

## Singing, music, and magic in the Finnish epic the *Kalevala* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion*

This paper focuses on singing, music, and the use of magic in the Finnish *Kalevala* and Tolkien's *Silmarillion*. Two stories from the *Silmarillion*, namely the first story 'The Music of the Ainur' and the tragic love story of Beren and Lúthien are used in this paper. Furthermore, there are several stories from the *Kalevala* with similar motives and themes to these two stories by Tolkien that I will explore in this paper. However, I will start first with examining Tolkien's fascination with the *Kalevala* and some notes on the epic.

### **Tolkien and the *Kalevala***

In the year 1912, a young J.R.R. Tolkien finds an English version of the Finnish epic the *Kalevala*. He immediately fell under its spell. Later Tolkien said about the epic: "the more I read of it, the more I felt at home and enjoyed myself" (Carpenter 1977: 49). A few years after his initial find of the *Kalevala* Tolkien wrote the following to his wife:

"trying to turn one of the stories — which is really a very great story and most tragic — into a short story somewhat on the lines of Morris' romances with chunks of poetry in between"

Tolkien 1981: 1

Tolkien never completed this translation but he wrote later that the *Kalevala*'s poem about the unfortunate hero Kullervo had served as the beginning of *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1981: 75). An unfinished version of Tolkien's attempt to recreate this story still exists and was published in 2015 as *The Story of Kullervo*. At the end of his life, Tolkien wrote to a friend that the *Kalevala* was still a source of interest to him:

"The germ of my attempt to write legends of my own to fit my private languages was the tragic tale of the hapless Kullervo in the Finnish *Kalevala*. It remains a major matter in the legends of the First Age (which I hope to publish as *The Silmarillion*), though as *The Children of Húrin* it is entirely changed except in the tragic ending."

Tolkien 1981: 257

### **Some notes on the Finnish epic**

In the Finnish epic the *Kalevala*, magic is more important than warfare. The use of magic is always connected to singing songs and the making music. But only when a song is sung with the right words or played with the correct melody it has magical powers and the singer or player is able to influence the physical world. The heroes in the *Kalevala* are praised for their ancient wisdom and their harmony with nature. Immediately in the first lines of the epic it becomes clear that singing plays an important part in the stories:

"Mieleni minun tekevi,  
aivoni ajattelevi,  
lähteäni laulamahan,  
saa'ani sanelemahan,  
sukuvirttä suoltamahan,  
lajivirttä laulamahan"

"I am driven by my longing  
and my understanding urges  
That I should commence my singing  
And begin my recitation  
I will sing the people's legends,  
And the ballads of the nation."

Not only is singing and music important for the plot of the epic, it has also played a major part in the survival of these ancient songs. The poems were orally transmitted from one generation to the other and each small village had its own traditional songs.

When we look at Tolkien's work, it becomes evident that the use of magic quite often involves singing. For example when the beautiful Lúthien sings the evil Melkor and his court to sleep in the *Silmarillion*, and Tom Bombadil saves the hobbits, Merry and Pippin, from Old Man Willow by incantation in the first part of *The Lord of the Rings*.

### **The creation of the world and its original theme**

In the *Silmarillion*'s first story Ilúvatar gives a musical theme to the Ainur and asks them to make new music based on the original theme:

“Of the theme that I have declared to you. I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music.”

*Silmarillion* 3

The Ainur start singing and because it is harmonious they increase their understanding of Ilúvatar and his creation. The music of the Ainur is very beautiful:

“Then the voices of the Ainur, like unto harps and lutes, and pipes and trumpets, and viols and organs, and like unto countless choirs singing with words, began to fashion the theme of Ilúvatar to a great music; and a sound arose of endless interchanging melodies woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing into the depths and into the heights, and the places of the dwelling of Ilúvatar were filled to overflowing, and the music and the echo of the music went out into the Void, and it was not void. Never since have the Ainur made any music like to this music.”

*Silmarillion* 3-4

The music of the Ainur doesn't only help them to understand Ilúvatar and his creation, it is also very pleasing to listen to. In the *Kalevala* there is a similar story in which music is pleasing to listen to, so pleasing even that everyone comes to listen. Väinämöinen, the main hero of the epic, builds a kantele (tradition Finnish harp-like instrument) out of the jaw of a pike and plays beautiful music on it:

“Jo kävi ilo ilolle,  
Riemu riemulle remahti,  
Tuntio soitto soitannalle,  
Laulu laululle tehosi;  
Helähteli hauin hammas,  
Kalan pursto purkaeli,  
Ulvosu upehen jouhet,  
Jouhet ratsun raikkahuivat.”  
out.”

“now joy waxed joyful  
delight echoed like delight  
music sounded like music  
song had the effect of song;  
the pike's tooth tinkled  
the fish-tail poured forth  
the stallion's hairs called  
the hairs of the steed rang

*Kalevala* 41: 23-30

When Väinämöinen plays, different people, such as the people from Tapio, animals, such as bears and birds, water nymphs and even gods, such as Kuutar and Päivätar, come to listen. All in all, everyone and everything listens to Väinämöinen's music. The King of the waves, Ahto says:

“En ole mointa ennen kuullut  
Sinä ilmoisna ikänä,  
Soitantoa Väinämöisen,  
Iloa ikirunojan”

“I have not heard such before  
ever in this world  
as Väinämöinen's music,  
as the eternal bard's joy!”

*Kalevala* 41: 139-142

Väinämöinen plays for one day and a second, his music moves the listeners and also Väinämöinen to tears.

In the *Silmarillion*, when Melkor weaves his own thoughts in the theme, a storm strikes up in front of Ilúvatar's chair. More or less the same happens in the *Kalevala* when Väinämöinen is angered by Joukahainen. The young Joukahainen hears about Väinämöinen's skill in singing and his wisdom. The youth is envious of Väinämöinen and decides to challenge him to a singing match. Even though Joukahainen's parents warn him of Väinämöinen's strength, Joukahainen still challenges him. When the heroes meet, they battle each other by singing spells. Joukahainen starts singing, but there's no deeper wisdom or truth in his songs. Because of this Väinämöinen asks Joukahainen to sing about the creation, the beginning of the world and other ancient wisdoms. Joukahainen starts singing again, but again he makes up the words for his song. The youth can't fool Väinämöinen and he then threatens to sing Väinämöinen to pieces (*Kalevala* 3: 99-103).

In the end, Väinämöinen loses his patience and gets angry. He starts singing about Joukahainen and Joukahainen's features and clothes start to change shape. Väinämöinen sings Joukahainen into the swamp and at the same time this happens:

“Järvet läikky, maa järisi,  
Vuoret vaskiset vapisi,  
Paaet vahvat paukahteli,  
Kalliot kaheksi lenti,  
Kivet rannoilla rakoili.

“the lakes rippled, the earth shook  
the copper mountains trembled  
the sturdy boulders rumbled  
the cliffs flew in two  
the rocks cracked upon the shores.”

*Kalevala* 3: 296-300

Joukahainen promises his sister's, Aino's, hand in marriage to Väinämöinen to save himself. The latter agrees to the deal and Joukahainen goes back to Pohjola.

What is important in this poem, is that songs can have magical powers when they are sung correctly. That is how Väinämöinen is able to sing Joukahainen into the swamp. Joukahainen, for his part, tries to wound Väinämöinen, but is unable to. Because Väinämöinen was present when the world was created, he remembers what happened and sings about that. Joukahainen, on the other hand, was not present during the creation and instead of learning about it, he makes up his own creation myth.

If we return to Tolkien's creation myth in the *Silmarillion*, something similar happens. Ilúvatar gives different themes to the Ainur and the music the Ainur make comes from these themes. When Melkor weaves his own ideas into the music, ideas that do not stem from Ilúvatar's original music, dissonance and disharmony begin to grow around him. Twice, Ilúvatar tries to influence Melkor to help him return to the original theme. In exactly the same way, Väinämöinen tries to influence what Joukahainen sings about. He orders Joukahainen to sing about the creation and to return to the original theme. Both Väinämöinen and Ilúvatar try to bring back the harmony and return to the original themes but fail in this attempt. They both go to extreme measures to succeed, Ilúvatar by

rising from his throne thereby seizing all music and Väinämöinen by singing Joukahainen into the swamp and almost drowning him.

Both Melkor and Joukahainen have ill-wishes, they are jealous, proud, and think they possess the same knowledge as Väinämöinen or Ilúvatar. Because of this, they are not in harmony with the original music and therefore unable to influence the physical world around them and use magic.

### **Beren and Lúthien's tragic love story and its parallels in the *Kalevala***

One of Tolkien's stories in which singing and the use of magic play a particularly important role is the story of Beren and Lúthien. In this story there are several instances in which singing is linked to the use of magic and for many of these instances we can clearly see the parallels with different poems from the *Kalevala*.

At the beginning of the story it is told that it used to be a song called the Lay of Leithian. However, the words of the original song are forgotten over the years and the story told in the book is just a remainder of the song. This reminds one of the *Kalevala* and its creation. The age of the epic folk poems is difficult to determine, but according to Pentikäinen, the first poems came about 3000-3500 years ago (1987: 111). The songs were transmitted orally from one generation to the next and therefore their words changed over the years. When Elias Lönnrot and other collectors collected the poems in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, many of the poems were already lost and it was hard to find complete poems (DuBois 1995). The story of Beren and Lúthien is the same in the way that it came from an ancient song or lay. However, it is important to keep in mind that the songs of the *Kalevala* came from authentic folk origins, whereas the lay and the subsequent story of Beren and Lúthien are a product of Tolkien's imagination.

In the main story there are several instances where singing and magic go hand in hand. There are various singing matches that remind of the one in the *Kalevala* mentioned earlier in this paper. Apart from the singing matches, Lúthien sings Morgoth and his court to sleep and she sings the most beautiful and sad song the world will ever hear in front of Mandos.

First, let's take a look at the *Kalevala*. In poem number 42 Louhi, the mistress of Pohjola, is the mistress of the Sampo. She has received this mysterious item as a trade for her daughter's hand in marriage. When her daughter dies at the hands of the infamous Kullervo, her husband, the smith Ilmarinen, feels that the Sampo belongs to him again. Ilmarinen gathers his two friends, Väinämöinen and Lemminkäinen, to set off to Pohjola and retrieve the Sampo. When they arrive, they soon find out that it is no easy feat to retrieve the object. The Sampo is locked away in a mountain cave and Louhi is unwilling to share the precious object with the heroes.

Therefore, Väinämöinen picks up his kantele and starts playing, the people of Pohjola hear his song and fall asleep:

“Vaka vanha Väinämöinen  
Kävi kanteloisehensa,  
Itse istui soittamahan,  
Alkoi soittoa somasti;  
Tuota kaikki kuulemahan,  
Iloa imehtimähän,  
Miehet mielellä hyvällä,  
Naiset suulla nauravalla,  
Urohot vesissä silmin,  
Pojat maassa polvillansa.  
Väkeä väsyttelvi,  
Rahvahaista raukaisevi:

“Steady old Väinämöinen  
seized his kantele  
he sat down to play  
began to play prettily;  
and they all stopped to listen  
marvel at the merriment—  
men in good spirits  
wives with smiling lips  
fellows with tears in their eyes  
and boys kneeling on the ground.  
He wears the folk down  
he tires the people:

Kaikki nukkui kuuntelijat  
Sekä vaipui katselijat,  
Nukkui nuoret, nukkui vanhat  
Väinämöisen soitantohon.”

all the listeners fall asleep  
the watchers sank down;  
the young slept and the old slept  
at Väinämöinen’s music.”

*Kalevala* 42: 65-80

The music Väinämöinen makes is so powerful that it lulls all the people of Pohjola to sleep, much like Lúthien’s music lulls Morgoth and his court to sleep. When everyone in Pohjola is asleep, the heroes retrieve the Sampo and bring it to their boat. Once they have loaded it onto the boat, Louhi awakes and immediately notices that the Sampo is gone. She sends a storm to the heroes and changes her shape into that of a giant bird to chase after the Sampo. A fight ensues and the precious object falls into the water where it breaks into very small pieces. In the story of Beren and Lúthien a similar loss to that of the loss of the Sampo is suffered.

The purpose of the story from the *Kalevala* is the retrieving of the Sampo, to make the land of Kaleva, where Ilmarinen, Väinämöinen and Lemminkäinen live, prosperous. Furthermore, there is a similar purpose to the story. The purpose is a wedding between Beren and Lúthien, it’s Lúthien’s father’s wish that Beren retrieves a Silmaril before he is allowed to marry her. It seems as if Beren and Lúthien succeed in their goal, they successfully take a Silmaril from Melkor and escape the obstacles he puts in their way. However, Beren is mortally wounded and dies before he and Lúthien get married, thereby not achieving their goal to get married.

Another element of these stories that is similar is the forging of a precious object, the loss of it and its near return. Ilmarinen forges the Sampo and exchanges it with Louhi for her daughters’ hand in marriage. When Ilmarinen’s wife dies, he wants the Sampo back because he has lost his end of the bargain. Ilmarinen feels robbed when he loses his wife, he even tries to forge a new wife. This attempt is unsuccessful and he therefore decides that he is entitled to the Sampo.

The elf Feänor forged the three Silmarils and Morgoth steals these from the elves. The elves feel robbed and try to get the Silmarils back. Even though Beren and Lúthien succeed in getting one Silmaril back, the elves eventually lose the Silmarils just as the Sampo is lost in the *Kalevala*.

Another parallel between the *Kalevala* and the story of Beren and Lúthien is found in the singing matches. There are two different singing matches in Beren and Lúthien’s story. In the first one Sauron and Felagund battle together and in the second Sauron and Lúthien sing. It is interesting that Sauron, the evil one, wins in the first match. Although he wins the first singing match he is ultimately defeated by Lúthien.

Earlier in this paper I mentioned a song that is so beautiful that it brings its listeners to tears or how human voices are able to sound like musical instruments. In the story of Beren and Lúthien there is a song that is the most beautiful and sad song the world has ever heard. When Beren has died, Lúthien goes to Mandos and sings for him. Because the song is so beautiful it moves Mandos and he allows one final meeting between Lúthien and Beren. Of course, these stories and the similar poem from the *Kalevala* are also very similar to the story of Orpheus, who plays his harp and everyone and everything comes to listen to his music. To look at the similarities and differences in these stories would be too lengthy a discussion for now, but it might be an interesting topic for later research.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have examined two stories from the *Silmarillion* and several similar poems from the *Kalevala*. What, in my opinion, is interesting in all of these stories, is the extensive use of singing, music and magic to achieve a goal instead of warfare and bloodshed, which we find very often in mythologies and fantasy literature. In that respect the *Kalevala* and these stories by Tolkien are

atypical for the genre. Even though these stories are different from what is usually expected, the stories themselves share many similarities when it comes to characters, for example Joukahainen and Melkor, Väinämöinen and Ilúvatar, or events, for example singing people to sleep, the various singing matches, and the beautiful music that moves not only people but also animals and gods. However, the most striking similarity between all these stories is the use of magic through singing specific songs or playing a certain melody.

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