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## Character Biography

### Nienna

By Oshun

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Nienna, one of the Queens of the Valar, is the sister of Námo and Irmo (often respectively called Mandos and Lórien after their dwelling places and collectively referred to as the Fëanturi or the "Masters of Spirits").<sup>1</sup> Among the Queens of Valar (the Valier<sup>2</sup>) she is outranked only by Varda and Yavanna.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Silmarillion*, Nienna's special place is identified as "mightier than Estë."<sup>4</sup> She is said to dwell alone in halls which

are west of West, upon the borders of the world; and she comes seldom to the city of Valimar where all is glad. She goes rather to the halls of Mandos, which are near to her own; and all those who wait in Mandos cry to her, for she brings strength to the spirit and turns sorrow to wisdom. The windows of her house look outward from the walls of the world.<sup>5</sup>

She is also said to mourn "every wound that Arda has suffered in the marring of Melkor. So great was her sorrow, as the Music unfolded, that her song turned to lamentation long before its end, and the sound of mourning was woven into the themes of the World before it began."<sup>6</sup> She is, however, distinguished not only by incessant weeping (what reader could tolerate that without the mitigation of other characteristics?) but embodies the attributes of empathy, understanding, and pity. Unlike her brother Námo, her duty is not to judge but to extend compassion: "But she does not weep for herself; and those who hearken to her learn pity, and endurance in hope."<sup>7</sup>

Nienna the Weeper extends her generous hand to those who pass through the halls of Mandos, treating them with a unique capacity for compassion, which is generally interpreted as a feminine virtue. Literary critic Debbie Sly notes in an article in the anthology *J.R.R. Tolkien and His Literary Resonances* that the "Valier represent, not a femaleness necessary to a creativity based on the model of sexuality, but *femininity* associated with particular spheres of influence, most notably in the case of Varda."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps even more so than Varda, Nienna echoes desirable traits that might be traditionally considered to be related to the female. She visits the halls of Mandos in order to support and console all those who are detained there and cry out to her "for she brings strength to the spirit and turns sorrow to wisdom."<sup>9</sup>

Nienna also shared her tutelage with the wisest of the Maiar Olórin (Gandalf): "He too dwelt in Lórien, but his ways took him often to the house of Nienna, and of her he learned pity and patience."<sup>10</sup> In the pages of *The Silmarillion*, she makes quite an effort to extend her pity and forgiveness to even the worst malefactors. When Melkor abases himself at the feet of Manwë and sues for his future freedom and a pardon for past wrongdoing, he vows "that if he might be made only the least of the free people of Valinor he would aid the Valar in all their works, and most of all in the healing of the many hurts that he had done to the world. And Nienna aided his prayer . . ."<sup>11</sup>

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Interestingly enough, her empathy is not limitless. Although Nienna encouraged Manwë to extend pardon and mercy to Melkor, she does not offer the same support to Fëanor. Perhaps Melkor's dishonesty in requesting and receiving the clemency of his brethren strained the quality of even Nienna's compassion. After Melkor destroyed the Trees and Fëanor refused the request of the Valar to turn over his Silmarils, Nienna wept but did not speak on behalf of his position. Instead, "Nienna arose and went up onto Ezellohar, and cast back her grey hood, and with her tears washed away the defilements of Ungoliant; and she sang in mourning for the bitterness of the world and the Marring of Arda."<sup>12</sup>

## Myths and Legends of Weeping Women or Goddesses

Extending across time, geography, and cultures, one encounters numerous stories of weeping women or goddesses. When I first read the description of Nienna the Weeper in *The Silmarillion*, it instantly brought to my mind the name and the figure of *La Llorona* (Spanish for Weeping Woman or the Weeper). This particular weeping woman may have been originally linked to "powerful Aztec goddesses"<sup>13</sup> and over centuries transformed into an entirely different entity in modern Mexican folklore.

There are a multitude of accounts of *La Llorona's* story ranging from those found within her pre-Columbian roots to the still-evolving role she plays in popular culture from Mexico to the southwestern United States. Among the oldest *La Llorona* tales is one of a Cassandra-like figure who is characterized by tears and prophecies. *La Llorona* is said to have been heard crying for her children in the months leading up to Cortes' arrival. For many this apparition signaled "the destruction of *Mexica*<sup>14</sup> culture, through conquest and subjugation of the Indigenous people of Mexico."<sup>15</sup>

Other "weepers" throughout history include Niobe of Classical Greek mythology. She was the "daughter of Tantalus, proud Queen of Thebes, whose seven sons and seven daughters were killed by Apollo and Diana . . . and Niobe wept until she was turned to stone."<sup>16</sup> Unlike Nienna she was acted upon rather than a character of action. Mythic mourning women are also known for their willingness to shoulder the sorrows of their peoples and to weep, like Nienna, not for themselves but with empathy for the suffering of others.

Devotion to the Virgin Mary in the aspect of Our Lady of Sorrows or the *Mater Dolorosa* (the grieving mother) dates back to at least the 14th century, if not earlier.<sup>17</sup> She is represented in art with an anguished expression and as often as not with flowing tears. As a devout and practicing Roman Catholic, Tolkien would have been familiar with this imagery, which resembles in its physical aspect the description of the hooded, weeping Nienna. Practitioners pray to the Sorrowful Mother, begging her to intercede for them before their god. Like Nienna, the Virgin Mary is believed to be forgiving and compassionate and willing to guide, comfort, and instruct.

John Arnot MacCulloch, a clergyman who wrote extensively in the first half of the 20th century about mythology and folklore, explains that Norse mythology features Freya as a weeping goddess as well:

With reference to her weeping, one of the goddess's [Freya's] titles is *gratfagra god*, "goddess beautiful in tears," and gold is called "tears of Freyja." In folk-tales the gift

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of weeping tears which become pearls is a well-known incident, and tears of gold are wept by a maiden in an Icelandic story.<sup>18</sup>

John Lindow, who specializes in folklore and Scandinavian medieval studies at the University of California, Berkeley, explains how in the *Gylfaginning* section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, Freyja is married to Ód, who leaves her alone for extensive period of time. In her loneliness she weeps for him and her tears are red-gold in color.<sup>19</sup> Freya's similarities with Nienna extend far beyond a propensity to weep. She also shares the skill of foresight and an interest in the heroic dead. (These elements will be discussed in detail below in the section related to earlier versions of Nienna's role in the texts.)

Anthropologist Curtiss Hoffman also notes that Nienna, like Cassandra, possesses the gift of prognostication,<sup>20</sup> although apparently not infallibility. But she does foresee the doom that awaits the Two Trees and waters the soil beneath them with her tears. Like other weeping women of legend, Nienna intercedes for others: "[W]hen Morgoth is first constrained by the Valar at the time when the Elves awaken, it is Nienna who intercedes for pardon on his behalf 'because of her kinship.'"<sup>21</sup> Hoffman further calls attention to the fact that the name Nienna is "formed from the same root as Niënor,"<sup>22</sup> sister of Turin, as is the *epessë*<sup>23</sup> of Níniel given to her by her brother.<sup>24</sup> David Salo's *Gateway to Sindarin* gives the root of Niënor as the Quenya word for "mourning" and states that Níniel can be translated as "maiden of tears."<sup>25</sup> But Niënor is a tragic figure ensnared by the curse placed upon her family by Melkor, while Nienna, despite her womanly virtue of empathy combined with compassion, is one of the strongest among the Ainur.

## Earlier Versions of Nienna in the Legendarium

For an elucidation of the related earliest accounts of both Nienna and Námo that are found in *The Book of Lost Tales* see [Dawn Felagund's character biography of Námo](#).<sup>26</sup> Námo's basic characteristics and persona change very little from his first appearance in *The Book of Lost Tales* to the final edit by Christopher Tolkien as published in *The Silmarillion*. Nienna, however, undergoes a sea change from her initial description in *The Book of Lost Tales* and her final incarnation in *The Silmarillion*.

Nienna is given a series of alternate names used throughout the pages of *The Book of Lost Tales*. The spelling *Nyenna* is recorded in the Appendix of names.<sup>27</sup> Others include Fui (Quenya for "night"), Heskil (Qenya for "Winter One"), Núri (Qenya for "Sighing One"), and the creepy, Gothic-sounding Qalmë-Tári (Qenya for "Mistress of Death").<sup>28</sup> It is not difficult to discern that the majority of these alternate names are intended for interpretations of the character of Nienna that are markedly different from the ones we read of in the latest version of the *Valaquenta*.

In *The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien's earliest draft of his epic, Mandos and Nienna divide responsibility for the spirits of the dead between them, with Mandos administering to the Elves while Nienna gathers the Mortals to her.<sup>29</sup> This version of Mandos and Nienna is remarkably similar to the story of Odin and Freya entering each battlefield and dividing among them the heroic dead. (I did not, however, find the basis upon which Odin and Freya made their choices.) British historian Héléne Adeline Guerber states that "Freya transported her chosen slain to Folkvang, where they were duly entertained, and where she also welcomed all pure maidens and faithful wives, that they might enjoy the company of their lovers and husbands even after death."<sup>30</sup>

Dawn Felagund notes in her Mandos biography, that the Nienna of *The Lost Tales* plays a harsher role than she does in the final edit of *The Silmarillion*: "Nienna passes judgment on mortal humans, sending them either to torment in Angband, to a blissful life in Valinor, or--for the majority--a rather nondescript existence on the plains of Arvalin."<sup>31</sup> The very mention of Angband makes one shiver and is not at all reminiscent of the Nienna of *The Silmarillion*, who comforts and counsels spirits housed in the halls of Mandos.

The summary by Dawn of the differences between *Lost Tales* Nienna and *Silmarillion* Nienna clearly outlines the evolution and dramatic changes in this character from the initial drafts:

Some would argue that the *Lost Tales* are too distant from the published work to provide reliable evidence of how to interpret the published texts. Nienna certainly illustrates why: From a cold, sinister character associated with death in the *Lost Tales*, she evolves in the published *Silmarillion* to the most empathetic of the Valar and the teacher of Olórin, who exerts a massive positive influence on the events of the Third Age as Gandalf, in part, because of his ability to pity characters like Gollum.<sup>32</sup>

## Summary

Nienna stands out as one of Tolkien's most stalwart female characters. She is unflinching before the marring of Arda, which she understands as well or better than any others among the Valar. *The Silmarillion* really does not stand alone. There is no happy ending to this book. It is the beginning and not the end of a tale. *The Silmarillion* is an introduction to and the pre-history of an epic story. Nienna concerns herself with the *dyscatastrophe* side of this epic. The *Silmarillion* never progresses beyond tragedy to that sudden joyous turn (or *euatastrophe*) which Tolkien defines in "On Fairy-Stories." *Dyscatastrophe* introduces the conflicts rather than resolves them:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale). . . . [I]t is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.<sup>33</sup>

We do not encounter this hoped for *euatastrophe* until the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. Nonetheless, despite her unnumbered tears, Nienna maintains, all too uncommonly among the Valar, the sense of hope and redemption within the pages of *The Silmarillion* by manifesting "humanistic and idealistic concerns,"<sup>34</sup> which combine to make folk and fairy tales satisfying. Nienna, however, is no Cassandra or Antigone, who weep and suffer only to meet with a tragic end. The sole relief granted their audiences is provided in a cathartic response engendered by a horrifying conclusion. Nienna instead, with her facet of a healer of wounded spirits and her capacity for sympathy, compassion, pity, and forgiveness, provides the hope of the eventual restoration of a "Joy beyond the walls of the world."<sup>35</sup>

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### **About the Author**

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