**The Lord of the Rings – a mythos applicable in unsustainable times?**

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This article explores the relevance of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* to environmental education and contemporary concerns about social and environmental injustices. It presents an account of the relationship between Tolkien’s environmental biography and those aspects of the story that highlight the connection between his personal experiential informal environmental education learning journey in the real world and his imaginative ‘sub-creation’. *The Lord of the Rings* is also considered a work of ‘fantasy’ or ‘speculative fiction’ that holds the potential to re-enchant the world by engaging the mythopoetic imagination, through a focus on its treatment of place, character and environmental ethics. In particular, it is argued that the story implicitly promotes, and is grounded in, a ‘Creation-centred’ ethic of stewardship. The article concludes with a discussion of pedagogical considerations on the continuing importance of the story as an inspirational work of literature, and its potential and limits as a source of inspiration for those engaged in challenging social and environmental injustices.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism; Tolkien; *The Lord of the Rings*; fantasy literature; mythopoetic imagination; creation spirituality; place-based education; environmental education

**Introduction**

J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*) is an epic tale set in the mythological realm of Middle-earth. Unfolding across a vast canvas of environmental and societal degradations and injustices wrought by the industrial–militaristic complex of the Dark Lord Sauron and his servants, the story traces the ultimately successful resistance offered by the seemingly inconsequential Hobbits and their allies. Whilst a self-contained work of fiction set within a fabulous realm and age, the ‘Battle for Middle-earth’ provides a host of themes relevant – or as Tolkien would have had it, ‘applicable’ – to the contemporary world, and would therefore seem a fruitful topic for exploration in terms of environmental education.

The story has represented a cultural phenomenon for nearly 50 years and has had a global impact, particularly in recent years with the highly acclaimed and popular adaptation for the screen by Peter Jackson (2001, 2002, 2003). But the films cannot be the only explanation – the books had already been translated into over 30 languages decades before the films were released. There is something, or rather, many things, about *LOTR* and the whole Middle-earth *Legendarium* which speak to people, young and old, from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. In particular, this paper argues
that the story has had, and crucially continues to have, a significant impact upon the environmental and moral imaginaries of many of its readers. Whilst coined in the popular technical sense some decades after publication, it would seem appropriate to use the term ‘sustainability’ in describing some key themes (social, economic and environmental) which emerge in *LOTR*. Furthermore, the story, it will be argued, possesses significant pedagogical potential, albeit implicit in nature, and more likely to be efficacious through processes associated with ‘self-education’, autodidacticism or ‘free choice’ learning than with formal educational approaches.

Tolkien was at pains to deny both the allegorical and topical nature of his imagined world. Yet he acknowledged the potential ‘applicability’ of the story in the minds, and to the lived experience, of readers (Tolkien 2007, xxvi). In environmental education terms, applicability can be discerned both in terms of its powerful evocation of environments and places; and more normatively in the implicit environmental and social justice messages contained within the narrative. One can, for example, discern messages concerning ‘right’/’just’ or ‘wrong’/’unjust’ ways to behave in relation to the environment and other ‘people’ (be they human or otherwise). The first flush of real popularity only occurred when the story was adopted by the counter-cultural movement in the 1960s, to whom it spoke directly in an era of Vietnam, Civil Rights and a proto-environmental movement. The story was similarly adopted by protestors within the Soviet Bloc in the 1980s (Curry 1998). Whilst the films in part account for the current renewed popularity, on a deeper level it may also speak of a renewed applicability expected of *LOTR* to the globalized and unsustainable world of today.

**An ecocritical approach informed by environmental education research**

The analysis offered here follows that of ecocriticism since it is concerned with exploring *LOTR* in terms of ‘issues of environmental imagining and representation… place as a fundamental dimension of both art and lived experience… and strong ethical and/or political commitment’ (Buell 2005, viii–ix). Ecocriticism has emerged from, and is still broadly allied to, literary criticism. It is particularly concerned with the relationship between literature and the environment although the focus of the field has broadened recently to consider other cultural artefacts such as film and media. What makes ecocriticism an innovative and important analytical field is its attempt ‘to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis’ (Kerridge 1998, 5). As might be expected given the inherent complexity of both the environmental movement and the field of literary criticism from which it has emerged, ecocriticism offers more of a broad research orientation than a prescriptive methodology. Consequently, the field is characterized by many alternative and sometimes antagonistic approaches and ‘readings’.

*LOTR* is a large work and offers a range of options for ecocriticism. For example, one might simply wish to critically evaluate the ‘science’ implicit in a narrative – for example, was *LOTR* based on now outdated understandings of succession and ‘steady state’ ecosystems? Alternatively, one might choose to focus on the rhetorical strategies and ‘environmental tropes’ such as ‘pollution’, ‘wilderness’, ‘pastoral’ or ‘apocalypse’ employed by the author; and to what effect, whether intentional or otherwise (Garrard 2004). From a more overtly ecofeminist reading, one might critically evaluate the text in terms of its gendered treatment of character and environment and the relationship between them. Thus for some ecofeminists, *LOTR* represents a problematic work given the relative absence of female characters and the emphasis on
‘masculine’ settings such as ‘wilderness’ (as a ‘macho’ context for challenge and adventure) and ‘the battlefield’ although certain male characters (such as the Elves and Ents) and settings (such as Rivendell and Lothlórien) do exhibit decidedly feminine traits (for a further exploration of this theme, see Rawls 1984).

Whilst acknowledging the value of pursuing such ecocritical trajectories, this article adopts a more focused and positive approach to its analysis. I seek to evaluate the narrative in terms of its relevance to contemporary environmental debates as a moralistic tale that Dickerson and Evans (2006, xvi) have argued ‘provides a deep and complex ecological vision incorporating many elements and spanning a broad spectrum of approaches, including positions compatible with both conservation and preservation in modern environmentalism’. As such the paper follows the admirable ecocritical analyses undertaken by Curry (1998) and Dickerson and Evans (2006) and my indebtedness to these works must be acknowledged. However, the paper extends the observations of these and other authors by drawing on concepts and lenses from environmental education research (such as on place attachment, significant life experiences, ecobiography and ecospirituality) to shed further light on how the book came to be written in terms of the significance of Tolkien’s own personal informal environmental education journey; and why the story still has such a powerful reaction in readers including, but not exclusively, children. As such it represents a case study of sorts that attempts to integrate several significant themes in environmental education using an ecocritical engagement with _LOTR_ as its focus.

It is appropriate at this point to acknowledge myself as one such reader who has had a powerful yet intermittent engagement with the work both in adolescence and, in preparation of this piece, adulthood – a period spanning two decades. This engagement presents several issues that must be acknowledged and addressed from the outset. First, an ecocritical approach necessarily involves the reflexive _subjective_ engagement of _an_ ecocritic (myself in this instance) with a literary text and other related materials. The relationship between reader and text can hardly be otherwise and, consequently, a claim to objectivity is never possible in such an analysis. Actually, as noted by Myhill (2007), to engage subjectively in reading a text or story is to:

> participate in creative transformations of words to ideas, understanding and imaginative engagement. It is a constructive endeavour of making personal meaning from text, not one of passively absorbing a message coded by the author of the text. Moreover, reading makes use of our social, moral and cultural understanding. (53)

Second, what follows in the analysis isn’t based on primary research (other, that is, than an important personal engagement with the work and other sources, as considered in the next section). No attempt has been made to obtain say, through questionnaire, interview, reflective journal or other empirical methods, firsthand reports from current or recent readers of _LOTR_ since these are not requirements for undertaking ecocriticism, as understood or practised here. Furthermore, such an approach would be too time-constrained to allow respondents to report reflexively on the impact _LOTR_ has had on them over an extended period of their lifetime – 20 years in the case of the present author – which represents an important theme of this article. Occasionally though first person voices are presented from secondary sources precisely because they demonstrate such a more reflexive and lifelong engagement with the story.

Third, the purpose of this inquiry has not been to provide any detailed pedagogical recommendations. This is not to suggest that more concrete educational planning isn’t possible or desirable, merely that it is beyond the scope of the article. This reticence
is for two reasons. Firstly, as an educator with a background in geographical education, environmental education and education for sustainable development, I do not have the requisite experience to do this work justice unlike colleagues with expertise in the teaching of literature. Secondly, there is a complex relationship between the educative/didactic vis-à-vis entertainment purposes and processes of storytelling. Sometimes this can be synergistic, a principle exploited in ‘edutainment’; sometimes it can prove antagonistic leading to disengagement and resistance on the part of learners. Added to this is the simple fact that it would be extremely challenging to handle a work of such length within the confines of the formal curriculum or typical informal educational programmes. Furthermore, external motivators and frameworks can prove inimical to the processes through which stories operate best autodidactically through ‘free choice’ or ‘self-learning’. You cannot, neither should not, make people read LOTR, dictate their engagement with it, nor expect them to be edified by it.

This reader and writer

Given the preceding discussion concerning the importance of personal engagement to ecocritical methods, it is important to outline some relevant personal background. My first encounter with the book was somewhat accidental or serendipitous. Nearly 25 years ago I was mesmerized by the innovative although flawed Bakshi (1978) animated adaptation which inspired me to go to the original source. I must admit that as an undergraduate merely seeking distraction I found the written text hard going on occasion and very nearly gave up. Similarly, my personal re-engagement with LOTR was first and foremost precipitated by Jackson’s films. The not inconsiderable effort needed to re-read the book was partly sustained by the desire to respond to the call for papers which gave rise to this special issue of Environmental Education Research (i.e., to write this article). However, as I found the efforts personally worthwhile I can also now attest to the potential for profound and unexpected personal learning to arise from such seemingly superficial extrinsic motivations.

I note too that the informal learning I experienced through reading LOTR as a callow youth was qualitatively inferior to the more recent given the intervening quarter-century of lived experience and maturing of my mythopoetic imagination (see below). The reflexively ecocritical engagement required in order to write this article was also significant for making this second encounter a more meaningful learning experience. For example, apart from the benefits of engaging in reflexive intellectual work, my own enjoyment of LOTR has also been greatly enhanced by significant spells in the outdoors in the kinds of places (moorland, woodland, mountain, marsh) that Tolkien describes so well. I have ‘felt’ transported to Middle-earth because the various environments (but thankfully not all) felt familiar. Indeed, my second encounter proved much richer than the first partly because I also now have a wealth of specifically environmental experiences upon which to draw after nearly 20 years as a geographical and environmental educator.

In addition to such generic environmental experiences, I have developed a deeply personal and meaningful connection to the story as a consequence of discovering some significant coincidences between Tolkien’s and my own ‘environmental biography’ in the course of researching this article. Significant coincidences include Cannock Chase and Great Bridgeford, Birmingham and Moseley, the Worcestershire Landscape and the Alps. The significance of these particular places for Tolkien is detailed below but it suffices to say that these are all places that I too have significant
lived experience of and very close attachment to. It was also personally gratifying to learn that Tolkien chose Welsh as the basis of one of his Elvish languages thanks to its beauty since this is my heritage (although I am currently a non-Welsh speaker). Finally, it is important to recognize a particular affinity I have come to feel for the story which is informed by an understanding of Tolkien’s Creation-centred spirituality and focus upon mythology and mythopoetics which represent key themes I explored in my doctoral thesis (Morgan 2007).

**A fairy story for children or an adult mythos? The lifelong educational potential of **The Lord of the Rings**

*LOTR* is undoubtedly popular with children and young adults including readers as young as 10, and it is often to be found in school libraries (including Primary) and in the ‘children’ and ‘adolescent’ sections of bookshops. In this respect, *LOTR* may be legitimately treated as ‘children’s literature’ since children read it. However, whilst originally conceived as a sequel to *The Hobbit* (undisputedly a children’s story), *LOTR* quickly took on a darker and more adult tone (Tolkien, Letter 34, cited in Carpenter 2006, 41) and Tolkien actually thought it ‘quite unfit for children’ (Tolkien, Letter 124, cited in Carpenter 2006, 136). Although he was pleased to hear that children enjoyed aspects of the story, it concerned him that they would encounter the work ‘too early’ when ‘they must fail to understand most of it’ (Tolkien, Letter 234, cited in Carpenter 2006, 310) and then wouldn’t bother to read it again when they were ‘ready’. He needn’t have worried since many who encountered the book at a young age have sustained a lifelong engagement with it, often rereading it repeatedly throughout their youth and into adulthood; or coming to it again with the film versions, or when, as a parent, they choose to share it with their children. This desire to revisit Middle-earth could be seen as mere nostalgia and a desire to recapture lost youth. Yet, an alternative explanation can be proffered – people find that they ‘grow’ with the story as they mature to the extent that the ‘child’ vis-à-vis ‘adult’ readings, whilst equally legitimate, may be very different. Consider this father’s reflections on re-reading the *LOTR* to his nine-year old son:

> For a long and magical run of nights, I journeyed together with my son through the great three-volumed world of Middle-earth … But Sean did not hear the same book as the one I read to him.

> What he discovered was the same book I had discovered that sleepless night in the land of Long Ago and Far Away – the single best adventure story ever written. As an adult, however, I found that during my long absence it had transformed into something else entirely. It was now the saddest book in the world … This is a book sad with wisdom. It moved me in ways my son could not feel. (Swanwick 2003, 35–7)

Thus *LOTR* represents a work which arguably straddles ‘children’s’, ‘adolescent’/‘young-adult’ or ‘adult’ literature. Consequently, this article wishes to extend the horizons within which *LOTR* may be considered appropriate as a potential vehicle for environmental education from childhood to ‘lifelong learning’, and to direct consideration to its varying significance at different phases of the lifespan.

The fact remains, however, that many consider *LOTR* as juvenile (see Moorcock 2004). Why is this? And how can it be refuted? In answer to the first question, the most likely explanation is that, as a work of ‘fantasy’, it is considered obviously ‘for
children’. Tolkien happily acknowledged the former contention whilst vehemently denying the latter. He wanted to rehabilitate the fairytale and ‘myth’ as an adult genre (Tolkien, Letters 159 and 181, cited in Carpenter 2006, 209, 232–3). Of course Tolkien’s concern was not with childish ‘fairies’ in the Victorian nursery sense but with adventures and explorations into the ‘Perilous Realm of Faërie’ and its ‘shadowy marches’ (Tolkien 2001). *LOTR* should properly be considered a work of ‘speculative fiction’ which imaginatively explores a fantastical alternative ‘world’. Such works, both in their production and consumption, exercise what has been referred to as the mythopoetic imagination because they involve ‘a different approach to reality, an alternative technique for apprehending and coping with existence. It is not anti-rational but para-rational; not realistic, but surrealistic, superrealistic; a heightening of reality’ (Le Guinn, cited in Hunt 2003, 10). Rather than using our default workaday cognitive capacities, such literature stretches us intellectually, stimulates the imagination, and engages our creativity. From such a perspective the:

interface between children’s literature and adult fantasy is a fruitful continuum that has led many younger readers into adult fantasy and that has helped preserve childhood’s pure delight in imagination well into adulthood for many readers and writers of fantasy. (Mathews 2002, 17–18)

For this reason the comic fantasy *Discworld* series author, Terry Pratchett, speaking in defence of Tolkien specifically and fantasy generally, says:

that fantasy is one of the best things a growing mind can read because it’s kind of like an exercise bike for the brain. It doesn’t actually take you anywhere but it really tones up the muscles that will. (Pratchett in the documentary *Ringers* [Cardova 2005])

A recognition of the educational value, as opposed to error, of engaging the mythopoetic imagination through fantasy may be extended to a consideration of the personal and cultural importance of ‘myths’. According to Armstrong (2001), humanity has evolved two modes of thinking, *logos* and *mythos*: the former is concerned with application of rationality to solve practical problems and gain knowledge about the phenomenal world; the latter, conversely, is concerned with the search for meaning in the face of the existential, psychological and metaphysical dimensions of life. Both modes are considered important and complementary. However, with the advent of Enlightenment and Modernity, the championing of *logos*-centric rationalities has been at the expense of the devaluation of *mythos*-centric possibilities. The world has consequently become disenchanted.

Turning the popular understanding of ‘myth’ as untruth on its head, ‘other world’ genres and ‘mythic’ narratives are concerned with deep ‘truths’ about our existential ‘being-in-this-world’ which a prosaic instrumental rationality obscures: ‘It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; and tree, and grass; house and fire; bread and wine’ (Tolkien 2001, 60). This provides a very strong case for using fantasy literature of ‘other worlds’ with young people (Hunt and Lenz 2003) and to look for opportunities to exercise the mythopoetic imagination across and beyond the curriculum by both learners and teachers (Leonard and Willis 2008). This can also be seen as crucial concern of certain discourses within environmental education and education for sustainable development which see such mythic re-enchantment of the world as the precursor to developing a deep affection for, and ethic of care and reverence towards,
the environment (see Abrams 1997; Dyer and Hodgson 2003). In support of this perspective, Armstrong (2005, 143) argues that the ‘mythic’ dimension of human experience is needed:

> to see beyond our immediate requirements, and enable us to experience a transcendent value that challenges our solipsistic selfishness. We need myths that help us to venerate the earth as sacred once again, instead of merely using it as a resource.

She further argues that contemporary western society can re-engage with this mythic dimension through art, music and literature in addition to religious or spiritual practice.

Tolkien clearly shared this view. He agreed with the assertion that fantasy literature is ‘escapist’ but argued that it assists the ‘good escape of the prisoner’ into reality, rather than the ‘flight of the deserter’ from it (Tolkien 2001). Such is an escape from familiarity borne of possessiveness and appropriation (Tolkien 2001) into ‘wonder’ which works by leading us out of ‘the drab blur of triteness or familiarity… [to the freedom to see] things as we are (or were) mean to see them – as things apart from ourselves’ (58). Thinking specifically in environmental education terms, LOTR:

> serves to reintroduce us to the wonders and beauties of the natural world around us, which we tend to accept rather than to wonder at as legitimate Things of Marvel. He [Tolkien] also turns to the materials from which fantasy is made – materials which lie all around us – showing how fantasy enlarges and underscores our appreciation of the real world, the Primary World. (Carter 2003, 75)

For Tolkien fantasy, myth and the fairy tale allow the satisfaction of ‘primordial human desires’: ‘One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is … to hold communion with other living things’ (Tolkien 2001, 13). These require the exercise of childlike (as opposed to childish) qualities on the part of both creator and receiver such as ‘the joy of invention and discovery, the wonder at variety and ingenuity – the fresh view of the different, the other’ (Hunt 2003, 4). However, the aim is clearly not to arrest the ‘learner’ in infantilism; nor is it restricted to the earliest phases of lifelong learning. According to Dickerson and Evans (2006), ‘Tolkien suggests that the shaping of the imagination paradoxically involves both the development of maturity and the recapture of a childlike understanding of the world’ (256). In Tolkien’s own words:

> Children are meant to grow up, and not to become Peter Pan’s. Not to lose innocence and wonder; but to proceed on the appointed journey: upon which it is certainly not better to travel hopefully than to arrive. But it is one of the lessons of fairy (if we can speak of the lessons of things that do not lecture) that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom. (Tolkien 2001, 45)

Thus, Tolkien thought in terms of a lifelong journey of personal (moral and spiritual) growth towards wisdom which he hoped to facilitate through his works of fiction. Indeed, part of LOTR’s ‘enduring appeal [is] because nearly every member of the Company undergoes immense moral and spiritual growth’ (Wood 2003, 84) with which readers can identify. In this sense, LOTR could be seen as a Bildungsroman, a story detailing the journey to maturation of its chief protagonists. But as has already been noted it might not be the same story at all life-phases. For its part, LOTR explores such existential themes as mortality, loss, sacrifice and proper conduct in the face of
despair. These are the ‘sad’ dimensions that the maturing mind is more likely to foreground in the story, and from which wisdom ensues; and which Tolkien feared would be lost on ‘immature’ or inexperienced minds. Consequently, LOTR is as much an adult as a children’s story and it is the contention of this paper that it holds great potential in terms of environmental education for both young and older readers, a point attested to by the legion of Tolkien fans of all ages who acknowledge the work as having transformed them deeply and for the better (the Ringers documentary contains numerous such vox pop admissions). The efficacy of the tale in this respect is significantly a consequence of the particular (environmental) biography of the author, to which we now turn.

Midland-Earth and beyond: Tolkien’s formative years

If you really want to know what Middle-earth is based on, it’s my wonder and delight in the earth as it is, particularly the natural earth. (Tolkien cited in Carter 2003, 2)

One crucial dimension or task of literary criticism is ‘to question who wrote the book, why they wrote it, and what values and opinions are embedded in the book’ (Myhill 2007, 54). In order to understand how the imaginative world of Middle-earth was created, it is helpful to consider the ‘leaf mould’ of memories (Tolkien, Letter 324, cited in Carpenter 2006, 409) from which Tolkien drew inspiration, his own ‘environmental education’ and ecobiography (Doerr 2004). Tolkien exhibited a very strong ‘Place Attachment’ (Altman and Low 1992) to, and ‘Place Identity’ (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff 1995) with, the ‘English Midlands’. This strong sense, or need, for rootedness through both familial and geographical ties was a consequence of tumultuous events in his early life which largely account for the story’s emphasis on loss and recovery (Mathews 2002). He lost both parents at an early age and was never settled for long. Yet, Tolkien’s strong regional identity wasn’t merely a self-conscious and romantic identification with a nebulous and socially constructed ‘Imagined Community’ (Anderson 1991). His formative years were largely spent in Birmingham and the surrounding countryside where he developed a strong experientially based connection to the landscapes, ecology and people. He had, in environmental education research terms, ‘significant life experiences’ (Chawla 1992, 1999, 2002), both positive and negative, which greatly informed the world of Middle-earth he created.

Invariably his times in the countryside were idyllic and contrasted strongly with his enforced periods in the rapidly industrializing and urbanizing city. From 1896 to 1900, the Tolkiens’ famously moved to the hamlet of Sarehole in the Cole Valley just outside the city, which instilled a deep and abiding love of the countryside and nature, and trees in particular. He reflected on these four years as being ‘the longest seeming and most formative part of my life’ (cited in Carpenter 2002, 42). Some notable features and events associated with this period provided the inspiration for ‘the Shire’, the idyllic if somewhat parochial home of the Hobbits. Thus Sarehole Mill, the local fords and the ‘wonderful dell with flowers’ (Tolkien cited in Ezard 1991) reappear as Sandyman’s Mill, the Ford of Bruinen, and a host of places such as the Old Forest, Fangorn Forest and the Midgewater Marshes (Blackham 2006). The garden party to celebrate Queen Victoria’s jubilee in 1897 provided the likely inspiration for ‘the Long-expected Party’ (Tolkien 2007, 35–40). Similarly, Tolkien’s memory of being
chased by a farmer for picking mushrooms is projected onto Frodo (Tolkien 2007, 122). The doors of local forges were horseshoe-shaped which might have provided the inspiration for the round hobbit doors (Blackham 2006); and he adopted the local term for cotton wool – ‘gamgee’ – as Samwise’s surname. Through this early biography, Tolkien was able create an imaginary place – the Shire – which has had such enduring appeal as ‘homely’ because he was effectively writing about the places he himself called home and cared deeply about. Mathews has characterized _LOTR_ as a work concerned with the ‘struggle to survive and recover from loss… of geographical, social, political, and moral systems’ (Mathews 2002, 61). All are relevant in terms of the current discussion of the relevance of _LOTR_ to sustainability although perhaps the first – geographical – is particularly pertinent. One might say that on one level _LOTR_ mythically recounts the struggle for physical _and_ psychological survival and recovery of ‘place’ or vibrant, locally distinctive and convivial places in the face of modern processes advancing both diminished generic ‘non-places’ (Augé 1995) and geo-social anomie or ‘placelessness’ (Relph 1974).

While the ‘significant life experience’ literature is usually focused on positive experiences, it should also be noted that significance can accrue from negative experiences of place. Middle-earth is also replete with awesome, fearful and/or degraded landscapes which can also be accounted for in terms of Tolkien’s environmental biography. *The scouring of the Shire* (Tolkien 2007, 1306–35) tells of its degradation which paralleled that observed by Tolkien as the metropolis inexorably encroached upon Sarehole: ‘The country in which I lived in childhood was being shabbily destroyed before I was ten, in the days when motor-cars were rare objects (I had never seen one) and men were still building the suburban railways’ (xxvi–xxvii). The young Tolkien once observed that a favourite willow had been cut down in a seemingly wanton act: ‘They didn’t do anything with it: the log just lay there. I never forgot that’ (cited in Carpenter 2002, 39). Indeed he didn’t and the episode is likely to have been the inspiration for both Treebeard’s description of the behaviour of the Isengarders: ‘Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot – orc mischief that’ (Tolkien 2007, 617); and the destruction of the party tree:

‘They’ve cut it down!’ cried Sam. ‘They’ve cut down the Party Tree!’ He pointed to where the tree had stood under which Bilbo had made his Farewell Speech. It was lying lopped and dead in the field. As if this was the last straw Sam burst into tears. (Tolkien 2007, 1330)

Sarehole Mill presented the young Tolkien with a vision of large-scale mechanization which he took to be out of place in the landscape. It reappears as a polluting presence as part of Sharkey’s (aka Saruman) ‘redeveloped’ and exploited Shire. Tolkien’s less than welcome spells in Birmingham presented him with ample inspiration for scenes of hubris and mal-development associated with the emerging machine age. He encountered large, ornate towering buildings which no doubt provided inspiration for the many towers which populate Middle-earth. Tolkien would also have drawn on his experiences of the metallurgical and extractive industries at various places within the city and surrounding Black Country for the industrialization of Isengard:

Once it had been green and filled with avenues, and groves of fruitful trees, watered by streams that flowed from the mountains to a lake. But no green things grew there in the latter days of Saruman. The roads were all paved with stone-flags, dark and hard; and
beside their border instead of trees there marched long lines of pillars, some of marble, some of copper and of iron, joined by heavy chains.

Many houses there were … so that all the open circle was overlooked by countless windows and dark doors. Thousands could dwell there, workers, servants, slaves, and warriors … The plain, too, was bored and delved. Shafts were driven deep into the ground … Iron wheels revolved there endlessly, and hammers thudded. At night plumes of vapour steamed from the vents, lit from beneath with red light, or blue, or venomous green. (Tolkien 2007, 723–4)

Or compare the following fictional but realistic description of the Black Country in Francis Brett Young’s *Far forest* –

a sunless, treeless waste, within a crescent of mournful hills from whose summits a canopy of eternal smoke was suspended above a slagged desert, its dead surface only variegated by… mounds on which the mineral and metallic waste of these [industrial activities] had been tipped, as on gigantic middens; by drowned clay-pits and sullen canals whose surface appropriately reflected an apocalyptic sky. (Cited in Hooke 2006, 229)

– with:

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 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. They had come to the desolation that lay before Mordor: the lasting monument to the dark labour of its slaves that should endure when all their purposes were made void; a land defiled, diseased beyond all healing – unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion. ‘I feel sick,’ said Sam. Frodo did not speak. (Tolkien 2007, 825)

But for biographical inspirations for the more awesome and horrific events and landscapes one must also look to Tolkien’s ‘significant life experiences’ beyond the Midlands and Britain. Before he left South Africa (where he was born), he was bitten by a tarantula, an experience which possibly provides the origins of Shelob, one of his most fearsome creatures. In 1911, at the age of 17, Tolkien joined family friends on a trip to the Swiss Alps which enabled him to write evocatively about the Fellowship’s abortive attempt to cross over Caradhras. Surely the grimmest part of Tolkien’s younger life was spent in the trenches of the Somme. Here, as Tolkien himself admitted (Letter 226, cited in Carpenter 2006, 303), are the origins of the horrors of the Dead Marshes. He was spared the fate of so many of his friends through contracting ‘trench fever’ which was a debilitating and recurring disease, an experience which allowed him to write with some authority on the progressive physical, emotional and even spiritual debilitations endured by Frodo as Ring Bearer.

By 1917, when Tolkien began writing the tales that would evolve into his whole *Legendarium* whilst convalescing in Great Haywood in Staffordshire (close to where he had undergone his basic training in Cannock Chase), he had had the key experiences which would provide the ‘leaf mould’ for his imaginative creation. From this point on, Tolkien drew on these experiences as well as his intimate knowledge of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic myths to develop, through the exercise of his mythopoetic imagination, his own personal mythos. This he undertook over the
remainder of his life purely for his own enjoyment (Tolkien, Letters 163 and 328, cited in Carpenter 2006, 211, 412) or, more probably, because he was driven to do so as an act of ‘sub-creation’ (Tolkien 2001). This use of personal narratives and personal mythologizing giving rise to an imaginal world has been identified as a powerful approach to personal growth in humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Rowan 1993, 2001). However, Tolkien was also motivated to ‘create a myth for England’ (Letter 131, cited in Carpenter 2006, 144–5), a mythological geography which could be gifted for the edification of his compatriots.

**Inspiring places, people and environmental ethic**

Tolkien gave us wonderful characters, evocative prose, some stirring adventures and exciting battles … but it is the place that we remember most of all. (Martin 2003, 3)

Hunt (2003) distinguishes between literary ‘otherworlds’ that are ‘mappable’ and therefore convincing as a ‘place’ or ‘realm’ as opposed to those that exhibit a ‘nebulous geography’ in which things just happen. Middle-earth is most certainly of the former type and is generally recognized as a particularly veridical one. This ability to evoke places, landscapes and a coherent geography is one of the greatest strengths of Tolkien’s writing, and part of the joy of reading LOTR is to be transported by the narrative into the places themselves, places which stay in the memory:

I can still remember the luminous green of the beechwoods, the freezing air of the mountains, the terrifying darkness of the dwarf mines, the greenery on the slopes of Ithilien, west of Mordor, still holding out against the encroaching shadow … I remember it at least as clearly as – no, come to think of it, more clearly than – I do many of the places I’ve visited in what we like to call the ‘real’ world … Middle-earth is a place I went to. (Pratchett 2003, 81–2)

Tolkien’s powers of description are legendary although readers are better able to appreciate these imaginary places if they have an experiential frame of reference as a guide as noted earlier in terms of my auto-ethnographic engagements. Equally, one may take Tolkien’s imaginary places ‘back’ into the real world in a deeply experiential manner. Thus Duane, describing a visit to the Alps, was shocked to find that:

I looked across the great blue gulf of air and saw them there, as perhaps he did …: Celebdil, Fanuidhol, and Caradhras the Cruel; Silvertine, Cloudyhead, and the terrible Redhorn. For just a flicker of time, genuinely, physically, I was in Middle-earth. (Duane 2003, 127)

Turning from the landscape, LOTR is populated by a range of traditional and invented fantasy creatures and ‘peoples’ or races. The chief protagonists are, of course, the Hobbits, often referred to as Halflings due to their diminutive stature. Hobbits are portrayed as a people close to nature, who love growing things and who value craftsmanship. Orcs, in contrast, value clever, labour saving devices or those of ‘mass destruction’ and enjoy destroying things. Hobbits manage their affairs communally with very little hierarchical leadership and exhibit a simple ‘joie de vivre’ based on friendship, singing, dancing and feasting. Parties are occasions for distributing material wealth much like the traditional potlatch of the Pacific North West (Dwarves and Dragons, in contrast, are hoarders). This simple, non-accumulative yet hardworking
lifestyle enable them more than any other people to withstand the influence of the Ring of Power, although they are not completely immune.

Clearly, Tolkien was not drawing inspiration from contemporary environmental utopian thinking but it is interesting to note the resemblances of the Shire to the societal ideals advocated by the bioregional movement (Carr 2004; McGinnis 1999) and the ‘municipal communalism’ envisioned by social ecologists (Clark 1990). Tolkien however provides a much needed caution against overly fetishizing the ‘local’ which is sometimes a characteristic of environmental utopian thinking. The parochialism of the Shire makes the Hobbits easy prey to Saruman/Sharkey and it is only through the intervention and leadership of the now worldly wise Hobbits of the Fellowship that the ‘Scouring of the Shire’ may take place. Tolkien also makes other implicit recommendations for ‘right social relations’. He advances a preference for ‘unity-in-diversity’ (a motif in accord with Tolkien’s Christian Trinitarianism): the heterogeneous alliance of autonomous individuals or peoples working collaboratively and selflessly towards a common goal for the Greater Good. This is exemplified by the Nine Walkers of the Fellowship specifically and the Free People of Middle-earth generally, once they have overcome their internecine squabbles, that is. These are set in opposition to the Nine Riders (the ghostly Ring Wraiths who have become de-individualized and homogenous drones of Sauron) and the dark forces of both Sauron and Saruman (who are motivated by fear and greed and are constantly quarrelling amongst themselves).

Turning more specifically to environmental ethics, Saruman quite literally exhibits a technical–scientific instrumentalist rationality: ‘He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except insofar as they serve him for the moment’ (Tolkien 2007, 616). His goal is ‘Knowledge, Rule, Order’ (338) and the desire to become a ‘Power’ (161) which he pursues at the expense of both landscape (Isengard and the Shire) and vulnerable people (e.g., Hobbits) which are considered expendable. This is an unsustainable ethic that gives rise to both social and environmental injustice which have echoes in the ‘many of the destructive outcomes of political and commercial globalization today’ (Elder 2006, xi). Saruman can be contrasted with Tom Bombadil – an enigmatic character who does not appear in the films. Tolkien described him as ‘the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxfordshire and Berkshire countryside’ (Tolkien, Letter 19, cited in Carpenter 2006, 26) and as a non-instrumentalist:

exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, because they are ‘other’ and wholly independent of the enquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with ‘doing’ anything with the knowledge. (Tolkien, Letter 153, cited in Carpenter 2006, 192)

Bombadil neither seeks, nor is beholden to, any Power, but is in tune with, and supremely of, the Created world, perhaps making him something akin to a Daoist master – ‘He is his own Master’ (Tolkien 2007, 346).

The actions of Sauron and Saruman and their acolytes are clearly unsustainable. Fortunately, the story also presents alternative visions for engaging with and caring for the environment. Dickerson and Evans (2006) identify three: agriculture practiced by the Hobbits in the Shire; horticulture associated with the Elves and Entwives; and fericulture – the care of ‘wilderness’ exemplified by the Ents. The first two management regimes admit a greater degree of manipulation of nature whereas the third is more in keeping with a ‘deep ecology’ ethic (Devall and Sessions 1985; Naess 1989) and it is perhaps unsurprising that the Ents are particularly popular with ‘Deep Greens’:
We saw the Ents as characters who represented defenders of the environment. And in that we really saw some solidarity between what they were after – defending the forest – and what we’re after as Green Party members which is also defending the forest. So we’ve used them as sort of a mascot for today. (Derek Iversen in Ringers)

The general principle which connects ‘right’ management of the biophysical and social realms throughout LOTR is Good Stewardship, ‘the benevolent, selfless custodial care’ (Dickerson and Evans 2006, xx) of that which we do not own but has been entrusted to our care, be it the environment or community. Denethor, who occupies the position of ‘Steward of Gondor’ is actually a Bad Steward for whom ‘stewardship is all about rule and authority’ (38). He refuses to relinquish his illegitimate power with the Return of the King; and when his personal future looks bleak, he simply falls into a paralysing and ultimately suicidal despair. Gandalf, in contrast, is a paragon of the Good Steward who says:

the rule of no realm is mine … But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I am also a steward. (Tolkien 2007, 992)

This ethic of Stewardship was based upon Tolkien’s own Creation-centred Catholic faith: right action concerns the celebration, preservation and restoration of Creation. Those responsible for marring it or who try to manipulate it for self-glorification are guilty of sin and need to be opposed. But such opposition should not itself be used as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement (a further sin of which Boromir and Denethor are both guilty) but rather based on thoroughly Christian virtues of love, humility, pity, compassion and service to others – virtues exhibited by Gandalf, Frodo, Sam, Aragorn and Faramir amongst others. Yet, responsibility for the defence and rehabilitation of Creation may not be at first recognized; nor might the correct course of action be immediately apparent. Like the Ents, and the Shire Hobbits at the end of the story, people may need to be both roused to action and empowered or conscientized (Freire 1970) to become a ‘change agents’ capable of, on the one hand, resisting the seduction of power (which all too often leads to sin in the senses noted above), and, on the other, taking affirmative action to overcome injustice (Freire 1970). These are themes and processes of particular significance to transformative and socially critical interpretations of environmental education, including matters touched on in a recent article in this journal by Hitzhusen (2007) and also has particular relevance to some more ‘critical’ readings of pedagogies of place (see Gruenewald 2003a, 2003b, and below).

Sam, perhaps the ‘chief hero’ of the story (Tolkien, Letter 131, cited in Carpenter 2006, 161), is the character who matures most to become the Good Steward of the Shire. When he briefly becomes a Ring Bearer due to Frodo’s incapacitation by Shelob’s sting, he successfully chooses to resist its alluring powers because he recognizes that his needs are simple and his station in life humble:

he knew in the core of his heart that he was not large enough to bear such a burden … The one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command. (Tolkien 2007, 1178)

Indeed, Sam is a gardener par excellence and he is the chief restorer of the newly Scoured Shire, selflessly using Galadrial’s gift of bountiful dust and the Mallorn seed
for the benefit of everyone (Tolkien 2007, 1338–9). The Appendices reveal that Sam also becomes steward of the community as seven-times elected Mayor (Tolkien 2007, 1441–2).

In many ways then, Sam is the exemplary embodiment of the virtues of Stewardship noted by Dickerson and Evans above. Cooper’s (2006) meditations on the primary object of such stewardship return us to the question of our relation to the land. For Cooper, the ‘meaning’ of gardens and gardening is one that can afford ‘epiphanies’. Cooper first advances a ‘modest’ proposal: that gardening can awaken an appreciation of the ‘unity between human beings and the natural world, an intimate co-dependence’ (136). He then goes on to advance a ‘further’ proposal of a more mysterious ‘epiphany’ possible, that of the ‘co-dependence of human existence and the “deep ground” of the world and ourselves’ (145). Thus, the garden may yield intimations of transcendence; and the practice of gardening, conducted with the right ‘enlightened sensibility’ ‘to the world as a gift that “needs” us, its creative recipients’ (150) is conducive to the realization of such transcendence. Sam as ‘gardener’, and in the final scene, cultivating his cottage garden, provides a literary vehicle that exemplifies both senses of ‘epiphany’ and, as such, ably illustrates the ethical and metaphysical core of *LOTR*. It is no less than appropriate that the story ends with Sam’s homecoming (Tolkien 2007, 1349).

**Conclusion**

We’re in solidarity with the People of Middle Earth. In support of the environment and social justice. (Derek Iversen in *Ringers*)

In the words of Gandalf, ‘he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom’ (Tolkien 2007, 337). Tolkien’s implicit disapproval of such an analysis also suggests an important caution for educators keen to formulate a prescriptive environmental education programme or scheme of work based on *LOTR* which might unintentionally destroy the ‘magic’ or efficacy of the story through the exercise of an instrumentalist rationality.

As this article has hopefully demonstrated:

a literary study that articulates Tolkien’s emphasis on restraining our individual appetites, defending beloved landscapes against the ethical and technological challenges symbolized by Mordor, and fostering sustainability in our communities can amplify the author’s potential for exercising an impact on present-day values and practices. (Elder 2006, x)

It points to the desirability of promoting ecocritical, reflexive engagements with *LOTR* for environmental education, providing these are sensitively handled. Certainly, this kind of inquiry has proved personally fruitful. The hope is that it will prove so also for the wider environmental education community and provide a stimulus for further environmental education informed ecocriticism to be undertaken as an end in itself into *LOTR* in its various other incarnations; or, indeed, into other works of ‘speculative fiction’. It remains to be seen how such studies could then be utilized in the design of environmental education interventions catering for wider constituencies.

It might also be hoped that the renewed popularity of *LOTR* provides a reason for young people to actually get back into the landscape and the emerging ‘place based
education’ (PBE) movement (Gruenewald and Smith 2008) has much to commend it in this respect. However, PBE is itself a contentious issue within environmental education scholarship as demonstrated by the lively exchanges in a recent issue – Volume 14, Number 3 – of this very journal (e.g., Bowers 2008; Greenwood 2008; Smith 2008; Stevenson 2008). Indeed efforts are being made, sometimes dubiously, to connect Middle-earth with real world places such as the New Zealand tourist industry, the Sierra Norte de Madrid region of Spain or the countless attempts by fanatic fans at recreating Middle-earth in ‘live action role-playing’ (LARP) games. An additional pedagogical recommendation might simply be to encourage firsthand environmental experience in the types of places encountered in the narrative. More specifically, this could represent a call to experiential environmental education and/or adventurous outdoor programmes designers to consider using LOTR as an inspiration for getting learners out into the landscape. Indeed, such programmes might, if carefully crafted, go further by deliberately seeking to stimulate the mythopoetic imagination in outdoor settings in the manner advocated by Dyer and Hodgson (2003), perhaps using LARPs as a template. Of course, such efforts would need to be handled exceedingly sensitively to avoid having the opposite effect of actively ‘turning learners off’ from authentic encounters with both the environment and their mythopoetic imagination.

LOTR is, in the first and last analysis, not an educational or environmental education tool but a ‘ripping yarn’. It can, and indeed has proved to be edifying and morally (even spiritually) transformative for very many, although obviously not for all readers. Yet, this has invariably occurred independently of deliberate external interventions. Consequently, encouraging others to engage experientially with the story (in the dual sense of a deep personal engagement with the narrative and in the kinds of places encountered therein) when it seems right for them might be the simplest, safest and ultimately most powerful educational recommendation to make. LOTR is a complex and carefully crafted narrative that transports the reader along with the protagonists on a personal journey of maturation in a world which is at one and the same time fantastical and familiar. Tolkien was driven to write a personal mythology that might also form a myth for the English people. However:

the fact that the books have been translated into languages all over the world, the fact that the films are playing to audiences all over the world suggests that what [Tolkien] actually did was to create, or perhaps re-create, a mythology for the world, a mythology for mankind, humankind. (Sibley in Ringers)

Similarly, ‘in the context of global modernization and the resistance to it, his stories have become an animating and inspiring new myth’ (Curry 1998, 25). If he has achieved these things, it is because he applied ‘the best magic – the ability to make reality itself more real’ (Duane 2003, 128) and his work ‘aspires to the elvish art of enchantment’ (Carter 2003, 75). Such enchantment works best unmediated on those young and old prepared to let it – my younger and older selves included. Long may it!

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References


