



Gandalf the Archangel

The Impact of J.R.R. Tolkien's Wartime Experience on The Lord of the Rings

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It is common knowledge that J.R.R. Tolkien's Catholic upbringing significantly influenced his worldview and writing, namely the development of Middle Earth and its various creatures and protagonists. As Tolkien himself acknowledged, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision... [I] should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know."¹ The Catholic Church however provides only a partial explanation for the shaping and influence on Tolkien and his writing. In fact, it was Tolkien's personal experiences as a young man in the crucible of World War I that catalyzed his deep Catholic faith thus culminating in the creation of his writing and characters; specifically, on Tolkien's wizard characters as analogous to Guardian Angels, and on *Gandalf* especially as modeled after all three of the archangels.

The implications and arguments I will use to develop this paper include (i) How Tolkien's personal wartime experiences influenced his thinking and the themes in *The Lord of the Rings*, i.e. that Tolkien's worldview and subsequent writing was shaped by the *combination* of his strong Catholic upbringing and deep faith *and* his dreadful personal experiences in the World War I and as the anxious father of a British soldier in World War II; (ii) A comparison of the characteristics of wizards and angels, including examples from *The Lord of the Rings* as relates to the teachings of the Church, i.e. why supernatural concepts such as Guardian Angels are necessary in Tolkien's characters and storylines; (iii) Specific examples of Gandalf's character and how it is modeled after the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, i.e. that Gandalf is simultaneously a leader of an

¹ Tolkien, J.R.R. 1892-1973. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: a Selection*. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Letter 142. To Robert Murray, SJ, December 2, 1953.

army, a messenger of fateful news, and a supernatural guide for those traveling on their earthly journey.

Janet Brennan Croft's 2002 journal article titled "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*"² focuses on the impact of World War I on Tolkien's life and writing. She opens the article with a somber reminiscence that "J.R.R. Tolkien was one of a generation of Englishmen 'caught by youth' during World War I." Tolkien, born in 1892 was only 22 years old - on the cusp of graduating from Exeter College, Oxford and completing officers training - at the outset of the war, and was subsequently deployed to the front "arriving at the Somme in the pouring rain at the end of June [1916]." Just a few short weeks after the commencement of the Battle of the Somme, the 24 year old Tolkien found himself engaged in combat against the German Empire alongside his French allies. The Battle of the Somme was one of the deadliest battles in history, with over 1 million casualties (Britain, France, and Germany combined) occurring in the span of only five months. By the end of the first day of the battle (July 1, 1916) British forces had suffered 57 thousand casualties, with nearly 20 thousand killed.³ While it is unclear how much hand-to-hand combat Tolkien encountered at the Somme, he was no doubt affected by his experiences, later recollecting "the animal horror of the trenches" and the hollowed out, shell-induced, watery graves of No-Man's Land.

Here, it is noteworthy that *The Hobbit* was published (in 1937) when Tolkien was 45 years old; *The Lord of the Rings* was published even later (in 1954) when Tolkien was well past middle

² Croft, Janet Brennan (2002) "The Great War and Tolkien's Memory: An Examination of World War I Themes in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*". *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charlies Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 23: No. 4, Article 2. [Quotations throughout this paper are references to the Croft journal article, unless otherwise noted].

³ Imperial War Museums, 2022. [Five Things You Need to Know About the Battle of the Somme](#)

age. But the effects of World War I still lingered deeply in his memory; “As Tolkien said in the Introduction to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, ‘it seems now often forgotten that to be caught by youth in 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years [during WW II]. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.’” Tolkien was candid about the impact of WW I on his writing and characters, acknowledging that “My ‘Sam Gamgee’ is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war”; “the Dead Marshes and the Morannon owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme”; and “one of the most telling quotes...where Tolkien says ‘a taste for fairy-stories was wakened by philology on the threshold of manhood, and quickened to full life by war’”. Croft shares a perspective from Tom Shippey (a renowned Tolkien expert) that “the concept of defeatism, [instigated by the horrific stalemate of No-Man’s Land] a word that did not enter the English language until 1918” is reflected in Tolkien’s writing, i.e. “that any hint of a willingness to give up and negotiate terms with the enemy is roundly rejected by the Free Peoples of Middle-earth.” As Shippey puts it, “with his best friends dead in Flanders Tolkien had cause to hate that idea like poison.”

Croft further contrasts the war-influenced writing style of Tolkien - *heroic fantasy* - with that of his 20th century contemporaries, such as Ernest Hemingway who “felt that the heroic style was rendered almost obscene by the unprecedented slaughter, stupidity, and waste of the war.” While Hemingway chose an ironic, realistic style with “direct and unromantic” word usages (e.g., in *A Farewell to Arms*), Tolkien maintained his pre-war, romantic writing style to both mythologize, and “apply fundamental spiritual truths to the Great War”. In other words, “Middle-earth could not exist without [a romantic vocabulary].” In view of this observation, Croft recounts the academic perspective of a fellow critic that “much of the tension and melancholy of Middle-earth rest[s] in

Tolkien's nostalgic longing for return to a lost past coupled with the knowledge that this was impossible save in the realm of the imagination.” (With regard to “spiritual truths” and the stylistic comparison between Tolkien and Hemingway, it is interesting to note that Tolkien was a devout and unwavering Catholic, taught from an early age by his mother Mabel and (after her death in 1904) his legal guardian Father Francis Xavier Morgan of the Birmingham Oratory to embrace the full richness, beauty, tradition, and truth of the Catholic faith⁴, while “Hemingway’s conversion to Catholicism and his participation in the Church remains clouded in mystery.”⁵).

Influenced by his war-time experiences - but not allowing them to alienate him from the traditions of his youth - Tolkien “put his Hobbits in a world that moved too fast for them, and then forced them to keep up with it.” He was “at once reactionary and avant-garde, turning his back on the modernism that had turned its back on the past”; his writing revealed a steadfast romanticism with characters exhibiting “a courage undiluted by confidence but at the same time untainted by rage and despair.” Like his World War I trench-mates, Tolkien’s characters “can be cheerful without hope, sad but not unhappy, and above all determined to ‘see it through’”.

We see that World War I, “one of the major turning points in world history”, and the first “global, total, modern war” had a significant impact on J.R.R. Tolkien. His use of heroic-romanticism is evident in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and his “stories...will have greater significance for the reader who understands the influence of the Great War on his writing and our world.” Croft has both a strong understanding of Tolkien’s writing and a deep appreciation for Tolkien’s personal experiences as a young British soldier, i.e. that Tolkien’s deep Catholic faith -

⁴ Carpenter, Humphrey (1977). *Tolkien: A Biography*. New York: Ballantine Books.

⁵ The Monitor, Volume CIII, Number 15, 14 July 1961. “Was Hemingway a Practicing Catholic?” [The Catholic News Archive](#)

incubating in his heart and mind from his youth - was undoubtedly roused by his experiences in World War I, and transformed over time into the writing and characters of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The two major influences in Tolkien's life - his Catholic faith, and the crucible of war in which it was further forged - are unmistakable in his writing.

Tolkien, having been raised by Father Morgan in the Birmingham Oratory, would have possessed a reliable understanding of the Church's teachings on angels. "The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls 'angels' is a truth of faith."⁶ "The whole life of the Church benefits from the mysterious and powerful help of angels..."⁷ The Church...celebrates the memory of certain angels more particularly (St. Michael, St. Gabriel, St. Raphael, and the Guardian Angels).⁸ From infancy to death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession."⁹ Necessarily, as a young man facing the "animal horror...of trenchlife"¹⁰ in World War I Tolkien would have sought protection and aid from his own Guardian Angel, in accordance with his deep Catholic faith. Lynn Schlesinger posits that the "angels of care" (i.e. wartime nurses and other caregivers) experienced by Tolkien in World War I influenced *The Lord of the Rings*; namely, the healing touches supplied by the likes of Elrond, Aragorn, Eowyn, and Ioreth can be traced to Tolkien's experience at the Somme and while recuperating in Birmingham at the 1st Southern Hospital.¹¹ More tellingly, Tolkien - gripped with anxiety over the well-being of his son Christopher in World War II - penned this heartfelt father-to-son reflection:

⁶ Catholic Church (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Edition. 328.

⁷ Catholic Church (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Edition. 334.

⁸ Catholic Church (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Edition. 335.

⁹ Catholic Church (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Edition. 336.

¹⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R. 1892-1973. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: a Selection*. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Letter 72. To Christopher Tolkien, April 18, 1944.

¹¹ Schlesinger, Lynn (2019) "Angels of Care and Houses of Healing in World War I: Their Possible Influence on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*". *Something Has Gone Crack: New Perspectives on J.R.R. Tolkien in the Great War*. Journal of Tolkien Research: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

“I perceived or thought of the Light of God and in it suspended one small mote (or millions of motes to only one of which was my small mind directed), glittering white because of the individual ray from the Light which both held and lit it. (Not that there were individual rays issuing from the Light, but the mere existence of the mote and its position in relation to the Light was in itself a line, and the line was Light). And the ray was the Guardian Angel of the mote: not a thing interposed between God and the creature, but God's very attention itself, personalized. And I do not mean 'personified', by a mere figure of speech according to the tendencies of human language, but a real (finite) person. Thinking of it since – for the whole thing was very immediate, and not recapturable in clumsy language, certainly not the great sense of joy that accompanied it and the realization that the shining poised mote was myself (or any other human person that I might think of with love) – it has occurred to me that (I speak diffidently and have no idea whether such a notion is legitimate: it is at any rate quite separate from the vision of the Light and the poised mote) this is a finite parallel to the Infinite. As the love of the Father and Son (who are infinite and equal) is a Person, so the love and attention of the Light to the Mote is a person (that is both with us and in Heaven): finite but divine: i.e. angelic. Anyway, dearest, I received comfort, part of which took this curious form, which I have (I fear) failed to convey: except that I have with me now a definite awareness of you poised and shining in the Light – though your face (as all our faces) is turned from it. But we might see the glimmer in the faces (and persons as apprehended in love) of others.”¹²

The character of Gandalf, while unquestionably evocative of the death, resurrection, and transfiguration of Jesus Christ, also brings to mind the role and nature of a Guardian Angel. As Christopher Tolkien confirms in the 1981 compendium, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*: “Nowhere is the

¹² Tolkien, J.R.R. 1892-1973. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: a Selection*. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Letter 89. To Christopher Tolkien, November 7-8, 1944.

place or nature of 'the Wizards' made fully explicit. Their name, as related to Wise, is an Englishing of their Elvish name, and is used throughout as utterly distinct from Sorcerer or Magician. It appears finally that they were as one might say the near equivalent in the mode of these tales of Angels, Guardian Angels.”¹³

Thus, we can conclude that guardian angels are essential characters in *The Lord of the Rings*:

- J.R.R. Tolkien was devoutly Catholic, and he explicitly acknowledged the Catholicity imbued in *The Lord of the Rings*;
- The Church certifies the importance of Guardian Angels, those supernatural beings surrounding human life with their watchful care and intercession from infancy to death;
- Tolkien - no doubt recollecting his own wartime experience - further expressed his belief in Guardian Angels and the comfort he received when contemplating their watchful care of his son Christopher during WWII;
- Therefore, whilst “the enemy is moving”¹⁴ and Frodo Baggins is deployed to the depths of Mordor to dispose of the One Ring in the only possible way, i.e. to cast it finally into the fires of Orodruin¹⁵, Tolkien would no doubt ensure that he be accompanied by a Guardian Angel. As Gandalf avows, “Even when I was far away there has never been a day when the Shire has not been guarded by watchful eyes...I will always help you...I will help you bear this burden.”¹⁶

¹³ Tolkien, J.R.R. 1892-1973. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: a Selection*. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981. Letter 131. To Milton Waldman.

¹⁴ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 61.

¹⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 61.

¹⁶ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 60, 61.

Not only does Gandalf serve as Frodo's Guardian Angel, but his character is clearly modeled after the archangels Michael (the leader of an army), Gabriel (the messenger of fateful news), and Raphael (a supernatural guide):

- SAINT MICHAEL. We see Gandalf leading the "Company of the Ring"¹⁷ from Rivendell "the elven-sword Glamdring...[girt at his side]"¹⁸, and of course defending the Company against the diabolical Balrog - "You cannot pass!"¹⁹ - brawling and falling atop the Balrog, finally casting him into the fiery abyss.²⁰ We are of course reminded of Saint Michael and his company of angels fighting the devil and casting them out of heaven.²¹
- SAINT GABRIEL. Gandalf delivers messages that change the course of history, for example, at the Council of Elrond when he "make[s] clear"²² to the attendees what is at stake with regard to the One Ring, and prophesies that "[Gollum] may play a part yet that neither he nor Sauron have foreseen."²³ And most importantly, when he stresses the requirement for humility in the heart of the Ring Bearer, "...that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this, we shall put [Sauron] out of reckoning."²⁴ We are reminded of Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah the priest announcing the birth of John

¹⁷ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 275.

¹⁸ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 279, 280.

¹⁹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 330.

²⁰ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 331.

²¹ Revelation 12:7-9.

²² Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 250.

²³ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 256.

²⁴ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 269.

the Baptist²⁵ and more to the point, his appearance to the Virgin Mary and her cooperative and humble “*fiat*”²⁶ setting in motion the coming of Jesus Christ.²⁷

- SAINT RAPHAEL. Gandalf shepherds the Company on their dangerous journey and brings healing when needed. For example when passing through the Mines of Moria, “Who will lead us now in this deadly dark? ‘I will’ said Gandalf. ‘Follow my staff!’”²⁸ and in the Houses of Healing where “Gandalf himself came in search of them...[and having laid them in beds]...went from one to the other full of care...”²⁹ We are reminded of Saint Raphael’s journey with young Tobias; “for a good angel will go with him, his journey will be successful, and he will return in good health.”³⁰

The imagery Tolkien uses to link Gandalf with a Guardian Angel, and more specifically, with the three Archangels, is apparent throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, the Catholic Church produced great influence on J.R.R. Tolkien and his writing. However, as demonstrated, it was Tolkien’s personal experiences as a young man in the crucible of The Great War that catalyzed his deep Catholic faith thus culminating in the creation of his writing and characters, especially that of the “archangel” Gandalf.

²⁵ Luke 1:13-19

²⁶ Luke 1:38

²⁷ Luke 1:26-33

²⁸ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 309.

²⁹ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings* (2004). HarperCollins Publishers. Page 859-860.

³⁰ Tobit 5:22