
Character Biography

Eärendil

By Oshun

In terms of his significance within Tolkien's legendarium Eärendil the Mariner, sometimes called Eärendil the Blessed (1), deserves and could easily occupy far more research time and space than this biography provides. His tale is one among those of Tolkien's principle characters which is most steeped in timeless and often repeated mythic themes that transcend national and cultural boundaries. He personifies the themes of the quest hero, the father of his people, the savior when others have tried and failed, and as a unifier of disparate peoples (in his case, the Noldor, Sindar and the great Houses of the Edain of the First Age). Notwithstanding his participation in the War of Wrath, the archetypal characteristics of Eärendil are based more upon the hero as voyager and explorer than the hero as warrior and combatant. Although, of course, raw physical courage is as necessary for Eärendil as it is in the case of Fingon, for example. But the warrior hero is more often characterized principally by pride and a culturally determined definition of honor, whereas the voyager hero is motivated by curiosity about the unknown and/or the challenge presented by the seemingly impossible.

In the context of Tolkien's created world, Eärendil represents the future and past. He is the ancestor of characters whose actions will be recounted in later tales and simultaneously symbolizes the links to the history of the Elder days, to that of the Sindar, the self-declared lords of Middle-earth before the return of the Noldor, to that of the exiled Noldor, young and impetuous, entering into a barely remembered or as yet not experienced wild land to find and befriend the second-born of the Children of Ilúvatar (the first mortal men). Most dramatically Eärendil becomes the savior who is said to become an actual star in the firmament whence he is to serve as an inspiration and a guide to his descendants. Clyde Kilby, Tolkien scholar, says that

The Rings is a world and one containing its own myths and legends from the immemorial past. The star most loved by the elves is that of Eärendil, the mariner who long before had made his perilous way from Middle-earth to Valinor and there heard things too sacred for mortal lands and therefore was set to sail his ship as a star. (2)

The intent of this biographical essay is not to provide a discussion of all of the above literary themes but to present the basic facts about Eärendil and the most significant sources of information for those who wish to pursue further research.

Tolkien summarizes:

He [Eärendil] is important as the person who brings the Silmarillion to its end, and as providing in his offspring the main links to and persons in the tales of later Ages. His function, as a representative of both Kindreds, Elves and Men, is to find a sea-passage back to the Land of the Gods, and as ambassador persuade them to take thought again for the Exiles, to pity them, and rescue them from the Enemy. (3)

Therefore, it is fitting that Eärendil is best remembered by the average reader as the father of Elrond and Elros, the so-called half-elven beings who connect within Tolkien's unbroken storyline the fates of Elves and Men. Eärendil is the son of the mortal man Tuor of the House of Hador of Dor-lómin and the Noldorin princess Idril, daughter of Turgon, High King of the Noldor and ruler of the hidden city of Gondolin. Through his father, Eärendil received the blood of the greatest of the noble houses of the Edain. ("The Men of the Three Houses thrived and multiplied, but greatest among them was the house of Hador Goldenhead, peer of Elven-lords" [4]) And through the heritage of his mother Idril, Eärendil became the sole surviving conduit of the blood of the illustrious Finwë, first king of the Noldor, in the person of Elven-lord Elrond as well as in the mortal scions of Elrond's brother Elros, the intrepid descendants of Númenor who were to participate in the legendary events of the Third Age as recounted in the saga of *The Lord of the Rings* and who, at long last, succeed the Elves as the lords and stewards of Middle-earth.

The name of Eärendil is one of the very few Tolkien admitted to borrowing directly from Saxon literature: there, as Earendel or Orendel or Horvandillus (obviously also equivalent to Tolkien's Sun-Maiden, Urwendi), he is still the Morning Star, an object of hymns of praise . . . But in the same Saxon sources, Orendel is the father of Shakespeare's Hamlet (Amlodhi) . . . (5)

Tolkien's own explanation of his creation and the choice of the name Eärendil is eloquent and, to this reader at least, does not simply reflect the importance of the Professor's philological background to his work, but is engagingly representative of the aesthetic sensibility that lies behind his specialization.

The most important name in this connexion is *Eärendil*. This name is in fact (as is obvious) derived from A-S [Anglo-Saxon] *éarendel*. When first studying A-S professionally (1913) – I had done so as a boyish hobby when supposed to be learning Greek and Latin – I was struck by the great beauty of this word (or name), entirely coherent with the normal style of A-S, but euphonic to a peculiar degree in that pleasing but not 'delectable' language. Also its form strongly suggests that it is in origin a proper name and not a common noun. This is borne out by the obviously related forms in other Germanic languages; from which amid the confusions and debasements of late traditions it at least seems certain that it belonged to astronomical-myth, and was the name of a star or star-group. To my mind the A-S uses seem plainly to indicate that it was a star presaging the dawn (at any rate in English tradition): that is what we now call *Venus*: the morning-star as it may be seen shining brilliantly in the dawn, before the actual rising of the Sun. That is at any rate how I took it. Before 1914 I wrote a 'poem' upon Earendel who launched his ship like a bright spark from the havens of the Sun. I adopted him into my mythology – in which he became a prime figure as a mariner, and eventually as a herald star, and a sign of hope to men. *Aiya Eärendil Elenion Ancalima* (II 329) 'hail Earendil brightest of Stars' is derived at long remove from *Éala Éarendel engla beorhtast*. But the name could not be adopted just like that: it had to be accommodated to the Elvish linguistic situation, at the same time as a place for this person was made in legend. From this, far back in the history of 'Elvish', which was beginning, after many tentative starts in boyhood, to take definite shape at the time of the name's adoption, arose eventually (a) the C.E. stem *AYAR 'Sea', primarily applied to the Great Sea of the West, lying between Middle-earth, and *Aman* the Blessed Realm of the Valar; and (b) the element, or verbal base (N)DIL, 'to love, be devoted to' –

describing the attitude of one to a person, thing, course or occupation to which one is devoted for its own sake. (6)

The inspiration for and the creation of the character of Eärendil and the circumstances of his life dates back to Tolkien's earliest ponderings upon his invented world and its history. The remarks above and below were written as a draft response to a letter, never sent but retained by the author who felt they held valuable information relating to not simply the origins of the name, but the character and his history and his importance in relation to his life-long fictional work as well.

Earendil became a character in the earliest written (1916-17) of the major legends: *The Fall of Gondolin*, the greatest of the *Pereldar* 'Half-elven', son of *Tuor* of the most renowned House of the Edain, and *Idril* daughter of the King of Gondolin. *Tuor* had been visited by *Ulmo* one of the greatest *Valar*, the lord of seas and waters, and sent by him to Gondolin. The visitation had set in *Tuor*'s heart an insatiable sea-longing, hence the choice of name for his son, to whom this longing was transmitted. For the linking of this legend with the other major legends: the making of the *Silmarils* by *Fëanor*, their seizure by *Morgoth*, and the recapture of one only from his crown by *Beren* and *Lúthien*, and the coming of this into *Earendil*'s possession so that his voyages westward were at last successful, see 1204-6 and 246-249. (The attempt of *Eärendil* to cross *Éar* was against the Ban of the *Valar* prohibiting all Men to attempt to set foot on *Aman*, and against the later special ban prohibiting the Exiled Elves, followers of the rebellious *Fëanor*, from return: referred to in *Galadriel*'s lament. The *Valar* listened to the pleading of *Eärendil* on behalf of *Elves* and *Men* (both his kin), and sent a great host to their aid. *Morgoth* was overthrown and extruded from the World (the physical universe). The Exiles were allowed to return — save for a few chief actors in the rebellion of whom at the time of the *L. R.* only *Galadriel* remained. But *Eärendil*, being in part descended from *Men*, was not allowed to set foot on *Earth* again, and became a *Star* shining with the light of the *Silmaril*, which contained the last remnant of the unsullied light of *Paradise*, given by the *Two Trees* before their defilement and slaying by *Morgoth*. These legends are deliberately touched on in *Vol. I* as being the chief ones in the background of *The L.R.*, dealing with the relations of *Elves* and *Men* and *Valar* (the angelic *Guardians*) and therefore the chief backward links if (as I then hoped) the *Silmarillion* was published. (7)

Tolkien's own footnotes within the two paragraphs cited immediately above have been omitted for the sake of brevity. They are largely, but far from entirely, of a technical nature relating to his study of Anglo-Saxon and the development of his Elvish languages. They may be found in the original text, if the reader so desires.

It is fascinating to read that Eärendil who is famous as a voyager and sailor is named as he is in reflection of a hunger for the sea on the part of his father. These are characteristics which will be passed down by Eärendil primarily through his son *Elros*'s descendants, who become the *Númenórean* explorers and traders. They return to *Middle-earth* in the *Second Age* as both benefactors and exploiters and their progeny participate in a leadership capacity in fighting the war that will end with the removal the threat of *Morgoth*'s lieutenant *Sauron* against the peoples of *Middle-earth*.

This is the point where the story of the role of the *Hobbits* in the destruction of the *One Ring* seems a bit strained and forced to this reader. In looking forward to the production of *The Hobbit* as a film, one's thoughts might be drawn to *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and even

for some to the context in which Tolkien created his novel *The Lord of the Rings* in response to his publisher's expressed desire for a sequel to *The Hobbit*.

Ryder W. Miller notes that

Director Peter Jackson and company have successfully brought much of J.R.R. Tolkien's literary classic *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) to the big screen. The movies have been spectacular, majestic and epic. But much, including the historical environmental context, is not clearly explicated due to the necessary simplification of bringing the epic tale to the big screen. (8)

His remark reminds this critic of how much of the vast collection of background notes and invented history of Tolkien's universe do not make it into his most read work. Readers who know that history well have an enriched experience of those books, which surpasses the imagination of those who have enjoyed *The Lord of the Rings*, but know very little of the context of that story line in the broader scheme of Tolkien's world. The Hobbit-centered focus of the completed epic novel may cause the story to appear at times as though it comes close to falling into the didactic and that the polishing of the novel without the inclusion of more details of Tolkien's world history results in the creation of an unnatural division between the vast and rich legendarium upon which it rests and the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*. One might see the earlier parts of the grand adventure--the tales of *The Silmarillion*--as bursting forth from the writer's pen with the restless energy of a young man and *The Lord of the Rings*, the epic novel of his maturity, bearing the earmarks of the stodgier, more conservative years of late middle-age. The fact remains, however, that Tolkien never lost his interest in that world in its explicit details and his commitment to seeing *The Silmarillion* published. He continued to refine and add to that history until his death.

Like many of Tolkien's earliest characters, Eärendil's place within that expanded and revised world is never challenged. The method of presenting this fictional history as the work of various authors permitted Tolkien to simultaneously take multiple points of view and to allow different interpretations of his work to co-exist. One is free to look at Eärendil from different angles.

Jared Lobdell emphasizes the scope of Tolkien's writing about his world, describing it as an Edwardian adventure story (which might have the far corners of the British empire as its setting) written from the sensibility of a philologist, which "stretches and stretches," (9) not unlike the manner in which the story of Eärendil touches the *Lord of the Rings*. One might see the stretching of Tolkien's tale as encompassing years rather than geography per se, the connection of the Ages of Arda from the First Age through the Third. Dr. Lobdell quotes Sam in *The Two Towers* referring to the connection between the events of the Third Age and the preceding majestic tales of *The Silmarillion*.

'But that's a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it -- and the Silmaril went on and came to Eärendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We've got -- you've got some of the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end? '

'No, they never end as tales,' said Frodo. 'But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later -- or sooner.' (10)

(For those who may not in the past have had much interest in pursuing Tolkien's expanded history of his world, the above passage, in the words of Sam, is Tolkien's version of a sign post, letting you know that *The Lord of the Rings* is simply the continuation and expansion of one aspect of the mythology which comprises his life's work.)

Eärendil is one of the few characters of *The Silmarillion* to receive an explicit year of birth within the narrative structure of the writings. In his case the year is First Age 503. We are even told in the birth announcement that he was not surprisingly a lovely baby.

In the spring of the year after was born in Gondolin Eärendil Halfelven, the son of Tuor and Idril Celebrindal; and that was five hundred years and three since the coming of the Noldor to Middle-earth. Of surpassing beauty was Eärendil, for a light was in his face as the light of heaven, and he had the beauty and the wisdom of the Eldar and the strength and hardihood of the Men of old; and the Sea spoke ever in his ear and heart, even as with Tuor his father. (11)

One can also surmise that Eärendil is a blond, as his mother and father were. Both the House of Hador and the Vanyar were famous for their light colored hair. (Idril's mother Elenwë was Vanyarin, as was her great grandmother Indis.) As a young child, Eärendil survives the fall of Gondolin and the obsession of Maeglin son of Aredhel with his mother Idril.

Tuor sought to rescue Idril from the sack of the city, but Maeglin had laid hands on her, and on Eärendil; and Tuor fought with Maeglin on the walls, and cast him far out, and his body as it fell smote the rocky slopes of Amon Gwareth thrice ere it pitched into the flames below. Then Tuor and Idril led such remnants of the people of Gondolin as they could gather in the confusion of the burning down the secret way which Idril had prepared (12)

Finding himself among the community at the mouths of Sirion of Elven exiles, émigrés from disparate disasters, Eärendil encountered and married Elwing the daughter of Dior. There is something poignant about the union of the two part-mortal, part-Elven survivors, one of the fall of Gondolin and the other of the fall of Doriath.

Bright Eärendil was then lord of the people that dwelt nigh to Sirion's mouths; and he took to wife Elwing the fair, and she bore to him Elrond and Elros, who are called the Half-elven. Yet Eärendil could not rest, and his voyages about the shores of the Hither Lands eased not his unquiet. Two purposes grew in his heart, blended as one in longing for the wide Sea: he sought to sail thereon, seeking after Tuor and Idril who returned not; and he thought to find perhaps the last shore, and bring ere he died the message of Elves and Men to the Valar in the West, that should move their hearts to pity for the sorrows of Middle-earth. (13)

While Eärendil is at sea, the Fëanorians attack the Havens of Sirion to which Elwing had brought the Silmaril, the one which Beren and Luthien had taken from the crown of Morgoth at great cost and which she had held onto at her escape from Doriath. Rather than relinquish the Silmaril, Elwing jumps into the sea with it, leaving their young sons at the mercy of Maedhros and Maglor. Instead of drowning and losing the Silmaril in the ocean, Elwing is transformed into a bird and does not lose the jewel.

On a time of night Eärendil at the helm of his ship saw her come towards him, as a white cloud exceeding swift beneath the moon, as a star over the sea moving in strange course, a pale flame on wings of storm. And it is sung that she fell from the air upon the timbers of Vingilot, in a swoon, nigh unto death for the urgency of her speed, and Eärendil took her to his bosom; but in the morning with marvelling eyes he beheld his wife in her own form beside him with her hair upon his face, and she slept.

Great was the sorrow of Eärendil and Elwing for the ruin of the havens of Sirion, and the captivity of their sons, and they feared that they would be slain; but it was not so. (14)

According to the version in the published *Silmarillion*, Maglor rescues Elros and Elrond from the ruins of the Havens of Sirion and raises them. Meanwhile, Eärendil and Elwing reach Valinor and Eärendil goes before the Valar and presents the story of the suffering in Middle-earth and the threat from Morgoth. The two are the only persons of Middle-earth to set foot in Valinor since the departure of the Noldor.

The remainder of the chapter of the published *Silmarillion*, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath," details the meeting of Eärendil with the Valar, their ruling on the mortality of the half-Elven couple ("Elwing chose to be judged among the Firstborn Children of Ilúvatar, because of Lúthien; and for her sake Eärendil chose alike, though his heart was rather with the kindred of Men and the people of his father" [15]) and the Valar's decision to send their might to aid the peoples of Middle-earth to overthrow Morgoth. It seems a shame to rewrite it here in detail since it is short and among the most cogent and readable pieces of text in *The Silmarillion*.

The most often referred to passage in discussions of the events of this period is the ruling of the Valar relating to the choice of the Peredhel.

But when all was spoken, Manwë gave judgement, and he said: 'In this matter the power of doom is given to me. The peril that he ventured for love of the Two Kindreds shall not fall upon Eärendil, nor shall it fall upon Elwing his wife, who entered into peril for love of him; but they shall not walk again ever among Elves or Men in the Outer Lands. And this is my decree concerning them: to Eärendil and to Elwing, and to their sons, shall be given leave each to choose freely to which kindred their fates shall be joined, and under which kindred they shall be judged.' (16)

Another passage is cited below for its sheer poetic power relates to the transformation of Eärendil's ship Vingilot from an earthly to a heavenly ship.

Now when first Vingilot was set to sail in the seas of heaven, it rose unlooked for, glittering and bright; and the people of Middle-earth beheld it from afar and wondered, and they took it for a sign, and called it Gil-Estel, the Star of High Hope. And when this new star was seen at evening, Maedhros spoke to Maglor his brother, and he said: 'Surely that is a Silmaril that shines now in the West?'

And Maglor answered: 'If it be truly the Silmaril which we saw cast into the sea that rises again by the power of the Valar, then let us be glad; for its glory is seen now by many, and is yet secure from all evil.' Then the Elves looked up, and despaired no longer; but Morgoth was filled with doubt.

Yet it is said that Morgoth looked not for the assault that came upon him from the West;

for so great was his pride become that he deemed that none would ever again come with open war against him. Moreover he thought that he had for ever estranged the Noldor from the Lords of the West, and that content in their blissful realm the Valar would heed no more his kingdom in the world without; for to him that is pitiless the deeds of pity are ever strange and beyond reckoning. But the host of the Valar prepared for battle; and beneath their white banners marched the Vanyar, the people of Ingwë, and those also of the Noldor who never departed from Valinor, whose leader was Finarfin the son of Finwë. (17)

Eärendil participated in the final battle of the War of Wrath from the decks of Vingilot without ever leaving the sky. Along the side of Thorondor and his eagles, Eärendil dealt the final blow that killed the dragon Ancalagon and cast it into Thangorodrim. One cannot help but wonder if Elros and Elrond were present at that last battle of the War of Wrath, and, if so, if they were aware that they looked upon their father, when he cast the definitive blow in that epic battle.

Some of the earliest versions of the tales included in the history of Arda grew less grim with the passage of time and their reworking. Whether Eärendil's story has a happy ending or not remains open to the interpretation of the reader. He is granted victory in his quests. He does reach the land of the gods. He is granted their assistance in freeing the peoples of Middle-earth from the threat of enslavement by Morgoth and, at the request of his wife, receives the gift of the quasi-immortal life of the Eldar. The latest version of the tale of Eärendil allows him return to Middle-earth to help overthrow Morgoth in the War of Wrath (18). He is also allowed to reunite with his wife Elwing, if only temporarily, that is part of time.

For many readers, however, his endless voyage in the form of a star across the sky might seem a less than happy ending. This version harkens back to the earliest versions of the Mariner's tale in one of the drafts of the poem of Earendel printed in *The Book of Lost Tales*, which concludes with a tone of heartrending understated melancholy.

Then Earendel fled from that Shipman dread
 Beyond the dark earth's pale,
 Back under the rim of the Ocean dim,
 And behind the world set sail;
 And he heard the mirth of the folk of earth
 And the falling of their tears,
 As the world dropped back in a cloudy wrack
 On its journey down the years.

Then he glimmering passed to the starless vast
 As an isled lamp at sea,
 And beyond the ken of mortal men
 Set his lonely errantry,
 Tracking the Sun in his galleon
 Through the pathless firmament,
 Till his light grew old in abysses cold
 And his eager flame was spent. (19)

Tolkien intends that reader accept Eärendil unquestionably as a hero and permitted him the accomplishment of the goals that had driven his life. But not for Eärendil is the orthodox happy

ending. He loses his sons in their childhood and, even after reunification with his wife, is not allowed to live out his life in peace but is condemned to forever travel the night skies "[t]ill his light grew old in abysses cold [a]nd his eager flame was spent," giving light and encouragement to others. Then again perhaps this is not such a terrible fate for the tireless voyager, the intrepid sailor, who would not necessarily want to spend his days in a tower surrounded by birds, but rather would prefer to be sailing in an ocean of space far more vast even than the seas of Middle-earth.

Works Cited

1. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of Men into the West."
 2. Kilby, Clyde S., "Meaning in the Lord of the Rings," *Shadows of Imagination: The Fantasies of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams*, ed. Mark R. Hillegas (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979).
 3. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 131 To Milton Waldman.
 4. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of Men into the West."
 5. Hoffman, Curtiss, *The Seven Story Tower: A Mythic Journey through Space and Time* (New York: Insight Books, 1999).
 6. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 297 Drafts for a letter to 'Mr Rang.' The letter drafted in August of 1967 was never sent in this form. Tolkien, however, retained the notes for future reference.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Miller, Ryder W., "The Missing Historical Environmental Context of Peter Jackson's the Lord of the Rings," *Electronic Green Journal* 1.20 (2004), Questia, Web, 31 Jan. 2011. (This writer's work manifests his interest in both science fiction/fantasy and the natural sciences.)
 9. Lobdell, Jared, *Tolkien's World of the Rings: Language, Religion and Adventure* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003).
 10. *The Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers*, "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol."
 11. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin."
 12. Ibid.
 13. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath."
 14. Ibid.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Ibid.
 18. Ibid.
 19. *The Book of Lost Tales II, The Tale of Earendel*.
-

About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).