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The Lord of the Rings: Intersectionality between Theology and Ecocriticism in Middle-earth

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Nature is a key feature of Tolkien's Middle-Earth. One would find it quite impossible to separate nature from the epic Tolkien has carefully constructed. Middle-Earth contains elements of nature in its various cultures; it is the lifeblood of the world. In the instances where nature is made to be inconsequential within the story, it is made to be a grievous thing. Contemporary scholarship recognizes "environment" to be more than the preservation of the natural world, but key to our own well-being. To this end, we study Ecocriticism to discover the lasting impacts of the environment in a mental and spiritual sense. As a Christian, I can neither divorce the Christian philosophy of stewardship nor the sense of the divine spirit from the existing dialectic between humanity and its connection to nature. Tolkien, in "*The Lord of the Rings"*, takes a similar stance pertaining to the divine and our connection to nature, which is manifested in both the book and the surrounding mythos that he has written pertaining to Middle-Earth. To this end, I utilize Ecocriticism to examine Tolkien's narrative of the divine and nature, the exploitation of nature, and the effects of such exploitive forces upon culture is an assertion, within a Christian framework, that humanity must acknowledge its role as steward of nature.

Tolkien correlates humanity's connection to the divine and nature. Ecocriticism is more than "treating" the environment better. As Dr. Timothy Morton says, it is summarily connected to constructs pertaining to the psychological and sociological systems of society— it is coexistence (Morton 2). Ecocriticism and *The Lord of the Rings* go beautifully together as there exists between the two a complementary view of nature and its connection to the human spirit. This complementary union is evaluated in Chris Brawley's "The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in the Lord of the Rings",

> For ecocritics, literature is a means to a paradigm shift, a learning of a new language which places the non-human in a central position as part of the whole; this paradigm shift replaces anthropocentric worldviews with ecocentric worldviews, where the environment is viewed with respect. Fantasy's subversiveness allows for a shift from the human to the non-human and thereby allows readers to experience what is not covered by our rational modes of knowledge (Brawley 1).

Reading *The Lord of the Rings* requires the reader to set aside their anthropocentric tendencies, which prioritizes the needs of humans likely in an exploitative manner, and adopt a more ecocentric perspective which allows for a diverse population in which trees and animals are seen. Given the magical properties of Middle-Earth, this perspective is ripe with opportunity as there are many instances where both animals and trees (nonhumans) are given either personality or "being". In commenting on this opportunity, Brawley adds in his analysis of Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories",

> Fantasy has the unique ability to subvert normal categories of thought, such as those between human and non-human, in order for a fusion of new possibilities which are not available in mimetic works. Subverting normative categories permits what Tolkien terms "**Recovery,**" a renewed relationship to the earth which acknowledges its numinous essence ("On Fairy- stories" 57). This renewed relationship with the natural world seeks to view nature as a part of a community, not a commodity. (Brawley 1)

This subversion that Brawley speaks to allows for a necessary amount of play for readers to encounter new perspectives allowing for the reframing of our own worlds. Our own world does not allow us to apply personhood to trees; however, through characterization/personification, we can examine the whole of nature as a type of being. There are many instances in the book where the stewarding of nature is defined in a positive light, wherein Tolkien seems to indicate a sort of communal connection between the steward and their "charge". This communal connection, as it pertains to stewardship, is a reality where the steward and the "charge" are both owed respect in their own right, but the "charge" decidedly takes on a submissive role to the steward, and the steward takes on a more dominant role to the "charge" (each to variable degrees). In Fellowship of the Rings, Tom Bombadil may be the "lord" of the Old Forest, yet the forest has a sense of being and is untamable. Tom has made for himself a home in the midst of one of the most dangerous woods, "The grass under their feet was smooth and short, as if it had been mown or shaven. The eaves of the Forest behind were clipped, and trim as a hedge. The path was now plain before them, well-tended and bordered with stone"(Tolkien 137), yet, it is a harmonious relationship, though the woods are most distrustful:

> Tom's words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers (Tolkien 147).

Tom Bombadil, though not of the trees himself, is quite attuned to the forest, to the point where he communes in a deep spirit and tends to it as if it were his own garden, yet he would not treat the Old Forest as a plaything that he has every right to, for he knows the wood to have a sense of spirit and grants it dignity. Another such instance is shown between Gandalf and Shadowfax, while the men of Rohan would have the horse bend to their will, it will bow its head to no one (Tolkien 30). Rather than being the lord of Shadowfax, Gandalf calls him a friend (Tolkien 297); though Shadowfax is free, he would go to Gandalf if he were called (Tolkien 297). The connection between Bombadil and Gandalf is that they are higher beings with no small source of power, yet they choose not to dominate the beings below them. Tolkien's portrayal of these relationships invites readers to reconsider the role of stewardship as a divine calling—one that demands humility and reverence for the natural world. In Middle-Earth, stewardship is not defined by power or control but by the willingness to coexist and nurture, drawing upon the sacred connection between humanity, nature, and the divine. This connection mirrors the Christian philosophy of dominion tempered with care, portraying humanity's role as one of guardianship rather than exploitation.

The antithetical answer to stewardship in *The Lord of the Rings* is exploitation. Tolkien takes this moment to bend the previously discussed harmonious relationship towards a destructive and exploitive end with the character of Saruman. In his quest for power, Saruman sought to understand things mechanically by breaking them apart. The spirit of Saruman has cast a long shadow over the era of the West, imprisoning our notions of nature within the metaphor of the machine (Simpson 1). Power for power's sake is not one of the chief arguments within *The Lord of the Rings*, for the pursuit of power is fuel for great evil. Saruman's quest for power does not merely poison him, but it is a poison that seeps into anything he touches. For as long as power is his goal, he shall exploit those around him until he achieves such a consuming goal. As Treebeard states, "He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things…" (Tolkien 76). As a blue wizard, Saruman was given a level of stewardship within Middle-Earth, it is a role bestowed upon him as a Maiar to tend to the well-being of the inhabitants as well as to stand as a representative of those who sent the Maiar. However, Saruman rejected this role of cultivator, ultimately rejecting Alluvatar. This rejection does not only affect Saruman's relationship with

Alluvatar, but to the Ents (of whom he had deep connection once), and to all nations. In this, the sullied relationship between Saruman and Fangorn Forest is but a reflection of the sullied relationship between Saruman and all the races previously entrusted in his care, to which many were condemned to ruin. Saruman's mechanistic worldview, devoid of reverence or empathy for the natural world, leads him to devastate the once-vibrant Isengard. The lush greenery surrounding the fortress is replaced with barren pits and industrial machinery, symbolizing the consequences of exploitative practices on the environment.

The effects of such exploitive forces drive disharmony between humankind and nature. "Tolkien's fascination with trees makes it all but impossible to read his work without the feeling that there is an underlying moral or message, a message that is most frequently suggested to be a critique of the consequences of industrialization" (O'Byrne 2). The deforestation of the Old Forest and the attack on Fangorn Forest further reveal the cost of such exploitation. The Ents, ancient beings who embody the spirit of the woods, lament the loss of their kin and the destruction of their home. Their grief and eventual retaliation highlight the inherent imbalance created when nature is treated as a mere resource to be consumed. This point is further driven by this excerpt from "The Fellowship of the Ring", "It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords" (Tolkien 147). In 1972, Tolkien connected the dangerous nature of the Old Forest to the past deeds of men, stating the trees of the Old Forest were "hostile to two legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries… [and that] in all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies" (Tolkien 419). Ultimately, the exploitation of nature in *The Lord of the Rings* is not only an environmental tragedy but also a profound cultural and spiritual loss. Through the lens of Ecocriticism, Saruman becomes a representation of modern humanity's failure to uphold its sacred responsibility to the earth, a failure that disrupts the balance between humans and the natural world. Tolkien's work reminds us that nature, when exploited, exacts a heavy toll—not just in ecological terms, but in the erosion of the values that define humanity's highest purpose.

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