

JEWELS AND JEWEL CASES: THE DEPICTION OF J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S THE SILMARILLION (1977) IN BLIND GUARDIAN'S NIGHTFALL IN MIDDLE-EARTH (1998)

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Abstract:

Written throughout J. R. R. Tolkien's literary career and later edited and published by Christopher Tolkien, The Silmarillion (1977) portrays the origins of Tolkien's fictional universe including the creation of Elves, the war over the Silmarils, and the rise of Morgoth, which leads to Sauron's emergence. It has been a source of inspiration for various artists, one of which is the German power metal band Blind Guardian. Their 1989 conceptual album Nightfall in Middle-Earth (1998) retells Tolkien's story over a series of songs forming a narrative that uses sonic elements and spoken word to highlight the main elements of the book. This article aims to showcase the methods implemented by Blind Guardian in order to adapt the story for music.

Keywords:

music, literature, heavy metal, Tolkien, Blind Guardian, intertextuality

The emergence of heavy metal music and subculture is said to have begun in the United Kingdom in late 1960s and early 1970s (Belgrad, 2016: 1). Taking inspiration from popular culture, it was a form of a reaction against industrialization undertaken by young people predominantly from the working class who saw their future as one dictated by working jobs simply to survive (6). As explained by Anderton and Burns (2025: 4): "[...] metal music has drawn on national myths, folk epics, and poetry [...]". The origins of the relationship between Metal and Tolkien is summarised by Leonard (2015: 2):

Metal has always been influenced by fantasy, be it sword and sorcery, science fiction, or horror. Metal began evolving from other genres—drawing on folk and rock among them—right around the time *The Lord of the Rings* was becoming a cultural touchstone and animators were exploring options for adapting the books as a film. The new genre, with its desire to depict eldritch evil and fantastic places and peoples, found a soulmate in Tolkien's work and world.

This influence of fantasy setting fits the image of industrialization as a reflection of evil. It resembles the power structures visible in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* where Sauron and orcs use mechanized weaponry as a threat towards rural cultures, such as the Shire, in order to enslave them. Due to the fact that Tolkien's stories could be interpreted in a multitude of ways, the metaphorical aspect of Tolkien's writing was a subject of interest and was by some utilized to encapsulate the tense social and political atmosphere surrounding the Cold War (Leonard, 2015: 2).

Over time, the popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien began to expand past the English language and his works were highly acclaimed by fans and critics in other European countries, leading to a creation of a multitude of metal bands who based their names on Tolkien's works such as Gorgoroth, Isengard or Amon Amarth (Leonard, 2015: 2). Kuusela (2015: 98) considers the power metal band Blind Guardian to be the German Tolkien-inspired band that achieved the most success. Their album *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* released in 1998 is a conceptual retelling of *The Silmarillion* that furthers the narrative and offers a new perspective on the story.

The musical identity of Middle-earth

The musical identity of Middle-earth has always been a subject that fascinated the fans of the novels as they imagined it as grandiose to reflect their setting (Leonard, 2015: 1). The importance of music in Tolkien's creation of the Middle-earth was underlined by Sturgis (2010: 127) as

Tolkien himself, though not a musician, certainly appreciated the importance of music in building a three-dimensional fictional world. His Middle-earth works

are full of descriptions of music and verses reflecting various languages, styles, and cultures.

As shown by Sturgis, in Tolkien's works music functions as an element of world-building that reflects the realities of different lives the characters lead. Its role is further highlighted by the fact that Tolkien himself sang certain songs, showing their importance in the story (127). Garth (2003: 255) points out that music is how the world in Tolkien's works was created as "Iluvatar reveals that their music has shaped the world and its history" and that suffering arises from Melkor's "'clash' with Iluvatar's themes":

In the beginning Eru, the One, who in the Elvish tongue is named Ilúvatar, made the Ainur of his thought; and they made a great Music before him. In this Music the World was begun; for Ilúvatar made visible the song of the Ainur, and they beheld it as a light in the darkness. (Tolkien, 1977: 25)

This portrayal seems to take inspiration from mythologies and various stories of genesis. Eden (2010: 86-87) argues that although Tolkien claimed not to use contemporary works, certain inspirations can be found in his writing such as the incorporation of themes characteristic to Arthurian legends and the interest in medieval stories in Victorian novels that implement the relationship between storytelling and music. Chandler (1970: 7) discusses the medieval aesthetic in the terms of its features:

The association of such ideas as nature, harmony, creativity, and joy with medievalism points up the other major aspect of the medieval revival, its attempt to create a coherent world view. As we have seen, medievalism was a response to historic change and to the problems raised by the various revolutions and transformations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

A similar issue of change was visible in the industrialization of the postwar United Kingdom that led to the rise of the heavy metal genre and its interest in

medieval themes and storytelling. This interest caused Tolkien's works to be adapted by a variety of bands. As highlighted by Belgrad: "Tolkien's story and his distinctive rhetorical style proved a source of inspiration and imagery for early Heavy Metal bands" (2016: 8). Characterized by the usage of loud sounds and rebellious overtones, the early Heavy Metal was a source of escapism for young people who longed to escape the 'dystopian' reality of their lives (Belgrad, 2016: 10). As Tolkien's writing provided both vivid descriptions and a universally relatable story, it gained widespread recognition, leading it to inspire and shape the youth culture of the late 20th century.

The intertextuality of Blind Guardian's Nightfall in Middle-Earth

As stated by Sturgis (2010: 134) Nightfall in Middle-Earth "retells the tragic story of the theft of the Silmarils, the Oath of Fëanor, and the Kinslaying, to the dawn of the Second Age". Ringsmut (2025: 112) explains that Nightfall in Middle-Earth "is focused on subjective experiences and emotions which make the songs and especially the lyrics more accessible to fans without an intricate knowledge of The Silmarillion. According to Ringsmut (115): "Blind Guardian's musical adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's literary universe is characterized by a highly coded and ambiguous narration from an in-universe subjective perspective, with concrete names and places being omitted in favor of sporadically placed specific details". This approach allows the story to become a new experience for the listeners who already know The Silmarillion without abandoning the concept itself.

Comparing the album to Tolkien's original, Ringsmut (108) points out a similarity between the creation of Nightfall in Middle-Earth and The Silmarillion as Tolkien kept changing the stories throughout his life and Blind Guardian has released a variety of special editions of the album. While discussing the relationship between the album and The Silmarillion, Ringsmut considers the album as its 'sounding

extension', meaning that the album is an intertextual addition to the narrative that builds upon the original story while remaining consistent. Because of that, it can be used to further the story.

The opening track, *War of Wrath*, is a spoken introduction to the story that depicts the conversation between Sauron and Morgoth. Despite its position, it takes place after the events of the rest of the album and at the end of *The Silmarillion*. The track sets the stage for *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* to be a retelling of what transpired. Ringsmut points out that "[*Nightfall in Middle-Earth*] begins with the sounds of clashing swords, battle cries, and thunderous roaring. Chains rustle and a drawbridge opens. The noise slowly recedes, and footsteps echo in a hallway" (110). This introduction fits within the medieval aesthetic and creates a sense of immediate danger that will be present all throughout the duration of the album.

Into the Storm introduces the catalyst of the events that occur in *The Silmarillion*—the *Silmarils*—the three jewels created by Fëanor using the Two Trees of Valinor as a source. The focus of the song is Morgoth's broken promise. In exchange for Ungolianta covering the world in darkness, Morgoth promises her a reward. He says: "Do as I bid; and if thou hunger still when all is done, then I will give thee whatsoever thy lust may demand. Yea, with both hands" (Tolkien, 1977: 74). Morgoth, however, wants to keep the *Silmarils* to himself. Due to the fact that the booklet omits question marks for all the songs, the lyrics can be read both as Morgoth wondering where he should hide the jewels and thinking how he himself can hide from Ungoliant not to give her the *Silmarils*: "Where can I run / How can I hide / The *Silmarils* / Gems of treelight / Their life belongs to me" (Blind Guardian, 1998: 1). In the book, Morgoth refuses to uphold the promise when Ungoliant is not satisfied with his offering after completing her task. She asks for the *Silmarils*, but he does not wish to give them away:

'Blackheart!' she said. 'I have done thy bidding. But I hunger still.' [...] 'With one hand thou givest,' she said; 'with the left only. Open thy right hand.'

In his right hand Morgoth held close the *Silmarils*, and though they were locked in a crystal casket, they had begun to burn him, and his hand was clenched in pain; but he would not open it. (Tolkien, 1977: 80)

Blind Guardian's song depicts the scene without the description, but it

remains true to the original: "Blackheart show me / What you hold in hand / I still hunger for more" (Blind Guardian, 1998: 1).

In *The Silmarillion*, Morgoth's refusal angers Ungoliant and in an attempt to defeat her, Morgoth releases a scream:

Then Morgoth sent forth a terrible cry, that echoed in the mountains. Therefore that region was called Lammoth; for the echoes of his voice dwelt there ever after, so that any who cried aloud in that land awoke them, and all the waste between the hills and the sea was filled with a clamour as of voices in anguish. (Tolkien, 1977: 80-81)

Blind Guardian portrays this scene in a separate track that follows *Into the Storm* called *Lammoth*. It features only Morgoth's muffled scream and the sounds of the wind. The sound effects are used to create the horror and the permanence of the scream carried by the wind. This combination of a spoken track and a song creating an arc will be visible throughout the rest of the album.

Following this track is *Nightfall*, the song that depicts the darkness that overtook the land. The event is shown from the perspective of Fëanor and his sons who swear revenge: "Nightfall / Quietly it crept in and changed us all / Nightfall / Immortal land lies down in agony" (Blind Guardian, 1998: 1).

As stated by Sturgis (2010: 134): "The music conveys rage and despair, which fits lyrics such as 'The doom of the Noldor drew near / The words of a banished king, «I swear revenge!»'" The end of the song features the sound of guitar and flute, allowing it to incorporate medieval elements without sacrificing the heavier sound of the rest of the song.

As a part of her study, Sturgis asked her students whether Blind Guardian's album reflects Tolkien's writing and she received their approval, showing that young people are interested in the dynamic depiction of the events in Tolkien's works and that the album can be used to showcase the themes of the stories as this song "also involves the students with the loss and desolation of the story—it is difficult to ignore the raw cry of 'Our hearts full of hate, full of pride, / How we screamed for revenge!'" (Sturgis, 2010: 134)

After this somber reflection of the consequences of Morgoth's actions, *The*

Minstrel offers an intermission in the form of one of Fëanor sons'—Maglor's—song. As explained by Ringsmut (2025: 114):

First, we hear the sweep of the ocean and rattling shells. As a sounding extension of Tolkien's world, the band used nature sounds and acoustic guitars playing wave-like descending and ascending lines to introduce the figure of the bard. A chime stroke leads into the verse accompanied by an acoustic guitar, flute, and plucked violin sounds.

The song stylized in a medieval aesthetic shares his uncertainty about the rest of the story. It ends abruptly when the The Curse of Fëanor begins and provides an immediate contrast by utilizing a heavier sound. The song continues the theme of revenge: "All hope is gone but I swear revenge". Fëanor's: "Well curse my name", "I'll keep on laughing" and "I will always remember their cries" (Blind Guardian, 1998: 1), are all in relation to the burning of the harbor:

Then Fëanor laughed as one fey, and he cried: 'None and none! What I have left behind I count now no loss; needless baggage on the road it has proved. Let those that cursed my name, curse me still, and whine their way back to the cages of the Valar! Let the ships burn!' Then Maedhros alone stood aside, but Fëanor caused fire to be set to the white ships of the Teleri. (Tolkien, 1977: 90)

The theme of the destruction of the ships and the murder the Teleri is continued in track eleven, Noldor (Dead Winter Reigns), which contains the lyric: "Tears unnumbered" (Blind Guardian, 1998: 2) that foreshadows the Battle of Unnumbered Tears that is yet to happen as well as explores the subject of guilt and the pursuit of revenge. The curse is referenced again in both this song and the spoken intermission Face the truth that includes the sounds of birds chirping in the background that follow the medieval convention and provide a break before the tension rises again.

Following The Curse of Fëanor, the album features two tracks that tell the story of Maedhros being captured by Morgoth and then set free. Captured contains a line spoken by Morgoth followed by laughter: "You are now my guest forever"

which does not appear in the book, as *The Silmarillion* only recollects the events of the capture in the form of description. In the background of the track the sound of wind and a muffled cry can be heard. Alongside *The Eldar* and *When Sorrow Sings*, Ringsmut (2015: 112) names the following song—*Blood Tears* as one amongst those that feature “experiences such as loss, love, and despair that are also conveyed via a subjective narrator perspective, making the story of *The Silmarillion* accessible on a more affective level”.

The next song and the lead single from the album, *Mirror Mirror*, explores the subject of doom by evoking the fairy tale imagery. In the beginning, the song informs the listener of the setting by referring to a common beginning of fairy tales ‘Far, far away’ and changes it to: “Far, far beyond the island” (Blind Guardian, 1998: 2). It furthers the fairy tale reference through the usage of ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall’ commonly associated with *Snow White* despite its incorrectness. A mirror on the wall is typically capable of answering a question, but in the case of this mirror rather than being asked a question, it is told that: “True hope lies beyond the coast” (Blind Guardian, 1998: 2). Implementing well-known fairy tale sayings and changing them to suit the story utilizes the medieval aesthetic evoked in *The Silmarillion* through words rather than through the music. Sonically, the song uses the contrast between the power metal sound and fairy tale references to subvert the expectations of the listener and inform them of the tragic events that occurred. As the lead single from the album, the song summarizes the story up to this point.

The remaining songs of the album show the war of Noldors against Morgoth. *Battle of Sudden Flame* and *Time Stands Still (At the Iron Hill)* concern the fall of Fingolfin. In *Battle of Sudden Flame* a choir accompanied by the sound of the flute contrasts with its title as in *The Silmarillion* the event is described as: “Thus began the fourth of the great battles, Dagor Bragollach, the Battle of Sudden Flame” (Tolkien, 1977: 151). *Time Stands Still (At the Iron Hill)* depicts the fight between Fingolfin and Morgoth. Tolkien details it as:

Thus he came alone to Angband's gates, and he sounded his horn, and smote once more upon the brazen doors, and challenged Morgoth to come forth to single combat. And Morgoth came. [...] But Fingolfin gleamed beneath it as a star; for his mail was overlaid with silver, and his blue shield was set with crystals; and he drew his sword Ringil, that glittered like ice. Then Morgoth hurled aloft Grond, the Hammer of the Underworld, and swung it down like a bolt of thunder. (Tolkien, 1977: 153)

The fight is closely retold in the song. Although, it adds the dialogue that is not present in the story, it follows the structure of Tolkien's description:

I stand alone
 No one's by my side
 I'll dare you, come out
 You coward
 Now it's me or you
 He gleams like a star
 And the sound of his horn's
 Like a raging storm
 Proudly the high lord
 Challenges doom
 Lord of slaves he cries
 Slowly in fear
 The dark lord appears
 [...]

The iron crowned is getting closer
 Swings his hammer down on him
 Like a thunderstorm he's crushing

(Blind Guardian, 1998: 2)

The next four songs focus on the characters of Maeglin and Finrod, both of whom faced despair. The Dark Elf resembles a religious chant and introduces the misfortunes that this sequence explores. Ringsmut (2025: 113) mentions Thorn as an example of a German convention since "[t]he Germanic tropes of fate and doom

appear in the form of a fatalistic perspective on life where the course of events is predestined". The Eldar is a piano ballad referencing the suffering of the Eldar, which connects to the theme of doom represented in this section. The tragedies that befall Maeglin and Finrod lead to the final conflict of the story, the aforementioned Battle of Unnumbered Tears, with the exception of the next sequence.

When Sorrow Sang and Out on the Water are the continuation of Nom the Wise and focus on the story of Beren and Lúthien and their reconciliation. As introduced in The Silmarillion:

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. (Tolkien, 1977: 162)

Following their story, the last three tracks focus on the battle preparation and the Battle of Unnumbered Tears itself. The Steadfast consists of Morgoth's speech and A Dark Passage is a depiction of Morgoth's thoughts before the battle. It portrays the army marching to the sounds of war drums. Final Chapter (Thus Ends...) closes the standard edition and marks the return of Maedhros. He leads the battle, but in the end, the Noldors are defeated. According to Garth (2003: 266): "[...] the Battle of Unnumbered Tears is much more than a military disaster. An epochal stage in a war that Tolkien saw as everlasting, it ushers in the enslavement of individual art and craft by impersonal industry and cold avarice [...]". Belgrad (2016: 4) notes that:

Tolkien fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. He recast this experience into the legend of a hopeless war fought by High Elves (the Noldor) against the lord of Darkness (Melkor or Morgoth) for the control of Middle Earth. Tolkien named his fantasy version of the Battle of the Somme 'the Battle of Unnumbered Tears.'"

Although the album ends with the Noldor unable to reclaim their freedom, there is hope as the final lines of the song are: "A new star shall arise / And a new day shall come, again" (Blind Guardian, 1998: 2). Due to the fact that Blind Guardian rearranges the chronology of events, the depiction of the story does not end with

the beginning of the Third Era, rather it ends on a somber albeit hopeful note.

Conclusions

As noted by Ringsmut: “Storytelling plays a major role in the music of Blind Guardian” (2025: 114). Nightfall in Middle-Earth is divided between songs and spoken intermissions relatively equally as the standard edition features eleven songs and eleven intermissions, providing a balanced listening experience. Together, they create a consistent story that encapsulates the essence of The Silmarillion, while also offering a different experience due to certain additions and omissions. Nightfall in Middle-Earth is not only an interesting Tolkien-inspired project, but also a novelty compared to Blind Guardian’s previous releases. Ringsmut states that “[b]y expanding their sound palette and experimenting with synthesized sounds, they contribute to the fantastical, medievalist sound imagery not found on their other albums” (114). The innovative approach to Tolkien’s stories shows that there is great musical admiration for the universe he created. As showcased by Leonard (2015: 2), the works of Tolkien are still recognized on a worldwide scale as they have been adapted and used as an inspiration not only in the metal music sphere but in other genres of music as well. J. R. R. Tolkien and Blind Guardian have both shaped the landscapes of their respective areas of art, inspiring artists for decades to come and showing that the relationship between literature and music is one that continues to evolve and change.

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