

Tolkien's Trees

Claudia Riiff Finseth

Anyone who has walked in a forest knows there is no better place for adventure. Snow White knew it, so did Hansel and Gretel. Trees and forests, with all their branches and paths, hollows and hiding places are perfect for suspense, surprise, enchantment and danger.

In his writings J.R.R. Tolkien gives us all kinds of forests and groves in which to find adventure – and he does more. He ascribes to his individual trees and forests a fantastic variety of meanings and possibilities by drawing from and adding to the rich symbolism of trees that has developed throughout the history of literature. Tolkien describes the trees with which we are familiar – oak, birch, willow – so that we see them with a fresh eye. He creates new trees for us such as we have never seen growing on our earth. He gives us a chance to look at things from a treeish point of view, which is to say a fresh point of view, and from there he can give an added dimension to his human characters, who define themselves in part through their attitude towards trees.

To speak of J.R.R. Tolkien and trees in one breath is to speak of a life-long love affair. From the time he was a boy and played among the trees in the countryside at Sarehole in Warwickshire at the turn of the century until his death at Bournemouth in 1973, Tolkien was, as Galadriel says of Sam the hobbit, a “lover of trees” (1966a, p. 486). Humphrey Carpenter in his biography (1977, p. 24) says of Tolkien,

... And though he liked drawing trees, he liked most of all to be with trees.

He would climb them, lean against them, even talk to them. It saddened him to discover that not everyone shared his feelings towards them. One incident in particular remained in his memory: ‘There was a willow hanging over the mill-pool and I learned to climb it... One day they cut it down. They didn’t do anything

with it; the log just lay there. I never forgot that.’

As a lover of trees and a man who abhorred the needless destruction of them, Tolkien the writer often defined his characters as good or evil in part by their feelings about trees. Many of the evil peoples in his stories are tree-destroyers. The orcs heedlessly and mindlessly hew away at the living trees of Fangorn; Saruman destroys the beauty of the Shire by erecting buildings from its trees; and Sauron’s evil presence turns Greenwood the Great to the black and decaying boughs of Mirkwood and makes Mordor so sterile that a tree cannot grow there (Tolkien, 1937, p. 310; 1966b, pp. 308-309). Conversely, among the good peoples of Tolkien’s world are many tree-lovers; one could almost say it is one of the hallmarks of Tolkien’s good people. Galadriel (1996a, p.434), Legolas and the whole host of Elves show a deep regard for trees, almost as brethren; the Ents and Huorns tend and guard their forests as shepherds protect their sheep (1966b, p.105); Samwise the hobbit-gardener cherishes the soil of Galadriel’s garden (1996c p. 374), using it to restore his own devastated Shire; Aragorn, rightful king of Gondor, takes as his banner symbol the White Tree (1996c, p.150); and Niggle desires nothing more before he dies than to finish his painting of a tree, Tolkien’s metaphor for one’s life work, for his own writing.

Tolkien’s life was filled from boyhood with the rich symbolism of the great trees of literature. The stories that “awakened desire” in him as a child included “above all, forests”. As a devout Catholic, he knew Christ’s metaphor of the vine and the branches, and perhaps even heard the legends of the tree that became the cross¹. As he grew older he discovered medieval literature, which became his speciality, including the cross-tree in the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Dream of the Rood”, and the *Poetic Edda* of Norse mythology with its World Tree,

¹ There are many legends of the cross that identify it with a certain tree. In one such legend the cross is made of an Aspen. when the tree realizes the use to which it is being put, its leaves begin to tremble, thus the Quaking Aspen. In another legend, when the trees learn that Christ is to be crucified, they agree not to let their wood be defiled in this way, and splinter apart at each touch of the axe. But the holly, realizing the inevitability of Christ’s death, out of pity permits itself to be the instrument of the Passion. Another legend tells that the cross is made of the tree that rose up over the bones of Adam after Eve planted a branch of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden on his grave. (Ferguson, 1961, pp. 13, 16 and 21; Eliade, 1952, pp. 43-44).

Yggdrasil.² His concept of trees as growing, living, conscious, feeling beings was nurtured by all of these. Through these he began to see the literary value of the image of the tree.

One of the earliest literary uses Tolkien makes of trees is in an episode of *The Hobbit* (1937, pp. 109-111) where Bilbo, Gandalf, and the Dwarves, fleeing the orcs of the Misty Mountains, are suddenly surrounded by wargs – evil wolf-like creatures. Luckily they are in a glade of trees. Jumping into the branches and climbing high, they find refuge and safety as they cradle in the boughs. Even when orcs come and, discovering them above, set the trees ablaze, the topmost branches of the trees provide a miraculous escape. For, only there atop the trees could Gwaihir, the Windlord, Lord of the Eagles, see them as he circled to investigate the smoke. Summoning his Eagle lords, they pluck the frightened travellers from the burning trees. The trees are refuge, escape, and finally sacrifice for Bilbo and his friends.

These themes of refuge and sacrifice blossom into fullness in Tolkien's forest of Lothlórien (1966a, pp. 432-491). This piece of heaven on Middle-earth is an enchanted land, sustained by the magic of the Lady of the Elves, Galadriel. In Galadriel's land grow the loveliest trees of all – the Mallorn trees. Their green leaves do not fall in the autumn, but turn golden and sparkle on their silver branches the whole winter through.

Tolkien's Silvan Elves set their dwellings, their watchtowers, and even the palace of Galadriel and Celeborn in these glorious trees. The trees are not only their refuge and safety, but all that to them is home and comfort. And Tolkien tells us that the secret of the beauty of the Mallorn trees is that they are beloved by elves (1981, p. 419).

Lothlórien's Mallorns also give refuge to Frodo and the Company of the Ring in their first night out of the dark and dangerous mines of Moria, and protect them from the avenging orcs (1966a, p. 444-447). The power to protect has been ascribed to other trees in history, most notably the cross. The cross is said in lore to have the power to ward off evil or harm. The cross is also the great symbol of sacrifice and it is not, I think, by chance that the Mallorn trees

resemble the shape of a cross with their tall, straight trunks from which the main branches grow almost perpendicular before turning up. At the top the main stem divides into "a crown of many boughs" (1966a, p. 444), just as Christ wore a crown of thorns on the cross.

With Frodo's quest, the question of sacrifice comes to the forest of Lothlórien. Whether good or evil avail, the enchanted land and its Golden Wood are doomed now that the Ruling Ring has been found. If the Ring falls to the enemy he will use its power to destroy Lothlórien and all else that is good in Middle-earth. If Frodo succeeds in destroying the Ring, Galadriel's power will fade, for her power, held in one of the three Elven rings, is tied to the one Ring. The bitter irony is that Galadriel dare not try to use the ruling ring herself, for though it would sustain Lórien for a while, eventually it would hideously corrupt her and all she has made beautiful. Galadriel therefore chooses to sacrifice Lothlórien and its Golden Wood for the chance that the rest of Middle-earth might be saved (1966a, pp. 472-474).

To Tolkien, trees are a way to define beauty and life in his terms. It is not just outward appearances, as we discover through Frodo's experience on the hill of Cerin Amroth in Lórien (1966a, p. 455):

As Frodo prepared to follow him, he laid his hand upon the tree beside the ladder: never before had he been so suddenly and keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin, and of the life within it. He felt delight in wood and the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter, it was the delight of the living tree itself.

Tolkien is redefining life for us. It is not to move, to eat, to breath as we know such things. Intelligence is not simply the ability to talk. The Mallorn do none of these things and yet through Frodo's touch we sense they are vibrantly alive and keenly aware of all around them. These do not DO, but simply ARE, and in that fulfil the definition of "alive" more than many of the beings on Middle-earth who through speech and action bring destruction, despair and death. Our modern Western world, with its emphasis on mass and fast production, often lacks this value, and Tolkien lamented it.³ Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969,

² The most widely distributed mythology for the centre of the universe is the Cosmic Tree. Usually it holds all three spiritual planes – heaven, earth, and hell – on its axis. Mircea Elaide describes it as "roots plunged down into Hell ... branches reaching to Heaven." (1952, p. 44).

³ In a 1944 letter to his son, Christopher, serving in WWII, Tolkien wrote, "I wonder how you are getting on with your flying since you first went solo – the last news we had of this. I especially noted your observations on the skimming of martins. That touches to the heart

p. 7) says this is much of the reason for despair in our world, since our value is in what we do, not who we are, as we grow old and lose our abilities, we lose our sense of meaning and purpose.

Through Frodo's experience of touching the Mallorn tree, Tolkien also tells us the living, growing tree is more beautiful than anything that could be carved or crafted from it. For Tolkien beauty is in being alive and healthy and whole, in being nurtured and nurturing in return, in the interchange that can be had only between one living thing and another. The trees of the Golden Wood are as beautiful inside as they appear on the outside; they are consistent; they are true. Each green or golden leaf, each yellow flower in spring, each uplifted, branching bough is most beautiful there, on the tree, where it is natural and a part of the whole of living creation. This beauty is apparent in Tolkien's translation of Treebeard's Entish description of Lothlórien (1981, p. 308);

The valley where the trees in a golden light
sing musically, a land of music and dreams;
there are yellow trees there, it is a tree-yellow
land.

In sorry contrast stand the Middle-earth forests of Mirkwood and the Old Forest. In these the presence of evil has destroyed all that was live and beautiful.

Mirkwood – the name, Tolkien tells us, is a “Primitive Germanic name ... black, and from the beginning weighted with a sense of gloom” (1981, p. 369) – was once Greenwood the Great. But Sauron settled there for a while, disguised as the Necromancer, and his evil poisoned the great green wood until it was black and dangerous – a place of eternal decay. In Tolkien theology only contortion and perversion result when beauty and life are used for evil purposes, as the evil Ring of power has transformed Sméagol from a hobbit-like being into a hideous and pitiful creature, Gollum. These are echoes of the Garden of Eden, where again trees are centre stage, the Tree of Life and the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Like Gollum, Adam and Eve gained power but lost innocence because of their inability to refuse the forbidden fruit (they were not as strong as Galadriel), and could never go back to their innocent

state. The Garden of Eden was forever closed to them.

Trees with knowledge of good and evil are, in a way, the theme of the Old Forest. Frodo and his friends plunge into the Old forest to escape pursuit by the nine ringwraiths, only to find a different danger awaiting them (1966a, pp. 165-169). This forest's knowledge of man's (and hobbit's) ways has turned it's “heart” to hatred, and hatred seems always to lead to evil. We learn from Tom Bombadil (1966a, p. 181):

Tom's words laid bear the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning; destroyers and usurpers.

The trees of the Old Forest have come to hate free creatures as the enemies who destroy them.. Their hate is long-learned; some were ancient trees that were lords before man walked the earth and began destroying. Tolkien says in a letter that “The Old Forest was hostile to two-legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries” (1981, p. 419).

Tom Bombadil tells us that the Old Forest is under the dominion of Old Man Willow (1966a, pp. 168-169), (inspired by an Arthur Rackham drawing – Carpenter, 1977, p. 181) who has great cunning and a rotten heart. His power spread “like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible finger-twigs in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest...” (1966a, p. 181).

Here malice is in the forest itself, personified by Old Man Willow, and not an outside influence like Sauron. Sauron has never been here. Tolkien, complaining about a BBC broadcast in which Old Man Willow was described as an ally of Mordor, wrote “Cannot people imagine things hostile to men and hobbits who prey on them without being in league with the Devil!” (1981, p. 228). Tolkien felt there is a malice implicit in the cosmos itself, of which Sauron is only one part. This is reminiscent of the cold and brutal world of Norse mythology, which Tolkien knew well (Carpenter, 1977, p. 72). The

of things, doesn't it? There is the tragedy and despair of all machinery laid bare. Unlike art which is content to create a new secondary world in the mind, it attempts to actualize desire, and so to create power in this World; and that cannot really be done with any real satisfaction. Labour-saving machinery only creates endless and worse labour. And in addition to this fundamental disability of a creature, is added the Fall, which makes our devices not only fail of their desire but turn to new and horrible evil. So we come inevitably from Daedalus and Icarus to the Giant Bomber. It is not an advance in wisdom! This terrible truth, glimpsed long ago by Sam Butler, sticks out so plainly and is so horrifyingly exhibited in our world wide mental disease that only a tiny minority perceive it. Even if people have ever heard the legends (which is getting rarer) they have no inkling of their portent ... I will forgive the Mordor-gadgets some of their sins, if they will bring (this letter) quickly to you ...” (1981, p. 89).

undertones of Ragnarok, the final war of the world in which the Norse heroes will lose to the evil frost giants, is always present, lending a certain dark pessimism to Tolkien's own mythology. Even though in his version good ultimately triumphs, his hero is irreparably wounded. His mythology also deeply influenced by Christian doctrine: for though his hero is wounded as a sacrifice to save Middle-earth, there is a resurrection of sorts waiting for him beyond the Grey Havens; a heaven and eternal life, if you will, beyond the westering seas.

Unlike Mirkwood, the malice of the Old Forest trees is not thoughtless, their hate is not unjustified. And yet this wood is, after all, evil. Evil because it has let its sorrow and pain be turned to malice, hate and destruction in turn. It has become no better than those who would destroy it, and can even no longer differentiate between those who mean it ill and those who simply want to pass through, like Frodo and his companions. Its prejudice is blind. This is a sad commentary on what bitterness can do, and in men as much in trees. There is many an Old Man Willow in the human world, who instead of gaining wisdom and understanding from his trials, has gotten only a rotten heart. The trees of the Old Forest have not only become evil, but they have become unnatural. They do untreeish things that go against the laws of nature, even in Middle-earth: they move about, they stifle the air instead of replenishing it, they trap people inside themselves as if they had become carnivores (1966a, pp. 159 and 166). What is more, these trees have become unnatural in a moral sense; they go against the laws which pertain to moral rightness or justice by preying on innocent hobbits with singularly cruel intent. They no long resemble trees except in appearance; a sharp contrast to the true heart that Frodo feels within the Mallorn tree of Lórien.⁴

Ages of trial and sorrow have brought wisdom and understanding to one forest on Middle-earth: the small and peculiar forest of Fangorn near Rohan.

Here reside the Ents and of all Tolkien's marvellous creations, the tree-like Ents are arguably the strangest and most wonderful.

Ents are the oldest of the mortal races that walk Middle-earth. Although at first glance they are easily mistaken for trees such as oak, fir, or rowan, they are in reality a tall troll-size creature that can move about. (Trolls are counterfeits made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness in mockery of Ents.) They have two legs and two arms which sprout long toes and fingers, very stiff but bendable joints, and "all the same eyes ... with the same slow, steady, thoughtful expression, and the same green flicker" (1966b, p. 119). Some Ents have grown sleepy and treeish, and are known as Huorns. The Ents are the shepherds of Fangorn forest. Although old, old and musty, it is not an evil forest, for the Ents are not an evil kind. They are one of the four original races of free people: Elves, Ents, Dwarves and Men. Legolas, who can sense good and evil intuitively, tells us of Fangorn (1966b, p. 119):

'I do not think the woods feel evil... No it is not evil; or what evil is in it is far away. I catch only the faintest echoes of dark places where the hearts of the trees are black. There is no malice near us, but there is watchfulness, and anger.'

Treebeard, the oakish⁵ Ent, is the guardian of Fangorn and the eldest of all his race. He seems to be not centuries, but millennia old. Treebeard has suffered much sorrow in his long life. He has seen the Entwives disappear from the face of Middle-earth, and he grieves for them and the Enting offspring which will never be. He has watched Saruman hack and destroy the trees he has lovingly tended. Like Old Man Willow, he has reason to distrust two-legged creatures, but Treebeard has not let it turn to blind hate, and so he spares the lost hobbits Merry and Pippin when he sees they are not harmful beings, even though he is close to the boiling point over

⁴ Treebeard describes it this way: "... you find that some (trees) have *bad* hearts. Nothing to do with their wood: I do not mean that. Why, I knew some good old willows down the Entwash, gone long ago, alas! They were quite hollow, indeed they were falling all to pieces, but as quiet and sweet spoken as a young leaf. And then there are some trees in the valleys under the mountains, sound as a bell, and bad right through. That sort of thing seems to spread. There used to be some very dangerous parts in this country. There are still some very black patches." (1966b, p. 89).

⁵ As Merry and Pippin look upon the Ents at the Entmoot, the great gathering of the Ents, they note: "... the variety that they saw: the many shapes, and colours, the differences in girth, and height, and length of leg and arm; and in the number of toes and fingers (anything from three to nine). A few seemed more or less related to Treebeard, and reminded them of beech-trees or oaks. But there were other kinds. Some recalled the chestnut: brown-skinned Ents with large splay fingered hands, and short thick legs. Some recalled the ash: tall straight grey Ents with many-fingered hands and long legs; some the fir (the tallest Ents), and others the birch, the rowan, and the linden. But when the Ents all gathered round Treebeard ... the hobbits saw that they were all of the same kindred, and all had the same eyes: not all so old or so deep as Treebeard's, but all with the same slow, steady, thoughtful expression, and the same green flicker." (1966b, p. 105).

Saruman the wizards's desecration of his trees (Helms, 1974, p. 99). He eventually spares even Saruman out of his great regard for the sacredness of life, refusing to kill anything or anyone hastily. Pippin describes Treebeard for us by looking into his eyes (1966b, p. 83):

One felt as if there was an enormous well behind them, filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present: like sun shivering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don't know, but it felt as if something that grew in the ground – asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between root-tip and left-tip, between deep earth and sky – had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years.

Treebeard's wise and generous refusal to act hastily is one of the great traits of the Ents. At first, though, it seems merely a humorous characteristic. Treebeard's constant chiding of the impetuous hobbits "not so hasty, now!" (1966b, p. 85) makes us laugh. When the Entmoot, the council of the Ents, carries on for days and all that's been accomplished is the introductions, we begin to think, like Pippin and Merry, that they will never finish in time to help the quest. This Entish abhorrence of hastiness; the slow, steady, day-long, night-long deliberation of the Entmoot; even the deep, melodic "Hrum, hoom" of Treebeard, all embody the antithesis of modern society with its emphasis on speed and mass production – things that troubled Tolkien. In fact, Treebeard sounds very Tolkienish when he says of Saruman, "He has a mind of metal and wheels, and he does not care for growing things" (1966b, p. 96).⁶ Contrary to modern society, Tolkien did not equate slowness with ineffectiveness, nor technology with wisdom or moral superiority. In a paradoxical twist that illuminates the tragedy of our machine age, Tolkien makes modern man seem strangely immobile and incompetent compared with the Ents once they have made a decision to act. As the Entmoot's ends, we begin to see a power in the Ents that surprises us – an emotion that humbles us. As he and Pippin watch the Entmoot they discuss whether the Ents will be able to aid in the fight against evil, Merry says it in this way (1966, p. 107):

But I have an odd feeling about these Ents: somehow I don't think they are quite as safe and, well, funny as they seem. They seem slow, queer, and patient, almost sad; and yet I believe they could be roused. If that happened, I would rather not be on the other side.

Of all Tolkien's creations, perhaps Treebeard is most like him. Tolkien himself disputes this, claiming in one of his letters (1981, p. 190), "Treebeard is a character in my story, not me..." But nonetheless, Tolkien was, at this time, a man who was feeling the years of his age ring around him even greater. He did not know or understand the latest technology, nor did he want to. His life was that of a bygone day, his memories of simpler times, like that of Treebeard. There is perhaps in Treebeard's lament for the days of the Entwives not just a little of Tolkien's own philosophy on life: At the death of his friend, C.S. Lewis, on whose booming voice Tolkien had modelled Treebeard's way of speaking, Tolkien wrote to his daughter, "So far I have felt the normal feelings of a man my age – like an old tree that is losing all its leaves one by one: this feels like an axe blow near the roots." And like the old, wise, slow and careful tree-loving treebeard, Tolkien had spent decades painstakingly and lovingly creating the mythology that would become his books. Most of all similarities, though, Tolkien also loved trees.

Whether an extension of Tolkien himself or not, Ents and Huorns, as living, walking relatives of trees, bring us more closely in touch with trees, as if through Ents we might begin to understand trees as the living things they are. Although we first view them as comic, we grow to love, and finally respect, even fear and be in awe of, the Ents. In this way Tolkien cultivates in each of us a little patch of his great love for trees. Carpenter (1977, p. 219) calls Treebeard "... the being who was the ultimate expression of Tolkien's love and respect for trees."

The suffering and sorrow of the trees of Middle-earth echo a tradition in literature of trees that have the capacity for pain and joy. The Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* from around the eighth century, tells of how the cross shared Christ's passion. Forced to be the instrument of Christ's death, it suffered the nail wounds, spear thrusts and drenching bloodstains together with the Saviour to fulfil God's will. The idea of a tree that can feel compassion was not new, even then. Yggdrasil, the

⁶ In fact, Treebeard's compliment to Gandalf is that he "is the only wizard who really cares about trees" (1966b, p. 105).

World Tree of the Norse Edda, “suffers more than men know,” (Orik, 1930, p. 33) having its roots constantly gnawed by creatures below, its leaves eaten from above (Hollander, 1962, p.60 stanza 36). What is more, it nourishes gods and men with the life-giving honey-dew that it drips; it shelters and gives birth to new life. The suffering and sacrifice of these trees is surprising. Yet though men are often ignorant to the suffering of trees, the trees of Middle-earth often know and feel the suffering of the free-peoples. They are healthy and strong where the free-peoples prosper, and wither where there is death (Ferguson, 1961, p. 39). Their fate is linked to the people’s fate, like Yggdrasil, source of unborn souls (Davidson, 1969, p. 112). It is an inter-connection that has since been born out by modern science, the delicate balance of the ecosystem.

Such is the life of the White Tree of Gondor. When Gondor flourishes under a rightful and true king, the tree flourishes; when Gondor declines, the tree withers away (1966c, p. 408). Thus the tree becomes something of a barometer of whether things are right in the land. If you can learn to read the trees, you can learn to read the hearts of the people, or at least the leaders, of the land. The White Tree of Gondor is so sensitive to human conditions that it will not flourish simply if a good man rules, but only if that man is the bloodline heir to the throne – the One Rightful King. The real test for Aragorn, heir apparent, is not his courage in battle, nor his powers to heal, nor even his wisdom to rule; Aragorn waits and watches for the withered tree in the Court of the Fountain to blossom once again (1966c, pp. 307-309). Aragorn trusts in the tradition of the sign of the tree, showing anxiety at the thought that the tree might not return, but never doubting it to be the final confirmation of his kingship. (Men, after all, do not possess the patience of the Ents.) Why does Aragorn trust so in the tree? Maybe because he is a Ranger, who has lived in and studied nature his whole life, and who in so doing is more in touch with living things than most men. Perhaps it is the Elven blood that runs in his veins, for Elves coexist in a deep bond with nature. It is also because he is wise.

When, finally, Gandalf takes Aragorn up into the mountains and shows him a slender white sapling in

the snow, a sense of fulfilment wells in us all. The tree is found, the world is right for now. The first sign that the time is imminent is the Elven-woman Arwen’s gift of a banner with “seven stars and seven stones and one white tree” (1966c, p. 27), sent as Frodo nears Mount Doom and the last battle approaches. When Frodo’s quest is over and Mordor has been defeated, the last sign that is awaited to indicate the world has been set right is the return of the living White Tree to the courtyard.

The living White Tree is the final symbol of recovery for Gondor, a country that looked at one time as though it were in its last decline. This is significant to Tolkien’s theory on the importance of fantasy in general. Tolkien saw fantasy as a potent form of art that, through the powers of sub-creation and enchantment, could provide readers with the healing gifts of recovery, escape and consolation. These are all gifts that Tolkien’s trees bear to Middle-earth. As Hans Christian Anderson said, “green is good for the eyes” (Lewis, 1981, p. 91), so Tolkien might have added: for the heart.⁷

Tolkien saw trees and his art of fantasy as closely resembling each other, so closely that Tolkien found the tree the perfect metaphor for his art in two short stories, *Smith of Wootton Major* and “Leaf by Niggle”. In fairyland Smith glimpses the King’s Tree, which “Bore at once leaves and flowers and fruits uncounted, and not one was the same as any other...” (1966d, p. 28). This is the same tree that Niggle, in his story, tries to paint, each leaf the same and yet totally different. In Niggle’s story the tree is an allegory for writing, for story-telling – for Tolkien’s own writing, and in a broader sense for the Tree of Tales. In his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (which together with “Leaf by Niggle” makes up a volume Tolkien titles *Tree and Leaf*), Tolkien gives encouragement to the would-be writer of fantasy in this way (1966d, p. 76):

It is easy for the student to feel that with all his labour he is collection only a few leaves, many of them now torn or decayed, from the countless foliage of the Tree of Tales... Who can design a new leaf? The patterns from bud to unfolding, and the colours from spring to

⁷ Hans Christian Anderson, like Tolkien, explored the theme of natural vs unnatural in his stories, with the idea that natural is intrinsically better, even redemptive. “The Nightingale” is one of his most famous examples. In that story the more subtle beauty of the real bird flourishing in its natural freedom is juxtaposed against the gaudy man-made mechanical bird. Anderson is commenting on man’s sad but constant desire to improve on the natural by creating the unnatural, or to possess the natural by domesticating or caging it. The song of the free bird cannot be improved upon. It is a gift.

autumn were all discovered by men long ago.
But that is not true...

He goes on to say that, although season and leaves – and tales – may be very similar, no two are every exactly the same, and one particular one may touch some in a way that all similar ones just can't quite.

Except for Andersen's lovely metaphor of The Tree of Poetry in "The Goblin at the Grocer's" (Lewis, 1981, p. 160), Tolkien's use of the tree as the representative of his art was unique for his time. This tells us perhaps more than anything how very much he loved trees. He chose them to symbolise the art that was the very purpose of his life. To Tolkien art was alive as trees, and trees as precious as art. He looked upon both as gifts and friends.⁸

Tolkien said "In all my wars I take the part of trees as against all their enemies" (1981, p. 419). He saw this feeling for trees as an awareness of universal man's deepest desires: "to hold communion with other living things, survey the depths of space and time, and to explore strange languages, glimpses of

an archaic mode of life, and, above all, forests" (Helms, 1974, p. 14). To understand this desire and to yield to it is to gain the wisdom of wizards, who "believe that the wise man is one who never sets himself apart from other living things, whether they have speech or not" and "learn what can be learned, in silence, from the eyes of animals, the flight of birds, the great slow gestures of trees" (Le Guin, 1969, p. 82). In his love for trees Tolkien shared in the wisdom of the wise. Through his art he endeavours to share that wisdom with us, hoping that we, like Niggle's friend Parish, might find ourselves more aware of trees as living things, as works of art and beauty, and as sensitive and feeling in their own way. If then, we catch ourselves listening suddenly to the rustle of leaves or the creaking of branches, noticing the subtle change of colours through the passing of seasons, or the especially pleasing symmetry of the crown of an oak, perhaps even nodding a smile to the occasional sway of a bough in our directing, Tolkien would approve.

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⁸ Of *Leaf by Niggle* Tolkien wrote: "One of its sources was a great-limbed poplar tree that I could see even lying in bed. It was suddenly lopped and mutilated by its owner, I do not know why. 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." (1966d, pp. 31-32).

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