Trinity Western University

Spiritual Stewardship of the Environment in *The Lord of the Rings*

Rehan Naqvi

ENGL 590 A

Dr. Monika B. Hilder

2 April 2024

Since its publication and from its earliest reviews, *The Lord of the Rings* has been recognised simultaneously as an epic, an adventure story, as well as a fantasy quest inspired by medieval romances and ancient myth (Auden 46; Spacks 82, 96-97). While these references are valid associations for Tolkien's work of high fantasy, they nevertheless contain another literary genre that accompanies them: the genre of nature writing. In *The Lord of the Rings,* the presence of nature is not relegated to the background as in most novels; it accompanies the plot from the moment the protagonists begin the quest from the Shire. Tolkien's continuous detailed description of locales and landscapes that the protagonists traverse across Middle-earth makes nature an ever-present companion to the narrative: an all-encompassing member of the fellowship of the ring in which every environment is rendered a moral reflection of its inhabitants. This mirroring of environment and inhabitants creates an ethical symbiosis between nature and the denizens who care or abuse the land around them (Spacks 84). The Shire is not only the bucolic countryside of an agrarian society, but also a reflection of the hobbits' ideals of peace and domesticity; the rolling, open meads of Rohan reflect the spirit of wide-ranging freedom that is essentialized by an equestrian culture; and at the opposite extreme, the sickened and corrupted waste of Mordor reflects the lack of being and the infertility that defines Sauron himself (Spacks 84). As Matthew Dickerson has noted, "It has been rightly said that the true hero of *The Lord of the Rings* is not Aragorn or Sam Gamgee or even Frodo but Middle-earth itself" (269). Indeed, the primary rationale for destroying the Ring, the sorcerous artifact that is the central symbol of evil in the book, is not only to defeat the dark lord Sauron but to prevent him from reducing nature to a lifeless waste which is foreshadowed by the state of his own domain in Mordor. In this context, the protagonists as well as the entire narrative movement of quest and war are subsumed under the aim of protecting the natural world of Middle-earth, be that the

woods of the elves, the mountain kingdoms of the dwarves, the farmlands of the hobbits, the grasslands and plains of the kingdom of men, or the forested wilderness of the ents. Similarly, Tom Shippey asserts the centrality of nature in all of Tolkien's work: "the theme that flashes from much of Tolkien's work is that of the identity of man and nature…. He created Middle-earth before he had a plot to put in it" (131-32). Clearly for Tolkien, the natural world was not merely a setting to decorate the plot; it was a vital presence suffused with Romantic elemental beauty and spiritual value expressed through the sub-creation of an enchanted environment (*Letters* 146). *The Lord of the Rings* contains, alongside the tale of an epic quest, the revelation of nature as sacred and spiritually alive: characters encounter supernatural beings who personify differing aspects of environmental stewardship or come to exemplify that stewardship themselves. For Tolkien, as for his great Catholic predecessor Saint Thomas Aquinas, nature participated in the divinity of its creator (Doede 27; Testi). In this context, within the environment of *The Lord of the Rings* specifically, the spiritual can be understood as the power that nurtures life, the exact opposite to the conventional modern supposition of spirit as a transcendent reality separate from, or unrelated to, all natural processes (Doede 34-35). Each character expresses Tolkien's challenge to the modern technologically instrumentalist view of nature as a phylogenetic abstraction defined and delimited by scientific nomenclature, a utilitarian view which is closely allied to Saruman and Sauron's treatment of the earth.

This essay argues that J.R.R. Tolkien intended to mythologize the idea of environmental stewardship as a spiritual duty. Tolkien wished to see a sacralization of nature reborn in the hearts and minds of his readers to confront the environmental destruction produced by the industrial revolution (*Letters* 96, 419-20) and continuing past Tolkien's own lifetime. Tolkien's whole legendarium displays an empathetic bond with nature from the creation of Middle-earth to

its conclusion at the end of the Third Age; however, specific to *The Lord of the Rings*, four characters are foregrounded as representatives of Tolkienian ideas of spiritual stewardship and environmental conservation: the wizard Gandalf; the nature spirit Tom Bombadil whom Tolkien referred to as the personification of the English countryside; the giant Ent Treebeard, a tree-man come to life to give voice to the wild forests; and the hobbit gardener and hero Sam Gamgee; Through these four characters deeply connected to nature, this paper will investigate Tolkien's vision of environmental stewardship as a spiritual duty based on the idea that he did not differentiate between the natural and the spiritual but regarded both as forming a totality of divine expression.

The inspiration for Gandalf's character immediately establishes the wizard's affinity with environmental stewardship. A postcard of a painting by Joseph Madlener called *The Mountain-spirit* was in Tolkien's possession and on which he had written, "Origin of Gandalf" (Carpenter, 51). The painting depicts a white bearded old man in a red robe wearing a broad hat seated on a boulder in a forest with mountains in the backdrop, a fawn nuzzling his hand with a stream flowing nearby. The fact that the animal, vegetable, mineral, and liquid elements of the earth are congregated around a figure whom Tolkien deliberately links to the invention of Gandalf suggests the centrality of the wizard's connection with nature. Though Tolkien was not the artist of the painting, he never regarded words or names casually and the idea of a nature spirit would likely have been attractive to him as it implies the old man is a personification of an aspect of nature. The title of the work combines the word "spirit" with the more elemental "mountain," suggesting metaphorically that the spiritual inheres in the natural and the figure is the guardian of the alpine environ. As will be seen below, the blending of the spiritual and material into one whole is a key element of Tolkien's definition of nature. The mountain spirit's benevolent

relationship with the forest's wildlife to whom he communicates is clearly a visual metaphor of care and protection. Unusually for a wizard, Gandalf is more closely associated with nature rather than with occult magic that is generally the leitmotif commonly linked to the magician. Through the mesh of Tolkien's imagination, the figure of the mountain-spirit in Madlener's painting transforms the idea of wizardry into benevolent stewardship of nature which is evident in Gandalf's behaviour and actions across the text. In *The Lord of the Rings* itself, Gandalf's intimate relationship with earthbound life is portrayed in several ways. First, despite being a personage of great power and authority, he is repeatedly shown as enjoying everyday pursuits such as eating, drinking, smoking, traveling and entertaining hobbit society with his firework displays (Tolkien 350-31). Next, Gandalf's relationship with other characters outside his role of a guide and advisor is amiable or amusingly paternal rather than otherworldly as one might expect from a powerful wizard, thereby suggesting he is emblematic of spiritual wisdom and benevolence alongside earthbound enjoyment; even when scolding others, he frequently sounds comically exasperated (299, 305). Tolkien establishes Gandalf as part of the web of common life, which is participatory and natural, unlike the wizard Saruman who holds himself aloof from the ordinary and brings destruction upon the hobbits and their home (994-96), thus proving himself the opposite of Gandalf both in his relationship with nature and the hobbits. Gandalf uses his power coercively only once against a hobbit and even that with the proviso that he was trying to protect Bilbo from the obsessive attraction of the Ring (33). Most revealingly, in one of the preeminent inspirational passages from the work, Gandalf openly announces his guardianship of nature as superior to the political rule of Denethor when the latter boasts of the centrality of Gondor in the war against Mordor:

> But I will say this: the rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. 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 also am a steward. Did you not know? (741-42).

Gandalf's affinity with nature is clear in the speech he gives to Denethor. He movingly uses the imagery of fertility such as "grow fair" and "bear fruit and flower" to explicitly establish his protective role of the environment that is further reinforced when he uses the term "stewardship." However, except for the mysterious reference to his "task" that hints of a greater providential plan behind his protective presence, it is harder to demonstrate Gandalf's spiritual stewardship relative to his conservational role for two reasons. First, in the foreground of the narrative, Gandalf is presented in his physical appearance as a wizard with his tall staff and pointed, wide-brimmed hat: he is less of a spiritual figure and more of a fantasy character, though obviously one with a moral vision and the ability to guide, inspire, and lead. Second, Tolkien was absolutely against using his works to directly express his religious views (*Letters* 172). However, Tolkien does hint at the spiritual origin of Gandalf in *The Return of the King* through the perspective of the hobbit Pippin who rides with the wizard to bring counsel to Gondor: "Yet by sense other than sight Pippin perceived that Gandalf had the greater power and the deeper wisdom, and majesty that was veiled. And he was older, far older…. What was Gandalf? In what far time and place had he come into the world, and when would he leave it?" (Tolkien 749). The abstract imagery of power and wisdom along with hidden majesty suggested by the evocative word "veiled" gives Tolkien the opportunity to suggest the spiritual background of the wizard: Gandalf had "come into the world" and would later depart from it as though he did not originate

in Middle-earth itself. Yet this spiritual quality of Gandalf's character is rarely foregrounded in the text since Tolkien is always careful to embody the spiritual rather than present it abstractedly, preferring to view spirituality as an internal element that animates earthly life, rather than an external imposition that dualistically imparts life as a secondary property. Ultimately, it can be argued that spirituality for Tolkien is immanent rather than transcendent, not because it was a vehicle for pantheistic belief, but because it was similar to incarnational theology in which the divine inheres in the natural without the diminution of either. As Robert Doede argues, "God does not merely bring creation/nature into existence, but also informs it with his own essence" (27). It is possible that given Tolkien's staunch Catholic beliefs, this incarnational view would have been deeply appealing to him, and it is suggested as such in Gandalf's confrontation with the Balrog in Moria. In the dialogue of this confrontation with the demon, Gandalf declares, "I am a servant of the Secret Fire, wielder of the flame of Anor" (Tolkien 322). In the context of this dialogue, Clyde Kilby writes in his text *Tolkien and the Silmarillion* that the Secret Fire had a personal religious meaning for Tolkien: "Very specifically [Tolkien] told me that the 'the Secret Fire sent to burn at the heart of the world' in the beginning was the Holy Spirit" (59). There is a clear correlation here between nature and spirit through a Christian lens, especially when it is noted that in the formative text of his mythology *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien refers to the spirit as the Flame Imperishable, the divine force that imbues natural creation (20) which parallels his views on incarnational theology confirmed in his discussion with Kilby cited above. It is therefore evident that, through the figure of Gandalf, Tolkien saw stewardship not only as the conservation of everything "that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower," but also as a spiritual duty of serving the "Secret Fire," the creative force of the divine through whom the earth is rendered sacred. In terms of spiritual stewardship, Gandalf's joyful engagement with the

everyday doings of life, the deeply human relationships of which he is the centre, the sense of spiritual mystery that surrounds his origins, and finally his call to action in the name of nature allow Tolkien to blend the spiritual and natural as a moral responsibility fused to the love of the living earth.

In contrast to Gandalf's subtle yet powerfully layered stewardship of nature, Tom Bombadil emerges as a character who is openly mythic in his guardianship of the environment. Like Gandalf, Bombadil's character inspiration is closely related to the wild as Tolkien explicitly referred to him as "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside" (*Letters* 26). Bombadil is one of the oldest living beings within the legendarium, existing even before the natural environment bloomed across Middle-earth: "Eldest, that's what I am…. Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn…. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless–before the Dark Lord came from Outside" (Tolkien 129). Tom Bombadil's stewardship over the land is not the moral defence of the environment, but actually an extension of natural phenomenon of which he is an embodiment. With his elf-like consort Goldberry, Tom fulfills the movement of the seasons and can challenge the darker aspects nature through the power of his song (Chance 39).

Despite his enchanted control of the environment, the spiritual aspect of Tom's stewardship lies in his benevolence and ability to protect his land from the chthonic powers that are also part of the polarity of nature; however, whereas Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wights are representative of death and decay, Tom is symbolic of life and fertility. Tom's country is set between the Old Forest to the west and the Barrow Downs to the east, one controlled by the life-hating Old Man Willow and the other by undead Barrow-wights. The geographic proximity of Tom's house to the Old Forest and the Barrow Downs is symbolic of the relationship between the

spiritual goodness associated with life and fertility set against the backdrop of decay and longing for death. Tom's spiritual nature cannot be understood without the admission of the power of death that is also an intrinsic part of nature and a challenge to the positive life drive he represents. When the hobbits encounter both Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wights, an enchanted sleep is placed over them which Jane Chance has associated with the unconsciousness of death (47-48). The wights inhabit a death mound, a burial place, literally a grave; Old Man Willow's name includes the adjective "Old" connoting age, death and the end of the life cycle. In contrast to both these antagonists symbolic of death, Tom Bombadil is supercharged with exuberance and youthful energy, his constant singing representative of both bodily and spiritual joy. Like Gandalf, Tom is an embodied spirit, earthy and alive, the very opposite of the conventional understanding of the spirit as an insubstantial phantom. In fact, it is the disembodied wraiths, undead wights, and the non-physical Sauron who are closer to the traditional popular idea of a spirit: invisible and insubstantial, their clothed presence an illusion, or as Gandalf explains to Frodo, "the black robes are real robes that they wear to give shape to their nothingness" (Tolkien 216). In contrast to this attenuated existence that is an enervated absence of being, Tom is the life-force of nature which is the living spirit.

Tom and his spouse's stewardship of the environment is partially defined by the power of their songs to control the weather or defend against the chthonic aspects of nature when a species oversteps the bounds of the natural order as Old Man Willow does (Chance 40). Songs are a clue to the revelation that nature manifests itself not only physically but also spiritually since all singing is expressive of an emotive state springing from the soul. Old Man Willow enchants the hobbits with a drowsy spell that is expressed as "cool words, saying something about water and sleep. They gave themselves up to the spell and fell fast asleep at the foot of the great grey

willow" (Tolkien 114). Tom rescues the hobbits by a counter-spell that is also sung: "I'll sing his roots off. I'll sing a wind up and blow leaf and branch away" (117). Similarly, the Barrow-wight chants a song of death and despair as a prelude to the human sacrifice it is about to commit on the unconscious hobbits but is out-spelled, first by Frodo singing a song to summon Tom and then exorcised from the barrow by Tom's own retaliatory singing. The Barrow-wight's song is filled with the bitterness, envy, and despair representative of existence turned unnaturally against itself (138), while Tom's song expresses the joy of life, courage and humour —the one being symbolic of the death drive and the other of the life force, respectively. Tom proves his spiritual stewardship of the environment by challenging the chthonic powers analogous to psychological entrapments that correlate to the darker aspect of the cycle of nature. In this context, when Frodo sings his praise of Goldberry, Tom's spouse and fellow spirit, his words skip over the dark cycle of death and decay, presenting only her own and Tom's role as life-giving agents of seasonal change: "O spring-time and summer-time, and spring again after!" (122).

However, it is Tom's role as the spirit of the land that extends his importance as the ultimate manifestation of nature's being. When Frodo questions Goldberry about Tom's identity she answers simply: "He is" (122). When Frodo asks Tom himself the same question, Tom first replies with another question that is almost mystical: "Tell me, who are you, alone, yourself and nameless.... Eldest, that's what I am" (129). Most significantly, the One Ring cannot make Tom invisible and its evil has no power over him since his essential self is pacifist with no desire for dominating other wills (Dickerson 21-22). When Tom's invulnerability to the One Ring is revealed at the Council of Elrond, he is recognised as a personification of nature whom Sauron is bent on destroying: "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the Earth

itself" (Tolkien 259). Tolkien himself suggested that Bombadil was an expression of existence without impure ulterior motives:

> [I]f you have, as it were taken 'a vow of poverty', renounced control, and take your delight in things for themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you. (*Letters* 179)

This quotation aligns well with the idea of Tom's role as a spiritual environmental steward who seeks to observe and understand but acts only occasionally to protect the unwary who accidently encounter a darker aspect of the land. Tom's knowledge of the land and its creatures can be easily paralleled to ecology that recognises the holistic niche of humans or hobbits within his part of Middle-earth:

> He told them tales of bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest, about the evil things and good things, things friendly and things unfriendly, cruel things and kind things, and secrets hidden under brambles.
>
> As they listened, they began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things were at home. (Tolkien 127)

Tolkien recognizes Tom's unique point of view as closely correlating to nature itself that does not judge its creations: "He is master in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges, and as far as can be seen makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow" (*Letters* 192). Tom understands the perspective and role of all living

creatures within the broader pattern of nature as a whole. It would not be an exaggeration, in the context of Tom's own answer to Frodo's question about his identity, that Tom is spiritually the incarnation of nature itself (Dickerson 19) as Tolkien clearly stated in his letter quoted above, Tom's stewardship being a watch over the land and only rarely an intervention.

If Tom Bombadil's antagonist Old Man Willow is a voiceless personification of the Old Forest which has become sufficiently conscious to fulfill a malicious purpose, then Treebeard is the exact opposite: an articulate, nuanced, and powerful voice of the wild woods of Fangorn and of trees generally. Tolkien's love of trees is well-established, and he recognised them as living creatures for whom he experienced fellow feelings as he would towards human beings (*Letters* 220). The origin of Treebeard and the race of Ents is partially inspired by Tolkien's desire to give trees a voice and his disappointment with the famous moment in *Macbeth* when it is discovered that Birnam Wood moving to besiege Macbeth's castle is in actuality just a camouflage of branches used by the English forces to disguise their numbers. In Tolkien's words, "I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war" (212). As critics have noted, Treebeard is the voice of the untamed forested wilderness that transcends human politics and designs (Dickerson 119; Flieger, *Green Suns* 211). Treebeard is the living representative of the earth become conscious that simply exists and delights in life as pure being, finding joy in the free pursuit of natural processes such as singing songs, drinking water, breathing air as well as shepherding trees. The secondary creation of trees that are mobile, conscious, and vocal was important enough for Tolkien to invent a guardian forest spirit as a representative of that which is non-human in nature. In their otherness, the Ents represent a different order of being than that determined by either Sauron or those fighting him, though Treebeard is careful to make a distinction which aligns the Ents in favour of all those who oppose the destruction of nature

(Tolkien 461). Treebeard's stewardship of the wild forests is a reminder that beyond war and alliances on one side or the other, nature is uninterested in the tides of history unless it must rise up out of a sense of self-preservation: "I am not altogether on anybody's *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them" (461). What is most powerful about Tolkien's forests, both those under Treebeard's protection and those beyond his borders is the spiritual gift of freewill and individuality with which they are endowed. The dangerous reputation of the Old Forest and Fangorn, as well as the enchantment of Lothlorien all indicate that regardless of his love and sympathy for trees, Tolkien viewed them unsentimentally as being independent of human designs and intentions. Treebeard's own point of view about the forested wilderness is nuanced because he makes distinctions among trees that humans rarely do: "Some of us are still true Ents, and lively enough in our fashion, but many are growing sleepy, going tree-ish, as you might say. Most of the trees are just trees, of course; but many are half-awake…. When that happens to a tree, you find that some have *bad* hearts" (457). This recognition of the individuality of trees is a prime requisite for a guardian of the wilderness who compares himself to a shepherd and trees to sheep (457) since it highlights what is intrinsically valuable in living things that human beings reduce to mere utility. In the case of the Ents, part of their stewardship is to protect the trees from human depredation: once Treebeard becomes aware of Saruman's violent destruction of woods, he rouses the trees to fight back. Perhaps moved by their defenselessness in the primary world, Tolkien for the first time suggests that a certain militant reaction is necessary if the wild forests are to survive in his secondary creation of Middle-earth. Similarly, Patrick Curry has pointed out the catastrophic fate of the arboreal world in the modern age and Tolkien's disgust with it (65-66). Tolkien also realised that the human abuse of nature as a mere resource had even predated the industrial revolution (qtd. in

Ordway, 206) which only accelerated an existing form of exploitation. If the spiritual is correlated to the natural, since nature is a creation of a divine entity as Tolkien and the Thomists believed, then a defence of the wilderness, which may on occasion be militant, can be justified as a part of spiritual stewardship of the environment. Tolkien's language becomes uncharacteristically assertive when he speaks of defending trees: "In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlorien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries" (*Letters* 419). Given that one of the major plot threads of *The Two Towers* is concerned with the overthrow of Saruman and his industrialised works at the hands of Treebeard and his forest, it can be suggested that Tolkien gave the wilderness the voice and the freewill to revolt against its own destruction. Unsurprisingly, one of the ways in which Tolkien's works were ahead of their time is in the depiction of Treebeard's stewardship and active defence of forested lands which is a possible reason that they have become sacred texts of parts of the modern environmental movement (Flieger, *Green Suns* 262). As the voice of wild nature, Treebeard distinguishes himself from all the other races in his vegetative patience and his gentle remonstrance against the impatience that tragically characterises human relations with the wilds due to the fallen nature of creation (Kocher 77).

Without the recognition that forests are living beings rather than merely resources for instrumental use, stewardship of the environment would be difficult to sustain and by suggesting that the wilderness has a right to defend itself, Tolkien asserts the spiritual equality of trees with humankind, since both are living creatures and thus spiritual by virtue of the life granted them from a divine source.

It is in the character of Sam Gamgee that Tolkien reveals the most human aspect of spiritual stewardship of nature within *The Lord of the Rings*. Unlike the other characters in this essay, the race of hobbits is the closest to humanity in its lack of supernatural power and for this reason Sam's relationship with nature is the most relatable. The inspiration for Sam's character lies in the village youths who became the valets and batsmen of the educated officer class with the outbreak of the First World War (Garth). The fact that Sam is a rustic not only establishes his connection with nature, but it is also a depiction of the realistic life of country dwellers involving courage, labour, and communal relationships. Sam exemplifies the human cycle of love and work within nature, and Tolkien models him as an environmental steward in a normative, practical sense that emphasises natural relationships as gardener, tree planter, cook, friend, husband, and father. Tolkien recognised these life skills as part of what undergirds heroism and explicitly commented on their importance: "I think the simple 'rustic' love of Sam and his Rosie (nowhere elaborated) is absolutely essential to the study of his (the chief hero's) character, and to the theme of the relation of ordinary life (breathing, eating, working, begetting)" (*Letters* 161). It should be noted from above that Tolkien regarded Sam as one of the chief heroes of his work and highlights the strength of Sam's character as being rooted in the ordinary. Unlike Gandalf whose character encompasses a high mimetic role as a wizard (Shippey 159), Sam does not come from a mysterious realm, but is very much part of the land itself, the agrarian fields and woods of the Shire: Sam's behaviour and actions are exemplars of Tolkien's ideas about normative stewardship beyond the call of Faerie and enchantment. Hugh Keenan has noted that both Bombadil and Sam wear the ring and relinquish it without evil after-affects (though in Sam's case there is an initial psychomachia involving the temptations of pride and power which he overcomes), perhaps because both Sam and Tom are so vitally close to nature (70).

However, unlike Bombadil, Sam is not a personified spirit and his spiritual connection with nature is established not only through his vocation as a gardener but his love for all living things, expressed particularly by his loyalty to Frodo, but reaching beyond. After the hobbits bid farewell to Tom Bombadil, it is Sam who verbalises the delight they all experience in his company (Tolkien 144), establishing an affinity between the nature spirit and the mortal gardener of nature. Sam's closeness to the animal world is evident in his relationship with the abused pony Bill. Though Bill comes to love all the hobbits, he bonds most closely with Sam (194) and Sam is the angriest of the company when the fellowship is forced to abandon Bill outside the Mines of Moria (296). Beyond the animal world, Sam's closeness to woods is highlighted in his outrage at the destruction of the trees in the Shire foreseen in Galadriel's mirror (353). Furthermore, unlike any of the other hobbit protagonists, Sam establishes a marital relationship and has numerous children, fulfilling nature's purpose of love and nurturing fidelity as well as fertility. Unsurprisingly, his wife's name Rosie is virtually eponymous with rose, therefore making Sam's marriage symbolic of his bond with nature. Finally, unlike his companions Frodo, Merry, and Pippin who typify the Shire's gentry, Sam belongs to the working class and is celebrated by Tolkien as the most representative of the hobbit race with all its human strengths and limitations (*Letters* 329). Verlyn Flieger has commented on the rural hobbits' profound link with nature without supernatural agency which yet retains a spiritual quality in its instinctive connection with the countryside. "These unshod little people are closer to the earth than [men], more physically in touch with it and more completely in tune with it. Gaffer Gamgee, whose speciality is roots, Farmer Maggot, with 'earth under his old feet, and clay on his fingers,' Sam, with his earthly practicality and shrewd common sense—these are the stuff of the earth" (*Splintered* 148-49).

The spirituality that is embodied in nature expresses itself in Sam's normative relationships as a gardener, friend, son, husband, and father. None of these commonplace social roles are seen as spiritual from a modern secular perspective, but Tolkien always regarded the ordinary as a container for the spiritual, not separated from the normative at an abstract metaphysical distance (*Letters* 66). Sam's moral virtues of courage and loyalty, his supportive role as Frodo's closest friend throughout the book, his place as a son to the Gaffer frequently alluded to in the narrative, and finally as husband to Rosie Cotton at end of the trilogy suggest that these social relations and moral qualities were simultaneously spiritual since they all partake of different facets of love. For Tolkien, an orthodox Catholic and profoundly religious individual, the sacralization of everyday life by Christian love, as opposed to merely romantic emotion, would have been a deeply spiritual experience. Viewed through the lens of secular understanding, Sam's normative social and biological relationships would not be regarded as spiritual at all; for the modern secular world with its Cartesian split of material and mental properties, spirit cannot inhere in either social or biological life processes. However, Tolkien through his instinctual love of the earth, his belief in a creator God who imbued his essence into his creation, wished to emphasise the enchanted quality of life through growth and flourishing, whether it be of trees or people. In Sam's case, enchantment was communicated through metaphor.

Since Sam lacks a supernatural expression of his connection with nature, it is expressed metaphorically through the imagery of Galadriel's gift of enchanted soil bequeathed to him. Furthermore, it is highly significant that both Aragorn and Sam plant a tree associated with morality as well as fecundity: the White Tree of Numenor and the *mallorn* tree of Lothlorien, respectively (Petty 239); Sam's actions mirror the role of the High King, one symbolising the

spiritual rebirth of Numenor in Gondor and the other of the Shire after Saruman's brief tyranny over it. As Dickerson has pointed out, by the end of the book Sam has evolved into the primary steward of the Shire, particularly in regard to reforesting. Dickerson gives Sam the superlative compliment of almost being an Ent in his care for the woods: "Though not exactly a counterpart to the Ents—he is not a Shepherd of the Trees, like Treebeard—in his nurturing of them, Sam has become as much as Treebeard's assistant as Gaffer Gamgee's" (156). However, the imagery of Sam's afforestation effort, and hence his own role as a spiritual steward, is amplified by the addition of Galadriel's enchanted dust.

> So Sam planted saplings to all the places where specially beautiful or beloved trees had been destroyed, and he put a grain of the precious dust in the soil at the root of each…. Spring surpassed his wildest hopes. His trees began to sprout and grow, as if time was in a hurry and wished to make one year do for twenty. (Tolkien 1000)

The enchanted quality of the spring growth, its source in Galadriel's dust, is an extended metaphor for Sam's own spiritual love of nature and his compassion in sharing his gift with the whole Shire: "the Lady would not like me to keep it all for my own garden, now so many folk have suffered" (1000). In this quotation, care for one's fellow beings encompasses both the human and vegetative world, rendering them coeval since both species are part of nature which partake of the divinity of their creator. The animating force behind Sam's spiritual stewardship is love and loyalty to the natural environment and all life within it.

Tolkien's ideas of stewardship of the environment as a spiritual duty is delineated through the four main characters covered in this essay; however, the nature of that spirituality is not didactic, since each character's individuality informs the way they relate to and are also an expression of nature. Gandalf's stewardship combines physical opposition to the threat of

environmental destruction posed by Sauron as well as a spiritual mission of protecting creation under the mandate of the Secret Fire; Tom's stewardship is elemental since he and Goldberry are seen as personifications of natural phenomena in their spiritually nurturing and fertilizing aspects; Treebeard's stewardship is specific to the forested wilderness and expressive of nature's spirituality that demands the right to be considered alive in opposition to the reductionist denial of life to anything other than humanity; and finally, Sam's stewardship reveals normative human relationships of marital fidelity, personal loyalty, and environmental conservation to be spiritual expressions of what is commonly viewed as merely social and horticultural behaviour. In the case of each of these stewardships, a relationship to the environment is present as an immediate physical reality, because for Tolkien the Flame Imperishable resides not at an abstract distance but within direct acts of nurture and lovingkindness towards nature. Ultimately, implicit in all the examples of environmental stewardship presented by Tolkien is the belief that spirituality inheres within the phenomena of nature since nature emanates from a sacred source, resonating with the Secret Fire that lies at the core of life, and is therefore forever in opposition to those powers that cannot recognise nature as part of the divine and are indifferent to its destruction.

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. “The Quest Hero.” *Tolkien and the Critics*, edited by Isaacs, N. D. and R. A. Zimbardo, Notre Dame UP, 1968, pp. 40-61.

Carpenter, Humphrey. T*olkien: A biography*. Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

Chance, Jane. *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*. Twayne Publishers, 1992.

Curry, Patrick. *Defending Middle-Earth*. St. Martin’s Press, 1997.

Dickerson, Matthew, Jonathen Evans. *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien*. University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

Doede, Robert. “From Living Souls to Software Selves.” *Human Flourishing in a Technological World: A Theological Perspective*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

Flieger, Verlyn. *Green Suns and Faerie: Essays on Tolkien*. Kent University Press, 2012.

---. *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World*. Kent University Press, 2002.

Garth, John. “Sam Gamgee and Tolkien’s batmen.” *John Garth*, 13 Feb. 2014, johngarth.wordpress.com/2014/02/13/sam-gamgee-and-tolkiens-batmen/ Accessed 5 April 2024.

Keenan, Hugh T. “The Appeal of *The Lord of the Rings*.” *Tolkien and the Critics*, edited by Isaacs, N. D. and R. A. Zimbardo, Notre Dame UP, 1968, pp. 62-80.

Kilby, Clyde S. *Tolkien & the Silmarillion*. Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976.

Kocher, Paul H. *The Master of Middle-Earth*. 1972. DelRey, 2003.

Ordway, Holly. *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-Earth Beyond the Middle Ages*. Word on Fire Academic, 2021.

Petty, Anne C. *Tolkien in the Land of Heroes*. Cold Spring Press, 2003.

Shippey, Tom. *The Road to Middle-Earth*. Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer. “Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*.” *Tolkien and the Critics*, edited by Isaacs, N. D. and R. A. Zimbardo, Notre Dame UP, 1968, pp. 81-99.

Testi, Claudio A. “Tolkien and Aquinas.” *Tolkien and the Classics*, edited by Roberto Arduini, et al. Walking Tree Publishers, 2019.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. HarperCollins, 1995.

---. *The Silmarillion*. George Allen & Unwin, 1977.

Works Consulted

Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their friends*. Houghton Mifflin, 1978.

Chance, Jane. *Tolkien’s Art*. St Martin’s Press. 1979.

Dickerson, Matthew. *A Hobbit Journey*. Brazos Press, 2012.

Duriez, Colin. *Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings: A Guide to Middle Earth*. Hidden Spring, 2001.

Ordway, Holly. *Tolkien’s Faith: A Spiritual Biography*. Word on Fire Academic, 2023.

Purtill, Richard. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion*. Ignatius Press, 2003.