

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

Unit Six: Treebeard's Lament

Content Focus: *The Lord of the Rings*, Book Three
Thematic Focus: The Price of Progress

Overview

Few novelists have been as moved as J.R.R. Tolkien by the fact that human beings share their planet with multitudes of plants and animals. The handouts, discussion topics, and suggested activities for Unit Six are designed to help the class appreciate Tolkien's love of nature and his dismay over industrialization, themes that permeate his fiction.

Learning Goals

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

- Give several examples of personification in [*The Lord of the Rings*](#).
- Paraphrase Tolkien's critique of modernism.
- Say what Tolkien regarded as "the most widespread assumption of our time."
- Give evidence that Tolkien revered the inanimate as well as the animate world.
- Indicate what Tolkien meant by "sub-creation."

Unit Six Content

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Comments for Teachers

Tolkien's admiration for traditional literature extended to the wild and wooded places in which those epics and sagas unfolded. Growing up on the outskirts of Birmingham, he watched in horror as furnaces and factories blighted the local landscape. Although the author resisted autobiographical interpretations of his fiction, few readers would dispute that Middle-earth evokes the green, preindustrial Europe where Beowulf, Lemminkäinen, and Tolkien's other beloved heroes once roamed.

In Book Three of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's sadness over the destruction of nature suffuses nearly every scene. Saruman emerges in these pages not only as a warmongering deceiver but as an environmental despoiler. "There is ever a fume above that valley in these days," reports Éomer, speaking of Isengard (page 539). As Théoden approaches Saruman's domain, we learn that "iron wheels revolved there endlessly, and hammers thudded. At night plumes of vapor steamed from the vents, lit from beneath with red light, or blue, or venomous green" (page 541).

By the end of Book Three, Saruman seems more technophile than wizard. Rather prophetically, Tolkien has him dabbling in genetic engineering, fashioning an improved breed of orc that can function in broad daylight. These Uruk-hai breach the walls of Helm's Deep with a kind of gunpowder — "a blasting fire," Aragorn calls it (page 526) — evidently concocted at Isengard. When the Ents march against Saruman, he responds with a kind of flame-thrower: "One of them . . . a very tall handsome Ent, got caught in a spray of some liquid fire and burned like a torch: a horrible sight" (page 554).

Meanwhile, through the wonderful and enigmatic character of Treebeard, Tolkien communicates his reverence for the natural world. "I am not altogether on anybody's side," says the shepherd of the forest, "because nobody is altogether on my side . . . nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays" (page 461). Treebeard's assessment of Saruman could hardly be more negative. "He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things" (page 462). The source of Treebeard's antipathy is simple: Saruman and his "foul folk" are destroying the forest. "Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot — orc-mischief that: but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc" (page 462).

Tolkien was not a primitivist, a Luddite, or an opponent of science. Indeed, in his correspondence he once described the elves as representing "the artistic, aesthetic, and purely scientific aspects of the Human Nature raised to a higher level than is actually seen in Men" (Letter No. 181). But Tolkien did believe that progress came at a price, and he doubted that modernism could satisfy the deeper yearnings of the human heart.

While studying Unit Six in class, students should be reading Book Four of *The Lord of the Rings* at home.

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Preliminary Quiz

1. Who says, "Farewell, Aragorn! Go to Minas Tirith and save my people! I have failed."

(Answer: Boromir, page 404)

2. What character has a language in which "real names tell you the story of things they belong to"?

(Answer: Treebeard, page 454)

3. Who was named heir to the "King of the Golden Hall"?

(Answer: Éomer, page 511)

4. Who came with Erkenbrand of Westfold to aid the defenders of Helm's Deep?

(Answer: Gandalf, page 529)

5. To whom did Théoden say, "I fear your voice has lost its charm"?

(Answer: Saruman, page 566)

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Key Terms

personification (per-son-e-fi-kay-shen) The literary device of using a fictional character to embody an abstract idea. In Book Three, Treebeard personifies the forest, and the Entwives personify agriculture.

anthropomorphism (an-thre-pe-mor-fiz-em) The attribution of human characteristics to plants, animals, and objects. Tolkien's Ents are essentially anthropomorphized trees.

empathy (em-pe-thee) The ability to identify with another creature's feelings and difficulties. The Ents empathize so strongly with trees that they become "tree-ish," even as many trees in turn become "Entish."

tribute (trib-yoot) A payment made by a nation to an alien ruler as a sign of submission. When Aragorn and company first encounter the Rohirrim, Éomer denies the rumor that his people pay tribute to Sauron.

parley (par-lay) A talk between opposing military forces. During the battle of Helm's Deep, Aragorn conducts a parley with the orcs. After their victory, Gandalf and Théoden set off to parley with Saruman.

coomb (koom) A narrow valley enclosed on all but one side. Tolkien describes Helm's Deep as a coomb.

dingle (din-gell) A wooded valley. After Merry and Pippin befriend Treebeard, he bears them on his shoulder into a dingle.

Industrial Revolution (in-dus-tree-el rev-e-loo-shen) The social and economic changes in Great Britain, Europe, and the United States that began in the late eighteenth century and involved the widespread adoption of machine-driven methods of production.

modernism (mod-er-niz-em) The revolutionary ideas in art, literature, and thought that emerged in the early twentieth century as a reaction against conventional forms and opinions.

sub-creation (sub-kree-a-shen) Tolkien's term for the construction of imaginary but convincing and self-consistent worlds, such as occurs when a poet composes an epic. For Tolkien, these "secondary worlds" reflect the primary creative act by which God brought the universe into being.

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Handouts

"The Savage Sound of the Electric Saw"

In this letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, Tolkien responds to an editorial in which his country's Forestry Commission was cryptically accused of creating "a kind of Tolkien gloom." Tolkien takes the opportunity to assail "the destruction, torture, and murder of trees perpetuated by private individuals and minor official bodies. The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent where trees are still found growing."

"The Delight of the Living Tree Itself"

These three paragraphs from the "Lothlórien" chapter offer some of Tolkien's most beautiful writing. While the author evidently regards Galadriel's realm as an earthly Paradise, there is nothing supernatural going on here, only veneration of the natural. You may want to draw students' attention to the Tolkienian way that Frodo comes to appreciate trees "neither as forester nor as carpenter" but for their own sake.

Beowulf Comes to Heorot

Lord of the Rings enthusiasts note that the Riders of Rohan are evidently based on the ancient Anglo-Saxons. This inference is both true and false. Whereas Rohirric culture revolves largely around horses (their Sindarin name means "Masters of Horses," and they call themselves Éothéod, Tolkien's Old English coinage for "Horsefolk"), the historical Anglo-Saxons were never renowned for their horsemanship. The Rohirrim are the Anglo-Saxons not of fact but of legend, myth, and poetry. When Legolas says of Meduseld, Théoden's Golden Hall, "The light of it shines far over the land," Tolkien is actually quoting line 311 of *Beowulf*, "Lixte se léoma ofer landa fela."

This handout offers a passage from *Beowulf* in which the hero and his companions approach Heorot, the hall of King Hrothgar. The class can compare these verses with the scene from Book Three in which Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli first come to Meduseld (pages 496–501).

Students may be interested to know that the title of Tolkien's novel quite possibly traces to *Beowulf*. When the hero grapples with Grendel's mother at the bottom of the lake, he is saved from her savage claws by the linked rings of his chain-mail armor (lines 1506-1507):

Baer tha seo brim-wylf tha heo to botme com,
hringa thengel to hofe sinum

Then the angry sea-wolf swam to the bottom
carried to her den the lord of those rings

Our modern English rendering comes from Howell D. Chickering, Jr.'s celebrated interlinear translation. The special designation accorded Beowulf — hringa thengel, "the lord of those rings" — is the kind of conventional Anglo-Saxon poetic phrase known as a kenning.

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Handouts

"The Savage Sound of the Electric Saw"

*On June 29, 1972, the Daily Telegraph ran an editorial criticizing the policies of Great Britain's Forestry Commission: "Sheepwalks where you could once ramble for miles are transformed into a kind of Tolkien gloom, where no bird sings . . ." By "Tolkien gloom," the Telegraph apparently meant the sinister aspect of the forests in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, though perhaps the editors were alluding to the desolation wrought by Saruman and Sauron. In his response, published five days later, Tolkien addresses both possibilities (Letter No. 339).*

30 June 1972

Merton College, Oxford

Dear Sir,

With reference to the *Daily Telegraph* of June 29th, page 18, I feel that it is unfair to use my name as an adjective qualifying 'gloom', especially in a context dealing with trees. In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two-legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries.

Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the domination of a Power that hated all living things but was restored to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story.

It would be unfair to compare the Forestry Commission with Sauron because as you observe it is capable of repentance; but nothing it has done that is stupid compares with the destruction, torture and murder of trees perpetuated by private individuals and minor official bodies. The savage sound of the electric saw is never silent wherever trees are still found growing.

Yours faithfully,

J.R.R. Tolkien

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(from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, pages 419-420)

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Handouts

"The Delight of the Living Tree Itself"

The following paragraphs are excerpted from the "Lothlórien" chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*. Each celebrates the love of trees, one of several passions that Tolkien shared with his fictional elves. A *sward* is an area of grass, and the *flet* is a wooden platform set high in the towering central tree.

When his eyes were in turn uncovered, Frodo looked up and caught his breath. They were standing in an open space. To the left stood a great mound, covered with a sward of grass as green as Springtime in the Elder Days. Upon it, as a double crown, grew two circles of trees: the outer had bark of snowy white, and . . . the inner were mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold. High amid the branches of a towering tree that stood in the center of all there gleamed a white flet. At the feet of the trees, and all about the green hillsides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green: they glimmered as a mist amid the rich hue of the grass. Over all the sky was blue, and the sun of afternoon glowed upon the hill and cast long green shadows beneath the trees.

The Lord of the Rings, page 341

The others cast themselves down upon the fragrant grass, but Frodo stood awhile still lost in wonder. It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked on a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed at once clear-cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured forever. He saw no colours but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful. In winter here no heart could mourn for summer or for spring. No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lórien there was no stain.

The Lord of the Rings, page 341

Haldir had gone on and was now climbing to the high flet. As Frodo prepared to follow him, he laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself.

The Lord of the Rings, page 342

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(from *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 1994, revised and corrected edition, pages 341-342)

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Handouts

Beowulf Comes to Heorot

The stone-paved road guided the Geats to Heorot, the golden hall. Their bright corselets shone; the hard rings of their hand-forged mail clinked and sang as they strode along.

Reaching the hall, weary from sea-voyaging, they set their shields and bucklers along the wall, then sat on benches as their mail shirts, fine gear of warriors, clanged. Stacked straight together stood their spears of ash, tipped with gray iron. They were an honorably weaponed warrior band.

Then noble Wulfgar, Hrothgar's herald, asked them from where they came, bearing burnished shields, grim helmets, and coats of iron. He said he had never seen so bold a company of strangers; plainly they were not exiles, but valorous adventurers of great prowess come to seek Hrothgar.

The proud earl of Geats, their helmeted war-leader, answered, "We are Hygelac's hall-companions; Beowulf is my name. I seek to tell your famous king, the son of Halfdane, of my mission, if he will grant us grace to greet his good self now."

Said Wulfgar the Vendel chieftain, whose courage and wise counsel were renowned, "I will tell the king of Danes, friend of Scyldings, Giver-of-Rings, most noble ruler, of your journey here, as you've requested, and swiftly bring the answer that he may deign to give."

Wulfgar went in haste to his master, to where the old, white-haired Hrothgar sat with his earls around him, and stood before his king. The stout thane was a good courtier, saying, "Men of the Geats have come from across the sea, my lord, and their leader is named Beowulf. They ask to speak with you; please don't refuse to hear them, gracious Hrothgar! They appear to be worthy warriors; their chief is most surely a hero who has led his men to us."

Hrothgar, protector of Scyldings, answered, "Yes! I knew him in his youth . . . "

* * *

Geats = Beowulf's tribe, possibly from southwestern Sweden, sometimes identified as the Gautar, Getae, or Goths

corselet = armored breastplate; here, a shirt of chain mail

Vendel = another Swedish tribe, possibly the Vandals

deign = condescend, see fit

earl = Old English eorl, a chieftain

thane = warrior serving a lord, ranked between an earl and an ordinary free man

courtier = member of a king's or other court

stout = strong, brave, dauntless

Scylding(s) = Sheafing(s), the Danish royal house

* * *

(prose adaptation of Part V of *Beowulf*, from the poetic translation by Francis B. Gummere; original text in the public domain)

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Suggested Activities

What Moves a Mountain? Treebeard is among the most memorable examples of personification in twentieth-century literature. To give students firsthand experience with this technique, have them try empathizing with aspects of nature we don't normally regard as sentient. After thinking his way into the "mind" of this "creature" — boulder, hill, mountain, sunflower, river, breeze, rain shower — each student should write a three-way dialogue among Pippin, Merry, and the personified entity. The challenge is to avoid blatant anthropomorphism, so that the river becomes truly riverish and the wind convincingly windy.

In the Footsteps of Saruman. Wherever your school is located, it probably isn't far from a scene that would have aroused Tolkien's indignation: a polluted stream, sprawling mall, metastasizing highway. Have each student visit such a site, capturing salient details through a series of photographs or vivid sentences. In reporting back to the class, the student should speculate about the sources of the problem. Tolkien's heroes have Saruman, Sauron, and the orcs to blame for the desolation they witness. Whom might we hold responsible for our contemporary wastelands?

Banking the Fires of Orthanc. Chances are good that your community is dealing with some form of pollution or technological hazard, and quite possibly several. Have the class collect newspaper articles, including letters to the editor, that address threats to the local environment. Post the clippings in one corner of the classroom. Does the emerging collage suggest that existing regulations are adequate to the threat, or will some sort of community activism be required to bank the fires of Orthanc? In the students' opinion, does progress become most problematic when it destroys animal habitat or when it jeopardizes human health?

The Fangorn Channel. Trees are much in the news these days: the threat to the Amazon rainforest, conflicts between conservationists and the timber industry, various incompatible responses to the problem of forest fires. In this activity the class collectively prepares a simulated TV news broadcast in which every story is written by trees for trees. While most of the bulletins should deal with serious environmental matters, some students may wish to submit arborocentric weather reports, sports results, and movie reviews. If time permits and the technology is available, the class might record their program on video.

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Discussion Topics

The Soul of the Ent. At one level Treebeard is an anthropomorphized tree, and yet this shepherd of the forest obviously doesn't see the world the way Pippin and Merry do. Ask students to identify those aspects of Treebeard's physiology and psychology that make him seem arboreal. What does Pippin find significant about Treebeard's eyes? Why is the Ents' word for "hill" — of which *a-lalla-lalla-rumba-kamanda-lind-or-burúmë* is but a part — so long?

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy. In a 1956 reply to a reader, Tolkien wrote, "If there is any contemporary reference in my story at all it is to what seems to me the most widespread assumption of our time: that if a thing can be done, it must be done" (Letter No. 186). Does the class agree with Tolkien's acerbic assessment of the modern mindset? If Tolkien is right, does this mean we shall eventually witness human clones or a full-scale nuclear war?

A Dwarf's Paradise. Have the class reread Gimli's rhapsody on the caves beneath Helm's Deep, which begins, "Gems and crystals and veins of precious ore glint in the polished walls; and the light glows through folded marbles, shell-like, translucent as the living hands of Queen Galadriel" (page 534). Would students infer that Tolkien's reverence for nature extends even to the inanimate? What is Legolas getting at when he says, "One family of busy dwarves with hammer and chisel might mar more than they make" (page 535)? Does Gimli's reply — "We would tend these glades of flowering stone, not quarry them" — suggest that dwarves value the natural world no less than they do their own creations?

Tools, Artifacts, and Machines. Evidently Tolkien places the products of conscious ingenuity in different categories. Most of the supernatural devices in Middle-earth, including the palantíri and the wizards' staffs, seem not to alarm him. Certain crafted artifacts, notably the elven rings, Aragorn's sword, and Frodo's mithril coat, even become objects of awe. Only full-blown technologies — Saruman's "precious machinery" — inspire Tolkien's manifest mistrust. In the students' view, are these distinctions among tools, artifacts, and machines valid? When does a tool become a machine? When does a machine become an industry? How might we differentiate "good progress" from "bad progress"?

The Tongue as Talisman. Middle-earth's inhabitants wield many implements, but for Tolkien one tool reigns supreme: language. In the author's view, when a person engages the full majesty of words — writing a powerful poem, composing a moving story, sustaining a great conversation — he or she is engaged in "sub-creation," fashioning a "secondary world" that parallels our observable, primary reality. Does the class agree that language is the most significant tool of all? What evidence do we find in Book Three that Tolkien was concerned with the misuses of language? In discussing this question, students will want to consider Wormtongue's verbal manipulation of Théoden, as well as the deceptively "melodious" and "kindly" voice Sauron deploys during the parley at Orthanc (pages 564–571).

Is Technology Neutral? Defenders of technology cite manifest advances in human health, freedom, and comfort. Critics of technology argue that all these benefits involve trade-offs. Where do students stand on this complex and thorny issue? Do they feel that technologies are fundamentally neutral, so the challenge is to use them wisely and appropriately? Or have some technologies become so pervasive that it is meaningless to speak of controlling them? What does the class make of the adage "We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us"?

The Faces of Wisdom. In describing the Rohirrim to his friends, Aragorn emphasizes their oral culture: "They are . . . wise but unlearned, writing no books but singing many songs" (page 420). Does the class agree with Aragorn that literacy is not essential to wisdom? Have students known people who lacked a formal education but nevertheless knew much of the world?

Treebeard's Revenge. The last march of the Ents is certainly a satisfying fantasy — an army of ambulatory tree-beings avenging their hacked and hewed brethren — but might this scene also reflect a real possibility? Ask the class to ponder the ways in which human assaults on the environment might ultimately invite retribution by nature. How many acres of rainforest can we lose before our planet's atmosphere becomes unbreathable? Might the greenhouse effect eventually trigger a contemporary "drowning of Isengard"?

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