

Arwen and Edward: redemption and the fairy bride/groom in the literary fairytale

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What does redemption mean in the context of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Twilight* series and specifically to the apparently unredeemable outsiders, little mentioned fairy-bride Arwen, and Edward, the fairy-groom with the unmentionable secret?

The problem of redemption has preoccupied religious thinkers, philosophers, psychologists, literary and other artistic movements through the ages, worldwide, as the question of how to cope with the grief and guilt our existence entails is a timeless and universal one. Their multiple influences can be felt in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and Stephenie Meyer, although they reach their own conclusions.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is an inverted quest story for the redemption of a whole world — Middle-earth — the saving and healing of that world — not through the conventional fairy story motif of search for treasure, but through renunciation of treasure: the corrupting Ring. Arwen, the fairy bride is caught up in this quest. Meyer's *Twilight* series portrays the struggle for redemption — for liberation — of an individual from his demonic or nature bound self, of Edward the fairy groom.

Both Arwen and Edward seek redemption through transcendence of the boundaries imposed by their assigned roles: she as an immortal elf is faced with future departure from Middle-earth, he as a vampire living on blood, a situation that confronts him on an almost daily basis.

At first glance both seem images of perfection, of self sufficiency (they are forever young, strong, beautiful and rich). They do not appear needy like their human counterparts, the faltering Aragorn (and by extension the fallible hobbit Frodo) and the accident-prone, insecure adolescent from a broken home — Bella. And yet they need these particular human beings, who initially endanger them. They recognize qualities of resilience, originality and compassion in Aragorn and Bella, they themselves do not appreciate, and both Arwen and Edward are lonely and incomplete without them. They seek a form of redemption in fulfilment through their relationship with their human Other.

Neither Tolkien nor Meyer, despite their Christian background, answer the question conclusively whether redemption as salvation is ultimately available to Arwen and Edward. These authors may have created alternate worlds and beings from another dimension, but their outlook remains realistically rooted in the uncertainties of the primary world as it was and currently is perceived by many of their contemporaries.

Although *The Lord of the Rings* has been classified as fantasy, even as the forerunner of twentieth-century fantasy literature, and *Twilight* has been labelled a teen romance, both can be seen as literary fairytales. Both draw on the rich tradition of the literary fairytale based on and reinterpreting folktales, myths and legends. Indeed with *The Lord of the Rings* "fairy lore in literature has here reached its high water mark"¹ in the opinion of the noted folklorist Katherine Briggs.

The Lord of the Rings is set in a world removed from ours by time and space to a vaguely prehistoric sphere, to the Once Upon a Time of the classic literary fairytale. Arwen's world is removed still further from the world of humans, by location, time, and by the prejudices of humans, born of fear and ignorance (Eomer views Arwen's grandmother Galadriel as a witch, her domain Lothlorien as a trap or illusion, the heroes coming from there as 'dreams and legends'², not believed in, though bringing hope when the situation seems hopeless). Arwen belongs not to the mundane, but to starlight and twilight³. But the real in *The Lord of the Rings* is removed from our reality by appertaining to hobbit farmers and hobbit artisans (of a rural idyll) and valiant warriors (of heroic epics). Arwen's world is a fairytale within a fairytale.

Twilight is set in the world we ourselves inhabit. Edward's family is integrated into human society, his adoptive father makes a positive contribution to the workplace, Edward goes to school. Edward's family are our neighbours, albeit the ambivalent 'Good Neighbours'⁴ of English fairy tradition.

The extraordinary is not removed from us but lives with us, perhaps even within us as it does in E. T. A. Hoffmann's literary fairytales. The magical is within our reach.

And yet Edward, like Arwen is accessible only through redemptive imagination as Atreju is to Bastian in Michael Ende's *Die Unendliche Geschichte*. Just as Bastian seeks to be reunited with his other self (Atreju), so Bella fears separation from her fairy groom Edward and Aragorn from his fairy bride Arwen.

Arwen is an elf, Tolkien's particular interpretation of an elf, "originally the Anglo Saxon name for fairies"⁵ according to Katherine Briggs. Like the fairies she can be seen as pagan god, nature spirit⁶, a symbol of the divine-demonic, blessed and cursed with eternal life (meaning existence), an exile (from her true home in the Undying Lands)⁷, or original inhabitant gone into hiding in our world⁸, a descendent of the departing fairies⁹ of folk tradition, lingering yet leaving, an 'inspirational hero'¹⁰, a giver of gifts, a provider of redemption to others (to Aragorn, her partner, by sharing his life, adapting herself to the demands his life call for, and

to Frodo, the Ring-bearer, ceding to him her place on the last ship to leave Middle-earth for Elven-home). Is Arwen herself redeemed or redeemable?

Arwen is the fairy-bride of a human, but she does not become so out of compulsion, no bird's wings or seal skins have been stolen from her obliging her to stay, forever longing for escape (as in the myth of Wieland the Smith's swan-maiden wife). Arwen unites with a human by her own choice. A human whose potential is revealed to her, when, having "cast aside his wayworn raiment", he is "clothed... in silver and white"¹¹ by Galadriel, in the classic fairytale role of the fairy godmother.

Arwen's choice involves the loss of her kin and the chance to journey to their paradise, a form of existence still, even if different from the human one. Like the little mermaid of Andersen's literary fairy tale, she chooses love and a short span of life.

Her choice to remain in Middle-earth with Aragorn means she must move out of the forest, the twilight and the shadows and to the city of Minas Tirith, embracing daylight, and human society with all its complexities.

Is there redemption for Arwen in the sense of the 'happy ending' of classic Western fairy tales? Tolkien who created fantasy not as escape or comfort but as challenge and insight, does not give a facile 'happily ever after' ending answer. Aragorn the mortal eventually dies. Arwen returns to the place where Galadriel's realm of Lothlorien fades. She has lost everything and will pass away. Arwen's end is one of resignation and 'sorrowful beauty'¹² much as we find it in the Japanese folk tale 'The Bush Warbler's Home', celebrating loss of everything as the achievement of nothingness in which a form of redemption may be found.

Edward, though sharing the blood lust of the vampire of Romantic, Gothic and contemporary fiction is also a manifestation of the fairy bridegroom. He conceals his true nature in accordance with the traditional taboo on human knowledge of the fairy partner's identity (as in the myth of Melusine). When Bella discovers his secret, she cannot be sure whether he will turn out to be a Bluebeard or a Swan Knight, her murderer or her protector. Whatever the case, ambivalent Edward is Bella's fate, a fairy in the sense of fatae¹³. "Your number was up the first time I met you" Edward asserts¹⁴. Her fate is sealed by their encounter.

Edward can be seen as a 'half deified spirit of the dead'¹⁵, as a 'fallen angel'¹⁶, as the demonic-divine lover, Beauty's Beast, Psyche's Cupid, whose meeting with his mortal partner requires sacrifice from both in order to achieve redemption for each other.

On a superficial level Edward appears to be the teasing fairy lover of European folk tradition and ballads who snares a mortal woman only to abandon her, after which she pines and usually dies¹⁷. In this sense Edward feeds on Bella vampirically and yet he did not mean to harm her by this action. Edward is not a conventional fairy lover or traditional vampire. Though bound by nature's implacable laws for existence, the necessity to eat (and therefore to kill), Edward is desperately seeking not to be governed

by his 'addiction'¹⁸. He is attempting to find redemption under the influence of his adoptive father Dr Cullen, who, having become separated from his own father (a vampire hunting priest, who may be interpreted as representing an established church persecuting heretics¹⁹), returns to the basics of Christianity, living in active service to others as a doctor²⁰.

Dr Cullen has overcome his blood lust in a Buddhist sense of going beyond 'craving'²¹ and has become life affirming, a valuable member of society healing others, sustained not by blood (or human life force) but by Christian faith²². He keeps a cross in his house and in the traditional Christian sense appears redeemed. But Edward does not have faith, nor does he live in service to others. So what of his redemption?

When Edward abandons Bella (in *New Moon*, the second book of the *Twilight* series) he does so because he wants to protect her. An incident in his home forces him to recognize just how dangerous the violently parasitical nature of the vampire is for her. He abandons Bella in a well intentioned effort to save her from himself and his kind. He is like the snake groom²³ of Japanese folk tales whose spirit-essence threatens to destroy his mortal bride, but who genuinely loves her. Edward thinks erroneously that by leaving Bella he gives her the opportunity to lead a safe life, integrated into human society. She is prepared to become a vampire to be with him, but Edward, like Andersen's little mermaid or Asimov's robot²⁴, sees indispensable value in being human and mortal. He does not want her to lose irretrievably what he regrets losing immeasurably. He wants to shield Bella from the misery and alienation he feels. In traditional terms he wants to save her soul and so sacrifices his personal happiness.

But Edward has made a choice for her and his choice almost destroys her. He does not acknowledge that he (love gained through night, a symbol of the inner world, as in the *Hymnen an die Nacht* by Novalis) transforms her material, mundane everyday existence, magically infusing it with meaning. He cannot accept that she would rather share hell with him without hope of redemption (as the protagonist does in director Vincent Ward's film *What Dreams May Come*, reinventing the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice) than be separated from him, her other self.

Edward is not Christian in the conventional, organized sense. He refuses to prey on humans (he thinks of himself as 'vegetarian'²⁵ as he hunts animals instead), because he wants to be an ethical being. He seems Kantian in that he feels he must do what is right or good without hope of reward, without faith even²⁶. He appears an unconscious follower of Albert Schweitzer, trying not to contribute to human suffering, seeking to replace the "amoral will-to-live with the ethical will-to-love"²⁷.

Edward and Arwen are rebels, they do not conform to others' expectations of them. They are free in that they are determined by the choices they make for themselves. Free will according to Christian thought makes redemption possible.

Arwen's choice to become human, in the tradition of Luthien her ancestor, is opposed by her father. Arwen's



father Elrond is not cruel as Luthien's was; he is saddened by Arwen's choice out of concern for her. She will lose all connection with her people and all hope of eternal life (existence) in a place of beauty and harmony. Elrond — the half-human, half-elf — had been given a choice long before Arwen was born, whether to cast his lot with elves or humans. He chose the former and will depart with them.

Why do Tolkien's elves depart? Why do they feel they cannot coexist with humans?

It is not only yearning for their true home that drives them, but also possibly the perception that humans, although liberated from the Ring, may, empowered by peace and prosperity, turn to the destruction of nature (the habitat of the elves) in their efforts to control it, much as their former enemies, the servants of the Ring had done. After all the Shire (the hobbits' homeland) was scoured after the Ring was destroyed and humans were involved in this devastating industrialization and exploitation.

"The world is changing," says Treebeard²⁸, the tree guardian, to the departing elves. Change is something the nostalgic elves are extremely wary of and reject. Arwen, by staying with Aragorn shows perhaps greater faith in human nature, in human capacity for regeneration and in the positive potential of change. While her kin look outside the world for a link to the divine, Arwen seeks to help make the divine accessible to those around her, those with no possibility of leaving. She continues to be part of the redemption process of Middle-earth, which does not stop with the destruction of the Ring.

Arwen may be regarded as related to the Chinese Buddhist Goddess of Mercy Guanyin or Kuan Yin²⁹, who remains in this world of suffering out of (compassionate) love, deferring her own deliverance from earthly matters.

Edward stands with his family against the Volturi, an ancient and powerful vampire clan — a few unconventional individuals against a traditional establishment. His restraint or abstinence goes not only against his own cravings but also against the norm, the creed of ruthless self gratification and relentless consumption imposed by the form of permissive society espoused by the dominant vampire clan. Edward and his family do not subsist in a dark fortress, sleeping in coffins, the domain of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, associated with decay and disease. They live in a white house protected by the shadow of trees, (very much the realm of Arwen), "very bright, very open and very large. The walls . . . were all varying shades of white"³⁰. Contrary to preconceptions about vampires Edward belongs to an Apollonian minority in constant passive resistance to a Dionysian majority. Edward is more closely related to the gleaming, sweet breathed panther³¹ of Anglo Saxon Christian allegory than Bram Stoker's repulsive, reptilian, foul breathed *Dracula*. Indeed Edward as the panther is the dragon's enemy³².

Arwen turns from the twilight of eternity and the elves' form of shared salvation, the redemption of return from exile granted to Galadriel when she lets go of ambition by refusing the Ring (a symbol of devouring³³ compulsion, domination and destruction, very much an emblem of vampirism).

Arwen chooses the temporal, a moment in time, personal happiness, however brief. She becomes a wife and mother, and lives in the present (uprooted from her past and cut off from her preordained future).

Whatever form Arwen's individual salvation may eventually take if granted is not revealed, but Aragorn parts from her with hope in redemption as liberation from the limitations of existence (short or long) inflicts on sentient beings: "In sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound forever to the circles of this world. . ."³⁴

Edward, finds some form of solace in music (in the Schopenhauer mode³⁵), in love — when reunited with Bella allowing her to make her own decisions, even if they entail pain for her — and in his choice to refrain from evil. This choice is not a foregone conclusion. Edward when confronted with the temptation Bella represents could become a vicious Byronic vampire³⁶. But his compulsion is repugnant to him, as it is to the Undead in Goethe's *Die Braut von Korinth* or in Angela Carter's *The Lady of the House of Love*. Edward's statement "I don't want to be a monster"³⁷ is at the root of all his choices, all his yearning for moral integrity, for redemptive transformation. Just as the vengeful water sprite Undine is changed into the compassionate Little Mermaid, so Edward's negation of his vampire nature makes, in Christian-literary fairytale terms, the attainment of a soul possible.

The vampire Nick Knight of the TV series *Forever Knight*



wished to repay his debt to society and to become human again, but he is destroyed by his blood dependency, guilt and grief. In marked contrast, Edward's capacity to love someone else more than himself breaks the spell of being a Beast — to a certain extent. For although he fights the craving successfully he can never be completely rid of it. He is forced to 'endure'³⁸. But he is not alone. Bella joins him, undergoing the terrible transformation necessary to become a vampire. And she seems largely free of the compulsion to hunt humans giving Edward hope that vampires are not beyond redemption. Edward's struggle will last as long as he exists, but it is this struggle which may ultimately lead to his salvation: As in Goethe's *Faust*: "Wer immer strebend sich bemueht/ den koennen wir erloesen" — He who strives and ever strives him we can redeem.³⁹



1. Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 210 (1967).
2. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 453–454 (1966).
3. "By the starlit mere ... they [the elves] rose ... their eyes beheld first of all the stars. Therefore they have ever loved the starlight." Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion* 56 (1977); "if you cleave to me, Evenstar, then the Twilight you must also renounce" Aragorn to Arwen, Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 1076 (1966).
4. "Of the many euphemistic names for the fairies the Good Neighbours is one of the most common" Briggs, K. *A Dictionary of Fairies* 196 (1976).
5. Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 217 (1967).
6. Fairies as "lost heathen gods ... and the spirits of the woods and wells and vegetation" Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 4 (1967).
7. The process of the elves' return to Middle-earth has been described as exile. "The Silmarillion is the history of the rebellion of Fëanor and his kindred against the gods, their exile ... and return to Middle-earth" Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion* first page (unnumbered) (1977).
8. Tolkien's elves inhabited Middle-earth before humans did (see *The Silmarillion*). By the end of the Third Age when the Ring quest takes place the elves are in decline and men are on the increase (see *The Lord of the Rings*). Compare with the entry on theories of fairy origins: "fairy beliefs ... founded on the memory of a more primitive race driven into hiding by invaders" Briggs, K. *A Dictionary of Fairies* 393 (1976).
9. "From the time of Chaucer onwards the Fairies have been seen to have departed or to be in decline, but still they linger" Briggs, K. *A Dictionary of Fairies* 94 (1976).
10. Porter, L. R. *Unsung Heroes of the Lord of the Rings* 115 (2005).
11. "Galadriel bade him cast aside his wayworn raiment, and she clothed him in silver and white" Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 1073 (1966).
12. Stories in Japan have "balanced figures of sorrowful beauty" Kawai, H. *The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in the Fairy Tales of Japan* 122 (1988).
13. Entry on Fairy: "originally Fay, from Fatae, the Fates" Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 217 (1967).
14. Meyer, S. *Twilight* 152 (2005).
15. a) "Fairies as half deified spirits of the dead" Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 4 (1967); b) Edward was once human, but was transformed into a vampire when he was dying. In his entry on vampires, Matthew Bunson quotes various sources, describing vampires as ghosts, revenants, the undead, reanimated bodies and so on, Bunson, M. *Vampire, The Encyclopaedia* 262 (1993).
16. a) Fairies as "fallen angels" Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 9 (1967); b) Edward is likened to an angel by Bella: "His angle's face was only a few inches from mine" Meyer, S. *Twilight* 230 (2005).
17. According to her index: a love talker or type of incubus Briggs, K. M. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* 257 (1967).
18. The vampire's urge to drink blood is compared to alcohol dependency and drug addiction in Meyer, S. *Twilight* 234–235 (2005).
19. a) "Stern measures were taken to purge ... heretics from the Church, ranging from the Inquisition to the individual punishment of excommunication ... the idea was fostered that excommunicants would be liable to transform into vampires" Bunson, M. *Vampire, The Encyclopaedia* 119 (1993); b) "As the Protestants came to power he [Dr Cullen's father, an Anglican pastor of the 1650s] was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions ... he led the hunts for witches, werewolves ... and vampires" Meyer, S. *Twilight* 289 (2005).
20. Entry on Christianity: "This supreme love to God is a complete oneness with Him in will, a will which is expressed in service to our fellowmen (Luke x25–37)" *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 5, 631 (1961); "early Christian literature is filled with medical terms ... Jesus was remembered as the great physician ... a vast activity animated the early church: to heal the sick" *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 5, 634 (1961).
21. Entry on Buddhism, Doctrines: "The second is the noble truth of the cause of pain and this is the craving (tanhua, thirst) that leads to rebirth ... The third is the noble truth of the cessation of pain consisting in the ... cessation of craving, its abandonment and rejection" *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 5, 326 (1961).
22. Entry on Christianity: "Man is to live in ... trust in the divine love ... hence he attains salvation" *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 5, 631 (1961).
23. A variant of the snake bridegroom tale which perfectly illustrates my point is HI 411 Stork's Eggs Ko-no tori no Tamago in Ikeda, H. *A Type and Motif Index of Japanese Folk Literature* (1971).
24. Asimov's robot sacrifices all his nonhuman traits, even immortality in his endeavour to become human. Asimov, I. *The Bicentennial Man* (2000).
25. "We call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke. It doesn't completely satiate the hunger — or rather thirst. But it keeps us strong enough to resist. Most of the time" Meyer, S. *Twilight* 164 (2005).
26. "A human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination — still less because it is done from self interest — but because it is done for the sake of duty" Kant, I. *The Moral law — Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* 19 (1993).
27. "The Christian hero ... and striving — even though inevitably unsuccessfully — to infuse and transform the amoral will-to-live with the ethical will-to love" Cupitt, D. *The Sea of Faith* 107 (1984).
28. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 1017 (1966).
29. "Guan Yin ... was about to cross over into heaven when she heard a cry ... from the world below. She turned around and saw the massive suffering endured by the people of the world. Filled with compassion, she returned to earth" *The Legend of Miao Shan*; available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guanyin>
30. "The trees held their protecting shadow right up to the walls of the house ... It was painted a soft, faded white" and "The inside was even more surprising. It was very bright, very open and very large ... The walls, the high-beamed ceiling, the wooden floors, and the thick carpets were all varying shades of white" Meyer, S. *Twilight* 280–281 (2005).
31. "He's most wondrous fair ... the coat of this beast is wondrous bright, glowing in beauty and gleaming in hues ... a breath more winsome, sweeter and stronger" Kennedy, C. W. on the panther allegory in the Exeter Book in *Early English Christian Poetry* 226 (1952). Compare Meyer's description of Edward: "His skin literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds ... his glistening lids ... a perfect statue ... glittering like crystal" Meyer, S. *Twilight* 228 (2005) and "I smelled his cool breath in my face ... sweet, delicious ... it was unlike anything else" Meyer, S. *Twilight* 230 (2005).
32. a) "Save the dragon only with whom for ever He wages eternal, unceasing war" Kennedy, C. W. on the panther allegory in the Exeter Book in *Early English Christian Poetry* 226 (1952); b) The historical Dracula, Vlad Tepes, on whom Bram Stoker is said to have based his fictitious character, is associated with dragons, the medieval Christian symbol of evil and the devil, see the entry on Dracula: "Dracula was based on the title Dracul given to Vlad's father, meaning the 'Devil' or the 'Dragon' Bunson, M. *Vampire, The Encyclopaedia* 71 (1993).
33. "The dark power will devour him" (Gandalf speaking of the Ring's dark power) Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 60 (1966).
34. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings* 1076 (1966).
35. Schopenhauer contended that suffering caused by the will can be briefly transcended by aesthetic perception (of art, music), Schopenhauer, A. *On the Suffering of the World* 100–101 (1970).
36. Entry on the vampire "Lord Ruthven, the villain, bore more than a passing resemblance to Byron and became a highly influential model for the so called Byronic vampire of literature" (the reference is to Dr John Polidori's *The Vampyre, a Tale*) Bunson, M. *Vampire, The Encyclopaedia* 269 (1993).
37. Meyer, S. *Twilight* 163 (2005).
38. *Twilight* (Contender DVD, 2009).
39. "Wer immer strebend sich bemueht/den koennen wir erloesen" von Goethe, J. W. *Faust II Act V*, 521 (1885); "He who strives and ever strives, him we can redeem" von Goethe, J. W. *Selected Works* (trans. Fairley, B.), *Faust II Act V*, 1046 (1999).