*Original Paper*

# A Comparative Analysis of the Role Functions of Dumbledore and Gandalf from a Narratological Perspective

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*Abstract*

*Based on narratological theory and employing A. J. Greimas's actantial model, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the narrative functions exhibited by Gandalf in The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings versus those manifested by Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series. The analysis reveals that while both characters fulfill the dual roles of "senders" and "helpers", their functional orientations diverge significantly: Gandalf operates predominantly as a "catalyst" and "mediator", in contrast to Dumbledore who primarily assumes the roles of "mentor" and "guardian". Notably, Dumbledore demonstrates paradoxical characteristics of an "opponent" within specific narrative contexts. These functional divergences not only manifest Tolkien's return to traditional epic paradigms but also embody Rowling's critique of contemporary society, thus delineating the transformative trajectory of 20th-century fantasy literature from mythological narration to humanistic narration.*

*Keywords*

*narratology, role functions, greimas's actantial model, fantasy literature, comparative characterization*

## 1. Introduction

Narratology, is defined as "the science of narrative", finds its foundational framework in Vladimir Propp's seminal work *Morphology of the Folktale*. This pioneering study by Propp put forward the concept of "functions" while systematically categorizing seven main character types. Building upon this theoretical lineage, Cheng Xilin's *An Overview of Narrative Theory* methodologically traces the origin and development of narratology, pointing out its evolution from Aristotle's Poetics to modern structuralist narrative theories. While acknowledging narratology's current limitations, Cheng notes that it still has "advantages and an important role", and "as Prince said narratology helps explain the uniqueness of any narrative". The conceptual architecture outlined in *Western Narratology* delineates

four constituent dimensions: "narrated content", "narrative discourse", "narrative action", and "narrative perspective". Within this framework, characters constitute the dynamic core of narrative content, their functional differentiation being essential for narrative construction. "Without characters, there's no action, so the plot can't unfold, and the narrative text can't form". In the realm of fantasy literature, where wizards frequently occupy critical narrative positions, most narratological studies has predominantly concentrated on overall narrative structure, narrative perspective, spatial narratives, alongside prototype criticism applied to wizard archetypes, with little on the role functions of wizards. J.R.R. Tolkien's Gandalf and J.K. Rowling's Dumbledore are highly representative wizards in fantasy literature. They not only promote the development of the plot but also influence the meaning of the narrative through their role functions. Therefore, from the perspective of narratology, this paper will analyze the differences in role functions of Gandalf and Dumbledore in their respective narratives with A. J. Greimas's actantial model, and reveal how their creative contexts affect these functions.

## 2. Role Functions

### 2.1 Sender and Helper

Vladimir Propp established the concept of "function" in *Morphology of the Folktale*, formally defining it as "a character's behavior defined in terms of its significance to the action process". Positioning story structure as his analytical locus, Propp argues that narrative research should prioritize character functions, given that "the functions of characters within a story are unchanging and limited". This theoretical foundation was later extended by A. J. Greimas in *Structural Semantics*, which postulates three binary actantial oppositions: Subject/Object, Sender/Receiver, and Helper/Opponent. Greimas's model provides a robust analytical framework for decoding character in literary texts. Under this model, both Gandalf and Dumbledore simultaneously fulfill the dual actantial roles of Sender and Helper. In Tolkien's legendarium (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*), Gandalf functions as the prime catalytic figure, propelling protagonists such as Bilbo and Frodo into their quests through strategic interventions. His role encompasses both orchestrating the heroes' journeys and providing tactical assistance during critical narrative junctures, thereby drives the narrative forward. Analogously, in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Dumbledore's position as Hogwarts' headmaster enables him to simultaneously act as a mentor and guardian in Harry's journey of magical learning and personal growth. Nevertheless, despite of these similarities, a closer examination reveals fundamental differences in the specific role functions of Gandalf and Dumbledore.

2.1.1 Gandalf: Catalyst and Mediator

Gandalf embodies a typical "catalyst" role across both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Through strategic guidance and tactical assistance to the protagonist groups, he propels the entire narrative's progression. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf perceives Bilbo's latent courage and wisdom, convinces him to join the Dwarves' adventure and to become the fourteenth member of the companion, laying the

foundation for the subsequent events, especially the reappearance of The One Ring. Similarly, in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is Gandalf who directs Frodo and Sam to Rivendell, thus began the whole story of *The Lord of the Rings*. "If you want my advice, make for Rivendell". This catalytic function aligns with Roland Barthes' concepts of "kernels" (noyaux) and "satellites" (satellites) based on the narrative function of events within a plot. Kernel events are those that propel the narrative forward and constitute the fundamental framework of the plot, while satellite events complement and expand the storyline, enriching it. In *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, nearly every Gandalf's intervention invariably accompanied by a turning point of the kernel events. He facilitates the formation of the Fellowship of the Ring, a decisive event directly determined whether the Ring could be destroyed and whether the final war against Sauron could be won; he led the reinforcements to aid King Théoden, won the Battle of the Helm's Deep, which laid the foundation for the ultimate victory of Middle-earth. Whether in *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf is the core driving force of the story. As Aragorn aptly observes, "He has been the mover of all that has been accomplished: and this is his victory". Thus, Gandalf's existence not only provides strategic guidance for the races of Middle-earth but also sets the direction for the entire narrative.

Furthermore, Gandalf's another important role function is that of a transracial "mediator", bridging Middle-earth's factional divides. Gandalf originally is one of the Maiar who serves the King of the Valar, Manwë Súlimo. When Númenor fell and Sauron still wreaked havoc in the Middle-earth, Manwë decided to dispatch five Maiar of comparable strength to Sauron to Middle-earth. Therefore, together with four other Maiar, Gandalf took the form of an old man and, as a wizard, helped the Humans and Elves of the Middle-earth fight against Sauron. Through diplomatic acumen rather than coercive power, he mediated among the races in Middle-earth, resolving their conflicts and promoting unity. In *The Hobbit*, his presence enabled Men, Elves and Dwarves to put aside their old grievances or new conflicts and fight together against Orcs and Wargs in the Battle of Five Armies; In *The Lord of the Rings*, he successfully persuaded King Théoden of Rohan to aid Gondor in Battle of the Pelennor Fields. His diplomatic mediation enabled Middle-earth's diverse races to overcome divisions and form a united front against their shared enemy, Sauron. "Concerning this thing, my lords, you now all know enough for the understanding of our plight, and of Sauron's. If he regains it, your valour is vain, and his victory will be swift and complete: so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts. If it is destroyed, then he will fall". Here, this strategic reconciliation that transformed fragmented communities into a cohesive resistance force, also demonstrates the importance of Gandalf's intermediary role in the narrative. He steps in to assist Humans, Dwarves, and Elves at critical moments, but without overreliance on magic. His abilities in the story remain limited, so ultimately it was the races of Middle-earth (Ents, Men, Elves, and Dwarves etc.) who defeated Saruman and Sauron themselves. In the grand history of Middle-earth, he is merely a wandering wizard, as a catalyst and mediator.

2.1.2 Dumbledore: Mentor and Guardian

In the *Harry Potter* series, Dumbledore primarily serves as both a "mentor" and "guardian". He acts not only as Harry's guide but also as his emotional anchor throughout his growth. Whenever Harry faces challenges, Dumbledore would appear as a "sagacious and helpful old man" to provide crucial support. Through patient instruction and wise guidance, he helps Harry comprehend his mission and gradually grow into a courageous and principled wizard. An example occurs in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* when Dumbledore discovers Harry lingering in front of the Mirror of Erised. Well aware of the mirror's nature, its allure and potential dangers, Dumbledore gently explained to Harry, "This mirror will give us neither knowledge nor truth". This explanation subtly guided Harry to understand the nature of the mirror and its impact on people, teaching him not to become overly obsessed with illusory dreams but to cherish real life. Throughout the conversation, Dumbledore behaved as a mentor and guardian, caring and teaching Harry to foster his growth, which not only reflected his educational philosophy but also reveals his core role function in the narrative—guiding Harry to make the right choices and driving his growth. In the Harry Potter series, Dumbledore primarily serves as both a "mentor" and "guardian". He acts not only as Harry's guide but also as his emotional anchor throughout his growth. Whenever Harry faces challenges, Dumbledore would appear as a "sagacious and helpful old man" to provide crucial support. Through patient instruction and wise guidance, he helps Harry comprehend his mission and gradually grow into a courageous and principled wizard. An example occurs in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone when Dumbledore discovers Harry lingering in front of the Mirror of Erised. Well aware of the mirror's nature, its allure and potential dangers, Dumbledore gently explained to Harry, "This mirror will give us neither knowledge nor truth". This explanation subtly guided Harry to understand the nature of the mirror and its impact on people, teaching him not to become overly obsessed with illusory dreams but to cherish real life. Throughout the conversation, Dumbledore behaved as a mentor and guardian, caring and teaching Harry to foster his growth, which not only reflected his educational philosophy but also reveals his core role function in the narrative—guiding Harry to make the right choices and driving his growth. Furthermore, Unlike Gandalf's divine aura, Dumbledore's mentor figure embodies a modernist deconstruction. Dumbledore's peculiarities, such as his fondness for sweets and his star-patterned robes, along with his past alliance with Grindelwald, subvert the stereotype of the "flawless" wise man. In the memory scenes in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Rowling deliberately depicts Dumbledore's avoidance of his family tragedy, suggesting that even the greatest mentor cannot transcend human limitations. This complexity lends a more realistic texture to his protective actions. When he pleads with Snape on the Astronomy Tower with a trembling voice, saying "Please...", it reveals the mortal fragility beneath the divine facade, making his character more relatable and emphasizing the modernity of his role as a mentor.

Dumbledore's role as a "guardian" is evident in his protection and support of Harry and the entire Wizarding world. After Harry's parents were killed, Dumbledore arranged for him to live with the Dursleys and used Lily's love to cast a magical protection over Harry. When Harry was twelve, he arranged for Hagrid to bring him to Hogwarts. The ultimate manifestation of this guardianship occurs in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, where Dumbledore was willing to sacrifice himself and asked Snape to end his life. His death was not only a kernel event in the story but also provided motivation for Harry's growth. Even after Dumbledore's death, the series of plans and will arrangements he left behind paved the way for Harry to find and destroy the Horcruxes, leading to the final battle's victory. Moreover, this sacrifice propelled the narrative to its climax and highlighted Dumbledore's significance within the story. Through his death, he secured additional time for the wizarding world to resist Voldemort, inspiring resistance and conveying the message of justice.

*2.2 Dumbledore's Opponent Traits*

Dumbledore's role demonstrates greater complexity than Gandalf's within Greimas's actantial framework. Notably, he occasionally exhibits certain traits of an opponent through his control over the information Harry receives. Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, Dumbledore sometimes strategically withholds truths from Harry in order to protect him or to facilitate his growth, particularly after Voldemort's return. This creates a situation of information asymmetry that can limit Harry's choices, placing him in a position of disadvantage. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, where Dumbledore deliberately distances himself from Harry to prevent Voldemort from accessing the Order's plans through the mental connection between Harry and Voldemort. "I believed it could not be long before Voldemort attempted to force his way into your mind, to manipulate and misdirect your thoughts". While logically sound, this approach generates unintended consequences—Harry interprets the avoidance as distrust, intensifying his emotional struggles. Dumbledore later acknowledges this misstep: "Harry, I owe you an explanation, an explanation of an old man's mistakes". While such information control stems from good intentions, it positions Dumbledore as an obstacle to Harry's growth to a certain extent, endowing him with certain traits of an opponent. Such moral ambiguity enriches the wizard role functions in fantasy literature, reflecting Rowling's nuanced exploration of how good intentions can paradoxically manifest as oppositional influences and profound contemplation of human nature and morality in her characterization of Dumbledore. This complexity contrasts sharply with Gandalf's more straightforward catalytic role, highlighting fundamental differences in how mentor figures operate within distinct narrative paradigms.

## 3. The Impact of Creative Context on Role Functions

*3.1 Gandalf: Tolkien's Return to Traditional Epic*

As a professor of linguistics, J. R. R. Tolkien delved into Old English and Norse mythology. Though living in the 19th and 20th centuries, his works largely exclude modern society, drawing instead from

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Norse myths and Old English literature, giving his stories an epic, mythical quality. In the 20th century, "there was growing concern over environmental damage from industrial pollution and population growth". Tolkien criticized this through Saruman's "vast armory" and his "plundering of nature" in his works. Through the Ents, whose homes are destroyed by Saruman, Tolkien expressed his disapproval of environmental pollution caused by industrialization and urbanization: "...we never are roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger. That has not happened in this Forest since the wars of Sauron and the Men of the Sea. It is the orc-work, the wanton hewing—rárum—without even the bad excuse of feeding the fires, that has so angered us". He thus sought solace in myths, and his works are filled with nostalgia for the mythic age, which is one of the reasons he created Middle-earth. Many of his characters, including Gandalf, were influenced by figures from Norse mythology. In the appendix to *The Hobbit*, Tolkien notes that the name "Gandalf" originates from the name of a dwarf in Norse mythology, "Gandálfr," which combines the Old Norse words gandr (magic staff) and álfr (elf). The appearance and personality of Gandalf are largely modeled after Odin from Norse mythology, both being wise, learned, brave, and magical elderly figures. In Tolkien's works, Gandalf's presence not only evokes nostalgia for the mythical era but also serves as a continuation of traditional values, preserving heroic virtues of courage, wisdom, and unity. By guiding the races of Middle-earth to unite against evil, he underscores the power of unity and courage, echoing the theme of heroes battling evil in Norse mythology.

*3.2 Rowling's Critique of Modern Society*

J.K. Rowling, as a contemporary writer, has crafted the *Harry Potter* series with a more modern touch that reflects contemporary social contexts. Organizations within the magical world, such as Hogwarts, the Ministry of Magic, and the Council of Magic, are inextricably linked to modern society. Thus, Dumbledore, as a central character in the story, naturally mirrors aspects of modern society and embodies its values.His role extends beyond guiding and educating Harry to championing social justice and equality. Dumbledore opposes the notion of "Pure-blood" and advocates for equality within the magical community, reflecting modern society's pursuit of multiculturalism and social justice. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when Dumbledore is about to be sacked by the Hogwarts Board of Governors, Hagrid exclaims, "Yeh can' take Dumbledore! Take him away, an' the Muggle-borns won' stand a chance! There'll be killin's next!" However, Dumbledore did not attempt to substantially alter the privileged status of "pure-blood wizards" or eradicate the breeding ground for dark forces (such as those in Diagon Alley, the Ministry of Magic, and certain interest groups within Hogwarts). Moreover, Rowling's critique extends beyond abstract ideals to systemic failures. For instance, while Dumbledore symbolically supports marginalized groups, his inaction toward institutionalized oppression—such as ignoring Hermione's S.P.E.W. movement for house-elf rights—mirrors real-world performative allyship that prioritizes rhetoric over structural change. Similarly, his passive tolerance of the Ministry's media manipulation through the *Daily Prophet* (which slanders Harry as a liar in *Harry Potter and the*

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*Order of the Phoenix*) reflects how power structures weaponize misinformation to maintain control. Dumbledore's strategic silence in these contexts, despite his moral authority, underscores the paradox of reformist leadership within corrupt systems—a tension Rowling explores to critique liberal individualism's limitations. Nonetheless, he educated and guided Harry to become a just wizard, and his existence once again emphasizes the power of education and the radiance of human nature. Rowling's Wizarding world, built upon the framework of modern society, is closely intertwined with reality, and the actions of its characters are not devoid of her reflections on the current state of capitalist society.

## 4. Conclusion

From a narratological perspective, we can distinctly observe the differences in role functions between Gandalf and Dumbledore. Gandalf, as a "catalyst" and "mediator", drives the unity of Middle-earth against evil, reflecting the traditional values of myths. In contrast, Dumbledore, as a "mentor" and "guardian", propels Harry's growth through education and guidance, mirroring modern societal values. These differences stem not only from the distinct creative backgrounds of the two authors but also illustrate the evolution of fantasy literature across different eras. Through comparative analysis of these two wizards, we can gain a deeper understanding of the diversity of wizard characters and the complexity of their narrative functions in fantasy literature. This comparison also reveals the transition of fantasy literature from mythological narration to humanistic narration.

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