

GANDALF WAS ONLY A FIFTH LEVEL MAGIC-USER

by Bill Seligman

What?? I hear you scream. Impossible, you cry; Gandalf was at least 30th, 40th, even 50th level!! After all, he was an Istari, and he had lived at least 2000 years! Oh, really?, I reply. Let us take a look at all the magic he ever performed, and see what was so high level about him.

First, let us leaf through the **Hobbit**. In order, Gandalf's spells were: 1) To make fancy colored smoke rings and have them fly about the room. This is no more than a variant on Pyrotechnics, with perhaps a bit of Phantasmal Force mixed in. 2) Tricking the trolls with Ventriloquism, a first level spell. 3) Lightning Bolts from his staff to kill the Orcs as they kidnapped the Dwarves and Bilbo. Third level spell. 4) Pyrotechnics to confuse the Orcs to rescue the Dwarves and Bilbo. Second level spell. 5) Lighting the way for the Dwarves and Bilbo while in the caves, with a glow from his staff. Second level spell. 6) Making pine cones catch fire and tossing them down upon the Wargs from a tree. A variant on Fireball, Pyrotechnics, and even the Druid spell Produce Flame. It is not specifically a spell mentioned on the D&D lists, but it is not terribly powerful all the same. 7) Tossing Sauron out of Dol Guldur. He did this in combination with the White Council, and so this does not count as an individual effort. (Besides, as I shall later show, Sauron was no more, or not much more, than 7th or 8th level.) 8) A combination of either Lightning Bolt or Light from his staff to warn the "good" side of the Battle Of Five Armies to get together, as you wish. Depending on the spell system you use, you may be able to change these figures by a level or two, but so far Gandalf has shown no abilities above 5th level.

Now, let us go to **The Fellowship of The Ring**. 1) His fireworks display at Bilbo's party: again, assuming they were magical, which does not have to be true, a variant on Phantasmal Forces, Pyrotechnics, etc. No more than second level. 2) Lightning Bolt battle with the Nazgul. Third level spells. (All right, if you wish to call the taming of Shadowfax magical, O.K. After the episode at the gates of Moria, there is no reason why Gandalf could not speak Equine, but a "Charm Animal" spell would be easier than Charm Person anyway.) 3) Adding fighters to the foam of the river that was overflowing the Nazgul. Phantasmal Force, perhaps a variant on Monster Summoning I (since we have not a hint as to the level of these fighters). 4) Lighting a fire in the middle of the snowstorm. A touch of Fireball, or even Produce Flame. (Note here Gandalf reveals how even this simple bit of magic can be detected for such a large distance. This shows the magical "weakness" of Tolkien's Middle Earth. Ah ha, you say, I see where you are wrong! Hold on, I'll come to that point later.)

To continue: 5) the flames when fighting the Wargs. Variant on Fireball, 3rd level. 6) Lighting the way in Moria. 1st level spell. 7) Fighting the Balrog. In his description of the battle, it seems to me he used only, or mostly, Lightning Bolts, with perhaps some Fireballs if you are generous. Still only third level. 8) Being resurrected. But this is not done by Gandalf, he was "sent back" and therefore had nothing himself to do with the feat.

On to **The Two Towers**: 1) The bursting into flame of Legolas' arrow. A mild Fireball, perhaps even an unusual form of Protection from Normal Missiles. 2) The awakening of Theoden. A combination of Lightning, Light, and Darkness. No more than 3rd level. 3) The breaking of Saruman's staff. This could have been a natural result of one Istari saying that to another, a mild Charm Person effect, or something of that nature. It is not spectacular enough, in any case, to go beyond third level spell-casting.

And now, **The Return of The King**: 1) The beams of light used to rescue Faramir. No more powerful than Lightning Bolt, for all the effect they had. They could have been the 3rd level spell Firebeam described in, I believe, **Alarums and Excursions #12**. 2) In the Battle of Slag Hills, when Gandalf should perhaps have used the maximum amount of his powers, he did nothing mentioned in the book. Perhaps he used Lightning Bolt of Fireball/-beam, but still this is no higher than 3rd level spells. 3) Talking mind-to-mind with Elrond and Galadriel. You don't need any more than ESP to make this work.

And that is it. If I have left any spells out, like Gandalf using the

Hold Portal or Wizard Lock in Moria, it is not intentional. But I do not think that they would go beyond 3rd level. If the words I have used such as "variant" make you think that he must have been at least 11th level to research the spells, remember that he had his Staff, and the ring Narya the Great, which was associated with fire-type spells anyway. Since he was forced to use them several times, when, as I have shown, a 5th level mage did not need them, perhaps he was even less than 5th level, but I shall not try to press my point too far. If you ask how he lasted so long battling a Balrog, I reply that that is a fault with the D&D combat system, so the point that a 5th level mage could not withstand the blows of the 10th level Balrog does not quite hold water. (I am referring only to the Balrog in D&D, not including the Eldritch Wizardry characteristics, as this type of Balrog is usually said to be too weak for a true Tolkien Balrog. In fact, when placed in perspective with Gandalf's battle with one, the Balrog described by Gygas and Arneson originally was of normal strength. As far as I am concerned, the type VI demon is a type VI demon, not a Balrog.)

As for Sauron: without going to too much detail, Clairvoyance, ESP, and perhaps an advanced Wizard's Eye, with much longer ranges than described in D&D. But since he had the Palantir, maybe he let the thing do most of the work for him, and his "Red Eye". If you are going to be nasty, then let him have Control Weather, which makes him 12th level. Still not spectacular, when there are those who regard Sauron as 75th level or so.

So how do we reconcile our intuition with the bare facts? Well, for one thing, as I hinted above, the universe of LOTR was magic-weak. It is easy to assume that it was run by "a very tough DM" who rewarded experience so slowly that it would take 2000 years for a pseudo-angel to get to the 5th level, and 6000 years or so for an EHP to reach 12th. But it is still unsettling. I would rather place the blame on the scale we are using: the D&D magic system. It seems a more likely thing for Gygas and Arneson to misjudge the spell levels. So what can we do? Change the spell system, the experience system or the levels of the spells, or all of the above? What is your response?

Please address your responses to Out on A Limb. - Ed.



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