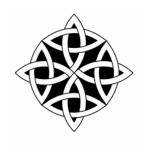# BEREN AND RHAEGAR AS TWO KIND OF HEROES
The cultural transmission of the topic of love

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Abstract: The aim of this contribution is to reflect on the characteristics of Beren and Rhaegar, two heroes. What links these two characters is that they both have love stories. J. R. R. Tolkien and G. R. R. Martin place an emphasis on the more attractive love dimensions of these characters than on the epic aspects. We aim at comparing both characters and examining similarities and differences between them. In order to accomplish this, we have to bear in mind the specific approach of each respective author to their stories. We will compare the development of both love stories, from the perspective of their different natures.
Key words: High Fantasy – Culture – Literature – Heroes.

Introduction

Our intention in this text is to explain how two fantasy heroes share the same love motif in their respective stories and, at the same time, reflect on their

connection to other classic myths. Both J. R. R. Tolkien and G. R. R. Martin had been readers of classic texts and, so, it is important that we appreciate the influence of mythical stories on their books.

Firstly, we aim to make a short summary of the stories of the main characters in this contribution.

Prince Rhaegar, the heir to the Iron Throne, abducted Lyanna Stark and murdered in Dorne. Lyanna was the daughter of the Warden of the North and betrothed to Robert Baratheon while Rhaegar was married to Princess Elia Martell. Lyanna died inside the Tower of Joy while Rhaegar was slain in single combat by Robert Baratheon during the Battle of the Trident.

The story of Lúthien and her fate is tied to Beren. She was the daughter of Thingol and she fell in love with Beren against her father's will. They, after many hardships, reached Angband and recovered a Silmaril. Lúthien died of grief when Beren died but, after singing a song of sadness, she and Beren were granted new lives together.

We focus on an analysis of these heroes because their influence is crucial on the works they feature in. Beren belongs to *The Silmarilion* (TOLKIEN 1977)*,* but at the same time refers to *The Lord of the Rings*, via Aragorn's love story (TOLKIEN 1993 [1954]), while Rhaegar's story is frequently remembered in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* universe (MARTIN 2000) as one of the reasons for the different battles between family houses.

By analyzing both texts, we appreciate a certain cultural transmission between them and notice how the same motifs of pre-rationality fluctuate between different texts. In this study we will explain how human beings need to create heroes and identify with non-rational actions in order to understand reality. Myths are the clearest demonstration of this, because from ancient times they

have answered questions to human beings and helped them conquer their fears.

Bearing in mind the relevance of pre-rationale stories to our lives, we will try to justify the presence and influence of heroes in these stories. Existential questions about our place in the universe have worried human beings throughout the ages and so humans have created characters who transcend our reality and bring hope to our lives. Thus, we will attempt to offer an explanation of the necessity and validity of myths, highlighting their function as predecessors of literary works such as Beren (Tolkien) and Rhaegar (Martin).

1. A brief approach to High Fantasy

We can define High Fantasy as a subgenre of fantasy fiction that is set in invented or parallel worlds, and is founded upon a diverse body of works in the already very popular genre of fantasy. High fantasy came to eminence through the works of authors such as Mass (MASS 2012), Rothfuss (ROTHFUSS 2007), or Sanderson (SANDERSON 2010). High fantasy is a recurring genre in Young Adult Literature, and is primarily characterized by its focus on a conflict between good and evil. If the literature is successful, it is able to capture our imagination and suspend disbelief in two major ways: firstly by internal consistency in the fantasy world and secondly by the protagonist's own belief in his or her experiences (LUKENS 2007: 21).

These stories are generally serious in tone and often epic in scope, dealing with themes of grand struggles against supernatural, and often evil forces. Typical characteristics of High Fantasy include elements such as elves and dwarves, magic, wizards, invented languages or quests.

High Fantasy worlds may be to a greater or lesser extent based on real world milieus, or on such legends as the Arthurian myth. When the resemblance to existing mythologies is strong, and particularly when real-world history is used, High Fantasy has the logical of an alternative world. When the scope is not on

the epic scale, and deals with the hero's personal fight against evil forces, epic fantasy may develop into the genre of sword and sorcery literature. For example, we can highlight heroes such as Thomas Covenant, Osberne Wulfgrimsson, Solomon Kane, Conan or King Arthur.

Some characteristics of this subgenre are: a target audience of adults or teens, and not children; an invented world, continent, or country (for example, Earthsea, Middle-earth or Westeros); specifically built cultures, sometimes with constructed languages and religions (for instance Elvish or Valyrian); medieval technology, often with a feudal social structure; magic, frequently performed by wizards and the like; non-human races such as elves and dwarves; an array of monsters and mythical creatures like trolls and unicorns; a pantheon of gods who meddle in human affairs; and epic battles between good and evil.

The fantasy writer creates a new and unique world for the characters, hoping to make readers believe that this other world not only could but does indeed exist within the framework of the book. The acceptance of this other world requires an ability to make the imaginary universe credible on the part of the writer.

2. On fantasy stories

Stories biased towards character rather than plot focus on the personality and inner life of the hero. In one sense, fantasy stories are almost always "about" one or more characters. In most stories, though, the tale is not about the character of the protagonist.

The structure of a story based on character is simple. The story begins at the moment the main character becomes so unhappy, impatient or angry with their position in life that they begin a process of change. It ends when the character either settles into a new role or gives up the struggle and remains in the old role (JONES 2005). Beren is an example of the mortal hero who accomplishes a seemingly impossible task. The task is to recover one of the stolen Silmaril

jewels from the iron crown of Morgoth, The Lord of Darkness. This quest echoes the Greek tale of *Jason and the Argonauts* in its execution of a task believed to be impossible. If we remember Jason's story, to summarise, he had to regain the throne stolen from his father by his uncle Pelias. To do this he had to bring him the Golden Fleece. Jason and the Argonauts battled Harpies and giants and then, in Colchis, he had to complete three seemingly impossible tasks. Finally, Jason returned to Lolcus with the Golden Fleece.

Also, for the end of the heroic tale of Beren and Lúthien, Tolkien borrowed from the Greek myth of *Orpheus and Eurydice*. In this case, they got married but Eurydice was bitten by a snake and died. Orpheus travelled to the Underworld to bring her back to life. Hades and Persephone let him go but Eurydice had to walk behind him and he was forbidden from looking at her. Orpheus turned to look at her near the entrance and she was immediately sent back to the Underworld. Beren dies of wounds sustained in recovering the Silmaril. Then the King of the Valar intervenes giving Lúthien two choices.

In the story, something is wrong with the fabric of the universe; the world is out of order. In classic literature, this can also include, amongst other events, the appearance of a monster (*Beowulf*), the "unnatural" murder of a king by his brother (*Hamlet*) or of a guest by his host (*Macbeth*), or the reappearance of a powerful ancient adversary who was thought to be dead (*The Lord of the Rings*). In all cases, a previous order—a "golden age"—has been disrupted and the world is in a state of flux, a dangerously unpredictable place.

These are event stories, examining the effect of occurrences on the stories. Too many writers of event stories, especially epic fantasies, don't learn from Tolkien. Instead, they imagine that the reader won't be able to understand their world if they don't begin with a prologue showing the state of their invented world. For instance, we can mention the prologue in Christopher Paolini's *Eragon*. This is not the case of G. R. R. Martin who offers us various points of view, introducing the plot-lines of the different noble houses of Westeros, the Wall, and the

Targaryens. Tolkien includes the Beren and Lúthien story as a chapter in *The Silmarilion*, while Martin divides the allusions to Rhaegar into the different books of the complete work.

3. The popular necessity for heroes

In the beginning were thunder and lightning, light and darkness, water and fire, then, onomatopoea appeared and, finally, the myth as personification of nature, which helped erase our fears by taming nature through words. The myth is not a scientific explanation but is a primitive narrative, told to satisfy deep religious desires and moral issues. In these myths we can find the origin of allegories and the way to moralize societies and their people. As we have mentioned, Tolkien was probably inspired by *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and used them as a basis for his heroes, in the same way as Martin used *Hades* and the myth of *Persephone*. This entails the invention of a new language and literature and, at the same time, is the origin of the literary characters we discuss in this contribution.

The myth is a complex cultural construction, and through it we try to find meaning in human life. Through myths, human beings experience extraordinary things and acquire powerful visions of the future. In the world of fiction, we are able to feel that we can achieve things that in our real lives are not possible. The world of fiction and myth allows us to imagine a better future, albeit impossible. As May states, without the myth we are a minor race, unable to go beyond word and listen to the speaker (MAY 1991). By using myth, we can establish a relationship between the pre-rationality of myths and the creation of heroes such as Beren and Rhaegar, whose behavior tries to give an explanation to beliefs, wishes and life. Thus, if the reader identifies himself with Beren or with Rhaegar they can feel themselves to be a kind of hero albeit in a fictional world, which can mirror feelings in the real world.

The figure of the hero is essential in understanding reality. Beren and Raeghar are based on mythic stories and have similarities to them. Both stories examine the topic of love. The difference of these stories to classic myths lies in the nature of mass media and the inclusion of these characters on different media platforms. Going beyond merely oral tradition, these characters and their stories are disseminated through television, cinema or the internet. Paradoxically, in the universes of both Tolkien and Martin, Beren and Rhaegar are well known characters but have not had the media attention of other characters created by their authors.

4. Classic and contemporary myths of modernity

The relevance of myths to the development of society is important because myths are continually present in different social media (literature, painting, sculpture, mass media and so on). Against rationality, humans being need to develop explanations for questions about life which cannot being solved or answered by rational science. This is because myths are still present in our culture and societies. For example, we can mention four important modern myths, whose representative characters are Don Quixote, Faust, Robinson Crusoe and Don Juan. In these characters, we discover influences on our contemporary societies, because the myths refer to human universals (such as love, death, ideals and hopes). Because of this, we can read these stories and use them to answer many questions both in fiction and in reality, because the collective imagination interprets them as main axes of social thought. Idealism versus rationality, love versus isolation, or the character of the conqueror are archetypes in our societies, and those aforementioned characteristics, although not real, are taken by us as a model or a rationale to explain daily events.

Heroes are necessary references for people who use them to compare their real life situations with the fictional. In fiction the hero overcomes adversity and fights against evil or natural obstacles and, above all, fights against power structures that are imposed on them by society. A classical example of heroes

or superheroes is shown in Superman and Batman. They have different qualities. The first one has supernatural qualities and the second uses technology. Both fight against evil and become a reference for citizenship. The hero can be seen as the attempt of the citizen to promote equality in society. This happens in the case of Beren and Rhaegar who, at the same time, also have ancestors in classic mythology.

Firstly, Beren and Lúthien mirror the famous couple described by Ovid, *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Jen Stevens points outs the transformation made by Tolkien in adapting these mythical characters into his *Silmarilion* (STEVENS 2004: 119-131). Other influences for the creation of Beren and Lúthien are *The Legend of Good Woman* (Chaucer) or *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare). On the other hand, in the case of Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark we find a parallel with the classic myth of *Hades and Persephone*. One day Hades, God of the Underworld, saw Persephone and instantly fell in love with her. Persephone was gathering flowers on a plain in Sicily when Hades suddenly appeared, thundering across the plain in his four-horse chariot. The god swooped down upon Persephone, scooped her up with one arm, and literally and figuratively deflowered her—leaving the plain scattered with blossoms of every colour. Resemblances between both stories exist in the three aspects of sudden falling in love, kidnapping and deflowering. Those elements are used by Martin to create his characters and the new story.

In Rhaegar's case there is the construction of a myth within the story. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the other characters mention him as a myth, he is an example of a pre-rationale creation about whom there is little information. Little by little, the characters give us information, all the while raising some never truly answered questions. For instance: was he the dragon that they were trying to revive?

In *A Game of Thrones*, Jorah Mormont tells Daenerys: "Your brother Rhaegar was the last dragon, and he died on the Trident. Viserys is less than the shadow of a snake" (MARTIN 2013 [1996]). So maybe Rhaegar was actually part-

dragon. This wouldn't be completely unexpected from a Targaryen. Indeed, some believe that, because of their Valyrian blood and other qualities, such as being able to tolerate heat, having premonition-like dreams or being dragon lords, the Targaryens are actually closer to gods than to men. This statement implies making Rhaegar's character an enigma which is in accordance to the definition of myth. This happens because his character cannot be explained from a rational point of view, but instead must be understood from within a fictional context.

Both Beren and Rhaegar are thus heroes related to classic mythology and who help explain the popular and human necessity to create heroes and identify with them.

5. Comparison between Beren and Rhaegar

Works by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are consolatory, where the rightful king is the one who claims the throne because the world is, in the end, rational and moral. Perhaps the best example is the character of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings.* Tolkien coined the term *eucatastrophe* to describe the unforeseen twists and turns that often take place at the end of our favourite fairy tales and legends, as when the villain's evil becomes an instrument in his own downfall. *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, delivers its fair share of "fortunate" calamities such as Sauron's forging of the One Ring. Placing so much of his power in this external object gives the heroes a chance to defeat him once and for all simply by destroying his Ring (HARVEY 2003). On the other hand, Martin is likely to draw not only from more obscure fantasy writers but also from horror or historical fiction, what allows him to bend genre rules and subvert the same conventions he initially may seem to support (VERHOEVE 2011).

The beginning of Beren and Lúthien's story tells us:

"Among the tales of sorrow and of ruin that come down to us from the darkness of those days there are yet some in which amid weeping there is joy and under the

shadow of death light that endures. And of these histories most fair still in the ears of the Elves is the tale of Beren and Lúthien. It is a story regarding hope and goodness." (TOLKIEN 1977)

Rhaegar's story is about anger with Robert Baratheon while it also functioning as a fairy tale of sorts for the generations to come, who will tell this tale of sexual violence and revenge to their own children as a way of explaining why Westeros is as it is.

Beren's fate regards the ring of Barahir and is about his death. So, in the text we can find this:

"For this ring was like to twin serpents, whose eyes were emeralds, and their heads met beneath a crown of golden flowers, that the one upheld and the other devoured; that was the badge of Finarfin and his house; Then Melian leaned to Thingol's side, and in whispered counsel bade him forgo his wrath. "For not by you," she said, "shall Beren be slain; and far and free does his fate led him in the end, yet it is wound with yours. Take heed!" (TOLKIEN 1977)

When we reflect on Rhaegar's character, although most references portray him as exhibiting bad behaviour, we have to take the assertions beyond their face value. There is a certain ambiguity in how Ned Stark views the Targaryen prince. Ned recalls his victory at Harrenhal, in a dream of the year of the false spring, seeing Rhaegar carry the day and then bear the crown for the queen of love and beauty. When he gives the trophy to Lyanna instead of his wife, princess Elia, "all the smiles died".

The importance of prince Rhaegar is emphasised by him being the origin of the *Game of Thrones* (the first book of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* saga). Thus, we are first introduced to him on the occasion of King Robert Baratheon's visit to Winterfell, the hold fast of his old comrade in arms Ned Stark. Robert justifies the war in which he and Ned had fought, and during which he usurped the dynasty that preceded his own, in part because he believes that the heir to that

dynasty kidnapped, raped, and killed Lyanna, Ned's sister and the woman Robert was pledged to marry (LOWDER 2012: 17).

Beren's reasons for seeking conflict are described in the text:

"Then for the second time Huan spoke with words; and he counselled Beren, saying: 'From the shadow of death you can no longer save Lúthien, for by her love she is now subject to it. You can turn from your fate and lead her into exile, seeking peace in vain while your life lasts. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone, or she must with you challenge the fate that lies before you – hopeless, yet not certain. Further counsel I cannot give, nor may I go further on your road. But my heart forebodes that what you find at the Gate I shall myself see. All else is dark to me; yet it may be that our three paths lead back to Doriath, and we may meet before the end." (TOLKIEN 1977)

In both cases, love is one of the central points:

"There came a time near dawn on the eve of Spring, and Lúthien danced upon a green hill; and suddenly she began to sing. Keen, heart-piercing was her song as the song of the lark that rises from the gates of night and pours its voice among the dying stars, seeing the sun behind the walls of the world; and the song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed." (TOLKIEN 1977)

In Rhaegar's case we can see that combined with the romantic vision of Lyanna as a tragic figure are the contrasting characters of prince Rhaegar. The man said to have started the war with his alleged abduction of Lyanna Stark is thought of as a man who acted because of love. Daenerys believes Rhaegar died for the woman he loved and that he even died with her name on his lips. Both characters, Thaegar and Beren die in the same way: death. However, in the aftermath of their deaths are very different. In the case of Beren there is hope:

"These were the choices that he gave to Lúthien Because of her labors and her sorrow, she should be released from Mandos, and go to Valimar, there to dwell until the world's end among the Valar, forgetting all griefs that her life had known. Thither Beren could not come. For it was not permitted to the Valar to withhold Death from him, which is the gift of Iluvatar to Men. But the other choice was this: that she might return to Middle-earth, and take with her Beren, there to dwell again, but without certitude of life or joy. Then she would become mortal, land subject to a second death, even as he; and ere long she would leave the world forever, and her beauty become only a memory in song.

This doom she chose, forsaking the Blessed Realm, and putting aside all claim to kinship with those that dwell there; that thus whatever grief might lie in wait, the fates of Beren and Lúthien might be joined, and their paths lead together beyond the confines of the world. So it was that alone of the Eldalie she has died indeed, and left the world long ago. Yet in her choice the Two Kindreds have been joined; and she is the forerunner of many in whom the Eldar see yet, thought all the world is changed, the likeness of Lúthien the beloved, whom they have lost." (TOLKIEN 1977)

Rhaegar was sad. As Bran Stark, Ned's son, tells his brother's children: "Robert fought a war to win her back. He killed Rhaegar on the Trident with his hammer, but Lyanna died and he never got her back at all" (LOWDER 2012: 18).

As we have seen, both Beren and Rhaegar have two different love stories but share the same unfortunate ending. They are considered heroes because of their actions and their fight against circumstances (both are involved in a love story with opposition from their beloved's father). Although the characters are very different we can establish a timeline and we can consider G.R.R. Martin as a student of Tolkien. If we do there is a relationship between both characters, a kind of inspiration for the younger reader (Martin).

6. Conclusions

In the end, we can understand two kinds of heroes and we can find universal topics such as courage, leadership or love. Beren is the rational and moral hero who receives the recognition of the other characters and the love of Lúthien:

"Then Thingol's mood was softened; and Beren sat before his throne upon the left, and Lúthien upon the right, and they told all the tale of the Quest, while all there listened and were filled with amazement. And it seemed to Thingol that this Man was unlike all other mortal Men, and among the great in Arda, and the love of Lúthien a thing new and strange; and he perceived that their doom might not be withstood by any power of the world. Therefore at the last he yielded his will, and Beren took the hand of Lúthien before the throne of her father." (TOLKIEN 1977)

Rhaegar is different. Ser Kevan Lannister says this when he imagines that, had King Aerys accepted Lord Tywin Lannister's proposal to marry his daughter Cersei to Rhaegar, the Dragon Prince might never have looked twice at Lyanna. We have to bear in mind that Rhaegar was exceedingly intelligent and excelled at anything he put his mind to. Rhaegar was also said to be quiet, private and bookish and was considered melancholic at times. This profile can maybe justify his romantic love for Lyanna Stark.

Both characters have a disgrace to them. Prince Rhaegar's attitudes in Summerhall are especially representative of this aura of tragedy and sadness surrounding him:

"And yet Summerhall was the place the prince loved best. He would go there from time to time, with only his harp for company. Even the knights of the Kingsguard did not attend him there. He liked to sleep in the ruined hall, beneath the moon and stars, and whenever he came back he would bring a song. When you heard him play his high harp with the silver strings and sing of twilights and tears and the death of kings, you could not but feel that he was singing of himself and those he loved." (MARTIN 2000)

The fate of both characters is death. Maybe this fact makes them more attractive to readers.

We conclude this contribution with some remarks. Firstly, readers identify themselves with the adventures of these characters because they are written as part of a romantic narrative. At the same time, Beren and Rhaegar are both

depicted as brave. Both are immersed in epic battles; the former in Morgoth and the latter in the Trident. Both Beren and Rhaegar have love as a motif in their lives. However, other characters refuse their love. In Beren's case, although he died, there is hope and a semblance of a happy ending. In Rhaegar's case the shadow of doubt still hangs over him, partially because *A Song of Ice and Fire* remains an unfinished work thus preventing us from knowing if there will be any further developments with Rhaegar that might cast a new light on his character.

In conclusion, we have found evidence to demonstrate these two heroes share common themes such as romance, adventure or conflict and, above all, play an important role in their books. There is no doubt that they are heroes who contribute greatly to the world of High Fantasy.

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