

Hither Shore

Interdisciplinary Journal
on Modern Fantasy Literature

Jahrbuch der
Deutschen Tolkien Gesellschaft e. V.

Literary Worldbuilding

Interdisziplinäres Seminar der DTG
27. bis 29. Oktober 2017, Augsburg

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SCRIPTORIUM OXONIAE

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese
Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im
Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-9818313-2-0

Hither Shore, DTG-Jahrbuch 2017
veröffentlicht im Verlag »Scriptorium Oxoniae«

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Abwicklung: Susanne A. Rayermann, Düsseldorf
Layout/Design: Kathrin Bondzio, Solingen
Umschlagillustration: Anke Eißmann, Herborn
Druck und Vertrieb: Books on Demand, Norderstedt

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The Voice of Nature in Middle-earth through the Lens of Testimony

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Introduction¹

It is well-known that J.R.R. Tolkien had a distaste for allegory and symbolism in his works: “There is *no* ‘symbolism’ or conscious allegory in my story” (L 262). Yet he appreciated applicability: “That there is no allegory does not, of course, say there is no applicability. There always is. ...there is I suppose applicability in my story to present times” (262). Following this last line of thought, the intention of this paper is to analyse how Tolkien, by use of the genre of testimony through the character Treebeard in *The Lord of the Rings*, generated as a by-product a political applicability which endows the Ents with a powerful voice to speak on behalf of nature and trees.

Tolkien was against a technologically overdeveloped world, being very protective of trees and nature: “I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and always have been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (L 220); and as he himself stated in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph*: “In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies” (419). This could also be seen in his daily life; in a letter, Tolkien criticised the foolish behaviour of a neighbour who was eager to have a huge poplar hewn, as it kept her house and garden in shadow and supposedly could fall on it (321). Tolkien considered these reasons unfounded and claimed: “Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate” (321). In fact, this incident seemed to trigger a change, as his biographer Humphrey Carpenter signals: “But the poplar had already been lopped and mutilated, and though he managed to save it now, Tolkien began to think about it” (199). Possibly, because of these kinds of unfortunate personal experiences he severely denounced the unnecessary abuse of trees and gave them a voice.

He brought into being the Ents, colossal walking trees with human form, as the guardians of the forests, heralded by Yavanna in her warning to Aulë in *The Silmarillion*: “Now let thy children beware! For there shall walk a power in the forests whose wrath they will arouse at their peril” (42). Looking at the

1 This essay has been completed under the auspices of the Predoctoral funding for non-doctoral Research Staff Training awarded by the Basque Government and of the research group REWEST, funded by the Basque Government (IT-1026-16) and the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU).

etymology of the name, Tolkien himself claimed the name Ent came from their connection with stone and “From the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer*, 87: ‘eald enta geweorc idlu stodon’, ‘the old creation of giants [i.e. ancient buildings, erected by a former race] stood desolate” (L 445). Julian Evans explains that *ets* is the Hebrew word in the Old Testament for tree (4) and originally *ent* is an Anglo-Saxon word which means ‘mighty person of long ago’ or ‘giant’ (L 208). This last Anglo-Saxon etymology embodies Tolkien’s concept of Ents to whom the reader may easily relate due to their anthropomorphism.² Andrea Denekamp argues on several occasions that the Ents have a different function: “they [the Ents] remain the voice of non-human nature” (5) indeed, an irate nature (8), offering a different perspective (24) and their creational intention was no other than to offer a rupture with humanity (5). Nevertheless, as Ignacio Abella argues, it can be easily perceived that the individual conscience of the Ents is what identifies them with humans (168) as well as their appearance. It is possible that we are not as closely bonded to nature as we used to be, thus the anthropomorphic form that Tolkien gave to the Ents, may further help humans empathise with the natural world.

In one of his letters, Tolkien resents that in an intended film adaptation of the LotR by the screenwriter Morton Grady Zimmerman, the latter is not concerned for trees. He also reveals the important part these play in his work: “I deeply regret this handling of the ‘Treebeard’ chapter, whether necessary or not. I have already suspected Z [Zimmerman] of not being interested in trees: unfortunate, since the story is so largely concerned with them” (L 275). In the mentioned chapter, which is the object of this study, the reader is provided with the narration of nature, an always forgotten side defended by no one.

In the 18th century with the rise of the English realist novel, a new type of fiction emerged in the form of diaries, personal narrations, which ultimately developed into a genre known as testimony. This genre typically comprises tales of human suffering that take place in the real world, seen in the 20th century in the testimonies of persecution of World War II; *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), also known as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, being representational and a well-known example. Testimony, though in Tolkien’s case crafted from imagination and not real, is very much present in LotR through the character Treebeard. In this paper I will present the formal characteristics and critical approaches to the genre of testimony and take a look at its presence in the narration. I will argue that through this genre, though unconscious of its use, Tolkien may have wanted readers to be cognizant of the irresponsible destruction of trees, and what these life forms might have felt, creating a collective awareness that could prevent future ravages.

2 Joseph Loconte designates the Ents as “humanoid trees” (9).

The Concept and Genre of Testimony in Treebeard's Narration

Paraphrasing Javier Sánchez Zapatero, testimonies are first-person narratives which go against the established history, opposing the official version given by the ruling power (105), and the narrative events are recorded by the author of the testimony or a third person. Hugo Achugar explains that testimony occurs whenever a subject is deprived of its voice and has been marginalised (66; Sánchez Zapatero 104), in Giorgio Agamben's words: two characteristics which bestow authority upon the witness (158). Margaret Randall adds that the witness presents a perspective of an event that really took place and this person can be a participant, main or secondary actor of the events that are being described, or an external narrator who aims to transmit the story to a broader audience (33).

One of the words in Latin to refer to a witness is *testis* and implies the following: “*testis* from which our word ‘testimony’ derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (**terstis*)” (Agamben 17), increasing the ‘validity’ of the narration, of which Treebeard is an excellent example.

Let us now turn to the question of who the primary author of the testimony is in the chapter “Treebeard” of LotR. According to the text, “Treebeard is Fangorn, the guardian of the forest; he is the oldest of the Ents, the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the sun upon this Middle-earth” (LotR 499). Fangorn is also the name of the place that he inhabits and takes care of, and he is labelled by Tom Shippey as a ‘natural object’ (132). This comes to show that he is understood not as part of the fauna but of the flora, hence an ideal vehicle for its representation. Brian Bates points out, that in the Middle Ages people conferred knowledge upon extraordinarily ancient trees (51), very true in Treebeard's case; a very learned individual who is the possessor of great wisdom. “Since Treebeard's memory reaches back to the earliest of times, he assumes the role of a guardian of memory with some authority” as Doris McGonagill (160) postulates. His longevity and knowledge grant him an outstanding perspective of past times and allow him to make the right decisions in the present, making him an adequate ‘spokestree’ to guarantee a future for nature.

Many scholars, as Elise Mckenna both when describing the novel LotR and Peter Jackson's movies, agree that the figure of Treebeard is intrinsically linked to the environment (230).³ Liam Campbell describes Treebeard as a “waking force of nature” in Middle-earth (66); one of the mediums used by Tolkien to

3 The fact that the character Treebeard can be taken as a representative of nature's thoughts is a recurring and outstanding idea in Liam Campbell's *The Ecological Augury in the Works of JRR Tolkien* (38, 176, 199, 247).

express how sorry he was for nature's destruction (61) and also as an animated version of nature (79). In fact, there is an implicit ecological stance present in Tolkien's work, that of the Ents against the cruelties of a process of industrialisation,⁴ which in Laura Crossley's words is a major theme in LotR (175).

The genre of testimony, in some cases, as Dominick LaCapra explains, is a tribute paid to the memory of loved ones (157). It is also a source of knowledge, as it reveals a parallel and hidden reality to readers (Sánchez Zapatero 103) and through its narrations the witnesses are able to save their experience and point of view, and thus themselves from oblivion (105).

It is also necessary to identify the transcriber. In the case of Treebeard, he is not a literate individual and therefore, Merry and Pippin are the media through which Frodo is able to keep record of the events experienced by this being. The hobbits, as well as nature, have been put aside in the history of Middle-earth, and the dissemination of the story by a marginalised individual in the official history is a responsibility bestowed on Frodo.

Treebeard's story, which was originally oral, was later narrated by Merry and Pippin to Frodo,⁵ who wrote it down. Achugar defines this as the 'complex social subject' (63) constituted by the literate (transcriber) and the marginal subject (witness), which in this case is completed by the intermediaries. Still, it is quite clear that what Achugar names the 'solidary literate' (78) is in this case performed by Frodo, transcribing the story and trying not to alter the voice of the witness whose speech is independent from the transcriber's comments. Frodo highlights this need of objectivity when he cannot understand why Bilbo introduces an invented element into the story of the Ring: "If you mean, inventing all that about a 'present', well, I thought the true story much more likely, and I couldn't see the point of altering it at all" (LotR 40).

History is a construct of the ruling elites and testimony offers for the first time the unique chance of enabling the 'making of history' by anyone (Randall 35), not necessarily the ones in power. Before being dethroned Saruman is an authority in Middle-earth, something that may suggest that he has certain influence over the writing of the History of the territory. Saruman and his minions are a threat to Treebeard, Ents and trees in general as he is determined to tame nature and exploit it for his own personal benefit. At first, he makes use of Fangorn's natural resources for the improvement of both Isengard and

4 Therefore, fulfilling Yavanna's wish: "Would that the trees might speak on behalf of all things that have roots, and punish those that wrong them" (S 40).

5 The whole story told in LotR is the testimony of Bilbo Baggins, Frodo Baggins and, to a lesser extent, Sam Gamgee, compiled in the Red Book of Westmarch: "Tolkien was obliged to pretend to be a 'translator.' He developed the pose with predictable rigour, feigning not only a text to translate but behind it a whole manuscript tradition, from Bilbo's diary to the Red Book of Westmarch..." (Shippey 117), showing how much he believed it himself. Tolkien even refers to his work by this title: "I shall, if I get a chance, turn back to the matter of the Red Book and allied stories soon" (L 300).

his army's weapons. This abuse of natural resources exists in the Real World, Robert Harrison points out that in England land managers considered the woods to be the enemies of progress (100) in the same fashion as Saruman and thus justifying their exploitation.

The testimony in Treebeard's narration goes against the traditional history of Middle-earth in the sense that a new perspective is added as Andrew Light indicates: "What he [Treebeard] and the other Ents do is not simply care for the forest as much as they serve as a narrative device that allows part of nature to speak for itself" (154). In the traditional history of Middle-earth, nature and trees have not been able to express their views on their maltreatment as this narrative has mainly been concerned with the Great Wars and the deeds of the Free Peoples.⁶ As Treebeard points out at the beginning of his testimony:

"I have not troubled about the Great Wars," said Treebeard; "they mostly concern Elves and Men. That is the business of Wizards: Wizards are always troubled about the future. I do not like worrying about the future. I am not altogether on anybody's *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*, if you understand me: nobody cares for the woods as I care for them, not even Elves nowadays." (LotR 472)

In this confession, Treebeard makes explicit his independence from the primary affairs of the people that inhabit Middle-earth, also implying that what he will narrate will go against mainstream history imposed by the governing civilisations.

Although Treebeard is a single individual this testimony under analysis is by no means personal. It could well represent the perspective of the other Ents and even, the symbolic opinion of 'normal trees' if these had the human capacity of speech. Sánchez Zapatero describes how Treebeard's voice represents the collective: "Gracias a su capacidad para reconstruir experiencias y hacer al lector sentirse en el lugar del otro, la experiencia individual adquiere un valor ético universal" ("Thanks to its capacity to reconstruct experiences and put the reader in the shoes of the other, the individual experience acquires a universal ethic value"; my transl.; 109). That is, readers are able to feel empathy for a being which is totally alien to them, to feel its suffering, sadness and comprehend its misfortune. Thus, allowing a greater understanding of the 'other's' life experience which makes them realise that their lives could have been similar (108f.). In his testimony, Treebeard portrays these feelings of despair when he narrates the carnage inflicted on the trees:

6 For instance, the second Defeat of Sauron (if his first surrender to Númenor taken as first), the Desolation of Smaug, the Quest of Erebor, the Battle of the Five Armies among others.

He and his foul folk (Saruman and his minions) are making havoc now. Down the borders they are felling trees—good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot—orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days.

“Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their own that are lost forever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once were singing groves.”

...Skinbark lived on the mountain-slopes west of Isengard. That is where the worst trouble has been. He was wounded by the Orcs, and many of his folk and his tree-herds have been murdered and destroyed. (LotR 474f.)

Frodo identifies so much with the testimony of Treebeard that despite being just a medium for his words it feels as if the Ent himself were speaking. In order to reach the goal of being a narration soaked with a moral message, testimonies should transmit the violence of the events that took place with extreme intensity (Sánchez Zapatero 119) as in this case. Myriam Jimeno clarifies that this collective understanding materialises mainly due to the sharing of the suffering that the testimony allows (173). This enables readers to place themselves in the witness's situation, empathise with the victims and hence, understand the problem better (173). The emotional bond and solidarity that this produces helps transfer the 'pain' that the witness suffers to the reader (178). As history tends to repeat itself, in this way, perhaps, the reader will not allow the barbarity told in the narrative to take place again in the future, generating a collective conscience in society:

Se pretende que el infierno personal relatado se convierta en material para la reflexión de los lectores y adquiera, por tanto, dimensiones de universalidad que le hagan trascender de las coordenadas espaciales y temporales en las que se produjo y que le permitan convertirse en paradigma condenatorio aplicable a cualquier manifestación histórica similar. (Sánchez Zapatero 119)

The intention is that the personal hell narrated, becomes material for the reader to reflect upon and thus, it acquires dimensions of universality that make it transcend spatial and temporal coordinates in which it happened, and that allows it to become a condemnatory paradigm applicable to any similar historical manifestation. (my transl.; Sánchez Zapatero 119)

This universality is the intent and ultimate goal of Treebeard's testimony. It has a similar feeling and tone of some of the testimonies concerning World War II, specifically those which focus on the murder and burning of humans, demonstrating the applicability of the testimony in fantasy literature. In the passage above, trees are described as if they were humans, which helps the readers create a closer tie and understand their suffering. It recalls the events which took place in Oradour-sur-Glane, where on the 10th of June 1944, 207 infants were killed and burned as narrated by the journalist Héctor Rojas Herazo:

Aquel es el saldo que el fuego... ha dejado de doscientos siete niños de la población francesa de Oradour. Yesas [sic] cenizas no han sido aventadas. Han sido dejadas allí, en el mismo sitio que las amontonara el invasor,... lo que hoy pudiera ser doscientas siete vidas para el amor, para la congoja o para la esperanza,... Esos niños no fueron reducidos a polvo porque ellos lo quisiesen. (391)

That is the result the fire... has left of two hundred and seven children of the French town of Oradour. And those ashes have not been fanned. They have been left there, in the same place where the invader had piled them, ... what today could have been two hundred and seven lives for love, for grief or for hope... Those children were not reduced to ashes because they wanted to.

(my transl.; 391)

The situation described is as desperate as Treebeard's, and the focus is placed on the two passages about the loss of loved ones, a tenet of the testimony. At a certain moment in LotR, when Treebeard is parting from Celeborn and Galadriel he uses the expression "by stock or by stone" (981). This phrase that according to Shippey adds no meaning to the conversation but "works well for Fangorn, whose sense of ultimate loss naturally centres on felled trees and barren ground" (181). That loss is ultimately what the testimony aims to represent; the suffering of a being that would have not been able to voice nature's suffering.

Addressing now the reception of the testimonial narrations, this can only occur if the authors generate what Sánchez Zapatero calls the ethics of memory, by which readers should believe the narrated events as true (Sánchez Zapatero 111). At no moment are readers blindfolded; before tackling testimonies, readers make a literary pact with the narrator and accept that the texts in front of them are credible and authentic (110f.). Ergo, the narrator becomes an ethical and political messenger that should not conceal or omit details of the events that took place; instead, facts should be presented as they were (LaCapra 157).

In the case of Treebeard's testimony in LotR, the transcriber makes no attempt to verify the events first hand or to interview Treebeard personally, though

they have a brief encounter in Isengard at the end of the book on Frodo's return journey (979-982). Consequently, Frodo, the narrator of the story, is forced to accept Merry's and Pippin's version of Treebeard's testimony. This certainly applies a kind of 'filter' to the events narrated and there is no suggestion in the text of any kind of alteration having taken place.

In this way, Frodo is similar to those historians, who prefer 'circumstantial spectators' rather than direct witnesses since they offer the high degree of objectivity and neutrality they are seeking (LaCapra 159). Both the circumstantial spectator and the direct witness are observers: the former suffers the consequences of the event, whereas the latter contemplates passively the action; Treebeard fulfils the role of the circumstantial observer and part of it may have been told by Skinbark. This distance is enhanced further thanks to the intermediaries Merry and Pippin, as they offer the necessary detachment to produce a narration which is closer to the truth, though readers must always bear in mind that purely objective truth is not always possible.

On Frodo's role as a transcriber it is said that the process starts in The Field of Cormallen: "Frodo and Sam learned much of all that had happened to the Company after their fellowship was broken" (LotR 955) and the subsequent recording process is foretold as well: "Frodo will have to be locked up in a tower in Minas Tirith and write it all down. Otherwise he will forget half of it" (956). Later in Rivendell, Bilbo also takes some notes when he hears the story from Merry and Pippin (986) yet Frodo is the one in charge of editing the material: "Collect all my notes and papers, and my diary too, and take them with you, if you will. You see, I haven't much time for the selection and the arrangements and all that. Get Sam to help, and when you've knocked things into shape, come back, and I'll run over it" (988). After going through so many filters which would make the narrative more objective, Frodo makes the final decision since Bilbo never has the opportunity to go through the material. Therefore, he is the sole faithful steward of Treebeard's tragic tale and the objective and truthful voice which lends credence to its transmission.

One must be aware that a testimony, in spite of containing historical truths, is always subjected to the fictionality of transforming those events into words (Sánchez Zapatero 116), providing the text with certain literary characteristics such as the organisation and editing of the discourse.

It is necessary to bear in mind that the original narrator, Treebeard, not the transcriber, is telling the events from his own memory and even if the story is real in a literary sense, the facts may be presented in a way in which they are slightly altered from reality (116). This effect is enhanced because the transcriber has not heard the story from the sufferer, but from a secondary source, heightening the effects of bad memory. This is not altogether negative, for in the testimony the portrayal of feelings and the empathy with which they engage the reader are more important than the exactitude of the events (118).

Moreover, to achieve that effect certain writers nowadays put aside veracity in favour of fictionality, to enhance the outcome of their account:

La recurrencia a la construcción de mundos ficcionales concebidos como metáforas de presentes históricos concretos provoca que la realidad no se presente ante el lector como una reconstrucción efectuada e impuesta por el autor. Más bien, ésta surge como una multiplicidad que, más que aprehendida, ha [de] ser comprendida. En consecuencia, el uso de estos recuerdos basados en la creación y el artificio puede activar el valor reflexivo y cognoscitivo de los textos y, con ello, convertirlos en instrumentos válidos para potenciar el uso ejemplar de la memoria. (Sánchez Zapatero 131-132)

The recurrence to the building of fictional worlds conceived as metaphors of specific historic present causes that reality is not presented to the reader as a reconstruction executed and imposed by the author. Actually, it emerges as a multiplicity that, more than being grasped, has to be understood. As a consequence, the use of these memories based on the creation and artful device can activate the reflexive and cognitive value of the texts, and with it, turn them into valid instruments to boost the exemplary use of memory. (my transl.; Sánchez Zapatero 131-132)

Even the objective genre of biography cannot save itself from some creative process where the writer uses the information with a particular and personal goal. This is the case with Simón Bolívar's⁷ fictional reconstruction in Waldo Frank's novel *Birth of a World: Bolivar in Terms of His Peoples* (1951) whereby an altogether totally new perspective of the South-American dictator is offered, drawing him closer to the individuals he ruled over. As Randall explains, Bolívar's imaginary representation as crafted by Waldo Frank is considered to be testimonial (39) and consequently, should it not also be possible to consider fantastic literature's testimony as testimonial? As John Fowles narrates in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969):

7 Simón Bolívar 'Libertador' (1783 Caracas, Venezuela - 1830 Santa Marta, Colombia) was the leader of the Spanish-American Independence. He wanted a united Spanish-America similar to the USA model. He founded the Republic of Bolivar (nowadays Bolivia). His approach to ruling countries did not please everyone, in particular the local oligarchies that ended up rebelling against him because of his dictatorial manners. Nonetheless, Waldo Frank provided in 1951 a new perspective of the leader showing him as benign to the ordinary people.

But this is preposterous? A character is either “real” or “imaginary”? If you think that, hypocrite lecteur, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it... fictionalise it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf—your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from the real reality. That is a basic definition of *Homo sapiens*. (87)

From this it may be derived that the line between fantasy and reality is a thin one. Tolkien himself made a claim about how sub-creations can be part of reality: “the author if it is the supreme Artist and the Author of Reality, this one was also made to Be, to be true on the Primary Plane” (L 101). The intent in a novel or a testimony could be essentially the same; to transmit a discourse of those without a voice who go against the established history and which allows the possibility of reconstructing truth (Randall 39). Moreover, Tolkien, in the Andrew Lang Lecture on fairy stories, made the following claim hoping that in some way his readers may regard his mythology as close to reality: “Every writer making a secondary world,’ he declared, ‘wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details) are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it’” (Carpenter 195). In fact, Tolkien said on Middle-earth: “imaginatively this ‘history’ is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet” (*Letters* 220).

In spite of its real-life nature, one must bear in mind that the genre of a real testimony commonly makes use of fictional devices for its narration. Thus, fictionality should not invalidate Tolkien’s narrative as a testimony. In a testimony, falsity is considered to invalidate it, whereas a novel is not discredited for having been invented and always preserves the “truths” narrated (Achugar 76). Acknowledging this claim, and considering the aforementioned evidence of Tolkien’s hybrid, it can be derived that certain novels can include potential testimonies, as in the case of Treebeard’s.

Concluding Thoughts

The previous section shows that Treebeard’s narration meets all the required characteristics to be labelled formally a testimony. It also demonstrates that testimonies can be employed to great effect even in a fantastic setting such as Middle-earth, in order to denounce the ravaging of trees and destruction of nature. Testimony in fictional literature, no matter how fantastic, is an important moralising tool and LotR is a clear example of that through the words of Treebeard. The previous offers a new perspective without precedence: the one of

nature, portraying its previously unexpressed suffering through the narrative. Moreover, the use of Treebeard's anthropomorphic shape, which helps draw the reader closer to the natural world, is a clever strategy to defend nature from human exploitation and create a collective conscience of its suffering.

Due to the great wisdom with which Ents are endowed, the final outcome may also come to tell the reader that "when forests are destroyed, it is not only an accumulated history of natural growth that vanishes. A preserve of cultural memory also disappears" (Harrison 62). This is because of the fact that myths and knowledge concerning forests, preserved by the Ents in the story, may be forgotten when the physical place has vanished.

However, it is also necessary to point out that the role of witness is not the only one played by Treebeard in the story. Both he and the Ents are active participants in the revolt against the tyrants who aim to reduce Middle-earth to ashes. The lack of any feasible alternative results in the rage for the felled and burned trees which is redirected towards socially helpful action: "we may help the other peoples before we pass away" (LotR 486). Rather than hold their ground and wait until Sauron or Saruman burst into their territory, they try to fight back: "the ents are thus marching to try to make a difference in an age when dark forces have risen and threaten the trees and the very ecology of Middle-earth" (Campbell 262).

Notwithstanding, the Ents will without a doubt pass away, and therefore, the trees' most sustainable, loyal and non-selfish servants will vanish and leave the future of the forests in the hands of Men. As Magdalena Mączyńska postulates: "the Fourth Age may either restore the respect for nature or strengthen the reverence for steel and machines" (130f.), much as in the Real World. A final question remains unanswered: will Aragorn's descendants, as our own, acknowledge the primordial importance of not only trees and forest, but of all kinds of life-forms, or will they fail for being as short-sighted as Saruman and Sauron?

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