

Teaching Guide:

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* and the Legendary World of Middle-Earth

Student Level: Year 10 and up

Learning Objectives

- Understand how and why fantasy authors build fictional universes, and what elements these universes require to feel 'real'
- Explore the relationship between fantasy and mythology
- Develop a deeper understanding of Tolkien's core literary themes and preoccupations
- Develop confidence in tackling dense and detailed prose in an academic setting
- Practice close reading

Readings to prepare outside of class: 'Of Beren and Lúthien' and 'Of Túrin Turambar' in *The Silmarillion*, pp. 152-177, 188-215 in the 2021 hardcover edition (Harper Collins). Approximately 50 pages of reading in any edition.

Narrative Summary of *The Silmarillion*

The Silmarillion is a composite work, a compilation of Tolkien's unpublished and draft materials put together and published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien with the assistance of fantasy writer Guy Gavriel Kay. These narratives collectively tell the history of Eä, Tolkien's mythological universe, from its creation through song by Ilúvatar (a lightly obscured Christian God figure) through three ages of immensely detailed and complicated history. As a result, this book is a corpus rather than a single text, consisting of representative materials offering a more or less complete picture of the web of legend J. R. R. Tolkien created and which serves as the backdrop to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Silmarillion begins with Ilúvatar's creation of the universe through song. His demiurges (divine figures responsible for the creation of the world), a collective of beings known as the Valar, and their lesser servants, the Maiar, join his song and assist him in creating various aspects of the world. One of the Valar, Melkor, wants to create his own melody, one not sanctioned by Ilúvatar, to increase his own glory and power, and as a result he turns away from Ilúvatar and falls into evil. Melkor corrupts many of the Maiar, creating fire demons called Balrogs and turning one of them, Sauron, into his trusted lieutenant. The Valar establish a realm in Eä called Valinor, where they plant two trees that shine with the light of the sun and moon. In the realm of Middle-earth, meanwhile, the firstborn Children of Ilúvatar – Elves – emerge for the first time. Many of the elves journey to Valinor to live with the Valar in the light of the Trees, but others stay in the twilight of Middle-earth.

When Fëanor, the greatest elf-smith, captures the light of the Trees in jewels called the Silmarils, Melkor feigns repentance and enters Valinor. He creates a rift between Fëanor and his brothers, kills the High King of the Elves, destroys the

Trees, steals the Silmarils, and flees to Middle-earth. Fëanor and his sons swear vengeance on any who withhold the Silmarils from them and pursue Melkor, whom they name Morgoth ('dark enemy'), to Middle-earth against the will of the Valar. Along the way, they commit the world's first kin-murder, when they slay other Elves for their ships.

Many Elves (the Noldor) go with Fëanor to Middle-earth, and they battle against Morgoth, with the tide constantly turning in favour of one side or the other. The Valar refuse to intervene on the Elves' behalf, and the way back to Valinor is barred to them because of the sins of Fëanor. Men, the second-born Children of Ilúvatar, awake in Middle-earth during this time, and some side with the Noldor, while others favour Morgoth. The royal House of Bëor of Dorthonion, great men and heroes, side with the Elves, and their kingdom is destroyed in a great battle with Morgoth. Barahir of the House of Bëor saves the life of the elf-king Finrod Felagund, lord of Nargothrond. Barahir's son Beren, who was a youth when the House of Bëor loses its lands to Morgoth, is the protagonist of 'The Tale of Beren and Lúthien', which describes his love for the Elf princess Lúthien, their mutual quest to recapture a Silmaril from Morgoth to prove Beren's worthiness to marry her, and Beren's resurrection through Lúthien's love and sacrifice.

Eventually the conflict between the Noldor (and their human allies) and Morgoth reaches a horrifying climax in the Nírnaeth Arnoediad, the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. Morgoth attacks the Noldor with a vast army, and the Elves are in turn betrayed by Men whose minds have been turned by Morgoth. The King of the Noldor, Fingon, is slain by a Balrog, and the great hero of Men Húrin is captured by Morgoth and his family cursed – a curse which falls heavily on his son Túrin, whose tragic life (including the accidental murder of his closest friend, multiple encounters with the dragon Glaurung, and unwitting marriage to his sister) is detailed in 'Túrin Turambar'. Only the Elvish city of Gondolin remains hidden from Morgoth, but the city is betrayed by a treacherous Elf. Eärendil, a survivor of Gondolin, sails to Valinor and entreats the Valar to come to the aid of Middle-earth. The Valar listen to Eärendil's plea, take a great host to Middle-earth, and defeat and bind Morgoth.

Elos, son of Eärendil, then becomes the king of Númenor, an island kingdom of Men in the sea between Valinor and Middle-earth. Morgoth's servant Sauron eventually corrupts the royal house of Númenor, persuading their last king to make war on Valinor itself, and the Valar destroy the island, sinking it into the sea. Survivors of Númenor who were not tempted by Sauron, including Elendil and his sons Isildur and Anarion, sail to Middle-earth and establish the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, setting into motion a war with Sauron leading to the forging of the Rings of Power and the events of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Characters in 'Beren and Lúthien' and 'Túrin Turambar'

Note: students can often be overwhelmed by the sheer number of names in The Silmarillion. Keeping a character list handy allows them to enjoy the plot and explore the central themes of these stories without panicking over historical details.

Characters Named in 'Beren and Lúthien'

Beren: son of **Barahir**, a prince of Men whose kingdom, **Dorthonion** in **Beleriand**, has been overtaken by **Morgoth**.

Lúthien: Elven princess of the kingdom of **Doriath**.

Barahir: King of the House of Bëor, which ruled the kingdom of **Dorthonion**; the kingdom was lost to Barahir in a great battle with **Morgoth** called the Dagor Bragollach just prior to the start of the story. Barahir lives as an outlaw, fleeing from Morgoth's forces.

Gorlim: a companion of Barahir whose wife was killed by Morgoth's forces.

Morgoth: a corrupted Vala formerly called Melkor, who rebelled against Ilúvatar and became the greatest force for evil in Eä. Stole the **Silmarils**, jewels containing the light of the sacred Trees of Valinor, from Fëanor. Ruler of the fortress of **Angband** under the active volcanoes called **Thangorodrim** in Middle-earth.

Sauron: a corrupted Maia and servant of **Morgoth**; committed to the destruction of the kingdoms of Men and Elves who resist Morgoth in Middle-earth. Holds the fortress of **Tol-in-Gaurhoth**.

Thingol: an elf-king who did not go to Valinor, but stayed in the twilight of Middle-earth. He is considered the high king of the Elves who did not go to Valinor (the Sindar). Ruler of **Doriath**, the Hidden Kingdom, near to **Dorthonion**. His court is in **Menegroth**, the Thousand Caves. Father of **Lúthien**. His warriors **Beleg** and **Mablung** are also mentioned.

Melian: a Maia (being of great power, analogous to an angel) who came to Middle-earth and fell in love with **Thingol**. Queen of **Doriath**. Her magic keeps the kingdom hidden from **Morgoth**. Mother of **Lúthien**.

Daeron: Elf minstrel in the court of **Thingol**.

Finrod Felagund: sometimes simply Felagund. An elf-king, one of the Noldor, who came with **Fëanor** from Valinor because he didn't want to abandon his kin. Felagund is king of the caves of **Nargothrond**, an elf stronghold against **Morgoth**. He owes his life to **Barahir**, and gave him a ring as a token of this debt. Gives the crown to his brother **Orodreth** in this story.

Fingon: High King of the Noldor at the time of this story, i.e. the current High King of the Elves who went to Valinor and returned to Middle-earth with **Fëanor** to fight **Morgoth**.

Finarfin: a great Elf of the Noldor, father of **Finrod Felagund**, kin to **Thingol**.

Mandos: a Vala (demiurge of Ilúvatar) who is responsible for the judgment of the spirits of Elven dead in the **Halls of Mandos**. An important feature of this story is that Elves and Men have different fates in death: Elves, who do not age or die of illness, go to the Halls of Mandos in Valinor if they are killed by violence or despair, where they dwell until reincarnation, while Men age and die, and their spirits go somewhere known only to Ilúvatar and are not reincarnated.

Fëanor: an Elf of the Noldor, the greatest smith who ever lived, who made the **Silmarils**, jewels containing the light of the sacred Trees of Valinor. Swore an oath to fight **Morgoth** (and anyone who wins or possesses a Silmaril outside of his own sons) when Morgoth stole the jewels and destroyed the Trees.

Celegorm and Curufin: two of the sons of Fëanor, who are bound by his oath to fight anyone who wins or possesses a Silmaril.

Huan: great wolfhound who serves **Celegorm** before defecting to **Lúthien**. A gift to Celegorm from **Oromë**, one of the Valar (demiurges of Ilúvatar). Fights first Sauron's wolf **Draugluin**, then the great wolf **Carcharoth**.

Thorondor: king of the Eagles of Middle-earth.

Orcs: evil beings who serve Morgoth and Sauron.

Characters Named in 'Túrin Turambar'

Túrin Turambar: a Man and the ill-fated son of **Húrin**.

Húrin: former lord of **Dor-lómin** and descendant of the **House of Hador**, a hero of men who is captured and tortured by **Morgoth** in the **Nírnaeth Arnoediad**, Battle of Unnumbered Tears, in which Morgoth destroys the forces of Elves and Men united against him.

Morwen Eledhwen: mother of **Túrin** and **Nienor**, wife of **Húrin**.

Nienor: sister of **Túrin**, also called **Niniel**.

Morgoth: a corrupted Vala formerly called Melkor, who rebelled against Ilúvatar and became the greatest force for evil in Eä. Stole the Silmarils, jewels containing the light of the sacred Trees of Valinor. Ruler of the fortress of **Angband** under the active volcanoes called **Thangorodrim** in Middle-earth.

Thingol: an elf-king who did not go to Valinor, but stayed in the twilight of Middle-earth. He is considered the high king of the Elves who did not go to Valinor (the Sindar). Ruler of **Doriath**, the Hidden Kingdom, near to **Dorthonion**. His court is in **Menegroth**, the Thousand Caves. His wife **Melían** is a Maia (angelic being) who protects Doriath with a magic border called the **Girdle of Melían**.

Beleg Cúthalion: Elf warrior in service to **Thingol**, who becomes a comrade in arms of **Túrin** when he arrives in **Doriath**.

Saeros and **Mablung:** elf warriors in service to **Thingol**.

Mîm: a Dwarf, last of the Noegyth Nibin (Petty-Dwarves), whose son **Túrin** accidentally kills.

Gwindor: an Elf of **Nargothrond**, formerly ruled by **Finrod Felagund** of the house of **Finarfin**, captured by **Morgoth** and tortured in the aftermath of the **Nírnaeth Arnoediad**.

Finduilas: an Elf princess of **Nargothrond**, daughter of its current ruler **Orodreth**, brother of **Finrod Felagund**. Formerly lover of **Gwindor**.

Glaurung: the greatest dragon in Middle-earth, known as the Father of Dragons, bred by **Morgoth** in **Angband**. Caused huge destruction in the battles **Dagor Bragollach** and **Nírnaeth Arnoediad**.

Discussion Questions and Points

1a. Why does Tolkien make such repeated, elaborate references to historical names and places in his imagined world? What kind of texture does this add to the stories of Beren and Lúthien and Túrin Turambar? How do the protagonists of these stories relate to the history of their world?

1b. What is a 'legendarium'? What can we learn from Tolkien's use of the term 'sub-creation' to describe the process of fantasy world-building, in which the human author is a 'little maker' creating his own world within God's primary creation – a word he also uses in *The Silmarillion* to describe the creative efforts of the Valar, Elves, and Men? How has Tolkien's creation of a complete fantasy world influenced our understanding of what fantasy literature is and should be?

2. How can the evident echoes of Christianity in Tolkien's legendarium help us read these narratives? If Melkor/Morgoth is an obvious Lucifer/Satan analogue, what

themes emerge in Lúthien's battle against him, Beren's imprisonment in the pit, and Túrin's repeated confrontations with his serpent Glaurung?

3a. 'Of Beren and Lúthien' begins 'Among the tales of sorrow and of ruin that come down to us for the darkness of those days there are yet some in which amid weeping there is joy and under the shadow of death light endures.' Why is Tolkien so persistent in juxtaposing darkness and light, sadness and joy, in these narratives? What does this kind of elegiac tone add to our experience of *The Silmarillion*?

3b. Tolkien wrote about the importance in his work of something he called *eucatastrophe*: 'the good catastrophe', the sudden joyous turn that snatches victory from the jaws of defeat. He writes in his essay *On Fairy Stories*, 'it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.' What kind of *eucatastrophe*(s) do Beren and Lúthien experience, and what do we make of Lúthien's choice of mortality in this context? Is death 'bad' in Tolkien's universe? Why is Túrin denied a *eucatastrophe*?

4. What fairy tale and mythological themes can be identified in these stories? (E.g., a quest to prove a suitor's worthiness; a maiden escaping a tower by means of her hair; an Orpheus-like journey to Hades; an Oedipus-like tragedy of lost identity.) How does Tolkien use these tropes?

5a. How are good and evil distinguished in these stories? How does Lúthien win her battles against Sauron and Morgoth? How does Túrin complicate the morality of Middle-earth in a text in which we otherwise have exceptional heroes facing off against an irredeemably evil 'Big Bad'? How does love face off against power, collaboration and compassion against selfishness, beauty against destruction?

5b. How do we reconcile the destruction caused by the oath of Fëanor with the beauty and value of the Silmaril Beren and Lúthien retrieve?

5c. What makes a hero in these stories? How does the Quest for the Silmaril structure 'Of Beren and Lúthien', and what does the absence of a quest do to 'Túrin Turambar'? What kinds of sacrifice does heroism mandate? What is a 'tragic hero', and is Túrin one?

6. What do we make of the importance of names in these stories? Why does Túrin have so many epithets? How do Beren and Lúthien name themselves and one another?

7. How does Tolkien integrate verse and song into his prose, and why does he do so?

8. What kind of relationship with the natural world do the protagonists of these narratives exhibit? What is the natural world of Middle-earth like, and what does

Tolkien's imagined landscape contribute to these stories? What does Tolkien's sense of the geography of Beleriand add to our experience of his *Silmarillion* narratives? (Note that all editions of *The Silmarillion* include a map of Beleriand, useful to examine in this discussion.)

Further Reading and Writing Exercises:

On Fairy Stories (with 'Beren and Lúthien')

Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy Stories', originally given as a lecture at the University of St Andrews in 1939, dissects, defends, and legitimises the fairy tale — and, more broadly, the fantasy narrative — as a literary form. His definition of a fairy story is one that takes place in an enchanted Otherworld, and one which gets to the heart of human joy and human suffering. The essay is not long; students can read all of it, or excerpts from it. Students can discuss in small groups, or write on, the following questions: why is the Otherworld so important to Tolkien's idea of fantasy, and how does this focus manifest in *The Silmarillion*? What does Tolkien think fantasy narratives should do for their audiences? How do these principles guide his story of Beren and Lúthien? How does his idea of eucatastrophe (see above) manifest in his own work? What other examples of eucatastrophe can we find in folklore, fairy tale, and myth?

The Story of Kullervo (with 'Túrin Turambar')

Tolkien based the core narrative of 'Túrin Turambar' on the story of Kullervo in the *Kalevala*, a Finnish epic compiled from folkloric and mythological material by Elias Lönnrot in 1835. Tolkien attempted to write his own version of the story of Kullervo as an undergraduate at Oxford in mixed prose and verse. Tolkien's undergraduate attempt has been edited by Verlyn Flieger as *The Story of Kullervo* (HarperCollins, 2015), and students should read excerpts of the introduction and his text.

Exercise A: Consider which elements of the Kullervo story can be found in 'Túrin Turambar' and which elements Tolkien has excised or altered. How has he transformed the story? What are the similarities and differences between Túrin and Kullervo, and what insights do Tolkien's alterations to the Finnish story offer us into the themes and values of 'Túrin Turambar'?

Exercise B: Provide students with bullet-point plot notes for two to three short myths. Invite them to write their own version of the narrative, fleshing out the basic plot they have been given and using their own style. Advanced students can also be asked to write a paragraph explaining their stylistic choices in their version of the myth.

Völsunga saga and Tolkien's Dragons (with 'Túrin Turambar')

Tolkien was a scholar of Old English and Old Norse literature at Oxford for his entire adult life, and his work on Kullervo was inspired by William Morris' reworking of the Old Norse *Völsunga saga* as Morris' own narrative 'The House of the Wolfings'. Students should read Sigurðr's fight with the dragon Fáfnir, available for free in R. G. Finch's field-standard translation here: <http://vsnrweb-publications.org.uk/Volsunga%20saga.pdf>. Students can also compare this material with chs. 12-14 of *The Hobbit* (the confrontation with Smaug).

Exercise A: How do Glaurung, Smaug, and Fáfñir all compare to one another? What features of these dragons have become standard in English-language fantasy? What Christian and allegorical readings are available for all three dragons? How does each hero interact with ‘his’ dragon, and how does the dragon function in his narrative?

Exercise B: Students should research a dragon tradition outside of Western Europe to compare to Fáfñir and Tolkien’s interpretation of the Norse dragon, making a short presentation to the class on their findings.

Further Reading in The Silmarillion

For more self-contained, narrative-driven episodes in this text: in the section headed ‘Valaquenta’ or ‘Quenta Silmarillion’, chapters 6-8 narrate the creation of the Silmarils, Melkor’s assault on Valinor, and the departure of the Noldorin Elves for Middle-earth. Chapters 16 and 23 narrate the fall of the hidden Elf city of Gondolin, followed by the famous voyage of Eärendil to persuade the Valar to aid Middle-earth against Morgoth in chapter 24. The section headed ‘Akallabêth’ narrates the downfall of Númenor as a self-contained story.

Resources for Teachers and Advanced Students: Information on Tolkien’s Life and Career and the Composition of *The Silmarillion*

- Stuart D. Lee, ed. *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014).
 - Particularly chapters 1 (a brief but thorough biography) and 5-7 (on myth-making, sub-creation, the mythology of Middle-earth, and *The Silmarillion* itself)
- Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Allen & Unwin, 1977).
- Stuart D. Lee and Elizabeth Solopova, eds. *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
 - Particularly 2.1.3-2.1.5 and 4.1-4.2
- Useful Oxford Fantasy podcasts: Grace Khuri’s podcast episode on *The Silmarillion*, available at <https://writersinspire.org/themes/fantasy-literature>; the nine-episode series ‘Tolkien at Oxford’, available at <https://writersinspire.org/themes/tolkien-oxford>; and episodes ‘Mythopoeia: Myth-Creation and Middle-earth’ and ‘Tolkien’s Turning Point: Tolkien and the History of Tongues’ in the Bodleian Libraries’ BODcasts, available at <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/bodleian-libraries-bodcasts>.