

The Lord of the Rings

QUESTIONS TO ALWAYS BE THINKING ABOUT

Tolkien wrote that, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.” Yet he also wrote that it, “is neither allegorical nor topical.” (*Frodo’s Journey*, ch1) In what sense, then, have you found *The Lord of the Rings* religious?

One of the most powerful symbols/ideas/themes in LOTR is the Ring itself. What is the literary/religious significance of it? What does it at times symbolize? Where have you found the Ring in your own life?

One of the other most powerful symbols/ideas/themes in LOTR is fellowship and its role in metanarrative. Where have you seen the themes of fellowship rising to the surface so far? What’s there for us to learn about fellowship (or the lack of/need for it)?

Our club’s definition of a Great Book includes that the book revels in the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. One Tolkien researcher writes, “For... Tolkien, the goodness, truth, and beauty of fairy stories are to be found in the way they judge the way things are from the perspective of the way things ought to be. The *should* judges the *is*.” Have you found this to be the case with Tolkien’s “fairy story”?

MEETING 1: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

In this first part, we find hobbits, some of the most insignificant creatures in all of Middle Earth, thrust into the middle of a great epic struggle for the fate of all. How does Tolkien feel about the narratives of the seemingly insignificant and how they fit into the greater metanarrative of Middle-Earth? (A metanarrative is an over-arching story in which all other stories fit. For example, your own personal narrative or ‘story’ has been woven by God into his much larger metanarrative, or over-arching story, of salvation.)

The elves have a greater role in *Fellowship of the Ring* than the books to come. What do you make of them? Why is there both a transcendence and yet sadness to the elves?

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

[Gandalf:] “A ring of Power looks after itself, Frodo. It may slip off treacherously, but its keeper never abandons it... There was more than one power at work, Frodo. The Ring was trying to get back to its master... Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought.”
 “It is not,” said Frodo. “Though I am not sure that I understand you.” (56ⁱ)

Q: What worldview is required for Gandalf’s “encouraging thought”? Can we say the same for the events in our lives? When we find ourselves dealing with the forces of evil, are we able to say there other transcendent forces at work, and why?

THREE IS COMPANY

Suddenly [Frodo] spoke, aloud but as to himself, saying slowly:

The Road goes ever on and on
 Down from the door where it began.
 Now far ahead the Road has gone,
 And I must follow, if I can,
 Pursuing it with weary feet,
 Until it joins some larger way,
 Where many paths and errands meet.
 And whither then? I cannot say.

‘That sounds like a bit of old Bilbo’s rhyming,’ said Pippin. ‘Or is it one of your imitations? It does not sound altogether encouraging.’

'I don't know,' said Frodo. 'It came to me then, as if I was making it up; but I may have heard it long ago. Certainly it reminds me very much of Bilbo in the last years, before he went away. He used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door," he used to say. "You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there in no knowing where you might be swept off to. Do you realize that this is the very path that goes through Mirkwood, and that if you let it, it might take you to the Lonely Mountain or even further and to worst places?" He used to say that on the path outside the front door at Bag End, especially after he had been out for a long walk.' (73-74)

IN THE HOUSE OF TOM BOMBADIL:

[Tom Bombadil] appeared already to know much about them and all their families, and indeed to know much of all the history and doings of the Shire down from days. Hardly remembered among the hobbits themselves. It no longer surprised them; but he made no secret that he owed his recent knowledge largely to Farmer Maggot, whom he seemed to regard as a person of more importance than they had imagined. 'There's earth under his old feet, and clay on his fingers; wisdom in his bones, and both his eyes are open,' said Tom. (132)

THE COUNCIL OF ELROND

"...I am Saruman the Wise, Saruman Ring-maker, Saruman of Many Colours!"...
"I liked white better," I said.
' "White!" he sneered. "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page can be overwritten; and the white light can be broken."
' "In which case it is no longer white," said I. "And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom." (259)

"A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Númenor. This then is one choice before you, before us. We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means." (259)

"[Elrond said,] 'The road must be trod, but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere.'
'Very well, very well, Master Elrond!' said Bilbo suddenly. 'Say no more! It is plain enough what you are pointing at. Bilbo the silly hobbit started this affair, and Bilbo had better finish it, or himself...'
Boromir looked in surprise at Bilbo, but the laughter died on his lips when he saw that all the others regarded the old hobbit with grave respect." (269)

MEETING 2: THE TWO TOWERS

Boromir failed and betrayed the Fellowship. Yet he is given an incredible amount of honour from the Fellowship. Why? Aragorn kept hidden how Boromir had tried to force the ring from Frodo. Was he deceiving the Fellowship? Does that make the praises of the Fellowship hollow?

Consider once more: How might Tolkien respond to someone saying, “I’m not all that important or skillful or influential of a person; I have very little to contribute to God’s metanarrative of salvation”? Where in the Two Towers do we find Tolkien’s response?

Great Books explore, illustrate, or develop Great Ideas. These include the seven virtues: justice, moderation, courage, wisdom, faith, hope, and mercy. Where might we find examples of or commentary on these virtues in the first two books of LOTR? Especially consider the virtues of courage, hope, and mercy. Note: Here we define faith as *trust* in that which is founded on an object having been found trustworthy. This faith/trust, looks to the past. Hope, in contrast, we define as that which looks ahead to the future.

In *The Two Towers*, Aragorn and Frodo are continually bemoaning the wrong choices they made. Aragorn bemoans how he made decisions that only lead to the breaking of the fellowship, and Frodo bemoans how he has made bad decisions that has long delayed the ring’s travel to Mount Doom. What might Tolkien be exploring with these attitudes in our two main heroes?

There are moments when a hero will seem to grow in stature when they speak. Consider Gandalf growing in stature as he tells Bilbo he is not a “conjurer of cheap tricks,” or when Aragorn speaks and it appears to all that a king is before him. There is even a moment with Frodo, in the taming of Smeagol: “For a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown and Gollum had shrunk: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud, and at his feet a little whining dog.” (618) Is this just innocent word-play, or is Tolkien communicating something to us in these moments?

TREEBEARD

‘Of course, it is likely enough, my friends,’ he said slowly, ‘likely enough that we are going to our doom: the last march of the Ents. But if we stayed at home and did nothing, doom would find us anyway, sooner or later. That thought has long been growing in our hearts; and that is why we are marching now. It was not a hasty resolve. Now at least the last march of the Ents may be worth a song. Aye,’ he sighed, ‘we may help the other peoples before we pass away. Still, I should have liked to see the songs come true about the Entwives. I should dearly have liked to see Fimbrelthil again. But there, my friends, songs like trees bear fruit only in their own time and their own way: and sometimes they are withered untimely.’ (486)

THE WHITE RIDER

[Gimli said,] ‘I thought Fangorn was dangerous.’
‘Dangerous!’ cried Gandalf. ‘And so am I, very dangerous: more dangerous than anything you will ever meet, unless you are brought alive before the seat of the Dark Lord. And Aragorn is dangerous, and Legolas is dangerous. You are beset with dangers, Gimli son of Gloin; for you are dangerous yourself, in your own fashion. Certainly the forest of Fangorn is perilous – not least to those that are too ready with their axes; and Fangorn himself, he is perilous too; yet he is wise and kindly nonetheless. But now his long slow wrath is brimming over, and all the forest is filled with it. The coming of the hobbits and the tidings that they brought have spilled it: it will soon be running like a flood; but its tide is turned against Saruman and the axes of Isengard. A thing is about to happen which has not happened since the Elder Days: the Ents are going to wake up and find that they are strong.’ (499-500)

THE ROAD TO ISENGARD

‘Yet also I should be sad,’ said Théoden. ‘For however the fortune of war shall go, may it not so end that much that was fair and wonderful shall pass for ever out of Middle-earth?’
‘It may,’ said Gandalf. ‘The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured, nor made as if it had not been. But to such days we are doomed. Let us now go on with the journey we have begun!’ (550)

THE WINDOW IN THE WEST

'Maybe, it would have been better had Boromir fallen there with Mithrandir,' said Faramir, 'and not gone on to the fate that waited above the falls of Rauros.'

'Maybe.' [said Frodo.] (677)

Would it have been better? If not, note what this tells us about the times we ourselves think we know what is best to happen in our contexts when it comes to the willful actions and effects of sinful humans.

THE STAIRS OF CIRITH UNGOL

'I don't like anything here at all,' said Frodo, 'step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.'

'Yes, that's so,' said Sam. 'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started. But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we've fallen into?'

'I wonder,' said Frodo. 'But I don't know. And that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to.'

'No, sir, of course not. Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it – and the Silmaril went on and came to Earendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got – you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?'

'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.'

'And then we can have some rest and some sleep,' said Sam. He laughed grimly. 'And I mean just that, Mr. Frodo. I mean plain ordinary rest, and sleep, and waking up to a morning's work in the garden. I'm afraid that's all I'm hoping for all the time. All the big important plans are not for my sort. Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!" And they'll say: "Yes, that's one of my favourite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot."'

'It's saying a lot too much,' said Frodo, and he laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth. To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. But Frodo did not heed them; he laughed again. 'Why, Sam,' he said, 'to hear you somehow makes me as merry as if the story was already written. But you've left out one of the chief characters: Samwise the stouthearted. "I want to hear more about Sam, dad. Why didn't they put in more of his talk, dad? That's what I like, it makes me laugh. And Frodo wouldn't have got far without Sam, would he, dad?"'

'Now, Mr. Frodo,' said Sam, 'you shouldn't make fun. I was serious.'

'So was I,' said Frodo, 'and so I am. We're going on a bit too fast. You and I, Sam, are still stuck in the worst places of the story, and it is all too likely that some will say at this point: "Shut the book now, dad; we don't want to read any more."'

'Maybe,' said Sam, 'but I wouldn't be one to say that. Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different. Why, even Gollum might be good in a tale, better than he is to have by you, anyway. And he used to like tales himself once, by his own account. I wonder if he thinks he's the hero or the villain? Gollum!' he called. 'Would you like to be the hero – now where's he got to again?' (711-713)

MEETING 3: THE RETURN OF THE KING

In this last part of the trilogy, Tolkien particularly develops the idea of *stewardship*. Where does he do this, and why does he use this imagery? What truth is he conveying?

Where do we find the LOTR's overarching theme of *providence* coming to a head in this third part?

Great Books explore, illustrate, or develop Great Ideas. These include the seven virtues: *justice, moderation, courage, wisdom, faith, hope, and mercy*. Where might we find examples of or commentary on these virtues in the first two books of LOTR?

Although Tolkien sought to resist writing allegorically, the character of Aragorn in particular is rich with Christ-like imagery, especially in the role of King and Lord. Where do you see this in the final book?

Consider the Bible verse about carrying one another's burdens. Where do we see this illustrated in LOTR?

For many of chapters, Tolkien writes from the perspective of Sam. The entire tale even ends with a vignette of Sam at home. Why might Tolkien have taken such an epic story and bound it so closely to the figure of Sam?

Tolkien wrote that the main theme of LOTR is not, as some thought, nuclear war or any earthly war, but rather, "[sic] Death and Immortality." Where do you particularly find this theme rising to the surface in the sections you've read this month?

THE PYRE OF DENETHOR

'So!' cried Denethor. 'Thou hadst already stolen half my son's love. Now thou stealest the hearts of my knights also, so that they rob me wholly of my son at the last. But in this at least thou shalt not defy my will: to rule my own end.'

'Come hither!' he cried to his servants. 'Come, if you are not all recreant!' Then two of them ran up the steps to him. Swiftly he snatched a torch from the hand of one and sprang back into the house. Before Gandalf could hinder him he thrust the brand amid the fuel, and at once it crackled and roared into flame. Then Denethor leaped upon the table, and standing there wreathed in fire and smoke he took up the staff of his stewardship that lay at his feet and broke it on his knee. Casting the pieces into the blaze he bowed and laid himself on the table, clasping the *palantír* with both hands upon his breast. And it was said that ever after, if any man looked in that Stone, unless he had a great strength of will to turn it to other purpose, he saw only two aged hands withering in flame. (854)

Part of the LOTR involves, as much as the rising of great heroes, the fall of Great heroes. What is the sin of Denethor? And how does this compare to Saruman?

THE LAND OF SHADOW

Far above the Ephel Dúath in the West the night-sky was still dim and pale. There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. (922)

This is my favorite quote from LOTR. What is Tolkien communicating with the symbol of the starlight? How could that single star beam give Sam hope? Where do we find these star beams in our own world?

MOUNT DOOM

'Down, down!' he gasped, clutching his hand to his breast, so that beneath the cover of his leather shirt he clasped the Ring. 'Down, you creeping thing, and out of my path! Your time is at an end. You cannot betray me or slay me now.'

Then suddenly, as before under the eaves of the Emyrn Muil, Sam saw these two rivals with other vision. A crouching shape, scarcely more than the shadow of a living thing, a creature now wholly ruined and defeated, yet filled with a hideous lust and rage; and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire. Out of the fire there spoke a commanding voice. 'Begone, and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom.' (943-4)

‘But do you remember Gandalf’s words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him! For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.’ (947)

Frodo ultimately failed at his task. And, through the work of Providence, Gollum, an evil nobody, carried out the mission. What is Tolkien teaching us by this strange turn of events?

THE STEWARD AND THE KING

Sing now, ye people of the Tower of Anor,
for the Realm of Sauron is ended for ever,
and the Dark Tower is thrown down.

Sing and rejoice, ye people of the Tower of Guard,
for your watch hath not been in vain,
and the Black Gate is broken,
and your King hath passed through,
and he is victorious.

Sing and be glad, all ye children of the West,
for your King shall come again,
and he shall dwell among you
all the days of your life.

And the Tree that was withered shall be renewed,
and he shall plant it in the high places,
and the City shall be blessed.

Sing all ye people! (963)

Then Frodo came forward and took the crown from Faramir and bore it to Gandalf; and Aragorn knelt, and Gandalf set the White Crown upon his head, and said:

‘Now come the days of the King, and may they be blessed while the thrones of the Valar endure!’

But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir cried: ‘Behold the King!’ (968)

ⁱ All quotes are from J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* Omnibus Edition (HarperCollins e-books)