

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

4610 English: Individual Authors: J.R.R. Tolkien

English Student Research

2022

Environmentalism in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings

Sophie Butler

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/english_4610jrrt



Part of the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Sophie Butler

Environmentalism in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings

Abstract

The theme of environmentalism within Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy, while sometimes underlying, is an ever-present background to the characters and actions of Middle-Earth. The hero's movements through nature contrasted with the criminal destruction of nature by the villains presents two clear perspectives about the treatment of nature, but Tolkien also inserts his perspective through the inclusion of Tree characters, like Ents. Trees and tree characters are an essential part of Tolkien's legendarium that help to illuminate the author's claims about environmentalism and the impacts of progress on the world. How characters interact with nature inform their ethics and point to Tolkien's thoughts regarding nature and the importance of one's relationship to it. The interaction of nature with forces like time and industry reveals Tolkien's claim about the importance of stewardship over nature and the consequences of neglecting or destroying it. Through character interaction with nature and industry to show the link between environmentalism and morality, as well as the messaging about stewardship and the consequences of neglect and industrialization, we can clearly see Tolkien's environmental ethic and melancholic view of progress.

J.R.R. Tolkien's love of nature and trees can often be seen in his writings throughout his life. As early as 1939, Tolkien presents art and creation as windows to truth through trees in his story, *Leaf by Niggle*. The idea that Niggle's artwork and secondary creation are used to reveal inherent truth is very much applicable in Tolkien's own writing of nature. The theme of environmentalism within Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, while sometimes underlying, is an

ever-present background to the characters and actions of Middle-Earth. The hero's movements through nature contrasted with the criminal destruction of nature, specifically trees. How characters interact with trees and tree characters inform their ethics and point to Tolkien's thoughts regarding nature and the importance of one's relationship to it. The interaction of trees with forces like time and industry reveals Tolkien's claim about the importance of stewardship over nature and the consequences of neglecting or destroying it. Trees and tree characters are an essential part of Tolkien's legendarium that help to illuminate the author's claims about environmentalism and the impacts of progress on the world. Through character interaction with nature and industry to show the link between environmentalism and morality, as well as the messaging about stewardship and the consequences of neglect and industrialization, we can clearly see Tolkien's environmental ethic and melancholic view of progress.

The strongest support for the claim of the importance of trees and tree characters is the Ents' creation and their introduction and impact on the legendarium. These characters are the connection of nature with sentience and personification to the fullest degree. They are also very wise, coming from their age. At the time of their introduction, Gandalf states that they are "the oldest living thing[s] that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth." in reference to Treebeard (*The Two Towers* 499). The creation of the Ents themselves points to Tolkien's claims about nature. Yavanna, a Valar and queen of the Earth and all growing things, created the Ents. She requested the Ents be created in response to her husband Aulë's children, the dwarves, who would cut down all the trees and nature needed by other races and peoples. (*The Silmarillion*, *Valaquenta*) This need for protection from the threat of the march of progress posed by the dwarves shows the threat that nature is under from industry and progress. Aulë is the embodiment of the maker or the smith, innovation, and creation of new things. This idea of

progress is never outright dismissed as evil. However, this push towards progress, better and finer things, led to Melkor's descent into Morgoth and the darkness that spread across Middle-earth. Progress and industry are growing forces in the Middle-earth of Lord of the Rings, but seemingly at the expense of nature and magic. Tolkien combats this with the creation of characters like the Ents, who are both stewards and defenders of nature.

After their creation, the Ents became shepherds of the trees. As Tolkien was himself a devout Christian, this link to stewardship and shepherding is very clear, as Jesus himself was the Good Shepherd, serving the flocks of men. So too, Treebeard claims the Ents serve the forest and trees around them. He says to Merry, "We keep off strangers and the foolhardy; and we train and we teach, we walk and we weed. 'We are tree-herds, we old Ents.'" (Two Towers, 468) The Ents are representative of Tolkien's environmental ethic, that there is a responsibility over nature to both preserve and conserve it. They represent stewardship over nature and Tolkien's claim that a certain standard of care is to be exhibited. Scholars Matthew Dickerson and Johnathan Evans expand upon this point, that Tolkien "implies that our stewardship responsibilities have inevitable consequences in terms of an objective environmental ethic in which some practices can be seen as objectively good or evil. Our use of our time and our treatment of the earth are not merely matters of personal preference: there are right and wrong ways to fulfill our duties as stewards of the earth. Tolkien would have us do right." (Dickerson and Evans, 49) This binary view of interaction with nature can be seen in the characters and setting of much of Tolkien's story. Through examining characters and their interactions with nature and industry, we can also see their moral intentions and alignments with Tolkien's view of environmentalism. Tolkien recognizes inherent goodness in those who want to preserve and protect nature rather than

destroy and modernize it. Through character relationships and interaction with nature or industrialization, we can also reveal their internal moral state.

The Hobbits are the first character we, as the audience, see meet the Ents, and it is through them that these characters get introduced. The two Hobbits, Merry and Pippin, are the most similar in terms of their relationship with nature out of the characters from the fellowship after Sam and Frodo depart. The Shire is a pastoral community, somewhat untouched by the outside world. We learn early on in *The Fellowship of the Rings* in “Concerning Hobbits” that the Shire is a fertile place, with agriculturally minded people, farmers, and gardeners, surrounded by forests. It makes sense that the Hobbits would be raised within and around nature as well as with respect for it and an understanding of stewardship via their communities' use of the land. This attitude towards nature puts them in the category of doing right by nature, if not as loyal stewards as the Ents. When the Hobbits tell Treebeard their story, “He made them describe the Shire and its country over and over again.” (The Two Towers, 472) By their descriptions, Treebeard asks after the Entwives, clearly thinking this is an area where they would thrive, living in a community with those who do not seek to destroy their home but rather preserve and work with the land. Merry and Pippin are able to express that they are not looking to destroy or disrespect the nature of Fangorn Forest, distinguishing themselves and all Hobbits from men or other species that would seek to harm nature for the sake of itself or progress. Due to this, they are able to speak with Treebeard and share his wisdom and history of the world. He shares with them knowledge others could not access due to what Treebeard has seen during his time on Middle-earth. Only through this relationship with nature is this achieved. This is another instance in Tolkien’s writing of trees being windows to truth, though this time, it's history, not beauty.

Through the Hobbits' conversations with Treebeard, we get a breakdown of the Ents' relationship with other races in Middle-earth. Early on in their discussion, the Hobbits mention the Elves said not to go to Fangorn, which gives a clue into the nature of the elvish relationship to the nature of Middle-earth. The Ents have an interesting relationship with the elves, as they too live in forests or in close communion with nature falling into the good category of Tolkien's ethic, yet the elves' connection to it seems to be diminishing. As seen in the elves of Rivendell in *Fellowship*, what light is left is fading, and so too is their care for nature. As they prepare to leave Middle-earth, they do not stop to consider the nature of Middle-earth, the peoples, and the Ents that will be left behind and eventually killed. Their progress is of a different kind, progress from one life to the next, but it still happens at the expense of nature as the Elves will no longer be there to live with it and care for the nature of Middle-earth. Treebeard echoes this, speaking on his relationship with the elves stating, "nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves now-a-days. Still, I take more kindly to Elves than to others: it was the Elves that cured us of dumbness long ago, and that was a great gift that cannot be forgotten, though our ways have parted since." (The Two Towers 472) The Ents still are thankful for the elves and the gift of speech, but their care since has diminished as the magic of Middle-earth recedes and progress pushes in. However, it is worth noting that elves are still preferred to other species that take progress much more seriously.

One relationship that is not ambiguous is the relationship between nature, Ents, and orcs. Treebeard is particularly fierce, stating, "there are some things, of course, whose side I am altogether not on; I am against them altogether: these – bura'rum' (he again made a deep rumble of disgust) '—these Orcs, and their masters." (The Two Towers 472) Tolkien's orcs are the true embodiment of evil, specifically in their treatment of nature. They bring destruction and death

with them, and that extends to the landscapes and nature they come into contact with. The Ents have issues with how the orcs treat nature. Treebeard says, “He and his folk are making havoc now...felling trees—good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot—orc-mischief that”(*The Two Towers*, 473). This reveals the largest evil towards nature for Tolkien, the destruction and desecration of nature for no reason other than that. What Treebeard seems to be most upset at, and what Tolkien is getting at is the destruction of trees and nature for progress’s sake, is upsetting but somewhat inevitable as time marches forward, but needless destruction of trees and nature, for the sake of no progress is unfathomable evil. The orcs and their treatment of nature represent the opposite of the Ents and are the furthest from true good stewardship. However, Orcs are only a reflection of the true evil lurking in Middle-earth and its desire for progress. This can more clearly be seen in the dynamics of Saruman and Gandalf.

Saruman and Gandalf are the two closest embodiments of Tolkien's binary environmental ethic and the eternal conflict between the stewardship of nature and the progress brought by industrialization. Saruman is the highest of the wizard order, seeking power for himself, ignoring the good imperative to preserve nature, rather using it for his own devices and personal gain with plans to modernize middle earth with the Ring. He partnered with orcs and the evil of Sauron, sweeping past Isengard's boundaries and starting to infect and affect surrounding trees and nature. Gandalf is seemingly an unorthodox wizard, looking into the small matters and helping lead the quest to destroy the ring, attempting to banish darkness from the lands. He does this as a duty and steward of the land and peoples of Middle-earth. When asked about Gandalf, Treebeard states, ““Yes, I do know him: the only wizard that really cares about trees”” (*The Two Towers*, 466). There is other evidence in the trilogy that Gandalf cares for the smaller issues that other Wizards deem unimportant, like his attention to and affection for Hobbits and their affairs.

Similarly, he engages closely with great figures of nature like the Great Eagle Gwaihir and Shadowfax. He exhibits his respect towards nature, and nature rewards him, and we never see him use it in the way men or orcs do. He has the sort of relationship with nature that seems common among Wizards. When admonishing Saruman and his decisions, Treebeard states, ““I used to talk to him. There was a time when he was always walking about my woods...his face, as I remember it...became like windows in a stone wall: windows with shutters inside. I think that I now understand what he is up to. 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 that they serve him for the moment. Now it is clear he is a black traitor”” (The Two Towers, 473). This demonstrates that Saruman also had a relationship with nature and the Ents, living near and allowing the Ents to complete their stewardship, even speaking with Treebeard. Only after his mind turns to progressing his own power, he becomes corrupted by the ideas of industrialism and militarism. He becomes a servant of evil, using trees like orcs only to serve the purpose of industry and self-progression.

Saruman’s story acts as almost a cautionary tale for Tolkien's audience, as Isengard and Sauruman's fate represents the inevitability of progress and the consequences of neglected stewardship. Space and setting are both important parts of this claim for Tolkein. We get the setting of Isengard and the Valley of Saruman affected by his search for progress and the Shadow that has taken root here. This is done in a way that's immediately recognizable to audiences as echoing what our modern world has done for the sake of industrialization, specifically deforestation. Scholar Michale Brisbois argues that the hero's journey from the pastoral and idyllic Shire through an increasingly damaged and scarred Middle-earth, ending in the empty desolation that is Mordor, echoes the ecological damage done in our world, recreated on

“imaginary soil.” (Brisbois 200) Tolkien takes this further at Isengard, showing the corruption that the search for eternal progress can bring, turning a wizard and previous protector of the forest into the nearest clearest threat to nature. However, Isengard also presents Tolkien with an opportunity to show the power of nature in his world. At the Reclamation of Isengard, the end to the use of nature, breaking the dam to reclaim and cleanse the nature of Saruman's evil simultaneously. Tolkien makes it clear that there is a certain power to nature reclaiming spaces, as well as the possible power of nature to fight back against industrialization. However, as the oldest things march to War for the last time, it indicates that they can only do so much and that their magic is failing.

The Ents, as guardians and stewards of nature, are not infallible. Even they can lose sight of the environmental ethic of stewardship, seen explicitly in the story of the Entwives. When asked about why there are so few Ents left, Treebeard explains that they cannot reproduce as they lost all the Entwives. He states, ““They did not die!’ said Treebeard. ‘I never said died. We lost them, I said. We lost them and we cannot find them.’” The wives were lost to the Ents due to their different models of stewardship. They cultivated nature differently, not hearing trees or protecting them, but creating gardens and letting things grow in their own way while the Ents kept wandering and walking until eventually, they could no longer find the Entwives. Their own march of progress led them away from the Entwives and the ability to make Entlings or ent children to continue this line of stewardship over Middle-earth. This is representative of how progress, even the slow progress of Ents, is enough to have its consequences, but it is also an inevitability of time. Some scholars have suggested that the Entwives are in fact dead and burned in the progress of men in the years since or became “tree-like” after so many years; however, Tolkien never gives the audience a clear answer, only alluding to them through Treebeards

storytelling and description of “lost.” However, this was done for a purpose. This idea of a lost nature is attractive in Tolkien's world as the magic and nature the audience and heroes are encountering are dwindling, even the Ents, the oldest thing or connection to that nature. However, if that nature and magic is simply lost, it is able to be found and restored through proper care and stewardship. Middle-earth already has examples of a lack of stewardship over nature and the consequences of evil acts against nature.

Tolkien presents a very clear view of the consequences of nature if left without stewardship. Land neglected or destroyed for the sake of industrialization and progress is represented by the empty and desolate landscapes of deadlands seen throughout Middle Earth, specifically in Mordor. Mordor is the source of the Shadow and where evil comes from in Middle-earth, so there is no nature, trees, or connection to the beauty and truth of the natural world. As Frodo and Sam Travel through Mordor, they encounter further desolation in the settings until they encounter the Dead Marshes. It is clear that this used to be a place inhabited by all sorts of people, Evident in the faces of elves, men, and orcs that all reside under the water, but that after stewardship over this land ended, it became a terrible and dark place, uninhabitable by any living thing. Gollum describes how they came to be, stating, ““All dead, all rotten. Elves and Men and Orcs. The Dead Marshes. There was a great battle long ago, yes, so they told him when Sméagol was young, when I was young before the Precious came. It was a great battle. Tall Men with long swords, and terrible Elves, and Orcses shrieking. They fought on the plain for days and months at the Black Gates. But the Marshes have grown since then, swallowed up the graves; always creeping, creeping.” (The Two Tower, 628) There is a sense that after this great battle, this land was abandoned, the dead not even being picked up and removed from the land. This led to evil and corruption spreading into nature itself, allowing nature to become evil. Due

to this lack of stewardship, the dead were able to become a part of the land and infect it, and so the marshes seem to take on the part of that environment, as Gollum describes them almost as sentient, “creeping”. Tolkien’s environmental ethic is again very clear here in that the complete destruction of nature without returning to take care of it is the highest form of evil, allowing nature itself to become corrupted by this lack of stewardship. Only through taking care of the land and becoming shepherds and stewards are we able to combat the creation of space like the Dead Marshes and slow the inevitable march of progress, making sure that nature and its protection of it are not forgotten for the sake of industry.

Through the creation of characters like the Ents and their interaction with the other characters of Middle Earth oh, we are able to see Tolkien's clear environmental ethic linking morality to one's attitude and care towards nature and trees versus progress and industry. Through the interactions of characters With both settings and species linked to nature and industry, we are able to decode Tolkien's inherent morality buried within his legendarium and unpack his own personal feelings about the inevitability of industrialization and the consequences of the march of progress on preserving and conserving nature.

Works Cited

Dickerson, Matthew T. and Evans, Jonathan, "Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien" (2006). Environmental Sciences. 6.

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_environmental_sciences/6

Brisbois, Michael J. "Tolkien's Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-Earth." *Tolkien Studies, Volume 2, 2005, Pp. 197-216 (Article)*, West Virginia University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tks.2005.0009>.

R., Tolkien J R. *The Lord of the Rings*. Harper Collins e-Books, 2014.