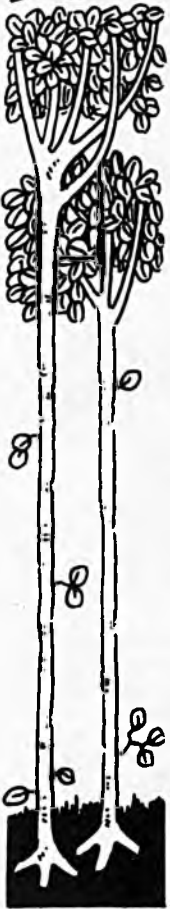


THE FOREST



in *The Lord of the Rings* AND *The Hobbit*

Tolkien takes us through four forests, all four of which used to be "all one wood once upon a time from here to the Mountains of Lune" (TT, p. 72); the forests encountered are Mirkwood in *The Hobbit*, and the Old Forest, Lothlórien and Fangorn in *The Lord of the Rings*. In using the Forest as a symbol of strangeness and danger, Tolkien is drawing on a well established tradition in story-telling. The most frequent use of the Forest is to be found in the Arthurian Cycle as assembled by Malory, purely because it is probably the longest compilation of tales around a central theme gathered. Later collectors of tales were also to find the Forest used in the same way. For example, in the fairy-stories, as we loosely call them, collected by the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault, many of the heroes have to battle through, or come to grief in, the Forest; one has only to think of the prince in "Sleeping Beauty", or of Hansel and Gretel, or Snow White. The reasons behind the great use of the Forest are not difficult to ascertain.

At the times when the Arthurian stories and the fairy-tales were still an oral tradition, mile upon mile of countryside would still have been woodland; even if explored, would contain wild boar and the wolf; these woods could contain every element of the unknown and the unseen and therefore were rife for imaginative speculation, let alone holding the tangible terrors of wild animals. It seems logical, therefore, that when one of King Arthur's knights steps out of the safe confines of Camelot, he should immediately enter a forest where he can find adventures, mostly dangerous, involving supernatural ladies in league with Morgan le Fay, and renegade knights arbitrarily challenging every passer-by.

As 'civilization' spread, the concept of the Forest widened to take in the vast and unknown city: the 'concrete jungle' is a term known by most people and an instantly recognisable shorthand for the wild and wicked city

where one can encounter as much danger and unfamiliarity as one could in the Forest of old. Dickens was the best utiliser of the city in this respect. In Great Expectations, Pip encounters people and places far stranger and far more squalid than he ever found on the Marshes at home, even when he has met and been scared half to death by the convict in the swirling mist. Arthur Conan Doyle was continuing this tradition when he wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories. Stories like The Red-headed League prove far more effective in showing the sinister side of the city and man's nature than when Holmes is transported to the wilder regions of Dartmoor in The Hound of the Baskervilles. One might expect strange things to happen in a place like Dartmoor, whereas London, the one-time symbol of safety and civilized values, has also become the Forest. It is interesting to note that while Dickens and Conan Doyle were writing so effectively about the concrete jungle and finding it just as exciting as the Forest, some, like Cecil Rhodes or Doctor Livingstone, were going to explore the actual jungles of the Dark Continent.

The emphasis in the twentieth century has turned to 'the final frontier', Space. But the idea has not changed since our ancestors told stories of adventures in the Forest. The Forest might not have been the final frontier but the heroes were definitely and boldly going where no man had gone before. The idea is to have a place or time where anything is possible. What Tolkien has successfully done is to bring the heroic epic into the twentieth century whilst still using the old symbolism.

But whether one regards the Forest as being symbolic or merely geographic, their functions remain the same: to move the story into surprise and danger.

Mirkwood in The Hobbit is the most sinister and malevolent Forest in Tolkien's writings — and what a lovely name, Mirkwood. Everything inside it from the supposed 'good-guys' (i.e. Thranduil and his Elves) down to a seemingly innocent stream, all militate against the dwarves and Bilbo. Tolkien here uses the Forest in its most traditional sense of being an evil place with no redeeming feature at all and Mirkwood is only redeemed outside The Hobbit with the expulsion of the Necromancer from its confines, and the friendship of Gimli and Legolas in The Lord of the Rings, the former's father having been the prisoner of the latter's.

The three forests in LotR are slightly different from Mirkwood. Although they are still unknown quantities until passed through and are regarded with fear by those who know little or nothing about them, their hearts remain pure. As we

know in the Old Forest, although Old Man Willow is a malicious beggar, the Forest does contain an ally in the form of Tom Bombadil. And all three forests in LotR hold points of respite for the wanderers. In the traditional sense though, it should be noted that the first unknown place the Hobbits come to on leaving the Shire is a forest, and like all forests, its reputation for strangeness has far outgrown the actuality, especially if one listens to "the old bogey-stories Fattie's nurses used to tell him, about goblins and wolves and things of that sort" (FotR, p. 121). But even leaving this and other things aside, as Merry says:

"There are various queer things living deep in the Forest ... something makes paths. Whenever one comes inside one finds open tracks, but they seem to shift ... from time to time in a queer fashion" (FotR, p. 121).

Tolkien is good at producing red herrings, of which this is one. In 'The Shadow of the Past' towards the end of his long tale of the Ring, Gandalf says:

"And be careful what you say, even to your closest friends! The enemy has many spies and many ways of hearing" (FotR, p. 72).

There has been a constant ostinato to the telling of the tale, Sam clipping the grass with shears. But as Gandalf stops speaking it becomes apparent that the clipping is no more. Is Sam Gamgee a spy for Mordor? Tolkien does the same kind of thing again as a horse comes riding out of the fog at Bucklebury Ferry; with Strider at Bree; and at the encounter with Glorfindel. Who, then, is making those paths through the Old Forest? The setting of a red herring implies a surprise of some sort and in the case of the Old Forest two surprises, firstly in the kindly nature of the maker of the paths, i.e. Tom Bombadil, and secondly in averting our immediate attention from the imminent encounter with Old Man Willow.

The second forest traversed by the Hobbits, Lothlórien, is as much a place of wonder and foreboding as had been the Old Forest and as expressed by Boromir (e.g. FotR, p. 352), Éomer (e.g. TT, p. 35) and Treebeard (e.g. TT, p. 70). And although Lórien contains no malice "unless a man bring it hither himself" (FotR, p. 373), like the Old Forest in Old Man Willow there is suspicion, as Haldir expresses when Gimli is bound to be blindfolded:

"Indeed in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who still oppose him" (FotR, p. 362).

But Lórien is different, in that it is literally an enchanted place, an



enchantment that is "right down deep, where I can't lay my hands on it" (FotR, p. 376); whereas the effects of Tom Bombadil on his home in the Old Forest were "less keen and lofty ... but deeper and nearer to mortal heart" (FotR, p. 134).

Even Celeborn treats our third forest, Fangorn, with caution (FotR, p. 390) but as in the cases of the Old Forest and Lothlórien, Fangorn serves as a refuge for Merry and Pippin, a point of respite from whence they emerge refreshed and 'grown'. Fangorn's secret is the Ents, "the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth" (TT, p. 102) and is indeed "perilous ... to those that are too ready with their axes" (TT, p. 103). Unlike its natural counterpart in the North, the Old Forest, Fangorn does more than give mere shelter. It very positively acts in the overthrow of Saruman, thus relieving one of the most dangerous fronts of the War.

All four of the Forests in both The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings seem to contribute towards the maturation of the Hobbits in particular. In The Hobbit Bilbo has hitherto been regarded by the hardy dwarves as so much baggage but with the help of the Ring he is enabled to help the dwarves escape the clutches of Thranduill which gives him some estimation in the eyes of the dwarves, and probably helps Bilbo to regard himself in a better light too. Therefore, one might say that Mirkwood is Bilbo's forest.

The Old Forest in The Lord of the Rings serves as the first testing ground for all four of the Hobbits who commence the Quest together. Although it is Merry and Pippin who become entangled in Old Man Willow, it is Frodo and Sam who have to devise a way of releasing them; all prove totally helpless until the arrival of Tom Bombadil. The lesson to be learned is that not only are the allies of Sauron conspiring against them, but very Nature itself. Though the experience does not exactly teach them to be more careful as we see a little later during the incident

on the Barrow Downs and when Frodo disappears at the Prancing Pony, it is, however, a sort of initiation into the ways of the world outside the Shire and merely the decision to go through the Old Forest in the first place enables the Hobbits to make future decisions that will prove far more crucial to the quest.

Lothlórien is a test for Frodo and Sam, or at least the emphasis is placed on Frodo and Sam, not only when Galadriel searches their thoughts but also when she lets them look into her Mirror. Sam's immediate reaction on seeing the Shire being 'industrialised' is to hot-foot it home again. Sam sees really what is still dearest to his heart, the Shire, which is an indication of his eventual reward, that very Shire. But as he said after the encounter with Gildor:

"... I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back ... I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it through, sir, if you understand me" (FotR, p. 96).

Looking into Galadriel's Mirror seals that resolve to go on but his eventual reward is reflected in Galadriel's parting gift (FotR, p. 392).

What Frodo sees in the Mirror reflects his best hopes and his worst fears, his hope in the vision of what might be Gandalf and his fear in seeing the absolute nothingness of Sauron, what he might become if consumed by the Ring. But he would appear to need the second scare of seeing what effect the Ring might have if given to Galadriel before he finally realises that the Ring must be destroyed. He also sees the sea - though in connection with a foresight of Aragorn's destruction of Corsairs of Umbar - but which begins his Sea-longing. Again his eventual reward is indicated in Galadriel's parting gift. What Frodo receives is "the light of Eärendil's star" (FotR, p. 393); Frodo's reward will be beyond the bounds of Middle-earth.

Thus it is that when Sam and Frodo emerge from Lothlórien, they are firmer than ever in their resolve to destroy the Ring, each having seen the need that most closely touched their respective hearts.

Fangorn belongs to Merry and Pippin alone. The whole episode has a lighter, more playful atmosphere to it and not only because the Hobbits are so small and Treebeard so large. Both the Hobbits and the Ents are referred to as a "careless custom" taught "only to children" (TT, p. 155). Indeed, when the two Hobbits meet Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas at Isengard, Gimli treats them like recalcitrant children and calls them "You rascals, you

woolly-footed and wool-pated truants!" (TT, p. 162). But part of this light-heartedness is relief at seeing them safe. And though the lessons learnt by Merry and Pippin in their encounter with Fangorn are less lofty than those learned by Sam and Frodo, they do learn. Firstly, there is the tragedy of the loss of the Entwives; Sam and Frodo discover Galadriel's dilemma while Merry and Pippin hear Treebeard's; this rather diminishes their recent jostlings with the Uruk-hai. Secondly, they grow physically due to Treebeard's ent-draughts. Heretofore, Merry and Pippin have been a bit neglected by Tolkien. Elrond excluded them from his council and was ready to pack them off to the Shire until they protested vehemently. Pippin is rather harshly dealt with by Gandalf when in Moria Pippin foolishly drops a stone into a well (FotR, p. 327) which is just the kind of thing children love to do. But his foresight and potential bravery begin to show when, whilst in the captivity of the Uruk-hai he leaves a sign for Aragorn to follow (TT, p. 53). Thirdly, in the company of the Ents, Merry and Pippin can begin to feel less insignificant. They might only be small, but like the initial tiny stone that starts rolling they cause an avalanche to fall on Isengard. Although they may not be much use as fighters by themselves, with the Ents they can begin to feel brave and to have achieved something.

The adventure with Treebeard points them in the direction of greater deeds. For such is Merry's determination later when Théoden refuses to take him into battle, he goes in secret with another determined soldier who is being denied the chance to fight (RotK, p. 77-8) and between them, he and Éowyn destroy the Nazgûl captain (RotK, p. 116). That day, also, the oral lesson of the loss of the Entwives becomes a reality to Merry when he has to face loss for the first time in the shape of Théoden and supposedly Éowyn too. But whatever happens, no-one will ever deny Merry the chance of a fight again, not after his destruction of a Ring-wraith.

Pippin's Waterloo comes at the very gates of Mordor when he kills a troll (RotK, p. 168-9) but he has a great weight bearing down on him; he fights because a heavy fatalism has engulfed him, thinking that Frodo and Sam are in Sauron's clutches and that Merry is probably dead, he fights to die himself and to be even with Merry in the rolls of honour. But he has enough about himself that he does fight and does not just give up to the sheer weight of armoury stacked against him and all the others of Aragorn's army.

The encounter with Fangorn has been an introduction for both of them to danger and grief and it is significant that all four forests are encountered by the Hobbits without Gandalf: Gandalf, on whom

so much dependence is placed by Bilbo and all the Fellowship. Each had his lesson to learn through his own resources to enable each to take on his respective burden both during and after the Quest.

Singly, the tree, as opposed to the Forest, can be seen as yet another symbol for Life itself. Gandalf makes the same equation when he reveals a sapling of the Tree of Númenor to Aragorn (RotK, p. 249-50), drawing a parallel between the tree's having survived in secret just as Aragorn has, and of this sapling being the symbol of Aragorn's line continuing even after death.

But while the single tree may survive as a symbol of hope, that hope is for Man and Treebeard augers ill for the wild and natural during the age to come when he says, "And there are too many Men there in these days" (RotK, p. 259).

The signs are that the four great forests of Middle-earth will eventually diminish into a copse here or a covert there and when Treebeard speaks his ominous words we already know what is going to happen to Lothlórien.

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Bibliography

J. R. R. Tolkien: The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers and The Return of the King, George Allen & Unwin, 1966.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WELCOME to the second edition of "Mallorn Mail". As you can see, we have overflowed somewhat this time - keep it up! I welcome letters on all aspects of Mallorn (general comments etc. should be sent to the editor of Amon Hen), and you can find a few brief guidelines on p. 2. Don't forget to mark your envelopes "Mallorn Mail" so that I can distinguish letters of comment from private communication! I would particularly welcome comments from new members, who have not received a Mallorn before. I look forward to hearing from you. . . and now on with the first letter overleaf! . . .