

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

Unit Nine: "The Quest Is Achieved"

Content Focus: *The Lord of the Rings*, Book Six
Thematic Focus: What Makes a Hero?

Overview

As befits its vast scope and extraordinary ambition, *The Lord of the Rings* boasts three major heroes — Frodo, Aragorn, and Sam — plus many secondary characters whose deeds are manifestly noble and courageous. In Unit Nine students consider the meaning of heroism and look back on the other thematic threads that make the novel a unified whole.

Learning Goals

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

- Contrast Aragorn's obvious valor with Frodo's concealed heroism.
- Give some possible reasons Tolkien regarded Sam as the "chief hero" of *The Lord of the Rings*.
- Account for the "joy-in-sorrow atmosphere" of Tolkien's epic fantasy.
- Indicate which of Tolkien's characters might be considered archetypes.
- Trace the development of the novel's themes, including corruption, free will, destiny, despair, and heroism, from Book One through Book Six.

Unit Nine Content

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Comments for Teachers

In Unit One we noted that *The Lord of the Rings* is sometimes called an "epic fairy tale." This label invites us to view Aragorn as the archetypal epic hero, the man of conspicuous *areté*, and Frodo as the archetypal fairy tale hero, the unlikely doer of great deeds. Critic Verlyn Flieger notes that to keep the novel from fracturing into parallel, disconnected narratives, Tolkien made the daring move of scrambling the two traditions, so that Frodo meets the typical fate of the epic hero — loss, defeat, an unhealing wound — while Aragorn wins the prizes normally reserved for a fairy tale hero, including a kingdom, a beautiful maiden, and the expectation of living happily ever after.

The Unit Nine discussions and activities should help students grasp the various theories of heroism dramatized in Book Six. These final chapters also present you with an opportunity to recapitulate the motifs and ideas that run through the entire epic.

The theme of Unit Four was power, corruption, and responsibility, and you may want to draw the class's attention to the moment in Book Six when Sam's inner strength is suddenly restored: "With a new sense of responsibility he brought his eyes back to the ground near at hand, studying the next move" (page 913).

Unit Five focused on the tension between free will and destiny, and Book Six elaborates on this idea through Sam's decision to spare Gollum (page 923), Saruman's rejection of Gandalf's generosity (page 961), Frodo's refusal to have Saruman slain (pages 995–96), and — most memorably and dramatically — Gollum's assumption of his destined role in the unmaking of the Ring, as predicted by Gandalf on page 58.

Unit Six celebrated Tolkien's love of nature, a theme that reemerges in Book Six when Aragorn discovers "the sapling of the line of Nimloth" (page 950) and also when Sam uses Galadriel's gift of soil from Lórien to make the Shire bloom anew (page 1000).

In the commentary for Unit Seven, we suggested that Tolkien's moral universe, while rooted in the dichotomy of good versus evil, is not dualistic or "Manichaeian." Redemption is always possible in Middle-earth because "nothing is evil in the beginning" (page 261). Book Six offers several examples of Tolkien's sober optimism, two of which involve stars: Sam's epiphany on page 901, when he sees a white star shining over Mordor ("The beauty of it smote his heart . . . For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing"), and Saruman's sarcastic response to Frodo's claim that Wormtongue has done him no evil: "No evil? Oh no! Even when he sneaks out at night it is only to look at the stars" (page 996).

Finally, Tolkien's concern with the phenomenon of despair, the theme of Unit Eight, is further developed in Book Six, notably through the healing of Éowyn (pages 937–44), the alienation of Frodo (page 1001), and the regeneration of Frodo's heroic companion (page 913): "Sam's plain hobbit-face grew stern, almost grim, as the will hardened in him, and he

felt through all his limbs a thrill, as if he was turning into some creature of stone and steel that neither despair nor weariness nor endless barren miles could subdue."

The Lord of the Rings is an example of what critic Northrop Frye calls "encyclopedic form," poems and novels that attempt to embody the entire life cycle and culture of a people. Such a work is commonly a fusion of genres. In Tolkien's epic fantasy, the synthesis of fairy tale idioms with heroic epic conventions yields a powerful but elusive mood, a "joy-in-sorrow atmosphere," as scholar Clyde Kilby terms it. Before students take leave of Middle-earth, you may wish to acknowledge the emotional core of Tolkien's novel, its lyrical embrace of loss and homecoming, unhealing hurt, and unembarrassed elation.

Examples abound in Book Six, including Frodo's lament following the achievement of the Quest (page 929), Gimli's grief over the imminent passing of Galadriel (page 953), and the Lady's farewell to Aragorn (page 960). Perhaps the loveliest such passage occurs near the end of Chapter IV, when the minstrel of Gondor celebrates the hobbits' triumph (page 933): "And he sang to them, now in the Elven-tongue, now in the speech of the West, until their hearts, wounded with sweet words, overflowed, and their joy was like swords, and they passed in thought out to regions where pain and delight flow together and tears are the very wine of blessedness."

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Preliminary Quiz

1. Name something that Sam threw into "one of the many gaping fissures that scored the land" of Mordor.

(Answers: Frodo's orc gear — shield, helmet, cloak — and his own pans, pages 916–17)

2. What lay did the minstrel sing on the Field of Cormallen?

(Answer: "Frodo of the Nine Fingers and the Ring of Doom," page 933)

3. To whom did Éowyn give an ancient horn from the hoard of Scatha the Worm?

(Answer: Merry, page 956)

4. Gandalf left the hobbits' company before they reached the Shire because he wanted to have a long talk with someone. Who was it?

(Answer: Tom Bombadil, page 974)

5. Who did not approve of "ironmongery, whether it wears well or no"?

(Answer: Gaffer Gamgee, Sam's father, page 991)

6. At the Grey Havens, who was seen to be wearing the elven ring "Vilya, mightiest of the Three"?

(Answer: Elrond, page 1005)

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Key Terms

archetype (ar-ki-tipe) An ideal or primal version of a concept, object, or human quality. Aragorn can be considered an archetypal epic hero and Frodo an archetypal fairy tale hero.

tragic hero A protagonist who, as a result of fate or a character flaw, falls from a high position and is subsequently ennobled by his suffering.

areté (ar-i-tay) Great personal excellence in both character and ability. Homer's warriors and Tolkien's heroes all have *areté*.

epiphany (eh-pif-eh-nee) A sudden insight resulting from an ordinary but striking event. Approaching the plain of Gorgoroth, Sam has an epiphany when he beholds a white star and finds his hope renewed.

scour (skow-ir) To clean something vigorously until all impurities are gone. In Chapter VIII of Book Six, Frodo and the other hobbits scour the shire of Saruman's malicious influence.

noisome (noy-sum) Offensive to the senses. Shelob inhabits a "noisome darkness."

palfrey (pahl-free) A riding horse as opposed to a war horse. Arwen rides a palfrey.

grist Grain ground in a mill. Sharkey's reign causes a shortage of grist in the Shire.

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Discussion Topics

The *Areté* of Aragorn. Two of the Grimm Brothers' tales included in this course, "The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs" and "The Water of Life," are quest adventures in which a hero, after overcoming obstacles and enduring hardships, wins both a kingdom and a fair maiden — which is what happens to Aragorn. Ask students to identify those aspects of Aragorn's heritage, character, and behavior that make him something more than a fairy tale hero. On what occasions does he exhibit *areté*? When Aragorn catalogues Beregon's transgressions and then announces, "For these things, of old, death was the penalty" (page 947), did the class anticipate that the King's final verdict would be so just and noble?

The Tragedy of Frodo. Irreparably damaged by his decision to become a Ring-bearer, Frodo is eventually ennobled by his suffering, and so some critics have labeled him a tragic hero. Have the class chart the "fall" that Frodo endures over the course of the novel. How does this descent make him a better person? As the discussion progresses, you may want to juxtapose the Frodo who laments "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature" (page 58) with the Frodo who responds to Saruman's knife attack by saying "Do not kill him even now" (page 996). How else did the Quest refine our hero? What do students make of his cryptic speech, "It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them" (page 1006)?

The Triumph of Sam. In his correspondence with a prospective editor, Tolkien called Sam "the chief hero" of the novel (Letter No. 131). Does the class agree with this judgment? As we reflect on the whole story, which of Sam's actions seem especially heroic? Some students may point to his battle with Shelob: "As if his indomitable spirit had set its potency in motion, the glass blazed suddenly like a white torch" (page 713). No less impressive is Sam's decision to continue the Quest alone after Frodo has apparently died (page 715). For many readers, Sam's finest hour occurs when he resists the temptation to put on the Ring and transform the vale of Gorgoroth into a lush kingdom: "The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm" (page 881).

"The Shadow Has Departed." Unit One invited students to consider Tolkien's notion of the eucatastrophe, the "turn" that delivers the fairy tale protagonist from disaster, bringing joy to hero and reader alike. Critics have noted three such "positive reversals" in Book Six: Gollum's attack on Frodo at the Cracks of Doom (pages 925), Éowyn's realization that "the Shadow has departed" (page 943), and Aragorn's discovery of "a scion of the Eldest of Trees" (page 950). Have the class revisit these eucatastrophes. Which did students find the most moving? The most believable? In each case, what factors keep the reader from anticipating a joyous turn? How does Tolkien suggest that the "miracle" traces to something beyond blind chance?

Knife, Sting, and Tooth. During the long course of the Quest, Frodo is variously assaulted by the Witch-king, Shelob, and Gollum. "I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden," he tells Gandalf on page 967. "Where shall I find rest?" Have the class discuss Frodo's three wounds. Which hurt causes him the most anguish? Can any of these injuries compare with the psychic damage done by the Ring? Might we presume to map each wound onto one or more of Tolkien's themes: power, corruption, good, evil, freedom, destiny, despair, heroism, and so on?

"The Ring Is Mine!" An especially dramatic moment occurs when Frodo, standing on the brink of the Cracks of Doom, renounces his mission: "I do not choose now to do what I came to do," he says on page 924. "I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!" What do students think is going on here? In declining to relinquish the Ring, is Frodo really making a free choice? Did this sudden betrayal of the Quest come as a surprise to students? Does it diminish Frodo's status as a hero, or does it actually enlarge his achievement?

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Suggested Activities

"Yet Not No Hope." In a 1963 letter to a sympathetic reader, Tolkien speculated on what might have happened if Gollum's gesture of love toward Frodo had not been denounced by Sam (Letter No. 246). The author imagines that the redeemed Gollum, after stealing the Ring and briefly savoring it, "would then have sacrificed himself for Frodo's sake and have voluntarily cast himself into the fiery abyss." Ask each student to imagine this hypothetical climax, then render it in three or four paragraphs. What thoughts rush through Gollum's mind as he plummets? What would Sam make of Stinker's heroic gesture? Some students may wish to include a moment in which Frodo recalls Gandalf's long-ago assessment of Gollum: "There is little hope for him. Yet not no hope" (page 54).

Here Lies a Hero. Have each student select a deceased historical figure whom he admires: scientist, artist, athlete, explorer, statesperson. After researching the late hero, the student should next imagine that he has been selected to carve a brief tribute on the person's tombstone. Finally, the student writes the epitaph in his journal. Did this figure seek renown, or was she seemingly selected by destiny? Was she an obvious hero in the epic mold, or were her contributions not immediately recognized? Which hero from *The Lord of the Rings* — Aragorn, Sam, or Frodo — should deliver this person's funeral oration?

"I Can't Carry It for You, But I Can Carry You." Not the least heroic aspect of Frodo and Sam's progress toward Mount Doom is their persistence in the face of terrible privation: hunger, thirst, exhaustion, pain. Divide the class into groups. Have each team select and research a historical journey that, beyond its logistical challenges, was a physical ordeal. The possibilities include the first ascent of Mount Everest, the race to the North Pole, the Lewis and Clark expedition, and Shackleton's Antarctic adventure. Students can put their findings in the form of hypothetical Weblog entries, written either by the central figure or by an opinionated follower.

The Scouring of Saruman. When the armed hobbits surround Saruman and Wormtongue at Bag End, Frodo forbids Sam to slay the wizard. "He was great once, of a noble kind . . . He is fallen, and his cure is beyond us; but I would still spare him, in the hope that he may find it" (page 996). Although Saruman's response is characteristic — "I must go hence in bitterness, in debt to your mercy" — it's not inconceivable that he might one day mend his ways. Ask the class to suppose that Saruman walks free of the Shire and eventually sees the light. Each student then composes a letter in which the repentant wizard thanks Frodo for restoring him to the path of wisdom.

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