
Character Biography Ancalagon the Black

By Oshun

Ancalagon the Black, Tolkien's biggest and most threatening dragon, appears but once briefly in the storyline. He enters into the narrative of *The Silmarillion* in the account of the War of Wrath as the "greatest of the winged dragons of Morgoth, destroyed by Eärendil."¹ The War of Wrath was the occasion of the final defeat of Melkor/Morgoth at the end of the First Age. At the plea of Eärendil, the Valar finally organized a mighty host in Valinor, including the Vanyar and the remaining Noldor, to travel to Middle-earth and join with the Men, Elves, and Dwarves there to fight Morgoth. After over forty years of war, Morgoth, facing defeat, called upon his greatest weapon held in reserve until that point:

Then, seeing that his hosts were overthrown and his power dispersed, Morgoth quailed, and he dared not to come forth himself. But he loosed upon his foes the last desperate assault that he had prepared, and out of the pits of Angband there issued the winged dragons, that had not before been seen; and so sudden and ruinous was the onset of that dreadful fleet that the host of the Valar was driven back, for the coming of the dragons was with great thunder, and lightning, and a tempest of fire.²

This impressive show of force was to be Morgoth's final effort. However, terrorizing though it was, it would not be enough:

But Eärendil came, shining with white flame, and about Vingilot were gathered all the great birds of heaven and Thorondor was their captain, and there was battle in the air all the day and through a dark night of doubt. Before the rising of the sun Eärendil slew Ancalagon the Black, the mightiest of the dragon-host, and cast him from the sky; and he fell upon the towers of Thangorodrim, and they were broken in his ruin. Then the sun rose, and the host of the Valar prevailed, and well-nigh all the dragons were destroyed; and all the pits of Morgoth were broken and unroofed, and the might of the Valar descended into the deeps of the earth.³

If Ancalagon can be referred to as darkest and most powerful weapon of Morgoth, then it is Eärendil bearing a Silmaril that is the ultimate resource held in reserve by the Valar.

In one of those multitudinous references to history and ages past that add such richness of texture to the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, Ancalagon is also referred to early on in that book in a conversation between Frodo and Gandalf wherein they discuss the nature of the One Ring:

But there is no smith's forge in this Shire that could change it at all. Not even the anvils and furnaces of the Dwarves could do that. It has been said that dragon-fire could melt and consume the Rings of Power, but there is not now any dragon left on earth in which the old fire is hot enough; nor was there ever any dragon, not even Ancalagon the Black, who could have harmed the One Ring, the Ruling Ring, for that was made by Sauron himself.⁴

In this reference one is reminded of the death of Ancalagon, indestructible except by Eärendil who uses a Silmaril to bring him down, the only power available to the armies of the West that day that was strong enough for that task.

Tolkien Loved Dragons

What is not to love about a story with a dragon? This is Tolkien's position entirely. He expresses this love in reminiscences of his early childhood and carries this fascination into the plots of some of his most lauded fiction. He cannot even resist discussing his fascination in one of his most read and respected scholarly lectures—"Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics." To start at the beginning, Tolkien claims to have loved dragons even before he developed his much-discussed obsession with language. He ties the two together when reaching back into his earliest memories.

I first tried to write a story when I was about seven. It was about a dragon. I remember nothing about it except a philological fact. My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say 'a green great dragon', but had to say 'a great green dragon'. I wondered why, and still do. The fact that I remember this is possibly significant, as I do not think I ever tried to write a story again for many years, and was taken up with language.⁵

Actually, word order comes naturally to native English-speaking children. They rarely mistake the order of adjectives. It seems possible what Tolkien's mother did not perceive when she read his sentence was that her fledging fantasist had just invented a category of creatures called "great dragons" and the individual dragon to whom he referred incidentally happened to be green.

In "Monsters and the Critics," Tolkien writes that, in literature and folklore, "[t]here are in any case many heroes but very few good dragons."⁶Tolkien took it upon himself to write some excellent dragons. We have Smaug in *The Hobbit*, who is a crafty, greedy, devious dragon in a familiar storybook sense, sitting upon his pile of treasures, jealous of the loss of the smallest item from his hoard. Dead is dead and Smaug causes a lot of deaths in the story, but Glaurung in *The Silmarillion* is perhaps Tolkien's truly most malicious dragon. He is the dragon as evil personified. When speaking of Beowulf's dragon. Tolkien notes:

But for Beowulf, the poem, that is as it should be. In this poem the balance is nice, but it is preserved. The large symbolism is near the surface, but it does not break through, nor become allegory. Something more significant than a standard hero, a man faced with a foe [the dragon!] more evil than any human enemy of house or realm, is before us, and yet incarnate in time, walking in heroic history, and treading the named lands of the North.⁷

The point Tolkien is trying to make is that the dragon is not an allegory in these tales (which is the basis for his complaint about allegory, but that is another discussion). The dragon is real. He walks and talks in a world of "named lands"—not some remote location. What we all love about Middle-earth is that it is such a world—we can see it, we can imagine its scents, we learn its regions and landscapes, and we feel we can all but touch it. Glaurung lives in that land. He first appears as a baby dragon during the First Age—the first fire-drake included in *The Silmarillion*. He harasses its population; he sets fires and destroys. Fingon and his horse archers in a heroic face-off drive him back to his master:

Glaurung, the first of the Urulóki, the fire-drakes of the North, issued from Angband's gates by night. He was yet young and scarce half-grown, for long and slow is the life of the dragons, but the Elves fled before him to Ered Wethrin and Dorthonion in dismay; and he defiled the fields of Ard-galen. Then Fingon prince of Hithlum rode against him with archers on horseback, and hemmed him round with a ring of swift riders; and Glaurung could not endure their darts, being not yet come to his full armoury, and he fled back to Angband, and came not forth again for many years.⁸

But Glaurung grows up and wages a war of fire and terror in the Battle of Sudden Flame. Fingon finally meets him again at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, at the pinnacle of his terrifying maturity:

There came wolves, and wolfriders, and there came Balrogs, and dragons, and Glaurung father of dragons. The strength and terror of the Great Worm were now great indeed, and Elves and Men withered before him; and he came between the hosts of Maedhros and Fingon and swept them apart.⁹

We next encounter Glaurung the Golden in the story of ill-fated Túrin. When Glaurung wages his war of marauding terror upon realm of Nargothrond, he burns, tortures, kills, and lays waste to the surrounding lands. He finally reaches Nargothrond, where he encounters Túrin and freezes him with a dragon spell of horror and then tortures him with words, more painful than any physical punishment:

'Evil have been all your ways, son of Húrin,' said he. 'Thankless fosterling, outlaw, slayer of your friend, thief of love, usurper of Nargothrond, captain foolhardy, and deserter of your kin. As thralls your mother and your sister live in Dor-lómin, in misery and want. You are arrayed as a prince, but they go in rags. For you they yearn, but you care not for that. Glad may your father be to learn that he has such a son: as learn he shall.' And Túrin being under the spell of Glaurung hearkened to his words, and he saw himself as in a mirror misshapen by malice, and he loathed what he saw.¹⁰

Finally, breaking out of the spell, with his dying breath, Túrin manages to slay the dragon, but the losses of life and destruction of land have been incalculable.

Smaug by comparison to Glaurung is a chatty, entertaining dragon, despite his lethal and destructive tendencies. Tolkien comments upon him in a more generalized discussion of dragons:

I find 'dragons' a fascinating product of imagination. But I don't think the Beowulf one is frightfully good. But the whole problem of the 'intrusion' of the dragon into northern imagination and its transformation there is one I do not know enough about. Fafnir in the late Norse versions of the Sigurd story is better; and Smaug and his conversation obviously is in debt here.¹¹

The details of Smaug in *The Hobbit*, and there are pages and pages of them—he is after all a major character in the story—have the tone of a children's tale (which it is). For example,

"I have always understood," said Bilbo in a frightened squeak, "that dragons were softer underneath, especially in the region of the—er—chest; but doubtless one so fortified has thought of that."

The dragon stopped short in his boasting. "Your information is antiquated," he snapped. "I am armoured above and below with iron scales and hard gems. No blade can pierce me."

"I might have guessed it," said Bilbo. "Truly there can nowhere be found the equal of Lord Smaug the Impenetrable. What magnificence to possess a waistcoat of fine diamonds!"¹²

Yet despite the tone of his exchanges with Bilbo, Smaug is lethal and vicious. Glaurung, of course, is the stuff of nightmares. By comparison to either of them, Ancalagon is but a massive blunt instrument, although horrifying in his proportions and through his implicit manifestation of the power and malice of his creator. Yet, despite the fact that he only appears once briefly and did not win a single battle, his size makes an indelible impression upon Tolkien's readers.

How Big Was Ancalagon?

His size has been a popular ongoing discussion on the Internet for well over a decade. Whether engaged in by gamers, Tolkien enthusiasts, or bona fide scholars, it raises this reader's hackles. The method implies that one should be able to scientifically explain how large Ancalagon would have to be to crush the towers of Thangorodrim, presuming we know precisely what Tolkien envisioned when he wrote of the "towers of Thangorodrim." We are not told exactly what Tolkien meant by those towers and, therefore, we certainly have no means of extrapolating their breadth or height. Various proponents of the size debate have provided us with approximate measurements and based their calculations of the size of Ancalagon upon those numbers. Needless to say, their variations are wide.

One could spend hours, if not days, reading all of the available arguments and pontifications about the size of Ancalagon. If one enjoys discussing Balrog wings, one might want to take on that task. (Author's note: I did it for a couple of hours and regretted it, with a few exceptions—one enlightening blog and some well-executed and entertaining drawings.) John Garth, author of *Tolkien and the Great War*, dedicated an entry on his blog to explaining why the ongoing Ancalagon-size argument is specious: Dragon scale: Why It's Impossible to Size Up Tolkien's Middle-earth.¹³ He makes relevant points sympathizing with readers' desire for specificity. For example, he opines that "it is inevitable that we should want to see more clearly into the misty distances – in fact, that's exactly the sense of yearning that Tolkien aimed to instill."¹⁴ He goes on to elucidate, rather gently, why precision *cannot* be obtained. He also notes that, "Tolkien's pictures cannot be taken as empirical evidence. They are heavily stylized, as befits a story with medieval or legendary/fairy-tale overtones. So, frequently, are his Middle-earth writings."¹⁵ On the other hand, this edition of Garth's blog is a resource for some of the intriguing graphics/artwork floating around comparing the sizes of Tolkien's dragons. While those illustrations necessarily cannot be definitive, they are definitely worth a look.

One will not find an answer to the size question in the texts either. Tolkien tells us what happened to Middle-earth as a result of that war, although without enough precision to even pin all of the destruction upon that single last battle. We have no basis upon which to assume that the damage was caused by Ancalagon himself dropping onto those mountains and exploding like a nuclear bomb.

If anything, one might read into the available information an implication that the damage to Beleriand could have occurred over a period of time in a war of more than forty years involving clashes among multiple powers and elements suspended somewhere between the mundane and the miraculous:

Thus an end was made of the power of Angband in the North, and the evil realm was brought to naught; and out of the deep prisons a multitude of slaves came forth beyond all hope into the light of day, and they looked upon a world that was changed. For so great was the fury of those adversaries that the northern regions of the western world were rent asunder, and the sea roared in through many chasms, and there was confusion and great noise; and rivers perished or found new paths, and the valleys were upheaved and the hills trod down; and Sirion was no more.¹⁶

The above paragraph is an account of a result of the War of Wrath, but not a detailed description of how a large part of Beleriand disappeared into the sea.

What is this writer's final position on the size of Ancalagon? He was huge, but not so big that Eärendil, wielding a Silmaril, with a corps of Maiarin-grade giant Eagles at his back, could not take him down. Size is secondary to the fact that forces of light finally outgunned the forces of darkness. In such an epic book, within which readers often point out "everyone dies," it takes a big monster for his defeat to bring one to the point of *eucaastrophe*. Tolkien describes *eucaastrophe* as

the "sudden joyous 'turn'" of apparently disastrous events, the moment past all hope when we know that everything is going to be all right. Tolkien makes it clear, however, that the joy of the turn, the consolation of *eucaastrophe*, is dependent on the fear of its opposite, the bad turn toward sorrow and failure.¹⁷

The defeat of Ancalagon and the capture of Morgoth, however, might be called an interim *eucaastrophe* within Tolkien's legendarium. We still have considerable sorrow to suffer through before Tolkien's long saga of Middle-earth ends. To mention only a few, we still have to read of Maedhros and Maglor's ultimate rejection by the Silmarils; the return of Sauron; the destruction of Eregion, the marvelous realm of the Noldorin Elves in eastern Eriador; the drowning of Númenor; and the Ages-long struggle of Elves, Dwarves, and Men against the return of darkness under Sauron culminating in the victory of the free peoples of Middle-earth in the War of the Ring. Nonetheless, the joy of that moment of Eärendil knocking Ancalagon out of the air and watching that greatest of dragons crashing down upon the peaks of Thangorodrim is a satisfying interim *eucaastrophe*—a true triumph of good over evil.

I would like to dedicate this bio to [IgnobleBard](#) in honor of his Halloween birthday. He has given a preliminary read to so many of my past bios and just this week presented my family a Baby Black Winged Dragon.

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About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).