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5 Tolkien and Trees  
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9 Shelley Saguario and Deborah Cogan Thacker  
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11  
12 **The forest and the fairy tale**  
13

14 Our sense of the forest derives as much from the depictions we  
15 encounter in stories heard or read in childhood as from actual  
16 encounters, and the expectation of enchantment or the sense  
17 of threat with which fictional forests are endowed animates our  
18 'readings' of actual forests. At first, it might appear that the trees and  
19 forests of Tolkien's Middle-earth are used primarily to stand for the  
20 natural world, in opposition to the unstoppable forces of modernity,  
21 but they are a multi-layered portrayal, with subtle links to fairy tale  
22 and folklore, and complex psychological symbolism. As Richard  
23 Hayman observes: 'Trees are important in Tolkien's work because  
24 they stand for attitudes to nature in general ... woods for Tolkien  
25 therefore offer temporary respite from the modern world, whether  
26 they are actual lived experience or the stuff of myth.'<sup>1</sup> It is only by  
27 tracing the representation of trees and forests from *The Hobbit* to *The*  
28 *Lord of the Rings*, that it is possible to see that Tolkien's 'attitude to  
29 nature' is central to both his particular use of fantasy, and his belief in  
30 the power of fantasy to imbue lived experience with meaning. For  
31 Tolkien, fantasy does not signify escape, but a deepening of under-  
32 standing. In *Tree and Leaf* he claims that, '[t]he magic of Faerie is not  
33 an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations ... to hold communion  
34 with other living things'.

35 This sense of communion and 'the importance of imagined  
36 wonder'<sup>2</sup> is one of the factors that leads to the complex status of  
37 Tolkien's work in relation to children's literature, creating limits that  
38 Tolkien himself decries in *Smith of Wootton Major*, in which he attri-  
39 butes a sense of 'Faery' to imagination:  
40

41 This compound – of awareness of a limitless world outside our domestic  
42 parish; a love ... for the things in it; and a desire for wonder, marvels, both

1       perceived and conceived – this ‘Faery’ is as necessary for the health and  
2       complete functioning of the Human as is sunlight for physical life.<sup>3</sup>

3  
4       However, the roots of what we recognise as children’s literature, and  
5       particularly the importance of folk and fairy tales to the Romantic  
6       sensitivity, provide a connection to an apprehension of nature as  
7       imbued with ‘quasi-historical depth’<sup>4</sup>. Forests, perhaps most power-  
8       fully, retain this mythic sensibility. Historians and commentators on  
9       fairy tales, including Tolkien, recognise the power and duality of the  
0       forest trope, and the extent to which its use demonstrates the inter-  
11      connectedness of the fantasy world and the real world.

12      The forest is an important trope in fairy stories. In *Fantasy, Myth*  
13      *and the Measure of Truth*, his study of the links between German  
14      Romanticism and the British fantasy tradition, William Gray claims  
15      that Tolkien’s particular use of fantasy set in an alternative world  
16      reflects the importance of its connection with the real world derived  
17      from the earlier fairy tale tradition, especially in *The Hobbit*.<sup>5</sup> Roger  
18      Sale sees the forest as a recurring motif in fairy tales and lists many  
19      stories that involve the passage of a central character through the forest:

20  
21      [F]orests in fairy tales are so frequent, and their associations so obvious,  
22      that they come to seem a given, not unlike the opening chord in a piece  
23      of music that can be played loudly or softly, by this or that instrument or  
24      the ensemble. It is, thus, important, because the story could not proceed  
25      without it, but the last thing one needs to do is to ponder what it means,  
26      because what it means will be what is made of it. After each other change  
27      in the story, especially in the character of the person in the wood, the  
28      wood itself will become tinged slightly, but it will never be anything in  
29      itself other than a forest, a place where one is liable to become lost, a place  
30      where princes never live but woodcutters often do and witches or wolves.

31      He sees Tolkien (along with Bruno Bettelheim) as one of the key  
32      commentators on fairy tales, and he cites Tolkien’s comment on ‘The  
33      Juniper Tree’ in *Tree and Leaf*, that ‘such stories have now a mythical or  
34      total (unanalysable) effect ... we stand outside our time, outside Time  
35      itself maybe’.<sup>6</sup> As Tolkien put it in a letter:

36      The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but  
37      the historical period is imaginary. The essentials of that abiding place are  
38      all there ... so naturally it feels familiar even if a little glorified by the  
39      enchantment of distance in time.<sup>7</sup>

40  
41      This quality, of being beyond interpretation, is found in the ‘root  
42      stories’ that influence Tolkien’s work, particularly those of the Nordic

1 and Germanic traditions. There is also a resemblance to his English  
 2 forebears, particularly George MacDonald, which Tolkien acknowl-  
 3 edged;<sup>8</sup> there are direct similarities, for instance, in the personification  
 4 of the forest in MacDonald's *The Golden Key*, where Tangle 'began to  
 5 feel as if all the trees were waiting for him, and had something they  
 6 could not go on with till he came to them', and Bilbo's first encounter  
 7 with Mirkwood.<sup>9</sup>

8 The characteristic that Tolkien appears to take from MacDonald  
 9 and from the epic, myth and folklore to which he continually alludes,  
 10 is the nature of the forest *as* forest – endowed with the qualities of  
 11 the forest as it is experienced. The forest itself is not magical, and  
 12 although it can take on allegorical readings, that is not its significance  
 13 in relation to the story. Rather, it is the nature of forests themselves,  
 14 for those familiar with them and the potential danger inherent in  
 15 them (particularly for children), that is emphasised. Descriptions, brief  
 16 though they are, do not portray the forest as enchanted. The darkness  
 17 *is* the 'suffocating and uncanny darkness' that Bilbo experiences, the  
 18 'tangled boughs' that allow 'a slender beam of light' to 'slip through  
 19 an opening in the leaves far above' and the 'eerie' sounds in the beech  
 20 trees *are* all realistic portrayals of ancient woodlands of England –  
 21 woodlands with which Tolkien was very familiar.<sup>10</sup>

22 Although many recent interpreters of fairy tales reject psycho-  
 23 analytic readings in favour of a more materialist approach, Bruno  
 24 Bettelheim's influence on our attempts to explain their effects cannot  
 25 be ignored. For Bettelheim, the passage into the forest signifies a  
 26 psychoanalytic space – a place separated from everyday experience  
 27 in which to be lost is to be found. The uncanny sense of the forest  
 28 waiting to do its work invites a reading that suggests the inevitability  
 29 of such a journey:  
 30

31 Since ancient times the near impenetrable forest in which we get lost  
 32 has symbolised the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our uncon-  
 33 scious. If we have lost the framework which gave structure to our past  
 34 life and must now find our way to become ourselves, and have entered  
 35 this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed  
 36 in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly devel-  
 37 oped humanity.<sup>11</sup>

38  
 39 Jack Zipes, in his study of the Brothers Grimm, develops an alterna-  
 40 tive analysis of the distinctive quality of fictional forests in order to  
 41 explain the importance of the forest in the Grimms' tales, in ways that  
 42 echo Tolkien's own concerns for the loss of human apprehension of

1 the natural world. Zipes suggests that in the Grimm Brothers' tales,  
 2 'the forest is rarely enchanted though enchantment takes place there.  
 3 The forest *allows* for enchantment, for it is the place where society's  
 4 conventions no longer hold true.'<sup>12</sup> This description is similar to  
 5 Tolkien's depiction of Mirkwood in *The Hobbit*: it is the Wood-elves,  
 6 who 'wandered in the great forests that grew tall in lands that are  
 7 now lost',<sup>13</sup> who contribute the enchantment rather than the forest  
 8 itself. Though elves are of the past and Tolkien appears to instruct  
 9 his readers not to look for them any longer, his forest is indebted to  
 0 those of earlier fairy tales, as an environment where enchantment and  
 11 transformation can take place. Attributing the imaginative power of  
 12 ancient forests to the sustenance of national identity and a memory  
 13 of past unity, he quotes Wilhelm H. Riehl (1852): 'In the opinion of  
 14 the German people the forest is the only great possession that has yet  
 15 to be completely given away.'<sup>14</sup> This is a concern similar to Tolkien's  
 16 own position. Paul Kocher emphasises the point that Middle-earth is  
 17 supposed to be 'our own green and solid Earth at some quite remote  
 18 epoch in the past'.<sup>15</sup> The world Tolkien portrays in *The Hobbit* and in  
 19 *The Lord of the Rings* is a world in which the old forests remain, but  
 20 have since been lost to us, as in the tales of the Brothers Grimm. This  
 21 loss is a loss of wholeness that, Tolkien claims, once existed.

22 For Tolkien, the enchantment is already part of the nature of forests  
 23 and trees, and in *The Hobbit*, it is quite clear that he has derived this  
 24 sense from the history of fairy tales. In *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien refers to  
 25 his own childhood reading and throughout his letters he emphasises  
 26 that the power of fantasy to stir the imagination is not an end in itself,  
 27 but a way of accessing an earlier, primeval understanding of 'commu-  
 28 nion with other living things'. According to Kocher, for Tolkien, 'only  
 29 fantasy can provide a recovery of knowledge of ourselves and the  
 30 world around us'.<sup>16</sup>

31  
 32  
 33 **'In all my works I take the part of trees as against**  
 34 **all their enemies'**<sup>17</sup>

35  
 36 Readers of Tolkien's work would know well, and by the fiction alone,  
 37 that Tolkien was a lover of trees, for they abound. Further, many book  
 38 covers on texts by or about Tolkien bear pictures of Tolkien himself,  
 39 with trees: sitting against a tree or sitting among the twisted roots of  
 40 an ancient tree-trunk.<sup>18</sup> The last photo taken of Tolkien, included in  
 41 Humphrey Carpenter's biography, is of him standing companionably,  
 42 next to one of his favourite trees (*Pinus nigra*) in the Botanic Gardens,

1 Oxford,<sup>19</sup> with his right hand pressed flat against the surface of its  
 2 gnarled bark. The HarperCollins edition of *Tree and Leaf* has on its  
 3 cover a drawing by Tolkien of an elaborate, fanciful tree, 'The Tree of  
 4 Amallion'. From *The Hobbit* through 'Leaf by Niggle' and *The Lord of*  
 5 *the Rings* to *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien represents extraordinary trees and  
 6 creates tree-related beings, such as the tree-herder Ents, or the even  
 7 more tree-like but still mobile former Ents, the Huorns. As Tolkien  
 8 himself explains in a letter of June 1955 to his American publisher,  
 9 Houghton Mifflin, 'I am (obviously) much in love with plants and  
 0 above all trees and always have been; and find human maltreatment of  
 11 them as hard to bear as some find ill treatment of animals.'<sup>20</sup> His son  
 12 Michael acknowledged a related personal legacy and the inspiration  
 13 for an artistic one:

14  
 15 From my father I inherited an almost obsessive love for trees: as a small  
 16 boy I witnessed mass tree-felling for the convenience of the inter-  
 17 nal combustion engine. I regarded this as the wanton murder of living  
 18 beings ... My father listened seriously to my angry comments and when  
 19 I asked him to make up a tale in which the trees took revenge on the  
 20 machine-lovers, he said, I will write you one.<sup>21</sup>



21 As a lover of trees, Tolkien could also offer detailed and obviously  
 22 closely observed descriptions of them in all his writings. His letters,  
 23 particularly to his son Christopher, contain descriptions such as:



24  
 25 The poplars are now leafless except for one top spray; but it is still a  
 26 green and leafy October-end down here. At no time do birches look so  
 27 beautiful; their skin snow-white in the pale yellow sun, and their remain-  
 28 ing leaves shining fallow-gold.

29  
 30 or

31  
 32 ... the silver light of spring on flower and leaf. Leaves are out: the white-  
 33 grey of the quince, the grey-green of young apple, the full green of haw-  
 34 thorn, the tassels of flower even on the sluggard poplars.

35 and

36  
 37 The rime was yesterday even thicker and more fantastic ... breathtak-  
 38 ingly beautiful: trees like motionless fountains of white branching spray  
 39 against a golden light and, high overhead, a pale translucent blue.<sup>22</sup>

40  
 41 These find their fictive and fantastical correlatives in *The Lord of the*  
 42 *Rings*; there is a close relation between the fantasy elements and the



1 vividness of Tolkien's apprehension of the trees he encountered daily.  
 2 Thus, the trees of magical Lothlorien are described as scintillatingly  
 3 as the trees Tolkien observed outside his window.<sup>23</sup>

4 The mythical *mallorn*, whose seed like a 'little silver nut', a gift from  
 5 Galadriel, is carried by Sam back to the Shire,<sup>24</sup> where he plants it  
 6 in the Party Field, where once stood the tree that had witnessed so  
 7 much Hobbit history, including Bilbo's farewell speech. As it grows, a  
 8 symbol of recovery after great tribulation, it is resplendent with silver  
 9 and gold: 'the only *mallorn* west of the Mountains and east of the Sea,  
 0 and one of the finest in the world'.<sup>25</sup> Tolkien sees *all* trees in ways  
 11 that are out-of-the ordinary; a short-hand term might be 'magical',  
 12 and so the transposition to fairy stories and fantasy is not a huge leap.

13 Tolkien also 'deploys' trees for their symbolic value, signifiers,  
 14 when healthy, of hope and regeneration (and in this he is not alone,  
 15 drawing as he does on a long tradition of legendary trees). Tolkien's  
 16 'Introductory Note' to *Tree and Leaf*, first published in 1964 and at  
 17 the time bringing together, 'On Fairy-Stories' and 'Leaf by Niggle',  
 18 states: 'though one is an "essay" and the other "a story", they are  
 19 related: by the symbols of Tree and Leaf' and by both touching in  
 20 different ways on what is called, in the essay, 'sub-creation'.<sup>26</sup> Paul  
 21 Kocher further addresses the figurative aspects of 'tree' and 'leaf' and  
 22 finds that Tolkien's 'tree' stands sometimes for that same whole body  
 23 of Tolkien writing, but more often for the living, growing tradition  
 24 of fairy stories in general, which the essay 'On Fairy-Stories' calls the  
 25 'Tree of Tales'.<sup>27</sup>

26 Tolkien refers to his short story 'Leaf by Niggle' in a letter to his  
 27 aunt Jane Neave, refuting that it should be seen as an 'allegory', and  
 28 preferring that it should be seen as 'mythical', because its main char-  
 29 acter, Niggle, 'is meant to be a real mixed-quality *person* and not an  
 30 'allegory' of any single vice or virtue'.<sup>28</sup> (Tolkien insists on the same  
 31 complexity for trees.) The tale is about an artist, whose topic is 'tree'  
 32 and 'leaf', and whose life work *is*, and is *emblemised by*, a Tree. Although  
 33 he is a painter, Niggle's favoured subject has much in common with  
 34 Tolkien's, as do the vistas his work generates, evocative as they are of  
 35 landscapes in the long narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*:

36  
 37 He was the sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees ...  
 38 Yet he wanted to paint a whole tree, with all of its leaves in the same  
 39 style, and all of them different ... Then all around the Tree, and behind it,  
 40 through the gaps in the leaves and boughs, a country began to open out;  
 41 and there were glimpses of a forest marching over a land, and of moun-  
 42 tains tipped with snow.<sup>29</sup>

1 Tolkien explained that the story related to a time when ‘I was anxious  
 2 about my own internal Tree, *The Lord of the Rings*. It was growing out  
 3 of hand, and revealing endless new vistas – and I wanted to finish it,  
 4 but the world was threatening.’<sup>30</sup> Niggle’s own artistic labours always  
 5 fall short, not least because of the interruptions and irritation caused  
 6 by his neighbour, Parish. After illness, and a strange period of inter-  
 7 rogation and journeying, he arrives in a place where he is confronted  
 8 by ‘the Tree, his Tree, finished. If you could say that of a Tree that  
 9 was alive.’<sup>31</sup> The estimation that ‘the Tree was finished, though not  
 0 finished with’ is a reflection of Niggle’s understanding that the Tree  
 11 is not his project alone. At this stage, Niggle also realises that Parish,  
 12 the philistine neighbour he has only seen as disruptive, has had a  
 13 contribution to make to the style he considers most distinctively his  
 14 own. The conclusion of the story shows how simultaneously impor-  
 15 tant and insignificant is Niggle’s own contribution to the Great Tree;  
 16 most important of all is that the Tree lives and continues to put forth  
 17 ‘leaves’. The remnant of Niggle’s picture is eventually lost to view ‘in  
 18 his old country’, stored in a dusty museum and then forgotten. Such  
 19 individual obscurity, however, belies the ongoing life of ‘the Tree’ to  
 20 which an important contribution has nevertheless been made. Of his  
 21 own Tree, Tolkien acknowledged that it ‘grows like a seed in the dark  
 22 out of the leaf mould of the mind: out of all that has been seen or  
 23 thought or read, that has long ago been forgotten, descending into the  
 24 deeps’.<sup>32</sup> In *Tree and Leaf* he encouraged overcoming the depressed  
 25 and depressing view: ‘Who can design a new leaf?’ His answer,  
 26 couched, of course, in arboreal terms, is also a plea for the ‘recovery  
 27 fairy stories help us to make’:

28  
 29 Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of the  
 30 pattern, and for some *eye*, this very year may be *the* embodiment, the first  
 31 ever seen and recognised, though oaks have put forth leaves for countless  
 32 generations ...<sup>33</sup>

### 34 *The Hobbit*

35  
 36 While trees and forests are central to Tolkien’s own conception of  
 37 living in the world, it is in the act of creation that they signify most  
 38 profoundly and it is in his fictional world that he most effectively  
 39 ‘passes on’ this apprehension. Through fantasy, Tolkien can be seen  
 40 to attempt to awaken his readers to the powerful and emblematic  
 41 significance of trees and forests – to *see* them as he does. The quality  
 42 of forests as ‘tinged’, but only ever a forest, is certainly familiar to a



1 reading of the forest in *The Hobbit*, and in part explains the workings  
2 of Tolkien's use of fantasy. By alluding to this 'unanalysable' effect in a  
3 book for children, Tolkien relies on a recognition of forests encoun-  
4 tered earlier in both fictional and actual terms, but also embeds a sense  
5 of them that can be taken to later reading, and perhaps, particularly,  
6 to *The Lord of the Rings*.

7 The importance of 'imagined wonder'<sup>34</sup> is embedded in Tolkien's  
8 treatment of the forest in *The Hobbit*, most often classified, because of  
9 its straightforward plotting and narrative voice, as a book for children.  
10 Tolkien himself looked back critically on its tone, but, for those who  
11 read *The Hobbit* as an introduction to the story of Middle-earth, this  
12 ability to engage with the 'imagined wonder' of his world is central  
13 to Tolkien's lasting attraction. Not only does his method of blending  
14 the mythic with actual experience use the forest as a site of enchant-  
15 ment and adventure, but he also portrays the forest in such a way as  
16 to embody *real* forests rather than to translate them into something  
17 fantastical.

18 In fact, there are few forests in *The Hobbit* and very few mentions  
19 of individual trees – certainly nothing that matches those in *The Lord*  
20 *of the Rings* – but they are crucial to the functioning of what could  
21 be considered a classical quest narrative, and provide an intimation of  
22 encounters in Tolkien's later work. We are in the same world: Middle-  
23 earth, at once a land of mythic status and a reminder of a possible  
24 primeval past of our own world. So that, while Tolkien's representa-  
25 tions of the forest serve a narrative function similar to those in fairy  
26 tales, they also recall the qualities of forest-ness that are familiar and  
27 realistic. Mirkwood, in particular, serves as a testing ground for the  
28 central character and provides the place for a rite of passage. It is in  
29 the forest that Bilbo discovers his 'true' character and recognises the  
30 role he will need to perform. His passage from innocence, particularly  
31 in terms of self-knowledge, to awareness, is played out through his  
32 adventure in Mirkwood, made more significant by the fact that once  
33 he has performed his function as the burglar, he no longer has to pass  
34 through the forest, but can travel around it during his journey home.  
35 However, on the outward journey, as is the case with many fairy tales,  
36 there is little choice for him but to go through the forest, for going  
37 round it would take too long – they must, according to Gandalf, go  
38 through 'if you want to get to the other side'. It might be possible to  
39 consider his encounter with Mirkwood, this 'dark', 'forbidding' and  
40 'uncanny' forest, in Bettelheim's terms, for even Gandalf's remarks:  
41 'keep your spirits up, hope for the best, and with a tremendous slice  
42 of luck you *may* come out one day ...' seem to be echoed in *The Uses*

1 *of Enchantment*,<sup>35</sup> at once recognising the need to confront one's fears  
 2 in order to allow the ego to come into being and teasing the reader  
 3 with the possibility of failure.

4 Yet it is not enough to interpret this 'unanalysable' aspect of the  
 5 forest as merely a fairy-tale motif representing a symbolic space,  
 6 although its place in Bilbo's adventures suggests a symbolic func-  
 7 tion. Mirkwood, like many such places in children's books and fairy  
 8 tales, is significant because it is a place which differentiates between  
 9 those who *know* it and those who do not. An innocent here, Bilbo  
 0 is warned about the dangers of the forest by those who are familiar  
 11 with its codes, such as Gandalf and Beorn. Like Mole, in *The Wind in*  
 12 *the Willows*, overcome by a sense of being watched and later admon-  
 13 ished by Ratty, who explains that it is necessary to 'know' the codes  
 14 of the Wild Wood, Bilbo is endangered precisely because he ignores  
 15 the rules and warnings, although his endangerment is required for  
 16 the acquisition of the necessary self-knowledge to succeed in his task.  
 17 Bilbo's innocence in relation to the dangers of the forest is emphasised  
 18 by his childlike stature, while those who issue the warnings, Beorn  
 19 and Gandalf, are represented as adult and knowledgeable. As Bilbo  
 20 approaches the woods where Beorn lives, his size, and therefore his  
 21 position in relation to the forest, is emphasised: 'At times they were  
 22 pushing through a sea of bracken with tall fronds rising right above  
 23 the Hobbit's head, at times they were marching along quiet as quiet  
 24 over a floor of pine needles, and all the while the forest-gloom got  
 25 heavier and the forest-silence deeper.'<sup>36</sup>

26 Bilbo's reluctance to enter Mirkwood is due in large part to  
 27 the warnings of Beorn, who is *of* the forest. His home reflects his  
 28 sense of belonging to that world and even his stature is described  
 29 in striking contrast to the Hobbit's childlike smallness. This helps to  
 30 emphasise the knowledge of, and power over, whatever the forest  
 31 signifies, for Beorn's home resembles a forest, though a controlled  
 32 version of it: 'the pillars of the house standing tall behind them and  
 33 dark at the top like the trees of the forest'. Whereas the darkness  
 34 at the top of Beorn's hall is compared to the forest, the company  
 35 are surrounded by 'the light of dancing flames', suggesting warmth  
 36 and safety in contrast to the encounters yet to come. It is only as  
 37 Bilbo approaches Mirkwood that the foreboding caused by Beorn's  
 38 warnings, like those of Little Red Riding Hood's mother – not to  
 39 stray from the path – come into force. The reliance on his child  
 40 readers' familiarity with fairy-tale forests imbues Tolkien's version  
 41 with an uncanny quality, and as the party approaches Mirkwood,  
 42 the personification of the forest serves to accentuate both a sense

1 of enchantment and its malign presence: ‘They could see the forest  
 2 coming to see them, or waiting for them like a black and frowning  
 3 wall before them.’ In particular, when Bilbo steps alone into the  
 4 forest, it seems ‘very secret’; ‘a sort of “watching and waiting feeling”,  
 5 he said to himself’.<sup>37</sup> His own ‘reading’ of the forest echoes the  
 6 anthropomorphic quality of not only fictional forests already known  
 7 to readers of fairy tales, and, as suggested, George MacDonald’s *The*  
 8 *Golden Key*, but an experience of actual encounters with forests as  
 9 beings, as living entities, creating a feeling that is full of foreboding.  
 0 In this way, Tolkien can already be seen to pull away from the kind  
 11 of anthropomorphism he rejected in others, just as he later resists  
 12 confining the meaning of the forest to allegory or symbolism.

13 Bilbo’s foray into Mirkwood, like those of characters who enter  
 14 the forests of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, changes him and,  
 15 more importantly, allows him to recognise that transformation. His  
 16 experiences in Mirkwood – being led off the path by the Wood-elves,  
 17 and battling the spiders in the treetops – allow him to discover his  
 18 inherent bravery and cleverness. He has faced a test of character and  
 19 redefined himself, by passing through the forest.

20

21

### 22 *The Lord of the Rings*

23

24 Whereas, in *The Hobbit*, ‘the forest’ is predominantly typological and,  
 25 perhaps, rather functional in terms of its symbolic resonance, forests  
 26 and trees in *The Lord of the Rings* are much more complex. Although  
 27 children ‘from about 10 onwards’ do read and become caught up in  
 28 the trilogy, Tolkien expressed the view that it was ‘rather a pity, really’  
 29 as it ‘was not written for them’. Rather, his aim was to write for  
 30 ‘any one who enjoyed a long exciting story’, the kind of narrative he  
 31 himself enjoyed, addressed expressly and directly to those who could  
 32 ‘understand adult language’.<sup>38</sup> Tolkien objected to fairy stories that  
 33 are ‘carefully pruned’ in a false and romantic estimation of what is  
 34 suitable for children: ‘if a fairy story as a kind is worth reading at all it  
 35 is worthy to be written for and read by adults’.<sup>39</sup>

36 Trees in the later narrative are not anthropomorphised, neither are  
 37 they static but rather, carefully differentiated: ‘as different from one  
 38 another as trees from trees ... as different as one tree is from another  
 39 of the same name but quite different growth and history; as different  
 40 as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir’.<sup>40</sup>  
 41 Rather than passive objects, they are seen as complex living subjects,  
 42 who respond to other subjects living in a particular environment. In

1 *The Lord of the Rings*, we see trees and forests which have, largely, fallen  
2 out of positive inter-relationship with other living beings:

3  
4 Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees are loved; elsewhere forests  
5 are represented as awakening to consciousness of *themselves*. The Old  
6 Forest was hostile to two-legged creatures because of the memory of  
7 many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of  
8 the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-  
9 loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the dominion of a Power  
0 that hated all living things but was restored to beauty and became  
11 Greenwood the Great before the end of the story.<sup>41</sup>

12  
13 The restoration of relationship is one of the themes of the long saga.

14 In Tolkien's view, fairy stories are able to represent 'profounder  
15 wishes: such as the desire to converse with other living things ...  
16 and the magical understanding of their proper speech'.<sup>42</sup> This is not,  
17 however, simply to represent humanised attributes in an anthro-  
18 pocentric setting. Michael Perlman notes in *The Power of Trees: The*  
19 *Reforestation of the Soul*, the frequent and 'myriad forms of human-tree  
20 parallels', but such 'analogy never implies a full and literal identity  
21 of humans and trees'. Rather, 'neither the parallels or differences ...  
22 can be consistently avoided or reconciled'. This is 'a tension ... basic  
23 to the world's tree stories'.<sup>43</sup> Where there is a tendency to anthro-  
24 pomorphise trees, it is due to a lack of thorough understanding and  
25 intimacy. Perlman also cites Michael Pollan, who claims in *Second*  
26 *Nature: A Gardener's Education*, that a gardener's familiarity with trees  
27 would highlight the differences between species, and would mitigate  
28 against Romantic and naïve identification. Pollan further differenti-  
29 ates between 'a humanised tree' and an 'ensouled' one, adding that  
30 someone who prunes trees, removing limbs and lopping growth for  
31 the tree's sake, would certainly develop 'a more complicated and less  
32 anthropomorphic understanding of how, and where, a tree lives'.<sup>44</sup> In  
33 all his descriptions of trees, one would be hard-pressed to find Tolkien  
34 privileging human characteristics, although they are certainly repre-  
35 sented as having 'emotional' responses and survival strategies.

36 Fundamentally, for good or ill, trees change (as do Ents and  
37 Entwives, Huorns, Hobbits, humans and all other beings). The Ents,  
38 once 'asleep' and silent, were 'woken up by Elves'. Ents and Entwives  
39 separate because their 'hearts did not go on growing in the same  
40 way', and the Huorns, once Ents, have grown more tree-like, and  
41 angry and 'queer'.<sup>45</sup> 'Trees may 'go bad' as in the Old Forest; Elves  
42 may turn into Orcs, noted Tolkien in a long explanatory letter.<sup>46</sup> At

1 times and in some cases, trees and forests are welcoming and benign,  
 2 actively helping the Hobbits, providing bowers of safety and fuelling  
 3 camp-fires with off-cast limbs. At other times, however, woods such  
 4 as the Old Forest are malign, or have become so. The Old Forest is  
 5 terrifying by reputation and, once entered, actively unwelcoming. It is  
 6 in the Old Forest and by the active malevolence of Old Man Willow  
 7 that the travellers are variously nearly drowned or nearly consumed  
 8 by and suffocated in the rotten heart of a tree. Tragedy is only averted  
 9 by Tom Bombadil's intervention, and he later offers an explanation  
 0 for the behaviour of Old Man Willow, but it is also important to note  
 11 that trees are not without their own inherent peculiarities, prejudices  
 12 and flaws:

13  
 14 Tom's words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were  
 15 often dark and strange and filled with a hatred of things that go free  
 16 upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroy-  
 17 ers and usurpers. ... The countless years had filled them with pride and  
 18 rooted wisdom, and with malice. But none was more dangerous than the  
 19 Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was  
 20 cunning, and a master of winds, and his song and thought ran through  
 21 the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power  
 22 out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and  
 23 invisible twig fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all  
 24 the trees of the Forest from the Hedge to the Downs.<sup>47</sup>

25 Critics have puzzled over the meaning of Tolkien's depiction of such  
 26 a malevolent tree as Old Man Willow. It sits uneasily with the view  
 27 of Tolkien as a 'tree-hugging' environmentalist and *The Lord of the*  
 28 *Rings* as an iconic book for the Green Movement. Old Man Willow  
 29 can be seen as rare and aberrant, but Tolkien refuses to patronise trees  
 30 (or any creature) by making them one-dimensional, or less subject  
 31 to the post-Fall corruption and conflict that threatens all living  
 32 beings. Tolkien also makes clear that when trees suffer injury, they  
 33 can become hostile. Contrary to simplistic expectations, hobbits are  
 34 among those who have harmed trees. The skirmish over the planting  
 35 of the Hedge involved trees moving nearer to it; in retaliation and to  
 36 secure their boundary, the Hobbits 'cut down hundreds of trees' and  
 37 made 'a great bonfire in the Forest'.<sup>48</sup> Eventually, Hobbits and trees  
 38 negotiate a wide boundary and an uneasy peace, with mutual fear  
 39 and resentment. Perhaps it is Tom Bombadil who is the exemplar of  
 40 a right relation to trees and the living world; he has an acceptance of  
 41 their variety and rightful co-existence. Bombadil is the polar oppo-  
 42 site of those who, like Saruman, cannot resist 'plotting to become a

1 Power', who have 'mind[s] of metal and wheels' and who care not  
 2 'for growing things, except as far as they serve him for a moment'.<sup>49</sup>

3  
 4  
 5 **'The suffering tree is the epitome of universal pain'**<sup>50</sup>

6 In 1953, Tolkien wrote to his long-term friend Father Robert Murray  
 7 (who had presciently noted that critics might have difficulty evaluat-  
 8 ing *The Lord of the Rings*: 'they will not have a pigeon-hole neatly  
 9 labelled for it'), affirming the book's positive religious aspect: '*The Lord*  
 10 *of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work;  
 11 unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I  
 12 have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything  
 13 like religion, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the reli-  
 14 gious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism.'<sup>51</sup> There  
 15 is a passage in another letter, where Tolkien uses a familiar image to  
 16 represent his particular faith: a tree. In a long letter to his son Michael  
 17 in 1967/8, Tolkien contrasted the 'protestant' 'search backwards' with  
 18 the dynamism ('likened to a plant') of the Catholic church, and the  
 19 arboricultural skill and familiarity required of those who tend it:

20  
 21 'my church' was not intended by Our Lord to be static or remain in per-  
 22 petual childhood; but to be a living organism (likened to a plant), which  
 23 develops and changes in externals by the interaction of its bequeathed  
 24 divine life and history – the particular circumstances of the world into  
 25 which it is set. There is no resemblance between 'the mustard seed' and  
 26 the full-grown tree. For those living in the days of its branching growth,  
 27 the Tree is the thing, for the history of a living thing is part of its life,  
 28 and the history of a divine thing is sacred. The wise know it began with  
 29 a seed, but it is vain to try and dig it up, for it no longer exists, and the  
 30 virtues and powers that it had now reside in the Tree. Very good: but  
 31 in husbandry the authorities, the keepers of the Tree, must look after it  
 32 according to such wisdom as they suggest, prune it, remove cankers, get  
 33 rid of parasites and so forth. (With trepidation knowing how little their  
 34 knowledge of growth is!) But they will certainly do harm if they are  
 35 obsessed with going back to the seed or even the first youth of the plant  
 36 when it was (they imagine) pretty and unafflicted by evils.<sup>52</sup>

37 Explicit mention of his faith is made by Tolkien in the Notes to  
 38 the essay 'On Fairy-Stories' – a somewhat surprising turn. Having  
 39 claimed, more familiarly, that 'successful Fantasy can ... be explained  
 40 as a sudden glimpse of the underlying truth or reality', he continues:  
 41 'The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which  
 42 embraces all the essence of fairy-stories,' and introduces his own

1 neologism: ‘Eucatastrophe’ or ‘good destruction’; ‘among the marvels  
 2 is the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe ... The  
 3 Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history: ... the story  
 4 begins and ends in joy.’<sup>53</sup> In his own ‘sub-creation’, *The Lord of the*  
 5 *Rings*, a similar restoration of joy is accomplished, and represented, in  
 6 deliberately religious language and imagery, by ‘a scion of the Eldest  
 7 of Trees’, which will replace the withered White Tree in the courtyard  
 8 of MinisTirith. In this passage, all the features already discussed in this  
 9 essay come together: trees, creation (art), fairy stories, and religion:  
 0

11 Then Aragorn turned ... out of the very edge of the snow here sprang  
 12 a sapling tree no more than three foot high. Already it had put forth  
 13 young leaves long and shapely, dark above and silver beneath, and upon  
 14 its slender crown it bore a small cluster of flowers whose white petals  
 15 shone like the sunlit snow ...

16 And Gandalf coming looked at it, and said: ‘Verily this is a sapling of  
 17 the line of Nimloth the fair, and that was a seedling of Galathilion, and  
 18 that a fruit of Telperion of many names, Eldest of Trees. Who shall say  
 19 how it comes here in the appointed hour? But this is an ancient hallow,  
 20 and ere the kings failed or the Tree withered in the court, a fruit must  
 21 have been set here. For it is said that, although the fruit of the Tree comes  
 22 seldom to ripeness, yet the life within may then lie sleeping through  
 23 many long years, and none can foretell the time when it will awake. ...

24 And Aragorn planted the new tree in the court by the fountain, and  
 25 swiftly and gladly it began to grow, and when the month of June entered  
 26 it was laden with blossom.

27 ‘The sign has been given,’ said Aragorn, ‘and the day is not far off.’ And  
 28 he set watchmen upon the walls.<sup>54</sup>

29 Tolkien concludes his essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’ with the claim that  
 30 ‘Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on’ and that the Christian  
 31 ‘may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually  
 32 assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation’.<sup>55</sup> The  
 33 now-familiar metaphor of effoliation (producing leaves) combines  
 34 with the metonym of ‘the Tree’ standing for all creation. The bibli-  
 35 cal and religious connotations of Tolkien’s work – and, in particular,  
 36 his late work – are explicit only intermittently: in his letters and  
 37 in the coda to the essay on fantasy, sub-creation and fairy stories.  
 38 Throughout all of his work, and with increasing complexity, Tolkien  
 39 attempts to express the profound meaning of trees as expressed vari-  
 40 ously in religious traditions, myth, saga and legend. Verging on the  
 41 pagan, and identified with by those who would identify themselves  
 42 as more pagan than religious, Tolkien’s tree- and forest-love seems at

1 first to stand in opposition to the Church, which was suspicious of the  
 2 pagan vestiges that continued ‘to haunt the conservative woodlands’  
 3 with their ‘age-old demons, fairies, and nature spirits’. Robert Pogue  
 4 Harrison notes both the various enjoinders in the Old Testament to  
 5 destroy the gentile’s ritualised sacred groves with prohibitions, such  
 6 as ‘Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of trees near unto the altar of  
 7 the Lord our God’ (Deuteronomy 16:21), and yet the persistence of  
 8 ‘certain elements of pagan culture’:  
 9

0 If certain elements of pagan culture survived the Christian revolution in  
 11 covert forms ... it was thanks in part to the fact that Christian imperial-  
 12 ism did not take it upon itself to burn down the forests in a frenzy of  
 13 religious fervour ... Fortunately for the forests, and for the ancient folk-  
 14 lore they fostered and perpetuated, the Christians did not organize cru-  
 15 sades ... which serves to remind us that, when forests are destroyed ... a  
 16 preserve of cultural memory also disappears.<sup>56</sup>

17 Of course, the Old and New Testaments both contain their tree refer-  
 18 ences, from the Old Testament Tree of Knowledge to the Tree of Life  
 19 in Revelation 22: ‘and the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing  
 20 of the nations’ (22:2). In the Christian tradition, Christ is crucified on  
 21 a tree of death (dead tree) and then, eucatastrophically, becomes the  
 22 Tree of Life.

23 Tolkien brings all these elements together, including his very  
 24 personal view that a tree is a beautiful, albeit fallen, aspect of creation,  
 25 and his knowledge of legend, saga and fairy story, of which, he claims,  
 26 the Christian Gospel is a prime example. Perhaps this is why Tolkien  
 27 insisted that *The Lord of the Rings* was not written for children, for the  
 28 eucatastrophic stories he tells contain both the most dreadful possi-  
 29 bilities (death) and the most joyful elements: creation; sub-creation;  
 30 re-creation.

### 31 32 **Notes**

- 33  
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- 27 22. Tolkien, *Letters*: 63, 73, 107.
- 28 23. See, for example, J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London:
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- 30 24. *Ibid.*: 374.
- 31 25. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966):
- 32 375.
- 33 26. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: v.
- 34 27. Kocher: 162.
- 35 28. Tolkien, *Letters*: 297, 321, 321.
- 36 29. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 94.
- 37 30. Tolkien, *Letters*: 321.
- 38 31. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 109.
- 39 32. Cited in Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography*: 126.
- 40 33. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*: 56, 57.
- 41 34. *Ibid.*: 19.
- 42 35. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*: 127, and see Bettelheim: 94.
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37. *Ibid.*: 117, 124, 126.
38. Tolkien, *Letters*: 429, 297.



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