Teaching Guide:
J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

Student Level: Year 6 and up

Learning Objectives
- Develop a deeper understanding of Tolkien's core literary preoccupations
- Practice close reading
- Practice identifying recurring themes across chapters and inferring authorial lessons from narrative events
- Develop an understanding of narratorial omniscience and narrative tone
- Identify and compare different models of heroism
- Understand the elements of a quest plot and the Hero's Journey

Readings to prepare outside of class: Chapters in *The Hobbit* average about 20 pages, and the vocabulary and style are accessible; students can move through it at whatever pace the teacher deems appropriate for their reading level, depending too on the frequency of classes. A suggested division is Chapter 1 on its own for a first class, then moving through three chapters at a time for a further six classes.

For a single class on the text, students should focus on Chapter 5, 'Riddles in the Dark', or Chapters 12-14 (Bilbo's meeting with Smaug and the death of the dragon). A single week of three classes can focus on Chapters 1, 5, and 12-14.

Narrative Summary of *The Hobbit*

Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit (hobbits are a small people who live in well-furnished hobbit holes, enjoy a good meal, and dislike adventures and the unexpected) living unbothered in his comfortable home at Bag End. While smoking on his porch one morning, he receives a visit from Gandalf the wizard, whose conversation flusters him. Bilbo invites him to tea the next day and escapes indoors. Gandalf, irked and amused by Bilbo, puts a secret mark on his front door, indicating that Bilbo is a burglar in need of work and looking for excitement. The next day, thirteen Dwarves (Dwalin, Balin, Fili, Kili, Ori, Nori, Dori, Oin, Gloin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and their leader Thorin Oakenshield) show up for tea, along with Gandalf, and the hapless Bilbo provides hospitality. The dwarves reveal they want to hire Bilbo to journey with them to the Lonely Mountain and help them recover their treasure from the dragon Smaug. Smaug destroyed the Dwarvish kingdom ruled by Thorin's grandfather Thror and has sat on their golden hoard ever since. Bilbo feels a sudden rush of bravery and accepts.

After oversleeping and nearly missing the start of the adventure, Bilbo sets out with the dwarves. The company is nearly eaten by three trolls when Bilbo attempts to burgle them and is caught, but Gandalf tricks the trolls by throwing his voice so that they stay up arguing until dawn, when the sunlight turns them to stone. Bilbo, Thorin, and Gandalf acquire Elvish swords from the trolls' hoard. The party stops at Rivendell, the home of the Elf Lord Elrond; Elrond discovers moon-runes on the map the Dwarves are using, which reveal the existence of a secret door into the Lonely Mountain. They proceed eastward into the Misty Mountains,

and, taking shelter from a storm, are captured by goblins and taken under the mountain to be killed. Gandalf again helps free them and as they escape Bilbo falls, hits his head, and is left behind in the dark tunnel.

Alone in the dark, Bilbo finds a ring on the ground and puts it in his pocket. He continues down the tunnel until he arrives at an underground lake. A creature called Gollum, who lives on a tiny island in the middle of the lake, arrives to investigate (and consider eating) Bilbo. The two end up engaging in a riddle contest: if Gollum wins, he gets to eat Bilbo, and if Bilbo wins, Gollum will show him the way out of the mountain. After a tense contest, Bilbo stumps Gollum with the question 'What have I got in my pocket?' which is technically a cheat. Gollum goes back to his island to find his prized possession, a ring that makes the wearer invisible, and kill Bilbo. He cannot find the ring and becomes distressed — and suspicious. Bilbo realises Gollum means to attack him and flees, Gollum in hot pursuit. Bilbo trips, the ring slips onto his finger, and Gollum runs right past him; Bilbo realises he is invisible. Bilbo follows Gollum to the exit, takes pity on him, and decides not to kill him. Instead he leaps over Gollum's head and exits the mountain, finding the Dwarves again.

The goblins and their Warg allies (large, intelligent, evil wolves) pursue the party that night, but they are rescued by gigantic Eagles, who owe Gandalf a debt. The company stays for several days with a man called Beorn, who can shape-shift into a bear, before heading on to Mirkwood, which they must cross to reach the Lonely Mountain. Gandalf departs on an errand to defeat an evil sorcerer called the Necromancer, and the rest of the party enters Mirkwood without him. After a long time in the dark and miserable forest, low on supplies, they disregard Gandalf and Beorn's orders not to leave the path, trying to join a feast held by the Wood-Elves. They get lost and are captured by giant spiders; Bilbo proves his worth by rescuing all the Dwarves and killing many of the spiders. The Elves, under the leadership of King Thranduil, then capture the Dwarves and imprison them. Bilbo sneaks invisibly into Thranduil's palace and eventually manages to free the Dwarves by packing them all into empty wine-barrels the Elves send down the river to Lake-town.

The party reveal their identities in Lake-town and are welcomed by the people, who are excited to hear that someone is finally going to kill the dragon (though some are skeptical). They arrive at the Lonely Mountain and struggle to find the secret door — until Bilbo, hearing a thrush knocking on a stone, looks up and sees the last sunlight of Durin's Day shining on the cliff wall, revealing the entrance. Bilbo is sent down to encounter Smaug, whom he answers in clever riddles, and steals a golden cup from the hoard. Smaug is enraged by the theft, and suspects that the party had the help of Lake-town. He leaves the Lonely Mountain unguarded — which the Dwarves enter to escape his fire — and goes to destroy Lake-town. The Thrush, part of an ancient race of birds who can communicate with men, hears Bilbo describe a bare patch in Smaug's treasure-crusted armour, and conveys this information to a Lake-town man called Bard, a descendant of the Lords of Dale, who shoots and kills Smaug as the dragon ravages the town.

The men of Lake-town go to the Dwarves in the Lonely Mountain and make historical claims on a portion of the treasure, which they want to use to rebuild the town. Thranduil and the Wood-Elves also arrive, also making historical claims on the treasure. The Dwarves refuse all comers and instead summon Thorin's kinsman Dáin for military support. Thorin is sinking deeper into 'dragon sickness' and obsession with the gold. Bilbo, attempting to avoid war, steals the prized

Arkenstone, greatest treasure of Thror, from the hoard and delivers it up to the men of Lake-town, who are now accompanied by Gandalf, and Thorin is forced to broker peace to get the Arkenstone back. The three assembled armies, now in truce, are suddenly attacked by an army of goblins and Wargs from the Misty Mountains, come to claim the treasure for themselves. The Battle of Five Armies ensues, and the Dwarves, Elves, and Men prevail with the help of the eagles, though they sustain heavy losses, including Thorin himself. Thorin forgives Bilbo on his deathbed, and Bilbo and Gandalf return to Bag End, bearing Bilbo's share of the treasure. There they discover that the other hobbits have assumed Bilbo dead and are auctioning off his belongings. Bilbo manages to chase down all his silverware and settle back into Bag End, but the other hobbits ever after considered him strange for having gone on an adventure.

Discussion Questions By Chapter

Chapter 1

1. The first sentence of *The Hobbit* is famous. What's so compelling about it? What do we learn about hobbits in the very first paragraph, and how does Tolkien set a tone for the book with his opening?
2. How would you describe the 'narrative voice' of this text?
3. What does the 'good morning' conversation (and the begging of pardons) reveal about Bilbo and Gandalf? What is Tolkien showing us about language here?
4. How and why does Tolkien integrate verse and song in this chapter? Why do the Dwarves sing?
5. What do Bilbo's Baggins and Took sides represent? When do they awaken?
6. What's wrong with the dragon's attitude to treasure? How do the dragon and the Dwarves relate to treasure differently?
7. What is the structure of a quest plot? How is *The Hobbit* setting up its quest plot? What aside from the treasure do we expect will be achieved?

Chapters 2-4

1. *The Hobbit* is a travel story as much as a quest; its subtitle is *There and Back Again*. What is the experience of leaving home like for Bilbo? What sort of character development does travel allow in this telling?
2. What recognisable fairy tale elements can we find in the troll episode?
3. Why is Rivendell called the Last Homely House?
4. Why does Tolkien bother to give histories to Gandalf, Thorin, and Bilbo's swords? What does the reference to Gondolin add to the story, and how does it heighten the stakes in the confrontation with the Great Goblin?

Chapter 5

1. What kinds of riddles do Gollum and Bilbo each tell? Are there themes that unify each of their riddles?
2. What kind of encounter do Gollum and Bilbo have initially? What's the role of curiosity in this encounter? What is their interaction like, and is there any kind of emotional connection between them, however briefly?
3. How do Gollum and Bilbo manage to answer one another's riddles? What happens to Gollum's attitude during the riddle game?
4. Why does Bilbo take pity on Gollum? Does Gollum deserve pity?

5. What lessons is the reader meant to take away from this whole encounter?
6. Was Bilbo right to take the ring?

Chapters 6-7

1. Intelligent animals feature significantly in these chapters. What are these animals like? What kinds of morality do they exhibit? Where do their loyalties lie? How are these characters similar to or different from other 'talking animals' you've encountered in fantasy texts?
2. Why doesn't Bilbo tell the Dwarves about the ring?
3. We saw fairy tale elements in the troll episode; what fairy tale and folkloric elements can be found in Beorn and his hall?
4. What kind of a person is Beorn? How does he compare to other allies the party has encountered?
5. How does Gandalf's trick with the Dwarves coming to Beorn's house mimic the way they showed up at Bag End in Chapter 1? What's the importance of hospitality in these instances?

Chapters 8-11

1. What does it suggest about the black river that Bombur dreams of a woodland king? What is the relationship between the Wood Elves and the forest like?
2. What tropes does Tolkien draw on in his depiction of the Wood Elves? What folkloric themes can be seen here (e.g. the three feasts)?
3. What does it mean that Bilbo names his sword at this particular moment?
4. Look up the words *attercop* and *tomnoddy*. What do they mean and where do they come from?
5. What do we make of the different reactions to Thorin's arrival in Lake-town? What sort of a character is the Master — is he a villain, and if so, what does Tolkien suggest is villainous about him? What foreshadowing is being done here?
6. What kind of character development do we get from Bilbo in these chapters, from the spider encounter to the barrel plot to the finding of the secret door, and what spurs it?

Chapters 12-14

1. Why does Tolkien go out of his way to tell us 'dwarves aren't heroes'? What does he mean by that? Do you agree? What is 'heroic' by the standards of *The Hobbit*? What kind of heroism does Bard demonstrate and why does Tolkien describe him as 'grim' repeatedly?
2. What does Tolkien mean when he says of Bilbo, 'He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone'?
3. What is the power of treasure in these chapters? What effect does it have on those who desire it and encounter it? How does the treasure serve, literally and metaphorically, as Smaug's armour?
4. Why does Smaug react as he does to the loss of the cup? What's wrong with the 'dragonish' response to treasure ownership?
5. What kind of wordplay does Bilbo engage in with Smaug? How does he transform his adventures?

6. What is the 'dragon-spell', and what is 'dragon-talk'? Is Smaug the only one who engages in 'dragon-talk' in these chapters? Can we draw parallels between Smaug and other characters (e.g. the Master)?
7. How are the relationships between Bilbo and the dwarves shifting in these chapters?
8. Why does Tolkien have the thrush deliver the crucial information about Smaug's weakness to Bard?

Chapters 15-19

1. Why does Tolkien offer us the contrast between the mirth and fires of the men and Elves and Thorin's blocked-up mountain fortress? What is the song for Thorin like, and what does it include or not include?
2. What is 'the power that gold has upon which a dragon has long brooded'?
3. What does the Arkenstone symbolise in these chapters, and what does it bring out in our various main characters? Was Bilbo right to give it to Bard? What does the decision tell us about his character? What kind of morality does he demonstrate?
4. Who deserves the treasure, and why?
5. How does Tolkien use the goblin army to resolve a seemingly intractable dispute? Does this solve or dodge the moral complexities of the situation?
6. What do we make of Thorin's deathbed apology, and his statement 'If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world'? Is the narrative punishing him for not realising this truth sooner? How do we see this idea played out (or not) in *The Hobbit*?
7. What do you think of Bilbo's final poem? Do you agree with Gandalf that he's not the hobbit he used to be, and why does this particular poem lead Gandalf to say so?
8. What do we make of Gandalf's final suggestion that a higher power was at work in these events? Is Bilbo 'only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all'?

Further Reading and Writing Exercises:

Dragons

Smaug has become an archetype: the way Tolkien portrays his dragon in *The Hobbit* has had a huge influence on European fantasy in the twentieth century. Students should work together to create lists of Smaug's most important features, before embarking on one of the following exercises:

Exercise A: Students can compare Smaug to the portrayals of dragons in another fantasy series of their choice, presenting their work in class. Younger students may particularly enjoy *How to Train Your Dragon*, *The Neverending Story*, and Tamora Pierce's *Immortals* series; middle-grade students might look at Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* books, *Dragonriders of Pern*, the Percy Jackson books, Laurence Yep's *Dragon* series, Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels, *Harry Potter*, or Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle*; older students may be interested in selections from *A Song of Ice and Fire/Game of Thrones*, Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* books, or Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*. These are only suggestions, and students will bring their own options to the table.

Older students can also explore some of Tolkien's Norse and early English source material. They can read *Beowulf* ll. 2200-2323 in Seamus Heaney's

accessible 1999 translation, which describes the theft of a gold cup from a dragon's hoard and the dragon's subsequent rampage. They can also read Chapters 13-15 and 18-20 (all very short) in *Völsunga saga* (available for free in R. G. Finch's field-standard translation here: http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Volsunga%20saga.pdf), which tell the story of a young hero who slays a wily talking dragon and learns to speak with birds. How does Tolkien adapt medieval material for *The Hobbit*? What changes does he make and what details does he keep? What can we learn about Tolkien as an author from these decisions?

Exercise B: Students should research a dragon or giant serpent tradition outside of western Europe to compare with Tolkien's Norse-inspired model, with the goal of exploring the notable commonalities and striking differences among these giant serpent traditions. Options include but are not limited to: the lóng (found in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean traditions), naga (found in Indian, Cambodian, Indonesian, and Malay traditions), imugi (Korean), ryū (Japanese), and zmey (in Russian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Czech, Polish, Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, and Romanian traditions), as well as a variety of serpent deities — e.g. Quetzalcoatl, Xiuhcoatl, Kukulkan, and Q'uq'umatz in Aztec and Mayan mythology, or Apophis in ancient Egyptian mythology — and legendary serpents. Such presentations can be done as group or individual work, and the level of detail they entail can be adjusted by age group.

Riddles in the Dark

One of the most important set-pieces in *The Hobbit* is the ancient riddle game that Bilbo and Gollum play under the mountain. Students can look collectively at the riddles Tolkien offers in Chapter 5 as well as bring in riddles they already know or have encountered elsewhere. Examining all of these riddles together, students can answer the following questions:

- What makes a riddle more than just a difficult question?
- What do the riddles under examination have in common? What features do they share?
- How do riddles 'work'? How do they manage to be both entirely true and entirely misleading at the same time? Invite students to point to, and analyse, specific lines as examples.
- How do riddles engage with an audience? What other kinds of texts ask the audience to contribute to their meaning?
- What kind of thinking do riddles ask you to do? How do riddles ask us to see the world around us differently?

Students can then choose an everyday object and write their own riddle about it. Remind them that every statement in their riddle has to be true of the answer without revealing it. Invite students to guess the answers to one another's riddles.

Older students can read, in translation, some of the Old English and Old Norse riddles Tolkien was drawing on to create his riddle game. A short and relevant selection can be found in *The Keys of Middle-earth* (see citation and chapter numbers below).

Farmer Giles of Ham

Tolkien wrote this comic pseudo-medieval fable in 1937 (reading it to its first audience at the Worcester College Lovelace Club in 1938 – check out the minutes

of the club meeting **here**). It has some important similarities to *The Hobbit*, including an unlikely rural hero, a lot of wordplay, and a wily, speaking dragon. Tolkien uses *Farmer Giles*, however, to make fun of medieval dragon-slaying narratives.

Students can discuss: In what ways does *Farmer Giles* parallel *The Hobbit*? In what ways is it different? How does Tolkien use Giles and Bilbo to comment on ideas about what a hero should be? How does Tolkien use humour in *Farmer Giles* and *The Hobbit*, and how does humour work differently in these texts?

Older students can compare actual medieval stories of dragon slaying like *Sir Eglamour* — available for free on **TEAMS Middle English Text Series** — to explore the ways Tolkien parodies the genre.

Resources for Teachers and Advanced Students on Tolkien and *The Hobbit*

- Stuart D. Lee, ed. *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).
    - Particularly chapters 1 (a brief but thorough biography) and chs. 8 (on *The Hobbit*) and 27 (on the Hero's Journey)
- Mark Atherton, *There and Back Again: J. R. R. Tolkien and the Origins of The Hobbit* (I. B. Tauris, 2014).
- 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 4.3-4.5
- Useful Oxford Fantasy podcasts: Rafael J. Pascual's lecture 'What Tolkien Learnt from Beowulf', available at **https://writersinspire.org/themes/fantasy-literature**; the nine-episode series 'Tolkien at Oxford', available at **https://writersinspire.org/themes/tolkien-oxford**; and episodes 'Writing The Hobbit: A Perilous Quest' and 'The Hobbit at the Bodleian: World Book Day' in the Bodleian Libraries' BODcasts, available at **https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/bodleian-libraries-bodcasts**.