

***The Hobbit* and Old English Riddles**
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Riddles in *The Hobbit*

In Chapter 5 of *The Hobbit*, the protagonist Bilbo Baggins finds himself in a deep, dark cave, where he encounters the slimy and threatening character Gollum. In order to get away from Gollum, Bilbo must win a riddle contest. If Bilbo can't answer one of Gollum's riddles, Gollum gets to eat Bilbo! But if Gollum can't answer one of Bilbo's riddles, Gollum promises to lead Bilbo to the way out. Learning to solve problems is a big part of Bilbo's adventures in the novel, and here he has to solve his problem by solving word puzzles as well.

Here are three riddles from the chapter. Can you solve them?

A box without hinges, key, or lid
Yet golden treasure inside is hid.

Thirty white horses on a red hill,
First they champ,
Then they stamp,
Then they stand still.

This thing all things devours:
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats high mountain down.

Old English Riddles from the 10th century

Riddles are an ancient type of creative word-play, and the oldest ones in English were written down in the 10th century (the 900s), but they may be even older. J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit*, knew these riddles, for he was a professor of Old English literature at Oxford University in England. Like the riddles he created for Bilbo and Gollum, the Old English riddles are also poems, and they rely heavily on *metaphor*: the figurative comparison of two or more things usually considered unrelated. Can you solve these very old riddles (on the next page)?

Old English, as you'll see and hear, doesn't seem like the English you speak and write – our language has greatly changed over the centuries. But every now and then there's a word that doesn't seem all that strange. Do you see or hear anything familiar?

Riddle 66

Ic þa wiht geseah on weg feran;
heo wæs wrætlice wundrum gegierwed.
Wundor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane.
[K-D 68-69]

I saw a creature wandering the way:
She was devastating-beautifully adorned.
On the wave a miracle: water turned to bone.

Riddle 48

Wiga is on eorþan wundrum acenned
dryhtum to nytte, of dumbum twam
torht atyhted, þone on teon wigeð
feond his feonde. Forstrangne oft
wif hine wrið. He him wel hereð, 5
þeowaþ him geþwære, gif him þegnað
mægeð ond mægga mid gemete ryhte,
fedað hine fægre; he him fremum stepeð
life on lissum. Leanað grimme
þam þe hine wlancne weorþan læteð. 10

On earth this warrior is strangely born
Of two dumb creatures, drawn gleaming
Into the world, bright and useful to men.
It is tended, kept, covered by women--
Strong and savage, it serves well, 5
A gentle slave to firm masters
Who mind its measure and feed it fairly
With a careful hand. To these it brings
Warm blessings; to those who let it run
Wild it brings a grim reward. 10

Riddle 49

Ic seah wrætlice wuhte feower
samed siþian; swearte wæran lastas,
swaþu swiþe blacu. Swift wæs on fore,
fuglum framra; fleag on lyfte,
deaf under ype. Dreag unstill 5
winnende wiga se him wegga tæcneþ
ofer fæted gold feower eallum.

I saw four weird fellows traveling
Together as one. This creature seemed swift,
Bolder than birds-left black tracks.
It flew through air and dove under waves.
The warrior who winds all four over gold-- 5
Plated roads pushed restlessly on.

Riddle 81

Nis min sele swige, ne ic sylfa hlud
ymb [. . . .]; unc dryhten scop
siþ ætsomne. Ic eom swiftra þonne he,
þragum strengra, he þreohtigra.
Hwilum ic me reste; he sceal rinnan forð. 5
Ic him in wunige a þenden ic lifge;
gif wit unc gedælað, me bið deað witod.

Shunning silence, my house is loud
While I am quiet: we are movement bound
By the Shaper's will. I am swifter,
Sometimes stronger--he is longer lasting,
Harder running. Sometimes I rest 5
While he rolls on. He is the house
That holds me living--alone I die.