

The two faces of nature



In J. R. R. Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*, the natural environment plays an important role as a tool for characterization and personification of the natural world. Readers who have studied Tolkien and know of his respect for nature might assume that he would depict the environment purely in a positive light, but in fact he shows it realistically as a source of good and as a potentially dangerous force. To create this view of nature, Tolkien presents many parts of the natural world as magical in nature; this empowers nature in hidden and surprising ways, both for good and for evil. In this author's work, nature is not simply a passive background for the plot; instead, nature appears as a character and even seems to have a mind of its own at times. The magical elements in *The Lord of the Rings* serve as warning that even though it may appear that nature can be controlled and manipulated by man, ultimately it asserts its authority and can work for our good or strike back.

The natural environment is a key to characterization in this novel. Nature's beauty and lush vegetation reflect the essential moral goodness of the inhabitants, such as the Shire and the Hobbits. In contrast, environments that are barren and ugly express the spiritual death and decay of characters in that portion of the tale, like Mordor and Saruman. There are several examples of the ways in which Tolkien is able to provide characterization through the use of setting to help the reader understand the connection between characters and the natural world. On one hand, the characters with positive personal characteristics are at ease and happy in a beautiful, uncorrupted setting. For instance, when we first meet the Hobbits, we learn that they are a peaceful, non-aggressive, and gentle folk who revel in the

beauty of the Shire where they live. In one scene, Bilbo and Gandalf are sitting inside Bag End looking out on Bilbo's garden. The description of their feelings towards the garden, and towards the Shire in general, is a reflection of their essentially good characters: "The late afternoon was bright and peaceful. The flowers glowed red and golden... 'How bright your garden looks!' said Gandalf. 'Yes,' said Bilbo. 'I am very fond indeed of it, and of all the dear old Shire...'" (Tolkien 25). In another scene, the Elf Legolas praises the beauty of the woods where his people live; his appreciation of nature is a reflection of his goodness as a character. He says to Aragorn, "'There lie the woods of Lothlórien! ... that is the fairest of all the dwellings of my people. There are no trees like the trees of that land...my heart would be glad if I were beneath the trees of that wood'" (Tolkien 335). Neither the Hobbits nor the Elves attempt to manipulate nature or change it to serve their ends. They respect nature. By characterizing the Hobbits and the Elves as nature-loving beings, Tolkien establishes their positive personalities and identifies them this way as protagonists.

On the other hand, characters with negative personal characteristics not only have no respect for nature but manipulate and corrupt it for their own benefit. One example is revealed in Treebeard's comments about Saruman: "'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. And now it is clear that he is a black traitor'" (Tolkien 473). Later as Treebeard is talking to Pippin and Merry, he explains how Saruman's evil attacks on nature have caused the Ents to be ready to fight back: "'Indeed I have not seen them roused like this for many an age. We Ents do not like being roused; and we

never are roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger” (Tolkien 485). These passages demonstrate Saruman’s wickedness as it relates to his complete disrespect for the natural world. This establishes him firmly as the antagonist. The Orcs are also characterized as malignant characters because of their total lack of concern for the trees and for their cruel wastefulness of the natural resources. Speaking of Saruman and the Orcs, Treebeard says, “ He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the borders they are felling trees... Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot... many had voices of their own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves” (Tolkien 474). Treebeard objects to the cutting of trees for any reason but especially when it is done maliciously by the Orcs. We learn a great deal about characters in this book based upon their view of nature and their interaction with it.

Critics who support this view include Ina Habermann and Nikolaus Kuhn, authors of “ Sustainable Fictions – Geographical Literary and Cultural Intersections in J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.” They propose the idea that the natural environment depicted in this work is a strong literary indicator or reflection of the characters in that section of the story. They specifically discuss “ benign natural forces and the contrasting industrialized forces of evil” (Habermann and Kuhn 263). Like Habermann and Kuhn, Alun Morgan’s article, “ *The Lord of the Rings*—A Mythos Applicable in Unsustainable Times?” examines the way that characterization is accomplished in Tolkien’s work. In agreement with the other authors, Morgan contends that a character’s respect towards the environment reflects similar

emotions towards his fellow man and is linked to moral and spiritual growth. Similarly in his article, “ Tolkien’s Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth,” Michael J. Brisbois expresses many of the same ideas. For example, Brisbois notes that in this novel, the complete disregard and disrespect for nature and the pursuit of monetary gain or power can only result in chaos and failure, as we see in Sauron’s ultimate fate. Brisbois says, “ Saruman’s involvement in the story is a cautionary tale for the reader...and his development of industry and militarism are intertwined in such a manner that the message becomes clear” (Brisbois 200). Clearly, Tolkien is able to create characterization in a subtle way through the use of the interaction of nature and the character.

The Lord of the Rings contains personification at numerous points. For example, Treebeard is a rounded character that expresses clear thinking, reasoning, and emotions. He is not a passive prop in the setting but is a fully engaged character. This is true of several of the other Ents in the story who have human characteristics. For example, Treebeard expresses sadness at the disappearance of the Entwives and yearns to be with them again; he says, “ Long we called, and long we searched; and we asked all folk that we met which way the Entwives had gone...but nowhere that we went could we find them... Our sorrow was very great...we believe that we may meet again in a time to come” (Tolkien 476). In Cynthia M. Cohen’s article, “ The Unique Representation of Trees in The Lord of the Rings,” she discusses the history of the depiction of trees in various pieces of literature and legend and describes in some detail literary trees, which have some similarity to the Ents, and which were not fixed in one place but were ambulatory. The Ents

provide nature's perspective about ecology by describing what it feels like to be destroyed by an evil force. A significant point this author makes about environmental concerns is that nature is not passive in Tolkien's work. For instance, the Fangorn Forest fights back against its enemies and the forest is "tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy" (Cohen 117). This is a clear reference to the ecological threat posed to nature, not only in Tolkien's world, but in our own. In another instance, the great eagle Gwaihir the Windlord swoops down and stands before Gandalf; the two of them have a conversation and Gwaihir expresses affection and duty as he vows to carry Gandalf to safety: "' I would bear you...whither you will, even were you made of stone'" (Tolkien 949). We see personification in the ways in which a tree and an animal think and behave like a human being.

There can be no doubt that Tolkien had a love for nature, as evidenced by his lyrical, beautifully expressed descriptions of forests and other landscapes in the novel: " Frodo looked back and caught a gleam of white foam among the grey tree-stems...It seemed to him that he would never hear again a running water so beautiful, for ever blending its innumerable notes in an endless changeful music" (Tolkien 346). A second example of Tolkien's admiration of the natural world is apparent as he says, " A golden afternoon of late sunshine lay warm and drowsy upon the hidden land between. In the midst of it there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows...there was a warm and gentle breeze blowing softly in the valley" (Tolkien 115). However, Tolkien goes beyond description of nature's beauties by instilling messages about protecting our environment. This idea

about Tolkien's view is supported by Danièle Barberis in her article, "Tolkien: The Lord of the Mines –Or a Comparative Study Between Mining During the Third Age of Middle-Earth by Dwarves and Mining During Our Age by Men (or Big-People)." She argues that since the Dwarves are important characters in the work, there is a connection between Tolkien's story and the mining industry. Barberis discusses the difference between the ways in which the Dwarves conduct mining in *The Lord of the Rings* and the way in which mining would be conducted by the "Big People," or humans. The author discusses the fact that, "sustainable development often involves the issue of environmental protection," yet in more recent times, the focus is more on "short-term profit exploitation" (Barberis 61). She draws a contrast between Men's goal in mining and the Dwarves' goal by mentioning Gimli's reluctance to reveal the location of some beautiful caves. Gimli does not want the caves to be spoiled by greedy exploitation. Therefore, according to Barberis, "Gimli does not suggest intensive mining; rather he suggests the most appropriate way to use these caves is simply to respect their beauty" (Barberis 61). Dwarves represent the proper stewardship of nature, in which it is treated with respect and appreciation; on the other hand, Men represent the abuse of nature, in which it is treated as a commodity to be used for profit or power. Therefore, Tolkien's message is that we can admire the beauty of nature, but that we also have a duty to respect and protect it.

In spite of the beauty of nature that he presents throughout the novel, Tolkien gives us a view of the other side of nature that can be dark, dangerous and deadly. While much of nature is glorified in its beauty and natural state, there are also parts of nature that pose a threat. One of the

best examples of this is the Old Forest that the Hobbits must travel through on their journey. Unlike the Ents, the trees in this forest have malicious intent towards the Hobbits, and the Hobbits can sense it: “ For the moment there was no whispering or movement among the branches; but they all got an uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity...they expected a sudden blow” (Tolkien 111). Having a will of their own, the trees attempt to confuse and block the Hobbits by shifting around and obscuring the pathways. The air within the forest became hot and stuffy and it got to the point that the Hobbits could not even see very far ahead. The ill intent of the trees became more and more noticeable: “ Now stronger than ever they felt again the ill will of the wood pressing on them ...They were depressed” (Tolkien 112). Cleverly, the trees cause the Hobbits to become very sleepy and to be bothered by hoards of flies; this causes Merry to seek shelter close to the trees where it was cooler and where there were fewer flies. Once the trees have their prey weakened and within reach they begin to swallow them into the earth. The trees cause huge opening to appear in the ground and the sleepy Hobbits either stumble in or are pulled in: “ Pippin had vanished. The crack by which he has laid himself had closed together, so that not a chink could be seen. Merry was trapped: another crack had closed about his waste; his legs lay outside, but the rest of him was inside a dark opening, the edges of which gripped like a pair of pincers” (Tolkien 117). Nature can be a force of darkness; this idea is discussed in an article, “ The Lord of the Rings(3) – The Mythic Dimension” by T. A. Shippey. She specifically discusses the dual nature of trees, which are sometimes shown as beautiful and benign, and at other times dangerous and deadly.

Water, also an important element of the natural world, plays a dual role in the story. In one sense, it provides rejuvenation for the weary travelers and is also a means to cleanse and be more comfortable. On the other hand, when the Fellowship meets the source of the Silverlode, Gimli warns the others not to drink: ““ Here is the spring from which the Silverlode rises...Do not drink of it”” (Tolkien 334). Presumably the water presents a threat, based on Gimli’s response. Legolas also talks about the Nimrodel and tells the others that its falling water may “...bring us forgetfulness of grief” (Tolkien 339). Although at face value this may seem like a positive result, the fact is that the ability of the water to alter men’s minds symbolizes the destructive power of nature.

There are other dangers within bodies of water, as we see in the scene in which the Fellowship has arrived at Moria. They are detained for sometime as Gandalf tires to decipher the password to get in. As they are standing near a stagnant lake, Boromir picks up a large stone and throws it into the water. Frodo is immediately alarmed and chastises Boromir, saying, ““ Why did you do that? ... I hate this place too, and I am afraid. I don’t know of what: not of wolves, or the dark behind the doors, but of something else. I am afraid of the pool. Don’t disturb it!”” (Tolkien 307-308). Frodo was right to fear the pool because something within attacks them: “ The others swung round and saw the waters of the lake seething, as if a host of snakes were swimming up from the southern end. Out from the water a long sinuous tentacle had crawled; it was pale-green and luminous and wet. Its fingered end had hold of Frodo’s foot, and was dragging him into the water” (Tolkien 308). This scene could be interpreted in two ways. One could be the

message that nature has hidden dangers for the unwary, and that we should not expect it to always be benign and safe. The other idea could be that when man bothers or disrupts nature, nature retaliates.

Any attempt to abuse nature for power and gain is eventually avenged in Tolkien's work. We see this when Saruman commands his Orc army to destroy trees and to build structures for use in creating Saruman's "precious machinery" of war. The path of destruction that Saruman and his minions leave behind them causes the Ents to call him "the tree killer!" For a time Saruman was successful in bending nature to his will, but his victory was doomed to failure. The Ents rise up against him, and though many of them are killed in battle, they manage to destroy Saruman's evil stronghold, causing water from the Isen to be diverted and to flood it. Proud of his hard-won victory, Treebeard says, "' We have worked hard; we have done more stone-cracking and earth-gnawing today than we have done in many a long year before...when night falls do not linger near this gate or in the old tunnel! Water may come through — and it will be foul water for a while, until all the filth of Saruman is washed away. Then Isen can run clean again'" (Tolkien 569). The power of nature, even against seemingly insurmountable odds, is very evident in this portion of the novel.

There are many beautiful descriptions of water in *The Lord of the Rings*, but there is also a description of a particularly horrible body of water called the Dead Marshes. Far from being fresh, clean and beautiful, these marshes are horrifying, malignant and filled with drowned corpses. As Sam, Frodo and Gollum are working their way across these dark bodies of water, Gollum describes the eerie scene: "' Yes, they are all round us...The tricky lights.

Candles of corpses, yes, yes. Don't you heed them! Don't look! Don't follow them!" (Tolkien 627). When Sam trips and his face comes very close to the surface of the marsh water, he springs up and cries, "' There are dead things, dead faces in the water...Dead faces!" (Tolkien 627). Frodo falls into a dreamlike state, similar to how he was affected in the dark forest. The water seems to lure him closer as if to swallow him along with its other victims. The Dead Marshes hold the corpses of both good and evil creatures and is simply seen as a dangerous place for any living thing. Describing what he sees in the Dead Marshes, Frodo says, "' They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water...grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair... But all foul, all rotting, all dead'" (Tolkien 628). It is not a surprise that Gollum, Frodo and Sam are eager to leave this cursed place, even though it takes them to an even more cursed destination, Mordor.

Nature plays an integral part in the story line in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings. It has significant symbolic value as a means of interpreting characters' personalities and motivations. It helps us determine twists and turns in then storyline. Nature is not simply a background to the story, but is a living part of it and in fact is one of the most important elements.

Furthermore, nature can be benevolent and beautiful or malicious and ugly.

It is interesting to note, however, nature usually is not the aggressor, but attacks or retaliates when it is disturbed in some way. Those who care for nature and treat it with respect are shown to be the heroes; conversely, those who no respect for nature and destroy it for their own gain are the villains. Tolkien's message is that we can judge by their interaction with

nature and that we should never assume that we are the masters of the natural world; it can rise up and turn against us.