

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

Unit Five: "The Tides of Fate Are Flowing"

Content Focus: *The Lord of the Rings*, Book Two
Thematic Focus: Free Will and Fellowship

Overview

In Book Two of [The Lord of the Rings](#), one of Tolkien's major concerns, the tension between personal freedom and providential design, emerges full blown. The Unit Five resources are intended to help students wrestle with the ancient problem of free will, both as a literary theme and as the sine qua non of their choices in life.

Learning Goals

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

- Discuss why "free will" is a crucial idea in the history of Western thought.
- Indicate how the ideal of fellowship not only suffuses Tolkien's epic but also figured in his personal life.
- Recapitulate the four proposed solutions to the Ring crisis considered by the Council of Elrond, and explain why only one proved acceptable.
- Compare and contrast two pivotal moments in Book Two: the test of Galadriel and the fall of Boromir.
- Paraphrase Galadriel's warning concerning prophecy.

Unit Five Content

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Comments for Teachers

In their consideration of [The Hobbit](#), students learned that unseen cosmic forces affect the affairs of Middle-earth. As Gandalf tells Bilbo at the end of the novel, "You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?" With these lines, Tolkien begins a conversation that will resonate throughout [The Lord of the Rings](#). To what degree are humans, hobbits, and other sentient creatures the authors of their own destinies, and to what degree are they players in a drama whose outlines they cannot fully perceive?

Early in Unit Five, you may want to clarify that the mystery of free will has obsessed philosophers for centuries. In [The Lord of the Rings](#), Tolkien refracts the problem through the prism of epic fantasy. There is plenty of evidence that the author does not regard human beings as the robots of fate or the puppets of chance. Freedom in Middle-earth is no illusion. "It is a heavy burden," says Elrond in conferring the Ring on Frodo. "But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right" (page 264). "I count you blessed, Gimli son of Glóin: for your loss you suffer of your own free will, and you might have chosen otherwise," says Legolas by way of consoling the dwarf as they leave Lothlórien behind (page 369).

At the same time, it's clear that Tolkien believes in a patterned, providential universe whose deepest workings are beyond human influence. "Bilbo was meant to find the ring, and not by its maker," Gandalf tells Frodo during their long conversation at Bag End. "In which case you were also meant to have it" (pages 53–54). "It has been ordained that you should hold it for a while," Aragorn informs Frodo in Rivendell, a sentiment echoed later by Elrond: "I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo" (page 264). "In the morning you must depart," Galadriel tells our hero at the end of his stay in Lothlórien, "for now we have chosen, and the tides of fate are flowing" (page 357).

Evidently Middle-earth is a world in which cosmic determinism and human determination have achieved a kind of dynamic equilibrium. For every pronouncement about fate or destiny, Tolkien offers an affirmation of free will. Throughout Book Two we witness Frodo, Gimli, Aragorn, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Boromir making authentic moral choices in the face of loss, temptation, and danger.

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

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Preliminary Quiz

1. In which part of Rivendell did Frodo hear Bilbo recite poetry?

(Answer: the Hall of Fire, page 224)

2. To whom did Gandalf say, "He that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom"?

(Answer: Saruman, page 252)

3. What did Aragorn call "a pretty hobbit-skin to wrap an elven-princeling in"?

(Answer: Frodo's mail-coat of mithril, page 327)

4. In Lothlórien can be found the elanor. What is it?

(Answer: a small golden flower, page 341)

5. Who seemed to Frodo "present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time"?

(Answer: Galadriel, page 364)

6. Just before the breaking of the fellowship, who asked Frodo to "lend him" the Ring?

(Answer: Boromir, page 390)

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Key Terms

free will The human capacity to make and act upon conscious choices, independently of social pressures, destiny, or other outside forces. When Frodo agrees to take the Ring to Mount Doom, and when he later decides to separate himself from the Company, he is exercising his free will.

counsel (koun-sul) Advice given by a knowledgeable person. The figure who offers wise counsel is found throughout epic literature: Nestor in *The Iliad*, Merlin in Arthurian romance, Gandalf in [The Lord of the Rings](#). In Tolkien's fiction, the mortals and elves seek counsel not only from wizards but also from each another.

council (koun-sul) A gathering convened to study a problem and formulate a possible solution. In Book Two, the Council of Elrond meets to ponder the crisis of the One Ring.

bane (bayn) Something that causes misery, destruction, or ruin. During the Council of Elrond, the One Ring is sometimes called "Isildur's Bane."

weregild (weer-gild or wir-gild) In Anglo-Saxon and Germanic law, compensation paid to the relatives of someone slain. At the Council of Elrond, the Elf Lord reports that Isildur claimed the One Ring as weregild for the loss of his father and brother on the slopes of Orodruin.

pseudo-choice (su-doe-chois) A sociological term for a choice exercised within a narrow realm. In favoring a back road over a superhighway, a driver is indeed making a choice, but on terms dictated by the automobile. One reason Tolkien's characters seem heroic is that they wrestle with authentic choices.

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Handouts

The Fellowship of the Ink

In this excerpt from Letter No. 90, written to his son Christopher, Tolkien describes a gathering of the Inklings, the unofficial literary society whose members included Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield. A typical session included at least one Inklings reading from a manuscript, and the meeting of November 24, 1944, was no exception: Barfield, we learn, offered up a short play about Jason and Medea. Tolkien greatly valued this sort of comradeship. In Letter No. 282, written to scholar Clyde Kilby, he stated, "But for the encouragement of C.S.L. [Lewis] I do not think that I should ever have completed or offered for publication [The Lord of the Rings](#)."

The Last Alliance

This handout is an excerpt from the last chapter of [The Silmarillion](#), "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age." It recounts the great battle on the slopes of Orodruin that climaxed when Isildur "with the hilt-shard of Narsil . . . cut the Ruling Ring from the hand of Sauron and took it for his own." The narrator observes, "Never again was such a host assembled, nor was there any such league of Elves and Men; for after Elendil's day the two kindreds had become estranged." We included this sequence for the insights it provides into the back story of [The Lord of the Rings](#) and also for its resonance with the themes of Book Two. In attempting the Quest of Mount Doom, the nine companions seek not only to destroy the One Ring but also to heal the "estrangement" that has infected the relationships among the peoples of Middle-earth. Evidently the possibility of fellowship did not die completely when the old alliance of Númenorians and Elves ended.

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The Fellowship of the Ink

In this excerpt from his correspondence with his son, J.R.R. Tolkien describes a typical meeting of the Inklings (Letter No. 90). When the author refers to "C.S.L." or "Jack," he means C. S. Lewis. "C.W." is the novelist Charles Williams. "O.B." is Owen Barfield. "The Red Admiral" is R. E. Havard, an Oxford doctor. "Warnie" is Lewis's brother, Major Warren Lewis. The Mitre was a pub. In issuing a series of "distinguo's," Barfield was evidently challenging Lewis to temper his assertions with more precise diction.

To Christopher Tolkien

24 November 1944

20 Northmoor Road, Oxford

My dearest, there has been a splendid flow of letters from you, since I last wrote It cheered me a lot to see a bit of Anglo-Saxon, and I hope indeed that you'll soon be able to return and perfect your study of that noble idiom . . .

Yesterday 2 lectures, re-drafting findings of Committee on Emergency Exams and then a great event: an evening Inklings. I reached the Mitre at 8 where I was joined by C.W. and the Red Admiral. [*These three then walked to Magdalen College and had dinner with C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield.*] O.B. is the only man who can tackle C.S.L. making him define everything and interrupting his most dogmatic pronouncements with subtle distinguo's. The result was a most amusing and highly contentious evening, on which (had an outsider eavesdropped) he would have thought it a meeting of fell enemies hurling deadly insults before drawing their guns. Warnie was in excellent majoral form. On one occasion when the audience had flatly refused to hear Jack discourse on and define "Chance," Jack said: "Very well, some other time, but if you die tonight you'll be cut off knowing a great deal less about Chance than you might have." Warnie: "That only illustrates what I've always said: every cloud has a silver lining." But there was some quite interesting stuff. A short play on Jason and Medea by Barfield, 2 excellent sonnets sent by a young poet to C.S.L.; and some illuminating discussion of "ghosts," and of the special nature of Hymns (C.S.L. has been on the Committee revising the Ancient and Modern). I did not leave till 12:30, and reached my bed about 1 a.m. this morn . . .

Your own father

* * *

(from [The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien](#), edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, page 103)

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The Last Alliance

Excerpted from "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age," the final tale in The Silmarillion by J.R.R. Tolkien

The following selection relates some of the momentous events that occurred in Middle-earth about three thousand years before The Lord of the Rings begins. Early in the narrative, Tolkien refers to "the drowning of Númenor," the cataclysmic flood that sank the island continent of the Dúnedain ("the Men of Westemness"), making exiles of Elendil and his two sons, Isildur and Anárion. This chronicle tells of Sauron's return to Mordor; of Sauron's attack on Gondor, culminating in the destruction of the White Tree; of the last alliance between Men and Elves; of the battle on the stony plain of Dagorlad; of Sauron's overthrow by Elendil and the Elven king Gil-galad; and of Isildur's fateful possession of the One Ring. When Tolkien says, "the siege was so strait that Sauron himself came forth," he means "strait" in the archaic sense of severe or difficult.

Thus the Exiles of Númenor established their realms in Arnor and in Gondor; but ere many years had passed it became manifest that their enemy, Sauron, had also returned. He came in secret, as has been told, to his ancient kingdom of Mordor, beyond the Ephel Dúath, the Mountains of Shadow, and that country marched with Gondor upon the east. There above the valley of Gorgoroth was built his fortress vast and strong, Barad-dûr, the Dark Tower; and there was a fiery mountain in that land that the Elves named Orodruin. Indeed for that reason Sauron had set there his dwelling long before, for he used the fire that welled there from the heart of the earth in his sorceries and his forging; and in the midst of the Land of Mordor he had fashioned the Ruling Ring. There now he brooded in the dark, until he had wrought for himself a new shape; and it was terrible, for his fair semblance had departed forever when he was cast into the abyss at the drowning of Númenor. He took up again the great ring and clothed himself in power; and the malice of the Eye of Sauron few even of the great among Elves and Men could endure.

Now Sauron prepared war against the Eldar and the Men of Westemness, and the fires of the Mountain were wakened again. Wherefore seeing the smoke of Orodruin from afar, and perceiving that Sauron had returned, the Númenóreans named that mountain anew Amon Amarth, which is Mount Doom. And Sauron gathered to him great strength of his servants out of the east and the south; and among them were not a few of the high race of Númenor. For in the days of the sojourn of Sauron in that land the hearts of well nigh all its people had been turned towards darkness. Therefore many of those who sailed east in that time and made fortresses and dwellings upon the coast were already bent to his will, and they served him still gladly in Middle-earth

When therefore Sauron saw his time he came with great force against the new realm of

Gondor, and he took Minas Ithil, and he destroyed the White Tree of Isildur that grew there. But Isildur escaped, and taking with him a seedling of the Tree he went with his wife and his sons by ship down the River, and they sailed from the mouths of Anduin seeking Elendil. Meanwhile Anárion held Osgiliath against the Enemy, and for that time drove him back to the mountains; but Sauron gathered his strength again, and Anárion knew that unless help should come his kingdom would not long stand.

Now Elendil and Gil-galad took counsel together, for they perceived that Sauron would grow too strong and would overcome all his enemies one by one, if they did not unite against him. Therefore they made that league which is called the Last Alliance, and they marched east into Middle-earth gathering a great host of Elves and Men; and they halted for awhile at Imladris. It is said that the host that was there assembled was fairer and more splendid in arms than any that has since been seen in Middle-earth

From Imladris they crossed the Misty Mountains by many passes and marched down the River Anduin, and so came at last upon the host of Sauron on Dagorlad, the Battle Plain, which lies before the gate of the Black Land. All living things were divided in that day, and some of every kind, even of beasts and birds, were found in either host, save the Elves only. They along were undivided and followed Gil-galad. Of the Dwarves few fought upon either side; but the kindred of Durin or Moria fought against Sauron.

The host of Gil-galad and Elendil had the victory, for the might of the Elves was still great in those days, and the Númenóreans were strong and tall, and terrible in their wrath. Against Aeglos the spear of Gil-galad none could stand; and the sword of Elendil filled Orcs and Men with fear, for it shone with the light of the sun and of the moon, and it was named Narsil.

Then Gil-galad and Elendil passed into Mordor and encompassed the stronghold of Sauron; and they laid siege to it for seven years, and suffered grievous loss by fire and by the darts and bolts of the Enemy, and Sauron sent many sorties against them. There in the valley of Gorgoroth Anárion son of Elendil was slain, and many others. But at the last the siege was so strait that Sauron himself came forth; and he wrestled with Gil-galad and Elendil, and they both were slain, and the sword of Elendil broke under him as he fell. But Sauron also was thrown down, and with the hilt-shard of Narsil Isildur cut the Ruling Ring from the hand of Sauron and took it for his own. The Sauron was for that time vanquished, and he forsook his body, and his spirit fled far away and hid in waste places; and he took no visible shape again for many long years.

* * *

Thus began the Third Age of the World, after the Eldest Days and the Black Years; and there was still hope in that time and the memory of mirth, and for long the White Tree of the Eldar flowered in the courts of the Kings of Men, for the seedling which he had saved Isildur planted in the citadel of Anor in memory of his brother, ere he departed from Gondor. The servants of Sauron were routed and dispersed, yet they were not wholly destroyed; and though many Men turned now from evil and became subject to the heirs of Elendil, yet many more remembered Sauron in their hearts and hated the kingdoms of the West. The Dark Tower was leveled to the ground, yet its foundations remained, and it was not forgotten. The Númenóreans indeed set a guard upon the land of Mordor, but none dared dwell there because of the terror of the memory of Sauron, and because of the Mountain of Fire that

stood nigh to Barad-dûr; and the valley of Gorgoroth was filled with ash. Many of the Elves and many of the Númenóreans and of Men who were their allies had perished in the Battle and the Siege; and Elendil the tall and Gil-galad the High King were no more. Never again was such a host assembled, not was there any such league of Elves and Men; for after Elendil's day the two kindreds became estranged.

The Ruling Ring passed out of the knowledge even of the Wise in that age; yet it was not unmade. For Isildur would not surrender it to Elrond and Círdan who stood by. They counseled him to cast it into the fire of Orodruin nigh at hand, in which it had been forged, so that it should perish, and the power of Sauron be forever diminished, and he should remain only as a shadow of malice in the wilderness. But Isildur refused this counsel, saying, "This I will have as weregild for my father's death, and my brother's. Was it not I that dealt the Enemy his death-blow?" And the Ring that he held seemed exceedingly fair to look on; and he would not suffer it to be destroyed. Taking it therefore he returned at first to Minas Anor, and there planted the White Tree in memory of his brother Anárion. But soon he departed, and after he had given counsel to Meneldil, his brother's son, and had committed to him the realm of the south, he bore away the Ring, to be an heirloom of his house, and marched north from Gondor by the way that Elendil had come; and he forsook the South Kingdom, for he purposed to take up his father's realm in Eriador, far from the shadow of the Black Land

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(from [The Silmarillion](#) by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, second edition, pages 292–295)

Unit Five: "The Tides of Fate Are Flowing"

Discussion Topics

"We Must Send the Ring to the Fire." The Council of Elrond considers three ways to counter the threat posed by the Ring: giving the artifact to Tom Bombadil, casting it into the Sea, wielding it against the Enemy. Can students recall who proposed each of these options? On what grounds does the Council reject all three? Why does Elrond believe that only a fourth course — "to walk into peril" — can resolve the crisis?

Galadriel's Test and Boromir's Treachery. Two particularly dramatic scenes in Book Two occur when first Galadriel and then Boromir find themselves in thrall to the One Ring. "You will give me the Ring freely!" says Galadriel. "In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen . . . All shall love me and despair" (page 356). Boromir is no less emphatic: "The Ring would give me power of command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner" (page 389). As students think back on both ordeals, do they find themselves empathizing more with Galadriel's triumph or Boromir's failure? Why is Frodo willing to relinquish the Ring to an elf but not to a human?

Frodo's Free Will. As Book Two progresses, Frodo makes several momentous decisions. At the Council of Elrond he announces, "I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way" (page 264). After becoming invisible to escape Boromir at Amon Hen, our hero realizes he is "free to choose" and has "one remaining instant" in which to use that freedom, whereupon he manages to pull the Ring off his finger (page 392). With his next breath Frodo decides that he must "go alone" into the Land of Mordor. What similarities and differences do students perceive among these three choices? Which resolution was probably the hardest for Frodo to make? The hardest to act upon?

Amity, Enmity, and the Quest. Beyond its affirmation of free will, Book Two celebrates the ideal of fellowship. Have the class discuss how each member of the Company — the hobbits, men, dwarf, elf, and wizard — must subordinate his personal desires to the common good. What agendas do Boromir and Aragorn defer for the sake of the Quest? When Gimli and Legolas transcended the traditional enmity between dwarves and elves, did students find this development convincing?

Tolkien's Artistic Fellowships. In his Tolkien biography Humphrey Carpenter talks about the inspiration the author drew from two small, casual groups whose members shared a love of literature. While attending King Edward's School, Tolkien and three other young men formed the TCBS (the Tea Club and Barrovian Society), and his years as an Oxford don were immeasurably enriched by the Inklings. After telling the class about the TCBS and distributing the Inklings handout, invite students to consider whether the fellowship theme in [The Lord of the Rings](#) owes something to these organizations. Why do artists value community so highly? Does anyone in the class routinely share his or her creative writing with friends? What are the differences between having a small audience and having no audience?

Choices versus Pseudo-choices. Sociologists have noted that modern consumer culture abounds in pseudo-choices masquerading as authentic choices. Franchise restaurants function within an extremely narrow definition of food. Different brands of clothing issue from identical sweatshops. What other pseudo-choices can students identify in our society? Does exercising a pseudo-choice ever make a person feel truly empowered? Are pseudo-choices an innocuous phenomenon, or do they trivialize the whole idea of free will?

The Blood of Kings. Some students may notice that, when the Lord of Rivendell discusses Aragorn's royal lineage during the Council of Elrond, the notion of innate superiority emerges: "But in the wearing of the swift years . . . the line of Meneldil son of Anáron failed, and the blood of the Númenorians became mingled with that of lesser men" (page 238). Does the class understand that Tolkien is presenting Aragorn's exalted ancestry in mythological rather than biological terms? In the students' view, is it possible to celebrate one's heritage without making an implicit claim of preeminence?

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Suggested Activities

A Dangerous Guide to Deeds. Galadriel's Mirror has many counterparts in contemporary culture: astrology, palmistry, Tarot cards, the I-Ching, Nostradamus's verses. Divide the class into groups, each of which selects a divination technique and then informally researches its effectiveness. Did any students conclude that fortune-telling is something more than a diversion? If the future is fixed, does this mean free will is an illusion? In discussing the latter question, the class should consider Galadriel's caveat: "Remember that the Mirror shows many things . . . Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide to deeds" (page 354).

The Tenth Companion. Ask students to imagine that the Fellowship includes an emissary from yet another Middle-earth race: the scholar-apes, the cat-people, the minstrel-gnomes, the enchantresses, whatever. Each student should compose several entries from the diary this tenth companion keeps during the trek to Amon Hen, featuring his or her candid opinions of Sam, Pippin, Gimli, and the others. Because the Fellowship lacks a female member, students can take this opportunity to enhance the quest with a heroine.

The Power of Choice. Do people have more freedom of choice than they realize? Before the week is out, each student should make, and then act upon, an authentic choice as opposed to a pseudo-choice. Some possibilities include: using public transportation, favoring a local merchant over a franchise, giving up television for a week, cutting the grass with a hand mower, volunteering for community service. The student should reflect on the experience in his or her daily journal.

The Circle as Symbol. The motif of the ring recurs in Western literature, variously symbolizing infinity, eternity, harmony, perfection, and sometimes imprisonment. Assign each student to research the "circle myth" of his or her choice. The possibilities include King Arthur's Round Table, Dante's Circles of Hell, Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung, the legend of King Solomon's Ring, and the "Charmed Ring" handout from Unit One. The student might present his findings as a hypothetical movie poster, magazine ad, book jacket, or travel brochure ("Escape to the Inferno This Winter").

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

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