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The Hobbit and The Father Christmas Letters

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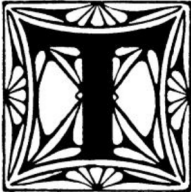
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Abstract

Traces the mutual influences of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and the letters he wrote to his children in the person of Father Christmas. Similar themes in Roverandom and *The Book of Lost Tales* are also discussed. She tracks the development of several motifs that appear throughout, like irascible wizards, playful elves, invented languages, impudent bears, and fireworks.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Bears; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elves; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Wizards; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages—Arktik; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Book of Lost Tales*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Father Christmas Letters*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R. *Roverandom*



*THE HOBBIT AND
THE FATHER CHRISTMAS LETTERS*

KRIS SWANK

AN OLD MAN FAMOUS FOR FIREWORKS. A last homely house in a desolate landscape. Elves. Goblins. Dragons. A gruff but affable bear. These are all familiar story elements from *The Hobbit*, the fantasy novel that earned J.R.R. Tolkien popular acclaim when it was first published in 1937. Before, during, and after his work on *The Hobbit*, Tolkien was also engaged in an annual holiday tradition of sending letters and pictures to his children in the guise of Father Christmas. These *Father Christmas Letters* also featured an old man with fireworks, a homely house, elves, goblins, dragons, and a gruff but affable bear. The worlds of Bilbo Baggins and Nicholas Christmas are very different, yet they have several striking similarities in character-types, settings and plotlines.

Tolkien famously discussed how new stories are constructed from the bones of old legends, tales and history. He said “the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits” (“On Fairy-Stories” [“OFS”] 125). Several scholars have shown how Tolkien himself made liberal use of the great world Cauldron of Story to create his own, new tales.¹ But in addition to the great Cauldron, Tolkien created his own Pot of Soup, recycling and recasting figures and devices from his personal legendarium into new and different stories. Elves and dragons, for instance, appear repeatedly in Tolkien’s tales. *The Hobbit* recycles character- and place-names (such as Elrond and Gondolin) from the bones of Tolkien’s older “Lost Tales,” the stories and poems which would evolve into *The Silmarillion*. In their introduction to Tolkien’s children’s story, *Roverandom*, Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond remark that “As more of Tolkien’s works have been published [...] since his death, it has become clear that nearly all of his writings are interrelated, if only in small ways, and that each sheds a welcome light upon the others” (xix).

Comparing *The Hobbit* to early Christmas letters—those written prior to and during Tolkien’s work on *The Hobbit*—interrelationships become apparent in at least three different ways:

¹ Examples of Tolkien source criticism include Chance, Fimi, Fisher, Flieger, Rateliff, and Shippey, *Roots and Branches*.

1. both the *Father Christmas Letters* and *The Hobbit* contain story elements which have common roots in Tolkien's early Lost Tales and poems;
2. some story elements in the *Father Christmas Letters* appear to have been borrowed from *The Hobbit*; and
3. a few story elements in *The Hobbit* appeared in the *Father Christmas Letters* first, suggesting that borrowing may have gone both ways.

Like the master chef who uses similar ingredients to create two very different flavors of soup, a master storyteller can use the same character-types, settings, and plotlines to create different stories. Analyzing these three types of interrelationships between *The Hobbit* and the *Father Christmas Letters* may shed light—if only in small ways—on Tolkien's creative process, how he added to and drew from his legendarium, his own Cauldron of Story, to produce new tales.

Father Christmas and the Letters

Each winter from 1920-1943, envelopes bearing hand-drawn stamps from the "North Pole" arrived for Tolkien's children. Inside were letters and pictures he created in the guise of Father Nicholas Christmas or one of his companions. At first these were simple greetings, but over the years Tolkien added colorful characters and exciting stories. The family preserved these artifacts and, after Tolkien's death, published them as the *Father Christmas Letters* in 1976. The collection has been revised and republished several times with the latest edition, *Letters from Father Christmas*, in September 2012.²

Father Christmas was, of course, already a familiar figure in England's Cauldron of Story, the personification of the Christmas spirit in the British Isles. "Some have pointed to a pagan origin (a perceived resemblance to Saturn, Neptune and Odin), but the term comes into use only in the 15th century" in Christmas carols (Bowler). As a figure of drink and revelry, his popularity suffered somewhat under the Puritans, but the Victorian revival of the holiday revitalized interest in Father Christmas. Perhaps his most famous depiction during this period is John Leech's 1843 illustration "The Second of the Two Spirits" for Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, "where the gigantic Ghost of Christmas Present, sitting among piled-up food and drink, wears exactly the kind of fur-trimmed loose gown of the modern Father Christmas—except that it is green, matching his holly wreath" (Simpson and Roud 120). Towards the end of the 1870s, Father Christmas became conflated with the European St. Nicholas and the American Santa Claus. Like those other figures, he came down chimneys

² Christina Scull presents an excellent comparison of the contents and quality of the reproductions in the various editions through the 2009 HarperCollins trade paperback (Scull, "The 'Father Christmas' Letters," 2010), and an analysis of the 2012 edition (Scull "The 'Father Christmas' Letters," 2012).

and put toys in stockings. More and more often he was depicted in a red costume (rather than green), and the holly crown was replaced with a hood (Simpson and Roud 120). It is this later image that Tolkien adopted for the letters he wrote to his children as Father Christmas.

The creation of *The Hobbit* was intricately linked to the *Father Christmas Letters*. In *The History of the Hobbit*, John Rateliff argues that Tolkien wrote major portions of *The Hobbit* over his Christmas holidays from Oxford in the early 1930s. During those same weeks he was creating his annual Christmas letters and illustrations for his children. “The presence of the Cave-Bear, Elves, and a magician at the battle with the goblins [in the 1932 Christmas letter] argues that the final chapters [of *The Hobbit*] were in progress at the time this letter was written” (Rateliff xvi). An early draft of *The Hobbit* contains two mentions of Christmas. First, Tolkien’s original introduction of Elrond described him being “as kind as Christmas” (Rateliff 115), though this was changed in the published version to “as kind as summer” (*The Hobbit* [H] III.49). Second, when Bilbo, Gandalf and the dwarves escape from wolves by climbing trees, Tolkien wrote that “Fili & Kili were right up a slender larch like a tall thin Christmas tree” (Rateliff 203). In his 1987 Preface to *The Hobbit*, Christopher Tolkien recalled, “In December 1937, two months after publication, I wrote to Father Christmas and gave *The Hobbit* a vigorous puff, asking him if he knew of it, and proposing it to him as an idea for Christmas presents” (H vi). Father Christmas soon responded, “I was going to send ‘Hobbits’—I am sending away loads (mostly second editions) which I sent for only a few days ago” (*Letters from Father Christmas* [FCL] 84).

Perry Bramlett states that Tolkien’s former student and friend Simone d’Ardenne believed the Christmas letters were the origin of *The Hobbit*. Bramlett quickly discounts this since “There are elves, goblins, and a delightful polar bear in the *Father Christmas Letters*, but no hobbits” (32). In a note, he speculates d’Ardenne “may have remembered hobbit stories being told during Christmas seasons after the Father Christmas letters arrived at the Tolkien home” (32n10). Despite their lack of hobbits, the *Father Christmas Letters* and *The Hobbit* are related, as the following examples illustrate. Each one influenced the development of the other—if only in small ways—and each was also influenced by Tolkien’s personal legendarium.

Influence of the Lost Tales and Poems

The first way in which the *Father Christmas Letters* and *The Hobbit* are related is that both contain common elements rooted in Tolkien’s early Lost Tales and poems. There are several interesting examples of the way Tolkien drew similar ingredients out of his personal Cauldron of Story and used them to produce new and distinct flavors of “soup.”

Homely Houses. One example of these common roots is the “homely house” encountered by travelers in remote places. Tolkien’s earliest such safe haven appeared in a 1915 poem “You & Me and the Cottage of Lost Play” where “down a warm and winding lane” dreaming children could be found tumbling, gardening, “dancing fairy rings / And weaving pearly daisy-strings, / Or chasing golden bees” (*The Book of Lost Tales, Part One* [BLT I] 28, 29). Around the winter of 1916-17, Tolkien wrote of Eriol the mariner, the mortal traveler who discovers the Cottage of Lost Play on the Lonely Isle, Tol Eressëa, after a long sea-voyage. There he finds a warm welcome and plenty of food, laughter, and storytelling (BLT I 13-20).

In *The Hobbit*, after travelling through a “silent waste” without trees, valleys, hills, or dwellings, Gandalf brings the Company “to the very edge of the Wild” (H III.44) where they find warm welcome, food, laughter and storytelling in the hidden valley of Rivendell. “And so at last they all came to the Last Homely House, and found its doors flung wide. [...] I wish I had time to tell you even a few of the tales or one or two of the songs that they heard in that house” (H III.48-49). Rateliff observes that Rivendell

is clearly inspired by the Cottage of Lost Play which had appeared in the frame story of *The Book of Lost Tales* where ‘old tales, old songs, and elfin <sic> music are treasured and rehearsed’ [...]—a description strikingly like that of Elrond’s house, which ‘was perfect, whether you liked food or sleep or work or storytelling or singing or just sitting and thinking best’ [...]. (119)

The house of Father Christmas is also located in a remote place: the North Pole. Accompanying the first Christmas letter in 1920 is a drawing of his house. Situated among barren snow-covered hills, sparse evergreens, and icy-white pillars is an inviting little cottage with warm red lights which line the path and shine from the windows (FCL 7). When Father Christmas needs a new house in 1925, he builds it on an even more barren cliff-top, but re-creates the cozy cottage-exterior, complete with warm red lights (FCL 15). And while today’s popular depictions of the North Pole focus on activities in the toy workshop, Tolkien’s Christmas letters are filled with accounts of hosting guests, feasting, storytelling, dancing, playing games, and sleeping, all of which are reminiscent of Rivendell and the Cottage of Lost Play.

Another analog appears in the children’s story *Roverandom*, which Tolkien wrote down around 1927. There, dreaming children are brought to play in a twilight garden on the dark side of the moon. And though the Cottage of Lost Play and the moon garden are destinations for children, Rivendell is an abode of the elves, and the North Pole a place where fabled characters live, they are all

manifestations of the same enduring vision: a remote, sheltered place that welcomes travelers, where a sense of play and childlike wonder flourish.

“Fairy Things.” A second example of the influence Tolkien’s early works had on both *The Hobbit* and the *Father Christmas Letters* is the depiction of elves and goblins. The popular view of Tolkien’s elves, according to fantasy literature scholar Dimitra Fimi, is “a higher race of beings, immortal, with exceeding beauty, wisdom and a strange grief” (10). Contrast this view with the more playful elves present in some of Tolkien’s early works. In one of his earliest poems, “Wood-Sunshine” (1910), he wrote of “light fairy things tripping so gay” and dancing “Sprites of the wood” (Carpenter 47). In the poem “Goblin Feet” (1915), Tolkien described “pretty little flittermice” (i.e. bats), “dancing goblin feet!” and the “padding feet of many gnomes a-coming!” (*The Annotated Hobbit* [Annotated] 113n10). This image of “fairy things” was not derived from the medieval Northern European sources which inspired Galadriel and Elrond, but from late Victorian and Edwardian conceptions of fairies and elves.³ As early as 1939, Tolkien is known to have disparaged this Victorian image of “fluttering sprites with antennae” (“OFS” 111) and “diminished [...] fancies either pretty or silly” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] App. F.1137). Yet the elves of Rivendell, when readers first meet them in *The Hobbit*, and the elves and gnomes of the North Pole, could be described as “light fairy things tripping so gay.”

There are several varieties of elves in the *Father Christmas Letters*—Snow-elves, Red Gnomes, red and green elves—all of whom are small in stature and are routinely associated with parties and playfulness. Father Christmas invites hundreds of elves and red gnomes to his Boxing Day party each year. At a Bonfire described in the 1929 letter, mischievous Snow-elves light off hundreds of Christmas rockets (32). The Red Elves “are very nice and great fun; but [...] they turn everything into a game. Even digging snow. And they will play with the toys they are supposed to be packing” (70). Imagine Elrond or the Elvenking of Mirkwood cavorting with toy railroad cars, stuffed bears, or silver sparklers. The North Polar elves are clearly a different sort of elf than the “higher race of beings” Tolkien describes in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*.

Elves are not the only diminutive and playful race in the Christmas letters; the goblins, too, could have come right out of Tolkien’s earliest poetry with its little dancing goblins and flying flittermice. In 1932, Father Christmas writes how goblins “love mechanical toys (though they quickly smash them)” (57). The 1933 Christmas letter describes a battle between the Red Gnomes and goblins small enough to ride bats (61). Fimi notes similarities between “Goblin

³ In Tolkien’s early writings, he often used the words “fairies,” “elves,” and “gnomes” interchangeably.

Feet” and George Cruikshank’s 19th-century watercolor *A Fantasy: The Fairy Ring*, which depicts tiny fairies dancing around a toadstool, and a small black goblin riding a bat (14). What is most striking for the present discussion is that Tolkien’s own illustrations for the 1932 and 1933 Christmas letters feature tiny black goblins nearly identical to Cruikshank’s.⁴ They battle equally-small red-clad gnomes. Father Christmas emphasizes the goblins’ diminutiveness by commenting that “Goblins are to us very much what rats are to you” (52).

The Rivendell elves of *The Hobbit*, on the other hand, are not especially diminutive; as the text says, “a tall young fellow, came out from the trees” (*H* III.47). However, they are laughing and playful like Tolkien’s fay folk from “Wood-Sunshine” and “Goblin Feet.” When Thorin’s Company first descends into the valley, the elves are singing from the treetops “O! tra-la-la-lally” (“and pretty fair nonsense” the narrator calls it [*H* III.46]). They playfully tease Thorin about his long beard and Bilbo for being too fat (*H* III.48). In Rivendell, on Bilbo’s return journey to Bag End, the elves serenade him loudly enough to “waken a drunken goblin!” (*H* XIX.271). Interestingly, both of Tolkien’s competing conceptions of elves are present in *The Hobbit* and, in fact, live side by side. Elrond, The Master of Rivendell, is described as “noble and as fair in face as an elf-lord, as strong as a warrior, as wise as a wizard, as venerable as a king of dwarves, and as kind as summer” (*H* III.49). He represents Tolkien’s “medieval,” higher race of elves. Fimi notes, “The Victorian fairies came to be more and more associated with a spirit of carefreeness, gaiety and whimsy, which could not fit Tolkien’s scheme for a serious mythology with the Elves as the main tragic figures” (22). And so Tolkien’s fairy-elves gradually disappeared from his works, with *The Hobbit* and the *Father Christmas Letters* representing some of their final appearances. Ultimately, it is the serious Elves who survived into *The Lord of the Rings*, where both Elves and goblins (i.e. Orcs) increased in gravitas over their counterparts in *The Hobbit* and the Christmas letters.

Invented languages. Tolkien wrote that his mythology and legends of the Elder Days (i.e. the Lost Tales) were “primarily linguistic in inspiration and [were] begun in order to provide the necessary background of ‘history’ for Elvish tongues” (*LotR*, “Foreword” xxii). Tolkien also worked his invented languages and scripts into *The Hobbit* and the Christmas letters. In *The Hobbit*, Thorin’s Map features dwarf runes that read “Five feet high the door and three may walk abreast” (*H* I.20). The map also hides secret moon-runes which instruct the dwarves to “Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks [on] Durin’s Day” (*H* III.50). Elf runes on the swords found in the trolls’ lair identify them as Orcrist

⁴ A color reproduction of George Cruikshank’s painting *A Fantasy: The Fairy Ring* (c.1850) is reprinted with permission in Fimi (15).

("Goblin-cleaver") and Glamdring ("Foe-hammer"), legendary swords of the High Elves of Gondolin (*H* III.49).

In the 1929 Christmas letter, North Polar Bear writes to the children in his native language, which utilizes a runic script. He notes (with his idiosyncratic spelling), "we always rite ↑ for T and V for U. This is sum Arktik langwidge wich means 'Goodby till I see you next and I hope it will bee soon' . . . Mára mesta an ni véla tye ento, ya rato nea" (31). Paul Nolan Hyde concluded that the Arctic language, though having similarities to Spanish, was ultimately "an ursine dialect of Quenya" (26). In 1937, Father Christmas's elven secretary, Ilbereth, writes "A very merry Christmas to you all" using an Elvish script (*FCL* 87). Hyde determined that Ilbereth was using a form of simplified Sindarin Tengwar with primarily phonetic spelling (24). Polar Bear appends a paragraph to Ilbereth's message, announcing "my turn" using Old Norse runic script, but writing in English (*FCL* 87).

From homely houses to playful elves and invented languages and scripts, Tolkien adapted several elements clearly originating in his own Lost Tales and poems to the worlds of *The Hobbit* and the *Father Christmas Letters*. But there are more relationships, and some suggest direct borrowing back and forth between the two worlds.

Influence of *The Hobbit* on the *Father Christmas Letters*

The second way the *Father Christmas Letters* are related to *The Hobbit* is that they contain some *Hobbit*-ish characters, settings and plotlines. This was not a unique practice: Tolkien drew upon other works he was writing about the same time he wrote some of the Christmas letters. In the 1926 letter, for instance, the Man-in-the-Moon falls into Father Christmas's back garden in an echo of Tolkien's 1923 poem "Why the Man in the Moon came down too soon."⁵ Scull and Hammond note the relationship between the 1927 Christmas letter and *Roverandom* (written c.1927, but in existence as an oral story since 1925). In both stories the Man-in-the-Moon uses magic to drive marauding white moon dragons back into their holes (Tolkien, *Roverandom*, xii-xiii). Tolkien also drew upon *The Hobbit*. As Rateliff observes, the tone of the 1932 and 1933 Christmas letters "suddenly becomes very like that of *The Hobbit* with the introduction of goblins to the series [...] whom they defeat with a combination of Father Christmas's magic, the combat prowess of a great bear, and the aid of their elven allies the Red Gnomes" (xvi).

⁵ This poem was originally published in *A Northern Venture: Verses by Members of the Leeds University English School Association* in 1923. It was more famously revised in 1962 for publication in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. The original text of the poem was reprinted in *BLT* I.204-206.

Goblin Caves. In the “Riddles in the Dark” chapter of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo falls down and gets lost in the pitch dark goblin caves. Likewise, in the 1932 Christmas letter, Polar Bear falls into hidden caves and “almost at once he smelt goblin!” (50). Certainly, the two cave adventures are quite different—for instance, there is no analog in the Christmas letters for Bilbo’s riddle contest against Gollum—but there are several striking similarities. Bilbo and the dwarves are carried away by goblins through a crack in the cave wall (*H* IV.57); Polar Bear gets lost in the caves and grows so thin “I should soon have been able to squeeze through a goblin-crack” (*FCL* 52). Gandalf extinguishes the great fire causing “a tower of blue glowing smoke” to confound the Misty Mountain goblins and cause them to flee (*H* IV.61); Father Christmas sends his “patent green luminous smoke down the tunnel” to make the North Polar goblins flee (*FCL* 57). Bilbo finds himself in a seemingly endless dark tunnel with passages that lead off to the sides (*H* V.67); Polar Bear finds himself in “a frightful dark part, all full of different passages” (*FCL* 52). Gollum inadvertently leads Bilbo to “the back-door” out of the mountain (*H* V.80); Cave Bear “offered to take Polar Bear to his private back-door” (*FCL* 52). Rateliff also identifies the small creature peering from behind a stone pillar and the red dragon painted on the cave wall in the 1932 Christmas picture as Gollum and Smaug (xvi).

The Battle of Five Armies. In the climactic chapters of *The Hobbit*, the dwarves, men and elves are besieged at the Lonely Mountain by hordes of wolf-riding goblins and a swarm of vampire-like bats, thick as “a sea of locusts” (*H* XVII.255). Rateliff compares this scene to a description of the North Pole’s worst goblin attack in centuries, as related in the 1933 Christmas letter (630). Polar Bear estimates there were a thousand goblins (*FCL* 61), some of whom rode bats. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf calls the armies together “in a voice like thunder, and his staff blazed forth with a flash like the lightning” (*H* XVII.255). Later, Gandalf is seen preparing “some last blast of magic before the end” (*H* XVII.260). In the 1933 Christmas letter, Polar Bear tells how Father Christmas battled the goblins with “Litening and fierworks [*sic*] and thunder of guns!” (62). In *The Hobbit*, the shape-changer Beorn arrives “in bear’s shape; and he seemed to have grown almost to giant-size in his wrath. The roar of his voice was like drums and guns; and he tossed wolves and goblins from his path like straw and feathers” (*H* XVIII.264). In the 1933 Christmas letter, Polar Bear charges in “squeezing, squashing, trampling, boxing and kicking goblins skyhigh, and roaring like a zoo” (61). Polar Bear also grows to giant size, becoming twice as tall in the 1933 Christmas picture as he was in the one from 1932.

Rateliff and Tom Shippey note the relationship between *The Hobbit*’s Beorn and the warrior were-bears of Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon literature. Bothvar Bjarki, of the Norse *Bjarkamál*, was a man who could project his spirit

into battle as a great bear (Rateliff 256). Beowulf's name is commonly explained as "bees' wolf," in other words, a honey-eater, a bear, "who breaks swords, rips off arms, and crack ribs with ursine power and clumsiness" (Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, 80). The Old English word "beorn" and the Old Norse "bjorn" also mean "bear." Tolkien's passion for the *Beowulf* poem manifested itself early on. He began an alliterative translation of the poem while a professor at Leeds between 1920 and 1925. And sometime after 1925, having won the Anglo-Saxon chair at Oxford, he produced a prose translation which was corrected by C.S. Lewis (Drout, "Beowulf: Translations by Tolkien" 61). Thus, there is a well-established connection between Tolkien and *Beowulf* well before summer 1930-January 1933, Rateliff's estimated dates for the writing of *The Hobbit* manuscript (xx). Of course, Tolkien was by no means finished with the poem after writing *The Hobbit*, as Tolkien scholar Michael Drout states that Tolkien most likely began work on what would become his seminal lecture "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" in 1934 (Drout, "Beowulf and the Critics" 56).

Beorn's battle scene in *The Hobbit* was written, then, no later than January 1933, about a year prior to Polar Bear's great battle scene written in December 1933. Given the prominently similar descriptions of their respective battles, it seems likely that Beorn influenced the evolution of North Polar Bear from comic sidekick (prior to 1932) to warrior hero in the 1933 letter, just as Bjarki and Beowulf contributed to the development of Beorn.

There are, of course, important differences between the two battles. In the Christmas letters there are no wolves, and the goblins are small enough to ride bats (61). There are no armies of dwarves, men, or eagles, and the elves are sometimes still called "gnomes." Tolkien isn't cloning *The Hobbit's* Battle of Five Armies in the Christmas letters, though he is using the same "soup stock," that is, different characters, but similar character-types: a thunder-and-lightning magician, a fierce warrior bear, hoards of goblins, and an army of elves. The 1932 and 1933 Christmas letters were created at the same time Tolkien was thought to be writing *The Hobbit*, so it might be impossible to determine whether one was the source of the other or if they were co-eval. Yet, the previous lack of goblins in the Christmas letters, and the sudden change in the letters' scope and tone in these years suggests that the letters owe something to *The Hobbit* rather than the other way around.

Influence of the *Father Christmas Letters* on *The Hobbit*

While there is a strong case that *The Hobbit* influenced the storylines of certain Christmas letters, did the borrowing go both ways? What elements, if any, did the *Father Christmas Letters* inspire in *The Hobbit*? There are a few familiar *Hobbit* story elements which appeared in the Christmas letters prior to

Tolkien's writing of *The Hobbit*, and these may suggest a bilateral exchange between these works.

Fiery Wizards. The first and most important contribution that the *Father Christmas Letters* may have made to *The Hobbit* concerns wizards. Tolkien's most famous wizard, of course, is Gandalf. The Gandalf we find in *The Hobbit*, though, is quite a different character from the later Gandalf of *The Lord of the Rings*—that later Gandalf is a Maia, one of the Istari, and a ring-bearer. In the first draft of *The Hobbit*, the wizard wasn't even called "Gandalf" but "Bladorthin" who Rateliff calls "very much a traditional fairy-tale enchanter [...] rescuing 'many princesses, earls, dukes, widow's sons and fair maidens' and slaying 'unlamented giants', exactly what we would expect of a hero from one of the old stories" (51). He is described as "a little old man with a tall pointed blue hat, a long grey cloak, a silver scarf over which his long white beard hung down below his waist, and immense black boots [...] very long bushy eyebrows" (Rateliff 30).

Tolkien stated in a 1946 letter that he thought of Gandalf as an "Odinic wanderer" (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 119), that is, a figure like the Norse god Odin. While there are key differences (Odin, for instance, had only one eye and was accompanied by ravens), physical similarities can be seen in Georg von Rosen's 1886 painting of "Odin, the Wanderer" where the god is portrayed as an old man with a pointed hat, white beard and bushy eyebrows. But Gandalf had other influences as well. Douglas A. Anderson notes that Tolkien kept a postcard reproduction of a late-1920s painting by Josef Madlener entitled "Der Berggeist" ("The Mountain Spirit") depicting an old man with a white beard, a long red cloak, and wide-brimmed round hat, which Tolkien annotated "Origin of Gandalf" (*Annotated* 36n14).

But Bladorthin/Gandalf was not Tolkien's first wizard. Rateliff wrote that "Tolkien's early work was filled with wizards" (697). He calls Tû (or Túvo), from the 1920-21 "Gilfanon's Tale," Tolkien's "very first wizard" (Rateliff 50). Tolkien wrote that Tû "was more skilled in magics than any that have dwelt ever yet beyond the land of Valinor" (*BLT I* 232). In an early outline of the tale, Túvo met Melko in the halls of Mandos during Melko's enchantment, and there learned "much black magic," though Tolkien struck out this last phrase (*BLT I* 234). Rateliff states that Tû/ Túvo is not an evil character, yet Tû does "set up a wizard kingship in the middle lands [i.e. Middle-earth]" (*BLT I* 234), and those who seek power in Tolkien's works are usually shadowy, if not downright corrupt. Furthermore, the evolution of Tû/ Túvo can be traced into Thu the Necromancer and finally into Sauron, the Dark Lord of Mordor.

Túvo, then, is Sauron's predecessor, not Gandalf's. Gandalf does, though, share similarities with Tolkien's early fairy-tale enchanters. Tolkien is known to have written a Man-in-the-Moon poem in 1915 (*BLT I* 202), possibly

“The Man in the Moon came down too soon,” which was first published in 1923 (*BLT I* 204). Here the Man is not a wizard: he performs no magic and his “fairy cloak” suggests he is an elf. In “The Tale of the Sun and Moon” (written c.1916-1919), the Man is named Uolë Kúvion and he is specifically called “an aged Elf with hoary locks” who dwells in a white turret on the Moon (*BLT I* 192-3). In 1927, he evolves into a wizard. In *Roverandom*, the Man-in-the-Moon is called “the greatest of all the magicians” (21). In the 1927 Christmas letter, he uses “freezing magics” to drive the moon dragons back to their holes (*FCL* 22). There are other fairy-tale wizards in *Roverandom* as well: Artaxerxes the wandering wizard, and Psamathos the sand-sorcerer, who are both irascible old men.

In 1920—ten years before he began writing *The Hobbit* and five years before the oral origins of *Roverandom*—Tolkien began to develop his first fairy-tale enchanter, Father Nicholas Christmas, and Gandalf shares a number of remarkable similarities with him. In physical appearance, Tolkien’s Father Christmas is, like Gandalf, a little old man with a tall pointed hat, a long cloak, a long white beard, bushy eyebrows and immense black boots. In one early drawing entitled “Riding down into Rivendell,” Tolkien even colors Gandalf’s cloak *red*, like Father Christmas’s, rather than Gandalf’s trademark grey (see Hammond and Scull 42). Both Gandalf and Father Christmas share a perceived resemblance to the Norse Odin. In addition, Tolkien portrays both Gandalf and Father Christmas as rather kindly, though sometimes exasperated, short-tempered old men. And though the word “wizard” is only used once in the *Father Christmas Letters*, in 1931 (44), which post-dates Tolkien’s earliest work on *The Hobbit*, early letters show that Tolkien’s Father Christmas was magical. In the 1923 Christmas letter, he claims to be over nineteen hundred years old, and he is able to travel hundreds of miles in one night (8). In 1925, he has “magic wishing crackers” (12). In 1929, he says that his “magic is strongest—at Christmas” (34). Furthermore, the Tolkien children considered Father Christmas to be a wizard: “Michael Tolkien recounts that the wizard ‘Kimpu’ in the family apocrypha derived his name from young Priscilla’s best attempt to say ‘Father Christmas’” (Rateliff xxxvi).

Both Gandalf and Father Christmas are also members of wizard families. Just as Gandalf refers to the wizard Radagast as “my good cousin” (*H* VII.111), Father Christmas mentions “my green brother and my father, old Grandfather Yule” in the 1930 letter (39). In 1931, Father Christmas writes that he and his Green Brother have collected food, clothes, and toys for the poor children whose families “cannot give them anything, sometimes not even dinner” (42). In the long letter of 1932, he mentions that his green trousers were a present from his green brother (55). Rogers and Rogers thought this “Green Brother” could be the personification of the summer solstice (quoted in Kapelle 199) just as Father Christmas is the personification of winter. Such a “Green Man” figure—the

embodiment of ancient springtime fertility myths—is certainly found in Tolkien’s Cauldron of Story, for instance, as the Green Knight. Tolkien first read the Middle English alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* at King Edward’s School, and in 1925 he edited with E.V. Gordon a definitive edition of the text (Seaman 615-616). But it is just as possible that Tolkien’s Green Brother is the personification of the older, green-robed and holly-wreathed image of Father Christmas, as in John Leech’s 1843 illustration of the Ghost of Christmas Present. After all, the Ghost tells Scrooge he has more than eighteen hundred brothers (Dickens 40). Additionally, both Tolkien’s red and green brothers are concerned with giving charity to the poor, as was traditional at Christmastime. (Recall the two gentlemen who call on Scrooge seeking donations during the festive season to “make some slight provision for the poor and destitute” [Dickens 11]). The Green Brother might have been Tolkien’s explanation to his children why Victorian pictures of Father Christmas showed him wearing green robes. Grandfather Yule, whose name is also Nicholas “after the Saint” (FCL 39), might, then, refer to the pre-Victorian image of the mid-winter spirit (Kapelle 199).

Table 1. Tolkien’s early wizards and antecedents.

Wizard	Appeared in	Date
The Man in the Moon (as a fairy or elf)	“Why the Man in the Moon came down too soon”	written March 1915 (?); published 1923
Uolë Kúvion (The Man in the Moon, as an Elf)	“Tale of the Sun and Moon,” <i>Book of Lost Tales I</i>	c.1916-1919
Father Christmas	<i>Father Christmas Letters</i>	Christmas 1920-1943
Tû/Túvo the wizard	“Gilfanon’s Tale,” <i>Book of Lost Tales I</i>	late 1920-1921 (?)
The Man-in-the-Moon (as a wizard), Artaxerxes the wandering wizard, Psamathos the sand- sorcerer	<i>Roverandom</i>	Christmas 1927 (?)
The Man-in-the-Moon (as a wizard)	<i>Father Christmas Letters</i>	Christmas 1927
Father Christmas’s Green Brother and father, Old Grandfather Yule	<i>Father Christmas Letters</i>	Christmas 1930-1932
Bladorthin (later called Gandalf)	<i>The Hobbit</i>	c.1930

The smoking gun (or smoking firework in this case) that Father Christmas may have been one of the inspirations for *The Hobbit's* Gandalf is Tolkien's coupling of wizards with explosive devices. The Man-in-the-Moon used rockets against the White Dragon in *Roverandom* (35). In the first *Hobbit* draft, Bilbo remarked "Bladorthin? Let me see—not the wandering wizard [...] who made such particularly [*sic*] excellent fireworks (I remember them! Old Took used to let us have them on Midsummer's Eve. Splendid! They used to go up like great lilies and snapdragons and laburnums of fire and hang in the twilight all evening) dear me!" (Rateliff 31). Throughout *The Hobbit*, Gandalf uses his pyrotechnics several times. Inside the goblins' Front Porch, he attacks with "a terrific flash like lightning in the cave, a smell like gunpowder, and several of them fell dead" (*H* IV.57). When trapped by wolves, Gandalf "gathered the huge pine-cones from the branches of his tree. Then he set one alight with bright blue fire [...]. Then another came and another, one in blue flames, one in red, another in green" (*H* VI.95-96). Just before the Battle of Five Armies, Gandalf orders the elves and dwarves to stop fighting each other. "'Halt!' he called in a voice like thunder, and his staff blazed forward like the lightning" (*H* XVII.255). Bilbo even notes that "Gandalf had made a special study of bewitchments with fire and lights" (*H* VI.89).

But Father Christmas was a master of fire and light before either the Man-in-the-Moon or Gandalf. In 1925, he makes "magic wishing crackers" (*FCL* 12). In 1926, when the North Polar Bear accidentally sets off two years' worth of Father Christmas's "Rory Bory Aylis" fireworks, the results are "the biggest bang in the world, and the most monstrous firework there has ever been" (*FCL* 16). In 1929, the Snow-elves let off hundreds of rockets at once, and Polar Bear lights 20,000 silver sparklers (*FCL* 32), and in 1931, Polar Bear "let his candle fall right POOF! into [the] firework crackers and boxes of sparklers" (*FCL* 42) causing yet another explosion. Polar Bear may frequently be the agent of destruction, but the text is always clear that the volatile devices belong to Father Christmas. There are additional references to explosives and fireworks in later Christmas letters which either coincide with or post-date the writing of *The Hobbit*. But, it is evident from the early letters that Tolkien's first master of pyrotechnics was Father Christmas.

The history of the English Christmas cracker dates back to 1847, when businessman Tom Smith engineered his Christmas bon-bons to *pop* with a small chemical explosion upon breaking open the wrapping (Tom Smith Crackers). Pulling crackers at Christmas, then, was a well-established tradition by the time Tolkien began writing his Christmas letters in 1920. Fireworks, on the other hand, were traditionally associated with Guy Fawkes Night (November 5th) rather than Christmas. Julie Anne Broadhead of Epic Fireworks, the largest online fireworks retailer in the United Kingdom, says that fireworks were historically used in England at various major celebrations—Henry VIII and

Elizabeth I, for instance, had fireworks masters, and Brocks Fireworks provided a regular display at the Crystal Palace starting in 1826—however, “I have not discovered any indication of Fireworks being used at Christmas in the UK by general consumers” (E-mail). Christmas fireworks were not traditional in Tolkien’s time. Broadhead adds, “I firmly believe that the fireworks detailed in Tolkien’s works in ‘Father Christmas’s Letters’ are referring to the Northern Lights.” Father Christmas’s penchant for “fire and light” may, then, be Tolkien’s own addition to the Christmas legend. It certainly prefigures Gandalf’s facility with explosives, and perhaps inspired it. Gandalf isn’t Father Christmas, but from physical appearance, temperament, and his mastery of fire and light, it seems that Tolkien’s unique characterization of Father Christmas did influence Gandalf’s early development.

Playful Bears. Another way in which the *Father Christmas Letters* may have influenced the development of *The Hobbit* concerns bears. The North Polar Bear’s real name, Karhu, is Finnish for “bear” (as Beorn’s and Beowulf’s names also mean “bear”). But aside from name meaning, Father Christmas’s sidekick was primarily a comic foil until his 1932-33 transformation into a goblin-kicking warrior. As discussed earlier, Polar Bear’s development that year is likely related to Tolkien’s writing of the Beorn chapters of *The Hobbit* about the same time. And, though Beorn can trace his literary lineage to Beowulf and Bjarki, Beorn also possesses some characteristics not evident in those serious Northern werebears, namely, a mocking sense of humor and a love of play. Those are character traits found, however, in early depictions of North Polar Bear.

Karhu first appeared in the 1925 Christmas letter, five years before Rateliff believes Tolkien began writing *The Hobbit*. Aside from a brief mention of Eriol’s uncle Beorn in a 1910s sketchbook (*BLT I 23*)—no apparent relation to *The Hobbit*’s Beorn—this makes Karhu Tolkien’s first bear character, and certainly the first one that is well-developed. In the pre-*Hobbit* Christmas letters, Karhu is played for laughs. He breaks the actual North Pole, breaks his own leg, sets off the world’s largest firework, breaks the moon into four pieces, sets the reindeer loose, freezes the skin off his nose, gets the Man-in-the-Moon passed-out drunk, falls down the stairs and smashes piles of Christmas presents—and that’s all just in the four letters from 1925-1928.

Beorn has characteristics which echo Karhu’s humorous side. Beorn growls, frowns, speaks gruffly and is “never very polite” (*H VII.112*), but he also has a “great rolling laugh” (*H VII.110*) and can be merry. After Beorn beheads a goblin and skins a Warg, he is “most jolly for a change; indeed he seemed to be in a splendidly good humour and set them all laughing with his funny stories” (*H VII.122*). He mocks Bilbo: “‘Not eaten up by Wargs or goblins or wicked bears yet I see’; and he poked Mr. Baggins’ waistcoat most disrespectfully. ‘Little bunny is

getting nice and fat again on bread and honey,' he chuckled" (H VII.122). Polar Bear also speaks gruffly and is impolite. In the 1926 letter, he interjects that Father Christmas is "Rude!" and mocks his shaky handwriting (FCL 16). In the 1927 and 1928 letters, he carries on a grumpy running commentary on Father Christmas's version of events at the North Pole (FCL 20-25). He also exhibits a teasing sense of humor, as in 1926 when he accidentally sets off the Northern Lights: "Father Christmas [...] is old and gets worried when funny things happen. You would have laughed too! I think it is good of me laughing. It was a lovely firework. The reindeer will run quick to England this year. They are still frightened! . . ." (FCL 16). The closest that Beowulf comes to this is a battle of words with Hrothgar's thegn—

Friend Unferth, fuddled with beer you've been babbling away about Breca's deeds [...] Breca has never, and neither have you, known such success in battle (I scorn to boast of it!) though it is quite clear that you killed your brothers, your own kinsmen: an evil deed for which, friend Unferth, you will one day roast shamefully in hell, shrewd though you are. (Ringer 30, 33)

Mocking, yes; humorous no, at least not to modern readers. This is serious male posturing and not the friendly ribbing Polar Bear gives Father Christmas, or Beorn gives to Bilbo.

Furthermore, Karhu and Beorn both enjoy dancing and parties. As early as 1929, Karhu is shown dancing in the margins of that year's illustration. He continues to dance, as in the 1932, 1937 and 1940 illustrations. Likewise, Beorn hosts a meeting of "little bears, large bears, ordinary bears, and gigantic big bears, all dancing outside from dark to nearly dawn" (H VII.121). The letters are also filled with accounts of Polar Bear entertaining guests at Christmas with feasting and gameplay. Near the end of *The Hobbit*, Beorn invites Gandalf and Bilbo to his house for Yuletide; it "was warm and merry there; and men came from far and wide to feast at Beorn's bidding" (H XVIII.268). Just as Beorn apparently contributed to Karhu's later development as a warrior, the early, comic Karhu may have contributed his mocking humor and playfulness to Beorn.

There are more relationships between *The Hobbit* and the *Father Christmas Letters* than can be discussed here. Additional analysis could be done on the similar narrative voice and episodic structure which exist in both works. The early, pre-*Hobbit* Christmas letters have been of special interest here, but what might be revealed from a similar analysis of the later letters? And, as has

been implicit in the present discussion, a comparison of *Roverandom* with both *The Hobbit* and the Christmas letters may also prove enlightening.

Fans and scholars of Tolkien have long been interested in his creative process—how he thought and wrote and developed his legendarium. Examining the interrelationships between different works gives us insight into this process and reveals how a storyteller can create new stories from similar story elements—new soup from old bones. Homely houses, “Victorian” elves and goblins, and Tolkien’s invented languages can all be traced back to his early Lost Tales and poems. Goblin caves and the wars between elves and goblins were, most likely, borrowed into the Christmas letters from Tolkien’s work on *The Hobbit*. And a few story elements—the development of fiery wizards and playful bears—appeared in the Christmas letters prior to their use in *The Hobbit*, and may have inspired their incorporation in that story. Tolkien’s creations were interrelated, and studying the lesser-known works like the *Father Christmas Letters* can shed meaningful light on the development of his more famous works, such as *The Hobbit*, even if that light is only small and red, glowing warmly from the windows of a little cottage at the North Pole.

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Image: "The Second of the Three Spirits" by John Leech, 1843.
Wood engraving for *A Christmas Carol*.
Scanned by Phillip V. Allingham for *The Victorian Web*.