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Reviews

The Great War Through Film: An Aggregated Film Review of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, *1917* and *Tolkien*

By Sara Haden and Kenya Ortiz Carrillo

Over the last two years, audiences have been treated to an abundance of films about The Great War, in commemoration of its 100-year anniversary. A wide array of films such as a documentary, a biographical drama, and an epic war story gave moviegoers several chances to enjoy different kinds of stories about the war. The variety in these types of films not only tells the story of this significant event in history from different perspectives, but it helps paint a more complete picture of the war and the people who fought in it. *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a documentary about the firsthand experiences of the soldiers in the Great War. *1917* is a dramatization of the experience of two soldiers, Lance Corporal William Schofield and Tom Blake, in the war. Finally, *Tolkien* uses the life of famous author J.R.R. Tolkien in the war to show how his experiences helped him create his famous fantasy setting Middle Earth. Though *Tolkien* and *1917* do sport some historical inaccuracies, when used in tandem with the first-hand accounts of *They Shall Not Grow Old*, these three movies as a whole can be used to understand the effects of The Great War on the soldiers who fought in it.

They Shall Not Grow Old

They Shall Not Grow Old, directed by Peter Jackson, was initially released in the United Kingdom on October 16, 2018, before airing

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on BBC Two for the centennial anniversary of the Armistice on November 11, 2018, and having a limited release in the United States. This film is a documentary about the firsthand experiences of the soldiers in The Great War, shown through voice-overs and largely never-before-seen film of the war from the Imperial War Museum's archives that have now been colorized and restored. The film also uses both war photographs and propaganda posters throughout its entirety, which suit the narrators' stories. The stories told by the soldiers vary from the day-to-day life of being in the British army to the more devastating stories of the frontlines. The film conveys a more realistic version of the war, from the viewpoints of the people who actually lived through it all, giving the audience a chance to see what it was truly like as if they were there.

The soldiers' narration adds a sense of commonality and relatability to the vision that most of the viewers have of The Great War as being one of glory and not of devastation. The film begins with the start of the war in 1914, when it was announced that Britain declared war on Germany, and many of the men talked about their enlistment stories, including lying about their ages, being eager to enlist, and even of the recruitment officers encouraging them. It continues on with other such stories that occurred in their day-to-day lives while serving in the British army. The film focuses on this until the topic shifts to stories about when the soldiers had to charge out of the trenches. From there, the soldiers' commentary differs from the preceding stories as they are no longer stories, but rather their feelings during those moments engaging in war. From the battlefield assaults to the aftermath of it all, the film shows the horrors of the vast cruelties of the war.

The addition of having the original film footage restored and in color gives the audience a glimpse into the reality that the soldiers faced during the Great War and leaves the audience with a connection to the soldiers' experiences. The colorization and restoration of the footage brings the stories to life as "the clarity

was such that these soldiers came alive.”¹ The beginning of the film shows the war footage in its original black and white, until the footage of the soldiers in the battlefield trenches changes into the restored, colorized footage that is then shown throughout the film. Towards the end of the film, the end of the war is shown with the return of the soldiers in England, and the footage changes back to the original unrestored version. This change in film usage was brought about because of the film’s budget, since “the budget we had was to colorize about 30 to 40 minutes of film” and Jackson did not want a “jump straight into the trenches,” so he left the film with the restored footage bookended by the original footage.²

Throughout the film, the stories paint a realistic and ugly picture of what the war was truly like, as though the audience is the once optimistic and bright-eyed boys who went off to a war and saw the harsh realities of a changing battlefield, from the previous wars. The film effectively transmits the idea that, while there were times of laughter and a sense of normality, there were also times of destruction and horror from the new warfare tactics of mustard gas and machine guns. The director’s change in footage color, and even the editing in making the footage appear more modern, helps to give a face and a voice to the countless soldiers who fought in the war, and to humanize them instead of only being known as numbers in history books.

1917

1917, directed by Sam Mendes, had a limited release on December 25, 2019 in the United States, before being released worldwide on January 10, 2020. The film’s plot revolves around two young soldiers, George MacKay as Lance Corporal Schofield and Dean-Charles Chapman as Lance Corporal Blake. The two are tasked with a seemingly impossible mission to deliver an urgent message

¹ Mekado Murphy, “How Peter Jackson Made WWI Footage Seem Astonishingly New With ‘They Shall Not Grow Old,’” *New York Times* (December 16, 2018).

² Ibid.

that would prevent hundreds of soldiers from walking into a trap laid by the Germans. Director Sam Mendes is able to bring the audience into the year of 1917, through the use of cinematography that makes it seem as if it was a real-time story, as Roger Deakins, the cinematographer, said when he read the script, "...That was a bit of a shock, but I read the script, and it seemed like an interesting way to tell the story. It wasn't a tacked-on gimmick."³ The film also begins and ends with the same shot of George MacKay's character resting against a tree, bringing a sense of routine to the extraordinary story. Director Mendes aimed to bring The Great War feel "like it happened yesterday" and the single-shot cinematography played a big role in achieving that goal.⁴

Mendes' story is not just a "guns and explosions" war story, it tries to make Lance Corporals Blake and Schofield's realities, the reality of war, more tangible to their audience. One of the ways he accomplishes this is by drawing stark differences between the two characters' views on their place in the war. Blake puts a high value on honor and glory, seen in his hopes for a medal and his refusal to shoot a wounded German pilot. On the other side of the spectrum, Schofield just wants to survive. Through a conversation between the two, we learn the Schofield has traded a medal that Blake covets for a bottle of wine, making it seem that he sees little value in honor in war. Blake loses his life trying to be an honorable soldier and saving an enemy, while Schofield lives to the end doing the opposite.

While the characters of Lance Corporals Blake and Schofield are fictional, their journey and struggle is grounded in a historical account. Mendes based the story of *1917* on stories his grandfather would tell him as a boy. Mendes said that one story his grandfather told him always stuck with him, and he stated in an interview with *Variety* that "It's the story of a messenger who has a message to carry. And that's all I can say. It lodged with me as a

³ Bruce Fretts, "'1917' and the Challenge of Making a Film Look Like a Single Shot," *New York Times* (January 29, 2020).

⁴"*1917*'s Sam Mendes: I Wanted to Make the War Feel Vivid, like It Happened Yesterday," *The Irish News* (January 8, 2020).

child, this story or this fragment, and obviously I've enlarged it and changed it significantly. But it has that at its core." Mendes used this "fragment" of a story in tandem with actual facts and occurrences of The Great War to tell an epic war tale that is just as true as it is made up. So, while the story is fictional, it does have the ability to immerse its audience in the reality of its characters, the reality of The Great War. Because of this, *1917* has solidified its place as one of the best Great War films to date.

Tolkien

The 2019 biographical drama and period piece *Tolkien* tells the story of Oxford Professor and author John Ronald Ruel Tolkien. Finnish Director Dome Karukoski intertwines stories of the famous fantasy author's boyhood friendships and budding romance with future wife Edith Bratt with his experience in The Great War, illustrating how these disparate sources inspired his works, especially *The Lord of the Rings*. Starring Nicholas Holt as Tolkien as a young adult, the viewer is treated to just under two hours of the wit and wonder he brings to the character. He shares the screen with actress Lily Collin, who brings a wealth of cynicism and playful encouragement to Holt's character, in her role as Edith Bratt. Holt and Collins are joined in ensemble by Patrick Gibson, Anthony Boyle and Tom Glynn-Carney as Robert Gilson, Geoffrey Smith and Christopher Wisemen respectively – forming the Tea Club, Barrovian Society (T.C.B.S.) and capping off the core of the film's cast.

Encapsulating the life story of someone with as impressive a legacy as J.R.R. Tolkien can be a daunting task. The production team chose to focus on the author's younger years to tell a story of his "chosen family," the T.C.B.S., and how the author drew upon those relationships to write his famous *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Tolkien as a young boy was fascinated by linguistics and surrounded himself with friends, all artistic types like Tolkien himself, of varying artistic interests. The group of young men's shared goal was to change the world through art, which is ironic

when all four boys later join the war effort; an attempt to change the world through combat. The film goes to great lengths to prove the differences between the boys, Tolkien especially, in their upbringing and interests and how through these differences they were able to form a deep, long lasting bond—a fellowship.

Another key piece of Tolkien's "chosen family" is his relationship with future wife Edith Bratt. The film uses Tolkien's relationship with Edith to not only showcase the budding romance that would inspire several archetypal relationships within his storytelling, but to also further press Tolkien's passion for language and talent for worldbuilding within the framework of his passion for Edith. In a scene where he and Edith sneak off to have dinner together, Tolkien talks emphatically about the beauty of words and sounds, specifically the combination of the word "cellar door," to which Edith argues that words themselves are not beautiful, they are beautiful because of what they mean. She then urges him to tell her a story, a story about this "cellar door," to make the word beautiful. And he does, he tells a story with high passion that is reflective of his passion for her.

The film uses The Great War in duality with Tolkien's relationships to define the man that would take the literary world by storm. The warm, rose-tinted scenes with his fellowship and future wife are presented in stark contrast to intermittent segments of Tolkien's experience in combat and war. Reinforcing the importance of relationships in Tolkien's life, his main drive during these war sequences is searching for his friend, Geoffrey Smith, across the frontlines of after having gone several weeks without hearing from him. His desire to find his friend is his driving force, which even sends him over the top of the trench and into no-man's land in the climax of the film. It is there we see Tolkien's encounter with war, a behemoth that must be banded against to defeat. This personification of war is demonstrated with images of Dragons, Nazguls, and Balrogs, familiar figures from *The Lord of the Rings*, into Tolkien's real war experience, and used to make war seem unreal – a thing of fantasy.

Though *Tolkien* does a great job of highlighting how author J.R.R. Tolkien's relationships and experience in The Great War inspired him to write so many genre-shaking works, critics are quick to condemn the film for skirting around the importance of the author's religion in his life. However, it can be argued that the way the film's cinematography plays with light is alluding to his devout Catholic faith, much like the symbolism found in *The Silmarillion*: a guiding light, always there and pushing him on. Regardless, the film holds Tolkien's religion in about as high regard as the author's biography on the official Tolkien Society's website.⁵ So, to condemn the film on that, I believe, is too quick of a sentence. I think the film does a great job of taking a highly revered man and bringing him to a certain level of relatability without undermining how extraordinary he was.

Tolkien is likely not what one would expect when looking for a film about The Great War, it is above all else a biographical period piece. However, *Tolkien* does a fantastic job focusing on how war can help shape the personal experiences of people. The film is arguably more about how one's relationships shape a person -- but Tolkien's relationship played a big part in his life and his experience in the war. The film demonstrates the more human side of war, and that is what makes it a good Great War film.

Conclusion

There is a reason that a hundred years later, we are still making and enjoying movies about The Great War. It is one of the bloodiest struggles in history, and a common somber memory for most of the modern world. We are now in the generations that will not grow up hearing stories from their elders about the war, most of them have passed. We make and enjoy films about The Great War as a way of remembering. *They Shall not Grow Old, 1917* and *Tolkien* are all very human, very "real" stories about The Great War that can be used to understand the experiences and effects of The Great War

⁵"The Tolkien Society." Accessed March 2, 2020, <https://www.tolkienesociety.org/>.

on the soldiers who fought in it. The Great War ended over 100 years ago, but our memory and respect for it has not.

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Author Bios

Sara Haden is an undergraduate student at CSUSB who will be earning her BA in History in June 2020 and was also part of the editing team of this edition of *History in the Making*. She is currently hoping to start a credential program soon to work toward becoming a high school history teacher. She has loved both anime, film, and history for most of her life and is extremely interested in how different stories are told and the effects of those stories. Sara would like to thank the other editors for their help with her pieces, Dr. Jeremy Murray for his guidance and Dr. Tiffany Jones for always encouraging her to go after topics that really excited her.



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