

# The Destiny Of Túrin, or a Dumézilian Approach of The Narn

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J.R.R. Tolkien and Georges Dumézil are not often compared by critics. Maybe because the bulk of academic research published on Tolkien comes from the Anglo-Saxon world where Dumézil is less famous than in France. Nevertheless, they have much in common. They were born in the last decade of the XIXth century and so were from the same generation. Both were outstanding linguists and philologists who shared a particular penchant for old languages. Tolkien knew more than ten whilst Dumézil had a perfect command of more than thirty idioms. Tolkien and Dumézil were both keen on mythology. Tolkien chose to specialise in legends from the north of Europe, and although Dumézil had a broader range of interests he too had a particular liking for Northern Mythologies.

If we look at all of these convergences it seems natural to try to compare their works, and especially to make an analysis of Tolkien's novels in the light of Dumézil's structures.

## A brief summary of Dumézil's thesis

As a result of his immense erudition in both mythologies and languages, Dumézil soon began to publish works about comparative mythologies but it was only at the end of the thirties with his book "Jupiter, Mars, Quirinus", that he presented his theory of functional tripartition for the first time. Each of his later publications was designed to develop and precisising his theory. According to Dumézil, all Indo-European civilisations, and Indo-Europeans only, were organised into three different functions:

- The sovereign and sacerdotal one named the "First Function" whose role is to rule and also to link humanity to the numinous.
- The warrior or "Second Function" which is charged with protection and the maintenance of peace but also paradoxically with bloodshed and violence.
- The "Third Function" was responsible for wealth production. In predominantly agricultural and pastoral societies, in which wealth was mainly due to good crops and fertility of the cattle, this third function is also logically associated with sexuality and fecundity.

The study of the whole legendarium of Middle-earth in the light of functional tripartition is too large a work for a relatively short essay. We would like to focus below on a small book from Dumézil published in 1956: « Heur et malheur du guerrier, aspects de la fonction guerrière chez les Indo-européens ». The bulk of this work is dedicated to the "three sins of the Warrior".

To verify if Dumézil's theories related to the Warrior are relevant to the universe created by Tolkien, we first have to identify a true warrior in Middle-earth. Even though Tolkien's books are full of gallant champions who accomplish fantastic deeds on the battle-field finding a true warrior is not that easy. If we look closely we can see that most of them are kings belonging primarily to the First Function rather than the Second. Secondly, they go to war out of duty. Given the choice, they would certainly prefer to take care of their land and people in a time of peace.

Túrin Turambar is an exception and seems a pure warrior:

- He goes to war before being fully grown-up, exactly like Cuchulain, the Irish hero, or Achilles in the Iliad.
- He loves war because "he yearned for brave strokes and battle in the open".<sup>1</sup>

Now let us see if his character matches the structure of an archetypal Indo-European warrior as studied by Georges Dumézil. According to the French Professor, the life of such a hero will follow five main stages. To support his thesis Dumézil uses numerous examples from various civilisations or periods of time, but for the sake of clarity, we will concentrate on only three Indo-European warriors, each one from a totally different body of mythology:

- Heracles, the Greek hero, as he is the most famous warrior of all times.
- Starcatherus, the Scandinavian hero.
- Sisupala, a minor character in the Indian epic "The Mahabharata" but a very interesting one nonetheless.

## 1. The special enmity of a god.

Archetypal warriors in Indo-European mythologies are always victims of a well-established enmity of a god and are persecuted by such for the duration of their lifetimes.

If we look first at Sisupala, as already mentioned above, he is the reincarnation of a demon and has often in previous lives fought with Visnu. The final encounter between them in the Mahabaratha is just the culmination of this enmity which has endured for millennia. From the very moment of his birth Sisupala's destiny is known because the oracle has predicted that Krsna (an avatar of Visnu) would kill him after a short life full of military deeds of valour.

Considering Starcatherus, he is the subject of a real negotiation between Odin on the one hand who tries to protect the hero (for very mean reason actually) and Thor on the other hand hates him because he can't forget that Starcatherus' grandmother had rejected him. Let us hear the dialogue

between the two gods

Thor : Starcatherus won't have any children  
 Odin : As a compensation he will have a life span three times longer than any man  
 Thor: He will commit a loathsome deed in each of those three lives  
 Odin: He will always have the best weapons and the richest garments  
 Thor: He will never own land or houses  
 Odin: He will have plenty of gold  
 Thor: This will never satisfy him and he will permanently lust for even more gold  
 Odin: He will be victorious in any battle  
 Thor: He will be seriously wounded in each battle  
 Odin: He will have the gift of poetry  
 Thor: He will forget immediately anything he has composed  
 Odin: He will be loved by any king  
 Thor: Commoners will hate him

All we can say is that the fate of poor Starcatherus is burdened by the grudge of the hammer bearer against him. One could call him “the Accursed of Thor”.

Heracles is no luckier really than his northern counterpart. Hera, the lawful wife of Zeus, weary of her husband's numerous affairs takes vengeance by hounding the Greek demigod. Her hatred for Heracles started even before his birth when she decides to spoil the plan of the unfaithful king of the gods and due to a trick of her own she manages to deprive Heracles of the throne he was to inherit.

As far as Túrin is concerned the hostility of Melkor toward him is absolutely obvious. In the preface of his book “The Children of Hurin” Christopher Tolkien reveals to us that his father had initially wanted to entitle his tale “Narn e'Rach Morgoth” which means “the tale of the curse of Morgoth”. It was only lately that he decided on “Narn I hin Hurin”. This shows without any ambiguity that the theme of a malediction from a preternatural being toward Túrin and his sister was essential in the opinion of Tolkien himself.

In conclusion it seems clear that on the specific point of the enmity of a god, Túrin fits perfectly within the structure of an archetypal Indo-European Hero.

## 2. A first sin against the First Function

During his life, after accomplishing a few exploits during his youth, the archetypal Indo-European Hero is to commit an offence, or break a taboo, against a member of the First Function.

Before executing Sisupala, Krsna says that he has been offended numerous times by his enemy. He does not give the entire list of these offences but he gives us an example. The father of Krsna, a great king and priest, had prepared a perfect horse for an extremely important sacrifice. On the eve of the ceremony, Sisupala stole this horse and in so doing he not only robbed and offended a priest-king but he also put in jeopardy the very harmony of the cosmos. As a result of this theft Sisupala has twice seriously offended the First

Function.

The offence committed by Starcatherus is even worse. At the end of the magical duel between Thor and Odin, the latter demands from the Scandinavian warrior, as a price for his defence, the life of his best friend the king Vikkar. As he is obliged to Odin, Starcatherus agrees to this demand and lures his trusting suzerain into a trap and kills him in a brutal human sacrifice.

Heracles himself also commits a “sin” against the First Function. Well aware of his superior valour and nobility he refuses to obey Eurystee, his king, and decides to kill the king's children. By deciding on this path of action, he not only rebels against a rightful ruler and First Functioner but also against Zeus himself who had, albeit unwillingly, set Eurystee on the throne. As a punishment Heracles is stricken by a crisis of madness and instead of killing the king's children, he slays his own wife Megara and their children. In order to atone for this brutal act of kin slaughter he is sentenced by Eurystee to his famous twelve works which are certainly the most famous part of his adventures.

Now, let us investigate the relationship between Túrin and the First Function. Túrin during his short life has met with several kings but the one he has known best is certainly Thingol, king of Doriath. Thingol is a rightful king and as such is a First Functioner but he is much more than just a simple ruler. His majesty is far above the other Sindars. He has been in Valinor during its bliss, he has seen the light of the two trees.. He has spoken face to face with the Valar. He is also the only elven king to have had the privilege of being married to a Maia, a preternatural being. This gives Thingol a special spiritual and sacred authority and qualifies him as a perfect representative of the First Function in Middle-earth.

Nevertheless, instead of being grateful to Thingol Túrin chooses to rebel against his benefactor. Later, when Thingol has sent him his best man to tell him that he has been cleared of any guilt, forgiven by the king and invited to reclaim his place in Thingol's hall, he answers full of pride “My hearth was proud as the Elf King [Thingol] said. And so it still is, Beleg Cuthalion. Not yet will it suffer me to go back to Menegroth and bear looks of pity and pardon, as for a wayward boy amended. *I should give pardon, not receive it*”.<sup>2</sup> By speaking in this way Túrin shows that he considers himself to be superior to Thingol in terms of nobility and hierarchy. This attitude is similar to the Greek hubris, the worst sin against the First Function for the ancients.

At this stage, it seems clear that Túrin fits perfectly with the notion of a “sin” against the First Function.

## 3. A second “sin” against the Second Function

After a first offence against the First Function, the archetypal Indo-European Warrior is to commit a second “sin” against the Second Function. In doing so he generally seriously breaches the code of honour of an heroic warrior. Let us consider what Krsna says about Sisupala before he kills his enemy: “having learned that I had left to visit the town of Pragyostisa, this felon came and torched Davaraka [the city of Krsna] even if he was the king's nephew”.<sup>3</sup> It appears that

instead of fighting the army of Davaraka in loyal combat, Sisupala used information he was able to obtain as a member of the family and treacherously attacked the city when it's most formidable champion was absent. For a reader in the XXIst century accustomed to all-out modern war, this may appear to be an efficient strategy, but in the mentality of the Aryans one thousand years BC, it demonstrated pure cowardice and disloyalty.

Starcatherus also behaves like a coward at one point during his "second" life. The incident occurs during a battle between the armies of king Regnaldus and king Sywaldus. Saxo Grammaticus in his "Gesta Danorum", describes the combat: "This battle was notable for the cowardice of the greatest nobles.[.] The chief of these, Starcatherus, had been used to tremble at no fortune, however cruel, and no danger, however great. But some strange terror stole upon him, and he chose to follow the flight of his friends rather than to despise it".<sup>4</sup> There is no ambiguity, Starcatherus despite all his experience and his past exploits fled from the battlefield and in so doing he amplified a panic among the army which caused their defeat and the death of the king he has vowed to protect.

We may believe that Heracles is beyond reproach but this is not the case. When he has atoned for the death of his wife and children with his twelve works, he decides to start afresh and to marry in order to start a new family. He falls in love with princess Iole, daughter of King Eurytos, but the king out of fear that Iole might suffer the same fate as Megara refuses to consent to the marriage. Angered, the hero then kills treacherously Iphitos, Iole's brother. This is his second sin. The guilt is not in the killing (which is consubstantial to the Second Function) but in the betrayal of a friend. In punishment for his treachery Heracles is sentenced to sell himself as a slave to the queen Omphale and to give the money he receives to Iphitos' widow.

So we know that our three heroes, who generally behave flawlessly, have all sinned once through either cowardice or disloyalty. Let us see now if Túrin has also sinned against the moral code of the warrior.

First of all he failed to protect Finduilas from Morgoth's servants even though it was his duty to do so. In fact he cannot manage to defend her because he is under the spell of the Dragon Glaurung but he has nonetheless betrayed the confidence that the elven princess had placed in him. The gravity of this failure is clearly emphasized by Gwindor's last words on the battle field of Thumhalad. With the prescience that comes with being close to death, he tells Túrin "Haste you to Nargothrond, and save Finduilas. And this last I say to you: she alone stands between you and your doom. If you fail her, it shall not fail to find you. Farewell."<sup>5</sup> Thus we know for certain that the inability to save Orodreth's daughter is an unforgivable sin which will lead him irrevocably to his moral decline and sinister doom.

Later, just before his own death, Túrin will commit another crime by slaying, out of wrath, Brandir, a disabled and unarmed man who is absolutely unable to defend himself. This murder is important to Tolkien and he takes

care to remind the reader of it a few pages later at the very moment that Túrin takes his own life. Gurthang, his sword, reproaches him bitterly for his crime: "I will drink your blood, that I may forget the blood [.] of Brandir slain unjustly. I will slay you swiftly".<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that Tolkien has chosen to remind us of Túrin's sin such a dramatic moment in order to explain his suicide and death.

#### 4. A last "Sin" against the Third Function

After his first two "sins" against the First and Second Function, the Indo-European archetypal hero has to commit one final offence against the Third Function, either by breaching some sacred law of marriage or by acting out of greed instead of honour.

Sisupala disguises himself and pretends to be the rightful husband of the princess Bhada and then he rapes her. The sin here is in the stratagem. According to ancient tales, heroes are permitted to seduce young women because of their valour and they can even take by force what they want, but they should not stoop so low as to pretending to be someone else in order to dishonour a princess.

Starcatherus succumbs to his lust for gold which he inherited from the curse of Thor at the beginning of his life. He accepts a bribe of one hundred and twenty pounds in solid gold to murder Olo, his king and friend as he lies unharmed in his bath. Well aware of the gravity of his crime "he was smitten with remorse and shame, and lamented his crime so bitterly, that he could not refrain from tears if it happened to be named. Thus his soul, when he came to his senses, blushed for his abominable sin".<sup>7</sup>

Heracles is also guilty. Although he had married Dejanire he later kidnaps his true love Iole and weds her secretly. In doing so he commits the crime of bigamy and breaches the sacred laws of marriage.

As far as Túrin is concerned, his "sin" against the law of marriage is crystal clear. When he weds his own sister he becomes guilty of incest and breaks the most universal of all taboos. As he does not know the identity of Niniel on the day of their marriage perhaps this could be seen as an extenuating circumstance but in the mentality of the ancients this is not the case. For instance Oedipus, when he frees Thebe from the Sphinx and then marries Jocaste, can not know that she is his mother. From our modern point of view Oedipus could be perceived to be innocent, but for the Greeks before Christ things were quite different. Oedipus is guilty and the gods cast a plague on Thebe. Only when Jocaste has hanged herself and Oedipus has put out his own eyes and fled the city as a beggar are the gods satisfied.

In the archaic world of the First Age described in the Silmarilion there is no doubt as to Túrin's guilt.

#### A death more or less freely accepted

Once he has successively offended all three Functions, the Indo-European warrior has exhausted his "right" to sin and is then doomed to die. He generally accepts this fate willingly and with good grace as a sort of atonement for his past crimes.

Sisupala knows perfectly well that the Oracle has foretold that Krsna will be his killer, but instead of avoiding him in an attempt to delay his brutal end, Sisupala deliberately provokes his foe. It seems obvious that Sisupala was in fact seeking his death in a manner akin to suicide.

Starcatherus was “*now worn out with extreme age, [...] was loth to lose his ancient glory through the fault of eld, and thought it would be a noble thing if he could make a voluntary end, and hasten his death by his own free will*”.<sup>8</sup> The state of mind of the Scandinavian hero concerning death is clear. He finally chooses a noble warrior, he considers his equal, and asks the young man to behead him in return for a substantial reward.

As for Heracles, whence he has put on the famous Tunic of Nessus he suffers terrible pains and decides that being burned alive would be less excruciating. In a nearby forest he then fells some pine trees with his bare hands and uses them to build his own pyre. Although the decision of Heracles to hasten his own death is due to an external event, by choosing to do so, the Greek warrior commits a clear suicide.

Túrin also decides to kill himself when he suddenly discovers that his wife is also his sister and that she is dead. Túrin's death is particularly remarkable because suicides are very rare in Middle-earth and they are always considered a sin.

## 6. A kind of post mortem survival

The Indo European warrior cannot just die an ordinary death. We have already seen that he accepts and often seeks his own death, but there is more. His vital strength is so huge that his life cannot just fade away and quietly disappear. On the contrary, the hero experiences some kind of post mortem adventure, or purely and simply overcomes death to become immortal.

Once he has been beheaded, Sisupala's soul becomes visible in the form of a shining being. This “ghost” first bows down before Krsna, his murderer before being absorbed into his bosom. After several millenniums of wars, through different reincarnations, the slain warrior can at last be united with Vishnu and, by this union of opposites equilibrium can be achieved.

Starcatherus' ending is different. He promises to Hatherus, his executioner, that if he manages to jump between his head and his body, before either touches the ground, he will inherit his strength and become invincible. Hatherus makes no attempt to do so which enrages Starcatherus so much that his severed head snaps viciously as it hits the ground.

The case of Heracles is even more extreme because he does not actually die. At the very last moment he is rescued from the pyre by his father, Zeus, who in a glorious apotheosis makes him an immortal. In Olympus he is at last reconciled with Hera who accepts him as her foster son. He then becomes her champion and the meaning of his name - glory of Hera- is finally justified.

Túrin is also to know a glorious fate after his death. In “The Lost Road”, Tolkien wrote “When the world is old and the Powers grow weary, then Morgoth, seeing that the guard

sleepeth, shall come back through the Door of Night out of the Timless void; and he shall destroy the Sun and Moon. But Aërendel shall descend upon him as a white and searing flame and drive him from the airs. Then shall the Last Battle be gathered on the fields of Valinor. In that day Tulkas shall strive with Morgoth and on his right hand shall be Fionwë, and on his left Túrin Turambar, son of Hurin, coming from the halls of Mandos; and the black sword of Túrin shall deal unto Morgoth his death and final end; and so the children of Hurin and all Men be avenged”. This end making Túrin the killer of Melkor during the eschatological Last Battle is very striking. Christopher Tolkien decided not to include it in the “*Silmarilion*” or “*The unfinished tales*” or even in his more recent “*The children of Hurin*”, probably because this reappearance of Túrin after death contradicts the so called theology of Arda where the souls of men are supposed to leave the circles of the world. This final destiny of Túrin imagined once by Tolkien is therefore all the more interesting and fits perfectly with the destiny of an Indo-European archetypal Warrior.

## Conclusion

It is fascinating to consider that most of the “Narn” had been written several years before the publication by Georges Dumézil of any of his works about the Three Functions. This demonstrates that Tolkien's knowledge of Indo-European mythologies was so profound and that he had such empathy with them that he managed to accurately reproduce their internal structure subconsciously.

## Notes

1. *The Silmarilion*. Chapter 21
2. *The Children of Húrin*. Chapter VI (my emphasis)
3. *Mahabharata*. Book II
4. *Gesta Danorum*. Book VII
5. *The Children of Húrin*. Chapter XI, the Fall of Nargonthrond
6. *The Children of Húrin*. Chapter XVII, the death of Túrin
7. *Gesta Danorum*. Book VIII
8. *Gesta Danorum*. Book VIII

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