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WALKING TO WISDOM

LITERATURE GUIDE SERIES

The Return of the King

J.R.R. Tolkien

by Hannah Eagleson



Inklings Collection



Walking to Wisdom Literature Guide: The Return of the King

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WALKING TO WISDOM LITERATURE GUIDE: *THE RETURN OF THE KING*

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INTRODUCTION TO STUDENTS

Dear Students,

We are excited that you have the privilege of reading *The Return of the King* alongside a mentor (the writer of this guide) who will lead you “further up and further in” (C.S. Lewis’s words in *The Last Battle*). We aim to give you a delightful experience with this book and, in the process, to share practices that we have learned that will help you become a good reader:

- reading carefully
- taking time to absorb a book
- paying attention to details as well as to great ideas over the whole book
- learning to mark up a book
- taking a few notes while reading
- learning to ask and answer good questions
- synthesizing those questions together in a piece of writing or an engaging project

If you spend a year doing all of the Inklings courses, you will not only collect some of the most important books and thoughts, but you will also have increased your abilities and pleasures as a reader.

C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Dorothy Sayers (two members and a friend of the Inklings whose work you will study in the Walking to Wisdom Literature Guides: The Inklings Collection) wrote nonfiction as well as fiction, and we begin your reading of fiction with a few select nonfiction essays they wrote on topics that overlap with the topics in the book you are reading. Part of their remarkable legacy is that they wrote about many of the same great ideas in stories, plays, and poems and in nonfiction essays. This means that reading the ideas without the stories in these nonfiction works, or “context essays,” will be a significant help to you in understanding them and in fully exploring the characters, plot, and imagery. American writer Flannery O’Connor said, “Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than if we have trembled with Abraham as he held a knife over Isaac.” This is what stories do—they give us an experience of certain knowledge, which is why how we feel about the book is part of what the book is teaching us. We have kept these things in heart and mind while making this guide for you.

We have suggested two reading schedules (page 3)—one that allows sixteen days to study the book and another that allows twenty-one days. Plan to double that or to add extra time for writing and enrichment activities (these begin on page 73). Your teacher will know what is best for your schedule.

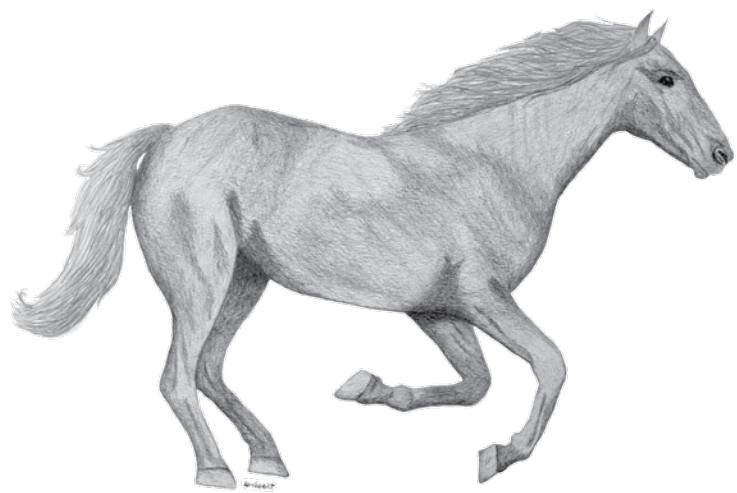
We have provided you with some space for answering questions, but we recommend that you also keep your thoughts, notes, and musings in a three-ring binder (or on the computer). For the life questions, you may want to keep a separate journal for meditative contemplation. We would like you to have as much room as you need because you will find that the Inklings writers require a lot of space! It is highly recommended that you look up unfamiliar words in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Return of the King* and keep a journal of these new vocabulary words and definitions as you work through the book and the guide.

You have the option of studying one guide or a few, or taking a year to study them all to fulfill your British literature requirement for high school English. Enjoy the study!

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEACHER

TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION
DELETE THIS PAGE IN STUDENT BOOK

Teacher's Introduction
Delete this page in student book



SCOPE AND SEQUENCE FOR THE WALKING TO WISDOM LITERATURE GUIDES: THE INKLINGS COLLECTION

C.S. Lewis

Context Essays (selections from these are read at the beginning of each guide): excerpts from *Mere Christianity*,¹ *The Weight of Glory*,² *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature*,³ and “Theology in Stories” by Gilbert Meilaender⁴

- *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*⁵
- *The Last Battle*⁶
- *The Screwtape Letters*⁷
- *Till We Have Faces*⁸

Dorothy Sayers

Context Essays: excerpts from *Letters to a Diminished Church*⁹

The Man Born to Be King (twelve-play cycle integrating the four Gospels)¹⁰

J.R.R. Tolkien

- *The Fellowship of the Ring*¹¹
- *The Two Towers*¹²
- *The Return of the King*¹³

-
1. The Walking to Wisdom Literature Guides: The Inklings Collection is keyed to the following editions: C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
 2. C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
 3. C.S. Lewis, *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Books, 1966).
 4. Gilbert Meilaender, “Theology in Stories: C.S. Lewis and the Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Word and World* 1/3 (1981): 222, http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/1-3_Experience/1-3_Meilaender.pdf.
 5. C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
 6. Lewis, *Chronicles*.
 7. C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
 8. C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1980).
 9. Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2004).
 10. Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Written for Broadcasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943). Reprinted with permission by Classical Academic Press, 2014.
 11. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2005).
 12. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2005).
 13. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2005).

THE INKLINGS

The Inklings was an informal literary discussion group associated with the University of Oxford, England, for nearly two decades between the early 1930s and late 1949.¹ The Inklings were writers, including C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams, who shared a love of similar stories and a remarkable commitment to ideas they shared. Their literary philosophies tended to depart from the period in which they were writing (modernist, 1900–1950) as did their cultural values. They liked to walk together and meet regularly to read their work aloud to one another.

“Properly speaking,” wrote Warren Lewis (brother of C.S.), “the Inklings was neither a club nor a literary society, though it partook of the nature of both. There were no rules, officers, agendas, or formal elections.”² While Dorothy Sayers did not attend the meetings herself, partly because she didn’t live in the same town or teach at Oxford, some have called her an Inkling based on her friendship with Lewis and Charles Williams. Her correspondence with both was avid and their work concerned with many of the same subjects, characters, and plots. They were a great encouragement to one another. Lewis even read Sayers’s play cycle, *The Man Born to Be King*, each year during the Lenten period. Therefore, although Sayers was not an “official” member of the Inklings, but rather a close friend of Lewis and Williams, we have included her in the Walking to Wisdom Literature Guides: The Inklings Collection, considering her an Inkling “in spirit,” which is to say that she shared the same ideas and aspirations and engaged in similar writing projects. Had she lived in Oxford, we suspect she would have attended the informal meetings of this remarkable group.

Readings and discussions of the members’ unfinished works were the principal purposes of meetings. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet*, and Williams’s *All Hallows’ Eve* were among the novels first read to the Inklings. Tolkien’s fictional Notion Club (see *Sauron Defeated*) was based on the Inklings. Meetings were not all serious; the Inklings amused themselves by having competitions to see who could read notoriously bad prose for the longest without laughing.³

Until late 1949, Inklings readings and discussions usually occurred during Thursday evenings in C.S. Lewis’s college rooms at Magdalen College. The Inklings and friends were also known to gather informally on Tuesdays at midday at a local public house, the Eagle and Child.

We hope that you will keep the spirit of the Inklings alive in your own study of this guide by working out your own responses to their work in community and conversation as well as laboring over your writing and sharing it with fellow travelers seeking to walk a similar path. Consider studying this course online at Scholé Academy (classicalacademicpress.com/online-courses/).

-
1. Clyde S. Kilby and Marjorie Lamp Mead, eds., *Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 230.
 2. Bruce L. Edwards, *Apologist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, vol. 3 of *C.S. Lewis: Life, Works, and Legacy* (Westport, CT: Praegar, 2007), 279.
 3. “War of Words over World’s Worst Writer,” *Culture Northern Ireland*, May 9, 2008, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/1739/war-of-words-over-world-s-worst-writer?search=inklings&rpg=1>.

DAILY READING OUTLINES FOR J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE RETURN OF THE KING*

Schedule 1

Book 5

- Day 1: Context essay “On Fairy-Stories” (or reread context essays of choice)
Day 2: Chapter 1—“Minas Tirith”
Day 3: Chapter 2—“The Passing of the Grey Company”
Day 4: Chapter 3—“The Muster of Rohan”
Day 5: Chapters 4–5—“The Siege of Gondor” and “The Ride of the Rohirrim”
Day 6: Chapters 6–7—“The Battle of the Pelennor Fields” and “The Pyre of Denethor”
Day 7: Chapter 8—“The Houses of Healing”
Day 8: Chapters 9–10—“The Last Debate” and “The Black Gate Opens”

Book 6

- Day 9: Chapter 1—“The Tower of Cirith Ungol”
Day 10: Chapter 2—“The Land of Shadow”
Day 11: Chapter 3—“Mount Doom”
Day 12: Chapters 4–5—“The Field of Cormallen” and “The Steward and the King”
Day 13: Chapter 6—“Many Partings”
Day 14: Chapter 7—“Homeward Bound”
Day 15: Chapter 8—“The Scouring of the Shire”
Day 16: Chapter 9—“The Grey Havens”

Schedule 2

Book 5

- Days 1–2: Context essay “On Fairy-Stories” (or reread context essays of choice)
Day 3: Chapter 1—“Minas Tirith”
Day 4: Chapter 2—“The Passing of the Grey Company”
Day 5: Chapter 3—“The Muster of Rohan”
Day 6: Chapter 4—“The Siege of Gondor”
Day 7: Chapter 5—“The Ride of the Rohirrim”
Day 8: Chapter 6—“The Battle of the Pelennor Fields”
Day 9: Chapter 7—“The Pyre of Denethor”
Day 10: Chapter 8—“The Houses of Healing”
Day 11: Chapter 9—“The Last Debate”
Day 12: Chapter 10—“The Black Gate Opens”

Book 6

- Day 13: Chapter 1—“The Tower of Cirith Ungol”
Day 14: Chapter 2—“The Land of Shadow”
Day 15: Chapter 3—“Mount Doom”
Day 16: Chapter 4—“The Field of Cormallen”
Day 17: Chapter 5—“The Steward and the King”
Day 18: Chapter 6—“Many Partings”
Day 19: Chapter 7—“Homeward Bound”
Day 20: Chapter 8—“The Scouring of the Shire”
Day 21: Chapter 9—“The Grey Havens”

ELEMENTS IN THE LITERATURE GUIDE

Make Notes: Possess the Book

Becoming a reader is all about learning to pay attention and gather the details to relish and realize the significance and unity of what you are reading. Try using the following symbols or making up your own system that covers the same basics. Underline interesting passages. Write in the margins so that you can go back to reference what you wrote to make your Great Ideas Quotes pages, answer questions, hold discussions, and support points you make in your writing assignments. Here is a simple marking system that we have found effective:

- * This is important or delightful.
- ? I have a question.
- ?? I'm confused.
- ! This is surprising or exciting to me.
- T This could relate to one of the themes or motifs of the book.
- ✓ This relates to something else I have read.
- X This is part of the conflict or the problem of the story.
- C This is significant in defining this character.

Tracing the Great Ideas Quotes

While you read, find quotes related to the given great ideas topics (or themes) for each unit, so that you can trace them all the way through the book. (Please remember that you are welcome to find your own great ideas themes in addition to ours.) Then be on the lookout for how they are worked out in each particular context. Write the quotes in the Tracing the Great Ideas section of each unit. See the first unit (page 15) for examples of how to record the quotations. At the end of the guide you will find these references helpful as you create a thesis. You will reflect upon the themes of the course and choose one from which you will develop an argumentative essay.

The following are summaries of some of the themes in the novel and a few questions worth asking as you start to study Tolkien's world. As you read, your definitions of these themes and what Tolkien does with them will grow, so this is only a starting point. Many of these themes are related, and it is useful to ask questions about how they relate to each other. The theme of goodness and the theme of friendship are deeply related in Tolkien, for instance, since part of the nature of goodness in Tolkien's world is to care for relationships with others. However, in this section, we have broken those themes down into separate strands for clarity. As you read and discuss, please feel free to explore the relationships among themes. You may also write your final paper about the relationship between two or more themes, if you wish.

Great Ideas in *The Return of the King*

Good and evil

The nature of good and evil is one of the strongest themes in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (abbreviated hereafter as *LOTR*), of which *The Return of the King* is the third book. The story is about a vast struggle between those who are seeking good and an ancient and evil foe who is gathering strength again.

Questions to be asking: What is the nature of goodness? What is the nature of evil? What does it mean for a person to be good or evil? What does it mean for a place to be good or corrupt?

At this point in the trilogy, it is clear that evil is powerful and self-seeking. It desires to please itself by destroying or dominating others. Evil is also seductive. It often tempts someone through a desire to do

good or enjoy beauty. Power is one of the most seductive aspects of evil, and all the good characters in *The Return of the King* voluntarily choose limits on their power.

Yet for all that, by the time we reach *The Return of the King*, it is clear that a character's relationship to good and evil can be extremely complicated in Tolkien's world. At the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boromir succumbs to the temptation of the Ring, but after being foiled he has a change of heart and dies courageously defending Merry and Pippin. Through much of *The Two Towers*, we see Gollum's conflict with himself. He is deeply twisted by the evil of the Ring that he carried for so many years, and yet there is something of his older, more innocent self left also, and it becomes more evident in response to Frodo's kindness.

Pride and humility

Deeply related to the theme of good and evil in *LOTR* is the theme of pride and humility. Pride in *LOTR* is the temptation to put confidence in and emphasis on the self, to trust one's own wisdom and goodness instead of being open to the learning and strength of others. Pride is a temptation for all beings, even the very good ones, but it always leads to evil in Tolkien if it is not resisted. Humility includes a recognition of one's own limits and a sense of the goodness and wisdom of other beings. Those who continue to choose goodness in Tolkien are deeply humble. They keep making the choice to seek and honor goods outside themselves.

The Fellowship of the Ring includes many examples of leaders who are humble enough to turn away from offers of vast power—Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, Aragorn, etc. It also has examples of those who are seduced by offers of power, such as Saruman. And there is at least one character, Boromir, who is lured by power but does turn back and do good.

In *The Two Towers*, we see consistently the importance of humility. Gandalf comes back from death far greater than he was before, but he remains humble. He does not desire to master, but to serve, and it is largely in this that his greatness consists. Frodo continues his quest, and it is his humility that allows him to bear the greatest burden of Middle-earth in his time.

Providence

Another strong though subtle theme in *LOTR* is a sense of what might be called providence. In Christian thought, providence is the idea that God is guiding the world and working its events out toward the good. While *LOTR* is not interacting as directly with Christian theology as a work such as C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, it is a book deeply shaped by Tolkien's Christian theological beliefs. Though *LOTR* does not present a theology of Middle-earth, it does suggest that in some way the events of the world are being directed or guided by something great and good.

By the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there are hints at least that some good being or force is directing events. We learn that the Ring did not come to Frodo by accident, but that he was meant to have it in some way. Though it is not clear who exactly meant Frodo to have it, there is the sense that something good is at work and may help him and the Fellowship.

In *The Two Towers*, there is still a sense of mysterious purposes that may be fulfilled by something beyond the individuals who struggle to do their task in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo's belief in this sense of purpose is perhaps most evident in his allowing Gollum to be his guide toward Mordor. While both Frodo and Sam know that Gollum may not be trustworthy, Frodo also sees that he may have some role to play as Gandalf foretold. Continue to look for ways that this theme unfolds across *The Return of the King*.

Individual freedom/choice

While *LOTR* has a sense of something good and powerful directing events and working them out toward some end, it also has a strong sense of the necessity and power of individual choices. Individual freedom is a major theme of the book, as well as the value of specific choices freely made by each person. Some great good is directing events, but it takes into account individual choices rather than overriding them.

In the trilogy, individual choice has become very important. Boromir chooses to defend Merry and Pippin even after his effort to take the Ring from Frodo, and Aragorn praises his choice. Frodo chooses to bear the Ring, and keeps making that choice even when it is very difficult.

In *The Two Towers*, the responsibility and the weight of individual choices is even more strongly felt. Gollum spends much of the book torn between what is left of his better nature and the evil that he has been tempted into by long years with the Ring. Frodo has many difficult choices to make about how to continue on his way. Many of the other characters, such as Théoden and Faramir, face important decisions; what they choose will deeply affect the fate of Middle-earth.

This theme of individual choice deepens even further in *The Return of the King*. Watch for ways that it grows as you read.

Forgiveness/redemption

Another strong theme in *LOTR* is the goodness of forgiveness and what might be called redemption, the transformation of evil actions into good results by the work of providence. This theme finds fuller expression later in the trilogy. Redemption always involves the interplay of providence and individual choice in *LOTR*. Questions to be asking: What is the nature of forgiveness? What does forgiveness allow in terms of individual lives and grander ongoing stories?

So far the trilogy has shown a great value for forgiveness and has suggested that a very deep redemption is possible. Near the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Gandalf tells Frodo how important mercy is and how good it is that Bilbo spared Gollum, who may yet be cured and/or have some part to play in the story of the Ring. Near the end of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Aragorn forgives Boromir for trying to take the Ring from Frodo and praises his good actions before Boromir dies.

Forgiveness and redemption matter greatly in *The Two Towers*. Frodo's ability to be compassionate to Gollum grows, and Gollum in response moves closer to the possibility of redemption, the hope that he might be able to find the person he lost when he committed murder and took the Ring so many centuries ago. These themes matter perhaps even more deeply in *The Return of the King*, as you will see.

Fellowship/friendship

What it means to be in friendship and in fellowship is another major theme of the book. The word *fellowship* in the title of the first novel comes to have a very deep meaning by the end of the series. It means a participation in the same central quest, a sense of shared suffering and celebration, deep concern for others, the knowledge that experience is shared and that the experience of others in fellowship with you is deeply intertwined with your own. Friendship is a profoundly important aspect of that fellowship.

In the first book of the trilogy, we begin to see how deep the fellowship is. The Company is fiercely loyal to Frodo, and almost everyone in it is willing to follow him into Mordor itself, though that is not what ends up happening. The members of the Company are also loyal to one another and knit together by friendship. They grieve deeply when Gandalf, one of their company, is lost in Moria, and they begin to form friendships even across old disagreements. In spite of the tension between Elves and Dwarves, for instance, Legolas and Gimli become good friends.

In *The Two Towers*, we see how the Fellowship continues to matter even when its members are no longer together. The members of the Fellowship who do not go to Mordor continue to look for ways to aid Frodo from a distance, and they continue to be faithful to each other. Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli go on a long journey to try to rescue Merry and Pippin, for instance. And of course the friendship and fellowship shared by Sam and Frodo grows only more evident as they struggle toward Mordor together.

Continue to look for ways that fellowship and friendship grow even more important in *The Return of the King*.

Heroism

Another question that is centrally important to *LOTR* is, What is the heroic? In much pre-Christian myth and legend, Greek as well as Anglo-Saxon, an individual hero seems to be centrally important. Single characters such as Beowulf or Odysseus are the main focus of the epics they inhabit, and the plot of the book pivots on their choices and actions. *The Fellowship of the Ring* embraces some of the natural virtues of the pagan hero and expands them, but it also challenges them. The book begins with the choosing of a

fellowship, not the choosing of an individual hero. Frodo Baggins is appointed to the central task of the novel, but he is not appointed to it alone.

Questions worth exploring in *The Return of the King* include the following: What does it mean to be a hero? How does Tolkien affirm or challenge traditional notions of the hero? How is heroism intertwined with fellowship for Tolkien?

Frodo is helped throughout *The Fellowship of the Ring* by the Company, and their presence is necessary to his survival and the success of his quest. These themes are emphasized further by the end of the book. Although Frodo tries to steal off and bear the Ring alone, as the solitary hero of many epic stories might do, Sam insists upon coming with him.

In *The Two Towers*, it becomes even clearer that Tolkien's trilogy is not about the solitary hero. Frodo needs the help of Sam, and even of Gollum, to work toward the completion of his task. While the more standard heroic talents and virtues of characters such as Aragorn are helpful in distracting Sauron from Frodo's quest and defending others, they cannot succeed at the most central thing, the destruction of the Ring. Follow this theme as you read *The Return of the King*.

The transcendent

LOTR is full of a sense that beings can confront something beautiful, astonishing, and beyond themselves, and can be moved or changed or often completely undone by that thing. They see its beauty and are moved to longing or wonder. Encounters with the Elves, especially great leaders among them, often bring about this experience in other beings. In Tolkien's work, the transcendent might also be experienced through song or story, or through particular places. Experience of the transcendent is elusive and astonishing and beyond control. The transcendent opens up the experience of those who encounter it and transforms them.

By this point in the trilogy, the characters have had many encounters with the transcendent. Rivendell and Lothlórien are places particularly filled with the transcendent, and the characters are profoundly changed by their experiences in them. Gimli is transformed and undone by meeting the Lady Galadriel.

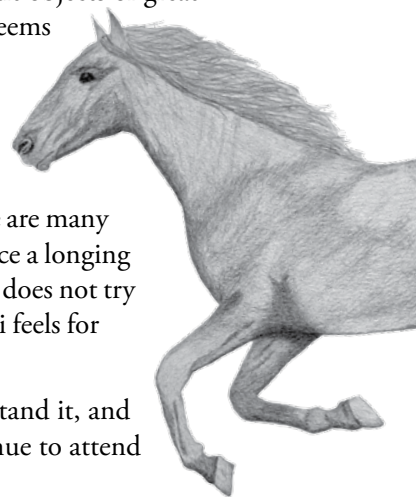
In *The Two Towers*, the transcendent continues to be deeply important. After Gandalf's return from death as Gandalf the White, he bears the transcendent in a way that is more evident than it was before. The memory of Lórien in the experience of the characters also brings the transcendent to mind again and again. The theme grows stronger yet in *The Return of the King*.

Longing

Tolkien's characters (and his readers) often experience a sense of a vast longing, a deep desire for something almost beyond naming or understanding. Frequently characters in *LOTR* experience this when encountering the transcendent. This longing at its best is always a real response to something genuinely good. However, there is also a counterfeit desire produced by things that seem to be beautiful but are in reality dangerous. Evil cannot produce real longing or real transformation, but it can craft objects of great power such as the Ring, and they can sometimes briefly offer a substitute desire which seems like the real thing. As you read, look for differences between real longing and the desire produced by evil.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the frenzied reaction produced by the Ring is an example of misplaced desire. The Ring appears beautiful but is actually evil, and it produces a compulsion toward itself that tempts those around it to desperate actions. However, there are many things in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that are genuinely good and beautiful, and they produce a longing that is greater and truer, an admiration that takes the characters outside of themselves but does not try to force their hands in the same way. The admiration that Sam feels for Elves or that Gimli feels for Galadriel is profoundly transformative, but it moves them toward good instead of evil.

Longing continues to be a central theme in *The Two Towers*. The Ents seem to understand it, and the Elves and characters such as Merry and Pippin grow in their ability to feel it. Continue to attend to it as you read *The Return of the King*.



The everyday

Another important category in *LOTR* is what might be called the everyday. Tolkien celebrates the virtues and pleasures that make everyday life satisfying—neighborly goodwill, the quiet humor of those who know each other over years, the value of treating those around you well in unspectacular ways. Tolkien also recognizes the small troubles and minor irritants of everyday life—the possibility of boredom, the disagreements among neighbors, etc. But on the whole, everyday life is something to be celebrated and cultivated in Tolkien’s world.

While the experience of the transcendent sometimes seems entirely removed from everyday life, Tolkien seems to have a sense that they are more closely related than is often recognized. The everyday roots and balances the experience of the transcendent, and the transcendent makes the everyday richer and deeper.

In the trilogy so far, we have seen the everyday especially through the characters of the Hobbits. They are practical and humble, not seen as among the great, and yet they are the characters who can do the most good for the quest of the Ring. Their everyday humor and humility is also clear throughout *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*.

As you read *The Return of the King* and the story grows even more epic in its scope, continue to watch for the many instances of everyday virtues and everyday humor.

Sorrow/loss

In an imperfect world, loss will always be involved in the effort to seek good, and Tolkien has a strong sense of how deep that loss can be. Tolkien’s world has hope, but it also has a profound recognition of the sorrow in the world.

One of the clearest ways this theme is approached in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is in the sense of loss the Elves feel, especially that of Celeborn and Galadriel. They know that, if Sauron is defeated, the beauty of Lothlórien will fade. And yet there is no other choice—if Sauron succeeds, he will destroy Lórien and everything else good in Middle-earth. They make the choice to seek the end of Sauron’s evil, even though they know that one of the results will be the fading of the power of the Elven rings, and with the rings, Lothlórien. This sense of deep loss is present in much of Tolkien’s world, and this is one of the strongest examples of it.

The Two Towers continues the deep recognition of loss as the Fellowship meets many characters and cultures that have experienced the loss of things. The Ents have lost the Entwives, and they wonder if they will soon lose their entire way of life. The people of Rohan have lost much to Saruman. And the sense that many good things will pass out of the world with the defeat of Sauron remains strong. Continue to watch for this theme, which deepens in many ways across the course of *The Return of the King*.

Story

Story is another central theme of Tolkien’s world. The telling of narratives provides pleasure, solace, and wisdom. Most of the stories in Tolkien’s world have some claim on historical truth within that world—they tend to be stories from personal history, or stories from legend or history that have some basis in reality within that world. They offer examples of other people who have experienced situations similar to those the characters are going through. In identifying with those who have experienced circumstances like theirs (or sometimes even harder ones), the characters find courage and comfort.

Stories are everywhere in Tolkien’s world, as *The Fellowship of the Ring* makes clear. They are told for solace, as near Weathertop; for wisdom, as at the council of Elrond; and for pleasure, as in the Hall of Fire at Rivendell.

In *The Two Towers*, stories continue to be a central theme. Many of the characters speak of what it means to be in a story, or of stories that give them hope or consolation. This theme grows even further in *The Return of the King*.

Journeying/homecoming

Another major theme of the novel is the tension between journeying and coming to or staying at home. Many of the characters are reluctantly propelled upon a quest (although some choose it with excitement). Often the need to protect their homes from disaster is what causes them to journey far away, but there is a sense still of being torn by the desire to be at home and the desire to adventure and to fulfill the quest.

In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the characters all set out on the journey. Near the end, they face the question of where to go next. For Frodo and Sam, the next step is clearly a journey. For Aragorn and Boromir, there is the possibility of going to Minas Tirith, which is a homecoming for Boromir and also for Aragorn, as the rightful king of Gondor. Yet it is a homecoming to a place gravely at risk, so it does not have the peace often associated with homecoming. At the beginning of *The Two Towers*, Frodo has made his choice and slipped away with Sam, but many of the other characters face questions about their next destinations.

In *The Two Towers*, the effects of journeying become clearer. Merry and Pippin grow into more than they have been, and Aragorn and Gandalf are able to rouse the hosts of Rohan to ride to the aid of Gondor because of their journeying. Yet at the same time the longing for home is evident as the characters miss the Shire and as we meet beings such as Treebeard, who have striking homes, even if they do like to wander sometimes. This theme will unfold with even greater power in *The Return of the King*.

Making

What it means to make things is also an important theme in Tolkien. To craft something and to care for it is an important role in Tolkien's world, and the objects produced often have great power and beauty. *Making* matters especially to the cultures of the Elves and Dwarves.

Making has been important in the first book of *LOTR*. The craftsmanship of the Dwarves in Moria, though now ruined, is astonishing. The work of the Elves in making the gifts given in Lórien produces powerful objects that help and delight the Fellowship. The making of the Elven rings has helped to sustain the beauty of Lothlórien for time beyond mortal count.

In *The Two Towers*, the theme of making continues. Gimli tells Legolas about the kind of work he would like to do in the caves near Helm's Deep. The power and beauty of things made by the Elves, such as the cloaks and brooches from Lothlórien, continue to be important in protecting the characters and giving them hope. Keep following this theme as you read *The Return of the King*.

Tell It Back

This is a summary exercise, a method of narrating the chapters orally, or "telling it back." It is a wonderful option that allows you to narrate the content of each chapter by oral summary—with or without a partner(s). A basic element of learning to read that never loses its delight and capacity to delight others, telling it back also helps to develop a strong mental outlining ability.

(Optional) We like it when people make their own illustrations for a book to enter more fully into the lives of the characters. Feel free to do so as you make your way through the book, as a chapter unit summary exercise, or afterward, when you have finished. How you feel about the book and what you are able to imagine about the book is part of what it is teaching you. Tolkien himself made drawings for many of his own characters.

Reading Questions

Reading questions encourage close reading of the text by asking comprehension questions. All answers are found in the text.

Discussion Questions

Discussion questions require you to synthesize the main ideas of the text that may be either explicitly or implicitly stated. Your answers to these should explain Tolkien's perspective, not your own. Depending on your level, learning needs, or preference, the in-depth discussion questions may be discussed with your teacher/fellow students or simply read to inspire critical thinking, or your answers may be written as short answers (one to two paragraphs).

Life Questions—Journaling Assignment

It's difficult to read any of Tolkien's writing without thinking about applying his ideas to your own life. *The Return of the King* is no exception. After each reading section, several "life questions" help you reflect on your own personal experiences and examine your own life in light of ideas from *The Return of the King*. You may write informal responses to the life questions in a separate journal.

Write Your Own Discussion Questions

At the end of each section, create two discussion questions that you think would make for good discussion among classmates, friends, and family. These should not chiefly be questions that have a sentence-long answer, but rather questions that would stimulate a longer exchange of ideas. Use our discussion questions and life questions as guides for writing yours.

INTRODUCTION TO J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND HIS WRITINGS

J.R.R. Tolkien lived in the imaginative world of Middle-earth—the setting of *The Lord of the Rings*—all his life, at least from the time that he was a teenager. Humphrey Carpenter, in his biography of Tolkien, describes the way in which story was a part of the Tolkiens' family life. Tolkien often told his children stories for all sorts of occasions. Once, for instance, he wrote a story to console his son on a holiday when he lost his toy dog on the beach. He told Christopher that the lost dog had initially been turned into a toy by a wizard. After being lost on the beach, he is turned back into a real dog by another wizard and proceeds to go on many adventures. Tolkien often wrote stories surrounding the family's life together, and he sometimes even illustrated them, along with his own poems. When he translated the great epic poem *Beowulf*, he wrote poetry to go with it and sang it to his children.

Tolkien's poems tended to be mythic and full of legend. As a philologist he studied languages and was particularly drawn to northern or Nordic languages. He wrote poems in alliterative verse (an Anglo-Saxon verse form). His creative work tended to be in two streams—that which he did for children and that which was lofty and mythic. In *The Lord of the Rings* (divided at the request of the publisher into three books: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*), it appears that these separate and distinct streams finally came together. He was able to create something bound up with myth and language but also full of childlike pleasures and stories. He said about himself:

I am in fact a hobbit in all but size. I like gardens, trees, and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humor . . . ; I go to bed late and get up late (when possible); I do not travel much.¹

These Hobbit-like qualities are beloved to readers of Middle-earth and its world. In addition to loving comfort, Hobbits turn out to be quite brave. Another clue on this subject of the courage displayed by small creatures comes in the form of a comment Tolkien made about World War I, in which he fought: "I've always been impressed that we are here, surviving, because of the indomitable courage of quite small people against impossible odds."² He shared with the northern (Nordic) peoples a sense that we are all fighting a long defeat, but the only shameful act is not to fight. Winning is not everything; fighting against evil is.

His own life started in 1892. He was born John Ronald Reuel to Mabel and Arthur Tolkien in South Africa, where his father worked as a banker. His father died in 1896 when J.R.R. was only four. He moved with his mother and younger brother to the English countryside (Sarehole near Birmingham), where the natural world as well as the human world of the small village had an enormous impact on his imaginative life. Even when his mother began to educate her sons, his favorite subject was language. She started with Latin and French (after English), and he was drawn as much to the sounds and shapes of the words as to their meaning. Looking back on this time, which ended when he won entrance to King Edward's School at the age of seven, he called it "the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life."³ It was also during this time that his mother entered the Roman Catholic church and remained steadfast despite great opposition from her family. Sadly, Tolkien's mother had diabetes, and in 1904 she died.

Tolkien's temperament in the years that followed is described as cheerful and irrepressible, with a great zest for life, including good talk, physical activity, and a good sense of humor. However, another strain of his personality was capable of despair, shadowed by impending loss—"Nothing was safe. Nothing would last. No battle would be won forever."⁴

1. Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), 179–180.

2. Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 180.

3. Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 32.

4. Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien*, 31.

It is noteworthy that both he and C.S. Lewis lost beloved mothers at an early age. They both fought in World War I and were disillusioned by the modern world. They both found the literary philosophies of the period in which they were writing (modernist) to be less interesting than those of previous periods which they preferred. They met at Oxford, where they both taught, at a meeting of the Koalbiters' Club, where they read Icelandic myths often in Icelandic. Soon afterward they were getting together every week, and eventually they agreed that they were going to have to write the stories they wanted to read because no one else was writing them. At the peak of their relationship they got together over three times weekly: on Monday midday, for lunch on Tuesdays with the other Inklings group members, and Thursday nights to read their work aloud to each other and to offer suggestions.

Academically, Tolkien found himself enchanted with the old English poem *Beowulf* and the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. These initiated his interest in the languages they used, and soon afterward he began inventing his own languages. Tolkien said about himself:

I am a philologist and all my work is philological. . . . It is all of a piece, and *fundamentally linguistic* in inspiration. . . . The invention of languages is the foundation. The “stories” were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse. To me a name comes first and the story follows.⁵

He believed that languages could be intrinsically attractive or repulsive. The Orc language, for instance, is repulsive. When Gandalf uses it in the council of Elrond, “all trembled and the elves stopped their ears” (315). Elrond rebukes Gandalf for using the language, not for what he says in it. By contrast, Tolkien thought that Welsh and Finnish were intrinsically beautiful, and he modeled his invented Elf languages (Sindarin and Quenya) on their phonetic and grammatical patterns. In *The Lord of the Rings* he has characters speak in these languages, sometimes without bothering to translate them—the point is made by the sound alone, just as allusions to the old legends of previous ages say something without the legends necessarily being told.

However fanciful Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth was, he did not think he was entirely making it up. He saw his work as reaching back to an imaginative world that had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination. He believed that studying words in their original languages could take you back even beyond the ancient texts it studied; that it was possible sometimes to feel one's way back from words as they survived in later periods, to concepts which had vanished but which had surely existed, or else the word would not exist. He said once in his letters that he had hoped to make a body of legend, similar to the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, that he could dedicate “to England; to my country.”

It was a grand goal. However, as we look at the influence of these books, it appears that he may have been granted his wish. This book (in three parts) has been consistently voted the number-one read book other than the Bible. It appeals to all kinds of people and has become beloved to many who would have little in common otherwise. Readers and rereaders of this book are deeply grateful for the richness it contributes to their lives. For a self-declared Hobbit who had a hard time finishing the stories and histories he wrote, *The Lord of the Rings* is indeed a remarkable achievement.

For Further Biographical Study

Please see the following resource written by Professor Ralph Wood: <http://www.leaderu.com/humanities/wood-biography.html>.

5. “165 To the Houghton Mifflin Co.,” *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, http://www.e-reading.ws/bookreader.php/139008/The_Letters_of_J.R.R.Tolkien.pdf.

SUMMARIZE THE CONTEXT ESSAY

Before you start reading *The Return of the King*, you will read and summarize the essay we have selected. Then cross-check your summary with ours (in the teacher's edition) to make sure you have covered the topic adequately. Your teacher will assign a word count for yours. The "context essay" will help you to understand and gain insight into many of the ideas that arise in *The Return of the King*. An important part of becoming a good reader involves being able to summarize your reading in such a way that someone else can understand what you have read.

In this guide we are asking you to read and summarize Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories." "On Fairy-Stories" is a challenging essay. If it proves too difficult, your teacher may direct you instead to choose two to three essays that you read earlier for *The Lord of the Rings* to summarize again—after all, C.S. Lewis said that there are no such things as readers, only rereaders, because he believed that rereading is essential to learning something deeply. The context essays for *The Fellowship of the Ring* guide are "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," "The Hobbit," and "Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," and the context essays for *The Two Towers* guide are "The Weight of Glory," "Charity," and "Theology in Stories."

UNIT 1: BOOK 5, CHAPTERS 1–3



Make Notes in Your Book



Tracing the Great Ideas

Remember, as you read, to look for and choose quotes related to the given great ideas themes so that you can trace them all the way through the book. (Please remember that you are welcome to find your own great ideas themes in addition to ours.) Record them (we recommend an abbreviated format, as demonstrated in the following examples) and their page numbers in the space provided in each chapter. Then be on the lookout for how they are worked out in each particular context. At the end of the guide you will use these quotes to create a thesis, from which you will develop an argumentative essay. If you are having trouble knowing which kinds of quotes would be appropriate under the given theme, ask your teacher or consult the teacher's edition.

Example quotes and their themes:

Great Ideas Quotes throughout these chapters for the theme *Good and evil*

Example quotes

“... looks may belie the man ...” (940)

“... We may stand ...” (954)

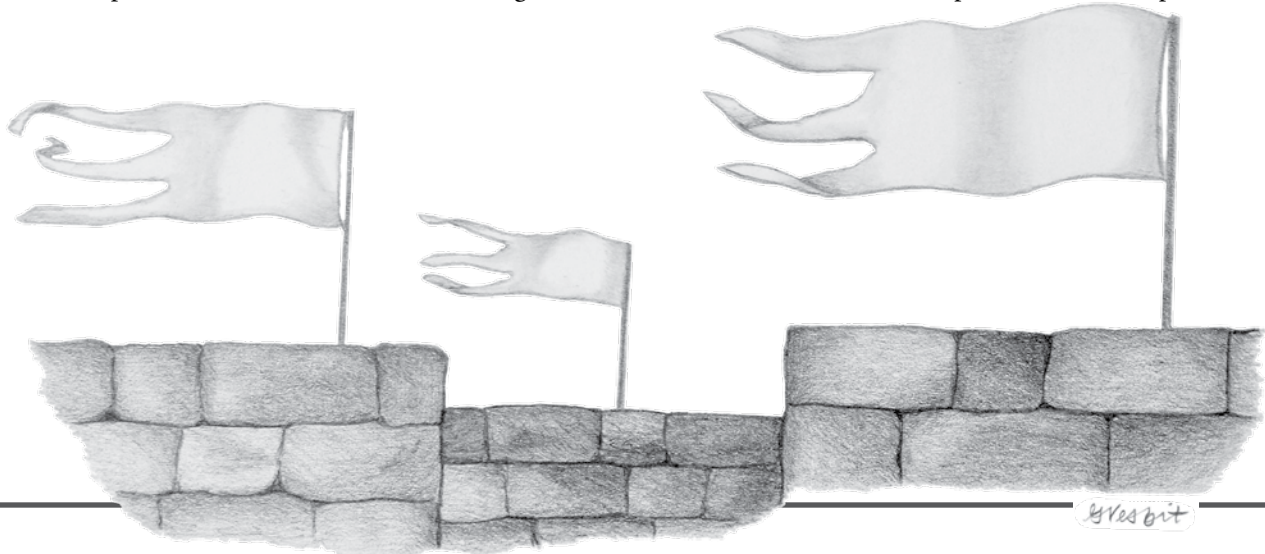
“... Such good will should not be denied. ...” (1001)

Great Ideas Quotes throughout these chapters for the theme *Sorrow/loss*



Tell It Back

Do an oral summary of your reading on a recording device or to another human being. Narrate the most important events in order while sharing the elements of the characters' development that are important.



Reading Questions

Chapter 1

1. In this chapter, we see that Denethor is a man great and powerful, one who has fought Mordor valiantly for a long time. There are many reasons to honor him. He says, regarding the death of Boromir, “But though all the signs forebode that the doom of Gondor is drawing nigh, less now to me is that darkness than my own darkness” (939). What does he mean by this?

To expand this question: Do you think this line is suited to a man with Denethor’s responsibilities?

2. Find a passage that shows Gandalf’s heavy responsibility and a passage that shows his merriment.

To expand this question: How might Gandalf be able to carry such responsibility and still have joy?

3. Read the passage on page 954 in which Beregond is talking about Faramir, beginning with “He is bold.” Is it possible that Faramir is more resolute than Boromir?

Chapter 2

1. After Aragorn watches Théoden, Éomer, and Merry ride away, he says this to his companion: “There go three that I love, and the smallest not the least. . . . He knows not to what end he rides; yet if he knew, he still would go on” (970).

What traits do you think Aragorn recognizes and admires in Merry, in spite of the fact that Merry is much younger and less experienced in great deeds?

Read the exchange between Aragorn and Éowyn on page 976 beginning with “Your duty is with your people” and ending with “because they are unpraised” to answer questions 2 and 3.

2. Éowyn asks, “May I not now spend my life as I will?” Aragorn replies that few may spend their lives as they please and still be honorable. What does he mean?

To expand this question: Do you think what he says is true?

3. Look at Aragorn's final words from this passage starting with "A time may come soon." What does he mean when he says that "there will be need of valour without renown" (976).

Chapter 3

1. Now that the story is following different parts of the Company, Tolkien occasionally gives a description of what is happening in more than one part of the story. Find a passage in this chapter that brings a number of threads together and explain why it might be a useful technique.

2. Read the excerpt about Merry beginning with "He loved mountains" and ending with "in a quiet room by a fire" (985). In some way, would you say that Merry has already had similar experiences over the course of the story?

2. When Pippin is sitting with Beregond, they hear the cry of the Nazgûl and almost despair. What changes Pippin's heart so that he does not despair?

Theme: Good and evil

Multiple horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 2.

3. Merry is afraid that he will be left behind when everyone else rides to battle. Read what the Rider of Rohan named Dernhelm says when offering to take Merry with him, beginning with "Then you shall go with me" and ending with "but come!" (1001).

Are there times when goodwill should not be denied, even if it does not seem safe or sensible?

Theme: Good and evil

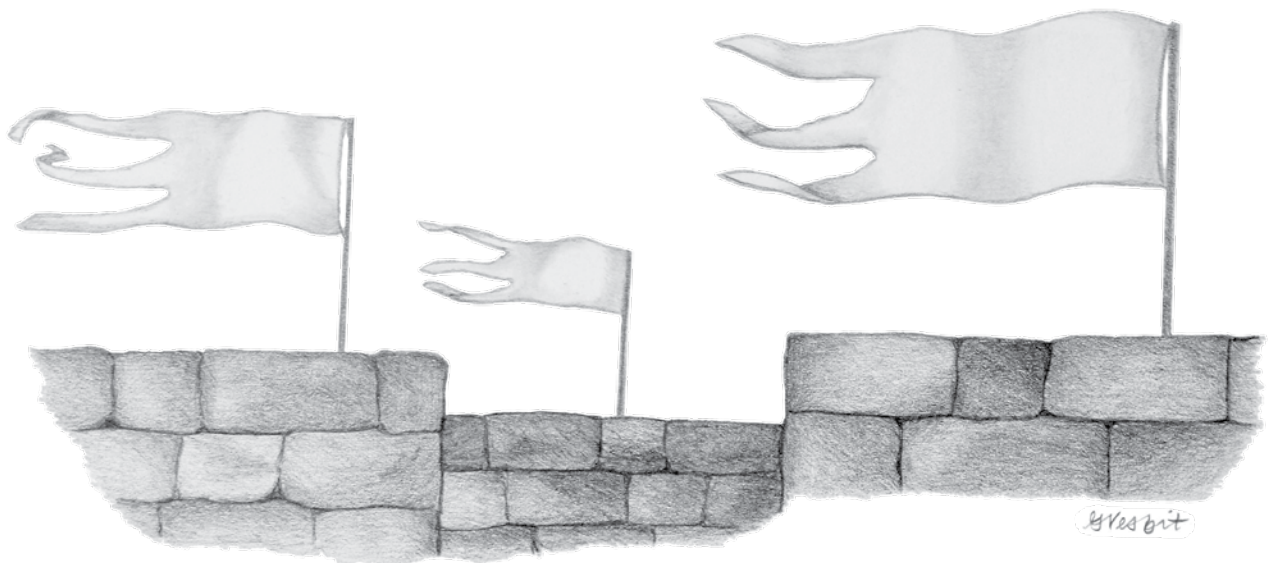
Multiple horizontal lines for writing the answer to question 3.



Write Your Own Discussion Questions

1. _____

2. _____



UNIT 2: BOOK 5, CHAPTERS 4–6



Make Notes in Your Book



Tracing the Great Ideas

Example quotes and their themes:

Great Ideas Quotes throughout these chapters for the theme *Good and evil*

Great Ideas Quotes throughout these chapters for the theme *Heroism*



Tell It Back

Reading Questions

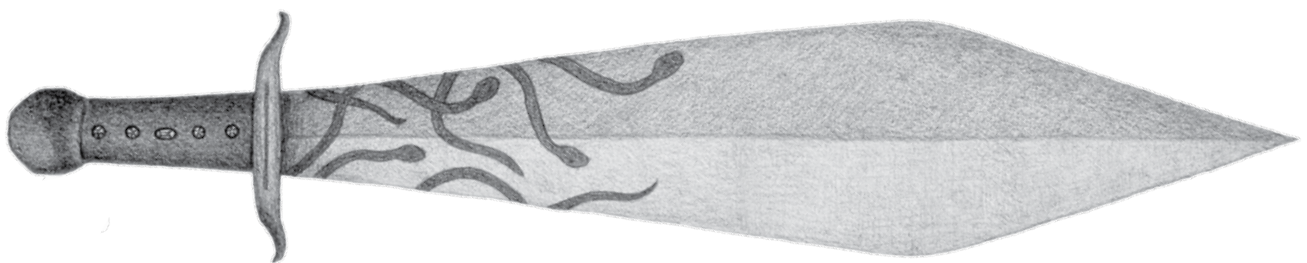
Chapter 4

1. Denethor asks Pippin if he can sing, and Pippin replies with a description of Hobbit songs. What do they usually say they are usually about?

2. Pippin sees Faramir coming and realizes that he would be willing to follow Faramir even under the shadow of the Black Riders. Describe at least one reason for this from what Pippin thinks about Faramir.

3. Read the brief interaction on page 1016 between Gandalf and Faramir, beginning with “Gandalf it was that last spoke” and ending with “Farewell!” What does Gandalf say to encourage Faramir?

To expand this question: Do you agree with what Gandalf says?



Chapter 5

1. How does Merry feel just before the battle?

2. What happens to the horn King Théoden blows after his call exhorting his troops to ride to Gondor?

3. What are the Riders of Rohan doing in addition to fighting when they attack the troops of Mordor at the end of this chapter?



Chapter 6

1. How does the prophecy that the lord of the Nazgûl will not fall by the hand of man come true in this passage?

2. How does Merry respond when Éowyn reveals who she is?

3. At the death of Théoden, Éomer tells his men: “*Mourn not overmuch! Mighty was the fallen, meet was his ending*” (1051). But “he himself wept as he spoke” (1051). Why might Éomer have both these responses at once?

Discussion Questions

1. Read Denethor’s response when asked what he would have done with the Ring, beginning with “But most surely not” and ending with “would not trouble us, being dead” (1011–1012). What is the difference between the view Denethor expresses here and the view of the Ring that Gandalf and Faramir have expressed earlier?

2. Denethor seems to have some flaws. But what signs are there that he is still a noble man and leader in many ways? Choose at least one passage or detail and try to articulate why it shows nobility in him.

3. Read what Gandalf says when he finds out that Gollum is with Frodo and Sam, beginning with “Treachery, treachery I fear” and ending with “Good night!” (1014). Do you think that what Gandalf describes sometimes happens? Can you think of any examples from other literature, from history, or from Scripture?

4. Read the passage about the sword that Merry uses to stab the Witch King, which is destroyed in the fight, beginning with “So passed the sword” and ending with “his unseen sinews to his will” (1052). Why is it significant that Merry uses this particular sword to kill the Witch King? What does that suggest about the work of the smith who made it?
