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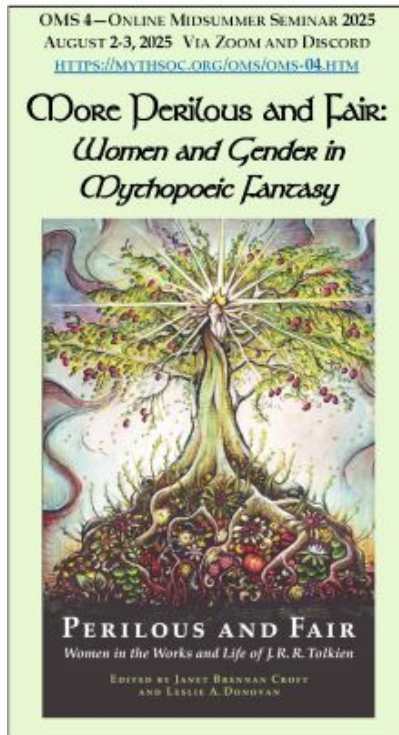
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Abstract

Adds to the scholarly dialogue on Tolkien's depiction of war-related mental trauma by examining Éowyn not as an example of post-traumatic stress disorder, but as a character suffering from, and beginning to recover from, traumatic grief. Emphasizes the role of Faramir as counselor and healer. Johnson's experience as a military chaplain gives added strength to his observations.

Additional Keywords

Grief, traumatic; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Éow; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Faramir; War trauma

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ÉOWYN'S GRIEF

BRENT O. JOHNSON

ÉOWYN, DAUGHTER OF ÉOMUND AND THÉODWYN and niece to King Théoden, is one of the most enigmatic characters created by J.R.R. Tolkien in his epic story *The Lord of the Rings*. Is she a role model for feminists, or merely a pitiful, flat character (easily described in one sentence), or is she a woefully misunderstood young woman who merely wishes to die in battle? Surely there is more to her than the story of a niece left behind when the men folk ride off to glorious war, a twenty-four year old women with a crush on one of the heroes of the book?

I propose in this paper that Éowyn's story of grief and recovery is a portrait of many soldiers' family members who remained in England during World War I, often close enough to hear the bombardment of artillery across the Channel, who struggled to recover from their losses, often without any resources in their communities. Tolkien also uses Faramir to show a possible path to recovery from traumatic grief. If it weren't for the compassionate presence of Faramir, a fellow patient who also suffered the loss of his entire family in the War of the Ring, she would not have recovered from her grief and would have died of despair.

Why isn't she a model of someone suffering from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)? She has been in the midst of war, not merely as a witness, but as a combatant: she rode off with the Rohirrim cavalry to Minas Tirith and slew the mount of the Ringwraith threatening her uncle, and took part in destroying the Witch-king. PTSD requires symptoms in three areas identified as behavioral, cognitive, and emotive. A diagnosis of PTSD is not made until symptoms from all three areas have manifested after at least one month following a traumatic episode. Éowyn only suffers symptoms similar to some cognitive and emotive realms for a few short weeks. She hasn't had time to develop PTSD. Anyone who is actually diagnosed with PTSD, and willing to talk about their experience—

whether suffering because of war, rape, or survival of a serious accident—will observe it took a long time for PTSD to manifest in their lives. Social workers who provide care for soldiers and their families around military bases in America often note that symptoms are often not noticed until 90 to 160 days following a combat deployment.

She is a woman who is gripped by grief. As a seven-year-old child she lost both of her parents. Her father fell in combat, and her mother wasted away in grief (*Lord of the Rings* [LotR] App. A: 1044). Raised by her maternal uncle, she nearly lost him when he mysteriously took ill, only to be rescued from an untimely dotage by the arrival of Gandalf (II.6.503). She loses her cousin Théodred, sees her brother imprisoned and then freed only to immediately ride off to a war she is forbidden to join, and witnesses the gruesome impact of war on her nation. When her beloved uncle Théoden is slain before her eyes, and she is nearly destroyed by the Witch-king that was her uncle's killer, she loses consciousness and nearly dies. When she recovers, it is a near thing brought about only by the superior healing skills of Aragorn, the man she thought she loved; she is so frigid she fails to respond to anyone who attempts to raise her spirits. She is overwhelmed with grief.

England was the home of many grieving war widows following World War I, and Tolkien no doubt met many family members who grieved deeply for the losses his nation had experienced between 1914 and 1918. In the United Kingdom alone 994,138 military and civilian deaths were recorded and 1,663,435 people were wounded (Commonwealth War Graves Commission). The BBC published an article on their web site in 2007 that estimated there were approximately 187,000 war widows and 500,000 children who lost a father in the war. The *Mail*, a daily newspaper in England, published an article in the same year that claimed only 35% of women between the ages of 19 and 40 married during the post war years of 1919 to 1939, and two million women were bereft of the opportunity to marry (Cable). The *Mail* article goes on to mention the 1921 and 1931 British censuses, revealing that in 1921 there 1,209 women for every 1,000 men between the ages of 25 and 29, and that by 1931 only 50% of those women had married. In an era that did not have sufficient medical caregivers trained to treat emotional traumas such as grief, when only the Churches were available to console people in the general populace who had experienced sudden loss, there were many who suffered from intense grief, and they often suffered alone. The most famous woman in the British Isles of that era was Queen Victoria, the "Widow of Windsor" who never ceased grieving for her consort, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, from his death in 1861 until her own death in 1901. When the nation's ruler wore widow's black for over forty years, the women of the British Isles were given a powerful and unhealthy role model for how to bear with grief.

As a military chaplain who has spent over eighteen years providing pastoral counseling to bereaved men and women in the Navy and Marine Corps, I have observed many who grieve the death of a loved family member or comrade. Most of them exhibit the grief patterns that have been brilliantly described by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her seminal work *On Death and Dying*.¹ I have witnessed, on rare occasions, family members who have not found the resilience to cope with their losses and needed extensive psycho-pharmacological care.

When someone encounters grief, they lose an attachment to someone or something, a very painful experience that is complex and is triggered by the distress of separation. Normal grief will run through a range of emotions, cognitive reactions, and social behaviors that many people expect to happen when there is a death or serious injury in the family. There will be a variation of intensity and duration depending on the individual who grieves and the quality of the relationship they held with the one who is lost. The members of the surrounding community are often available to assist the sufferer through his or her bereavement. Many neighbors and family members can relate to normal grief for they have also felt the same pain when they experienced a similar loss.

Traumatic grief is a distinct emotional response to loss that transcends normal grief (Goulston 240). It is often a syndrome of chronic yearning, a result of bitterness, a sign of disengagement, and an indicator of the sense of meaninglessness felt when a loss is so overwhelming all previous coping skills fail the bereaved. Experts in bereavement feel there is a prevalence of traumatic grief in about 10—15% of those who suffer a loss in America (Friedman 4).

In the *Diagnostic Statistics Manual-IV* the only diagnosis that deals with grief is listed under a section labeled as V62.82b bereavement. It is linked with symptoms characteristic of a Major Depressive Episode (*DSM-IV-TR* 311). The next edition, *DSM-V*, has a proposed inclusion of a disorder called prolonged grief. It is also known as traumatic grief. This disorder is brought about by Separation Distress, and a sufferer needs to display at least one of the three following symptoms experienced on a daily basis, or at least to a degree that disrupts their normal behavior: 1) Intrusive thoughts related to their loss, 2) Intense feelings of emotional pain, sorrow, or pangs of grief related to the loss, and 3) Yearnings for the person who has died. The traumatic sufferer must also show five or more of the following symptoms for six months or more:

¹ Dr. Kubler-Ross describes the stages of grief as: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Éowyn will exhibit all but one: she won't accept her situation in the Houses of Healing.

1. Confusion about one's life role or diminished sense of self.
2. Difficulty accepting the loss as real.
3. Avoidance of reminders of the reality of the loss.
4. Inability to trust others since the loss.
5. Bitterness or anger related to the loss.
6. Difficulty moving on with life.
7. Numbness (absence of emotion) since the loss.
8. Feeling that life is unfulfilling, empty.
9. Feeling stunned, dazed, or shocked by the loss.

This is a difficult and serious form of grief, and if not handled well leads to impairment in social functioning. Éowyn, although physically healed from her injury, was not ready to accept all the losses she had experienced since she was a small child. There were many women, and not an insignificant number of men, in England during the inter-war years who were not able to recover from their losses on the battle fields of France, Belgium, Turkey, and the High Seas when nearly an entire generation was lost to war.

When encountering someone who is grieving traumatically we all ask, "What can we do?" All the normal procedures do not seem to work. Traditional grief work does not bring about the desired relief from bereavement. An outpouring of sadness and crying do not signify any sort of recovery, and often are not even exhibited. The recovery is all about reconciling the loss; of a person, of a world view, of a sense of self in relation to what was lost. What we can do is prevent any unhealthy destructive behaviors, restrain the bereaved from aggressive acting-out, and plant the seeds of eventual adaptation to the new reality facing the one who has experienced loss. In this paper I will look at how Tolkien outlines those responses in the character of Faramir during his stay in the Houses of Healing. I will examine such issues as reengagement, renewal, meaning, purpose, and hope. I will show how Faramir created attachments, broke through Éowyn's reluctance and fear, and did things that brought out good feelings even though Éowyn was numb to his efforts at first. These responses I listed above assist us in aiding in the recovery of those who suffer from traumatic grief due to loss in combat.

Éowyn's Tale of Sorrow

Readers first meet Éowyn in the story when Gandalf leads a delegation to the hall of Théoden, King of Rohan. She stands behind the chair of the ailing king, "[a] woman clad in white" (*LotR* III.6.501). At this point in the tale that is all she is: a flat character who fills a space in the hall, a woman who has no name. Following the healing of Théoden by Gandalf, the white-clad woman steps forward, unnamed, to assist the King's first halting steps off the dais. Only when

she is dismissed by her uncle is she named: "'Go, Éowyn sister-daughter!' said the old king. 'The time for fear is past'" (III.6.504).

It is at this point that readers are introduced to her character, and Tolkien concentrates upon her eyes. "*Grave and thoughtful* was her glance, as she looked on the king with *cool pity* in her eyes" (emphasis added). She is perceived to be as "stern as steel" (III.6.504). Éowyn receives a description of the kind usually reserved for leaders. Her character is strong and her perception is keen, so that it appears she may not be just a simple flat character reserved for background scenes and set decoration.

Her next appearance comes with Théoden's decision to go to war. She comes bearing a cup of wine, much as Anglo-Saxon women would have borne a mead cup to heroes gathered in halls in the days of Beowulf. Her task is to hail the heroes gathered in her uncle's hall and to receive the title Lord of the Eorlingas in Théoden's absence during the war. Here she is described as a person of trust, "fearless and high-hearted" (III.6.512); in other words, a noble person not simply because of her birth, but due to her unique abilities and sensibilities. As the Rohirrim ride off to war at Helm's Deep, a stronghold for the people of Rohan, she is depicted standing at the doors of the hall watching until the host is lost from sight.

We do not hear of Éowyn again until 252 pages later, when she welcomes Aragorn and his Grey Company of kinsmen and friends to Edoras as they journey to Gondor and battle with their enemies. She knows only rumors of recent battles, is eager to hear what has happened, and concerned for the rest and comfort of her guests. When she hears of the route south Aragorn intends to take, a journey through a cursed mountain, she attempts to dissuade him. The debate turns to duty and she admits to being bitter that it is her fate to be left behind when the host rides off to war: "to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return" (V.2.767).

In World War I it was not unusual for men to come home from the front on a weekend furlough, be fêted by the local community, the women of their families hosting their returning heroes, until they climbed back on the trains and ferries and returned to the war in the trenches. Bitterness during an unexpected visit home during a deployment is a common experience for family members who have created a routine that enables them to live without their loved ones sent off to war.²

² The cycle of deployment is a paradigm used by the armed forces to describe the various emotional dynamics a family goes through during a military operation. After the emotional turbulence following the departure of a military member the family eventually falls into a routine known as the recovery and stabilization stage. When the member returns without warning, causing the family to miss the anticipation of homecoming stage, there is often a feeling of bitterness within the family.

It is during this conversation with Aragorn that Éowyn admits to her greatest fear "'A cage,' she said. 'To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire'" (V.2.767). She sees her life as one at risk of being inconsequential during a time of crisis. For a second time she is left standing at the doors while an armed party rides off to face the great challenge of her day; only this time she is described as "a figure carved in stone, her hands clenched at her sides" (V.2.768). How many women stood at their doors in Tolkien's England, the same frustration on their face, as the men of their communities strode off to face danger while they stayed home, close to the war, but barred from its fury?

Éowyn's task for the next several pages is to welcome and send off the Rohirrim, to outfit Merry as a page for King Théoden, and to pass the news that Aragorn took the Paths of the Dead when he passed by Edoras. Then we get rare glimpses of her thread in the tale until the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, where she slays the Ringwraith that stands threatening over her beloved uncle Théoden following the king's fall from his mount. She announces herself in response to the Witch-king's taunt that no man may slay him: "[N]o living man am I! You look upon a woman" (V.6.823). The quote that brings cheers from women in every theater, the phrase that gains her entrance into the Feminist Hall of Fame. Yet it is here that she receives a wound that is nearly mortal, and she is borne off the field to the Houses of Healing. It is here that her grief goes from normal to traumatic. She has borne enough loss. First her father and mother when she was a child, the death of her only cousin in recent weeks, now the death of her uncle, and the uncertainty of her brother's safety, let alone the realization that he is no longer simply a sibling, but now the king of her people.

Éowyn's Traumatic Grief

Éowyn's physical injuries are easily tended to when she is brought into the city of Minas Tirith. Her broken arm is bound up, and wounds to her shield arm are tended. It is the state of her soul, her resiliency that concerns Aragorn when he is called in to wake her from a coma-like state while she lies in the Houses of the Healing. If we review the nine possible symptoms that can be present in traumatic grief we see some of those signs in Tolkien's description of her in the scene when she is awakened.

First there is numbness to any emotion when she comes out of her slumber and finds her brother at her side. There is no tearful reunion, no outpouring of pent-up emotions. Instead she asks questions. "How long have I been dreaming?" "What of the Lord of the Mark?" "What of the king's esquire, the Halfling?" (V.8.850). When Gandalf describes his joy at seeing her awake, she questions her health and does not thank him for his concern.

She has some difficulty accepting the loss as real. Her broken arm is of no consequence if she can just fill the saddle of some rider who fell on the field that day. After the host of Gondor goes to Mordor and she remains behind to heal she asks the Warden of the Houses of Healing to let her go before she has finished healing. Éowyn may be hale in body, but her spirit is despairing and she will not admit it. She sees release only in going off to war with her brother.

The inability to trust others can be seen in her refusal to take the Warden's advice on rest and healing, and her reluctance to see Faramir as anything other than the Steward of the Minas Tirith when he clearly is falling in love with her. She does not seek him out each day as he has invited her, but lets five days elapse before walking with him in the gardens, and even then her responses are guarded. It is hard to open up to a new person when you have already been abandoned by so many you have loved and trusted in the past.

Her comment to her brother Éomer reveals her bitterness when she says it appeared her family "was sunk in honour less than any shepherd's cot" (V.8.850). In her debate with the Warden she reveals more pain and bitterness when she says if given the choice between life in healed body and painful death in battle she would "choose the latter" (VI.5.937). When a summons comes after victory has been won over Mordor, Éowyn refuses to go to the Fields of Cormallen and celebrate the great triumph. Faramir asks why she does not go, and she admits it is because of Aragorn's lack of love for her. She also refuses Faramir's declaration of love since she will "desire no man's pity" (VI.5.943). Her bitterness makes it hard for her to see the love Faramir so evidently feels for her.

Her statements also reveal another symptom of traumatic grief: a difficulty moving on with life. She would prefer to move on towards death. She quietly resists Faramir's initial attempts at friendship, does not seek any new interests in life, and constantly asks for news of battle and the opportunity to look off to the east, where the host has marched to war. She was proclaimed the Lord of the Eorlingas and was directed to stay in Rohan and lead the people, but she refuses to take up that duty. All she wants is a warrior's death like those her father and uncle received, not the slow wasting away of grief like her mother who died during Éowyn's childhood. This seeking for a warrior's death may also reveal confusion over her role in life, another symptom of traumatic grief. We also see in her statements a feeling that her life has no meaning now that Aragorn has refused her love and all her family have gone to war, most of them dying in the process. Éowyn is a woman trapped in the unrelenting web of traumatic grief. She is a literary mirror for all those family members, war widows, and the stunned 'lost generation' who struggled to recover from their tremendous losses in World War I.

Faramir's Patience

There is recovery from traumatic grief, but it is not always found in a cathartic release of pent up emotion, the spewing forth of dammed-up anger towards those that have died. There are ways to plant healthy coping skills in the garden of the soul, and to help someone reconcile with their losses. Faramir, the quiet student of Gandalf, a man with a Númenórean soul undimmed by his ancestors' years of life in Middle-earth, demonstrates the skills needed to assist someone in their recovery from traumatic grief.

There is a curious little passage found in *The Silmarillion* that sheds some light on Gandalf's interests and abilities in dealing with grief. This passage from the Valaquenta describes Nienna, a Vala or angelic being, who "is acquainted with grief, and mourns for every wound that Arda has suffered in the marring of Melkor." Her place of residence in the undying lands is in the west where she can look out from the world. Tolkien describes her as one who "brings strength to the spirit and turns sorrow to wisdom" (*Silmarillion* 28). A few pages later Olorin is introduced, and he is described as spending time at Nienna's house where "he learned pity and patience"(31). Olorin was the name Gandalf was known by in the West, and with Gandalf as his mentor one may wonder how much of Nienna's wisdom Faramir had picked up over the years. One would almost wonder if Númenórean gardens near Houses of Healing were named Nienna's Garden.

Tolkien compresses a healing process that often takes years into one chapter, but the key methods are all there. Faramir finds ways to connect and engage with Éowyn. He creates attachments with her, carefully seeks out ways to break through her reluctance at forming relationships, and presents meaning, purpose, and hope—all three important themes in *The Lord of the Rings*—to Éowyn while she waits for news from the east. He tries some things that may bring out good feelings in Éowyn, even though she is initially numb to them, and reminds her that she is not alone in the world.

In the modern-day field of Combat Operation Stress Management, care givers seek ways to connect with people who are suffering from emotional wounds.³ In Faramir's case there is their joint confinement to the care of the Warden while they heal from their physical wounds. "I myself am in the Warden's keeping," answered Faramir." He carefully builds a case for listening to their medical caregivers: "You and I, we must endure with patience the hours of waiting" (*LotR* VI.5.938-9).

³ The five points of Combat Operational Stress First Aid are; calm, cover, connectedness, capacity, and confidence. These five techniques are not obvious in Tolkien's work, but they are there in principle when Faramir talks with Éowyn.

At the same time Faramir looks for ways to accommodate her need for news of the war to the east. He arranges for her meet him in a garden that looks east on a daily basis, and offers to spend the time together with her as a fellow patient. He even spends several hours with Merry, who was wounded with her in the slaying of the Ringwraith, learning all he can about Éowyn and gaining insights into her grief (VI.5.940).

All throughout their stay in the Houses of Healing Éowyn mentions her desire to be away in battle, and to die like her uncle Théoden. Faramir is very careful in respecting her views, while at the same time challenging her beliefs. In the following passage Éowyn expresses a desire to die and Faramir replies in a way that gets her to reframe her position.

"But I do not desire healing," she said. "I wish to ride to war like my brother Éomer, or better like Théoden the king, for he died and has both honour and peace."

"It is too late, lady, to follow the Captains, even if you had the strength," said Faramir. "But death in battle may come to us all yet, willing or unwilling. You will be better prepared to face it in your own manner, if while there is still time you do as the Healer commanded." (*LotR* VI.5.939)

Lord Moran, the personal physician of Winston Churchill during World War II, and a former Battalion Surgeon in the British Army in World War I, has written, "Moods expose the workings of the conscious mind, as dreams lay bare what has hitherto been hidden in the unconscious" (41). Éowyn expresses a sense of doom, angst she cannot describe other than as the feeling she is standing on the edge of an abyss. Faramir connects with this sense of doom and compares it to the tsunami wave that destroyed his ancestral homeland of Númenor. He goes on to say his reason insists that the end of days has come, but his emotions check that thought and call for hope. He connects with her, carefully challenges her beliefs, and gradually adds meaning and purpose to her life.

People recovering from traumatic grief need to try new things on. They need to enlarge their list of activities that bring pleasure, to find new attachments in the world around them; they need to adapt to a changing model of themselves. Éowyn saw herself as a warrior queen, but the only person who could give her that position was Aragorn, the newly returned king of Gondor, and he was attached to another woman. Faramir gives her the freedom of the city, and encourages her to go to Cormallen when her brother summons her. When she refuses to go, Faramir carefully asks her reasons and offers her a role in his life. She announces her desire to be a healer and he proposes marriage. She is again the White Lady of Rohan, just as we first met her in Edoras. It is time for her to acquire a new identity.

Is Éowyn a flat character according to the definition laid down by E.M. Forster, one described in one sentence? Many people assume she is and describe her as Éomer's sister, or as a necessary plot device to bring down the leader of the Nazgûl. I believe she is a complex character by Forster's definition, one able to surprise the reader at any point in the story. Her decision to become a healer was not one many readers would expect from a daughter of such a warlike race as the Eorlingas. Tolkien first introduces her as a lady dressed in white. Like a *tabula rasa* her life is written out as the story progresses, one filled with grief, until her despair nearly overwhelms her. Only after the careful tending of Aragorn, Gandalf, the healers of Gondor, and the compassion of Faramir does she shed her despair and become the White Lady of Rohan.

Dr. Judith Herman, the author of *Trauma and Recovery*, the seminal text on recovery from traumatic issues, notes there is a process one goes through as trauma is properly dealt with. She calls for three phases: safety, story, and community. If someone who has experienced great loss can find themselves in a safe place, physically and emotionally, be brought to a point where they can express their own story and correctly label themselves without fear of judgment, and develop a new community that accepts them as they are, they will move on as healed people. Faramir and those who practice in the Houses of Healing provide those steps for Éowyn as she faces her grief.

Tolkien no doubt knew many widows and orphans from families impacted by England's casualties during World War I. Like many in his contemporary society, he saw too many people who would not recover from the traumatic losses they had experienced between 1914 and 1918. There were those who did recover from their despair and went on to make new lives for themselves in post-war England, as did people in the rest of the world in those days. Medical science at that time did not have terms with which to diagnose people suffering from traumatic grief, but anyone with an observant mind would distinguish those who recovered from those who did not, and what may have made the difference in those recoveries.

Tolkien's stated aim in writing his Middle-earth legendarium was to create a mythology for England, a nation that lacked any mythology of its own. Myths contain fragments of light, elements of truth that are conveyed to listeners of those myths and instructions on how to live a meaningful life. In the passages that revolve around Éowyn and her grief in *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien, as a sub-creator, sheds light on various sources of grief, the perils of unattended grief, and how healing of a despondent soul may be brought about. England was rocked by grief following the staggering loss of so many lives in World War I, and he witnessed a growing toll again as he wrote during World War II. Myth points listeners and readers towards hope, and Éowyn becomes a model of recovery in the mythopoeia that is Tolkien's life work. If Tolkien's belief that

Applicability “resides in the freedom of the reader [...] (not) in the purposed domination of the author” (*LotR* Foreword xvii) holds true, then each individual who reads Éowyn's tale of grief will find hope restored in her healing and her calling as a healer.

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