

The Missing Historical Environmental Context of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*

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Director Peter Jackson and company have successfully brought much of J.R.R. Tolkien's literary classic *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) to the big screen. The movies have been spectacular, majestic and epic. But much, including the historical environmental context, is not clearly explicated due to the necessary simplification of bringing the epic tale to the big screen. However, if one is willing to look for an environmental message, one can find one in the depiction of the topography and the relationship between the peoples of Middle Earth to the landscape.

There are many fine performances, although the absorbing sweep of the tale dwarfs many of the characters involved, The forest folks, the elves, are ethereal and introspective. Hugo Weaving's Elrond and Liv Tyler's Arwen are profound. Orlando Bloom's Legolas the elf is superhuman. John Van Rhys' Gimli the dwarf, from a mining culture that lives underground, is clearly from a different culture. The rural hobbits are originally innocent and playful, but despite being hardened by the war, they do manage to keep their sense of humor. Ian McKellen is solemn and angelic as the wizard Gandalf. Christopher Lee is aloof and stern as Saruman. The human royalty, who live in a constant state of warfare, are more emotional than the elves, but not always. Aragon, the king returned (played by Viggo Mortensen), is a man of self restraint who holds his feelings inside. Gimli the Dwarf is all emotion and provides comic relief. Loathsome and pitiful Gollum, the former and corrupted owner of the ring in question, will not be easily forgotten. Gollum does not belong among the forces of Light or Darkness. Evil is implacable in Tolkien's and Jackson's Middle Earth, and submission is not an alternative for the heroes.

LOTR is primarily about war and the inherent fight for freedom. But also at stake is the natural world with an old theological enemy who would pervert and destroy the beauty of the pre-industrial Middle Earth. The story begins in the unspoilt setting of the Shire with its beautiful woods, fields and rivers. It is from this landscape that the idealistic and playful hobbits (Bilbo: Ian Holm, Frodo: Elijah Wood, Sam: Sean Astin, Pippin: Billy Boyd, and Merry: Dominic Monaghan) originate.

Forces are arising that will enslave and destroy the Shire and the rest of the beautiful places of Middle Earth. The elves can sense the return of the Dark Lord in the water, earth and air. Bilbo, an adventurous hobbit, has brought

back a mysterious ring to the Shire, which is out in the boondocks. The Dark Lord Sauron created this ring in an earlier age. In it he has put forth his "cruelty, malice and will to dominate all life." If the Dark Lord regains the ring he will control all of Middle Earth. He will also be able to control those who own the other subservient rings that Sauron gave to the dwarves, elves and men of Middle Earth.

There is also a war in nature between the forces of Light and Darkness in Tolkien's Middle Earth. Not stated in the movie is that Middle Earth had its Lucifer, whom Sauron sought to emulate in later ages. Each side has its dominion of creatures. There are the forces of Light with its pure waters, sunlight, starlight, horses, elves, Ents... There is also the Dark side with its ringwraiths, evil felines, wargs, trolls, goblins, orcs, balrogs, spiders, dinosaurs... In the middle of this struggle is the world of men, some of whom already serve the Dark Lord. If Sauron regains the ring, all will fall under his dominion.

This struggle is far away from the pleasure seeking hobbits that usually are not major players in world affairs. But now Frodo, Bilbo's nephew, is entrusted with the fate of the ring, which has brought the Shire to the attention of Dark Lord. Sauron has taken the form of a lidless, searching eye that looks over Mordor from the tower of Barad-dur. He has regained power in the land of Mordor, and now searches for the ring to complete his plans.

The ring must be brought elsewhere or destroyed; otherwise the Shire will be enslaved. Gandalf, a friend of the elves, must consult the chief of his order, Saruman, who is knowledgeable about the ways of men and dark magic. Saruman is convinced that the peoples of Middle Earth will lose the battle with Sauron and has joined forces with the Dark Lord.

One can figure out an environmental context, but not a history, from the alternatives presented. There are the woods, fields and rivers of the Shire that Frodo loves. There are the mountains, the horses of Rohan, the Ents of Fangorn Forest, and the pure waters of the world. In contrast is the landscape of the Dark Lord, which now includes Saruman, with its mechanization, breeding, dirt, pollution, volcanoes, and neon lights. The Dark forces also seek control and power, whereas the forces of Light seek only freedom, survival and fun. The minions of the Dark Lord find fun in destruction. The forces of Light are appreciative of nature. Bilbo chooses to leave the Shire, wanting to see the mountains again. Frodo, on the other hand, is saddened when he must leave the idyllic pastoral setting of the Shire to begin the long journey that will lead him to the heart of evil.

Gandalf, when he finds out that Saruman is in league with the Dark Lord,

questions Saruman's sanity. Saruman is willing to delve in the dark arts, whereas Gandalf and most of the other free peoples do not see accommodating the shadow as an alternative. The Dark forces would alter the world to the extent that it is not worth living in.

Sam, Frodo's gardener and companion on the quest to Mount Doom to destroy the ring, reminds us that there are some good things in the world and they are worth fighting for. In the past, people have died for such things.

By the time Frodo leaves the Shire with the ring the ringwraiths (Dark Riders), proud kings and ring owners who are now servants of Sauron, have infiltrated the pastoral setting of the Shire and the nearby areas. Frodo and his companions become stalwart friends and venture into the dangerous outside world. They must venture forth without the help of Gandalf, who is a prisoner at Saruman's tower Orthanc. Saruman tells Gandalf, whom he cannot convince, "So you have chosen death."

The band of hobbits are joined and aided by Strider, a Ranger who has an intimate familiarity with the natural world and an understanding of the ringwraiths. To avoid the ringwraiths, Strider leads the band off the road. They will make their way to Rivendell for consultation with and the protection of the elves. Tolkien and Jackson tell the story through the eyes of the hobbits as they encounter a wild and dangerous world. Also at stake are the beautiful natural areas they pass through.

Frodo finds help along the way, some of which is of the natural world. The ringwraiths fear fire and water, and have a hesitant relationship with the ring bearer, preferring to let the ring take control of its hobbit owner before they take it. Frodo, stabbed by a Nazgul blade at the Ranger lookout Weathertop, will eventually journey to the nether world of the ringwraiths. The elven princess Arwen takes Frodo to her father's house to treat his wound and saves his life. Over beautiful wooded fields, Arwen outraces the Dark Riders. She, an immortal elf, tells Strider that she does not fear them. The forces of nature, the pure magical waters of the Rivendell that unhorses and washes the ringwraiths out of the story for some time, aid her.

Frodo awakes in the beautiful eleven abode of Elrond: Rivendell. It is here that the free peoples of the world send representatives to decide the fate of the ring. To the council are invited elves, dwarves, men, and the ring bearer, Frodo. Here Strider's noble heritage is revealed. Also assembled are other important personages like Gandalf and Boromir (Sean Bean), an heir to the Stewardship of Gondor which borders Sauron's lands. These are the people who will combat Sauron, whom Saruman now calls "The Lord of the Earth."

Gandalf was saved from Orthanc by a giant eagle that was informed of his plight by a moth. Some of the wild creatures of the world also oppose the plans of the Dark Lord.

The ring brings turmoil to the council of Elrond, but Frodo emerges to volunteer to take responsibility for it. Frodo says, "I will take it, but I don't know the way." To match the nine ringwraiths, a fellowship of nine, representing the free peoples of the world, will take the ring to Mordor to destroy it where it was created, in the cracks of Mount Doom. The burden of the war with Sauron will fall on the shoulders of men, because the elves are leaving Middle Earth and the dwarves have their own problems in other parts of the world.

The fellowship of nine is soon to be observed making its way through the wilderness. Shot in New Zealand, the films confront the viewer with the beauty of the outdoors. But there are spies among the birds, dark birds that tell Saruman of the whereabouts of the fellowship. The mountains, influenced by Saruman, will not let the fellowship pass over them, so in an effort to avoid Saruman's forces they take instead the underground route west through the mines of the Dwarven kingdom of Moria.

In the dark labyrinth of Moria the hobbits become acquainted with the dark minions of the enemy: orcs, trolls and fouler things. The dwarves once ruled Moria, but the dark minions overran them. This is news to Gimli, a dwarf from another part of the world. The dwarves dug "too deep" and unleashed an evil creature from an earlier age. Gandalf battles the ancient evil so the fellowship can escape. In the depiction of the mines of Moria, Tolkien and Jackson are making a statement about the consequences of greed and avarice. The dwarves of Moria could not withstand those who would seek what they themselves sought: riches. The dwarves were master craftsmen. Wars in Middle Earth had been fought over crafted magical items in the past as well. The orcs had made a tomb out of what was once one of the wonders of Middle Earth. Gimli points out some of the remaining wonders as they strive to make it through Moria. They are lucky to survive the trip.

The fellowship, without Gandalf, escapes Moria and finds refuge for a time among the peoples of Lothlorien, an elvish kingdom to the west of Moria. Here in the wondrous forest where the elves live in the trees, the fellowship recoups, regroups, and finds guidance. Galadriel (Cate Blanchett), the lady of the woods, lets Frodo know that if their mission fails, the Shire also will be lost. Galadriel gives Frodo a phial with the light of Earendil, "their most beloved star." After their stay in the wondrous Lothlorien, the fellowship travels south with gifts and elven boats. Aragorn the Ranger is now in

charge of the expedition.

The movie, *The Fellowship of The Ring*, uses topography and landscape to present a dichotomy between worlds of the forces of good and evil. One clearly understands what will be destroyed if the battle is lost. The subsequent breaking of the fellowship sends its members in many directions, but the battle lines have been drawn. The later films reinforce the depiction of this dichotomy.

But the depiction is confused by the fact that there is also the black and white, and sometime gray depictions of magic and the undead nether world. Gandalf, once the Grey Pilgrim, returns as The White Wizard to direct the war against Sauron's dark minions. The world of men is also usually portrayed in gray. This gray world contrasts, as well, with the natural green world.

The most obvious environmental statement in the movie is made in *The Two Towers* where the very trees get revenge on traitorous Saruman who tried to destroy the forest Fangorn as part of his war effort. The Ents, shepherds of the trees, are the oldest residents of Middle Earth and they are drawn into the war by the wily Hobbits. At a young age, Tolkien was offended by passages in Macbeth where soldiers disguised as trees carry out an attack. He waited for the opportunity to portray real trees as the attackers.

Saruman predicts in *The Two Towers*: "The Old World will burn in the fires of industry. ... Forests will fall ... to drive the machine of war."

Also in danger are the people of Rohan and their medieval culture with kings, warriors and peasants. They must battle Saruman to survive. The landscape depictions of Rohan's beautiful fields and horses indicate to the film watchers whose side they should be on.

The Ents, venerable and ancient tree entities, are reluctant to take on Saruman, and prefer to be isolationists. They are usually left alone because almost all fear to enter the forest Fangorn. "I am on nobody's side. Nobody cares for the woods anymore," explains Treebeard, Chieftain of the Ents, to the hobbits Merry and Pippin. "Destroyers. Upsurpers. Curse them," he utters vehemently.

Treebeard, who has existed since an earlier time, had not known of the existence of hobbits before, and he adds them to his list of residents of Middle Earth. Most others on that list existed in fantasy literature before Tolkien. Merry and Pippin eventually draw the Ents into the battle. "All that was green and good in this world will be gone," said Merry, but Treebeard is

not convinced until he sees his brethren being chopped down. "Some of those trees were my friends," yells the ancient Ent of his felled tree friends. The Ents break a dam and let loose the pure waters which submerge Saruman's industrialized stronghold Isengard, and "wash the filth away."

Treebeard remembers the Saruman of old: "There was a time when Saruman walked in my woods. Now he has a mind of metal and wheels. He no longer cares for growing things." Saruman had raised an army and bred a new type of orc for the sole purpose of destroying the world of men. But Saruman fell to the Middle Earth "forces" of nature.

One also finds the problematic depiction of good and bad in nature in *The Two Towers*. Gollum/Smeagol the former finder of the ring joins Frodo and Sam on their quest. The hobbits convince Gollum to guide them to Mount Doom and he takes them through the untrammelled bog and fens, which we now recognize are home to endangered wildlife. In Jackson's films something as ugly as Gollum could never be fully appreciated by the forces of Light, much less the "vile" creatures of Middle Earth that are at the service of the Dark Lord. We once thought such things of wolves, ravens, and sharks.

The Return of the King further emphasizes the environmental context through the voice of hobbit Sam, a gardener, and of the king-to-be Aragon/Strider, who has an intimate understanding of the natural world as well as a high comfort zone for the places between life and death. The story of *LOTR* has now diverged into the storylines of the looming war between the remaining forces of the West against Sauron and the hazardous journey of Frodo and Sam to Mount Doom.

Aragon, having helped to defeat the armies of Saruman, now raises an army of the undead to help in the war against Sauron. For some reason this army is depicted in green. In life they had failed to honor the pledge they made to Aragon's ancestor, and now as incorporeal spirits they cannot find peace until they fulfill that oath to fight Sauron. Gondor will need the help of this ethereal army to combat the very substantial orcs and monsters from Mordor. Some of these menacing creatures were bred in mockery and to destroy the creations of the lords of Light. All sorts of enslaved creatures are used in servitude of the Dark Lord, but we wouldn't mind their extinction. One can contrast them with the horses of Rohan that serve willingly.

It is not until *The Return of the King* that the movie watcher sees Mordor, a volcanic landscape filled with huge armies. One can easily come to the conclusion that the source of their food is shipped in from other places. Frodo is almost overcome in a city of the dead in Mordor that for some

reason has bright green neon lights. Maybe the choice of this color green in both these instances of death-Aragon's army of undead and Mordor's city of the dead-is a way to signify that one force will cancel out another force in this war, but these sickly green glowing undead could never be associated in the minds of the viewers with the healthy plains and grass fields of Middle Earth.

In looking for a green message one should not lose track of the stouthearted companionship of Sam who fears the magical unnatural. On the cracks of Mount Doom Sam manages to keep the mission going, but the ring has had its influence on Frodo. Falling under the influence of the ring Frodo has forgotten spring in the Shire, the sound of water, and the touch of grass. It is this memory and value of the natural world that had sustained him in the past. Here Tolkien and Jackson are saying that the will for power can make one unconcerned for such things. Such an affect is observed in Saruman. At this juncture one can see parallels to the corrupt in our world who have lost concern for the unspoiled natural world. It is also important to note that Sam is a gardener in a world that has evil creatures, rather than a preservationist in a world with pure Nature.

Where the tale lacks verisimilitude one must make allowances for it being a very, very exciting tale in a world with different logic than ours. We have technology, but they had magic. Even though there is no talk of organized preservation or environmental groups in Middle Earth, there is still the need among Middle Earth's free people to protect the beautiful places that they value and have depended upon. Middle Earth is "pre" nonprofit.

Like the hobbit Bilbo does in the prequel *The Hobbit*, the diminutive hobbits in the *LOTR* help save the day. Some have noted that *LOTR* can be read as a parable of children growing up and accepting adult responsibilities. In the books there are scenes where the hobbits are tucked into bed, in the movie the hobbits are looked after. The friendship that forms between Legolas the Elf and Gimli the Dwarf is also about growing in that they develop tolerance. In some ways the story echoes the European experience of going off to war. Steeped in Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature, Tolkien told his tales using the motifs of that time. Tolkien, an unlucky man who was orphaned and lost all but one friend by the end of WW I, found personal peace in Christianity and his creation Middle Earth. *LOTR* is also J.R.R. Tolkien's reaction to war (he was a WW I veteran and his son Christopher a WW II veteran). Elements of WW II were highlighted in Jackson's movies. Saruman in some sense represents Germany and the Nazis. He breeds an army and the people of Rohan, his enemies, worry about genocide. Mordor, with its unknown lands to the south and east, on some level represents the threat of the Soviet Union. Tolkien could express himself with themes from the past, but the new

movies have successfully explored our modern fears of the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Tolkien stated that he was writing about himself when he wrote about hobbits. In the book and the movie adaptation Tolkien has shown how the rural English could make a contribution to solving the problems of the world. The hobbits are less susceptible to the influence of the ring of power. The diminutive hobbits are idealistic and brave. In the final analysis they are not foolhardy, but very lucky.

J.R.R. Tolkien made it very clear in his forward to *LOTR* that he hated allegory, and if *LOTR* was allegory, the ring of power would have been used and the new user of the ring would have taken his place as the ruler of Middle Earth. Others would have also developed the ability to make rings of their own. Tolkien asserted that he wanted to create a world for the development of the elfish language he created, and he wanted his readers to experience joy.

But one can see the appeal of Tolkien's works to the 1960s counterculture and understand the subsequent development of a following to them. The modern movie-going crowd will revel in the suspense of the movie, but they may not be privy to the significance of this literary work that was voted into classic status by the counterculture. The work is post-nuclear in that the power, the ring-shaped like the button-if used, could destroy the world. The hobbits, who are more immune than others to the ring's or power's charm, provide the solution for the post-nuclear age. The book and movie create a war scenario so black and white and threatening that even a hippie would consider becoming part of the war effort. The hobbits have some of the same interests as the hippies: good food, pipe weed, mushrooms, Luddism, parties, and the enjoyment of the outdoors. The film watcher wants to also protect the beautiful outdoor scenery they see in the movies.

More fully realized in the books are powers of nature to combat the darkness. Tolkien imbued the power of light in pure water, fire, captured starlight, as well as in mountains and trees. But the movies do not fully capture the sense of loss that is present in the longer story of Good vs. Evil presented in the longer tale of Middle Earth. Tolkien attempted to bring a new mythology to England, one that grew out of his studies in Medieval and Anglo-Saxon literature. Tolkien, a devout Christian and "Subcreator," sought to create a mythology that was less sordid than the myths of the Greeks and King Arthur. He wasn't thrilled with Shakespeare either. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis helped influence what was subsequently considered acceptable reading, that is, medieval literature, science fiction and fantasy. Both authors presented the battle between good and evil in stark ways.

But before the *LOTR*, before *The Hobbit*, Tolkien wrote parts of *The*

Silmarillion about the earlier ages of Middle Earth. He wanted to create a mythology born out of the texts of various strands of fantasy and Anglo-Saxon and Medieval literature. The publication of this work, *The Silmarillion*, which was changed from the original when it was posthumously published by his son Christopher after J.R.R.'s death, was his life's work. The complete telling of the story of Middle Earth leaves one with a sense of loss for the beauty that was destroyed by the Dark forces. Tolkien wrote about natural theology, about a created world and wilderness rather than Nature as an Other, a place where creatures developed through survival of the fittest. In viewing the natural world from a perspective of natural selection as Darwin saw it, we use evolution to explain these dark creatures; the unanswered question in Tolkien's and Jackson's mythos is whether or not they would be able to repent. The creatures of darkness are not given the opportunity to grow beyond their circumstances. Gollum was not originally a creature of darkness and he ceased to belong on either side. Tolkien also wrote about Beowulf, whose nemesis Grendel considered itself an enemy of God.

In an earlier age Sauron, the demonic force in the *LOTR*, was the servant of Middle Earth's Devil, Morgoth/Melkor. Tolkien's pantheon of gods created wondrous and beautiful creatures. Before the existence of sun and the moon, the gods created two magical world trees to light the world and the stars for the elves, who were born first in distant lands, to enjoy. The elves originally worshiped the makers of these wondrous natural things. The stars were beautiful artistic works, there was music in the sound of the wind and the movements of water.

Morgoth, who sought to pervert and destroy, decimated the world's trees. Morgoth fills Middle Earth with dark and loathsome creatures. Much evident in the longer story, which the film could not capture, is the vandalism of the theological creation of Nature's inhabitants. The orcs were originally elves who had been corrupted and bred to fight wars by the Dark Lord. Saruman in the movie only says they were made into "a ruined and terrible form of life."

One of the problems of fantasy literature (and film) is that it presents monsters, whereas environmentalists have come to see less popular creatures as also in need of protection. As others have also observed, some of the monsters that were hunted in "the past" in fantasy literature have now become considered endangered species. Tolkien and Jackson also have their good and evil creatures, but the evil needs to be combated for good to survive. Saruman who was sent to Middle Earth to contest the Dark Lord Sauron is corrupted and becomes a pawn, as did many but not all of the ancestors of the kingdom Gondor. The longer story of Middle Earth details the heroic efforts necessary to combat those who would pervert and destroy

what the forces of Light created. Sauron's master Morgoth is defeated in an earlier age, but Sauron never truly repents and he brings much ruin to Middle Earth during his reign.

Though not clearly stated in the film, war itself is also an environmental issue in that it destroys human life, and during war the welfare of the environment and habitat is not even a consideration. Tolkien and Jackson allow Nature to fight back, but in reality it cannot. The earlier or fuller tale, including the *Silmarillion*, is more environmental in that the story is about those who would stave off the destruction or perversion of the efforts of their labor to create natural beauty. Those who need an explanation, which the film does not supply, may miss that the insignia of the tree and stars, worn in Gondor and by Aragorn the King who will unite Middle Earth, was also a symbol of the druids of England.

The movies of *LOTR* have the potential to make a big impact on the world, as the books have. Douglas A. Anderson in the introduction to *Tales Before Tolkien* writes that there is almost a dividing line between the fantasy that was written before and after *LOTR*. The movies have the potential to bring critical appreciation to genre fiction and film in the fields of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and detective fiction. Maybe we will be seeing more of these types of films nominated for the top awards. Many genre fiction authors have taken up environmental themes in their work. Also in process is the advent of the DVD technology that allows people to watch extended versions of a film at home. The extended/DVD versions of the tale are more satisfying than the original screen version in that they tell more of the tale. The original screen versions of *LOTR* seem choppy and incomplete in comparison.

The movies are wholesome entertainment because the good guys win. They will result in our having a greater appreciation of and wariness for the unspoiled natural world and more respect for young adults, who we need to trust to help save the day. The presentation of beautiful New Zealand will give us new zeal in the fight to preserve wilderness, but hopefully the films will not make us care only about what we consider beautiful.

For the fans of fantasy, hopefully there will be more from Jackson. There could be *Greyhawk* with its polluters and battle between good and evil, *Elric of Melnibone* (a possible victim of pollution poisoning), Bulfinch's *Mythology*, and so forth. Jackson is presently working on a new movie of King Kong, which can also be interpreted as having an environmental message. The great ape King Kong could be seen as an endangered species fighting against urbanization. Tolkien also forced us look backwards, backwards to the bittersweet *Silmarillion*.

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