

J.R.R. Tolkien's Cult of Gandalf as a Literary Memory, or Reflection, of Ancient Germanic Spiritual Symbolism and the Cult of Odin

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ABSTRACT: This article explores parallels between the J.R.R. Tolkien's cult of Gandalf and the historic, Germanic, cult of Odin / Óðinn. The cult of Gandalf is considered as a possible adaptive, and reflective, creative memory of ancient Germanic spiritual and mythic symbolism through an analysis of the follower-types and elementary ideas that feature in Tolkien's writing.

KEYWORDS: Tolkien, Gandalf, Odin, Mythology, Archetypes

Finding Gandalf

J.R.R. Tolkien's character, Gandalf, first appears to readers as:¹

'an old man with a staff [...] a pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which his long white beard hung down below his waist, and immense black boots', and quickly, both readers and other characters realise that he was actually a 'wandering Wizard [... who worked great magic' (Tolkien, 1937, pp. 5-7).

Scholars and commentators alike have seized on that description, highlighting its close proximity to the aesthetic of the Ásatrú god, Óðinn. That aesthetic likeness augments the many links between Gandalf and Óðinn's personas, mystical powers and functions, binding them for close readers. More than just recognising Gandalf as an 'Odinic wanderer' (Tolkien, 1981, p. 119), Tolkien explained that his character was a divine being (a Maiar)—with the name Olórin among deities (Tolkien, 1980, p. 395). Consequently, scholars have explored links between the powers,

¹ Links between the visual aesthetics of Óðinn and Gandalf through popular artistic expressions should also be noted—such as the illustrations of Willy Pogany that appeared in widely read classic children's book, *The Children of Odin* (Colum, 1920), and the illustrations of Allan Lee that accompany copies of the *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1968).

mythic archetypes / symbols and social functions of Gandalf and Óðinn (Burns, 2000; Jøn, 1997; St Clair, 1992)—arguably following the thinking of Emeritus Professor John S. Ryan (a former student of Professor Tolkien), who authoritatively highlighted and investigated links between Ásatrú / Germanic tradition and Tolkien's Middle-Earth in his powerful 'German Mythology applied: The Extension of the Literary Folk Memory' (1966).²

This paper sets out to explore some of the ways in which remnants of the spiritual symbolism of ancient Germanic peoples associated with the historic, legendary and mythical followers of the cult of Óðinn (on that cult see: Chadwick, 1899), is reflected in Tolkien's Middle-Earth, through suggestions of a gentle cult of Gandalf. Like features among the devotees of the two cults are made central, rather than focussing on links between Óðinn and Gandalf themselves. Through the use of symbolic follower-types, and crafting related functions and symbolism surrounding those followers, Tolkien builds upon the mythic material that his tales echo, adding a depth to his world that enables readers to draw upon layers of inner meaning that a more purely fictional setting and story might not possess. Such layers of meaning play upon the communicative power of the ancient mythic / legendary symbols that Tolkien embeds throughout his narratives (through techniques such as the use of these follower-types and functions) prompting in readers' memories of some elementary ideas that are common in the traditional northern mythos.

Many scholars have noted a phenomenon (particularly Ryan, 1973), in like instances to Tolkien's narratives of Middle-Earth, where a reader 'leaps in response to the effective presentation in poetry of an ancient theme' (Bodkin, 1965). Those reader responses are most likely due to the way that cultural memory, symbolism and archetypes, are manipulated by the writer, and then recalled by the reader—a process noticeable among texts that skilfully treat mythic material. Towards explaining such responses to ancient mythic symbols and archetypes, drawing upon the theories of Carl Jung (1962), Joseph Campbell has suggested that:

Symbolic 'archetypes [...] are the common ideas of myth. [...] They are elementary ideas that could be called "ground" ideas[. . . .] The archetypes of the unconscious are manifestations of the organs of the body and their powers. Archetypes are biologically grounded. [...] All over the world, and at different times of human history, these archetypes, or elementary ideas, have appeared in different costumes. The differences in the costumes are the results of environment and historical conditions.' (Campbell & Moyers, 1991, pp. 60-61)

² Ryan was one of the three scholars in 1992, worldwide, to be awarded an Honorary Doctorate, by the American Tolkien Society, for his Tolkien-related research. He was the only non-British person to receive that award.

Related to Campbell's idea, the philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1957) strongly argued that the biologically grounded archetypes and symbols of myth are as old, if not older, than language itself. Hence, the meanings and understandings generated through those archetypes surely touches something very deep within the core of the reader. Ryan (1973) recognised a similar point about Cassirer's explanations of archetypes. Therefore, the influence of a mythic / legendary formula upon the follower-types, symbols and functions, of Middle-Earth's cult of Gandalf, presents a way for readers to look into a mirror, whilst reading a Western twentieth-century 'costumed' fantasy genre text, to explore themes, ideas and mythic symbols, that have been part of their cultural, and perhaps also biological, inheritance, for thousands of years.

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In the Eyes of the Everyman, Hobbits and the Dead

The hobbits, representative of simple average folk within Middle-Earth, possess a gentle but distinct cult of Gandalf. Tolkien portrays that cult in many ways. Initially he hints at it by revealing—through Bilbo's remarks—that the hobbits venerate the wizard through probably regular re-tellings of age-old stories about him (Tolkien, 1937, pp. 6-7). In *The Lord of the Rings* it is revealed that even though Gandalf's firework displays and exploits 'now belonged to a legendary past' (Tolkien, 1968, p. 37) the hobbit children still call the ancient wandering wizard G for Grand. What is more, Tolkien also informs his readers that the hobbits still 'knew him by sight, though he only appeared in Hobbiton occasionally and never stopped long'. Such indications are continued throughout Tolkien's Middle-Earth narratives, and it is even suggested that the hobbits have a legend that Gandalf was the creator of fireworks—which to the simpler and less technological folk of the Shire must surely have thought somewhat magical in nature. These indicators of a cult of Gandalf align with the way that the Germanic peoples venerated Óðinn by regularly recounting tales of his deeds within the legendary past, viewing him as a creator of knowledge and magical powers, and, possessing traditions holding that he would sporadically walk among their settlements as an aged wise wanderer.

Considering the positioning of men in the gentle cult of Gandalf, there is much symbolic importance to be found of the final large-scale battles of the Third Age—such as the Battle of Hornburg (at Helm's Deep) and the Battle of Pelennor Fields (for the city Minas Tirith, and in due course Gondor and the race of men). Significantly these battles bring the Third Age / aeon to a close, so they possess very real resonances to the final

battles and events within the Germanic myth-cycle, including the Ragnarök.

Regarding the Battle of Hornburg and related events, two key points suggest that the men of Middle-Earth revere Gandalf. Initially, the specifics of the battle were set out by Théoden, the seventeenth King of Rohan, following the counsel of Gandalf and taking refuge in Hornburg. In this, readers witness the influence that Gandalf holds over the decisions of kings—and that they follow his advice—placing him in a very socially powerful position. This confidence in Gandalf’s wisdom is echoed by Aragorn, who tells Théoden (when doubts arise over his decision to follow Gandalf’s counsel during the darker moments of the battle): ‘Do not judge the counsel of Gandalf, until all is over, lord’ (Tolkien, 1968, p. 562). Secondly, during the battle, ‘a thousand men on foot; their swords ... in their hands’ (Tolkien, 1968, p. 565) appear upon a ridge, led by Gandalf and forming as Rohirrim reinforcements to courageously charge into an almost apocalyptic battlefield against the forces of Darkness. That charge turned the tide of the battle. In this way, highly reminiscent of the tales of Óðinn and his cult, we see the common warrior / man courageously following Gandalf to battle in the final series of apocalyptic battles for an Age / aeon.

The Battle of Pelennor Fields (Tolkien, 1968, pp. 872-884), the largest battle of the Third Age, extends these resonances. Further, the events leading to the battle arguably augment the list of those who might loosely be termed Gandalf’s followers, providing a further important parallel between the two cults. The Pelennor Fields battle sequence is reminiscent of the mythic battle of Vígríðr Field—fought by the Æsir and their allies, under the leadership of Óðinn, against the monstrous creatures of Darkness. In that battle, the Æsir were aided by the dead warrior followers of Óðinn (the *einherjar*). The turning point of the Battle of Pelennor Fields was the arrival of the Corsair ships of Umbar, flying of banner of the White Tree of Gondor—as it is from that moment onward that the armies of the companions rise toward victory (Tolkien, 1968, p. 881). The Corsair ships were only able to join the battle on the side of the companions as Aragorn, akin to Heimdallr calling forth the gods and dead warriors, or *einherjar*, to Ragnarök, called forth the Dead Men of Dunharrow to aid the companions by helping take the ships from enemy forces so that Aragorn and his allies might then use them. Here we must also recognise the way that the Dead Men of Dunharrow and the *einherjar* can both be representative of a connection to the values and struggles of the dead / ancestors in moments where the protagonists fight most strongly for the restoration of order and balance—re-birthing them from conflict cycles and resetting them to that which is ‘normal’ for their societies.

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What Were They Fighting For?

Similarities between the followers of both cults extend beyond outwardly projected follower-types and their functions within battles. In the final battle sequences for the Third Age readers see the forces of the companions, and hence the gentle cult of Gandalf, fight many monstrous enemies—including the elephantine *mûmakil* beasts, remnant of the beasts fought by the cult of Óðinn in Ragnarök. As Ryan notes, the

final battle sequences recall the Ragnarök, where representatives of all races of men, the dead and even the wolves of the Voluspá come against each other (Ryan, 1966, p. 49).

Those battles take place in Middle-Earth, seemingly, with participants possessing some knowledge that their actions, if successful, would reset balance and birth a renewed aeonic cycle, rather than to directly defeat and permanently banish the style of 'evil' / Darkness that they fight against. This is evidenced by the notion of it being the Third Age—and the Darkness having been banished previously yet having returned in a cyclic form. While this concept has been hinted at by scholars previously (St Clair, 1992, p. 66), it becomes much more significant in discussions of links between the followers of the two cults, as it indicates a similarity in not only follower-types but perhaps even some levels of their mindsets and archetypal / symbolic functions. This same process of re-birth and the resetting of the aeonic cycle also takes place through and after the Ragnarök.

Tolkien also noted that his myth-cycles in the *Silmarillion* (Tolkien, 1979) owe much to Ragnarök in their treatment of the final battles of the world—and the way that they reset the world, allowing balance to be restored and everything to start afresh (Tolkien, 1981, p. 149). That recognition by Tolkien adds further weight to the notion of those who work towards the reset of ages within Middle-Earth, such as the followers of the cult of Gandalf, possess strong links to those who fought for / in the reset of the Germanic mythological aeons—such as the followers of the cult of Óðinn.

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The Mythic / Legendary Shape-Shifter as an Elite Warrior

There are many other creatures in Middle-Earth which would also appear to be associated with a gentle cult of Gandalf, with one of the most important examples being Beorn. Beorn, the dangerous skin-changer, or

shape-shifter, of *The Hobbit*, is most likely a representation of the cult of Óðinn's *berserkr* warriors. This assumption has been made by many scholars, with David Day going as far as to state that Beorn 'was a berserker' (Day, 1993, p. 30) and Ryan speaking of 'the primitive Berserk, whose type is strongly evoked by the battle fury of Beorn, half man half beast, in *The Hobbit*' (Ryan, 1966, p. 49).

A *berserkr* was regarded the elite warrior-type among the followers of Óðinn (Harnesson, 1994). He was thought to be 'selected' by Óðinn, was larger than most and was sometimes believed to be able to 'shape-shift'—taking on the form of a wild bear during battle and then becoming impervious to pain while gaining immense strength (van Zanten, 2007). Such battle-rage inspired changes in self seem to often occur directly after the *berserkr* imbibes intoxicants made from hallucinogenic mushrooms. Our knowledge of *berserkr* primarily comes from a range of skaldic verses and sagas—with notable portrayals of them appearing in *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar* (Guðni Jónsson (ed), 1964) and *Hrólfs saga Kraka* (D. Slay (ed), 1960).

As might be inferred from the linguistic resonances of his two names, Beorn's mystical skin-changing ability, like the *berserkr*, allowed him to take on the shape of a giant black bear. Exploring the name Beorn, it is drawn from Old English, where it means: man, or warrior, while sometimes suggesting a sense of nobility. *The Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* notes both that the 'word is only used by poets', and that it is linked to the Icelandic *björn* (Bosworth, 2010), which can mean either bear or warrior. Further to this, in the drafts for the work, Beorn was, for a time, instead called Medwed (Cawthorne, 2012). Commentators have speculated that Medwed is most likely linked to the Russian form *medved*—a circumlocution for bear meaning 'honey-eater' (Casselmann, 2012). In this way, character names come alongside the actions and personality of Beorn to denote and reinforce important elements of characterisation. Speaking of outwardly visible characterisations, such as the combination of Beorn's names, actions and personality, within Tolkien's work, Ryan noted that:

the medieval world had an old-fashioned notion of characterization, here followed, deliberately, although such is not fashionable with modern critics. Thus if the character is an elf or a dwarf the imagined being has his inside on the outside, his is a visible soul. This enables the qualities of men to be more to the fore, to be themselves. Because they have been dipped in myth we see them the more clearly (Ryan, 1966, p. 47).

Similar processes surround the name / word *berserkr*, in the Old Norse, as it signifies someone who wears the shirt (*serkr*) of a bear (*ber-*). Some

commentators have alternatively interpreted the *ber-* element to be drawn from *berr-* meaning bare (Blaney, 1972, p. 20), so suggesting they were bare chested (without armour).³ The bear was a sacred, and arguably totemic, animal of Óðinn (along with: the wolf, the eagle and the raven). It is generally accepted that the bear was also totemic to *berserkr* warriors.

The *berserkr*-like Beorn played an important role early in the War of the Ring, as he greatly aided the eventual victors of the Battle of the Five Armies. Notably he also renders much assistance to Gandalf and his companions in *The Hobbit*, indicating a positive, close and possibly even mystical association between the two characters. The presence of a character such as Beorn, and his beneficial relationship with Gandalf, suggests gentle symmetry between Óðinn's elite warrior followers and this shape-shifting follower of Gandalf through this loose parallel to the relationships between Óðinn and *berserkr*.

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Birds, beasts and spirit helpers as committed followers

The flames were under Gandalf's tree. ... Gandalf climbed to the top of his tree [surrounded by ...] the spears of goblins. [...] It] would have been the end of him, though he probably would have killed many of them as he came hurtling down like a thunderbolt. [Just at that moment] the Lord of the Eagles swept down from above, seized him in his talons, and was gone. (Tolkien, 1937, p. 98)

In this fashion readers are first introduced to the relationship between Gandalf and eagles—an event that might be considered as a distant parallel to Óðinn's escape upon eagle wings in *Skaldskaparmal* (Sturluson, 1995, pp. 63-64, ch. 58), and which would suggest that eagles take part in the cult of Gandalf. In Tolkien's world the eagles seem to feel that Gandalf is in some way important, or even sacred—and those feelings possibly illustrate some kind of mystical bond between the two. The eagle was a bird with a sacred, or even totemic, link to the cult of Óðinn—as was mentioned above. What is more, following this original depiction of eagles, readers are told that:

³ This reading is plausible as it is noted that some well-known *berserkr* did not wear armour.

‘Loud cried the Lord of the Eagles, to whom Gandalf had now spoken’—immediately following which a large pack of eagles attacked the circling goblins. (Tolkien, 1937, p. 98)

Not only is this indicative of Gandalf’s ability to communicate fluently with eagles, but it would also seem to suggest that he can command them to do his bidding. This power of communication would additionally appear to be evidence that like Óðinn, Gandalf is some form of shaman, as such communicational skills, and the control of predatory animals, are commonly recorded as being among a shaman’s mystic powers (Eliade, 1988). However, it should also be noted that this episode can be interpreted as a distant parallel to Óðinn’s ordeal—so familiar from the Old Norse *Hávamál* (Faulkes, 1986-1987, pp. 68-77, strophes 138-145, vol. 131). This is as both characters climbed a tree, suffered an ordeal of sorts, and then used shamanic powers upon leaving the tree. More importantly however, it shows that these eagles are not mere animal friends of Gandalf, but thinking and communicative beings that are able to actively participate within his gentle cult, and whose actions hold affective agency on the events of the War of the Ring.

The relationship between Gandalf and eagles is strongly reinforced during *The Lord of the Rings*. There is a moment of crisis, where once again Gandalf’s existence would seem to have been threatened, and then, we are told in Gandalf’s voice:

Gwaihir the Windlord, swiftest of the Great Eagles, came unlooked-for to Orthanc; and he found me standing on the pinnacle. Then I spoke to him and he bore me away, before Saruman was aware. (Tolkien, 1968, p. 279)

Here readers see a strong bond between Gandalf and the eagles—as well as his communicative powers regarding animals, and their strong desire to aid him. In this way we can identify eagles as members of the gentle cult of Gandalf—much as they feature within the cult of Óðinn.

Ravens, a second predatory bird, also hold a place of significance in the gentle cult of Gandalf—and provide parallels to the cult of Óðinn. ‘As in Old Norse, where the ravens Huginn and Muninn were informants for Othin, so the raven (The Hobbit, p. 268), is made into a sage battle counsellor’ (Ryan, 1966, p. 54). Those two bird-followers / servants often perch on Óðinn’s shoulders.

Þá sendir hann í dagan at fljúgja um allan heim ok koma þeir aprt at dögurðarmáli (Sturluson, 1982, p. 32);

bringing him news from the four corners of Miðgarðr. As Eliade has suggested, Óðinn's birds, Munin and Hugin, probably represent:

in highly mythicised form, two helping spirits in the shape of birds, which the Great Magician sent (in true shamanic fashion!) to the four corners of the world (Eliade, 1988, p. 381).

Aligning the follower-types of the two cults even more closely, Tolkien stated that within Middle-Earth eagles that bring news for other beings are actually 'spirits in the shape of [...] eagles' (Tolkien, 1993, p. 162). Although eagles usually perform the 'collectors of knowledge' role that is performed by ravens for Óðinn in Ásatrú tradition (see: Tolkien, 1968, p. 279)—providing some contrasts—this means that both the cult of Gandalf and the cult of Óðinn include 'shape-shifted' helping spirits that take the form of predatory birds. Further, the types of birds that those helping spirits shift into are arguably totemic to both Óðinn / Gandalf.

The most significant other beast that seems to form part of Gandalf's cult is Shadowfax—the horse. *Faxi*, an element that appears to be used in the name of Shadowfax, is an element commonly used in Old Norse horse names. Arguably the most prominent example of the Old Norse *faxi* compound is in the name Freyfaxi, which appears in *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* (Cawley, 1932)—a text that Tolkien both studied for his final exam at Oxford University and then taught while holding the Rawlinson and Bosworth Professorship. Consequently, we might infer from the use of the abbreviated *fax* compound, and the probable linguistic / mythic / symbolic influences on the name Shadowfax, that Tolkien wanted to provide readers with a hint that the archetypal mythic symbols associated with Shadowfax were those that could be found around the legendary horses of Old Norse literature.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf explains that Shadowfax is 'the best horse', and that he had 'never seen the likes of him' (Tolkien, 1968, p. 279). This opinion is echoed throughout Tolkien's writings and is a deeply significant point—as the godhead Óðinn also attracted a like epic mount to his service, the steed named Sleipnir. According to the Snorra Edda '*Sleipnir er baztr*' (is best) of all horses (Sturluson, 1982, pp. 17, ch.15). Furthermore, both of these horses came to their owners through somewhat mysterious circumstances. Consequently, both figures appear to have horses of legendary power drawn to them—and taking part in their respective cults as followers of sorts. Here then, we see further evidence for the mythic symbols associated with follower-types being linked between both groups.

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In Sum

In considering Middle-Earth as a ‘complex mythic location’ (Ryan, 1969, p. 161), it becomes evident that readers are presented with culturally rich: settings, motifs and characters; that function collectively as:

an enormous archetypal analogue to a Western World close to our own, yet set in a time where at once wild men live in woods, the elves are departing, the heroic age is passing, and even the non-religious “feudal” system is giving place to an enlightened concept of hierarchy (Ryan, 1969, p. 161).

That archetypal analogue, then, can be viewed as a modern literary reshaping of a collection of elementary ideas from fairy stories, legend and myth, employing various mythic symbols and linguistic resonances of the Western World’s traditions to both communicate layered meaning to audiences and add textual depth. In this way, the narratives of Middle-Earth can be interpreted as an instance where mythic / symbolic borrowings function ‘as a “language” which, properly understood, will tell us things otherwise un-revealed’ (Ryan, 1973, p. 51), a phenomenon which Ryan noted about meaning constructions within / communicated by mythic texts more generally. Consequently, the similarities in follower-types among the gentle literary cult of Gandalf, and mythic / legendary elements of the more explicit and historical cult of Óðinn, take on additional and deeper meaning due to the way that Middle-Earth provides a literary reflection, or perhaps even memory, of the archetypes of ancient Germanic myth-cycles.

In interpreting Gandalf’s interactions with his followers, or the actions of the followers themselves, it is valuable to remember the archetypes and Germanic mythic / legendary / historic material that held influence on Middle-Earth’s creation, as those symbols sit firmly within a much older mode of communication. In Campbell’s terms, the Middle-Earth narratives then become the clothing of ancient mythic symbols, with the followers of the cult of Gandalf fulfilling the mythic functions earlier associated with the legendary followers of the cult of Óðinn. The strong yet challenging ties between man and nature, life, death and re-birth—in beast-followers, the shape-shifter motif, and the spirituality attached to predatory birds through presenting them as helping spirits and the connections to the dead / ancestors—are evident throughout not only the cults, but also the way that cult members struggle to bring a re-birth to their worlds after a time of darkness and chaos.

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Public domain image of Óðinn from Otto von Reinsberg-Düringsfeld's *Das festliche Jahr in Sitten, Gebräuchen und Festen der germanischen Völker* (1863).