

# **Ecological Discourse and the Fantastic: Mordor, Lóthlorien, and the Shire in *The Lord of the Rings***

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## ABSTRACT

In response to such pressing ecological problems as disembedding and deterritorialization that often come with globalization, current environmental solutions tend to focus on the urgent and practical need to re-establish a sense of place within human communities. Some debates have followed, examining whether this sense of locale should be defined against or at the expense of a sense of the globe. This eco-theoretical question resonates with themes in fantasy and sci-fi literature, which critics have deemed as particularly suitable for narratives that deal with abstract ideas of cosmic significance. Among the most potent ideas explored by fantasy and sci-fi writings are those about utopia and dystopia. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien offers visions of both: while Mordor intends to bind all into one, Lóthlorien, the elusive elven country that awes and terrifies all, functions as a version of the fantastic story that allows diversity within oneness. Aragorn, the future King of Middle-earth, and Sam, the newly appointed Mayor of Bywater in the Shire, learn tremendously from their journeys into and back from the utopian Lóthlorien and the dystopian Mordor. In expounding the text from an ecological point of view, this paper speculates on the stance Tolkien's text may take on the specific environmental debate over the intertwined or antagonistic relation between the sense of the local and that of the global. It seems that, on this issue, Tolkien's ideas are often at odds with some environmentalists' calls that emphasize local resistance over global negotiation.

KEY WORDS

place

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The idea of place plays a major role in many modern and postmodern discourses that look into the impact of globalization on human ecology. One thorny issue that remains is how to deal with modern science and technology, which compete with and transform nature in human habitats. For human beings, however, the question is no longer simply a matter of choosing between science and nature, while they themselves remain as spectators and vote-casters aloof from the debates.

Current studies show that the relations between science, nature, and human beings are much more fluid, and the possible alliance and enmity among the three much more ambiguous, than just an unchanging, top-down, anthropocentric perspective allows (Massey and Jess; Adams). In line with this argument, Doreen Massey, Paul Quintas, and David Wield study how, for instance, high-tech science parks in England are strategically placed and carefully designed with much thought about blending their imagery harmoniously into the surrounding natural environment. Not only do science and nature cooperate in this case, but the deliberate presence of nature in high-tech science parks also issues an obvious commentary on the local, mainly manufacturing, economy as being “outmoded” (87). Here we see how, within a human community, different levels of science and technology compete with one another, and this rivalry has direct implications for the different types of human labor involved in the competing work cultures. At the same time, the very ideas of science, nature, and human inhabitants multiply, becoming unstable and self-critical in this case. That is, the placement and design of the high-tech science parks have made it problematic to think of science as a separate entity independent of humanity, or nature as a world out there detachable from human

cultural and technological conceptualizations of it. Not only do distinct human minds exist behind the high-tech science parks, but these minds also perceive nature and human ecological relations to it in variants of the cultural and technical terms adopted by the human minds that function behind the local manufacturing communities. The difference in concepts of science and nature appears in this instance acute enough to create critical rift within human society, and for another thing, to reveal the fundamental problem of imagining a homogeneous humanity in ecological discourses.

Consider, for another example, what Manuel Castells sees as the impact of the rising postmodern network society. Castells analyzes the construct and the many attributes of the “virtual” economic space called “the space of flows” which has been brought about by the revolution of information technology. The fluid sense of the territory of this new space has unsettled traditional notions about the physical borders and boundaries of a place. The missing tangible boundaries in turn challenge people’s sense of their immediate natural habitat, the locale. Not only does the space of flows with its many hubs and nodes become the new, overriding, organizing center of “function and power in our societies,” but it is also poised to impose, across the globe, an unfamiliar horizontal spatial logic that pressures the inhabitants of the presently power-hijacked local “places” to question their sense of the locale, governed basically by a vertical spatial logic. About the human effects of this spatial restructuring, Castells adds,

It follows a structural schizophrenia between two spatial logics that threatens to break down communication channels in society. The dominant tendency is toward a horizon of networked, ahistorical space of flows, aiming at imposing its logic over scattered, segmented places, increasingly unrelated to each other, less and less able to share cultural codes. (428)

It is therefore not enough to recognize how, for good or bad, science may have changed the natural environment and people’s sense of place. The process and resultant pattern of this technical makeover on both

global and local levels also requires investigation.

A case in point is the broad pattern of an intensifying sense of displacement experienced by human communities. As Anthony Giddens points out, while mechanization has become increasingly routinized around the world in the modern era, both nature and human social behaviors—significantly their interactions with the natural environment—are often predicated by and under the immediate threat of global homogenization (Giddens 76–77). In particular, two distinct developments are noted in the process of global mechanization: a) the ability to conduct business across vast distances within a minimum amount of time and b) the high mobility of human labor. As a result, all those cross-national/continental activities make it very difficult for local people to form a concrete relationship to their immediate habitats. This in turn has triggered a whole range of problems of displacement, or the problems of what Giddens describes as disembedding and John Tomlinson terms as “deterritorialization” (Giddens 20–22; Tomlinson 106–08). The main result of these problems is that place begins to lose more and more of its local significance, such that its distinctiveness ceases at the point where the world becomes an undifferentiated, single space. The resultant human effects include a sense of loss and indifference to the surrounding natural habitat, which seems unstable and predictable at the same time. As Roland Robert remarks, in a world after globalization, how to maintain “the expectation of uniqueness” has become a highly contested issue “after nostalgia” (50–51).

Finally, in response to all these ecological problems that come with globalization, the subsequent environmental solutions often focus on the urgent and practical need to re-establish a sense of place within human communities. In the local vs. global debate, the local-centered environmentalist view, to describe it in a nutshell, tends to focus on and privilege the local over the global, the sedentary over the migratory, the structured over the fluid, and the diachronic over the synchronic view of the inhabitants’ relation to their natural habitats. In addition, the local view implies that the sense of place and the responsibility towards one particular place are more relevant than, if not different from, the sense of the globe and the responsibility towards multiple places.

Meanwhile, some further debates have followed to look into whether the sense of locale should be defined against or at the expense of the sense of the globe (Massey and Jess 226–27). This eco-theoretical question resonates with themes in fantasy and sci-fi literature. In Richard L. Purtill's analysis of the genre, fantasy and sci-fi literature are particularly suitable for narratives that deal with abstract ideas of cosmic significance. And among the most potent ideas explored by fantasy and sci-fi writings are those about utopia and dystopia (Purtill 34). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien offers visions of both: while Mordor intends to bind all into one, Lóthlorien, the elusive elven country that awes and terrifies all, functions as a version of the fantastic story that allows diversity within oneness. Aragorn, the future King of Middle-earth, and Sam, the newly appointed Mayor of Bywater, have learned tremendously from their journeys into and back from the utopian Lóthlorien and the dystopian Mordor. In examining the text from an ecological point of view, this paper speculates on the stance Tolkien's text may take on the specific environmental debate over the intertwined or antagonistic relation between the sense of the local and that of the global. It seems that, on this issue, Tolkien's ideas are often at odds with some environmentalists' calls that emphasize local resistance over global negotiation.

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Though Tolkien has been lauded by many as one of the localist environmentalist forerunners, to my mind this does not seem to be the unambiguous stance taken up by *The Lord of the Rings*. Rather, quite the opposite, the text questions the view privileging the local, especially in the context of a global ecological crisis. This does not mean that the story ignores the pain and the burden of resistance of the local against the encompassing, homogenizing power of the global. Again, quite the opposite, the concluding episode of the battle of Bywater acknowledges the necessity of this local resistance. Still, the combined warfare in Mordor and then the Shire suggests that a meaningful sense of place can only be supported by an acute sense of

the globe. Consider the enigmatic character of Tom Bombadil. Primal, intuitive, powerfully resilient, and close to all lives in the Old Forest, Bombadil represents the best the Shire has to offer. “A moss-gatherer” in Gandalf’s words (*LOTR*, iii. 332), he yet chooses not to leave the Shire and get involved in the war against Sauron, which basically means that, if no one takes on the war in his stead, he is just waiting there to be destroyed along with all Middle-earth. Still, his choice is highly respected by all, including Gandalf, who is himself “a stone doomed to rolling” (*LOTR*, iii. 332). Furthermore, Bombadil’s local-centric position is seconded at least partially in spirit by Treebeard and the Ents, who also choose to remain in place in Fangorn (*LOTR*, iii. 312). With that choice not to roam and further search for Entwives, the Ents, perhaps tellingly, may also face extinction in *The Lord of the Rings* (although we don’t know whether the Entwives still exist).

Read in this light, Tolkien’s text seems to suggest that in a war for global ecological balance, options other than local resistance are still viable and worth considering, even if these other options don’t necessarily seem desirable for those who do choose to take them on. It’s thus important to recognize the multiple optional positions Tolkien’s text offers, from Bombadil, to Frodo, to Gandalf; from the Shire to Lóthlorien, Fangorn, and Gondor. In other words, besides being warmly embraced by the peace movement of 1960s and by green groups for its idyllic description of the life of the Shire, *The Lord of the Rings*, read from yet another angle, comes across as a war-leaning piece. Its narrative centers

- a) on a reluctant but inevitable war,
- b) on a handful of unlikely heroes being driven out of their familiar habitats to engage a homogenizing threat on a global level, either by choice or by the manipulative cultural, political, and economical forces or by yet other indefinable powers,
- c) on these individuals’ identities being compressed, expanded, and distorted to an extent unrecognizable even in their own eyes, and finally
- d) on a hard-fought, incomplete peace and a piece of nature susceptible to abuse by the local community as well as by the

global profiteers.

From an ecological standpoint, one further notices that the whole experience of the four hobbits, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, to wander across Middle-earth away from the familiar Shire and wage a war against Mordor, approximates the acute cultural experience of displacement such as is described by Giddens and Tomlinson. And after all that, while some other members of the original Fellowship continue to drift elsewhere, the hobbits come home, having become wiser and knowing better how to situate their rooted locale within the mobile globe. They are able to continue to marvel at the peace and nature of the little corner of the world they are in, although they themselves are inevitably a bit out of place because of their global experiences and synchronic vision. A significant detail shows how, once home, Frodo and his three companions find themselves being affectionately referred to, by other hobbits of the community, as “the Travelers” (*LOTR*, iii. 367). For all their efforts to rebuild the life in the Shire after the War of the Ring, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin are just short of becoming total strangers in their own homeland; the latter three do successfully re-integrate, but it takes time. Standard environmentalist ideas about the value of place and locale become very problematic and the four hobbits find themselves functioning in “the virtual space of flows.”

At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, many options are still viable, with some actions more clearly upheld than the others. Though not all of these could be readily subsumed under the modern and postmodern discourses on nature and ecology, they remain options. For our discussion, two messages seem significant towards the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. The first one concerns the ecological integrity of the Shire. As Frodo hauntingly remarks, the Shire that has changed while they were away, now with the implementation of a ruthless policing system and an exploitive manufacturing industry, has almost been turned into another Mordor.

“This is worse than Mordor!” said Sam. “Much worse in a way. It comes home to you, as they say; because it is home and you



remember it before it was all ruined.”

“Yes, this is Mordor,” said Frodo. (*LOTR*, iii. 360).

The ensuing local battle in Bywater is thus fought as a statement against mechanizing the Shire. Still, the way in which Mordor and the Shire in the course of the narrative have become mutually indexical tells us something about Tolkien’s complex views on place and space, or the local and the global. After the War of “Mordor,” both abroad and on the home front, the Shire, if not the whole of Middle-earth, inevitably changes. It has become a place that has a keener sense of both its distinct hominess, its strength, its potential, and its vulnerability, its dark propensity, and, for good or ill, its synchronic relation to Middle-earth as a whole. Without this global vision, the local purity of the Shire is a mere illusion.

The second message of the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings* is more disturbing: it concerns Frodo’s passing into the Grey Havens. The ring-bearer who knew firsthand the inevitability and the horror of the war with Mordor, surviving the war for ecological justice with an irreducible understanding of the high price of a piece of clean land, was so wounded in the process that he could not rest again in the Shire, but had to pass away into the elven haven beyond the sea. As Frodo had foreseen before he even actually set foot back in the Shire, “There is no real going back. Though I may come to the Shire, it will not seem the same; for I shall not be the same. I am wounded with knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?” (*LOTR* iii. 323). After his extensive wandering into many localities of key importance across Middle-earth, Frodo’s wounds, willing or not, could be understood as the inevitable side effects of drastic cultural hybridization, here to extend once again Tomlinson’s term into Tolkien’s text (Tomlinson 141–47). Witnessing the most glorious, as suggested by Lóthlorien, and the most horrifying, as suggested by Mordor, Frodo, the historian turned warrior, has forever become marginalized in the Shire—or any place in Middle-earth. Sam, the ring-bearer for a very short time, fares better. He has been “the Gardener” of the Shire and the strength of his rootedness shows forth

throughout his and Frodo's shared journey to Mordor and back. Especially towards the last segment of the climb to Mount Doom, Sam was often the one who stayed intuitive and had visionary sights of hope (e.g., *LOTR* iii. 234). As Jane Chance points out, his earthy personality appears, after experiencing Mordor, to have helped the process of his reinhabitation in the Shire (107). As Frodo reassures Sam: "But you will be healed. You were meant to be solid and whole, and you will be" (*LOTR* iii. 372). Perhaps also because of Frodo's long tenure as ring-bearer, Sam's reinhabitation remains deeper and stronger than Frodo's and it benefits the Shire more substantively.

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Now, if we consider the War of the Ring from an ecological perspective and zero in on Mordor as the main figure for the dark homogenizing power in *The Lord of the Rings*, the significance of this place becomes extremely unstable textually. Mordor is dark because it represents an excessive desire for control; as the inscription on the One Ring indicates, "One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them" (*LOTR* i. 66). This picture of Mordor's rule is bleak because Middle-earth will then become one totalized, homogeneous single space. But if Middle-earth manages to escape Sauron's long arms, isn't Aragorn restored as the King who returns in the end to rule over the vast territories across Middle-earth, and Sam also appointed as the future mayor of Bywater to look over the Shire? Thus, a structuring hierarchy between ruler and ruled is not done away with, but is maintained, and in fact it is made desirable. In what way, then, is one controlling structure different from the other? To consider this paradox, we may need to look elsewhere for explanation. This is exactly where Lóthlorien and the elements of the fantastic in *The Lord of the Rings* come in. Both Aragorn and Sam have intense connections to the elven country: Aragorn married Arwen, an elven daughter who willingly gave up her immortality to follow a mortal, and Sam has been an ardent believer of the elven lore, even when very little of it was provable to the provincial mindset of the rest

of the Shire. Their symbolic affinity with Lóthlorien may help explain the significance of the new hierarchical order after the war of Mordor. And to understand Lóthlorien as a fantastic counterpart to mechanical Mordor, one needs to examine the significance of legends, stories, and songs in *The Lord of the Rings*.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, plenty of legends, stories, and songs circulate and are cherished far afield by many. They function like kinetic thoughts connecting all Middle-earth dwellers. The fantastic narratives put into either poetry or songs cut through the barriers of time, distance, and otherwise impassible natural obstacles, such as the looming mountains, thundering rivers and ghostly murmuring forests, which separate and confine the various living things in their isolated realms. Scattered across this vast geographical land and even the generic spectrum, the Middle-earthlings define themselves and others in the stories and melodies they have made up, heard about, admired or shunned. And the strengths of the different species are in turn measured against their capacities for legendary narratives. The ones that respond to poetry and songs the most readily, such as the hobbits and the elves, or have the most intimate knowledge of fantastic materials, such as the wizards, are often the ones who either compose legends and songs or become legends themselves in the historic consciousness of Middle-earth dwellers.

All these direct or indirect dealings with legends, stories, and songs help circulate a worldview that each species may live separately, but all are bound up and measured against each other in the fantastic memory of Middle-earth. Take the hobbit, for example. Bilbo and Frodo write and enjoy silly songs about themselves, about their fondness for ale and "the bath at close of day." Sam and Ted, on the other hand, debate vehemently about the existence of the Ents beyond the North Moors and the elven Grey Havens out by the sea. Among all legends and songs, those about the elves are the most favored among the hobbits, if not all Middle-earth dwellers. They serve as a synchronic link and vision of a world so encompassing and inclusive that their wholeness is not only a possibility but a fantastic reality.

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Unlike the massive presence of Mordor with its deserts, marshes, frowning Mount Doom and the searching, controlling Eye of Power, Lóthlorien has only an airy existence in Middle-earth and, as mentioned earlier, it exists at first only as a story. What's more, this story could pan out to be one of puzzling significance, especially for the this-worldly men of Gondor and Rohan. Boromir observes, "But of that perilous land we have heard in Gondor, and it was said that few come out who once go in; and of that few none has escaped unscathed" (*LOTR* i. 443). Later, with other riders of Rohan, Éomer would also associate Galadriel, the lady of Lóthlorien, together with the now broken Fellowship, with evil sorcery: "Few escape her nets, they say. . . . But if you have her favour, then you also are net-weavers and sorcerers, maybe" (*LOTR* ii. 30). The full potency of the tale about Lóthlorien, nonetheless, is nowhere more revealing than when, after the disastrous loss of Gandalf to the Mines of Moria, the remaining Fellowship of the Ring is picked up by the elves and thus stumbles into the legendary elven world at the time of their greatest need. What the weary Fellowship from Middle-earth needs is a viable fantasy of wholeness and connectedness. And Lóthlorien reveals the many possibilities of such a fantasy.

To begin with, Lóthlorien demonstrates how, in a world of oneness, all creatures are to become both keen on and nonchalant about their diverse distinctiveness. A ready example concerns the less-than-smooth entry of Gimli, the dwarf, into the elven realm. On account of the past historical strife between elves and the dwarves, Gimli was asked, despite his earnest protest, to be blindfolded before stepping into the realm of Lóthlorien. Two ensuing actions indicate the calming sensibility this magical place instills into its visitors. Respecting the laws of the land, Aragorn convinces the rest of the Fellowship to be blindfolded like Gimli: "It is hard upon the Dwarf to be thus singled out. We'll all be blindfold, even Legolas" (*LOTR*, i. 456). Even Legolas, an elf and a kinsman in Lóthlorien, agrees to give up his sight, the most

distinctive generic quality for an elf, for the sake of the wholeness of the Fellowship. Already, through the magical land's testing and coaching, the Fellowship of Middle-earth grows closer and tighter, willingly over-writing their differences by the laws of the land. Halfway into Lóthlorien, they then receive Lady Galadriel's special favor for free entry without blindfolding. The epiphany has been achieved; the laws can relax. Later still Galadriel even defends Gimli against the harsh words of Celeborn, the elven Lord of Galadhrim. In response to Galadriel's defense of him, "the Dwarf . . . looked up and met her eyes; and it seemed to him that he looked into the heart of an enemy and saw there love and understanding. Wonder came into his face, and then he smiled in answer" (*LOTR*, i. 467).

During the Fellowship's visit to Lóthlorien, many an incident similar to Galadriel's reception of Gimli takes place. These incidents challenge all concepts about boundaries: those between species, laws and free will, enmity and love, real time and compressed time, physical reality and fantasy. The main point is not the mutual exclusiveness of these ideas but their fluidity in this fantastic world. Sam observes, "I've never heard of a better land than this. It's like being at home and on a holiday at the same time" (*LOTR* i. 474). It is in Lóthlorien that the four hobbits first learn about and begin to function in "the space of flows."

Secondly, Lóthlorien suggests how living things, nature, and even science can together achieve a certain mutually nourishing co-existence. The secret of this harmonious world seems to reside in the elves' marvelous relationship to their land. "[T]hey seem to belong here," as Sam the gardener quickly perceives, "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" (*LOTR* i. 473). Besides writing poetry and making music, the elves make wonderful items, always taking their inspirations from their beloved land. One of the best gifts the Fellowship has received from this encounter is an elven cloak for each. The cloak has a hue that is hard to describe. But their making was not through magic, as the unnamed elves' leader explains to Pippin: "They are elvish robes certainly, if that is what you mean. 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 thought of all that we love into all that we make” (*LOTR* i. 486). Later these camouflaging cloaks will protect the members of the Fellowship through many perils. It is through Lóthlorien that the Fellowship experiences the comfort of deep immersion in one’s natural surroundings. This revelation has the ring of classic ecological discourse. As Patrick Curry points out, “Tolkien’s prescient ecogism . . . anticipates, in many ways, both ‘social’ and ‘deep’ ecology, and retraces a pre-modern way of understanding the world which is still that of surviving indigenous tribal peoples” (28). The profound, nourishing relationship between the locale and the living creatures in and out of the land shows the Fellowship an ideal way to interact with nature and material objects. As Aragorn insists, all who come out of Lóthlorien will not be not scathed but not unchanged (*LOTR* i. 443).

Finally, Lóthlorien seems to carry a subtly subversive message, perhaps not for the fictional characters, but for the audience outside the narrative. That is, through the creation of the fantastic world of Lóthlorien, Tolkien might be attempting to construct a viable ecological discourse for the warring and mechanizing Middle-earth, using Lóthlorien as a model for maintaining ideal relationships not only with nature but with all living things. But the elven country also reminds one of the unpredictable dark forces behind all things natural, living, and creative. For example, Lóthlorien is closely linked to the art of magic-ring-making, which leads to Sauron’s stealing their art and the subsequent forging of the One Ring that ultimately becomes a threat to Middle-earth. And Elves have also other failings, such as what Purtil identifies as their possessive tendency, their resistance to change, in short, their unwillingness to give up things that should have come to their natural passing (75–76). All this is comparable in some ways to the Dark Lord’s obsessive desire for absolute power and control. Read in this light, Lóthlorien becomes a figure not just about deep embracing, but also about cautiously negotiating with nature, life and creativity. The main problem with such negotiations is that it’s hard to give an adequate projection for the outcome. Nature, life, and creativity, to use Lakoff, must be categorized as perilous things to be

awed and feared at once in Tolkien's mythological world. Lóthlorien may have many fantastic gifts to give, but the significance of these gifts is sometimes hard to define. It is at this point that Tolkien's ecological discourse becomes the most vulnerable, but it is all the more poignant for it.

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To conclude, it may be useful to survey once more the topography of Middle-earth. One notices that against the fantastic vision of wholeness and connectedness, there still persists the stubborn and fragmented physical exclusiveness of the different species residing across Middle-earth. The dwarves of the Misty Mountains, the elves of Mirkwood, the men of Rohan and Gondor, the wizards of Orthanc, the hobbits of the Shire, the Ents of Fangorn, as well as the goblins, the trolls, the orcs, and all other fell creatures under the sway of Mordor, all insist on their differences, if not quite scorning one another's peculiarities. This certainly suggests that diversity rules in Middle-earth: all creatures' distinct subjectivity is not to be ignored. However, *The Lord of the Rings* is more than just a tale acknowledging and embracing natural differences in all species. Centering on an ecological crisis in Middle-earth, the story depicts a war against the imminent tyrannical rule of conformity, or against what Curry implies, the prospect of devastating "ecocide" (77) symbolized by Mordor's intent of absolute dominance with the One Ring on its side. It is worth noting how the war for diversity and ecological balance is conceptually based on a belief, a fantastic pretext, that all things living are fundamentally and intimately bound up as one. Thus, on the thin fine line between diversity and oneness rises Tolkien's Middle-earth. Right on the edge of this line across the perilous landscape of Middle-earth are Lóthlorien and Mordor, unstable and never thoroughly resolved. So, even though Tolkien's fantastic narrative is intensely moral, and the forces of good and evil are ultimately unambiguous, the text remains complex, inter-relational, and problematic in some respects.

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