

# The Lord of the Rings and the Four Loves

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A tombstone in Oxford's Wolvercote cemetery is inscribed 'John Ronald Reuel Tolkien / Beren and Edith Mary Tolkien / Lúthien'. Because these are the names of husband and wife, lovers, in Tolkien's writings, and because their equation here with Tolkien himself and his wife is firmly founded on his own conception of the man who married the daughter of an Elf-King and a goddess, as a parallel to his own romance, his inscription hints an answer, differing from the usual ones, to the question of why *The Lord of the Rings* has been such a meaningful novel for innumerable readers for nearly half a century: it and the invented mythology from which it was developed are permeated by love. Readers of a 1960 book by C. S. Lewis will remember that the Greeks discerned four loves: *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*. Each and all of the four loves are integral in the created world as Tolkien understood it and in the "subcreated" world of his imaginative work.

To the authors of a newspaper profile on himself, Tolkien maintained that Middle-earth originated in his love of language. He liked to invent new languages – but they required people to speak them – indeed, required a world. He would make that world. But attributing the origin of Middle-earth to the love of languages linked it to his public life, as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. The Wolvercote monument, and remarks in Tolkien's letters, show that Middle-earth originated also in his private life – specifically in *eros*, the passionate love of man for woman or woman for man.

## Beren and Lúthien

The earliest surviving written account of Beren and Lúthien dates as far back as 1917, when Tolkien had only just entered upon his vocation as storyteller. In fact, he laboured on the story all his life: it appeared, incomplete, in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), as a narrative poem, but it was not until after his death, with the publication of *The Silmarillion* in 1977, that a more complete telling was given to the world. "I met the Lúthien Tinúviel of my own personal 'romance' with her long dark hair, fair face and starry eyes, and beautiful voice" (when he was 16 and she was 19) in 1908. In the myth, Beren falls in love at first sight with the slender Tinúviel as she dances in the wood. This story was first conceived by Tolkien, then an officer in the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, "in a woodland glade filled with hemlocks" in Yorkshire where, a year after their wedding in 1916, he strolled with Edith under the shadow of possible death in the Great War. I have quoted from two letters of 1972 that Tolkien wrote, recently bereaved, to his sons. He said he would not give the world an autobiography. His nature expressed itself "about things deepest felt in tales and myths." And the story of Beren and Lúthien, and their trials even unto death, was among the very earliest of those myths. He identified it as "the kernel

of the mythology," of his imaginary world, in a 1955 letter to his American publishers (but he didn't tell them about his romance). To change the metaphor – when Tolkien began *The Lord of the Rings* twenty years later, he had an incredibly rich compost of myth and legend upon which to nourish it.

## The role of friendship in creating LOR

We owe the existence of *The Lord of the Rings* not only to the eros of Ronald and Edith Tolkien, but to *philia*. The writing of its three volumes, which commenced in December 1937, took twelve years. If not for the friendship of C. S. "Jack" Lewis, Tolkien said ten years after the *Rings* final volume was published, "I do not think that I should ever have completed [it] or offered [it] for publication." Having finished reading the completed typescript, Lewis wrote to Tolkien, "All the long years you have spent on it are justified." Those words apply to Lewis himself, who encouraged, criticized, prodded, and kept at the perfectionistic Tolkien till the book was done; one may say, awkwardly but with some truth, that if love for Edith and for languages begot the mythology, Lewis was the midwife who brought the mythology's most massive embodiment into the world. The interest of Tolkien's son Christopher and of other members of the Inklings circle, and the patience of publishers, was of immense importance, of course, but, Tolkien confessed, "[Lewis] was for long my only audience. Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby." The friendship of the two men aptly conforms to Lewis's account of *philia* – the companionship, esteem, and loyalty of two persons united by a shared enthusiasm (and by opposition to certain foes). By the way, if not for Tolkien, we would not have had Lewis's own *Out of the Silent Planet*, the first volume of his remarkable "space trilogy".

Love, then, brought *The Lord of the Rings* into being. Most of its readers will not be aware of the facts of Tolkien's life, however. But integral to *The Lord of the Rings* itself are the Four Loves. Tolkien did not use the searching psychological realism of, say, Tolstoy's account of the loves in *Anna Karenina*, rather presenting them with an iconic clarity of outline in his accounts of characters in the book.

## Father figure

*Storge* is the first of the four loves discussed in Lewis's book – "the humblest and most widely diffused of loves," the love of familiar faces because they are familiar, for this is "the least discriminating of loves." It's the fondness of parents for children, the fondness of pet owners for their pets. The wizard Gandalf exhibits *storge* towards hobbits – Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*, and Frodo, Samwise, Pippin and Merry in the Lord. He is often exasperated by them, but, even though hobbits do not seem to be promising



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participants in a tremendous war of good against evil, Gandalf defends them against their detractors, like a parent who keeps his or her children on their toes but stands up for them when others criticize them unfairly. Samwise exhibits *storge* in his turn. When the fellowship of the Ring arrives at the portal of the subterranean realm of Moria, Sam is bitterly sorrowful about abandoning Bill, a pony abused by his former owner but much invigorated by Sam's attention and a stay in the Elves' hidden refuge of Rivendell.

### The power of comradeship

*Philia* is everywhere in *The Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, the world is saved because of friendship, in that Sam's refusal to be parted from Frodo at the banks of the Anduin makes possible Frodo's arrival, many weary leagues later, at the fiery Cracks of Doom, where alone Sauron's ring can be destroyed. Critics often focus on Frodo in examining the climax of the novel, as he and the ruined creature Gollum struggle on the brink of the fire; but Frodo never would have got so far without Sam.

The love between Frodo and Sam was probably, originally, a matter of *storge*, since Sam is Frodo's deferential social inferior. Because they committed themselves to a task, they became comrades. Both, eventually, endured the burden of the Ring. When Mount Doom is convulsing, after the Ring falls into the fire, and the two hobbits must expect death at any moment, Frodo's last words in the climactic chapter are, "The Quest is

achieved, and now all is over." They have fulfilled their common task. "I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam."

Lewis might have said that, if we stick strictly to his account, Frodo and Sam were comrades rather than friends. "Friendship arises out of mere Companionship," Lewis wrote, "when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure." Tolkien offers a variant on this, in which two initially antagonistic and touchy persons, brought together by a common necessity and the vocation of warrior, grow in appreciation not so much of one another as of aspects of the world new to them. The Dwarf Gimli learns to love the Elvish woodland kingdom of Lórien and its Lady, and not just the beauty of well-made things such as typically obsesses the Dwarves. The Elf Legolas becomes willing to reconsider his abhorrence of caverns, and promises to tour Aglarond or Helm's Deep with Gimli someday.

One is reminded of Lewis's friendship with Arthur Greeves, which began in youth and lasted till Lewis's death. Everyone who has read *Surprised by Joy* remembers Lewis's account of his and Arthur's almost alarmed delight when they discovered each loved the Norse myths. But they learned from one another, also, like Gimli and Legolas. Lewis was much more at home than Greeves was in the worlds of poetry and scholarship, but he credited Greeves with teaching him to love the Homely. "He taught me to



*The ships of the Faithful wrecked on the shores of Middle-earth*

John Ellison



feel with him," Lewis wrote, "at once a human affection and a rich aesthetic relish for his antediluvian aunts, his mill-owning uncles, his mother's servants, the postman on our roads, and the cottagers whom we met in our walks. What he called the 'Homely' was the natural food both of his heart and his imagination. A bright hearth seen through an open door as we passed, a train of ducks following a brawny farmer's wife, a drill of cabbages in a suburban garden – these were things that never failed to move him, even to an ecstasy." Lewis, like Gimli and Legolas, received an enhancement of his ability to receive with delight some quality in the world that he felt he formerly had not given its due meed. That, as well as the discovery that one is not alone in the world with his love of some special insight, interest, or taste, is a typical blessing of *philia*.

### Passion in LOR

The romantic passion of Beren and Lúthien is matter of legend by the time of the Third Age, the era of *The Lord of the Rings* in Tolkien's chronology, and for Tolkien's most developed presentation of their story we must turn to *The Silmarillion*; but *eros*, the third of the four loves described by Lewis, is not absent from *The Lord of the Rings*. There is the almost entirely offstage romance of Aragorn and Arwen, as one subplot. My guess is that the films will bring forward this love story, as well as a subplot that is developed with much care by Tolkien, the unrequited love of the shield-maiden Éowyn of Rohan for Aragorn. The understated quality of Tolkien's account of this love story, and the turmoil of the war of the Ring, sometimes cause the Éowyn - Aragorn story to be almost forgotten by readers. In fact, though, Tolkien wrote with much sensitivity, of the sorrowful passion of a young woman who, despairing first of her homeland and then of the man she longs for, desperately longs to die in battle; of her near approach to death; and of her gradual opening to a new and deeper love. If it is not too grotesque, one could suggest that elements of this plot are strangely akin to the experiences of some women who, when young, had had a "phase" of bitter dissatisfaction with American society as well as anguished disappointment with their fathers and/or men for whom they felt sexual passion, and who then threw themselves into nihilistic political radicalism or feminism. (We must remember that Éowyn had had to watch her father, the king, decline into ignobility under the deplorable influence of his advisor, Wormtongue, the tool of Saruman. Éowyn was ashamed of him and of her country. She witnessed the renewal that Gandalf brought, but was forbidden to accompany her father into war, and by that time, she was suffering from her passion for Aragorn.) This is not the sort of thing that happens in medieval romances or in modern fantasy novels, and perhaps not often in purportedly realistic ones, but Tolkien included it, and it's a real accomplishment – a tale of baffled love, hurt love, and then a new, healing love.

Two other instances of *eros* in *Lord of the Rings* may be mentioned: Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, and the Ents and the Entwives. Some readers have objected to the nonsensical endearments – "Hey come derry dol! merry dol! my darling!" – that pour from Tom's lips as he bustles about, bringing flowers to lay before his "pretty lady." Why, isn't it obvious that Tom and Goldberry are perpetual

newlyweds? Tom has the giddy happiness of a young man who's just married his sweetheart. That's why they don't have any children! They've been together from time immemorial -- yet it's as if he's just brought her home. The title poem in the collection *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* confirms this, telling of Tom catching the River-woman's daughter and taking her home with him. "Lamps gleamed within his house, and white was the bedding; / in the bright honey-moon badger-folk came treading," these last being members of Tom's little kingdom. The poem ends with the image of "fair Goldberry comb[ing] her tresses yellow" – and perhaps the reader has seen a sheet of sketches drawn by Tolkien with coloured pencils, printed in *J. R. R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*, that includes the slender young Edith, seen from behind, wearing just a petticoat and arranging her hair as she looks in a mirror. The Ents love the Entwives, but have lost them, preferring their gardens to the Ents' wandering lives among the wild forests. Always the Ents hope for news of their mates; and they hope for a day – one might say an eschatological day – of reconciliation.

### Love as charity

"Frodo undertook his quest" to destroy Sauron's perilous Ring "out of love – to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could; and also in complete humility, acknowledging that he was wholly inadequate to the task," Tolkien wrote in a reflective letter of 1963. In the book itself, Frodo has faced the stark fact: "It must often be so [...], when things are in danger: someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them." This self-surrender costs Frodo dearly, although Tolkien, in the same letter, states explicitly what is implicit in the novel, that "Frodo was given 'grace': first to answer the call (at the end of the Council [of Elrond, in which representatives of the free peoples confer about the terrible danger of the Ring]) after long resisting a complete surrender; and later in his resistance to the temptation of the Ring... and in his endurance of fear and suffering." Frodo crawling up Mount Doom inevitably recalls the ascent of Jesus bearing the burden laid on Him. Frodo is, necessarily, the book's pre-eminent image of *agape* or charity, the fourth of Lewis's four loves. Frodo bears an evil load not of his own making to the place where it was forged and can be destroyed. Christ bore the burden of mankind's sin to the place of the cross, which was, many Christians have believed, the same place where grew that Tree whose fruit was sinfully plucked, long before. The scene of primordial evil becomes the place of the great sacrifice for the deliverance of others.

Especially for those rereading it, who know already what is going to happen, the reading of *The Lord of the Rings* can become a sort of ritual of the "Stations" not of the Cross, but of the Four Loves, which refreshes them. Many (re)readers probably think they are simply reading the most captivating fantasy of them all. But Fantasy, Tolkien said in *On Fairy-Stories*, can "recover" for us the reality of "common" things such as fire, bread, tree, iron – freeing them from the "drab blur of triteness or familiarity – from possessiveness." Such stories take "simplicities," "fundamental things," and make them luminous for us. He does this for no lesser matters than the Four Loves themselves, in *The Lord of the Rings*.