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Tolkien's Orphaned Heroes: Kullervo, Húrin and the Limits of Fostering

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Andrew Higgins of the Centre for Fantasy & the Fantastic, School of Critical Studies, University of Glasgow for organizing the Tolkien sessions at Leeds, and Kristine Larsen for sharing her work on fostering in the legendarium with me.

Tolkien spent much of his youth as an orphan, having lost both parents by the age of twelve, and this early trauma left an indelible mark on his life and work. One of the most moving artefacts in the exhibition *Tolkien, Maker of Middle-earth*, which was on view in 2018 at the Bodleian Library in Oxford, was the letter dated 1 December 1895 that the four-year-old Tolkien dictated to his father, who had remained in Bloemfontain, in the Orange Free State (now the province Free State in the Republic of South Africa) while Tolkien, his mother Mabel, and his baby brother Hilary were visiting family in England. “I am so glad I am coming back to see/ you it has been such a long time since we came away from you/ I hope the ship will bring us all safe back...”¹ The letter was never sent, because a telegram arrived the very same day informing Mabel that Arthur Tolkien had died of rheumatic fever. Another artefact on display in the exhibition was a drawing in pencil and black ink by a twelve-year-old Tolkien depicting Tolkien and his uncle Neave sitting by the hearth mending clothes, with the caption “What is Home without a Mother {or a Wife}.”² Tolkien sent this to his mother while she was in the hospital several years later, sick with diabetes, of which she died shortly thereafter, leaving the Tolkien children orphaned of both mother and father. This dramatically altered Tolkien’s and his younger brother Hilary’s physical and emotional circumstances. In a letter to his son Michael from 24 January 1972, written barely two months after his wife Edith’s death on 29 November 1971, Tolkien recalled his grief upon losing his mother: he remembered “... waving a hand at the sky saying ‘it is so empty and cold.’”³ In another letter after Edith’s death written to his son Christopher on 11 July 1972, Tolkien stated that he and Edith, who was also an orphan, had “rescued one another,” from “the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods...” and yet, Tolkien continued, “we could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling.”⁴ In his biography of Tolkien, Humphrey Carpenter describes Tolkien as “in a sense a homeless child.”⁵ Most of Mabel Tolkien’s family cut her off after her conversion to Catholicism, and she had to move several times to find affordable housing near appropriate schools for her sons. After their mother’s death, Hilary and Ronald moved again, first to the home of their aunt Beatrice Suffield, whom Carpenter describes as “deficient in affection” and insensitive to her nephews’ emotional state: she burned all of

¹ Catherine McIlwaine, *Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2018)122-23.

² McIlwaine, 132-33.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Revised and expanded edition, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023) 584

⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Letters*, 590.

⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000)19.

Tolkien's mother's letters and other papers, for example, without considering that such documents might be an important keepsake for the boys.⁶

Happily, Mabel Tolkien had appointed Father Francis Morgan guardian of her sons, and he proved to be more than a legal guardian; he cared for the boys as if they were his own children. In a letter to Michael from 1941, Tolkien wrote that Father Francis "had been a father to me, more than most real fathers, but without obligation..."⁷ In other letters to Michael, he recalled "the sudden miraculous experience of Fr Francis' love and care and humour..." and stated that he "first learned charity and forgiveness" from his guardian.⁸ These reminiscences were written many years after Fr Morgan's death in 1934, a testimony to the lasting effect that the priest's excellent fostering had on Tolkien's life; it also heavily influenced his creative work.

Tolkien's legendarium is replete with characters who have lost one or both parents through death or abandonment, and who are consequently fostered or adopted. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Éowyn are raised by close kin. Éowyn, orphaned of both parents, is raised by her uncle King Théoden, whom she loves as a father. After the death by drowning of Frodo's parents Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck, Bilbo Baggins legally adopts Frodo, whom the Gaffer describes as his "first *and* second cousin, once removed either way."⁹ After Aragorn's father Arathorn II is slain by orcs, his mother Gilraen seeks refuge in Rivendell, and the Elf Elrond becomes a foster father to the two-year-old Aragorn, who only learns of his true parentage at the age of twenty. Some characters are fostered while their parents are still living: in the various versions of the story of Tolkien's tragic hero Túrin, Túrin's father Húrin is briefly fostered by an uncle during his youth: "It is said that for a while the sons of Galdor [Húrin and Huor] dwelt in Berthil as foster-sons of Haldir their uncle, after the custom of Northern men in those days."¹⁰ There are also characters in Tolkien's legendarium who are fostered by individuals with whom they do not share any close biological kinship. Tuor, son of Huor and cousin of Túrin, is fostered by Elves at the request of his mother Rían: "And I beg of you to foster him, and to keep him hidden in your care, for I forbode that great good, for Elves and Men, shall come from

⁶ Carpenter, 33.

⁷ *Letters*, 73

⁸ *Letters*, 584; 495.

⁹ In "A Long-Expected Party," Sam's father, the Gaffer, makes this comment to a group of hobbits, who "have a passion for family history," to explain why it was natural for Bilbo to adopt Frodo: "'You see: Mr. Drogo, he married poor Miss Primula Brandybuck. She was our Mr. Bilbo's first cousin on the mother's side....and Mr. Drogo was his second cousin.'" J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: 50th Anniversary One-volume Edition* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004 [1994]) 23.

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) 35.

him.”¹¹ In her articles “Medieval Fostering in the First and Third Ages of Middle-earth: Elrond as Fóstri and Fóstr-Son,”¹² Kristine Larsen analyzes in great detail the fostering of Elwing and Eärendel’s twin sons Elrond and Elros by their parents’ enemies, Fëanor’s sons Maglor and Maedhros. Larsen’s article “Half-Elven and Half-Orphans: The Choices and Consequences of ‘Crossing Over,’” argues that “This relationship foreshadows Elrond’s fostering of Aragorn in the Third Age, and mirrors Ronald and Hilary’s relationship with Father Morgan.”¹³ However, as nurturing as Fr. Morgan was towards his young charges, he could not entirely heal the psychological and emotional wounds left by the loss of both of their parents. Tolkien worked through this trauma through the depiction of foster fathers and foster sons in some of his earliest tales, in particular through the characters of Kullervo and Túrin .

Tolkien’s mother died in 1904. Seven years later, while attending King Edward’s School in Birmingham, Tolkien had his first encounter with W.F. Kirby’s 1907 translation of the Finnish epic *Kalevala*, which had been passed down as oral history and then compiled by Elias Lönnrot in 1835. The epic begins with a creation myth and continues to the story of Kullervo. Wishing to read the work in its original language, Tolkien borrowed a Finnish Grammar from the Exeter College library. In 1955, Tolkien wrote to W.H. Auden that by 1912 he had begun his project to “reorganize some of the *Kalevala*, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, into a form of my own.”¹⁴ In 1914 and 1915 respectively, Tolkien read an essay he had written on the *Kalevala* to the Exeter College essay club. In his correspondence, Tolkien recalls being drawn to the *Kalevala* primarily for mythopoetic and linguistic reasons. To Auden he explained how his

¹¹ “Of Tuor and his coming to Gondolin” in *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980) 17. The fostering of Tuor by Elves is also recounted in “The Qenta Noldorinwa,” Part III: The Quenta in *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) 146, n.3: “Now Húrin of Hithlum had a brother Huor, and as has been told Rían his wife went forth into the wild and there her son Tuor was born, and he was fostered by the Dark-elves; but Rían laid herself down and died upon the Hill of Slain,” and “Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin,” in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977) 238: “It has been told that Huor the brother of Húrin was slain in the Battle of Unnumbered Tears; and in the winter of that year Rían his wife bore a child in the wilds of Mithrim, and he was named Tuor, and was taken to foster by Annael of the Grey-elves, who yet lived in those hills.”

¹² Kristine Larsen, “Medieval Fostering in the First and Third Ages of Middle-earth: Elrond as Fóstri and Fóstr-son,” *Amon Hen: Bulletin of the Tolkien Society* #264:11-14; Part Two #265:11-13, 2017.

¹³ Kristine Larsen, “Half-Elven and Half-Orphans: The Choices and Consequences of ‘Crossing Over’,” *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 15: Iss.1, Article 6. (2022)
Available at <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol15/iss1/6>

¹⁴ *Letters*, 313. See also <https://www.tolkienestate.com/letters/letter-to-the-poet-w-h-auden-7-jun-1955/>

series of languages “became heavily Finnicized in phonetic pattern and structure,” and in a letter to Christopher Bretherton he wrote that “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*.”¹⁵ In her essay “Tolkien, *Kalevala*, and ‘The Story of Kullervo,’” in her critical edition of *The Story of Kullervo*, Verlyn Flieger perceived yet another reason Tolkien was drawn to the *Kalevala* “...it seems possible that the story of Kullervo also resonated deeply with the circumstances of his very early life. Kullervo’s description of himself as ‘fatherless beneath the heavens’ and ‘from the first without a mother’¹⁶ cannot be overlooked.” Flieger further notes that Tolkien transferred two canceled lines of verse directly from the Kirby *Kalevala* to his own story: “I was small and lost my ~~mother~~ father; I was young (weak) and lost my mother.” (Tolkien MS B 64/6, fol. II verso) Flieger continues: “Like Kullervo, Tolkien had lost first his father, and then his mother. When he was small (a child of four) his father dies; when he was young (a boy of twelve but surely feeling ‘weak’ at the loss, his mother died suddenly and unexpectedly, from untreated diabetes.”¹⁷ The Finnish tale of fratricide, incest and suicide clearly did not correspond to Tolkien’s experience, and yet according to Flieger, “There was undeniably something in Kullervo’s story which touched him deeply and made him want to “reorganize [it] into a form of his own.””¹⁸ In *Tolkien, Self and Other* Jane Chance notes that Tolkien shared with the character Kullervo the state of being orphaned, which had a lasting impact on the writer’s future: “An orphan, like Frodo and Kullervo, Tolkien can also be described as if ‘in exile’—not just at the age of three or four, but for much of his entire life and career.”¹⁹ They also shared the experience of having been fostered, albeit under very different circumstances.

It may be useful at this point to recall the bare elements of the tale of the Finnish Kullervo from the *Kalevala* that relate to the circumstances of his being orphaned and fostered, which ultimately leads him to commit incest with his sister. Kullervo’s uncle Untamo kills his father Kalevo and abducts his mother, who is pregnant with Kullervo. Kullervo later learns of his father’s murder and vows to avenge it. He is unloved and mistreated by his uncle, who after making three unsuccessful attempts to kill him, sells him to a smith, thus separating him

¹⁵ *Letters*, 485. See also <https://www.tolkienestate.com/letters/letter-to-christopher-bretherton-a-reader-16-july-1964/>

¹⁶ Elias Lonnrot, *Kalevala*, 2 vols. Translated by W.F. Kirby (London: Dent, Everyman’s Library, 1907) vol. 2, p. 101, ll. 59-60, cited in Verlyn Flieger, “Tolkien, *Kalevala*, and ‘The Story of Kullervo,’” in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Story of Kullervo*, edited by Verlyn Flieger (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016) 143.

¹⁷ Flieger, 143.

¹⁸ Flieger, 145

¹⁹ Jane Chance, *Tolkien, Self and Other: “This Queer Creature”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 39.

from his mother.²⁰ Kullervo is not treated any better by the smith and his wife, who bakes a stone into a loaf of bread that she gives Kullervo. When Kullervo tries to cut the loaf, he breaks the only heirloom he has from his father, a knife. Kullervo avenges himself on the smith's wife by changing bears and wolves into cattle, which devour her when she tries to milk them. As Kullervo flees into the forest, the smith's wife curses him. Later, while driving his sleigh, Kullervo approaches several young maidens, each of whom he invites to join him, but only the third is drawn to him and succumbs to Kullervo's advances. When the two reveal their parentage to each other, they discover that they are brother and sister. Realizing that they have committed incest, the sister commits suicide. Flieger points out that Lonnröt compiled his retelling of the story drawing upon different *runos* from different regions of Finland, and chose not to dwell on this disturbing episode: "The scene is potentially tragic, but handled so quickly and tersely that it's over almost before you know it."²¹ After his sister's suicide, Kullervo, enraged even more against his uncle Untamo, seeks him out and kills him, then asks his own knife to kill himself.

Tolkien's version keeps the magical elements of the original tale in the Finnish epic, but he gives Kullervo a twin sister, with the name Wanōna, meaning "weeping"; in the *Kalevala* the sister is nameless. As in the Finnish tale, Tolkien's Kullervo, whose father has been murdered by his uncle and who has been separated from his family for many years, encounters his sister during his wanderings and is attracted to her. Under a spell from the dragon Glaurung that has erased her memory, Wanōna also fails to recognize her sibling. Like Kullervo's sister in the *Kalevala*, Wanōna ends her life by throwing herself over a waterfall once she learns of her relationship with Kullervo. Tolkien's account of her suicide adds pathos to the scene through contrasting the natural beauty of the setting — "the green dewy grass" the "silver column" of the waterfall—with the horror of Wanōna's self-destructive act as she runs "like a shivering ray of light" only to fall "to the ugly depths" of the chasm beneath the waterfall. The rising of the sun, the singing of the birds and the bright green grass only exacerbate Kullervo's anger:

"And before he could leap up and grasp her she sped across the glade...like a shivering ray of light in the dawn light scarce seeming to touch the green dewy grass till she came to the triple fall and cast her over it down its silver column to the ugly depths even as Kullervo came up with her and her last wail he heard and stood heavy on the brink as a

²⁰ Flieger notes that other mythic heroes such as Sigurd and Chū Chulainn are fostered by a smith (Flieger, 55-56)

²¹ Flieger, 154.

lump of rock until the sun rose and therat the grass grew green, birds sang and the flowers opened and midday passed and all things seemed happy: and Kullervo cursed them, for he loved her.”²²

The theme of incest resulting from ignorance of one’s biological identity occurs in other ancient myths and legends that end tragically, in particular, the Oedipus myth, but also in later versions of the Arthurian legend. Arthur, it must be recalled, begets his son Mordred through intercourse with Morgause, whom he does not realize is his half-sister. Mordred brings about the end of Arthur’s reign, leading a rebellion against him and killing him in battle.²³ The best-known version of the Oedipus myth is Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* (c. 430 BC) although the origins of the myth go back to the time of Homer.²⁴ In Sophocles’ play, after an oracle prophesizes that the infant Oedipus will grow up to kill his father, King Laius of Thebes, and sleep with his mother, Queen Jocasta, the king orders a shepherd to expose the child on a mountainside. A shepherd takes pity on the infant and gives him to a visitor from Corinth, who then takes him to King Polybus of Corinth, who adopts the infant and raises him as his son. In the realm of myth oracles are rarely wrong; in spite of his best efforts, Oedipus cannot escape his fate, and in ignorance of his origins, kills his father Laius and sleeps with his mother, who hangs herself upon learning that she committed incest with her own son. Oedipus then blinds himself and goes into exile.

In Tolkien’s *The Story of Kullervo*, it is not a prophecy, but rather a curse uttered by the smith’s wife when she realizes what Kullervo has done that foretells the tragic outcome of the story:

“Woe thou Sāri Kampa’s offspring
Woe thou crooked fated child Nyelid
Ill thy fortune dark thy faring

²² J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Story of Kullervo*, edited by Verlyn Flieger (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016) 38-39.

²³ In “Malory’s Morgause,” Dorsey Armstrong notes “...it is not until the thirteenth century and the composition of the earliest sections of the French Vulgate that the story of Mordred includes his incestuous conception.” *On Arthurian Women, Essays in memory of Maureen Fries*, edited by Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas: Scriptorium Press, 2001) 151. Raymond H. Thompson cites specifically the Vulgate *Mort Artu* and the *Suite du Merlin* as the earliest texts containing the incest theme. “Mordred” in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, edited by Norris J. Lacy (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1996) 328.

²⁴ Classical scholars have traced the earliest appearance of Oedipus in classical literature to *The Odyssey*, in a scene in which Odysseus encounters Oedipus’ mother while visiting the underworld, Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 5th edition, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007) 476-478.

On the roadway of thy lifetime.
 Thou hast trod the ways of thralldom
 And the trackless waste of exile
 But thy end shall be more awful
 And a tale to men forever
 Of a fate of woe [and] horror...”²⁵

Earlier in the text, however, Tolkien suggests that poor fostering and ill treatment by their murderous uncle play a significant role in determining Kullervo’s and Wanōna’s fate. “But for lack of their mother’s care the children were reared in crooked fashion, for ill cradle rocking meted to infants by fosterers in thralldom: and bitterness do they suck from breasts of those that bore them not.”²⁶ As Kristine Larsen notes, “In *The Story of Kullervo*, he clearly lays much of the titular character’s personality flaws at the feet of his foster father, his father’s murderer (and father’s brother) Untamo.”²⁷ After his three attempts to kill Kullervo fail, “Untamoinen sends his nephew “to become a slave and to labour for him without pay and but scant fostering.”²⁸ Seeing that the boy performs the tasks assigned to him poorly, Untamo then separates Kullervo from his sister Wanōna by selling him to a smith, whose fostering is no better; the smith’s wife is particularly harsh in her treatment of Kullervo: “Treacherous and hard and little love did she bestow on the uncouth thrall, and little did Sāri [Kullervo] bid for her love or kindness.”²⁹ Such lack of nurturing and abuse was bound to have long-lasting negative repercussions, according to Verlyn Flieger: “Tolkien’s Kullervo is clearly marked and motivated by early trauma.”³⁰

It is not surprising that the trauma of being separated from their biological families by violent means and subsequently abused by fosterers would lead to tragic outcomes for both the Kullervo of the *Kalevala* and of Tolkien’s retelling. A further element of complexity lies in the sexual attraction of Kullervo to his biological sister. The late Dr. Betty Jean Lifton, author of several books on adoption and adoptees’ searches for their birth families, observed that biological siblings who had been separated through adoption often felt a strong physical attraction to each other once they finally met: “But siblings of either sex often seem drawn to each other physically, like magnets. Once sees them holding hands, embracing each other frequently. Usually there is an innocence about it—

²⁵ *The Story of Kullervo*, 31.

²⁶ *The Story of Kullervo*, 8.

²⁷ Kristine Larsen, “Medieval Fostering in the First and Third Ages of Middle-earth: Elrond as Fóstri and Fóstr-son, Part II,” *Amon Hen* #265, 12, 2017.

²⁸ *The Story of Kullervo*, 12.

²⁹ *The Story of Kullervo*, 20.

³⁰ Flieger, 151.

like children clutching each other, so as not to become lost again. Yet sometimes the intensity of the attraction can be so strong that they can be overwhelmed by it.”³¹ Tolkien’s Kullervo is instantly attracted to Wanōna when he encounters her in the woods, but she is frightened and tries to escape him. Kullervo is so overwhelmed by his attraction to the maiden that, having only known violence in his youth, he reacts violently and pursues her “till he laid hands upon her and bore her in his arms away in the depths of the woods. Yet was she fair and he loving with her...”³² Loving he may have eventually been, but it is noteworthy that Kullervo initially seized Wanōna by force. In *The Children of Hurin*, the first encounter between separated siblings Túrin Turambar and his twin sister Niënor is depicted much more gently. Informed by his companions that they have found a young woman lying unconscious and naked in the woods, Túrin wraps her in a cloak and carries her back to the hunters’ lodge. Like Wanōna, Niënor’s memory has been erased by the dragon Glaurung, and yet Túrin seems familiar to her:

“There they lit a fire and wrapped coverlets about her,
and she opened her eyes and looked upon them;
and when her glance fell upon Turambar a light came in her face,
and she put out a hand toward him, for it seemed to her
that she had found at last something that she had sought
in the darkness, and she was comforted.”³³

Having experienced the trauma and grief of losing his parents at an early age, followed by the demoralizing experience of being unloved and emotionally neglected by his first fosterer, his aunt Beatrice Suffield, Tolkien could well relate to the character of Kullervo, as Flieger and Chance have noted, but perhaps even more so to a character of his own creation, Túrin Turambar. In his introduction to his edition of *The Children of Hurin* published in 2007, Christopher Tolkien states that *The Story of Kullervo* was the germ of the story of Túrin Turambar, a “character who was of deep significance” to his father, “and in dialogue of directness and immediacy he achieved a poignant portrait of his boyhood, essential to the whole: his severity and lack of gaiety, his sense of justice and his compassion...”³⁴ The reference is to the description of Túrin’s childhood, but these lines could well apply to Tolkien’s own bleak situation as an orphan, who only experienced love and compassion from his guardian Father Morgan. Christopher

³¹ Betty Jean Lifton, *Lost and Found: The Adoption Experience*, 3rd edition, expanded and updated (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2009) 165.

³² *The Story of Kullervo*, 36-37.

³³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Children of Húrin*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) 215.

³⁴ *The Children of Húrin*, 13.

Tolkien notes that the earliest version of this story, *Turambar and the Foalokë*, one of the stories included in *The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien's "first work of imaginative literature" was "certainly in existence by 1919, if not before," and that Tolkien always intended that this tale "be told in much fuller form."³⁵ Although he abandoned the *Lost Tales* before they were completed, Tolkien later significantly expanded the story of Túrin in a long poem composed in ancient English alliterative metre, the *Children of Húrin*, which he began in the 1920s while on the faculty of the University of Leeds, but which he abandoned by 1924 or 25 for reasons that "must remain unknown", according to Christopher.³⁶ Tolkien also left "a mass of later but undated writing concerned with the story...with great elaboration of the old versions and expanded into narrative previously unknown,"³⁷ but like earlier versions, unfinished. In 2007 *The Children of Húrin* was published, in which Christopher pulled together all of early and later versions and manuscripts in a "continuous narrative from start to finish" to complete this tale which had been so important to his father.³⁸

The resulting narrative greatly expands upon the psychology of the tragic hero Túrin. He shares with Kullervo the fate of unwittingly committing incest with his sister Niënor, whose name significantly means "mourning." (Later, Túrin he gives her the name Níniel, "Maid of Tears," because tears are her only response to his questions after she awakes in the hunters' lodge where he has brought her.) Túrin's childhood and youth are marked by grief and loss. He loses first his father, Húrin, who is imprisoned by Morgoth, then a younger sister, Lailith, who dies of an illness, and finally his mother, Morwen, who sends the eight-year-old Túrin away to Doriath, the realm of the Elf Lord Thingol and the Maia Melian. for his own protection. Morwen gives birth to a daughter, Niënor, after Túrin's departure, and while Túrin knows of her existence, he never has the opportunity to meet her because Morwen turns down the invitation to join her son in Doriath. Sundered from his biological family, Túrin has the opposite fostering experience of Kullervo, for Thingol and Melian are ideal foster parents. Thingol accepts the guardianship of Túrin willingly:

"And those who saw this marveled, for it was a sign that Thingol took Túrin as his foster-son; and that was not at that time done by kings, nor ever again by Elf-lord to a Man. Then Thingol

³⁵ Christopher Tolkien, "Introduction: Middle-earth in the Elder Days," in *The Children of Húrin*, 8-9. See also *Turambar and the Foalokë* in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales*, Part Two, edited by Christopher Tolkien

³⁶ Christopher Tolkien, Appendix 1: "The Evolution of the Great Tales," in *The Children of Húrin*, 272.

³⁷ "The Evolution of the Great Tales," 281

³⁸ "The Evolution of the Great Tales," 282.

said to him: ‘ here, son of Húrin, shall your home be; and in all your life you shall be held as my son, Man though you be. ... Perhaps the time may come when you shall regain the lands of your father in ...but dwell now here in love.’³⁹

Like Kullervo, Túrin is a misfit, decidedly “other,” impulsive and angry for “a shadow lay on his youth. Nonetheless, he was held in love and esteem by those who knew him well, and he had honour as the fosterling of the king.”⁴⁰ Thingol and Melian frequently refer to Túrin as their foster-son, but Túrin never in turn calls them foster mother or foster father. From a psychological perspective, this attitude is not entirely without explanation. Studies of individuals who were adopted or fostered at a young age reveal that many have a life-long fear of rejection or abandonment, which can lead to difficulty forging healthy relationships.⁴¹ Tormented by ignorance of the fate of his father Húrin, resentful of what he perceives as abandonment by his mother, still grieving over the death of his younger sister Lalaith, Túrin is incapable of accepting or returning affection, and is even mistrustful of even those who love him most. Against the counsel of his foster parents, he goes to join the fight against Morgoth, returning to Doriath after three years. After he accidentally kills Saeros, a member of Thingol’s court who insults his mother Morwen, Túrin is banished by his foster father, who later pardons him when he learns the truth: that Saeros had provoked Túrin and pursued him with the intention to murder him.

“ ‘I am grieved. I took Húrin’s son as my son,
and so he shall remain, unless Húrin himself
should return out of the shadows to claim his own.
I would not have any say that Túrin was driven
Forth unjustly inot the wild, and gladly would
I welcome him back; for I loved him well.’ ”⁴²

But Túrin rejects Thingol’s pardon and his paternal love, and lives as an outlaw. Wandering from place to place, Túrin assumes different names to hide his true identity as son of Húrin, whose family has been cursed by Morgoth: “ ‘Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. They shall die

³⁹ *The Children of Húrin*, 77.

⁴⁰ *The Children of Húrin*, 82.

⁴¹ See Betty Jean Lifton, *Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* (New York: Basic Books/Harper Collins Publishers, 1994) 109-124.

⁴² *The Children of Húrin*, 96.

without hope, cursing both life and death.’ ”⁴³ But as in the case of Túrin’s predecessor Kullervo, Tolkien does not ascribe his character’s ill fortune entirely to a curse. When Túrin reproaches the Elf Gwindor for revealing that he is the son of Húrin, Gwindor shoots back, “ ‘The doom lies in yourself, not in your name.’ ”⁴⁴ As has been noted, the trauma of Kullervo’s childhood losses and subsequent thralldom and poor fostering played a role in shaping his character and his destiny. In contrast, the loving fostering Túrin receives from Thingol and Melian is on a par with the devotion of Father Morgan to the young Ronald and his brother Hilary, and yet Túrin not only rejects Thingol’s forgiveness, he refuses to accept a gift of lembas sent by his foster mother Melian via his friend the Elf Beleg, declaring, “ ‘I will not receive gifts out of Doriath’ ” to which Beleg replies, “ ‘Then send back your sword and your arms...Send back also the teaching and fostering of your youth.’ ” Beleg reproaches Túrin for his pride, but does not abandon him, leading Túrin to question his own worthiness: “ ‘I wonder, friend, that you deign to come back to such a churl.’ ”⁴⁵ Such a statement reveals Túrin’s feelings of guilt and shame, which prevent him from accepting Beleg’s unconditional friendship and loyalty. Through the character of Túrin, Tolkien tapped into the complex feelings that are often buried deep within the psychology of adoptees and foster children, and which persist into adulthood: “Each impending or perceived threat of abandonment sets up a domino effect of other issues...Some of these issues are fear of rejection, lack of trust, fear of intimacy, loyalty, shame and guilt...”⁴⁶

In both *The Story of Kullervo* and the *Children of Húrin* the protagonists ask their swords to kill them, thus adding their deaths to the suicides of their sisters, with whom they have unknowingly committed incest. While on the surface these early narratives bear a structural resemblance to the tragic tales of classical and medieval myths in which curses and prophecies are seldom unfulfilled, the details of the social and family environments of Kullervo and Túrin lend an additional psychological verisimilitude to their stories. Perhaps this is why, years later, in the famous letter to Milton Waldman from 1951, Tolkien somewhat disdainfully dismissed comparisons of Túrin to other tragic heroes: “There is *The Children of Húrin*, the tragic tale of Túrin Turambar and his sister Niniel—of which Túrin is the hero: a figure that might be said (by people who like that sort of thing, though it is not very useful) to be derived from elements in Sigurd the Volsung, Oedipus and the Finnish Kullervo.”⁴⁷ Tolkien’s *Kullervo* is an

⁴³ *The Children of Húrin*, 64.

⁴⁴ *The Children of Húrin*, 170.

⁴⁵ *The Children of Húrin*, 140.

⁴⁶ Nancy Newton Verrier, *The Primal Wound: Understanding the Adopted Child* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 2009 [1993]) 82-83.

⁴⁷ *Letters*, 209-210

unfinished work—he only left an outline of the end of the story—and as Christopher Tolkien notes in his commentary on the *Children of Húrin*, Tolkien did not finish any of the versions of Túrin’s story that he began and then abandoned. While it true that Tolkien left many works in incomplete form, his repeated unsuccessful attempts to complete the tragic tales of Túrin and Kullervo can possibly be ascribed to the nature of the stories themselves. Perhaps in these tales of hapless heroes searching in vain for families from whom fate and circumstances have sundered them, Tolkien was expressing his own deep longing for the people he had lost in his youth and young manhood: his father and mother, his dear friends killed in WWI. However, as Kristine Larsen notes, “...while it is undeniable that Tolkien’s wartime trauma shaped his writing, we also see echoes of a far earlier trauma reverberating through the history of Middle-earth...”⁴⁸ Certainly Tolkien’s experience of being orphaned, then poorly fostered before experiencing the loving nurturing of his guardian Father Morgan informed his portrayal of these tragic heroes. While there are many positive depictions of being fostered in the legendarium, the characters of Kullervo and especially Túrin suggest, as Tolkien wrote to Christopher, that some sufferings are so dreadful that they leave wounds that “could not wholly heal.”⁴⁹

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⁴⁸ Larsen, “Half-Elven and Half-Orphans,” 8.

⁴⁹ *Letters*, 590.

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