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The Inherent Goodness of Gardens and their Stewards

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The Inherent Goodness of Gardens and their Stewards

Despite the mixed reception of *The Hobbit* movies, Tolkien and his works remain beloved icons of western literature. It would not be farfetched to claim that Tolkien has been re-designated as a “classic” again due to the enormous exposure the Peter Jackson films gave to the Oxford professor’s fully-realized world. Doubtless the grand scale of the production and the revolutionary special effects in the films had a great deal in cementing Tolkien into the 21st century conscience. At the end of the day however, special effects are only cutting edge for a limited time, and Tolkien himself was popular long before the Jackson trilogy was even conceived. No, there must be a more subtle aspect of Tolkien’s works that has allowed them to remain classics and not fade into obscurity. The Catholic subtext of the stories could certainly be a possibility for this phenomenon, however it is well documented that many of Tolkien’s early adopter were the countercultural youths of the 60’s who for the most part rejected traditional Western institutions such as capitalism and Christianity. A more likely reason for Tolkien’s continued popular and academic fascination is the ecological angles that many of his works take. Tolkien’s *Legendarium* promotes the image of a “tended nature” above all other depictions of the natural world, watched over by divinely appointed stewards such as Gandalf, the Elves, and the Ents.

It would be disingenuous to say that Tolkien conforms to a simplistic “nature equals good, technology equals bad” paradigm that would be at home in James Cameron’s *Avatar* or the Eoin Colfer’s *Artemis Fowl* series. Rather, it makes more sense to describe Tolkien’s ideal view of nature as being tended. That is not to say that man’s capacity for environmental destruction is overlooked. Quite the contrary; in *The Silmarillion* one of the primordial *valar*, Yavanna,

expresses this very fear, “They will delve in the earth, and the things that grow and live upon the earth they will not heed. Many a tree shall feel the bite of their iron without pity” (*The Silmarillion* 45). Yavanna is right about her misgivings, however it would seem that the places in Middle Earth that align most closely with the divine and goodness are inhabited and toiled. Patrick Curry notes this important characteristics of these “good” places, writing that, “conversely, the most enchanted places in Middle-earth are so, at least partly, because they are loved and cared for” (Drout 165). He uses Samwise’s observations about Lothlórien to reinforce his point: “whether they’ve made the land, or the land’s made them, it’s hard to say” (*FR*, II, vii, 468). Already a picture is emerging that beings close with the divine live with nature, and do not dominate it entirely to their uses. At the same time, nature has not been left unchecked, and people’s habitation of nature, and even their tilling and reaping of its bounties, are an unambiguously good thing. The home of the *valar* themselves, Anor, contained gardens in places considered the cornerstone of divinity, as Matthew Dickerson notes, “Eden is most often described as a garden, and Valinor’s most holy places are its garden of Lórien and the mound of Ezellohar where grew the Two Trees” (504). The trees, Laurelin and Telperion, were not created by Erú, the omnipotent Creator of Arda. Instead the trees grew from Yavanna’s “song of power, in which was set all her thought of things that grow in the earth” (*Silmarillion* 38) and watered with Nienna’s tears. This is not the last time planted trees make an appearance, for it is the planting of Nimloth at Numénór that symbolizes the relationship between the divine realm and the mortal one. The two are sundered from one another until Aragorn plants a sapling descended from the White Tree of Gondor at the end of *Return of the King*.

Looking earlier in Tolkien’s works, positive imagery associated with gardening permeates through *Leaf by Niggle*. Early in the story, Niggle obsesses over a painting; always

adding on to it but never finishing it. While art is in itself admirable, the text makes clear that Niggle's obsession has come to the detriment of his other duties, especially the caring of his garden, "But underneath he was thinking all the time about his big canvas, in the tall shed that had been built for it out in his garden (on a plot where once he had grown potatoes)" (*Leaf By Niggle* 141). Delving deeper into the text, one could see Niggle's shed as the encroachment upon nature. If Tolkien wanted to make a statement praising a man's dedication to his art, he would not have provided such imagery suggesting neglect. In his pursuit of art, Niggle has disrupted the goodness of his home. *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* suggests the same thing, as "the nature of the parenthetical comment emphasizes that Niggle's focus on his painting has been at the expense of his garden – not a flower garden, but one in which a nutritive staple once grew. (Dickerson and Evans 173). When Niggle is later taken to the world of his painting, is through Niggle and Parish's gardening that the realm of the Painting is able to grow more beautiful than when it was first realized.

Were Tolkien to write a simplistic narrative espousing the total superiority of nature, and not favoring gardens, he would not include counter-narratives that seem to be opposed to this concept. Nature is not good in it of itself, and indeed even the aspects of nature aligned with the good side of the stories' conflicts are not to be taken lightly. Yavanna warns Aulë of the Ents' power "for there shall walk a power in the forests whose wrath they will arouse at their peril" (*Silmarillion* 46) and the *Huorns* of Fangorn are portrayed with an intimidating sense of beings from another world. There exist more depictions of untamed nature than these beings, and not all of them are as inclined to good as the Ents. The Old Forest neighboring the Shire is perhaps the best example of nature's capacity for cruelty. It is implied that the Old Forest harbors a grudge towards the Hobbits for hewing down trees by their border, yet there appears to be an

unmistakable signs of malevolence within the forest. The Hobbits, faced with unbridled nature for the first time in their journey, walk with the feeling of “being watched with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity” (*FR* I.vi.139). The forest proceeds to waylay the Hobbits, and place them under an enchantment. Their journey almost comes to a disastrous end when an old willow tree threatens to bifurcate Merry, and it is only with the timely intervention of Tom Bombadil, the land’s guardian, that he is saved.

Thus Tolkien can show the ferocity and malevolence of untamed nature, disavowing arguments that his work is yet another ham-fisted author tract on the environment. Looking at the other side of the man versus nature conflict yields a grey area as well; not all depictions of artificial constructs, or “the Machine” as Tolkien would call it, are portrayed as inherently evil. Most notably of these constructs is Sandyman’s mill. The corruption of the Shire must be treated as a definite evil act, and allegories for the dangers of industrialization are bountiful in the final chapters of *Return of the King*. What makes Sandyman’s mill stand out is that it is treated as a place of previous good, even before industrialization, “Take Sandyman’s mill, now. Pimple knocked it down almost as soon as he came to Bag End. Then he brought in a lot o’ dirty-looking Men to build a bigger one and fill it full o’ wheels and outlandish contraptions... where his dad was the Miller and his own master” (*RK* VI.ix.1263). The difference between technology such as mills, ropes, and the magic of the elves is that they are not focuses on power. Sandyman’s father was not contributing towards the blighting of his land, he was producing grain for the Shire. Sauron and his ilk utilize machines as means to power, but technology itself is not inherently evil.

Evil in the Legendarium is not simply that which is mechanical, there exists ruinous as well as dominating aspects of it as well. Gardens promote growth, yet order guides the plants so

that they do not grow wholly undisciplined. To destroy the sources of growth, or uproot it in favor of external devices is what Tolkien considers truly evil. Saruman's evilness does not solely come from his defilement of Fangorn's forests, but his desire for power over the living as well. As Fangorn puts it, "Saruman is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment" (*TT* III.iv.586-587). Saruman's wanton destruction of nature and his desire to exploit it is, in the words of Patrick Curry, "identified as integral to moral evil in this world" (164). Sauron himself, the very personification of evil in the third age, is said to possess the ability to "torture and destroy the very hills" (*FR* II.ii.348). His land is not described as land, but as "The desolation that lay before Mordor," its "lasting monument... a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing" (*TT*, IV, ii, 786). Evil corrupts and destroys life, and when it does produce life, as seen with the orcs and other such beasts, said life is exploited as a means to gain power. In this sense, while possessing divine power, Saruman and Sauron cannot be called gardeners. They desire subjugation and servitude, not growth and prosperity.

The lust for power, specifically power over others, cannot be said to be anything other than evil in Tolkien's works. Nonetheless, the inherent goodness of the natural world needs a guide, lest nature grow unpredictable and wrathful. After all, a garden requires a gardener to tend it. Rather than that of a king, though, Tolkien's *Legendarium* reinforces the idea of a steward of sorts looking over the gardens of the world and the life within. A steward, much like a gardener, tends to the care of his appointed realm, while not remaining in absolute power. Such power over creation is reserved solely for Erú. Adding onto this the "stewardship" of nature contains a divine component, one cannot simply assume their dominion over any living things: "Any lordship or authority possessed by the Children of Ilúvatar is subordinate to the authority of another in the

cosmic hierarchy. Theirs is granted to them as a gift by a higher authority” (Dickerson and Evans 60).

The character that most exemplifies this principle is Gandalf. Being a *maiar*, Gandalf is closer to Erú than his human, and even elven companions. Out of the five wizards that came over to Middle Earth, Gandalf remained the only one to not grow corrupted or abandon his post. Acting as an avatar of sorts for divine goodness, Gandalf possesses a degree of power, especially so once he is reincarnated into Gandalf the White. Yet despite his power, Gandalf claims no land to rule, instead proclaiming:

“All worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower in the days to come. For I also am a steward” (*RK*)

Most significantly, the person Gandalf is speaking to at this moment is Denethor, the steward of Gondor. Liam Campbell notes that, “Gandalf, in claiming that he is ‘*also* a steward’ (emphasis added) to Denethor matches his own notion of stewardship against that demonstrated and declared by Denethor, who is himself a steward” (Campbell 118). Gandalf’s stewardship watches over the “interconnectedness of living things” (120) as opposed to any sort of realm. This firmly places him on the side of good, as he does not subjugate those beneath them, but intervenes on their behalf to protect them from evil, demonstrating Tolkien’s conception of “humanity’s need to view all living things and the canopy of nature as precious and worthy of protection, not just as commodities to meet the needs of the human race but as wonders in their own right” (120). Denethor may be a steward, but he is ultimately self-serving, unlike Gandalf. His “understanding of his role as Steward of Gondor, however, is defined in terms of rule and

dominion. He has lost sight of his need to serve the good of Gondor and instead has become preoccupied with the thirst for power and rule (118). This makes the important distinction between the two characters. Denethor is not a gardener, he does not tend his land, and even abandons it in his suicidal paranoia. Gandalf rallies the people of Gondor in the defense of Minas Tirith. He “decidedly reticent to use his powers in anger... In other words Gandalf understands on a very fundamental level the connection between evil and the desire ‘to destroy and check life’ without justifiable cause” (121). Sauron is a *maia*, after all, and he has used his appointed powers for ruination. Gandalf has only killed when defending those under his protection, much the same as when a gardener kills weeds to protect his own plants. Gandalf exemplifies the ideal gardener in Tolkien’s world of cooperative nature.

There exist other characters associated with stewardship over the natural land, most notably Tom Bombadil and the Ents. No discussion of the natural world in Tolkien’s *Legendarium* can exist without mention of Tom Bombadil, “whose selfless knowledge and love of the created world are independent of any power they might afford” (Dickerson and Evans xx). Bombadil himself is the Eldest, an immortal being that could be described as powerful, however “the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control are utterly meaningless” to him and “the means of power quite valueless” (21). Frodo himself assumes that Bombadil is master over a domain, asking Galberry, “Then all this land belongs to him?” Galberry utterly rejects this notion, her “smile faded” as she explains to Frodo, “That would indeed be a burden... the trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master” (*FF* I.vii.155). Bombadil does not ride his ponies save in great need, and the land around his house is tended, but not abused, “the grass under their feet was...mown or shaven. The eaves of the Forest behind were clipped, and trim as a hedge” (*FR* I.vi.152).

Bombadil's own home is not overrun with raw nature, it is tended and lives in conjunction with it. In this sense he is a steward as well.

Amidst all this discussion surrounding immortal beings and divine angels, there stands one meek figure whose very profession is gardening: Samwise Gamgee. Sam is introduced through his father, who "had tended the garden at Bag End for forty years" (*FR* I.i.26). From the onset, there is an immediate connection to gardening and the earth. Taken from precedent, one can reasonably assume Samwise will be portrayed in wholly good terms, and indeed he is. At first glance, Sam does not seem to be an ideal hero, but, as Stephen Yandel suggests, Sam "displays a range of overlapping, conflicting, characteristics... Sam sees the practical sides of situations, perhaps more clearly than any other character, but also gleans their relation to the past... (Drout 587). True, Frodo still remains the "hero" of the tale whilst the two hobbits journey into the valleys of Mordor, but there lies a significant change once they enter the dark land: the narration shifts almost entirely to Sam, and furthermore he remains the only character uncorrupted by the ring. The case can be made that the narration had to switch to Sam, as Frodo had now been exposed to the immortal powers that have shaped the world, becoming more akin to an elf than a hobbit. Sam is not meant for such revelations as Frodo has seen, after all, "his name means 'half-wise' in Old English... which suggests not merely a half-wit, but someone with multiple kinds of wisdom" (587). Indeed Sam's more earthly wisdom is what truly prevails in the text, he is the one to carry Frodo and keep the ring safe. But Sam's most significant action occurs following the War of the Ring. Faced with the destruction of the Shire's pastoral beauty, Sam plants the silver nut of Galadriel, and spreads her dust around the land. He expresses worry that "only his great grandchildren... will see the Shire as it ought to be" (VI.ix.1275) but soon his plants bring forth great beauty to the Shire, and it grows fairer than before. Dickerson and

Evans see Sam's planting as a positive statement on gardening: "Tolkien's portrayal of a healthy Shire includes agriculture, horticulture, and feraculture all coming together, touching one another, overlapping and commingling in all places" (157). It is not "nature" that dominates the Shire and makes it wholly good once more, it is "culture" instead. Sam's gardening brings about the good in the world, the tenderness of his hands and his practicality, mixed with his childlike idealism at times, paints a picture of a humble creator.

Despite constituting an integral part of Tolkien's worldview and a force of unbridled good in Arda, the gardening motif does not seem to have been picked up by any adaptation of Tolkien's works to date. Indeed, it would appear that the exact opposite of gardening is celebrated instead, that is to say, taking life and destroying creations. Additional battle scenes such as the fighting at Amon Hen and the wolf riders attacking the Rohirrim were added, but nature and its power fades into the background. Bombadil himself is completely omitted from both the Ralph Bakshi film and the Peter Jackson Trilogy. Treebeard and the Ents must be roused by Merry and Pippin to destroy Isengard, instead of deciding to defend their realm of stewardship themselves. Sam is elevated from a servile position to being essentially Frodo's lover. More significantly, Sam does not receive a box of dirt from Lothlórien as a gift, he is merely given the elven rope. Gardens and eco-centrism are waylaid to make room for high-octane orc-killing action.

This violent tradition carries over to the other medium most well-known for adapting Tolkien: video games. Since *Fellowship*'s release in 2001, over twenty games have been released depicting Middle Earth. Every single one of those games places an emphasis on the Wars of Middle Earth, a simulation of pastoral life in The Shire would most likely not be marketable.

Due to this, characters in these games are only distinguishable by their resilience and abilities when killing orcs.

Oddly enough, the only adaptation of Tolkien's works that includes gardening as more than just a profession is the LEGO video game adaptation of *Lord of the Rings*. Like other video game adaptations of the trilogy, a decent portion of the game is made up of combat – against the Orcs, the Easterlings, or just dismantling surrounding blocks. Sam can dig up manure to find in-game currency, and more importantly he can grow plants. The plants are grown in a comically oversized matter, but not once in the game are they used for combat. Instead, plants that Sam grows serve as platforms, puzzle solutions, and sources of currency. Sam himself can participate in the battles against the forces of Sauron, but his character's unique ability is perhaps the only time a video game has acknowledged the hobbit's humble occupation. The LEGO format was the only medium through which this could work, as the toys themselves are meant to be literal building blocks. Films, and it would seem most videogames that place and emphasis on action, seem to rely upon such blocks if they wish to be more constructive than destructive in nature.

Sam's dirt-box, the two Trees of Valinor, and all other producers of life fall under the same umbrella: sub-creation. While true creation belongs to Erú, sub-creation that respectfully homages the divine can be made, and the easiest way to create these homages is through gardening. A case can quite easily be made that the tended realm, and nature combined with an anthropomorphic grower, is Tolkien's ideal scenario in interacting with nature. The garden constitutes the perfect image of this interaction, as man is still allowed some agency in the form of a gardener or steward. In this sense, Tolkien's text is eco-centric to its core: the goodness of all beings and their divinity can be found in certain aspects of nature. Not a simple diatribe, the *Legendarium*, "tends to engage with nature in an integrative way rather than to marginalize it as

Other, as apparent in Tolkien's treatment of Middle-earth as a predecessor to our world" (Drout 167). Marginalizing nature would result in places such as the Old Forest, plant-life grown wrathful towards those that walk on two legs. Instead, nature and mankind can coexist with one another, with man protecting his garden from those who would defile it while enjoying the fruits of his pasture. When mortals tend the earth, rather than destroy it, they can then establish once more a connection with the divine, and goodness can return to the realms of men.

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