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

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Content Focus: *The Hobbit,* Chapters I – VII
Thematic Focus: The Magic of Language

Overview

Rivendell … Lothlórien . . . Númenor . . . Galadriel . . . Aragorn . . . Barad-dûr . . . Rohirrim . . . Silmarillion: the forests and mountains of Middle-earth echo with musical words, strange names, and lyrical Elven phrases. Having read the first half of *The Hobbit*, students can now begin experiencing its themes, its meaning, and Tolkien's delight in language.

Learning Goals

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

• Indicate what a philologist does.

• Write a sentence using Anglo-Saxon runes.

• Obtain etymological information from an unabridged dictionary.

• Paraphrase Tolkien's critique of the hoarding instinct.

• Discuss the idea of "not knowing what you do not know."

Unit Two Content

These lesson plans were written by James Morrow and Kathryn Morrow in consultation with Amy Allison, Gregory Miller, Sarah Rito, and Jason Zanitsch.

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

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Comments for Teachers

It's important to clarify at the outset that, while *The Hobbit* is generally regarded as a "children's story," this course treats it as a valuable prelude to *The Lord of the Rings* and as an entrée into the larger world of heroic epic.

You might begin Unit Two by drawing the class's attention to the first page of *The Hobbit,* which features Tolkien's explanation of runes. The third sentence is remarkable: "English is used to represent the languages." In other words, Tolkien wants us to imagine that much of the dialogue in this story represents translations from other languages. Hobbits, dwarves, goblins, and elves all have their own distinctive tongues.

The astonishing fact, of course, is that Tolkien didn't simply posit these languages. He imagined what they might look and sound like, and in the case of the elven tongues — Quenya and Sindarin — he fashioned them in full. A brilliant philologist, Tolkien had a gift for devising syllables and syntaxes no one had ever heard before. Indeed, the author's primary motive in creating Middle-earth was to give his invented languages a home.

Although Tolkien did not write *The Hobbit* with a sequel in mind, in retrospect the book seems rather like a rehearsal for *The Lord of the Rings.* Before the story is done, we leave the folktale realm of trolls and goblins to behold a spectacular clash of armies. Like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* is an epic fairy tale.

Beyond its emphasis on language, Unit Two highlights the fairy tale dimension of *The Hobbit,* beginning with the discussion of motifs and including the activity called "Finding Your Inner Troll." The next module focuses on *The Hobbit* as a heroic quest in the epic mold.

While studying Unit Two in class, students should be reading Chapters VIII – XIX of *The Hobbit* at home.

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Preliminary Quiz

1. Name two of the three physical attributes that, in Gandalf's opinion, should make Bilbo an ideal member of the quest team.

(Answer: Bilbo can fit through a hole too small for a dwarf; hobbits are quieter than anyone else; the dragon has never smelled a hobbit.)

2. What is the Last Homely House?

(Answer: the home of Elrond and the Elves in Rivendell.)

3. Name two kinds of unnatural creatures that menace Bilbo and the dwarves.

(Answer: trolls, goblins, spiders, wargs, dragons.)

4. What happened to William, Tom, and Bert when the sun came up?

(Answer: They turned to stone.)

5. What is particularly unusual about Beorn?

(Answer: He can change into a bear.)

6. Who was Durin?

(Answer: In Thorin's words, "He was the father of the fathers of the eldest race of Dwarves, the Longbeards, and my first ancestor: I am his heir.")

7. What was the "false riddle" that Bilbo used to stump Gollum?

(Answer: "What have I got in my pocket?")

www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com   3 of 17

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Key Terms

philology (fill-oll-oh-gee) The study of languages and how they change over time. J.R.R. Tolkien was one of the greatest philologists who ever lived. Philology literally means "love of words."

runes (roons) The characters of ancient Germanic alphabets. Because they were cut into wood or scratched on stone, runes are thin and angular. Early Anglo-Saxon texts were written in runes.

epithet (ep-a-thet) A descriptive word or phrase added to a person's name. Early in *The Hobbit,* Bilbo acquires the epithet Burglar. The dwarf Thorin bears the epithet Oakenshield.

Indo-European A vast family of languages, spoken by about half the world's population. English belongs to the Indo-European group.

Old English The language spoken in many parts of Britain from about A.D. 450 to 1150. Old English is also known as Anglo-Saxon.

Beowulf **(bay-oh-wolf)** The only complete epic poem to have survived in Old English. It tells of the mighty warrior Beowulf, who protects his people by killing the water monster Grendel, then Grendel's mother, and finally a ferocious dragon. Tolkien was one of the world's greatest experts on *Beowulf,* and the poem strongly influenced his fiction.

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

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Handouts

Anglo-Saxon Runes

This is an excerpt from Ruth Noel's *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth*. In the author's words, "The runes . . . are those shown on the map in *The Hobbit.* They are one of several types actually used by writers of Old English and other Germanic languages. They are listed in their original Old English order, the first six letters of which give runes their alternate name, *futhork*."

The Tree of Language

This diagram of language groups comes from *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, edited by Calvert Watkins.

Beowulf and Grendel

In this scene from *Beowulf,* the hero encounters Grendel for the first time — and the monster meets his match. It is an exciting episode. Grendel rips open the door of the hall, then kills and eats a warrior before Beowulf grapples with him. The handout includes a literal translation of the first two lines paired with the original Anglo-Saxon, after which the entire scene is presented in modern English prose. Students might be interested to know that "Beowulf" means "Bee Wolf" — that is, a bear (bears being a kind of wolf that steals honey from bees). Beowulf was perhaps imagined as a "berserker" ("bear shirt"), a warrior who in the frenzy of battle could either turn into a bear (like Beorn) or display the animal's power. Some scholars believe that the character of Beowulf traces to the folktale type known as "the bear's son."

Dwarf Catalogue from the Elder Edda

This passage from the Old Norse poem "Voluspo" was Tolkien's source for the dwarf names in *The Hobbit,* as well as the name "Gandalf," which translates as "Wand Elf" or "Staff Elf" — not a dwarf, obviously, but perhaps a wizard. Tom Shippey speculates that "Voluspo" actually provided Tolkien with his initial inspiration for *The Hobbit.* The professor asked himself, "What sort of story would involve a wizard getting mixed up with dwarves?"

Handouts

Anglo-Saxon Runes

Rune	Letter	Rune	Letter	Rune	Letter
ᚠ	F	ᚻ	H	ᛗ	E
ᚢ	U/V	ᚾ	N	ᛗ	M
ᚦ	TH	ᛁ	I	ᛚ	L
ᚩ	O	ᛄ	J	ᛉ	NG
ᚱ	R	ᛈ	P	⊠	D
ᚳ	K	ᛇ	Z	ᛞ	D
ᚲ	C	ᛋ	S	ᚨ	A
ᚷ	G	ᛏ	T	ᚯ	EE/OE
ᚹ	W	ᛒ	B	ᛃ	Y

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

### Handouts

The Indo-European Family of Languages

The Indo-European family of languages, of which English is one member, is descended from the prehistoric Proto-Indo-European language, which was spoken in an as yet unidentified area between eastern Europe and the Aral Sea around the fifth millennium B.C. This chart displays the genetic relationships
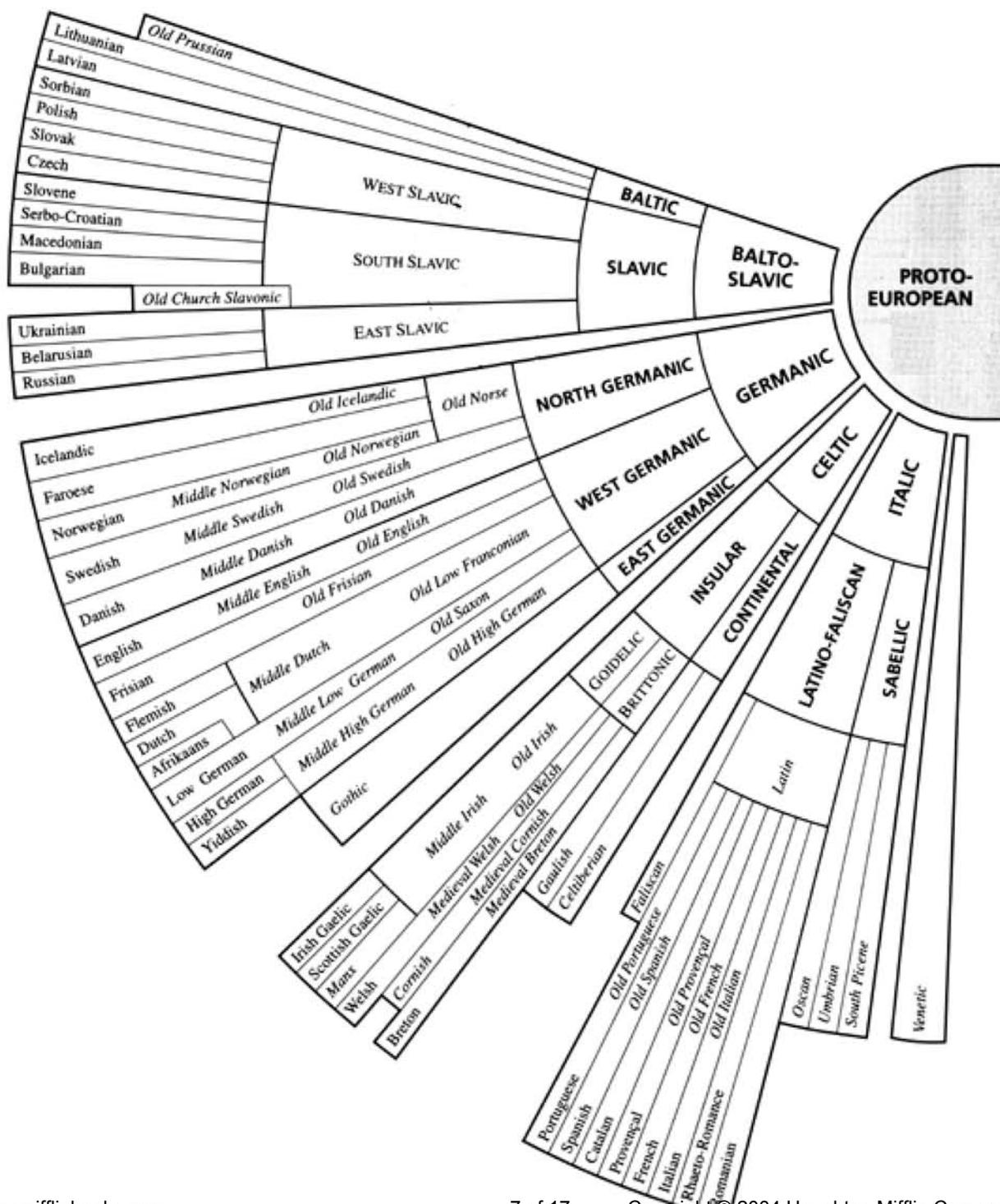
Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Handouts

among the principal languages of the Indo-European family and loosely suggests their geographic distribution. The European branches are shown in somewhat fuller detail than the Asian ones, and in the Germanic group, to which English belongs, the intermediate historic phases of the languages are also shown. Extinct languages are in italics. A table of the principal Indo-European sound correspondences appears on pages 146–147.
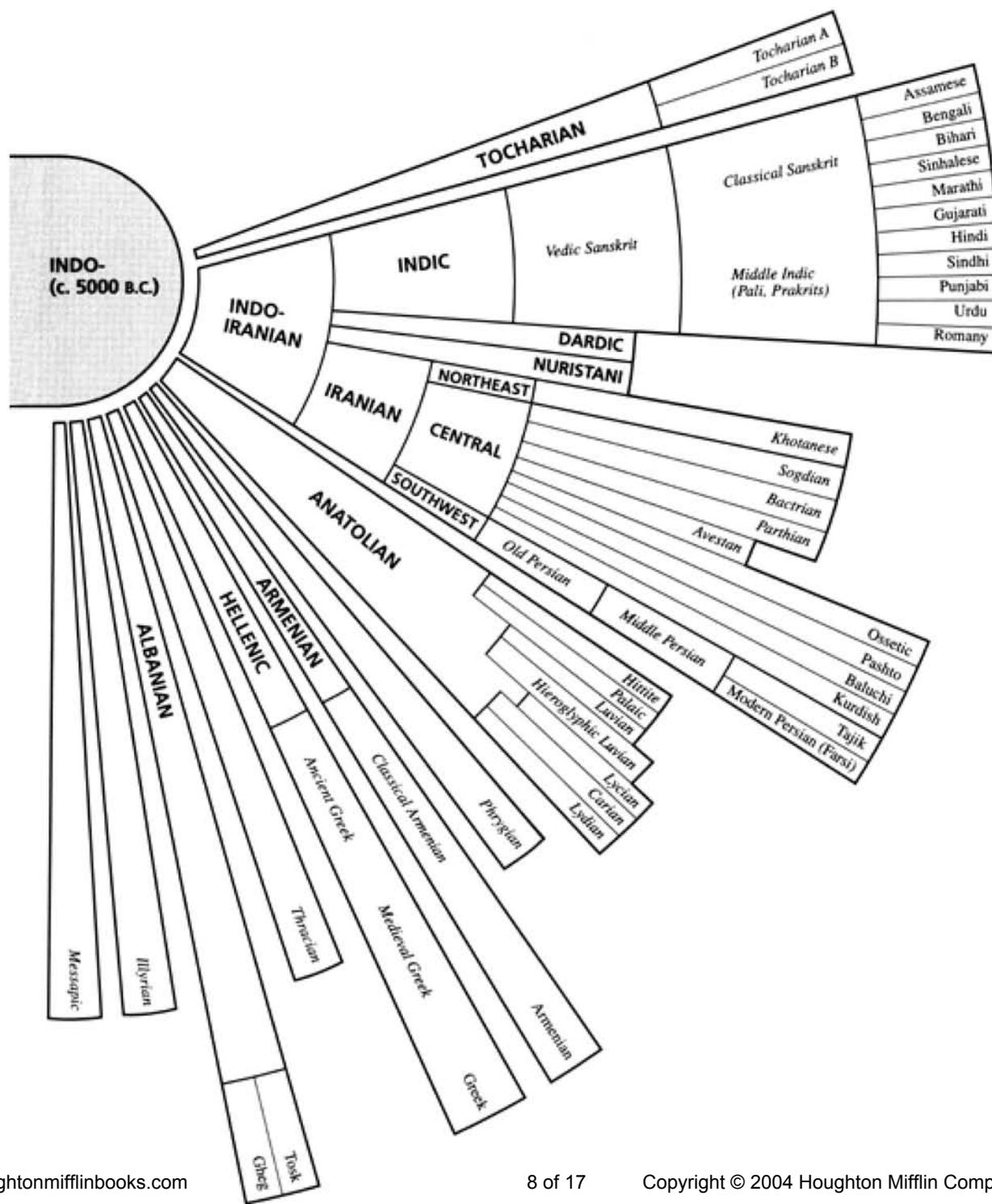
Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Handouts

Beowulf and Grendel

Original Old English (in modern alphabet):

Da com of more   under mist-hleothum
Grendel gongan   Godes yrre baer

Literal translation:

Then up from the marsh   under misty cliffs
Grendel came walking   God's wrath he bore

Excerpt from *Beowulf*, Part XI:

Up from the moorland, from the misty crags, Grendel came walking, bearing the wrath of God. The monster had a mind to seize from the mead-hall someone of human kind; under dark clouds he walked till he saw the stately palace, the house shining with gold. Not for the first time did he seek the home of Hrothgar, yet never would he find luck harder, or heroes hardier, in that hall!

The cursed warrior came to the portal, raging, striking the door; he ripped open the hall-mouth, though it was bolted with iron. Then the fiend trod the fair-paved floor, full of anger; flashes of fire streamed from his eyes.

He saw in the hall a band of heroes, kinsmen sleeping clustered, the liegemen of Hrothgar. He laughed in his monster's heart, thought to sever their souls from their bodies, devouring each one of them in a savage banquet before dawn.

After that evening, Wyrd forbade the fiend to feed more on mankind; for mighty Beowulf, Geat-king's kinsman, was watching, waiting for his foe's attack. Not that the monster was minded to pause! Straightway he seized a sleeping warrior, tore his guts and drank his blood; swallowed him in pieces, swiftly devoured the dead man, even his feet and hands.

The monster moved on, caught Beowulf with his claw. The hero, still in bed reclining, propped himself on one elbow, clutched boldly that claw in return. Soon the shepherd of sins discovered that never, in any part of Middle-earth, had he met a hand-grip so strong…

Glossary

mead = alcoholic beverage made from honey

hardy = tough, strong

liegemen = sworn followers

straightway = immediately

Wyrd = fate, destiny, doom

Geat(s) = Beowulf's tribe

shepherd of sins = Grendel

(adapted from the poetic translation by Francis B. Gummere; original text in the public domain)

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Handouts

The Catalog of Dwarfs

Excerpt from "Voluspo,"
the first poem in the Elder Edda

There was Motsognir | the mightiest made
Of all the dwarfs, | and Durin next;
Many a likeness | of men they made,
The dwarfs in the earth, | as Durin said.

Nyi and Nithi, | Northri and Suthri,
Austri and Vestri, | Althjof, Dvalin,
Nar and Nain, | Niping, Dain,
Bifur, Bofur, | Bombur, Nori,
An and Onar, | Ai, Mjothvitnir.

Vigg and Gandalf | Vindalf, Thrain,
Thekk and Thorin, | Thror, Vit and Lit,
Nyr and Nyrath, | now have I told
Regin and Rathsvith | the list aright.

Fili, Kili, | Fundin, Nali,
Heptifili, | Hannar, Sviur,
Frar, Hornbori, | Fræg and Loni,
Aurvang, Jari, | Eikinskjaldi.

The race of the dwarfs | in Dvalin's throng
Down to Lofar | the list must I tell;
The rocks they left, | and through wet lands
They sought a home | in the fields of sand.

There were Draupnir | and Dolgthrasir,
Hor, Haugspori, | Hlevang, Gloin,
Dori, Ori, | Duf, Andvari,
Skirfir, Virfir, | Skafith, Ai.

Alf and Yngvi, | Eikinskjaldi,
Fjalar and Frosti, | Fith and Ginnar;
So for all time | shall the tale be known,
The list of all | the forbears of Lofar.

(adapted from the Henry Adams Bellows translation of the Old Norse Poetic Edda, also known as the Elder Edda; original text in the public domain)

Translator's note: Most of the names presumably had some definite significance, such as Northri, Suthri, Austri, and Vestri ("North," "South," "East," and "West"), Althjof ("Mighty Thief'), Mjothvitnir ("Mead-Wolf"), Gandalf ("Magic Elf"), Vindalf ("Wind Elf'), Rathwith ("Swift in Counsel"), and Eikinskjaldi ("Oak Shield"), but in many cases the interpretations are sheer guesswork.

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

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Discussion Topics

Bilbo's Internal Conflict. A pivotal moment occurs in Chapter V, when our hero is about to stab Gollum to death. "A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish" (page 80). Have students ever experienced a flash of sympathy for someone they normally found annoying? Is it true that "To know all is to forgive all"? What keeps us from seeing the "hard stone, cold fish" that is the lot of so many people?

Measuring the Motifs. The first half of *The Hobbit* features several themes that the class may recognize from their earlier study of myths and fairy tales. When the morning sun turned the trolls to stone in Chapter II, did any students think of Medusa? Did Bilbo's reckless bargain with Gollum — if I win the riddle game, you aren't allowed to eat me — evoke the rash promise motif of "Rumpelstiltskin"? What other themes did students notice? The forbidden action? The well-earned reward? The descent into the underworld?

A Worldly Worm. In Chapter I, Thorin Oakenshield offers his low opinion of Smaug: "Dragons steal gold and jewels . . . and they guard their plunder as long as they live . . . and never enjoy a brass ring of it. Indeed they hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value" (page 22). Is it typical for creatures, humans in particular, to hoard their possessions without appreciating "a brass ring of it"? Are celebrities and billionaires especially vulnerable to this foible? Have students encountered people who "know the price of everything and the value of nothing"?

Being Wise to Ignorance. Early in Chapter IV, the narrator tells the reader, "Even the good plans of wise wizards like Gandalf and of good friends like Elrond go astray sometimes when you are off on dangerous adventures over the Edge of the Wild; and Gandalf was wise enough to know it" (page 53). Invite students to share anecdotes of their "best laid plans" going awry. Was the disaster a result of being "over the Edge of the Wild"? Can the class think of historical figures or fictional characters who lacked the wisdom to know their limitations?

A Hero Called Beowulf. After summarizing the plot of *Beowulf* for the class, ask students to infer the connections between this heroic epic and *The Hobbit.* In what ways does Beorn suggest Beowulf? If you have a copy of *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator* by Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, you can show the class E. V. Gordon's conception of a Norse hall juxtaposed with Tolkien's own drawings of Beorn's abode (pages 122–123). Near the end of the lesson, distribute the "Beowulf and Grendel" handout and have students scan both renditions of the initial lines. At first glance Anglo-Saxon looks entirely foreign, but eventually students will notice the affinity between modern English and its ancestor.

www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com   13 of 17

Unit Two: Runes, Riddles, and a Ring of Power

Suggested Activities

Writing in Runes. After receiving the handout called Anglo-Saxon Runes, the class should have no trouble using this ancient alphabet. As an initial exercise, have each student write his or her name in runes. The more advanced students might use runes for a daily journal entry.

Speaking in Riddles. By browsing the Internet or scouring the library, students can collect a variety of classic riddles. Beyond the primordial Riddle of the Sphinx, this type of puzzle exists in all cultures and throughout all ages. Who can find the strangest riddle? The most profound? The most delightful? The most outrageous? A riddle with several answers? Perhaps the class will want to split into two teams and stage a riddle contest reminiscent of the famous Gollum-Bilbo match.

Inventing a Language. Divide the class into groups. Each team first makes up a name for a nonexistent language — Blorgolese, Arcanian, Friktic, whatever — then fleshes it out with ten verbs, ten nouns, ten adjectives, and five prepositions. Prefixes and suffixes are allowed. Verbs will prove the biggest challenge. Do the speakers of this secret tongue look to the future, or do they live only for the moment? Are the tenses formed through inflections or through auxiliaries? If time permits, the groups can share their languages by creating grammar books or dictionaries.

The Personal Epithet. In this activity students investigate the meanings of their own names to derive personal — and often delightfully absurd — epithets. Baby-name books are a useful resource here. If a person is called Fred Edwards, his personal epithet would be "Peaceful-Ruling Son of the Rich Guardian." If she is Linda Cooper, her epithet would be "Beautiful Barrel Maker." Some class members may have difficulty tracing their last names. In such cases, invite the student to invent whatever epithet he or she would like to bear.

The Amateur Philologist. After studying the handout called "The Tree of Language," the class can use unabridged dictionaries, Internet resources, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* to trace the heritage of common English words. For example, the proto-Indo-European word *weid,* meaning to see, entered Anglo-Saxon as *wis,* hence our English word "wisdom." Meanwhile, *weid* became *videre* in Latin, hence our words "video" and "vision." Finally, in its suffixed form *woid-o, weid* became the familiar Sanskrit word *veda.*

Finding Your Inner Troll. So basic and compelling are the great fairy tale motifs — the impossible task, the rash promise, the forbidden action — that many students will enjoy incorporating them into their own fiction. The idea is not to produce a Faerie story for its own sake, but to use the genre in exploring a personal theme or making a satirical point. The setting can be archaic or contemporary, the characters convincing or comical. If students have trouble thinking up plots, remind them that the genre thrives on wish-

fulfillment fantasies. What if a frustrated high school athlete, disgruntled babysitter, bored software engineer, envious business executive, or failed Nascar driver turned to Faerie in seeking her heart's desire?

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

Bibliography

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

Works by J.R.R. Tolkien

The Annotated Hobbit, annotated by Douglas A. Anderson.

The History of The Lord of the Rings, ed. Christopher Tolkien.

The History of Middle-earth, Vol.2 The Book of Lost Tales, ed. Christopher Tolkien.

The History of Middle-earth, Vol.3 The Lays of Beleriand, ed. Christopher Tolkien.

The Hobbit, 1938.

The Hobbit, 2002.

The Lord of the Rings.

    The Fellowship of the Ring.

    The Two Towers.

    The Return of the King.

The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays, ed. Christopher Tolkien. HarperCollins UK, 1997.

The Road Goes Ever On: A Song Cycle (poems), music by Donald Swann. Houghton Mifflin, 1978.

The Silmarillion, second edition, ed. Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

The Tolkien Reader. Del Rey Books, 1989.

Books about Tolkien

Bassham, Gregory, and Eric Bronson, eds. *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy.* Open Court, 2003.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends.* Houghton Mifflin, 1979.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography.*

Carpenter, Humphrey, ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien.*

www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com   16 of 17

Flieger, Verlyn. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World.* Kent State University Press, 2002.

Garth, John. *Tolkien and the Great War*.

Hammond, Wayne G., and Christina Scull. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*.

Noel, Ruth S. *The Languages of Tolkien's Middle-earth*.

Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-earth*, revised and expanded edition.

Shippey, Tom. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*.

Zimbardo, Rose A., and Neil D. Isaacs, eds. *Understanding The Lord of the Rings*.

Other Resources

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, fourth edition.

Chickering, Howell D., Jr., interlinear translator. *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition.* Anchor Books, 1977.

Gummere, Francis B., translator. *Beowulf.* 1910.

Jackson, Guida M. *Traditional Epics: A Literary Companion.* Oxford University Press, 1994.

Johnson, John William, Thomas A. Hale, and Stephen Belcher, eds. *Oral Epics from Africa.* Indiana University Press, 1997.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction.* HarperCollins, 1992.

Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace.* New American Library, 1968.

Watkins, Calvert. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, second edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Zipes, Jack, ed. *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm.* Bantam, 2003.

www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com   17 of 17