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## **Tolkien's Natural Pathos**

**Ecological Imperialism and Romanticism in *The Lord of the Rings***

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## Lord of rings, lover of trees

*“For if Sauron of old destroyed the gardens, the Enemy today seems likely to wither all the woods” (Tolkien 621).*

This is the voice of the preservationist Treebeard in *The Two Towers* contemplating the diminishing state of the forests of Middle-earth, eloquently illustrating the impact the bellicose Sauron and his empire has on the environment. Treebeard explains how the entwines and their gardens have been exterminated by Sauron and how his home, the Fangorn forest, is suffering from reckless abuse due to Saruman’s industrial aspirations. To Tolkien, the Sauron of old probably stood for the colonial power of the British Empire, and the “Enemy of today” would presumably represent the progress of modernity and industrialism in the world. Tolkien critic Patrick Curry defines modernity as “the combination of modern science, a global capitalist economy, and the political power of the nation-state” (22). Tolkien’s relationship to this combination will be an important part of this analysis.

Consequently, this paper strives to merge Tolkien’s supposed deep love for nature represented in *The Lord of the Rings* with his anti-industrialist, anti-colonialist and anti-materialist views through the theory of *ecological imperialism*. With ecological imperialism one attempts to illustrate how the imperialistic powers of European countries not only resided in science, capitalism and military forces, but also in their impact on ecology and biological life.

This paper not only discusses the historical aspect of Tolkien’s concerns however, but also analyzes the way in which Tolkien relies on the heritage of Romanticism. As Romantics emphasize for example “grandeur or picturesqueness” with evocative descriptions of landscapes, celebrating nature (Oxford Concise English Dictionary), the aesthetic quality of Tolkien’s descriptions of nature will be an integral part of this analysis. Furthermore, in line

with Tolkien's anti-industrialist beliefs Romantics criticize industrial progress and poet William Blake for example "deliberately developed imagery of [...] industrialism, and science" (O'Neill 39). Tolkien certainly follows in this literary tradition with his meticulous portrayals of the nature of Middle-earth and the impact of the tyrannizing forces of Sauron and Saruman.

*The Lord of the Rings* was originally published in the mid-1950's and since its release a plethora of analyses have been done on this particular trilogy already, some of which scrutinizing Tolkien's environmental concerns and how he utilized his literature to present them. Accordingly, it is argued by many that the trilogy to a large extent is a response to the progress of modernity and this paper continues that discussion but provides a more in-depth analysis from a new perspective, namely the combination of ecological imperialism and Romanticism.

As Tolkien advocated diminished industrialism and denounced state power, key elements in the imperial part of ecological imperialism (Curry 25), it is important to look at how imperialism rarely is accomplished without warfare and how war effects nature. In WWI, Tolkien was a soldier in the British army and he learned that war was something he detested. He complained: "These grey days wasted in wearily going over, over and over again, the dreary topics, the dull backwaters of the art of killing, are not enjoyable" (Carpenter 78). Subsequently, in the war, Tolkien experienced the impact war and industry had on nature first hand. Humphrey Carpenter describes: "Grass and corn had vanished into a sea of mud. Trees, stripped of leaf and branch, stood as mere mutilated and blackened trunks" (84). Clearly, Tolkien saw the problem with industrial warfare due to imperialism and how it ruins nature.

Therefore, it is not hard to picture why Tolkien wished to write of a world with never-ending forests and marvellous landscapes. In his youth, Tolkien grew to love trees. He drew trees, climbed them and oddly also talked to them. In a quotation from Carpenter's biography

on him, Tolkien remembers a tree he used to climb: “One day they cut it down. They didn’t do anything with it: the log just lay there. I never forgot that” (22). At an older age he confessed: “I am [...] much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (Dickerson/Evans 130). Evidently, Tolkien found a strong relationship with nature and that closeness is undeniably mirrored throughout the novels in his adherence to the Romantic heritage in writing about the scenery and surroundings, which is why that aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* will be closely examined in this paper. As Romantics, and especially Blake, often commented on the issues of industrial progress Tolkien’s link to both ecological imperialism and Romanticism appears even more interesting to analyze.

In conclusion, the argument made in this essay is that representations of ecological imperialism can be found in the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* by comparing it to historical examples. Also, the importance of the Romantic vein in Tolkien to the descriptions of Middle-earth’s natural life and its struggle with industrial progress due to imperialism will be thoroughly discussed. Thus, the aim of the essay is to analyze the trilogy from an ecocritical perspective regarding the possible historical and aesthetic symbols of Tolkien’s worries when it comes to the effect which imperial power and modernity have on the environment. This paper will hence provide an analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* made from a historical and literary point of view through ecological imperialism and Romanticism.

## **Breaking down the trilogy**

### **Ecocriticism and materialism**

To begin with, in the introduction the given aim was to scrutinize whether these three books can be perceived from an ecocritical standpoint, so this chapter will first dig deeper into what

ecocriticism actually is. In his book *Ecocriticism*, Greg Garrard explores some examples: “What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” (3). Continuing, he also describes the ecocritic himself/herself: “The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear [...] Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (4). Furthermore, Lawrence Buell presents a checklist for defining literary works that are environmentally oriented and one requirement he mentions is that “the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history” (Coupe 237). This requirement is important to Tolkien’s connection with Romanticism and will be discussed later on.

As Alfred W. Crosby states regarding ecological imperialism, the imperialism dealt with here is closely linked with materialism and he points out that the industrial cultures have always been obsessed with the idea of ownership which has resulted in a reason for expanding the empire by conquering with the force of war (3,4). Presumably, as Tolkien was not fond of the idea of a powerful state, there exist possibilities of discovering anti-materialist sentiments in the trilogy as well. Sauron’s ring of power, the one ring, is definitely credible as a symbol for materialism in the novels and the issue of obsession with ownership that Crosby saw as a factor behind imperialism, hence it is reasonable to argue that critique of material ownership is essential to discuss here. Gandalf describes the ring as “the Master-ring, the one Ring to rule them all” (Tolkien 66). The quote refers to the quintessential materialist object, the Master-ring to rule them all. Sauron and Saruman’s struggles to retrieve this all-powerful ring, including the violence and suffering they cause to Middle-earth’s nature and its people, are the chief grounds for assuming that the One Ring is the fundamental symbol for the obsession with possession that is materialism.

## Sauron and Saruman, nature's nemeses

In *Green Imperialism*, Richard H. Grove discusses the impact the empires of Europe had on ecology around the globe. Since ecological imperialism in *The Lord of the Rings* is in focus, in this first chapter a comparison will be made between the actual damage the British Empire caused to its colonies, mostly to the island of St Helena, and the damage the empires of Sauron and Saruman inflict on the natural life of Middle-earth in Tolkien's trilogy.

Arguably, the most prominent sign of the struggle between nature and imposing industrial power in the novels is the rise of the ents against Saruman and his army because here one witnesses nature literally fighting back. This quote from Treebeard sums up the conflict quite well: "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" (Tolkien 615). Grove describes Britain's need for timber due to warfare as the main reason behind deforestation on the colonial islands (56), and in the same fashion Saruman orders his orcs to cut down trees so that his industry can flourish. In *The Two Towers* Treebeard thoroughly recounts the ill deeds Saruman is responsible for and concludes that "he is plotting to become a power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things" (616). Furthermore, he shows how badly Saruman's greed has impacted the forest of Fangorn:

He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the borders they are felling trees – good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down down and leave to rot – orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days. Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; 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. I have been idle. I have let things slip. It must stop! (617)

Apparently, the industry of Saruman, just like the timber hungry British Empire, has let its quest for power, regardless of the consequences, develop into a huge problem for the survival of natural life. Treebeard has finally understood that he must react, taking the rest of the ents along to combat Saruman and destroy Isengard (the wizard's fortress). In the same way as the Romantics foresaw industrialism's ruinous effect on nature, Treebeard has here indeed realized just how hard it has hit his home Fangorn and finds that if action is not taken, it might just be the end of the talking trees.

Concerning Isengard and the actual fight there, it is appropriate to scrutinize what Saruman did to the environment of his own home to instigate the conflict. Gandalf tells Elrond's council that "whereas it had once been green and fair, it now was filled with pits and forges" and "over all his works a dark smoke hung and wrapped itself about the sides of Orthanc" (339). Continuing, after the siege of Helm's Deep the main characters return to Isengard to witness what the ents have accomplished and discover the demise of The Vale of Isengard. "Once it had been fair and green [...] It was not so now" (722). The riders also notice that "no trees grew there; but among the rank grasses could still be seen the burned and axe-hewn stumps of ancient groves", "smokes and steams drifted in sullen clouds" and on the newly paved street "no blade of grass was seen in any joint" (722). For three whole pages Tolkien focuses on Saruman's terrible destruction of the once beautiful valley of Isengard in order to build an industrial town where he had "treasures, store-houses, armouries, smithies, and great furnaces. Iron wheels revolved there endlessly, and hammers thudded" (723,724). Saruman's industrialization of the once green Isengard symbolizes that his modern mind of metal and wheels has turned a picturesque area into a factory for industry and war, an issue Tolkien thoroughly contemplated (Arvidsson 146,147).

After the war of the ring is won, the fellowship return to Isengard to observe the work of the ents: "All the stone-circle had been thrown down and removed, and the land within was

made into a garden filled with orchards and trees, and a stream ran through it” (956). The fact that malice has vanished from the lands is symbolized by the replanting of trees and the health of the gardens, something which is very typical throughout the novels. Grove describes similar sentiments in the former colony of India, after the British Empire had left and gardens had been planted to rescue nature, quoting the British East India Company’s Bishop Heber: “It is not only a curious but a picturesque and most beautiful scene, and more perfectly answers Milton’s idea of paradise except that it is on a dead flat instead of a hill, than anything which I ever saw” (409). In both cases, the returning health of nature represents the absence of imperialistic dominion and industrial destruction.

Subsequently, when the hobbits return home to the Shire believing the world is saved and everything is picture perfect again they receive a shocking welcome:

Many of the houses they had known were missing. Some seemed burned down. The pleasant row of hobbit-holes in the bank of the north side of the Pool were deserted, and their little gardens that used to run down bright to the water’s edge were rank with weeds. Worse, there was a line of ugly new houses all along Pool Side, where the Hobbiton Road ran close to the bank. An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road towards Bag End they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air. (981)

The misery does not stop here though. As the hobbits examine the full extent of the damage done to Hobbiton they are told that there is an anonymous leader (Saruman) hiring mercenaries who “cut down trees and let ’em lie, they burn houses and build no more” (989). Furthermore, as if pointlessly cutting down trees was not enough, industrialization has finally reached the machine-refusing Shire too. Frodo and the others find that the old mill has been replaced with a new one “full o’ wheels and outlandish contraptions” and although there exists no corn to grind Saruman’s ruffians are “always a-hammering and a-letting out a smoke and a stench [...] and they pour out filth a purpose; they’ve fouled all the lower Water [...] If

they want to make the Shire into a desert, they're going the right way about it" (990). The reckless implementation of machines has not only impacted the Shire aesthetically but also practically in the defiling of the water in the area. Ruined water in Middle-earth will be discussed again shortly.

Eventually, when the hour has finally come to deal with Saruman for the last time the Hobbits undergo "one of the saddest hours of their lives". On their way to Bag End they acknowledge that "all along the Bywater Road every tree had been felled [...] All the chestnuts were gone. The banks and hedgerows were broken. Great waggons were standing in disorder in a field beaten barren of grass. Bagshot Row was a yawning sand and gravel quarry" (993). The destruction of the natural life in the Shire is a means of showing that, even though it seems absolutely incredible, if the environmental issue is not dealt with it will backlash and affect every corner of the world. In their wildest imaginations the hobbits could not perceive the thought that anything could happen to the tiny, insignificant country of the Shire but Tolkien wants to illustrate how false a belief that is. In the end however, when Saruman is dead, the beauty of the Shire is eventually restored thanks to the miracle powder Sam receives from Galadriel which makes everything grow at an unimaginable pace. Tolkien lets the restored health of the nature of the Shire represent the restored health of the entire people and this is expressed in how "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" (1000). Here, the connection between nature and the peoples of Middle-earth is emphasized in the way the prosperity of nature mirror the prosperity of the people.

However, Saruman, "the tree-killer" and "tree-slayer" (Tolkien 740,957), is not the only enemy that the nature of Middle-earth must deal with. Sauron and his forces are the main villains in *The Lord of the Rings* and they do more damage to trees and water than anyone

else. Looking at the historical context, Grove states that the repercussions of war on nature can be traced back to the 15th century when the need of timber to the battle ships left a devastating mark on the environment (27). In the early 18th century the condition of the forests on the colony of St Helena was almost irreparable and the British' previous misuse of the island's resources had led to drought (Grove 114). In comparison, the nature of Mordor seems to be eternally sterile, something which is described in detail during Sam and Frodo's journey through the wretched land. While traversing the rocky lands of Mordor they experience how few plants grow there but through the narrator one finds out that "once in milder days there must have been a fair thicket in the ravine" (790). Here Tolkien discusses the changing climate and how deforestation effects the ecology just as Grove shows how deforestation can cause drought which eventually leads to a ruined soil leaving it sterile, unable to make anything grow.

To avoid drought there is an obvious need for water and accordingly Grove writes that "deforestation caused major water-supply problems" (30). In 17th century France for example the reckless felling of trees had caused a predicament so difficult the problem had "become so universal and rooted that a remedy seemed impossible" (Grove 59). In the same way, Tolkien repeatedly brings up the state of the water in Mordor and how it has been affected by the rule of Sauron and his destructive ways. When Sam and Frodo for the first time see Minas Morgul, the dark fortress of the Witch King, they discover that "the water flowing beneath was silent, and it steamed, but the vapour that rose from it, curling and twisting about the bridge, was deadly cold" (921). The defiled water has already been brought up but another indication on how badly the land of Mordor has been treated during Sauron's reign lies in that the vapours rising from the water are deadly. According to Grove, St Helena also suffered and deforestation had "altered the taste and colour of the water there" (121). The similar water issues definitely seem to connect Tolkien to ecological imperialism in this aspect.

Continuing, looking at the lethal vapours in Mordor's water, it is not only the water that has been contaminated but the very air they breathe as well. Grove writes that deforestation on St Helena led to an increase in filth in the air rendering it more dangerous to breathe than before (121). Equivalently, in the treeless, barren land of Mordor Sam and Frodo felt the air "grew harsh, and filled with a bitter reek that caught their breath and parched their mouths" (Tolkien 825), and later on their journey, despite being parched and in severe pain, they find that "worst of all, the air was full of fume; breathing was painful and difficult" (918). The poisonous smoke covering Mordor bluntly symbolizes the smoke climbing through the air from factory chimneys.

It is not only the ecology that is affected by the ecological imperialism but the biological world, in this case the animals, suffer too. Like the trees of the Shire being wantonly cut down, Grove describes the colonialists' pointless killing of endangered species on St Helena and Mauritius and blames the Empire for the extinction of the dodo and near extinction of the sea tortoise (146,327). Similarly, while attempting to pass the Dead Marshes, Sam mournfully exclaims: "Not a bird!". "No, no birds", Gollum answers. "Lots of things, lots of nasty things. No birds" (818,819). The complete lack of animals here reveals that the fauna of Middle-earth is affected in the same way the flora is, and the two cannot exist without cooperation.

Behind all of the exhausted lands, foul water and disappearing animals lies the colonial deforestation. In *Green Imperialism*, Grove concludes that the East India Company of the British Empire was responsible for more deforestation compared to other European nations (52), and the orchs of Sauron's empire are the EIC's equivalents in *The Lord of the Rings*. During Elrond's council in Rivendell, the elf-king himself unfolds how the Old Forest has diminished over the years and remembers that "time was when a squirrel could go from tree to tree from what is now the Shire to Dunland west of Isengard" (345). Hence, the reader is

informed of the transformation Middle-earth has gone through and how vital it is to stop the decay of the woods, animal life, water and the air.

The first sign of war and deteriorated nature can be detected when the fellowship travel by boat on the river of Anduin, lay eyes on the slopes they pass and notice how the slopes look “as if fire had passed over them, leaving no living blade of green”. “What pestilence or war or evil deed of the Enemy had so blasted all that region even Aragorn could not tell” (495,496). Furthermore, In *The Two Towers* Treebeard discloses to Merry and Pippin the story of the entwines. The young hobbits are told that when the ents searched for the entwines, instead of the entwines’ gardens, they “found a desert; it was all burned and uprooted, for war had passed over it” (620). These episodes are just fragments of all the destruction the orcs cause to the woods. Treebeard, the shepherd of the trees, describes another incident with the orcs as their cutting down trees “without even the bad excuse of feeding the fires” (633). Treebeard’s reflections mirror what Tolkien said about the meaningless felling of trees he experienced as a young boy.

*The Return of the King* unveils whom that king really is, but not until the orcs have been defeated outside Minas Tirith. When at war, Sauron’s orcs grasp every chance they get to ruin nature and at the commencement of the siege of the White City “watchmen on the walls heard the rumour of the enemy that roamed outside, burning field and tree” (803). Even Legolas regrets the impact the army of the free people had, “rampling unheeded the grass and the flowers”, while hunting their enemies (857). Hence, even though war is sometimes necessary to deter evil, the novels seem to lament all parts of war and what it brings. The descriptions of the industrial war of the ring appear to suggest how experiences of ruined meadows, burnt trees and fallen comrades in the war, along with his childhood memories of cut down trees, were incentives for Tolkien to portray the machines as potential exterminators of natural life.

Finally, Grove does not devote his work simply to the destruction by the colonialists but also to the conservationism in the ex-colonies that followed it. In *The Lord of the Rings* the idea of sustainability is introduced twice by Gandalf, first in Elrond's council in Rivendell and secondly in the council held after the fight outside Minas Tirith, before taking the final battle to Mordor. When the issue of annihilating the ring is discussed in Rivendell, Gandalf insists that "it is not our part here to take thought only for a season, or for a few lives of Men, or for a passing age of the world. We should seek a final end of this menace, even if we do not hope to make one" (347). At the latter council he develops this thought further: "Other evil there are that may come; For Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till" (861). Clearly, these quotes contain conservationist messages and suggest that a more farsighted approach should be applied to how nature is to be treated. The imperialists regarded only what occurred in their own time and these quotes express the opposite side to that egotist, materialist view.

### **Buell's demand on the free peoples of Middle-earth**

Returning to Buell's demand on environmental literature, concerning the connection between humans and nature and portraying nature as a character, the issue is if *The Lord of the Rings* shares the traits of the Romantic era in terms of the aesthetic quality of natural depiction and industrial scepticism. Consequently, regarding this connection, one has to analyze the inhabitants of Middle-earth. Naturally, it seems appropriate to begin with the elves who actually live in forests and in humongous trees. They seem to be in absolute unison with the natural world. While riding through the Huorn woods after the battle at Helm's Deep for

example the elf Legolas exclaims: “These are the strangest trees I ever saw, and I have seen many an oak grow from acorn to ruinous age [...] they have voices, and in time I might come to understand them” (713). Seemingly, Legolas is able to communicate with the trees and wishes to understand them when the rest of the company riding through are frightened. This is one of several occasions where Tolkien’s elves seem to symbolize wisdom and understanding and also an immense connection with the natural world of Middle-earth.

In *Ents, elves and eriador* Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans regard the main purpose of the elves as preservers of natural beauty, that is the “aesthetic qualities of the created world” (109). One could argue that the elves appear to be the Romantics of Middle-earth based on the role as preservers of aesthetic qualities. Moreover, Cynthia M. Cohen describes the relationship as “more than close – it is symbiotic” (104). She draws this conclusion from a quote by Tolkien depicting the close link between elf and tree: “Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees are loved” (Cohen 104). It also appears to be that elves not only cooperate with trees but with natural elements such as rivers too. To exemplify, when Frodo on horseback is chased by the ringwraiths he crosses a river and faces his hunters. When they attempt to follow, the river rises and sweeps the wraiths away (Tolkien 280). Subsequently, Frodo is informed by Gandalf that this was caused by Elrond. Here, as well as indicating just how close elves are to nature, Tolkien reminds the reader of nature’s brute force and what could happen when pushed too far.

Turning to our own human race represented in the trilogy, it is evident that men, although the elves are nature’s true protectors, also are very much in tune with the natural history of Middle-earth. Take the White Tree of Gondor for example. According to Cohen, this tree indicates whether the line of kings is healthy or not and is a symbol of the prosperity of the land of Gondor (99,100). When Gandalf and Pippin first arrive in Minas Tirith where the White Tree is planted in the final part of the trilogy Pippin reflects on the decay of the city

and imagines what it once was in all its pride and glory. Then he encounters the tree and witnesses that “the falling drops dripped sadly from its barren and broken branches back into the clear water” (736), and the dead tree clearly symbolizes the approaching death of the Gondorian culture. In the final chapters of the entire series, when, against all odds, peace and health have been restored after the destruction of the ring and a new king is ready to seize the throne a sapling from the White Tree is found and planted. Obviously, this is a sign that the human race in *The Lord of the Rings* is tied to nature in this aspect. However, Tolkien is also keen on implying the insignificance of man in comparison to the vast life of nature. This is apparent in *The Two Towers* when Gandalf reminds King Theoden of the minute role of importance he plays to the ancient ents: “to them you are but the passing tale; all the years from Eorl the Young to Theoden the Old are but a small matter” (717). By looking at the link between the White Tree and Gondor’s power combined with Tolkien’s attempt to put humans in perspective to nature’s grandeur it is easy to conclude that natural life and human life are quite clearly supposed to be connected at their very root.

Last, and undoubtedly least when it comes to size, the hobbits (or halflings) will now be the focal point since they are one of the free peoples and they are, eventually, the ones that are the deciding factor for the outcome of the war. Evidently, all the free peoples of Middle-earth are closely linked to the natural world and that most certainly includes the hobbits as well. On the very first page of the trilogy, in the chapter *Concerning hobbits*, the reader finds that hobbits “love [...] good-tilled earth”, prefer the “well-farmed countryside” and neither “understand or like machines” (1). Their link to nature is further enhanced as Tolkien describes their ability to blend in with nature when sensing danger, an ability they possess because of “a close friendship with the earth” (2). Hence, there seems to be a mutual bond of respect between hobbits and nature. There is a clear reason why Tolkien would choose “friendship” as the word of describing the relationship between hobbits and nature which is to

emphasize how nature should be respected and what the result of breaking that bond is will be addressed later on.

According to a radio interview with the BBC, Tolkien referred to the Shire as an image of the English Midlands, a countryside he grew to love as a young boy (Dickerson/Evans 13). Dickerson and Evans believe that the characteristics of rural England and its ecology to a large extent is represented in the landscapes of the Shire (155). Thus, the lives of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* are possible representatives of an ideal Tolkien believed man should strive to live up to and although hobbits are lazy and fat they mirror Tolkien's anti-industrial beliefs (Tolkien 1). They are non-materialistic, anti-modernist, agricultural and very naturalistic in their "return to nature" approach, and of course they "have great appreciation for trees" (Dickerson/Evans 98). Accordingly, they appear to embody what Tolkien felt was wrong with the modern technological era following the world wars. Bill McKibben shared Tolkien's concern in *The End of Nature* from 1989 and suggested that science and a modern technological order will be the end of nature (Huggan/Tiffin 204,205). In contrast, however ineffective, hobbits symbolize the opposite of technological progress.

To conclude, Tolkien has undoubtedly characterized the free peoples of Middle-earth in a way which links them to the natural life of *The Lord of the Rings*, illustrating how he probably wished for man to act when it comes to respecting it.

### **The character of nature**

Moving on, one does not have to look far when attempting to find signs of the nature in *The Lord of the Rings* being more than what Buell referred to as "a framing device". For the sake of this analysis more than a framing device means that the natural world is basically one of the novels' characters. For example, the Old Forest featured in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is

indeed an entity with a personality and a temperament. This is the forest in which Frodo and his companions travel through on the way to Rivendell in order to decide what to do with the ring. When entering the forest, Merry describes the seemingly animate trees there:

But the forest is queer. Everything in it is very much alive, more aware of what is going on so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you. They are usually content merely to watch you, as long as daylight lasts, and don't do much. Occasionally the most unfriendly ones may drop a branch, or stick a root out, or grasp at you with a long trailer. (144)

He continues by describing the actions of the malevolent forest's characteristics at night:

I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge. I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind. They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in. (144,145)

A forest has hardly ever been assigned more human traits than the Old Forest of Tolkien's landscape, although it is noticeable that the forest is exclusively depicted as evil and angry. full of menace and this might seem odd when trying to showcase Tolkien as a proponent of environmentalism. However, if one looks closer at the history of the Old Forest, Merry unfolds the story of hobbits cutting down "hundreds of trees", subsequently burning them in the forest and burning the ground at the edge of the woods. He concludes: "After that the trees gave up the attack, but they became very unfriendly" (145). Arguably, Tolkien sought to imply that the trees were only responding to a deforestation and were not intentionally evil from the beginning of their existence. That was caused by the action of others. "After the attack" may indicate that the trees were not very friendly to begin with, however, it is rather plausible to argue that they were merely defending themselves from the hobbits invading "their" land (Dickerson/Evans 140).

Incidentally, the hobbits as tree cutters here clashes with their embodying Tolkien's views. It will be argued here however that Tolkien is illustrating how it is possible to reconcile with nature and although the hobbits were once reckless and inexperienced they are still a friendly, nature loving people as they "love peace and quiet" (Tolkien 1). In addition, as one peruses the history of the hobbits, Tolkien concludes that "at no time had Hobbits of any kind been warlike, and had never fought among themselves" (7), since they had always believed that "peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-earth and the right of all sensible folk" (7). It seems as if the incident with the Old Forest was an unfortunate mistake and from Merry's descriptions it would appear that they have certainly learned to be more respectful of the forest.

After the hobbits finally arrive in Rivendell and Elrond's council decide what has to be done with the One Ring, *The Fellowship of the Ring* takes the nine travellers on an epic journey through various types of natural habitats, and after failing one of their planned routes they take on the mountain of Caradhras. Immediately, one is given the feeling that the mountain has a mind of its own. The companions find themselves in a snowstorm but the reader is not supposed to believe that this is a regular snowstorm. As Gimli the dwarf puts it: "Caradhras has not forgiven us. He has more snow yet to fling at us, if we go on" (379). Apparently, the snow stopping the fellowship is brought down by the will of the disturbed mountain, referred to as a "he". When they are finally forced to escape the mountain path and pull back to lower ground the road is shut behind them. "And indeed with that last stroke the malice of the mountain seemed to be expended, as if Caradhras was satisfied that the invaders had been beaten off and would not dare to return" (382). The key word is probably "invaders" in this quote. Perhaps Tolkien was implying that they were disturbing the peace of the mountain since his world was not just the flora and the fauna but to him mountains and rivers and winds were alive as well (Dickerson/Evans 8).

Unmistakably, the wind plays its most important part in *The Return of the King* when Sauron invades the free lands of Middle-earth and covers them in a cloud of black smoke. This smoke seemingly represents industrialism and Curry views Sauron and Mordor as the only entity in Middle-earth “which is industrial, imperialistic, and possessed of an all powerful state” (32), all the qualities Tolkien abhorred in one single villain. Additionally, Mordor is described as an “utterly authoritarian state, with a slave-based economy and [...] intensive industrialism” with the “technological and instrumental power embodied in Sauron”, its emperor (24,52). Tolkien’s representation of the battle of modernity and industrialism gradually conquering nature finds its root in the war of the ring, visualized in the invading force of Mordor assaulting the allied resistance of the free people of Middle-earth. The impact of industrialism is foreshadowed already in *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Sam stares into the elf-queen Galadriel’s mirror: “Like a dream the vision shifted and went back, and he saw the trees again. But this time [...] they were not waving in the wind, they were falling, crashing to the ground” (471). The vision of the devilry of industrialization continues: “Lots of folk were busy at work. There was a tall red chimney nearby. Black smoke seemed to cloud the surface of the Mirror” (472). This, of course, is not very “hobbit-like” with hobbits being “busy at work” and the message seems clear; industry will change the world Sam lives in, even one as peaceful and picturesque as the world of the Shire.

Returning to the wind, while riding under the veil of Sauron’s black smoke and approaching the great battle outside of Minas Tirith the army of the Rohirrim is helped by a tribe of wood-men (another type of people highly in touch with nature simply referred to as the Wild Men). Before retiring back into the woods and leaving the army the headman of these wood-men, Ghan-buri-Ghan exclaims: “Wind is changing!” (817). This changing of the wind could be insignificant in any other story, but in *The Lord of the Rings* it is foreshadowing the turning of the tide and the eventual victory for the allied free peoples of

Middle-earth, further exemplifying how Tolkien makes the natural elements of Middle-earth more vivid.

The personifications utilized by Tolkien to animate nature offer an increased insight into what he sought to accomplish in *The Lord of the Rings*. Obviously, he imagined a world with a higher sense of “oneness” with natural life and thus created nature as something truly alive. Nowhere in the books is this better illustrated than with the appearance of the ents, and especially Treebeard, or Fangorn, or all the other different names he carries. The ents are, simply put, gigantic, walking and talking trees and they are the shepherds of the trees which cannot speak, such as the Huorns mentioned earlier. Cohen writes that the old Anglo-Saxon word “ent” basically means giant (112). She also explains that the ents are something unique for *The Lord of the Rings* and the several different trees with personalities like Treebeard and Old Man Willow exclusively appear in Tolkien’s trilogy (92). The way Tolkien utilizes all of these natural elements as characters provides the nature of Middle-earth with a mind of its own and it is a way for Tolkien to intensify the importance of Middle-earth’s ecology.

## **The Romantics and Richard Wagner**

### **Tolkien’s inspiration?**

In *Green Imperialism*, Grove presents a theory which states that early environmentalism had its roots in the literary movement of Romanticism (224), and this chapter attempts to show how Tolkien drew inspiration from the Romantics while wishing to highlight the struggle between nature and industry. This theory is of great interest to this analysis since Tolkien followed in the path of pivotal Romantic works, especially milestones like Coleridge’s *Frost at midnight*, Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* or Blake’s epic *Songs of Innocence and Experience* which to a large extent dealt with nature. Accordingly, just to illustrate how an immense role

nature is assigned and how richly it is depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*, here follows a passage from Frodo and Sam's journey towards Mordor:

All about them were small woods of resinous trees, fir and cedar and cypress, and other kinds unknown in the Shire, with wide glades among them: and everywhere there was a wealth of sweet-smelling herbs and shrubs [...] Here Spring was already busy about them: fronds pierced moss and mould, larches were green-fingered, small flowers were opening in the turf, birds were singing [...] Many great trees grew there, planted long ago, falling into untended age amid a riot of tamarisk and pungent terebinth, of olive and of bay; and there were junipers and myrtles; and thymes that grew in bushes, or with their woody creeping stems mantled in deep tapestries the hidden stones, sages of many kinds putting forth blue flowers, or red, or pale green; and marjorams and new-sprouting parsleys [...] The grotts and rocky walls were already starred with saxifrages and stonecrops. Primerasphodel and anemones were awake in the filbert-brakes; and asphodel and many lily-flowers nodded their half-opened heads in the grass: deep green grass beside the pools. (850)

This entire passage is comprised in just one single page with nothing but astonishingly detailed descriptions of the flora in the region. This quote represents the tradition of the era of Romanticism and how Tolkien drew from that inspiring him in both views and technique. As Romanticism emphasizes “grandeur and picturesqueness” this passage clarifies how Tolkien, in line with his predecessors, celebrated the beauty of nature by utilizing an evocative narrative describing the natural life. It also subtly implies that nature in Middle-earth is alive and very much carries its own personality. Romantics do not simply discuss the beauty of nature however, they also lament the progress of industry and modernity, a discussion Tolkien held in high regard (Arvidsson 146).

When comparing Tolkien to the Romantics, William Blake will be the writer in focus here, first and foremost because “he has more to say to the present world than any other poet

of his time”, at least according to Milton O. Percival (Percival 34). Moreover, Blake is selected since his work shares various similarities with Tolkien. Initially, much like Tolkien, Blake expressed a sincere care for trees, illustrated specifically in this quote from one of his letters: “The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing which stands in the way” (Coupe 16). To someone clearing the ground for construction a tree would just be something standing in the way while to a Romantic like Blake, or presumably Tolkien, the tree is a symbol for much more. Blake’s dismay with industrial progress shines through here as well as his appreciation for the beauty of nature. Secondly, he also resembles Tolkien in the fact that he created his own mythology with characters like Urizen and Luvah which would resemble what Tolkien accomplished with Middle-earth (Schorer 45).

The most evident similarities however are found in what they write about and in which contemporary issues they address, especially the concern all Romantics shared when it comes to the negative effect they believed modernity had on society. Both of them strongly disapproved of the damage war caused to nature and interestingly enough, identical to what Tolkien witnessed in WWI, in *The Four Zoas* Blake depicts corn fields run over by cavalry horses ruining the ground (Erdman 102). Blake further implied that energy which could be used for constructive and creative work was wasted in war (Frye 48). In addition, the duo strongly criticized scientific advancement and had quite harsh sentiments regarding it and to exemplify, Tolkien thought of this increase in science as “the utter folly of these lunatic physicists” while Blake stated that “Science is the Tree of Death” (Curry 86; Hagstrum 148). As supposed Romantics they both share a scepticism towards the progress of science which is defined in these two quotes.

As stated earlier, war is often part of imperialism and with imperialism, according to Crosby, comes materialism. Neither Tolkien nor Blake were proponents of either imperialism nor materialism, on the contrary, they sought to advocate a type of anti-colonialism and anti-

materialism. Tolkien used symbols for this and the symbol for materialism is of course the ring of power and how it consumes its owners while Sauron and the force of Mordor represent imperialism. Blake on the other hand was more direct in his critique which is illustrated quite well by David V. Erdman's description of Blake's opinions: "For counting gold is not abundant living; and grasping colonies and shedding blood whether in the name of royal dignity or in the name of commerce is not living at all, but killing" (Erdman 88,89).

According to the same critic, Blake also urged his countrymen to let "the British Colonies beneath the woful Princes fade" (89). To let the colonies fade definitely refers to a giving up of the British colonies reducing the power of the nation state, a major part of Tolkien's ideals, connecting their concerns in this respect. Furthermore, Blake comments on the impact the Empire has on its own people, namely the citizens of England and how it increases the growth of the tree of evil inside them (Erdman 62). Tolkien and Blake apparently shared thoughts on how Britain should be run in terms of ruling.

Regarding the tree inside of us, Blake, just as Tolkien, is keen on the connection between man and nature and consistently utilizes personifications in his poems. Benjamin Heath Malkin sees Blake's personifications as "bold", his thoughts as "original" and his writing style as "epic" (12). All of the three adjectives are quite reminiscent of Tolkien's famous work. As described in the earlier chapters, the fusion of nature and the different peoples of Middle-earth is extremely important in *The Lord of the Rings*, and in the same fashion Blake emphasizes that symbiosis. Accordingly, Hazard Adams describes Blake's poetry as a "human vision, where nature is no longer a surrounding physical existence but a city within the spirit" (82), and in the same way Mark Schorer regarded the nature in Blake's poetry as "not only a lively nature in general, but a nature mingling with man" (38). If nature is a "city within the spirit", mingling with man then there can be no doubt that Blake thought of the relationship between human and nature as a vital bond, requiring more attention than it

was ultimately given. In the same respect, Buell sees that relationship as the foundation in ecocritical analysis.

Lastly, one quite intriguing similarity between Tolkien and Blake is the appearance of the “Orc” character in Blake’s poetry and the “orcs” in *The Lord of the Rings*. Orcs are a devilish, war-mongering people representative of Sauron’s enslaving power, but they were elves once. Similarly, according to Northrop Frye, Blake’s Orc was once a hero of romance “ridding the barren land of its impotent aged kings” but eventually, as with Tolkien’s orcs, “we see him subside into the world of darkness” (55).

Continuing, Frye, editor of a collection of essays on Blake, compared Blake to German composer Richard Wagner and how Blake’s illustrations featured symbols which are supposed equivalents to Wagner’s use of leitmotifs (124). There is a more comprehensive similarity, however, uniting both Blake and Wagner with Tolkien, namely their adherence to the Romantic tradition praising nature and criticizing industrialization. The most interesting comparison here is the one between Wagner and Tolkien, and Stefan Arvidsson insists that Tolkien borrowed material and ideas from Wagner’s legendary opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (20). Regarding that comparison it seems appropriate to discuss what separates or brings the two landmark pieces together, for example if *The Hobbit* is included in the *The Lord of the Rings* they are both tetralogies and they both extensively borrow material from Old Norse mythology (Arvidsson 150).

To start off with, however, here follows a closer look at the most obvious connection between them, namely the rings themselves. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the ring represents utter evil and all the ringbearers at some point succumb to its seductive power despite their knowing how dangerous it is. After taming Gollum, Frodo describes that power to him: “All you wish is to see it and touch it, if you can, though you know it would drive you mad” (Tolkien 807). Pierre A. Walker writes that the ring in the *Nibelungen* cycle also possesses an

extremely corrupting power and argues that it draws a curse over all who wear it or even desire it (19). There is an episode in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* where one of the main characters, Wotan, has the chance to restore love and health by giving up the ring, however he chooses to keep it and is not persuaded otherwise until the voice of the earth itself, interestingly enough, convinces him to surrender the ring (Shaw 182,183). Thus, a plausible conclusion would be that the respective rings symbolize anti-materialism, an opinion Arvidsson shares and states that Wagner fought against “capitalistic decadence”, i.e. materialism (104).

However, although they both expressed that anti-materialist standpoint British playwright and self-proclaimed “Wagnerian” George Bernard Shaw highlights Wagner’s intensely imperialist leanings, which is exactly what Tolkien deeply combatted, and quotes Wagner’s praise: “Hail, hail, our Caesar! Royal William! Rock and ward of German freedom!” (157). Wagner openly celebrates the emperor here comparing him to one of the most influential leaders of all time, Julius Caesar, for better or for worse. Since materialism and its included obsession with possession is a major part of imperialism it seems confusing that Wagner would advocate one while condemning the other, however it was probably that imperialistic vein in Wagner that Tolkien reacted against while at the same time being inspired by Wagner’s writings.

According to Robert A. Hall, the major difference between the authors in terms of their views on imperialism is not the only dividing issue, however, and he goes as far as to say that *The Lord of the Rings* is in fact “anti-Nibelungen” (Arvidsson 159). Furthermore, Arvidsson’s [*The Dragon Syndrome*] provides several paragraphs containing dividing factors such as religion, themes, politics and the endings (pp 159-165). However, the argument made here is that there are more important similarities than there are differences. Just as with Tolkien, Wagner’s natural pathos appears to imbue *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and Susan

Bratton writes that one of the main characters Siegfried is closely linked to nature in that he can converse with birds and she illustrates forests as “the nurturing environment for Siegfried” (8). In comparison, elves in *The Lord of the Rings* apparently have the ability to speak to trees and understand their thoughts.

Tolkien of course saw great evil in destroying nature which is portrayed for example in the attack by the Old Forest after having been cut down, and also in the rise of the ents when discovering how Saruman has ruined much of the Fangorn forest. Correspondingly, Berthold Hoeckner analyzes the root of evil in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and finds that the genesis of evil can be found in the defiling of nature. “We learn that Wotan drank from the Well of Wisdom, which dried up, and that he broke a branch from the World Ash Tree, which withered away”, Hoeckner informs, indicating that the origins of evil in Wagner’s ring cycle exist due to the misuse of natural life (167). In many ways the effect of Wotan’s actions is reminiscent of the abominable landscape of Mordor with the dried up well similar to Mordor’s spoiled water which “had an unpleasant taste, at once bitter and oily” (Tolkien 900), and the withered tree reminiscent of Mordor’s earth which “seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked” (902). Possibly, Tolkien found inspiration in Wagner’s display of natural adulation.

Moreover, the branch Wotan breaks off from the tree he turns into a weapon which seems like a relevant symbol for the industrialism of war, something Tolkien was passionately protesting against. For Wagner, Wotan’s industrialism, according to Michael P. Steinberg, is a sign of the strength of the German empire which the composer celebrated without hesitation (706,707). However, in contrast to what Steinberg writes, it rather seems as if nature is of vast importance to Wagner as well and it looks as if both he and Tolkien expressed a wish for a “return to nature” and diminished materialism. The fact that Tolkien distanced himself from Wagner presumably lies in Wagner’s strong imperialistic beliefs, the part of British rule that

Tolkien firmly denounced, although sharing Wagner's natural pathos. Stephen McClatchie argues that at the end of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* when the world is destroyed Wagner is depicting the end of the material world as "a return to uncorrupt nature" (186,187). Thus, despite their imperialistic differences, and although Tolkien once angrily exclaimed that "both rings are round, and there the resemblance stops" (Arvidsson 148), they appear to have come together regarding nature.

Like the orcs' resemblance to the Orc in Blake's poetry there is a similar likeness to a character in Wagner's operas, namely the one between Sauron and Alberic. Tolkien appears to have found inspiration in this character in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and while Curry blames Sauron for utilizing a "slave-based economy" the evil dwarf Alberic in Wagner's opera finds that method applicable as well. "For his gain, hordes of his fellow-creatures are thenceforth condemned to slave miserably, overground and underground" (Shaw 173), and in Alberic's mine "which resounds with the clinking anvils of the dwarfs toiling miserably to heap up treasure for their master" (Shaw 179), the slaves are forced to work endlessly for the sake of Alberic's industrial and materialist mind wishing to conquer the world and only resting "when the soft airs and green mosses of its valleys shall be changed into smoke, slag, and filth" (Shaw 180). Tolkien's character thus finds an antecedent in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and these two capitalist characters neatly connect Tolkien and Wagner in their dislike of materialism and capitalist economy.

To summarize, Tolkien seems to have found a great deal of inspiration in the tradition of Romanticism and in the way it combines appreciation for scenic landscapes and discontent with the progress of industrialism. The Romantic traits which Tolkien incorporates into *The Lord of the Rings* connect with the representations of ecological imperialism through the appeal for diminished industrialism. Also, they find a link in expressing how machines and war in general leave a ruinous mark on nature.

## Epilogue

The argument stated in this essay is that representations of how ecological imperialism and industrialism destroy nature can be found in the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. In addition, it was further explained how Tolkien drew from the literary tradition of Romanticism regarding the depiction of nature and the lamenting of industrial progress to get his point across. The analysis was made from an ecocritical perspective which means that one peruses literature in order to find ideas dealing with environmental crises.

When comparing *The Lord of the Rings* to the authentic historical events which Grove discusses it is quite simple to connect the dots. Grove finds that the deforestation caused by for example the British Empire and the British EIC exhausted much of the land and the soil on the colonial island of St Helena and other locations resulting in environmental problems such as drought and foul water leading to risk of famine and an irreparable damage to the natural life of the islands. Even exotic animals were wantonly hunted to extinction. With this in mind, Tolkien's trilogy offers several, if not all, of these aspects of environmental deterioration due to Saruman and Sauron's quests for absolute power. In total disregard of natural impact their servants burn fields and cut down trees just for the sheer joy of destruction. Mordor's barren landscape is a desert of pits and fumes, poisonous water and is perhaps a vision of how Tolkien pictured what the future could look like if the issues of sustainability are not addressed. These views are most prominently expressed by Gandalf and Treebeard in their respective monologues on the state of the world and what is wrong with it.

At the same time Tolkien's ideals are probably best illustrated in the lives and lands of the hobbits. Their simple, anti-technological and down to earth-lifestyle and their passion for gardens along with their connection to the earth appear to embody Tolkien's standpoint. Furthermore, Tolkien introduces those leanings in a fictional milieu based on his very own

mythology. The concept of using an individually created myth is not entirely new however and it has been argued here that Tolkien was strongly influenced by the British Romantics, especially William Blake, and by legendary composer Richard Wagner, all of which celebrated a return to the natural state of being. As Romantics find a connection to ecological imperialism in their adulation of nature as well as in their detestation of industrialism and progress of modernity Romanticism has come to be an integral part of discussing environmental issues in *The Lord of the Rings*. Using it here has indicated that Tolkien very much was affected by how the Romantics could portray a desire for an intensified unity with nature and at the same time criticize industrial progress.

In conclusion, based on what can be extracted from the analysis included in this essay it definitely exists a major possibility that Crosby's theory of ecological imperialism can be applied when scrutinizing *The Lord of the Rings*. Saruman and Sauron's imperialistic desires, mainly symbolized in the hunt for the One Ring, combined with their immense obsession with industrialism and destruction are by all means the main reasons to the suffering of nature in Middle-earth. Finally, Curry believes that we as readers "find ourselves reading a story about ourselves, about our own world. That is one reason why so many readers have taken it so to heart" (24). Accordingly, Tolkien's representations of Romanticism and ecological imperialism, reflecting the repercussions of modernity, seems applicable to contemporary discussions which is why these novels have the ability to symbolize environmental concerns today. Perhaps ecocritical analysis can further incorporate former unexplored classic literature into the discussion of modern issues.

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