

# Finding Nature's Intrinsic Value

Affinity to Nature and Environmental Destruction in *The Lord  
of the Rings*

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## Abstract

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**Abstract:**

This thesis examines depictions of and attitudes towards nature in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The depictions can be divided into two different categories: those that highlight awe-inspiring qualities of nature and promote the idea of living in harmony with it, and those that concentrate on environmental destruction and the characters' ethical stances concerning the loss of nature. Through its nature descriptions and underlying ethical stances *The Lord of the Rings* can affect the reader's own relationship with nature.

In the thesis, *The Lord of the Rings* is discussed from ecocritical viewpoints, concentrating on human-nature relationship and environmental destruction. Drawing on from studies concerning literature's ability to affect us through imagination, character identification, narrative empathy and sympathy, and narrative ethics, this thesis demonstrates how the attitudes towards nature in the novel can make the reader appreciate the natural world. Through the above mentioned means the reader may begin to feel stronger emotional affinity to nature and as a result starts seeing nature as having value beyond using it as a commodity.

The first discussion chapter focuses on the awe-inspiring and magical nature of Middle-earth and shows how descriptions of it can instil a sense of wonder towards nature in the real world. After that the characters who live in harmony with the natural world are discussed: Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, the Elves and the Ents all live in close connection with nature, presenting a model of a harmonious relationship with nature. In the second discussion chapter the environmental destruction of Middle-earth is examined: the destruction of nature goes hand in hand with the actions of the villains, and the heroes of the story constantly judge those who destroy nature. Underlying ethics of the novel are further highlighted by the story of Saruman which serves as a cautionary tale of using nature as a commodity. Through narrative empathy, narrative sympathy and character identification, the reader is likely to be on the side of the heroes, and therefore the novel guides the reader in the direction of its underlying ethical stance that presents nature as having intrinsic value.

The discussion on *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrates the ways in which literature can help the reader form a new relationship with the natural world by highlighting awe-inspiring qualities of nature and presenting a model of living in a harmonious relationship with nature, and by presenting destruction of nature as ethically wrong. As one's emotional affinity to nature is likely to lead to willingness to protect the natural world, literature may offer us some tools to tackle both climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

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## 1. Introduction

“Maintaining the resilience of biodiversity and ecosystem services at a global scale depends on effective and equitable conservation of approximately 30% to 50% of Earth’s land, freshwater and ocean areas” (IPCC 34). This is the message concerning protection of nature that the report by Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change sends us in 2022. Nature conservation, therefore, is one of the keys to preventing both human-made climate change and the increasingly rapid loss of biodiversity. Even though there is a strong consensus among climate scientists that swift action is needed, there is also an obvious lack of action when it comes to policies that would help us with preventing the worst impacts of both climate change and biodiversity loss. Climate scientist Peter Kalmus laments that despite attempts to spread information concerning climate change in countless different ways, “nothing has worked” (Kalmus). If spreading information concerning the effects of human-made climate change and the loss of species is not enough to make significant changes in policies and lives of individuals, how can literature, and more specifically J. R. R. Tolkien’s work *The Lord of the Rings*, help us?

In his work *Biophilia* (1984) Edward O. Wilson (1929-2021), a biologist best known as the founder of sociobiology and for his work on the study of ants, calls for “moral reasoning of a new and more powerful kind” in order to understand what makes us appreciate and protect life on Earth in all forms (138-139). This moral reasoning has to do with our fascination of nature and seeing its intrinsic value, instead of only using it as a commodity, finding “the old excitement of the untrammelled world” than can offer “reenchantment to invigorate poetry and myth” (Wilson 139). Wilson, therefore, sees “moral reasoning” – ethics – and appreciation towards life as well as the sense of wonder of nature as solutions to the reluctance to act for the sake of preserving nature. Studies show that positive real-life experiences with nature can shape our relationship with it in a positive way (Kals et al., Schultz, Mayer and McPherson Frantz). However, I suggest that there is also another way that has potential to shape our relationship with the natural world: literature.

Many literary works deal with nature and our relationship with it, either as the main theme or among other themes. Even though J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* may be best known as a significant work of high fantasy genre, featuring Tolkien’s detailed mythology concerning Middle-earth, different races typical for fantasy novels, such as the Elves and the Dwarves, and a quest for the purpose of destroying evil, it also presents detailed descriptions of nature. Furthermore, throughout *The Lord of the Rings* destruction of nature is always tied to the spread of evil and the villains of the novel, while respecting nature’s intrinsic value and nature conservation are traits of the

heroes. Tolkien himself notes: “The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness” (*Letters* 178). This way, when it comes to attitudes towards nature, the story speaks to us in two different ways: it highlights awe-inspiring qualities of the natural world and promotes ideas of our connectedness to nature, while also promoting an underlying ethical stance that destruction of nature is work of evil, and thus the story has potential to affect the reader’s own relationship with nature as well.

In this thesis, I am going to first introduce *The Lord of the Rings* in light of ecocriticism that deals with nature and environmental issues in literary works. After that I will discuss how literature has potential to shape our relationship with nature, drawing on from studies concerning literature’s ability to affect us through imagination, character identification, narrative empathy and narrative sympathy, and narrative ethics. After that I will move on to my own discussion concerning *The Lord of the Rings*. In the first discussion chapter I will show how qualities I call *biophilic aspects* emphasize nature’s intrinsic value and can consequently affect the reader. The second discussion chapter concentrates on narrative ethics – the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling – showing how the novel’s underlying ethical stance towards destruction of nature may affect the reader as well.

## 2. Middle-earth and Its Nature

Tolkien's imaginary land, Middle-earth, is an intricate creation, and therefore Tolkien's works offer many possible points of view for analysis. In the first subchapter, I will first briefly introduce J. R. R. Tolkien. After that, I will move on to introduce *The Lord of the Rings*, concentrating on aspects dealing with nature. In the second subchapter, I will further examine the nature of Middle earth by discussing what other scholars have already said about *The Lord of the Rings* in relation to nature, laying the basis for my own discussion concerning depictions of nature and the human-nature relationship in the novel.

### 2.1 Introducing J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was a scholar of English language and an author best known for his fictional works depicting Middle-earth. He was a professor of Anglo-Saxon, meaning Old English, at the University of Oxford (Doughan). Besides English he also studied languages like Gothic, Welsh and Finnish (Doughan). Tolkien even invented his own languages, of which his Elvish language *Qenya* is influenced by Finnish (Doughan). His background as a scholar of languages can be seen in his works that feature many poems and excerpts of characters speaking his imaginary languages. Besides creating languages, Tolkien also created rich and intricate mythology of Middle-earth. In *The Lord of the Rings*, events before the timeline of the novel are constantly referred to, which makes Tolkien's world appear solid: the book features places and characters with rich and detailed history. Tolkien also experienced the effects of industrialization in Birmingham and fought in The First World War (Doughan). The influence of his experiences can be seen in the anti-industrialization notions and depictions of the destruction caused by war in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is probably the best-known work of high fantasy genre. The book was originally published in three parts. *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* were both published in 1954, and *The Return of the King* in 1955. Many who have not read the book know the story because of Peter Jackson's movie trilogy, released in 2001, 2002 and 2003. The movies are based on Tolkien's story, following the same plot and introducing the same major characters, even though some parts of the book and some minor characters had to be left out from the movies due to the length and complexity of Tolkien's work.

The story of *The Lord of the Rings* continues from where Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, published in 1937, ends. Both works take place in Tolkien's imaginary land called Middle-earth. In *The Hobbit* a Hobbit called Bilbo Baggins comes to the possession of a ring that makes its user invisible whenever worn. The events of *The Lord of the Rings* begin with Bilbo's ring being passed on to his young relative and heir Frodo Baggins. Soon Frodo and the reader learn that the ring is actually the One Ring, which the antagonist and the main villain of the novel, Sauron, made a long ago. Sauron and his armies have begun a war, aiming to take control of Middle-earth. Because Sauron has heard about the reappearance of the ring that long had been missing and sends his servants to pursue it, Frodo and his friends end up fleeing their home, the Shire, with the ring. Eventually it is decided that the ring must be destroyed by secretly taking it to Sauron's land called Mordor and casting the ring to the fire of Mount Doom, where it originally was forged, as it is the only way to ensure that Sauron does not regain his full power by possessing the ring. The reader follows the characters who journey through Middle-earth from the Shire located in the western part of Tolkien's imaginary land to the land of Mordor in the east. During this journey the characters pass through different places often described in detail, meeting different peoples inhabiting those lands.

While the reader is taken on the adventure with the four Hobbits – Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin – there are also several other central characters that the plot follows, mainly the members of the Fellowship of the Ring that is sent to destroy the One Ring. These characters are from different races, such as the Men (meaning humans in Tolkien's fantasy world), the Elves, and the Dwarves. There are also other magical races introduced to the reader, such as tree-like, ancient creatures called the Ents, and the servants of the enemy, the Orcs. As is the case with many works of the fantasy genre, some of the races of Middle-earth are characterized as good (such as the Elves and the Ents) while some are characterized as evil (the Orcs). Even though the characters of the novel can make a choice whether to act for the good of those around them or to serve the evil powers, the clear distinction between good and evil persists throughout the story, and is relevant to this thesis, for the division between the heroes and the villains determines the characters' stance towards destruction of nature, as I will discuss later.

Another notable aspect of *The Lord of the Rings* is its descriptions of places where the events take place. Tolkien has paid close attention to detail, which can be seen in the descriptions of landscapes, whether it be lush, green homes of the Elves or the barren landscapes of Mordor, where the enemy Sauron resides. Tolkien himself was fascinated by botany (*Letters* 402-403). One prominent feature of the book is the way that trees are described. Some are immobile but clearly perceiving their surroundings: Tolkien's trees communicate and sing, and act in a hostile way towards intruders. Other kinds of trees, called the Huorns, are able to move. However, they do not possess

the same human-like traits as the Ents, treeherds, that are closer to humans than the Huorns, resembling trees in appearance but talking and acting in a human-like manner. Tolkien's own affection for trees seems to have strongly affected *The Lord of the Rings*, for Tolkien states that "[i]n all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies" (*Letters* 419).

Due this rich material for analysis, many scholars have written about *The Lord of the Rings* from ecocritical viewpoints, concentrating on the nature of Middle-earth and its effect on the reader. In the next subchapter I am going to examine what already has been discussed in relation to the natural world of Middle-earth, laying the foundation for my own work concerning the themes of human-nature relationship and the destruction of nature in *The Lord of the Rings*.

## 2.2 *The Lord of the Rings* in Light of Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism cannot be said to be a distinctive methodology in relation to literary studies, but rather it deals with the ways texts discuss environmental issues (Bennet and Royle 162). Ecocritical thinking may include thinking about details such as plants and insects, or larger entities such as ecosystems or the earth (Bennet and Royle 162). Common themes in ecocritical studies are the relationship between humans and nature and the ways that literature deals with destruction of nature (Bennet and Royle 160). When we think about Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, two themes relating to ecocriticism become especially prominent. Since there is an abundance of nature-related descriptions in *The Lord of the Rings*, we may look at those descriptions and consider how they affect the story and our reading of it. Besides the descriptions, there is also a recurring theme relating to nature: the conflict between those who appreciate nature for its intrinsic value and those who destroy it. Out of these two themes, several authors have discussed Tolkien's imaginary nature and its effect on the reader.

Brawley (2007) argues that mythopoeic fantasy, such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, can instill a sense of wonder which, in turn, can make us re-evaluate our relationship with the natural world around us; once a religious feeling of numinous is instilled with the help of Tolkien's fantasy world, based on mythology created by Tolkien, we may turn this new awareness to nature we encounter in our own world (292). Fantasy allows us to experience things that are not possible in our own world, and, due to its subversive quality, allows a shift from anthropocentric worldview to non-human experiences – therefore it can be said that departing from reality with the use of imagination and the resulting feeling of enchantment is what allows fantasy to change our way of thinking about the natural world (293-294). Brawley further argues, that in *The Lord of the Rings* the scenes



featuring the four Hobbits' encounters with a character named Tom Bombadil and an Ent called Treebeard, as well as their arrival at the forest of Lothlórien – scenes in which descriptions of nature are especially prominent – all have indescribable qualities, which heightens the reader's sense of wonder (301). Furthermore, Brawley notes that ultimately "Tolkien's book is a validation of life itself, a validation of the survival of nature" (302).

Similar to Brawley's arguments regarding the religious feeling of numinous evoked by nature descriptions in *The Lord of the Rings*, Brisbois (2005) mention religious aspects of nature in relation to Tolkien's world as well. As Brisbois puts it, Tolkien's imaginary nature "can be understood as a system of symbolic representation of religious expression" (202). Due to this symbolism and the way morality affects the events of the story Brisbois sees nature of Middle-earth infused with Roman Catholic religious values (201-202). Hence, even though Brawley concentrates on the religious feeling of numinous and the resulting enchantment evoked by mythopoeic fantasy, such as Tolkien's works, and Brisbois analyzes the values underlying the symbolism of the Middle-earth, both Brawley and Brisbois agree that there are some religious aspects when it comes to Tolkien's imaginary nature.

Besides discussing the underlying religious values, Brisbois notes that nature in *The Lord of the Rings* is a fundamental part of Tolkien's imaginary world (197). Furthermore, the nature of Middle-earth is a complex creation: it is based on the realistic nature of our own world but has many imaginary features as well (198). Brisbois divides Tolkien's nature into *Passive* and *Active nature* (203). Passive nature means those aspects of nature that do not directly affect the outcome of events in *The Lord of the Rings*, while the term Active nature is used to describe those aspects that have direct effect on the events of the story (204). Passive nature is further divided into two distinct categories: *Essential* and *Ambient nature* (204). Essential nature is used to refer to all the realistic elements of Tolkien's nature, such as descriptions of landscapes that do not have any further symbolic meaning (204-205). Ambient nature, on the other hand, is more symbolic and it takes the reader one step closer to the magic of Tolkien's world: the features of the natural world have hidden symbolic meanings (206-207). As an example of this Brisbois mentions how an Elf Legolas interprets a red sunrise as a sign that something has happened the night before, and that seasonal changes from autumn to spring represent the overall mood of the story – the story begins with the rise of evil powers (autumn) and through dark times (winter) good finally prevails and Middle-earth can be rebuilt again (spring) (206-207).

Just like Passive nature, Active nature is also divided into two categories: *Independent* and *Wrathful nature* (208). Independent nature includes creatures that have mind of their own but do not threaten anyone, while Wrathful nature includes similarly conscious creatures, good and evil,

that take an active role and often act violently towards the characters (208). This distinction, however, is not fully convincing, because Brisbois uses Tom Bombadil as a primary example of Independent nature. Brisbois argues that Tom must resemble nature since he is not in contact with human-like culture and does not desire any social power (209). However, it cannot be ignored that Tom Bombadil is rather a human-like character: in appearance he resembles a human, he dresses like a human and lives in a house. It can be argued that instead of being a personification of nature, Tom Bombadil resembles a way of living in harmony with nature and respecting it, as I will show later when I discuss Tolkien's characters' connection to nature. Another aspect of Independent nature, according to Brisbois, are the Eagles, for they really do not participate in the events of the story and rather work as *deus ex machina* (211). However, here we have to ask where we draw the line between nature and human-like culture when it comes to fantasy stories like *The Lord of the Rings*. Even though resembling the birds of our own world, Tolkien's Great Eagles talk, think and behave in a relatively human-like manner. This makes them seem more like many human-like races of Middle-earth than animals like we traditionally understand them in our own world.

When it comes to the other category within Active nature, Brisbois makes some crucial points. Brisbois defines Wrathful nature as those aspects of nature that directly influence the events and the outcome of the story – often Wrathful nature acts in a threatening way (211). Some examples of Wrathful nature in *The Lord of the Rings* are a tree called Old Man Willow, the mountain of Caradhras, an ancient demon called the Balrog, tree-like creatures called the Ents, and the Huorns that are less human-like than the Ents and rather resemble trees that are partly awake and able to move (211). As Brisbois notes, “Wrathful nature is a cautionary symbol in Middle-earth. It endangers the good as well as the bad, because it is not a culture on its own but rather a manifestation of the natural world” (212). What Brisbois means is that Wrathful nature often seems to revenge on those who have treated nature badly or destroyed it. However, here once again arises the difficulty of defining what is nature and what human-like culture in *The Lord of the Rings* – are the Ents, humanoid beings that in appearance resemble trees, really part of nature if they have homes with some human-like features, or do they just live in a tight connection with nature? Even Brisbois seems to differentiate the Ents from nature when he notes that “the treeherd Ents, the Elves, and the Hobbits all live in a relationship of stewardship with nature” (203). In Tolkien's work, some plants, especially trees, seem to have a consciousness and an agenda, while some humanoid characters, such as the Ents, definitely could be classified as a race or people despite resembling trees.

Ryan (2015) further analyzes Tolkien's trees and discusses the human-like traits of plants in *The Lord of the Rings*. As Ryan notes, in the story plants and plant-like-beings that have a voice appear in the form of trees as opposed to other types of plants such as weeds and herbs (126). Ryan

argues that many of Tolkien's trees have intrinsic capabilities; for example, in the Old Forest the trees, among them the spiteful Old Man Willow, seem to have a consciousness as well as memories of invaders who have been destroying the forest (128). Ryan further argues that trees have these intrinsic capabilities since the branches of the trees sway even though there is no wind, and eventually Old Man Willow sings a siren-like lullaby that makes the Hobbits fall asleep (130-131). On the contrary, other types of plants in *The Lord of the Rings* are mute but tend to appeal through their smell (126). The main example of this is *athelas*, an herb that has healing properties, and which Ryan argues therefore having different kind of intelligence than sonic trees (136). Overall, Ryan sees that "communicative abilities of Middle-earth flora . . . prompt readers to think imaginatively beyond the prevailing conception of the plant as mute and unintelligent" (126). This point can once more be connected to the overall argument presented before: the awe-inspiring qualities of Tolkien's imaginary nature can make the reader consider nature from a different perspective, making the reader see the complexity of nature in a new light. Interestingly, recent scientific studies suggest that plants can in some ways perceive their surroundings, communicate, and even make sounds even though we are not able to hear them (see Khait, Lagomarsino). These scientific findings certainly make Tolkien's imaginary nature appear not so distant from our own.

All the scholars mentioned above have concentrated on the fantastic qualities of Tolkien's imaginary nature, but it seems that less attention has been paid to the relationship that different races and characters of Middle-earth have with the natural world, including the destruction of nature. Because of this, I will in the first discussion chapter of this thesis further demonstrate how certain characters live in close connection to nature, showing us a way of life that celebrates harmony with the natural world. In the second discussion chapter I will turn my attention to the ways that the destruction of nature and attitudes towards it are depicted in the book, showing that both of these aspects – affinity to nature and judging those who destroy it – may prompt the reader to rethink their own relationship with nature. Before that, however, it is necessary to discuss whether literature can affect or change the reader, and if so, what kind of aspects may contribute to literature's ability to do this.

### 3. Literature's Effect on the Reader

Before discussing aspects of literature that may have power to make the reader shape their own relationship with nature, I will briefly discuss what kind of aspects are shown to contribute to one's willingness to protect the natural world. Environmental psychology offers us some evidence that positive experiences with nature can make us feel more connected with the natural world, which in turn can increase our willingness to protect it. Kals et. al (1999) found that an important factor behind emotional affinity towards nature is experiencing nature with significant others (193). Emotional affinity to nature, on the other hand, clearly correlated with nature-protective behavior (194). In addition, a study by Schultz (2000) indicated that concern for the environment correlates with a person's connection to other people and nature (402). For example, results of the study suggested that participants taking the perspective of animals felt more connected to the natural world, momentarily reducing the emotional division between themselves and nature (403). Consequently, Schultz concludes that activities that reduce the division people feel between humans and nature, such as spending time in nature and being in contact with animals, are likely to heighten one's feeling of connection to nature, while activities where animals are treated as less than humans, such as viewing animals in cages in zoos, can have the opposite effect (403). Similarly, a study by Mayer and McPherson Frantz (2004) shows that those who feel connected with nature, and see oneself as a part of it, are less likely to harm the natural world (512). Therefore, it seems clear that there exists a connection between the feeling of being connected with nature and the willingness to protect it, and that positive experiences in nature have the potential to make that connection stronger. But can literature have the same effect on us as real-life experiences in nature?

Interestingly, Kals et al. note that "on a theoretical level, it is not experiences with nature themselves but rather their psychological representation that should have effects" (197). This statement seems to imply that a person may not have to be in a direct contact with nature, but rather that a person's attitude towards nature, and the things a person associates with nature, are of importance. Furthermore, all the studies discussed above highlight the importance of one's feeling of connectedness with nature – a theme reoccurring throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. One can argue that real-life experiences are not the same as reading about similar experiences. While this is true, there is also evidence that reading fiction affects our brain. A study by Speer et al. (2009) found that reading a story activates the same parts of the reader's brain than what would be activated in real-life situations similar to those described in the story (995-996). Furthermore, a study by Djikic et al. (2009) showed that a fictional text has potential to change the reader's traits, at least temporarily. This was shown in a study comparing those participants who read a fictional short story, as opposed

to those who read the same story in a documentary form (27-28). The changes, however, were not the same for everyone, but rather unique for each of the participants (27). Therefore, it seems that an individual's character, values, and life experiences have a part to play in the direction literature can guide fiction readers, and it is not certain to which extent literature can shape one's behavior or how long such effect may last. Even so, there are arguments that support the theory that literature has the potential to influence the reader's world view, and in the next subchapters I will delve into how this can be achieved. I will begin by discussing the role of imagination. After that, I will move on to examine the effects of character identification and narrative empathy and sympathy. Lastly, I will conclude the chapter by discussing how underlying ethics of a novel may affect the reader's relationship with nature.

### 3.1 The Role of Imagination

As mentioned in the introduction, Wilson argues that finding "the old excitement of the untrammled world" that can offer "reenchantment to invigorate poetry and myth" could be a key to increasing our willingness to protect nature (Wilson 139). Even though the "reenchantment" Wilson talks about may be acquired by spending time in nature, there is another possibility as well. Nature can work as a source of fascination and inspiration for a writer, but written works may also offer the reader this kind of enchantment. Therefore, this kind of "old excitement" of nature can be found through literature as well. The idea that imagination can shape our understanding of other living beings, humans or animals, is not new. For example, the Romantic movement emphasized the idea that through imagination it is possible for us to identify with others around us, including animals, as we can see in the way Keats talks about taking part in a sparrow's existence (Bate 144). This sympathetic imagination allows us to understand other beings around us in a way that reason cannot (Bate 145).

In her work *Love's Knowledge* (1990), Martha Nussbaum defends literature's transformative power with ethical issues when she argues that while the reader participates on adventures with the characters, the reader also faces situations that could happen in their own world (166, 171). In Nussbaum's other work *Poetic Justice* (1996), she argues that literature allows us to experience what it would be like to live someone else's life by placing ourselves to other people's shoes (5). Because of literature's ability to invoke strong emotions in the reader, literature also allows us to confront our thoughts and feelings (5). Nussbaum argues: "Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through . . . self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to

many things that may be difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation” (6). Because of this kind of confrontation and the experience of walking in another person’s shoes “novel-reading . . . can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (12).

Furthermore, Farrelly argues that sometimes spending time in nature is not enough, but that through the use of imagination we can build our environmental imagination – our relationship with nature as well as our moral responsibility with the natural world around us (128). According to Farrelly, myths are particularly efficient in shaping our environmental imagination (129). This view is echoed in Brawley’s argument that we need a change of perception in our attitudes towards nature (294). Like Wilson, Brawley also talks about enchantment when he claims that mythopoeic fantasy, such as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, can help us rebuild our relationship with the natural world; through imagination and fascination felt while reading the story, the reader can start seeing nature in new light (292-294). Besides fascination, literature has an ability to evoke other feelings in the reader as well. In the next subchapter, I will turn my attention to character identification, narrative empathy, and narrative sympathy, because they also play a role in literature’s ability to affect our understanding of the world.

### 3.2 Character Identification, Narrative Empathy and Narrative Sympathy

The characters we identify with may play a part in the way we see the underlying ethics of *The Lord of the Rings*. When a story contains clear distinction between good and evil characters – the heroes and the villains – we become engaged on the side of those whose traits we value (Phelan *Experiencing Fiction* 1). This division between good and evil is typical for works of fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, where the distinction is clear. Keen notes that character identification can lead to empathy (214). When we identify with characters and their struggles, it becomes easier to feel with them, and to feel for them, as we begin to understand the characters better. Phelan explains that the narrative also has ways to reinforce our initial judgements concerning the characters (*Experiencing Fiction* 1). This can be seen in *The Lord of the Rings* in the way that the heroes’ attempt to save Middle-earth from Sauron’s tyranny – submission and slavery of people and destruction of the environment – is depicted. Following the struggle of the heroes and following their thoughts and actions can lead to further identifying with them and consequently feeling narrative empathy and narrative sympathy.

Feelings of empathy and sympathy are closely connected to this kind of identification with the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is important to make a distinction between the two feelings. As Keen puts it, empathy means feeling what the other person is feeling, while sympathy means feeling for someone (208). Keen uses examples to demonstrate this: while “I feel your pain” would mean feeling empathy, “I feel pity for your pain” would mean feeling sympathy towards a person (209). It is important to note, that these definitions of empathy and sympathy do not include action of any kind; they are used to refer to feelings, even though these feelings can lead to altruism as well. With narrative empathy, the empathy we feel while reading, the connection between the empathy that the reader feels and possible response to the text is also unclear, because the reader’s knowledge that the events of the story are not real may affect their response (Keen 212). Even though stories make us feel emotions, we know them to be fiction, and therefore they do not automatically affect our behavior.

However, even though there are many questions concerning the ways that narrative empathy (feeling what characters are depicted feeling) and narrative sympathy (feeling for the characters) may affect the reader, a study by Mar et al. (2009) suggests that reading fiction develops our empathy skills, ruling out to some extent the possibility that people who tend to experience empathy more also read more (420-421). Yet, it is still possible that those who tend to be strongly immersed in fiction read more and therefore also develop empathy skills (422). Therefore, it is not clear that reading fiction would have the same effects on all the readers. There are, however, some aspects that can be connected to the way that the reader comes to feel narrative empathy and narrative sympathy, which in turn can reinforce character identification.

Howard Sklar explains that we come to know fictional characters much the same way as people in real life: in both cases we get fragmentary information and fill in the gaps with our feelings, hunches and so forth (11). In case of literature, we may fill in the missing information either with textual cues or with our knowledge of real-life situations and people (12). This is true to the genre of fantasy as well, since even with fantasy we fill in the gaps by placing the characters in the context of the world known to us (12). In a way, a reader immersed in the world of fiction momentarily may “disengage his awareness of the work’s fictionality” (14). This way the characters and events for a moment seem real to us. Keen also supports these thoughts by arguing that “fiction does disarm readers of some of the protective layers of cautious reasoning that may inhibit empathy in the real world” (213). This means that literature, as opposed to real life situations, can make the reader feel empathy – or similarly sympathy – in situations where the reader’s caution may prevent such feelings in real life. According to Sklar, the reader’s emotional response to the narrative may lead to ethical

reflection (23). This way narratives may make us consider ethics when it comes to real-life events as well.

Keen also discusses some aspects of narration that may affect which characters we identify with, and which characters therefore make us feel narrative empathy more readily. According to Keen, different narrative techniques, such as using first- or third-person narration, and character identification, such as characterization, naming and actions of characters, may affect how we feel narrative empathy (215-216). For example, presenting the thoughts of characters can promote the character identification and empathy that the reader feels (Keen 219). Narrated monologue and quoted monologue also give the reader access to the minds of characters, evoking empathy (Keen 219-220). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the reader becomes aware of the heroes' thoughts in several different ways: the third-person narrator describes what the characters – usually the Hobbits – feel, and many characters themselves describe their feelings by presenting a quoted monologue or by telling others about their feelings. Often the actions of the heroes allow the reader to interpret how they are feeling. The heroes are depicted as worried, sad, missing a loved one, or desiring a pint of good beer. The villains, on the other hand, remain more distant to the reader. Even the Wizard called Saruman, who is described more in detail than the main villain Sauron, mainly remains a mystery when it comes to his thoughts. What the reader sees are feelings such as hunger for power and scorn towards those who do not see the value of such power. This way the villains remain more distant, presented mainly through emotions deemed negative, while the inner life and motivation behind the actions of the heroes become clear to the reader. Therefore, the reader is more likely to feel empathy and sympathy towards the heroes. This may make the reader more likely to embrace the ethical stances expressed by the heroes of the story.

### 3.3 Narrative Ethics

Phelan argues that narrativity is always double layered, for it consists of the events of a story and audience response: when the reader observes the events of a story, making judgements becomes possible (*Experiencing Fiction* 7). Phelan further divides the judgements made by the reader to three categories: interpretive judgements concerning actions and elements present in the narrative, ethical judgements concerning moral value of characters and their actions in the story, and aesthetic judgements concerning artistic qualities of a story (*Experiencing Fiction* 9). When we consider attitudes towards nature and its' destruction in *The Lord of the Rings*, ethical judgements become particularly relevant. Phelan argues that narratives are based on their own ethical standards, guiding



the reader to certain ethical judgements (*Experiencing Fiction* 10). Therefore, when we look at a story like *The Lord of the Rings*, in order to analyze potential effects on the reader it is crucial to “reconstruct the ethical principles upon which the narrative is built” (Phelan *Experiencing Fiction* 10).

Two of the four issues of narrative ethics defined by Phelan can be used to define the underlying ethical stances of a story: the ethics of the told, and the ethics of the telling (*Narrative Ethics*). The first one concentrates on the relationships between the characters, their actions, and events in the story, while the second one deals with text-internal matters concerning narration, such as how techniques are used to convey the values underlying a specific work (*Narrative Ethics*). As Phelan notes, ethical judgements are not only based on the reader’s judgements concerning the events of the story, but also on the author’s implied ethical principles underlying the work (*Experiencing Fiction* 12). Phelan sees that when it comes to narration, ethics and aesthetics of a work are closely linked together: by looking at rhetorical aesthetics we can analyze how the work’s rhetoric is built and how this may affect our judgements (*Experiencing Fiction* 13). The reader’s ethical and aesthetic judgements influence each other, and therefore aesthetic judgements may have consequences for ethical ones (Phelan *Experiencing Fiction* 14). For example, in *The Lord of the Rings* the surroundings and nature are described in vivid detail, which may affect the reader’s imagination and thus their judgement of the events of the story and narration, as I will demonstrate in the discussion chapter later.

Both imagination and character identification – identifying with the heroes and consequently feeling narrative empathy and sympathy – may play a part in a way that nature depictions in *The Lord of the Rings* can prompt the reader to consider their own relationship with nature. Furthermore, they add to the reading of underlying ethical principles present in the work by making the reader take the side of the heroes. In the next chapter, I will discuss how qualities that I in this thesis call *biophilic aspects* may affect the reader. In the second discussion chapter, I will concentrate on the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling in relation to the environmental destruction of Middle-earth.

## 4. Biophilic Aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*

Bump argues that “the ideal for environmental and animal ethics, if not all ethics, may well be an emotion, the feeling that we are deeply, instinctively connected to all living beings, now called biophilia” (58). This term was first defined by Wilson in his work with the same name, *Biophilia*. Wilson describes the term biophilia as our “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (1). What Wilson means is that we have an innate affinity to the natural world around us. Cho and Lee (2018) define the term as “the concept of emotional affinity and connection with nature” (445). In this thesis I will use the term biophilia, or biophilic aspects, in this sense: to describe certain characters’ connection to nature, their way of living harmony with it, and their appreciation for nature’s beauty and its intrinsic value.

In the first subchapter I am going to discuss how the sense of wonder evoked by the descriptions of the magical nature of Middle-earth can result in understanding the intrinsic value of the nature of our own world as well. I will concentrate on Tolkien’s anthropomorphic trees, also discussing how the trees that are not anthropomorphic also possess fantastic qualities, and the descriptions of paradise-like places that are lush and green and offer the heroes some rest and safety. In the second subchapter I look at how some people of Middle-earth live in a close connection with nature, valuing it for its own sake instead of using nature as a commodity, giving us a model for our own relationship with nature. I will discuss the characters of Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, the Elves, and the Ents.

### 4.1 Awe-Inspiring Nature of Middle-earth

In *Biophilia* Wilson calls for “moral reasoning of a new and more powerful kind” in order to understand what makes us appreciate and protect life on Earth in all forms (138-139). As discussed earlier, this has to do with our fascination of nature because of its intrinsic value, finding “the old excitement of the untrammelled world” than can offer “reenchantment to invigorate poetry and myth” (Wilson 139). Interestingly, Brawley also talks about “enchantment” while discussing “the numinous”, a religious feeling the reader feels while reading mythopoeic fantasy, such as *The Lord of the Rings*: enchantment, or a sense of wonder that the reader feels while reading the novel can make us see the natural world around us in a new light (292-293). Because of recovering a sense of awe towards nature, the reader can start seeing nature as having an intrinsic value instead of seeing the natural world only as a commodity (Brawley 294-295). In this chapter I am going to show how some

aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* can be a source of the sense of wonder for the reader, therefore increasing the reader's appreciation towards nature in our world as well, and making the reader feel more personally connected to nature.

#### 4.1.1 Anthropomorphic Trees

One of the most prominent qualities of the magical nature of Middle-earth are the trees that are often given anthropomorphic characteristics. Forests, such as the Old Forest near the Shire, the forest of Lothlórien, a woodland dwelling of the Elves, and the ancient forest of Fangorn, where the Ents live, are all mysterious places with the sense of trees being alive; sometimes trees are very human-like, and even the feelings or actions of trees are being described, while at times trees are more plant-like and this magical quality is more about the power and life within trees and growing plants.

Both the Old Forest and the forest of Fangorn offer an example of anthropomorphic trees that seem to be alive, conscious, and relatively human-like. When the Hobbits first head to the Old Forest, hoping to avoid the Black Riders, Merry tells the others:

But the Forest is queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you. . . . Occasionally the most unfriendly ones may drop a branch, or stick a root out, or grasp at you with a long trailer. . . . I thought the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind. They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and can hem them in. (*Rings* 110)

The trees of the Old Forest are clearly given very human-like awareness of their surroundings and it is said that the trees have feelings as well. Unlike real plants of our own world, the trees also seem to be able to move on their own at times. A further example of the anthropomorphic trees of the Old Forest is the Great Willow. The Hobbits fall under the spell of an old willow that tries to drown Frodo and entrap Merry and Pippin inside its trunk (*Rings* 117). The willow therefore seems to have its own mind and is aware of its surroundings, being hostile towards strangers. The Hobbits also feel that the forest is threatening, for trees watch them as they approach Tom Bombadil's house: "they caught a sight of queer gnarled and knobby faces that gloomed dark against the twilight, and leered down at them from the high bank and the edges of the wood" (*Rings* 121).

Similarly, some trees in the ancient Fangorn forest seem to be awake. First the forest appears just very old and oppressing, almost lifeless to Merry and Pippin (*Rings* 459, 461-462). In the sunlight, however, Fangorn forest starts to look more alive: the Hobbits observe beautiful shades of brown and green (*Rings* 462). When they meet Treebeard, a tree-like creature called an Ent, and leave with him for one of his homes, it is told that “[m]any of the trees seemed asleep, or as unaware of him as any other creature that merely passed by; but some quivered, and some raised up their branches above his head as he approached” (*Rings* 467). Trees therefore seem to have the same kind of sense of their surroundings as the trees of the Old Forest. Furthermore, Treebeard tells the Hobbits that some Ents are becoming tree-like, while some trees are waking up (*Rings* 468). Since the Ents are humanoid creatures and trees plants, this notion further dissolves the distinction between humanoid beings and vegetation.

Those trees that are not human-like creatures like the Ents, but are able to move, are called the Huorns in *The Lord of the Rings*. Even though Treebeard does not talk much about the Huorns, Merry guesses that they are Ents that have started to resemble trees in appearance (*Rings* 565). He further tells that the Huorns silently watch over trees but are also able to move so that it is hard to notice: “You stand still looking at the weather, maybe, or listening to the rustling of the wind, and then suddenly you find that you are in the middle of a wood with great groping trees all around you” (*Rings* 565). The Huorns are still able to talk with the treeherd Ents (*Rings* 565). From Merry’s explanation we can conclude that the sudden appearance of a forest near Helm’s Deep is because of the Huorns: “Where before the green dale had lain, its grassy slopes lapping the ever-mounting hills, there now a forest loomed” (*Rings* 541). The hosts of Saruman are afraid of the trees, but they end up being driven to the threatening forest, never returning (*Rings* 541-542). The Huorns therefore are somewhere between Tolkien’s immobile but conscious trees and the Ents, giving trees human-like traits, and this may evoke the sense of wonder in the reader. Such a sense of wonder can be transferred to the real world, so that the reader may start seeing nature of our own world as having almost magical qualities as well.

Some trees of Middle-earth are less humanoid but still presented as having power and life within them. Lothlórien, a beautiful, lush forest and a dwelling of the Elves, offers us this kind of a portrayal of trees. When the Fellowship of the ring reaches Lothlórien after escaping the mines of Moria, Legolas tells them about the *mallorn* trees that grow in Lothlórien:

There are no trees like the trees of that land. For in the autumn their leaves fall not, but turn to gold. Not till the spring comes and the new green opens do they fall, and then the boughs

are laden with yellow flowers; and the floor of the wood is golden, and golden is the roof, and its pillars are of silver, for the bark of the trees is smooth and grey. (*Rings*, 335)

The beautiful image painted of the golden forest makes the trees of Lothlórien rather unlike any trees in our world: they are not said to be awake like the trees of the Old Forest and Fangorn, but even so they are magical. When Frodo later touches a trunk of one mallorn tree, we are told that “never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree’s skin and of the life within it. He 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” (*Rings* 351). For the first time he realizes how full of life growing things like plants and trees are, and this awakening in Frodo has potential to make the reader consider trees as living things that have intrinsic value beyond using them as a commodity.

Respectful attitude towards trees can also be seen in those instances where trees have a symbolic meaning. The most obvious example of this is the white tree of Minas Tirith in Gondor, withered in the absence of the king: “in the midst [of a fountain], drooping over the pool, stood a dead tree, and the falling drops dripped sadly from its barren and broken branches back into the clean water” (*Rings* 753). When Aragorn becomes a king, he goes to a mountain near the city of Minas Tirith with Gandalf. There he mourns that even though he has become a king, he has no certainty that he will have descendants to rule Gondor. However, to his surprise he finds a sapling tree there, “a scion of the Eldest of Trees”, the same kind of as the dead one in Minas Tirith (*Rings* 971). Aragorn takes the tree to the Citadel, removing the dead tree and planting the sapling there, and we are told that “swiftly and gladly it began to grow; and when the month of June entered in it was laden with blossom” (*Rings* 972). The growth and blossoming of the tree signal that Aragorn’s line shall continue: he has returned to Minas Tirith as a king and gets to wed his beloved Arwen.

One more instance of valuing trees is the mallorn tree Sam plants in the Party Field in the Shire. Using the gift received from the elven queen Galadriel in Lothlórien, he begins restoring the Shire with the help of dust that is soil from Galadriel’s own garden. The box of soil also contains a little silver nut, a seed of a mallorn tree, and when the tree begins to grow, we are told: “In the Party Field a beautiful young sapling leaped up: it had silver bark and long leaves and burst into golden flowers in April. It was indeed a *mallorn*, and it was the wonder of the neighbourhood. In after years, as it grew in grace and beauty, it was known far and wide and people would come long journeys to see it” (*Rings* 1023). The tree evokes the sense of wonder in the inhabitants of the Shire so that it becomes a respected and admired sight, and even people from outside the Shire travel to see the tree. This kind of a description can make the reader feel the sense of wonder as well and may in turn make the reader look at the beauty of the real world from a new perspective.

#### 4.1.2 Paradise-Like Places of Refuge

Besides the depictions of Tolkien's fantastic trees, the sense of wonder can also be invoked by the magical places of Middle-earth. In *The Lord of the Rings* the places where the characters find some rest and safety after their travels tend to be lush and green paradise-like places. The most obvious example of this is the beautiful forest of Lothlórien that the fellowship reaches soon after escaping the Orcs and the Balrog in the dark mines of Moria. The descriptions of Lothlórien can easily be associated with the garden of Eden due to the lushness and life within the forest, that is in stark contrast with the surrounding world, where the travelers have encountered many dangers and become weary. Lothlórien's golden mallorn trees greet them even though it is winter. The environment is serene: "they heard an endless rustle of leaves like poplars in the breeze" (*Rings* 337). Aragorn is glad to have reached the trees, the land of the Elves, that can offer them safety after their trials and the tragic loss of Gandalf (*Rings* 338). This is partly because of the power of the Elves that inhabit the forest: evil cannot access the land, and only those who bring evil with them need to be afraid of the magic of the forest (*Rings* 338).

Besides the golden mallorn trees, Lothlórien is associated with flowers, for Legolas calls it "Lórien of the Blossom" (*Rings* 339). This can refer to the mallorn trees in the spring, but during the winter some flowers bloom there as well. The paradise-like qualities of Lothlórien become clear to the reader, as experienced through Frodo on the hill of Cerin Amroth:

When his eyes were in turn uncovered, Frodo looked up and caught his breath. They were standing in an open space. To the left stood a great mound, covered with a sward of grass as green as Springtime in the Elder Days. Upon it, as a double crown, grew two circles of trees: the outer had bark of snowy white, and were leafless but beautiful in their shapely nakedness; the inner were mallorn-trees of great height, still arrayed in pale gold. High amid the branches of a towering tree that stood in the centre of all there gleamed a white flet. At the feet of the trees, all about the green hillsides the grass was studded with small golden flowers shaped like stars. Among them, nodding on slender stalks, were other flowers, white and palest green: they glimmered as a mist amid the rich hue of the grass. Over all the sky was blue, and the sun of afternoon glowed upon the hill and cast long green shadows beneath the trees. (*Rings* 350)

Haldir the Elf then tells about the flowers: "'Here bloom the winter flowers in the unfading grass: the yellow elanor, and the pale niphredil'" (*Rings* 350). Even during the winter the grass is green and flowers bloom. Frodo's admiration of the beauty of Cerin Amroth is further highlighted in how the

colors are described as “fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them” (*Rings* 350).

Besides being beautiful, the atmosphere of Lothlórien is described as idyllic and serene: the forest is a place that has the healing power to strengthen weary travelers. When Frodo steps into the stream of Nimrodel, we are told that “the strain of travel and all weariness” were washed away (*Rings* 338-339). The stream of Nimrodel is also given rather anthropomorphic qualities when it is told that “they heard the music of the waterfall running sweetly in the shadows” (*Rings* 339). During the stay of the Fellowship, Lothlórien remains harmonious and serene: “All the while that they dwelt there the sun shone clear, save for a gentle rain that fell at times, and passed away leaving all things fresh and clean. The air was cool and soft, as if it were early spring, yet they felt about them the deep and thoughtful quiet of winter” (*Rings* 358).

Even though not as prominent in its paradise-like qualities, another dwelling of the Elves, the valley of Rivendell, including the house of Elrond Half-elven located there, offers the Hobbits similar safety and rest earlier in the story. It is noted that “[m]erely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness” (*Rings* 225). The surrounding nature is also depicted in a manner that highlights calming qualities of nature:

Sam led [Frodo] along several passages and down many steps and out into a high garden above the steep bank of the river. . . . Shadows had fallen in the valley below, but there was still a light on the faces of the mountains above. 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, as if summer still lingered in Elrond’s gardens. (*Rings* 226)

Mentions of gardens and the scent of trees and flowers create a picture of a lush place with plants, and the vicinity of the Misty Mountains and the river and waterfalls, implied by mentions of running and falling water, create a picture of an idyllic valley surrounded by mountains, even though descriptions are scarcer than those of Lothlórien.

Besides the beautiful and lush dwellings of the Elves, the homes of the Men also offer travelers some safety. The clearest example of this is the garden of Ithilien, that used to belong to the land of Gondor, but has recently been taken over by Sauron’s forces by the time Frodo, Sam and Gollum arrive there. Ithilien is described in detail: “All about them were small woods of resinous trees, fir and cedar and cypress . . . and everywhere there was a wealth of sweet-smelling herbs and shrubs” (*Rings* 650). It is told that, as opposed to the land that Frodo and Sam have passed through, spring has already reached Ithilien: “Here Spring was already busy about them: fons pierced moss and

mould, larches were green-fingered, small flowers were opening in the turf, birds were singing. Ithilien, the garden of Gondor, now desolate kept still a dishevelled dryad loveliness" (*Rings* 650).

Further descriptions highlight the overgrown and yet garden-like qualities of lush Ithilien even more, as many different plant species are mentioned:

"[G]roves and thickets there were of tamarisk and pungent terebinth, of olive and of bay; and there were junipers and myrtles; and thymes that grew in bushes, or with their woody creeping stems mantled in deep tapestries the hidden stones; sages of many kinds putting forth blue flowers, or red, or pale green; and marjorams and new-sprouting parsleys, and many herbs of forms and scents beyond the garden-lore of Sam. The grotts and rocky walls were already starred with saxifrages and stonecrops. Primeroles and anemones were awake in the filbert-brakes; and asphodel and many lily-flowers nodded their half-opened heads in the grass: deep green grass beside the pools, where falling streams halted in cool hollows on their journey down to Anduin." (*Rings* 650)

When Frodo, Sam and Gollum proceed their journey through the lush vegetation of Ithilien, we are told that "sweet odours rose about them" (*Rings* 651). The air of Ithilien makes the Hobbits feel relaxed and raises their spirits (*Rings* 651). Following a stream they arrive at "a small clear lake", a stone basing overgrown with different plants, further described as follows: "the carven rim [of the basin] was almost wholly covered with mosses and rose-brambles; iris-swords stood in ranks about it, and water-lily leaves floated on its dark gently-ripping surface; but it was deep and fresh, and spilled ever softly out over a stony lip at the far end" (*Rings* 651). In contrast with the earlier barren landscapes near Mordor, the lush and fragrant garden of Ithilien offers the Hobbits a place of refuge before their final trial on their way to Mordor.

Other places inhabited by Men who help the heroes, and fight Sauron together with them, are also described as having richness of vegetation. Even though many may remember the yellowing grasslands of Rohan from Peter Jackson's movies, the description of Rohan is quite different in Tolkien's story. When Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, in pursuit of the Orcs that have Merry and Pippin as hostages, descent from the rocky hills of Eryn Muil, they arrive at the land of Rohan:

At the bottom they came with a strange suddenness on the grass of Rohan. It swelled like a green sea up to the very foot of the Eryn Muil. The falling stream vanished into a deep growth of cresses and water-plants, and they could hear it tinkling away in green tunnels, down long gentle slopes towards the fens of Entwash Vale far away. They seemed to have left winter clinging to the hills behind. Here the air was softer and warmer, and faintly scented, as if spring was already stirring and the sap was flowing again in herb and leaf. (*Rings* 424)



Even Rohan, although being mainly grassland, is lush and green, and the air is fragrant. Later when Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli together with Gandalf head to meet king Theoden of Rohan, it is further told that “[o]ften the grass was so high that it reached above the knees of the riders, and their steeds seemed to be swimming in a grey-green sea” (*Rings* 505). Rohan, therefore, like the dwellings of the Elves and the gardens of Gondor, is a lush place full of life, and in contrast with the barren lands overtaken by the enemy.

What all these nature descriptions have in common is that the lands that are told to be lush and green belong to those on the side of good, as opposed to the villains of the story. Therefore, these places offer the travelers some rest, refreshment, and safety on their journey. The Shire, the home of the Hobbits, can also be seen as one of these places in its pastoral idyll: the Hobbits farm the land and in their own way live in a symbiosis with nature. These vivid descriptions may turn the reader’s attention to nature in way that can make the reader look at the nature of our own real world in new light as well. This way, descriptions of these idyllic places may heighten the reader’s own appreciation of nature. Moreover, people inhabiting many lush natural places of Middle-earth clearly appreciate nature, wishing to take care of it, and as a result live in a harmonious relationship with nature.

## 4.2 Living in Harmony with Nature

In this chapter, I am going to concentrate on some of the people of Middle-earth that live in a harmonious relationship with nature and show appreciation towards nature: Tom Bombadil and his wife Goldberry, the Elves and the Ents. The relationship that these characters have with nature may influence us in a way that makes us value our own relationship with nature as well, and the appreciation towards nature present in the book can enable us see the beautiful qualities and intrinsic value of nature surrounding us.

### 4.2.1 Tom Bombadil and Goldberry

Tom Bombadil and his wife Goldberry are some of the characters living in a harmonious relationship with nature in Middle-earth, as portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tom Bombadil, living in a house in the Old Forest, can actually be seen as representing a human-nature relationship, while his wife, Goldberry, resembles a personification of nature itself.

When Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin leave the pastoral Shire and head to the Old Forest to avoid the Black Riders looking for Frodo and the ring he is carrying, the forest and wild nature seem intimidating to the Hobbits: they feel the atmosphere oppressing and feel like the forest is trying to entrap them (*Rings* 111). The change to this oppressing feeling of the forest comes when the Hobbits encounter Tom Bombadil who saves them from the great willow with his power to tell the willow to release Merry and Pippin (120). After meeting Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, the Hobbits, and therefore also the reader who experiences the events with them, come to understand the forest and nature more.

Tom Bombadil's relationship with nature becomes evident when Frodo asks his wife Goldberry who Tom Bombadil actually is. She replies: "He is the Master of wood, water, and hill" (*Rings* 124). This statement obviously makes it sound as if Tom is the owner of the Old Forest. However, Goldberry denies it, saying: "The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master" (*Rings* 124). Because of Goldberry's words we must conclude that Tom being "the Master" means his ability to use power over other living things: no-one can do him harm. Later it is also mentioned that Tom Bombadil is "the Eldest" and "First" (*Rings* 131, 266). In this light it seems that all of these titles mean one thing: Tom has been in the Middle-earth longer than anyone else, and he also has great powers if he wishes to use them.

However, from Goldberry's words we can also conclude that Tom does not own any land at all, except for the house he has at the edge of the Old Forest. It is worth noting that Goldberry denies Tom's – or anyone's – right to own land or any living creatures or plants; instead of exploiting nature Tom and Goldberry exist side-by-side with other beings and allow the natural world around them to exist for its own sake. To Tom, the value of nature is not in all the different ways it can be used but in the beauty of nature itself (Brawley 297). When the Hobbits listen to Tom's tales it is said that "they began to understand the lives of the Forest" (*Rings* 129). Tom Bombadil is a representative of the "experience of numinous", highlighting the "theme of non-appropriation of nature" as Brawley expresses it: Tom makes the Hobbits understand the life of the forest and all living things, and with his guidance they can build a different view of their relationship with nature (Brawley 296-297). Tom Bombadil therefore can be said to represent a harmonious relationship with nature that is not based on using nature as a commodity.

Tom's wife Goldberry, on the other hand, appears much more mysterious and more tightly connected to nature than her husband: Goldberry resembles a personification of nature, while

Tom Bombadil remains very human-like. McCauley Basso (2008) argues that Goldberry represents nature as we first, unlike other women, meet Goldberry without the presence of a man, surrounded by nature (142). Similarly, Enright (2007) also states that Goldberry represents the power of nature (95-96). This close connection to nature can be seen in titles used of Goldberry: she is said to be a “River-daughter”, or a “daughter of the River” (*Rings* 122–123). Even though we cannot know if the River with a capital “R” actually refers to water or some mythical being, this title connects Goldberry with water. Tom tells the Hobbits that he first met Goldberry by the pool where he now goes to collect lilies to please his wife; Goldberry was “sitting in the rushes” (*Rings* 126). Moreover, when the Hobbits arrive at Tom’s house and first hear Goldberry’s singing, her connection to water and the natural world is instantly established: “Then another clear voice, as young and as ancient as Spring, like the song of a glad water flowing down into the night from a bright morning in the hills, came falling like a silver to meet them” (*Rings* 122). The sound of Goldberry’s singing reminds the Hobbits of the sound of running water.

Just like Goldberry’s titles and descriptions of her singing voice, her outfit resembles the natural world and the element of water:

Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown was green, green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew; and her belt was of gold, shaped like a chain of flag-lilies set with the pale-blue eyes of forget-me-nots. About her feet in wide vessels of green and brown earthenware, white water-lilies were floating, so that she seemed to be enthroned in the midst of a pool. (*Rings* 123)

It is not only Goldberry’s title, singing voice and looks that can be associated with nature; even the sounds of her moving around remind the Hobbits of a river as well. When she rushes to greet the Hobbits, we are told that “as she ran her gown rustled softly like the wind in the flowering borders of a river” (*Rings* 123). Another example of the sounds, that Goldberry makes while moving around, is that when she walks away after saying goodnight to the guests “[t]he sound of her footsteps was like a stream falling gently away downhill over cool stones in the quiet of night” (125). All these descriptions bring images of nature and water to mind, and therefore the wonder the Hobbits feel when meeting Goldberry resembles the feeling of wonder relating to nature’s beauty and calming effect (*Rings* 123). Since Goldberry, unlike her husband, seems to be a part of nature, Tom’s relationship with his wife can be said to represent a harmonious way of living with nature. After leaving the Shire where the Hobbits farm the land, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin for the first time experience a way of life that has more to do with existing alongside nature than using the land to

plant vegetables and flowers. As the Hobbits travel further to the east, they also meet others who live in harmony with nature.

#### 4.2.2 The Elves

Already at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* the Elves' connection to nature becomes evident. Right after leaving his home Bag End, Frodo and his companions Sam and Pippin meet some Elves who invite the Hobbits to stay the night in the woods with them. The Elves invite their guests to dine in "the hall". Turns out that the hall is not a manmade building, but a hall-like natural place: "At the south end of the greensward there was an opening. There the green floor ran on into the wood, and formed a wide space like a hall, roofed by the boughs of trees. Their great trunks ran like pillars down each side" (*Rings* 82). For the Hobbits, spending a night outside is new, but the Elves regard this natural hall-like formation as a place where they can eat and sing. Otherwise the Elves live near nature as well. Even though the house of Elrond is a man-made place, it is located in the middle of beautiful scenery of mountains and has gardens, as mentioned already earlier when the paradise-like places of refuge were discussed.

The Elves dwelling in the forest of Lothlórien clearly live in close connection with nature as well. Legolas tells the fellowship about the habits of the Elves: "for that was the custom of the Elves of Lórien, to dwell in the trees, and maybe it is so still. Therefore they were called the Galadhrim, the Tree-people. Deep in their forest the trees are very great" (*Rings* 341). A little later when the fellowship meets Haldir and other Elves they end up sleeping on wooden platforms, flets, built on the trees (*Rings* 344). Even the city of the Elves of Lothlórien, Caras Galadhon, is built on trees (*Rings* 352-354). The life of the Elves in the forest therefore seems to be closely tied to the golden mallorn trees. Sam makes some notes on the Elves of Lothlórien when he says: "they seem to belong here, more even than Hobbits do in the Shire. Whether they've made the land, or land's made them, it's hard to say" (*Rings* 360). The Elves are part of the forest, living in a respectful symbiosis with it.

The relationship between the Elves and trees becomes even more evident later when Treebeard, an Ent that Merry and Pippin meet, tells: "nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays. Still, I take more kindly to Elves than to others: it was the Elves that cured us from dumbness long ago, and that was a great gift that cannot be forgotten, though our ways have parted since" (*Rings* 472). The Elves may not be as integrated to the natural world as Goldberry or the Ents, but even so they love everything living and everything about the natural world. When the Fellowship is about to leave Lothlórien and receives color-changing elvish cloaks for their

journey, they are told about the cloaks: "Leaf and branch, water and stone: they 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" (*Rings* 370).

The connection between the Elves and nature can also be seen in the way that Legolas talks about trees. He is able to feel the emotions within the forest of Fangorn, where the Ents, unknown to Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli, are planning their attack on Isengard. Legolas says: "There is no malice near us; but there is watchfulness, and anger" (*Rings* 491). He then adds: "[The forest] has suffered harm. There is something happening inside, or going to happen. Do you not feel the tenseness? It takes my breath" (*Rings* 491). From other events in *The Lord of the Rings* we can conclude that the anger and the harm Legolas is able to sense are because of the Ents' and trees' anger towards Saruman who has cut down parts of the forest. Even so, Legolas clearly appreciates the forest: "It is old and full of memory. I could have been happy here, if I had come in days of peace" (*Rings* 491). Later after the battle of Helm's Deep, on the way to Isengard, Legolas would like to explore the trees that have come from Fangorn: "Legolas was ever glancing from side to side, and would often have halted to listen to the sounds of the wood" (*Rings* 546). He mourns that he does not have time to stop by the trees: "I wish that there were leisure now to walk among them: they have voices, and in time I might come to understand their thought" (*Rings* 546). While Gimli is able to feel only hatred of the trees, Legolas perceives their feelings further, and is not afraid of them. Despite Gimli's fear of the trees, the two end up making a promise: if the war is won, they will visit places of Middle-earth together, Gimli returning to Fangorn forest with eager Legolas.

Overall, these examples make it clear that the Elves love and appreciate the natural world and view trees as intellectual beings, which they sometimes are in Tolkien's world. They choose to live in the middle of nature, living in harmony with it, and in this way offer the reader a model of the way of living in close connection with nature. Besides Tom Bombadil, Goldberry and the Elves, tree-like Ents also offer the reader a fresh perspective concerning a harmonious relationship with the natural world.

#### 4.2.3 The Ents

Maybe the beings most integrated to nature in Middle-earth are the Ents. The Ents are creatures that in appearance resemble trees, and therefore they look less human-like than some other people of Middle-earth. When the Hobbits first see the Ent called Treebeard, they mistake him for a tree, described as "one old stump of a tree with only two bent branches left: it looked almost like the

figure of some gnarled old man, standing there, blinking in the morning light" (*Rings* 462). This figure turns out to be a tall and sturdy human-like, or a "troll-like", being resembling a tree (*Rings* 463). Later, when Merry and Pippin meet other Ents, the Ents are described to differ from each other like trees differ from each other, "some as different as as one tree is from another of the same name but quite different growth and history; and some as different as one tree-kind from another, as birch from beech, oak from fir" (*Rings* 480). The oldest Ents are "bearded and gnarled like hale but ancient trees" and the other Ents are described as being "clean-limbed and smooth-skinned like forest-trees in their prime" (*Rings* 480). The Ents remind Merry and Pippin of different species of trees such as beeches, oaks, chestnuts, ashes, firs, birches, rowans and lindens (*Rings* 480). Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin that the Ents are "tree-herds" (*Rings* 468). They take care of and herd trees. Even though the Ents are humanoid creatures, it is also mentioned that some of them are becoming sleepy and tree-like, while some trees are waking up (*Rings* 468). This makes the distinction between plants and the Ents difficult to define, and therefore the Ents can be seen to be more integrated to the natural world than even Tom Bombadil and Goldberry or the Elves.

The Ents' close connection to nature is evident when Treebeard takes the Hobbits to one of his homes. Much the same way as the natural hall of the Elves at the beginning of the story, Treebeard's home consists of evergreen trees that together with the ground form a natural hall-like place, with a little stream and a rock wall and a roof at the end of it (*Rings* 470). There is also a bed covered in dried grass and bracken (*Rings* 471). Treebeard's home therefore seems to be a mixture of the elements of the forest and features of human-like homes. The Hobbits are also refreshed and nourished by a water-like drink prepared by Treebeard that is said to have a faint scent of "a distant wood borne from afar by a cool breeze at night" (*Rings* 471). Later we are told that much the same way as trees and other plants, the Ents get their nourishment from water, for they only drink and do not eat solid food (*Rings* 561). These living habits together with the resemblance to trees tell the Ents' affinity to the natural world.

Besides living in a symbiosis with Fangorn forest, Treebeard also makes his attitude towards trees and nature clear when he calls Gandalf "the only wizard that really cares about trees" (*Rings* 466). Since trees matter to Treebeard a great deal, he views those that appreciate nature in a high regard. Treebeard also brings perspective to the Hobbits and the reader when he says that a "hill" is "a hasty word for a thing that has stood here ever since this part of the world was shaped" (*Rings* 466). This brings the reader's attention to how many aspects of nature have existed long before human beings: such a notion makes nature appear valuable by itself, for it implies that nature should be respected merely for having been there for a long time. Treebeard clearly respects those who treat nature and trees kindly. It is also mentioned that Treebeard hates Orcs and "their masters"

(*Rings* 472). The reason to this is clear as well: the Orcs cut down trees, destroying nature (*Rings* 474).

Just like Treebeard makes it clear that he loves trees and hates those that destroy them, the Ent Quickbeam also makes his attitude towards trees and those that cut them clear. As Quickbeam is a “hasty” Ent and has already decided what he is going to do, while the other Ents are still in the middle of discussion concerning Saruman’s deeds, Merry and Pippin get to spend some time with him. Quickbeam’s delight in the forest is obvious: “He laughed if the sun came out from behind a cloud, he laughed if they came upon a stream or spring: then he stooped and splashed his feet and head with water; he laughed sometimes at some sound or whisper in the trees” (*Rings* 483). Rowan trees are especially dear to Quickbeam: “Whenever he saw a rowan-tree he halted a while with his arms stretched out, and sang, and swayed as he sang” (*Rings* 483). Later, when Merry and Pippin stay the night at Quickbeam’s ent-house, a mossy stone encircled by rowans with a spring nearby, Quickbeam tells about rowan trees that he loved: “these trees grew and grew, till the shadow of each was like a green hall, and their red berries in the autumn were a burden, and beauty and a wonder” (*Rings* 483). However, the Orcs cut down his trees: “I came and called them by their long names, but they did not quiver, they did not hear or answer: they lay dead” (*Rings* 483). Quickbeam clearly is devastated by the death of his rowans. He had given them names, much in a similar fashion as humans name their pets, highlighting how in his eyes each of the trees was an individual with an ability to hear the Ents and converse with them.

The Ents, therefore, live in a symbiosis with nature and take delight in it, especially in trees. They mourn the trees that are cut down and feel anger towards those that take part in the destruction of nature. However, these are only some of the instances where destroying nature is condemned in *The Lord of the Rings*. In the following chapter, I will continue on the matter of nature by further examining how the destruction of nature is depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*, and how the characters regard environmental destruction.

## 5. The Destruction of Middle-earth

Destruction caused by war is a central theme in *The Lord of the Rings*: the characters of the story fight in an effort to protect their homes and lives from Sauron's regime that would destroy the world as they have known it. In Tolkien's story, however, the spread of the power of the enemy gains a visual aspect that goes beyond the destruction caused by war in our own world – the power of good and evil can be seen in the landscapes of Middle-earth. Even though war in our world also can damage nature, in *The Lord of the Rings* the places where the heroes dwell are lush, green places, and the inhabitants live in harmony with nature. The villains, on the other hand, live in destroyed, barren and desolate places, and with the spread of the evil powers formerly flourishing landscapes become wastelands. Furthermore, the characters fighting the evil clearly condemn such destruction and mourn environmental losses. This way their ethical stances towards the destruction of natural environments becomes clear to the reader. Hence, destroying nature also is considered work of evil in the story. Brisbois notes this when he discusses the relationship between the characters and nature: "By advocating stewardship [of nature] rather than dominion, Tolkien puts his villains on the other side of the coin. Saruman and Sauron are not caretakers; they are destroyers. They wish to smash nature and the world into submission" (203).

In this chapter I am going to discuss *The Lord of the Rings* in light of Phelan's ethics of the told and ethics of the telling. First, I am going to concentrate on the ethics of the telling: the qualities of narration that make the novel's underlying ethical stance towards environmental destruction clear. I will show that in *The Lord of the Rings* environmental destruction is repeatedly linked to the rise of evil powers, those of both Sauron's and Saruman's, and the deeds of their servants, the Orcs. After that, I will move on to the ethics of the told, looking at the events within the story and the characters' actions and reactions to nature being destroyed. By doing this I will show how environmental destruction is condemned throughout the story by the heroes. Lastly, I am going to discuss Saruman's role in the story, as Saruman is the prime example of using nature as a commodity in *The Lord of the Rings*, and can be seen as a cautionary tale of what happens when nature's intrinsic value has been forgotten.

### 5.1 The Spread of Evil – The Destruction of Nature

Environmental destruction is clearly linked to the spread of the dark lord Sauron's power and the rise of evil powers in *The Lord of the Rings*. Hence, when we look at the underlying ethical stances within



the narration – the ethics of the telling – we can see that in Tolkien’s story protecting nature is considered virtuous, while participating in the destruction of nature is presented as an act of evil. The ethics of the told – the events within the story and the actions of the characters – are intertwined with the ethics of the telling: often when the narration highlights the moral virtues linked with the protection and appreciation of nature, or when the narration links environmental destruction with the acts of evil, the characters act and react accordingly as well. Therefore, even though in this subchapter I will mainly focus on the ethics of the telling and the aspects of narration that tie the environmental destruction to the power of evil, the discussion touches on the ethics of the told – the events within the story and the actions of the characters – as well.

To begin with Sauron’s land, Mordor, the reader can notice that when Frodo and Sam get closer to it, the landscapes become more barren and devoid of life. Brisbois notes this as well when he explains: “Throughout the trilogy, the heroes’ movement through landscape is created with close attention to detail. The journey from the pastoral Shire through the increasingly desolate Middle-earth to the wasteland of Mordor is rendered in clear, obvious detail” (200). This kind of change is especially prominent after Frodo and Sam depart from the fellowship and head to the hills of Eryn Muiil located on the eastern side of the river Anduin. The eastern side has been taken over by Sauron, and the change in landscape highlights this fact. Eryn Muiil is described as barren landscape, and the Dead Marshes further in the east are described as a place “where nothing moved” (*Rings* 603). Even though at Eryn Muiil Frodo and Sam encounter “a few gnarled and stunted trees”, it is told that “many were dead and gaunt, bitten to the core by the eastern winds” (*Rings* 605). As the east is where Sauron’s land Mordor is, east is repeatedly referred to as being evil itself in the book, and therefore we can conclude that the trees have indeed died due to the power of nearby Mordor. This conclusion is supported by how Gimli says that he will not ask questions from the East Wind, and Aragorn replies “That is as it should be . . . In Minas Tirith they endure the East Wind, but they do not ask it for tidings” (*Rings* 418).

The places Frodo and Sam arrive at after leaving Eryn Muiil gradually become even more unpleasant. Even though there is some vegetation on the Dead Marshes, it is not an appealing or flourishing place: “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 like ragged shadows of long-forgotten summers.” (*Rings* 626) It is also told that the marshes reek (*Rings* 609, 620, 625). After Frodo and Sam, with the help of Gollum, manage to get to the other side of the marshes, near the Black Gate of Mordor, the landscape becomes even more barren:

Even to the Mere of Dead Faces some haggard phantom of green spring would come; but here neither spring or summer would ever come again. Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness. The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light. (*Rings* 631)

Therefore, it is evident that the closer to Sauron's dwelling Frodo and Sam get, the more barren and devoid of life the scenery becomes. Once again the reader is given a hint that the desolation is because of Sauron's power: it is said to be "the lasting monument to the dark labour of [Mordor's] slaves (*Rings* 631). In a similar fashion, even though there is some "scrubby", "coarse" and "withered" vegetation in the area called Morgai in Mordor, the further in Mordor Frodo and Sam go, the more barren the landscapes become: "all seemed ruinous and dead, a desert burned and choked" (*Rings* 921, 923). As Frodo and Sam approach Mount Doom and the dwelling of Sauron, Barad-dûr, the environment becomes even more devoid of life.

Further proof of the changes in the environment being linked to the dwellings of villains and destructive evil powers is the case of Ithilien, Goldor's garden, already mentioned in the previous discussion chapter as one of the places that offer the travelers some rest and safety. Since passing through the Black Gate to Mordor seems impossible, and Gollum promises to show Frodo and Sam a better way, the company briefly stops at the northern part of the area called Ithilien. This garden-like area used to belong to Gondor, but like the rest of the eastern shore of Anduin, during the events of *The Lord of the Rings* it is occupied by Sauron's forces. After the descriptions of horrible and barren landscapes near the gates of Mordor, Ithilien is described in astonishing botanical detail, listing over twenty plant species (see *Rings* 650-651). For example, it is told that in Ithilien there are heathers and pine-trees and that the air is "fresh and fragrant" (*Rings* 649). This is in stark contrast with the previous landscapes, but the reader is also told the reason to it: "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" (*Rings* 649). Sauron's power has not yet been able to corrupt the beauty of the lush Ithilien. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Faramir and his men, inhabitants of Gondor, reside in Ithilien so that they can defend Gondor. Like other places where the heroes of the story dwell and the protagonists get a moment of rest, Ithilien is green and lush, as opposed to the barren and lifeless habitats of the villains.

However, it is not only the landscape descriptions of Mordor that link destruction of nature to the rise of evil. Notions of Sauron destroying life and nature can be found throughout the story. For example, when the fellowship of the ring arrives at the beautiful, lush forest of Lothlórien, Haldir the Elf tells them: “The mountains to the west are growing evil; to the east the lands are waste, and full of Sauron’s creatures” (*Rings* 348). This contrast is further highlighted when Frodo looks at the world beyond lush Lothlórien from the hill of Cerin Amroth: “Beyond the river the land appeared flat and empty, formless and vague, until far away it rose again like a wall, dark and drear” (*Rings* 351). This sets a clear contrast to the magical Lothlórien that is one of the last dwellings and refuge of the Elves. The areas taken over by Sauron and his creatures have become barren wasteland, devoid of life, while Lothlórien, a locus of good and the power of the Elves, is full of life and nature’s beauty. However, Sauron’s evil is able to destroy woods as well. On Cerin Amroth, Haldir tells that the part of the distant forest of Mirkwood ruined by Sauron is a place “where the trees strive one against another and their branches rot and wither” (*Rings* 352). We can clearly see that it is due to Sauron’s evil power that nature is gradually being destroyed in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Similar link between the destruction of nature and the evil powers of Sauron can be seen when Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin how the Ents lost the Entwives: while the Ents love trees, the Entwives are more like gardeners who love fruits and flowers, and because of this they left the Ents and made gardens of their own (*Rings* 476). Treebeard tells that when the Ents went looking for the Entwives, they found that the formerly lush and beautiful land of the Entwives had been destroyed. Treebeard tells: “We crossed over Anduin and came to their land; but we found a desert: it was all burned and uprooted, for war had passed over it” (*Rings* 476). He continues talking about the former gardens of the Entwives: “Men call them the Brown Lands now” (*Rings* 476–476). It is noteworthy that the Brown Lands are located between Mirkwood, where Sauron’s old dwelling Dol Guldur is, and Mordor, the dwelling of Sauron during the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. Treebeard confirms that the destruction of the gardens of the Entwives is work of Sauron when he mourns: “For if Sauron of old destroyed the gardens, the Enemy today seems likely to wither all the woods” (*Rings* 477). Treebeard also notes that “the withering of all woods may be drawing near” (*Rings* 473). The destruction Treebeard is talking about is tied to the spread of evil powers, that of Sauron, and to the lesser evil powers such as Saruman’s deeds, that I will further discuss later. Whenever there is destruction caused by evil, nature is gone.

Lesser villains and servants of Sauron and Saruman, the Orcs, also deserve a mention here when it comes to destroying nature. Treebeard tells how Orcs have cut down the trees of the Fangorn forest by Saruman’s orders: “Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot – Orc-mischief that” (*Rings* 474) It is also told that Orcs cut down the rowan trees that the Ent Quickbeam

loved (*Rings* 483). Orcs, therefore, are destroyers, even though they often destroy because of orders of their evil masters. Even so, there are some further notions that Orcs do not respect plants and life themselves either. When Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli follow the Orcs that have kidnapped Merry and Pippin, Legolas says: “No other folk make such trampling (...) It seems their delight to slash and beat down growing things that are not even in their way” (*Rings* 419). Later the trail of the Orcs is being described in a similar fashion: “Nearly due west the broad swath of the marching Orcs tramped its ugly slot; the sweet grass of Rohan had been bruised and blackened as they passed” (*Rings* 424). The Orcs, therefore, seem to care very little about nature and plants, even without orders from their masters.

The destruction of nature, therefore, is clearly linked to the villains and the spread of evil powers in *The Lord of the Rings*. This way, when we consider the ethics of the telling, the narration of the story highlights nature’s intrinsic value and presents the destroyers as being morally on the wrong side. Furthermore, in the story the environmental destruction of Middle-earth is clearly condemned by the characters themselves as well: when we look at the ethics of the told, we can see that the ethical stances of the characters support the underlying ethics of the narration. This can be seen both in the emotions and reactions of the characters as well as their following actions. In the next subchapter, I am going to show how the heroes’ reactions to environmental destruction further put the destroyers on the ethically dubious side, reinforcing the idea that nature should be protected because of its’ intrinsic value.

## 5.2 Ethical Stances of the Characters

In *The Lord of the Rings*, often when there are descriptions of nature being destroyed, we are told about the heroes’ emotions as well: disbelief, outrage, grief. These emotions and reactions caused by environmental destruction are clearly seen in the Ents who decide to rise against the destroyer of their trees, Saruman, and the Hobbits when they return to the Shire and see it has changed. In both instances we can also see how the heroes’ anger leads to action. However, even before the action the reader becomes aware of the characters – the heroes’ – feelings. Both the Ents and the Hobbits make it clear that destroying nature is considered shocking and something that destroyers should be punished for. The fact that the protagonists and the heroes of the story are against the destroyers already sets the reader on the same side: the reader, too, may start wishing for a punishment for those that are responsible for such unforgivable deeds. This way, character identification, narrative empathy and narrative sympathy combined with the ethics of the told – the events related to the

environmental destruction of the homes of the Ents and the Hobbits and the acts of the characters' – can influence the way that the reader starts viewing the loss of nature in our own world as well.

The Ents and the Hobbits share many similarities in their condemnation of the destruction of nature, but the Ents' mourning for the loss of trees has lasted for a long time compared to the swift actions of the Hobbits returning to the Shire. The Ents avoid being hasty at all costs, and so when Merry and Pippin meet Treebeard, the Ents have been watching their trees being destroyed for a long time already even though they are fully aware of Saruman's treachery. Treebeard's feelings are obvious when he mourns: "nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays" (*Rings* 472). As mentioned earlier, Treebeard also notes: "the withering of all woods may be drawing near" (*Rings* 473). Because of the evil powers of Sauron and Saruman, Treebeard fears that trees, and therefore a huge part of life in Middle-earth, will be completely lost. Treebeard's anger towards Saruman is obvious: "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. And now it is clear that he is a black traitor" (*Rings* 473). The decision to stop Saruman comes as Treebeard mourns the cut trees again: "Many of those trees were my friends (...) It must stop!" (*Rings* 474). Eventually Treebeard manages to convince the other Ents, who also have quietly watched their environment being destroyed, that it is time to act. Their feelings towards destruction of nature and destroyers are therefore made clear to the reader: the Ents agree that those who destroy are doing wrong and need to be stopped.

A similar example can be seen in the chapter called "Scouring of the Shire", when Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin return to the Shire from their adventures. The Hobbits are horrified to find that the Shire has changed, and not for good: Hobbit holes – homes of the Hobbits – have been deserted, gardens are gone, trees have been cut down, and there is a chimney pouring out black smoke (*Rings* 1004). Later it is also told that the water has been polluted (*Rings* 1013). The four Hobbits' feelings become evident when we are told that seeing the Shire changed is a "painful shock" to them (*Rings* 1004). When they ride through the changed landscape, we are also told that "it was one of the saddest hours in their lives" because there were ugly new buildings and "every tree had been felled" (*Rings* 1016). As the reader has been on journey with the Hobbits from the very beginning and has been reading about the idyllic and pastoral country of the Hobbits, this changed landscape comes as a shock to the reader as well.

It is noteworthy, that the destruction the Hobbits are so horrified about, is also linked to the spread of evil, for Saruman originally is responsible for the havoc in the Shire. When the Hobbits arrive at Bag End, Frodo says: "Yes, this is Mordor (...) Just one of its works. Saruman was doing its work all the time, even when he thought he was working for himself. And the same with those that

Saruman tricked, like Lotho.” (*Rings* 1018) Destruction of the Shire, therefore, is an act of evil like the destruction of nature elsewhere in the book as well, and the heroes of the story condemn those who are responsible for such deeds. By linking the changes in the Shire to Mordor, it therefore becomes plain that just like the actions of Sauron’s terrible regime, the destruction of the pastoral Shire and the nature of Middle-earth is deemed ethically wrong in the story.

Such a sentiment is further enforced by the Hobbits and their efforts of rebuilding the Shire into the pastoral and flourishing place it once was. When the Fellowship is leaving Lothlórien, and each member of the fellowship gets a gift from Galadriel, Sam gets a box of soil from Galadriel’s own Orchard. Galadriel says: “Though you should find all barren and laid waste, there will be few gardens in Middle-earth that will bloom like your garden, if you sprinkle this earth there” (*Rings* 375). The destruction of nature should be mended. When Sam, after returning to the Shire, uses the gift, it is told that “spring surpassed his wildest hopes. His trees began to sprout and grow, as if time was in a hurry and wished to make one year do for twenty” (*Rings* 1023). After the four Hobbits’ initial shock of seeing the Shire destroyed, they decide to act, for it is the right thing to do: to restore nature like it once was. This way, the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling in *The Lord of the Rings* both promote the idea that nature has intrinsic value, and that we are responsible of taking care of the natural world.

Ultimately, in *The Lord of the Rings* the heroes of the novel aim to protect and restore nature, while the villains destroy it. As the reader is inclined to be on the side of the heroes due to aspects relating to character identification, narrative empathy and narrative sympathy, the reader is more likely to agree with the heroes that nature should be respected and protected. The reader feels with and feels for the heroes of the story, while villains remain more distant, and only qualities deemed negative are visible to the reader. Moreover, in Tolkien’s story, participating in the destruction of nature is not without consequences, as we can see when we look at the case of Saruman. In the next chapter, I am going to demonstrate how Saruman serves as a cautionary tale to those who yearn to dominate nature and use it as a commodity, forgetting nature’s intrinsic value.

### 5.3 Cautionary Tale of Using Nature as a Commodity

The clearest example of the condemning attitude towards the environmental destruction in *The Lord of the Rings* is the story of Saruman, once a respected and wise wizard corrupted by his own desire of power. Saruman’s corruption is clearly linked to the way he treats nature and those he considers to be lesser and weaker than him. In the council of Elrond, Gandalf tells the others about Saruman’s

dwelling, Isengard, and the tower of Orthanc in the middle of it, that “whereas [Isengard] had once been green and fair, it was now filled with pits and forges (...) Over all his works a dark smoke hung and wrapped itself about the sides of Orthanc” (*Rings* 260). When Saruman still cared for living things, such as trees and animals, his surroundings were lush and green, but with the change of his heart his surroundings also begin to resemble polluted and barren landscapes associated with industrialization and factories.

Therefore, abandoning good and turning to evil is presented as a physical change in the environment and the change of Saruman’s attitude towards the natural world. As mentioned earlier, Treebeard tells Merry and Pippin that “[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” (*Rings* 473). Interestingly, metal and wheels are contrasted with living things, and so the acts of evil are directly linked with the destruction of environment caused by industrialization. This is further highlighted when Treebeard talks about the trees that Saruman’s Orcs have cut down: “most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always smoke rising from Isengard these days” (*Rings* 474). Saruman uses nature as a commodity and does not see its intrinsic value (Brawley 320). This can also be seen in the way he scorns the wizard Radagast, who is a friend of birds and animals (*Rings* 258). Blinded by his quest for power and the dominion of Middle-earth, Saruman sees Radagast’s interest in living creatures as pointless tinkering. Similar attitudes can be seen in our own world, where long-term consequences of natural resources are often ignored in pursuit of instant financial gains and economic growth.

However, destroying nature will eventually have severe consequences, both in our own world and in *The Lord of the Rings*. As Brisbois notes, Saruman serves as a cautionary tale (200). This can be seen both in the way the Ents decide to destroy Isengard, and in the way Saruman’s tale comes to an end after his mischief in the Shire. Ultimately, the Ents can be seen as nature’s revenge: tree-like Ents and Huorns, creatures that resemble moving trees more than conscious creatures like the Ents, destroy Isengard, resulting in Saruman being stripped of his power. The change in the usually calm and slow Ents resembles the power of nature: it is told that the change “seemed now as sudden as the bursting of a flood that had long been held back by a dike” (*Rings* 485). With nature any kinds of changes are slow, but for example the power of a single hurricane or a flood can be devastating. Recently, tipping points have also been discussed in relation to the stability of ecosystems – changes caused by climate change may come quicker than previously predicted once certain tipping points have been passed. Much the same way the Ents endure Saruman’s acts, until finally they decide that he has done too much damage and must be stopped, much the same way that passing a tipping point in our world is predicted to increase the rate that the severe consequences of climate change

become reality. Pippin notes: “[Saruman] made the great mistake of leaving [the Ents] out of his calculations” (*Rings* 567). In a similar fashion, humans often tend to leave the impacts of climate change and the loss of biodiversity out of their calculations, even though scientists have long warned that there will be severe consequences. Looking at the similarities between the Ents and the consequences of ignoring both climate change and the loss of biodiversity, the Ents destroying Isengard can therefore be seen as nature’s revenge.

The example of the Shire is slightly different because instead of the Ents, symbolizing nature, it is the actions of the Hobbits that stop the havoc the now powerless Saruman has wreaked: it resembles less nature’s revenge and more actions taken by those that care about the natural world and wish to protect it. However, there are similarities as well, like Brawley notes:

The threat to the Shire which Sharkey or Saruman represents is the same threat he represents to the Ents; it is a threat of appropriation, a sense of ownership or possession of nature, and it is that which dissociates one from a recovery of nature. The scouring of the Shire represents the effects of industrialization and the problem is quite bleak. (305)

However, this final mischief of Saruman does not end well either, as we can see when the Hobbits together drive the intruders away and take the Shire back to the Hobbits, its original inhabitants. It is noteworthy how Wormtongue, a servant of Saruman, in the end turns against Saruman who has merely used him, and ends up killing his master (*Rings* 1020). Saruman has not appreciated or seen the value of those around him, for he only seeks power over others, as demonstrated earlier. This is what causes Saruman’s own downfall, both when it comes to the Ents’ revenge and the way his own servant turns against him in the end. His own greed and desire for power turn out to be his undoing.

All in all, when we look at these examples, it is evident that Saruman serves as a cautionary tale of regarding nature as a commodity and using others to gain more power. If we consider how the destruction of nature is tied to the spread of evil and the misdeeds of villains, how the heroes react strongly when they see nature having been destroyed and act accordingly, and how a cautionary tale of Saruman has been included in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is obvious that the novel advocates nature conservation and morally condemns those who do not care about nature and continue destroying it. The ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling reveal the underlying ethical stances of the book: we should recognize nature’s intrinsic value, and, just like the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings*, act so that we may prevent further environmental destruction in our own world. As the reader of the novel is inclined to take the side of the protagonists and the heroes, this message also has potential to influence how the reader views the natural world.



## 6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined how literature that deals with themes like human-nature relationship and environmental destruction can affect the reader, making the reader see nature in new light. Literature that deals with these themes may even help the reader to build a new relationship with nature – a relationship based on nature’s intrinsic value instead of using nature as a commodity. Qualities of fantasy novel can be especially helpful with this, as they often present nature as magical and awe-inspiring, like is the case with *The Lord of the Rings*. Through the use of the reader’s imagination, character identification, narrative empathy, narrative sympathy, and the ethical stances underlying Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the book has potential to build our relationship with nature. *The Lord of the Rings* does this in two different ways: with biophilic aspects of the story and with ethical stances towards the destruction of nature.

The power of the biophilic aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* lies in the way they help us imagine new ways of living in relationship with nature. In modern western societies, where we can purchase whatever we like, if we have enough money, with just a few clicks, it is easy to forget that everything on our planet is based on natural resources. Without healthy ecosystems and flourishing biodiversity, agriculture and producing food become difficult. Even though issues like the decline in pollinators and intensive farming’s effect on the soil and aquatic ecosystems are well-known to us, practices harmful to nature’s biodiversity and wellbeing are still continued. Even though we know that forests help with tackling issues like the loss of biodiversity and climate change, we are still cutting down forests at an alarming rate to make space for cattle, and so on. Of course, sometimes people are not aware of the effects of the current practices, and sometimes continuing the harmful practices may be the only way to survive, but the problem is that even those that have the knowledge are reluctant to make changes. In this, imagining a new way of living in harmony with nature may help. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tom Bombadil and Goldberry, the Elves and the Ents offer us a model of valuing and protecting nature instead of exploiting it.

Besides biophilic aspects present in the novel, its underlying ethical stances may also make the reader consider the relationship between humans and nature. As we begin the story with the Hobbits and travel with them and other heroes through Middle-earth, the reader is likely to feel narrative empathy and sympathy for these characters, as opposed to villains that remain more distant to us. The characters’ delight in the beautiful landscapes and plants of Middle-earth, and their consequent shock and anger when nature has been destroyed, evokes narrative empathy and narrative sympathy in the reader. The heroes of the story condemn the villains who destroy nature,

and so the reader may also start considering nature's destruction as ethically dubious or wrong. A cautionary tale of using nature as a commodity – the story of Saruman – can further turn the reader's attention to similar issues in our own world. Like in *The Lord of the Rings*, in our world exploiting natural resources and pollution have dire consequences as well. Those consequences might be so slow and invisible in some parts of the world that they are easy to ignore, but that is precisely the reason that literature, among other things, can help us to turn our attention to them.

However, even though I have presented some evidence that literature can affect us this way, it is important to note that "readers' empathic dispositions are not identical to one another" (Keen 214). Every reader reacts to stories they read in their own way. Life experiences differ, and some readers are likely to feel empathy more readily than others. Besides natural differences in empathic dispositions of different readers, situations may also be different. Some novels may resonate with their first audience at the time of publication, while others only manage to evoke the readers' empathy later with new generations of readers (Keen 214). *The Lord of the Rings* certainly is a lengthy work, which may exhaust some readers. Extensive descriptions of landscapes can be tiresome for some. And sometimes one may not be fully able to concentrate on a work of fiction, which may result in the effect of literature being less pronounced. Because of these differences, reading any work of literature is likely to affect different readers in different ways. Due to the length of *The Lord of the Rings*, it would also be difficult to measure what kind of effect it can have on someone, compared to the time before reading the book: either the entire book could be read, in which case some readers might stop mid-way, or then the researcher should decide what kind of excerpts would represent the story accurately. In such a case it would be hard to tell whether the effect of the excerpts would be the same as the effect of the entire novel. It is also possible that aspects outside fiction, such as the current ongoing discussion about climate change and biodiversity loss, affect the reader, and therefore such aspects should also be taken into account if reader response studies would be made. Overall, the effect of literature and its possibilities for environmental education and our relationship with nature require further investigation.

Even though the effect of literature on the reader therefore is not self-evident and it is hard to measure such effect, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has potential if we consider what kind of literature can help advocate for the protection of nature, which has become even more crucial than before due to the accelerating impacts of both climate change and the loss of biodiversity. As Farrelly notes, qualities of literature that may affect the reader's own relationship with nature are such as presenting nature as having intrinsic value, displaying places and characters that have unique and even magical qualities, portraying the characters as having an intimate relationship with nature, and being able to either protect or destroy nature (140). As shown in this thesis, all the above-mentioned

aspects can be clearly seen in *The Lord of the Rings*. The heroes aim to protect nature, for they consider it as having intrinsic value, and because the natural environments in *The Lord of the Rings* are also their homes: many of the characters live in a harmonious or symbiotic relationship with the surrounding nature. The heroes of the story condemn the villains that cause the environmental destruction in the novel and aim to restore the places that have been destroyed. Thus, Tolkien's story sends its reader a message similar to what Gandalf says to Aragorn, the newly crowned king of Gondor: "it is your task . . . to preserve what may be preserved" (*Rings* 971).

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