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# From the Shire to the Somme: Comparing Military Themes in The Hobbit and Up to Mamtez

## Abstract

The Hobbit, by J.R.R. Tolkien, tells the story of the titular Bilbo Baggins who goes on an adventure to help a band of dwarves retake their home from a dragon. Throughout the adventure, Bilbo and the dwarves endure many hardships similar to those of a British soldier fighting on the western front in the First World War. These hardships are especially comparable to Llewelyn Wyn Griffith's World War One experience described in his book Up to Mametz. Military themes of enforced adventure, constant and escalating danger, comradeship, and the devastation of war can also be found in both the Hobbit and Up to Mametz.

## Keywords

World War One, J.R.R. Tolkien, The Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins

## Disciplines

Fiction | Literature in English, British Isles | Military History

## Comments

Student research paper written for FYS 191-4: Through the War-drobe: The Words and Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

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From the Shire to the Somme:  
Comparing Military Themes in *The Hobbit* and *Up to Mametz*

Alexander Remington

Through the War-drobe: The Words and Worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis

November 16, 2019

The novel, *The Hobbit*, by J.R.R. Tolkien tells the story of Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit, and a group of dwarves as they try to recapture an ancient dwarfish stronghold from a dragon. Though this story is firmly within the fantasy genre, Tolkien, who served in the British Army during the First World War, was undoubtedly influenced by his experiences on the Western Front while writing *The Hobbit*. It is unsurprising then, that certain military themes found in *The Hobbit* seem to reappear in the war-time memoir *Up to Mametz* by Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, an officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Specifically, themes of enforced adventure, constant and escalating danger, comradeship, and the devastation of war are integral parts of both Bilbo and Wyn Griffith's experiences.

The first major theme shared by *The Hobbit* and *Up to Mametz* is that of enforced adventure. At the beginning of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf arrives at Bilbo's hobbit hole and tells him, "I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it's very difficult to find anyone."<sup>1</sup> Bilbo rebukes this offer, exclaiming, "Sorry! I don't want any adventures, thank you. Not today."<sup>2</sup> However, Gandalf decides that Bilbo is coming along for the adventure whether he wants to or not. Similarly, in Britain during the First World War, there was a huge campaign to encourage enlistment into the Army, with millions of men signing up. In his book, *The Last Great War*, Adrian Gregory writes:

Large numbers did join up in the first few weeks of August. Between [the] 4 and 8 [of] August 8,193 men enlisted, and by 22 August numbers had grown to over

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

100,000. Of those who enlisted a substantial number probably *were* motivated by enthusiasm and a desire to fight.<sup>3</sup>

However, many men who enlisted later in the war, including Tolkien, signed up out of a sense of duty and pressure from the government, family, or friends rather than genuine enthusiasm. In their book, *The Inklings*, the Zaleskis point out:

Everyone around shared the same sense of urgency; the world was falling to piece, and time was running out. War had erupted in 1914 and Oxford was now chockablock with soldiers. Tolkien.... knew that sooner or later he would find himself on the front, where rumor placed the life expectancy of newly arrived soldiers at less than two weeks. Unlike many of his friends, he did not break off his studies to enlist, for he dreaded the dreariness and brutality of military life.<sup>4</sup>

In *Up to Mametz*, Wyn Griffith also comments on the feeling of reluctance and duty felt by his fellow soldiers, writing, “Some talk of leave and of the joy of meeting again, promises of letters, all in a coward’s effort to avoid the challenge of the morrow and to escape from the unescapable.”<sup>5</sup> These soldiers, who all volunteered, are nonetheless nervous and unenthusiastic about the idea of actually going to war similar to Bilbo’s unwillingness to risk his life and reputation by going adventuring with Thorin and his dwarves. Though Bilbo is very reluctant to join the dwarves on their adventure, he still expresses a feeling of duty towards helping them. Bilbo explains, “Tell me what you want done, and I will try it, if I have to walk from here to the East of East and fight

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<sup>3</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Philip and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship* (New York: Farrar, Stratus and Giroux, 2015), 67.

<sup>5</sup> Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up To Mametz ... And Beyond* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), 1.

the wild Were-worms in the Last Desert.”<sup>6</sup> Both Bilbo and Wyn Griffith felt that they had some obligation to serve, putting aside any fear or misgivings they possessed in the name of duty.

Throughout *The Hobbit*, Bilbo and Thorin’s company is repeatedly attacked by foes, varying from goblins, to wargs, to giant spiders. These trials seem to escalate in danger as the story progresses until reaching a peak at the Battle of the Five Armies. This theme of constant, ever increasing danger is also very prominent in *Up to Mametz*. Wyn Griffith recalls as he was marching to his trench for the first time, “We broke into single file. A singing note drooped through the air – what was that? A stray bullet. Another followed, and another, and the sound grew ominous to me.”<sup>7</sup> As Wyn Griffith and his regiment were transferred in and out of the lines and moved to different positions, they had quite a few skirmishes with the Germans while enduring constant bombardments. This danger also developed over time as they made attacks and raids, cumulating in the Battle for Mametz Woods. Wyn Griffith recounts one of these skirmishes writing, “Bullets from an enemy machinegun were ripping the air overhead, weeping the line of the parapet to catch any heads that stood above it. Shells were bursting in plenty, but as far as I could see they were doing little damage inside the trench.”<sup>8</sup> While Bilbo and Thorin’s company were not shelled with artillery or strafed with machineguns, they were constantly harried by evil creatures as they traveled through Middle Earth.

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<sup>6</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up To Mametz ... And Beyond* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Another point of similarity between Bilbo in *The Hobbit* and Wyn Griffith is that both formed strong bonds with their comrades over time. However, neither group made friends and companions instantly. Llewelyn Wyn Griffith recalls, an interaction with some battle-hardened officers during the beginning of his deployment:

The three officers greeted us in a manner benevolently neutral, showing neither cordiality nor resentment at the sudden burden of two thrown upon the company mess... They smiled quietly, but not unkindly, at our answers, while we tried to learn as much about our task as question and answer could teach us.<sup>9</sup>

While the officers are polite, they are reserved as they do not quite respect Wyn Griffith, who has not yet seen battle. Bilbo also encounters this phenomenon when he first meets the dwarves, who do not think much of their newfound burglar. When making plans for their adventure, Thorin complains about Bilbo to Gandalf. Tolkien writes, “‘Very well then,’ said Thorin, ‘supposing the burglar-expert gives us some ideas or suggestions.’ He turned with mock-politeness to Bilbo.”<sup>10</sup> Thorin does not believe that Bilbo will be of any use to the party because of his lack of experience. Though Thorin is considerably ruder to Bilbo than the officers were to Wyn Griffith, both were looked down upon by the veterans.

Overtime, the dwarves begin to respect Bilbo, in the same way that soldiers find comradeship with their fellow men. After Bilbo escapes Gollum and the Goblins in the Misty Mountains and rejoins Thorin’s company, he is greeted with relief and admiration. Tolkien writes, “The dwarves looked at him with quite a new respect, when he talked about dodging guards, jumping over Gollum, and squeezing through, as if it

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>10</sup> J. R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 21.

was not very difficult or very alarming.”<sup>11</sup> Bilbo has proven himself capable and has now been put through some danger and survived, gaining himself the admiration of the group. Wyn Griffith also formed strong emotional bonds with his comrades by surviving the trials and combat of the Western Front. In the aftermath of a battle, Wyn Griffith writes, “When the varying accounts of the survivors were collated and the final count was made, it become evident that we had paid dearly for the assault...Sadness fell upon us all, officers and men, for there were many friends we would never see again.”<sup>12</sup> Wyn Griffith and his men lost many comrades that they had come to respect, which made the pain of losing them even stronger.

The final theme shared by Wyn Griffith and Bilbo is that both faced the carnage and devastation of large battles. At the end of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo witnesses the Battle of the Five Armies commenting, “Down too came many of the Lake-men, for Bard could not restrain them; and out upon the other side came many of the spearmen of the elves. Once again the goblins were stricken in the valley; and they were piled in heaps till Dale was dark and hideous with their corpses.”<sup>13</sup> Bilbo’s description of the battle is reminiscent to Wyn Griffith’s description of the Battle of Mametz Woods. Wyn Griffith writes, “There were more corpses than men, but there were worse sights than corpses. Limbs and mutilated trunks, here and there a detached head, forming splashes of red against the green leaves,”<sup>14</sup> Tolkien, who served at the Battle of the Somme, would have

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up To Mametz ... And Beyond* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword Military, 2010), 60.

<sup>13</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 259.

<sup>14</sup> Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up To Mametz ... And Beyond* (Great Britain: Pen & Sword



been no stranger to this kind of violence and likely drew upon his own experience in battle to describe the grisly scene of piles of dead in *The Hobbit*. Wyn Griffith also recalls witnessing the destruction of a previous battle at Givenchy, writing:

There was ugliness everywhere one looked, the ugliness of smashed new brick and new plaster, a terrible ugliness, inconceivable to one who has seen no ruins but those of aged walls, mellowed by sun, wind, and rain. Why does a new thing broken look so much older than a ruin of the Middle Ages?<sup>15</sup>

Wyn Griffith's description of the devastated buildings is eerily similar to the image of the ruined city of Dale in *The Hobbit* which is described as "the grey ruins of ancient houses, towers, and walls."<sup>16</sup>

Though Tolkien has made it clear that *The Hobbit* is not an allegory to the First World War, it is clear that he utilized his experiences and emotions from the war as inspiration. When comparing Bilbo's experiences in *The Hobbit* to Llewelyn Wyn Griffith's memories in *Up to Mametz*, common themes begin to appear. Both Bilbo and Wyn Griffith had to learn how to cope both physically and mentally with the stress and trauma of being compelled into adventure, facing unwavering and increasing danger, forming close bonds of comradeship, and confronting the horrors and desolation of war.

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Military, 2010), 108.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 187.

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I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Alexander Remington