

# Tolkien's Middle-earth: Lesson Plans for Secondary School Educators

## Unit Seven: Tolkien's Moral Universe

Content Focus: *The Lord of the Rings*, Book Four  
Thematic Focus: The Nature of Good and Evil

### Overview

No less compelling than the physical landscape of Middle-earth is the metaphysical terrain that Tolkien's characters negotiate. In Unit Seven, students examine the moral universe of *The Lord of the Rings* with special emphasis on the nuances the author brought to the classic dichotomy between good and evil.

### Learning Goals

By the end of Unit Seven, the student should be able to:

- Appreciate Tolkien's use of the literary device called "doubling."
- Discuss how the author develops Elrond's premise — "nothing is evil in the beginning" — in Books Three and Four.
- Make a case that Tolkien rejected "Manichaeism."
- Indicate the differences between an ethics based on rules and an ethics based on virtue.
- Say what is meant by a "false virtue."

### Unit Seven Content

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#### Comments for Teachers

First and foremost, Tolkien intended *The Lord of the Rings* to be a grandly entertaining story that took the reader's imagination to places it had never been before. As an ethical thinker and a man of faith, however, Tolkien also wanted to help his audience grapple with some fundamental moral issues. With its emphasis on the potential salvation of Gollum, not to mention its apocalyptic encounter between the beneficent Galadriel (offstage but symbolically present) and the depraved Shelob (onstage and impossible to ignore), Book Four offers students an opportunity to understand Tolkien's views on the nature of good and evil.

We suggest that you begin Unit Seven by laying out the three different definitions of evil to which Western thought is heir. The first is the "dualistic" or Manichaeic view: good and evil exist in the universe as equal and opposite principles, forever at war. The second is Augustinian theology: evil is not an independent force but rather "privation," the absence of good. A third theory holds that evil is essentially an unavoidable byproduct of the laws and conditions that God laid down at the beginning of time.

Critics disagree over whether to term *The Lord of the Rings* a "Manichaeic novel". Our foremost Tolkien scholar, [Tom Shippey](#), believes the label is accurate up to a point. What many readers find most intriguing about Tolkien's worldview, however, is its non-Manichaeic aspects. As Elrond declares during the momentous council in Book Two, "For nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so" (page 261).

Indeed, the whole Quest of Mount Doom turns on the assumption that good and evil do not mirror each other. The free folk of Middle-earth know that, for all Sauron's wisdom, it would never occur to him that they might voluntarily relinquish the Ring. In the Eye's moral blindness lies the Quest's one chance of success.

While studying Unit Seven in class, students should be reading Book Five of [The Lord of the Rings](#) at home.

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**Preliminary Quiz**

1. What does Gollum call the sun?

(Answer: the Yellow Face, page 607)

2. Who said, speaking of the Ring, "I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway"?

(Answer: Faramir, page 656)

3. The "last child of Ungoliant to trouble the unhappy world" is better known as . . . ?

(Answer: Shelob, page 707)

4. What action by Sam convinced him that Frodo "had died and laid aside the Quest"?

(Answer: When Sam took the Ring from around his master's neck, Frodo had no reaction, page 715)

5. To what creatures is the orc Gorbag referring when he speaks of Sauron's "favorites nowadays"?

(Answer: the Nazgûl, page 720)

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### Key Terms

**doubling** The literary device of supplying a character with his moral or psychological opposite.

**Manichaeism (man-i-ke-izm)** A religious doctrine, formulated by the third-century Persian prophet Mani, that treats good and evil as equal and opposite principles.

**Augustinian theology** The doctrines of Saint Augustine, the most influential of the early Church fathers. In Augustinian theology, evil is not a force in itself but rather the absence of good.

**virtue ethics** The school of ethical philosophy that regards conscience or character as the source of goodness.

**Kantian ethics** The school of ethical philosophy, predicated on the ideas of Immanuel Kant, that emphasizes universally binding duties.

**utilitarianism** The school of ethical philosophy that regards "the greatest good for the greatest number" as the proper aim of a moral or legal system.

**moral evil** An evil perpetrated by a human being, such as premeditated murder.

**natural evil** A catastrophe unrelated to human desire, such as a tornado or an epidemic.

**doom** A dreadful fate or an official judgment. Tolkien frequently uses "doom" in the latter sense. In Book Four Faramir declares that Frodo shall be free to roam around Gondor, then adds, "This doom shall stand for a year and a day."

**gangrel** A wandering beggar. In Book Four Frodo describes Gollum to Faramir as "a wretched gangrel creature."

# Tolkien's Middle-earth: Lesson Plans for Secondary School Educators

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### Handouts

#### The Discord of Melkor

This handout reproduces the opening of "Ainulindalë," the first tale in *The Silmarillion*. The title means "The Music of the Ainur" (Tolkien's Holy Ones, represented by the Valar in *The Lord of the Rings*), and the plot relates how, even though the creator-god Ilúvatar is wholly benevolent, evil nevertheless came into the cosmos.

Melkor, the agent of this malevolence, is clearly a kind of Satan figure, and you may want to have students read "The Discord of Melkor" in conjunction with the biblical account of the Fall of Man. What's most impressive about our "Ainulindalë" excerpt, however, is Tolkien's startling use of an idea not found in Genesis: music as the primal form of communication and the essential substance of creation. Through a wonderfully rich and magnificently sustained flight of rhetoric, we experience an angelic choir bringing order to the cosmos and suffusing reality with beauty and meaning, their voices "like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs." But even the most glorious harmony entails the possibility of disharmony: the cacophonous and contrary theme of Melkor, seeker of power and sower of discord.

The language of these paragraphs is lofty, variously reminiscent of the King James Bible, *Paradise Lost*, and William Blake. If the class is fairly sophisticated, you can assign this handout without hesitation. Less able readers will probably fare best if they read "The Discord of Melkor" aloud, guided by your explanations of the more difficult phrases.

#### "I Do Not Deal in Absolute Evil"

This handout is an excerpt from an unpublished 1956 essay in which Tolkien meditated on W. H. Auden's review of *The Return of the King*. Tolkien articulates his opinion that Auden emphasized the theme of freedom at the expense of the novel's religious and ethical concerns. Elaborating on his complaint, the author revisits the story of Ilúvatar and the Ainur, so this selection becomes a natural complement to "The Discord of Melkor." Note how in the second sentence Tolkien evokes the Augustinian idea that evil, like the nonnumber zero, has no substance. The "Morgoth" discussed here is the same malign being as the "Melkor" of the previous handout.

## Unit Seven: Tolkien's Moral Universe

### Handouts

#### The Discord of Melkor

Excerpted from "Ainulindalë," the first tale in *The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien

*The opening pages of [The Silmarillion](#) tell of Ilúvatar, the supreme being of Tolkien's mythos, and how the most powerful of Ilúvatar's creatures, Melkor, brought disharmony into the world.*

There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Ilúvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad. But for a long while they sang only each alone, or but few together, while the rest hearkened; for each comprehended only that part of the mind of Ilúvatar from which he came, and in the understanding of their brethren they grew but slowly. Yet ever as they listened they came to deeper understanding, and increased in unison and harmony.

And so it came to pass that Ilúvatar called together all the Ainur and declared to them a mighty theme, unfolding to them things greater and more wonderful than he had yet revealed; and the glory of its beginning and the splendor of its end amazed the Ainur, so that they bowed before Ilúvatar and were silent.

Then Ilúvatar said to them: "Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song."

Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words, began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void. Never since have the Ainur made any music like this music, though it has been said that a greater still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days. Then the themes of Ilúvatar shall be played aright, and take Being in the moment of their utterance, for all shall then understand fully his intent in their part, and each shall know the comprehension of each, and Ilúvatar shall give to their thoughts the secret fire, being well pleased.

But now Ilúvatar sat and hearkened, and for a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were not flaws. But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to

interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself. To Melkor among the Ainur had been given the greatest gifts of power and knowledge, and he had a share of all the gifts of his brethren. He had gone often alone into the void places seeking the Imperishable Flame; for desire grew hot within him to bring into Being things of his own, and it seemed to him that Ilúvatar took no thought for the Void, and he was impatient of its emptiness. Yet he found not the Fire, for it is with Ilúvatar. But being alone he had begun to conceive thoughts of his own unlike those of his brethren.

Some of these thoughts he now wove into his music, and straightway discord rose about him, and many that sang nigh him grew despondent, and their thought was disturbed and their music faltered; but some began to attune their music to his rather than to the thought which they had at first. Then the discord of Melkor spread ever wider, and the melodies which had been heard foundered in a sea of turbulent sound. But Ilúvatar sat and hearkened until it seemed that about his throne there was a raging storm, as of dark waters that made war one upon another in an endless wrath that would not be assuaged.

Then Ilúvatar rose, and the Ainur perceived that he smiled; and he lifted up his left hand, and a new theme began amid the storm, like and yet unlike the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty. But the discord of Melkor rose in uproar and contended with it, and again there was a war of sound more violent than before, until many of the Ainur were dismayed and sang no longer, and Melkor had the mastery. Then again Ilúvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that his countenance was stern; and he lifted up his right hand, and behold! a third theme grew amid the confusion, and it was unlike the others. For it seemed at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity. And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of Ilúvatar, and they were utterly at variance. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.

In the midst of this strife, whereat the halls of Ilúvatar shook and a tremor ran out into the silences yet unmoved, Ilúvatar arose a third time, and his face was terrible to behold. Then he raised up both his hands, and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Ilúvatar, the Music ceased.

(from *The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, second edition, pages 15–17)

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**Handouts**

**"I Do Not Deal in Absolute Evil"**

*This paragraph comes from a long essay that J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in response to W. H. Auden's enthusiastic reaction to *The Return of the King*, published in the *New York Times Book Review* of January 22, 1956. Tolkien had mixed feelings about Auden's article. He was impressed that a brilliant poet and scholar had taken his novel so seriously, but he thought that Auden had failed to fully appreciate the book's philosophical and religious core.*

In my story I do not deal in Absolute Evil. I do not think there is such a thing, since that is Zero. I do not think that at any rate any "rational being" is wholly evil. Satan fell. In my myth Morgoth fell before Creation of the physical world. In my story Sauron represents as near an approach to the wholly evil will as is possible . . . he went further than human tyrants in pride and the lust for domination, being in origin an immortal (angelic) spirit. In *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict is not basically about "freedom," though that is naturally involved. It is about God, and His sole right to divine honour. The Eldar and the Númenóreans believed in The One, the true God, and held worship of any other person an abomination. Sauron desired to be a God-King, and was held to be this by his servants; if he had been victorious, he would have demanded divine honour from all rational creatures and absolute temporal power over the whole world . . .

(from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 1981, pages 243–244)



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### Discussion Topics

**"Let Our Folly Be Our Cloak."** Analyzing Sauron's one great weakness, poet and critic W. H. Auden noted that "while Good can imagine what it would like to be Evil, Evil cannot imagine what it would be like to be Good." In the students' view, are history's greatest villains people who lacked imagination? Why does Sauron's limited imagination give the Quest a shot at success? As the discussion progresses, ask the class to relate Auden's insight to Gandalf's declaration before the Council of Elrond: "Let our folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy" (page 262).

**A Second Chance at Salvation.** At the end of Book Two, Aragorn orders Boromir, recently fallen from grace, to guard the halflings (page 395). In Book Three Gandalf invites Saruman to "turn to new things" (page 568). Book Four includes one of Tolkien's favorite scenes in the novel, Gollum's epiphany when he descends from Shelob's lair and sees the sleeping hobbits, Frodo's head resting peacefully in Sam's lap (page 699). Have the class discuss the nature and outcome of these three opportunities for redemption. Why does Boromir act so selflessly and die so nobly? Might Saruman indeed have repented? What goes wrong with Gollum's near-deliverance?

**The Shadow Side.** Many of the virtuous characters in Tolkien's novel have perverse counterparts, and so do the sentient races themselves. The Ringwraiths are a twisted form of men, the trolls were made "in mockery" of the Ents, and the orcs are "counterfeit" elves. Have the class discuss Tolkien's evident fascination with doubling. Does Sméagol represent the dark side of Frodo's psyche? Might this account for why our hero spares Gollum from Faramir's archers at the Forbidden Pool? Is Tolkien's use of "shadow" characters the same thing as Manichaeism?

**The Lady and the Spider.** Although Galadriel is physically back in Lothlórien, she is spiritually present during Frodo and Sam's encounter with Shelob. Have students identify the devices and details through which Tolkien achieves this effect. What does the author accomplish by juxtaposing the gift-giving Galadriel and the all-consuming Shelob? Without Galadriel's metaphorical presence, might Shelob's depravity — "for all living things were her food, and her vomit darkness" — seem merely lurid? Is Galadriel a goddess? An angel? Or would Tolkien prefer that we simply think of her as the Lady of Lórien?

**The Orc and the Other.** Throughout human history terrible injustices have accrued to the notion that entire classes of people are inferior, degraded, unenlightened — orcs, if you will. Given this sad truth, were any students dismayed or even angered by Tolkien's hordes of benighted orcs swarming across Rohan and Gondor? Would the class say that Tolkien's concept of an evil, subhuman race undercuts his nobler themes of redemption and forgiveness? What aspects of Tolkien's larger moral vision might keep us from seeing strangers and outsiders as orcs?

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### Suggested Activities

**Virtues and False Virtues.** Aristotle taught that a virtue differs not only from a vice but also from a "false virtue." Courage, for example, is the opposite of both cowardice and the faux virtue of recklessness. Ask the class to generate a list of their favorite virtues and then consider whether each has a problematic complement. Record the results in the form of a blackboard chart or a computer-generated diagram. Did students decide that humility, honesty, diligence, loyalty, or even charity can be pushed too far? What are the differences between Sam's fidelity to Frodo and the Nazgûl's fealty to Sauron? When a person makes a moral choice in Tolkien's universe, is he obeying a rule, or is he following his nature?

**Slinker Meets Stinker.** Book Four gives us several scenes of Gollum conversing with his Sméagol side. Have the students pair up. Each team should prepare a drama improvisation based on an internal conflict from the novel, with the two students playing two different voices in the character's head. The possibilities include Frodo's impulse to escape the Barrow-wight by becoming invisible, Boromir's desire to bear the Ring to Gondor, and Aragorn's uncertainty over whether to follow Frodo or pursue the orcs who abducted Pippin and Merry. Might Saruman have experienced a twinge of internal conflict when Gandalf visited him after the flooding of Isengard?

**No Sympathy for Sauron.** Ask the class to imagine that the school's principal is running against Sauron for state governor. The students' job is to produce posters, pamphlets, bumper stickers, and television spots that will win votes for the former. The aim is less to valorize the principal than to point out that his opponent behaved badly while dictator of Mordor. Do the resulting anti-Sauron slogans and insults sound like contemporary campaign rhetoric? What would Tolkien say to a politician who believes that all his critics hail from Barad-dûr?

**Harmony, Disharmony, and Manichaeism.** In the opening pages of *The Silmarillion*, reproduced in the handout called "The Discord of Melkor," Tolkien presents evil as analogous to disharmony in music. Ask the musically inclined students to bring their clarinets, keyboards, and other instruments to class. Invite this ad hoc band to play a familiar melody — "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," "Happy Birthday to You," "Pop Goes the Weasel" — as harmoniously as possible. Next the group should perform the piece again, this time trying for maximum discord. After the noise dies down, have the class discuss whether cacophony is indeed a good metaphor for evil. You might point out that in a Manichaean universe half of the musical instruments would be engineered to produce only dissonance.

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A comprehensive listing of books and sources referenced in the nine curriculum units.

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