
Character Biography

Glorfindel of Gondolin and Glorfindel of Rivendell

By Oshun

Glorfindel is one of several among Tolkien's notable heroes who have provoked a substantial amount of controversy. There is, of course, the question as to why Glorfindel's horse Asfaloth wore a bit and bridle in the first edition of *The Lord of the Rings* "when Elves ride without bit, bridle or saddle" (1). This reader would not have been drawn into that discussion, but Tolkien himself saw fit to agree to correct the questionable bits of tack to read "headstall" (2). Further clamor ensued when many Tolkien buffs were provoked to complain when Glorfindel's big potential scene in Peter Jackson's filmed version of *The Lord of the Rings* was given to Arwen (one of many controversial changes introduced into the movie script). Of greater significance, however, is the ongoing dispute over whether or not Glorfindel of Gondolin and Glorfindel of Rivendell can be considered to be the same character.

Apparently, from Tolkien's unpublished notes and various comments upon those drafts by Christopher Tolkien, one is able to conclude that at the time his father had written details of a character named Glorfindel into the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* he had not intended said Glorfindel to be one and the same as the Elf lord Glorfindel who is described as the head of the House of the Golden Flower in his earlier accounts of the fall of the hidden city of Gondolin (3).

However, at some point, Tolkien became aware of the duplication of names. He then considered his alternatives. The narrative of the fall of Gondolin was one close to his heart and changes to it could not be lightly considered. He could declare the two characters to be one and same and, if so, it would be necessary to conceive of a plausible history or back story to explain how Glorfindel died and returned to Middle-earth. Secondly, he could decide to distinguish them one from the other and leave it at that.

More than thirty years later [approximately 1972 according to further remarks by Christopher Tolkien] he took up the question of whether Glorfindel of Gondolin and Glorfindel of Rivendell were indeed one and the same, and this issued in two discussions, together with other brief or fragmentary writings closely associated with them. I will refer to these as 'Glorfindel I' and 'Glorfindel II'. (4)

In the scenario that Christopher Tolkien refers to as 'Glorfindel I,' his father's notes delineated a plot which would include Glorfindel returning from Aman to Middle-earth in the early part of the Third Age as a companion of Gandalf and representative of the Valar to the Men and Eldar of Middle-earth.

The second scenario, 'Glorfindel II', places Glorfindel's return to Middle-earth in the Second Age, during the reign of Gil-galad. The majority of those who argue that the two Glorfindel stories should be merged into one have a tendency to take the Glorfindel II scenario as their "canon Glorfindel." They would posit that Glorfindel, one of the heroic defenders of Gondolin, was returned in the Second Age to bolster the forces of Gil-galad and Elrond in the fight against Sauron.

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Those who reject the One-Glorfindel theory might use a few different arguments. There could be an unwillingness to accept the introduction of the requisite complicated theories of Elven reincarnation at all. Tolkien had not yet carefully worked out the details of those aspects of his canon, as his remarks relating to his personal continuing development of various theological concepts expressed, for example, in his comments upon the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*. Others may simply reject any newly introduced concept which had not yet passed into a final draft in the narrative.

Readers fascinated by Tolkien's Elves more likely than not found themselves initially drawn to learning more about them not from reading *The Silmarillion* or combing the volumes of *The History of Middle Earth* but from their first exposure to these quasi-immortal beings in *The Lord of the Rings*. Among the first Elves that one meets in those books is Glorfindel. Tolkien's physical description of this noble Elf lord is unforgettable:

Glorfindel was tall and straight; his hair was of shining gold, his face fair and young and fearless and full of joy; his eyes were bright and keen, and his voice like music; on his brow sat wisdom, and in his hand was strength. (5)

The original character of Glorfindel of Gondolin, on the other hand, can be traced back to one of Tolkien's earliest versions of his history of the Elves, *The Fall of Gondolin* (6), segments of which survived into the later text *Of Tuor and his Coming to Gondolin* (7), parts of which came to be included in the published *Silmarillion*.

Christopher Tolkien notes:

My father said more than once that 'The Fall of Gondolin' was the first of the tales of the First Age to be composed, and there is no evidence to set against his recollection. In a letter of 1964 he declared that he wrote it "out of my head" during sick-leave from the army in 1917," and at other times he gave the date as 1916 or 1916-17. (8)

Tolkien's description of Glorfindel in *The Fall of Gondolin* rivals that in *The Lord of the Rings* for its picture of beauty and light personified.

There stood the House of the Golden Flower who bare a rayed sun upon their shield, and their Chief Glorfindel bare a mantel so brodered in threads of gold that it was diapered with celandine as a field in spring; and his arms were damascened with cunning gold. (9)

The name Glorfindel means "golden hair" (10). Christopher states:

This name is in fact derived from the earliest work on the mythology: *The Fall of Gondolin*, composed in 1916-17, in which the Elvish language that ultimately became that of the type called Sindarin was in a primitive and unorganized form, and its relation with the High-elven type (itself very primitive) was still haphazard. It was intended to mean 'Golden-tressed',⁽⁴⁾ and was the name given to the heroic 'Gnome' (Noldo), a chieftain of Gondolin, who in the pass of Cristhorn ('Eagle-cleft') fought with a Balrog [Demon], whom he slew at the cost of his own life.

⁽⁴⁾ [For the original etymology of Glorfindel, and the etymological connections of the elements of the name, see II.341.] ([11](#))

An enquiry of Dath Fingon relating to the name resulted in the following explanation:

From what I can tell, Glorfindel is an early Gnomish name. . . . 'Findel' is an archaic version of the word that later became 'finnel' in mature Sindarin. This is how the word would have existed in the North Sindarin spoken in the First Age. Whether or not North Sindarin or a dialect similar thereto was spoken in Gondolin is not explicitly known, but it's both possible and probable. Therefore, the name Glorfindel would have been accurate Sindarin in the First Age.

Over the next few millenia, Sindarin underwent several sound changes. The shift of medial ND to NN is one, so by the Third Age 'findel' had become 'finnel'. Glorfindel, had he been named in this era, would have been Glorfinnel instead.

It's also possible that only the spelling of his name remained archaic while the everyday pronunciation was updated to Glorfinnel. ([12](#))

The golden-haired and golden-outfitted Glorfindel cannot but remind one of the western storytelling trope of dividing good and evil characters into light-haired and dark-haired. The golden-haired Vanyar, favored by Manwë, are blond while the dark-haired Noldor are the rebels against the Valar. In *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, Margery Hourihan notes that

. . . . for all its variety, *The Lord of the Rings* simply reasserts the traditional dualisms and the superiority of the Western patriarchal elite.

This is readily apparent if we compare the language used to describe the good characters with descriptions of the Orcs. Here is Frodo's, and the reader's, first sight of the elf lord, Glorfindel:

Suddenly into the view below came a white horse, gleaming in the shadows, running swiftly. In the dusk its bit and bridle flickered and flashed, as if it were studded with gems like living stars. The rider's cloak streamed behind him, and his hood was thrown back; his golden hair flowed shimmering in the wind of his speed. To Frodo it appeared that a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil. (Tolkien 1954:221 [*The Fellowship of the Ring*, "Flight to the Ford"])

The indicators of the elf-lord's goodness are all to do with status, wealth, beauty and blondness. ([13](#))

This obviously is mitigated by the fact that Elrond and his progeny, for example, who unquestionably take their place along side the good in Tolkien's legendarium, are raven-haired, along with the majority of Tolkien's Elves.

Another question raised in relationship to Glorfindel is whence the golden hair? This query is based upon the statement that “[t]hey [the Noldor] were tall, fair of skin and grey-eyed, though their locks were dark, save in the golden house of Finrod” (14). The texts do not posit anywhere that Glorfindel is either of the house of Finrod Felagund or that he might be of Vanyarin descent. It would not appear to be unreasonable to assume that the latter in particular might be true, since Tolkien did introduce examples of mixed Noldorin and Vanyarin heritage among named characters in his legendarium.

--to be continued

(Part two of the Glorfindel biography, which will be published in next month’s newsletter, will largely consist of the separate narratives of Glorfindel’s deeds and his character development in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*.)

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6. *The Book of Lost Tales, Part 2, The Fall of Gondolin*.
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10. *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 345 To Mrs Meriel Thurston.
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14. *The Book of Lost Tales I, The Cottage of Lost Play* (note by Christopher Tolkien).

About the Author

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