

7. Riddles in the Dark

By
J.R.R. Tolkien

1. Writer's introduction

J.R.R. Tolkien (1892–1973) was an English writer, philologist, and academic, best known for creating *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955). Born in Bloemfontein, South Africa, and raised in England, Tolkien was a professor at Oxford University. His expertise in languages and mythology heavily influenced his writing, particularly in constructing rich, detailed fantasy worlds. His works, particularly the Middle-earth legendarium, have become cornerstone texts of modern fantasy literature, influencing generations of writers and readers. Tolkien's legacy includes numerous adaptations of his works into films, games, and other media.

J.R.R. Tolkien is primarily known for his epic novels, but he also wrote several short stories, many of which are set in his Middle-earth universe. One notable example is "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth, Beorhthelm's Son," a poem exploring themes of heroism and death. Additionally, his short stories, like "Leaf by Niggle", reflect his fascination with creation, imperfection, and the artist's struggle. Tolkien's short stories often explore philosophical and moral dilemmas, showcasing his talent for blending deep themes with mythological elements. While not as famous for short fiction, his contributions in this genre are still significant.

2. Introduction to the Story

"Riddles in the Dark" is a pivotal chapter in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo Baggins, lost deep in the Misty Mountains, encounters Gollum, a mysterious, cave-dwelling creature. In this chapter, Bilbo and Gollum engage in a tense riddle contest, with Bilbo's life hanging in the balance. The chapter is significant for introducing the magical One Ring, which Bilbo stumbles upon during the encounter. The riddles serve as a metaphor for the characters' inner struggles, and this encounter marks a turning point in Bilbo's journey, showcasing his courage and quick thinking while deepening the mystery of the Ring.

The genre of "Riddles in the Dark" by J.R.R. Tolkien is primarily fantasy. It is a chapter from his novel *The Hobbit* (1937), which falls within the broader fantasy genre. This specific chapter features a contest of riddles between Bilbo Baggins and Gollum, set in a mysterious underground cave. The story blends elements of adventure and mystery with fantastical creatures and settings, characteristic of Tolkien's imaginative world-building. Additionally, the chapter can also be categorized as a psychological thriller, as the tension between Bilbo and Gollum escalates, and the stakes are high for Bilbo's survival.

3. Summary

In "Riddles in the Dark," a key chapter in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, Bilbo Baggins finds himself trapped in the depths of the Misty Mountains, separated from the rest of the dwarf party. After wandering through the dark and eerie tunnels, he stumbles upon a strange and terrifying creature named Gollum. Gollum is a twisted, ancient being who lives in the deep caves, far from the world of the living. He is possessive and secretive, obsessed with a mysterious object he calls "my precious."

Bilbo, in his search for an escape, encounters Gollum and, after a tense introduction, the two strike a deal. Gollum proposes a riddle contest to determine Bilbo's fate: if Bilbo wins, Gollum will show him the way out; if Gollum wins, he will eat Bilbo. The riddles they exchange are full of wit and cleverness, but each also reflects the nature of the contestants. Gollum, with his twisted personality and obsession with the Ring, speaks in riddles that are often dark and cryptic, while Bilbo's riddles are more straightforward and innocent.

As the contest progresses, the riddles become increasingly difficult, and Bilbo starts to fear that he might lose. In a critical moment, Bilbo, desperate and unsure of what to do, asks a riddle that wasn't part of the original game: "What have I got in my pocket?" This riddle stumps Gollum, and Bilbo's quick thinking buys him time. Unknown to Gollum, Bilbo has accidentally found the One Ring, a magical artifact that allows the wearer to become invisible. Bilbo, using the Ring, escapes from Gollum's sight and sneaks away while Gollum searches for him, believing Bilbo has vanished.

In his frantic search for a way out, Bilbo realizes that the Ring has strange powers, allowing him to remain undetected by Gollum. Bilbo's use of the Ring, though accidental, marks the first significant interaction with the object that will play a central role in Tolkien's larger Middle-earth legendarium. As Gollum becomes more desperate, Bilbo finds a way to escape the caves by using the Ring's power to remain unseen. However, in the process, he unknowingly foils Gollum's pursuit, who remains unaware that Bilbo has the Ring.

Bilbo eventually exits the caves and reunites with the dwarves, though he keeps the discovery of the Ring a secret. He doesn't fully understand its significance yet, but he feels a strange connection to the object. Gollum, meanwhile, returns to his dark lair, vowing to find and retrieve "his precious" Ring.

"Riddles in the Dark" is a key chapter not only in *The Hobbit* but in Tolkien's broader legendarium. It is where Bilbo's character begins to change, as he becomes more resourceful and courageous. It also introduces the One Ring, a pivotal object that will play a central role in *The Lord of the Rings*. The chapter highlights themes of cleverness, survival, and the corrupting influence of power, as Gollum's obsession with the Ring foreshadows its darker role in later narratives.

4. Important Characters

In "Riddles in the Dark" from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, two central characters dominate the chapter: **Bilbo Baggins** and **Gollum**. Their interactions form the crux of the story and play a pivotal role in the development of the novel's plot, particularly in introducing the One Ring.

i. Bilbo Baggins

Bilbo is the protagonist of *The Hobbit*, a reluctant adventurer thrust into dangerous and unfamiliar situations. In "Riddles in the Dark," Bilbo's resourcefulness, bravery, and quick thinking are on full display. Initially, Bilbo is terrified and disoriented after becoming lost in the dark caves of the Misty Mountains, separated from his companions. However, through his cleverness and wit, he rises to the challenge of facing Gollum and surviving the deadly riddle contest.

Bilbo's most significant action in this chapter is his accidental discovery of the One Ring, which grants him the power of invisibility. This newfound power allows him to evade Gollum's pursuit and find a way out of the caves. Although Bilbo does not fully understand the significance of the Ring at this point, it foreshadows its importance in later events. Bilbo's actions in the chapter show a significant growth in his character, from a timid hobbit to a more confident and cunning adventurer. He also demonstrates empathy when he decides to spare Gollum's life, which further highlights his moral integrity and the complexity of his character.

ii. Gollum

Gollum is one of the most memorable and complex characters in Tolkien's legendarium. He is a creature corrupted by the power of the One Ring, which he once possessed and which he calls "my precious." Gollum's personality is shaped by his obsession with the Ring, which has twisted him into a paranoid, deceitful, and often pitiable being. His dual personality — the innocent "Smeagol" and the dark, obsessive "Gollum" — is reflected in his riddles, which are both clever and full of dark undertones.

In this chapter, Gollum is a formidable adversary, both intelligent and dangerous. His riddles, while challenging, also reveal his twisted nature. His desperation to regain the Ring, which he lost long ago, underscores his obsession and foreshadows the lengths to which he will go to recover it. Gollum's sinister nature is balanced with moments of vulnerability, as he pleads for the Ring and speaks of his past in a way that hints at the creature he once was before the Ring's corrupting influence took over.

At the same time, Gollum is not without his vulnerabilities. His obsession with the Ring makes him increasingly unstable, and his failure to solve Bilbo's riddle is a sign of his intellectual and emotional unraveling. Gollum's inability to solve the simple "What have I got in my pocket?" riddle, and his subsequent confusion, illustrates the extent of his fixation on the Ring. His frustration leads him to become increasingly hostile and dangerous, culminating in a desperate and fruitless search for Bilbo.

iii. The One Ring (as a Character)

Though not a character in the traditional sense, the One Ring plays a significant role in this chapter. The Ring, found by Bilbo during his encounter with Gollum, is an object of immense power, capable of granting invisibility to its wearer. It becomes an almost silent character in the story, influencing events and characters. Its corrupting influence over Gollum is evident, and its role in Bilbo's survival signals its future importance in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In short, In "Riddles in the Dark," Bilbo and Gollum are two sharply contrasting characters, each representing different responses to the power and temptation of the One Ring. Bilbo's cunning, empathy, and morality set him apart from Gollum, whose obsession and madness are the result of the Ring's corruptive influence. These two characters drive the chapter's plot, with Bilbo's resourcefulness allowing him to escape, while Gollum's fixation on the Ring continues to define his tragic existence. The interaction between these characters is one of the defining moments in *The Hobbit*, offering insight into the broader themes of power, obsession, and morality.

5. Themes

In "Riddles in the Dark" from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, several important themes are explored, particularly focusing on cleverness vs. obsession, the corrupting influence of power, and identity and self-doubt. These themes are revealed through the interaction between Bilbo Baggins and Gollum, both of whom are central to the events of this chapter.

i. Cleverness vs. Obsession

A key theme in this chapter is the contrast between Bilbo's cleverness and Gollum's obsession with the One Ring. Bilbo, though initially frightened and disoriented, uses his wit to survive. The riddle contest between Bilbo and Gollum showcases this battle of intelligence, where Bilbo manages to outthink Gollum, despite the latter's centuries of experience. However, it's not just intelligence that secures Bilbo's victory; it is his quick thinking and ability to stay calm in a high-stakes situation that ultimately enable his survival.

Gollum, on the other hand, represents the theme of obsession. His entire being is consumed by his desire to reclaim the Ring, and this obsession blinds him to the simplicity of Bilbo's final riddle: "What have I got in my pocket?" Gollum's fixation on the Ring and his fixation on defeating Bilbo lead to his failure, symbolizing how obsession can cloud judgment and undermine one's capabilities.

ii. The Corrupting Influence of Power

The One Ring is a central symbol in Tolkien's work, representing the corrupting influence of power. In "Riddles in the Dark," the Ring's power is introduced in a subtle yet significant way. Bilbo stumbles upon the Ring, not fully aware of its significance, while Gollum's obsession with the Ring is clear. For Gollum, the Ring is a source of corruption that

has turned him into a pitiful creature, mentally and physically warped by his long years of possession. His obsessive pursuit of the Ring highlights how its power can consume and degrade a person's character.

In contrast, Bilbo's discovery of the Ring reveals a more ambiguous relationship with power. Although he doesn't yet understand its full potential, his use of the Ring to escape Gollum shows that he is not immune to the influence of power. This moment foreshadows the importance of the Ring in the larger Lord of the Rings saga, where its corrupting effects on characters like Frodo, Boromir, and others will be explored in greater depth.

iii. Identity and Self-Doubt

Another theme explored in this chapter is the idea of identity and self-doubt, particularly through Gollum's character. Gollum's internal conflict is evident in his split personality: "Smeagol" and "Gollum." Smeagol represents a glimpse of the creature Gollum once was, someone capable of kindness and normalcy, while Gollum embodies the darker, obsessive side consumed by the Ring. This duality reflects Gollum's struggle with his identity, as he is unable to reconcile the two aspects of his personality.

Similarly, Bilbo experiences self-doubt, especially as he faces the seemingly insurmountable challenge of dealing with Gollum. Bilbo's confidence fluctuates throughout the chapter, but ultimately, it is his ability to overcome his fears and trust in his instincts that allows him to escape. In this way, Bilbo's journey toward self-discovery begins, marking a shift from the timid hobbit at the start of the novel to a more courageous and resourceful character.

In "Riddles in the Dark," Tolkien explores themes of cleverness vs. obsession, the corrupting influence of power, and identity and self-doubt. The contrast between Bilbo and Gollum, and the introduction of the One Ring, not only serve as crucial elements in *The Hobbit*, but also lay the groundwork for the larger moral and philosophical questions explored in *The Lord of the Rings*. This chapter deepens the reader's understanding of the Ring's power and its effect on characters, both immediately and in future narratives.

6. Writing Style

In "Riddles in the Dark," J.R.R. Tolkien's writing style is marked by a blend of vivid description, rich dialogue, and thematic depth. His ability to immerse the reader in the atmosphere of the dark, subterranean world, combined with his use of tension and suspense, makes this chapter particularly engaging. Tolkien's style in this chapter reflects his mastery of world-building and his skill in using language to create a sense of mystery and danger.

i. Descriptive Language and Atmosphere

Tolkien's writing in "Riddles in the Dark" is particularly notable for its ability to create a strong sense of place. The gloomy, eerie setting of Gollum's cave is vividly brought to life through detailed descriptions. For example, he writes:

"The darkness was complete. He was utterly lost. It was a long, long time before he found himself able to move again."

This passage uses simple yet effective language to evoke the feeling of isolation and despair that Bilbo feels. The reader is immersed in Bilbo's sense of confusion and fear, enhancing the atmosphere of the underground world. Tolkien's use of sensory details, such as the oppressive darkness and the cold, damp environment, reinforces the unsettling nature of the setting.

ii. Dialogue and Characterization

Tolkien's dialogue in this chapter is another key element of his writing style. The exchange of riddles between Bilbo and Gollum is crucial for both plot progression and character development. Through their riddles, the personalities of the two characters are revealed. Gollum's dialogue reflects his dual nature — the inner conflict between the corrupted, obsessive "Gollum" and the more innocent, remorseful "Smeagol." This duality is evident in Gollum's speech, as he frequently shifts between these two personalities. For example:

Gollum: "We are lost, lost, and we cannot find it, my precious." Smeagol: "No, we can't, but we must find it, or we can't go on."

This internal dialogue reflects the fractured nature of Gollum's identity and adds depth to his character. Meanwhile, Bilbo's speech is often pragmatic and clever, reflecting his resourcefulness. The contrast between Bilbo's calm and logical speech and Gollum's frantic and obsessive dialogue underscores the tension between the two characters.

iii. Tension and Suspense

Tolkien builds tension throughout the chapter by using language that conveys a sense of danger and urgency. The riddle contest is not just an intellectual exercise, but a life-or-death situation for Bilbo. As Gollum's frustration grows, so does the intensity of the scene. For example, when Bilbo asks the fateful riddle, "What have I got in my pocket?" the text reflects both Bilbo's nervousness and Gollum's increasing desperation:

"Gollum was getting madder and madder, and his voice was growing shriller. He was beginning to lose his temper."

This escalation of Gollum's anger creates a palpable sense of peril, adding suspense to the moment. Tolkien's use of pacing, with the alternating riddles and the growing conflict between the two, keeps the reader engaged and invested in the outcome.

iv. Symbolism and Thematic Depth

Tolkien's writing also reflects a deep thematic exploration of power, obsession, and survival. The One Ring, introduced during this chapter, is not explicitly explained at this point, but its significance is foreshadowed through Gollum's obsession with it and Bilbo's accidental discovery. The Ring, though not named outright, represents a symbol of power and corruption, a theme Tolkien revisits throughout his work.

In conclusion, Tolkien's writing style in "Riddles in the Dark" is marked by detailed description, dynamic dialogue, and careful pacing. These elements work together to create a tense and immersive atmosphere, while also developing key themes such as the corrupting influence of power and the contrast between intelligence and obsession. His use of language in this chapter showcases his ability to craft a compelling narrative that is both engaging and thought-provoking.