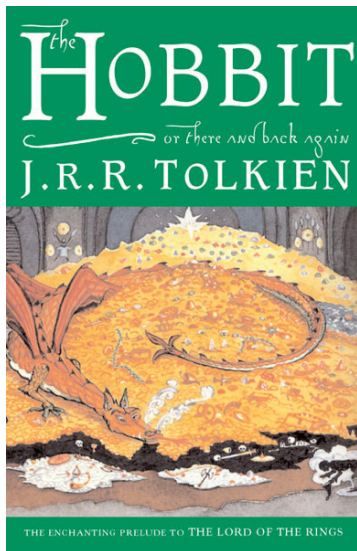


# Discussion Guide

# THE HOBBIT

BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN



## About the Book

Many decades ago in England, a highly respected professor at Oxford was correcting exam papers and, having a few minutes to spare, idly scribbled on a blank page in an exam book, “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” He didn’t even know what a hobbit was, or why he wrote those words. But they were, nevertheless, the beginning of one of the most famous fantasy adventure tales ever written. The professor was J.R.R. Tolkien, and the book, of course, was *The Hobbit*. Tolkien was a teacher of (among other things) philology and a student of many languages, including such ancient ones as Old Icelandic, Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon (the basis of modern English), and others, long since dead. He would seem to be an unlikely author of a fantasy tale, but he had originated some languages for his own amusement and had written about an imaginary world in which to use them. The idea of *The Hobbit* fitted in that world somehow, and Tolkien, wrote over some years, the story of the adventures of Bilbo the hobbit and Gandalf and the dwarves. He read it, with great applause, to his children as he was writing it, and finally it was submitted for publication. Rayner Unwin, the ten-year-old son of Tolkien’s English publisher, read it for his father and thought the book was appealing. *The Hobbit* was published to favorable reviews in 1937 and has been a favorite with millions of readers ever since. It has become a classic and has been read even more since the publication of its famous sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*.

## Rhymes

Professor Tolkien was deeply interested in words, their meanings, and the ways they could be used. He loved rhymes, riddles, proverbs, sayings, songs, folktales, and stories. The reader will notice Tolkien’s use of verse in telling us about his characters. For example, here is a verse from a goblin song:

Clap! Snap! The black crack!  
Grip, grab! Pinch, nab!  
And down, down to Goblin-town  
You go, my lad!

Do they sound jolly and friendly? Hardly! Here’s an elf song:

O! Will you be staying  
Or will you be flying?  
Your ponies are straying!  
The daylight is dying!  
To fly would be folly,  
To stay would be jolly  
And listen and hark  
Till the end of the dark  
To our tune  
ha! ha!

This sounds lighthearted and merry, a song of friendship and feasting. Other songs and poems are humorous or descriptive. The dwarves sing a funny song about Bilbo’s apprehension when they are washing the dishes at his house after the party following their unexpected arrival:

Dump the crocks in a boiling bowl;  
Pound them up with a thumping pole;  
And when you’ve finished, if any are whole,  
Send them down the hall to roll!  
That’s what Bilbo Baggins hates!  
So, carefully! carefully with the plates!

Ask your students if they noticed other rhymes throughout *The Hobbit*. They could also make up their own rhymes in a style that echoes the character. A song by Bilbo about how much he misses his home and hearth, its coziness and comfort, would be both appealing and a truthful reflection of Bilbo’s feelings.

## Riddles

Another way words are used is in games. There are many word games available, modern (Scrabble, for instance) and ancient, but the oldest and most famous is the riddle. There are some riddles that everyone knows, such as “What’s black and white and red (read) all over?” A newspaper, of course. Some are very ancient indeed, like one Bilbo used: “No-legs lay on one-leg, two-legs sat near on three-legs, four-legs got some.” The answer was “Fish on a little table, man at table sitting on a stool, the cat has the bones.” This was very similar to the riddle that the Sphinx asked Oedipus thousands of years ago: “What animal walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?” (Humans on all fours as babies, two legs as adults, and three, including a cane, in old age.)

Bilbo and Gollum competed against each other to win a riddle-game. Riddle-games were sacred; if an agreement was reached, the contestants had to abide by the terms. The terms of this one were that if Bilbo won, Gollum would show him the way out of the goblins’ cave, but if Gollum won, he got to eat Bilbo. You will notice that some of the riddles asked by Bilbo and Gollum as part of the riddle-game were very old, such as the egg riddle: “A box without hinges, key, or lid, / Yet golden treasure inside is hid.”

Some were very difficult, such as the one about the dark. And one Bilbo made up. It was not, strictly speaking, a riddle at all, but a question. Gollum, however, accepted it and, as bound by the rules of the game, lost, although he certainly didn’t intend to follow the rules.

Asking riddles and reading riddle books are still popular. Students can create their own riddle-games, using either familiar riddles or ones made up by the student. But don’t eat the loser!

Proverbs and sayings also say things in short and pithy ways. You may know the proverb “Early to bed and early to rise make a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” One whole book of the Bible is called Proverbs and gives lots of advice. Several of Bilbo’s sayings became proverbs. One was “escaping from goblins to be caught by wolves!” Help your students find others. (Hint: Look for a proverb about dragons.) Help them construct their own proverbs.

## Rings and Other Magical Items

The fact that *The Hobbit* is a fantasy adventure story means that there probably will be magic in it. And indeed there is magic. But before we talk about the ring, which no doubt comes first to mind, consider

some of the other magic. What are some other magical incidents? Besides magical objects, there are beings with magical abilities — or disabilities. Dwarves can make weapons with magical properties, and elves make magic light. Beorn can change his shape from a man to a bear and back, and what’s more, can talk to his trained animals that assist him. The eagles can speak, and so can some of the birds on the Lonely Mountain. Smaug is a magical beast, a dragon, who can also speak. The trolls turn to stone in the sunlight.

And, of course, there is Gandalf, the wisest of wizards, who can do many things, though if you’ll notice he never does magic unless he has to. Gandalf seems to specialize in fire and light. He uses magic fire against the wargs and magic darkness in the goblins’ cave. He knows his way around strange places without a map, though that might just be his wisdom and knowledge.

There are quite a few magical objects in the tale. There is the trolls’ magic purse, which cries out and reveals Bilbo to the trolls. The swords Orcrist and Glamdring, belonging to Thorin Oakenshield and Gandalf, are magic; they gleam when goblins are near. Bard’s arrow that killed Smaug seems never to fail to hit its target.

But, of course, the most famous of the magical objects is the ring that Bilbo finds in the goblins’ cave. It confers invisibility on the wearer, which is certainly useful in a pinch. Bilbo is generally careful in using it only when he needs to, which is fortunate, as it exerts a strong hold on its possessor. He uses it to escape the goblins’ cave, to rescue the dwarves from the Elvenking’s dungeon, and to get the Arkenstone to Bard and his allies for bargaining with Thorin, all meritorious purposes. He proves an excellent holder of the ring, as he has no ambition to be powerful. In the sequel to *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, it is made clear that it is the most powerful and important of all the magic rings. Talk with your students about what they would do with a ring of invisibility.

## Runes

Runes were different symbols, like letters, used for writing. Several messages in *The Hobbit* were transmitted by runes; in fact, the whole journey would have been fruitless unless Bilbo and others were able to translate the runic messages. The first message was on the map of the Lonely Mountain and was especially magical because it could be read only by moonlight on a certain day of the year.

What does each rune mean? Bear in mind that some runes represent two letters together, such as “th.” There are whole messages on the endpapers and title page of the book. What do they say?

Students can also write a runic message of their own. Students can even make up their own runes using their own set of characters. It can be a secret way of communicating with those who know what their runes mean, like a secret code.

### Things to Consider

You can see that *The Hobbit* is an exciting story, but it also has some serious questions to ask the reader. Here are some things to think about.

In the riddle-game between Gollum and Bilbo, were both Bilbo and Gollum fair in their questions?

Was Bilbo right to spare Gollum? Would Gollum have spared Bilbo if he could have caught him? Did Bilbo have any right to keep the ring?

Should Bilbo have told the dwarves about the magic ring as soon as he found it?

Was Bilbo right to keep the Arkenstone? What would have happened if he had given it to Thorin or kept it for himself?

Did Bilbo change during his journey?

Is Bilbo the only hero in the story? What about Bard, for instance, and Thorin Oakenshield and Beorn? What are some of the heroic qualities, besides bravery, that some of the characters have? Are all heroes good, or can they have both good and bad qualities? Does Bilbo have any bad qualities? Is Gandalf always good?

Why are there no women and children as important characters in this tale? Can you imagine any of these heroes being women? Why?

### Conclusion

J.R.R. Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* as a serious story. Although it has a dragon and a wizard and magic and much humor, it is not generally a funny story. Although it has a physically small hero, it is not really a comedy. Although it has hairsbreadth escapes and last-minute rescues, it is not solely an adventure. What do you and your students think it is really about? You might suggest *The Lord of the Rings* to students who enjoyed *The Hobbit*.