



THE LORD OF THE RINGS *the return of the king* study guide

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for the novel By J.R.R. Tolkien



with overview
essays for the
complete *lord of
the rings*

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Synopsis

The Return of the King—the third volume (Books V and VI) of *The Lord of the Rings*—continues and concludes the story begun in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*.

Book Five begins with the members of the Fellowship dispersing again as they prepare to withstand the impending onslaught from the Dark Lord Sauron and his Nazgûl. Pippin and Gandalf arrive at the city of Minas Tirith, where the Men of Gondor will soon make a stand against the armies of Sauron. Denethor, Steward of Gondor, strives with Gandalf for power and supremacy as they prepare for Sauron's assault, but his pride comes crashing down as personal tragedy strikes and defeat looms.

Merry pledges himself to the service of the king of Rohan and, unwilling to stay behind as the king marches to the aid of Minas Tirith, he seeks a way to join the Riders of Rohan as they go to war. Gimli and Legolas follow Aragorn into the Paths of the Dead, from which no man has ever returned, in a desperate attempt to bring aid to Gondor before it is too late.

Eventually, the survivors of the assault on Gondor gather before the gates of Mordor in a desperate, hopeless attempt to engage Sauron again in battle and keep him distracted from the two lonely hobbits they believe are still alive, trying to find their way through the wastelands of Mordor to the seat of Sauron's power. Frodo and Sam must destroy the One Ring by casting it into the fires in which it was forged in the heart of Mount Doom. But at the crucial moment Frodo's strength finally fails.

The Return of the King brings to conclusion J. R. R. Tolkien's epic masterpiece of good versus evil, personal struggle, and redemption.

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effects do you think it is designed to have on the reader? Does it increase your appreciation for the story? Why or why not?

Alliteration and Assonance:

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds either at the beginning of words or within words. *Assonance* is the repetition of vowel sounds within words. Both techniques give a passage a lyrical quality. In the paragraph below, underline instances of alliteration and cross out instances of assonance. Remember that both techniques use repeated *sounds*, not necessarily the same letter.

All was ominously quiet. The light was no more than that of dusk at a dark day's end. The vast vapours that arose in Mordor and went streaming westward passed low overhead, a great welter of cloud and smoke now lit again beneath with a sullen glow of red.

Questions:

1. How does Sam make his way past the Two Watchers at the gate of Cirith Ungol? How do he and Frodo escape them when leaving Cirith Ungol, and what happens to the Watchers then?
2. How does Frodo react when he learns that Sam has the Ring? What does this imply about Frodo or the Ring? [If you have read *The Fellowship of the Ring*, to what other event is this similar?]

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Thinking About the Story:

9. These chapters contain several parallels to situations found in scripture. Look up each of the scriptures below, then briefly describe the incident or situation from the book that comes closest to being a parallel to the scripture.
 - a. Genesis 37:28, 36; 45:4–7:
 - b. Genesis 37:31–35:
 - c. Matthew 4:1–10 [Luke 4:1–13]:
10. *Anthropomorphism* is the giving of human characteristics to a nonhuman object or creature. (Anthropomorphism is often confused with *personification*, which is embodying an idea or concept in human form, such as Jiminy Cricket personifying a conscience in the Disney *Pinnocchio* movie.) Underline the words in the following passage that illustrate anthropomorphism, then explain what tone they give the passage and how Tolkien uses the anthropomorphic words to help create the tone.

And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai on the other side of the valley low scrubby trees lurked and clung, coarse grey grass-tussocks fought with the stones, and withered mosses crawled on them; and everywhere great writhing, tangled brambles sprawled.

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14. From whose point of view is this section predominately presented? Why do you think Tolkien decided to approach these chapters from this character's viewpoint?

Dig Deeper:

15. Describe the specific temptation Sam faces when he puts on the Ring at Cirith Ungol. What similarities or differences do you see between this temptation scene and the temptations of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13? What do Sam and Jesus' temptations suggest about the right and wrong uses of power? Consult Matthew 20:20–28 when thinking about your answer.
16. What does Sam see high above the Ephel Dúath one night that changes his perspective on his and Frodo's circumstances? How does his perspective change?

Read Psalm 102:25–27; Isaiah 57:15; John 1:5, 16:33; Hebrews 1:10–12, 13:8. How might these verses provide Christians with an experience similar to Sam's? To what "light" should Christians turn—what is eternal and secure?

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17. Tolkien once wrote that lembas serves two functions in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a “device for making credible the long marches with little provisions,” and it has “what one might hesitatingly call a ‘religious’” function: “This becomes later apparent, especially in the chapter ‘Mount Doom.’” [Tolkien, *Letters* 275] Based on the description of lembas in that chapter, what might its “religious” function or significance be? Read John 6:27, 48–51 and 1 Corinthians 10:14–22. How might *lembas* be similar to or different from the bread discussed in these biblical texts?
18. Just like Isildur (see *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book II, Chapter 2), Frodo chooses to not destroy the Ring. In a draft of a letter to one of his readers, Tolkien offers this commentary on the end of the Quest:

“No, Frodo ‘failed’ [O]ne must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.”
[Tolkien, *Letters* 252.]

What do you think Tolkien meant? How does the scene at the Cracks of Doom support your answer? How *is* “the power of Evil in the world” overcome—not only in Middle-earth, but also in our world today? Read Matthew 6:13—a text Tolkien himself suggested was critical for interpreting Frodo’s “failure”—and Romans 7:15–25 when considering your response.

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and so had no way to prepare himself for meeting a man such as Denethor. Denethor, though he knew much of the outside world, thought about it only in relation to its importance to Gondor. Neither Pippin nor Denethor looked at their place within a larger world. Instead they looked upon the world only through their own interests.

12. Answers will vary. Pippin offers his allegiance during a moment of feeling a sense of obligation toward Boromir and also feeling piqued at some slight in Denethor's attitude toward him and toward hobbits in general. Merry pledges himself to Théoden out of a sudden impulse of love for the old king. Both decisions are spur of the moment, have the effect of separating the hobbits from their friends, leave the hobbits wondering what they have done and whether it was wise, and tie the young hobbits to two of the most important leaders in the coming wars. The greatest difference is that Merry's pledge was motivated by love, whereas Pippin was motivated by duty. The reader may see the motivations reflected in the rulers.

13. Responses will vary, as both Aragorn and Éowyn make strong arguments throughout this passage. Aragorn concentrates on her duty to the needs of her people; Éowyn argues that she is wasted in her current capacity, and that she is left to be sacrificed when all the men are gone. In this argument, point of view seems to be everything.

14. Responses will vary. Tolkien may be reflecting that people tend to romanticize or dramatize events after they are over, forgetting the violence and sadness of events, or changing them into the way we *wish* to remember them. On the other hand, in later years the events may be distilled into potent emotional symbols and memories, without the specific pain of direct involvement. The songs may well mention the pain and sadness of the wars, much as the elvish songs often concern the pain of separation and passing, but the immediacy is gone and the events are distilled into a more bitter-sweet universal experience.

15. The tone of this passage and the end of the chapter becomes very lyrical and structured, using repetition and formal language. For example: "The lady Éowyn greeted them and was glad of their coming"; "And she answered as one that likes not what is said:" "Then he kissed her hand, and sprang into the saddle, and rode away, and did not look back." The passage reads like an epic poem, such as *Beowulf*, which is written for oral recitation. This may be Tolkien's way of giving Aragorn's ride on the Paths of the Dead an epic feel. However, the actual ride under the mountains changes point of view to Gimli, the character most unlike the rest of the party. Gimli is horrified and terrified by the trip, and his point of view is a strong contrast to the epic element before and after the ride in darkness—perhaps to make it more accessible to the reader or to give it a greater sense of realism. The lyrical, epic language before and after the ride under the mountains may illustrate what Tolkien earlier was saying about the songs of Rohan: it is easier to be "romantic" about an event before or after, but during the event one concentrates on dealing with the immediate experience.

Dig Deeper:

16. The modern saying is, "Where there is a will, there is a way." The modern saying means something like, "If you desire something strongly enough, you can find a way to accomplish it"; Dernhelm's saying could be paraphrased, "If you are willing, a way will present itself" or "a way will be provided." The difference is subtle, but possibly very important: the modern saying is self-based—"you can do anything, if you believe or want it badly enough," might be another paraphrase. Dernhelm's proverb implies another active force—something else "opens" a way—perhaps alluding