Homely Pastorals versus the Unhomely Forest in *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* and *The Hobbit*

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Abstract

The representation of forests in British fantasy literature has changed with the changing dynamics of our relationship with the forest. The forest has been represented as many things- a place of redemption and trial, purity and temptation, mystery and adventure, freedom and exile; but it has not been represented as "home." It is a liminal space between this world and the otherworldly; it is a place of enchantment. The protagonist must return home from the enchanted forest reborn or after a magical experience. The 'enchanted forest' is a leitmotif in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and *The Hobbit*, two seminal works in modern British fantasy. There are extensive studies of the forests of Tolkien (with a special focus on his iconic trees) and of the Shire as Tolkien's idealized England. However, the forests of Tolkien have rarely been studied as opposed to the idea of home. In this paper, I argue that Tolkien epitomizes the idea of a pastoral home through the Shire by constantly contrasting it with the 'unhomely' representation of forests. The article considers the cultural history of the British with their forest to understand why the forests are represented as 'unhomely' in the select texts. In this paper, I demonstrate that the two stories are ultimately tales of returning to a pastoral home after experiencing the enchantment that the forest has to offer.

Keywords

Enchanted forest, modern British fantasy, pastoral, landscape, home

Introduction

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and *The Hobbit* mark the beginning of what we now call the modern British fantasy. And though "Modern fantasy owes its existence in large part to the traditional fairy tale" (Manlove 1), Tolkien marked the separation of the fairy tale from the modern fantasy with his essay "On Fairy Stories." The modern British fantasy still carries some of the common tropes of the fairy tale tradition- like the 'enchanted forest'. Enchanted forests in fantasy and fairy tales function as a limit between the natural world and the otherworldly. It is a free space outside the humanized landscape of the tale and is often presented as antithetical to the humanized world.

The earliest magical forest can be traced back to the ancient Mesopotamian mythology of Gilgamesh. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the forest is represented as an antagonist to the hero and the civilized world. And this antagonism can be observed in many tales down the ages. We can trace a change in the literary forests of English imagination from the medieval imagination of the Brocéliande Forest in the Arthurian legends and the English folklore forest of escape in *Robin Hood*, which are chartered woods belonging to the king; to the enchanted forest in the fairy tales of *Beauty and the Beast* and *Snow White,* and fantasy tales like *Phantastes*; to the modern fantasies like the Forbidden forest of *Harry Potter* and the dark Woodhill forest of *The*

Chronicles of Narnia where forests start becoming more unmapped and outside the domain of the kings. Tolkien created several enchanted forests in his mythopoeic fantasies, of which *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy and *The Hobbit* contain - Mirkwood, the Old Forest, Fangorn, and Lothlorian. This shift like the forests from royal woods of England to unchartered forests can be credited to the popularity of Grimm's Fairy Tales.

Harrison in his *Forest: The Shadow of Civilization* comments on how the forests were an important part of the Grimm's Fairy Tales because forests had an "imposing presence in folklore and legends" (Harrison 165) and were considered "a site of rootedness, joining the soil and its tillers in a mystical, timeless unity" (Wilson 8). The Grimm's Fairy Tales introduced the Germanic forests to the popular imagination in Britain. But the English identity remained pastoral for a very long time and represented "peace, innocence, and simple virtue" (Willams 1). Tolkien who wanted to write a tale dedicated "to England; to my country" (Tolkien, Letters 182) represented this pastoral identity through the homely representation of Shire. Yet in Tolkien's work forests are a prominent presence. They are unchartered and enchanted forests like the forests of fairy tales and are strictly outside the boundary of the Shire or the land of men.

In this paper, I look into the idea of home and forest in *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR* hereafter) Trilogy and *The Hobbit* by Tolkien. All the four enchanted forests - Mirkwood is malicious, the Old Forest is defensive, Lothlorien is benevolent, and Fangorn is old and largely unbothered by worldly matters are enchanted and awake, unlike the more humanized landscape of rural Shire. In this paper, I argue that Tolkien epitomizes the idea of a pastoral home through the Shire by constantly contrasting it with the "unhomely" representation of forests. The article considers the cultural history of the British with their forest to understand why the forests are represented as "unhomely" in the select texts. In this paper, I demonstrate that the two stories are ultimately tales of returning to a pastoral home after experiencing the enchantment that the forest has to offer.

The Shire represents homely rural England: A nation "connects a group of people to a particular geographical place . . . A nation . . . must have a homeland" (Miller). This geographical place, according to Paul Readman, is a "landscape" (Readman 1). The nation creates the landscape of its homeland in discourse with history, culture, and religion. Paul Readman in *Storied Ground*, Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, and Alun Hawkins in *The Death of Rural England* show how the British idea of home was predominantly pastoral. In Tolkien's *LOTR* Trilogy and *The Hobbit,* we find different landscapes of the pastoral Shire in conflict with the forests, while both the forest and Shire conflict with the industrial landscape of Mordor and Isengard.

Francis Bacon's essay "Of Gardens" in his collection *Essays* (1597) begins with "God Almighty first planted a garden." (Bacon, 217). Bacon uses religion to justify the English aesthetic values which prefer a tamed garden to a wild forest. 'God Almighty' has himself preordained nature to be like a garden- a product of human construction. Samwise is Bilbo's gardener and his presence shows the importance of tending the land in the Shire. The Shire is an agricultural landscape, meaning it is a society that trimmed a part of the land to provide for their

food and shelter. A garden is a familiar green space that is non-threatening and has lost its agency to be threatening. The Shire is cut off from the rest of Middle-Earth and is unwelcoming to new things and strangers.

The hobbits have lived in the same place for ages and have a rooted history in Shire. They have given up any identity they may have had before the hobbits settled down in the Shire. A "home is a place of continuity" (Werner 8) both temporal and spatial: "Home in its most profound form is an attachment to a particular setting, a particular environment, . . . It is the point of departure from which we orient ourselves and take possession of the world" (Freestone 110). The home, in contrast to the forest, represents everything familiar and mortal. It is both a spatial, temporal, and psychological construction. We build our homes in contrast to the world and take control and change the home environment through our aesthetic and moral values. Tolkien comments in *LOTR* that the hobbits had "colonized Shire" (Tolkien, LOTR 149) and made it their home. The use of the negative word "colonized" shows that though it appears that the hobbits were living in harmony with nature, it was after taming the land into their homely landscape. They cannot naturally live in harmony with nature like the elves. Unlike the elves who have their court in the forest, and gather their food from the forest without cultivation, the hobbits have created their "park," their garden, as their home.

Tolkien differentiated the Shire from the wild as it is "Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort" (Tolkien, *Hobbit*) and follows this with a description of the hobbit-hole as having "pantries (lots of these), wardrobes (he had whole rooms devoted to clothes)" (Tolkein, *Hobbit*). An abundance and food and clothing became the signs of civilization. This difference in comfort is brought about more by the negative description of the wild as a dark bad place, "queer," and a place of dark adventures.

Tolkien writes appreciatively of the simplicity of the hobbits and their proximity to nature: "I am a hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands" (Tolkien, Letters 360). John Garth's *Tolkien's Worlds: The Places That Inspired the Writer's Imagination* traces the origin of Shire to the rural homeland of Britain. Tom Shippy's *The Road to Middle-earth: How J. R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* "Organisationally to the Shire, with its mayors, musters, moots, and Shirriffs, is an old-fashioned and idealized England, while the hobbits, in their plainness, greediness, frequent embarrassments, distrust of 'outsiders' and most of all in their deceptive ability to endure rough handling form an easily recognizable if again old-fashioned self-image of the English" (Shippy 93). Tolkien indicates the relation clearly by using the word 'shire' which is synonymous with the word "country."

The hobbits belong to an agrarian civilization and love merriment and food. Their food is described in great detail by Tolkien and as we know from his letters, the simplicity of English food was a matter of pride for Tolkien. The description of Bilbo's birthday party at the beginning of the story of *LOTR* focuses on the abundance of food and how the hobbits enjoyed eating. Bilbo keeps mourning the lack of food and shelter throughout his journey and Sam tries to offer Frodo a warm cooked meal to give him a sense of warmth of home. Along with food Tolkien

also romanticized the image of leisurely smoking. The slow life, the love for food and smoke, the agricultural society of Shire, and the innocence and simple living, give rise to the image of Shire as an imagination of a homely rural England.

What is a British forest?

Unlike the familiar landscape of the pastoral shire, the forests of Middle-earth are uncharted wild lands of which very little is known. They bring in the fear of unfamiliarity and being outside the domain of any human authority. Very little is known about what goes on inside the forests and their stories are discontinuous. We know Mirkwood was once fair and benevolent before it turned into the dark woods and that Fangorn was once alive. But these we know from the vague comments spread across the texts. Bilbo, in *The Hobbit*, calls it a place for adventures, "nasty disturbing uncomfortable things" (Tolkien, *Hobbit*), which takes away the pleasures of home and "makes you late for dinner" (Tolkien, *Hobbit*). Only magical creatures like the unseen animals and the giant spiders in Mirkwood, and the elves (who are more like fairies than mortals) call the forests their home.

This representation of the forest is not in keeping with the Brocéliande Forest in the Arthurian legends, or the chartered woods of *Robin Hood*. *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* traces the origin of the word "forest" from "forests" in medieval Latin which meant outside the enclosed land but not free from its association with the king. According to Oliver Rackham, the word "forest" has been unwisely used in British history: "To the medievals, a forest was a place of deer, not a place of trees" (Rackham) and it belonged to the king and did not necessarily have woody trees. But the forests of Middle-earth are "a large area of land covered with trees and plants, usually larger than a wood' ("forest") which is a modern definition of forest in The Cambridge Dictionary online. This representation of forest is influenced by the German forests of the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* which are "unconventional, free, alluring, but dangerous" (Zipe 68): this description fits the Middle-earth forests. But the Germans lived in the "waldvolk" in constant interaction with the wild forest (Wilson 42) and thus they are ingrained into the German identity. Thus, the forests in the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* take an active part in the stories: as home and as sites of action. The forests in Middle-earth, on the other hand, only act when provoked. The only instance when a forest rises to action is the attack of Fangorn on Isengard. Apart from this, the forests are just perilous passageways and elvish dwellings, set apart from the sites of action.

British fantasy borrowed the idea of the free wilderness from the German fairy tales: "The mysterious aspect of forests led men to invent an enchanted world in those forests, places of life and shadow at the same time, places of nature hiding an invisible, unknown world, either threatening or enchanted" (Besson 91). English fantasy did not create the forest as home, as a site of the active development of the story, but as a place set outside the familiarity of home for enchanted experiences free from the restraints of the societal order.

Forests are the land of Faërie.

Greg Garrard traces the origin of the word "wilderness" to "the Anglo-Saxon 'wilddeoren,' where 'deoren' or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation." (Garrard

60). This shows the clear distinction that the British made between the "home" (cultivated land) and the wild (uncultivated land). In Middle-earth, every dwelling "homeland" is juxtaposed with a wilderness. The Old Forest is outside the Shire. Similarly, Fangorn is outside Rohan, and Mirkwood is to the west of Esgaroth and marks the border of the lake town. Lothlorien is outside the borders of Khazad Dum where the dwarfs lived. This juxtaposition of civilization and the enchanted forest is spatially and thematically important. "An enchanted forest requires a margin, even an elaborate border" (Tolkien, "Stories" 58), says Tolkien. The Brandybucks keep their doors closed at night to keep the forest away. The need to keep this land of the wild separate from the humanized world of the shire is emphasized when in the chapter "The Old Forest" Merry recalls the incident when the trees tried to cross the hedge. He tells the story of how the trees had moved beyond their restricted space and planted themselves so near the Hedge that the hobbits had to set them on a bonfire. And now there is still a barren land like a line drawn between the shire and the Old Forest. The Shire, thus, builds itself by separating itself from the wild Old Forest.

The forests are set apart from the humanized Shire that has been tamed and cultivated to provide a luxurious bourgeois hobbit life. They represent a primal time when Middle-earth was yet untouched by the trimming hands of civilization. The forests provide both spatial and temporal shifts. The entire land is endowed with a kind of will and mystery. The water of Fangorn makes Merry and Pippin grow taller and the stream of Lothlorian sends Gimli to a deep dream. The enchanted forests are not just the trees, the land itself is the land of "faerie." As Tolkien describes the "faerie," the enchanted forest contains "many things besides elves and fays, and dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted" (Tolkien, "Stories"). So, Pippin asks Merry if only the trees are dangerous in the Old Forest and Merry describes the Old Forest as 'queer . . . much more alive, more aware . . . than things are in the Shire . . . unfriendly . . . various queer things are living deep in the forest" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 110).

And these queer things include the enchanted stream in both Lothlorien and Mirkwood and the huge spiders in Mirkwood; but not only these, everything in the enchanted forest is awake and can intrude into our path anytime. Merry comments on the smell in Fangorn that it smells like the old Took's room which smelled like old age. And indeed, it is as if in Fangorn time has been standing still because it is only there that the Ents are still awake. The continuity of time inside the enchanted forest is disrupted. When Sam points out that even though the sun and the moon were the same in Lothlorien as in the Shire, the time seemed to be different, Legolas clarifies that it is the place and not the time that was enchanted. Frodo believes that on leaving Lothlorien they had again entered the mortal world.

Like the hobbits who are skeptical of outsiders, "the trees do not like strangers" (Tolkien, *LORT* 110). The home is secured only by defending it from the intrusion of a stranger. The trees too have created their boundaries, and whenever the breach of boundary happens, there is a conflict. The forest of Lothlorien was kind to them because they were accompanied by elves, the

forest dwellers. Mirkwood has been corrupted and is hostile to Bilbo and the dwarfs out of spite. But the Woodelves have made it their home. In his study of Mirkwood as an enchanted forest, Post comments that there is an ambiguity in the representation of Mirkwood as antithetical to the court because the "royal palace of the Wood-elves is situated within the boundaries of Mirkwood. This means that in *The Hobbit* court and forest are not antithetical in their relationship" (Post). However, he misses the point that the Elves are themselves Otherworldly creatures in Middle-Earth.

The Old Forest, on the other hand, is only trying to defend itself from the trimming and pruning of men and denying humanization. Tom Bombadil lives in the forest freely and quite merrily, but he too is a mysterious being who is unaffected by the One Ring. This sets him above Gandalf too. Apart from Tom Bombadil, the Old Forest treats everyone with suspicion and occasionally drops a branch to create obstacles. The action of the Old Willow tree, though it is portrayed as malicious, is acting on the fear of the strangers.

The forest of Fangorn mostly keeps out of affairs of any kind. But they are enchanted and weary of strangers nonetheless. Treebeard, an Ent, is a conscious old tree. Unlike the other forests where the trees have gone to sleep, the Ents in Fangorn forest are still awake. And though the trees act hostile to the later parties of Aragon, it does not do so with Merry and Pippin who seek refuge there. Treebeard confesses that he would have taken them for orcs if he had not heard the hobbits first. Thus, the forest of Fangorn is awake and conscious and home for Ents. And though it is not malicious, it certainly is wary of strangers and only shelters those who mean no harm.

"There and back again"

Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with Thousand Faces* lists the call of the dark forest as one of the most typical calls to adventure in myths and fantasy. The hero is called from his home to adventure, to venture into unknown places. Though Campbell reads them as psychological, it is important to look at the contrasting landscapes between the home and the place of adventure: the "there" in the story. The hero must listen to the call of adventure. Yet we find tales where the call goes unanswered. Campbell notes that this is because the protagonist is "Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action" (Campbell, 54). In *The Hobbit* and *LOTR* series, we find many instances of this conflict between the call and the cultural restraint. The Shire folks never travel very far from home. By situating their family history in the landscape of Shire, the hobbits built the place as their familiar home. And everything unfamiliar and unpredictable is scorned as "queer."

The "forgotten handkerchief" becomes the symbol of a culture that had to be left behind to heed the call for adventure. In *LOTR* Gandalf recalls how Bilbo had forgotten his handkerchief in *The Hobbit* and thinks how Frodo too will have to leave back such refinements and symbols of culture. The handkerchief's importance is so much so that Gandalf later delivers it to Bilbo on his journey. The "forgotten handkerchief" is also the representation of the protagonist's willingness to give up the culture to heed the call. The willingness of Sam to part with his cooking pan becomes important. He tries to cook some rabbit stew just like at home and thinks that it will

bring back the warmth in his master Frodo when Frodo was suffering from the loss of warmth due to the ring he had to carry. The warmth he wanted to bring back was the warmth of home which Frodo was losing from his heart because the ring was corrupting him.

Bilbo laments the loss of home throughout. Tolkien dedicates the chapter "Queer Longings" in *The Hobbit* to the longing for home. As we see in "The Last Homely House," it is the comfort and safety that comes from familiarity that makes a place "home." The names of the chapters themselves show the contrast between the homely and the unhomely. "Not at Home" in *The Hobbit* is another such example.

The story sets out because the Dwarfs want to reclaim their lost home. Frodo was called to adventure because the One Ring threatened the idea of his home- the rural lifestyle of Shire. The news of the strange creatures in land around Shire was an intrusion into his home and so he sets out to destroy the ring and save his home. In the end, both Bilbo and Frodo want to return home and "enjoy the Shire . . . for years and years, after all you have done" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 1029).

The forest lands are "pre-eminently desirable'' (Tolkien, "Stories" 31) but not home. They are like Eden, we wish to return to Eden but like Lothlorien, Eden is like "being at home and on a holiday at the same time" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 361). It is for the people like the elves who have not lost their purity like man and can live in the forests and feel at home. Thomas Honegger studies the contrasting food habits of the hobbits, Gollum, and elves, and shows how food habits are used to contrast between cultured and uncultured. He points out that the elves are magical creatures, remote and unworldly. "The food of the elves seems to come closest to approaching this pre-lapsarian quality. Their "art of Enchantment," to use Tolkien's terminology from "On Fairy-Stories," can overcome the opposition between nature and culture, by offering a third way where the forest (nature) is transformed into the city (culture) without losing its identity" (Honegger). But this way of life is an unattainable longing. Gollum's (who used to be a hobbit) closeness to nature, eating raw food is seen with distaste. Thus, the rural Shire life is the only salvation for the hobbits. The Little golden flower from Lothlorien is all the Eden that they can afford.

Conclusion

To conclude, the forest of modern British fantasy is opposed to the idea of home because of the sociocultural history of Britain with forests. We see that throughout the Middle-earth stories, the familiarity and safety of home is mourned. Though the enchanted forests are desirable for adventure and Edenic experience, they are "there" and the protagonist must come "back again" to home. "I feel that as long as the Shire lies behind, safe and comfortable, I shall find wandering more bearable: I shall know that somewhere there is a firm foothold" (Tolkien, *LOTR* 62). This dialogue by Frodo expresses something at the core of *LOTR* and *The Hobbit*- the paradoxical desire for a faerie and the longing to return home. The dwarfs search for their underground homes, the elves return to the Grey Heaves losing their earthly homes, the hobbits save their home and the men retrieve their homes.

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