

A GUIDE TO

The Hobbit There and Back Again

J. R. R. Tolkien

Going on was the bravest thing he ever did.

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Hobbit is a fantasy with strong elements of the fairy tale, the folk epic, and the medieval romance. It addresses the themes of growing up, facing danger, and learning what is truly valuable in life.

Setting: The tale begins in the cozy underground home of the title character and then continues through an imaginary landscape of valleys, forests, marshes, lakes, and mountains—each with unique and fascinating features that test the adventurer’s wit and endurance.

Protagonist: The hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, a nimble little furry-footed creature who, though he loves his meals and his home, cannot resist a call to adventure.

Conflicts: The main **external** conflict is between the adventurers—Bilbo, Gandalf, and their dwarf friends—and the dragon Smaug, who has stolen the dwarves’ ancestral treasure. Before confronting the dragon, however, the hobbit and his friends have many other enemies and obstacles, natural and supernatural, to overcome. Bilbo must also come to terms with the conflict between his desire for safety and his yearning for adventure.

Resolution: From the first, the hobbit chooses adventure over security. Despite his discomfort and homesickness, he faces up to each new danger on the journey and remains with his friends until the dragon is slain. He returns with a new knowledge of himself and the world and with perhaps a greater appreciation for the pleasures of home.

Themes: In order to grow up and learn about the world and ourselves, we must be willing to leave the safety of the familiar and discover the joys and perils of a wider world. Evil and danger exist, and those who confront them are changed forever.

BACKGROUND

Quest Literature. The narrative structure of the quest is an ancient one evident in the oral tradition of most cultures and in the earliest heroic epics, such as Homer’s

Iliad and *Odyssey*, the Icelandic *Edda*, and such English medieval romances and legends as those of King Arthur and the quest for the Holy Grail. The quest usually involves an untested character who embarks on a journey fraught with perils to attain a very specific goal. The way in which the character confronts obstacles is as important as attaining the object of the quest.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Bilbo Baggins, the hobbit, a resident of the decent, orderly, and decidedly unadventurous region of Hobbiton, Under the Hill. Bilbo is a bit of a split personality—he loves the comforts of home but is not immune to the lure of the unknown and unexpected.

Gandalf, in outward appearance an old man with a long, white beard and a staff—but with a wizard’s (or a magician’s) knowledge and power, including a skill with fireworks and an ability to fire the imagination with a spellbinding tale.

Dwalin, Balin, Kili, Fili, Bifur, Bofar, and Bombur, some of the thirteen dwarves that are sent to Bilbo’s house by Gandalf and with whom Bilbo sets out on his long journey. The sturdy dwarves have long beards and wear colorful hoods and belts; although they are small, they are strong and used to the hard work.

Thorin Oakenshield, the proud and brave leader of the other dwarves. A descendant of an illustrious line, he is committed to recapturing the ancient treasure that the dragon Smaug stole from his people in the time of his father, Thrór, and his grandfather Thráin.

Old Smaug, a giant, winged dragon covered with leathery scales. He breathes fire and emits an awful stench. An ugly, greedy, murderous creature, he represents all that is evil, unjust, and terrifying.

PLOT

Chapter 1. An Unexpected Party. On a Wednesday in April, Bilbo Baggins is surprised in his cozy, little hobbit hole by the arrival of Gandalf, the wizard, who invites him to take part in an adventure. The following day thirteen dwarves arrive and make a merry party, singing of far-off lands and wrongs that need righting. Despite some serious misgivings, Bilbo decides to join the dwarves in

their **quest** to reclaim the mountain and the treasure that the dragon Smaug stole from Thorin's ancestors. Gandalf has assured the dwarves that Bilbo is the perfect treasure hunter or "burglar" they need. Gandalf gives them a map and a silver key to a secret entrance in the Lonely Mountain where the dragon resides.

Chapter 2. Roast Mutton. The next morning the party of fourteen sets out. The first of many **complications** arises, however, when the weather takes a nasty turn and Gandalf disappears. The little party is cold, wet, and hungry. The dwarves spot a campfire and send Bilbo to investigate. Approaching stealthily, Bilbo sees three voracious trolls, roasting meat. Bilbo decides to pick one of the troll's pockets to prove himself an audacious burglar, but the troll, Bill, catches him and rouses his companions. When the dwarves try to rescue Bilbo, they all end up in sacks. Luckily Gandalf returns and, confusing the trolls by imitating their voices, saves the day. When dawn breaks, the trolls turn to stone (a **fairy-tale motif**), and the adventurers raid their cave. They find food, two swords and a dagger, and a hoard of gold. They bury the gold nearby, planning to retrieve it on the return journey.

Chapter 3. A Short Rest. The party proceeds in the direction of the Misty Mountains. Before the adventurers reach the forbidding mountains, however, they are welcomed in the Last Homely House in the fair valley of Rivendell, a **setting** in stark contrast to the forbidding mountains ahead. Their host, Elrond the elf-friend, offers food, rest, and security for fourteen days. One midsummer morning they set out for the Misty Mountains.

Chapter 4. Over Hill and Under Hill. The party follows the mapped path up the steep mountainside and gets caught in a fierce thunderstorm. They take shelter in a large cave. While they are sleeping, a crack in the back of the cave opens and goblins stream out. They snatch up everyone except Gandalf, who manages to let off a bolt of lightning and escape. The dwarves and Bilbo are taken prisoner and interrogated by the Great Goblin. Again Gandalf comes to their rescue, slaying the Great Goblin with the magic goblin-killer sword. The dwarves run through the caverns with goblins pursuing. Bilbo falls on a rock and loses consciousness.

Chapter 5. Riddles in the Dark. Bilbo wakes up in a dark tunnel and, crawling along, finds a metal ring which he slips into his pocket. Alone now, Bilbo, in a pivotal scene, bravely decides to go forward. He meets a small, slimy, dark creature named Gollum. Mumbling the words "my precious," Gollum speaks a strange sort of lisping baby-talk patter. At first Bilbo is able to keep himself from being eaten by Gollum by trading riddles with him. Eventually Bilbo runs away and discovers that the ring he found was lost by Gollum and has the power to make its wearer invisible. Bilbo uses the ring to elude Gollum and at last manages to squeeze through the back door of the cave.

Chapter 6. Out of the Frying-Pan and into the Fire.

In the open air, Bilbo realizes he has come out clear on the other side of the mountain. He discovers that his friends too are outside the mountain. Bilbo tells about his encounter with Gollum but leaves out the part about the ring. The party moves on, the goblins still in pursuit. As the moon rises they come to a clearing and are forced to climb trees to escape howling, ravenous wolves (Wargs). Gandalf rains burning pine cones down on the wolves, but the goblins arrive and stoke the fires under the trees where the dwarves are pinned. Just as the smoke begins to choke them, the Great Eagles of the North swoop down and carry Bilbo and his friends to safety.

Chapter 7. Queer Lodgings. Bilbo and his party are set down on a rock ledge. To their dismay, Gandalf announces he will soon leave them. He then takes them to the wooden house of the "skin-changer" Beorn, who can take the form of a huge hairy man or a great bear. Careful not to upset the unsociable Beorn, Gandalf introduces the travelers gradually until all fourteen are sitting on Beorn's porch and he has heard the complete story of their adventures. Captivated by the tale, Beorn offers the hungry band a sumptuous meal. The skin-changer describes the perils of the path through the great, dark forest of Mirkwood, which Bilbo and the dwarves must travel to reach the dragon's stronghold in Lonely Mountain. Generously outfitting the party for their journey, Beorn warns them to stay on the path at all costs. At the edge of the dark and ominous forest, Gandalf leaves the group.

Chapter 8. Flies and Spiders. Picking their way through the dense forest, Bilbo and the dwarves are surrounded by the glowing eyes of insects and are brushed by spiders, moths, and bats. Desperate and hungry, they ignore Beorn's warning and stray from the path to investigate glowing fires and the sound of elfish singing. Three times they approach the campfires and each time the lights go out. Becoming separated from the others, Bilbo uses his sword to kill a giant spider who has begun to wind a web around him. Lost and alone in the darkness, he discovers that other huge, talking spiders have bound and hung the dwarves from a branch. Bilbo uses his ring to make himself invisible and then starts throwing stones and singing to draw the spiders off. The creatures run in different directions trying to catch Bilbo, but he quickly cuts down his dangling comrades. Visible again, Bilbo and the weary dwarves engage in a fierce battle with the spiders. When they are finally safe from the spiders, Bilbo tells the story of Gollum and the ring. Then suddenly they realize that Thorin is gone. Before the troubles with the spiders began, the wood elves had taken him prisoner.

Chapter 9. Barrels out of Bond. The next day all the dwarves are captured and, like Thorin, imprisoned by the elves. Bilbo, who has escaped capture by becoming invisible, follows them into the elf cave unseen and devises a plan for the dwarves' escape. Bilbo's plan is to

hide the dwarves in empty wine barrels that are to be shipped downriver to a lake town where men live. Outsmarting some elves, Bilbo frees the dwarves and gets them stowed into the barrels. He is forced to jump onto a barrel himself. After a rough ride the barrels run aground in shallow water.

Chapter 10. A Warm Welcome. As the barrel rafts approach Lake-town, the peak of the Lonely Mountain becomes visible in the distance. The town is inhabited by men who dimly remember the old legends of the dragon who stole their people's treasure and laid waste the valley town of Dale. When Thorin explains their mission, the party is welcomed by the Master of Lake-town. With a new supply of provisions the friends set out on the last leg of their quest.

Chapter 11. On the Doorstep. It is autumn as they approach the dread mountain, and the **setting** becomes more barren and desolate. As they ascend the slope the party can see below to the ruins of the village of Dale and ahead to a yawning mouth in the rocks, from which clouds of steam and the Running River emerge. This is the main entrance to the dragon Smaug's hold in the bowels of the mountain, but the travelers must find the secret entrance. Eventually they find a door hidden by an overhanging cliff. They cannot open it until a sun ray hits the rock face and reveals a small hole into which Bilbo slips the silver key. They pass through the door into utter darkness.

Chapter 12. Inside Information. The dwarves urge Bilbo to go down into the tunnel and investigate further. The hobbit conquers his fear and goes bravely on alone toward the dragon's lair. He steals a cup from the sleeping dragon and returns to the surface to show it to his friends. The dragon wakes up and discovers his loss. Wildly angry, he flies out of his cave and circles the mountain, breathing fire and destroying everything in his path. Bilbo and the dwarves escape by going in the secret door. Bilbo returns to the dragon's lair, but this time the creature senses his presence—and they speak. Bilbo uses flattery to trick Smaug into revealing a vulnerable spot on his underside. Angered by the hobbit's wit, Smaug pursues the fleeing Bilbo but is unable to follow him up the narrow passage. Back on the ledge by the secret door, Bilbo describes the dragon's soft spot. A nearby thrush makes odd movements and then flies off. Smaug is now flying about outside looking for intruders, which forces Bilbo and the dwarves to go back into the tunnel. This time Smaug rams the side of the mountain and the door is shut forever. Suspecting that the men of the Lake assisted the trespassers, the dragon flies off in the direction of Lake-town.

Chapter 13. Not at Home. Trapped for what seems like days in the stifling passage, the dwarves and Bilbo finally decide to head for the dragon's den. They move quietly in the dark. Finally, they light torches and examine the treasure trove of gold, gems, and armor in Smaug's chamber. The dwarves are mesmerized with

greed as they gaze on the wealth. Bilbo himself quietly pockets a great white gem called the Arkenstone, which is described in **images** of light. Finally Thorin, remembering the cave from long ago, leads them to the front gate. Cold, hungry, and afraid of the dragon's return, the party follows Balin, an old dwarf, to a rocky chamber that used to serve as a guardroom. In the distance, they see a gathering of birds.

Chapter 14. Fire and Water. The dragon has flown toward Lake-town. Seeing Smaug's approach, the Lake-men arm themselves. Unharmful by the barrage of arrows, the scaly dragon rains fire down on the wooden town. The fearless Bard, captain of the archers and a former resident of Dale, has only one arrow left when the old thrush perches on his shoulder and tells him about Bilbo's discovery of Smaug's vulnerable spot. Bard takes aim at the spot and brings the dragon crashing down on the wooden town. The people of Lake-town clamor for Bard as their leader. While all rejoice at the death of the dragon, the capture and distribution of the treasure remain major **complications**.

Chapter 15. The Gathering of the Clouds. Back on the mountain, Bilbo and the dwarves hear the news of Smaug's death from an old raven named Roac. Roac also tells them of the widespread claims to a share in the dragon's hoard, which the dwarves consider their rightful property. Thorin declares his intention to defend the treasure of his people and sends for reinforcements from a nearby dwarf clan. The dwarves fortify the entrance to the mountain, while the Lake-men and elves camp nearby. After a peace talk with Thorin, Bard proposes that the wealth be shared. Thorin, however, declines to compromise and shoots an arrow into Bard's shield. Bilbo disapproves of Thorin's action.

Chapter 16. A Thief in the Night. Winter and the siege proceed, but Thorin remains stubborn in his refusal to compromise. On watch one night Bilbo uses his invisibility ring to slip away from the mountain. In the hope of averting war, he goes to Bard's camp and gives Bard and the Elven King the Arkenstone to use as a bargaining chip with Thorin. Bilbo knows the feisty dwarf values the gem above all else. Just then an old man comes out of a tent to praise Bilbo; it is Gandalf, who holds out hope for a happy ending. Buoyed, Bilbo returns undetected to the mountain.

Chapter 17. The Clouds Burst. Bard, the Elven King, and Gandalf, in disguise, convince Thorin to share the treasure in return for the Arkenstone, but all efforts at peace are overthrown when goblin hordes descend and the Battle of the Five Armies begins—goblins and wolves on one side and dwarves, elves, and men on the other. Just when it looks as if the goblins and wolves might win, a squadron of Eagles from the Misty Mountain arrives, and the bloody conflict is **resolved**. Watching the birds approach from his perch above the battle, Bilbo is suddenly hit with a stone and falls unconscious.

Chapter 18. The Return Journey. When Bilbo comes to, he is carried down to a tent in the valley of Dale, where Gandalf is camped with the victorious armies. Thorin, who is dying, begs Bilbo's forgiveness for his warmongering at the dragon's gate. Gandalf explains how the Eagles and Beorn, who had come in the shape of a bear, routed the goblins. After Thorin dies he is buried with the Arkenstone on his breast and his magic sword on his tomb. The mountain is returned to the dwarves, with the treasure divided fairly among all the victims of the dragon. Bilbo sets off with Gandalf, the elves, and Beorn. It is a year since he set out, and all he wants is to go home.

Chapter 19. The Last Stage. On the first of May, Bilbo and Gandalf arrive at the Last Homely House and are greeted by the sweet music of elf-song. After a week, Bilbo again becomes anxious to get home. As they cross the border of the Wild, Bilbo remembers the trouble with the trolls, and they recover the cache of gold buried the year before. But no amount of gold could please him as much as the sight of his own homeland. "You are not the hobbit that you were," says Gandalf as the quest story ends.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Tolkien's novel is its creation of a complete and convincing imaginary world with its own history, geography, heroes, villains, myths, and legends—a world with similarities to our own.

Discussion groups or students doing individual research might focus on the following activities.

1. The Reluctant Hero

Although Bilbo Baggins, like all heroes of epic and romantic tales, sets out on a quest and faces and overcomes many obstacles, his heroism is not quite epic. Students may enjoy discussing the nature and extent of Bilbo's heroism, using questions like these:

- In what ways is Bilbo a reluctant hero?
- What is heroic and not so heroic about Bilbo?
- How is Bilbo changed by the end of the story?
- How is Bilbo like or unlike modern questing heroes in movies and sci-fi stories?

2. Finding Motifs

Although Tolkien has created an original imaginary world, he has also borrowed extensively from the

traditional elements of myths, fairy tales, fables, and folk tales. Have students compare Tolkien's use of these motifs with the way they are used in myths or fairy tales students are familiar with:

- wise advisers
- talking animals
- magic objects
- evil dragons
- the treasure trove
- dwarves, elves, trolls
- riddles and runes
- underworld settings
- metamorphoses
- the perilous journey

MEET THE WRITER

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973) was born in South Africa and moved to Britain as a child. At an early age he developed a fascination with history, legend, and language. He even invented his own languages and then created stories in which he could use them. He graduated from Oxford and later joined the faculty there as a professor of English and Anglo-Saxon Literature. Tolkien created *The Hobbit* originally as a bedtime story for his children and was talked into publishing it by his friend C. S. Lewis. It became the prelude to his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, in which he extends the world of *The Hobbit* to the level of a cosmic struggle between good and evil. Tolkien always maintained that he was writing fairy tales, not allegories, and that a story must first succeed just as a tale—that it must excite, please, and even on occasion move.

READ ON

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The first in a trilogy that begins a heroic quest to save the world from evil. *The Two Towers* is the second part of the trilogy, in which the armies gather for battle. *The Return of the King* is the conclusion of the quest.

Homer, *The Odyssey*. The classic Greek epic, in which a hero must prove himself before he can reclaim his kingdom, his wife, and his home.

Louis L'Amour, "Trap of Gold." The quest for a buried treasure trove in the American West.

Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*. The archetypal quest story set in the Middle Ages, with knightly heroes, wizards, and reeking dragons.

Sundiata, retold by D. T. Niane. An epic of old Mali, in which an unpromising boy becomes the hero who saves his people and creates an empire.

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