



Redefinition of Mortality in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Tale of Tinúviel

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2026-05-23 Revised: 2026-06-02 Accepted: 2026-09-28 Keywords: Beren and Lúthien; Cleanth Brooks; Immortality Sacrifice; J.R.R. Tolkien; Mortality Redefinition; New Criticism DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.10782 Corresponding Author: Cerrya Abelita cerryaabellita@students.unnes.ac.id English Literature, Universitas Negeri Semarang	<i>This research examines the theme of death in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Tale of Tinúviel (Chapter 1 of Beren and Lúthien), where mortality is presented not simply as a tragic end, but as a meaningful and transformative condition. This study uses Cleanth Brooks' New Criticism, with particular attention to paradox, irony, and organic unity as the main concepts for interpreting literary meaning. Using a descriptive qualitative method and close reading, this research analyses how death is represented in the narrative, how human responses to death are portrayed, and how the story redefines mortality through Tinúviel's choice. The analysis reveals that death functions as an active force that shapes both the structure of the narrative and the actions of the characters. The story also presents different responses to death through its characters, from fear and resistance to acceptance and surrender. More importantly, Tinúviel's decision to relinquish her immortality for Beren's return shows Tolkien's distinctive understanding of mortality. Unlike many conventional fantasy narratives that treat death only as loss or punishment, Tolkien presents mortality as a choice that carries moral and existential meaning. Although this research focuses mainly on the main tale of Beren and Lúthien from the standalone book, particularly the first chapter of the book, Tale of Tinúviel, separated from The Silmarillion or the earlier and/or later stories that come before and after the main Tale of Tinúviel, it contributes to Tolkien scholarship by showing that death is not merely a supporting theme, but a central principle that organizes the story's meaning.</i>

1. Introduction

Death is the end of human biological life, where the functions of vital organs permanently cease. According to basic medical understanding, death has long been familiar to humans as an inseparable part of existence (Lizza et al., 2024; Tkemaladze, 2025; Nair-Collins, 2018). There are several definitions of death according to scholars: First, basic definition of death in human life can be understood as the loss of overall integrative function, which is often described as a common or intimate event (Sudarmoko, 2010), or in the medical field, death refers to the end of human life biologically, marked by the cessation of vital functions such as the heart, lungs, and brain, followed by the decomposition of the body (Wahyuni, 2021);

Second, from a religious perspective, death is the departure of the soul from the human body or a transition from the world to the afterlife, which is often referred to as the call of the Creator, where death is something predetermined and will be encountered by every living being. In Hindu belief, death is an event where the soul of the deceased will undergo reincarnation into another living being according to their deeds. Meanwhile, in Islam, the soul of the deceased will be taken to a place where all their deeds throughout life will be accounted for (Anggariani & Malik, 2021);

Third, from a social perspective, death triggers cultural responses such as funeral rituals, mourning traditions, and social expectations that shape the perception of grief among the family or relatives left behind, and these often become customary traditions that differ in each region which are sometimes considered burdensome because the care given to the deceased family member is often interpreted as a debt that must be repaid by the family left behind by carrying out these traditions (Mangape et al., 2021);

Fourth, from the perspective of literary anthropology, death plays a role in revealing the existence of cultural structures and symbols in society. Sahar (2020), in his research, examines Victor Turner's symbolic perspective, which explains death as a liminal phase or a period of transition from one state or existence to another state or existence through ritual ceremonies, where individuals experience a ritual transition from their life status toward the world after death. Not only that, Turner formulates human life phases into separation, liminality, and aggregation, using the mudyi tree and the Ndembu community as objects of his study, as they identify individual identity within society and community through liminality.

In line with this research, other researchers use Mircea Eliade's theory to analyze the sacredness of human life or mortality, where death functions as a boundary that connects the human world with the divine dimension (Rusidi et al., 2025). These analyses are reinforced by Ginkel (2013) through Mary Douglas's theory, which reveals that death produces ritual boundaries that often disrupt social order in society, where collective responses such as funeral ceremonies are a necessity. These perspectives show that death not only impacts individuals or their immediate environment but also the broader social structures;

Last, from a psychological perspective, several studies suggest that human responses to loss, or in this case, death, are not singular. They use Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model (as cited in Fitryani et al., 2021) to show several emotional stages of grief, starting from denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These findings show that death for humans is not merely an event, but also a process that involves the transformation of individual awareness of loss and the fate of mortality, applicable both to the individual themselves and to the people left behind. In line with this, other studies use Ernest Becker's findings (Liechty & Piven, 2024) on awareness of death that actually becomes a source of deep anxiety within humans.

According to Becker in *The Denial of Death*, humans often consciously attempt to deny their mortality through various means to maintain the continuity of their identity.

This leads humans to understand death as a threat to their existence, ultimately triggering defensive responses within themselves. Meanwhile, other studies discuss similar ideas using more modern theories such as Zygmunt Bauman, who views death as a social construct influenced by modernity. Bauman identifies mortality as a postmodern life strategy, which was then constructed by Hendar Putranto (2022) into 6 “immortal projects” or ways individuals create strategies to give meaning to life, including self-constitutional, fame in fashion and celebrity, repetition and representation, games and spectacle, momentary pleasures, social stratification, affirmation of identity and authority. This is showing that the focus of modern people tends to change from fear of death to making strategies to live a more meaningful life within the limits of mortality.

The issue of death will continue to be discussed because it is an eternal mystery faced by every human being, including in literary works. The theme of death has long been a central interest in English literature throughout history, reflecting transformations in worldview regarding death over time. Beginning in the Middle Ages, when the dominance of the Church at that time made the concept of heaven and hell more real than the physical world, positioning death as a definite spiritual transition. During the Renaissance, the development of science brought a paradigm shift in the perspective of death, triggering the societal view of death to shift to total destruction or annihilation, as quoted in the ending of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* dialogue "The rest is silence," a denial of the existence of the afterlife.

The continuity of the theme of death can be seen from the Victorian Era, which was haunted by high mortality rates, even though religious views at that time had become more individual (secularism), which ultimately triggered the emergence of supernatural themes in literary works, for example *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, which presents a series of deaths as a union of Heathcliff and Catherine (Blanca & Pop, 2025; Sarkar, 2022). This issue is also widely discussed in other English literary works across various genres and generations, beginning with the ancient Greek myth of *Orpheus and Eurydice*, which presents the theme of death and their attempt to transcend it (Spentzou, 2019), then *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare with themes of contemplation of death and revenge (Lestari & Sopandji, 2024; Duczek, 2024), *Adonais* by Percy Bysshe Shelley, a pastoral elegy for John Keats that reflects on premature death and the immortality of the poet's soul within him (Everest, 2007), as well as death-themed poems by Emily Dickinson (Zahra & Raza, 2024; Ma, 2025; Akhter, 2021).

One literary work that deals with death, for example, is *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann, which presents the theme of exploring an obsession and destruction toward death (Shookman, 2003), *The Dead* by James Joyce with the theme of a year-end reflection on death and loss (Perwira, 2019), as well as the poems of Sylvia Plath, which are haunted by the theme of suicide drawn from her personal experience (Kara, 2024; Rahmani, 2021; Astuti & Chalesti, 2022).

Several studies have discussed these works too, for example, “The Theme of Death in Victorian and Modernist Literature” a research conducted by Giuseppe Giordano (2025), which discusses the comparison between Victorian and modern literary works that use the theme of death through the poems of Emily Brontë and D.H. Lawrence, “From Castle to Crypt: A Gothic Exploration of Shakespearean Drama and Victorian Fiction” by Tasmia Moslehuddin and Zareen Rafa Khan Aronee (2025), which discusses the element of death, madness, and

Gothic in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, also “Dying in Art in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” by Line Cottagnies (2022), which analyzes *memento mori*, a Latin phrase meaning “remember that you must die” and *Ars Moriendi* which means the art of dying.

These researches show how broad the exploration of the theme of death is in literary works, where it is often used as a driving force of the narrative. Furthermore, in the research titled “Death and Literature: Different Approach From Simplicity to Obscurity” (2017), John Skelton examines how each writer has different ways of using the theme of death as the main theme in their narratives, starting from the depiction of grief to the complexity of characters’ behaviors toward death as represented within the text. In this context, J.R.R. Tolkien becomes one of the writers who presents a unique approach to death in literature, particularly in *The Tale of Tinúviel*, which was published separately in *Beren and Lúthien* (2017).

However, only few of these researches discuss death in detail, as death is often merely a complementary element in the plot without in-depth analysis. To fill this research gap, this research analyzes *The Tale of Tinúviel* by J.R.R. Tolkien addresses death within its narrative, more specifically how Tinúviel challenges death for Beren, making it a “gift of mortality,” which in Tolkien’s philosophy means the sacrifice of giving up immortality vs. death itself (Mathie, 2003). Death here is important in adventure fantasy stories, reflecting the theme of the sacrifice of immortality (immortal elves) vs. death as a gift of Ilúvatar (Mirzabayati, 2024).

The Tale of Tinúviel was originally one of the narratives from Tolkien’s collection of stories compiled in *The Silmarillion* (1977), which was later rearranged by his son, Christopher Tolkien, into a chapter in a standalone book. The narrative begins when Beren, a mortal man, falls in love with Tinúviel, an immortal princess of fairies. Seeing this, Tinwelint, Tinúviel’s father, is enraged because he considers Beren unequal to their kind. He then gives Beren a quest to retrieve the Silmaril from the crown of Melko, the King of Darkness, as a condition if he wishes to obtain his blessing to marry Tinúviel.

This quest is, in fact, a situation that implicitly leads him toward death. Although he ultimately succeeds in obtaining the Silmaril, Beren loses his right hand and later his life in the process. The turning point in this narrative occurs when Tinúviel refuses Beren’s death as the climax of their story. It is then that Tinúviel decides to go to the realm of death and plead the death himself to return Beren to the world of the living. This act is not without consequence, it requires her to relinquish her immortality and choose life as a mortal being in return.

The moment when Tinúviel consciously chooses mortality in order to change the ending of her love story becomes the central focus of this research. At this point, mortality no longer functions merely as a narrative resolution, but as a moment that reconstructs the meaning of death within the story itself. This transformation opens space for a deeper analysis of how death is represented and redefined throughout the narrative. The researcher proposes the title *Redefinition of Mortality in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Tale of Tinúviel*, which is formulated into several research questions as follows: First, how is death described in the story? Second, how do humans perceive death in the story? Third, how does this story redefine death? In line with the research question, this research aims to analyze the construction of the meaning of death and mortality as redefined in the text through narrative representation as well as the actions of the characters.

More specifically, the objectives of this research are to explain the representation of death as depicted in the narrative *The Tale of Tinúviel*, to identify how humans, symbolized through the characters in the story, represent death through the events presented within it, and to elaborate how the narrative *The Tale of Tinúviel* presents moments in which the

concept of mortality is redefined within the framework of the fictional world constructed by J.R.R. Tolkien.

2. Method

In this study, the researcher employs the descriptive qualitative research method to analyze how death is interpreted and how mortality is reconstructed within the narrative. This method is chosen because it allows the researcher to explore meanings and symbols in the narrative such as language, the actions of the characters, and the implementation of events as interpretive research instruments.

The data sources used in this study consist of two types:

1. The primary data source: the narrative *The Tale of Tinúviel*, which is Chapter 1 of *Beren and Lúthien* (2017) by J.R.R. Tolkien, separate from *The Silmarillion* and/or stories that come before or after the narrative.
2. The secondary data sources: consist of previous studies, books, and scholarly articles relevant to the study of death, mortality, J.R.R. Tolkien, and the application of the New Criticism method in literary works, which function to support and strengthen the researcher's arguments and analysis in this study.

The researcher also employs the New Criticism theory of Cleanth Brooks as the analytical foundation of this study. In his book *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), Brooks emphasizes that literary analysis must focus on the intrinsic elements of the text, such as structure, language, symbols, and the relationships of interconnected meanings within it. This approach applies three main analytical elements:

Paradox: textual contradictions that enrich meaning in the narrative and create tension that actually strengthens the narrative's central theme (*The Well-Wrought Urn*, pp. 8–15).

Irony: a situation in which what is expected in the narrative contradicts what actually occurs, revealing this contradiction as an expression of the complexity of human experience through the characters (*The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 92).

Organic Unity: the result of the unification of all elements in the narrative, forming a coherent and complete whole.

In the context of this research, the New Criticism theory is used to examine how death is represented in the text, to identify the contrast between immortality and mortality represented by the characters in the story, and to analyze how the narrative structure constructs a redefinition of mortality while applying the elements of New Criticism by Brooks in answering the research questions.

Brooks' statement about the complexity of human experience in literary works becomes relevant to understand how death serves not only as a biological end of a character's life, but also as a construction of meaning produced through the relationships between elements within the narrative. In line with the principles of New Criticism, this research does not focus on extrinsic aspects of the narrative such as the author's biography or readers' responses, but rather on the structure of the narrative and meaning constructed within the literary text itself.

In analyzing the data, the researcher follows several steps: (1) conducting close reading and note-taking on the parts of the text that are relevant to the research topic and the formulated research questions of the object of study; (2) classifying and analyzing the data based on the representation of death, the characters' responses to death, and the construction of the meaning of mortality in the narrative in accordance with the research questions; (3)

applying Cleanth Brooks' New Criticism theory to interpret how the text intrinsically builds and reconstructs the concept of mortality in *The Tale of Tinúviel*.

3. Result and Discussion

In this section, will be revealed the analysis of how the theme of death in *The Tale of Tinúviel* redefines the existential meaning of its characters based on the formulated research questions. *The Tale of Tinúviel* is a narrative that presents death as an element worthy of scholarly research. Therefore, this section explains how death is defined in the story, how human perspectives in accepting death are depicted in the story, and how the narrative redefines the meaning of mortality within the framework of its fictional world.

How Death is Described in the Story

In the narrative *The Tale of Tinúviel*, the event of death is marked by the appearance of the word Mandos, which is explained in the preceding chapter as: "*Mandos is the name both of the Vala and the place of his abode. He is the keeper of the Houses of the Dead.*" (*Beren and Lúthien*, p. 23).

This description shows that the event of death in this narrative is represented as a concrete entity named Mandos, which has two dimensions simultaneously: a place (abode) and an agent (Vala, or divine power, symbolized as "he" in "He is the keeper of the Houses of the Dead").

Within the narrative, Mandos is mentioned in several death events. First, at the death of Karkaras Knif-fang: "*Karkaras fell like a stone, for at that same moment the king's spear found his heart, and his evil spirit gushed forth and sped howling faintly as it fared over the dark hills to Mandos*" (*The Tale of Tinúviel*, p. 52).

Second, at the death of Beren: "*Yet even as he spake the shadows of Mandos lay upon his face, and his spirit fled in that hour to the margin of the world, and Tinúviel's tender kisses called him not back.*" (*The Tale of Tinúviel*, p. 52).

Through these two quotations, it can be concluded that death in this story is depicted as a process of transition from the world of the living to a certain realm. This representation reaches its climax when Tinúviel enters the realm of Mandos to plead for Beren's return to the world of the living. This request is not simply granted, but requires significant consequences where she must relinquish her immortality and live as a mortal being, as explained in Mandos' dialogue: "*Lo, O Elves, it is not to any life of perfect joy that I dismiss you, ... and know that ye will become mortal even as Men, and when ye fare hither again it will be for ever, unless the Gods summon you indeed to Valinor.*" (*The Tale of Tinúviel*, p. 53).

At this stage, death in the story is no longer portrayed solely as a final ending, but as a condition that can be negotiated through the actions and choices of the characters. According to Brooks, this can be understood as a central paradox, where an apparent contradiction creates the tension that strengthens the narrative's central meaning.

This paradox becomes visible in the portrayal of Mandos. Although Mandos is introduced as the keeper of the death realm and the embodiment of an inescapable fate, he is nevertheless moved by Tinúviel's grief and devotion, as the text states, "*...Now her beauty and tender loveliness touched even the cold heart of Mandos,*" (*The Tale of Tinúviel*, p. 53). The figure who should represent the absolute separation between life and death thus becomes capable of responding to emotion and sacrifice.

A similar irony appears in Tinúviel's decision to surrender her immortality in order to bring Beren back to life. Rather than treating immortality as the highest form of existence, the narrative gives greater meaning to mortality when it is chosen willingly. In doing so, the story

transforms death from a fixed and unreachable force into an existential condition shaped by love, sacrifice, and personal choice.

Therefore, death functions not solely as a plot device that determines the fate of the characters, but as an organizing principle that unifies the narrative's larger meaning. As Brooks argues, "the greatest works of art... resolve the paradox" (*The Well-Wrought Urn*, p. 15).

Human Perception of Death in the Story

Humans in the narrative *The Tale of Tinúviel* are represented not only by characters explicitly depicted as human (Beren), but also by other beings (Karkaras, which is a wolf). However, these figures function as symbols that stand for humanity as a whole. Both reflect two different responses to their fate as mortal beings, showing that human perceptions of death in the story are constructed in diverse ways.

The difference in their perceptions is evident in how their responses to death are described in the text. At Beren's death, the text states, "...the shadows of Mandos lay upon his face, and his spirit fled in that hour to the margin of the world," conveying a sense of calmness and acceptance of death. In contrast, Karkaras' death is described as "...and his evil spirit gushed forth and sped howling faintly as it fared over the dark hills to Mandos," giving the impression of fear and rejection of death. By presenting these contrasting reactions, Tolkien shows that mortality is not experienced in the same way by every individual. Death becomes a reflection of moral and existential awareness, where acceptance is associated with meaning and sacrifice, while fear is associated with resistance and despair.

Human perception depicted in the story aligns with how death affects human psychology. In this context, Beren's peaceful acceptance of his death aligns to the *acceptance* stage in Kübler-Ross's model stated by Fitryani et al. (2021), which indicates that individuals who are aware of their mortality fate, mostly have reached the acceptance stage of their life. In contrast, Karkaras' reaction when death approaches proves Becker's "Denial of Death" theory as described by Liechty & Piven (2024), where the individual's fundamental response, such as the fear of mortality, potentially drives the rejection of death. Thus, the story shows two spectrums of human perception of death: as a fate to be accepted and as a threat to be feared. By applying Brooks' New Criticism analysis, this difference can be concluded as a form of irony that enriches the meaning within the text.

Furthermore, if compared with what Putranto (2022) explained about Bauman's idea of modernity, in which humans are encouraged to live meaningfully within the limits of mortality, Tolkien's narrative goes further. In the fictional world he builds, limitations are not only accepted by the main characters, but also used as a means to demonstrate that the characters can overcome those limitations. This is proven in Beren's decision to accept the quest from Tinwelint despite knowing that it would lead him toward his death. This shows that the characters in the story do not simply live within the limitations of mortality but instead transform those limitations into new possibilities (transcendence through finitude).

Thus, it can be concluded that the human perception of death in this story is not singular, but rather complex and contradictory, as reflected through the depiction of individuals' fear and acceptance of death.

How Death is Redefined in the Story

In *The Tale of Tinúviel*, death is no longer portrayed as an absolute end of its main characters' story, but is redefined as a transformational condition. Unlike most conventional tragic narratives that view death as an irreversible event, in this story, death is used to open up the possibility of negotiations for existential restoration. This is evidenced by Tinúviel's actions, while she was still an immortal elf, as she crossed the realm of the dead (Mandos) and interacted directly with the divine power (Vala) to plead for Beren's return to the world of the living. This event results in a form of existential transformation, in which life is not restored freely, but through a significant consequence, namely the choice to become a mortal being.

This Tinúviel's action is what Brooks refers to as a paradox, which, simply put, Brooks explains that the contradictions of meaning within a narrative do not always need to be resolved directly, but instead can be unified into a coherent whole. In this context, death, which should be understood as an individual journey, as symbolized in the text "*all must tread alone*", instead opens space for interaction, dialogue, and even negotiation between an immortal being and the divine force. Moreover, the story emphasizes that this has never happened before, marking Tinúviel's action as one of the unique aspects of the narrative, as described in the text "*...nor has this ever been done since to Man or Elf*" (*The Tale of Tinúviel*, p. 53).

Furthermore, the quest given by Tinwelint to Beren at the beginning of the story, which implicitly leads him toward death, actually serves as the main driving force of the narrative. However, rather than leading to a tragedy that brings the story to an end, this event instead results in a redefinition of mortality through Tinúviel's decision to relinquish her immortality. It is here that what Brooks calls organic unity is formed, where all elements in the story such as love, sacrifice, death, and immortality are interconnected and form a whole and profound meaning.

In short, the story overturns the conventional understandings of tragedy by presenting death as something negotiable, conditional, and potentially transformative. In line with Brooks' view, "*language of paradox... is the only language adequate to the fullness of experience*" (*The Well Wrought Urn*, p. 192). In this context, death in this story is no longer understood merely as punishment or limitation for the main characters, but as an existential condition that opens the possibility for new meaning that can be changed through their actions. In this case, mortality appears as a meaningful choice, rather than solely a consequence that must be accepted.

4. Conclusion

Analysis New Criticism in *The Tale of Tinúviel* reveals death as an organizing principle governing the narrative. Rather than merely serving as a complementary plot device, death in this story plays a role in reconstructing the meaning of mortality in fantasy literature. The three main findings of this research emphasize the repositioning of death from what should have been the tragic end of the characters' story into an existential privilege that is consciously chosen, as presented in the results and discussion section. The contribution of New Criticism theory in this research serves to affirm that death in *The Tale of Tinúviel* is not just a supporting element of the narrative, but serves as a central element that unifies other narrative elements such as paradox, irony, and organic unity, as explained in Brooks' theory. Unlike other literary works that also address death in their narratives, J.R.R. Tolkien constructs the meaning of mortality as a gift from the divine force, which creates a unifying

paradox that fills the research gap related to in-depth analysis of the theme of death in adventure fantasy within literary studies.

This research contributes by extending the use of New Criticism into the realm of mythological fantasy and by offering a new way to understand death in literary works, which is not just as a supporting plot element, but as a structural principle that shapes the narrative itself. It also opens up possibilities for further research, such as comparing this story with *Lai of Leithian* (the chapter that follows *The Tale of Tinúviel*) or exploring the concept of mortality in *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*, in order to keep track on the development of the idea of the "Gift of Ilúvatar" across Tolkien's works.

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