdom, reminding Bilbo of his place in the grand scheme of things.

**Thorin Oakenshield**

Thorin is the leader of the dwarves, and he takes himself very seriously. He is conscious of his position as son of Thrain and grandson of Thror, King under the Mountain, and mindful of his birthright to the treasure trove guarded by Smaug. He retains this sense of self throughout the journey until, in Chapter 8, he is captured by elves and imprisoned in the palace of the Elvenking. At this point, Bilbo assumes the role of leader, freeing Thorin and the other dwarves when they could do nothing to effect their own release.

Thorin is brave and intelligent and his leadership of the dwarves is unchallenged; Kili and Fili are especially loyal to him and eventually die with him in the Battle of Five Armies. He makes a mistake, however, when he refuses to parley with Bard on the eve of the battle. His intense desire for the treasure, typical of the dwarf love of beautiful material things, and his refusal to reconcile with the elves are contributing factors to that war. When he dies of wounds suffered in the Battle of Five Armies, he is buried with the Arkenstone, a gesture of love but also of the futility of battling for property.

**Smaug**

Smaug is a dragon whose evil, like Gollum's, is indicated by his isolation. He lives alone in the Lonely Mountain, his only purpose to guard the treasure he stole from the dwarves during the reign of Thorin's grandfather. Smaug rarely leaves his lair, and he sleeps on top of the accumulated ornaments, utensils, and weapons that constitute the treasure. He represents the wrongful impulse to hoard, to accumulate beyond what one can use and to refuse to share with others. In revenge for the theft of the Arkenstone, he destroys the town of Lake-town (Esgaroth). The complete destruction of the town and the displacement of men, women, and children is depicted as characteristic of Smaug's irrationality and evil. There is nothing sympathetic about Smaug, and Bard's slaying of him is a relief to all. The evil of his hoarding continues, however, when Goblins, elves, Wargs, men, and dwarves converge on the Lonely Mountain in a battle over possession of the treasure.

**Gollum**

Gollum is a fascinating character. Like Smaug, his solitary life is a clue to his wicked nature; all other characters in the book, even the evil Goblins and Wargs, are members of communities. Gollum is so alone that he speaks only to himself, even on the rare occasions when he finds himself with someone else, as he does with Bilbo in Chapter 5. He speaks to others in the third person, apparently unable to say "you," and he calls himself "my precious" out of a perverted kind of self-love. He is clever, as seen when he engages Bilbo in the exchange of riddles, but his cleverness is only a means of entrapping his victims. He is the owner of the ring of invisibility, and he flies into a murderous rage when he realizes that Bilbo has found it.

**Themes**

**Coming of Age**

Although Bilbo Baggins is “fully grown” at the beginning of The Hobbit, his adventures teach him to be brave, to take responsibility for himself and for others, and to develop skills he didn’t know he had: in effect, to grow up. When Gandalf and the dwarves approach Bilbo with an offer to be their burglar, Bilbo is so satisfied with his life and his home that the mere thought of adventure is enough to… read analysis of Coming of Age

**The Power of Language**

During The Hobbit, Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarves confront countless dangers: spiders, goblins, wood-elves, wolves, a dragon, etc. To defend themselves, they use an equally vast number of weapons: knives, daggers, spells, fire, rocks, sticks. Yet one of the most important weapons that they use—and one of the most important skills Bilbo develops on his travels—is language. In the early chapters of the book, Bilbo exhibits almost no sophisticated command of language… read analysis of The Power of Language

**Greed, Trust, Fellowship**

Virtually every one of The Hobbit’s primary characters—including both the heroes and the villains—is at least partially motivated by a desire for unnecessary material things. Smaug, the primary antagonist of the novel, is so greedy that he notices when Bilbo steals a single cup from his vast collection of treasure. (Tolkien notes that his anger is that of a rich man who’s lost something he never uses.) The dwarves are struggling to reclaim… read analysis of Greed, Trust, Fellowship

**Heroism**

The Hobbitis a fantasy novel, and it contains many of the genre’s traditional tropes: a quest, treasure, a dark forest, and even a dragon. With this in mind, it’s worth asking who the hero—arguably the most important fantasy trope — ofThe Hobbitis, and how Tolkien defines heroism. Bilbo Baggins is the protagonist ofThe Hobbit, meaning that he’s the default hero. In the early chapters of the book, Bilbo is cowardly… read analysis of Heroism

**Home and Birthright**

The desire and love for a home motivates most of the main characters in The Hobbit. Sometimes, the characters’ desires for home contradict each other. For instance, Bilbo Baggins says at many points throughout his journey that he regrets ever leaving his home in hobbit-town, while the dwarves with whom he’s embarking on his adventure seek to return to (and reclaim from Smaug) their home under the Lonely Mountain. In many cases, having home… read analysis of Home and Birthright

**The Quest**

The major theme of The Hobbit is the quest, one of the oldest themes in literature. As a scholar of ancient languages and literatures, Tolkien would have known the theme well through Greek and Norse myth and Old- and Middle-English poetry. The quest theme is central to the story of Beowulf, the Old-English epic about which Tolkien published an essay of lasting scholarly significance in 1937. The quest story best known to modern readers is probably the Arthurian legend of the Holy Grail, in which a knight ventures forth in search of a sacred cup (the Grail) that he brings back to restore power to his king and, thus, improve the welfare of the kingdom. The Grail story is an important sub-plot in the middle English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which Tolkien edited with his friend E. V. Gordon and published in 1925. Given that a cup and the Grail are similar objects, it is interesting that it is a cup that Bilbo Baggins steals from the dragon's treasure when he first descends to Smaug's lair in Chapter 12.

The quest theme is related to two important features of The Hobbit and other works in which it occurs. The first of these is the journey plot structure. The protagonist or main character who embarks on a quest must physically go somewhere; his search involves travel, usually in a circular route such that he returns home with the object of his quest. The journey allows the main character to encounter various characters and circumstances that are unfamiliar and even threatening to him. Thus, novelty and suspense are built into the journey plot. Bilbo, for example, encounters Goblins, Wargs, elves, Gollum, and Smaug the dragon on his journey to help the dwarves retrieve their treasure, and he travels well beyond the hobbit-lands through Mirkwood and the Misty Mountains to the Lonely Mountain. Along the way, he escapes death several times, undergoes the privations of hunger and bad weather, and ultimately sees combat in the Battle of Five Armies. None of this would have been possible if he had stayed at home in the safety of his hobbit-hole. The structure of a journey plot is often described as episodic, meaning that the protagonist moves from scene to scene (or episode to episode) in a rather simple linear fashion; there is no complex interweaving of the various characters he meets throughout the story. This is generally true of The Hobbit: It is not until Chapter 15 that the various groups of creatures Bilbo encounters on his journey converge on the Lonely Mountain in what becomes the Battle of Five Armies

**Symbols**

**The Hidey Hole**

Bilbo's home in the Shire is described as perfectly clean, cozy, and homey. It is his place of peace—a place he struggles to leave in the beginning of the novel, thinks about often on his journey, and is happy to return to at the end of his adventure. He thinks of home primarily when he is tired or worried, suggesting that even the memory of home comforts him. While the novel values adventure and bravery, this symbol is a reminder that adventure is only alluring if you have a safe place to return to.

**Swords**

The swords—Orcrist and Glamdring—are classic symbols of heroism. Throughout literary history, heroes have often been paired with equally memorable (and named) swords, such as King Arthur's Excalibur, for example. In The Hobbit the swords are powerful not only literally with their blades, but also figuratively with their names. When Bilbo names his sword, it is one step in his transition from naïve hobbit to literary hero.

**The Ring**

Gollum's ring symbolizes power. With the ring the impossible becomes possible. Gollum, a desperate, lonely creature, views the ring as his most precious object. When he loses it he loses what little power he has left in the world (to kill goblins and other creatures), rendering him even more pathetic than before. He is so pathetic that Bilbo even chooses not to kill him. With the ring in his possession, Bilbo is brave, adventurous, and victorious—three characteristics of a powerful literary hero.

**The Arkenstone**

The Arkenstone symbolizes a bygone era of peace—a time when Thorin's ancestors were at one with nature and the species of Middle-earth lived in harmony. Thorin is desperate to keep the Arkenstone (and the rest of his treasure hoard), refusing to share with anyone. Thorin is buried with the Arkenstone, which symbolizes his return to his people as well as the loss of peace in Middle-earth—symbolic foreshadowing of the adventurous trilogy to come.

**Darkness and Light**

In this classic tale of good versus evil, darkness and light symbolize the bad and good. Gandalf, a symbol of goodness, is described as having "long white hair ... sweeping silver beard ... [and] great snowy brows." This is contrasted with the dark, dirty, and dismal descriptions of Gollum, the goblins, and Smaug, who all live in the darkness. Very early in the novel Bilbo asks for "a little" light—symbolizing that he is honest, moral, and slightly naïve. The dwarves, however, who are greedy and self-motivated, ignore his request. They prefer "dark for dark business," meaning they don't want to be seen doing mischievous deeds and therefore do them out of sight.

**Motifs**

**Magic** and the **responsibility** of using it is a motif in this story. Whether it is Gandalf's spells or Bilbo's ring, magic is always a motif that rubs through the book.

**Discussion Questions**

**1.In The Hobbit what style and narrative does J.R.R. Tolkien use to appeal to children, the intended audience?**

Tolkien takes a very whimsical approach to describing the hobbits, dwarves, and Gandalf. He creates a magical world with newfangled, sometimes silly words that capture a reader's imagination. His use of description paints vivid pictures for young and old audiences alike. He encourages the reader to suspend belief by mixing the ordinary with the fantastical. Tolkien's whimsy creates a light, enjoyable tone, which masks the seriousness of some of the novel's topics. For example, Bilbo Baggins's home seems like many homes in the modern world, except his home is built into the side of a hill and down into tunnels. Early in the story, a wizard (Gandalf) arrives who shoots fireworks; what child doesn't connect fireworks with magic? There is also, of course, the juxtaposition of an ordinary person being thrown into extraordinary circumstances. Readers of all ages are drawn into Bilbo's internal conflict—a conflict that pits staying ordinary, safe, and boring against taking risks, trying something new, and doing the unexpected.

**2.What range of emotions does Bilbo go through in Chapter 1 of The Hobbit?**

Bilbo first becomes uncomfortable with the unexpected appearance of Gandalf, because hobbits take comfort in the expected. Bilbo rarely does anything outside the norm and certainly doesn't go on adventures—and Gandalf represents adventure. While hobbits thoroughly enjoy hearing tales of goblins, dragons, and outlandish ventures, the thought of going on an adventure themselves makes them very uncomfortable. The next day at teatime, a number of unexpected guests arrive: 13 dwarves and one wizard; that in itself is enough to send Bilbo into a tailspin. Additionally the dwarves chatter about Bilbo being a burglar, an idea Gandalf put into their heads by writing it on Bilbo's door. Bilbo is bewildered; he has no idea why the dwarves would assume he is a burglar. Then Bilbo's hidden desires and inclinations toward adventure are awakened when the dwarves begin to play magical instruments and sing a song of stolen gold, tragedy, a dragon, and retribution. By the time the song is over, Bilbo feels excited and vigorous. He asks for the dwarves to lay out the plan, but gradually his unadventurous Bagginsish side starts to overpower his adventurous Tookish side; that is, his father's ancestral influence begins to win out over the inspiration of his mother's family. When Thorin mentions how some "may never return," Bilbo collapses and has to be carried to his room. After some rest he eavesdrops on the dwarves and Gandalf. The wizard and dwarves argue back and forth regarding Bilbo's qualifications. Gloin, a dwarf, describes Bilbo as a grocer and wonders at Gandalf's assessment of the hobbit as fierce. When Bilbo hears that Gandalf called him fierce, he wants more than anything to live up to Gandalf's expectations. He feels inspired and brave. Thus early in the story Bilbo is presented with an inner conflict between his desire to maintain the status quo and a yearning to follow his instincts by going on a fantastical expedition. Within him his father's unadventurous traits wrestle against his mother's adventurous characteristics. Bilbo is enticed by the dwarves' map and by their song, and he soon agrees to the adventure.

**3.In The Hobbit how does J.R.R. Tolkien avoid frightening young readers while writing about sobering and unpleasant events***?*

Tolkien uses a great deal of humor to soften the blow of unpleasant details and events. For example, as readers learn that a ferocious dragon has caused devastation and the death of Thorin's friends and family, Gandalf has us pondering how the dragon could have gotten through the door to the gold after consuming so many dwarves. Tolkien doesn't skip over the unpleasantness that is required to create conflict and danger, but he quickly distracts the reader.

**4.What is the initial conflict between Gandalf and the dwarves in Chapter 1 of The Hobbit?**

The initial conflict between Gandalf and the dwarves concerns their estimation of Bilbo's strengths and his suitability as a member of their expedition. Bilbo Baggins is a simple character—or at least that is what readers are led to believe as the story begins. As a hobbit he is very excitable, so when the dwarves mention the danger that goes along with this adventure, Bilbo has a temporary emotional collapse. The dwarves are cynical and gruff creatures and have very little patience with him. They question Gandalf's choice of Bilbo as a burglar; they can't imagine he has the fortitude and bravery required to steal treasure from a murderous dragon. Gandalf is quite offended that the dwarves question his judgment. He comes to Bilbo's defense and reminds the dwarves that the 13 of them can go on without him and Bilbo if they so desire. The dwarves resolve to go along with Gandalf, but they are no less skeptical.

**5.In Chapter 2 of The Hobbit how does Bilbo end up joining the expedition, and what does he leave behind?**

Bilbo wakes up to find his house empty, all of his guests departed, and for a moment he is disappointed. But then he quickly begins to forget that he was even asked on an adventure, resuming life as normal. Gandalf suddenly arrives. He says Bilbo is to accompany the group and gives him the note left by the dwarves. Bilbo has only minutes to make it to the rendezvous spot, so he takes off without thinking. He leaves without his coat, pipe, and kerchiefs. If he had time to think or had made a conscious decision to leave, he would have prepared all the items customary for a trip.

**6.What biases do the dwarves have against hobbits in the fantasy world of The Hobbit?**

Each different group of creatures in The Hobbit harbors biases against other groups. The dwarves, for example, seem to think negatively of hobbits—or perhaps they just don't like Bilbo. In their defense, Bilbo certainly doesn't behave fiercely, nor does he appear to have the fortitude of a burglar—both qualities Gandalf assured them Bilbo possessed and upon which their quest, and possibly their lives, depends. Even after Bilbo proves himself in Chapter 2 by voluntarily going out into a dark forest to investigate a fire, the dwarves have very little positive to say about him. Although Bilbo is (partially) successful in stealing a purse during this brave excursion, the dwarves are critical of why he would choose that moment to steal.

**7.How does Bilbo act in Chapter 2 of The Hobbit that shows Gandalf's assessment of his ability to be a burglar was correct?**

Bilbo voluntarily goes out into the dark and eerie forest to discover who or what has built a fire. As he gets closer to the fire he is able to move so stealthily, "[not] even a weasel would have stirred a whisker at it." He discovers three large, scary trolls sitting by the fire eating mutton. He attempts to steal a purse from one of the trolls and is initially successful, although his success is dampened when the magical purse's alarm system alerts the trolls to his presence. Bilbo also has a sharp wit about him, as demonstrated when he tries to entice the trolls to let him go so he can cook for them instead of being cooked himself.

**8.In Chapter 3 of The Hobbit what does the elves' song tell readers about these creatures?**

The elves have a clear sense of what Bilbo and his crew are up to. They either have the gift of forecasting or prophecy, or some other source (perhaps Gandalf) has told them about the group's adventure. Their music is at first glance whimsical, which gives the initial illusion that they are silly and frivolous: "O! What are you doing,/And where are you going?/Your ponies need shoeing!" As they continue their song, it becomes clear that the elves already know Bilbo's and many of the dwarves' names without introduction. They also sing, "What are you seeking," implying they already indeed know that there is some sort of treasure they seek. This chapter reveals a great deal about the elves through their song: they are mysterious, alluring, cheerful, and intelligent.

**9.As Tolkien discusses the use of swords in Chapter 3 of The Hobbit, what evidence confirms his knowledge of Anglo-Saxon language, history, and culture?**

The swords in The Hobbit have a rich legacy and often reveal much about the characters who wield them. They evoke strong reactions in the characters around the owner of a particular sword (much like real swords throughout Anglo-Saxon history, which were sources of pride and heritage, often passed down from generation to generation). For example, in Chapter 3 Elrond reads the runes on the swords that Thorin and Gandalf took from the trolls, learning they were made in Gondolin for the goblin wars. Tolkien uses personification (giving the swords names) to highlight the importance or symbolism of each sword through history. The sword Thorin carries is called Orcrist, or Goblin-cleaver. Apparently it is a famous blade and well known among goblins (as seen by the reactions it elicits in Chapter 4). The blade Gandalf found is named Glamdring, or Foe-hammer.

**10.In Chapter 4 of The Hobbit what do readers learn about the motivation, moral character, and role of goblins in Middle-earth and what they symbolize in Tolkien's real world?**

The goblins are a war-loving species, evil at their core. They are portrayed carrying axes and bent swords. Author J.R.R. Tolkien states implicitly that goblins are "cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted." Even their songs—often sardonic or darkly humorous—reveal their viscous ways: "Swish, Smack! Whip crack!/Batter and beat!" Goblins are talented builders and smiths, but they choose to create only ugly objects—objects that are often used to cause pain. They have no qualms about using slaves and prisoners to manufacture these implements. They make a variety of weapons and take special delight in creating machines that have the capacity to kill large numbers of people at once. Goblins also desire to make "instruments of torture." They have no preference about whom they hate and kill, but they especially dislike Thorin's people (probably because of the historic goblin wars). Goblins most likely represent the people and nations that sought to destroy Tolkien's way of life in rural England. Tolkien fought in the British army against the Germans in World War I and was very much changed by the experience. Even after returning home, Tolkien was surrounded by death: nearly all the men from his village were killed during the war. Tolkien was spared this fate because he became deathly ill and was removed from battle, later being deemed medically unfit for general service. Tolkien was profoundly affected by the bombing and mass destruction he witnessed during the war. In The Hobbit the goblins certainly have a love of war and a taste for death. In this way these characters may represent Germany and its desire for European domination.ten in the dark.