



## Trabajo Fin de Grado

# Environmental Attitudes in *The Lord of the Rings*

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## **Introduction.**

20<sup>th</sup> century England embraces a prolific and highly diverse literary panorama. Different literary movements, new ideologies and emerging forms of protest shaped the first half of the century, resulting in a great variety of authors and masterpieces. Among them, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) creates a writing style that shares some of the literary features of his time but also has significant differences that shape his own personal style. As David Doughan comments about Tolkien's life in The Tolkien Society website, although he was born in South Africa, he spent a significant part of his childhood in Sarehole (Worcestershire), which influenced profoundly his values, his love for nature and his future works. During his lifetime he moved several times, and his broad career covered several different occupations, such as editor, philologist, university professor and writer. He also made important contributions to the study of the English language and literature.

His interest in ancient mythology and his career as a philologist, as well as his Catholic faith and his experience in the First World War are important elements to take into account when studying his works. But he was, above all, a lover of nature, which is one of the fundamental ingredients to create his well-known imaginary literary world, in Tolkien's own words: "If you really want to know what Middle-Earth is based on, it is my wonder and delight in the earth as it is, particularly the natural earth" (qtd. in Karen Wynn Fonstad ix). He had a special love for trees and the environment, and was against the excessive industrialization that was destroying, little by little, many parts of the English countryside. Nevertheless, he insistently emphasized that his works could not be labelled as allegorical; rather, he defined them with the concept of applicability, and gave several explanations for the

understanding of this, both in his letters and in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations [...]. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse “applicability” with “allegory”; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* xxiv).

Tolkien’s writing gives freedom to the readers to interpret his imaginary works and relating them to real life, but avoids the imposition of a single point of view. Nevertheless, he is aware and recognises the fact that experience affects the way in which an author writes a story (Tolkien, *LOTR* xxiv).

Thus, following the principle that nature and the environment were essential elements in the construction of Middle-Earth, this essay takes an ecocritical approach to the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, more specifically *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) trilogy. Ecocriticism is defined by Glotfelty in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* as the “study of the relationship between literature, and the physical environment” (18) and expands this definition arguing that “ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies”. (18) In this manner, one of the aims of ecocriticism is to condemn the degradation of nature as a consequence of industrialization and human action, and warns the readers about the irreversible consequences of going beyond the limits of the natural world. Anti-industrialization and the defence of the environment over human interests has been a key element of denunciation in many authors in the course of English and American literature. Authors such as Wordsworth in Britain or Henry David Thoreau in the U.S, among others, were concerned about the importance of protecting the environment, and were

important figures for the subsequent analysis of literature from an ecocritical point of view (Garrard 48).

J.R.R. Tolkien's position against the destruction of the environment for the sake of modernity and technology was reflected both in his fiction and letters. However, Tolkien's works cannot be labelled as environmental literature nor can he be labelled as environmentalist, for he insisted on the fact that his works were not allegorical. Thus, the ecocritical approach of this essay is precisely based in the sense of applicability to the reader, but at the same time it takes into account Tolkien's own experience and delight in unspoiled nature. On the whole, it can be said that nature acts both as a source of inspiration for the writer and as an important agent for the interpretation of environmental issues for the reader.

Several Tolkien's writings, from poems to short-stories and entire novels, were placed in an imaginary universe called Arda, which represents a mythological past of our present day Earth. Middle-Earth is one of the continents of Arda, where the events of *The Lord of the Rings* take place (Bolintineanu, A. "Arda"). For the purpose of this essay, we shall examine a selection of the most relevant races and characters in the trilogy, based on their relationship with nature and the way in which they contribute to the preservation or the degradation of the surrounding environment. The hobbits, the elves, the ents, and Tom Bombadil and Gollum as separate entities are analysed on the base of their attitude towards the environment and contrasted to other different kind of characters, mainly those who represent evil and disruption. The relationship between the different characters with the environment and the way in which some of them employ the natural resources can be seen as an important reason for the decay of Middle Earth as a sustainable civilization. The purpose of this essay is to analyse and contrast the characters

mentioned above from an ecocritical point of view, analysing their relationship with the natural earth and giving present-day readers the keys to make connections between Tolkien's imaginary world and our contemporary real ecological situation.

### **The Sustainable Community of The Shire: The Hobbits.**

In the first place, hobbits are the central and essential characters both in *The Lord of the Rings* and, as its very name imply, *The Hobbit* (1937). Their simplicity, enjoyment and appreciation of simple pleasures, together with their attachment to the earth and the environment, contribute to the depiction of The Shire as an ideal community in which its inhabitants manage to live in harmony with nature, taking advantage of the natural resources without disrupting its natural course. Throughout the narrative, we find many aspects of the way of life of these folks. Tolkien describes them as a peaceful community based on farming and closely related to the earth. A powerful indication of his attachment to the natural earth is their habit of walking barefoot, thus establishing a direct contact with the ground (Tolkien, *LOTR* 2). Also remarkable is their tendency to dwell in holes, making comfortable and cosy houses beneath the ground, which from Treebeard's point of view, "sounds very right and proper" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 465). Tolkien himself stated once "I am in fact a Hobbit in all but size. I like gardens, trees, and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food" (Tolkien to Deborah Webster, October 25, 1958, in Carpenter 303). The author loved nature and he was specifically very fond of trees, which play an important role in his narratives.

In relation to the idea of the hobbits as closely related to the earth, the reader finds in these creatures a rejection of big and complicated machinery; rather, they

prefer simple and handmade objects for their daily activities, which bring them closer to nature, as Tolkien states in the very beginning: “They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom” (1) This way of life as a pre-industrial society has little in common with our present days, in which, as Harold Fromm argues in his essay, the bounds that existed once between humans and nature no longer exist in most contemporary societies, direct contact with nature breaks when we make an excessive use of technology. The population of, at least, the developed countries in the world enjoy everyday commodities without thinking about where does they come from and what is the cost of this way of life for our surrounding environment. (33)

Instead of living out of industry and technology, the livelihood of hobbits is mostly based on sustainable agriculture and small trade. As Dickerson and Evans point out, an environmentally sustainable type of agriculture is based on the idea of self-sufficiency, little portions of land for each neighbour rather than bigger agribusiness, which they define as “an endless cycle of acquisition and dependency.” (16) Several scholars, such as D. H. Meadows, D. L. Meadows and J. Randers, deal with the problems of agribusiness, analysing the reasons why the earth is reaching its limits, and point out that “on large farms, simple economic considerations lead almost inevitably to the use of labour-displacing machinery and to the purchase of still more land.” (147). This is a serious matter nowadays, not only because of the social implications that those authors point out, but also because of the incredible damage of soil infertility, pesticides, degradation, etc. By contrast, hobbits love “good tilled-earth: a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 1). At first sight, Tolkien seems to feel nostalgic for a distant past, an agricultural medieval society that has been replaced severely by modernity

and machinery. Nonetheless, there are also some instances throughout the narration in which certain medieval values are implicitly criticized. The figure of Éowyn defeating the Witch-king, disguised as a man after being forbidden to get involved in the battle, or the hierarchical social system imposed by Saruman in The Shire at the end of the book, suggest that Middle-Earth is not an idealized medieval society; rather, it takes some characteristics from our past society which are considered to be more respectful and careful with the earth.

The Shire is then remarkable for its pre-industrial agrarian way of living. If the reader compares The Shire and the hobbits' lifestyle, with the industrial system of Isengard and Saruman's mass production of soldiers and weapons at the expense of deforestation and pollution, many connections with the past and present real life come to mind. The vocabulary that Tolkien uses for the description of landscapes is significant, for he employs adjectives related to beauty and purity to describe The Shire and changes the tone when describing Isengard and Mordor with adjectives that express ugliness, bareness, destruction and despair. The reader can see in Saruman the figure of a modern powerful industrialist whose main aim is the uncontrolled mass-production of identical goods without being concerned about the environmental damage. In the second volume of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, Barbol warns the hobbits about Saruman with a statement that, more than fifty years after being written, is even more applicable to the real life context: "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" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 473). Treebeard could be describing not only the owner of a factory, but also a large portion of the population, whose minds are 'turning into metal and wheels' due to the current dependency on technology.



Similarly, gardening is another defining feature of hobbits that plays an important role in their perception and preservation of natural beauty. The importance of gardening is illustrated mostly in the figure of Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's gardener, friend and fellow in the journey through Middle-Earth. Named by Galadriel in Lothlórien as the "little gardener and lover of trees" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 375), he is labelled also as "the chief hero" in one of Tolkien's letters (Tolkien to Milton Waldman, in Carpenter 178), demonstrating the fact that Sam's role in the fulfilment of the mission is crucial. Samwise is portrayed as a loyal and strong fellow, and precisely the most striking characteristic that makes him a 'hero' is his simplicity. For him, happiness lies in the simple pleasures of a modest life, away from ideas of power and magnificence. For this reason, he demonstrates a high resistance against the temptations of the ring:

deep down in him lived still unconquered his plain hobbit-sense: he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden [...] The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command (Tolkien, *LOTR* 901).

As Dickerson and Evans state in their book, the fact that hobbits delight in simple pleasures and reject the idea of exercising any kind of power to obtain certain benefits, is what makes them able to elude the persuasion of the ring. (13) Thus, Sam as a gardener is regarded as a protector and carer, not only for plants and trees, but also for other living beings.

The chapter entitled as "The Scouring of The Shire" is one of the most important chapters of the trilogy, not only for its environmental significance but also for the understanding of the whole story. Once the hobbits have returned to The Shire after their adventures, they encounter their home totally ruined. The four hobbits, as

Campbell observes, separated in pairs, have experienced the environmental consequences of this kind of industrialized system in Mordor and Isengard (43). Now that they are strong, trained and experienced, they have to recover their damaged lands. One of the main consequences of the invasion of The Shire, mentioned earlier in this paper, is that agribusiness has replaced the sustainable agricultural form of life of the hobbits. Pimple owns a large amount of lands, which reflects a problem that is, nowadays, much extended in our society: the lack of connection between the earth and the people who work it, and the fact that the majority of people do not produce the food that they consume (Dickerson and Evans 86). The distant gap between humans and the natural world that produces their needs is, or should be, an issue of concern. As Scott Russell Sanders states: “most of the time, nature appears framed in a window or a video screen or inside the borders of a photograph” (194). In this sense, the small farmers of The Shire prove to be, in this chapter, stronger and wiser than those trying to introduce a system based on the uncontrolled exploitation of the land at the expense of the destruction of the agricultural equilibrium, the enslavement of the population and, in general, the separation of the hobbits from their beloved earth.

In this manner it is not surprising the little concern for the environment that exists in a time in which people avoid direct contact with nature and commodities seem to be inexhaustible to a large amount of people when, in fact, the natural resources that make them possible are dangerously reaching their limits. As Albert Bartlett suggests in his conference by explaining some basis on arithmetic, such as the exponential function and the steady growth, the current state of population growth and its subsequent abuse of the resources cannot be sustained. To understand the laws of nature means to understand the impossibility of the human desire for

continuous demographic growth together with the delusional idea of unlimited resources and commodities.

The distressing outlook of The Shire under the effects of Saruman's industry is described as "sad and forlorn", with an "unusual amount of burning going on" while the hobbits see how "smoke rose from many points round about." (Tolkien, *LOTR* 1000). The consequences of industrialization seen by the hobbits when they return after one year far away from home may be, perhaps, similar to that of many places in England when the Industrial Revolution took place. Nowadays, many people could feel identified when reading this vivid description:

An avenue of trees had stood there. They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road towards Bag End they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air (Tolkien, *LOTR* 1004).

### **Wilderness and Preservation of Pure Nature: The Elves.**

The elves are also concerned with the importance of nature and its conservation and they share with the hobbits a special love for nature and growing things. Nevertheless, their habits and methods for taking care of the environment are significantly different from that of the Halflings (or hobbits). The elves are mostly concerned with the beauty of pure, unspoiled nature. While the hobbits' lifestyle is based on sustainable agriculture, the culture of the elves is centred around the concept of 'sustainable horticulture', the growing of plants for aesthetic purposes: for them, uncorrupted beauty opposes the barrenness and distress proper of the enemy's forces (Dickerson and Evans 98-100). Thus, when Tolkien describes Rivendell and Lothlórien, the two larger elvish locations in *The Lord of the Rings*, the narrative

depicts a land rich in beautiful and impeccable vegetables. The pureness of the trees, the flowers, and the fresh grass is astonishing in the sight of the foreigners, and are the result of the elves's especial care for living beings.

First, the description of Rivendell illustrates accurately the importance of beauty in all respects: from the architectural constructions and gardens of the place, to the bright clothes of the folks and the lyrics of their songs, everything seems to preserve carefully the inherent beauty of the elves. Tolkien describes Rivendell as an environmental paradise: "The air was warm. The sound of running and falling water was loud, and the evening was filled with a faint scent of trees and flowers." (Tolkien, *LOTR* 226) The immortality of the elves has positive effects for their understanding of nature and the changes and alterations that it has suffered during the history of Middle-Earth. Thus, Elrond's affirmation that "time was when a squirrel could go from tree to tree from what is now The Shire to Dunland west of Isengard" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 265) is an implicit warning about the devastating effects of deforestation.

In contrast with the earthy paradise of Rivendell, Gandalf's warning describing the transformation of Isengard changes completely the tone of the narration: "whereas it had once been green and fair it was now filled with pits and forges [...] a dark smoke hung and wrapped itself about the sides of Orthanc" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 260). Contrasting the pastoral lifestyle of the hobbits, who make a responsible and respectful use of the land, and the environmental aesthetics of the elves, who delight in nature's beauty for its own sake, Saruman is only concerned about nature or living beings as long as they serve for his purposes. He represents the devastating effects of a firmly supporter of industrialization, who does not care about the irreversible environmental condition (Campbell 98).

The second important elvish location, Lothlórien, does not leave the members of the fellowship indifferent. Just after the fighting in Moria with the terrible goblins and the loss of the beloved Gandalf, they find themselves in one of the most beautiful places on Middle-Earth, capable of healing mind and body with its unique beauty and peace. Legolas, used to the life in the woods, describes the forest of Lothlórien as “the fairest of all the dwellings of my people” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 335). In this chapter, there are several descriptions of the trees and the dwellings of the elves on the branches. It can be said that the pure love for unspoiled nature as its primitive state, proper of the elves, is somehow contagious, for Frodo at this point of the story “felt a delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was the delight of the living tree itself.” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 351).

In contrast, the landscape that the hobbits find afterwards in Mordor is totally barren, poisonous and heart-breaking. It is totally opposite to Lothlórien: it does not heal, but sickens; while the elves live out of fresh pure nature, the inhabitants of Mordor live out of rotten food, poisonous water, smoke and ashes. The description of the last stage of the hobbits’ journey is distressing, for they have even difficulties to breathe due to the extreme pollution of the land (Tolkien, *LOTR* 940), and even walking is difficult in a “wide region of fuming, barren, ash-ridden land.” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 936). Thus, by comparing the beautiful descriptions of the unpolluted Lothlórien and these distressing descriptions of Mordor as a heavily industrialized land, the reader can make many connections with his own surrounding environment nowadays. Taking Mordor as the final irreversible destiny of present earth, the reader can agree with D. H. Meadows, D. L. Meadows and J. Randers when they conclude, after analysing some of the environmental dangers of our present day society, that “if the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food

production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years.” (23)

At this point, two concepts are illustrative of our present context: ecocide and anthropocentrism. Just as Sauron tries to annihilate every form of life in order to control the lands, human action destroys the environment in order to benefit from it, maintaining commodities at the expense of the waste of the natural resources. Thus, anthropocentrism, that is, “the system of beliefs and practices that favours humans over other organisms” (Garrard 183) and ecocide, “the destruction of entire habitats, rather than just individual organisms or species” (Garrard 183) are, unfortunately, two major present problems that are difficult to solve. People in Middle-Earth fight for the conservation of nature against the shadow of Mordor and ultimately they are successful in the mission; yet the elves, as Haldir expresses, believe that, even if Middle-Earth is saved from evil, a complete return to the past is not possible, and the world will never be the same. (Tolkien, *LOTR* 349) In addition to this, it is important to remark that Middle-Earth represents a non-anthropocentric world that is supposed to have existed before our present days (Campbell 158). In that sense, Middle-Earth stands for our past history, and the pessimistic view of Haldir can be interpreted by the reader as an augury of the consequences of the Age of Men, which begins after the destruction of the Ring. Several scholars and students on the matter argue that our present-day society is already doomed to failure, as Eustoquio Molina explains in his essay, defending the idea that the uncontrolled proliferation of the human race will lead the earth to collapse and humanity to become extinct. In the end, Tolkien’s imaginary world, unlike the present real world, considers humanity a tiny part of the world, rather than placing it at the very centre of it (Campbell 159).

With regards to this exaltation of nature's beauty, the elves are also concerned with the conservation of the natural beauty of those objects that, directly or indirectly, come from the earth itself. Craftwork is very important in elvish culture and for them the products coming from the earth have to preserve as much as possible their intrinsic beauty. For these reasons, elvish handicraft has, more often than not, magical attributes that make these objects highly valuable among Middle-Earth. For instance, when Elrond explains to the council at Rivendell the purpose of the three elvish rings of power, he makes it clear that they are not weapons and that their makers "did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained." (Tolkien, *LOTR* 268)

Conversely, products derived from the industrialized regions of Middle-Earth, such as Mordor and Isengard, not only are intended for the destruction of the environment and the enslavement of the free peoples, but they also lack the beauty and the impressive attributes of elvish artistry. They often resemble the mass-production of objects in assembly lines, proper of our present days, which lack all the good qualities of handicraft production. While Elvish weapons, for instance, are real pieces of art and even have a name on their own that distinguishes them from the others, weapons made by the enemies are similar or identical between them, lacking the elegance and uniqueness that only committed craftsmen can produce. Kinsella connects Tolkien with the Arts and Crafts movement by establishing some similarities between architecture in Middle-Earth and the values of the artists of that movement. He highlights that those architects were concerned, as much as Tolkien, with the "building's impact on the landscape" (Kinsella 91). The artists were also concerned with the damage that the industrial production made to the traditional

beauty of craftwork. For instance, the nineteenth-century theorist John Ruskin stated that “the Industrial Revolution had dehumanized the artisan, turning him into a machine, robbing him of his creativity and leading to buildings, artefacts and decorative objects that were ugly because they had no soul” (qtd. In Kinsella 89).

As Harold Fromm states in his essay, the idea of nature as the producer of all our needs and commodities today is almost inexistent for many people, especially new generations of children (33). The art of handmade goods resides in the whole process involved between the raw material and the final product, which is considerably lost in the new contemporary concept of manufacturing. In this respect, when the fellowship is about to leave Lothlórien and they receive the elvish gifts, the reader is able to see the importance of the uniqueness of craftwork. Elvish clothes, as stated by one of the leaders there, “have the hue and beauty of all these things under the twilight of Lórien that we love; for we put the thought of all that we love into all that we make.” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 370)

Also remarkable and connected to the idea of the healing landscapes of The elves, their great knowledge of medicinal plants and nature’s healing effects is one of their most important talents. Many instances of this useful wisdom appear during the narration. For instance, Legolas comments on the healing effects of Nimrodel, the river close to Lothlórien: “I will bathe my feet, for it is said that the water is healing to the weary” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 339). Athelas is the plant most widely used so far in the narration. It plays an important role in healing many characters, including Frodo, Gimli, Sam, Merry, Faramir or Eowyn. Nevertheless, the use of this plant depends heavily on a deep knowledge of the natural environment, due to the fact that, as Aragorn comments regarding the importance of understanding wilderness, “it is not



known in the North, except to some of those who wander in the Wild.” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 198).

### **The Shepherds of the Forests: The Ents.**

Tolkien’s love for trees and his worries about the destruction of the woods were often expressed explicitly in his letters, and implicitly in his fiction. He declared once his deep love for trees and his rejection of human mistreatment of the forests (Tolkien to the Houghton Mifflin Co., in Carpenter 233). On another occasion, he also affirmed that “every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate” (Tolkien to Jane Neave, September 8-9, 1962, in Carpenter 340) making reference to the low concern about forests. His appreciation of the intrinsic natural beauty of the trees and woods was illustrated in the figures of the ents, more concretely in Treebeard, the shepherd and thus protector of the woods, who “speaks on behalf of the trees and forests of Middle-Earth, indicating the value of wilderness.” (Dickerson and Evans 129) Thus, the ents value and defend the status of wilderness in the forests and try to fight against the external forces that attempt to destroy them for their own benefits – whether it is for industry, furniture or bonfire.

In this respect, Flieger’s point of view on the issue highlights that not only orcs, Saruman and Sauron should be blamed for the destruction of the forests, but also the hobbits, Tom Bombadil, and each race that makes use in one or another way of wooden materials (qtd. in Campbell 257-259). This critical view supports the idea of wilderness discussed and defended by several authors; Garrard, for instance, gives an explanation to this tendency, stating that “wilderness narratives share the motif of escape and return with the typical pastoral narrative, but the construction of nature

they propose and reinforce is fundamentally different” (59), and describes wilderness as formed by “apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature” (60). However, this seems an unrealistic approach to Tolkien’s values and to the solution for deforestation nowadays. Both Tolkien’s works and the present idea of protecting the forests may rely on the idea of a balance between the natural earth and human needs. The concept of ‘sustainability of the forests’ resolves this conflict. It is discussed by Ulrich Grober talking about John Evelyn’s *Sylva*, arguing that it consists on the proper management of the forests, avoiding the devastation and deforestation of them, thus making a good and controlled use of the woods.

The most important part of the narrative concerning the ents occurs in the second volume of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, when Merry and Pippin meet Treebeard, who although being highly reluctant at the beginning, ends up taking part in the War of the Ring, destroying the power of Isengard. These chapters have several and fundamental implications for the understanding of the narrative in environmental terms. First of all, the ents’s duty as protectors of the forests is severely challenged by Saruman’s purposes. The industrialization of Isengard and the conflicts with Sauron have brought to Middle-Earth severe environmental consequences, such as deforestation. This loss is seen in the figure of Treebeard in two manners: through his lamentations and sorrow for the bright past that cannot be recovered, and the present concern for the irreversible disappearance of the trees and, specifically, the ents, due to the damage of the evil forces and to the loss of the Entwives. The description of Treebeard by Pippin exemplifies the connection between the past and the present in this character: "one felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with

the present (Tolkien, *LOTR* 463). Tolkien's criticism of deforestation is evident in the values expressed by Treebeard, who tells the hobbits that "there was all one wood once upon a time: from here to the Mountains of Lune, and this was just the East End" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 468). For Treebeard (also called Fangorn), as for many people concerned with the irreversible consequences of environmental damage, the impossibility of returning to the past is regrettable and devastating:

Those were the broad days! Time was when I could walk and sing all day and hear no more than the echo of my own voice in the hollow hills. [...] And the smell of the air! I used to spend a week just breathing. (Tolkien, *LOTR* 469)

There is not much hope in the present of the ents, as they have realised that the peoples of Middle-Earth are no longer concerned about the forests's painful fate, and for that reason Treebeard is reluctant to join the War. He states: "I am not altogether on anybody's side, because nobody is altogether on my side, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 472). Sadly, the future is not more hopeful, for he predicts that "the withering of all woods may be drawing near" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 473). From these passages the reader can make evident connections with the present day situation of the forests. It is widely known the problem of deforestation nowadays, as a result of the excessive growth of the population and subsequent economic growth in developed countries, which is one of the main factors that produce the disappearance of trees and the vegetal realm in general, due to the growing need of natural resources and the spread of pollution (Garrard 21). Ultimately, deforestation affects not only trees, but also a whole complex ecosystem living in the forests, affecting also humans in one way or another. D. H. Meadows, D. L. Meadows and J. Randers discuss in their book the necessary ingredients for the functioning of our present day society, being the forests

one important physical resource among all the ingredients that “are the ultimate determinants of the limits to growth on this earth” (45). Thus, human action exhausts the natural resources of the earth without taking into account its limits, resulting in an inexorable advance towards scarcity.

In contrast with the environmental vision embodied by the ents, Saruman, the orcs and other creatures under the rule of Sauron represent the destruction of the environment in its most terrible form, not only for war or industrial purposes but also for fun and entertainment. As Legolas observes, “it seems their delight to slash and beat down growing things that are not even in their way” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 419). This points out to their inherent wickedness, and the corruption of their morality is seen not only in the destruction of living beings outside their communities, but also in the murder of the members of their own community.

In this sense, the creatures that form the evil forces of *The Lord of the Rings* contrast sharply with the sense of protection and unity proper of the ents. Treebeard is deeply affected by the disappearance of the Entwives, which acts as a prediction of the extinction of the ents and, subsequently, the ending of the protection of the forests. He is also concerned with the extermination of his friends surrounding Isengard, a key element that eventually leads to the uprising of the ents. (474, 485-487) Meanwhile, orcs, goblins and other evil creatures do not show any attachment to their partners during the entire trilogy, and there are many instances of the cruelty of the orcs, such as Gorbag’s assassination by Shagrat:

He sprang on to the fallen body, and stamped and trampled it in his fury, stooping now and again to stab and slash it with his knife. Satisfied at last, he threw back his head and let out a horrible gurgling yell of triumph. (Tolkien, *LOTR* 907)

The orcs do not show any kind of moral improvement, while other characters, such as the hobbits, men, the ents, etc, evolve and grow wiser as the narrative advances. In this sense, Fangorn is an important place of transformation, for the forests in Tolkien's imaginary world contribute to the evolution of the people that enter them, but also changes in some way or another the creatures that live inside, and even the future events (Merkelbach 64). Both the two hobbits and Treebeard change during the events occurred since they met. Pippin and Merry's improvement resides on the fact that their role and their involvement in the War of the Ring becomes particularly important. Also Treebeard's implication on the War changes, partly moved by the hobbits's presences, an essential turning point for the destruction of evil. Tolkien transforms the forests from mere background elements to active indispensable characters that play a fundamental role in the story.

After the destruction of Isengard, nothing is left from the industrial system that Saruman had carefully built in the place. The description of the attack on Isengard is highly significant for the interpretation of the events in relation to the environment. As Pippin remarks when telling the events to Aragorn and the others, Saruman made a terrible mistake that led to the uprising of the forest:

The Ents are safe [...] He seems at one time to have got round them, but never again. And anyway he did not understand them; and he made the great mistake of leaving them out of his calculations. He had no plan for them, and there was no time to make any, once they had set to work (Tolkien, *LOTR* 567).

This excellent illustration of the consequences of defying nature, together with the powerful descriptions of the fighting, can be interpreted by the readers as a warning of the power of nature for destruction as a consequence of its excessive exploitation: "At times the whole valley echoed." (Tolkien, *LOTR* 571) and "there we sat high up

above the floods and watched the drowning of Isengard.” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 572). The damage of the environment has always severe consequences not only for animals and vegetation, but also for human beings. As Rueckert explains, “this is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature” (107). The reader can infer from Saruman’s experience the idea that destroying the surrounding environment will lead, sooner or later, to the destruction of humanity itself. A crusade against globalization and technology is not the solution to this problem though. Rather, science, progress and technology should be used responsibly for human purposes but also for developing new ideas for the protection of the environment.

The ultimate response of nature over its domination contrasts with the deathly and inert landscapes in Mordor and its proximities. In Isengard, nature reacts because there is still hope for a recovery; it has been severely damaged but not irreversibly. Instead, much of the natural landscapes of the surroundings of Mordor mark the desolation of a place that has been already consumed by the effects of this perilous condition: “dreary and wearisome [...] the only green was the scum of livid weed on the dark greasy surfaces of the sullen waters. Dead grasses and rotting reeds loomed up in the mists” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 626). There is no hope for “a land defiled, diseased, beyond all healing” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 631-632). However, there are also beautiful places in the surroundings of Mordor: in Ithilien, Frodo and Sam feel alleviated, and “it seemed good to be reprieved, to walk in a land that had only been for a few years under the dominion of the Dark Lord and was not yet fallen wholly into decay” (Tolkien, *LOTR* 649). This statement relies on the same premise mentioned above; the places which have been dominated for a long time by Sauron present an

irreversible decay, while those that have been defended by western people resist and endure the scourge of the evil neighbours.

### **Contrasting Tom Bombadil and Gollum.**

Before closing the analysis of this set of characters, it is essential to mention Tom Bombadil and Gollum as separated entities, not belonging to a group of characters but standing on their own. First, Tom Bombadil is an intentional enigma in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien to Naomi Mitchison, April 25, 1954, in Carpenter 193). As a character, he was important enough to become the protagonist of a collection of poems entitled *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962). He is one of the most important characters for the understanding of several environmental issues in the trilogy. Tolkien made clear that Tom's storyline is important for the things he represents rather than the narrative story itself (Campbell 79). He stands for "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside" (Tolkien to Stanley Unwin, December 16, 1937, Carpenter 32), which has important implications for the environmental perspective of the book. This character represents not only nature at its purest form, but also nature under threat (Campbell 83). The chapter concerning Tom Bombadil is rich in natural descriptions and poems and songs about nature. His wife Goldberry, giving an explanation of who is Tom Bombadil to the hobbits, asserts that he does not own the natural surroundings, rather "the trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 124). This is essential for the construction of the character as a powerful being, the only one capable of resisting the power of the Ring. His only concern is the knowledge of the natural environment, and thus the protection of it,

and he is not concerned about the War, the destruction of the Ring, or such things. Precisely, the great power existing in Tom Bombadil is the result of his intentions: “he has no wish to rule, exploit or master [...] he places value not on power but on understanding” (Campbell 80).

In contrast with him, the reader meets Gollum later on, a frail, scruffy creature obsessed with the Ring and totally corrupted by this obsession. His existence and fate is connected to that of the Ring, because he has become so alienated that his ‘treasure’ (the Ring) is his only reason for living. Thus, the reader can interpret Gollum as a victim of the industrial system that surrounds the Ring. The machinery resulting from the industrial processes, more often than not, “rather than enriching humanity and enhancing the world, it has the power to corrupt the natural goodness of people and to unmake the natural beauty of the world (Nicolay 42). Previously in the paper, the terrible industrial effects on the environment were discussed; along with the destruction of nature, it comes the destruction and corruption of morality and, subsequently, the individual’s own sense of living. As discussed above, the reader can interpret that Tom Bombadil is not corrupted because he is totally isolated from the effects of the industrial processes in Mordor. Nevertheless, he is in danger of disappearing with the landscape if the evil forces win the battle. Gollum, who was once a hobbit called Smeagol, does not longer belong to that race, and he is during the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* an odd creature. The point that Nicolay makes about those characters that despair is applicable to Gollum: they “are somehow already alienated from their communities as well as themselves” (109) Nevertheless, the fact that he has a split personality makes the reader wonder if he is totally and irreversibly corrupted or he has, after all, a little bit of goodness remaining from his



life before the Ring founded him. He seems to be almost completely corrupted, but there is still a little remnant from the innocent Hobbit he once was (Nicolay 158).

## **Conclusion.**

To conclude, J.R.R. Tolkien creates, through his powerful imagination, a mythological world that represents, in several ways, a distant past, but also creates meanings and attitudes that can be applicable for the present and the future of the reader. His intention by writing his works following the ‘sense of applicability’ mentioned above contribute to the immortality of his legendarium and the values that it represents. Among all the interpretations that the reader can make after reading *The Lord of the Rings*, the ecocritical point of view is essential for the understanding of the whole story and for the extraction of meanings for our present-day environmental context. The reader can infer meanings and ultimately learn something about each character, for the characters analysed in this paper contribute to the protection or the destruction of the environment. Thus, Middle-Earth in *The Lord of the Rings* represents, for many readers, the decay of a civilization threatened by the evils of industrialization and resulting pollution and corruption. Finally, evil forces are defeated and harmony is restored, but the remnants of such a mistreatment of the land will always be visible.

Tolkien’s call for simplicity and closeness to the earth by making the hobbits the protagonists of the story is a powerful lesson for the reader. In the end, the hobbits, a small-sized race, almost unknown to many people in Middle-Earth, with their simplicity and modest way of living become the heroes of the story and saviours of the world. Small actions made by current people are usually what make

the difference, which can be a lesson applicable also to the field of ecology and environmental awareness: “this need to see even the smallest, most remote part in relation to a very large whole is the central intellectual action required by ecology and of an ecological vision” (Rueckert 108). Even the smaller act can change the course of humanity, just as the smaller creatures change the course of Middle-Earth history. Raising awareness on the matter and changing the present-day situation is in the hands of all the inhabitants of the Earth.

Nevertheless, nowadays it is impossible to attempt a ‘Scouring of the Natural World’. There is no going back to the past, as the hobbits do in The Shire: a return to past modes of lives is not possible in our present day society. Instead, a change of attitudes towards the environment is urgent and necessary. People need to become aware that the natural earth has its limits and that we are rapidly approaching them:

We are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem itself. The present system of production is self-destructive. The present course of human civilization is suicidal. In our unwitting march toward ecological suicide we have run out of options. Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by social organization which they have devised to conquer nature (Rueckert 116).

In my opinion, a look back at the past for a severe change of our present attitudes and ways of life is necessary to change the imminent future. We are too close to the collapse of our society and environment. In a world in which nature is being rapidly destroyed for an excessive and irresponsible use of technologies, a drastic change is needed. In fact, there are indeed small rural communities today in the developed world that live in contact with nature and respect, as much as possible, the environment. And the reason for this respect lies on the ability of that people to

see the inherent beauty of the land and its many attributes. Several societies, in the developed countries especially and in the urban areas, have become totally dependent on technologies at the expense of a growing distance from the natural world and its destruction; a natural world that, ironically, sustains those technologies. Nonetheless, this is not to say that all kind of progress, science and technology should be avoided. The concept of sustainability defended in this paper does not refer to a return to the 'medieval system' in which war, famine and injustices are everyday events. Rather, it means the control and appropriate management of this progress in order to avoid the depletion of the natural resources and the irreversible damage of the land. In my opinion, to become aware of the fact that our own lives depend entirely on nature and its processes is the first step towards a change in our attitudes. The first thing we have to do is to become closer to the land, in order to learn how to take benefits without destroying it. This does not mean that all rural population respect the environment: perhaps more contact with nature is needed in the big cities, but raising the awareness of the importance of sustainability is needed both in urban and rural areas. It is time to appreciate, take care and thank nature for its gifts and to learn how to benefit from the environment in harmony with it, and not against it: being more like Tom Bombadil, and less like Saruman.

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