As you read, pay attention to clues to Roland’s character: what he says, what others say to him and about him, and what he does. In what ways is he a hero? Which of his character traits are most responsible for his downfall?

Roland’s companion Oliver has seen the advancing Saracen army and knows that the small French rear guard is outnumbered. He begs Roland to blow on his horn, the olifant, in order to summon more troops from Charles’s (Charlemagne’s) army, but Roland refuses, saying that he will lose his reputation and bring shame on the French if he calls for help. He believes that he and the other French fighters are more than equal to the Saracens. Oliver continues to urge Roland to call for help, to no avail. Finally Roland, Oliver, Archbishop Turpin, and the other French fighters clash with the Saracens in the mountain pass. For a time, the French hold their own.

110

The battle is fearful and full of grief.
Oliver and Roland strike like good men, the Archbishop, more than a thousand blows, and the Twelve Peers\(^5\) do not hang back, they strike!

The French fight side by side, all as one man. The pagans die by hundreds, by thousands: whoever does not flee finds no refuge from death, like it or not, there he ends all his days.
And there the men of France lose their greatest arms:

4. Twelve Peers: noblemen chosen as Charles’s select band of leaders.
they will not see their fathers, their kin again, or Charlemagne, who looks for them in the
passes.

Tremendous torment now comes forth in France, a mighty whirlwind, tempests of wind and
thunder,
rains and hailstones, great and immeasurable,
bolts of lightning hurtling and hurling down: it is, in truth, a trembling of the earth.
From Saint Michael-in-Peril to the Saints, from Besançon to the port of Wissant, there is no house whose veil of walls does not crumble.

A great darkness at noon falls on the land, there is no light but when the heavens crack. No man sees this who is not terrified, and many say: "The Last Day! Judgment Day! The end! The end of the world is upon us!"

They do not know, they do not speak the truth: it is the worldwide grief for the death of Roland.

Roland and the Twelve Peers fight fiercely against the Saracens, but they are greatly outnumbered. At last it becomes apparent even to Roland that the battle cannot be won, and he finally decides to use his magical horn, the olifant, to call Charlemagne’s army for relief. But Oliver, angered that Roland’s pride had prevented him from blowing the horn earlier, when it could have done some good, stops Roland with harsh words, pointing out that it truly would be a disgrace to sound the horn now, when all hope has been lost.

And Roland says: "We are in a rough battle. I'll sound the olifant, Charles will hear it."
Said Oliver: "No good vassal would do it.

When I urged it, friend, you did not think it right. If Charles were here, we'd come out with no losses.

Those men down there—no blame can fall on them."

Oliver said: "Now by this beard of mine, If I can see my noble sister, Aude, once more, you will never lie in her arms!"
And Roland said: "Why are you angry at me?"
Oliver answers: "Companion, it is your doing.
I will tell you what makes a vassal good:
   it is judgment, it is never madness:
restraint is worth more than the raw nerve of
   a fool.

Frenchmen are dead because of your wildness.
And what service will Charles ever have from us?
If you had trusted me, my lord would be here,
we would have fought this battle through to the end,
Marsilion would be dead, or our prisoner.

Roland, your prowess—had we never seen it!
And now, dear friend, we've seen the last of it.
No more aid from us now for Charlemagne,
a man without equal till Judgment Day,
you will die here, and your death will shame
   France.
We kept faith, you and I, we were companions;
   and everything we were will end today.

We part before evening, and it will be hard."

Turpin the Archbishop hears their bitter words,
digs hard into his horse with golden spurs
and rides to them; begins to set them right:
"You, Lord Roland, and you, Lord Oliver,
I beg you in God's name do not quarrel.
To sound the horn could not help us now, true,
but still it is far better that you do it:
let the King come, he can avenge us then—
these men of Spain must not go home exulting!

Our French will come, they'll get down on their
feet,
and find us here—we'll be dead, cut to pieces.
They will lift us into coffins on the backs of
mules,
and weep for us, in rage and pain and grief,
and bury us in the courts of churches;

and we will not be eaten by wolves or pigs or dogs."
Roland replies, "Lord, you have spoken well."
Roland has put the olifant to his mouth, he sets it well, sounds it with all his strength. The hills are high, and that voice ranges far. They heard it echo thirty great leagues away. King Charles heard it, and all his faithful men. And the King says: "Our men are in a battle." And Ganelon disputed him and said: "Had someone else said that, I'd call him liar!"

And now the mighty effort of Roland the Count: he sounds his olifant; his pain is great, and from his mouth the bright blood comes leaping out, and the temple bursts in his forehead. That horn, in Roland's hands, has a mighty voice. King Charles hears it drawing through the passes. Naimon\textsuperscript{°} heard it, the Franks listen to it. And the King said: "I hear Count Roland's horn; he'd never sound it unless he had a battle." Says Ganelon: "Now no more talk of battles! You are old now, your hair is white as snow, the things you say make you sound like a child. You know Roland and that wild pride of his—what a wonder God has suffered it so long! Remember? he took Noples\textsuperscript{°} without your command:

the Saracens rode out, to break the siege; they fought with him, the great vassal Roland. Afterwards he used the streams to wash the blood from the meadows: so that nothing would show. He blasts his horn all day to catch a rabbit, he's strutting now before his peers and bragging—who under heaven would dare meet him on the field?

So now: ride on! Why do you keep on stopping? The Land of Fathers lies far ahead of us."

\textsuperscript{81.} Naimon: a duke and advisor to Charlemagne.

\textsuperscript{89.} Noples: in Spain.
Roland sounds his horn again. Charles commands his army to ride to Roland’s aid, but it is too late to save Roland and his peers, who have been defeated by the Saracens. Before he dies, Oliver asks forgiveness of Roland.

168

Now Roland feels that death is very near.

100 His brain comes spilling out through his two ears; he prays to God for his peers; let them be called; and for himself, to the angel Gabriel; took the olifant; there must be no reproach!
took Durendal\(^\circ\) his sword in his other hand,
and farther than a crossbow’s farthest shot he walks toward Spain, into a fallow land, and climbs a hill; there beneath two fine trees stand four great blocks of stone, all are of marble; and he fell back, to earth, on the green grass, has fainted there, for death is very near.

104. *Durendal* (dû’ren däl): Roland’s unbreakable sword; said to be the sword that had belonged to the Trojan hero Hector.

169

High are the hills, and high, high are the trees; there stand four blocks of stone, gleaming of marble.

Count Roland falls fainting on the green grass, and is watched, all this time, by a Saracen: who has feigned death and lies now with the others, has smeared blood on his face and on his body; and quickly now gets to his feet and runs—a handsome man, strong, brave, and so crazed with pride that he does something mad and dies for it: laid hands on Roland, and on the arms of Roland, and cried: “Conquered! Charles’s nephew conquered!

120 I’ll carry this sword home to Arabia!”

As he draws it, the Count begins to come round.
Now Roland feels *someone taking his sword!* opened his eyes, and had one word for him: "I don't know you, you aren't one of ours"; grasps that olifant that he will never lose, strikes on the helm beset with gems in gold, shatters the steel, and the head, and the bones, sent his two eyes flying out of his head, dumped him over stretched out at his feet dead; and said: "You nobody! how could you dare lay hands on me—rightly or wrongly: how? Who'll hear of this and not call you a fool? Ah! the bell-mouth of the olifant is smashed, the crystal and the gold fallen away."

Now Roland the Count feels his sight is gone; gets on his feet, draws on his final strength, the color on his face lost now for good. Before him stands a rock; and on that dark rock in rage and bitterness he strikes ten blows: the steel blade grates, it will not break, it stands unmarked. "Ah!" said the Count, "Blessed Mary, your help!"
Ah Durendal, good sword, your unlucky day.
for I am lost and cannot keep you in my care.
The battles I have won, fighting with you,
the mighty lands that holding you I conquered,
that Charles rules now, our King, whose beard
is white!
Now you fall to another; it must not be
a man who'd run before another man!
For a long while a good vassal held you:
there'll never be the like in France's holy land."

173

Roland the Count strikes down on a dark rock,
and the rock breaks, breaks more than I can tell,
and the blade grates, but Durendal will not break,
the sword leaped up, rebounded toward the sky.
The Count, when he sees that sword will not be
broken,
softly, in his own presence, speaks the lament:
"Ah Durendal, beautiful, and most sacred,
the holy relics in this golden pomme!
Saint Peter's tooth and blood of Saint Basile,°
a lock of hair of my lord Saint Denis,°
and a fragment of blessed Mary's robe:
your power must not fall to the pagans,
you must be served by Christian warriors.
May no coward ever come to hold you!
It was with you I conquered those great lands
that Charles has in his keeping, whose beard is
white,
the Emperor's lands, that make him rich and
strong."

174

Now Roland feels death coming over him,
death descending from his temples to his heart.
He came running underneath a pine tree
and there stretched out, face down, on the green
grass,
lays beneath him his sword and the olifant.
He turned his head toward the Saracen hosts,

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160. **Saint Basile** (ba-sēl’): fourth-century religious writer and monastery administrator; fought for orthodoxy within the Catholic Church.

161. **Saint Denis** (den’i-s): third-century apostle to the Gauls, who was martyred; patron saint of France.
and this is why: with all his heart he wants
King Charles the Great and all his men to say,
he died, that noble Count, a conqueror;
makes confession, beats his breast often, so feebly,
offers his glove, for all his sins, to God.

Count Roland lay stretched out beneath a pine;
he turned his face toward the land of Spain,
began to remember many things now:
how many lands, brave man, he had conquered;
and he remembered: sweet France, the men of
his line,
remembered Charles, his lord, who fostered him:
cannot keep, remembering, from weeping, sighing;
but would not be unmindful of himself:
he confesses his sins, prays God for mercy:
"Loyal Father, you who never failed us,
who resurrected Saint Lazarus\(^o\) from the dead,
and saved your servant Daniel\(^o\) from the lions:
now save the soul of me from every peril
for the sins I committed while I still lived."
Then he held out his right glove to his Lord:
Saint Gabriel\(^o\) took the glove from his hand.
He held his head bowed down upon his arm,
he is gone, his two hands joined, to his end.
Then God sent him his angel Cherubim\(^o\)
and Saint Michael,\(^o\) angel of the sea's Peril;
and with these two there came Saint Gabriel:
they bear Count Roland's soul to Paradise.