

A Reader's Guide



The Lord of the Rings

by J.R.R. Tolkien

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*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them*

"An extraordinary work — pure excitement." — *New York Times Book Review*

Since its first publication in 1954-55, J.R.R. Tolkien's peerless fantasy has accumulated worldwide acclaim. No other writer of Tolkien's century created an imaginary world as distinct as Middle-earth, complete with its own geography, history, languages, and legends. And certainly no one has created characters as endearing as Tolkien's large-hearted, hairy-footed hobbits. Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, their fellow hobbits, and the various creatures of Middle-earth—wizards, men, elves, ents, dwarfs, orcs, trolls, wargs, the Nazgûl, and others—continue to seize the imaginations of readers everywhere. Named in several polls as the twentieth century's best book, J.R.R. Tolkien's masterwork tells of the grand and noble quest undertaken by Frodo Baggins and the Company of the Ring to defend their world against the growing power of evil.

We hope the following discussion questions will prompt a deeper understanding and appreciation of this remarkable novel, of the world it brings into being, and of Tolkien's accomplishment in creating that world.

The Fellowship of the Ring

1. "I am in fact a *Hobbit* (in all but size)," wrote Tolkien to a correspondent in 1958. "I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated) . . . I like, and even dare to wear these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not

travel much." How would you describe the hobbits' way of life and behavior? How are they different from us, and how are they similar?

2. "I have, I suppose," wrote Tolkien in 1958, "constructed an imaginary *time*, but kept my feet on my own mother-earth for *place*. . . . *Middle-earth* is . . . a modernization or alteration . . . of an old word for the inhabited world of Men." How has Tolkien created a sense of an actual world with seemingly real landmarks and a credible imaginary history?

3. How is it significant that Gollum had been a hobbit before acquiring the Ring? To what degree can the Ring's powers be used for good or evil depending on the moral character of its bearer?

4. Gandalf tells Frodo, "But you have been chosen and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have" (p. 60). How are Frodo, Sam, and others called upon to use their "strength and heart and wits"?

5. How would you explain Sam Gamgee's determination to stay with Frodo no matter what? What qualities, talents, and shortcomings does Sam reveal as the journey continues, and how is he changed by his experiences?

6. Strider says of Gandalf that "this business of ours will be his greatest task" (p. 169). In what ways does this turn out to be true, and how is Gandalf himself unpredictably affected by "this business of ours"?

7. How do the Black Riders' methods of sensing their surroundings link them with evil and the dark and make them particularly terrifying? What do you think Strider means when, speaking of the Dark Riders, he tells the hobbits, "You fear them but you do not fear them enough, yet" (p. 162)?

8. After being wounded in his fight with the Black Rider, Frodo realizes "that in putting on the Ring he obeyed not his own desire but the commanding wish of his enemies" (p. 194). In what other instances do characters act against their own best interests?

9. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom," Gandalf proclaims to Saruman (p. 252). How does this idea manifest itself throughout *The Lord of the Rings*?

10. Saruman advises Gandalf that their best choice would be to join with the "new Power" that is rising so "to direct its course, to control it" (p. 253). To what extent is the main theme of *The Lord of the Rings* the uses, abuses, and consequences of power?

11. Elrond tells the Company: "The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (p. 262). How do Elrond's comments apply to the quest?

12. Why does Gandalf say that it would "be well to trust rather in friendship than to great wisdom" in deciding who should accompany Frodo (p. 269)? In what ways might friendship be more powerful than great wisdom?

- 13.** Before the Lady Galadriel's gaze, each member of the Company felt "that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something that he greatly desired" (pp. 348-9). Why might that choice be important for each?
- 14.** Boromir argues that the Company's choice is between destroying the Ring and destroying "the armed might of the Dark Lord" (p. 360). Is his argument valid? To what extent does the completion of either task depend upon the completion of the other?
- 15.** How would you characterize the conflict between Aragorn and Boromir? In what ways is that conflict important to our understanding of Aragorn and the purpose of his quest?

The Two Towers

- 1.** Aragorn says to Gimli, "We must guess the riddles, if we are to choose our course rightly" (p. 406). How does choosing the right course of action, in *The Lord of the Rings* and in life, depend upon guessing riddles correctly?
- 2.** "Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?" Éomer asks. How would you explain Aragorn's response: "A man may do both" (p. 424)?
- 3.** Merry and Pippin look back out of the shadows of Fangorn, "little furtive figures that in the dim light looked like elf-children in the deeps of time peering out of the Wild Wood in wonder at their First Dawn" (p. 449). How do the initial innocence and lasting hopefulness of the hobbits provide a balance to the more complex experience of men, the Elves' ancient knowledge, Gandalf's wisdom, and Sauron's evil?
- 4.** Treebeard says of Saruman, "He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things" (p. 462). How does Tolkien illustrate the limitations and menace of technology and the benevolence and rewards of growing things?
- 5.** "Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear," says Aragorn, "nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men" (p. 428). Why does the struggle between good and evil continue much the same from age to age, from place to place, and from one group to another?
- 6.** If a wizard as wise and powerful as Saruman can be corrupted, what chance does anyone have against the forces of evil? How are Gandalf, Aragorn, Frodo, and others able to withstand the temptations and desires to which Saruman, Gollum, Wormtongue, and others succumb?
- 7.** What does Treebeard mean when he says that "songs like trees bear fruit only in their own time and their own way" (p. 475)? To what extent might this be true of people in *The Lord of the Rings*?
- 8.** "Often does hatred hurt itself," says Gandalf (p. 571). How might this be true of hatred and evil in the novel and in life?

9. What lineage does Faramir claim, and how is it related to Aragorn's? What other family pedigrees does Tolkien present, and why do you think family histories and ancestral lines are so important?
10. When Sam speaks about "the old tales and songs," what does he say characterizes the tales and songs that really matter? How does he distinguish between "the best tales to hear" and "the best tales to get landed in" (p. 696-7)?
11. What do you find characteristic of each dwelling and community in the various regions of Middle-earth? How is each specific in terms of its locale and the culture of its residents?
12. In what ways are Faramir and Gandalf alike? How is Sam's observation that Faramir reminds him of Gandalf supported by Faramir's actions and statements?

The Return of the King

1. How are Gandalf's power, wisdom, and majesty manifested throughout the novel? How, and with what consequences, does he apply his powers in his relationships with the various other residents of Middle-earth?
2. How would you characterize the relationship between Faramir and his father, Denethor? What causes Denethor to be so critical of his son?
3. Éowyn protests to Aragorn, "All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house" (p. 767). What are Éowyn's and Aragorn's opposing views of a woman's duties and roles?
4. Why might "all great lords, if they are wise" use others as their weapons, as Denethor notes (p. 800)? What instances do you find in *The Lord of the Rings* and in our world of leaders using others to obtain their ends?
5. How would you describe "the joy of battle" that comes upon the Rohirrim as they advance on besieged Minas Tirith (p. 820)? What other instances of it occur in the novel? What might be the consequences of giving oneself up to "the joy of battle"?
6. Seeing the dead porter at the Closed Door, Gandalf exclaims of the Enemy, "Such deeds he loves: friend at war with friend; loyalty divided in a confusion of hearts" (p. 833). What other deeds and estrangements does the Enemy love, and how does each serve Sauron's purposes?
7. Mourning Théoden in the Houses of Healing, Merry apologizes for his sarcasm by saying, "But it is the way of my people to use light words at such times and say less than they mean. We fear to say too much. It robs us of the right words when a jest is out of place" (p. 852). What does he mean? At what other serious moments do the hobbits engage in humor?
8. "It is best to love first what you are fitted to love, I suppose," says Merry; "you must start somewhere and have some roots" (p. 852). How is this true of the hobbits and others?

- 9.** Speaking of the Orcs, Frodo tells Sam, "The Shadow that bred them can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own" (p. 893). Why is it significant that, while good can create "real new things," evil can merely counterfeit or mock creation?
- 10.** When Sam sees the white star twinkling through the cloud-wrack above the Morgai, "the beauty of it smote his heart [and] the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing" (p. 901). In what ways is the Shadow of evil finally only "a small and passing thing"?
- 11.** What does Gandalf mean when he tells the hobbits that they must settle the affairs of the Shire themselves? In what ways have they been "trained" for just that task, according to Gandalf, and in what ways have they "grown indeed very high" (p. 974)?
- 12.** Just before Frodo boards the ship in the Grey Havens, he says to Sam, "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" (p. 1006). How is this true in the novel and in our own lives?
- 13.** What kind of lives do you think Sam and Rosie, Merry, and Pippin have after Frodo and Gandalf's departure? What might be the significance of the novel's ending with Sam and Rosie enjoying the comfort and love of their new home (p. 1008)?