

Nature in *Lord of the Rings*

Juliana DeFrancesco

Tolkien's use of nature in *Lord of the Rings* offer readers respite, insight, and suspense while traveling the journey forged by Frodo and his companions. Throughout the books we encounter detailed descriptions of nature that convey deeper meaning than the mere words used to describe the trees, meadows, fields, mountains and all other aspects of nature. "No book published in recent times creates a more poignant feeling for the essential quality of many outdoor experiences of flowing streams and the feel and taste of water, of light in dark places, of the coming of dawn." (Kilby, page 282). Tolkien used nature in a way that has yet to be matched by any other writer, painting scenes that are troubling, picturesque, or magical through language. Tolkien did not spare a detail when it came to nature scenes in the books, creating a vivid image in the reader's mind. It was this skill and Tolkien's unmatched use of nature to foreshadow, lighten moods, and ease readers' minds that added to the mystical feel of the books, and made them stand out from the others of his time, and those written today.

Tolkien wastes no time introducing readers to his detail oriented descriptions of nature and the magical feel, giving the readers the basic images they need to enter into Middle-earth. "Nature in *The Lord of the Rings* serves as the basic element of the imaginary world the reader perceives." One of the first times we see this is when Sam and Frodo first set out from the Hobbiton: "The night was clear, cool, and starry, but smoke-like wisps of mist were creeping up the hill-sides from the streams and deep meadows. Thin-clad birches, swaying in a light wind above their heads, made a black net against the pale sky." (Book One, page 79). Tolkien is obviously describing the landscape around Frodo and Sam, but on top of that he is hinting at the evil they are about to face and how they are safe for now, but not for long. We see this in how

Tolkien describes the mist and its trek moving closer to Sam and Frodo, the mist is symbolizing the evil that will slowly creep into their adventure and how the evil, and the black riders, are slowly getting closer to the hobbits. Tolkien also foreshadows the struggle between good and evil that will take place throughout the journey with the phrase “made a black net against the pale sky” the black net here is a representation of evil and how it is trying to block out or cover up the pale sky, which is a representation of good. We see this contrast throughout the entire series of dark fighting light; evil fighting good. Tolkien does not stop there however, with his imagery of nature, he also uses nature to show us how cruel and trying this trip will be for the hobbits.

We see nature’s first interference with the hobbits’ journey, when the exhausted group takes rest at the base of Old Man Willow. Tolkien also uses this scene to introduce nature’s magical component as well with the mention of song and spell. “They gave themselves up to the spell and fell fast asleep at the foot of the great grey willow.” (Book one, page 132). This setup by Tolkien is done for a number of reasons, it reinforces the power and importance of nature in the story, reinforces the connection between song and spell, and sets us up for the introduction of a crucial character. Tolkien’s use of song to draw the hobbits to the willow and cast them under the tree’s spell, conveys to readers just how powerful nature can be, but most importantly exposes the mystical side of nature. On one hand Tolkien uses nature as a respite from evil or a foreshadowing of evil to come. Meanwhile on the other hand, Tolkien uses nature to add a mystical feel to the story, adding to the magical element from Middle-earth. With this new element added to nature’s list of different characteristics, the readers are taken deeper into Middle-earth. The new magical element added to nature, really pulls the reader farther into the story, and makes them feel as though they were transported into another world. It aids in

Tolkien's want to write a story that is mythical. This element is a major contributor to making Middle-earth something of a mythology. Tolkien does not stop here with the different uses of nature in his writings; he also uses nature to expose the readers to the narrator.

The use of nature by Tolkien to expose different characteristics of the narrator speaking is an interesting tactic, and a useful one. In doing this Tolkien is able to allow the readers to forge a connection with the narrator, but it also gives them the ability to distinguish between different narrators. We can see the distinctions between different narrators based on the descriptions of the landscapes, woods, and plants that the hobbits in counter on their journey. Less detailed descriptions of nature lead the reader to believe that the narrator is more likely a Pippin, Frodo or Aragorn like character. While as a description of nature that is more detailed and properly names different types of plants, trees, and grass leads the reader to believe that the narrator is more of a Sam like character. We see a very detailed oriented description of nature in book four that seems to be very Sam like; "Beyond it were slopes covered with somber trees like dark clouds, but all about them lay a tumbled heathland, grown with ling and broom and cornel, and other shrubs they did not know." (Book four, page 287). This quote seems to be from a narrator who is likely a Sam like character because of the attention to detail and the vast knowledge of nature. We can make this assumption because Sam was a gardener before the hobbits set out on their journey. Sam or a character like Sam would be the only people in Middle-earth to have the extensive knowledge to make such observations of the landscapes the hobbits encounter. Without these details to differentiate between types of narrators, the readers would be at a disadvantage. They would not be able to tell narrators apart, therefore leaving a lot of readers to assume that one narrator is speaking throughout the entire story. The assumption that there is only one narrator severely alters the entire story, and how the reader interrupts the story. The fact that Tolkien

realized this and took the time to make sure there were distinctive differences between the way narrators talked and described things shows how important it is for the reader to notice these differences. Tolkien took time and care to make sure that every aspect of this story was important to the story and aided the readers in getting the full experience while reading the books.

Tolkien used nature in a multitude of ways to convey different messages throughout the story. The care took in making it something large and in your face, or more subtle and hidden is a skill that many writers lack. Tolkien was able to take one thing and turn it into something that many people would never see it as. Not only was nature used to convey different messages throughout the story, but it was also personified to bring an extra element to the story that lifts it up to even greater heights. “The representation of nature in *The Lord of the Rings* is at once comforting in its familiarity and Fantastic in its personifications.” (Brisbois, paragraph 1)

Tolkien’s personification of objects in his story is what makes his story unique and sets it apart from the rest. It takes the story to new and daring heights that were not reached or even dreamed about when Tolkien first started writing *The Lord of the Rings*. We travel with these objects that have suddenly become living function beings into a world of wonder and awe. Tolkien achieved many things with the writing and the completion of *The Lord of the Rings* series. Tolkien raised the bar in the literary world for mythical stories and set the standards for authors to come.

Work Cited

Brisbois, Michael J. "Project MUSE - Tolkien's Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth." *Project MUSE - Tolkien's Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Feb. 2015.

Kilby, Clyde S. *Shadows of Imagination: The Fantasies of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1969. Print.

Tolkien, J. R. R., J. R. R. Tolkien, J. R. R. Tolkien, and J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings*. Print.