

The Grey Pilgrim's Task
Gandalf, Sauron, and the Ring of Power

Among all of the complex and interesting characters created by J. R. R. Tolkien in his epic work, The Lord of the Rings, Gandalf the wizard has perhaps intrigued readers and scholars the most. Most debated have been such questions as where he came from, what race of beings he belonged to, and what the source of his power is. In addition, some scholars believe that Gandalf to be either human or elvish. This paper will prove that Gandalf, like all of the Istari including Sauron, was a Maia sent by the Valar to oppose the will of Sauron by igniting the resistance of the free peoples of Middle-Earth, and that his power lay primarily in his angelic nature.

Before examining evidence suggesting that Gandalf is a Maia, it is necessary to explain the various orders of angelic beings described by Tolkien. The highest order of beings in Tolkien's mythological framework are known as the Valar.¹ The Valar were numbered among the group of beings known as the Ainur who participated in the creation of Arda, or Earth (Tolkien, Silmarillion 15). It was the Ainur's song at the behest of Eru (God) that created the world of Middle-Earth. After the creation was sung into thought, Tolkien informs us that the greatest of these spirits came to Middle-Earth to "fulfill the vision" of the world given to them by Eru (Silmarillion 25). The Elves called the greatest of the Ainur "the Valar, the Powers of Arda, and Men have often called them gods" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 25). The Valar could best be described as:

The Guardians of the World, semi-divine or 'demiurgic' beings created by the One before the Creation itself to aid and assist Him in the rule of the World and the maintenance of equilibrium. They participated in the making of Middle-Earth, but their roles as Guardians precluded them from dwelling with the One in Over-heaven, and so, at the Beginning of Days, they came to the Undying Lands in the Uttermost West and there dwelt for ever, within sight of Middle-earth and within call of the One (Tyler 502).

Based on these descriptions, it quickly becomes apparent that the Valar were a form of semi-divine beings who existed in the West as directors of the plan of Eru.

These beings were served by a lesser order of angelic beings known as the Maiar. In The Silmarillion, Tolkien says that “With the Valar came other spirits whose being also began before the World, of the same order as the Valar but of less degree. These are the Maiar, the people of the Valar, and their servants and helpers” (30). In addition, they are described as “persons of the ‘angelic’ order, though not necessarily of the same rank. The Maiar were ‘spirits,’ but capable of self-incarnation, and could take ‘humane’ (especially Elvish) forms” (Tolkien, Unfinished Tales 411). Thus, the Maiar carried out tasks assigned them by the Valar in Middle-Earth and in the Uttermost West.

A difficulty that arises in the description of these two angelic orders is their relationship to the Elves. In Tolkien’s world, the Elves, like the Valar and the Maiar, are immortal and can return to Valinor. However, the Elves are not angelic beings with the powers of creation like the Valar and the Maiar.² In the song which created Arda, both the Valar and the Maiar participated. It was this creative force that produced the Elves, the firstborn people of Middle-Earth, upon whom the Valar bestowed the favor of allowing them the opportunity to pass into Valinor when they wearied of Middle-Earth.

With this description of the Valar and the Maiar in mind, it is now possible to see the Istari, the Order of Wizards in Middle-Earth, actually as Maiar sent to incite the peoples of Middle-Earth in resistance to Sauron. Tolkien says:

... with the consent of Eru they [the Valar] 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 (Unfinished Tales 406).

Although this passage does not indicate that the Istari were Maiar, it does clearly indicate that the Istari were sent by the Valar to Middle-Earth and were members of the order of the Valar. Additionally, Christopher Tolkien offers editorial notes in the Unfinished Tales based on information in his father's notes that support the idea that the Istari were actually Maiar in human form (See Appendix A). Given these notes, it is quickly apparent that the Istari were of a very high order of beings who sat at the councils of the Valar. Indeed, Tolkien indicates that "We must assume that they [the Istari] were all Maiar, that is persons of the 'angelic' order, though not necessarily of the same rank" (Unfinished Tales 411). Thus, it is clear that the Istari include a number of very powerful Maia charged by Manwë, chief of the Valar, with opposing Sauron through non-violent means.

This description of the Istari indicates that each of the wizards derives his power from the native qualities that he had as a Maia. Additional evidence is offered in one of the many volumes of books edited by Christopher Tolkien that illustrates the evolution of these novels. He describes his father's notes about the Istari as follows:

The page that I give first begins with the note 'Wizards = Angels', and this same note is found on the other two pages. I also take it to be the first appearance in written record of this conception, i.e. that the Istari or Wizards were *angeloi*, 'messengers', emissaries from the Lords of the West (The Treason of Isengard 422).

Thus, it appears that Tolkien intended to relate the Istari with the Judeo-Christian conception of an order of angels who serve as messengers to mortals and who deal with the evils of the world. This description of the Istari as messengers to Middle-Earth is continued in The Tolkien Companion where Tyler describes the Istari as being of "Valinorean race, although they came to mortal lands in the shapes of aged Men; for, while their powers were great, they were forbidden to reveal their true natures or to use their full strength in direct

conflict with the enemy” (193). It appears that the wizards were an order of messengers sent to oppose the rising threat of Sauron without tapping their full angelic powers in direct conflict with the Dark Lord.

However, additional support for the Istari as members of the order of the Maiar and messengers from the Lords of the West does not end at this point. In one of his letters dated April 25, 1954, J. R. R. Tolkien says of the Istari that:

There are no precise opposites to the Wizards--a translation (perhaps not suitable, but throughout distinguished from other ‘magician’ terms) of Q. Elvish *Istari*. Their origin was not known to any but a few (such as Elrond and Galadriel) in the Third Age. They are said to have first appeared about the year 1000 of the Third Age, when the shadow of Sauron began first to grow again to new shape. They always appeared old, but grew older with their labours, slowly, and disappeared with the end of the Rings. They were thought to be Emissaries (in the terms of this tale from the Far West beyond the Sea), and their proper function, maintained by Gandalf, and perverted by Saruman, was to encourage and bring out the native powers of the Enemies of Sauron (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 180).

Later, in discussing the nature of Gandalf, Tolkien says:

But G. [Gandalf] is not, of course, a human being (Man or Hobbit). There are naturally no precise modern terms to say what he was. I wd. venture to say that he was an *incarnate* ‘angel’--strictly an *angelos*^a; 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 might endure long, and only show slowly the wearing of care and labour (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 202).

^a*angelos*, “messenger” (Greek)

Given these numerous references to their nature, it is clear that Tolkien intended the Istari to be interpreted as Maiar who derived their power, like Gandalf's powers over fire and lightning and Radagast's power of shapechanging, from their position among the angelic order of the universe (Fellowship 337). In addition, it is clear that the Istari were each sent to work towards the eradication of the threat of Sauron by encouraging the resistance of the indigenous peoples of Middle-Earth. As such, they were forbidden to match Sauron's power with power of their own, for it is fairly sure that if the five wizards had worked in concert with their power they could have defeated Sauron. However, this approach would have repeated the Valars' mistake in eradicating the threat of Morgoth in the First Age, which caused the destruction of part of the world (Tolkien, Unfinished Tales 406).

Why, though, did the Valar decide to send members of their own order to Middle-Earth to fight the threat of Sauron? The answer is centered in the very nature of Sauron. In The Silmarillion, he is described as a great and powerful Maia of the people of Aulë. Tolkien says, "Among those of his [Morgoth's] servants that have names the greatest was that spirit whom the Eldar [elves] called Sauron, or Gorthaur the Cruel.³ In his beginning he was of the Maiar of Aulë, and he remained mighty in the lore of that people" (31). This description of Sauron as a lordly Maia should make clear why the Valar saw it as a necessity to send other Maiar to Middle-Earth to oppose him.

Additionally, Sauron's power has been further enhanced by his long service to Morgoth. Tolkien says that "Sauron was become now a sorcerer of dreadful power, master of shadows and of phantoms, foul in wisdom, cruel in strength, misshaping what he touched, twisting what he ruled, lord of werewolves; his dominion was torments" (Silmarillion 156). Indeed, Sauron is described as Morgoth's lieutenant and most

powerful servant, a servant who caused untold amounts of sorrow among both men and elves during the First Age and the ages thereafter (Tolkien, Silmarillion 47).

Some scholars, however, disagree with the assessment of Sauron as a Maia of great power. Tyler says of him that “. . . it might seem likely to later scholars that Sauron himself was ultimately of Eldarin race, seduced into evil far back in the First Age, when he became ‘a servant’ of a greater power, Morgoth of Angband” (423), thus suggesting that Sauron was an elf lured away by Morgoth and given great power. This assessment of Sauron, though, is not in agreement with Tolkien’s own writings. In describing the fall of Númenor, Tolkien speaks of the “death” of Sauron’s physical body but not of Sauron’s total destruction. Rather, he says:

. . . Sauron was not of mortal flesh, and though he was robbed now of that shape in which he had wrought so great an evil, so that he could never again appear fair to the eyes of Men, yet his spirit arose out of the deep and passed as a shadow and a black wind over the sea, and came back to Middle-earth and to Mordor that was his home. There he took up again his great Ring in Barad-dûr, and dwelt there, dark and silent, until he wrought himself a new guise, an image of malice and hatred made visible; and the Eye of Sauron the Terrible few could endure (Silmarillion 280).

Thus, in indicating that Sauron was not mortal and did not actually die in the downfall of Númenor, Tolkien informs the reader that Sauron’s power was not merely given him by Morgoth, because Morgoth did not have the power of creation. It took all of the Ainur in song at the behest of Eru to create the world. As such, Sauron is revealed as a malicious force who derives his great evil power from his own nature as a Maia. The final point of proof can be found in The Silmarillion where Tolkien says of him that:

Of old there was Sauron the Maia, whom the Sindar in Beleriand named Gorthaur. In the beginning of Arda Melkor seduced him to his allegiance, and he became the greatest and most trusted of the servants of the Enemy, and the most perilous, for he could assume many forms, and for long if he willed he could still appear noble and beautiful, so as to deceive all but the most wary (285).

In fact, his power as a Maia is best described by Noel when she says that “he seems, like the orthodox Satan, to have been incapable of material creation, but to have produced illusions and to have corrupted what came within his long reach” (101).⁴ This power to delude people and corrupt things of beauty illustrates the near invincibility ascribed to Sauron. In addition, this description of Sauron as a Maia of great personal power indicates why the Valar had to send Maiar in human form, the Istari, to Middle-Earth.

In fact, the sending of five Maiar in human form is suggested, at least by Tolkien, to have been due to the fact that Sauron was an immortal, angelic spirit of a far higher order than either Gandalf or Saruman (Carpenter and Tolkien 243). This difference of order explains why, in The Lord of the Rings, Sauron’s power seems so great as to possibly overwhelm the combined resistance in Middle-Earth. Indeed, there are moments in the novels when the reader almost fears to turn the page because of what might happen. In addition, Robley suggests that it is “the sin of pride which leads other ‘Guardians’ like Saruman and Denethor astray, into thinking they can compete with Sauron” (127). One must remember that the Istari were sent from Valinor to contend with Sauron by igniting the resistance of Elves, Dwarves, and Men to fight against the Shadow. Even Saruman, the greatest of the Istari, according to Gandalf, is unable to contend directly, alone, with Sauron’s will without falling under the Shadow and joining its power. This suggests why the Valar sent the Istari as emissaries and messengers to the peoples of Middle-Earth: raw power must be met with wise resistance. If power is matched with power, pride is the resulting accomplishment, a pride which causes the fall of all the powerful (Robley 127).

At this point, additional proof that Gandalf is indeed a member of the Maiar becomes evident. If we agree that Sauron is one of the greatest of the Maiar and that the Istari are Maiar sent from the Valar to

oppose him, it follows that we should be able to match other named Maiar with each of the Istari. Who were Gandalf's fellow Maiar, then? As one can read in the Appendix to the paper, it is apparent that Tolkien considered Gandalf and the Maia named Olórin to be one and the same. However, the question quickly arises as to whether there is proof to support this contention other than Tolkien's nearly illegible notes. Luckily, Olórin and his characteristics are covered in enough detail in various works to allow a conclusion as to the relation between him and Gandalf.

Our first indication of this relationship can be found in The Two Towers, the second volume of The Lord of the Rings. In his discussion with Frodo, Faramir relates the many names by which Gandalf has been known to the peoples of Middle-Earth. Faramir says that Gandalf said of his many names:

“Many are my names in many countries . . . 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” (Tolkien, Two Towers 353).

Clearly indicated among these many names is Olórin. Tolkien says in The Silmarillion that “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” (Silmarillion 31).

Additionally, Tolkien says of him that:

. . . 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 of 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 (Silmarillion 31).

Thus, the very nature of this Maia seems to have been centered in the purpose of encouraging the hearts of those in despair, to lift them up without their knowing how they had been freed from the shadows. If we look at a translation of the high-elven name, Olórin, we find that it is derived from *Olor*, which can roughly

be translated as “dream” (Tolkien, Unfinished Tales 413). However, “dream” in this sense is more in keeping with Tolkien’s description of the vivid memory of the Eldar race of Elves (Unfinished Tales 413). Specifically, this root word might best be interpreted as “*clear vision*, in the mind of things not physically present at the body’s situation” (Tolkien, Unfinished Tales 413).

However, Tolkien does not leave his readers with any serious questions about Gandalf’s Maia nature. Rather, he offers even clearer evidence about what his purpose was in additional passages in the Unfinished Tales. In his editorial notes to his father’s works, Christopher Tolkien says that “In an earlier version of this passage (Silmarillion, pp. 30-1) it is said that Olórin was ‘counsellor of Irmo,’⁵ and that in the hearts of those who hearkened to him awoke thoughts ‘of fair things that had not yet been but might yet be made for the enrichment of Arda’” (Unfinished Tales 414). Even though these notes indicate that Tolkien himself was not completely clear about the origins of Olórin, he was quite clear about Olórin’s nature and power.

In truth, one final description is quite revealing in showing Olórin’s connection to Gandalf. Tolkien says:

Manwë will not descend from the Mountain [Taniquetil] until the Dagor Dagorath, and the coming of the End, when Melkor returns. To the overthrow of Morgoth he sent his herald Eönwë. To the defeat of Sauron would he not then send some lesser (but mighty) spirit of the angelic people, one coëval and equal, doubtless, with Sauron in their beginnings, but not more? Olórin was his name. But of Olórin we shall never know more than he revealed in Gandalf (Unfinished Tales 413).

It is apparent that Tolkien was aware of debates by some scholars of his day attempting to relate Gandalf and Manwë, lord of the Valar, to see them as the same person. However, Tolkien quickly dismisses that belief by indicating that the mythology of Middle-Earth requires that Manwë will only descend from

Taniquetil to overthrow Melkor/Morgoth in the final battle when the world ends. Thus, the most telling part of this quote is the fact that Tolkien says that we will not be able to learn more of Olórin than what was revealed in Gandalf. This evidence clearly indicates that Olórin and Gandalf are the same being.

However, rather than just rely on this one statement, a number of other references can be used to show the similarity between Olórin and Gandalf. One excellent example can be found in appendix B of The Return of the King. In describing Gandalf, Tolkien states that “Mithrandir⁶ was closest in friendship with the Eldar [elves], and wandered mostly in the West, and never made for himself any lasting abode” (Tolkien, Return 455). In like manner, Olórin was said to favor the Elves above all of the other Children of Ilúvatar.

Yet one more similarity between these two can be found in Gandalf’s refusal to take Frodo up on his offer to give him the Ring of Power. Gandalf says:

“With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly.” His eyes flashed and his face was lit as by a fire within. “Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness, and the desire of strength to do good. Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength. I shall have such need of it. Great perils lie before me” (Tolkien, Fellowship 95).

If one reviews Christopher Tolkien’s editorial remarks about his father’s notes included in the Appendix of this paper, it is quite clear that Olórin feared Sauron and considered himself too weak for the task Manwë had appointed him to accomplish. Thus, Gandalf’s admission that the Ring would tempt him with “the desire of strength to do good” sounds quite similar to the fears of weakness expressed by Olórin. Robley also speaks about this humility on the part of Gandalf/Olórin when he says that “Gandalf is always presented . . . as properly humble toward his knowledge” (131).

Yet, some of the clearest parallels between these two can be found in the third and final book of The Lord of the Rings. One of the chief descriptions of Olórin was his ability to lift the spirits of those who came into contact with him. In The Return of the King during the siege of Minas Tirith, Gandalf the White is shown to have a similar impact in lifting the spirits of the defenders in the face of the terror of the Nazgûl. The narrator says that “Wherever he came men’s hearts would lift again, and the winged shadows pass from memory” (Tolkien, Return 119). Even though the effect is temporary, it is the same type of effect that Olórin was said to have on those who were despairing. In like manner, Gandalf is described in the Unfinished Tales:

Warm and eager was his spirit (and it was enhanced by the ring Narya), for he was the enemy of Sauron, opposing the fire that devours and wastes with the fire that kindles, and succours in wanhope and distress; but his joy, and his swift wrath, were veiled in garments grey as ash, so that only those that knew him well glimpsed the flame that was within (Tolkien 408).

Once again, Gandalf’s power to encourage the hearts of those who are experiencing pain, sorrow, despair, and distress is too similar to that of Olórin to be mere coincidence.

Finally, the parallels to be found between Olórin and Gandalf can be summed up in the rather revealing analysis of the spirit inside of Gandalf by Pippin, one of the young hobbits. When looking closely at Gandalf, Pippin sees a marvelous paradox:

. . . in the wizard’s face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow; though as he looked more intently he perceived that under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth (Tolkien, Return 34).

It is the great joy underneath the careworn exterior that identifies the noble spirit of Olórin that is residing in the human body known in Middle-Earth as “Gandalf.”

Besides being similar in character, Olórin and Gandalf are also similar in the power that they have at their command. Although Tolkien never discusses the powers that Olórin had as a Maia, it is clearly the case that an angelic being would have great “supernatural” power beyond the ken of mere mortals. As such, representations of Gandalf’s powers indicate that his spirit is too powerful for a mere mortal to possess. In the three novels of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien gives us the opportunity to see Gandalf in two incarnations. First, we are shown the considerable powers of Gandalf the Grey in The Fellowship of the Ring. Finally, we are given illustrations of his enhanced powers in The Two Towers and The Return of the King.

Throughout The Fellowship of the Ring, Tolkien affords us many opportunities to see the power of Gandalf the Grey in stunning detail. The first such instance is when Gandalf holds off five of the Nazgûl on the hill of Weathertop (Tolkien, Fellowship 346).⁷ Although he cannot destroy these fell servants of the Enemy, he obviously holds his own in a battle of such magnitude that Frodo and Aragorn could see the lightning stabbing upwards while they are in the Midgewater Marshes, miles away (Tolkien, Fellowship 247). Later, when Aragorn and the hobbits arrive at the top of Weathertop, Tolkien vividly describes the burnt ground around the top of the hill as follows:

But in the centre a cairn of broken stones had been piled. They were blackened as if with fire. About them the turf was burned to the roots and all within the ring the grass was scorched and shrivelled, as if flames had swept the hill-top; but there was no sign of any living thing (Fellowship 251).

The destructive power needed to ravage the top of the hill could not be used by a mere mortal.

An even more striking illustration of Gandalf’s power can be found in the battle between the Fellowship and the Wargs before the company makes it to Moria. In this scene, Gandalf is revealed as a

powerful being with the ability to set a whole hill of trees afire with little effort. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

In the wavering firelight Gandalf seemed suddenly to grow: he rose up, a great menacing shape like the monument of some ancient king of stone set upon a hill. Stooping like a cloud, he lifted a burning branch and strode to meet the wolves. They gave back before him. High in the air he tossed the blazing brand. It flared with a sudden white radiance like lightning; and his voice rolled like thunder.

“Naur an edraith ammen! Naur dan i ngaurhoth!” he cried.

There was a roar and a crackle, and the tree above him burst into a leaf and bloom of blinding flame (Tolkien, Fellowship 390).

Of particular importance in this scene is the description of Gandalf himself. Notice that he seems to grow and to become “a great menacing shape.” This description seems to suggest that at the moment when Gandalf is forced to use brute power he is revealed to those around him as a being of much more importance and puissance than he normally allows to be seen. Also of importance is the fact that Gandalf is not described like the average wizard in most fairy tales. Rather than being a weakling whose only power resides in his spells, Gandalf is described as being strong and hale. He strides forward to meet the wolves; and, he tosses a branch high into the air. It could be argued that underneath the veneer of the frail exterior resides the powerful spirit of Olórin, who is only revealed in moments when Gandalf must use his true power in defensive anger.

Finally, the most revealing moment of Gandalf the Grey’s power comes in his two confrontations with the Balrog. Balrogs were other angelic beings, possibly Maiar of a lesser order than the Istari, that were corrupted to the service of Morgoth. Tolkien says:

For of the Maiar many were drawn to his [Morgoth’s] splendour in the days of his greatness, and remained in that allegiance down into his darkness; and others he corrupted afterwards to his service with lies and treacherous gifts. Dreadful among these spirits were

the Valaraukar, the scourges of fire that in Middle-earth were called the Balrogs, demons of terror (Silmarillion 31).

In this instance, Gandalf the Grey is matched against a creature of equal stature to himself. When Gandalf speaks the spell of closing that will shut the door that his companions have just passed through, he feels a great power on the other side speaking the spell of opening (Tolkien, Fellowship 423). Indeed, the power of the spirit is so great that at first the door begins to open before Gandalf regains control (Tolkien, Fellowship 423). Finally, the strain on the door is too great and it explodes nearly killing Gandalf in the process (Tolkien, Fellowship 423). The raw power that was required for Gandalf to contain in order to control the door truly indicates his stature as a Maia.

In addition, if there were any doubt about the power contained in Gandalf the Grey, it is cleared up in his confrontation with the Balrog on the bridge that leads to the exit of Moria. Particularly revealing in this test of raw power is the fact that Gandalf succeeds in blocking this spirit of fire. In one of the most famous scenes from the novel, Gandalf says:

“You cannot pass” . . . The orcs stood still, and a dead silence fell. “I am a servant of the Secret Fire⁸, wielder of the Flame of Anor. You cannot pass. The dark fire will not avail you, flame of Udûn. Go back to the Shadow! You cannot pass” (Tolkien, Fellowship 429).

At this point, all doubts about whether Olórin and Gandalf are the same person must be cast aside. A mortal man could not have withstood the power of a balrog. Of the peoples of Middle-Earth, only an elf-lord, like Glorfindel at the fall of Gondolin, would have had the power to withstand and defeat a balrog (Tolkien, Silmarillion 243). Gandalf, although in the form of a mortal man, which does die in the subsequent battle between him and the Balrog, cannot be a mortal, given the epic proportions of this battle; and, it is this “death” that leads to his return in the incarnation of Gandalf the White.

In this second incarnation as “the White,” we are given even more examples of power beyond the control of a mortal man. The first example of the hidden power inside of Gandalf is shown in Fangorn Forest when he is reunited with his friends: Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli. The narrator says that “In other lands they would have greeted him with kind words; but now they stood silent, each feeling a strange expectancy: something was approaching that held a hidden power--or menace” (Tolkien, Two Towers 122). The narrator describes Gandalf here as “white, shining now as if with some light kindled within, bent, laden with years, but holding a power beyond the strength of kings” (Tolkien, Two Towers 133). It seems that Tolkien is suggesting that we are glimpsing Gandalf as he would be in Valinor, a being of white light and power beyond mortal understanding. As such, it is once again apparent that Gandalf is none other than Olórin, servant of Manwë.

With his return as Gandalf the White, the use of his powers changes from those shown to us in The Fellowship of the Ring. The use of his powers is now more openly in keeping with the nature of Olórin since we repeatedly see him healing those who are in need. One such instance of this renewing power is shown to us in his audience with King Théoden where he silences Wormtongue and revives the king in the matter of a few moments (Tolkien, Two Towers 151). Here, Gandalf shows his power as Olórin, the Maia of encouragement and renewal.

Even though Gandalf the White’s power is focused on renewing and encouraging those in need, he also illustrates the power to command the obedience of a fellow Istari. After the defeat of Saruman’s army, Gandalf and King Théoden go to a parley with Saruman at Orthanc, his fortress. When Saruman refuses to listen, Gandalf orders him to return and hear the “charges” against him:

“Come back, Saruman!” said Gandalf in a commanding voice. To the amazement of the others, Saruman turned again, and as if dragged against his will, he came slowly back to the iron rail, leaning on it, breathing hard. His face was lined and shrunken. His hand clutched his heavy black staff like a claw . . . “Saruman!” he cried, and his voice grew in power and authority. “Behold, I am not Gandalf the Grey, whom you betrayed. I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death. You have no colour now, and I cast you from the order and from the Council . . . Saruman, your staff is broken” (Tolkien, Two Towers 241).

Although some might argue that this show of power really does not prove that he is a Maia, it seems a particularly important scene in support of such a contention. If Saruman and Gandalf were just wizards who obtained their power from long study and practice, it would seem a weak argument to say that Gandalf could break the staff of a fellow wizard and cast him out of the order of the Istari. In addition, even to suggest that maybe Saruman’s powers were waning as he fell into evil is not a satisfactory argument, since who is to say that one can only be a wizard if one is on the side of good. It seems readily apparent that Gandalf was not only casting Saruman out of the order of the Istari but that he was also passing along the sentence of Manwë as well, that for treacherously failing in the task appointed by Manwë, Saruman would not be allowed to return to Valinor. Rather, he would join Morgoth in the Void. Only a Maia would have the power to pass such a sentence on a being of great power like Saruman, a being of power who was considered the highest of his order.

Finally, Gandalf is revealed in The Return of the King as a force much greater than anyone previously realized. During Gandalf’s audience with Denethor, Steward of Minas Tirith, Pippin began to realize the true power inherent in the wizard. The narrator says that with “a sense other than sight Pippin perceived that Gandalf had the greater power and the deeper wisdom, and a majesty that was veiled” (Tolkien, Return 32). This statement, which might easily be missed, indicates that Gandalf is more than just

a mortal wizard of great power. Rather, Pippin sees past the human shell to the spirit residing inside, thus realizing that there is a kingly but hidden spirit inside, a spirit that will be revealed to the enemy in a short period of time.

Soon after this audience, the opening moves of the War of the Ring are made. In the ensuing events, Gandalf twice rescues Faramir from the Nazgûl. In both instances, he reveals an angelic power that none of the Nazgûl, except possibly the Lord of the Nazgûl, can withstand. In the first instance, Gandalf rides out from the plain to rescue Faramir who is returning from Ithilien before the Enemy begins the siege of Minas Tirith. In this dramatic moment, we are given a description of white shafts of light shooting from Gandalf's upraised hand causing the Nazgûl to retreat from the battlefield (Tolkien, Return 100). In the second instance, Gandalf rides out with the Gondorian cavalry to rescue the rearguard of the troops that have been repulsed from their defense of the bridges at Osgiliath. At this dramatic moment, Gandalf rides forth shimmering with a brightness that stuns and excites the onlookers from the wall of the city (Tolkien, Return 114). Once again, the power revealed in these moments is far too great to be wielded by a mere mortal. It appears that Tolkien is once again revealing Gandalf as Olórin, a Maia with great power against the forces of evil.

Another example of the power of Gandalf/Olórin can be found in the scene in which the Lord of the Nazgûl is about to enter Minas Tirith after the gates of the city have just been destroyed by siege engines. The only power present in Minas Tirith that could possibly prevent the entrance of this evil being is Gandalf:

"You cannot enter here," said Gandalf, and the huge shadow halted. "Go back to the abyss prepared for you! Go back! Fall into the nothingness that awaits you and your Master. Go!" (Tolkien, Return 125).

Of course, one might point out that the confrontation between these two powerful beings is broken off before a true engagement is begun. However, it must be noted that this powerful lord of evil stops when rebuked by Gandalf. In addition, during his momentary pause, the horns of the Rohirrim are heard, which call him back to the battle and away from the gates of the city. Thus, one could suggest that his stopping here means the Lord of the Nazgûl recognized the power of Gandalf the White and saw the Being underneath the frail exterior.

It is important at this point that we deal with the Elven ring that Gandalf was given by Círdan when he appeared at the Grey Havens. Over the years there has been much discussion about the power of this ring and its effects on Gandalf. Indeed, some critics have suggested that this ring is the source of Gandalf's considerable powers. Noel says quite clearly that "the source of this power was Narya, the Ring of Fire, one of the three Elven Rings" (109). In addition, she suggests that much of his overall power as a wizard in Middle-Earth was derived from this ring of power--a contention necessary, perhaps, if we see Gandalf as human or elven (Noel 99). However, such suggestions are not supported by Tolkien's descriptions of Narya's powers:

Now these were the Three that had last been made, and they possessed the greatest powers. Narya, Nenia, and Vilya, they were named, the Rings of Fire, and of Water, and of Air, set with ruby and adamant and sapphire; and of all the Elven-rings of Sauron most desired to possess them, for those who had them in their keeping could ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world (Silmarillion 288).

Thus, the description of the basic power of these rings does not suggest that they awarded the user great offensive power. Rather, their very nature was a defensive sort of "magic" that would keep the natural decay of the living world from occurring as quickly where they were being wielded. In addition, Tolkien later describes the effects of these rings by saying that "Yet after the fall of Sauron their power was ever at

work, and where they abode there mirth also dwelt and all things were unstained by the griefs of time” (Silmarillion 298). This describes nicely the Valley of Rivendell and the Vale of Lothlórien, lands in which the griefs of the world are held off and apparent perpetual happiness holds sway.

It appears then that the chief effect of Narya was not to grant Gandalf great offensive power but to bolster his native effect as Olórin. In The Return of the King, the gift of this ring to Gandalf by Círdan⁹ is described in detail great enough to allow us to say that the main effect of the ring was on others rather than on Gandalf himself. Círdan says:

“Take this ring, Master . . . for your labours will be heavy; but it will support you in the weariness that you have taken upon yourself. For this is the Ring of Fire, and with it you may rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill. But as for me, my heart is with the sea, and I will dwell by the grey shores until the last ship sails. I will await you” (Tolkien, Return 456).

Indeed, with the repeated instances in which Gandalf serves as an encourager of resistance among the peoples of Middle-Earth, it seems that Círdan chose well in giving him this ring with which he was able to rekindle hearts grown cold from fear of the Shadow in the East. Yet, it would appear that Gandalf’s considerable powers over fire and lightning were native sources that arose out of his origins as a Maia, not out of the Elven Ring of Power, Narya.

Finally, how successful was Gandalf? To answer this, we must discuss the nature of the task assigned to the Istari by the Valar. In his letters, Tolkien indicates that the Istari were messengers from the West to guide the resistance of the peoples of Middle-Earth to Sauron. Tolkien describes them as “Emissaries (in the terms of this tale from the Far West beyond the Sea)” (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 180). In yet another letter dealing with this subject, Tolkien reiterates that the Istari were sent as messengers from the Valar to incite opposition to Sauron (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 202).¹⁰

Additionally, Tolkien is quite clear about the nature of the task assigned to the Istari by the Valar. He says that the Istari were sent to “train, advise, instruct, arouse the hearts and minds of those threatened by Sauron to a resistance with their own strengths” (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 202). In fact, Tolkien says that Gandalf’s fall in Moria was necessitated by the treachery of Saruman who had become allied with Sauron, stating that the Valar allowed Gandalf to act as an “angel” when the physical powers of the Enemy were too great for mortals (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 202). In a similar statement in a later letter, Tolkien says that 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” (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 237). This supports the evidence cited earlier in this paper of the angelic rescues of Faramir in The Return of the King.

Tolkien’s numerous assertions about the task of the Istari can be backed up by examining a number of passages in The Lord of the Rings. When discussing his return from his death on Zirak-zigil, Gandalf informs his companions that “Naked I was sent back--for a brief time, until my task was done” (Tolkien, Two Towers 135). In like manner, he reveals the nature of his task after Denethor has suggested that Gandalf wishes to rule Gondor. Gandalf denies this, saying,

“ . . . the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward” (Tolkien, Return 33).

Thus, it is clear that Gandalf has been sent to win a victory not through the force of his own power but to encourage the resistance of those around him to the evil of Sauron.

This sentiment offered to us by Gandalf is echoed later after the siege of Minas Tirith is lifted and the Lords are attempting to determine what step to take next in their war against Sauron. Gandalf counsels that they should strike first by leading an army of sufficient size to gain the attention of Sauron, thus keeping his Eye focused outside of Mordor rather than inside where the hobbits Frodo and Sam--the Ring-Bearers--are seeking the Cracks of Doom to end the Ring Quest. Aragorn says in this council, "Let none now reject the counsels of Gandalf, whose long labours against Sauron come at last to their test. But for him all would long ago have been lost" (Tolkien, Return 192). It is clear that Aragorn recognizes the task that Gandalf has been given, the total defeat of Sauron through the native attempts of the populous of Middle-Earth.

These statements about Gandalf's mission to Middle-Earth are summed up conclusively after the defeat of Sauron. At his crowning as the new king, Aragorn says "By the labour and valour of many I have come into my inheritance. In token of this I would have the Ring-bearer bring the crown to me, and let Mithrandir set it upon my head, if he will; for he has been the mover of all that has been accomplished, and this is his victory" (Tolkien, Return 303). The new king realizes quite well that the victory over Sauron would not have occurred had Gandalf not been ever-present, moving the peoples of Middle-Earth in a masterful game against the powerful lord of shadows, Sauron. His sentiment is echoed later by Gandalf, who says to his four friends (Merry, Sam, Pippin, and Frodo) that "The Third Age was my age. I was the Enemy of Sauron; and my work is finished. I shall go soon. The burden must lie now upon you and your kindred" (Tolkien, Return 308). Thus, Gandalf, Olórin, greatest of the Istari, was the only Maia sent to Middle-Earth to successfully complete his task, the total defeat of Sauron.

In conclusion, clearly Gandalf is a Maia sent by the Valar to ignite the resistance of the peoples of Middle-Earth against the great evil of Sauron, Lord of the Ring. Using Tolkien's letters and

unfinished works, as well as The Lord of the Rings, it has been possible to prove that Gandalf was indeed the Maia Olórin, and that he was successful in his task of instigating the defeat of Sauron through the resistance of the people of Middle-Earth. In The Tolkien Reader, Tolkien says:

It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to a child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality (86).

In creating Middle-Earth, Gandalf, and the numerous memorable characters in these novels, J. R. R. Tolkien has succeeded in creating a wonderful world that causes the reader to feel the emotions of the characters as they face the fight against the evil represented by Sauron. As such, Tolkien's works will continue to enchant future generations of readers who enter the world of Middle-Earth.

APPENDIX

[Christopher Tolkien's comments on his father's notes.]

Most of the remaining writings about the Istari (as a group) are unhappily no more than very rapid jottings, often illegible. Of major interest, however, is a brief and very hasty sketch of a narrative, telling of a council of the Valar, summoned it seems by Manwë (“and maybe he called upon Eru for counsel?”), at which it was resolved to send out three emissaries to Middle-earth. “Who would go? For they must be mighty, peers of Sauron, but must forgo might, and clothe themselves in flesh so as to treat on equality and win the trust of Elves and Men. But this would imperil them, dimming their wisdom and knowledge, and confusing them with fears, cares, and wearinesses coming from the flesh.” But two only came forward: Curomo, who was chosen by Aulë, and Alatar, who was sent by Oromë. Then Manwë asked, where was Olórin? And Olórin, who was clad in grey, and having just entered from a journey had seated himself at the edge of the council, asked what Manwë would have of him. Manwë replied that he wished Olórin to go as the third messenger to Middle-earth (and it is remarked in parentheses that “Olórin was a lover of the Eldar that remained,” apparently to explain Manwë’s choice). But Olórin declared that he was too weak for such a task, and that he feared Sauron. Then Manwë said that that was all the more reason why he should go, and that he commanded Olórin (illegible words follow that seem to contain the word “third”). But at that Varda looked up and said: “Not as the third;” and Curomo remembered it.

The note ends with the statement that Curomo [Saruman] took Aiwendil [Radagast] because Yavanna begged him, and that Alatar took Pallando as a friend.

On another page of jottings clearly belonging to the same period it is said that “Curomo was obliged to take Aiwendil to please Yavanna wife of Aulë.” There are here also some rough tables relating the names of the Istari to the names of the Valar: Olórin to Manwë and Varda, Curomo to Aulë, Aiwendil to Yavanna, Alatar to Oromë, and Pallando also to Oromë (but this replaces Pallando to Mandos and Nienna).

The meaning of these relations between Istari and Valar is clearly, in light of the brief narrative just cited, that each Istar was chosen by each Vala for his innate characteristics--perhaps even that they were members of the “people” of that Vala, in the same sense as is said of Sauron in the *Valaquenta* (*The Silmarillion*, p. 32) that “in his beginning he was of the Maiar of Aulë, and he remained mighty in the lore of that people.” It is thus very notable that Curomo (Saruman) was chosen by Aulë. There is no hint of an explanation of why Yavanna’s evident desire that the Istari should include in their number one with a particular love of the things of her making could only be achieved by imposing Radagast’s company on Saruman; while the suggestion in the essay on the Istari (p. 407) that in becoming enamoured of the wild creatures of Middle-earth Radagast neglected the purpose for which he was sent if perhaps not Yavanna. Moreover both in the essay on the Istari and in *Of the Rings of Power* Saruman came first and he came alone. On the other hand it is possible to see a hint of the story of Radagast’s unwelcome company in Saruman’s extreme scorn for him, as related by Gandalf to the Council of Elrond:

“‘Radagast the Brown!’ laughed Saruman, and he no longer concealed his scorn. ‘Radagast the Bird-tamer! Radagast the Simple! Radagast the Fool! Yet he had just the wit to play the part that I set him.’”

Whereas in the essay on the Istari it is said that the two who passed into the East had no names save *Ithryn Luin* “the Blue Wizards” (meaning of course that they had no names in the West of Middle-earth), here they are named, as Alatar and Pallando, and are associated with Oromë, though no hint is given of the reason for this relationship. It might be (though this is the merest guess) that Oromë of all the Valar had the greatest knowledge of the further parts of Middle-earth, and that the Blue Wizards were destined to journey in those regions and to remain there.

Beyond the fact that these notes on the choosing of the Istari certainly date from after the completion of *The Lord of the Rings* I can find no evidence of their relation, in time of composition, to the essay on the Istari.

I know of no other writings about the Istari save some very rough and in part uninterpretable notes that are certainly much later than any of the foregoing, and probably date from 1972.

Source: Tolkien, Christopher, ed. Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth. New York: Ballantine Books, 1980.

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ENDNOTES

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1. For those who are not familiar with Tolkien's works, there are numerous examples of changing names in different languages. For example, the name for "God" is Eru in Valinorean which shifts to Ilúvatar in Quenya Elvish. Another example of multiple languages can be found in Gandalf's many names. [Back](#)

 2. In Tolkien's universe, elves are immortal beings in the sense that though their bodies can die their minds and memories remain intact when they are reborn. This is distinct from the immortality of the Valar and the Maiar who cannot die despite the fact that they can appear in human or elvish form. An example of this "reincarnation" of elves can be seen in Glorfindel who at the time of Lord of the Rings has lived twice as Glorfindel (Tolkien, Silmarillion 243; Carpenter and C. Tolkien 286). This is distinct from the transformation of Gandalf after the battle with the balrog in Moria. [Back](#)

 3. Melkor was "The Quenya name for the great rebellious Vala, the beginning of evil, in his origin the mightiest of the Ainur; afterwards named *Morgoth*, *Bauglir*, *the Dark Lord*, *the Enemy*, etc. The meaning of *Melkor* was 'He who arises in Might'; the Sindarin form was *Belegûr* 'Great Death'" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 340). [Back](#)

 4. Unlike Satan/Lucifer, Sauron is not, however, the perverted archangelic power: that would be Melkor/Morgoth (viz. Silmarillion, "Ainulindalë"). [Back](#)

 5. Irmo was "The Vala usually named Lórien, the place of his dwelling. *Irmo* means 'Desirer' or 'Master of Desire'" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 419). [Back](#)

 6. *Mithrandir* is the Elvish name of Gandalf which means "The Grey Pilgrim" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 341). [Back](#)

 7. The Nazgûl were "*Ring-wraiths*, the slaves of the Nine Rings of Men and chief servants of Sauron" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 347). [Back](#)

 8. The similarity between the "Flame Imperishable" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 10) of Eru and the Judeo-Christian conception of the Holy Spirit as "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:1-4) cannot be just a coincidence. [Back](#)

 9. Círdan was "during the Second and Third Ages keeper of the Grey Havens in the Gulf of Lhûn" (Tolkien, Silmarillion 322). The Grey Havens was the seaport where the Elves departed from Middle-Earth on their journey to Valinor. [Back](#)

 10. Tolkien maintains in his letters that *he* doesn't know all the answers to these questions, that he is

merely an historian and translator of what texts have survived from the days of these epic deeds (Carpenter and C. Tolkien 216). [Back](#)