

Discussion Questions for *The Hobbit*

1. Chapter One, which comprises thirty-six pages, has been criticized for being too long, as well as being somewhat boring. Why did Tolkien take such a long time with this chapter? What important elements of the story did Tolkien introduce in this chapter? How does the chapter shed light on the personalities of the characters involved in the story?
2. *The Hobbit* is often characterized as a children's book. In his memoirs, Tolkien mentions that he wanted to write a book for his children. Do you believe that *The Hobbit* is merely a children's book? Why or why not?
3. Tolkien wrote *The Hobbit* as a prelude to *The Lord of the Rings*, his trilogy about the third age of Middle Earth. Does *The Hobbit* stand alone as a novel, or does it serve better as an introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*?
4. A number of critics maintain that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are allegories of the First and Second World Wars. Tolkien vigorously maintained that he disliked allegorical tales, and that neither work was allegorical in nature. What is your opinion on the allegorical nature of *The Hobbit*; please provide details from the text which support your opinion.
5. Tolkien introduces a number of characters who are mythological in nature during the narration of *The Hobbit*. Among the mythical characters are hobbits, dwarves, wizards, trolls, elves, and the skin-changer, Beorn. In his famous essay on fancy, Tolkien maintains that in order for mythical characters to be accepted by the reader, the author needs to create a "willing suspension of disbelief" in the mind of the reader. What does Tolkien mean by the "willing suspension of disbelief"? Does Tolkien succeed in creating a "willing suspension of disbelief"?
6. One of the critical episodes in the novel occurs when Bilbo finds the magic ring. After finding the ring, Bilbo meets Gollum and the two engage in the riddle contest. The contest is presented as being a time-honored game with a strict set of rules. When Bilbo inadvertently blurts out "what have I got in my pocket?" Gollum mistakes this for a riddle. Bilbo, unable to think of another riddle, goes along with Gollum's mistake. Since Bilbo was in a particularly bad spot, with Gollum likely to kill him, is his riddle justified?
7. Just before Bilbo escapes from the tunnel which leads to an exit from the Misty Mountains, he must get past Gollum, who is blocking the way. At first, Bilbo was tempted to injure or kill Gollum, but he changed his mind. Tolkien comments as follows: "A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror welled up in Bilbo's heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope of betterment, hard stone, cold fish, sneaking and whispering. All these thoughts passed in a flash of a second." Later, in the *Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf tells Bilbo's nephew Frodo, that Bilbo's pity for Gollum was the primary reason that prevented the ring gaining a hold over Bilbo. Why is pity such an important concept in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*? How did Bilbo's action affect the trajectory of the story, and the conclusion in *The Lord of the Rings*? Why did Bilbo act as he did toward Gollum, when it was clear that Gollum would not act this way toward Bilbo?
8. Near the end of the novel, Bilbo purloins the Arkenstone, and uses it as ransom in an attempt to avoid a war among the dwarves, elves and men. Was Bilbo justified in his actions? Was the "theft" of the Arkenstone a sufficient justification for avoiding a war?

9. Throughout the book, Tolkien uses a number of poems and songs to add to the mood of the novel. Do you think the poems and songs are effective? Why or why not? Following is a link to a video in which Tolkien sings one of the songs:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7HFnbYc7MM>