
Character Biography

Elwing the White

By Oshun

Most readers of Tolkien are introduced to the name of Elwing in the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings* when Aragorn explains to the Hobbits the connection between the Eldar and the Edain through the line of the Peredhil.

There live still those of whom Lúthien was the foremother, and it is said that her line shall never fail. Elrond of Rivendell is of that Kin. For of Beren and Lúthien was born Dior Thingol's heir; and of him Elwing the White whom Eärendil wedded, he that sailed his ship out of the mists of the world into the seas of heaven with the Silmaril upon his brow. And of Eärendil came the Kings of Númenor, that is Westerneße. (1)

Elwing appears throughout the texts referenced as the daughter of Dior, wife of Eärendil, sister of Eluréd and Elurín, and mother of Elrond and Elros.

Elwing was born at Tol Galen, while Beren and Lúthien still lived there. "[S]he was named Elwing, which is Star-spray, for she was born on a night of stars, whose light glittered in the spray of the waterfall of Lanthir Lamath beside her father's house." (2)

Dior leaves Beren and Lúthien, after Thingol's death, and goes to Doriath with his wife and their young sons Eluréd and Elurín, and Elwing their youngest. He takes up the Silmaril, begins to wear it and "set himself to raise anew the glory of the kingdom of Doriath." (3) Not coincidentally, he also draws the attention of the sons of Fëanor, who attack Doriath to regain possession of the Silmaril. At the fall of Doriath, Eluréd and Elurín are kidnapped and left to die in the woods by followers of Celegorm. Although Maedhros seeks to save them, they are never found. Elwing, however, is rescued and escapes with survivors of Doriath to the Havens of the Sirion.

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. (4)

The most important event in Elwing's life occurs while she stays at the Havens of Sirion with her two young sons. While Eärendil is at sea, Fëanor's remaining sons attacked the Havens of Sirion seeking once again to reclaim the Silmaril. Rather than give it up, Elwing casts herself into the sea, leaving her sons at the mercy of Maglor and Maedhros. Instead of drowning, she is saved.

For Ulmo bore up Elwing out of the waves, and he gave her the likeness of a great white bird, and upon her breast there shone as a star the Silmaril, as she flew over the water to seek Eärendil her beloved. (5)

Despite all the events in which Elwing plays a role as one of the major catalysts, her character, like so many in *The Silmarillion*, but perhaps most notably in the case of the women, never really becomes memorable or distinct in itself. Whether or not the women of Tolkien's legendarium are treated with the attention and care that is given the men is a point of controversy among aficionados of his work. This writer, for one, finds the arguments convincing that women are not considered with the same weight as their male counterparts. The position defended by those who claim he does give women their due appears to me to be much weaker.

In a less than comprehensive search of academic discussions on the topic of women in Tolkien, this writer found the most substantive defenses of his treatment of women in theological journals, which defend Tolkien as an embodiment of the values of Christianity. More typical of discussion of the role of women in Tolkien's work, however, would be following type of statement:

Although the women fantasists accept some of Tolkien's premises, they differ strongly with him on the subject of women's roles. The most obvious "anxiety" for women writers results from the presumption that female characters in the Secondary World must be restricted to the roles played by women in our primary world's medieval romances-- object of the quest, mother, temptress, witch--or else absent, as in epics such as Beowulf or the Song of Roland. The late twentieth century writers are unanimous in believing that Tolkien should have swerved from this presumption in his attitude toward women, whether expressed overtly in characters such as Rosie Cotton or Arwen, or implicitly by their absence. They ask: Where are the Dwarf women? Must the Companions of the Ring be male? (6)

Women fantasy writers universally acknowledge their debt to Tolkien's work, while seeking to find their own path. A contemporary fantasy author, Patricia McKillip, is quoted in the same article as saying: "Even in college I thought I should write at least one volume from a woman's point of view--as LeGuin did in the Earthsea trilogy --because there were no women *for me* in Tolkien." (7)

Of course, as readers of fanfiction, we know where the women are. They are the much-maligned so-called Mary Sue *tenth walkers*. One might consider the likelihood that this genre could be rooted in the paucity of strong female characters in the original canon.

In the case of Elwing, the one example of concrete action on her part could be interpreted as less heroic and more an incomprehensible abandonment of her children, without any explanation of why this should be accepted as a positive choice, and the apparent assumption on the part of her creator that it will be accepted as such. Conversely, the ranks of the Noldor, and by extension the peoples of Middle-earth, are punished harshly for actively seeking recompense for the murder of their King and the theft of their greatest technical achievement. Elwing, on the other hand, is rewarded for refusing to return a Silmaril to its rightful owners.

And it is said that Elwing learned the tongue of birds, who herself had once worn their shape; and they taught her the craft of flight, and her wings were of white and silver-grey. And at times, when Eärendil returning drew near again to Arda, she would fly to meet him, even as she had flown long ago, when she was rescued from the sea. Then the far-sighted among the Elves that dwelt in the Lonely Isle would see her like a white bird, shining, rose-stained in the sunset, as she soared in joy to greet the coming of Vingilot to haven. (8)

The decision that Elwing makes to take the Silmaril and jump off her balcony into the sea, leaving her children to Maedhros and Maglor, and then running off to Valinor without looking back, is apparently a stretch for a number of people. She, of course, at this point assumes that they are the slayers of her brothers and that there is no reason to suspect the outcome will be different for Elrond and Elros. Therefore, she chooses to save the Silmaril over protecting her children and, yet, she and her husband are given the choice to align themselves with the Elves and accept quasi-immortality.

There are precedents in myth and mythic literature for similar forms of behavior, but I hardly think that Tolkien intended to bring to mind Medea according to Euripides when characterizing one of his heroines, who is purportedly taking the side of the good and just according to the logic of his story by saving a Silmaril for the Valar and transporting it to Aman. Maybe I am wrong. Perhaps Tolkien's intent was to demonstrate that a Silmaril is infused with a power similar to that of the One Ring to take hold of the will of its bearer. But his references throughout the texts to Elwing's action are positive. For example, it is at least partially through the agency of Elwing that the Valar are eventually predisposed to consider coming to the aid of the peoples in Middle-earth in their ever-more-desperate struggle against Morgoth.

Eärendil wedded Elwing, and with the power of the *Silmaril* passed the Shadows and came to the Uttermost West, and speaking as ambassador of both Elves and Men obtained the help by which Morgoth was overthrown. Eärendil was not permitted to return to mortal lands, and his ship bearing the *Silmaril* was set to sail in the heavens as a star, and a sign of hope to the dwellers in Middle-earth oppressed by the Great Enemy of his servants. (9)

Or, alternatively, one might argue that Elwing is simply a placeholder in the genealogical tables of the most important lines of Men and Elves in Tolkien's legendarium. That, however, is a significant role, since, through her marriage to Eärendil, she unites the most significant branches of the Eldar in Middle-earth to the Edain, the representatives of Men newly arrived in Beleriand in the First Age.

The lineage of the most famous of the Peredhil (half-elven) (10) in Tolkien's works dates back to Lúthien, the daughter of King Elu Thingol of Sindar and Melian the Maia, who falls in love with Beren of the House of Bëor. Elwing is born to their son, Dior, and Nimloth, "a kinswoman of Celeborn, prince of Doriath." (11) A more detailed variant on Elwing's family, which appears only in *Unfinished Tales*, is that Nimloth is said to be the daughter of Galathil who is a descendant of Elu Thingol's brother Elmo and the brother of Celeborn. (12) Eärendil is the product of the union of Idril of Gondolin and the mortal Tuor.

Of equal importance is the connection of the Elves of the First Age to the Edain, the most important of the Houses of the first Men of Middle-earth (notably the House of Bëor through

Beren and the House of Hador through Tuor), who become the rulers of Númenor. The importance of the heritage transmitted through Elwing and Eärendil cannot be underestimated in its significance within the epic of Elves and Men in Tolkien's world. On the side of the Elves, they are able to trace their bloodlines back to the King of the Sindar in Doriath, the High Kings of the Noldor in Middle-earth, the favored-by-the-Valar Vanyar, and the House of Finwë in Valinor. Finally, the union of Arwen and Aragorn, who both trace their lineage back to that same Peredhil pairing, is one of major importance in *Lord of the Rings*.

At the end of the First Age the Valar gave to the Half-elven an irrevocable choice to which kindred they would belong. Elrond chose to be of Elven-kind, and became a master of wisdom. To him therefore was granted the same grace as to those of the High Elves that still lingered in Middle-earth: that when weary at last of the mortal lands they could take ship from the Grey Havens and pass into the Uttermost West; and this grace continued after the change of the world. But to the children of Elrond a choice was also appointed: to pass with him from the circles of the world; or if they remained, to become mortal and die in Middle-earth. (13)

The stories of Elwing's descendants symbolize simultaneously the unity and similarities between the Eldar and the Edain and the distance and profound differences. The return of the Men of Númenor to Middle-earth in the Second Age marks the beginning of the period of the final disappearance of the Elves from Middle-earth and the transformation of that invented world into a precursor of our own. This conclusion neatly summarizes Elwing's particular importance to Tolkien.

The Bloodlines of the Peredhil

Luthien/Beren = Dior

Lúthien	Beren	Dior
1/2 Maiarin	of the Edain	1/2 of the Edain
1/2 Sindarin	--	1/4 Maiarin
--	--	1/4 Sindarin

Idril/Tuor = Eärendil

Idril	Tuor	Eärendil
--	of the Edain	1/2 of the Edain
5/8 Vanyarin(14)	--	5/16 Vanyarin
3/8 Noldorin	--	3/16 Noldorin

Elwing/Eärendil = Elros and Elrond

Elwing	Eärendil	Elros and Elrond
1/8 Maiarin	--	1/16 Maiarin
5/8 Sindarin	--	5/16 Sindarin
1/4 of the Edain	1/2 of the Edain	3/8 of the Edain
--	5/16 Vanyarin	5/32 Vanyarin
--	3/16 Noldorin	3/32 Noldorin

Elwing/Eärendil = Elros and Elrond (simplified)

Elwing	Eärendil	Elros and Elrond
1/8 Maiarin (12.5%)	--	1/16 Maiarin (6.25%)
5/8 Elven (62.5%)	1/2 Elven (50%)	9/16 Elven (56.25%)
1/4 of the Edain (25%)	1/2 of the Edain (50%)	3/8 of the Edain (37.5%)

Elrond/Celebrian = Elladan, Elrohir, Arwen

Elros and Elrond	Celebrian	Elladan, Elrohir, Arwen
1/16 Maiarin (6.25%)	--	1/32 Maiarin (3.125%)
9/16 Elven (56.25%)	Elven (100%)	25/32 Elven (78.125%)
3/8 of the Edain (37.5%)	--	3/16 of the Edain (18.75%)

Works Cited

1. *Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship of the Ring*, "A Knife in the Dark."
2. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Doriath."
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings."
5. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath."
6. Faye Ringel, "12 Women Fantasists: in the Shadow of the Ring," *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances: Views of Middle-Earth*, ed. George Clark and Daniel Timmons (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000) 165.
7. *Ibid.*, 166.
8. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath."
9. *Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings."
10. In fact, the so-called Peredhil are not half-Elven at all, with the exception of Eärendil. See the chart at the end of this article.
11. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Ruin of Doriath."
12. *Unfinished Tales*, "The History of Galadriel and Celeborn."
13. *Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "The Númenórean Kings."
14. There is an ambiguous reference in *History of Middle-earth, vol. XI*, "Of Maeglin," implying that Elenwë, the wife of Turgon, mother of Idril, might have been Vanyarin. For purposes of this table I have assumed that she was.

About the Author

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