

J.R.R. Tolkien's Love of Trees and the Environment

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Austrian Pine - *Pinus nigra*. April 22, 2006. Photo © 2006 by J.R. Crellin
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Tolkien Takes the Part of Trees Against All Their Enemies.

J.R.R. (John Ronald Reuel) Tolkien loved the unspoiled countryside and felt a special affinity for trees, especially ancient ones such as the Oak, Willow, and – one of his favorites – the Piñas Nigra (a.k.a. the *Pinus nigra*¹, Black Pine or Austrian Pine)

(Carpenter, Humphrey. *J.R.R. Tolkien A Biography*. 144). This

“green ideology” of Tolkien’s was made manifest in many of his

literary (*Letters*. #339) and personal writings (Shippey, Tom.

Author of the Century. 89). Indeed, Tolkien was greatly disturbed

by the industrial environment to which he was intimately exposed

during his younger years around the turn of the 20th century, and he repeatedly involved trees in various aspects of his writings, including those based in Middle-earth and Númenor. He despised the “infernal combustion” engine (*Letters*. #64) and felt strongly that heavy industry was causing terrible destruction to the earth. It is clear that Mordor corresponds to his perception of the industrialized modern era (*Letters*. #135). Tolkien repeatedly involved trees in various aspects of his writings, including those based in Middle-earth and Númenor.

J.R.R. Tolkien often wrote about his affinity for the environment, trees, and his dismay at the destruction of so much that he held so dear. He was especially vociferous about the “lunatic destruction of the physical lands which Americans inhabit” (*Letters*. #328). Again and again he wrote in detail to friends and family about the trees in the area where he was currently living or working in (*Letters* #49, 61, 77, 88,135, 321, 323). It is possible that the dry, barren landscape of

¹ In scientific nomenclature, the first (genus) name is written with leading capital, the second (species) name with a small leading character. -Thomas Morwinsky Ph.D.

Bloemfontein, South Africa where Tolkien was born, and the early industrial town of Sarehole, England from his youth, greatly increased his love for the greenery and many colors of England's natural environment. Tolkien equated himself to his "Hobbits," stating how he liked "gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands;" (*Letters* #212). Furthermore, Tolkien stated in no uncertain terms his stance regarding trees, in a June 30th, 1972 "Letter to the Editor" of the Daily Telegraph, "*In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies.*" (*Letters* #339)." In fact, Tolkien so loved trees that in his Middle-earth, the Hobbit's calendar included a day initially known as "Tree's day" a day during which to give weekly homage to trees, later called "Trewsday", and finally Tuesday (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*, p. 123).



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A Brief Tolkien Biography.

Tolkien is most famous outside of the academic world for his fictional works *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Slightly less well known are his many posthumous Middle-earth related works edited and released by his son Christopher Tolkien.

The "short list" includes: *The Silmarillion*,

Unfinished Tales, *The History of Middle-earth* 12 book series, and most recently *The Children of Húrin*. J.R.R. Tolkien is also highly regarded in the academic world for his translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo*, from the 14th century works of the English West Midlands. This list must also include the 2009 publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, written in the style of old Norwegian and Icelandic "Poetic Edda".

Also of significant impact on many literary courses is Tolkien's insightful and positive 1936 critique, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*. This critique radically changed the

previously negative views of “fantasy” literature by academia (*Author of the Century*. Pp 149-150) In his 2001 translation of *Beowulf*, Seamus Heaney expressly credited Tolkien’s work, commenting in his introduction that *“Tolkien's brilliant literary treatment changed the way the poem was valued and initiated a new era – and new terms – of appreciation.”* (*Beowulf – A New Verse Translation by Seamus Heaney – Bilingual Edition*, Norton Paperback 2001 p xi). The impact of Tolkien on *Beowulf* is covered in more detail in the 2008 essay *J.R.R. Tolkien's Impact on the Beowulf Poem's Acceptance as Art by the Literary Community*, by Hawke Robinson.

In 1895, Tolkien's mother moved J.R.R. and his younger brother Hilary to England. Tolkien's father later died in South Africa. Tolkien initially grew up in Birmingham and then Sarehole, England. He loved the Worcester countryside. When he was forced to live in the more industrialized parts of England he would think longingly of his years in the relatively unspoiled countryside which greatly impacted his later works, and he would escape to the countryside or the coast whenever his busy schedule allowed.

Many of the few photos Tolkien allowed to be taken of him publicly involved him sitting or standing beside the ancient oak or willow trees of Worcestershire or Oxford. Trees constantly recur in many of his works both related and unrelated to his Middle-earth mythologies. These were not just peripheral scenery mentions of trees like most authors. An entire series of short stories known as “Tree and Leaf” were inspired by a single “great-limbed poplar tree” in view through the window of his home on a neighbors’ yard, that was suddenly cut down by its owner. About that event, Tolkien stated, *“It is cut down now, a less barbarous punishment for any crimes it may have been accused of, such as being large and alive. I do not think it had any friends, or any mourners, except myself and a pair of owls.”* (*The Tolkien Reader*, Introductory Note, Tree and Leaf. pp. 33-34).

Tolkien made trees a critical key aspect of his stories and creation mythology for his universe known as “Eä” in which “Middle-earth” was just a critical, though geographically small, part. In portions of *The Silmarillion* and related *History of Middle-earth* books, Tolkien described the critical importance in detail of the “Two Trees of Valinor” , “about their fate all the tales of the Elder Days are woven”. (*The Silmarillion*, 35). These trees were named Laurelin and Telperion, that waxed and waned throughout the “day” and “night” between golden and silver. These trees were the precursors to the Sun and Moon. They were later poisoned and destroyed, “withered them, root, branch, and leaf” (*The Silmarillion*, p. 76) by the attack of Morgoth’s spear and the envenomed maw of Ungoliant (in effect the mother of Shelob) the hideous giant spider (*Silmarillion*, p. 73).

Morgoth, Sauron, and Mordor (*Letters* #135, 75, 153) in some aspects represented for Tolkien the more negative aspects of Man and technology, as he frequently called it “The Machine” which he also equated to “magic” (*Letters* #131). Though Tolkien repeatedly stated over the years that he despised allegory (*Letters* #131), he seems to have made some overt exceptions in the case of the environment and trees, especially heavy industry that he considered dirty, and though not inherently evil and malevolent, “pretty certain to serve evil ends” (*Letters* #153). Above all he considered heavy industry destructive of every aspect of the surrounding environment, and he even wished for the (continued) destruction of factories and power-stations (*Letters* #52).

“Every Tree Has It's Enemy, Few Have an Advocate” (*Letters* #241)

Another recurring reference to the power and significance of trees held by Tolkien was the White Tree of Númenor, Nimloth (S. “White Blossom”), which is the Sindarin form of the Quenya Ninquelótë, one of the names of Telperion. Nimloth was descended from the line of trees of Galathilion, the white tree of Tirion, which was in turn descended from White Telperion which

Yavanna caused to grow in the land of the Valar. This theme recurred throughout much of Tolkien's Middle-earth tales, ranging from the establishment of the kingdom of Númenor on the island continent, to Isildur's bravery in sneaking into the courts of the Kings of Númenor in Armenelos, to steal the fruit of Nimloth (*Silmarillion*, pp 272-273), just before it was cut down and burned according to the machinations of Sauron. Isildur delivered it to Elendil and the fruit traveled with the few survivors of Númenor to Middle-earth. This fruit was the seed that became The White Tree of Minas Ithil, whose line was later continued in the Tree of Minas Anor/Tirith, and the sign of the direct linking of the kingship of the Númenóreans / Dúnedain. In later years their descendants were found in the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor. This theme also recurred when Aragorn had to find the sapling high in the mountains as part of fulfilling the renewal of Númenórean kingship and proof that he was the true heir to the throne, as it was also the sign of a new life, and a new "Age" after the death of the previous tree for so many centuries. The white tree was also on Aragorn's standard (*The End of the Third Age*, pp. 15, 56).

Tolkien manifests a means of defense/vengeance in the form of the Ents and the Huorns, especially in the defined characters of Treebeard and Quickbeam (considered "hasty" by the other Ents). Ents were walking, talking, "tree herders" that had been around for many thousands of years looking after the ancient, but dwindling forests. Pippin and Merry, with much cajoling, and "hasty words" managed to talk Treebeard and his fellow Ents into joining the fight against Saruman and his forces. This was despite the initial attitude of Treebeard being "not altogether on anyone's *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*" (*LotR*, 472).

Then there were the trees of Mirkwood and Fangorn forest, part of what was long ago a contiguous block of forest known as "Greenwood the Great". Now many of the surviving ancient trees were so "angry" about their desecration over the eons, they exuded a palpable sensation that

“any that walked on two legs” might feel the trees wished to crush and strangle them (*LotR*, pp 546-547) —most especially the Orcs.

This similar state of not-so-latent maliciousness by ancient trees was also shown in the embodiment of “Old Man Willow”. The ancient tree did not trust men because of the destruction of his kin by ax and fire caused by Men and Orc. In *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (pp 197-198), when Bombadil came into the area of Old Man Willow, the tree trapped and tried to strangle him. Only through song, cajoling, and persuasion did Bombadil convince Old Man Willow of his good intentions. Then, and only then, was he able to be freed from the Tree’s clutches.

A similar situation occurred with the Hobbits in the chapter “The Old Forest” (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, pp 116-121), when Old Man Willow captured Merry and Pippin in a similar fashion, and only Bombadil was able to save them by threatening Old Man Willow with “Old grey Willow-man! I’ll freeze his marrow cold if he don’t behave himself.” (*LotR* p. 120).

A third distinct variant of tree “awareness” was manifest in the “Huorns”. These trees were considered more “sleepy”, less “awake” than the Ents, but more malicious. They wreaked revenge upon any that would threaten their kind with ax or fire. The Huorns were also capable of being far more mobile than the likes of “Old Man Willow”. Huorns were used to help turn the tide of the Battle of Helm’s Deep in *The Two Towers*. The Huorns traveled the many leagues from Fangorn forest to Helm’s Deep, and cleaned up the mess of the remaining Uruk-hai and Dunlendings by surrounding, capturing, and cutting off the escape of the Orcs and evil Men who were never to be seen again.

As can be seen throughout his writings, Trees played an especially strong role in Tolkien’s personal and public life, not to mention their prevalence in his work itself. Tolkien best summed up his overall attitude towards trees versus man and industry with his 1955 letter to his

American publisher, Houghton Mifflin Co. stating, “*The ennoblement of the ignoble I find specially moving. I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals.*” (Letters #165).

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