

The Light of Stars: Frodo's Elvish Air

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“There is something strange about you, Frodo, an Elvish air, maybe” Faramir tells Frodo (“The Window on the West” p. 653). There is indeed something that sets Frodo apart from other Hobbits. Sam sees it when Frodo is asleep in Ithilien:

The early daylight was only just creeping down into the shadows under the trees, but he saw his master's face very clearly, and his hands, too, lying at rest on the ground beside him. He was reminded suddenly of Frodo as he had lain, asleep in the house of Elrond, after his deadly wound. Then as he had kept watch Sam had noticed that at times a light seemed to be shining faintly within; but now the light was even clearer and stronger. Frodo's face was peaceful, the marks of fear and care had left it; it looked old, old and beautiful, as if the chiseling of the shaping years was now revealed in many fine lines that had before been hidden, though the identity of the face was not changed. Not that Sam Gamgee put it that way to himself. He shook his head, as if finding words useless, and murmured, “I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him whether or no.” (“Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit” p. 638)

Sam sees it again in Mordor when he thinks Frodo is dead: “And for a moment he lifted up the Phial [of Galadriel] and looked down at this master, and the light burned gently now with the soft radiance of the evening-star in summer, and in that light Frodo's

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face was fair of hue again, pale but beautiful with an elvish beauty, as of one who has long passed the shadows” (“The Choices of Master Samwise” p. 716).

What is this Elvish air and why does Frodo, a Hobbit, have it? Is Frodo of Elvish descent? Does he have more in common with the Elves or Númenóreans than he does with other Hobbits? To answer these questions we first need to examine what Tolkien tells us about Hobbits, Elves, and the Men of Númenor.

Concerning Hobbits

Tolkien makes it clear that most Hobbits are a simple, peace-loving, provincial folk. Bilbo, Frodo, Merry, and Pippin stand out because of their adventurous tendencies, inherited from their Tookish ancestors. This restlessness is stronger in Bilbo and Frodo, who also stand out because, unlike most Hobbits who have large families, they are lifelong bachelors. After his retirement, Bilbo appears more comfortable living among Elves in Rivendell than he ever was in the Shire. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien hints that these things could be because Bilbo’s alleged fairy heritage:

It was often said (in other families) that long ago one of the Took ancestors must have taken a fairy wife. That was, of course, absurd, but certainly there was something not entirely hobbitlike about them, and once in a while members of the Tookclan would go and have adventures. They discretely disappeared, and the family hushed it up; but the fact remained

that the Tooks were not as respectable as the Bagginses, though they were undoubtedly richer. (“An Unexpected Party” p. 16)

Is it absurd? Hobbits are related to Men (Prologue p. 2 and “At the Sign of the Prancing Pony” p. 146-7) and Men have married Elves on at least three noteworthy occasions. We also know that Fallowhides, the branch of Hobbits that includes the Tooks and Brandybucks, were friendlier with Elves than other Hobbits (Prologue p. 3) and that Hobbits may have originally learned about building from the Elves (Prologue p. 6). By the time Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* it was clear that the origin of Hobbits was unknown in Middle-earth, but that they could be ennobled by associating with Elves. The most notable example is in SR 1420 after Sam casts Galadriel’s gift of dust into the air of the Shire and “all the children born or begotten in that year, and there were many, were fair to see and strong, and most of them had a rich golden hair that had before been rare among hobbits” (“The Grey Havens” p. 1000).

Frodo was distinctly different from other Hobbits long SR 1420, in fact, long before he left the shire: “Indeed, though he did not know it, Bilbo (and Gandalf) had thought him the best hobbit in the Shire” (“Fog on the Barrow Downs” p. 137). His restlessness, attraction to starlight, and Elves also set him apart: “to the amazement of sensible folk he was sometimes seen far from home walking in the hills and woods under the starlight. Merry and Pippin suspected that he visited the Elves at times, as Bilbo had done” (“The Shadow of the Past” p. 41). When Frodo finally does leave the Shire, he sets out at night so he can enjoy walking under the stars (“Three is Company” p. 69). Tolkien

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is deliberately ambiguous about Frodo's Elvish air, so it and his attraction to all things Elvish is never clearly explained, leaving the possibility that there *is* something unusual in his family tree.

What about the Ring? Over the course of *The Hobbit* and *LotR*, four different Hobbits possessed the Ring. Could Frodo's Elvish air be a result? This is highly unlikely. Bilbo possessed the ring for 60 years and showed no sign of the Elvish light that radiates from Frodo. Sam carried the ring briefly but under very difficult circumstances and also showed no sign of Elvishness. Gollum/Smeagol possessed the Ring for hundreds of years and found contact with light or anything Elvish painful, so the Ring is definitely not the source of Frodo's Elvish air.

Concerning Elves

Elves in Middle-earth look much like Men, but are nobler in spirit and more beautiful in form. In most Elves this nobility is reflected in the light that seems to emanate from them, such as when Frodo, Sam, and Pippin meet Gildor and company on the road in the Shire: "They passed slowly, and the Hobbits could see the starlight glimmering on their hair and in their eyes. They bore no lights, yet as they walked a shimmer, like the light of the moon above the rim of a hill before it rises, seemed to fall about their feet" ("Three is Company" p. 78).

Frodo's first sight of Glorfindel is similar: "To Frodo it appeared that a white light was shining through the form and raiment of the rider, as if through a thin veil" ("Flight to the Ford" 204). When Frodo asks Gandalf about it later he explains that "you saw him

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for a moment as he is upon the other side: one of the mighty of the Firstborn. He is an Elf-lord in a house of princes” (“Many Meetings” p. 217). This seems to imply that only some Elves radiate this light, most likely those High Elves who saw the light of the Two Trees in Valinor, the wisest and most powerful Elves in Middle-earth. Galadriel, however, is never described as radiating light but she and Celeborn have keen eyes: “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 (“The Mirror of Galadriel” p. 345). Elrond and Arwen, who are half-Elves, don’t seem to radiate light either but it is reflected in their eyes, probably because of their descent from Lúthien and Melian. Elrond’s eyes “were grey as a clear evening, and in them was light like the light of stars” (“Many Meetings” p. 221). Arwen’s description is similar: “the light of stars was in her bright eyes” (ibid.). So, whether it is radiated from their forms or from their eyes, this light is a characteristic shared by many Elves in Middle-earth. No other races exhibit this light, but it can show up in anyone even those of partial Elvish descent.

Concerning Númenóreans

Númenóreans are the descendants of Elros, brother of Elrond, who chose to be of Man-kind. Because Númenóreans are descendants of Lúthien, an Elf, and Melian, a Maia (refer to Fig. 1 Elrond’s Family Tree) the inner light associated with Elves shows through in Aragorn, in whom the blood of Númenor runs true.

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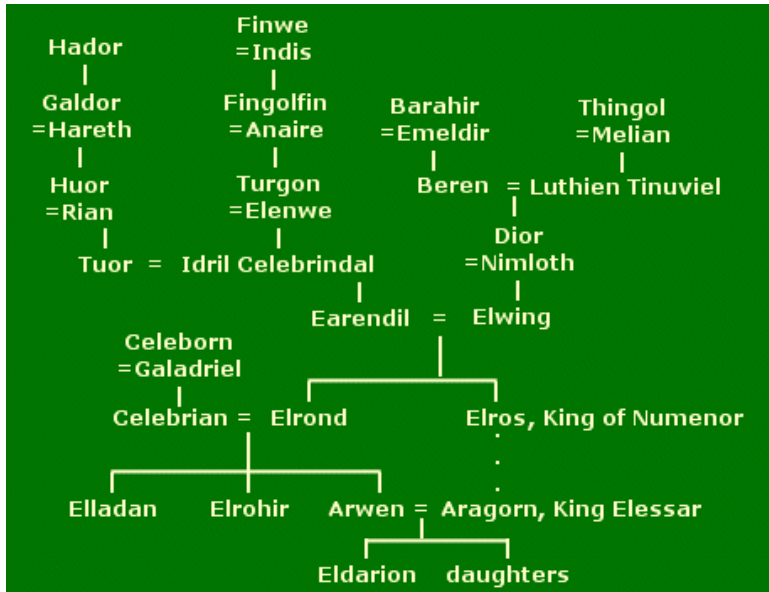


Figure 1 Elrond's Family Tree. Source: “Elrond.” The Thain’s Book.

Tolkien repeatedly describes the hidden nobility that Aragorn allows to shine through from time to time and his eyes shine with an Elven light. The Hobbits see it in Bree: “in his eyes gleamed a light, keen and commanding” (“Strider” p. 168). The light in his eyes shines when Aragorn tells the Hobbits the tale of Beren and Lúthien (“A Knife in the Dark” p. 190) and when he sees the Argonath (“The Great River” p. 384).

Aragorn also radiates light that evokes images of Eärendil and Elendil. When Frodo sees him with Arwen in Rivendell “a star shone on his breast” (“Many Meetings” p. 232). When Aragorn reveals his hidden nobility to Éomer “For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown. Éomer stepped back and a look of awe was in his face. He cast down his proud

eyes” (“The Riders of Rohan” p. 423). Éomer may not perceive the crown the same way as Legolas does, but whatever he sees humbles his pride.

How *do* mortals perceive this air of Númenor? Apparently in much the same way they perceive wizards, based on comments by Frodo, Sam, and Pippin. When Frodo awakens in Rivendell, he tells Gandalf about meeting Aragorn and says that Aragorn reminds him of Gandalf (“Many Meetings” p. 214). Pippin says nearly the same thing in “The Houses of Healing” (p. 852) and Sam has a similar reaction to Faramir in Ithilien:

“Ah well, sir,” said Sam, “you said my master had an elvish air; and that was good and true. But I can say this: you have an air too, sir, that reminds me of, of, -- well, Gandalf, of wizards.”

“Maybe,” said Faramir. “Maybe you discern from far away the air of Númenor .” (“The Window on the West” p. 667)

Pippin sees a likeness between Gandalf and Denethor in whom, like Faramir, the blood of Númenor runs nearly true:

He [Denethor] turned his dark eyes on Gandalf, and now Pippin saw the likeness between the two [...] Denethor looked indeed much more like a great wizard than Gandalf did, more kingly, beautiful, and powerful; and older. Yet by a sense other than sight Pippin perceived that Gandalf had the greater power and the deeper wisdom, and a majesty that was veiled.

And he was older, far older. (“Minas Tirith” p. 740)

The Hobbits don't know that wizards are Istari, a type of Maiar, but do see something that sets them apart from ordinary Men, some air reminiscent of Númenor or Elves. Frodo sees the similarity in Rivendell at the feast celebrating his recovery when Elrond, Glorfindel, and Gandalf are "revealed as lords of dignity and power" ("Many Meetings" p. 220). Based on this evidence we can conclude that Númenóreans and the Istari have an something like an Elvish air, but ordinary Men and Hobbits do not, though some Men and Hobbits can perceive it in others.

Speaking of perception, Frodo seems unaware of the light he radiates, can not control it, and not everyone can see it. Apparently only those who are good and wise are aware of it: Sam and Faramir, who comment on it, and, presumably, Gandalf, Elrond, Aragorn, and Galadriel. Frodo's inability to control this light might be part of the reason Galadriel gives him the light of Eärendil: to give him light and hope "when all other lights go out" because he can not control his own light ("Farewell to Lorien" p. 367).

Concerning Elf-Friends

While Frodo may have ancestors who are Elves or Númenóreans, at the very least he *does* have a special friendship with Elves, who refer to him as an Elf-friend. Gildor recognizes it as soon as he meets Frodo ("Three is Company" p. 79). The term Elf-friend can refer to the Edain who were "drawn to the Light of the West, entered Beleriand, where many of them entered the service of the Eldar and fought valiantly in the Wars of Beleriand" (Foster 135). It is also "a title or epithet bestowed by Elves upon those of other races who aided them or liked them" (143).

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Bilbo is the first Hobbit to be named an elf-friend by the Elvenking at the end of *The Hobbit*, but he has no change in his appearance as a result of this friendship. Frodo, on the other hand, seems to have physical signs that indicate this special relationship, and it is evident early in *The Fellowship of the Ring* for Goldberry tells him: “I see you are an elf-friend; the light in your eyes and the ring in your voice tells it” (“In the House of Tom Bombadil” p. 122).

In *The Silmarillion*, whenever there are marriages between any of the Free People of Middle-earth, the lesser race is ennobled by association with the greater race. For example, Thingol (an Elf) is ennobled by his marriage to Melian (a Maia), and Tuor (a Man) is ennobled by his marriage to Idril (an Elf). Is it possible that associating with Elves has ennobled Bilbo and, especially, Frodo so much that their “Elvish air” has rubbed off on Frodo? So much so that Frodo emanates an Elvish air unlike any other mortal? Bilbo spent far more time with Elves than Frodo, living in Rivendell for years without showing any sign of the light that emanates from Frodo. Even after Sam blesses the Shire with Galadriel’s gift of dust in SR 1420, no other Hobbits radiate an Elvish light, so it seems unlikely that being named an Elf-friend or associating with Elves is the origin of Frodo’s Elvish air.

Concerning the Valar

Another possibility is that this light is a mark of the Grace of the Valar. A discussion of the influence of the Valar in *LotR* and who their agents might be are topics for another paper (or two!), but from the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there

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are hints that Frodo is being guided by an outside influence. Sometimes the guidance is in the form of encouragement, such as Frodo's dreams and visions, and sometimes it's much more direct, when Frodo feels as if someone else is speaking through him.

Unlike other Hobbits, including Bilbo, Frodo has prophetic dreams and visions that could be encouragement from the Valar. This sense of foresight, even if he doesn't recognize it, makes him more like Elves and Númenóreans than other Hobbits. In fact, foresight is unheard of in other Hobbits. In Hobbiton, Frodo grows more and more restless after Bilbo's departure. This could just be his Tookish side kicking in, but after he leaves Hobbiton Frodo begins having dreams and visions that foreshadow his future. He dreams of the sea after leaving Hobbiton but before leaving Shire ("A Conspiracy Unmasked" p. 106). Later he dreams of Gandalf trapped in Orthanc ("In the House of Tom Bombadil" p. 125) and, while in the house of Tom Bombadil, of a ship sailing to the Undying Lands ("Fog on the Barrow Downs" p. 133). In Galadriel's mirror he sees a ship sailing to the Undying Lands ("The Mirror of Galadriel" p. 355) and he is refreshed by his dreams, even when he can't remember them ("The Passage of the Marshes" p. 620). Clearly, something is influencing Frodo's dreams and guiding him toward his appointed task and that something is likely the Valar.

At times Frodo feels as if someone else is speaking through him. This, too, could be the Valar, guiding their chosen one. It starts in the Old Forest when Frodo calls for help without any idea of why or what he hoped for ("The Old Forest" p. 116) and happens again on Weathertop when Frodo calls on Elbereth when attacking the

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Ringwraith (“A Knife in the Dark” p. 191). It is most clearly an outside influence in “The Council of Elrond” when Frodo offers to bear the burden of the ring: “At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, *as if some other were using his small voice*” [emphasis mine] (“The Council of Elrond” p. 263). This outside influence is again clear when Frodo calls on Eärendil when facing Shelob: “*Aiya Eärendil Elenion Ancalima!* he cried, and knew not that he had spoken; for it seemed that another voice spoke through his, clear, untroubled by the foul air of the pit” (“Shelob’s Lair” p. 704).

Under dire circumstances at Amon Hen Frodo can perceive a voice telling him to take the ring off but the text makes it clear this is Gandalf: “Take it off! Take it off! Fool, take it off! Take off the Ring!” (“The Breaking of the Fellowship” p. 392). This is the only time the reader can tell who or what is influencing Frodo, and leads to the conclusion that the other instances must be someone other than Gandalf.

There are other hints that something is influencing events in the war of the Ring. When Gandalf explains the history of the Ring and how it came to Bilbo he says: “Behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought” (“The Shadow of the Past” p. 54-55). While Frodo doesn’t quite understand this, it’s clear that Gandalf, a Maia and agent of the Valar, does.

Though he doesn’t say so directly, Elrond also recognizes the influence of the Valar, as he explains to those gathered for his council:

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That is the purpose for which you are called hither. Called I say, though I have not called you to me, strangers from distant lands. You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. Believe rather that it is so ordered that we, who sit here, and none others, must now find counsel for the peril of the world. (“The Council of Elrond” p. 236)

He also recognizes the influence of the Valar on Frodo when he tells Frodo “If I understand a right all that I have heard [...] I think that this task is appointed to you, Frodo; and that if you do not find a way, no one will” (“The Council of Elrond” p. 264).

The Valar push Frodo and Sam to complete their quest and offer respite afterwards. Frodo and Sam are driven by a sense of urgency on Mt. Doom: “Suddenly a sense of urgency which he did not understand came to Sam. It was almost as if he had been called: ‘Now, now or it will be too late!’ He braced himself and got up. Frodo also seemed to have felt the call” (“Mount Doom” p. 921). After their long quest is completed, Frodo’s dreams and visions culminate in a longing for the sea. Sam comments that Rivendell has something of everything:

“...the Shire and the Golden Wood, and Gondor and kings’ houses and inns and meadows and mountains all mixed,” [...]

“Yes, something of everything Sam, except the sea,” Frodo had answered; and now he repeated it to himself: “Except the Sea.” (“Many Partings” p. 964)

Sam simply longs for home, but Frodo openly longs for the sea and the peace of Valinor where he can truly be healed and be free of the scars left on him by the Ring. Frodo has been slowly changing over the course of his quest. His very essence has shifted; he is still a Hobbit but he identifies with Elves far more than Hobbits, so much so that the Shire no longer feels like home.

Concerning Valinor

Elrond recognizes not only the influence of the Valar in Frodo's life but the unusual and exalted status this gives him:

But it is a heavy burden. So heavy that none could lay it on another. I do not lay it on you. But if you take it freely, I will say that your choice is right; and though all the mighty elf-friends of old, Hador, Húrin and Túrin, and Beren himself were assembled together, your seat should be among them. ("The Council of Elrond" p. 264)

Frodo is in even rarer company: he (along with Bilbo) becomes the first mortal to enter Undying Lands since Tuor and Eärendil. Tuor, a Man and agent of Ulmo, spouse of Idril and father of Eärendil, was the first and only mortal allowed to stay in Aman; even Eärendil was not allowed to do so: "in after days it was sung that Tuor alone of mortal Men was numbered among the elder race, and was joined with the Noldor, whom he loved; and his fate is sundered from the fate of Men" (*Silm.* "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin" p. 245).

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If Tuor was the chosen agent of Ulmo, which Vala is guiding Frodo? Probably more than one, most likely Manwë, Varda, Irmo and Ulmo. Manwë's "delight is in the winds and the clouds, and all the regions of the air" (*Silm.* "Valaquenta" p. 26). When seated on his throne with Varda he can see "further than all other eyes" (*ibid.*). Varda is the Lady of the Stars and "in light is her power and joy" (*ibid.*). When seated on her throne with Manwë she "hears more clearly than all other ears the sounds of voices that cry from east to west, from the hills and the valleys, and from the dark places that Melkor has made upon earth" (*ibid.*). Together Manwë and Varda watch over the events unfolding in Middle-earth. They intervene indirectly using eagles (emissaries of Manwë) and light which brings hope (realm of Varda).

Irmo is the master of visions and dreams (*Silm.* "Valaquenta" p. 28). He is probably the source of Frodo's dreams and visions.

Ulmo is the Lord of the Waters; he "loves both Elves and Men, and never abandoned them, not even when they lay under the wrath of the Valar" (*Silm.* "Valaquenta" p. 27). He mostly "speaks to those who dwell in Middle-earth with voices that are heard only as the music of water. For all seas, lakes, rivers, fountains, and springs are in his government; so the Elves say that the spirit of Ulmo runs in all the veins of the world. Thus news comes to Ulmo, even in the deeps, of all the needs and griefs of Arda, which otherwise would be hidden from Manwë" (*ibid.*). Ulmo is why the Children of Ilúvatar find comfort and peace near water, and he is the source of the sea-longing felt by Elves and a few select mortals.

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Of all the characters in *LotR* and *Silm*, Frodo has the most in common with Tuor: both are agents of the Valar, fulfill an impossible quest beyond all hope, long for the sea, and are rewarded with entrance to the Undying Lands. The only real difference between them is how well they understand the intervention of the Valar in their lives. Tuor had a direct encounter with Ulmo while Frodo's guidance was indirect. In the end, though, they share the unusual exception of being allowed to cross the sea to Aman.

In conclusion, Frodo's Elvish air could be due to his ancestry but is most likely a sign of the Grace of the Valar, which foreshadows his chosen destiny: to bear the Ring to its destruction and eventually sail to the Undying Lands. Frodo's admission Aman is rare, giving him more in common with Tuor than any other person or race in Middle-earth. The intervention of the Valar in Frodo's destiny is unusual but not unheard of and it is only through their Grace that Frodo can complete his quest and later truly be healed and free of the scars left on him by the Ring.

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