Teaching Guide:
J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

Student Level: Year 9 and up

Learning Objectives

- Explore the relationship between fantasy and mythology
- Develop a deeper understanding of Tolkien's core literary themes and preoccupations
- Develop confidence in tackling dense and detailed prose in an academic setting
- Practice close reading

Readings to prepare outside of class: *The Lord of the Rings* is a long and involved work, over 1,000 pages in most editions. Keen older students could read the entirety of *LOTR* over a summer holiday as an independent reading project or to prepare for classes. Otherwise, depending on student interest and teacher preferences, the following chapters (or a selection thereof) will allow students to enjoy the most interesting material over three weeks of classes:

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book I, the prologue, chs 1-2 (Bilbo's birthday party and the revelation of the Ring and its history), 11 (their encounter with the Black Riders on Weathertop); Book II, chs. 2 (the council at Rivendell), 4-5 (the journey through Moria), 7 (encounter with Galadriel), 10 (the breaking of the Fellowship).

In *The Two Towers*, Book III, chs. 1 (the death of Boromir), 5-7 (the return of Gandalf, meeting with King Théoden of Rohan, and Battle of Helm's Deep), 10 (confrontation with Saruman); Book IV, chs. 1 (first encounter with Sméagol/Gollum), 7-10 (journey to and through Cirith Ungol).

In *The Return of the King*, Book V, chs. 7-8 with the very end of ch. 6 (from 'It was no more than a league…'; the Battle of the Pelennor and the death of Denethor); Book VI, chs. 1-4 (Sam and Frodo's journey to Mount Doom and the defeat of Sauron), 9 (Frodo's departure for the Grey Havens). Those interested in Éowyn can look at Book V ch. 2 and Book VI ch. 5; those interested in Tolkien's attitudes toward nature and industrialisation can look at Book VI ch. 8.

Narrative Summary of *The Lord of the Rings*

Bilbo Baggins celebrates his 111th birthday with a party, then suddenly departs the Shire, leaving his magic ring to Frodo Baggins, his heir. Seventeen years later, the wizard Gandalf the Grey returns to the Shire to tell Frodo that it is in fact the One Ring, forged by the Dark Lord Sauron and containing a significant portion of his terrible power. Gandalf promises to return by Frodo's birthday and accompany him out of the Shire with the Ring, but he fails to do so. Frodo sets out instead with his gardener Samwise Gamgee and cousin Peregrin (Pippin) Took. They are pursued by mysterious, threatening Black Riders, who are banished by a group of High Elves passing through the Shire on their way to the Grey Havens, a harbour from which

they will depart Middle-earth for Valinor, home of the Valar (divine beings, servants of Tolkien's Catholic God figure, Ilúvatar). With the help of Farmer Maggot, they meet their mutual friend Meriadoc (Merry) Brandybuck, who, along with Pippin, insists on accompanying Frodo and Sam on their journey. After an unsettling adventure in the Old Forest and an encounter with a barrow-wight, they are twice rescued by Tom Bombadil, who is a kind of ancient embodiment of the countryside and natural world. Upon reaching the village of Bree, they encounter a Ranger who calls himself Strider, identified as a friend of Gandalf's, and together they journey towards Rivendell, house of the Elf Lord Elrond. On the way they are attacked by several Black Riders, now identified as the Nazgûl, wraiths who were once kings of men, enslaved by the Rings of Power controlled by the One. Frodo is stabbed, and grows increasingly ill as they near Rivendell. The Nazgûl attempt to capture Frodo at the Ford of Bruinen on the borders of Rivendell, but the combined might of Strider, the elf Glorfindel, and Elrond's control of the floodwaters saves Frodo.

Elrond convenes a council at Rivendell, at which Strider is revealed to be Aragorn, the heir of Isildur and therefore rightful king of Gondor and Arnor; the wizard Saruman the White is revealed to be a traitor working for Sauron; and the Ring must be destroyed by being thrown into the fires of Mount Doom in Sauron's kingdom of Mordor, where it was forged. Frodo volunteers to take the ring to Mordor, and Elrond chooses eight companions for him, the Fellowship of the Ring: Sam, Merry, Pippin, Aragorn, Gandalf, a dwarf called Gimil, a prince of the Wood-Elves called Legolas, and Boromir, son of Denethor, Steward of Gondor.

The Fellowship attempts to cross the Misty Mountains by taking a pass over the mountain of Caradhras, but the mountain does not like their presence and does not suffer them to pass. Instead, they go through the Mines of Moria, an erstwhile Dwarf kingdom revealed to have been destroyed by Orcs. The Fellowship engage in battle with Orcs still in the mines and are eventually confronted by a Balrog, a demon of shadow and flame created by Morgoth (the Satanic opponent to Ilúvatar, long defeated by the Valar, but Sauron's true master). Gandalf confronts the Balrog and both plunge into the abyss below the Bridge of Khâzad-Dum. The others escape to the forest of Lothlórien, realm of the Lady Galadriel and her consort Celeborn. Galadriel gives Frodo and Sam visions of the past, present, and future, counsels and arms the Fellowship, and sends them down the river Anduin. Boromir succumbs to temptation and tries to take the Ring from Frodo. Frodo decides to go on to Mordor alone, but Sam intercepts him and insists on going with him.

The remaining members of the Fellowship are attacked by Orcs and Uruk-hai sent by Sauron. Boromir falls attempting to protect Merry and Pippin, who are carried off. Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli pursue the Orcs into the nearby kingdom of Rohan, land of the horse-lords. They meet Éomer, kinsman of the king Théoden, who has been unjustly exiled; the king is under the thrall of Saruman. Éomer reports that he and his men killed the Orcs. Merry and Pippin escape the attack into Fangorn Forest, where they meet Treebeard, an Ent. Tracking the hobbits to Fangorn, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli meet an unexpectedly resurrected Gandalf, now Gandalf the White, chief of the Istari. Gandalf takes Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli to Edoras, city of the Rohirrim and frees Théoden from Saruman's influence. Taking an army to Helm's Deep, Théoden and the Rohirrim defeat Saruman's army, while the Ents attack and destroy Saruman's stronghold of Isengard. Gandalf strips Saruman of his rank and powers when he refuses to aid them. Saruman's servant

Gríma throws a palantír (seeing stone) from the top of the tower, and Pippin steals it in the night. Sauron sees Pippin through the stone, and Gandalf rides for Minas Tirith, the capital city of Gondor, taking Pippin along. Meanwhile, Frodo and Sam confront the creature Gollum, erstwhile owner of the One Ring, who has been following them as they make their way through the wastelands of the Emyn Muil. Gollum attempts to seize the Ring, but Frodo instead makes Gollum swear to serve him. Gollum leads them through the Dead Marshes and to the Black Gate of Mordor, all the while struggling with a war between two facets of his personality: Sméagol, the part of him that retains some sense of self outside of the Ring and exhibits loyalty to Frodo, and Gollum, the part of him committed to obtaining the Ring at all costs. When the Black Gate proves impassable, they go through the land of Ithilien, encountering Boromir's brother Faramir, who does what his brother could not, and resists the temptation of the Ring. Gollum leads the hobbits into Mordor through the pass of Cirith Ungol, where the hobbits are attacked by the giant spider Shelob. Sam wounds her and drives her off, but Frodo is stung and appears to have died. Gollum vanishes. Sam takes the Ring to continue the quest alone, resisting its temptation. Orcs find Frodo's body, and Sam learns from them that Frodo is alive.

Sauron's army marches on Minas Tirith; Théoden musters the Rohirrim to ride to the aid of the city, while Gandalf attempts to warn Denethor of the danger. The city is besieged and breached by the Lord of the Nazgûl, the Witch-King of Angmar; Denethor falls into despair, attempts to burn himself and his wounded son Faramir alive, and is killed while Pippin and Gandalf save Faramir. The combined forces of Gondor and Rohan defeat Sauron's army on the Pelennor Fields, aided by Aragorn, Legolas, Gimil, and the Rangers of the North, who have brought the Dead Men of Dunharrow to the battlefield and turn the tide of the conflict. Éowyn, sister of Éomer, kills the Witch-King with the help of Merry. Théoden is killed. Aragorn reveals himself to be the true King of Gondor by healing many of the injured, then leads the forces of Gondor and Rohan to the Black Gate as a diversion to prevent Sauron from realising that Frodo and Sam are attempting to destroy the Ring.

Sam rescues Frodo from the Orcs, and they set out across the Land of Shadow. As Frodo slowly succumbs to the weight of the Ring, Sam finds new depths of courage and an iron will, carrying his master up the slopes of Mount Doom. At the Cracks of Doom, Frodo gives in to the power of the Ring and claims it as his own. Gollum reappears and attacks Frodo, biting off his finger with the Ring still on it. Immediately afterward, Gollum plunges into the Cracks of Doom, dying and inadvertently destroying the Ring. Sauron loses his power, the Nazgûl are destroyed, and the armies of Gondor and Rohan emerge victorious. The Eagles rescue Frodo and Sam from Mordor, and they are honoured for their deeds. Aragorn is crowned King and marries Arwen Undómiel, daughter of Elrond; Éomer becomes king of Rohan and Éowyn marries Faramir, now Steward of Gondor under Aragorn. The hobbits return to the Shire to find that Saruman (under the alias 'Sharkey') has taken over the Shire, industrialising and polluting it; they drive him out, and he is killed. Merry, Pippin, and Sam return to their lives in the Shire, healing it from Sharkey's evil, but Frodo is still wounded mentally and physically from his ordeal. Eventually, unable to stay in the Shire, he sails from the Grey Havens to Valinor with Gandalf and Bilbo, seeking peace.

Discussion Questions and Points

1. Why does Tolkien make such repeated, elaborate references to historical names and places in his imagined world? What kind of texture does this add to the narrative presented in *LOTR*? How do different characters – e.g. Aragorn, Frodo, Sam – relate to the history of their world? Relatedly, what does *LOTR* gain from the elegiac tone created by Tolkien's inclusion of fantasy history, and their constant encounters with the ruins of kingdoms long past?
2. Tolkien wrote about the importance in his work of something he called *eucatastrophe*: 'the good catastrophe', the sudden joyous turn that snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. He writes in his essay *On Fairy-stories*, 'it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.' How does this help us read the ending(s) of *The Return of the King*?
3. What is evil 'like' in *LOTR*? How does love face off against power, collaboration and compassion against selfishness, beauty against destruction?
4. What role does Gollum play as a character in this narrative? Why include him? Can he, as Frodo hopes, be redeemed or saved? What in him is worth saving? How does his role in the eucatastrophe of Mount Doom inflect the rest of his presence in the narrative?
5. What does the One Ring represent? How does it operate? Why and how does it seduce Boromir, and why and how does it fail to seduce Sam?
6. What makes a hero in these stories? How is Sam's heroism different from Aragorn's? What kinds of heroism do we witness in the Battle of the Pelennor or at Helm's Deep, between characters like Éomer, Éowyn, Aragorn, Merry, and Pippin?
7. What makes a good king or leader in *LOTR*? How is leadership practiced, for better or for worse? Why is the narrative invested in monarchy?
8. What is battle 'like' in *LOTR*? How does Tolkien describe war and violence, and why?
9. What do we find notable about the moment of Gandalf's resurrection? What kinds of Christian inflection, in general, can we read into this story? How does Tolkien's Catholicism inform his storytelling?
10. What are the Rohirrim like in comparison with the people of Gondor? What cultural distinctions does Tolkien draw between them, and why? How does Tolkien talk about 'innate' nobility, rank, and authority in *LOTR*?
11. Why are all the evil men who support Sauron's army from the east and south? What do we make of the racist depictions of black and brown men in the Battle of the Pelennor, in contrast to the depictions of the heroism of Éomer and Théoden? How can we best critique, engage with, and respond to this racism?
12. What are women like in this text? What kinds of power do they wield, and what kind of limitations do they come up against? What does the figure of Galadriel owe to romance and fairy stories? What do we make of Éowyn's misery, her determination to die in battle, and her eventual embrace of domesticity?
13. How does Tolkien integrate verse and song into his prose? Why does he do so?

14. What kind of relationship with the natural world do the protagonists of these narratives exhibit? Why is 'the scouring of the Shire' the final difficulty the hobbit protagonists must confront?
15. What is Frodo and Sam's relationship like, and why? How does class inflect their interactions? Why is Sam's love for Frodo so powerful and so important? How does the presence of Gollum change their dynamic? What does witnessing their love do to Gollum?
16. Frodo and Sam several times discuss the peril they face by imagining themselves as characters in a story. What is the importance of storytelling in *LOTR*? How does narrative give strength to Frodo and Sam? What kind of power does narrative and a sense of history bestow on Aragorn? How do characters like Éowyn narrativise themselves?
17. Why are the Elves leaving Middle-earth? Why does Frodo have to go on to the Grey Havens, and essentially embrace the peace of death? Why doesn't he heal, when others do, and how does his suffering operate within the narrative?

Further Reading and Writing Exercises:

On Fairy-stories

Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy-stories', originally given as a lecture at the University of St Andrews in 1939, dissects, defends, and legitimises the fairy tale (and, more broadly, the fantasy narrative) as a literary form. His definition of a fairy story is one that takes place in an enchanted Otherworld, and one which gets to the heart of human joy and human suffering. The essay is not long; students can read all of it, or excerpts from it. Students can discuss in small groups, or write on, the following questions: why is the Otherworld so important to Tolkien's idea of fantasy? What does Tolkien think fantasy narratives should do for their audiences? How do these principles shape *LOTR*?

The Lord of the Rings and Medieval Roots

Tolkien was a scholar of Old English, Middle English, and Old Norse literature at Oxford for his entire adult life, and his work is deeply influenced by the medieval texts he studied.

Exercise A: Old English. Rohan and the Rohirrim of *LOTR* are based in many ways on pre-Conquest England, from the mead-hall (a literal translation of *Meduseld* from Old English) that Théoden ('prince, lord') rules to the names of his kin (Éowyn, 'horse-joy', and Éomer, 'horse-famous') to the round shields carried by the Eorlingas. The poem Aragorn recites as they ride towards Edoras is based on the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, and their entrance to Meduseld draws from *Beowulf*. Students can be divided into small groups and each assigned a section of *LOTR* alongside an Old English text in translation; available in *The Keys of Middle Earth* (see bibliography below) are *The Fight at Finnsburg* and *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*, to read with the Moria chapters; *Beowulf* ll. 26-52, to read with the death of Boromir, and ll. 306-70, to read with the Rohan chapters, along with *The Wanderer*; *The Battle of Maldon*, to compare with the Battle of the Pelennor; and *The Seafarer*, to compare with Frodo's journey to the Grey Havens. Students can write up or present on the links between their section of *LOTR* and their Old English text, focusing on the following questions: what similarities and differences of theme, style, imagery, form, and/or content exist between these two texts? What insights

does Tolkien's use of medieval texts, and especially his transformation and alteration of those texts, offer us into *LOTR*?

Exercise B: Middle English. Tolkien was also influenced by his work on Middle English romance, especially in his depictions of the landscapes of Middle Earth, from Lothlórien to the plains of Gorgoroth, and his depictions of Elves (particularly Galadriel and Arwen). Also available in *The Keys of Middle Earth* are excerpts from the romances *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Gawain*, and the religious poem *Pearl*, to be read alongside the chapters dealing with Rivendell, Lothlórien, and Mordor, in a similar exercise to that described above for Old English texts. Tolkien also, however, completed a full-length translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* early in his academic career, and older students can engage with his translation directly. What similarities and differences can be found? How do Tolkien and the Gawain poet approach landscape, privation, suffering, wrongdoing, court culture, the power of the feminine?

Creating a Legendarium

The Lord of the Rings changed the fantasy genre in that it created an expectation that fantasy writers would offer a complete and fully-realised secondary world, with a history, languages, and fleshed-out social structures. As a final, creative project, students can try their hand at creating their own secondary world. This world can be as imaginative as students like in its geography, wildlife, civilisations, types of beings, and cultures. Elements could include, depending the age and interest of students: a map of all or part of their invented world, glossaries of invented vocabulary words with shared morphemes, original poems, historical texts, artwork of various kinds, narrative fiction. Throughout the project, students should be asked to consider and justify their imaginative choices: does their world have internal consistency? How has the landscape of their invented world shaped its cities and peoples? How did their invented language(s) develop, and what is their relationship to the history of places in which they are spoken? What elements must one consider when creating a secondary world? What details make a secondary world 'believable' or give it verisimilitude, and why? They should also respond with direct analysis of *LOTR*: what feels 'real' about Middle-earth, and what makes it feel consistent? Are there places where Middle-earth is inconsistent?

This project also gives students the opportunity to examine the maps and artwork Tolkien created throughout his work on *LOTR* and his textual explorations of Middle-earth more broadly. Galleries of Tolkien's artwork and useful articles explaining some of the mechanics of his language invention can be found at **https://www.tolkienestate.com/en/painting.html**.

Resources for Teachers and Advanced Students: Information on Tolkien's Life and Career and the Composition of *The Silmarillion*

- Stuart D. Lee, ed. *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).
    - Particularly chapters 1 (a brief but thorough biography), 6 (the mythological history of Middle-earth), and 9 (on *LOTR* itself)
- Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Allen & Unwin, 1977).

- Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, eds. *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
    - Particularly 4.4-4.13
- Useful Oxford Fantasy podcasts: the nine-episode series 'Tolkien at Oxford', available at **https://writersinspire.org/themes/tolkien-oxford**; the five-episode series 'Tolkien's Medieval Languages'; the two-episode series 'Tolkien Archive and Exhibition at Bodleian'; individual episodes 'Tolkien's Turning Point: Tolkien and the History of Tongues', 'Tolkien's Beowulf and the Critics', 'J. R. R. Tolkien: Medievalist and Mythmaker' and 'The Stories of Lewis Carroll, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Philip Pullman', all available at **https://writersinspire.org/themes/fantasy-literature**.