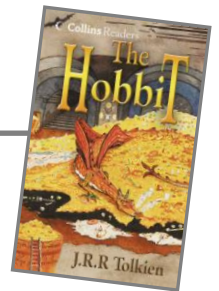


## Teaching the Hobbit

We asked Gareth Calway, [Read On author](#) and literary extraordinaire, to share some fresh ways of thinking about and teaching *The Hobbit* following the film's release.



### Dispelling assumptions

*The Hobbit* is NOT *The Lord of the Rings*, however much the Peter Jackson film would (for marketing and continuity reasons) have you think so. (In Jackson's defence, Tolkien, to garner the huge popularity of his first book, did call LOTR a sequel to *The Hobbit*.)

Paul Kocher, author of [Master of Middle Earth](#) says, 'Despite its surface connections with LOTR the two works are so unlike fundamentally as to be different in kind.' Elrond is a very different being and Rivendell a very different place in its earlier outing, as is Middle Earth and the 'edge of the wild' mapped. Kocher goes on to say that '*The Hobbit* is a story for children about the stealing of a dragon's hoard by some dwarves with the reluctant aid of a little hobbit. LOTR stretches the adult imagination with its account of a world in peril.'

Child readers – or rather *listeners* – are addressed in the first person singular throughout *The Hobbit*: 'Gandalf! If you had heard only a quarter of what I have heard about him...you would be prepared for any sort of remarkable tale.' Sound effects to delight childish ears are legion: Bilbo's doorbell rings *ding-dong-a-ling-dang*, Gandalf's smoke rings go *pop*, his wand goes *poof*, Bilbo falls *splash* into the water; and those proto-punks the goblins (the story is crammed with sound-rich verse) sing *Clash, crash, Crush, smash...Swish, smack, Whip crack* as they carry the captured Bilbo underground. *The Hobbit* seems, then, predominantly 'junior fiction' to be read aloud in genial-adult manner to fairly young children.

However, along with the fairly stiff vocabulary there are not infrequent more 'adult' episodes including fun-pokes at the suburban stodginess of hobbit society, the high moral sparing of Gollum, debates about law, equity and morals (e.g. Bard's claim to share the treasure after killing the dragon; Bilbo's contract) suggesting that Tolkien is speaking also to his adult reader. This is why the book is both a different genre from its so-called sequel, and contains enough of that epic's seriousness in embryo to make its classification as 'junior fiction' problematic. None of this should worry us: like a pantomime the book is a family entertainment with something for all ages and, as teachers, it provides the ideal read-aloud (and vocabulary-stretching) book for the classroom for all abilities where the occasionally child-puzzling seriousness will be carried along by the general fun and can be teased out in child-terms as required.

*The Hobbit* also provides a scholarly but light-hearted link to and development of all the (German, Celtic) nursery rhymes, folk and fairy tales about trolls, elves, goblins, quests, etc. as well as being the child-friendlier version of LOTR's orcs, an altogether more metaphysical/fallen/evil creature. It is in that sense a preparation for the sophisticated reworking/revitalising of Celtic and Nordic mythology for our own time (which Tolkien felt we lacked) achieved in the later books. Compare *The Hobbit's* book-long breezy donnishness with the lighter narrative style at the very opening of LOTR, before 'the shadow of the past' falls.

### A Few Classroom Specifics

- The onomatopoeia, rhyme and rhythm effects of the sounds cited above can lead to writing activities where students create their own **soundscapes** of Bilbo's perilous journeying.
- The troll episode makes a great classroom **drama**: Gandalf's ventriloquism leading to tableaux of the trolls and fun captions for this 'still.' 'Riddles in the dark' – which became so important to LOTR – will intrigue students with its 'lighter' approach to that fateful episode.
- A **courtroom scene** with Gollum's lawyers arguing that Bilbo is a thief and in which the defence does or does not have access to the LOTR evidence of how Gollum came by the ring himself. This can generate much spoken and written English, and purposive reading of key passages.

(See also the new free resources available for downloading: Students write their own '[Quest Short Story](#)' – creating a hero, a goal and a load of obstacles – and expand on a favourite Hobbit character: tell us '[Gollum's Back-story](#)'. Just imagine his teen years! Get creative!)

### Using the film

Bad creatures (in LOTR they would be 'evil') tend towards stoniness. The trolls Bert, Tom and William are trapped by Gandalf's ventriloquism and their comic slow-wittedness: 'for trolls, as you probably know, must be underground by dawn, or they go back to the stuff of the mountains they are made of, and never move again.' This is thrilling stuff for a generation familiar with vampires, as Tolkien's was with the classical Gorgon. In *The Hobbit* film (official trailer [here](#)), a mountain itself takes shadowy human form and this malevolent conflation of a living thing recurs: Gollum becoming 'the slimy island of rock in the middle of the lake'; the scale-bejewelled dragon turning into the precious stones he covets in a disgustingly sensual tail-flickering way. Tracing Tolkien's sound-rich language from text to screen is a fun way of appreciating both arts. Not to mention: Snob alert! Orcs in the LOTR movies and trolls in *The Hobbit* film are cockney, while the hobbits (though crucially not grand) are rather bourgeois. But the utterly hideous goblin king in *The Hobbit* is posh and boy what a monster of poshness he is! It's an interesting topic to spur conversation among students of all backgrounds.

*Gareth Calway grew up near Bristol – his first memory is of being attacked by a toucan at Bristol zoo. He now lives in Norfolk with his wife Melanie. He was an English teacher for 27 years and has been a full-time writer, journalist, children’s author and actor since 2007. His Punktured History of Britain shows take him out on the road to museums, village halls and the Edinburgh Fringe. If he’s ever made England football manager, he will get them to practise the penalty shoot out.*

**Now, go Hobbit! As ever, the free Teacher Lessons are available to you for [downloading](#), and now we’ve got even more free stuff including [PowerPoint writing activities](#) and more fun [Twitter](#) and blogging action to come.**