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Tolkien's Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth

Michael J. Brisbois

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Tolkien's Imaginary Nature: An Analysis of the Structure of Middle-earth

Michael J. Brisbois (bio)

"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 shimmering 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 leaf-tip, between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given its own inside affairs for endless years."

(TT, III, iv, 66)

This is how Pippin would try to describe his first impression of Treebeard's eyes, long after the War of the Ring ended. To many readers, Tolkien's novel creates a sense of an "enormous well" at work beneath the text. This effect is related to two elements of the novel: Tolkien's use of medieval myth and legend and the natural world of Middle-earth. Many scholars have examined the medieval sources of Tolkien's work, and this aspect of the novel has been thoroughly discussed since the publication of the novel. However, the natural world of Middle-earth has not. Nature in *The Lord of the Rings* serves as the basic element of the imaginary world the reader perceives. The representation of nature in *The Lord of the Rings* is at once comforting in its familiarity and Fantastic in its personifications.

In order to begin an analysis of Middle-earth's natural world, we will draw a deliberate and arbitrary distinction between nature and the constructs of culture. This is a very difficult distinction to make in Middle-earth. One cannot simply refer to the cultural constructs of Men,¹ because of the presence of Dwarves, Elves, Ents and Orcs, nor merely bipedal species, since the Great Eagles of Misty Mountain possess culture. The complex relationship between Elves and forests or Dwarves and mountains makes defining nature even more complex. Sam knowingly comments about the Elves of Lothlórien: "they seem to belong here, more even than Hobbits do in the Shire. Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say, if you take my

meaning" (*FR*, II, vii, 376). The subtle magic that infuses the elves is intertwined with the land they live in, suggesting they do not make clear distinctions between [End Page 197] culture and nature. In order to come to terms with nature in Middle-earth, we must understand it as a third space, an artificial creation of imagination and not a direct mimesis of our real or constructed nature. As readers explore the world of Middle-earth through the journey of the four hobbits, they move steadily from the real to the imaginary, a transition critical to the function of fantasy and imaginary nature.

The fundamental (and obvious) problem with the nature of Middle-earth is that it is not real. Furthermore, we are only able to draw examples from a limited range of material. In humanity's normal relationship with nature, we at least are able to rely on a level of tactile response and phenomenological study. We can sense and interact with nature. We can perceive cause and effect. According to Ernest Gellner, in our standard relationship with nature we can understand that it is apart from culture in one of five ways: "1) The complexity of human-social material; 2) the fact that meaning enters into human conduct in the way in which it is absent in nature...; 3) the feedback character of social processes; 4) the fact that in culture, unlike nature, acquired characteristics are transmitted; and 5) the Joker card of free will and, if it obtains, inherent unpredictability" (Gellner 14-15).

Through this relationship with real nature, we develop a sense of what is human and what is not. However, Middle-earth is not a world in the same way as ours. It is a fabrication of the mind...



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MICHAEL J. BRISBOS

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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