

2020

## Peril and Possibility: Wilderness as a Space of Becoming in Tolkien's *The Children of Húrin* and Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity*

Philip J. Vogel  
philipjayvogel@gmail.com

Kenton L. Sena  
kenton.sena@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Vogel, Philip J. and Sena, Kenton L. (2020) "Peril and Possibility: Wilderness as a Space of Becoming in Tolkien's *The Children of Húrin* and Whedon's *Firefly* and *Serenity*," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol10/iss1/6>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Christopher Center Library at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Tolkien Research* by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at [scholar@valpo.edu](mailto:scholar@valpo.edu).

**PERIL AND POSSIBILITY: WILDERNESS AS A SPACE OF BECOMING IN TOLKIEN'S  
*THE CHILDREN OF HÚRIN* AND WHEDON'S *FIREFLY* AND *SERENITY***

**INTRODUCTION**

Wilderness has long preoccupied the Western mind, and for just as long, competing views on the nature of wilderness have vied for predominance. While they have ebbed and flowed through time, George Stankey proposes that these competing views have promoted an ambivalent attitude towards wilderness: “Throughout history, the conception of wilderness as the locus of evil has been countered, if not offset, by the conception of wilderness as sanctuary” (24). Both conceptions of wilderness have deep roots in Western culture. In the Bible, wilderness appears as a place of desolation, condemned by God, but also as a place of purification and refuge (Stankey 12). While God condemns Israel to wander in the desert for 40 years, He also prepares them for the Promised Land during this time. Although Satan tempts Jesus while he fasts in the wilderness for 40 days, angels surround him to bring him comfort. These conceptions also have roots in classical tradition. For Oedipus, the wilderness represents a place of condemnation—where his parents leave him to die and where he later flees as an adult to avoid his prophesied doom—and a place of deliverance—where the shepherds find him (Fimi 44-45).

Early European and Colonial American conceptions of the wilderness generally follow this trend. *Beowulf*, in which the monster Grendel is the *mearcstapa* (literally, “border-walker”), imagines wilderness as a place of peril (Flieger 95, Stankey 14). The apprehension of wilderness made its way into the New World through the Puritan colonists. When they landed, a veritable wilderness stretched before them: “Besids, what could they see but a hideous & desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts & willd men? And what multitudes ther might be of them they knew not” (Bradford). The famous Puritan minister Cotton Mather described wilderness as a habitation of “Dragons,” “Droves of Devils,” and “Fiery Flying Serpents” (Manning 25). As scientific knowledge of the world develops, later intellectual traditions, in particular Romanticism and Transcendentalism, hold wilderness in a higher regard, understanding nature as sublime (Stankey 15-16). For example, Henry David Thoreau believed nature is God’s purest creation; in order to draw near to God, one must draw near to nature.

The tension between wilderness as a place of peril and as a place of purity has persisted throughout the history of Western civilization, but the exploration of this tension has been nuanced. For example, the monster Grendel in *Beowulf* is a prototypical Wild Man, who shares a kinship with Enkidu from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and King Nebuchadnezzar from the Book of Daniel. In “Tolkien’s Wild Men” Verlyn Flieger describes the Wild Man: “A refugee from civilization, he is a

prowler lurking both actually and metaphorically on the borders of society. His home is the forest, the wilderness outside the boundaries set by civilization” (95). Flieger also notes that the archetype of the Wild Man encompasses a wide range of characters—everyone from werewolves to the noble outlaw Robin Hood (98-99). Through these wide-ranging expressions of the archetype, stories make various claims about the nature of wilderness, how man inhabits wilderness, and how wilderness shapes man. In *The Children of Húrin*, and *Firefly* and *Serenity*, J.R.R. Tolkien and Joss Whedon contribute to the nuances found in the literary traditions of wilderness by emphasizing wilderness a place of becoming, rich with possibility and fraught with peril.

### A GEOGRAPHY OF WILDERNESS

The geographies of *The Children of Húrin*, and of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, share similarities that allow each work to unfold in a setting characterized by being on the border. In Shepherd Book’s monologue, Whedon maps the ‘Verse:

After the Earth was used up, we found a new solar system and hundreds of new Earths were terraformed and colonized. The central planets formed the Alliance and decided all the planets had to join under their rule. There was some disagreement on that point. After the War, many of the Independents who had fought and lost drifted to the edges of the system, far from Alliance control. Out here, people struggled to get by with the most basic technologies; a ship would bring you work, a gun would help you keep it. A captain’s goal was simple: find a crew, find a job, keep flying. (“The Train Job” 1.2, “Bushwhacked” 1.3, “Our Mrs. Reynolds” 1.6)

The ‘Verse contains three distinct regions arranged in concentric rings. The central planets comprise civilization. The border planets, characterized by a mix of civilization and wilderness, lie beyond these. While the Alliance maintains a presence, the border planets provide enough anonymity for less-than-honest people to conduct business without the scrutiny of the Alliance. The rim planets occur in the outermost ring of the ‘Verse. Here, Reavers rule the skies, terrorizing the nearby border planets. With the exception of some stops on Alliance-controlled planets, most of *Firefly* and *Serenity* occurs either in space or in the outer rings of the ‘Verse.

*The Children of Húrin* shares a general geography characterized by civilization surrounded by a border region where monsters press in from beyond the frontier. The Elven kingdoms of Menegroth and Nargothrond represent civilization (Fimi 47). Beyond the woods of Doriath, “men had dwelt in scattered homesteads; they were of Haleth’s folk for the most part, but owned no lord, and they lived both by hunting and husbandry. [...] But most were now destroyed, or

had fled into Brethil, and all that region lay under the fear of Orcs, and of outlaws” (Tolkien 98). These scattered homesteads, built on the more primitive technologies of hunting and husbandry, stand in contrast to the “marvels of Menegroth” where Túrin learned “much lore, hearing eagerly the histories of ancient days and great deeds of old” and “woodcraft and archery and (which he liked more) the handling of swords” (Tolkien 76, 81). Dimitra Fimi describes this wilderness setting as “threatening, infested with orcs and other creatures of Morgoth and harbouring people that have been corrupted by darkness, like Eöl the Dark Elf, or bands of outlaws and criminals” (48). Both Whedon and Tolkien create geographies that set the stage for the drama of their stories to unfold on the border, resulting in an interesting examination of how protagonists outside of civilization face the opportunity to become monstrous or heroic.

### **LIVING ON THE BORDER**

Both *Serenity* Captain Malcolm “Mal” Reynolds and Túrin choose to live on the border rather than in civilization. While Mal makes the choice that leads him to the border before the events of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, flashbacks, as well as events and conversations that take place after he has made the choice, clarify his decision. Mal obviously disagrees with the Alliance, who he says wanted to “unite all the planets under one rule so that everybody can be interfered with or ignored equally” (“The Train Job” 1.2). When the Alliance mobilized to conquer the other planets, Mal joined the Browncoats, a group of resistance fighters who defend their independence. Even after losing the war, Mal chooses independence by purchasing a ship, finding a crew, and making a living by doing jobs of questionable legality. He prefers to pass his days in space and among the border planets rather than among the civilized planets under the rule of the Alliance. When Inara says to Simon “You’re lost in the woods. We all are. Even the captain. The only difference is, he likes it that way,” Mal interrupts, “No, the only difference is, the woods are the only place I can see a clear path” (“Serenity” 1.1). For Mal, the border represents the opportunity to maintain his own perspective.

Like Mal, Túrin exhibits pride and stubbornness in his choice to leave Doriath. Throughout his time in Thingol’s domain, Túrin chafes at the hesitance of the Elves to wage open war against Morgoth and spends most of his days in the North-marches fighting Orcs (Mitchell 92). Jesse Mitchell sees this as Túrin’s *raison d’être*: “The only clear objective that Túrin consistently maintains is his desire to affront Morgoth” (Mitchell 104). Túrin argues for extending the resistance beyond the borders of Doriath, but King Thingol refuses: “The part of my people in the war with Angband I rule according to my wisdom, Túrin son of Húrin. No force of the arms of Doriath will I send out at this time; nor at any time that I can yet foresee” (Tolkien 84). Mitchell suggests that “[Túrin] needs only a single

excuse [...] to abandon the Hidden Realm and set out on his own” (92). He finds his excuse when he accidentally kills Saeros, one of King Thingol’s counselors. Mablung implores him to return to Doriath and submit himself to the judgment of the King, but Túrin refuses: “If the King were just, he would judge me guiltless. But was not this one of his counsellors? Why should a just king choose a heart of malice for his friend? I abjure his law and his judgement” (Tolkien 91). When he bids Mablung “Farewell!” Mablung responds: “Fare free! For that is your wish” (Tolkien 91).

### NOBLE OUTLAWS

Ostensibly, Mal becomes an outlaw after the war: “We’re not thieves—well, we are thieves” (“The Train Job” 1.2). Throughout *Firefly*, the crew of *Serenity* encounters a host of ignominious outlaws, such as Adelai Niska, who tortures Mal and Wash in “War Stories” (1.10); Patience, who attempts to cheat Mal out of his earnings in “Serenity” (1.1); or the Grange brothers, the “disreputable men” in “Safe” (1.5) who wound Shepherd Book in a firefight with law enforcement. In contrast to these outlaws, Mal resembles the noble outlaw, an archetypal character most famously portrayed in Robin Hood. Badger comments about Mal: “Still a soldier. A man of honor in a den of thieves” (“Serenity” 1.1). In “Shindig” (1.4), Inara asks Mal in frustration, “You have no call trying to make me ashamed of my job. What I do is legal. And how’s that smuggling coming?” To which Mal replies, “My work’s illegal, but at least it’s honest.” Fred Erisman comments about this scene, “For Mal, a life of openly acknowledged shadiness is preferable to a socially acceptable one that requires hypocrisy and pretense” (254).

Throughout the course of *Firefly*, Mal frequently faces a choice between others and self, forced to sacrifice either his own comfort and safety or that of his crew and others. After robbing a train of Alliance cargo for the violent crime boss Adelai Niska, the crew of *Serenity* discover that the stolen cargo is a medicine that treats a degenerative disease afflicting the townspeople of Paradiso. When the Sheriff of Paradiso requests more medicine from the Alliance, they refuse. Shouldering the risk of breaking their deal with Niska, Mal returns the medicine to Paradiso (“The Train Job” 1.2). The *Serenity* crew’s worst fears about the broken deal come true when Niska kidnaps and brutally tortures Mal and Wash (“War Stories” 1.10). They are saved through a series of actions by the rest of the crew, exhibiting a principle that Mal expresses to Saffron: “I got people with me, people who trust each other, who do for each other and ain’t always looking for the advantage” (“Our Mrs. Reynolds” 1.6). Mal’s self-sacrificial choice to give up the job, forego the payoff, and incur the wrath of Niska reveals his internal moral character that sets him apart from other outlaws. Even in the absence of an external societal constraint, Mal chooses to place others before himself.

Mal also regularly puts himself and his crew in harm's way in order to help individual crew members. They narrowly rescue Simon and River from an angry mob preparing to burn River at the stake for being a witch. "Cut her down," Mal demands. The leader of the mob replies, "That girl is a witch." Mal responds, "Yeah, but she's our witch," and cocks his weapon, threatening: "So cut her the hell down" ("Safe" 1.5). In the same episode, Mal risks an interaction with the Alliance in order to get Shepherd Book the medical attention he needs for a gunshot wound ("Safe" 1.5). While Mal has chosen to live in space and among the border planets in order to be free, he consistently puts himself in situations in which he must relinquish his freedom for the good of others—even at the risk of self-endangerment. In "The Train Job" (1.2), Shepherd Book confronts Mal concerning the choice to harbor the Alliance fugitives Simon and River when Mal clearly wishes to avoid attention from the Alliance. Mal simply responds: "Only cause it's the right thing to do." Where the other outlaw that populate the 'Verse would likely choose their own freedom over the good of others, Mal "ain't always looking for the advantage." In this way, he exhibits the noble outlaw archetype.

When Túrin flees Doriath, he becomes an outlaw in the Wilderness (Flieger 102) Because of his involvement in Saeros' death, Túrin fears that King Thingol will treat him unfairly (Tolkien 91). While Túrin must own the guilt of unkindness, Saeros' death was an accident, and ultimately King Thingol pardons him: "Such fault as can be found in Túrin I now pardon, holding him wronged and provoked" (Tolkien 95). But Túrin refuses to trust himself to the wisdom of King Thingol and the constraints of the law, fleeing to the wilderness in a "self-imposed exile" (Croft, "Túrin and Aragorn" 157). Here he joins a band of outlaws, firmly entrenching himself in the Wild Man archetype.

Túrin's companions in the wilderness do not exhibit the characteristics of noble outlaws, and he struggles between identifying as an outlaw himself and rejecting their monstrous behavior (Fimi 50). The band of outlaws are "houseless and desperate men," called the "Gaurwaith" (meaning "wolf-men") by the people whose homesteads they raid. When Túrin first encounters them, he recognizes their actions as Orc-work: "I thought that only Orcs waylaid men" (Tolkien 99). Their Orc-work includes rape, which Túrin disrupts during his first spring with the band of outlaws. After mistakenly killing the outlaw leader who was chasing a young woman through the forest, Túrin asks Andróg, "Where are the Orcs, then? Have you outrun them to help her?" (Tolkien 103-104). A year after Túrin flees Doriath, Beleg finally catches up with the band of outlaws while Túrin is away in the field. In Túrin's absence, Andróg convinces the outlaws to bind Beleg to a tree without food or water for two days and nights, all the while arguing that they should kill the Elf (Tolkien 112-114). The outlaws operate as a completely unchecked and amoral band, a chaotic force indiscriminately preying on the good and the evil. They concern themselves with meeting their own needs, fulfilling their own passions,

and exerting power over others. These monstrous characteristics typify Morgoth and his servants, in particular Brodda and the Easterlings who invaded Dor-lómin. As Andróg says, “Outlaws have no law but their needs” (Tolkien 104).

When Beleg implores Túrin to return with him to Doriath, Túrin chooses in pride to remain in exile. He continues in the company of the outlaws instead of returning with Beleg to the North-marches, saying: “They are of my own kind, and there is some good in each that might grow” (Tolkien 116). Beleg’s counsel belies his distrust of the outlaws and his fear that they will not grow into goodness as Túrin hopes: “If you try to wean them from evil, they will fail you” (Tolkien 116). As Beleg predicts, the outlaws continue in cruelty. When they encounter Mîm the Petty-Dwarf and his sons, Andróg shoots two arrows at them, and the other outlaws wrestle Mîm to the ground. Andróg once again offers Orc-like counsel: “It is an Orc, or of Orc-kind. Kill it!” But Mîm, when Túrin allows him to speak, suggests that of the two of them, Andróg is more Orc-like: “Do not let them slay me, master, for no cause, as Orcs would” (Tolkien 130-131). Later, when they arrive at Mîm’s cave, the Petty-Dwarf discovers that one of Andróg’s arrows had struck one of his sons, killing him. The outlaws, especially Andróg, consistently engage in Orc-work. They attack first, show no kindness to strangers, and pursue their own fulfillment.

Still, like Mal, Túrin is a noble outlaw. In the absence of the outward restraints of society, he works to reshape his life and community according to the good he knows. He denounces the outlaws’ violence and rape. He shows kindness to Beleg and encourages him to stay and fight alongside the outlaws. He also shows kindness to Mîm, working to heal the wounds inflicted by his companions. Ultimately, he brings order and moral structure to the band of outlaws, marshalling them to oppose Morgoth and forbidding them to continue oppressing Men and Elves (Tolkien 114).

### **A WILDERNESS OF BECOMING**

The wilderness presents Mal and Túrin with the choice to become more human or more monstrous. For Mal, this is most clearly seen in his arc in *Serenity*. At the beginning of the film, Mal and the crew of *Serenity* pull off a bank heist on a border planet. However, Reavers ambush them, and they narrowly escape. Mal and the crew send the townspeople to safety inside the bank vault, but one man tries to escape with them on their shuttle. Mal shoves him off the shuttle, and the Reavers grab him. In mercy, Mal shoots the villager, and the Reavers drop him. This is a moment of moral ambiguity for Mal. On one hand, the shuttle would not be able to escape the Reavers with any added weight. On the other hand, dropping the payload would have made room for the villager. Rather than drop the payload to accommodate the man, Mal makes the selfish choice and pushes him off.

While Zoe recognizes Mal's choice to shoot the villager as "a piece a' mercy," she also points out that "in the time of war, we woulda never left a man stranded." Mal is visibly bothered by the events and the conversation. While the choice to leave the villager behind does not put Mal at the level of depravity of the Reavers (about whom Zoe warns, "If they take the ship they will rape us to death, eat our flesh, and sew our skins into their clothing, and if we're very, very lucky, they'll do it in that order" ["Serenity" 1.1]), it does leave Mal teetering on the edge of a downward moral slope. Mal's choice to value the payload over a man's life bears a striking resemblance to the ambush Patience orchestrates for Mal in the episode "Serenity" (1.1). She would prefer to keep her money at the cost of Mal's life.

Although the depravity of the Reavers seems colossal, the behavior of Adelai Niska comes astonishingly close. When the crew of *Serenity* encounters Niska in "The Train Job" (1.2), he threatens them by showing them a hanging corpse, apparently tortured to death: "Now for you, my reputation is not from gossip. You see this man. Eh, he does not do the job. I show what I do him, and now my reputation for you is fact, is solid." Soon after, he explains that the corpse is his wife's nephew. In a later episode, Niska captures Mal and Wash, subjecting them to torture. It begins with electrical shocking, but progresses to mutilation. Over the course of the torture, Mal's ear is cut off, his heart is stopped by a machine inserted into his chest, and his heart is restarted in order for the torture to continue with pliers ("War Stories" 1.10). A thin slice of order separates Niska's depravity from that of the Reavers. Although the Reavers turn out to be artifacts of a failed Alliance experiment, the mythology surrounding them gives a powerful commentary on outlaw like Niska. Mal explains to Shepherd Book: "Reavers ain't men. Or they forgot how to be. Now they're just nothing. They got out to the edge of the galaxy, to that place of nothing, and that's what they became" ("Bushwhacked" 1.3). Reavers might not be men who traveled to the edge of civilization and became monstrous, driven by the vast nothingness into which they stared, but this mythology closely describes Niska's path as well as the threat that everyone who chooses to live in the wilderness faces.

Unlike Niska, or even Patience, Mal responds to his moment of moral crisis in a way that regains his humanity. He stares into the nothingness that comes from freedom from societal strictures and finds within himself the character to resist making monstrous choices. As the film progresses, Mal consistently chooses to make personal sacrifices to help River and Simon discover the secret hidden in River's mind. Ultimately this pursuit costs the lives of Shepherd Book and his community, as well as Wash, leaving the *Serenity* wrecked and her crew battered. However, the increasingly selfless choices made by Mal and the crew reveal the truth to the 'Verse, a major blow to the control of the Alliance. Over the course of *Serenity*, Mal, who finds himself in a moral crisis at the beginning of the film,

reclaims the fundamental character that Badger identifies in him—“Still a soldier. A man of honor in a den of thieves” (“Serenity” 1.1).

While his arc is not quite as dramatic, at least in part because *The Children of Húrin* is a tragedy, Túrin also consistently makes choices to become more human, rather than more Orc-like. Túrin, who prefers war in the North-marches over the comforts of Menegroth, is a Wild Man long before he leaves Doriath. In his infrequent appearances in civilized spaces, he becomes increasingly uncivilized: “[...] he cared no longer for his looks or his attire, but his hair was unkempt, and his mail covered with a grey cloak stained with the weather” (Tolkien 86). His appearance sparks contempt from Saeros, and Túrin snaps, injuring Saeros with a goblet (Tolkien, 86-88). The affront to his honor incenses Saeros, who vows to kill Túrin (whom he calls a “woodwose”—literally a Wild Man) should he draw his sword on him outside of King Thingol’s halls (Tolkien 88, Flieger 102). Mablung’s warning portends the harm that would be done: “Take heed, Saeros, lest you do the will of Morgoth in your pride” (Tolkien 88).

The next day, Saeros ambushes Túrin on his way back to the North-marches. Túrin quickly overpowers him, but proceeds to make monstrous choices, stripping Saeros naked and chasing him through the woods (Tolkien 89). Mablung cries out to Túrin to stop the madness: “This is Orc-work in the woods!” Túrin replies, “Orc-work there was; this is only orc-play.” He chases Saeros to the edge of a high ravine where Saeros falls to his death in an attempt to leap to the other side (Tolkien 90).

This spectacle seems shockingly out of place in the kingdom of Doriath. Although Saeros instigates the incident by ambushing Túrin, Orc-work in and of itself, Túrin responds with cruelty and without mercy, which King Thingol explains as evidence of “heart hard and proud” (Tolkien 93). Túrin’s response resembles the play of Orcs, who terrorize and humiliate their enemies, and the character of Morgoth, who imprisons a leader of men, cursing his family and forcing him to look on as their lives lead to ruin. Túrin’s participation in this behavior evidences an alignment with the monstrous rather than the human, which Mablung identifies: “A shadow is over you. When we meet again, may it be no darker” (Tolkien 91).

When Túrin encounters the outlaws, he introduces himself as Neithan, “The Wronged,” rather than by his true name, rejecting his heritage and identity, taking on the persona of a victim, and dismissing his responsibility in the Saeros’ death (Croft, “Túrin and Aragorn” 157, Broadwell 39, Flieger 102). Túrin kills one outlaw, whose place he takes in the band, and quickly earns their trust and respect due to his skill. Initially, Túrin falls into the cruelty of the outlaws. This period represents his nadir. Túrin, son of Húrin, Lord of Dor-lómin, foster-son of Thingol of Doriath, sworn enemy of Morgoth, raiding the scattered homes of men alongside outlaws.

After interrupting Forweg and Andróg's rape attempt, Túrin publicly denounces their actions, demanding that the outlaws either make him their leader and accept his direction or let him leave: "I will govern this fellowship now, or leave it" (Tolkien 106). When he steps into leadership, he begins to regain his own character. Immediately, he leads them further into the wilderness, away from the scattered homes of men. However, when Túrin returns to the outlaws' cave and finds Beleg bound to a tree, he realizes to an even greater degree the "fruitlessness" of their deeds: "Never until now have we tormented a prisoner; but to this Orc-work such a life as we lead has brought us" (Tolkien 113-114). He reckons with the reality that he in the past he failed to forbid the outlaws from killing those who wandered near their camp, even encouraging it by murmuring against the people of Doriath. He participated in Orc-work and lived among a people who practiced Orc-work.

With this realization, Túrin repents of his lawlessness, refusing to raid the free peoples anymore: "At least my hands shall not again be raised against Elves or Men. [...] Angband has servants enough. If others will not take this vow with me, I will walk alone" (Tolkien 114). When they encounter Mîm, Túrin tries to prevent his men from harming the Petty-Dwarf and his family, but he is too late to prevent Andróg from killing Mîm's son. Túrin offers his skill at healing—"I have some healing arts. May I help you?"—but by then Mîm's son has already passed (Tolkien 131). The turn of events puts Túrin through anguish: "pity long hardened welled in Túrin's heart as water from rock" (Tolkien 132). He places himself in Mîm's debt, and his earnestness and genuineness allay Mîm's anger and desire for vengeance. The Petty-Dwarf only demands that Andróg break his bow and arrows and lay them at his son's feet to never wield again (Tolkien 132). During the time with Mîm in Bar-en-Danwedh, Túrin shows him kindness and treats him with respect, receiving kindness and respect in return. When Beleg brings Túrin the Dragon Helm, the heirloom of his father's house, Túrin reaches the zenith of this part of his story and takes on the name "Gorthol, the Dread Helm," reclaiming his identity as a mighty leader of men and fierce enemy of Morgoth (Tolkien 146).

Túrin's time with the band of outlaws in the wilderness only comprises a part of his tragic arc. After Morgoth's servants discover the secret passages of Bar-en-Danwedh, and the outlaws are routed, Túrin goes on to inadvertently bring about the sack of Nargothrond, the death of Beleg, and the partial destruction of Brethil. The time in the wilderness, however, presents Túrin with the opportunities to reject the Orc-like ways of his past, reclaim his humanity, and bring order to a lawless community. Although his exile in the wilderness begins with Orc-play, through the humiliation and death of Saeros, and continues in Orc-work with the band of outlaws, he consistently makes choices that shape his own character and the characters of those around him to become more human and less monstrous. He delivers the daughter of Larnach from violation, denounces pillage and rape, and

leads the band of outlaws away from the homesteads they terrorized. He rescues Beleg from the cruelty of Andróg, recognizing and rejecting the outlaws' long-standing pattern of cruelty toward Men and Elves. He also extends friendship and kindness towards Mím, a stranger among them. Finally, he reclaims his own identity, renaming himself the Dread Helm, acknowledging his heritage, and marshalling men to resist the forces of Morgoth in Don-Cúarthol, the region surrounding their secret lair in Amon Rûdh (Broadwell 39).

### PERIL AND POSSIBILITY

In 1949, Joseph Campbell published *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, in which he describes the classical monomyth—a series of events that archetypal heroes experience. Campbell summarizes the monomyth in his introduction: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 30). Decades after Campbell put forth the classical monomyth, Jewett and Lawrence suggested a uniquely American version, which makes distinctions between the events Campbell identifies and those typically found in popular American stories. They describe the American monomyth in this way: “A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity” (Jewett and Lawrence 6). Given Tolkien’s reliance on and inspiration from European mythology, one can rightly expect to find elements of Campbell’s monomyth in Tolkien’s works. Similarly, as Whedon clearly draws from the American mythology of the Wild West in *Firefly* and *Serenity*, one might expect to find elements of the American monomyth in those works. While similarities exist in both cases, the unique aspects of the works provide a fruitful discussion.

Both Mal and Túrin align with the noble outlaw archetype. At first glance, this appears similar to the outsider status of the hero in the American monomyth, but neither character is truly an outsider. Janet Brennan Croft notes that in the American monomyth the hero is already separate from his community at the outset of the journey “either because he originates from outside or is an idealistic loner within but not of the community” (“Jackson’s Aragorn” 217). His eventual victory does not imply acceptance by or return to the community. This is in contrast to Campbell’s classical monomyth, in which the hero is thrust into the adventure from within a community and returns victorious to his community with a boon. While Mal is an outsider to the Alliance and the town of the border planets, he is a member of the crew of the *Serenity* (an “outsider” community), distinguishing him from the

outsider of the American monomyth. Túrin similarly stands in the space between the two monomyths. Like the hero of the classical monomyth, he comes from within the community of Dor-lómin and returns to his community after many adventures when he settles among the men of Brethil. On the other hand, while at Menegroth he considers himself an outsider, like the hero from the American monomyth. Later, Túrin relinquishes this by becoming a member of the band of outlaws. The classic loner of the American monomyth, Croft notes, “typically rejects democratic discussion and decision-making and favors instead independent action without accountability” (“Jackson’s Aragorn” 221). As noble outlaws within outlaw communities, Mal and Túrin do not have the luxury of shirking democratic discussion and decision-making for action with accountability. Instead, they find themselves members—and leaders—of novel outsider communities, influencing them to resist the evil that threatens their world.

A second notable difference between the *Children of Húrin* and *Firefly* and *Serenity* and the classical and American monomyths is the space in which the hero’s journey unfolds. In the classical monomyth, the hero typically leaves a quotidian world to enter a region of supernatural wonder. In the American monomyth, the hero comes into a paradisaical community to deliver it from some threat. In contrast, Mal and Túrin’s journeys unfold in a wilderness fraught with peril and pregnant with possibility rather than a world of supernatural wonder or a paradisaical community. Here they face a deep peril: their own vice. To the extent that they choose to cultivate the human in themselves rather than the monster in themselves, they find the rich possibility of the wilderness—opportunities to become more fully human and to create better communities than the ones they left. For Mal this is a community that embraces the maxim “do for each other and don’t always look for the advantage,” and for Túrin this is a community that resists Morgoth and protects all the free peoples. The wilderness, with its perils and possibilities, serves as the catalyst for creating a new community uniquely situated to deliver a world from the evil that threatens it. By choosing this setting for their stories, Tolkien and Whedon do not simply break convention by deviating from the events predicted by the classical and American monomyths; they also clarify the ambivalence attached to the Western conception of the wilderness. The wilderness is not either a place of danger and evil or a place of purity and goodness. It is both—a place of rich possibility fraught with perils.

## WORKS CITED

- Bradford, William. *Bradford's History of "Plimoth Plantation."* Project Gutenberg, 2008, [www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24950](http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24950).
- Broadwell, Elizabeth. "Essë and Narn: Name, Identity, and Narrative in the Tale of Túrin Turambar." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1990, pp. 34–44.
- "Bushwhacked." Tim Minear, director. *Firefly*, season 1, episode 3, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.
- Croft, Janet Brennan. "Jackson's Aragorn and the American Superhero Monomyth." *Picturing Tolkien: Essays on Peter Jackson's the Lord of the Rings Film Trilogy*, edited by Janice M. Bogstad and Philip E. Kaveny, McFarland & Co., 2011, pp. 216-226.
- . "Túrin and Aragorn: Evading and Embracing Fate." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2011, pp. 156–70.
- Erisman, Fred. "Stagecoach in Space: The Legacy of Firefly." *Extrapolation*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2006, pp. 249–58.
- Fimi, Dimitra. "'Wildman of the Woods': Inscribing Tragedy on the Landscape of Middle-Earth in The Children of Húrin." *Tolkien: The Forest and the City*, edited by H. Conrad-O'Briain and G. Hynes, Four Courts Press, 2013, pp. 43–56.
- Flieger, Verlyn. "Tolkien's Wild Men: From Medieval to Modern." *Tolkien the Medievalist*, edited by Jane Chance, Routledge, 2003, pp. 95–105.
- Lawrence, John Shelton, and Robert Jewett. *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002.
- Manning, Robert E. "The Nature of America: Visions and Revisions of Wilderness." *Natural Resources Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, Winter 1989, p. 25-40.
- Mitchell, Jesse. "Master of Doom by Doom Mastered: Heroism, Fate, and Death in The Children of Húrin." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2010, pp. 87–114.
- "Our Mrs. Reynolds." Vondie Curtis Hall, director. *Firefly*, season 1, episode 6, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.
- "Safe." Michael Grossman, director. *Firefly*, season 1, episode 5, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.

- “Serenity.” Whedon, Joss, director. *Serenity*, season 1, episode 1, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.
- Serenity*. Joss Whedon, director. Universal Pictures, 2008.
- “Shindig.” Vern Gillum, director. *Firefly*, season 1, episode 4, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.
- Stankey, George H. “Beyond the Campfire’s Light: Historical Roots of the Wilderness Concept.” *Natural Resources Journal*, vol. 29, no. 1, Winter 1989, p. 9-24.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Children of Húrin*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.
- “The Train Job.” Joss Whedon, director. *Firefly*, season 1, episode 2, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.
- “War Stories.” James Contner, director. *Firefly*, season 1, episode 10, Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.