
Character Biography Gandalf (Olórin)—Part 1

By Oshun (Illustrated by pandemonium_213)

Whether in the guise of Gandalf the Grey or Gandalf the White, Tolkien's most famous wizard plays the role of the nearly perfect guide, instigator, and mentor for the heroes of both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. He steps into the fray as an active combatant as well, e.g., Gandalf is not simply an armchair general. Tolkien devoted an entire essay to his Wizards, emissaries from the Valar sent to level the playing field in the struggle against the dark Maia Sauron by the free peoples of Middle-earth: the Elves, Men, Dwarves, and Hobbits. "The Istari" in *Unfinished Tales* was written in 1954, late enough to be considered one of the more authoritative texts, provides an excellent source for everything one might have wanted to know about the Wizards.

The majority of readers first encounter Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the form of an elderly bearded man. "An old man was driving it [a horse cart] all alone. He wore a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, and a silver scarf. He had a long white beard and bushy eyebrows that stuck out beyond the brim of this hat."¹ One quickly learns that he is a friend of Hobbits, Men and Elves, wise and somewhat mysterious. A significant number of readers will have already met Gandalf in *The Hobbit*, wherein he is described almost word-for-word as he is in *The Fellowship of the Ring*: the same pointed blue hat, long grey cloak and silver scarf, beard and bushy eyebrows.² The narrator of the opening pages of *The Hobbit*, however, emphasizes of mystery which surrounds Gandalf in his introduction of this important character.

Gandalf! If you had heard only a quarter of what I have heard about him, and I have only heard very little of all there is to hear, you would be prepared for any sort of remarkable tale. Tales and adventures sprouted up all over the place wherever he went, in the most extraordinary fashion.³

Gandalf appears in *The Hobbit* as the wise and mysterious wanderer, a wizard no less, who first proposes an adventure to Bilbo Baggins who is surprised and appalled at the very idea. Disappearing in and out of the story, as Gandalf is wont to do, he charges Bilbo with a seemingly nearly impossible task. He changes the conservative Hobbit forever by placing him in the middle of an adventure of a lifetime and simultaneously draws the reader into the marvelous world of Middle-earth.

Gandalf also appears in the published version of *The Silmarillion* in a markedly different aspect: that of a semi-divine Maia hidden within the guise of an old man, whom we met in *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien introduces him in *The Silmarillion* as the Maia Olórin. "Wisest of the Maiar was Olórin. He too dwelt in Lórien, but his ways took him often to the house of Nienna, and of her he learned pity and patience."⁴ [More will be added later on the significance of Gandalf's residence in the gardens of Irmo in Lórien, place of dreams and consolation, so different from the strife and hardship in Middle-earth.]

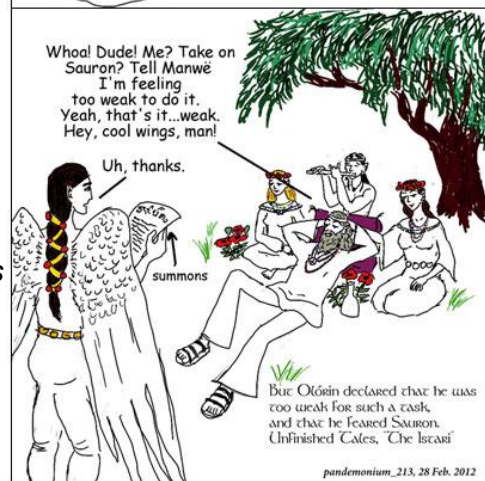
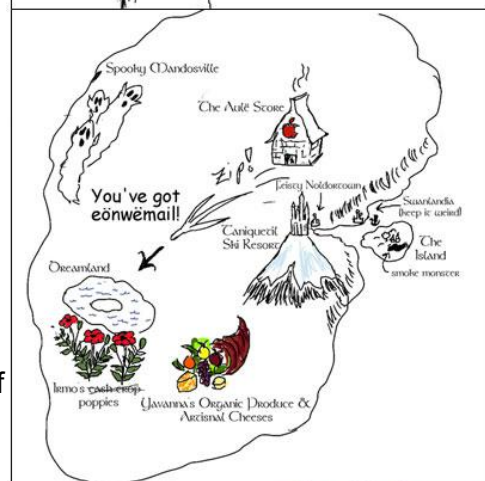
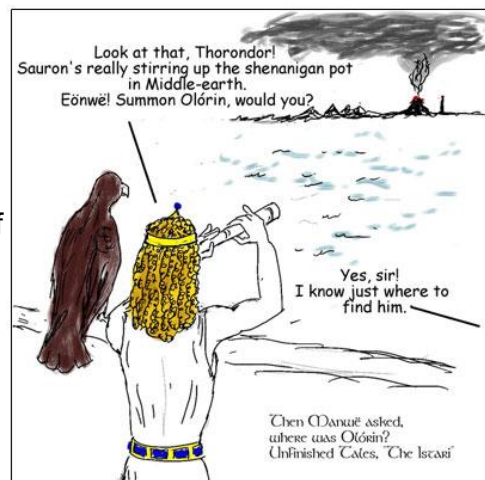
One may find in the *Unfinished Tales* article a precise and comprehensive explanation of whom and what Gandalf actually is. Christopher Tolkien confirms that Gandalf is one of the *Istari*, who are of the Maiar. "It appears indeed from the mention of Olórin in the Valaquenta (*The Silmarillion* pp. 30 –1) that the Istari were Maiar; for Olórin was Gandalf."⁵ It goes on to explain that

"... though he loved the Elves, he walked among them unseen, or in form as one of them, and they did not know whence came the fair visions or the promptings of wisdom that he put into their hearts. In later days he was the friend of all the Children of Ilúvatar, and took pity on their sorrows; and those who listened to him awoke from despair and put away the imaginations of darkness."⁶

Gandalf bears a proliferation of names, as do most of the major characters in Tolkien's legendarium. The name by which he is known as a Maia of Aman is Olórin. In *The Two Towers*, Faramir lists several of Gandalf's names,

'Mithrandir we called him in elf-fashion,' said Faramir, 'and he was content. *Many are my names in many countries, he said. Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn to the Dwarves; Olórin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten, in the South Incánus, in the North Gandalf; to the East I go not.*'⁷

Gandalf fascinates and attracts the reader because he fundamentally satisfies a need. Literary archetypes exist because they appeal to certain universal desires to look to a guide, guardian, protector, mentor, or adviser who knows more than the struggling protagonist. He represents the Other, the supernatural or unknowable, coming from outside of the ordinary world of the protagonists. Tolkien himself has referred to Gandalf as angelic.



he was an *incarnate* 'angel'— strictly an ἄγγελος,⁸ that is, with the other *Istari*, wizards, 'those who know', an emissary from the Lords of the West, sent to Middle-earth, as the great crisis of Sauron loomed on the horizon. By 'incarnate' I mean they were embodied in physical bodies capable of pain, and weariness, and of afflicting the spirit with physical fear, and of being 'killed', though supported by the angelic spirit they might endure long, and only show slowly the wearing of care and labour.⁹

The archetypes that Gandalf epitomizes include those of the wizard or magician, the wise old man who acts as a teacher and/or manipulator and whose principle role is to see that the major actors complete their quest and achieve their goals. This figure necessarily possesses the attribute of wisdom and also certain magical powers or qualities. Gandalf has been compared to the wizard Merlin, who is most often in modern interpretations of Arthurian legend as a wizard and senior advisor to Arthur.

[Gandalf's] function as a 'wizard' is an *angelos* or messenger from the Valar or Rulers: to assist the rational creatures of Middle-earth to resist Sauron, a power too great for them unaided. But since in the view of this tale & mythology Power – when it dominates or seeks to dominate other wills and minds (except by the assent of their reason) – is evil, these 'wizards' were incarnated in the life-forms of Middle-earth, and so suffered the pains both of mind and body.¹⁰

Some of the popular interpretations of the story of Merlin, in which one might say he bears more than a passing resemblance to Tolkien's Gandalf, include T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* and Mary Stuart's Arthurian series which begins with *The Crystal Cave*. Those writers came after Tolkien and retold the tales of the most famous of wizards written about in English with a conscious look back at the legendarium, beginning largely with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. If anything, Tolkien would have consciously avoided mirroring too closely those sources that prominently included the figure of the elder wizard or magical adviser. The traditional figure of Merlin, like Gandalf, is of uncertain, mysterious, and not entirely natural origins. Yet, like Gandalf, he can still suffer human distress and must struggle to achieve his purpose, sometimes succeeding and sometimes failing.

They were also, for the same reason, thus involved in the peril of the incarnate: the possibility of 'fall', of sin, if you will. The chief form this would take with them would be impatience, leading to the desire to force others to their own good ends, and so inevitably at last to mere desire to make their own wills effective by any means. To this evil Saruman succumbed. Gandalf did not. But the situation became so much the worse by the fall of Saruman, that the 'good' were obliged to greater effort and sacrifice. Thus Gandalf faced and suffered death; and came back or was sent back, as he says, with enhanced power.¹¹

In Rohan, when he approaches King Theoden's court, the reader is given pictures of both Gandalf the mundane and Gandalf the extraordinary in the space of a few lines.

Old and weary you seem now, and yet you are fell and grim beneath, I deem. [The guard at the gates of Edoras says addressing Gandalf]

Suddenly he threw back his grey cloak, and cast aside his hat, and leaped to horseback.

He wore no helm nor mail. His snowy hair flew free in the wind, his white robes shone dazzling in the sun.¹²

Others have analyzed in some detail the similarities of Tolkien's Gandalf to the Scandinavian deity Odin in his earthy more humble form. Tolkien scholar Marjorie Burns, in her article "Gandalf and Odin,"¹³ notes the similarity in physical description of Gandalf to Odin, not to mention his habits, characteristics and reasons for his earthly wanderings.

. . . it was specific attributes that Gandalf and Odin share that suggested a link between the wizard and the god. They saw that the most distinctive features of Gandalf -- his hat, beard, staff, and penchant for wandering -- were, as well, the key characteristics that Odin displays when he leaves Asgard and travels in disguise through the plane of human existence, the middle-earth of Norse mythology. During these earthly journeys, Odin does not appear as a stern and forbidding deity or a bloodthirsty god of battle -- but rather as a grey-bearded old man who carries a staff and wears a hood or a cloak (usually blue) and a wide-brimmed, floppy hat.¹⁴

She continues to cite one of the most prolific of academics currently publishing in Tolkien studies, Verlyn Flieger, who she quotes as saying, "she noted that both Merlin and Odin play a part in Gandalf's character, though the connection Flieger recognized between Odin and Gandalf was not so much their appearance as their shared ability to lead. 'A kind of Odin-figure,' she calls Gandalf, 'mustering troops and bringing them to battle'."¹⁵

A magnificent description of Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, paints him as a true mixture of the near godlike and the humble:

Gandalf was shorter in stature than the other two; but his long white hair, his sweeping silver beard, and his broad shoulders, made him look like some wise king of ancient legend. In his aged face under great snowy brows his eyes were set like coals that could suddenly burst into fire.¹⁶

In *The Lord of the Rings* Gandalf acts as counselor and wise confidant of the remaining High Elves in Middle-earth, like Galadriel and Elrond. He is the trusted friend of the secretive Dwarves, a champion of the Hobbits and a teacher and support to the leaders among the Men of Middle-earth.

For with the consent of Eru they sent members of their own high order, but clad in bodies as of Men, real and not feigned, but subject to the fears and pains and weariness of earth, able to hunger and thirst and be slain; though because of their noble spirits they did not die, and aged only by the cares and labours of many long years. And this the Valar did, desiring to amend the errors of old, especially that they had attempted to guard and seclude the Eldar by their own might and glory fully revealed; whereas now their emissaries were forbidden to reveal themselves in forms of majesty, or to seek to rule the wills of Men or Elves by open display of power, but coming in shapes weak and humble were bidden to advise and persuade Men and Elves to good, and to seek to unite in love and understanding all those whom Sauron, should he come again, would endeavour to dominate and corrupt.¹⁷

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5. *Unfinished Tales*, "The Istari."
6. Ibid.
7. *The Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers*.
8. Greek: *áγγελος* = a messenger or a delegate, could indicate either human or celestial.
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Character Biography Gandalf (Olórin)—Part 2

By Oshun

Gandalf is one of the more popular figures Tolkien created. It is impossible not to like and admire him. As was noted in the first half of this biography, he plays multiple roles throughout his intervention into the history of Arda. But, in all of those aspects, he offers himself to the readers and the protagonist alike as a guide and beacon throughout a heroic undertaking, the failure of which is too horrible to contemplate. He is the wise man whose advice, based in near-forgotten knowledge and his own ongoing investigations, if used correctly, could lead to triumph.

Gandalf as a character is deeply rooted in Tolkien's history and not simply because of the later connection of Gandalf of *The Hobbit* to the Istar described in most detail in the *Unfinished Tales*, or Gandalf as the Maia Olórin introduced in *The Silmarillion*.

In Tolkien's fiction, all roads lead to "The Silmarillion." When Tolkien finally finished *The Lord of the Rings* in 1950, he told Sir Stanley Unwin that it was "not really a sequel

to *The Hobbit*, but to *The Silmarillion*" (L, 136). . . . the nature of the story itself was an inevitable consequence of "The Silmarillion," in which Tolkien's imagination had been steeping for several years.¹

The Hobbit, with its limitations of having been written as a children's tale, can only provide a sneak preview into Tolkien's already extensively developed world of Arda. It, however, shows Gandalf playing a significant role as a caretaker on the shores of Middle-earth. He takes upon himself the responsibility to support and defend within his limited means (he is not as strong as Sauron, or initially even Saruman, but in the end wiser than both) the forces of light against an ever encroaching darkness. There is always the sense that when Gandalf recruits players to accomplish a discrete goal within his larger game, this is necessary because he himself is already involved in some other mysterious aspect of strategic importance.

It is Gandalf who researches the origins and possible location of the One Ring in the libraries of Minas Tirith, having exhausted other means, and also Gandalf who suspects and proves that the Necromancer in Dol Guldur is actually Sauron, once again returned to Middle-earth after the destruction of Númenor. Gandalf also is first aware that Saruman has turned to the dark side.

The Lord of the Rings, of course, is not simply the story of the triumph of a final collaboration of the Elves, Men, Dwarves and Hobbits, which leads to the Age of Men and final days of the Elves in Middle-earth. It is the story of Gandalf's central role, which cannot be overestimated, in the victory over Sauron. One might call it the final attempt by the Valar to intervene directly into the affairs of Middle-earth.

In *The Hobbit*, the reader learns that Gandalf acts within in the context of events that lie well beyond the attention of the simple, homely people of the Shire.

It was in this way that he [Bilbo] learned where Gandalf had been to; for he overheard the words of the wizard Elrond. It appeared that Gandalf had been to a great council of the white wizards, masters of lore and good magic; and that they had at last driven the Necromancer from his dark hold in the south of Mirkwood.²

Gandalf takes upon himself the positive roles of mentor, guide, *deus ex machina*, counselor, wise man, kindly grandfather and noble Maia. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Gandalf speaks to Frodo of Saruman, he indicates that Saruman once held a place above him in the hierarchy of the Istari.

Yet he is great among the Wise. He is the chief of my order and the head of the Council. His knowledge is deep, but his pride has grown with it, and he takes ill any meddling. The lore of the Elven-rings, great and small, is his province. He has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets of their making; but when the Rings were debated in the Council, all that he would reveal to us of his ring-lore told against my fears.³

There are different versions of the time and circumstances of the arrival of the Istari in Middle-earth. In the *Unfinished Tales* version of the story of Olórin/Gandalf, the Istari included five Maiar sent to Middle-earth in the year 1000 of the Third Age, to assist the free people of Middle-earth in resisting the rise again of Sauron. Along with Gandalf, Manwë sent a group of five: Alatar, Pallando, Radagast, and Saruman.⁴ At the beginning of Tolkien's epic novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf refers to himself as a humble member of a larger group of angelic spirits sent to help the people of Middle-earth fight the long battle against Sauron and the remnants of

Melkor's minions. But a little less than midway through, the reader is convinced that Gandalf is the wisest and the best of the Istari.

Tolkien summarizes well the possibility of the Istari choosing good or evil and notes therein Gandalf's moral superiority over Saruman.

. . . these 'wizards' were incarnated in the life-forms of Middle-earth, and so suffered the pains both of mind and body. They were also, for the same reason, thus involved in the peril of the incarnate: the possibility of 'fall', of sin, if you will. The chief form this would take with them would be impatience, leading to the desire to force others to their own good ends, and so inevitably at last to mere desire to make their own wills effective by any means. To this evil Saruman succumbed. Gandalf did not.⁵

The Lord of the Rings begins in a manner not at all dissimilar from the opening passages of *The Hobbit*. Gandalf appears in The Shire, with the eventual purpose of involving a somewhat less than enthusiastic Hobbit in an adventure that will strain his resources beyond any previously acknowledged limit for purposes beyond his wildest imagination.

After drawing Frodo out of The Shire and into the affairs of Men, Elves and Dwarves and becoming the pivotal piece in the standoff between good and evil in Middle-earth, Gandalf disappears twice. He first misses a meeting point on the road to Rivendell and later falls in the underground caverns of Moria in the process of combating and destroying a Balrog.

From the moment that Gandalf reappears, in resplendent glory, and names himself Gandalf the White, no reader has any remaining doubt that this Balrog-killer is a wizard of great power. When Gimli shows relief at identifying their dear old friend Gandalf, the wizard asserts:

'Dangerous!' cried Gandalf. 'And so am I, very dangerous: more dangerous than anything you will ever meet, unless you are brought alive before the seat of the Dark Lord.'⁶

He stresses that he is overshadowed in power at this point by arguably only Sauron. He is not only dangerous and no longer to be confused with the grandfatherly figure whose first purpose in this novel appeared to have been to entertain Hobbit children with fabulous fireworks. The physical manifestation of his newly revealed power is an otherworldly glow.

They all gazed at him. His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe; the eyes under his deep brows were bright, piercing as the rays of the sun; power was in his hand. Between wonder, joy, and fear they stood and found no words to say.

At last Aragorn stirred. 'Gandalf!' he said. 'Beyond all hope you return to us in our need! What veil was over my sight? Gandalf!' Gimli said nothing, hut sank to his knees, shading his eyes.⁷

To his enemies, or those who are unable to distinguish between the forces of light and darkness, he is described in less positive terms. The ailing and ensorcelled King Theoden from his throne in the Meduseld bitterly names him Stormcrow:

But news from afar is seldom sooth. Here you come again! And with you come evils worse than before, as might be expected. Why should I welcome you, Gandalf Stormcrow?⁸

Grima Wormtongue adds malice to mistrust when he addresses Gandalf,

'It is not yet five days since the bitter tidings came that Théodred your son was slain upon the West Marches: your right hand, Second Marshal Of the Mark. In Éomer there is little trust. Few men would be left to guard your walls, if he had been allowed to rule. And even now we learn from Gondor that the Dark Lord is stirring in the East. Such is the hour in which this wanderer chooses to return. Why indeed should we welcome you, Master Stormcrow? *Láthspell* I name you, Ill-news; and ill news is an ill guest they say.'⁹

Finally, in Minas Tirith, immediately preceding the Battle of Pelennor Fields, we learn that Gandalf is viewed as a mentor also by Faramir while profoundly distrusted and feared by Denethor, himself driven mad by his constant contact with Sauron through his unwise use of the Palantír. Denethor echoes the emphasis of Theoden and Grima Wormtongue when identifies Gandalf as a bearer of bad news.

Indeed, in literature as well as life, the wise man bearing news that the recipient does not want to hear is no more welcome than Cassandra with her prophecies that no one wants to believe. Gandalf is characterized as one who tells people things they do not want to know: that the Shadow will rise again, that the Ring is dangerous and uncontrollable, that neither the Maiar (Wizards) nor the Elves will be able to destroy it and, thus, they need to trust the Hobbits to fulfill this epic task. At no time is he less welcome--except, of course, with Saruman--than when he walks into the Citadel in Minas Tirith and present himself to Denethor.

The guards who greet Gandalf at the wall of Minas Tirith note that he often carries bitter news, and he explains why that would be true.

'May you bring good counsel to Denethor in his need, and to us all, Mithrandir!' Ingold cried. 'But you come with tidings of grief and danger, as is your wont, they say.'

'Because I come seldom but when my help is needed,' answered Gandalf.

* * * *

'Mithrandir! Mithrandir!' men cried. 'Now we know that the storm is indeed nigh!'

'It is upon you,' said Gandalf. 'I have ridden on its wings. Let me pass! I must come to your Lord Denethor, while his stewardship lasts. Whatever betide, you have come to the end of the Gondor that you have known. Let me pass!'¹⁰

And along the same lines as his city guard above, we have Denethor.

'Dark indeed is the hour,' said the old man, 'and at such times you are wont to come, Mithrandir. But though all the signs forebode that the doom of Gondor is drawing nigh, less now to me is that darkness than my own darkness.'¹¹

Although it eventually becomes clear that Denethor reacts to Gandalf with considerable antagonism, his demeanor and attitude is far more lordly and impressive than Peter Jackson's interpretation of the Steward of Gondor in the movie.

The most revealing aspect of Denethor's mistrust of and aversion for Gandalf is revealed in his attitude toward Faramir. Up the point when Faramir arrives, Denethor is in large part gracious although not warm toward Gandalf. That all changes after Faramir describes his meeting with Sam and Frodo in Ithilien.

'Your bearing is lowly in my presence, yet it is long now since you from your own way at my counsel. See, you have spoken skilfully, as ever; but I, have I not seen your eye fixed on Mithrandir, seeking whether you said well or too much? He has long had your heart in his keeping.

'My son, your father is old but not yet dotard. I can see and hear, as was my wont; and little of what you have half said or left unsaid is now hidden from me. I know the answer to many riddles.'¹²

Denethor directly expresses a fear that Faramir withholds information from him that he would willingly share with Gandalf. His paranoia stems in part from the despair nurtured by Sauron and in part from the fact that Faramir is indeed a "wizard's pupil"¹³ in that Denethor's younger son has the wisdom and courage to have placed his trust in Gandalf.

When Denethor completely loses contact with reality, it is Gandalf who then takes on the role of leader and captain of the defense of the city in the Siege of Minas Tirith. After the victory of the Battle of Pelennor Fields, Gandalf joins with the Captains of the West in planning their strategy to buy time for Frodo to destroy the Ring, and it is he, along with the Great Eagles, who rescue Sam and Frodo in the end.

His work accomplished, Gandalf at last leaves Middle-earth in the company of Elrond, Galadriel, Bilbo and Frodo, along with his great steed Shadowfax.

Then Círdan led them to the Havens, and there was a white ship lying, and upon the quay beside a great grey horse stood a figure robed all in white awaiting them. As he turned and came towards them Frodo saw that Gandalf now wore openly on his hand the Third Ring, Narya the Great, and the stone upon it was red as fire. Then those who were to go were glad, for they knew that Gandalf also would take ship with them.¹⁴

Thus, Gandalf returned as he had come to the land across the Sundering Seas, with these last words to the Hobbits whom he had loved.

Well, here at last, dear friends, on the shores of the Sea comes the end of our fellowship in Middle-earth. Go in peace! I will not say: do not weep; for not all tears are an evil.'¹⁵

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About the Author

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