

It is easy to see how Lewis's response to Lindsay began with a "mental picture of floating islands." The vast ocean of Perelandra is filled with an archipelago of floating islands. It is on these that the Green Lady lives. But there also a fixed land, which Maleldil (God) permits her to visit, but has forbidden her to remain on after nightfall.

For *Perelandra*, exactly like *A Voyage to Arcturus*, presents its metaphysics in terms of imagery and action. That is why — and how — it leads its readers, not to an intellectual conclusion, but to a mode of sensibility, one quite contrary to the kind Arcturus is likely to inspire. To read Lewis's book shortly after finishing Lindsay's is like walking out of a theater into cheery sunlight after seeing a very scary movie. The movie was fun, and you're glad you saw it, you enjoyed the terror of it, but the sunlight reminds you that even in this fallen world of ours there is a good deal more to life than unrelenting gloom.

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Commentary: **Strange Visions of Mountains – the Montane Motif in Tolkien's Fiction**

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Even a cursory glance at a map of Middle-earth will show how Tolkien's fictional world looks all but studded with mountains of every description: massive ranges and isolated peaks, gently sloping hills and fiery volcanoes. However, their role in the narrative is not merely geographical: they are the abode of monsters and the repository of fabulous treasures; they function as beacons, walls, places of observation, and many other things. Indeed, Tolkien's mountains often act as impenetrable walls, preventing intruders from trespassing into places where, for one reason or another, strangers are not allowed. The Echoriath, the Encircling Mountains, hide the Elven realm of Gondolin from the outside world; while the forbidding Ephel Dúath and the dreary Ered Lithui effectively fence Mordor off the rest of the world.

However, in spite of their clearly paramount importance in Tolkien's narrative, it is quite difficult to find actual references to this motif in the vast body of secondary literature currently available on his work. Whereas Karen Wynn Fonstadt's *The Atlas of Middle-earth* and articles of similar content describe the various mountains and ranges from a geological point of view and sometimes compare them to real features of our primary world, they do not deal with the topic in its many implications as a narrative motif.

If one thinks that Britain's highest mountain would be considered little more than a hill elsewhere, Tolkien's fascination with mountains is rather intriguing. Even though he was born in South Africa, home of massive mountain ranges, it is quite unlikely that he saw any of them before he left the country at three years of age. Moreover, as an adult Tolkien did not travel extensively: his only real experience with mountains at close quarters was in 1911, on the occasion of a trip to the Swiss Alps with a group of 12 people which included his aunt, Jane Neave. The sight of those magnificent peaks in all their glory (not to mention the physical effort and the dangers inherent to the trip) was to leave a deep impression on the 19-year-old Tolkien: in fact, in his first published work of fiction, *The Hobbit*, a huge, imposing range, to whom he had given the Old Norse name of Misty Mountains¹, played a very important narrative role.

As Anderson remarks in *The Annotated Hobbit*, Tolkien's drawings of both the Misty Mountains and the Lonely Mountain are alpine in both shape and form, bringing to mind the profile of such well-known peaks as the Matterhorn². The author's trip to the Swiss Alps left him with such a strong impression that he recalled it over 50 years afterwards, when writing to his son Michael in 1967 (*Letters* #306), giving a very detailed account of the excursion. In another letter (#109), written in 1947 to his publisher, Stanley Unwin, Tolkien declared that he longed "to see the snows and the great heights again!" As Hammond and Scull point out, these words are echoed by Bilbo in the first chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, when he is preparing to leave the Shire forever³.

Indeed, the Misty Mountains are possibly the single most important element in Tolkien's fictional landscape. For sheer size alone, this mighty range is doubtlessly one of the most striking features in Middle-earth, therefore its crucial role in Tolkien's geography should not come as a surprise. In the third chapter of *The Silmarillion*, the Misty Mountains look so forbidding that their very sight frightens the Teleri and prevents them from pursuing their journey towards Beleriand:

[...] beyond it were mountains whose sharp horns seemed to pierce the realm of the stars, [...] But the mountains were the Hithaeglir, the Towers of Mist upon the borders of Eriador; yet they were taller and more terrible in those days, and were reared by Melkor to hinder the riding of Oromë.

In *The Hobbit*, the three chapters (4, 5 and 6) dedicated to the crossing of the Misty Mountains are central to the development of the plot, since the range acts as a border between the (relatively) civilized lands of the West and the dangers of Wilderland. In fact, the motif of the crossing of mountains should be quite familiar to keen readers of adventure fiction, being almost a constant in many books of the genre. Even more than rivers or deserts, mountains are the obstacle *par excellence* for the heroes to overcome in order to reach their goal. Mountain journeys can be encountered in many classics of 19th-century adventure fiction, such as Rider Haggard's novels, as Green points out:

Mountains loom in the background, near but far [...]. The hungry journey over a perilous plain toward visible but distant mountains, like so much in *The Hobbit*, echoes a situation in King Solomon's Mines – in this case the trek across the African desert toward mountains⁴.

In such episodes, we can see humans struggling against the brute, uncontrolled forces of nature and ultimately gaining the upper hand, even at a great cost. Mountains are equally a recurring motif in fairy tales, with very similar connotations: they are a literal representation of the difficulty associated with a journey, a quest or, more generally, a task. Imposing and insuperable as they appear, mountains are perfectly suited to representing both isolation and physical impediment⁵.

Since many of Tolkien's stories are travel-based quests, it is not surprising to find that mountains feature prominently in the role of barriers, though not in an exclusively physical sense. As an essential narrative device in Tolkien's fiction, they do not only stand on the path of the heroes as very material obstacles, but somehow appear as agents of a sort of 'rite of passage' for some of the main characters in the stories. After crossing the Misty Mountains, Bilbo is a changed person: his frightening adventure in the underground caves is a turning-point for him. His finding of the Ring and subsequent encounter with Gollum lead to the development of quite a different personality from the one he had at the beginning of the book, as well as helping him to gain the Dwarves' respect. Then, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf dies and is brought back to life with enhanced powers after his fall from the bridge of Khazad-dûm and the battle with the Balrog on the highest peak of Celebdil. Frodo himself is first made aware of the pursuit of his 'double', Gollum, during the journey through Moria; he also undergoes a kind of apparent death after his passage through Shelob's Lair, which is the only way for him and Sam to cross the Ephel Dúath into Mordor. The crossing of mountains is here connected to the motif of the underground journey, which has often been dealt with in the secondary literature on Tolkien's work.

The final goal of the quests in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* is, in both cases, an isolated peak surrounded by a wasteland, which can be only reached after a long, dangerous journey. However, as shown by the quote I have chosen as a title for this essay, Tolkien's fictional mountains do not only represent the lurking dangers of the outside world: they are also a powerful symbol for adventure and change, the very image of the beauty and majesty of untamed nature. Even though his adventures in the Misty Mountains and in Erebor have almost cost him his life not one, but several times, Bilbo still longs for them, as he exclaims in 'A Long-Expected Party': "I want to see mountains again, Gandalf – mountains; and then find a place where I can rest". Years later, in 'The Shadow of the Past' Frodo "found himself wondering at times, in the autumn, about the wild lands; and strange visions of mountains that he had never seen came into his dreams".

Just like the author himself, Tolkien's characters cannot escape the fascination of mountains, although at times they can feel dwarfed, almost crushed by the sheer might of their presence. In 'The Muster of Rohan', during his journey through the White Mountains with the host of Théoden, Merry (who "loved mountains, or he had loved the thought of them marching on the edge of stories brought from far away") feels "he was borne down by the unsupportable weight of Middle-earth".

Besides their role as physical impediments, and the obvious dangers posed by landslides, avalanches, bad weather and such, mountains can be a hazard on account of the dangerous beings which they sometimes hide. In Chapter 4 of *The Hobbit*, the passes of the Misty Mountains "were cheats and deceptions and lead nowhere or to bad ends; and [...] were infested by evil things and dreadful dangers". As a matter of fact, fictional mountains are frequently described as harbouring anything from giants and

dragons to thieving, murderous humans; accordingly, many of Tolkien's mountains are the abode of an interesting variety of highly dangerous creatures: Orcs, the Balrog, Smaug, Gollum, Shelob.

Volcanoes are obviously the most dangerous mountains of all: frighteningly unpredictable, in their depths lurk the destructive powers of Earth's fiery core. Though Tolkien had no first-hand experience of volcanoes, he was probably familiar with the Icelandic Journals of William Morris, who was one of his major influences. Marjorie Burns draws an interesting comparison between Morris's report of his trip to Iceland and Tolkien's imaginary landscapes. The Iceland connection appears particularly strong in the description of the desolate volcanic wastes surrounding Mount Doom, as well as the mountain itself. Furthermore, even when they are not real volcanoes, mountains can harbour terrifying creatures connected with fire, as Burns aptly points out:

Tolkien's mountains [...] have fire at their core. This is even true of the Lonely Mountain, where Smaug, with his fiery breath and mountain-shaking wrath, awakes like an 'old volcano' which has 'started eruptions once again' [...] Moria has its red, burning fissure out of which flames and smoke emerge.⁶

However, in its main function as Sauron's forge, Mount Doom evokes a powerful figure of Greek mythology: the blacksmith god, Hephaistos, from whose Latin name of Vulcanus the word volcano originates. In fact, volcanoes were associated with him and his work: in particular, Mount Aethna in Sicily was reputed to be the forge where the god and his monstrous helpers, the one-eyed giants called Cyclops, created marvellous objects such as weapons, jewellery, and even automated statues. The character of Sauron undoubtedly shares some of the features of Hephaistos, who also endowed his creations with a magic power which gave him a hold over whoever used them⁷.

Volcanoes are also frequently associated with human sacrifice: in the religions of peoples who lived in volcanic areas, such as South-east Asia, human sacrifices used to be made in an attempt to avert the wrath of the mountains. In *The Lord of the Rings*, at first it is the One Ring that must be 'sacrificed' in the fiery chasm, but at the end it is a living creature that ends up as a victim to the fiery mountain. Even Gandalf's fate suggests a sort of self-immolation: as he tells Wormtongue in 'The King of the Golden Hall', he has passed through fire and death.

However, not all the dangerous dwellers of Tolkien's mountains are creatures related to fire, or even flesh-eating monsters like Shelob or the slimy yet pitiable Gollum. The sinister Dwimorberg, Dunharrow's Haunted Mountain, is without any doubt one of the most fascinating of Tolkien's creations. Though it appears all but briefly in the narrative, its function as an essential turning point of the story cannot be discounted. Of the many barriers that the members of the Fellowship find on their path, the Dwimorberg seems to be even more impenetrable than the others. In 'The Passing of the Grey Company', only the courage and motivation of Aragorn and his followers are able to overcome it, as in this case the danger is not related to the very physical threat of being killed or eaten, but rather to the terror of the unknown:

The light was still grey as they rode, for the Sun had not yet climbed over the black ridges of the Haunted Mountain before them. A dread fell on them [...]. There under the gloom of black trees that even Legolas could not endure they found a hollow place opening at the mountain's root, and right in their path stood a single mighty stone like a finger of doom.

The Haunted Mountain strongly hints at all kinds of evil happenings, with its dark, forbidding appearance and the mysterious door from which "fear flowed [...] like a grey vapour", suggesting black magic and unnameable cults in a more than oblique way.

Mountains are not only haunted: they may also be holy. Tolkien's work contains very few direct references to religion, resulting, among other things, in a definite lack of actual places of worship. The only one explicitly mentioned, however, is situated on top of the mountain of Meneltarma, which stood at the very centre of the island kingdom of Númenor. On several occasions (namely *Letters* #153 and 156), Tolkien stated quite clearly that this place was not by any means a temple as we intend it: nevertheless, in the Akallabêth it is said that it was "hallowed to Eru Ilúvatar, and it was open and unroofed, and no other temple or fane was there in the land of the Númenóreans." This sacred place was neglected in the years of the kingdom's decline; at the end, though, it is the mountain itself which shows the first signs of the wrath of the One at Ar-Pharazôn's sacrilegious enterprise: "Then suddenly fire burst from the top of the Meneltarma, and there came a mighty wind and a tumult of the earth [...]". The doomed Queen, Tar-Míriel, seeks sanctuary in the holy place at the top of the mountain, but to no avail: "Too late she strove to ascend

the steep ways of the Meneltarma to the holy place; for the waves overtook her, and her cry was lost in the roaring of the wind". Like the rest of the island, the mountain is swallowed by the sea; but, according to legend, "The summit of the Meneltarma [...] was not drowned for ever, but rose again above the waves, a lonely island lost in the great waters; for it had been a hallowed place, and even in the days of Sauron none had defiled it."

Interestingly, at the end of the Akallabêth, it is related that sometimes mariners managed to get within reach of the Undying Lands, meeting a fate which is sharply reminiscent of Dante's *Ulysses* when he comes in sight of the mountain of Purgatory: "[...] and so had come to the lamplit quays of Avallónë, or verily to the last beaches on the margins of Aman, and there had looked on the White Mountain, dreadful and beautiful, before they died". In 'The Steward and the King' there is also mention of a hallowed place on the slopes of Mindolluin: "[...] they found a path made in ages past that few now dared to tread. For it led up on to the mountain to a high hallow where only the kings had been wont to go". In this secluded place Aragorn, guided by Gandalf, finds a seedling of the White Tree, a symbol of hope and regeneration for the realm of Gondor.

Not surprisingly, mountains are traditionally considered as a link between Heaven and Earth, as proved by the meaning of Meneltarma's very name, the Pillar of Heaven. They are places where the gods dwell, and human ascension is limited. In many mythologies, particularly (but not exclusively) in the Far East, mountains are seen as images of Paradise, which can only be reached after a long process of spiritual training and purification. The same is also true for Dante's mountain of Purgatory, whose top (the Earthly Paradise) can only be reached after having gone through all the stages of purification from the seven deadly sins. Tolkien drew on this imagery in *Leaf by Niggle*, when casting the Mountains as the next highest stage in Niggle's spiritual growth⁸. After a disciplinary stay in the workhouse for having left his painting unfinished, the protagonist of the story is finally free to travel towards the mountains which he had originally painted as a background to his Tree:

He was going to learn about sheep [...] and walk even further and further towards the Mountains, always uphill. Beyond that I cannot guess what became of him. Even little Niggle in his old home could glimpse the mountains far away, and they got into the borders of his picture; but what they are really like, and what lies beyond them only those can say who have climbed them.

While the workhouse stands for Purgatory, the mountains clearly represent Paradise, the ultimate reward, though difficult to reach: "There were the Mountains in the background. They did get nearer, very slowly [...], a glimpse through the trees of something different [...]"

Another widespread motif in many of the world's mythologies is the mountain as abode of the gods. As a devout Catholic, Tolkien was obviously familiar with the religious implications of mountains in both the Old and the New Testament. On the other hand, the dwelling of the ruling pair of the Valar, Manwë and Varda, on the pinnacle of Taniquetil, the White Mountain, is Valinor's answer to the Greek Mount Olympus. As described in the first chapter of *The Silmarillion*, the lord of the winds and the lady of the stars could not live anywhere else but on the highest mountain of Arda, where "spirits in the shapes of hawks and eagles flew ever to and fro from his halls; and their eyes could see the depths of the sea, and pierce the hidden caverns beneath the world".

It has often been noted that Tolkien's mountains possess an almost sentient quality. When referring to this peculiar aspect of Tolkien's natural landscape, Brisbois calls it "Active nature", which has "a level of intelligence, if not outright sentience, in its processes"⁹. Furthermore, as Burns observes, both Tolkien and Morris refer to their mountains by using terms normally associated with the shape and movements of the human body: "Like Morris, Tolkien gives life to his landscapes through active, watchful verbs and through the use of human form (through 'shoulders', 'heads', 'arms', 'limbs', 'knees', and 'feet' of mountains or hills [...])¹⁰". The two ranges surrounding Mordor "swung out long arms northward" at their meeting point, the Haunted Pass; the sinister fortress of Minas Morgul stands "some way between the valley's arms [...] high on a rocky seat upon the black knees of the Ephel Dúath"; the peak of Caradhras, seen from afar, "stood up like a tooth tipped with snow". The Lonely Mountain has a 'heart', the Arkenstone, a white gem of inestimable value, whose well-meaning theft by Bilbo is decisive for the conclusion of the story.

In several instances, Tolkien's mountains even seem to have a personality of their own, showing what Patrick Curry calls "evidence of an active animism, a natural world that is literally alive"¹¹. In 'The Ring Goes South', even from a distance, the formidable Caradhras, the highest of the Mountains of Moria,

looks disturbingly ominous to the members of the Fellowship: “On the third day Caradhras rose before them, a mighty peak, tipped with snow like silver, but with sheer naked sides, dull red as if stained with blood.” Later in the book, it unleashes its anger at the Fellowship with a heavy snowfall which endangers the lives of the smallest members of the group. On such evident malevolence towards humans rests the mountain’s bad reputation, as Gimli points out: “Caradhras was called the Cruel, and has an ill name [...]”. When the Fellowship’s attempts to cross the Redhorn Gate are violently rejected, Gimli again comments: “It is no ordinary storm. It is the ill will of Caradhras. He does not love Elves or Dwarves [...]” Accordingly, Brisbois maintains that Caradhras is one of the forms taken by “Wrathful nature” which endangers the good as well as the bad¹².

In Chapter 10 of *The Hobbit*, Bilbo’s first glimpse of the Lonely Mountain, when riding a barrel down the Forest River towards Lake Town, is equally suggestive of its potential dangers: “And far away, its dark head in a cloud, loomed the Mountain! [...] All alone it rose and looked across the marshes to the forest. [...] [Bilbo] did not like the way the Mountain seemed to frown at him and threaten him as it drew even nearer.” Then, after the destruction of the Ring, even Mount Doom, in the eponymous chapter of *The Lord of the Rings*, comes across as a living creature in its death throes, as if it were an extension of Sauron himself. The description of the mountain’s agony is strikingly, intensely tragic: unlike Caradhras, Orodruin is not purposefully cruel. It just dies as it lived, loudly and violently, having exhausted its primary function:

[...] even as they passed towards the Mountain’s quaking feet, a great smoke and steam belched from the Sammath Naur, and the side of the cone was riven open, and a huge fiery vomit rolled in slow thunderous cascade down the eastern mountain-side. [...] Behind them the Mountain was convulsed. Great rents opened in its side.

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1. Tom Shippey, pp. 80-1 in *The Road to Middle-earth* (revised and expanded edition). London: HarperCollins, 2005. The name is actually to be found in the Elder Edda.
2. Douglas A. Anderson (ed.), p.256 in *The Annotated Hobbit* (revised and expanded edition). London: HarperCollins, 2003.
3. Wayne Hammond and Christina Scull, pp. 69-70 in *The Lord of the Rings. A Reader’s Companion*. London: HarperCollins, 2005.
4. William H. Green, pp. 57-8 in *The Hobbit. A Journey into Maturity*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995.
5. Gian Paolo Caprettini (ed.), pp. 250-1 in *Dizionario della fiaba italiana*. Roma: Meltemi, 2002.
6. Marjorie Burns, p. 80 in *Perilous Realms. Celtic and Norse in Tolkien’s Middle-earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.
7. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (eds.), p. 465 in *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (English translation by John Buchanan-Brown). London: Penguin Books, 1996.
8. Paul Kocher, p. 162 in *Master of Middle-earth. The Achievement of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: Pimlico, 2002.
9. Michael J. Brisbois, p. 204 in ‘Tolkien’s Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth’, *Tolkien Studies* 2, ed. Douglas A. Anderson, Michael D.C. Drout, and Verlyn Flieger, Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2005.
10. Burns, p. 85 in *Perilous Realms*, cit.
11. Patrick Curry, p. 110 in *Defending Middle-earth. Tolkien: Myth and Modernity*. London: HarperCollins, 1998.
12. Brisbois, p. 212 in ‘Tolkien’s Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth’, cit.