

# Fertility and Grace in *The Lord of the Rings*

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“I stand in Minas Anor, the Tower of the Sun,” she [Eowyn] said; “and behold! The Shadow has departed! I will be shield maiden no longer, nor vie with the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all things that grow and are not barren.” (Tolkien, Part III p. 262)

The theme of fertility and the openness to and nurturing of new life is one that provides a key to the deep structure of *The Lord of the Rings*. It is important that Sam is a humble gardener; he functions as a seed bearer who literally and figuratively brings about a renewal, healing, and flowering of the Shire. His efforts are, of course, aided by the soil from Galadriel’s garden, and the seed from the Mallorn tree. At the most basic level, the Earth’s bringing forth vegetation is a kind of grace. A free gift. The Earth is itself, a character in the story. Tolkien’s loving and detailed descriptions of the vegetation, the clouds, the weather enrich the story immensely, and nature is constantly described in active terms. For example, the barrow downs “stalk,” mountains or forests “march,” the wind hisses softly and sadly, the river flings pale shimmering arms around the island just below the gates of Argonauth. But the power to defy Sauron is not in the Earth; Sauron has the power to torture and destroy the very hills. (Tolkien, Part I, p. 298)

When the book opens, Middle-earth is portrayed as a world in decline, even apart from Sauron. Even the dragons are going downhill. Gandalf tells Frodo “It has been said that dragon-fire could melt and consume the rings of power, but there is not now any dragon left on earth in which the old fire is hot enough...” (Tolkien, Part I, p. 67) The crafts are in decline. The Numenoreans by mysterious powers built the tower of Orthanc, sculpted the great statues of the kings on the Gates of Argonauth, and brought and set up the black stone of Erech, for example, marvels that cannot now be replicated. The dwarves have lost many of the secrets of their fathers and can no longer do the kind of fine work they did in the past. The paths of the Ents and the Entwives have become sundered and there are no Entlings. The elves have withdrawn to a few strongholds such as Rivendell and Lothlorien, where they keep alive the stories and traditions of their past. As Treebeard says, Lothlorien used to be called Lauralindorenan, Valley of the Singing Gold. “now they make the name shorter... perhaps they are right; maybe it is fading, not growing,... The Dreamflower.” (Tolkien, Part II, p. 68) It is no longer creative. Galadriel describes herself and Celeborn as “fighting the long defeat.” (Tolkien, Part I, p. 400) Conflicts among the various free folk have weakened their ability to cooperate. Men fear and misdoubt the

elves, and there is a long and bitter quarrel between dwarves and elves.

Upon first seeing Minas Tirith, Legolas observes: “there is too little here that grows and is glad.” (Part II, p. 152) The men of Gondor hungered after life unending, and “kings made tombs more splendid than houses of the living, and counted old names in the rolls of their descent dearer than the names of sons. Childless lords sat in aged halls musing on heraldry; in secret chambers withered men compounded strong elixers, or in his cold towers asked questions of the start. And the last king of the line of Anarion had no heir.” (Tolkien, Part II, p. 322) So the watch on Mordor slept, allowing Sauron to return and re-occupy it.

Sauron represents the radical rejection of grace. He lusts for power and total control. The Barrowwright’s incantation over Merry, Pippin and Sam, conveys in a powerful way what this amounts to. It says “In the black wind the stars shall die, and still on gold here let them lie till the dark lord lifts his hand over dead sea and withered land.” (Tolkien, Part I, p. 160) The term “withering” serves as the antithesis of fertility. Treebeard, for example, speaks of “the withering of all woods.” (Tolkien, Part II, p. 75) Ithilien, garden of Gondor, had been under the dominion of the dark lord only a few years, and was not yet fallen wholly into decay. It had retained a certain “disheveled dryad loveliness.” (Tolkien, Part II, p. 289). But as one gets closer to Mordor, vegetation becomes harsh and twisted and finally gives up. Sauron allows nothing to manifest a life of its own, but devours all. He can “torture and destroy the very hills.” (Tolkien, Part I, p.298) The desolation that lay before Mordor is described thus:

Dreadful as the dead marshes had been... more loathsome far was the country that the crawling day now slowly unveiled to his [Frodo’s] shrinking eyes. Even to the Mere of the Dead Faces some haggard phantom of green spring would come; but here neither spring nor summer would ever come again. Here nothing lived, not even the leprous growths that feed on rottenness.. A land defiled, diseased beyond all healing – unless the Great Sea should enter in and wash it with oblivion. I feel sick said Sam.” (Tolkien, Part II, P. 265-66)

The story, then, is about the breaking in of grace that renews Middle-earth. Sam’s development from a comic servant whose masculinity had been undermined by his father to the benign patriarch he becomes is but one strand of this renewal. Eowyn and Faramir go to Ithilien to make of it a garden. And Arwen renounces immortality to wed Aragorn, one of whose names is Evinyat, the renewer; he

re-plants the white tree (which comes from the line of Telperion, Eldest of Trees) in the court of the kings and under his rule things are set in order and healed. “In his time the city was made more fair than it had ever been, even in the days of its first glory; it was filled with trees and with fountains... The houses were filled with men and women and the laughter of children, and no window was blind nor any courtyard empty.” (Tolkien. Part III, p. 266)

The flowering of the Shire involves an astonishing outpouring of new life. All the trees, flowers and crops grow as though trying to make one year do for twenty. Young hobbits fairly bathed in strawberries and cream, the yield of leaf was extraordinary, and the barley was so fine that the brew of 1420 became legendary. Everyone was pleased except those who had to mow the grass! There were many weddings and of the many children born or begotten in that year many had a rich golden hair – a trait that had been rare before that.

The most important role in this glorious renewal, of course, is played by Frodo. His acceptance of this role, which Elrond says is appointed for him, occurs just as the noon bell rings. “I will take the ring, although I do not know the way” (Tolkien. Part I, p. 303) and it is as if some other will is using his small voice. For a Catholic, this scene carries strong resonances of the Angelus prayer, traditionally said as the noon bell rings (see, for example, Corot’s painting by this name). This prayer celebrates the Annunciation – Mary’s acceptance of her mission to become the mother of Jesus. After being told that she would conceive by the Holy Spirit, Mary replies “behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord, be it done to me according to thy word.” The fact that the fall of Sauron occurs on March 25, the traditional feast of the Annunciation, then, is not accidental.

The new flowering that follows the fall of Sauron, however, is not universal. As Gandalf says “The evil of Sauron cannot be wholly cured or made as if it had never been,” (Tolkien. Part II, p. 169) and many fair things will pass away. Ultimately, Frodo has been too wounded to remain and enjoy the Shire. “The Shire has been saved, he says, but not for me. When things are in danger, someone must give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them.” (Tolkien. Part III, p. 338) His departure, allows Sam to no longer be torn in two – “to be one and whole for many years... All that I had and might have had I leave to you.” (Tolkien. Part III, p. 337). A new age is dawning in which men will multiply and the elder kindred decline or depart. The Ents are not reunited with the Entwives. As Treebeard says “some dreams are withered untimely.” (Tolkien. Part II, p. 92)

The fourth age will be the age of men. Gimli remarks (in the Last Debate chapter) that “There is a frost in Spring or a blight in Summer and they [the things that men begin] fail of their promise.” Legolas replies that “seldom do they fail of their seed... that will lie in the dust and rot and spring up again in times and places unlooked for. The deeds of men will outlast us, Gimli.” Gimli replies “and yet come to naught in the end but might-have-beens, I guess.” And here Legolas has the last word: “To that the elves know not

the answer.” (Tolkien. Part III, p. 153 for all four of these quotes). I think we can take that to be Tolkien’s last word as well. “We must do what we can for the succor of the years wherein we are set,” says Gandalf (Tolkien. Part III, p. 160). Throughout *The Lord of the Rings* there is a deep assumption that some higher power is at work bringing good even out of what seem like accidents or mistakes, and we have no reason to believe that this will cease to be the case in the Fourth Age that is dawning. But evils may arise as well. So we are left with hope that that which was good in the Third Age will carry over and enable those in the Fourth Age to flourish and deal with whatever arises. The Shire is a land where gardeners are held in honor. It represents the ordinary side of human nature, full of small pleasures, sometimes petty and narrow, but capable of heroism and sacrifice. As Elrond says of the “deeds that move the wheels of the world” (Tolkien. Part I, p. 302) that small hands do them because they must when the eyes of the great are elsewhere. When the Dark Lord’s culture of death threatens all of Middle-earth, it is the heroism of Frodo and his companions that saves it.

May the Shire live forever unwithered!

#### Works Cited

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Lord of the Rings in three volumes*. New York: Balantine Books. 1994.

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