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## **Glory Road: Epic Romance As An Allegory of 20th Century History; The World Through The Eyes Of J.R.R. Tolkien**

Curriculum Unit 87.02.11  
by Elizabeth T. Lawrence

“For Still there are so many things  
that I have never seen:  
in every wood in every spring  
there is a different green”  
—excerpt from Bilbo’s Song—

The writings of J.R.R. Tolkien are a wonderful medium through which to introduce the student to a number of literary concepts. The author as pure story-teller is the first such concept. The writings are to be examined for their richness and content alone. This section looks at how the story grips the imagination, how its different parts are related, and how a tale hangs together in time. The structure of a good story is consistent with its history, physics and metaphysics. It is rare that an author creates the comprehensive cosmology that constitutes Middle-Earth.

*The Hobbit* is also a terrific medium for introducing young readers to the concept of allegory. An examination of Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* will give rise to lively debate over whether or not there is allegory at all. If there is, was it intended by the author to be read as such?

Tolkien himself has disclaimed that, stating that the stories are neither “topical or allegorical”. It is difficult to accept his statement at face value however. *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, as the stormclouds of fascism darkened Germany, Spain and Italy. It is difficult to imagine that Tolkien was oblivious to this in his writings. Indeed, there is evidence in *The Hobbit* which negates the author’s protest. The story raises several issues which are too easily identified with the situation in Europe in the mid-thirties.

In the story, the dragon Smaug sits coldly over his hoard just to the North of Middle-Earth, while the young

Hobbits dismiss as alarmist the concerns of the “gammers” over his rising power. The goblins, who evolve into the race of Orcs in *The Lord of The Rings*, are described as overly concerned with technology; “with gears and wheels and so forth.” Ultimately the Lake folk and the dwarves are required to put aside their greedy differences to join forces to combat the common enemy of Goblins invading them.

If we look to the events in Europe when *The Hobbit* has been published we can see that Hitler has come to power in Germany, the Anschluss of Austria, the rape of Czechoslovakia and the occupation of the Rhineland has already occurred. The Spanish revolution was in full swing. Mussolini had invaded Ethiopia. Factions of appeasement were abundant (“I have met with Herr Hitler and we have achieved peace in our time,” said the Prime Minister of England). The French were at economic odds with the rest of the continent. War to many seemed inevitable in that summer of 1937. Indeed the rise of evil power in Tolkien’s writings parallels the language commonly used to describe it in the press and literature. Where the language implying darkness is used in the popular press to mean the rise of evil forces, the world of Tolkien’s writing literally becomes dark as his adventurers get closer to and enter Mordor.

Is not the allegory readily apparent? The goblins, evil, overly concerned with gears and wheels, are easily compared with the Nazi stereotype of technological, amoral wizards. They are warriors who by reason of race and heritage were prepared to conquer the world. The appeasers, who ignored the menace rather than prepare to face it, look too much like the wishful thinking of Chamberlain, the French sellout of the Rhineland, the British and French conspiracy to throw Czechoslovakia to the wolves in order to protect themselves than Tolkien’s disclaimer would have us believe. Race and heritage are a major factor of introducing each of the characters in the story. When each is introduced Tolkien spends some time describing the characteristics and habits of each racial group. Lastly, Tolkien perceives that the economic infighting and jockeying for position created by depression era Europe led to the divisiveness between the Western nations. Just as the lake people and the dwarves must put aside their greed to face the common foe, so too must the nations of Europe put aside their individual interests to face the mounting threat of Fascism.

The debate in the classroom comes about by Tolkien’s own protestations that he did not intend such an analysis. Certainly we must give some credence to the author’s own statements about his work. The possibilities are multifold. It is fashionable for authors whose allegories are premeditated to suggest that their readers are putting too much into the work. I think that this is a luxury enjoyed by authors, since it permits them to play a deep game with their readers—a game upon which they and the reader (particularly the academician who lives on analysis) thrive.

A second possibility, in our discussion, is the idea advanced by Freud which influenced “New Critics” of the sixties. The allegory is there, but it got there not through premeditation. It exists through subconscious inclusion.

The concept that I prefer, and that I believe is born out by the text, is that the ideas are allegorical, but the story can stand on its own merit, Tolkien’s protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. It is difficult to imagine the contemporary (and ultimately colleague) of Eliot, Pound and Joyce being uninfluenced by then or the literary vogue of his time.

We cannot lose sight of the idea that *The Hobbit* is a children’s story, evolved from the stories that Tolkien told his son at bedtime. It is a far simpler work than *The Lord of The Rings*, and seems intended to be read aloud by an adult to children as Tolkien spun the tales at his son’s bedside. The skill of the author here leaves something for everyone. The adult who reads aloud is left with some thought-provoking material. The child with a morality story will have its allegorical quality explained to him (if necessary) by the adult reading to

him. Once again Tolkien's thoughts must be viewed with a grain of salt. He refers to *The Lord of The Rings* as a "sequel" to *The Hobbit*. It is only superficially a sequel. The Ring trilogy is far more mature, with the Orcs maturing in power and scope and a transformation of the Gandalf character from a simple stylized wizard to giant of a leader. He is endowed with overwhelming power and wisdom. Just as it is an error to compare *Tom Sawyer* too closely with *Huckleberry Finn*, it is an error to treat the Ring trilogy as a sequel to *The Hobbit*. The reason, I suspect, for the author's statement to that effect was economics. *The Hobbit* was a huge economic success during its many printings. It makes better sense to preserve the characters and settings and permit them to mature than to do away with them and start from scratch when the medium of the story will be essentially unchanged.

The question for the classroom then is, why write this way? The student must get at three possibilities: 1) that the allegory was intended and coldly premeditated or 2) that it was completely unintended and is a coincidence that we read into the stories using the hindsight of historical events or 3) that it was unintended on a conscious level but unavoidable on a subconscious level. The allegory appeals to persons in many walks of life. Without commenting on the political content of the material, Colonel Jeff Cooper has recently written: "No one seems to be criticizing the 'White minority government' of the Soviet Union. Most of the people who reside behind the walls of Mordor are Asiatics." Certainly Cooper, with his Eric Hoffer, workingman's philosophy approach to politics has little problem comparing Tolkien's sense of evil to totalitarianism. (Was Ronald Reagan's 'Evil Empire' comment J.R.R. inspired???)

A third important use for *The Hobbit* in the classroom is to demonstrate that authors are often borrowers and users of older source material. Robert Heinlein has written that authors 'knock the serial numbers off and give (someone else's) work a new coat of paint'. He points to how often the Romeo and Juliet tale has been respun. Heinlein's openness as to sources leads Oscar Gordon to quip during a fantastic sequence in Heinlein's 1970 fantasy *Glory Road*, "that is o.k. as long as we don't make a Hobbit of it."

Tolkien, too, is open and honest about his source material. There are easily identified elements of *Grettir's Saga*, *The Ring of the Nibelungs* and *Beowulf* running throughout the books. Rather than conceal the sources, however, Tolkien scholarship invites the reader to identify them for himself. It is apparent that Tolkien's view of literature was one of continual evolution. The themes and traditions that came before are continued into new works. As a *Beowulf* scholar, Tolkien was keenly aware of the Scop's use of older source material. Far from being completely original, *Beowulf* borrows heavily from earlier versions of the Bear's son Tales (the name Beowulf is a pun identifying the source—the Bee wolf or the bear), and is influenced by the writings of Virgil in the Aeneid. The Anglo-Saxon text of *Beowulf* pinpoints the locus of action as 'Middangeard' . . . middle earth.

Similarly in *The Hobbit* we can identify earlier sources. The dragon Smaug is strikingly like Fafnir as he appears (unnamed) in the second half of *Beowulf*. He is powerful, terrorizing, and watches over a huge treasure trove. The ring of Power (which evolved to its great stature in *The Lord of The Rings* rather than *The Hobbit*) was a gold ring forged in ancient times by an extinct race. The comparison to *The Ring of the Nibelungs* is unmistakable.

At the end of the *Return of The King*, Bilbo leaves Earth on a sailing ship for some mystical place. Similarly, at the end of *Morte D'Arthur* the body of Arthur is transported to Avalon on a sailing vessel. The similarity is no coincidence. Golum is somewhat enigmatic. In name, he conjures up images of the Medieval Jewish tale of the 'Golem.' In character he is much more Celtic however.

Other sources are more subtle. Tolkien, trained as a linguist and a *Beowulf* scholar, was intimately involved

with the alliterative verse of the Anglo-Saxon poem. Though he drew no roadmap for his readers, many of the songs and poetry presented in both the Ring trilogy and *The Hobbit* use the same scansion and alliteration as does the Beowulf author:

“Ents the earthborn, old as Mountains  
the wide walkers, water drinking;  
and hungry hunters, the Hobbit Children  
the laughing-folk, the little people . . .”

Tolkien doesn't have to proclaim, “now look people, this is the way the Saxons wrote, so here it is”. The poetry stands by itself. Much of Tolkien's magic is that he requires his reader to do some work in order to get the most out of the text, but he doesn't hide the sources.

Originally Tolkien's fascination with fairy stories as a medium was awakened by his linguistic studies. His linguistic efforts predate his novels. It seems that it was his interest in the evolution of language that gave rise to his interest in story-telling. The novels create several languages and alphabets. As great craftsmanship is evident, wherever Tolkien presents text in a language of his own creation (Elvish, Dwarvish) he provides enough data, in the form of appendices, for the diligent reader to translate any such text. Annotations on maps, scrolls and walls can all be translated into contemporary English.

In the character of Hobbits we may see humans in caricature. Of the races that are introduced (Elves, Dwarves, Goblins, Ents, Humans, Hobbits), the Hobbits are the most carefully developed. Humans are pre-understood since we are they. Elves are noble but on the verge of extinction.

Hobbits are carefully developed as characters within the tale. They are developed as caricatures of humans, both in their physical appearance and their idiosyncrasies. The Hobbit is a man as he really is (at least in Tolkien's eyes) and humans are man as we like to think of ourselves.

*The Hobbit* is a fine introduction to the works of Tolkien for middle school students. It is enormously appealing to many readers who have otherwise resisted literature. The tale is extremely tactile, and its characters complex: some loveable, some contemptible, but none superficial. All are well developed with personalities, egos and a sense of self. Tolkien far surpasses the predigested spoon-fed stuff that passes for imagination in the 1980's. “Star Wars” may make some pretty good movies but are not close to the substance of T's work . . . but a teacher may use Tolkien to demonstrate the concept of source material for George Lucas. Here you may want to get into a unit teaching film vs. novel.

Appended to the text are lesson plans and activities for the classroom teacher. Some biographical data is useful here as well. John Ronald Raul Tolkien spent his early life in South Africa, returning to England as a child. His close relationship with his mother was due to his physical frailty and the loss of his father early in life. She was his teacher and loved to tell him tales from her own unique past. He studied at the Birmingham Oratory and subsequently went on to Oxford on a scholarship. He served in the First World War and was returned to England after being wounded. After the war he took up a teaching post at Leeds as “reader” in the

English language. Four years later he was promoted to the rank of Professor. Tolkien spent the next twenty years at Oxford in the Chair of Anglo-Saxon literature and as fellow of Pembroke College. His love for the written word, linguistics and fantasy became well known.

It is important to remember that Tolkien was recognized as an academician well before he published his works of fiction. His scholarship can stand independently of the Trilogy for which he is most widely known.

## LESSON PLANS AND ACTIVITIES

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(Part of the Unit)

### **Lesson Plan #1:**

**Goal To introduce characters in *The Hobbit* to students on a more intimate basis.**

**Objective Students will be able to name and recognize characters from the tale and identify same when the story is read.**

Teaches through role-play, self-awareness, oral speaking and characterization.

The teacher should assign a character, Bilbo, Gandalf, Smaug etc., to each student. The student will then have to find out personal traits of the character assigned. This is made easier by Tolkien who is a very visual writer and complete in his descriptions. Refer to *The Hobbit* as source. The student then “becomes” the character. Teacher gives an 8 to 10 minute period to showcase the character. Each student will present his character to the class. He may do this in one of the suggested ways below:

1. role play the character with costume;
2. first person dialogue, “I, who snort at my hoard . . . ”
3. draw a picture of the character on large paper and give a brief description orally

When all of the students have completed their presentations, the teacher can tie together the assemblage of characters and review them with the class audience. Students can then understand how important each character is to the tale (part of the whole) and how it comes to life in the story spun by Tolkien.

### **Lesson Plan #2**

*Name that Character!*

**Goal To have the students become so familiar with the characters in *The Hobbit* , as to know them from simple clues.**

**Objective Students will be able to quickly recognize characters from the story when given minimal clues.**

Developing auditory-memory skills.

This is an adapted version of the famous “I’m thinking of an animal game” which every adult who has ever driven with children, has used. The life saver of long car trips! Here, in the classroom, it takes on a different dimension because the teacher has prepared small index cards (3”x5”) full of character details. These cards are kept by the teacher. No character names are on the cards (she may code them as to the names).

Students, on a first-come, first-served basis, are given a card and then a time limit is set for the game. Students using the index card full of information (clues) have to guess correctly the name of the character. The name must be spelled correctly as well. All answers are timed and must be within the stipulated time limit.

Teacher may wish to begin with 10 minutes and as students become more adept with Tolkien’s material, cut the limit to 8 minutes, 6 minutes or 3 minutes etc.

This is at the teacher’s discretion and one must take into consideration the reading levels of the students in the classroom.

## ***CLASS ACTIVITY***

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*Word Scramble* , a Vocabulary game.

Objective: To teach vocabulary skills within the unit. The students will recognize and be able to unscramble vocabulary words found in *The Hobbit* .

The student can use the book as a reference or a ditto prepared by the teacher of possible words. This hand-out can be given before the activity begins.

An example list is below.

\*Suggested words to be placed, in a scrambled form, on the chalkboard.\*

1. Bilbo
2. shire
3. Hobbits
4. Gandalf
5. Thorin
6. Golum
7. Smaug
8. orc
9. Mordor
10. Elrond

Teacher has a choice of vocabulary, since this story is chock full of vocabulary. It is the richness of vocabulary content that makes *The Hobbit* appealing.

### **Activity #2**

Show the film version of *The Hobbit* . Have students critique it in class afterwards.

I have found that Weston Woods, which is a children's library and artistic publishing house, has for rent the film version of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* . After seeing the film, the students may wish to critique it on their own. This process allows the student to think critically. It allows the students to:

- a) see similarities and differences via the cinemagraphic adaptation;
- b) offer personal opinions and criticisms which may never occur after a simple reading of the text.

For slower readers, this activity is perfect for it will cement the main thrust of the story. Children are auditory beings and very visual, thus showing them *The Hobbit* will greatly influence their understanding of Tolkien's work.

It is also part of the unit's core to show the difference between great writing and great cinemagraphic effects.

This is a way of comparing and contrasting prose with films. What would Tolkien have thought of this film?

The teacher may wish to prepare a set of questions with yes or no answers and comments. Students are more apt to be truthful if this is done anonymously. They'll have no fear of "counter-attack".

### **Telephone # for Weston Woods**

Children's Library: (203) 226-4666

Rates do vary. Rental/purchase. It is also available on VHS/Beta cassette. Check your local video stores. The cassette film version is produced by ABC VIDEO; SONY and is 1 hour and 15 minutes long.

### **Activity #3**

*Invent a Code!*

Sample of Tolkien alphabet is attached to the unit.

Students may wish to develop their own special alphabet. This activity hinges greatly on phonetic ability in writing. Each letter will have an accompanying sound. Each symbol a meaning.

Students may wish to study various ways of writing. Here, we are teaching sound/symbol relationship. Good sources might be Egyptian hieroglyphics, Greek or Hebrew alphabets, or picture writing of Prehistoric man. We are all familiar with the Rebus type stories those verbal puzzles found in children's magazines. There the pictures are interjected where a word would be found, and the reader must solve the puzzle using sounds in order to get the entire message.

Tolkien developed his own alphabet. As a master of linguistics, he carefully gave birth to the language of his

tales. Students can also give birth to their own creative alphabet. Marvelous secret messages can be written.

These student-made alphabets can be displayed in the classroom.

The teacher can do several activities with these alphabets. Each day, a message in one of the alphabets can be placed on the chalkboard and everyone has to break the code. This is an excellent warm-up exercise to begin the English class.

It also sets the scene for studying and understanding Tolkien. This activity challenges the minds of students.

#### CLASSACTIVITY (SAMPLE)

(figure available in print form)

\*The above is a message done in Tolkien alphabet.

This may be found in detail in this book.\*

## Annotated Bibliography

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1. Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. 1964.

In this work, Fletcher analyzes allegory in authors writings. He goes into a discussion of symbolism and effect on various pieces of literature. A good reference for this unit.

2. Tolkien, John R.R. *The Hobbit*. 1967.

A fictional story about a race of beings called hobbits. The main character, Bilbo, sets forth on a great adventure (Bilbo is challenged by Gandalf the Wizard) and as this fabulous tale unravels the reader will meet a new world created by Tolkien. This “new” place has its own set of characters each clearly defined. Written as a child’s story, it has all the color, details, and excitement needed to sustain children’s interest yet, it is enjoyable to adults as well. Tolkien’s use of words, vocabulary level, content and complicated plot sequencing makes this tale interesting to many ages.

3. Ready, William. *Understanding Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings*. 1978.

This work, first known by its original title, *The Tolkien Relation*, is another critical book that is essential in understanding the depth of Tolkien as a writer. Its biographical content (Chapter I) is very useful in order to acquaint the reader with Tolkien, the man. An excellent text to have on hand, especially in teaching this unit.

4. Kocher, Paul H. *Master of Middle-Earth*. 1972.

A critical work analyzing dwarves, orcs, elves, hobbits and all of Tolkien’s techniques. Kocher himself presents this work in much of a Tolkien “spirit”. It gives us a full picture of Tolkien’s work of fantasy and insight into his theory behind his writing. Chapter I: “Middle-Earth, an Imaginary World?” and Chapter II: “The Hobbit” are very thorough and helps us to understand Tolkien’s world.

5. Radice, Betty and Robert Baldick. *Beowulf*. (Penguin Classics) 1957.

A prose translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem with an introduction by David Wright. This is an



Anglo-Saxon poem translated into contemporary English prose. Described as an elegiac poem, it is only a little over 3,000 lines in length but rich in its oral sources (thus meant to be recited). Interesting!

6. Tolkien, John R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. (10th. printing) Houghton-Mifflin Co. 1965.

A tale that grows in the telling. It is the first part of the trilogy written by Tolkien. This picks up where *The Hobbit* ends. However, this story is more involved with history (olderworld) and is more suitable for the adult reader.

## Student Bibliography

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Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*.

*Scholastic Magazines* : "Practical English" March 1967. Vol. 42 #7

Encyclopedia Britannica: Egyptian Writings (Vol. II) 1977.

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