

# Female Characters in Fantasy: Comparison of J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time

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**Female Characters in Fantasy: Comparison of J.R.R.Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*  
and Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time***

Završni rad

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## **Abstract**

Two authors, J.R.R.Tolkien and Robert Jordan, wrote novels that belong to the same genre, the fantasy literature. What they have in common, besides the genre, are female characters. While in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* there are only a few female characters, Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* is bursting with women characters. This paper will compare three characters from each series, first introducing the general idea about women in both authors' works, but before delving into analyses about women and their roles, first the idea of fantasy and what it actually means will be explained and identified. At the end, a conclusion about differences and similarities between both authors will be given, after a careful inspection and comparison.

**Keywords:** female characters, fantasy genre, comparison, female roles in literature,

**J.R.R.Tolkien, Robert Jordan**

## Introduction

It could be said that fantasy as a literature genre is fairly young. It became widely popular with J.R.R.Tolkien publishing his series, *The Lord of the Rings*, in 1954, but before that, fantasy as a genre was not much read nor written. Another famous fantasy writer, who happened to be a good friend of Tolkien's, C.S.Lewis, wrote about fantasy and its meaning in his work *Experiment in Criticism*. According to Lewis (1965), fantasy is any kind of narrative that deals with something supernatural and impossible. He lists some of the famous novels throughout the history that are kin to the fantasy genre, noting that fantastic elements are the only thing those novels have in common (Lewis 50). With the popularization of fantasy as a literary genre, many literary critics have dedicated their time and words to female characters and their roles in fantasy literature, amongst others.

The goal of this paper is to acquaint the reader with the female characters in two high fantasy series, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R.Tolkien and *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan. By presenting some of the female characters from the novels, the reader will get an insight in how female characters are created, what their positions are, and how significant they are for the whole action in the series. In the end, the differences and similarities between female characters from two worlds will be discussed, giving the reader some food for thought on the position of women in novels now and then.

## 1. J.R.R.Tolkien's Female Characters

There are not many female characters in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. They are so few in number, they can be listed: Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, Rosie Cotton, Goldberry, Arwen, Galadriel and Eowyn. The first three characters are not even that important for the main plot, as they are mentioned only a couple of times, having a role in the protagonists' side-adventures. Those who actually matter are the last three: Arwen, Galadriel and Eowyn. Madill (2008) argues that the only purpose of these three characters in the series is to attribute certain masculine qualities to the main male characters. Their role, position and general description will be discussed in broader terms later in the paper.

Tolkien received many criticism for his portrayal of female characters. His females are: '*...maidens who must adhere to male protectionism*' (Skeparnides). According to Skeparnides, women are described as pure, beautiful and virginal, just like in Shakespearean tradition. However, they are caged in the male world, and the only way they can achieve glory and accomplish something is to cast away their sex and take up male garb (Skeparnides).

## 1.1. Arwen

Arwen is the first important female character the reader meets in the series. She is seen through Frodo's eyes, while he is resting in Rivendell from his injury. The description of her makes the reader think she is a beautiful apparition Frodo imagines, his vision still clouded by his pain. Her raven hair, pale complexion and general beauty that emanate from her presence cause the reader to lose breath before Arwen:

and there sat a lady fair to look upon, and so like was she in form of womanhood to Elrond that Frodo guessed that she was one of his close kindred. Young she was and yet not so. The braids of her dark hair were touched by no frost, her white arms and clear face were flawless and smooth, and the light of stars was in her bright eyes, grey as a cloudless night. (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 295-6).

Later, it is revealed Arwen is Elvish, a daughter of Elrond. The mystery of her beauty is now more clear, and since in Tolkien's story Elves are the wisest of all, Arwen is in possession of such wisdom and knowledge: "thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 296). She, like all Elves, is immortal and has lived many lives. Her kindness and generosity are best expressed when she gives up her immortality for Aragorn's love and Frodo's wellbeing; she gifts Frodo with her jewel in order to relieve him of his pain and denounces her place on the ship to Valinor, so Frodo could sail to a better place: "I shall not go with him now when he departs to the Havens (...) If your hurts grieve you still and the memory of your burden is heavy, then you may pass into the West, until all your wounds and weariness are healed" (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1276).

The only way Arwen partakes in war is passive. She makes a banner for Aragorn, to encourage him and his men and to lift their spirits during endless battles against Evil: "a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it (...) And the

stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1109). Through her grace and beauty, Arwen complements Aragorn’s masculinity and paints him as a strong, heroic and just king.



## 1.2. Galadriel

Galadriel is the second female character the reader meets in the series. She is by far the most powerful, as she is ancient and wise. She is an Elf, and in regards to her family ties, she is Arwen's maternal grandmother. She resides in a secluded forest of Lothlorien, known for its golden leaves and peace the forest offers. The Fellowship meets Galadriel, sitting side by side with her spouse, Celeborn. She is described as a great beauty, with a wave of golden hair and old, yet wise and all-knowing eyes:

On two chairs beneath the bole of the tree and canopied by a living bough there sat, side by side, Celeborn and Galadriel. (...) Very tall they were, and the Lady no less tall than the Lord; and they were grave and beautiful. (...) and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold; (...) but no sign of age was upon them, unless it were in the depths of their eyes; for these were keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory. (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 461).

She does accompany Celeborn in their rule, but Tolkien acknowledges her strength and power by having her sit next to Celeborn, thus making them equal.

Another testimony to her strength is her internal, ever-lasting battle with Sauron, the Dark Lord. He tries to penetrate her mind, discover the secrets of Elves and exploit them, but Galadriel is strong in mind and resists his attacks: "I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind, or all of his mind that concerns the Elves. And he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed" (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 474). She is also the keeper of one of the Elvish Rings of power, Nenya of Adamant, and adamant has always been a legendary rock with incredible endurance and strength.

The power simply radiates from Galadriel's presence, making her seem like something unreachable, a part of beautiful, yet long forgotten history: "She seemed no longer perilous or terrible, nor filled with hidden power. Already she seemed to him, as by men of later days Elves

still at times are seen: present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 486).

Galadriel’s gifts and advice help the Fellowship reach their goal, and her wisdom helps them battle the Evil they find in their way. Her role in the war is not as passive as Arwen’s, but Galadriel still does not actively participate in battles – only through gifts and words.

### 1.3. Eowyn

Eowyn is the third and last main female character in the series. She is often called “a daughter of Rohan,” as she is King Theoden’s niece. She is first seen during the act of purification of Theoden. Even in such a dark moment, she is beautiful and caring, her strength mirroring in her posture: “Grave and thoughtful was her glance, as she looked on the king with cool pity in her eyes. Very fair was her face, and her long hair was like a river of gold. Slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings” (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 672). Aragorn comments on her appearance and the impression she left on him when he first saw her: “When I first looked on her and perceived her unhappiness, it seemed to me that I saw a white flower standing straight and proud, shapely as a lily, and yet knew that it was hard, as if wrought by elf-wrights out of steel” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1134). The images of steel strength and firmness, often used to describe men, are now assigned to one of the women, and to a mortal one as well.

Her power and ability to lead is acknowledged by one of the King’s men, Hama. When they talk of a person able to guard the people of Rohan, Eowyn is described as a perfect leader: “She is fearless and high-hearted. All love her. Let her be as lord to the Eorlingas, while we are gone” (Tolkien, *The Two Towers* 683). The qualities of fearlessness and valour have usually been ascribed to men, but now Tolkien uses the same attributes to describe a maiden of Rohan.

However, these qualities are not good enough to qualify Eowyn to actively engage in war. During her short quarrel with Aragorn, her strong mind comes out, and she voices the desperation of her position and role of female in an all-male world:

All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-

woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death. (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1027).

Her gender prevents her from riding into battle, so despite her brave, honest words, she needs to cast her femininity aside, and dress as a man, taking up a male name, Dernhelm, so she could fight for what she believes in and live the life of battle and honour she so desperately craves for.

On the battlefield, Eowyn shows such courage, only some could parry. She faces the Witch-king of Angmar, the leader of the Ringwraiths, standing tall, proud and unyielding, defending her King at the cost of her life: “Still she did not blench: maiden of the Rohirrim, child of kings, slender but as a steel-blade, fair but terrible. A swift stroke she dealt, skilled and deadly. The outstretched neck she clove asunder, and the hewn head fell like a stone” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1101-2).

Nevertheless, having fallen in love with Faramir, Eowyn decides to give up the life she had always wanted and settle for a peaceful life of a healer: “I will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren” (Tolkien, *The Return of the King* 1264). Her action does have an ambiguous meaning; she is either too weak to pursue her life-long dream of glory and settles for a profession fit for a woman, or she simply grew as a person and is ready to sacrifice her dreams for love and in favour of a better future. Either way, she changes her plans to adjust to a man.

## 2. Robert Jordan's Female Characters

Robert Jordan's series *The Wheel of Time* is possibly the longest fantasy series ever to be written. His series is comprised of fourteen books, the first being published in 1990, and the last in January 2013. Many critics resent Jordan for describing his female characters in a similar manner: they are all beautiful, powerful, and irritating to men.

Goldsmith (2003) argues that Jordan is one of the few authors who depict female characters in action, and is able to create an image of a powerful woman. She confirms that with the claim that Jordan is not afraid of long descriptions of women, or their adventures. He gives them not only beauty, but adventurous spirit and keen intellect as well.

However, Jordan's world is based on the theory that: "men and women cannot fill each other's role" (Goldsmith). Every attempt to do so resulted in failure and deep misery; the main antagonist of the series, the Dark One, was set loose by such an attempt. This confirms the rigid division of strictly male and strictly female roles and chores, reflecting a traditional sexist male viewpoint (Goldsmith). Nevertheless, "Jordan has no handicap in creating strong individuals with unique personalities" (Goldsmith). This is most obviously seen in some of the main characters, of which Elayne, Aviendha and Graendal will be scrutinized.

## 2.1. Elayne

Elayne Trakand is, by the end of the series, a queen of Andor, a powerful Aes Sedai<sup>1</sup> and heir presumptive to the throne of Cairhien. The main character of the series, Rand al'Thor meets her in the gardens of her palace and is struck by her beauty:

She was perhaps two or three years younger than he, tall for a girl, and beautiful, her face a perfect oval framed by that mass of sunburst curls, her lips full and red, her eyes bluer than he could believe. She was completely different from Egwene in height and face and body, but every bit as beautiful. (Jordan, *The Eye of the World* 595).

Her beauty is only one of the characteristics that Jordan ascribes to her. As she is to ascend to the throne one day, she is well-educated, cunning and strong. Besides her beauty, she uses her brain as well, as shown on many occasions. Throughout the series, she shows great intelligence, the most remarkable moment when she copies the weaves she had seen only twice before, in order to save someone's life: "She barely understood some of what she was doing, and none at all of other parts, yet she paid close attention, from her hiding place, to how the weave was shaped" (Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven* 514). She demonstrates such ability with weaves again when she binds Aviendha, Min and herself to Rand al'Thor later in the series, having witnessed the creation of the weaves only once. That only confirms her as a formidable Aes Sedai of great strength and skill.

Amongst other roles in the series, Elayne carries that of the queen of Andor, which is a rather large country in the Westlands<sup>2</sup>. It is specific in the sense that only a woman can sit on the throne, and a man is considered King Consort. The throne is usually inherent, but the heiress must prove herself to be worthy of the crown. Through her majestic game with the other ruling

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<sup>1</sup> An Aes Sedai is a person who can channel One Power. In the Age of Legends, both men and women could have been Aes Sedai, but after the tainting of saidin, the male half of One Power, only women could wield One Power and not go insane, so only females remained Aes Sedai until present time in the series.

<sup>2</sup> The Westlands is a name of the continent on which the action takes place.

houses, Elayne wins the Rose Crown for herself, thus proving herself capable of holding the throne and ruling: “I watched you grow up, and by the time you were fifteen I knew you’d be a good queen, perhaps as good as Andor has ever had” (Jordan, *Knife of Dreams* 743).

## 2.2. Aviendha

As well as Elayne, Aviendha is another strong, powerful female character. She comes from a warrior nation, the Aiel. They could equal the Arab tribes in our world, by their fierceness and endurance. The first time the reader meets Aviendha, she is still a Far Dareis Mai<sup>3</sup>, spirited and skilled in battle, but still full of respect for Aes Sedai: “She had heard all of her life how deadly Aiel were – these Maidens of Spear no less than members of the male warrior societies...” (Jordan, *The Dragon Reborn* 432). She is also very beautiful and attractive, with a variation of red hair and pale eyes, common to any Aiel: “Blue-green eyes and reddish hair cut short except for a narrow tail that hung to her shoulders; soft, laced knee-boots and close fitting coat and breeches all in the shades of earth and rock. Such coloring and clothing had been described to her once; this woman was Aiel” (Jordan, *The Dragon Reborn* 432).

Because of her immense strength in One Power, she is called from the ranks of Far Dareis Mai to train and become a Wise One, one of many spiritual leaders of Aiel people. During her training, she shows a great deal of intellect and serves as an advisor to Rand al'Thor, teaching him the way of Aiel, since Rand's father was a respected chief in Aiel society. In many of his battles, Aviendha stands side by side with Rand, helping him either with her power or with her well-calculated advice. For some time, during his teachings, she is the first to follow after Rand, no matter the peril: “She was the first to step through, watching Rand, not where she put her feet. She walked all the way to him without once so much as glancing at anything except his face” (Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven* 841).

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<sup>3</sup> Far Dareis Mai is an Aiel name and means Maiden of Spear. It is a special warrior society, female exclusive, and the membership is lifelong, unless a woman decides she wants to marry or have children, or is called to train for a Wise One.



### 2.3. Graendal

Graendal is one of the many female antagonists. She is ancient, over three thousand years old, and extremely powerful. Her evilness does not manifest through her external appearance, she is actually very beautiful, with full figure and particular taste in clothes and jewels: “Graendal would have been accounted a stunningly beautiful woman, lush and ripe. Her gown was green silk, cut low. A ruby the size of a hen’s egg nestled between her breasts, and a coronet encrusted with more rested on her long, suncolored hair” (Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven* 18).

She is the type to actively participate in battle, but she chooses to linger in the shadows and play her part through other people: “Graendal, too, followed conquest, though her methods did not involve soldiers; for all her concern with her toys, she took one solid step at a time” (Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven* 23). She is very skilled in Compulsion, a weave of One Power that allows the weaver to control the mind of the affected. The stronger the weave, the more submissive the person is, gradually forgetting who they are: “This pair might have been of use, properly manipulated, but the level of compulsion Graendal employed surely left them good for little more than decoration” (Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven* 19).

Even though she might not be the most powerful of the Forsaken<sup>4</sup>, she is still adept in warcraft, as demonstrated in the Last Battle, when she uses compulsion to lead the four great generals to make mistakes and destroy their own armies with wrong decisions. As one of the Forsaken, she is cruel and feared, a status that actually flatters Graendal: “She is devious, and she uses her pets in rites to cause the roughest soldier I ever knew to swear celibacy” (Jordan, *The Fires of Heaven* 502).

However, when she fails to do so as ordered by the Dark Lord, Graendal is killed and resurrected under a new name, Hessalam, and under new look, which finally reveals her rotting nature from

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<sup>4</sup> The Forsaken are a group of channelers, both male and female, who served the Shadow in the Age of Legends. There used to be more of them, but only the strongest thirteen survived until today, sealed in the prison with the Dark One.

the inside: “The creature had alarmingly unpleasant features, with a hooked yet bulbous nose and pale eyes that were off center with one another. She wore a dress that tried to be fine, of yellow silk, but it only served to highlight the woman’s ugliness” (Sanderson and Jordan, *A Memory of Light* 68).

## Conclusion

As seen from the previous analyses, both Tolkien and Jordan have female characters that possess immense strength in mind or in body. Compared to Jordan's characters, Tolkien's characters do not seem without power. They are all very brave, and their intelligence is equal to that of men. It is obvious especially in the examples of Arwen and Galadriel, since they are of Elvish people and they possess a wisdom that is bestowed upon them at the moment of their birth, as well as beauty. All of Tolkien's female characters are beauties, with pale complexion and deep, starry eyes. It is possible to claim that with Tolkien's female characters, their appearance matches their soul, as they are all kind, good-natured and graceful. The only thing that Tolkien lacks, and Jordan has an abundance of it, is female characters in action.

While only one of Tolkien's female characters actively participate in war and battle, Jordan has an entire Ajah<sup>5</sup> of Aes Sedai whose sole purpose is to fight in the Last Battle. Even though the Green Ajah is named the Battle Ajah, other Aes Sedai fight in battles as well, no matter the colour or purpose of their Ajah. That is the main difference in these two series: the idea of female characters fighting, equal to men. Not to underestimate Jordan, most of his female characters are adorned with ethereal beauty and charm, but contrary to Tolkien, their beauty sometimes does not reveal whether their soul is as beautiful as their appearance.

Nevertheless, both authors must be accounted for creating exceptionally strong female characters, whose idea of beauty and bravery still stands as a role-model for other authors such as G.R.R.Martin and G.G.Kay, and women around the world as well.

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<sup>5</sup> Ajah is a name for a group of Aes Sedai, and they are divided in seven groups/Ajahs, according to their main role and purpose in the world. The Ajahs are as following: Red, Green, Grey, White, Yellow, Blue and Brown.

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