



University
of Stavanger

MAGNUS JORDAL IVERSEN
SUPERVISOR: SONYA LOUISE VECK

Wonderous Stories of Hope: An Ecocritical Reading of Trees in The Lord of the Rings

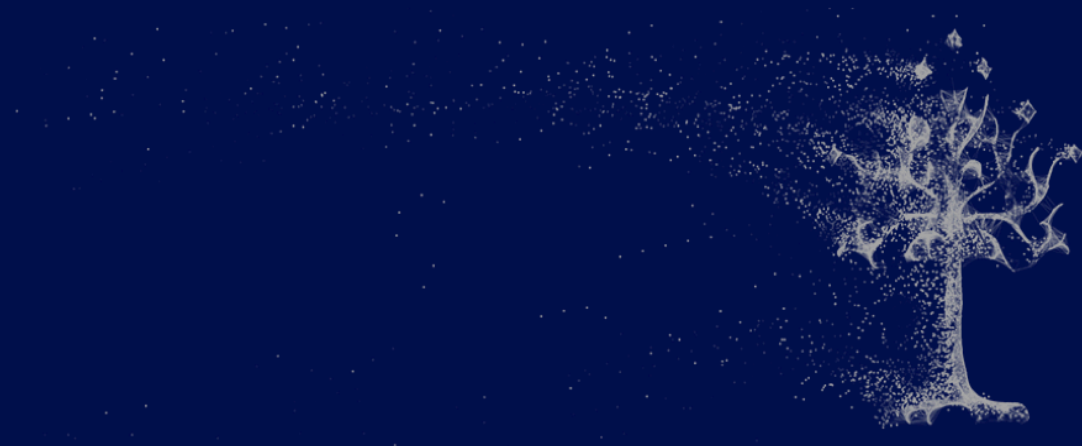
Bachelor thesis, 2024

Engelsk språk og litteratur - bachelor

Faculty of Arts and Education

Department of Cultural Studies and Languages

Words: 5813



Copyright © 2014
LotrProject

Abstract

Trees has an immense part of our lives, not only as beautiful scenery, but also contribute significantly to our ability to breathe. This thesis presents an ecocritical view on the use of trees in the legendarium *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) by J.R.R. Tolkien, which became especially popular during the 1960's and 1970's and again with the Peter Jackson film trilogy in the early 2000's. Its epic scope of righteousness and villainy set in a imaginary universe with a variety of sentient fairy tale-inspired beings has intrigued millions, and as one pick up the books you learn that much of this impact have their wellspring from the prose describing places, nature, objects and people - all of whom carried by deep, cosmic and inventive lore. This is also considered noteworthy in terms of understanding the gravity of trees in Middle Earth. Besides trees, ecocriticism and literature don't immediately strike as impactful as for example scientific articles for social change. But as there is ample research to its defence, even an essay by Tolkien himself on this topic (more specifically on fairy tales), which elaborate on fantasy's capacity to enthrall its reader in an alternative space - this essay will explain that foundation first to challenge any obstructive bias. On that note, I look into fantasy's function in terms of generating hope for a sustainable future and then show trees in four different scenarios: a healthy tree in Lothlórien, a dead holy tree in Gondor, the political standpoint of an Ent (the deviant amongst my chosen trees), and the results of a silver nut planted in Hobbiton. Each with their symbolic themes of morality, grace, and the balance between nature and culture.

Introduction

‘Of all thy realm what dost thou hold dearest?’

All have their worth,' said Yavanna, 'and each contributes to the worth of the others. But the *kelvar* [animals] can flee or defend themselves, whereas the *olvar* [plants] that grow cannot. And among these I hold trees dear. Long in the growing, swift shall they be in the felling, and unless they pay toll with fruit upon bough little mourned in their passing. So I see in my thought. Would that the trees might speak on behalf of all things that have roots, and punish those that wrong them!'

(Tolkien, 1977, 40)

After the process of photosynthesis, leaves may fall with a clean conscience having provided energy to the tree that formed them. Before they fall, trees reclaim most of the energy and structures that facilitate photosynthesis, but a fallen leaf will still have some energy stored, available for life on and in the ground to recycle. A healthy soil-microcosm will support the formation of new leaves (with essential nutrients and minerals). Such is the basic science of a healthy tree; leaves extract and give back to the roots – but also provide various means of survival for other beings¹. With this image in mind I will look into how the fantasy work *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954-1955) depicts trees as numinous - that is; spiritual in a non-theistic manner, and, by overlooking Tolkien's disregard with conscious allegory (Letter to Milton, 1977, xiv-xv), I chose to do an ecocritical interpretation. But firstly I will argue for the fantasy genre's function for ecocritical thinking and how it can induce hope under distressing times², in this case in the face of climate change³. This will fit thematically later to the symbolic use of trees in terms of regeneration and sustaining life - a suitable approach as the author deems art as “sub-creative” compared to biological life (1977, xv), which leads me to believe Tolkien had some similarities with a modern day environmentalist, or even an old

¹ From a private discussion on nature's way of sustainability vs. anthropocentric conduct. Kudos to my good friend and biologist Liem Dominic Østrådt-Jennings for this simplified explanation.

² I won't fail to mention that ‘distressing times’ in LOTR is of course caused by an immensely evil force seeking world domination, so it's not directly comparable.

³ This last detail is a small but important nod towards the youth, as “two-thirds of people between the ages of 16-25 respond that they feel sad, scared, and anxious when thinking about the future” (Yazell, 2024).

school 'hippie' - ranking humanity as a part of nature, not above (in a fundamental, evolutionary hierarchy).

For interpretation, I look into four passages with mentions of trees in LOTR (abbr. *The Lord of the Rings*), namely in order; the vocal ruminations of the anthropomorphic tree, Treebeard (would rather be called an Ent) in the second book *The Two Towers* (1954), Frodo's impression of a lustrous tree in the elven woodland-realm of Lothlórien in the first book *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) juxtaposed with the fading White Tree of Gondor with its significant lore, predominantly mentioned in the last book *The Return of the King* (1955), and lastly the cultivation of a new Party Tree in Hobbiton, planted by Samwise towards the end in *The Return of the King*. For additional substance I felt the necessity to include some essential lore-wise information, to know who characters are and more, which will be briefly addressed using *Silmarillion* (1977), as this added greatly to my personal aesthetic experience (in addition to Tolkien's musical neologism; i.e. inventive words, especially names). I will attempt to write this essay in a certain style to fit the theme - hence the embellished subtitles - as therein Tolkien's prose (not that I compare myself) lies the essence of this epic legendarium, depth of beauty and prompt for introspection for its audience. Geography and main storyline will have brief reminders, as it's expected that the reader has some prior knowledge of the works.

For an ecocritical understanding and how this can serve a hopeful function, I will firstly present how Tolkien defends reading fairy tales in *Tree and Leaf* (1964) - which I will take the liberty to expand to the fantasy genre in general - and I am set to use the articles "Nature vs. "Reality" in Fantasy Fiction: The Potential for Ecocritical Imaginings" (abbr. "Nature vs. "Reality"", Bal, 2021) and "A Climate of Hope" (Ashcroft, 2017), to further cement this argument⁴. For Tolkien's treatment of trees I will use the essays "How Trees Behave - Or Do They?" (Flieger, 2013), "Ending the dualism of nature and industry in *The Lord of the Rings*" (Sprouse, 2011), as well as showing his love for them with examples from the books (including *Silmarillion*, 1977). To attempt to explain the concept of the numinous, I will use

⁴ Disclaimer: I will not go into a scientific detailing in an attempt to convince those of denying political views of human influence on climate change. For further reading on this topic I refer to The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) webpage (link in References). And as scholars used are apparent in their critique on capitalism and postcolonialism and link fantasy as an subversive tool - I abstain from further explanation and 'finger pointing', as this is a given in ecocriticism.

the essay “The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in "The Lord of the Rings"” (Brawley, 2007).

Visions of Hope

Fantasy, according to my social circle, I deem is not for everyone - as the outlandishness and supernatural elements of the genre sometimes may cross into over-exaggeration, breaching realistic boundaries, leaving the reader disinterested and unable to relate. Or, in contrast, maybe total escapism is what's desired? These are things I've pondered for a long time, and there is arguably a childish element necessary to fully enjoy contemporary fantasy as intended (especially those marketed for teens and younger, like the Harry Potter-series), as its historic predecessor is the fairy tale. Tolkien read these aplenty as a child, as well as studied as an adult, and in his non-fictional book *Tree and Leaf* (1964), which includes the essay “On Fairy-Stories” (1939), he recounts and defends the genre, including this ‘childish element’ I mentioned.

First off, there's a need to settle what a fairy and the faërie actually is: a fairy is “a small imaginary being of human form that has magical powers, especially a female one” (like Tinker Bell from the Peter Pan-universe), whereas the faërie is the realm they dwell in, i.e. a fairyland (Oxford Languages). As such Tolkien defined the fairy-story as “one which touches on or uses Faërie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy”, and faërie's older definition is roughly translated as ‘magic’ (10). Though this is not limited to the race of fairies only, respectfully, but rather of all supernatural beings; trolls, elves, dragons, mermaids, and so on (classic examples are the folktale collections by Brothers Grimm and the literary fairy tales by H. C. Andersen). This comprehension — not making fairy stories a fairy species exclusive — diminishes the lexicographer's definition at the time, and will be the one I stick to.

An important note here, in terms of ecocriticism, is that Tolkien consider these creatures as more ‘natural’ than humans. Perhaps made in jest, but nonetheless a revealing comment on lexicographers definition of fairies as ‘supernatural beings of diminutive size’: “*Supernatural* [...] can hardly be applied [to fairies], unless *super* is taken merely as a superlative prefix. For it is man who is, in contrast [...] supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he.” (4-5). Yet, fairies are capable of both good and evil in a human sense, but we need to consider them as a separate creation to man, living in another mode (Flieger, 19). Yet are not very different from us, a small example in LOTR is the tree-spirit Old Man Willow (of unknown race, possibly a former Ent) who's

“filled with a hatred for things that go free upon the earth” (1954, 130). Like how real-world gardeners may consider unwanted stationary outgrowths in their gardens as ‘weeds’, and have them removed. It’s a hard to miss comment on moral nuance, Tolkien here is speaking up for the non-verbal side of nature.

Onto the peculiar relevance of a childish approach: children, as well as adults⁵, are especially enriched by fairy tales, according to Tolkien. Adult themes of the somber and violent parts of the human psyche, was to him educational (or rather “lessons in things that do not lecture”, 45) in preparing youngsters for the realities and hardships of life. It’s about not treating children as a “special kind of creature, [or] almost a different kind of race, rather than as normal, if immature, members of a particular family, and of the human family at large.” (maybe an offhand comment on Walt Disney⁶). Although children in this case read tales more experiential, with a *desire* for wonder, while adults more likely *study* them (as they can study anything) (1964, 34). In short, he defends that they understand the stories on a more pantheistic level than adults, and can recognize different classes and like them all the same (at times), and more often they are concerned with righteousness (39). The notion of being ignorant to political indications and prejudice, and being welcoming to a multicultural fellowship, lending a bit of the *benefit of the doubt*, is a fitting lead on how one should approach reading Tolkien; a little through the mind of a child. Therein lies also cautiousness, of course, as they should not be protected from darkness: “Most good ‘fairy-stories’ are about the *aventures* [adventures] of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches [i.e. in danger or close to it].” (9-10), which is how a story offers substantial impact and stand the test of time.

The previous section underpins what fantasy can utilize in the form of ecocriticism and instilling hope for the future, and that a good fairy story is also worth reading as an adult. A term coined by Tolkien, called “Secondary Belief” (in a “Secondary World”), which means

⁵ Today fantasy is associated with all age groups, and fairy tales mostly read to children as per tradition. Besides myths, folklore and legends (on a different podium), the fantasy of fairy tales (which had significant influence on LOTR) was, probably still is, especially associated with children.

⁶ Walt Disney’s productions were to him depriving children some of these truths; replacing them with goofy childishness. For example: Tolkien was not a fan of the Walt Disney caricatured depiction of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937), as it was, according to him, oversimplified and lacked the seriousness (and violence) of the original work. Therefore he forbade any of his work near the Disney Studios. Tolkien dying before the Disney Renaissance of 1989 (Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin) were perhaps for the best.

innate enthusiasm for a world, as whence you enter, what you relate as ‘true’ “accords with the laws of that world.” (37). A crucial feat of a good fantasy novel. Tolkien is rather strict here, as any moment of disbelief - pulling you into the “Primary World” again - renders the art as futile, and intolerable to proceed in. One can also imagine a world full of Peter Pans by taking this at face value. Deflecting this logic he says:

Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pans. Not to lose innocence and wonder; but to proceed on the appointed journey: that journey upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive, though we must travel hopefully if we are to arrive.
(45)

This also circles back to the importance of a childlike mindset, having valorous credence, paralleled with adult responsibilities. This hunch is what the essay “A Climate of Hope” (Ashcroft, 2017) conveys, a core to be reckoned with beyond interpretation (22) and holds a high regard for authors in general; “writers are the dream mechanism of the human race” (Okri, 1977, as cited in Ashcroft, 2017). His exposition borders on the esoteric, but I tend to agree with the statement that ecocriticism in literature, “instead of taxing science for its use of language to represent (mimesis), examines its ability to point (deixis). [...] [And] [t]hrough deixis, meaning develops from what is said or signed relative to physical space.” (Howarth, 1996, as cited in Ashcroft, 2017). Another way to explain a belief in a “Secondary World”. He related this to how fantasy stories can imbue the reader with a hope for a certain *utopia* (his words). As this can bear connotations to the satirical work *Utopia* (1516) by Thomas More, I choose respectfully to rather view this as a politically *greener* world; balancing nature and industry, as I learned Tolkien's works illustrate. Though, Reyyan Bal in “Nature vs. “Reality”” define the utopian as such: “[...] an enclave in which alternative modes of living can be imagined [...] in which nature is essential and central rather than merely a useful resource in an anthropocentric⁷ culture.” (2021, 1284), this makes the use of the term more clear in this context.

⁷ “[A] philosophical viewpoint arguing that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world.” A term which entered the academic field of environmental ethics in the 1970s (Boslaugh, Britannica Encyclopedia).

This paper, as previously stated, will not dig into the reasoning of what constitutes the realities of climate change, but rather gives an outlook on how fantasy's sophistication and detachment from reality, in this case concerning trees of Middle Earth, can take you to a place where utopian ideas (e.g. conserving old-growth forests, cleaner oceans, realizing ideas surrounding degrowth⁸, etc.) and societal change to accommodate a brighter future can be discussed (1286), and inspire similar actions of hope in the real world.

Shepherd of Trees

Bal highlights the first of my 'trees of choice' (in this case technically not defined as a tree) which is the sentient tree-like being Treebeard (an ancient Ent and tree shepherd of Fangorn Forest), which Merry and Pippin meets after escaping capture by a patrol of Uruk-hai (strong breed of Orcs) and make a run for it into Fangorn, during the second book. This happens after the splitting of the fellowship and Boromir's death in book one, whereas Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas decide to pursue the Uruk-hai, while Frodo (afraid of the rings influence on his mates) and Samwise continue to Mordor on their own.

The overarching war against Sauron that the fellowship was formed for, is of no initial interest to Treebeard at first. Up till now we haven't met any characters that strikes me as this politically neutral: "I am not altogether on anybody's side, because nobody is altogether on my side, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays." (although he takes a clear liking to Elves, compared to Orcs) (1954, 472). He also gives us this clear-cut dialogue about Sauron's right-hand wizard, Saruman: "He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment." (473). To connect 'metal and wheels' to the Industrial Revolution, or industry at large, seems plainly apparent coming from a mellow anthropomorphic tree⁹.

Fangorn is also located in the centre of Middle Earth, seemingly right between The Shire (where the journey starts) and Mordor (where the quest must be completed). So, if we were to draw a map where the North-Western lands stands for egalitarianism and South-Eastern for totalitarianism, Fangorn falls in between, thus offering new perspectives.

⁸ An academic and social movement "argu[ing] that the unitary focus of modern capitalism on growth, in terms of the monetary value of aggregate goods and services, causes widespread ecological damage and is not necessary for the further increase of human living standards." (Wikipedia, 2024).

⁹ As told by the man himself in this televised snippet uploaded by Epic Kingdom (21. May, 2022); he always wished to know how a tree felt about things. Link in bibliography.

Furthermore, Bal quotes Patrick Curry depicting the whole land of Middle Earth as a living character based on the “profound presence of the natural world” (2004, 50, as cited in Bal, 1290), which brings us to how the Hobbits change their perception from a rather superficial view of the war, to a more philosophically compassionate one; of equality and respect for all beings. Hobbits, known as devoted gardeners, now finding themselves on the other end of the stick, fully under the care and protection of an Ent, must have been a key factor to this revelation. “Through this understanding, they are able to bring together the human alliance against Sauron and Saruman with an alliance of nature, [because they] realise that this evil harms the one as much as the other.” (1293).

The Hobbits in the end also has an impact on Treebeard, rousing him from inertia and inspiring reclamation for his Fangorn forest-kin - being cut down by Saruman to fuel his weapon manufacturing at Isengard, located adjacent to the forest - and he promptly decides to summon other Ents for retaliation. Symbolically (and ironically), the end of Isengard is brought upon by one of trees’ closest elemental allies for survival: water. They break a dam, thus flooding the area. This act of destruction, that eventually leads to victory (1294), shows that recovery and restoration is never out of bounds with a strong vision.

Awakening Awe

Why care about trees? Besides being a useful resource as lumber and firewood, and something to climb, swing from, and nailing a birdhouse to - these components hold an innate reverence in sheer stature and variety, not to mention that some have sustained life for their surroundings for thousands of years. This knowledge and by sight render them aesthetically unrivaled, in my and presumably Tolkien’s opinion (referring to my chosen introductory quote from *Silmarillion*). Though, a forest is also a place of the uncanny; of getting lost and harboring the unseen, of what you may prefer to stay hidden - in a psychological sense. For example, after the events in the Mines of Moria and Gandalf’s death, the fellowship arrive and discuss how to move forth in the Lothlórien, an elven forest located North-West. Boromir has doubts about entering “[...] that perilous land we have heard in Gondor, and it is said few come out who once go in; and of that few none have escaped unscathed.” To which Aragorn replies that it would be correct if *unscathed* was switched with *unchanged* (338). Moreover, it will only prove dangerous for those with evil intent. An intriguing thought, entering this passage with an ecocritical eye.

The trees of this forest are called *Mellyrn*, with the unique quality of having smooth, silver-gray bark and long, large leaves colored green on the upper side and silver beneath, and

most peculiarly; instead of shedding leaves come autumn, they turn to gold and don't fall until spring again arrives. Rendering the forest floor golden, with new yellow flowers sprouting from the beads (335). The feeling of awe-inspiring beauty is described in many variations throughout Tolkien's legendarium (meaning: a literary collection of legends, Wiktionary, 2024), but a good example is Frodo's impression of one such tree when putting his hand on it: "[...] never before had he been so suddenly and keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself." (351). From this position he gazes out on the landscape and focuses on a hill with many mighty trees (or towers), and it seems to emanate a power in the form of light that keeps the land "in sway". A healthy forest of elvish influence (will elaborate in the next subtitle). If these descriptions and Frodo's experience awaken a certain feeling of transcendence, of timelessness and inexplicable wonder, then this is as closely I can define the numinous.

Brawley was also onto this, and describes it as "a state of mind which has as its basis a unique feeling-response to the holy which is oftentimes equated with God." (2007, 292). His essay explains and expands on the term invented by Rudolf Otto for his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), where it's argued that this feeling is the "common core" amongst all religions, but is not exclusively bound to religion (292). Brawley then adapts this concept to fantasy literature. Moreover, this feeling can be evoked by symbols objectifying the numinous, even without a clear reference - there is always one nonetheless. In other words, it's a sense of deep joy from a hidden source. It's like Brawley defines Otto's use of the *ideogram*: to try to conceptualize that which cannot be conceptualized (293). And through Frodo, the reader can experience a sub-version of the actual thing through imagining it. This conceptual essence is linked with the genre-theory of the Secondary World, and then, for relevance to this thesis; a reader's glee can materialize into a reminder of nature's beauty and a wish to conserve. Propelled by a shared point of view by the author and other readers, this can have a collective effect and converge into my chosen theme of hope.

In stark contrast we can look at the profane descriptions of the South-Eastern region Mordor, which is ruled by Sauron: "[...] Mordor was a dying land, but it was not yet dead. And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai [...] low scrubby trees lurked and clung, [...] [and] [t]he sullen shrivelled leaves of a past year hung on them, grating and rattling in the sad airs, but their maggot-ridden buds were only just opening." (1955, 921). Projecting here the mindscape of a realm ruled with tyranny and fear. A smaller example is my next tree, found within the realm of Gondor, in the capital city

Minas Tirith, where a fragment of Sauron's influence has found its way to the human psyche of the ruling steward.

Dominion Over Stewardship

In Middle Earth trees have a great historical- and cosmic value which adds to the numinous and acts as a source of unsullied light (before any 'fall'¹⁰, i.e. evil influence). I will keep details down the essentials, to trees and Elves, for the relevant context (as a complete overview of the lore will exhaust the space for this paper). We have the Two Trees of Valinor; *Laurelin* and *Telperion*, the golden and the silver tree, which was one of three sources of light in Valinor (simply put: a paradise; land of the gods; also called the Undying Lands by Elves and Ring-bearers who journey there for eternal bliss). These trees would eventually fall to the first Dark Lord Melkor, and by result the dew of each tree formed the Sun and Moon as sub-creations of light, sullied by evil (symbolic use of the duality of good and evil; evil emerging always from a source of good, 1977, xvi¹¹). Elves, who live long and harmonious lives with nature, is especially fond of the Telperion, and gave a sapling to the former King of Númenor as a symbol of friendship between Elves and Men. A seedling of this tree was eventually taken by Isildur (one of the former rulers of Gondor) and planted in Minas Tirith, in the citadel's courtyard, becoming a symbol of the line of kings. The seedling became a white tree, and the third of its kind is what's in LOTR, and albeit resembling and being a descendant of Telperion, emanate no light. Over time, this tree eventually died as there hasn't been a proper king for nearly a thousand years, yet it's still left standing and is now under the care of the delusional steward Denethor.

This is in the back of the wise and revived wizard Gandalf's mind as he and the hobbit Pippin are entering the royal grounds of Minas Tirith (just west of Mordor). They have travelled in advance from the fellowship, following the events in Rohan, primarily the Battle of Helms Deep. "A sweet fountain played there in the morning sun, and a sword of bright green lay about it; but in the midst, drooping over the pool, stood a dead tree, and the falling drops dripped sadly from its barren and broken branches back into the clear water." (1955,

¹⁰ "There can not be any story without a 'fall' [...]" (1977, xvii), which can be linked to the biblical theme of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God and subsequent fall from Eden to Earth. I will add that Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic throughout his life (Letter #213, 1981, 303).

¹¹ Also constituted by this quote from Elrond (in reply to why they cannot use the One Ring against Sauron): "For nothing is evil in the beginning." (1954, 267). I review this as an understanding for developmental psychology.

753). Displaying here the contrastive effect of the sun, greenery and water, with this once eminent trunk. The lack of lushness, besides lore, can be described by the Sprouse article¹² as consequence of Denethor's dominion rather than stewardship:

He fell under the delusion of his own power and sees himself as kingly. It is further explained that in his control, Minas Tirith was “falling year by year into decay” and the white tree had all but died in his care.” (30). [And to clarify the spirit of a Zen reading (which this article is):] The goal is not another world but another way of living in this one, even as nirvana is not another place but a liberated way of experiencing this one. (2011, 28)

When Gandalf and Pippin warn about Sauron's impending doom, Denethor refuses to cooperate in the war, as this is none of his concern when taking place out of sight of his city wall garrison. This behavior can be linked with the Sprouse's buddhist reading of the books; depicting Samwise and Frodo as *bodhisattvas* (people delaying enlightenment to liberate other beings from delusions and suffering), and the Ring reinforcing the opposite, the ego - or rather illusion opposed to empathetic, good-natured enlightenment. The steward has in other words isolated himself in his ego and castle. Moreover, a Zen-reading is not mainly concerned with a black-and-white understanding of industry vs. nature, but rather of power, which I find relevant and valid.

The white tree's vigor living in relation to the ruling king is what's showcased here; an unfit substitute with dulled wisdom and compassion, equals dead roots. Although, it wasn't always like this. Denethor became bitter after the death of his wife, and went further into despair and hopelessness as he found the force of Sauron to be overwhelming (seen through a Palantír stone controlled by Sauron), and after the death of his son Boromir. Hence, this fitting quote (originally describing Saruman's loss in Isengard): “[...] ‘dis-enchanted’ people will fall for the first rationalization for exploiting and destroying, and a disenchanted world doesn't feel worth defending.” (Eliade, 1958, as cited in Sprouse, 29). An apparent depression seem to haunt Denethor, and a series of further disenchanting incidents ultimately leads him to suicide.

¹² A Zen Buddhist reading of the books that fits well with ecocriticism.

When Aragorn in the end undertakes the throne as the rightful descendant of Kings, he and Gandalf eventually find another small sapling of Telperion down a stony slope on Mount Mindolluin (the mountain Minas Tirith lies at the foot of). “[...] [O]ut of the very edge of the snow there sprang a sapling tree no more than three feet high. Already it had put forth leaves long and shapely, dark above and silver beneath, and upon its slender crown it bore one small cluster of flowers whose white petals shone like the sunlit snow.” (1955, 971). Aragorn prior to this had just confessed to Gandalf that he is concerned about the future of Men after his death and Gandalf’s incoming departure, that will deprive himself and future generations of his sage guidance. In reply Gandalf confidently instructs: “Turn your face from the green world, and look where all seems barren and cold!” (971). This new scion signals the healing process of Denethor’s regime (Sprouse, 30), and this scene in general is a fine allegory to what concerns an older, responsible person might have for the coming generations. Reminding one to only keep an open mind and look for solutions where it might be least expected to find.

Silver Linings and New Beginnings

Many people are tested by the One Ring's temptations throughout the story, and one of its close call victims at one point was the dependable and selfless Hobbit, Samwise. Late in book three, in the South-East when he and Frodo ventures into Mordor, Samwise becomes delusional and craves to make the hellscape of Gorgoroth brim with gardens and trees. Which sounds like a rather wholesome idea, yet still is not right in the natural balance of Middle Earth. He pulls himself together by understanding that this is the corruptible power of the One Ring - thus choosing reality and not to indulge with his ego (Sprouse, 28). This segment ends with one of the most remarkable quotations from my research: “The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command.” (1955, 901). He’s letting go of the unsatisfying illusion of grandeur, and epitomize the imperative nuance between nature and culture.

Towards the end, when the Hobbits have returned home to the Shire region and their village Hobbiton, they are met with the horrific sight of their renowned Party Tree having been cut down and left dead in the Party Field, as well as many other beautiful fallen trees. As one can tell, Hobbits are of a jovial and festive sort, and under the branches of this tree (unknown type) there are dear memories tied, like Bilbo's farewell speech in book one. Early in their adventure, the fellowship received one gift each from the beautiful and divine elf Galadriel, one of the rulers in the Lothlórien. Samwise was gifted a box with unusual soil,

containing also a silver nut; “For you little gardener and lover of trees, [...] It will not keep you on your road, nor defend you against any peril; but if you keep it and see your home again at last, then perhaps it may reward you.”. An impractical tool for the journey ahead, yet still representing a means to an end; “Though you should find all barren and laid waste [in Hobbiton], there will be few gardens in Middle-earth that will bloom like your garden, if you sprinkle this earth there.” (1954, 375). Thus, serving as a motivational tool for Samwise to continue on to use this gift after the war is over. Alas, when they meet the sight of a ravaged Party Field by the hands of Saruman, he plants the silver nut in the Party Tree’s stead, as well as spreading the soil in other places where other trees once stood. To his surprise, come April, a beautiful sapling with “silver bark and long leaves [with] golden flowers” (1955, 1023) springs forth, growing at tremendous speed. Thus, the first Mellyrn-tree outside of Lothlórien forest was cultivated. There is not much material regarding this tree, but it implied that it certainly outshone the old tree in terms of grace and it also became a staple for Hobbiton, as travellers from far and wide came to see one of the finest Mellyrn of the world.

A rewarding sign towards the end of the journey, as this tree features many the books themes of what makes nature sustainable; adaptation, change, variety, tenderness, and in this case: a little help from a Hobbit. All of whom bargains for new life - and beginnings.

Conclusion

In this thesis I’ve argued for fantasy’s power to inspire hope and change through the means of imagining a Secondary World where practically anything is possible. Where one of the author’s main tools is to heighten experiences through numinous descriptions of ordinary, yet important things - in this case highlighting trees. Additionally, I’ve shown four different examples how J.R.R. Tolkien has worked in trees in *The Lord of the Rings*; the opinions of the ‘tree-diplomat’ Treebeard (the vocal Ent and tree shepherd of Fangorn forest), an attractive depiction of a grown Mellyrn-tree in the Elf-dwelling forest Lothlórien, a doleful remnant of the White Tree of Gondor in the negligent city Minas Tirith, and the newborn Mellyrn-tree in Hobbiton planted by Samwise. With contextual scrutiny of lore, descriptions and dialogue, there is a clear bridge to ecocriticism, as each tree and Ent correspond greatly to their environment, which again corresponds to the moral activities of their inhabitants - whereas technology and the authority’s principles plays a crucial part. This is linked to arguments defending the fantasy genre’s footprints in regards to influencing environmental hope, whereas the articulation and appreciation of life in LOTR can be transferred to our

reality, and initiate a wish to improve and renew the balance between the anthropocene and nature.

I see trees repeatedly being used in the arts and mythology as a primeval symbol of life: Tree of life: Yggdrasil, The Bodhi Tree, Tree of Knowledge; Gustav Klimt's symbolist painting *The Tree of Life* (1909), and even in video games like *Elden Ring* (2022), as well as other titles by Hidetaka Miyazaki, to name a few. Although, I believe popular use in fantasy has its roots in LOTR, and during my study it's clearer to me as to why. After finishing the books it feels like the Welsh word *hiraeth*, meaning "a wistful longing for a home that never was" (Wiktionary, 2024). As the trees, characters, fates, cultures, and so on, are very present while reading. Tolkien's approach also resembles the philosophy depicted by 19th century American transcendentalists, which paid homage to nature for their simple, fundamental 'truths' of existence.

Granted that my approach to this thesis requires a certain appreciation for Tolkien's aptitude and innate love for language, worldbuilding and descriptions of quiescent plants like trees, I think, regardless if a reader don't *feel* the same aesthetic depth as I, LOTR presents a different look on materials surrounding us in everyday life. The vigilance, exuberance and nuance of his characters and narrative boils down to a beautiful depiction of hope, rendering the reader unscathed and (I imagine) changed for the better. Which I believe to be of utmost importance, especially for younger generations.

Works cited

- Ashcroft, Bill. "A Climate of Hope." *Le Simplegadi*, vol. XV-No. 17, no. 17, Nov. 2017, pp. 19–34, www.doi.org/10.17456/simple-53. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- Bal, Reyyan. "Nature vs. 'Reality' in Fantasy Fiction: The Potential for Ecocritical Imaginings." *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 20, no. 3, July 2021, pp. 1283–96, www.doi.org/10.21547/jss.843678. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- Epic Kingdom & BBC. "J.R.R. Tolkien Talks about Trees." *www.youtube.com*, 21 May 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BW4cuB3CEo. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- Brawley, Chris. "The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in 'the Lord of the Rings.'" *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 18, no. 3 (71), 2007, pp. 292–307, www.jstor.org/stable/24351004. Accessed 20 Oct. 2022.
- Flieger, Verlyn. "How Trees Behave-or Do They?" *Mythlore*, vol. 32, no. 1, Mythopoeic Society, Sept. 2013, p. 21, www.jstor.org/stable/26815844. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- "Hiraeth." *Wiktionary*, 11 Mar. 2024, en.wiktionary.org/wiki/hiraeth. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- "Legendarium." *Wiktionary*, 16 Jan. 2024, en.wiktionary.org/wiki/legendarium. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- LotrProject. (2014) "Treebg" [Image], *LotrProject*, Retrieved from lotrproject.com/statistics/. Accessed 14 May 2024.
- Sprouse, Sarah J. "Ending the Dualism of Nature and Industry in the Lord of the Rings." *Mallorn: The Journal of the Tolkien Society*, no. 51, 2011, pp. 27–31, www.jstor.org/stable/48614740. Accessed 6 May 2024.
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. "Climate Change in Data: The Physical Science Basis." *www.ipcc.ch/*, 2021, www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/resources/climate-change-in-data/. Accessed 6 May 2024.

Tolkien, Christopher. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Allen & Unwin, 1981, p. 303,

bibliothecaveneficae.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/the_letters_of_j.r.tolkien.pdf.

Accessed 6 May 2024.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia*. 1964.

HarperCollinsPublishers, 2001.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Fellowship of the Ring (The Lord of the Rings Part 1)*. 1954.

HarperCollinsPublishers, 2011.

---. *The Return of the King (The Lord of the Rings Part 3)*. 1955. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2011.

---. *The Two Towers (The Lord of the Rings Part 2)*. 1954. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2011.

[Continuous page numbering through Part 1 to 3]

Tolkien, Christopher & Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*. 1977. HarperCollinsPublishers, 2013.

Ulrich, Sterling. "Why the Creator of the Lord of the Rings Hated Disney." *CBR*, 20 Mar.

2024, www.cbr.com/lord-of-the-rings-tolkien-hated-disney-explained/. Accessed 6

May 2024.

Wikipedia Contributors. "Degrowth." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 12 May 2024,

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degrowth. Accessed 14 May 2024.

Yazell, Bryan. "Young People Imagine a Dystopian Future due to Climate Change."

www.sciencenordic.com, ScienceNordic, 16 Jan. 2024,

www.sciencenordic.com/climate-change-denmark-researchers-zone/young-people-imagine-a-dystopian-future-due-to-climate-change/2284882. Accessed 6 May 2024.