

Name: Joy Kim

Title: Good and evil in relation to nature as portrayed in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings

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Supervisor: Thomsen

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Abstract

This essay is an investigation to attempt to answer the research question: “How is good and evil portrayed in J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, and to what specific theme or themes does that portrayal contribute?” The essay analyzes the literary elements of the text of The Lord of the Rings while taking into account Tolkien’s background and outside commentaries through the use of primary and secondary sources. The motif of nature in relation to the development of the portrayal of good and evil is investigated to uncover various themes and the author’s intent. First of all, through the obvious lack of nature associated with it, evil is portrayed as an overtaking, infectious force, in a contrasting light to good. Secondly, Tolkien constantly associates the concept of good with nature, developing themes about the human state of mortality and the passing of the natural world. Lastly, through the contrast that the author’s use of the motif of nature creates, a struggle between good and evil is constantly present throughout the text of The Lord of the Rings. The essay concludes that The Lord of the Rings uses the motif of nature to portray that the struggle between good and evil is omnipresent, but it is within mankind’s hope to resist it.

214 words

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Introduction

When asked what his father's profession was, near the outbreak of World War II, young Michael Tolkien informed the army that his father was "a wizard" (Birzer 1). J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, was a wizard indeed. Tolkien's trilogy is famously remembered as an epic myth dictating the legend of a world of fantasy, all created by one man. Tolkien derived the name for his world, "Middle-earth", from the word "Midgard", an old Germanic name for the planet Earth. In other words, Tolkien considered Middle-earth the same planet we live on now; The Lord of the Rings merely described a different, ancient era. Therefore Tolkien regarded his work as important. Should the world not know and learn from its past? Tolkien was a part of the English generation to have lived through both World War I and World War II, having lost most of his closest friends to the trenches of the First World War and living through his son's involvement as a soldier in the Second World War. Both conflicts engrained deep memories and feelings for Tolkien and notably, quite prominent throughout the text of The Lord of the Rings, is the constant presence of the conflict between good and evil. So at the time of its publication in 1955, The Lord of the Rings became a personal reflection for a world that had just survived war.

So how is good and evil portrayed in the Lord of the Rings and to what specific theme or themes does that portrayal contribute? In notable conjunction to the theme of the struggle between good and evil is the prominent motif of nature throughout the text of the trilogy. The destruction of the English countryside as a result of war affected Tolkien deeply and throughout his life Tolkien held an intense dislike for industrialization. "The war made me poignantly aware of the beauty of the world I remember. I remember miles and miles of seething, tortured earth...

It was a searing experience” (Birzer 2-3), Tolkien said in 1968, reminiscing on the past of his youth. Already one can see from where what Garth calls “the mood that underpins his entire legendarium: a wistful nostalgia for a world slipping away” (109) comes from. In the process of writing and thus, expression, Tolkien began to tie together his feeling of loss and love for nature and his strong sense of epic struggle he salvaged as the result of his war experiences. In the texts of The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, and The Return of the King, Tolkien portrays various themes about nature and the battle between good and evil through the use of nature as a motif.

Nature as a motif

Nature as a motif is used to portray good and evil for a very good reason; through the use of personification, Tolkien uses the motif of nature to reflect mankind, and in this way makes the themes concerning nature’s relation to the struggle between good and evil within the human world visible.

Personification is a figure of speech in which human attributes are given to an animal, an object, or a concept. When interacting with nature, either through a character or as a narrator, Tolkien very often chooses to refer to natural elements as if they were human beings. Such figures of speech are extended and ongoing, such as with the mountain named Caradhras as spoken about by Gimli when the Fellowship of the Ring attempts to cross its pass: ““It was no ordinary storm. It is the ill will of Caradhras. He does not love Elves and Dwarves, and that drift was laid to cut off our escape”” (Tolkien, Fellowship 285). Tolkien has portrayed this mountain as having a will of its own. Caradhras becomes very human, having the capacity to hold feelings – in this case, it chooses to *not* love the mortals that make up the Fellowship and even throw in their path difficult obstacles out of that spite: ““Or Caradhras less cruel,” said Gimli. ‘There he

stands smiling in the sun!’ He shook his fist at the furthest of the snow-capped peaks and turned away” (Tolkien, Fellowship 324). However, Gimli’s outcries seem like less of an apostrophe than they really are; certain characters actually speak of hearing nature talk: “‘That is true,’ said Legolas. ‘But the Elves of this land were of a race strange to us of the silvan folk, and the trees and the grass do not now remember them. Only I hear the stones lament them: *deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone*” (Tolkien, Fellowship 276), Legolas reiterates on behalf of the stones of the land of Hollin. Nature here does not only have the capacity for feeling, but it also has the capacity to *remember* – to have a past and a personal history. Nature is not just capable of emotion, but is here shown to be able to grow, change, and forget. If nature itself – the one thing on our planet to have lasted since the beginning of time – is able to shift and reform, what is that saying about the stability of mankind?

Tolkien intends for us to see the similarities between mankind and nature, and through that, see the differences in their responses with regards to good and evil. It can be said that nature in The Lord of the Rings tends to act more neutral and more passive to outside influences. Gimli says that “‘Caradhras was called the Cruel, and had an ill name... long years ago, when rumour of Sauron had not been heard in these lands” (Tolkien, Fellowship 282). The mountain Caradhras acts independently – not being in league with Mordor or Sauron, as the creatures fallen under Sauron’s rule (such as the Orcs) are, but is spiteful of mortals according to its own judgment. Aragorn explains “‘There are many evil and unfriendly things in the world that have little love for those that go on two legs, and yet are not in league with Sauron, but have purposes of their own. Some have been in the world longer than he” (Tolkien, Fellowship 282). The “things that have little love for those that go on two legs” are obviously not human, while “two legs” refers to man, or in the context of Tolkien’s diversely inhabited world, mortals in general.

Tolkien, here, portrays nature very much as a character to foil the changeability of the human heart and also touches on nature's animosity for the mortals that live among it – whether Orc or Elf, it makes no distinction.

As both the characters and the narrator speak of nature as alive, the reader is led to do the same. Naturally, at its death, we feel troubled – and the effect is to feel as Tolkien felt about the passing away of his beloved English countryside; Tolkien makes nature as personal to us as he felt it was personal to him. In this way, nature reflects mankind – through the use of personification, we as readers see the similarity and intimacy between nature and man that Tolkien points out for us.

Nature and evil

Nature in relation to evil – or rather, the lack of nature in relation to evil – is used to strikingly and visibly contrast evil against good. The Ent, Treebeard (as a talking, walking tree, a striking manifestation of Tolkien's use of personification of nature within a character), says of the evil wizard Saruman that “he has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for living things, except as far as they serve him for the moment” (Tolkien, Two Towers 462). Notice the way that Tolkien chooses to align evil and disdain for the living and natural world with the lack of nature -- with “metal and wheels”! Similarly, look at the way Tolkien has chosen to describe the area around Mordor:

...here neither spring nor 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 mud, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounts 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... They had come to the desolation that lay before Mordor... a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing – unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion. (Tolkien, Two Towers 617)

Here Tolkien characterizes the dwelling of Sauron and center of evil, Mordor, with ugliness and the lack of living, natural things. Even here the traces of nature left are personified, the pools “gasping” and “choked”, as if the mountains had “vomited”, and the effect is that Tolkien horrifies us with the image that horrified him – the image of his beloved countryside torn to pieces, killed, dying, gasping – when he stood as a soldier at the edge of a battlefield. Death is a fact of human life, so to see something thought to be so permanent so shattered – so human – is unnerving. However, make no mistake; Tolkien is not a sadistic maniac determined to make us feel his pain. In the midst of death and destruction of the natural world, he shows us hope. In the above passage, Mordor is described as “a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing – unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion”. A difficult hope to believe in, but it is there, and throughout the text of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien continues to use the sea and water as a symbol of good and of hope, and as a prominent ‘sub-motif’, so to speak, within his use of nature. The description of Isengard has a similar effect to that of the description of Mordor:

It was fashioned by the builders of old, who smoothed the Ring of Isengard, and yet it seemed a thing not made by the craft of Men, but riven from the bones of the earth in the ancient torment of the hills. A peak and isle of rock it was, black and gleaming hard: four mighty piers of many-sided stone were welded into one, but near the summit they opened into gaping horns, their pinnacles as the points of spears, keen-edged as knives. (Tolkien, Two Towers 541-542)

Here Tolkien associates evil with manmade objects and the cost of nature caused by industrialization, calling the pinnacles of Isengard the points of “spears” and “knives”. However, Tolkien also makes a very important distinction here; he says that evil – in this case, represented by the tower of Isengard -- does not necessarily stem from “the craft of Men” but that it stems from “the ancient torment of the hills”. Craft itself is not evil; however, when it comes at the expensive price of the cost of nature, it aligns itself with wickedness. The main thing Tolkien wants to portray to us about the evil is that it overtakes; it comes into existence by conquering, very literally in Tolkien’s world, the earth; in other words, it contrasts very much the natural state of the world and is not originally part of the world of Middle-earth, spreading by infectious and almost viral means. It is worth noting that at the battle of Isengard, the ents unblock the dams erected by Isengard and use the onslaught of water to destroy the industrialization areas around the tower.

Nature and good

Good is emphasized both by the previously discussed portrayal of evil and the way Tolkien associates abundance of nature with good – specifically, good is portrayed as the correct state of the world. To see this one only has to examine Tolkien’s description of the elven country Lothlorien:

No blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth. On the land of Lorien there was no stain... Though he walked and breathed, and about him living leaves and flowers were stirred by the same cool wind as fanned his face, Frodo felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. (Tolkien, Fellowship 341-342)

This state of nature contrasts with the state that is visible in the mountain Caradhras and the stones of Hollin discussed earlier. The nature of the outside world, not protected from the onset of evil by the magic of Lorien, is subject to forgetfulness and ephemerality, growing ever closer to a state of mortality. Tolkien shows evil to be directly connected with death, whereas good is associated with everlasting life. Lothlorien is a symbol of how the world should have been; it is a land frozen in a time of a past innocent age. However, sadly, even Lothlorien is not free of danger; not long after he arrives there, Frodo climbs up to a platform high in a tree and looks out to see that a shadow lays across the lands that are outside of Lorien, and Tolkien says that “the sun that lay on Lothlorien had no power to enlighten the shadow of that distant height” (Tolkien, Fellowship 342). Here the advancement of evil is emphasized by Tolkien’s previous praising of Lothlorien. If such a place, an elven country still inhabited by living trees and the memories of old, can do nothing against the power of evil except within itself, then what is there in Middle-earth that can? This sentiment is reflected in the tale of Tinuviel that Aragorn tells to the hobbits while on the way to Rivendell, which tells of the elf-maiden Tinuviel and the mortal man Beren. They fell in love, and as a result, Tinuviel was doomed to die, no longer possessing the longevity of elves. Throughout the poem, while notably not the case with Beren, Tinuviel is described in terms of nature (“light of stars in her hair”, “feet as light as linden-leaves”). The song ends describing their fate as lovers:

Long was the way that fate them bore,
O’er stony mountains cold and grey,
Through halls of iron and darkling door,
And woods of nightshade morrowless. (Tolkien, Fellowship 189)

You see here that mortals – symbolized in Beren – contrast aspects of nature. This does two things; first, the contrast in the song between mortals and nature shows characteristics of mankind. Mortal beings do not stand as firm as nature does, and is subject to death and changes of heart. Secondly, it shows that nature does not have mortality attached to it, and lasts as long as the world it exists in does, as Frodo sees in Lothlorien. However, that means that with the passing of nature, so occurs the passing of the world, and that is exactly what is happening during the events of The Lord of the Rings. In this song, Tinuviel represents the sorrow that comes with the passing of what was meant to last. She becomes doomed to mortality and fated to wander through “halls of iron”. Tolkien’s intent is to show us that the correct state of the world is quickly passing because of the conflict between good and evil.

The conflict between good and evil

Opposites always clash in violent conflict (though not always physically) and the pair of good and evil is no exception. This can be most clearly seen in the one place in Middle-earth that is still protected from evil, Lothlorien, within one of its rulers, Lady Galadriel. Frodo, naively thinking that it would be for the best, offers the One Ring to her, because he considers it too great of a burden for himself. However, even though Galadriel is one of the wisest of the immortal elves that reside within the land of innocence, even she is susceptible to the battle against evil within her heart: ““Wise the Lady Galadriel may be,’ she said, ‘yet... I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer... The evil that was devised long ago works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls... And now last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen... All shall love me and despair!’” (Tolkien, Fellowship 356). Alarmingly, one can see that near the end of the

passage, Galadriel herself – the Lady of Lorien, ruler of the good land -- shows signs of giving into temptation. The effect of seduction by evil on someone that is strong and powerful is frightening, for then what can withstand evil's lure? A short while later, however, she says, calmed, "I pass the test," (Tolkien, Fellowship 357). How did she do it? Tolkien tells us "She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall...and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose voice was soft and sad" (Tolkien, Fellowship 356). There was nothing else causing this to happen; there was no one calming her down or a threat that gave her no choice to do otherwise. It was out of Galadriel's own will that she resisted evil.

Overcoming evil for good requires the strength of our own determination, and no one is exempt from its snare. The character of Gollum is a physical representative of the Ring's effects – a 'loser' of the battle between good and evil, so to speak. The evil that started in Gollum's mind spread to even his original and natural appearance, transforming him into a pale-skinned, large-eyed, slimy monster of the dark. Gollum stands as a symbol of the extent of power that evil – which is in this case embodied in the One Ring -- has over mortals and nature. In contrast, consider both the characters of Bilbo and Frodo; both possessed the Ring but managed to avoid its dark power by giving it up – Bilbo to Frodo and Frodo to the fires of Mount Doom -- but in neither instance was it easy. It is interesting to note that as hobbits, Bilbo and Frodo are characteristically very in tune with nature, in a way similar to the elves of Lorien. Sam comments, "Now these folk [elves of Lorien] aren't wanderers or homeless, and seem a bit nearer to the likes of us [hobbits]: they seem to belong here, more even than Hobbits do in the Shire. Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say, if you take my meaning"

(Tolkien, Fellowship 351). In other words, the elves of Lorien are so one with nature that neither is indistinguishable from the other.

We see here that the thing that causes the conflict between good and evil is desire, which is, needless to say, present in all human natures – whether one is as the wisest of elves or like a simple hobbit. It stems both from the prospect of having power and the lack of a harmonious existence with nature. But, as always, we are not left by Tolkien without hope; we still have the free will we were born with.

Conclusion

Through the use of the motif of nature, Tolkien expresses various themes about epic conflict -- between good and evil, old and new, the weak and the great. The cost of evil – the presence of mortality and the cause of the deterioration of the world of the past – is expensive. However, the force of evil, through powerful and easily spread, is not without check. These themes are not so much about message rather than truth, and Tolkien's story is not so much about entertainment rather than escape. Truth and escape may seem to be conflicting ideas, but in The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien has merged one with the other in the same way he has merged his tangible emotions with a world of fantasy. He shows us that, in the struggle between good and evil, the passing of the world we live in is happening at this very moment. But he does not leave readers in despair. When we wonder what in the Middle-earth can save us from the onset of evil, Tolkien gives us hope best expressed in the words of the elf Haldir: "...but whereas the light perceives the very heart of the darkness, its own secret has not been discovered. Not yet."

(Tolkien, Fellowship 343)

3407 words

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