



J.R.R. Tolkien's
The Hobbit

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>The Hobbit</i> by J.R.R. Tolkien ISBN- 10: 0618260307 ISBN-13: 978-0618260300
<i>Plot</i>	Homebody Bilbo Baggins struggles to find his courage and character when he accepts a commission from a band of dwarves to burgle a dragon lair.
<i>Setting</i>	Middle Earth. Bag End in the Shire. the Misty Mountains. Mirkwood Forest. The Lonely Mountain and surrounding countryside. Smaug's Lair. The Goblin mines. Autumn in Bilbo's middle-age.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit and the story's protagonist• Gollum, a hobbit-like creature who dwells under the mountain• The dragon Smaug, one of the story's main antagonists• The other dwarves: Oin, Gloin, Dori, Bombur, Bifur, Bofur, Balin, Dwalin, Fili, Kili, Nori• Bard of Dale, captain of the archers in Lake Town• The Master, self-appointed (and self-interested) leader of Lake Town• Beorn the skin changer• Various Wargs, goblins, elves, and other fantastic creatures
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Man/ Nature Man vs. Himself Man vs. Society
<i>Theme</i>	The nature of courage. The quest motif. The importance of Fellowship. The fear of man
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Foreshadowing Symbolism Motif

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



Where does this story happen? In what country or region does it take place? Does the story happen in the country or the city? Does the story happen in one spot, or does the action unfold across a wide area? (1a-c)

Any discussion of Tolkien's work must begin with setting since the author uses it so consistently to underscore his plots, characters, and themes. As a teacher, you may sometimes allow your discussions to begin with plot or conflict in order to get the students involved right away, but in the case of *The Hobbit*, setting should not be postponed.

The Hobbit takes place throughout Middle Earth, an imaginary world of Tolkien's creation. It spans the countryside, from homey, rural farmlands to craggy mountain tops.

What is the mood or atmosphere of the place where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny or dark and bleak? What words or phrases or descriptions does the author use to create this atmosphere? (1d)

The mood of this story changes with the topography of its scenes. The story begins in Bilbo's own valley, Bag End in the Shire, a quaint place full of warmth and sunshine. The ensuing journey takes Bilbo through the Misty Mountains beyond the Last Homely House of Elrond the elf, through the wild forest of Mirkwood where giant spiders lurk and elves make merry, through dark goblin infested mines and into the very heart of the Lonely Mountain, where the great Dragon, Smaug, makes his lair.

Is the setting a real or imaginary place? If it is imaginary, is it subject to the same physical laws as our world is? (1g)

Although the geographical setting is imaginary, its topography resembles our world. Middle Earth is subject to the same physical laws that our world obeys and bears striking resemblance to the English countryside and German mountains.

The fact that the setting is imaginary is significant. It reminds us that every detail is created intentionally for storytelling purposes. The geography of Middle Earth is an essential part of the story of *The Hobbit*, for it gives form and shape to the journey of Bilbo and the dwarves.

Among what kind of people is the story set? What is their economic class? How do they live? Are they hopeful? Downtrodden? Depressed? Why? (1h)

Middle Earth is populated with dwarves, elves, hobbits, men, and mythical beasts. Here there are dragons, giant spiders, shape-shifters, and goblins. Of these groups, the dwarves are perhaps most important to this story. They live in mountain caves and delve for jewels and precious stones. Though descended from noble kings, they are a downtrodden race, primarily due to the desolation of Smaug. Fiercely proud, however, they plan to recapture their former glory.

Hobbits, for their part, are homely, common folk. Their humility makes them ever hopeful. They are not generally concerned with things too high for them to understand. The greater part of their thoughts is taken up with cheerful and comfortable hobbit holes, where larders are full and kettles always singing.

In what season does the story take place? (2c)

The story covers one season, fall, and begins, "One morning, long ago in the quiet of the world..." Readers of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy will understand that this story precedes Frodo's epic struggle against evil.

Does the story happen in a particular year, era, or age of the world? What historical events take place just before the story opens? Do these events help explain the actions of characters, the action of the story or its mood? (2d)

Long ago, before the story opens, the dwarves enjoyed a legendary time of peace and prosperity. The dragon Smaug drove the dwarves from home and country, however, and reduced them in number and substance. The "Desolation of Smaug" occurred so long ago by the time the story begins that most dwarves count this previous "golden age" as little more than legend. Nevertheless, the quest to reestablish a dwarfish kingdom under the Lonely Mountain in order to restore an era of peace and prosperity provides one of the main elements of the story's plot.

In what time of life for the main characters do the events occur? Are they children? Are they just passing into adulthood? Are they already grown-ups? Does setting the story in this particular time of the characters' lives make the story better? (2e)

Bilbo Baggins is 50-years-old when the story begins. He is more or less middle-aged for a hobbit. Bilbo is old enough to want comfort, yet young enough to be stirred by the prospect of adventure. This is the perfect time in his life for a fabulous, unanticipated journey. Had he been younger or older, readers would have feared for his safety as much as they would have doubted his shrewd wit.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



Who is the story about? (3)

The main character of this story is its namesake, a hobbit named Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo is both respectable and prosperous. Although, like his kinfolk, he is small in stature, this in no way reflects upon the magnitude of his heart. Like most hobbits, Bilbo is stoutly built. He dresses in bright greens and yellows and goes shoeless, since his feet bottoms are like tough leather. His brown curly hair frames a "good-natured," nut brown face.

Like his kinfolk, Bilbo enjoys good company, good meals, and humor. Yet, unlike others of his kind, Bilbo has an adventurous streak which he inherited from his mother, Belladonna Took. Tolkien's creation of the hobbit character is designed to make him an "everyman" with whom the reader identifies. He's not tall and imposing; he is not glamorous or majestic; he is not mysterious or magical. He is common. Over and over again, Tolkien returns to the theme of Bilbo's most heartfelt desires: food, drink, tobacco, song, gardening, fellowship – to put it in one word, home. Bilbo is motivated by a desire we all share. Bilbo wants to go home.

Make up a list of adjectives that describe the protagonist, what words or actions on the character's part make you choose the adjectives you do? (3f)

Bilbo is a fully drawn protagonist. Just like a real person, his character is a combination of sometimes contradictory elements. He is both foolish and wise, timid and courageous, selfish and hospitable. In particular, his stubborn streak belies his unassuming manner.

Bilbo is:	And yet he is also:
Vulnerable, timid, naïve, quiet, gentle	Hospitable and friendly
Unpretentious, unambitious, retiring, humble	Plucky, determined, resourceful, courageous
Foolish and impulsive	Observant, inventive, and sagacious
Deceptive and surreptitious	Genuine, honest, sincere

Thin-skinned and irritable	Accepting, warmhearted, kind, trusting
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What do other characters say about Bilbo? (3.K.) What does Bilbo say about himself? (3j)

Comments of the other characters in the story about Bilbo, as well as his own comments about himself, can be collected to support the adjectives listed above. Here are some examples:

Gandalf:

"excitable little fellow...gets funny queer fits, but he is one of the best...as fierce as a dragon in a pinch" (p. 21).

"I have chosen Mr. Baggins and that ought to be enough for all of you. If I say he is a burglar, a burglar he is, or will be when the time comes. There is a lot more in him than you guess and a deal more than he has any idea of himself" (p. 23).

"You are not the hobbit you were" (p. 326).

"You are very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you, but you are only quite a little fellow in the wide world after all!" (p. 330).

Gloin the dwarf:

"Will he do, do you think? It is all very well for Gandalf to talk about this hobbit being fierce, but one shriek like that in a moment of excitement would be enough to wake the dragon...it sounded more like fright than excitement! ...as soon as I clapped eyes on the little fellow bobbing and puffing on the mat, I had my doubts. He looks more like a grocer than a burglar!" (p. 21)

Thorin Oakenshield:

"friend and fellow conspirator, this most excellent and audacious hobbit..." (p. 312).

"Good thief" (p. 312).

"There is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure." Thorin suggests that the world would be better with more people in it like Bilbo (p. 312).

Narrator:

"[Bilbo] was a kindly little soul" (p. 312).

The Elven King:

"...Bilbo the magnificent...I name you elf-friend and blessed" (p. 318).

Other Characters:

Most of Bilbo's companions say that he is touched in the head and call him "poor old Baggins," disbelieving his tall tales. The creature Gollum calls him a "nasty nosy thing" (page 94).

Of what nationality is the protagonist? (3g)

Bilbo hails from the Shire, a rural country of hobbits in the west of Middle Earth. This detail is extremely important for understanding both Bilbo's character and the major themes of the story. We must understand what sort of place Bilbo refers to with the word "home," for it figures very prominently in his desires and aspirations throughout the story. You might say, in fact, that "home" or "going home" is one of the central ideas of the story.

Like the details of Bilbo's physical appearance, the details of his home in the Shire are carefully crafted by the author. A peaceful agricultural land shielded from the trouble of the outside world, the Shire is a place of safety, prosperity, and rest. Even the fact that hobbits live underground reinforces the idea of stability and permanence. The contrast between this idyllic homeland and the wild woods and mountains beyond its borders serves to heighten tension as the story moves toward its climax.

The similarities between Bilbo himself and the land in which he lives might make for a fruitful comparison. Does Bilbo belong in the Shire? How can you tell? Do any of his personality traits seem out of place in the Shire?

What does the protagonist believe to be the most important thing in life? (3m)

We need only to look at the list of adjectives we have already composed to get an idea of Bilbo's priorities. This is one good reason for having students compose such a list at the outset of any discussion of character. We can tell immediately, for example, that Bilbo loves the comfort of home, peace and quiet, and rest.

As the story progresses, we find out that Bilbo also values dependability and keeping his word. Perhaps even more important to him is his reputation with others. As soon as he falls in with the dwarves, Bilbo becomes obsessed with establishing his reputation among them. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that he joins the dwarf band under somewhat false pretenses as their "burglar," though he knows nothing of the "burgling" trade.

Bilbo is keenly interested in proving himself to be a hobbit of valor. He curses his own timidity and foolishness, and constantly looks for opportunities to prove (to himself, even) that he is brave and strong.

Do the character's priorities change over the course of the story? In what way? What causes this change? Is a change for the better, or for the worse? (3n)

In some ways Bilbo's priorities do not change as the story progresses: he remains steadfast and faithful to the dwarves, well representing his sturdy Shire heritage. In addition, no matter how far he journeys, he continually longs for the creature comforts of home.

On the other hand, when it comes to "valor," Bilbo's priorities undergo a dramatic change. A discussion of when and how this change comes about can lead your students directly to one of the central themes of the story: the nature of courage. See the discussion of "what does Bilbo want?" below.

How does the personality of the character reflect the values of the society (or individual) that produced the story? (3o)

Bilbo embodies an essentially western Christian view of human nature. That is to say, Bilbo is a combination of noble and ignoble traits, possessing all the strengths and frailties common to man. A discussion of this question might turn to Tolkien's Catholic faith and his traditional English heritage. Bilbo is no secular humanist hero who exerts his will against the bonds of nature. Rather, Bilbo's heroism (if you can call it that) consists in realizing what sort of creature he is and becoming the best version of himself. In this sense, Tolkien's story has much in common with a pre-modern worldview, where each person has his place in the Great Chain of Being. Elves are elves; dwarves are dwarves; wizards are wizards; hobbits are hobbits – success and greatness involve being who you are in the fullest way.

Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an "Everyman" with whom the reader is meant to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life generally in some way? Is the character a "sympathetic character"? Do you identify with him and hope he will succeed? Do you scorn or despise his weakness? Why? (3p,q)

Bilbo is certainly an "Everyman" figure. While his adventures are those of fairytales, his internal struggles against pride, fear, greed, and selfishness are common to all men. For this reason, Bilbo is an intensely sympathetic character. Readers root for him from the very beginning of the story.

Sometimes it is effective to ask this question backwards; begin by asking students whether they like Bilbo or not, and then ask them why. Eventually it will become clear that they like him because he is just like they are. They share his struggles, strengths and weaknesses. This, of course, is the definition of an "Everyman" character, and Bilbo is one of the best examples of this in literature.

Who else is the story about? Is there a single character that opposes the protagonist in the story? In other words, is there an antagonist? (4a)

Smaug, the legendary dragon who lives under the Lonely Mountain, is the main antagonist in this story.

“Dragons steal gold and jewels...from men and elves and dwarves, wherever they can find them...they guard their plunder as long as they live (which is practically forever unless they are killed), and never enjoy a brass ring of it” (page 27).

Apparently, dragons have little taste or judgment when it comes to gold and jewels, but they do understand “market value” (page 27).

Having stolen all the gold in the northern regions, Smaug fell on the more southerly town of Dale and on the Lonely Mountain, in which the dwarves had made their homes and stored their ample wealth. He drove everyone away and guarded his ill-gotten treasures jealously. He was "a most specially greedy, strong and wicked worm..." (page 27).

Thorin, however, means to avenge his ancestors:

"we have never forgotten our stolen treasure...we still mean to get it back, and to bring our curses home to Smaug – if we can" (page 28).

Since Bilbo is hired by Thorin to re-steal what the dragon has stolen, Smaug becomes his enemy, too.

What actions does the antagonist take to oppose the protagonist? (4c)

Your answer to this question depends upon which of Bilbo's goals you are discussing. Most obviously, Smaug opposes Bilbo and the dwarves in their quest for the treasure simply by lying atop his hoard:

"Smaug lay, with wings folded like an immeasurable bat, turned partly on one side, so that the hobbit could see his under parts and his long pale belly crusted with gems and fragments of gold from his long lying on his costly bed" (page 233).

When your discussion turns to Bilbo's inner struggles, however, Smaug's role as antagonist becomes subtler. The dragon uses smooth and convincing words to play upon Bilbo's doubts about himself and his friends:

"I suppose you got a fair price for that cup last night?... nothing at all! Well that's just like them. And I suppose they are skulking outside, and your job is to do all the dangerous work. And get what you can when I'm not looking – for them? And you will get a fair share? Don't you believe it! If you get off alive, you will be lucky" (page 243).

How does the author's description of the antagonist inform you of his character? Does he have any physical attributes or personality traits that mark him as antagonistic? (4e)

Smaug "...had a wicked and wily heart..." (page 244).

"Smaug had rather an overwhelming personality" (page 244).

Smaug's self-report:

"I kill where I wish and none dare resist...now I am old and strong, strong, strong...my armor is like tenfold shields, my teeth are swords, my claws spears, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, my wings a hurricane, and my breath death!" (page 245)

How do the antagonist's words and actions affect those around him? Does his very presence corrupt? (4h,i)

Smaug has the ability through clever words to sway his hearers. Tolkien calls this a "dragon spell." A good example of this is when he attempts to set Bilbo against his friends (page 243). This attempt backfires, however, when Bilbo sees not only the shortcomings of his friends, but also his own. In the end, Smaug becomes the instrument of his own undoing because Bilbo's self-knowledge frees him from the fear of man and restores his courage and sense.

Is the antagonist truly evil, by definition, or is he merely antagonistic to the protagonist by virtue of his vocation or duty? (4m)

Smaug is evil by nature: he's a dragon! Evil is what dragons do best. This is another way in which *The Hobbit* partakes of an older tradition. Until fairly recently, you could always count on the implacable evil of dragons in literature. These days, the lines between good and evil are not so clearly drawn. What this says about the state of our culture is perhaps a subject for a separate discussion.

What are the antagonist's surroundings (does he live next door to the dump like Bob Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example)? Are his surroundings related to his character? Did the author put him where he is on purpose? (4n)

Smaug's surroundings certainly betray his character. He makes his bed on a stolen hoard in dark, fetid chambers. He prefers lonely places. Everything about his home is oppressive and hot. Sulfurous gases pervade the atmosphere of his lair. The air there is filled with a smoky red glow and a low rumbling noise. All the sights and sounds of his environment suggest a likeness to hell itself.

Younger students may benefit from comparing Bilbo's home and surroundings with Smaug's. How do the natural habitats of the two characters emphasize their personality traits? Older students can be encouraged to put this comparison in the language of literary analysis: how does the author's use of setting sharpen the conflict between protagonist and antagonist in this story?

Who else is the story about? (4)

A list of the other major characters in the story:

Gandalf – a white wizard who uses his magic for the good of his company and against the forces of darkness in his magical world. Gandalf is a longtime friend of Bilbo's family.

Gollum – dweller of the deepest goblin tunnel and one-time owner of the precious ring that Bilbo finds. Gollum's long time in darkness has corrupted his heart. He has forgotten the light.

Goblins – implacable enemies of dwarves and elves, goblins are dark, evil creatures who dwell in mines. "Now goblins are cruel, wicked, and bad hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones. They can tunnel and mine as well as any but the most skilled dwarves, when they take the trouble, but they're usually untidy and dirty..." (page 69).

Dwarves – high-spirited characters who love beautiful handmade things with a fierce jealous love. Dwarves are supremely skillful in metal work and jewelry craftsmanship. They are naturally suspicious of others, and their fatal flaws are lack of forgiveness and greed.

There are 14 dwarves in all:

Thorin Oakenshield claims rightful kingship of the Lonely Mountain through his grandfather Thror and leads the dwarves' expedition.

Dori carries (and drops) Bilbo in the goblin mines under the hill. He also helps Bilbo into the tree when he is in danger of the Wargs. "He was really a decent fellow, in spite of his grumbling...Dori did not let Bilbo down..." (page 110).

Bombur falls into the magical stream in Mirkwood Forest and subsequently into a magical sleep.

Balin and his brother **Dwalin** are lookout men for the dwarf band. Balin is "rather fond" of Bilbo (page 231). Balin's reputation in Middle Earth outlived him: Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* relates that, in later years, Balin led a legendary expedition of his own to found an ill-fated city in the mines of Moria.

Gloin is unconvinced of Bilbo's value to the expedition (see above). He is the father of Gimli, who, though he does not appear in *The Hobbit*, plays a large role in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Other members of the expedition receiving less attention from the author in terms of character development are **Bifur, Bombur, Bofur, Fili, Kili, Nori, Ori, and Oin**.

Elves – a mysterious, magical people who live in the woods and have little to do with the other inhabitants of Middle Earth. The elves who figure in *The Hobbit* "...differed from the high elves of the West, and were more dangerous and less wise." They are descended from ancient tribes that never went to Faerie in the West. They are "not wicked folk," but are said to "distrust...strangers." Like the dwarves, elves have a weakness for treasure. Even so, they are "reasonably well behaved even to their worst enemies when they capture them..." (page 184).

Beorn – a skin changer who helps the company on its way to the Lonely Mountain.

"He changes his skin; sometimes he is a huge black bear, sometimes he is a great strong black haired man with huge arms and a great beard...some say he is a bear descended from the great and ancient bears of the mountains that lived there before the giants came. Others say that he is a man descended from the first man who lived before Smaug or the other dragons came into this part of the world, and before the goblins came into the hills out of the north...he is not the sort of person to ask questions of...under no enchantment but his own" (page 127).

Beorn is not evil, but remains fearsome due to his strength and unnatural enchantments. He is both powerful and unfamiliar. Even so, once befriended by Gandalf and company, he remains a faithful ally. He offers the company both help and hospitality. As a man, he keeps animals and especially loves his horses. His animals serve him.

Bard of Dale – the courageous and skillful captain of a company of archers in Lake Town near the Lonely Mountain. A descendant in the line of Girion, Lord of Dale, Bard slays the great dragon Smaug with his last and most precious arrow. Consequently, the remnant of the people of Lake Town desire to make him king, but the greedy master of the town discourages it.

Bard longs to rebuild his homeland, Dale. After Smaug's attack, he rallies the people of Lake Town to make provisions for the coming winter, saving many townspeople in the process. An honorable man, Bard forsakes the title and distinction of the kingship of Lake Town, remaining loyal to the unworthy, selfish town master instead.

Approaching the dwarves, Bard asks only that they reimburse the people of Lake Town and restore Dale the historic losses it has suffered at the dragon's hands. Bard seeks only what is due him.

Some textual references for this summary:

"I am Bard of the line of Girion; I am the slayer of the dragon!" (Page 272).

"... they praised the courage of Bard and his last mighty shot" (page 271).

"'We will have king Bard!' the people near at hand shouted in reply" (page 272).

"Bard took the lead, and ordered things as he wished, though always in the Master's name...probably most of them would have perished in the winter that now hurried after autumn..." (page 274).

"I serve you still – though after a while I may think again of your words..." (page 273).

The Master – a sly politician and shrewd businessman who is the regent of Lake Town. He loves comfort and will not hazard himself for his people. He is a mean man, small of heart and spirit, driven by his love of money and power.

"As for the Master, he saw there was nothing else for it but to obey the general clamour, for the moment...and pretend to believe that Thorin was what he said" (page 215-216).

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



What does the protagonist want? (5)

Initially, Bilbo wants nothing more than to be let alone to enjoy his quiet life in the Shire. However, when the dwarves abuse his character and call him a "little fellow bobbing on the mat" (page 21), he becomes determined to win their good opinion by proving himself a fierce burglar. Once volunteered for the task by his own rash words, he immediately regrets it: "Bilbo you were a fool..." (page 22). As the journey progresses, he grows attached to the dwarves and becomes determined to do well by them. He is tickled to find himself more capable than he had believed possible and is taken with his own cleverness.

This cleverness is evidenced first in Bilbo's encounter with Gollum. After riddling him, Bilbo perplexes Gollum with the question, "What have I got in my pocket?" Gollum discovers he has lost "his precious," and as he suspects Bilbo, he comes for him. As Bilbo flees, he accidentally slips the ring on his finger. It takes a minute for him to realize he has become invisible. However, once he is aware of it he uses his new power to his advantage. Upon finding his friends, he dazzles them with a tale of his brilliant escape, never mentioning the ring or its powers. He is content to let them believe it all to be the result of his own shrewdness. "Bilbo's reputation went up a very great deal with the dwarves after this. If they had still doubted that he was really a first-class burglar, in spite of Gandalf's words, they doubted it no longer" (page 103). Gandalf makes a veiled remark suggesting that he knew of the ruse: "Mr. Baggins has more about him than you guess" (page 104).

Bilbo's conceit only grows when he defeats the spiders in Mirkwood forest. "He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder..." (page 170). When he rescues his friends from the spiders, he revels in their praises, which are freely given even after they learn of his ring. "... Bilbo began to feel there really was something of a bold adventurer about himself after all..." (page 181).

Bilbo's next act of shrewdness is to follow the dwarves into the Elven king's cave on the edge of Mirkwood and manage their escape in apple barrels on the great river. By the time they reach Lake Town, all the dwarves, and indeed Bilbo himself, are convinced of his value.

Once in Lake Town, Bilbo's next object is to find the "back door" into the heart of the mountain by deciphering the runes on Thorin's map. This he does with the help of a thrush (page 228).

Once inside the mountain, Bilbo's aim is to discover the dragon's lair and to "burgle" it. He overcomes his terror in the tunnel and confronts the dragon Smaug. In a sense, this is a climactic moment in the story:

"Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to that. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the fast danger that lay in wait" (page 233). When Bilbo masters himself, he finally becomes the fierce and brave person he wants to be. He has proven his courage to himself.

In the tunnel, Bilbo sees himself clearly, yet overcomes his terror to do the job before him. Courage, he finds, is not the absence of fear. His encounter has changed him and he will never be the same hobbit again.

Smaug and his riches corrupt Bilbo for a time. Enchanted by the sight of such wealth, Bilbo wants to possess treasure too. "His heart was filled and pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves..." (page 234). However, once Bilbo has successfully stolen the first cup from the horde, his success seems anti-climactic. The praise of the dwarves sounds empty, and their good opinion becomes strangely irrelevant.

When Smaug calls the dwarves' character and honesty into question, Bilbo's confidence in his friends is shaken and he begins to doubt their good intentions towards him. At this point, Bilbo begins to act on his own behalf, making provision for himself. He takes Thorin's Arkenstone, a horrible mistake that will cost him the good opinion of his friends.

Still, Bilbo's desire to possess the hoard of Smaug is short-lived. Faced with the Dragon's terrifying power, all he really wants is to survive. He longs for the comfort and security of the Shire, and regrets his own lost innocence. No longer does he desire the praise of men. He has seen men for who they really are, just as he has seen himself. He knows the depravity that dwells in the human heart and, disillusioned by himself and others, turns from this illusory vanity to more substantial things.

At this point, what Bilbo desires most of all is to be able to rely on his friends' goodness. Yet, he cannot shake the dragon's words. "Bilbo wished he'd never heard them, or at least he could feel quite certain that the dwarves now were absolutely honest when they declared that they had never thought at all about..." (page 250).

Once Smaug is slain and Bard comes to them with terms, Bilbo is dismayed by Thorin's unyielding, uncharitable greed. Now, Bilbo wants peace and an end to the quest. "Bilbo longed to escape from the dark fortress, and to go down and join in the mirth and feasting [of the elves] by the fires..." (page 283).

He hopes to end the dispute between the companies by delivering the Arkenstone to Bard for bargaining. This fact wins praise from Bard, who honors him. So too does a disguised Gandalf. "Well done, Mr. Baggins!... there is always more about you than anyone expects" (page 295). Bilbo has struck a blow against greed (his own and Thorin's), and yet he remains sober and steadfast, longing only to return to his friends, loyal in his disloyalty.

When the company discovers the encroaching goblin army, enemies become allies against their truly evil attackers. Now, their hope is to defeat the wicked goblins' plan to overthrow the forces of goodness in Middle Earth.

So, a quick recap: what **does** Bilbo want?

- Comfort/peace/home.
- The good opinion of Gandalf and the dwarves.
- To believe in the good and honest character of his friends. To believe in their relationship. To preserve fellowship.
- To burgle the dragon's hoard.
- To possess the dragon's hoard (briefly).
- To survive his encounter with the dragon and the ensuing battles.
- To be fierce and brave, really.

What a many-faceted character! No wonder we love Bilbo. He is as complicated as we are.

Why can't the protagonist have what he wants? Do physical or geographical impediments stand in his way? (6,8)

Geographically speaking, all of the obstacles that face the dwarves in their quest for revenge face Bilbo as well. He (and they) must travel through the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood Forest. They must navigate the perils of each place they traverse to reach the Lonely Mountain. Once there, they must locate the "back door" into the lair of the dragon.

Does the character lack strength, mental acumen, or some other necessary ability? (6b)

As we have already seen, Bilbo's lack of any special or magical abilities is a key detail in the story. He will succeed or fail based on his hobbit wit alone.

Don't pass up the chance to discuss this all important theme with your students. Success comes in the midst of limitation and hardship, and a hero without weaknesses is no hero at all. As true in life as it is in literature, this idea cannot be presented too early. Teachers of older students may want to compare Bilbo's shortcomings with those of his nephew Frodo, the protagonist in *The Lord of the Rings*. Though neither hobbit has the heroic qualities that seem to be necessary for their tasks, they emerge as heroes nonetheless.

Does the character lack self-confidence, good health, or social connections? (6c)

In order to succeed, Bilbo must overcome both his fear and his desire for comfort and safety. He must discover what real courage he possesses in order to endure the privations and dangers of the journey and to confront the evil dragon. Even more importantly, he must overcome the evil within his own heart – his personal dragon. He must subdue his desire for wealth and reputation in order to achieve peace for himself and for Middle Earth.

What types of conflicts are present in the story? Man versus man? Man versus nature? Man versus God? Man versus society? Man versus himself? (6g-k)

At this point in the discussion, this question may be fairly easy for most students to answer. Any story that deals with the hardships of a journey has a Man versus Nature conflict. Any story with a war in it has a Man versus Man or a Man versus Society conflict. Finally, any story where the protagonist undergoes the sort of changes that Bilbo experiences has a Man versus Himself conflict. There is more to it, of course: the journey, the war and the change of heart are not the only examples of this conflict in the story. Just as in real life, where innumerable conflicts swirl all around us, *The Hobbit* has plenty of conflict for study.

Despite its apparent simplicity, this question lends itself very well to writing assignments, especially for younger students. You can ask them to identify a category of conflict appropriate to the story and then explain how the story's components (setting, characters, plot, and theme) support or develop this.

How is the main problem solved? (9)

The story's main circumstantial conflict is solved when Bard of Dale slays the dragon Smaug and liberates the dragon's hoard. Bilbo's quest to become a courageous hobbit is fulfilled when he first overcomes his fear in the tunnel outside Smaug's lair.

You might say that these two problems exist “on the surface” of the story. They can be identified, resolved, and dispensed with in a brief discussion of major plot elements. The deeper conflict within Bilbo, that between his better nature and the "dragon-ish" part of himself, is resolved more subtly, and may require you to be more specific and direct in your questioning of the students.

When Bilbo has his moment of self-realization in the tunnel, this deeper conflict is on the verge of resolution. Having heard the Dragon's words against his dwarf friends, Bilbo begins to fight their effect on his own heart. Smaug's suggestions have touched something within him and exposed it. His own selfishness is stirred up, and he begins both to doubt the honesty of the dwarves and to desire their treasure for his own.

At this point, Bilbo ceases to bask in the praise of the dwarves, or even to acknowledge them. His desire for their good opinion fades away in the face of his dual adversaries: the dragon in the lair, and the dragon of self-interest that lurks in his heart. Consequently, one

element of Bilbo's inner struggle, his desire for the good opinion of his friends, is resolved.

As Bilbo emerges from the tunnel, however, he brings more than the burgled cup with him. In Smaug's lair, he has found both greed and suspicion in his own heart. As he deals with this burden, the greed and suspicion that Thorin displays while bargaining with Bard of Dale seem insupportable to Bilbo. Finally, disgusted and weary, he forsakes his self-interest in the single act of relinquishing the Arkenstone into the hands of Bard.

This act costs Bilbo a great deal, since Thorin values the stone above all else. It puts Bilbo in a position to be derided and scorned, but it signifies that he has won his inner battle against his heart's devilish impulses. Bilbo's deep desire for peace has trumped his lust for glory and praise. His desire for fellowship has conquered his fear of man. His victory is not lost on Gandalf, who smiles approvingly. "Well done, Mr. Baggins!" (page 295).

What events form the highest point or climax of the story's tension? Are they circumstantial evidence, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? (9d)

As we have just seen, the climactic moment in Bilbo's inner struggle comes when he delivers the Arkenstone to Bard and returns to take responsibility for his actions before Thorin. This is evidence that he has:

- Found courage/become noble
- Overcome his fear of man and his pride
- Overcome his greed and suspicion
- Denied himself for the greater good

Bilbo punctuates his hope that his fellowship with the dwarves will continue:

"Farewell!" he cried to them. "We may meet again as friends." (page 299).

Bilbo puts his faith in the good hearts of his companions, despite the fact that they may be unworthy of such faith. He behaves magnanimously, and ceases to be a silly and foolish hobbit. He has become noble and honorable.

Does the protagonist solve his own dilemma? Is it solved by some external source or third party? Is the protagonist helpless in the end to achieve his goal, or does he triumph by virtue of his own efforts? (9e)

Depending on the conflict you are interested in discussing, this question can be answered in a variety of ways. Bilbo's inner struggle against greed and selfishness resolves itself with help from an unlikely source: Thorin Oakenshield, the greedy, selfish dwarf King. Thorin's bad behavior before Bard of Dale disgusts Bilbo and provokes him to surrender the Arkenstone, renouncing his own selfishness and greed. Thorin's sin serves as a mirror

to Bilbo. Seeing himself in Thorin's selfishness, Bilbo finds both the strength to forsake his own greed and the compassion to forgive Thorin's.

How does the story end? (10)

When you come to the conclusion of the story, it is still important to keep in mind the particular conflict you are discussing. With younger students, you may focus on the surface level, circumstantial conflict throughout your discussion. In this case, a discussion of the story's conclusion will focus on "The Great Battle of the Five Armies" in which an alliance of dwarves, elves, and men defeats the forces of wargs and goblins. Evil has been defeated in Middle Earth, and its good people can go back to their peaceful lives.

An even more powerful conclusion takes place with Thorin's deathbed repentance for his ill temper toward Bilbo. By blessing the hobbit, Thorin affirms the growth of the main character throughout the story and his own better character.

"I wish to part in friendship from you, and I would take back my words and deeds at the gate...there is more in you of good than you know, child of the kindly West. Some courage and some wisdom, blended in measure..." (page 312).

Bilbo's wholehearted forgiveness is clear by his response to Thorin's death:

"Then Bilbo turned away, and he went by himself, and sat alone wrapped in a blanket, and whether you believe it or not, he wept until his eyes were red and his voice was hoarse. He was a kindly little soul" (page 312).

Were you satisfied with the resolution of the story? If not, why not? (10b)

Obviously, this question can be answered in various ways, but the important thing is to require students to give a considered reason for their answers. One reason to be satisfied with the resolution is that it resonates with the realities of inner struggles and their resolutions in the real world. Most battles are won by slaying our inner dragons. Most petty offenses dim in the light of greater evils. Forgiveness and mercy for others is most often found in the recognition of our own need of it. And hope, the hope that bears and believes all things, does not disappoint. Thus, even though this story is pure fantasy, it is nevertheless very real – and this is why we like it!

How does the solution of the conflict affect individual characters? (10d)

Bilbo, having completed his task, is free to return to the peace and comfort of his home. Upon returning there, however, he finds that all is not well. "Bilbo found he had lost more than spoons – he had lost his reputation..." (page 327). This no longer bothers him, however. He knows that reputation can't make one happy. Bilbo is content with self-knowledge in the end. It has finally brought him peace:

"... he remained very happy to the end of his days..." (page 328).

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



What does the protagonist learn? (11)

Bilbo learns his own true value. He learns to consider himself rightly. He learns that he is both noble and sinful. He sees his weakness and his strength. Most notably, he learns to value what is most important: peace, fellowship, and home.

What is the main idea of the story? (13)

One theme you might suggest in your discussion is the nature of courage. Bilbo's quest for courage is what lures him into this story in the first place when, full of resentment against the dwarves and their small opinion of him, he sets out to prove himself more than they think. In the end, however, the courage required to burgle the Dragon's hoard is small potatoes. Bilbo must summon much greater courage to deny himself, his desires, and his reputation for the peace of the company. He must sacrifice himself in very real ways for the good of his friends, even risking being misunderstood and maligned by them. This is Bilbo's bravest act of all.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE



Foreshadowing

Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17a)

"Bilbo became more and more unhappy and his foreboding grew" (page 249).

"Going on...was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the fast danger that lay in wait" (page 233).

"... but that belongs to another adventure in which the hobbit again showed his usefulness" (page 184).

"Be good, take care of yourself – and don't leave the path!" (page 152).

"Many a time afterwards, the Baggins part regretted what he did now..." (page 22).

Symbolism

Does the author use any objects, persons, pictures or things to represent an idea in the story? For example, darkness may be used to represent wickedness. Light may be used to represent truth and goodness. In the allegorical play *Everyman*, the main character represents or symbolizes sinful man. The symbol of a dove represents the person of the Holy Spirit (17b)

Smaug the dragon symbolizes evil, greed, and selfishness.

The treasure hoard symbolizes temptation that corrupts, the enticement of sin.

The singing teakettle symbolizes hearth, home, and peace.

Bilbo the hobbit symbolizes humility, nobility, and the integrity of common folk.

As you discuss symbolism, you might use the idea of the journey to introduce your students to **motif** – a recurring thematic element in a story that gives it coherence and purpose. The *Hobbit* is organized around the journey motif. All the characters are engaged in a quest to find something, whether it's treasure, courage, self-knowledge, or home.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



Who is the author? (18)

John Ronald Reuel (J.R.R.) Tolkien (1892 –1973) was an English writer and university professor. He taught Anglo-Saxon and English literature at Oxford University from 1925 to 1959.

Tolkien is most famous for his books, which include not only *The Hobbit* (1937) but also *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) and *The Silmarillion* (published posthumously in 1977), all written about his own fantasy world of Middle Earth. Tolkien also published scholarly articles relevant to literary criticism in his role as Oxford don. Of these, his 1936 lecture “Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics” is perhaps the most important. This essay changed the way scholars interpreted the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf and is still relied upon today by literary analysts. His edition of the medieval legend *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also became a long-lived academic standard.

Tolkien was born in South Africa, but moved to England at the age of three. He attended Oxford University, graduating with a degree in English language in 1915. He married his childhood sweetheart, Edith Mary Bratt, the next year and lived with her until her death in 1971, 55 years later.

Tolkien volunteered for British Army service soon after his marriage as England was then engaged in fighting World War I. He fought in France at the Battle of the Somme, where he contracted trench fever.

Tolkien was greatly affected by his wartime experiences. “By 1918,” he once wrote, “all but one of my close friends were dead.” The themes of loss and parting can be clearly seen recurring in his fictional works, including *The Hobbit*.

Tolkien had a range of personal and professional associations, from the Christian apologist and author C.S. Lewis to the poet W.H. Auden. He was the devoted father of four children and a devout Roman Catholic.

Tolkien’s political and religious views were traditional and conservative. For example, he opposed the reforms and changes implemented in Catholic worship after the Second Vatican Council in 1965. He also supported the regime of Francisco Franco against its republican opponents during the Spanish Civil War.

After his retirement from Oxford in 1959, Tolkien became increasingly famous due to the reputation of his books. In 1972 he was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II.

Tolkien died on 2 September 1973, 21 months after his wife Edith. They are buried together at Wolvercote Cemetery, Oxford.

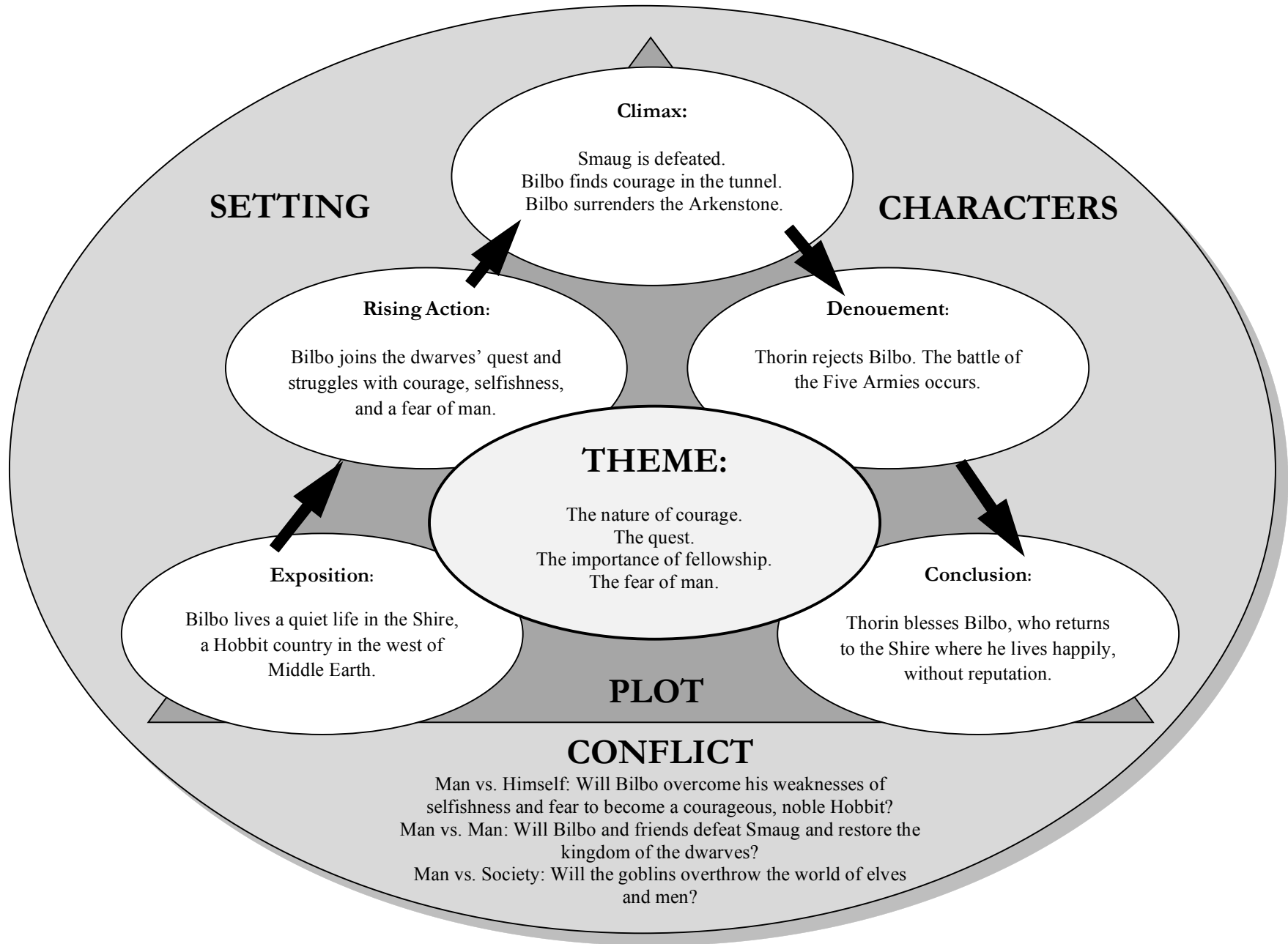
STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the **climax** and central **themes** of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central **conflict**. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien: Story Chart



The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien: Blank Story Chart

