



THE TREE OF TALES

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he TREE of Tales, the myths of Good and Evil, making and breaking, Light and Darkness, is a great tree, with roots spread out well into the past; a strong trunk which forges through the human psyche; and a wide canopy of leaves and blossoms which

cast the light of those myths on the present.

Perhaps, though, it should be called the 'Forest of Tales', for it is itself full of trees, which have long played a great role in the world of myth. Trees are strong and long-lived; and a man could see a tree, which was an old giant when he was born, seemingly unchanged as he lay on his deathbed.

So, to man, they soon came to be symbols of immortality. Evergreen trees, which hold their leaves even through the coldest winter, were thought never to die, and so achieved a religious status. Deciduous trees, which appeared to die in winter, burgeoned again with leaf and flower in spring, and so were a sign of resurrection, a sign that life truly was indestructible.

Man, of course, wanted to communicate with them. He wanted to learn their secrets, and desired understanding of 'the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees' (*Tree & Leaf* p.22). Natural phenomena held secrets, and while man could not talk to the thunder or lightning, there was always the chance of seeing, and even talking to, the stone giants who cause it. He may even return alive!

And, just as thunder and lightning

have always surrounded man, so have woods. Europe was once blanketed in dark, murky woods. It is said that in Saxon times a squirrel could travel from the Severn to the Wash without once setting foot on the ground; and there was all one wood from Fangorn 'to the Mountains of Lune' (*LotR* II.3.14. "Treebeard")

TREE SPIRITS

So man was constantly surrounded by trees, and as well as food, warmth and shelter, they provided him with the inspiration of life, not only now but for ever. And we have seen, too, how he would try to communicate, to learn their secrets and their changing moods. A wood could be open and friendly one moment, in the light of the sun - as when Pippin felt he almost liked Fangorn - but dark and sinister the next.

As he learned more about the trees their spirits, with whom he tried to communicate, became more independent. The hamadryad, the wood nymph who lived and died with the tree with which she dwelt, developed into the dryad, with a more independent existence, nearer to man, and thus more open to communication.

So the tree inched its way into the myths of mankind and, as with so many other aspects of Faerie, Tolkien wove the patterns into his own myth, that of Middle-earth. Each group in human society has its own leaves on the branches of the Tree of Tales, its own branch of blossom, yet each branch can give access to the whole tree.

It is beyond the powers of any man to portray the whole tree in its full glory, and equally impossible to show properly the inner workings. "Myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and

lies before it can be dissected" (*The Monsters and the Critics* p.15). But Niggle discovered, in the end, that a single leaf can be pictured, and can give some idea of the glory of the whole. Tolkien knew this only too well, and within the structure of Middle-earth many different single leaves of the Tree of Tales are hidden. Their detail is often hidden, but they play their part. The story is "not about [these things] but it receives part of its life, its vividness, its tension from them" (*The Monsters and the Critics*: "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" p.73).

"The seed of the tree can be replanted in almost any soil" (*Tree and Leaf* p. 57)

ORDINARY TREES

Though many of the references to trees in Middle-earth are rooted in myth, much of the time their appearance is merely descriptive, setting a scene. Even here, though, it is an indication of Tolkien's care to see how wisely they are chosen. Though there are 'strange, nameless trees' in the Old Forest, and other named trees, such as mallorn, which we no longer know, most of the trees of Middle-earth are familiar and homely.

In the Shire the trees are those native to the North - oak, ash and beech. As Strider and the hobbits approach Rivendell and enter the hill country these give way to birches, firs and pines, natural mountain-side trees. And as Frodo and Sam come South to the woods of Ithilien, they find cedars and cypresses, olives and bays, trees of warmer climes. These are a natural part of the landscape of Middle-earth.

But in Middle-earth the trees also seem to have a greater share of life - the hamadryads and the dryads of Middle-earth are still alive, and to a greater degree than are those in our trees.

We have seen how the spirits of trees developed into characters, and slowly grew to be more independent of the tree in which they dwelt. So we find, in Middle-earth, that in the older forests the spirits are still hamadryads - they have not escaped from the form of the tree. They are the rotten heart of Old Man Willow, and the Huorns. In their highest form they truly can communicate with man, for they are the Onodrim, the Ents.

But the dryads, the spirits which have become independent of tree form, are still closely associated with the trees, just as were the dryads of Greek myth. They are the Woodland Elves of Mirkwood, the long gone Elves of Eregion and, especially, the Galadhrim of Lothlórien. They are independent, and yet as dependent on the mallorn as is that beautiful tree on them.

These are the immortal trees with which man desperately desired communication; and in the Faerie land of Middle-earth that desire is granted.

THE FAMILY TREE

Myth is one of the unifying factors in society, one of the ties which binds it together from one generation to the next. It is small wonder, then, that the diagram which indicates descent and parentage is a 'family tree' and that we cling to our 'roots'.

Indeed, the world itself is held together by a tree. In Norse myth Midgard, the known world, or Middle Earth, was held together and unified by a mighty Ash tree, called Yggdrasil, whose roots extended to the Underworld and branches to Heaven. Indeed, in Norse myth the first man was created from an ash. In Teutonic myth the first woman, Embla, was also created from a tree. Man owed his life, and his future, to the tree.

We find in Tolkien a tree which is the symbol of the Family of Man, also - the White Tree of Gondor. It could almost be said that the realm of Gondor was created from this as man was from the first ash. Its health is a sign of the health of the Line of Kings, and Aragorn is instructed to plant any fruit that the Tree might produce, that the line shall not die out.

But this vision of trees as the ancestors of man, and also of the success of their future in as much as they are a symbol of immortality, has resulted, in many lands, in penalties for harming or killing trees. An early Irish poem, the "Triads of Ireland", calls for the sacrifice of a living creature in payment for felling an apple. In ancient Germany, anyone found damaging an oak was put to death. And even today, in many primitive tribes, someone who has to cut down a tree to make a canoe or build a house, will first apologise to the spirit of the tree, and often leave a sacrifice to placate it. It is hardly surprising, then, that Treebeard gave a dark glance at Gimli's axe, and that Gimli had, earlier, been given strict instructions to 'cut no living wood' for it was "perilous to touch the trees" of Fangorn (*LotR* II.3.II, "The Riders of Rohan").

THE LIGHT OF THE TREES

There also runs through the tapestry of Middle-earth a twin thread of silver and gold, the light of the two Trees of the Valar, called Telperion and Laurelin. Though they were killed, and drained of their light by Ungoliant, not all was lost, and their light was still shining down on Frodo and Sam in the darkness at the end of their quest. The light of these trees is shed over all Middle-earth, a memory of the Undying Lands from which all men and elves are sundered.

So too, it is a reflection of the light of those other two trees from whose light we have been sundered. In the Undying Lands of the Garden, eastward in Eden, were two trees, the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Man's misuse of them led to his exile from the Garden, yet, as in Middle-earth, the light still shines upon us, for hope.

The general qualities of trees, of resurrection and immortality, can be seen to be tightly woven into the fabric of Middle-earth, just as if they had been unwound from the older myths and the yarn re-used by Tolkien when he wrote. Or, perhaps, more as if seeds had been taken from the Tree of Tales, and sown in the fertile soil of Middle-earth, aided by the dust from Galadriel's little box.

But many trees developed individual characteristics of their own, which have passed into folk-lore, and these too have made their way into the lands east of the Sea.

INDIVIDUAL TREES

The willow has an ancient association with death, and mourning. In ancient China coffins were made with willow, and the Jewish exiles in Babylon sang their songs of grief beneath the willows. Could it be mere coincidence that it was at the song of a willow that the hobbits almost came to grief while traversing the Old Forest? (*LotR* I.1.VI. "The Old Forest"). Willows do not sing their songs of grief for naught - but then Old Man Willow may have been a 'Crack-willow', if anyone had asked Merry and Pippin.

Or was it more than mere wanton destruction that caused Saruman's hordes to cut down trees and leave them lying, especially when it was the trees of Quickbeam, the rowans, which were most sorely treated? For, in Celtic lore, the rowan has long provided protection from evil, and was often planted around houses to keep away witches and demons. Did Saruman know this? Were the rowans a barrier to his evil ambitions?

And finally, the holly. Holly more than many trees was a symbol of immortality, the triumph of life over death. It bore its glossy dark leaves all year round, and its bright red berries in the darkest depths of winter. The Romans used it to decorate their houses at the mid-winter festival of Saturnalia, from where it has migrated to general use at Christmas all over Europe.

What better to symbolise the unmeasurable life of the Elves and of their kingdoms than the tree of Eregion? Hollin, one of the chief realms of the Elves, even took its name from the holly tree. And, even when the Elves of Eregion were long gone, the two great holly trees at the gates of Moria still stood, the greatest trees of their kind.

Maybe the most poignant aspect is the uprooting of these trees after the entrance into Moria of the company of nine. For their mission was to destroy the Ruling Ring, and when that was accomplished all that was wrought by the Elves beneath its shadow was doomed to dwindle and fade. So the trees has stood, for so long a memory of the Elves, passed along with them. There was none but the mallorn to remember the Firstborn, another tree which, bearing colours through the winter, could be a symbol of immortality.

But, though the hollies were uprooted; Fangorn, with no Entings, dwindled; and Lothlorien faded, the Tree went on. The White Tree of Gondor was replanted, and the Party Tree, so wantonly cut down, was replaced by the only mallorn 'West of the Mountains and East of the Sea'. The world changed.

But the Tale goes on, and the Tree of Tales still bears fruit.



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