

## The Lord of the Rings: a myth for modern Englishmen

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On 25th June, 1996, I defended my Ph.D. in the University of Granada (Spain). Its title was *Fantasia, épica y utopía en The Lord of the Rings. Análisis temático y de la recepción (Fantasy, Epic and Utopia in The Lord of the Rings. Thematic Analysis and Reader's Response)*. The second part of the thesis, as suggested in the title, focused on the analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* from the perspective of reader-response oriented theories. I wanted to collect as many interpretations as possible from readers who had a special interest in *The Lord of the Rings* and, accordingly, I elaborated a questionnaire which members of the British Tolkien Society and the *Sociedad Tolkien Española* received in September 1995. I offered to publish the results of my study in *Mallorn* but lack of time have prevented me from preparing it for publication in English until now. The lines that follow are the abridged conclusion of the second part of the Ph.D. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who answered the questionnaire for making this part of the study possible and to Gavin Sinden for his help with the computer (he made the questionnaire more attractive to look at than I could ever have done). To all of you, thank you very much.

The results obtained after analysing the questionnaires offer a very interesting vision of a group of readers of *The Lord of the Rings*. However, they can only be read as a sample of the millions of readers of *The Lord of the Rings* all over the world. Some of the answers given by the respondents might extend to other readers but we must avoid falling into the temptation of believing that these conclusions are applicable to all Tolkien readers. Nevertheless, they provide us with very interesting information and help us to offer an empirical answer to the question asked by Randel Helms (1974, p. 64).

Why do certain contemporary readers seem to require so absolutely what Tolkien has to give to the extent that regularly, on completion of the third volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, they begin again on the first?

The first thing that stands out after the analysis is the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* is far from becoming in Spain the phenomenon that the book is in Great Britain. Previous to the distribution of the questionnaire among members of the societies in both countries, another questionnaire was distributed among students of Spanish and English Philology in the University of Granada in Spain. The results of this first questionnaire showed that, even though *The Lord of the Rings* (for us *El Señor de los Anillos*) was familiar by repute to most of the students, only a few of them had read it and even fewer could answer the questions satisfactorily. As regards the second questionnaire, only 18 members of the *Sociedad Tolkien Española* answered it, in contrast with the 181 who answered from the Tolkien Society in Britain, mainly consisting of British readers. This difference in number is quite a proportional reflection of the difference in members from both societies; the Spanish society had around 40 members by the end of 1995, in sharp contrast with the nearly half a thousand of the British Tolkien Society. Moreover, more than twenty years separate the founding of both societies, since the first official meeting of the *Sociedad Tolkien Española* was celebrated in February 1991. Definitely, the Tolkien phenomenon is in Spain, if a phenomenon at all, a very recent one and, for a number of reasons, I honestly doubt that *The Lord of the Rings* will ever reach the number of sales in my country that it has reached in Britain.

In the first place, it seems that fantasy is a more prolific genre in the United Kingdom than in Spain. We only have to go inside any book shop in both countries to see the room allowed in the shelves to the fantasy genre. What we call *fantasía épica* is quite a recent genre in Spain and, even though the number of readers grows progressively, this type of fiction does not seem to be written by Spanish authors since most of the books found in book shops are translations from British or American titles. Moreover, even though the main authors are translated, the sales do not go near the number they reach in Great Britain. According to the critic Susana Camps (1989, p. 84), this could be due to a difference in national character. For her, Spaniards have shown historically a much more grave and austere character

which leads them to condemn anything fantastic as a lie. Fantasy in Spain reached one of its greatest moments during the flourishing of the *novela de caballerías* – “chivalry novels” – like *Amadís de Gaula*, *Amadís de Grecia*, *Palmerín de Olivia* or *Palmerín de Inglaterra*, to mention but a few. This type of fiction presented a world of fantasy and adventure which was strongly condemned by ascetic and moralist writers and this attitude, according to Camps, is a characteristic feature of the disposition shown by Spaniards towards the fantastic.

This difference in national character may well be one of the causes for the disparity in the reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in both countries. This seems to be borne out by the failure to publish Tolkien's works in Spain during his lifetime, mainly because publishing houses did not want to risk bringing out such a long book about a subject of which there was virtually no tradition in our country.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it can also be argued that the fact that Spanish is not the language in which *The Lord of the Rings* was originally written may play an important role in the different receptions. The reader who has access to a work of literature through a translation does not receive the book directly from the author but through an intermediary, the translator, whose particular perception of the book is inevitably present in the translation. And yet, translation does not seem to have been an obstacle for the extraordinary reception that *The Lord of the Rings* experiences in other European countries. As is known, it was immediately translated into Dutch, only a year after the publication of *The Return of the King*, in a country where fantasy fiction was “an unknown entity in the fifties” (van Rossenberg, 1995, p. 302). The Swedish translation was completed in 1960 and, generally, of all the European countries into whose languages *The Lord of the Rings* has been translated, it is in those of the North of the Continent where it has experienced a better reception.

It seems, then, that reading the book through a translation cannot be used as the only reason to justify the different reception of *The Lord of the Rings* in Spain. We will find the reason in Tolkien's own words, uttered before *The Lord of the Rings* was published:

[...] once upon a time [...] I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic to the

level of romantic fairy-story [...] which I could dedicate simply: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, **be redolent of our “air” (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe; not Italian or the Aegean, still less the East)**, and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things), it should be “high”, purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long steeped in poetry. [my bold]. (Carpenter (ed.), 1990, p. 230)

In writing his fantasies, Tolkien not only pretended to create an environment where his invented languages could grow but also to restore the epic tradition in England and offer a mythology that the English could recognise as their own. According to the answers given by some of the readers, his efforts were highly rewarded:

It is a “Mythology for England” and reminds me of the best of England's character, culture and countryside with Northern myth.

In effect, even though *The Lord of the Rings* has become a mythology not exclusive to England, Tolkien's work appeals very directly to the imagination of the English readers who can recognise in the hobbits and in the Shire their own character and their own countryside. In many occasions, when asked what *The Lord of the Rings* evoked for them, readers mentioned the English way of life and the rural countryside, whose progressive disappearance was lamented, as it was by Tolkien himself, by many of them.

On the other hand, it is well known that the tradition Tolkien was most inspired by was distinctively English. *The Lord of the Rings* echoes the Anglo-Saxon period, Victorian medievalism and its idealisation of the Middle Ages, whereas – and here we find an explanation for its greater popularity in Northern Europe – Tolkien's own mythology is most directly indebted to its Northern equivalent. This aspect may partially explain the lesser popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* in Southern Europe, where the Classic mythological tradition is predominant. Both traditions share elements common to all mythologies but the atmosphere that Tolkien

<sup>1</sup> As explained by Francesc Parcerisas, who translated *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* into Catalan. (de los Santos et al., pp. 51-56).

recreates in his works is undoubtedly that of the European Northwest and its mythology.

The second most outstanding conclusion extracted from the analysis of the questionnaires was the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* appeals mostly to a male audience. Only 28,72% of those who answered the questionnaires in the Tolkien Society were women, while in Spain the female representation was even smaller, 16,66%. Also the number of female members in both societies is inferior: one third in the British one and less than that in the Spanish one.

Whether we agree or not on the existence of certain types of discourse which appeal more directly to the female imagination, sensitivity or psychology and some that do the same with members of the opposite sex, the main reason why I think the book has problems in attracting a female audience so strongly is the scarcity of female characters that the female reader can easily identify with. As one of the respondents stated:

I feel Tolkien has a weakness in his lack of women characters. It's well written, but I have no passion for the work, because, to me, this is a glaring deficiency too difficult to overlook. I get tired of reading of what are essentially boys' clubs (no girls allowed).

It is not true that there are no female characters, but it is true that they are scarce and their number is insignificant if compared with the amount of male characters. It is not true either that there are no strong female characters – we have Éowyn and Galadriel – or that all of them are, independently of their rank “the most hackneyed of stereotypes [...], either beautiful and distant, simply distant, or simply simple.” (Stimpson, 1969, p. 18). In effect, a lack of psychological introspection is noticeable in most of the female characters but it is unfair and hasty to accuse Tolkien of being a misogynist, as Catharine Stimpson does, or of being sexist, as some of the respondents did:

[...] it is [...] sexist (Éowyn – the only human female in the book – is treated as a spare wheel and although she has a moment of glory, is afterwards squashed down to being a housewife) [...]

There is no indication in *The Lord of the Rings* of the alleged misogyny of which Stimpson accuses Tolkien. On the contrary, the problem with women in *The Lord of the Rings* may stem from the fact that some of them are too idealised to allow any effective identification between character and reader. On the

other hand, to accuse Tolkien of sexism would be to impute him an opinion of women as intellectually inferior to men, an opinion Tolkien never showed any sign of sharing. He had no problems in encouraging his female students and he collaborated eagerly with two of them: Simonne d'Ardenne and Mary Salu. He might have had a particular vision of women, inevitably conditioned by the times in which he lived and the essentially male atmosphere of Oxford, but the treatment offered to his female characters does not indicate that he considered them inferior to men.

Moreover, even though Tolkien devotes little attention to the psychological evolution of his female characters, Éowyn is the exception that confirms the rule and helps us to see to what an extent – a short one, though – Tolkien is capable of entering the female mind. The first description he offers of Éowyn's physical aspect corresponds to that of the female stereotype of the heroines in medieval romances:

Grave and thoughtful was her glance, as she looked on the king with cool pity in her eyes. Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern and steel, a daughter of kings. Thus Aragorn for the first time in the full light of the day beheld Éowyn, Lady of Rohan, and thought her fair, fair and cold, like a morning of pale spring that is not yet come to womanhood. (Tolkien, 1992b, p. 537)

However, even in this description, Tolkien offers a glimpse of Éowyn's strong personality; she is not also fair, but also sad, cold, strong. In the character of Éowyn we find a woman of action trapped in the conventional roles assigned to women, as she complains to Aragorn:

'All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death.'

'What do you fear, lady?' he asked.

'A cage,' she said. 'To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire.' (Tolkien, 1992b, p. 816)

The words that Tolkien puts in Éowyn's mouth fail to support the opinion that he portrays *all* women in the traditional roles of wife and mother. Éowyn is a shield-maiden who, as the rest of the Rohirrim, searches for honour in battle and is very far from being the traditional heroine who depends on men to see her destiny fulfilled. However, the reader cannot help to feel that Éowyn's role is that of an adolescent who must grow up and leave behind her role of shield-maiden to adopt the one traditionally assigned to women, that of a protector rather than a destroyer of life. Her stay in the Houses of Healing actually serves three purposes: the healing of the wound caused by the Nazgûl, that of the infatuation for Aragorn and, finally, the healing of her "shieldmaidenism". When Tolkien first introduced Éowyn to the reader, he compared her with a morning spring "that is not yet come to womanhood" and the finding of Faramir's true love during her convalescence will heal her and help her pass from shield-maiden to defender and protector of life:

Then the heart of Éowyn changed, or else at last she understood it. And suddenly her winter passed, and the sun shone on her.

'I stand in Minas Anor, the Tower of the Sun,' she said; 'and behold! the shadow has departed! I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren.' And again she looked at Faramir. 'No longer do I desire to be a queen,' she said. (Tolkien, 1992b, p. 1001)

After Éowyn's words, Faramir says to the Warden in the Houses of Healing: "'Here is the Lady Éowyn of Rohan, and now she is healed'", which may indicate that Éowyn needed to be healed in more than one way. It is thus easy to understand the complaints uttered by some respondents in relation to Tolkien's female characters, especially as regards Lady Éowyn, since her sudden abandonment of her role as shield-maiden is not at all convincing. Since this is the only female character of which Tolkien offers psychological introspection, it must not surprise us that some of the respondents complained of Tolkien's incapacity to enter the female mind. Tolkien conceived his female characters through his perspective of male observer and Éowyn's attitude would be frequently observed among most of the women he knew.

Due to the higher number of male characters and the deeper introspection that Tolkien offers of them, it is not surprising that *The Lord of the Rings* attracts mostly a male audience. In fact, there was no woman among the three favourite characters chosen by the respondents, which were Sam, with 28% of the votes, followed by Gandalf (25%) and Aragorn (16%).

For many of the respondents, Sam was the true hero of the trilogy. Most of them considered that, without his help, Frodo would have never managed to destroy the Ring and some of them also thought that the Ring had no power on him. Whereas Frodo eventually gives up and reclaims the Ring for himself, Sam apparently has no problem in rejecting the tempting visions offered by the jewel and is capable of recognising its tricks.

In effect, the common sense that characterises hobbits and that the respondents so much appreciated in Sam, prevents him from falling into the temptation of keeping the Ring on, but I do not think we can infer that it has no effect on Sam. We must not forget that Sam had been wearing the Ring for a short time and the influence exerted on him was still very weak. Frodo did not have any problem either in offering it to Gandalf as soon as he knew of its evil power, to Aragorn in the Council of Elrond and to Galadriel in Lothlórien, when he had already been exposed to its negative influences for months. Sam is not at all immune to the Ring; nobody is, as Gandalf assured Frodo in Bag End. The fact that his humility and simplicity prevented him from succumbing immediately to temptation does not mean that Sam is most resistant to the power of the Ring. We cannot know how he would have reacted if he had been under its influence for as long as Frodo had.

On the other hand, we cannot be sure either that the Ring had not started to act upon Sam when he found Frodo in the tower of Cirith Ungol. Tolkien says that when the moment arrived in which he had to give Frodo the Ring, "Sam felt reluctant to give up the Ring and burden his master with it again." (Tolkien, 1992b, p. 946) and offered to carry it for a while in order to help his master. This is one of the most moving passages of the book since the reader, who does not doubt Sam's good intentions, cannot help feeling sorry for the hobbit after his master's unfair reaction. This passage serves to see the extraordinary change that had taken place in Frodo, but we could also think that the Ring is beginning to act upon Sam who – let us remember Gandalf's words – is not immune to its influence since the Ring

can control anybody's will by appealing to their strongest feelings. For Gandalf, the way of the Ring to his heart was by pity, "pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good." In the same way, the Ring could have found a way to Sam's heart by appealing to the great love that the hobbit feels for Frodo. I do not doubt of Sam's genuine intentions at Cirith Ungol but I do believe that the Ring would have known how to distort them if he had been wearing the Ring for as long as Frodo.

In any case, whether or not he is the real hero, Sam is undoubtedly a valuable helper. His love and unconditional dedication to Frodo as well as the courage with which he carries out the freely accepted task, made him especially attractive to the eyes of the respondents:

[...] throughout the whole book, regardless of situations, meetings, happiness and sadness, he remains essentially himself and true to his cause, that of Frodo's bulwark.

Sam can be considered as the character with whom it is easiest for the reader to identify at an unconscious level. As one of the respondents said:

Sam [...] is the most "ordinary" and down to earth. Never the one I imagined myself as, he is always the easiest to identify with.

In contrast with Frodo, whom someone found more grandiose and with whom, consequently, it turns out to be more difficult to identify, Sam is more credible, "the closest to 'Everyman' and through him we most fully participate in the journey." In the middle of the tense atmosphere in Rivendell just before the Fellowship of the Ring start their quest, Sam's worries are those which are familiar to us. Aragorn and Gandalf have very different matters in mind to those that worry Sam:

Sam eased the pack on his shoulders, and went over anxiously in his mind all the things that he had stowed in it, wondering if he had forgotten anything: his chief treasure, his cooking gear; and the little box of salt that he always carried and refilled when he could; a good supply of pipe-weed (but not near enough, I'll warrant); flint and tinder, woollen hose; linen; various small belongings of his master's that Frodo had forgotten and Sam had stowed to bring them out in triumph when they were called for. He went through them all.

'Rope!' he muttered. 'No rope! And only last night you said to yourself: "Sam, what about a bit of rope? You'll want it, if you

haven't got it. Well, I'll want it. I can't get it now.'" (Tolkien, 1992b, p. 297-8)

The character who took the second place as favourite was Gandalf and its main attraction lay in the aura of mystery surrounding him regarding his origins and his hidden power. The relationship of identification that is usually established between the reader and Sam is less likely to be found with Gandalf, although there are always exceptions, as it was the case of a 52 year-old respondent who justified his preference for Gandalf because he found it easier to identify with him as he grew older. His wisdom, power and temperance made him more frequently appear before the respondents as a protective figure, "the father type figure guiding his troublesome children" or "a stable force in an unstable situation", capable of offering the reader reassurance and hope. Thus, the reader experiences with the members of the Fellowship the same feeling of safety when Elrond announces that Gandalf will be one of its fellows, the same sadness and disorientation after the wizard's fall in Moria and an immense happiness when he reappears as Gandalf the White.

If we apply the archetypal models pointed out by Joseph Campbell in his study of the monomyth, Gandalf interacts with the main hero, Frodo, in several ways. As he appears at the beginning, not only in *The Lord of the Rings*, but also at the beginning of *The Hobbit*, Gandalf fulfils the function of "herald", whose responsibility is the "calling to adventure" which constitutes the first step in the stage of separation:

The herald's summons may be to live [...] or, at a later moment of the biography, to die. It may sound the call to some high historical undertaking. Or it may mark the dawn of religious illumination. As apprehended by the mystic, it marks what has been termed "the awakening of the self." [...] But whether small or great, and no matter what the stage or grade of life, the call rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration – a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and birth. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand. (Campbell, 1993, p. 51)

That is the way Gandalf appears to the hobbits in Bag End. In *The Hobbit*, he manages to get Bilbo into

an adventure without his realising exactly how, "without a hat, a walking stick or any money, or anything that he usually took when he went out." (Tolkien, 1992a, 38) and the same happens 77 years later, with Frodo. The calling of the herald constitutes an invitation to the hero to abandon his state of comfort and to embark on an adventure into the unknown. If the call is accepted, as it is in the case of Frodo, the hero will come out of the adventure completely renovated. Precisely, that is indicated by the answer of one of the respondents who chose Gandalf as his favourite character because the wizard "possesses great knowledge [and] wisdom, showing mankind part of his own potential and challenging him to wake up to this potential." Thanks to Gandalf, the hobbits leave the state of innocence offered by the Shire and grow up after the initiatory journey, thus being capable of solving all the problems on their own when they get back home.

Finally, Aragorn took the third position as favourite character. As happened with Gandalf, what seemed most attractive for the readers was the aura of mystery surrounding the character and his transformation in Aragorn, king of Gondor, from the scruffy ranger Strider. The nobility of his character, his perseverance and utmost patience as well as the secondary place that accepts, in relation to Gandalf and Frodo, were the characteristics pointed out by those who chose him as favourite character.

As the typical hero in heroic narrative, Aragorn appears more as a figure to imitate than a character we can easily identify with, since Tolkien does not develop his feelings and thoughts in as much detail as he does with his hobbits. Before leaving Rivendell, Tolkien writes that "Aragorn sat with his head bowed to his knees" and adds that "only Elrond knew fully what this hour meant to him." (Tolkien, 1992b, 297). The reader can imagine what Aragorn is thinking, the importance that the moment has for his future, but, as I say, s/he can only *imagine* it, as an external observer. Tolkien allows us to share Aragorn's feelings only to a certain extent, he does not give us direct access to his thoughts, as he does with the hobbits.

Whether or not some of the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* may appeal more directly to the archetypes conforming the masculine unconscious, the last conclusion extracted from this analysis is that Tolkien effectively managed to create a mythology for England. Myths all over the world fulfil the function of offering humans the necessary elements

to unite them to the past and root them into the world. Generally, this is produced by the direct appeal to the archetypes that conform to our unconscious. As Joseph Campbell suggested, a common structure to all mythologies is that of the "hero quest", which offers the necessary elements for the audience to re-enact in their minds the initiatory journey made by the heroes. This structure is very clearly present in *The Lord of the Rings*, developed in such a way that it attracts readers independently of their sex. With the characters, but especially with the hobbits, the reader has the opportunity of taking an initiatory journey after which many of the respondents confirmed that they had come back completely transformed. In this sense, it should be pointed out that the average age when the respondents first read *The Lord of the Rings* was 16/17. At this age, the reader can see him/herself easily identified with the transformation experienced by the hobbits who can accompany him/her in passing from childhood into adulthood. This has led some critics to believe that *The Lord of the Rings* is a book about and for adolescents (Menziés, 1983, 56-72), a belief which cannot be sustained after one has read the answers to the questionnaires. Even though it is a book most frequently discovered in adolescence, *The Lord of the Ring* is appreciated not only at this stage of life. Many of the respondents pointed out that the book could be considered as a guide for life.

For many readers, *The Lord of the Rings* seemed to offer some sort of "roots" in this world, a function which is for myths to fulfil. Some respondents mentioned the strange familiarity they felt while reading *The Lord of the Rings*, in particular, one of them assured: "It makes me feel like I belong somewhere". This sensation of familiarity is undoubtedly caused by the "inner consistency of reality" of Tolkien's work, which allows the reader to see under the surface of Middle-earth, the mythic and legendary background to the Third Age. The twentieth century has been classified as an age hungry for myths. Part of the crisis which can be observed in human behaviour is due, to a certain extent, to the secularisation of society and the loss of faith in everything but empirical reality (Jung, 1995). In part, *The Lord of the Rings* was born precisely to satisfy this hunger for myths, offering readers a live mythology they can easily relate to.

Moreover, readers go back once and again to *The Lord of the Rings* because it fulfils the three functions which Tolkien assigned to fairy stories. It offers "escape", understood not as "the flight of the

deserter” but the “escape of the prisoner”, since the way readers escape from everyday reality to enter that of Middle-earth makes them come back to the real world refreshed, capable of seeing that reality from a new perspective – what Tolkien called “Recovery” and someone compared to a religious experience:

The Lord of the Rings puts things in proportion for me; it restores balance and sanity. When I read *The Lord of the Rings* I feel soothed, cheered, encouraged, uplifted – similar to the way I do in a religious service. Reading it takes me to ‘Niggle’s Parish’ and enables me to glimpse ‘the Mountains’. It seems to be what life is really about. It seems to go straight to the heart of what is important to me.

And, finally, it offers “the Consolation of the Happy Ending”. Respondents found this eucatastrophic ending in the message of hope that permeates Tolkien’s work, in the importance given to the values of friendship, unity and courage required to face any situation and, especially, in the feeling of final victory against the forces of Evil. This ending, however, is not a way of turning our backs on reality. Tolkien does not present a work where Evil has been

forever eradicated since this victory is part of “the long defeat”. However, even this “uplifting pessimism” – as it was wonderfully described by one of the respondents – carries a message of final hope that most of them received after reading the book, the same message received by Sam when looking at the distant star in Mordor.

The same problems present in our world have to be faced by the characters in Middle-earth and, in both worlds, hope is always necessary to avoid falling into the hands of Evil. The intimate relationship established by Tolkien between his sub-created secondary world and the primary one allows the reader to enter Middle-earth without feeling deceived. There is no need for the “suspension of disbelief” since the “inner consistency of reality” makes it unnecessary; disbelief does not arise even after the umpteenth reading. There are so many and so different unnoticed details of which we become aware in every new reading, so many and so different the experiences are narrated by every reader, that *The Lord of the Rings* can, indeed, be called a myth:

A myth points, for each reader, to the realm he lives in most. It is a master key; use it on what door you like. (Lewis, 1989, p. 115)

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