
Character Biography

Thuringwethil

By Oshun

Thuringwethil is a villain who appears in the tale of Beren and Lúthien. For a relatively obscure character, who appears only briefly and is mentioned but four times by name in *The Silmarillion*, she is known among readers and perhaps viewed as an intriguing creature or one whom readers love to hate.¹ This might be partly because she is one of the all too few women characters in Tolkien's work, or the interest in her could be rooted in a widespread enthrallment with vampire stories. Women readers of Tolkien and writers of Tolkien fanfiction crave to read and tell a story from a female point of view. It is not impossible, in this case, that the readers' interest in this character is more strongly based on gender and power than upon her ability to startle, frighten, or horrify.

Thuringwethil is described as female and a vampire; however, her nature is not explicitly named in the texts. Because of her ability to shift shapes, many speculate that she might be of the Maiar. We know that Melkor perverted Maiar to his will, best known among those being Sauron, and the texts state that there are numerous Maiar unnamed in the recording of the histories:

With the Valar came other spirits whose being also began before the World, of the same order as the Valar but of less degree. These are the Maiar, the people of the Valar, and their servants and helpers. Their number is not known to the Elves, and few have names in any of the tongues of the Children of Ilúvatar; for though it is otherwise in Aman, in Middle-earth the Maiar have seldom appeared in form visible to Elves and Men.²

The origins and exact type of being that Thuringwethil is cannot be found in the texts. We do know, however, that after the war between Melkor and the Valar, before the coming of the Elves, there remained in Middle-earth many hostile elements associated with the Dark Vala. One could assume that among those Sauron might not have been the only of the Maiar, but simply the greatest:

Nonetheless the Valar did not discover all the mighty vaults and caverns hidden with deceit far under the fortresses of Angband and Utumno. Many evil things still lingered there, and others were dispersed and fled into the dark and roamed in the waste places of the world, awaiting a more evil hour; and Sauron they did not find.³

Theodora Goss, Hungarian-American fantasy writer and lecturer at Boston University, noted that the fascination with vampire-like creatures dates to ancient times:

Tales about creatures resembling vampires have existed in various cultures, probably back to the beginning of human culture itself. Such creatures may be demons that suck blood or reanimated corpses. In the Sanskrit *Baital-Pachisi*, for example, King Vikram promises a magician that he will bring him a Baital, a spirit that animates dead bodies. He finds the Baital hanging from a tree like a bat.⁴

So the association of bats and vampires reaches into antiquity for its origins. Goss goes on to explain, however, that the "vampire as we know it comes primarily from Eastern European folklore, filtered through a long literary tradition."⁵

Vampire Thuringwethil and werewolves might have been a surprise to first-time readers of *The Silmarillion*, not expecting to find horror fiction tropes in Tolkien. But the Professor is unlikely to have looked to popular fiction or scary movies for his inspiration, but to one or another of numerous older traditions. Thuringwethil herself is described in *The Silmarillion*'s "Index of Names" as, "Thuringwethil 'Woman of Secret Shadow', the messenger of Sauron from Tol-in-Gaurhoth who took the form of a great bat, and in whose shape Lúthien entered Angband."⁶

Both Sauron and Thuringwethil take the forms of bats or vampire-bats in *The Silmarillion*. Thuringwethil is called "the bat fell"⁷ of Sauron: "She was the messenger of Sauron, and was wont to fly in vampire's form to Angband; and her great fingered wings were barbed at each joint's end with an iron claw."⁸

The mention of Thuringwethil in *The Silmarillion* is a small but compelling detail within one of the central stories of the Elder Days, the story of Beren and Lúthien. For nearly two years after Morgoth breaks the over four-hundred-year-long Siege of Angband with his surprise attack across the north of Beleriand in the *Dagor Bragollach*,⁹ the Noldor were able to defend the isle of Tol Sirion, which had been fortified by Finrod Felagund and was being held by Orodreth.¹⁰ But it fell at last to Sauron, who by then had become "a sorcerer of dreadful power, master of shadows and of phantoms, foul in wisdom, cruel in strength, misshaping what he touched, twisting what he ruled, lord of werewolves."¹¹ Driving out Orodreth and taking control of the isle, "Sauron made it into a watch-tower for Morgoth, a stronghold of evil, and a menace; and the fair isle of Tol Sirion became accursed, and it was called Tol-in-Gaurhoth, the Isle of Werewolves."¹²

When Beren sued Thingol for the hand of Lúthien, the King of Doriath demanded a Silmaril as a bride price. Beren then called upon Finrod Felagund to fulfill his oath sworn upon the Ring of Barahir¹³ to assist him in fulfilling his quest for a Silmaril, and Felagund joined him. Beren and Finrod were intercepted and fell, along with their small company from Nargothrond, into the hands of Sauron and were imprisoned in the pits of Tol-in-Gaurhoth. Lúthien, however, intuited their dire situation, confirmed by her mother Melian the Maia, and determined that *she* would rescue Beren and his supporters on her own.¹⁴ After a series of adventures and misadventures, Lúthien is kidnapped by Celegorm and Curufin and taken to Nargothrond. Hindering her quest temporarily, this abduction gains her in the end the incomparable assistance of Celegorm's famous Huan the Hound of Valinor.

Celegorm and Curufin imprison Lúthien in Nargothrond, "[b]ut Huan the hound was true of heart, and the love of Lúthien had fallen upon him in the first hour of their meeting; and he grieved at her captivity."¹⁵ Huan helps Lúthien escape her captors, and he carries her to the Isle of Werewolves, where Beren and Finrod are held captive. Although not in time to save any but Beren, Huan, with his strength and loyalty, and Lúthien, with her Maiarin powers, are able to defeat Sauron, who then abandons the isle in the form of a vampire in order to escape:

Then Sauron yielded himself, and Lúthien took the mastery of the isle and all that was there; and Huan released him. And immediately he took the form of a vampire, great as a dark cloud across the moon, and he fled, dripping blood from his throat upon the trees, and came to Tar-nu-Fuin, and dwelt there, filling it with horror.¹⁶

This point is where, lacking any explicit description of the death of Thuringwethil, that one must attempt to detect how she meets her demise. Lúthien basically tears apart and destroys Sauron's fortifications and dungeons as she retakes the island of Tol-in-Gaurhoth. The anonymous author or authors of the brief biography of Thuringwethil on *Tolkien Gateway* plausibly deduce that she must have been slain either by Huan or in the collapse of the walls of the fortress of Minas Tirith on Tol-in-Gaurhoth.¹⁷

The next time we encounter any mention of Thuringwethil, it is in the context of Lúthien, at the suggestion of Huan, using the skin of Sauron's messenger bat as a disguise. Huan managed to salvage her bat skin or cloak and produces it later when it is much needed in order to enter into the halls of Angband and take the Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth:

By the counsel of Huan and the arts of Lúthien he was arrayed now in the hame of Draugluin, and she in the winged fell of Thuringwethil. Beren became in all things like a werewolf to look upon, save that in his eyes there shone a spirit grim indeed but clean; and horror was in his glance as he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings. Then howling under the moon he leaped down the hill, and the bat wheeled and flittered above him.¹⁸

One of the most dramatic mentions of Thuringwethil is chronologically the last--Lúthien's impersonation of Sauron's servant when she first attempts to gain admittance into the halls of Angband clad in the skin of the vampire bat. Lúthien appears before Melkor's throne. Her disguise, which was good enough to get her that far, did not pass his inspection. When asked who she is, she replies:

'Thuringwethil I am, who cast
a shadow o'er the face aghast
of the sallow moon in the doomed land
of shivering Beleriand.'

And Melkor, no fool, for all his villainy responds:

'Liar art thou, who shalt not weave
deceit before mine eyes. Now leave
thy form and raiment false, and stand
revealed, delivered unto my hand!'¹⁹

Melkor might have seen right through that bat-suit, but Lúthien's light magic is stronger than his dark in the end, and she and Beren steal the Silmaril. Such is the end of Thuringwethil's tale, a discarded bat skin on the floor before Morgoth's throne.

Works Cited

1. For example, searches on 3 June 2016 show that of [Archive of Our Own](#) hosted 43 stories which included Thuringwethil and that the [Silmarillion Writers Guild](#) had an additional 14 works listing her as a character.
2. *The Silmarillion, Ainulindalë.*
3. *The Silmarillion, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor."*
4. Goss, Theodora. *Folkroots: Vampires in Folklore and Literature, Realms of Fantasy.* Accessed 3 June 2016.
5. Ibid.
6. *The Silmarillion, "The Index of Names."*
7. *The Silmarillion, "Of Beren and Lúthien."*
8. Ibid.
9. Is the fourth of the great battles of Beleriand in the First Age, the Battle of Sudden Flame. *The Silmarillion, "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin."*
10. *The Silmarillion, "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin."*
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. The ring was given to Beren's father Barahir when he saved the life of Finrod Felagund in the Dagor Bragollach. At that time, Finrod pledged to aid any scion of Barahir who presented him with this ring. *The Silmarillion, "Of the Ruin of Beleriand and the Fall of Fingolfin."*
14. *The Silmarillion, "Of Beren and Lúthien."*
15. *The Silmarillion, "Of Beren and Luthien."*
16. Ibid.
17. *Tolkien Gateway, "Thuringwethil."* 3 June 2016.
18. *The Silmarillion, "Of Beren and Luthien."*
19. *The Lays of Beleriand, "Lay of Leithian,"* Canto XIII.

About the Author

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