

# Tolkien's Middle-earth: Lesson Plans for Secondary School Educators

## Unit Eight: War and Peace in Middle-earth

Content Focus: *The Lord of the Rings*, Book Five  
Thematic Focus: An Enemy Called Despair

### Overview

Although many critics have asserted that the central theme of *The Lord of the Rings* is the conflict between good and evil, another significant dichotomy — hope versus despair — runs through the novel. In the sieges, skirmishes, and battles that fill Book Five, the noble defenders of Middle-earth struggle not only against their external foes but also against defeatism. Unit Eight invites students to analyze the intricate mixture of optimism and fatalism that informs Tolkien's artistic vision.

### Learning Goals

By the end of Unit Eight, the student should be able to:

- Discuss the interplay of hope and despair in *The Lord of the Rings*.
- Specify some similarities and differences between Denethor's suicidal madness and Éowyn's desire to die in battle.
- Explain why critics have said that *The Lord of the Rings* is an antiwar novel but not a pacifist novel.
- Contrast the self-reflective heroism of Faramir with the warrior ethos of the *Iliad*.
- Name several myths that include a descent to the land of the dead.

### Unit Eight Content

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#### Comments for Teachers

The bulk of [\*The Lord of the Rings\*](#) was composed during World War Two by a writer who'd fought in World War One. While the book is not a war novel in the sense that Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* are war novels, some critics have argued that we cannot fully comprehend Tolkien's masterpiece without considering the violent historical events that touched his life.

The author's attitude toward armed conflict was complex and perhaps paradoxical. On the one hand, [\*The Lord of the Rings\*](#) includes several overtly pacifist moments, such as Sam's reaction in Book Four when an enemy Southron falls dead at his feet, slain by Faramir's archers: "He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home" (page 646). On the other hand, the Battle of the Pelennor Fields in Book Five features many blood-stirring episodes, among them Éomer's bold song and subsequent thoughts: "Once more lust of battle was on him; and he was still unscathed, and he was young, and he was king . . . And lo! even as he laughed at despair he looked out again on the black ships, and he lifted his sword to defy them" (page 829).

The author addresses the theme of despair as thoughtfully as he explores the subject of war. In Tolkien's universe fatalism is not automatically a fault. As the Unit Four handout, "The Light Before the Sun," demonstrates, he actually admired the gloomy courage that underlies Norse mythology, with its central vision of Ragnarök, the doom of the gods. Tolkien believed that a noble individual might experience and even entertain despair — but he will not succumb to it, as Denethor does when he throws himself on the pyre. Much of Éowyn's heroism lies in the fact that, before the story is over, she conquers her despair.

You may want to launch Unit Eight by commenting on the author's war experiences. In 1915, shortly after graduating from Oxford with honors in English language and literature, Tolkien was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers. He soon found himself in the trenches, and in 1916 he saw action as a signal officer during the Battle of the Somme. For further information, we highly recommend John Garth's recent biography, [\*Tolkien and the Great War\*](#).

While studying Unit Eight in class, students should be reading Book Six of [\*The Lord of the Rings\*](#) at home.

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**Preliminary Quiz**

1. What do the mountains Amon Dîn, Eilenach, Nardol, Erelas, Min-Rimmon, Calenhad, and the Halifirien have in common?

(Answer: The beacons of Gondor are lit upon them, page 731)

2. What sorts of beings did Aragorn summon to the Stone of Erech?

(Answer: the Dead, page 770)

3. Who chided Denethor for being concerned only for the welfare of Gondor, while he himself pitied even Sauron's slaves?

(Answer: Gandalf, page 795)

4. Name three important characters who go to the Houses of Healing after the Battle of the Pelennor Fields.

(Answer: Faramir, Éowyn, and Merry, page 842)

5. Which of Sauron's human servants was "more cruel than any orc"?

(Answer: the Mouth of Sauron, lieutenant of the Tower of Barad-dûr, page 870)

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**Key Terms**

**despair (di-spare)** A profound feeling of hopelessness.

**prudence (prood-ins)** Good sense in managing practical matters. After the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Gandalf counsels the victors that they will never defeat Sauron through prudence.

**fey (fay)** Appearing to be under a spell of death. At various points during the Siege of Gondor, Aragorn, Éowyn, and Denethor are said to be fey.

**Ragnarök (rag-neh-rock)** In Norse mythology, the "doom of the gods," the final battle in which humans and deities alike will succumb to the forces of darkness.

**heathen (hee-thin)** An adherent of a polytheistic religion. Originally heathens were simply "people of the heath." Denethor vows that he and his son "will burn like heathen kings."

**muster** To bring together a group of soldiers for a specific purpose, such as an inspection or a march to war.

**shiver** To shake or to splinter apart. Tolkien often uses the word in the latter sense: "Right through the press drove Théoden Thengel's son, and his spear was shivered as he threw down their chieftain."

**hauberk (haw-burk)** A long shirt of chain mail.

**pyre (pire)** A pile of wood on which a dead body is ceremonially burned.

**bier (beer)** A wooden frame for carrying a corpse to its burial place. During the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Théoden's followers bear his dead body off the field on a bier.

## **Unit Eight: War and Peace in Middle-earth**

### **Handouts**

#### **"So Horrifying One Is Stunned"**

On August 9, 1945, Tolkien wrote a letter to his son Christopher in which he shared his reaction to the news that atomic bombs had devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This handout includes the key paragraph, which students may find useful in sorting out Tolkien's, and their own, attitude toward warfare. Although the author couldn't have known the precise statistics — an estimated 150,000 Japanese citizens died in the two blasts, with thousands more eventually succumbing to radiation — he evidently intuited the magnitude of the horror.

#### **"Your Heart Is Hard As Iron"**

Here is a vivid moment from the most famous war epic of all time, the *Iliad* of Homer. The death of Hector at the hands of Achilles makes for an interesting comparison with the slaying of the Witch-King by Éowyn and Merry in "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields," and it stands in stark contrast to our final handout, a sorrowful record of Viking devastation from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*.

#### **"The Greatest Evil That Any Army Could Do"**

These pages are excerpted from those portions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* dealing with King Ethelred II's struggles against Norse invaders. Collectively these entries form a laconic but poignant record of the misery that Viking raids visited on Anglo-Saxons in early medieval England. Of the various battles catalogued here, one in particular, the English defeat at Maldon, came to figure crucially in Tolkien's thinking about war.

The extensive fragment of Old English poetry called *The Battle of Maldon* valorized the chivalry that the English warrior-leader Beorhtnoth showed in allowing his Viking foes to leave their island camp and cross the River Pante on a tidal causeway, so that neither side would have a geographical disadvantage. Beorhtnoth's gesture proved disastrous — he was slain along with his closest followers, and the Northmen ravaged the country — but that didn't keep the poet from romanticizing what happened at Maldon.

Tolkien took a different view. Indeed, he was so troubled by *The Battle of Maldon*, he wrote a one-act play, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, critiquing the warrior's faux heroism. The key line belongs to a level-headed civilian named Tídwald: "Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault . . . Too proud, too princely!"

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**"So Horrifying One Is Stunned"**

*This paragraph is excerpted from a letter J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to his son on August 9, 1945. On that day an atomic bomb devastated the Japanese city of Nagasaki, killing as many as 75,000 people outright. Three days earlier another such weapon had visited an equal measure of destruction on Hiroshima.*

The news today about "Atomic bombs" is so horrifying one is stunned. The utter folly of these lunatic physicists to consent to do such work for war-purposes: calmly plotting the destruction of the world! Such explosives in men's hands, while their moral and intellectual status is declining, is about as useful as giving out firearms to all inmates of a gaol and then saying that you hope "this will ensure peace". But one good thing may arise out of it, I suppose, if the write-ups are not overheated: Japan ought to cave in. Well we're in God's hands. But He does not look kindly on Babel-builders.

(from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, page 116)

## Unit Eight: War and Peace in Middle-earth

### Handouts

#### "Your Heart Is Hard as Iron"

#### Excerpt from the *Iliad* of Homer, Book XXII

*(Achilles slays Hector to avenge the death of his own best friend, Patroclus)*

Hector drew out the keen blade that hung so strong and weighty by his side, and bracing himself he sprang forward like a soaring eagle that swoops from the clouds onto a lamb or timid hare — thus did he brandish his sword and charge Achilles. Mad with rage, Achilles darted fiercely toward him. He kept his wondrous shield before his breast, and his gleaming helmet, made with four layers of metal, bobbed up and down, and the golden plumes with which Hephaistos had adorned the helmet danced and swayed around the crest: bright as the evening star that through the stillness of night outshines all others — such was the gleam of the spear poised in the right hand of Achilles, portending the death of noble Hector.

He eyed Hector's fine flesh up and down to see where best to wound him, but all was protected by the splendid armor that Hector had plundered from Patroclus upon slaying him, save only the throat, where the collarbones divide the neck from the shoulders: a most deadly place — here then did Achilles strike Hector as he came toward him, and the point of his spear went right through the fleshy part of the neck, but it did not sever his windpipe, so he could still speak.

Hector fell headlong, and Achilles stood boastfully over him, saying, "Hector, as you were stripping Patroclus's armor you thought you would be safe, and you reckoned not on me, who was not with him. What a fool you were: for I, his friend, mightier far than he, was waiting in reserve at the ships, and now I have laid you low. The Achaeans shall give Patroclus all due funeral rites, while dogs and vultures shall have their way with your body."

Then Hector said, as the life ebbed out of him, "I beg you, beg you by your life, and by your parents, let not dogs devour me at the ships of the Achaeans, but accept the rich treasure of gold and bronze that my father and mother will offer you, and send my body home, that the Trojans and their wives may give me the ceremony of fire when I am dead."

Achilles glared at him and answered, "Dog, do not beg to me by my parents. Would that I might find appetite enough to cut your flesh into pieces and eat it raw, for the ill you have done me. But of this I am sure, that nothing shall save you from the dogs — no, it shall not be, even if the Trojans bring ten- or twenty-fold ransom and weigh it out for me on the spot, with promise of yet more. Though Priam son of Dardanus should bid them offer me your weight in gold, even so your mother shall never lay you out and mourn over the son she bore, but dogs and vultures shall gobble your flesh."

Hector with his dying breath then said, "I know you well, and was certain that I could not move you, for your heart is hard as iron; beware now, or my curse shall bring the gods' anger upon you, so there will come a day when Paris and Phoebus Apollo, valiant though you be, shall slay you at the Scaean gates."

When he had spoken thus, the shrouds of death enfolded him, and his soul went out and flew downward to the house of Hades, lamenting its sad fate that it should have youth and strength no longer. But Achilles said, speaking to the dead body, "Die! For my part I shall accept my fate whenever Zeus and the other gods see fit to send it."

\* \* \*

Hephaistos = Greek god of the forge, who made Achilles's armor

Priam = Hector's father, king of Troy

Scaean gates = gates of the walled city of Troy

Phoebus Apollo = name referring to Apollo's role as a sun god; Apollo favored the Trojan side

Paris = brother of Hector, the Trojan prince who ran off with Helen, wife of Greek king Menelaus, and brought her to Troy, thus sparking retaliation by the Achaeans (Greeks): Menelaus and his allies, including Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus

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(adapted from the translation by Samuel Butler; original text in the public domain)

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**"The Greatest Evil That Any Army Could Do"**

Excerpts from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

*For many generations, from about A.D. 892 to 1154, the English peoples kept a terse but useful record of their own history. These various overlapping narratives are known today as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. The selections offered here come from the reign of Ethelred the Unready, a period of catastrophic raids by Vikings. In 1953, one year before the appearance of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien wrote a short verse play about one of these battles, the rout of the English forces at Maldon.*

A.D. 982. In this year came up in Dorsetshire three ships of the pirates, and plundered in Portland. The same year London was burned.

A.D. 987. This year was the port of Watchet plundered.

A.D. 988. This year was Goda, the thane of Devonshire, slain; and a great number with him: and Dunstan, the holy archbishop, departed this life, and sought a heavenly one.

A.D. 991. This year came Anlaf with three and ninety ships to Staines, which he plundered without, and went thence to Sandwich. Thence to Ipswich, which he laid waste; and so to Maldon, where Ealdorman Britnoth came against him with his force, and fought with him; and there they slew the ealdorman, and gained the field of battle; whereupon peace was made with Anlaf, and the king received Anlaf afterwards . . . by the advice of Siric, Bishop of Canterbury, and Elfeah of Winchester. This year was Bamborough destroyed, and much spoil was there taken. Afterwards came the army to the mouth of the Humber; and there did much evil both in Lindsey and in Northumbria.

A.D. 994. This year came Anlaf and Sweyne to London, on the Nativity of St. Mary, with four and ninety ships. And they closely besieged the city, and would fain have set it on fire; but they sustained more harm and evil than they ever supposed that any citizens could inflict on them. The Holy Mother of God on that day in her mercy considered the citizens, and ridded them of their enemies.

Thence the Danes advanced, and wrought the greatest evil that ever any army could do, in burning and plundering and manslaughter, not only on the sea-coast in Essex, but in Kent and in Sussex and in Hampshire. Next they took horse, and rode as wide as they would, and committed unspeakable evil. Then resolved the king and his council to send to them, and offer them tribute and provision, on condition that they desisted from plunder.

These terms they accepted; and the whole army of the Danes came to Southampton, and there fixed their winter-quarters; where they were fed by all the subjects of the West-Saxon

Kingdom. And they gave the Danes 16,000 pounds in money . . .

A.D. 995 This year appeared the comet-star.

\* \* \*

thane = Anglo-Saxon military rank, between chieftain and freeman

ealdorman = the principal magistrate and commander of the military forces of a shire in Anglo-Saxon England

fain = gladly

the king = Ethelred II, the Anglo-Saxon ruler

Anlaf = a Viking chieftain

Sweyne = a Viking chieftain

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(adapted from the translation by James Ingram; original text in the public domain)

## Unit Eight: War and Peace in Middle-earth

### Discussion Topics

**Denethor's Madness.** At some point during the Siege of Gondor, Denethor's fatalism crosses the line into madness, and he prepares to immolate himself and Faramir. Have the class discuss why Denethor succumbs to despair. Is he another victim of the Ring? What role does the Seeing Stone play in the Steward's fall? How might Galadriel have cautioned Denethor regarding the palantír's prophecies? Shortly before Denethor's march to the pyre, Gandalf upbraids him: "And only the heathen kings . . . did thus, slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death" (page 835). Do students understand why Denethor's suicide is ultimately an act of "pride"? What distinguishes the admirable pride of an effective ruler from the ruinous pride of a Denethor?

**Éowyn's Despair.** Tolkien establishes an illuminating parallel between Denethor's desire to burn on the pyre and Éowyn's wish to die bravely in battle. Would the class say that Éowyn is frankly suicidal when she attacks the Nazgûl Lord? "I have, maybe, the power to heal her body, and to recall her from the dark valley," Aragorn declares as Éowyn lies wounded in the Houses of Healing. "But to what she will awake: hope, or forgetfulness, or despair, I do not know. And if to despair, then she will die . . . Alas! for her deeds have set her among the queens of great renown" (page 849). Why aren't Éowyn's deeds sufficient to guarantee that she will awaken to hope? Besides getting past her unrequited love for Aragorn, what changes will have to occur in Éowyn's heart before she is healed?

**Gandalf's Counsel.** "This war then is without final hope, as Denethor perceived," the wizard tells Prince Imrahil and Éomer after they have swept Sauron's forces from the Pelennor. "Victory cannot be achieved by arms, whether you sit here to endure siege after siege, or march out to be overwhelmed beyond the River" (page 680). Have the class discuss the alternative to "victory by arms" that Gandalf presents in this scene. In the students' understanding of history, has a war ever been won through combat alone? How would the class weigh fighting per se against such factors as morale, disease, weather, geography, supply lines, lucky breaks, and the home front?

**"Nor the Warrior for His Glory."** During Frodo and Sam's sojourn with the Captain of Gondor, Faramir voices an elegant thought: "I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Númenor" (page 656). Ask the class to identify those qualities in Faramir that enable him to distinguish the love of arms from the imperative to protect hearth and home. In practice, is the distinction between self-defense and naked aggression easy to maintain? What about "preemptive" wars?

**Tolstoy and Tolkien.** In the greatest of all antiwar novels, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Napoleon Bonaparte is portrayed as a being no less corrupt than Sauron. And yet Tolstoy refuses to accord individual soldiers the sort of sympathy Sam extends to the slain Southron (page 646). "At the battle of Borodino," Tolstoy wrote, "Napoleon did not fire a shot and did

not kill anyone. All that was done by the soldiers. Therefore it was not he who did the killing." What does the class make of Tolstoy's rigorous pacifism? Do some students regard it as a libel against the honorable profession of soldiering? Would anyone argue that, by locating evil in only a few characters, Tolkien distracts us from the fact that every war is an immense collaboration, characterized by shared guilt and countless bloody hands?

**"The Uttermost End of Need."** Like his valiant, if misguided, son Boromir, Denethor cannot bring himself to renounce completely every conceivable use of the Ring. Instead of being entrusted to "a witless halfling," Denethor tells Gandalf, the Ring should have been "kept hidden dark and deep. Not used, I say, unless at the uttermost end of need" (page 795). Does this rationalization sound familiar to students? Can the class give examples of political leaders sponsoring invasions or pursuing reprehensible policies because their nations were supposedly "at the uttermost end of need"?

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#### Suggested Activities

**The Heroine with a Thousand Faces.** In Éowyn we find both a compelling secondary character and the representative of a type, the woman warrior. Divide the class into groups, then assign each to investigate an aspect of female valor. While some teams will prefer to study individual heroines, from Boudicca to Joan of Arc to Molly Pitcher, others may want to consider the Amazons, the Valkyries, and other such sororities. Each student group can use its research to write a proposal for a dramatic TV series about an actual woman warrior or a legendary heroine. In most cases, will it be possible to write entertaining scripts without deviating from the known facts or violating the accepted mythologies?

**A Tolkien-like Conflict?** Sad to say, as you read these words, at least one war is raging somewhere in the world, and probably several. Invite the class to bring in news clippings or Internet printouts about the most prominent such conflict. Can *The Lord of the Rings* help us understand the political and psychological dimensions of the war in question? Has one side succumbed to despair? Is that despair likely to trigger reckless acts? Are pride, honor, duty, and the other "warrior virtues" irrelevant to modern warfare?

**A Radioactive Ring?** Tolkien conceived the central premise of his epic fantasy many years before the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. And yet in some of their deliberations about the One Ring, the free folk of Middle-earth might almost be talking about nuclear weapons. (On page 357 Sam suggests that Galadriel "put things to rights" through the Ring, and she replies, "That is how it would begin. But it would not stop with that, alas!") Ask the class to imagine they're reading Tolkien's epic shortly after its publication in 1954. Have each student write the author a letter congratulating him on his prescience, noting several moments in which the characters are evidently discussing nuclear strategic doctrine. What sort of letter might Tolkien, who was never happy when readers imposed contemporary issues on his fiction, have written back?

**The Hospitality of Hell.** Among the most dramatic motifs in epic literature is the visit to the land of the dead. Working in groups, the class can investigate the netherworld journeys of Gilgamesh, Ishtar, Hercules, Odysseus, Perseus, Orpheus, Aeneas, and other heroes. Each team might present its findings as an improvised drama in which the returning traveler offers his skeptical audience physical and anecdotal proof of his adventure. How do the classic mythological descents differ from Aragorn's journey into the depths of the Haunted Mountain? Why was the Grey Company successful in negotiating the Paths of the Dead when most such missions fail?

**"The War to End All Wars."** Historians and scholars are nearly unanimous in their opinion that the First World War was the defining event of the twentieth century. With its unimaginable toll in human lives and incalculable damage to human ideals, this catastrophe dethroned the optimism that had characterized the nineteenth century "Age of Progress." While it's impossible to encompass the conflict in a few class periods, you may want to have

each student prepare a brief oral talk on some aspect of the Great War. Possible topics include: the prewar balance of power, the Western Front, the American role, the Battle of the Somme, the poetry of Wilfred Owen.

# Tolkien's Middle-earth: Lesson Plans for Secondary School Educators

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A comprehensive listing of books and sources referenced in the nine curriculum units.

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