

The Fellowship of the Ring: Tolkien's Metaphysics

1. How is Bilbo different at the opening of the LOTR, as compared with the first chapter of the Hobbit? How does the tone of the narrator compare in the two works? How are the two "parties" similar, and how different? What best explains the differences?
2. What effect does the Ring have on Bilbo? On Gandalf? What sort of force or entity is it? Does it have a 'mind' of its own? Is it working on or with something already in Bilbo, or in Gandalf?
3. What does Gandalf mean by saying that Bilbo was 'meant' to find the ring? Meant by whom? How does Gandalf know this?
4. Compare Frodo's song (p. 144/159) with the Elves' song to Elbereth in the Shire (p. 99/117). What do "woods"/"trees" represent in this context?
5. According to Tolkien, the appearance of the Ringwraiths surprised and disturbed him as much as they did the characters. Tolkien treated certain mysteries (like the character and fate of the two blue wizards) as though these were questions of fact he did not know how to answer. Can this be taken literally? Do stories, or at least some stories, really pre-exist their author's imagination? Can writing (at its best) be an act of discovery as opposed to invention?
6. What is the meaning of "The Old Forest"? Why is it so sinister and threatening? Is there some will or mind that is thwarting the hobbits' progress, or does it only seem so? Is the OF connected with Sauron or an independent force? In what way does the spiritualization or personification of the Old Forest/Old Man Willow relate to the 'primordial desires' that Fairy Stories are supposed to fulfill? What's the significance of the fact that Nature is represented as morally ambiguous or ambivalent (including the Willow's "malice")?
7. Who or what is Tom Bombadil? What is his meaning or significance in the story? Does the encounter with Bombadil constitute a sheer digression from the story? Why does the ring have no effect on him? Is his appearance an example of what Tolkien calls "eucatastrophe" in "On Fairy-Stories"? Is Bombadil elvish? Are the hobbits under a kind of enchantment?
8. What does the line in Bombadil's song, "till the world is mended", say about Tolkien's world?
9. Did Frodo fail by putting on the Ring on Weathertop (p. 261)? Was the resistance really unbearable, as the narrator (Frodo?) tells us?
10. Why was the name of Elbereth more deadly to the Ringwraith than the stroke of Frodo's sword (p. 265)? What does this indicate about the relationship between language and reality?
11. Elrond says that the councilors have been "called" to Rivendell, but not by him. What does he mean? (p. 318)
12. Why have all the victories against evil in Middle-Earth been "fruitless"? (319-320). Do Elrond's pessimistic reminiscences leave any room for hope?
13. How has Saruman been corrupted? How does his moral downfall reflect itself in his language? In what way is the evil of Saruman reflect the disasters of the 20th century? (339-341)
14. Gandalf says that it is perilous to study to deeply the arts of the Enemy. (347) How is this warning embodied in Tolkien's own writing?

15. How does Celebrimbor of Hollin (p. 398, “Journey in the Dark”) serve as a line between the Silmarils and the rings of power? Is the creation of the lesser rings simply a recapitulation of Feanor’s creation of the Silmarils? Is there anything in the Silmarillion that corresponds to the One Ring?
16. How does the Balrog help to link the Lord of the Rings and the Silmarillion? (Note: the Udun is an alternate name for Morgoth’s fortress, Utumno.) What does Gandalf mean when he says he wields the “flame of Anor”?
17. How does the friendship of Legolas and Gimli mirror the conflicts between Elves and Dwarves in the First Age?
18. Aragorn decides to go forward after Gandalf’s loss, despite the lack of hope. (p. 432) Is this Nordic conception of courage without hope compatible with the Christian virtue of hope? Is Aragorn guilty of despair?
19. Why does Aragorn describe Lothlorien as “fair and perilous”? What is perilous about it?
20. Why does Galadriel test the hearts of the Fellowship? How does Frodo turn the tables on her (473)? Why is Galadriel able to pass her test? Contrast Galadriel and Feanor.
21. Galadriel expresses an asymmetry between light and darkness: the light perceives the very heart of darkness, but its own secret has not been discovered. (p. 456) How does this embody an Augustinian conception of the difference between good and evil?
22. What exactly does the mirror of Galadriel do? Why is it significant that Galadriel qualifies “what will happen” with “what may happen”? Does the mirror reveal mere possibilities? How then to explain the fact that it did in fact reliably predict the future in each case? (pp. 468ff)
23. Galadriel makes an odd statement about the mirror: some things it reveals “never come to pass *unless* (sic) one acts to prevent them.” (p. 470) Is this a typo or slip of the pen? Did Tolkien mean that some things never come to pass *if* one acts to prevent them, or did he intend the paradoxical “unless” (“if not”)? Or did he inadvertently omit a “no” -- “unless *no* one acts to prevent them”? Or, was the paradox intentional? (Think about the fulfillment of the prophecy about Oedipus.)
24. In the Silmarillion, the Silmarils represent sub-creation gone disastrously wrong. Recall that Earendil’s star is in fact one of these Silmarils. Why does the light of Earendil’s star play such a purely positive role in the Lord of the Rings? Discuss how this illustrates the principle of good as the inadvertent by-product of evil.
25. Examine the developing friendship of Gimli and Legolas. How does Gimli’s encounter with Galadriel contribute to their growing intimacy? (442) Why is Gimli such an exceptional dwarf?
26. Why does the flow of time seem to be suspended in Lothlorien? 482-3 (Relate this to Tolkien’s discussion of “enchantment” in “On Fairy Stories.”)
27. How does Boromir’s fall under the spell of the Ring advance the progress of the Quest? 494-5 What would or might have happened if Boromir had resisted the temptation?
28. Is Frodo merely a pawn in the contest between Sauron and Gandalf (the two “voices”)? 499 Does he genuinely have any free choice, or does it only seem so to him? Why is Frodo able to take off the ring on Amon Hen, but not able to resist the temptation to put it on on Weathertop (p. 244)?
29. Is Sam’s expression of hope mere bravado, naïveté, or something else? (506)

“Leaf by Niggle” <http://www.epubbud.com/book.php?g=QCLTJ8S8>