“Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came”

Robert Browning · *1855 · original English text*

A knight, Childe Roland, comes at the end of a long quest to the Dark Tower. The poem is his account, in thirty-four stanzas, of the last stage of the journey across a barren country that seems to be poisoned. Browning said he wrote it in a day, from a dream, and has never explained what the tower is.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it mean to go on when everything you see tells you that the quest is hopeless and that others have failed?

The poem does not say what the Dark Tower stands for, and readers have read it as a figure of failure, death, faith, or the poet’s task. What is clear is the knight’s resolve. He has been told the way by a malicious old man, he sees the ruin of the land and recalls his lost companions, and at last he sees the tower and sets a horn to his lips. The ending is a challenge and not a victory.

KEY CHARACTERS

Childe Roland
The knight and speaker, who has come to the end of his quest.

the old cripple
A malicious figure who points the way.

Cuthbert
A friend of Roland’s who fell.

Giles
Another friend lost on the quest.

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Old Man’s Directions
OPENING STANZAS

Roland meets a cripple who points the way and seems to expect him to fail. The knight suspects he has been lied to, and decides that the best hope is to go on.

- The old man’s smile is cruel.
- Roland accepts the possibility of failure.
- The quest has been long.

02
The Barren Plain
MIDDLE STANZAS

He crosses a plain of thistles, sick grass, and twisted trees. The land is described as if it had been tortured.

- The landscape is a mood.
- Every detail is ugly and strange.
- The knight keeps moving.

03
The Lost Companions
MIDDLE STANZAS

He recalls his friends, Cuthbert and Giles, who fell or betrayed, and fears he will join them.

- The memory of friends adds grief.
- Roland tries to think of them as they were.
- He feels the weight of other failures.

04
The River and the Hills
LATE STANZAS

He crosses a dark river, with a fear of what is under his feet, and sees hills like a ring.

- The river is a dangerous crossing.
- The hills close around him.
- The country seems to wait.

05
The Tower
FINAL STANZAS

He recognizes the tower, sees the hills as a crowd of the lost, and blows his slug-horn to announce himself.

- The tower is a plain, blind thing.
- The lost knights look on from the hills.
- The poem ends with the call, not the outcome.

The Quest | Failure and Resolve | Landscape as Mood | Memory

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Browning said it came from a dream. Notice how dream-like the images are.
2. Ask what the tower stands for. Give more than one answer.
3. The ending is a challenge, not a victory. Think about why.
4. Listen to the rhythm. How does it feel like walking?

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the original English text (Project Gutenberg #50954: The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, Cambridge Edition, ed. Horace E. Scudder (Boston: Houghton Mifflin)), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/browning-childe-roland/.