

Feeling Forests and Talking Trees: Discovering an Animate Environment through Fantasy

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Fundamental to fantasy literature is the production of new worlds, a process J.R.R. Tolkien describes as “subcreation” in which readers are both familiar and unfamiliar, comforted and unsettled; these spaces are made to test the bounds of imagination while we analyze our own world, and our place in it, in relation to the imagined (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” 12). Tolkien’s Middle-earth exists today as *the* foundational fantasy world due to its rich liveliness, depth of characters and landscapes, and status as familiar but also decidedly unfamiliar. The power of not just Tolkien’s work, but fantasy as a genre, rests in what he describes as the three central “faces” of fantasy stories: “The Mystical towards the Supernatural, the Magical towards Nature, and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man” (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” 9). According to Tolkien, at the core of fantasy is an attempt to reveal the magic of nature, making nature animate and vibrant while simultaneously casting “man,” or humanity, into a role as other, or outsider. Tolkien’s “mirror of scorn and pity” functions as a means to break down anthropocentric modes of thinking, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as the “primary or exclusive focus on humanity; the view or belief that humanity is the central or most important element of existence, especially as opposed to God or the natural world” (“anthropocentrism”). Ursula K. Le Guin discusses fantasy’s work at breaking down anthropocentrism in line with Tolkien in the essay “The Critics, the Monsters, and the Fantasists,” where she states that “realistic fiction is drawn towards anthropocentrism, fantasy away from it” (87). Studying Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* through the lens of ecocriticism—specifically, works advocating for the vibrancy and animacy of oft-considered “insensate” material such as Jane Bennet’s *Vibrant Matter* and Mel Chen’s *Animacies*—alongside criticism on fantasy made by Le Guin and

Tolkien reveals the tensions between nature, the environment, and humans. Here, I argue that Tolkien makes fantasy literature a ground to rework hierarchies and understandings of nature and humanity, as fantasy ultimately reveals the power and vibrancy of nature as a force in and of itself.

Lively Natures: Revealing the Animacy and Vibrancy of Individual Environmental Forces

In thinking through the dichotomy between man and nature, rather than perceiving nature as “magical,” like Tolkien does, I aim to advocate the power of nature by revealing the vitality and animacy of specific environments described in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The environments and forces of forests, trees, and mountains in these texts function as characters with importance akin to the various human-like characters (elves, hobbits, men, and dwarves) found in the texts, as they each have histories, personalities, liveliness, and, at times, even emotions. Such rich characteristics make these environments and forces animate, following Mel Chen’s definition of animacy as “a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveliness” (2). In tandem with thinking through the environment’s animacy, fantasy also establishes the vitality of environmental forces; Jane Bennett defines “vitality” in her book *Vibrant Matter* as “the capacity of things...not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Bennett affirms the close relationship between “things” typically considered inanimate and humans; this relationship is found in Tolkien’s work as the “things” of the environment that have the ability to affect humans and be affected by them. Yet, these forces are simultaneously individual agents with motives and personalities that are not shaped by interactions with humans. Specific examples such as the Old Forest, the mines of Moria, and the Ents reveal the animacy

and vitality of the environment as Tolkien fantasizes mobile, lively, at times even talking and feeling environmental entities. In this way, the identities and perceptions of the environment are broken down and transformed by fantasy.

As the hobbits begin their journey, they enter environments that are new, uncomfortable, and even unpleasant; the first of these environments that they encounter is the Old Forest which is described as “queer” due to its sense of liveliness and agency. Merry states “the forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much more 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...I thought all the trees were whispering to each other” (108). According to Mel Chen, “queer” can refer to “animacy’s veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate” (11). Merry confirms that the forest feels “alive,” and thus establishes the environment as an animate one, with the trees as individual animate beings. Therefore, the forest deviates from the cultural understanding of trees, and nature, as inanimate, which leads to the environment’s description as “queer.” Its deviation is further solidified as Merry personifies the forest: by describing the trees’ awareness, ability to watch intruders, talk to one another, and their dislike for strangers, Tolkien suggests that the trees have physical capabilities akin to people, as well as personalities and a history. This personification is further confirmed when Pippin talks to the trees, telling them “I am not going to do anything. Just let me pass through, will you!” treating the forest as a fellow person, thus acting on Merry’s earlier feeling of the trees’ liveliness (109). The Old Forest is a decidedly animate environment and creating this environment this way shows how fantasy authors break down our conceptualizations of nature to rethink environmental forces as living beings.

Because of the forest's liveliness and personality, the hobbits find themselves working against the forest, which has oppositional desires and goals to the hobbits; such opposition upholds Bennet's definition of vitality as the ability to have individual agency (viii). The forest's agency is understood once the hobbits become aware of its history and personality: "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" (127). The Old Forest's history makes it a character with as much depth as any human-like character in the text, as it is shaped by its past and holds propensities and tendencies which shape their personalities, upholding Bennett's criterion for vitality. The forest's "hatred" suggests a capacity for feeling, Tolkien's way of describing animacy and vitality. Although the forest's feeling of hatred suggests a reactionary response, and thus lack of individual agency, the fact that the forest can feel at all, regardless of the reason, upholds Bennet's concept of vitality. In establishing the forest as a feeling character, Tolkien uses fantasy to force readers into thinking about the environment as being just as animate and vibrant as ourselves.

As the Old Forest's hatred fuels a desire to block the hobbits' passing, the hobbits grow fearful of the environment and the forest's animacy and vitality. Tolkien writes "as they went forward, it seemed that the trees became taller, darker, and thicker...they all got an uncomfortable feeling that they were being watched, with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity" (109). As the trees seem to grow in length and size, they assert their dominance over the hobbits, claiming their home, and solidifying the hobbits' presence as intruders. The darkness creates a sense of foreboding as it impairs the hobbits' ability to see while they become the objects of the trees' sight. The forest eventually impedes the hobbits' journey physically as Tolkien writes "the trees began to close in again, just where they had appeared from a distance to

be thinner and less tangled” until they eventually swallow Pippin and Merry: “Pippin had vanished. The crack by which he had laid himself had closed together, so that not a chink could be seen. Merry was trapped: another crack had closed about his waist (112, 115). In this way, the vitality of the trees works against human conceptualization of matter as “passive stuff...raw, brute, or inert,” instead showing their capacity as active beings (Bennet vii). Bennett continues to state that humans often have “the habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” a concept that is conflated here as the “matter” of the environment and the bodies of the hobbits become intertwined, showing that each has vitality and agency (vii).

With Merry and Pippin held captive inside the trees, Tolkien breaks down the divide between the environment and the human to show that each has individual power that can work against the other; in this way, the environment is made out to be equal to the human, which rethinks Chen’s conceptualization of our society’s animacy hierarchy: “an ordered hierarchy from inanimate object to plant to nonhuman animal to human” (40). The animacy hierarchy is broken down entirely due to the forest’s imprisonment of the hobbits, an action that reflects a reversal of the forest’s victimization from oppressive human actions of “gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning” (127). Here, the forest appropriates the dominating role of humans by impeding the hobbits’ journey. This action further solidifies the similarities between the hobbits and the forest as each works toward enacting a desired goal based off of their feelings and the world they live in; such a similarity is reinforced by Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think* as he states “We humans...are not the only ones who interpret the world. ‘Aboutness’—representation, intention, and purpose in their most basic forms—is an intrinsic structuring feature of living dynamics in the biological world. Life is inherently semiotic” (74). As both are beings with intention and purpose, Tolkien destroys the animacy hierarchy by depicting the

hobbits and the Old Forest as similar forces and agents in the world who each reflects Kohn's conceptualization of "aboutness." In this way, Tolkien imbues the forest with emotion and desire to illustrate the forest as an environment with purpose and intention.

Because the Old Forest breaks down the animacy hierarchy—and therefore deconstructs the division between nonhuman and human—the hobbits dislike the forest, which they show in their perception of it as a dark and hateful environment in the text. However, Tolkien affirms the vitality, importance, and value of negatively perceived environments when Elrond reminisces about his time spent in the Old Forest. He states that the forest has been dilapidated and appropriated by humans as "all that now remains is but an outlier of its northern march," effectively justifying the forest's antagonism and darkness (258). He continues, "time was when a squirrel could go from tree to tree from what is now the Shire to Dunland west of Isengard. In those lands I journeyed once, and many things wild and strange I knew" (258). Elrond is nostalgic for a past when animals were free and natural environments still possessed their integrity; this past also reflects a kinship between animal, human, and the environment, a kinship that can only exist when the nonhuman is not appropriated or oppressed by the human. Matthew Dickerson describes this storytelling as important in *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* since it suggests that "these things 'wild and strange' are worth knowing and that tales about them are worth telling—in short, that wilderness is valuable" (134). Here, Tolkien shows that humans should not be selective in admiring only "good" environments, but a variety of environments, as they each affirm nature's vibrancy, animacy, and similarity to humanity.

While Tolkien begins his commentary on the appropriation and destruction of the environment with his description of the Old Forest, he acknowledges this problem most clearly in his depiction of the dwarves and their proclivity for mining resources from mountains.

Dickerson describes the dwarves as valuing “the environment primarily as a source of fuel, building materials, and precious gems and metals” (101). However, the dwarves have a much more complex relationship with the environment. Although they indeed engage in resource extraction, the dwarves have mixed feelings of ownership over the mountains as well as reverence for them. This is seen as Gimli laments over the dwarves’ lost home, Moria: “Moria! Moria! Wonder of the Northern world! Too deep we delved there, and woke the nameless fear” (234). Here, Gimli shows that he believes Moria possesses a mystique, making the mountain a place that he can never entirely know or understand. He simultaneously admits to the hubris of the dwarves by claiming they mined “too deep,” a description that displays the dwarves as dominant, masculine oppressors of a feminized environment which they penetrate for their own goals and pleasures. A similar argument is made by Ursula Heise who critiques the human “presumption to know the natural world scientifically, to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically, and thereby ultimately to create a human sphere apart from it in a historical process that is usually labeled ‘progress’” (507). Tolkien imbues his text with a moral imperative as Gimli states they “woke the nameless fear,” that caused their desertion of Moria (234). In this way, Tolkien’s work is a cautionary tale against resource exploitation and appropriation of the environment.

Although the dwarves consider the mountains to be their home, they follow Heise in creating a sphere apart from nature as they position themselves as rulers over the environment. This is seen in *The Hobbit* when Thorin states, “my grandfather was King under the Mountain,” a title which shows a feeling of ownership and dominion over the environment (22). As Richard Matthews states that “Moria, the name of the great pit, means ‘given without love’” in Tolkien’s Elvish tongue, it’s clear that Tolkien situates the dwarves’ relationship with the mountains as an

example of human hubris and exceptionalism (71). “Given without love” also implies a feeling of resentment held toward the dwarves by the mountain, a feeling which asserts this environmental space as not only animate and vibrant but emotive and affective. However, the dwarves ascribe their own definitions of meaning and value to the environmental materials they mine, which Gandalf shows when he says, “The wealth of Moria was not in gold and jewels, the toys of the dwarves; nor in iron, their servant” (309). As Gandalf describes certain resources as “toys,” and others as “servants,” Tolkien establishes that the dwarves view the natural resources as insensate matter, matter whose purpose resides in merely fulfilling the wishes and desires of the dwarves. Tolkien again projects a moral lesson onto his readers for this way of thinking in *The Hobbit* as the dragon Smaug usurps the dwarves' dominion over their mountain, after which Thorin states “we went away” (23). Here, Tolkien exiles the dwarves from their “home,” because they could not appreciate the environment, and its vitality, in and of itself. In this way, Tolkien not only establishes the fact that the environment is animate and vibrant but also cautions readers to recognize the value in such qualities by showing that if the environment is not valued, humanity will be punished.

In working to teach his readers to acknowledge the environment's animacy and vitality, Tolkien constructs the walking, talking ents in order to give the environment a voice with which to speak directly to the characters of the text and, by extension, the readers. As Merry and Pippin meet the ent Treebeard, he states, “my name is growing all the time, and I've lived a very, very long time; so *my* name is like a story” (454). Treebeard is an example of the hobbits' insignificance and transience in the history of Middle-earth as Treebeard transcends generation, has lived before the hobbits, and will continue living after them. Describing his name as always “growing” affirms his liveliness and his own status as constantly growing and learning about the

world. Richard Matthews suggests that the tree “is a complex symbol for Tolkien, as it has definite Christian echoes of both the tree of knowledge and the tree of sacrifice” (68). Treebeard solidifies his representation of knowledge due to his age, which is suggestive of wisdom. The ents represent wisdom and age for the environment as a whole, as the environment exists throughout generations of people, a constantly growing site of stories.

The ents are simultaneously symbolic of the tree of sacrifice as their land has been constantly destroyed and damaged by the human-like characters of the text. Treebeard states “Down on the border they are felling trees—good trees. Some of these trees they just leave to rot” (462). Because of the way his home has been destroyed, Treebeard has grown ambivalent to the struggles between different races in Middle-earth as he states “I have not troubled about the Great Wars...they mostly concern men and elves...I am not altogether on anybody’s *side* because nobody is altogether on my side” (461). Here, Treebeard expresses sadness, even resentment, for how his environment has been devalued. In this way, Treebeard becomes more than a symbol, rather a living, animate character, following Patrick Curry’s idea that in Tolkien’s work “trees are never *just* symbols, and in their individuality convey the uniqueness and vulnerability of ‘real’ trees” (70). Treebeard’s vulnerability shows that despite the environment’s power, its devastation can lead to a mournfulness, and a justification for the environment’s animosity towards people, such as the Old Forest’s negative feelings in relation to the hobbits. Although highly symbolic, Tolkien shows that environmental forces are always more than mere symbols, as individual forces of the environment are vibrant and feeling.

By revealing the vibrancy and animacy of the environment, fantasy works to break down not just anthropocentrism, but human exceptionalism, which Eduardo Kohn describes in *How Forests Think* as the mode of thinking through which “we have treated humans as exceptional—

and thus fundamentally separate from the rest of the world” (7). Throughout his work, Tolkien breaks down and reconfigures the animacy hierarchy to force readers into rethinking our own value and animacy, and the animacy of other natural forces. Forces such as the ents and the Old Forest affect not only the characters in the text, but readers as well, as they force us readers to inhabit the place of the environment and feel sadness, resentment, and hatred over human devaluation of the environment.

The Body’s End: A Return to Nature Upon Mental & Physical Trauma

Devalued environments are vividly expressed in Tolkien’s Dead Marshes, an abject environment devastated by human intervention. The devastating personal and ecological effects of war have often been analyzed in comparison to Tolkien's work due to his experience as a soldier during the Great War and subsequent work in writing *The Lord of the Rings* as a war story. In response to questions about the influence of war on his writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien is quoted in the compilation *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* as having said “Personally I do not think either war...had any influence upon either the plot or the manner of its unfolding. Perhaps in landscape. The Dead Marshes...owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme” (303). Rather than writing an allegory of the events that transpired during the war, Tolkien instead used the various wartime environments as inspiration for crafting not only the setting of *The Lord of the Rings* but also the psychological states of his various characters. In this way, Tolkien’s rich memory of the wartime environmental landscape suggests that the environment has the power to drastically affect the human psyche, revealing the strong affinity between humans and the environment; this affinity can result in human emotional and psychological devastation that occurs in tandem with environmental destruction. Such effects are

best seen during Frodo and Sam's journey from the peaceful Shire to their eventual crossing through the Dead Marshes, an area suggestive of the negative impact that trench warfare had on the western environment. The Dead Marshes are similar to the trenches in that they both function as abject wetland spaces, eventually losing material integrity as they become "neither strictly land nor water" (Giblett 3). Reading the Dead Marshes in *The Two Towers* and trenches as wetland spaces through a lens of Rod Giblett's *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*, and tracking the emotional response to such spaces using Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* ultimately shows that when environmental landscapes are made abject and destroyed, this devastates not only the environment itself but also the human psyche.

Frodo and Sam's emotional response to the Dead Marshes is drastic since the area's nature as abject, destroyed wetland space starkly contrasts with their home in the Shire, an idealized natural environment. Frodo is "in love with the Shire" a diverse and thriving environment containing "woods and fields and little rivers" (32). The Shire is constantly represented as a flourishing and vibrant environment, such as when it is described as "fresh...the new green of Spring was shimmering in the fields and on the tips of the tree's fingers" (45). Tolkien's imagery of the Shire in springtime evokes a sense of renewal and rebirth, with the description of "new green" implying the Shire is an innocent, young, and safe environment for the hobbits. The Shire's innocence and the color green effectively establish its function within the text as pastoral, a term defined in *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard as "the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" (63). Tolkien creates the Shire as not only a stable environment but an alive one, as his description of the space as "shimmering" suggests a bright vitality while his personification of the trees makes them lively, individual agents in the text. The Shire's environment thus holds a dual function in

the text, as it represents a safe space with an unchanging nature that Frodo can rely on, while simultaneously establishing the environment as composed of a multitude of vibrant, lively characters, rather than passive matter.

Although the Shire is a vibrant space regardless of human intervention, its “green” innocence and function as pastoral lead the hobbits to preside over it as owners of an environment they perceive to be stagnant and passive. Since the hobbits think of the Shire as a place that can never be corrupted, they consider it an environment that can be relied on to remain unchanging in the future. Upon hearing of the danger encroaching upon the boundaries of the Shire, Frodo tells the elf Gildor, “I knew that danger lay ahead, of course; but I did not expect to meet it in our own Shire” (82). Here, Frodo claims ownership of the Shire as he refers to it as his “own,” and is fearful over the environment becoming corrupted, because this would conflict with not only the Shire’s innocence but also with Frodo’s continued dominion over the space. A loss of the Shire’s innocence would reflect a failure of Frodo’s role as owner and conservator, as he tells Gandalf before their journey, “I should like to save the Shire, if I could,” characterizing the Shire as a helpless, passive space that he must preserve (61). Frodo’s statement here reflects issues concerning the pastoral and “green,” which Jeffrey Jerome Cohen states in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* as having “become our synonym for sustainability” (xx). According to Cohen, “green” “too frequently signifies a return, however belatedly, to the verdancy of an unspoiled world, to whatever remnants of a lost paradise might be reclaimed” (xxi). Much like the pastoral, the Shire’s “green” innocence results in a perception of the environment needing protection; this helplessness leaves the environment open for humanity to “reclaim” an idealized state of the environment and find pleasure in both the aesthetics and nostalgia of a “green” space.

While thinking of the Shire as a passive environment, Frodo cannot fully acknowledge the independent vitality of the Shire, or its history and identity outside of those who currently preside in it—the hobbits. As much as Frodo loves the Shire, and wishes to remain close to it physically and emotionally, his self-identification as conservator and savior of the Shire fulfills Cohen's explanation of the problematic relationship that "green" thinking creates between humans and the environment: "green readings have a tendency to reproduce...a split between nature and culture that can lead to analyses stressing anthropocentric and detached concepts like stewardship, preservation, and prescriptive modes of environmental management" (xx). By wanting to save the Shire, Frodo actually creates a division between himself and the space because he idealizes the environment rather than acknowledging its independence. This is affirmed by Gildor, who tells Frodo, "But it is not your own Shire...others have dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more" (82). Gildor's description of the Shire's history, its identity before the hobbits, and the environment's longevity as it will outlive the hobbits reaffirms the liveliness of the Shire by showing the environment can never truly be understood by the hobbits. The Shire's agency is thus muted by Frodo, who is not forcibly made aware of environmental agency until his journey, especially so during his time traversing the Dead Marshes.

While the hobbits still remain in the Shire, Tolkien establishes the ability of the environment to intensely affect the emotions of people, as Frodo's emotions are transformed when he is positively affected by the perceived innocence of the Shire. Upon learning of his role in the war "Frodo was a good deal disturbed...but his uneasiness wore off and in the fine weather he forgot his troubles...The Shire had seldom seen so fair a summer, or so rich an autumn: the trees were laden with apples, honey was dripping in the combs, and the corn was tall

and full” (66). Tolkien again uses imagery of the seasons to present the Shire as an idealized environment, as the farming seasons of summer and autumn suggest growth and prosperity. However, autumn amplifies the idealized state of the Shire, as the “fair” and “rich” seasons are to quickly transform into winter, a season opposing the qualities that make summer and autumn so idyllic. Time and the transience of the seasons lead Tolkien to not only solidify the capability of the Shire to positively affect Frodo but also to over-emphasize this positivity through the abundance of crops. The use of terms such as “laden,” “dripping,” and “full” suggest an overwhelming, almost excessive nature in the environment, while the crops themselves symbolize the consumption of food and the pleasure derived from such consumption, making the autumn season in the Shire a time of gratification and happiness. This gratification is idealized with the sweet crops of apples and honey as Tolkien stresses the importance of Frodo’s finding pleasure in the Shire at this specific moment, as the approaching winter would not see such prosperity of crops. The excessive nature of the crops suggests that the land of the Shire is incredibly fertile, reinforcing the environment’s health, which positively impacts Frodo’s mood; the scenery heals his uneasiness, translating the Shire’s identity as comforting, healthy, and innocent onto Frodo’s feelings. The Shire’s identity ultimately functions as a source of optimism for Frodo, as he justifies his eventual departure by stating “I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold, even if my feet cannot stand there again” (61). His statement evokes Garrard’s description of the pastoral function as “a harmonious vision of rural independence and fortitude that hides a harsh world” since Frodo believes the Shire’s innocence and the positive affect he receives from it will shield him from the experiences that may be unbearable in his

travels (45). However, as Frodo is confronted with the Dead Marshes, he experiences an erasure of the positivity created by the Shire, and an ironic loss of firm, healthy land.

Frodo and Sam face the opposite of the Shire's healthy, stable land when they arrive before the Dead Marshes, as they see a muddied environment that is not ideal, living, or prosperous; rather, the marshes represent a hellish opposition to the innocent and thriving Shire as they are described by Sam as "evil-smelling fens" (611). Sam's association of the marshes with a malicious nature conforms to the tradition of associating wetlands with "death and disease, the monstrous and the melancholy" (Giblett 3). The association of wetlands with an evil, monstrous nature imbues the Dead Marshes with an active agency in opposition to the hobbits and their goal. This same antagonistic environmental agency is described by Alysson Booth in *Postcards from the Trenches*, where she states that in the trenches "land was treacherous; dirt was liable to become mud or quicksand or water into which you could be sucked or trapped; it represented potential drowning, suffocation, immobilization" (61). In her description of the trenches as treacherous, Booth personifies the land, suggesting that environments consisting of mud and water actively work to inhibit the human body. The association of water with drowning shows a fear of uncontrollable natural spaces and affirms Giblett's association of wetlands with death, as these spaces have the capability to end human life. While the Dead Marshes act as a hellish environment with personified, individual agency, their animacy results in a heightened ability to affect the hobbits psychologically and physically.

Describing the Dead Marshes as diseased suggests a poisoned atmosphere, a characteristic implicit in the physicality of the land; however, the diseased state of the land also begins to poison Frodo's mindset, as he is negatively affected by the decay around him. When the hobbits first look out toward the marshes, Tolkien describes the scene by writing "Night was

gathering over the shapeless lands before them; the sickly green of them was fading to a sullen brown” (589). Tolkien uses vague terminology with the words “gathering,” “shapeless,” and “fading,” which each reiterate the formlessness of the Dead Marshes while highlighting their vibrancy as these terms show the environment’s capacity for transformation. Rather than the colorful imagery of the crops, fields, and trees of the Shire, the marshes are cast into darkness, both due to the time of night and because of the dead surrounding greenery; this darkness contrasts with the Shire (where Frodo felt safe and held a powerful role in relation to the environment) and makes the marshes an area over which Frodo cannot have control due to the environment’s individuality and lively, changing state. As Frodo cannot fully see the environment, he cannot entirely understand it either, which suggests that the antagonism represented by the marshes is not due to the environment itself, but due to the inability of the hobbits to control it. The land is devoid of any individual growths of nature until the hobbits come across “a few gnarled and stunted trees,” but even these growths are described as diseased and unappealing, lacking the fertility of the Shire (591). This negative atmosphere quickly affects Frodo as he comes to think of crossing through the marshes as his “doom” and he admits “I am tired, Sam. I don’t know what is to be done” (590). Just as he adopted the positive feelings evoked from the Shire’s environment, Frodo similarly translates the shapelessness of the marshes’ environment into his own emotional state, as he begins to feel aimless, lacking energy, motivation, and purpose. The power of the environment’s hold on Frodo’s emotions speaks to what Giblett describes as “the low poisonous, decidedly unhealthy wetland” in that, the marshes are both actually poisonous in their state as diseased, leading to an absence of growth in the land, but are figuratively (and affectively) poisonous as well, as they corrupt Frodo’s positive mindset (3).

Frodo is similarly affected by the smell of the Dead Marshes, which drastically affects and alters his senses, similar to the effects of the trenches on the senses of soldiers. Fussell describes the trenches as having “The stench of rotten flesh...over everything...you could smell the front line miles before you could see it” (49). Just as the sense of smell became a hindrance and source of disgust for the soldier, the hobbits are also disgusted by the stench issued from the Dead Marshes. Tolkien writes: “The reek of them came to their nostrils, heavy and foul, even in the cool night air” (606). Tolkien reinforces the totality with which the soldiers were overwhelmed by the stench of bodies rotting in the mud of trenches as the hobbits never receive a reprieve from the stench. Fussell continues to state that “To be in the trenches was to experience an unreal, unforgettable enclosure and constraint, as well as a sense of being unoriented and lost” (51). Fussell’s description of feelings such as constraint, disorientation, and disgust over smell show the soldier’s lack of control over their bodily faculties and over the environment, illustrating the totality with which the atmosphere consumed human body and mind. The hobbits’ description of the stench as foul is similar to Fussell’s description of the trenches smell as rotten: both represent a decayed environment, eventually leading to similarly damaged psyches.

Such constraint due to environmental factors makes the hobbits’ experiences similar to the physical hardships of soldiers; the atmosphere is described by Gollum as being comprised of “mists, nice thick mists” that enclose the hobbits within an environment that limits their sight and movement (611). The marshes come to be perceived as an antagonistic space to the hobbits, as they work against their health when “The air, as it seemed to them, grew harsh, and filled with a bitter reek that caught their breath and parched their mouths” (617). In this subtle manner, the atmosphere prohibits the function of the hobbits’ basic physical necessities and leaves them

craving water, the very substance working against them. The degeneration of his health leaves Frodo feeling “weary, weary to the point of exhaustion...he walked like one who carries a load, the weight of which is ever increasing; and he dragged along slower and slower” (616). Frodo’s physical weakness reaffirms the environment’s diseased state, as the ingestion of the air negatively manipulates the interiority of Frodo’s body. While trudging through the wetland, Frodo’s agency and abilities are slowed and constrained, showing that, although the marshes represent an antagonistic environment to the hobbits, all environments—those considered innocent and peaceful like the Shire and those perceived as negative such as the Marshes—possess agency and the ability to affect.

Frodo feels emotionally weighed down due to the effect the environment has on his health, but also due to the physically oppressive nature of the mud in the marshes; these effects break down the integrity of the hobbits' identities as they find themselves becoming similar to Gollum, who is perceived as abject throughout the text. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines abject as “that which is opposed to *I*” (1). Gollum represents an opposition to the hobbits, because, while he is described by Gandalf as originally being “of hobbit-kind,” he is different from the hobbits as his physicality is one of degeneration caused by his possession by the Ring (51). Initially, Gollum is the only one who becomes overwhelmed with mud, seen as “his fingers and face were soiled with black mud” (610). Since he is soiled with mud, Gollum becomes tainted, an impure figure, adopting the evil characteristics of the marshes. Due to his impurity, Sam calls him a “nasty creature” and “poor wretch” (610). The term “nasty” suggests Sam is disgusted by Gollum while “poor” suggests a sympathy, even tenderness, toward him; this complex understanding of Gollum reflects the complexity of the marshes as they are simultaneously abject and lively (610). Gollum is quick to lose his physical integrity and status

as person due to the mud, an action descriptive of Santanu Das's understanding of the "aggressive agency of trench mud...blurring the boundaries of the body and confusing the categories of subject and object" (45). Sam begins to objectify and dehumanize Gollum due to his close proximity to the mud.

Gollum's abject state is amplified as Frodo and Sam perceive him as having a close affinity with the mud, and thus sharing the mud's negative characteristics as evil and malicious. However, the hobbits themselves lose their own bodily integrity as they too become covered by the mud: "Often they floundered, stepping or falling hands first into waters as noisome as a cesspool, til they were slimed and fouled almost up to their necks and stank in one another's nostrils (614). The hobbits must rethink their personal and physical identity as the agency of the malicious environment overwhelms them physically and makes them abject like Gollum. Just as Gollum is aligned with the negative characteristics of the marshes, the hobbits too adopt the stench of the mud and are imbued with the aspects of the environment that created their feelings of disgust toward it. Sam specifically is described as falling in the marshes, during which he "came heavily on his hands, which sank deep into sticky ooze, so that his face was brought close to the surface of the dark mere. There was a faint hiss, a noisome smell went up, the lights flickered and danced and swirled" (613). Describing the marshes as hissing with lights reflects the liveliness of the marshes, despite its abjection and the hobbit's perception of it as unpleasant. Such liveliness reflects Mel Chen's description of animacy: "Matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly or otherwise 'wrong' animates cultural life in important ways" (2). The deathly and "wrong" environment of the marshes breaks down the divide between the hobbits and Gollum, as they are confronted with the fragility of their own bodies and understanding of the environment.

Just as Chen describes the importance of acknowledging the animacy of matter, not only in pleasing environments like the Shire but also in environments such as the Dead Marshes that are perceived as negative or “wrong,” the liveliness of both environments in *The Lord of The Rings* shows the vibrancy of all environments, as they all have the capability to affect humans, and be affected by them. The Dead Marshes are eventually described by Gollum as being the burial sites for many corpses that are “All dead. All rotten” from a “great battle many years ago” (614). In this way, the destruction of the environment that created the Dead Marshes is explained as being due to human intervention, showing the way humans also affect the environment. This cycle of effects affirms the close relationship between the environment and the human, who each have the ability to change and transform one another.

Discovering Wonder: Deconstructing Anthropocentrism and Rebuilding Human Relationships with the Environment through Storytelling

After completing his journey, Frodo returns to the formerly perceived innocent, safe Shire and realizes that the events of his journey—and the war in Middle Earth—have altered his psyche and the Shire’s environment irreversibly. As Frodo describes in *The Return of the King*, “I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me,” Tolkien effectively breaks down the pastoral as Frodo admits that he has changed; he no longer feels ownership over the Shire or that he has a place in it, as he acknowledges that the Shire will exist without him after he leaves it (1006). In breaking down the pastoral, Tolkien forces Frodo, and us readers, to similarly reconsider our knowledge of the environment, and our place within it. Frodo’s altered relationship with the Shire speaks to the way in which the genre of fantasy creates a space for breaking down anthropocentric ideas of having knowledge of and control over the environment,

because works of fantasy depend on the construction of new worlds, ones in which the readers are unfamiliar, and thus, must adopt a new position as a learner and outsider. Repositioning the readers allows for a reexamination of nature as these texts reveal the impossibility of having total control over, and knowledge of, the environment. Tolkien's fantasy ultimately shows the power of storytelling in deconstructing harmful attitudes of hubris towards the environment as the texts instead instate a reverence for nature to show that an appreciation for the environment is a key source of hope for improving human relationships with nature.

Readers of fantasy are forced to imagine a new world, one they cannot control or entirely know. Such uneasiness reflects an issue with anthropocentrism, as this same lack of knowledge exists toward our own environment, yet human hubris assumes knowledge in order to justify control. Tolkien forces his readers to entirely relinquish knowing an environment when Frodo enters Lothlórien, as he and the fellowship must walk through the forest blindfolded. The loss of sight impairs the fellowship's awareness of the environment, as they are forced to rely on their other senses and are thus unable to describe the environment as it physically appears to them. Rather, they depend on the way the environment feels and the way it affects them in order to understand it: "They felt the ground beneath their feet smooth and soft, and after a while they walked more freely, without fear of hurt or fall. Being deprived of sight, Frodo found his hearing and other senses sharpened" (340). The fellowship realizes the close proximity humans always have with the environment as they touch the "smooth and soft" ground, and soon develop a balance of trust with the environment as, although blindfolded, they walk freely. This freedom suggests that pleasure can be derived in experiencing nature, a thought that Ursula K. LeGuin reaffirms when she states, "Fantasy's green country is one that most enter with ease and pleasure" (65). Rather than feeling uneasy over his loss of sight, and thus control, Frodo and the

reader are imbued with similar feelings of comfort, learning to trust the environment as he walks freely through Lothlórien without fear — such freedom speaks to a need for relinquishing human hubris and knowledge. Matthew Dickerson cites poet Robert Siegel’s idea that “Tolkien finds that looking closely at nature can help one climb outside of himself and gain a sharp, contemplative awareness of the world” and, more specifically, of the environment (108). In Tolkien’s text, Frodo and the fellowship are able to affirm a close bond with nature and eventually realize its agency and liveliness by not looking closely, but *being* close to it. Here, fantasy shows its work as a subversive genre as the text ultimately reveals that human nature must relinquish control and knowledge—as Siegel states, climb “outside of himself” so as to better understand oneself and nature.

By depending on the senses of touch, smell, and sound to discover a world and the environment, Tolkien establishes the importance of having a “sense of wonder” over nature by forcing the fellowship, and readers, to relinquish control and knowledge over the entire space of the environment and instead feel the vibrancy of individual aspects of it (Brawley 293). Chris Brawley posits that “The sense of wonder at the world Tolkien describes as enchantment...can help us revise our ways of viewing the world around us” (293). Tolkien creates a sense of wonder for readers in Lothlórien as Frodo initiates a relationship with this environment from a role stripped of power by experiencing and basking in the sensory experience of walking through the forest: “He could smell the trees and the trodden grass. He could hear many different notes in the rustle of the leaves overhead, the river murmuring away on his right, and the thin clear voices of birds in the sky. He felt the sun upon his face and hands when they passed through an open glade” (340). By depending on hearing, smelling, and touching, Frodo becomes more intimate with nature while in Lothlórien, and readers are similarly invited into this intimacy as Frodo

reveals the all-consuming presence of the environment as he is physically surrounded by its various lively parts. The spatiality of birds and leaves overhead places Frodo beneath the environment, showing his minuteness compared to the natural processes of the world. Describing the leaves and birds speaks to the multiplicity and liveliness of the environment, multiplicity Frodo can only realize through this sensory experience as he becomes aware of the minutia which comprise the environment. Tolkien's description of feeling sun on one's body suggests a sense of warmth and pleasure, one that is reinforced by Lothlórien's abundance of glimmering "golden flowers" (341). Warmth and gold suggest that abandoning a desire for control over the environment can lead to deriving pleasure from the environment. Ultimately, Frodo's sensory experience reveals a physical state of insignificance compared to the environment, which reflects humanity's shared insignificance. However, by relinquishing assumed knowledge about the environment, one can find pleasure in it.

Tolkien further reveals the insignificance of humanity in comparison to nature by deconstructing human exceptionalism and human feelings of having control over nature during moments in the text when nature imbues characters with fear and dread. At these times, Tolkien employs Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger...whatever is in any sort terrible...is the source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (33-34). Oftentimes, environments perceived by characters as negative affect characters the most as they strip away human conceptualizations of control over the environment, forcing the characters and readers to reconfigure previously conceived notions of nature. Merry performs such a reconfiguration as he travels through the mountains of Gondor in *The Return of the King*. During this journey, Merry "looked out in wonder upon this strange country...It was a skyless world, in which his eye,

through dim gulfs of shadowy air, saw only ever-mounting slopes, great walls of stone behind great walls, and frowning precipices wreathed with mist” (774). The overwhelming vastness of nature is illustrated through Tolkien’s description of the mountains as “ever-mounting,” and “great,” which make Merry small and insignificant in comparison. The lost sky reflects a loss of light and descent into darkness, which is revealed when Merry describes the mountains as covered in mist; this mist acts as a barrier between Merry and the mountains, so he cannot fully see, and therefore, understand them—much like Frodo in Lothlórien.

Overwhelmed by the darkness and vastness of the mountains, Merry begins to feel weighed down by the sublime of nature; here, fantasy works as subversive by forcing Merry and the reader to reconsider idealized and often inaccurate conceptualizations of nature. Tolkien writes that Merry “loved mountains, or he had loved the thought of them marching on the edge of stories brought from far away; but now he was borne down by the insupportable weight of Middle-earth. He longed to shut out the immensity in a quiet room by the fire” (774). Here, Merry’s conceptualization of mountains on the “edge” of stories suggests the passivity of mountains, and nature in general; in such stories, mountains are not described as overwhelming and are thus sidelined as mere pleasurable descriptions of landscape. Sidelining the mountains in stories presents mountains and nature as existing on the periphery of human life. Tolkien deconstructs this by making Merry feel “borne down” or oppressed by Middle-earth due to the mountains: nature moves from the periphery to the central focus of humanity, forcing readers to confront the omnipresence of nature. Merry’s desire to “shut out the immensity” of the mountains in a room suggests that, unless one actively isolates oneself from nature entirely, nature can be overwhelming, unpleasant, and frightening entity.

Describing nature as a presence to be afraid of contrasts against the overwhelming yet pleasurable state of Lothlórien; in this way, Tolkien shows the duality of nature, illustrating fantasy's value in representing such duality. Conflicting representations of, and feelings about, nature in fantasy are described by Richard Matthews who states "Fantasy enables us to enter worlds of infinite possibility. The maps and contours of fantasy are circumscribed only by imagination itself. The breathtaking sweep of its scope can be awesome and even frightening" (1). Matthews accurately describes Merry's reaction to the mountains: it is fearful and, therefore, reflective of the sublime. According to Burke, "The passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*... is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (47). Tolkien reflects this suspension of motion when he describes Merry as follows: "He sat for a moment half dreaming, listening to the noise of water, the whisper of dark trees, the crack of stone, and the vast waiting silence that brooded behind all sound" (774). Merry enters a dream-like state of suspension after becoming fearful of the mountains, astonished over the difference between how he had previously considered mountains and the way they actually are. While Tolkien created Lothlórien in order to reveal how humanity can derive pleasure from the environment if human exceptionalism is relinquished, Tolkien conversely uses fear and awe to show readers the mastery of nature, and the ability for nature to transform human emotion and understanding.

Tolkien uses similar feelings of awe in describing Lothlórien, although this awe is positive as he attempts to make this environment a state of peaceful nature that once existed in our own world but has become corrupted over time. Lothlórien's state of wonder incites positive affects for both Frodo and the readers and reveals the pleasure to be found in reconsidering relationships with the environment. Frodo ponders, "It seemed to him that he had stepped over a

bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more” (340). Here, Frodo mourns the loss of a time in which the world in its entirety was similar to that of Lothlórien, a time in which people and nature had closer relations. Le Guin describes this mourning and nostalgia by saying that natural environments of fantasy “imply that modern humanity is in exile, shut out from a community, an intimacy it once knew. They do not so much lament, perhaps, as remind...us of what we have denied, what we have exiled ourselves from” (86). Tolkien reveals that “Frodo stood still, hearing far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth” to remind readers of the way nature has been lost and reshaped due to human intervention over time (342). In this way, fantasy works to remind readers of the way our world and nature have been manipulated and transformed due to human hubris. As Le Guin states, “withdrawing from the Industrial Revolution and Modern Times, the fantasy story is often set in a green, underpopulated world of towns and cities surrounded by wilderness” (86). She shows that fantasy actively works to strip away feelings of human hubris and knowledge by removing modernity and technology from these worlds and instead focusing on nature. Tolkien upholds Le Guin’s notions about fantasy by reestablishing the pleasure and wonder to be found in nature, which are then later mourned by the readers when modern society’s loss of kinship with and appreciation for the environment reflects itself in the text.

As Tolkien works to enchant the environment, reveal its wondrous state to readers, and lead readers to lament the way nature has changed—or been lost—over time, he implores readers to cultivate the ability to appreciate the environment in and of itself, rather than as a means of human industrialization and progress. The issue of progress is cited by Jane Bennett who claims that “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-

destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (ix). To combat thinking of nature as matter, Tolkien describes the materiality of trees in Lothlórien as animate and lively. He writes: [Frodo] laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and the texture of the tree’s skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester or carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself (342).

The intimacy here between Frodo and the tree allows Frodo to acknowledge the life within the tree. Since Frodo touches the tree while on the ladder, Tolkien creates a visual in which Frodo has risen from the ground (a position in which the trees’ vastness emphasizes his insignificance) to place him and the tree side by side as equals. In this scene, Tolkien achieves his concept of recovery: “Recovery (which includes return and renewal of health) is a regaining—regaining of a clear view... “seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them”—as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness” (19). Tolkien achieves recovery in Lothlórien, as Frodo realizes that establishing a relationship of equality with nature is pleasurable. Rather than appropriating and using the tree for his own means (such as a forester or carpenter would), Frodo takes pleasure in the tree’s simple existence, its unique materiality, and liveliness. Through Lothlórien, Tolkien uses fantasy to show readers how possessiveness is unnecessary, and futile, for understanding nature. As Frodo lays “his hand upon the tree,” a passive, gentle action, he signifies the trees independence. Feeling the tree’s bark leads readers to rethink our own familiarity with trees and nature; in this way, Tolkien and fantasy effectively ask readers to clean our own windows, and strive for

recovering relationships with nature, in which relinquishing possessiveness and acknowledging liveliness and independence of the environment is essential.

Tolkien's work of fantasy is riddled with complexity in depicting nature and our relationship with the environment. Tolkien depicts nature as both pleasurable and fearful, each forcing humanity to question our preconceived understandings of nature. Le Guin states, "Fantasy is construction of meaning," and, as such, Tolkien's fantasy works to deconstruct and rebuild meaning for nature and our perceptions of the environment (85). As Haldir tells the fellowship in Lothlórien, "the world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater" (339). This statement describes the complexity of nature, which consists of "good" and "bad" environments that each hold a multitude of entities and imbue people with a variety of contrasting feelings. Haldir's words reflect the hope that can be found for the environment in fantasy as a variety of places both light and dark comprise the environment; this duality is essential to the vibrancy of the environment, and fantasy works to help humanity recover an appreciation for such vibrancy. As Treebeard states at the end of the series after planting new trees in the destructed landscape of Isengard, "The world is changing: I feel it in the water, I feel it in the earth, and I smell it in the air" (959). Just as the environment is always transformative and constantly changing, so does fantasy work to transform meaning and change human perceptions of nature and the environment.

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