**Upon the world-tree; death, transformation and return in *The Lord of the Rings, The dream of the Rood,* and *Havamal*.**

**Introduction**

This essay is a comparative study of certain elements in the three texts named in the subtitle above: *Havamal*, from the *Elder Edda*; *The Dream of the Rood*; and *The Lord of the Rings*. The paper will focus on selected passages, to examine their nature as turning points, cruces, within their narratives. The passages, and the works as a whole, have several similarities, for example each - Norse Myth, Anglo-Saxon poem, and twentieth-century prose fiction - embodies aspects of the northern heroic ethos that so attracted Tolkien. (St. Clair) Moreover, each work presents one culture through the filter of another’s world-view. Tolkien and the author of the *Dream of the Rood* both present Christian virtues through the veil of the northern heroic tradition, while Snorri Sturlason looks back at the Norse pagan tradition from a Christianised northland (Fouracre 498-9) much as Tolkien argued was the case with the Beowulf-poet. (*MC*, 26-27) However, the focus of this essay will be upon similarities of narrative structures and shaping within the texts.

There needs to be one disclaimer before turning to the texts. Modern English is my own language; Old English I studied long ago; Old Norse I foolishly neglected to study, opting instead for a useless course on: *The history and principles of literary criticism*. Therefore I shall work from translations, but with reference to original texts where I can, hoping not to make linguistic mistakes. Any that are present in the text below, I shall be glad to have corrected. The study proper will begin with a survey of the narrative thread of each of the chosen subjects.

**Gandalf**

This narrative thread can be traced through: Tolkien’s *Essay on the Istari; (UT* 388-402*) Of the Rings of Power and the third age; (Sil* 283-304*) The hobbit; (H* Ch I-VII and XVI- XIX*)* and *The Lord of the Rings* (both text and appendices; references will appear below.) Gandalf, a Maia of Valinor whose original name was Olórin, (*UT* 396-7) entered Middle-earth *when maybe a thousand years had passed* of the Third Age. (*RT*, 365) He and the other Istari *came from over the sea out of the Uttermost West* (*UT*, 388) as emissaries of the Valar, *who still took counsel for the governance of Middle-earth*. (*UT*, 399) Gandalf was the last to arrive on mortal shores, and was perceived by Cirdan the Shipwright at the Grey Havens to be *the greatest spirit and the wisest*. (Ibid) Spirits now embodied in flesh, the Istari were charged with responsibility for supporting and guiding the races of Middle-earth in their resistance to Sauron, should he arise again.

Gandalf’s proved to be a wandering life, so that he was known as Mithrandir, the Grey Pilgrim, to the elves; while the name Gandalf, Wand-Elf, was given to him by mortals who assumed him to be an elf, seeing that he aged slowly and had an air about him that they felt to be elvish. (*UT*, 390-1)

The arrival of the Istari in Middle-earth coincided with the coming of the shadow to Greenwood the Great, and the changing of its name to Mirkwood. (*Sil*, 299) Gandalf was the first to suspect that this was the feared shadow of Sauron’s return, and went himself to Dol Guldur in TA 2063, expelling ‘the Sorcerer’ for a time. (*Sil*, 300; *RK*, 368) Yet in TA 2460 (*RK,* 368) Sauron returned to Dol Guldur in greater strength; in response to this, the White Council was formed in TA 2463. (*RK*, 368)

Gandalf, for the next four centuries of Middle-earth, played his part with the rest of the Wise and the Great in fending off the consequences of Sauron’s return and of the resultant increase in war and suffering among the free peoples. Then in TA 2845 Thráin II, seeking to revisit the dwarf kingdom of Erebor, was taken prisoner by the servants of Sauron and imprisoned in Dol Guldur. Here Gandalf discovered him in TA 2850, receiving from him the key of Erebor, and confirming that the ‘Sorcerer’, also known as the Necromancer, was indeed Sauron. (*RK*, 368-9)

In TA 2941, Gandalf contrived a meeting in the Shire between Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thror, son of Thráin II, and Bilbo Baggins. (*RK*, 370; *H*, Ch 1: *An unexpected party*) This marked the beginning of the Quest of Erebor, recounted in *The Hobbit*. During this period Gandalf, along with the other members of the White Council, drove Sauron from Dol Guldur, releasing Mirkwood from the Dark Lord’s immediate shadow as he withdrew to Mordor.

In TA 2956 Gandalf met Aragorn, and friendship was kindled between the two. (*RK*, 371) Gandalf maintained over the following years an ever closer watch upon the Shire and upon Bilbo in particular. He grew to fear that Bilbo’s Ring was the One Ring of Sauron, which both Gollum and the Dark Lord were seeking. In TA 3017 the Wizard confirmed this suspicion by his researches in the archives of Minas Tirith in Gondor. (*RK*, 371)

From TA December 25, 3018 to January 15, 3019, Gandalf assumed the role of guide and helper to the Fellowship of the Ring. He led the Company from Rivendell through Hollin, in the attempted crossing of Caradhras, and through Moria. He brought them safely away from the attack in the Chamber of Mazarbul, only to fall into the abyss beneath the Bridge of Khazad-dûm while defending the others from the Balrog.

After falling into the depths below Moria, *Gandalf pursue[d] the Balrog to the peak of Zirak-zigil.* (*RK*, 373) In throwing down his enemy he was wearied unto death, and fell lifeless upon the peak. Yet on TA February 14th 3019 he was returned to life and lay *in a trance* upon the height. (*RK*, 373) Three days later he was rescued by Gwaihir the Windlord who bore him to Lorien.

By TA March 1st 3019 Gandalf was in Fangorn Forest north of Rohan where he was reunited with his companions of the Fellowship, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli. (*RK*, 373) Gandalf’s soubriquet was now *The White* rather than *The Grey*, and he was robed in white; while his hair and beard had turned from grey to silver. (*TT*, 98) He assumed his place as a leader of the western forces, first healing Theoden of Rohan, helping to marshal the forces of Rohan at the battle of Helm’s deep, then at Isengard casting Saruman from the order of the Istari before bearing away the palantír of Isengard. With Peregrine Took he rode the three hundred miles from Isengard to Minas Tirith, where he assumed the leadership of the defence after the suicide of Denethor. With Aragorn and Imrahil he led the Host of the West to the Black Gate of Mordor, in hope of drawing the attention of Sauron away from the desperate journey of Frodo and Sam to Mount Doom. On TA March 25th 3019 Gandalf was carried by Gwaihir away from the battle outside the Black Gate, and brought to Mordor where Gwaihir’s companions rescued Frodo and Sam from Orodruin. (*RK*, 374-375)

In the afterdays of the Fall of Sauron, Gandalf was privileged to place the crown on Aragorn’s head at his coronation, and was present with the rest of the Fellowship at the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen. On the journey north from Gondor, Gandalf rode furthest of all the great ones in the company of the Hobbits, accompanying them beyond Bree and only parting from them at the borders of Tom Bombadil’s land, where he turned aside to spend some time. Gandalf passed away from Middle-earth to the West upon the TA 21st September 3021 (the last year of the reckoning of the Third Age of Middle-earth). He sailed from the Grey Havens in company with Frodo, Bilbo, Galadriel and Elrond and many others of the Fair Folk, and with his great horse Shadowfax. (*RK*, 377)

**The Rood**

This narrative thread is contained within the dream-vision of the narrator of the poem, and is spoken by the Rood itself from beginning to end. The Rood begins to speak to the dreamer at line 28, starting with its memory of being *cut down from the edge of the wood/ripped up by my roots*. Although not mentioned by the Rood, we may assume that its quiet life as a tree at the edge of these unnamed woods had gone on for many years, since it was considered tall and strong enough to be used in the construction of a cross for execution. The narration moves quickly to the scene at Golgotha; in this version of the story, which differs at many points from the Gospel narrative, the Rood states that it was carried to the hill by ‘men’ (32) and that it then saw Christ, *the Saviour of mankind/ hasten with great zeal, as if he wanted to climb up on me* (33-4). It continues to emphasise that Christ *ascended on the high gallows, / brave in the sight of many, when he wanted to ransom mankind*; (40-41) it was the duty of the Rood to stand firm and support the *warrior*. (42) The description of the wounds of the passion implies that they were inflicted on the Rood, and that it shared in the experience of the Crucified. *They pierced me with dark nails; on me are the wounds visible....* (46)

The Rood goes on to describe the death of Christ and the deposition, and how it remained in place on Golgotha to witness the carving of Christ’s tomb and his entombment (48-69). Then the Rood and its companion crosses were left weeping for a time, until *men began to fell us all to the ground* (73-74) The crosses were buried *in a deep pit*. (75)

From this parallel entombment, the Rood was rescued by *the Lord’s thanes* (75-76) and raised up to become *glorious now/towering under the heavens.* (84-85) The rest of the poem concerns the Rood’s urging the dreamer to spread the understanding he has derived from this vision, so that others may be assured of the hope of salvation; (95-121) followed by the prayer of the dreamer and his sense of the certainty of salvation. (122-156)

**Odin**

This narrative thread is taken mainly from the translation of *Havamal* in *The Elder Edda* by Taylor, Auden and Salus, supplemented by various online sources (see Works Consulted, below). Odin was the chief of the Aesir in Norse Mythology, and among many other names was known as *Allfather*, as he was the ruler of Gods and humanity. He was god of war and death, but also of wisdom and poetry. Early in time, he sought wisdom in the form of a draught from the well of Mimir, and paid for it with one of his own eyes. He suffered further in order to win the knowledge of the Runes for humanity, hanging as a sacrifice to himself for nine days upon the branches of Yggdrasil, the World-Tree. Later he also stole the mead of poetry, made from the blood of the murdered Kvasir, by turning himself first into a man named Bölverkr and then into a serpent in order to penetrate into the mountain where the mead had been hidden by Suttung. Swallowing three draughts of the mead, he slithered out of the mountain, transformed himself into an eagle, and came safely home to Asgard.

It was believed that at the Ragnarok, the great battle at the end of days, Odin and the other gods would die, and the world would be submerged in water; two humans would survive to repopulate the world. Some of the Gods would also survive.

These are only brief outlines of the narrative arcs of the three subjects; Gandalf, the Rood and Odin. I have no space here to go into greater detail except in respect of the comparisons and contrasts I plan to draw between the crucial events in the three narratives. The next section will focus on points of commonality among the three narratives, under the headings: fall/death; dislocation in time and space; elevation/transformation/return.

**Fall/death**

**Gandalf**

From *The Lord of the rings*, the extracts of special interest to this theme are the account of Gandalf’s fall at the Bridge of Moria, and his own account of his battle, death and return. (*FR*, 342-345; *TT*, 104-107) In fact, rather than falling, Gandalf is pulled down from the bridge when standing against the Balrog. Although Gandalf is a Maia and has great power, the Balrog is an enemy of equal stature and strength; a Maia that has turned to evil. The Wizard’s intention is to hold the bridge long enough to allow the escape of the rest of the company; in the event, he does facilitate their escape, but as Gandalf breaks the bridge with his staff, the Balrog’s whip captures the Wizard, who falls with his foe. At this point in the narrative it appears to the other characters that Gandalf is irretrievably lost and it is not until Gandalf recounts his tale to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli at Fangorn that the full extent of the battle is understood. The struggle lasts for eight days, and extends from the depths below Moria to the highest peak of the mountain.

Gandalf himself summarises this experience in an impatient exclamation at Edoras: *I have not passed though fire and death to bandy crooked words with a serving-man till the lightening falls!* (*TT*, 118) In fact the battle is far more elemental - in the premodern sense - since Gandalf passes through all four of the elements - earth, air, fire and water; passes beyond known space and time; and both falls and climbs to enormous depths and heights. As he recounts the tale to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli he names all these stages of his death and rebirth; but does not tell them everything. ....*if there were a year to spend, I would not tell you all*. (*TT*, 104) That this withholding is due to the severity of the conflict is clear from his response when Gimli names the Balrog.

*‘Name him not!’ said Gandalf, and for a moment it seemed that a cloud of pain passed over his face, and he sat silent, looking old as death. ‘Long time I fell,’ he said at last, slowly, as if looking back with great difficulty. ‘Long I fell and he fell with me. His fire was about me. I was burned. Then we plunged into the deep water and all was dark. Cold it was as the tide of death: almost it froze my heart.* (*TT,* 105)

I have quoted this paragraph in full for several reasons. Firstly, the degree of pain and suffering Gandalf reveals in this description; secondly, the repetition of the word *death*, as a confirmation by the narrator that Gandalf has indeed died; and thirdly the clear passage through the elements, plunging through air that is contained in earth, burning with fire then chilled by water. A Maia is a spiritual being, indeed Gandalf is described by Tolkien as ‘an angel’. (Letter 156) Here the fall from a height plunges Gandalf not only a great distance by linear measurement, but deep into the physicality of the world; its hardness, its waters, its heat and cold and sliminess.

**The Rood**

From *The dream of the Rood*, we look at lines 28-87. The fall of the Rood is, like that of Gandalf, inflicted by hostile agencies. A strong, healthy tree is assaulted, uprooted, and then cut and shaped into a cross.

*Þæt wæs geara iu,         (ic þæt gyta geman),   
þæt ic wæs aheawen         holtes on ende,*

*astyred of stefne minum.         Genaman me ðær strange feondas,*

*geworhton him þær to wæfersyne,         heton me heora wergas hebban.* (28-31)

Like Gandalf, the Rood is overcome by the strength of the enemies (*feondas*) set against it. It is unable to hold onto its strong and upright stance when hewn (*aheawen*) with axes and undermined at the roots - a parallel with the cutting of Gandalf’s legs from under him by the Balrog with its whip, and also perhaps an allusion to the constant gnawing at the roots of Yggdrasil by the dragon Nidhoggr (Porteous, 192) Sweet glosses *astyrian*, of which *astyred* is the past participle, as; move, agitate, incense. The tree that becomes the Rood is neither merely physically uprooted nor merely locationally displaced; it is subject to the anger and distress that the deracination, the separation from the familiar, brings with it. It is outraged at learning why this has been done to it; that it is required to become an instrument of shame for those who are themselves shameful in the eyes of others; for criminals (*wergas*).[[1]](#endnote-2) This is a fall into ignominy, not merely a fall from physical uprightness.

**Odin**

From *Havamal*; stanzas 138-139.

138.Veit ek at ek hékk

Vindga mei~~ð~~i á

nætr allar níu,

geiri unda~~ð~~r

og gefinn Ó~~ð~~ni,

sjálfr sjálfum mér,

á Þeim mei~~ð~~i

er manngi veit

hvers hann af rótum renn.

139.Vi~~ð~~ hleifi mik sældu

né vi~~ð~~ hornigi.

Nyesta ek ni~~ð~~ur,

nam ek upp rúnar,

æÞandi nam,

féll ek aptr Þa~~ð~~an.

Odin is not coerced into suffering and danger, but in his role as culture-hero seeks three boons for humanity; wisdom, the runes, and inspiration. Losing an eye at Mimir’s well as payment for a draught of the wisdom-giving water, Odin goes on to experience death by hanging in order to penetrate the secret of the runes. All these sufferings had previously been predicted for him by the Norns, the three sisters who sit at Udr’s Well in the shadow of Yggdrasil, and can see the past, present and future. (Bauschatz, 12)

His descent/fall in stanza 138-139 is paradoxically like an elevation, in that he is suspended upon the world-tree – *a wind-swept gallows* (Auden, 56)- for nine days and nights. Yggdrasil, the world-tree that supports creation in Norse mythology, is immeasurably huge and Odin can be conceived of as dangling from the tree at an enormous physical height. The tree is rooted in three realms: Niffleheim, the abode of Hel; Asgard of the Gods; and Jotunheim of the giants - *Þeim mei~~ð~~i/er manngi veit/hvers hann af rótum renn.* (Auden, 172) Despite this cosmic stature of the Tree, the suffering and degradation of being hanged like a thief or murderer is of course a deep abnegation, a disgrace like that felt by the Rood. Odin is the Allfather, the chief god of the north, and in his suffering on Yggdrasil is repeating a motif that runs through his story in the Eddas. He and his brothers were the shapers of Midgard, the abode of humanity; yet Odin often ‘comes down’ from Asgard to wander among ordinary people, and descends yet further in his Prometheus-like role, notably when he visits Mimir’s well, hangs upon Yggdrasil, and steals the mead of poetry. Like Gandalf he passes through several elements; water at Mimir’s well, the air when upon the tree, and the earth when he becomes a snake to enter the mountain and steal the mead. After hanging in pain and passing through death, Odin falls from the tree; as culture-hero he has been sacrificed to himself as Allfather, to pay the price for what he has gained.

**Dislocation in time and space**

**Gandalf**

Gandalf’s narrative emphasises how far out of normal space and time he falls. He and the Balrog are: ...*beyond light and knowledge*...; at.... *the uttermost foundations of stone; .....far under the living earth, where time is not counted*. They are then drawn into regions even further beyond experience; ....*Far, far below the deepest delving of the Dwarves the world is gnawed by nameless things. Even Sauron knows them not. They are older than he. Now I have walked there, but I will bring no report to darken the light of day.* (*TT*, 105)

It is clear that at this ‘depth of despair’ Gandalf is already far beyond the fields we know, out of time and out of normal space; he does not simply pass beyond them when he dies on the heights. It is also noteworthy that his evenly-matched opponent becomes in his despair *my only hope*. Only by clinging to his enemy does he find the way back to the heights and the clear air *above the mists of the world*. This emphasises the submission to evil, baleful powers that characterises the displacement experiences of all three protagonists in this study.

Within the mountain, both Gandalf and the Balrog *fell from the high place*; now it is only the Balrog, and in falling it meets its end. After this victory Gandalf *strayed out of thought and time*; this is his crux, his turning-point. Throughout this experience he has been noticeably moving further and further away from space and time, from the mortal dimensions in which his battle – as an emissary - must necessarily be fought; now he leaves them entirely.

*Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell.*

*“Naked I was sent back-for a brief time, until my task was done.  And naked I lay upon the mountain-top. The tower behind was crumbled into dust, the window gone; the ruined stair was choked with burned and broken stone. I was alone, forgotten, without escape upon the hard horn of the world. There I lay staring upward, while the stars wheeled over, and each day was a long as a life-age of the earth. Faint to my ears came the gathered rumours of all lands: the springing and the dying, the song and the weeping, and the slow everlasting groan of overburdened stone.* (*TT*, 106)

Gandalf has died; he has left the everyday time and everyday life of Middle-earth; it is not clear whether his spirit left his body and then returned to it, or whether he was bodily carried away on the roads of which he will not tell. After this experience comes one that is more understandable to his listeners and to the reader; he lies upon the mountain-top, elevated certainly, but isolated and still out of time and place. There is great pathos in his use of the word *forgotten*; his sense of isolation leaves him feeling that both those who have sent him back, and those who were his companions in the quest, have now left him alone , *without escape*. In the bleakness of the stony heights he loses sense of time, and lies passively *staring upwards*; whatever the calendar may say, for Gandalf this experience lasts for long ages and the passage of that time is so distorted that he can see the movements of the stars as they wheel by. The sounds of the earth below come only *faint to my ears*. Gandalf remains balanced precariously between two worlds, sent back but not yet re-engaged in the pains of Middle-earth.

**Rood**

The Rood’s experience of being poised between worlds comes in lines 51-56;

*Geseah ic weruda god*

*Þearle Þenian.         Þystro hæfdon*

*bewrigen mid wolcnum         wealdendes hræw,*

*scirne sciman,         sceadu forðeode,*

*wann under wolcnum.         Weop eal gesceaft,*

*cwiðdon cyninges fyll.         Crist wæs on rode.*

Here the story told by the Rood accords with the Gospel story in the matter of the cloud that drew across the skies and darkened them during the crucifixion; *sceadu forðeode,/wann under wolcnum.* The darkness is untimely, (Luke, 23:44) signifying a suspension of the natural cycles of the world and bringing the Rood, along with all creation, into a liminal place between time and eternity – the ‘timeless moment’ when *Crist wæs on rode* . *Weop eal gesceaft,* says the Rood, all of creation wept; the attention of everything in the world is focused on the tragedy in which the Rood plays a central part. This is a clear reference to the story of Baldur the beautiful, who in Norse myth was supposedly unable to be harmed by anything in creation, so beloved was he. The other gods amused themselves by hurling things at him and watching him survive unscathed. But his mother Freya had failed to obtain a promise from the mistletoe that it would not harm Baldur, and Loki tricked the blind god Hod into throwing a mistletoe dart at his brother Baldur. However Hel, goddess of the dead, agreed to release Baldur if all creation would weep for him; the giantess Thokk alone refused to do so, and Baldur was lost. Thus the Rood stands balanced at a further liminal point, between the old and the new religions of the northlands; for the crucified Christ, *all* creation weeps, and He is resurrected. This is the crux, the turning-point for the Rood, when it is lifted out of its own sense of loss and disgrace into an understanding of the cosmic moment, the glorification of the ‘young warrior’ who has given his life.

**Odin**

Odin’s experience, which gives its name to this study, is the most briefly described and enigmatic of the three. Guerber summarises it in this way;

Odin himself relates that he hung nine days and nights from the sacred tree Yggdrasil, gazing down into the immeasurable depths of Nifle-heim, plunged in deep thought, and self-wounded with his spear, ere he found the knowledge he sought. (Guerber, 32)

This looks superficially like a paraphrase of *Havamal*, where in stanza 138 Odin reports;

*Veit ek at ek hékk*

*Vindga mei~~ð~~i á*

*nætr allar níu,*

*geiri unda~~ð~~r*

*og gefinn Ó~~ð~~ni,*

*sjálfr sjálfum mér,*

However, Guerber adds two details; that Odin is gazing down into Niffleheim and that he is *plunged in deep thought*. The need to add detail is understandable given the brevity and starkness of the *Havamal* account. There is no inward reflection comparable to Gandalf’s or the Rood’s, no conscious sense of the experience of being beyond time and place. Guerber’s assumption that Odin was *plunged in deep thought* provides a neat, if unintended, parallel with the actual plunge of Gandalf and fall of the Rood – as if Odin’s fall and elevation are one and the same, at once on high and gazing into Hell. He is entirely removed from the all the worlds supported by Yggdrasil, suspended instead from the central pillar of those worlds.

In this sacrifice of himself to himself - *sjálfr sjálfum mér -* Odin not only hangs upon the tree, he is also pierced with a spear - *geiri unda~~ð~~r.* The echo of the death of Christ as seen by the Rood recalls the sense of debasement and shame associated with criminality, and explains Odin’ status as patron god of those condemned to hanging. Like a criminal or prisoner, he is exiled from the normalities of life; *Vi~~ð~~ hleifi mik sældu/né vi~~ð~~ hornigi;* no-one brings him food or drink, throughout his ordeal. (139) He is as one dead to the worlds of Norse cosmogony. This is his turning-point in his search for the knowledge of the runes.

**Elevation /transformation/return**

**Gandalf**

Gandalf has in one sense already been elevated, raised up, before his experience of passing out of time; he has attained the peak of the mountain by pursuing the Balrog, and has passed beyond Middle-earth to the Lords of the West. However, this is not the completion of his elevation and restoration.

*And so at the last Gwaihir the Windlord found me again, and he took me up and bore me away. ”*

*[...]*

*“I tarried there in the ageless time of that land where days bring healing not decay.  Healing I found, and I was clothed in white.”* (*TT*, 106)

Gandalf’s rescue is effected and his restoration aided by two powerful forces; the great eagle Gwaihir and Galadriel, Lady of Lorien. Gwaihir has saved him previously from imprisonment in Orthanc, and will later help Gandalf to rescue Frodo and Sam after the fall of the Dark Tower. (FR, 275; RK, 227-9) Throughout Tolkien’s legendarium, the great eagles are the messengers of Manwë, and their intervention signifies that sense of a guiding power to which Gandalf himself sometimes alludes. (E.g. FR, 65) Gandalf is not only *sent back*; he does not remain alone, isolated and naked as a new-born child, but is *carried back* to the times and tides of Middle-earth. He is helped. As Gwaihir bears him away from the mountain; “*Do not let me fall!” I gasped, for I felt life in me again. “Bear me to Lothlórien!”* (*TT*, 106) Gwaihir confirms that this is what the Lady Galadriel has requested; the threads of narrative are bringing Gandalf to precisely where he needs to be. In Lorien, Gandalf is robed anew in white, signifying his assumption of the headship of the Order of Istari and of the White Council, in place of the discredited and traitorous Saruman. When he meets again his three comrades, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli, it is clear to them that he has returned to them stronger and greater than before. Aragorn says;

*...You are our captain and our banner. The Dark Lord has Nine: but we have One, mightier than they: the White Rider. He has passed through fire and the abyss, and they shall fear him. We will go where he leads.* (*TT,* 104)

**Rood**

After the ‘timeless moment’ the Rood describes the deposition and entombment of Christ (57-69). Its tale then returns to its own experience of burial (75), leading on swiftly to its recovery by *the Lord’s thanes* (75ff)and its elevation to glory as a symbol of salvation and resurrection.

Hwæðre me þær dryhtnes þegnas,   
freondas gefrunon,           
[ond](http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/a2.5.html" \l "n7) gyredon me         golde ond seolfre. (75-77)

After all its suffering and degradation the Rood is received by Christians, not as the shameful instrument of Christ’s death, but as the symbol of his victory. This is at least as great a reversal of expectation as that of Gandalf’s return from the depths below the earth.

.         Is nu sæl cumen   
þæt me weorðiað         wide ond side   
menn ofer moldan,         ond eall þeos mære gesceaft,   
gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne. (80-83)

The Rood has become a ‘beacon,’ a symbol of light out of darkness. This closely parallels Gandalf’s return from darkness and his reclothing in white: *His hair was white as snow in the sunshine; and gleaming white was his robe...* (*TT*, 98) The rood also shines brightly, *adorned...with gold and silver* (77), a banner to follow like the White Rider.

**Odin**

Odin’s personal gain from his suffering is harder to uncover; he begins his period of withdrawal from time and space as chief God of the north, and holds that same status after his return. The brevity of the Havamal description and the stark tone hardly conduce to a sense of triumph or redemption. Auden and Taylor render this as;

I looked down; with a loud cry

I took up runes; from that tree I fell. (Auden, 56)

An alternative translation offers;

I took up the runes, screaming I took them,

and I fell back from there.

(<http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=get&type=text&id=Hav>)

The *loud cry* or *scream* might indicate pain and sorrow as much as elation; and Odin’s descent from the tree is a *fall*, not an elevation. We are left to conclude that he has gained rather than lost through his death and resurrection, simply by virtue of his taking up the Runes. Through the use of the Runes in ritual inscriptions and later in communication, Odin has provided enlightenment to humanity. Here again is the theme of light shining in darkness that is exemplified in the rising of Gandalf and his transformation to *The White*, and in the recovery of the Rood to become a shining beacon. Odin’s triumph is that of both culture-hero and shaman, mediating between humanity and the supernatural realms to bring back knowledge and power. Meletinskiĭ says;

Odin is transformed from the culture-hero....into the world’s first shaman. He submits to a shamanic initiation rite – hanging from a tree and being pierced by a spear... (Meletinskiĭ, 225)

Thus Odin, like Gandalf and the Rood, functions as a guide to humanity, one who has suffered and has returned with wisdom and power. Each of these three very different protagonists has in common the experiences of death, transformation, the crossing of elemental and supernatural boundaries, and the return to an elevated status and respect.

**Concluding thoughts; crisis and eucatastrophe**

The narrator of *The Hobbit* said of Bilbo’s finding the Ring under the Misty Mountains: *It was a turning point in his career, but he did not know it.* (*H*: *Riddles in the dark*) Crossroads and turning points may be markers of a change of narrative direction as well as route-markers in geographical journeys. They may also be markers of change and development of the character. The related ideas of *Crux,* crisisand turning pointinclude the following;

* (From Latin [*crux*](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/crux#Latin)) cross, wooden frame for execution.
* The basic, [central](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/central), or [essential](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/essential) [point](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/point) or feature.
* The [critical](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/critical) or [transitional](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/transitional) [moment](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/moment) or [issue](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/issue), a [turning point](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/turning_point). **1993**, Laurence M. Porter, "Real Dreams, Literary Dreams, and the Fantastic in Literature", pages 32-47 *in* Carol Schreier Rupprecht (ed.) *The Dream and the Text: Essays on Literature and Language*.
  + The mad certitude of the ogre, Abel Tiffauges, that he stands at the **crux** of history and that he will be able to raise Prussia "to a higher power" (p. 180), contrasts sharply with the anxiety and doubt attendant upon most modern literary dreams.
* The [hardest](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hardest) [point](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/point) of a climb.
* A [decisive](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/decisive) point at which a [significant](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/significant) [change](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/change) or [historical](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/historical) [event](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/event) [occurs](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/occur), or at which a [decision](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/decision)/choice must be made.
* A [crossroads](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/crossroads) or intersection.

Each of our protagonists faces the full complexity of these connotations; suffering and loss, a choice that is no choice, a fall that leads to death and yet is the route to the eucatastrophe, the happy turn. In spite of the grimness of each fall and the death-experience, each returns to life and to renown. Moreover, each displays a repeated pattern of fall and rise as the narratives progress.

Gandalf is first elevated above the drop into the chasm, perched at the highest point of the bridge, where he also has the moral high-ground. He falls to the depths, but rises again in his escape to the heights. Then he drifts into death, a further falling-away, but returns to life, being again elevated by the flight with Gwaihir and elevated in status by Galadriel’s clothing him in white.

The Rood is first elevated by its growth as a tree reaching toward the air, then cut down, then elevated again and exalted by its sense of privilege in taking part in the noble sacrifice of the ‘young warrior.’ Yet it is then brought low in spirit by its shared pain with Christ and is taken into the stillness of the moment of death. Its next descent comes when it is cut down again and buried. Then come final elevation and enormously raised status, when it is discovered, rescued from the grave and transformed into a glorious symbol of salvation.

Odin, from his high status as chief of the gods and ruler in the upper world of Asgard, is brought low, to the roots of Yggdrasil in search of wisdom at Mimir’s Well. To secure the runes he is humbled and degraded by a criminal’s death. He is permanently disabled by the loss of one eye, but returns from the extreme sacrifice to affirm his stature as God and culture-hero.

Thus each apparent fall out of the story, to what would appear to any observer as oblivion, is a key factor in the successful resolution of the narrative: the plunge of Gandalf; the burial of the Rood; the hanging of Odin. Not merely because the pause in action leads to a change of narrative direction, but because of the changes within the protagonists of those personal narrative strands. Their threads are woven back into the overall narrative so as to strengthen hope and endurance for others, and to lead ultimately to victory or gain – for a time.

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1. Many associations cluster around this term. *‘Wargs’[in H* & *LOTR] are a linguistic cross between Old Norse* vargr *and Old English* wearh*, two words showing a shift of meaning from ‘wolf’ to ‘human outlaw’.* (Shippey, *Road*, 74 note) Pridmore further adduces connections with werewolf beliefs (Forest-Hill, 197-221). Generally speaking, to be associated with *wearh* or to suffer the humiliation of the *wearh* is evidently a separation from the common life and a degradation. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. In the interest of complete honesty I must say that it is 40 years since I ‘consulted’ this work. It was the instrument of my own infection with *The Northernness*. If anyone has a spare copy....................... [↑](#endnote-ref-3)