

Fantastical Imaginations of Environmental Truths

The Role of Fantasy Literature in the Ecocritical Debate

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Abstract

Environmental threats have faced humanity for as long as we have been on this Earth. At the start of the previous century, industrialization was what worried most environmentalists, as climate change is what keeps these minds busy today. Though these ecological problems are analysed by biologists, physicists, mathematicians, and others in scientific research, literary studies contribute to this issue by interpreting texts in relation to the physical environment. This particular field of literary studies is called ecocriticism, and it attempts to abolish the distinction between humans and nature by prompting people to interpret nature as an equal with interests of its own. Though texts of non-fiction and literary fiction have played an important role in the development of ecocriticism, the genre of fantasy has so far often been overlooked by prominent theorists in the field. However, in this thesis I argue that fantasy literature is relevant to the field, as its authors incorporate ecological themes and narratives in their texts, whilst following certain literary ecocritical traditions. By looking at the literary tropes of the pastoral, wilderness and apocalypse in the canonical *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien, *The Earthsea Cycle* by Ursula K. Le Guin, and *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, I analyse in what manner the canonical fantasy literature of the past seventy years has participated in the literary ecocritical tradition. I also investigate which particular environmental threats were of interest during these authors' times, and what their contribution to environmental consciousness has, or may have, been. These analyses ultimately highlight why fantasy literature should be considered in ecocritical discourse.

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Introduction

The use of impossible probabilities is preferable to that of unpersuasive possibilities.

— Aristotle, *Poetics* 1460a

In his book *The Great Derangement*, author and literary ecocritic Amitav Ghosh writes that fantastical literature is not only ill-suited to contribute to the ecological debate,¹ but that it is actually detrimental to it. Ghosh claims that when an ecological topic is placed in a work of fantasy, it negatively fictionalizes a non-fictional problem: “It is as though in the literary imagination, climate change were somehow akin to extra-terrestrials and interplanetary travel” (Ghosh 7). He states that however strange and uncanny the phenomena of ecological change may be, the threats are quite real. He supposes that when actual ecological issues are featured in speculative fiction —both fantasy and science fiction — “no one would believe it as being true” (Ghosh 16). He pleads for ecocritical literary fiction that is not neglectful in its narrow scales of time and space, and disparages fantastical novels that fictionalize true problems of climate change.

This critique on fantasy and its having no place in the ecocritical debate, is echoed by literary scholar Darko Suvin. Though Suvin *does* interpret science fiction within the speculative fiction genre as a way to contribute to the ecocritical debate — as it represents an imagined world that is actually possible — he disregards fantasy, because “the intrusion of magic into an SF² story marks it as a failure to imagine a ‘better’ world, and is a distraction from SF’s utopian function” (Suvin 499). According to him, this utopian function is the reason we should be reading ecocritical texts in the first place, as these narratives are useful

¹ The specifics of this debate will be explored in Chapter 1.

² SF is used here as an abbreviation of Speculative Fiction (not Science Fiction).

in their “promise that another world – a better world – is not just fantasmatically [sic] but materially possible” (Suvin qtd. in Buse 267). Though Suvin too argues for the dismissal of fantasy literature’s role in the ecocritical debate, it is not due to fantasy’s supposed inability to represent non-fictional ecocritical issues in a fictional world, but for its impossibility to represent any true solutions.

Ghosh is certainly right in saying that the ecological problems that we face are so large and incomprehensible that they seem almost fictional, while Suvin is correct in arguing that fantastical elements such as magic cannot serve as actual solutions for climate change or as keys to an environmental utopia. However, the logic by which they argue that fantastical literature has no place in the ecocritical debate appears faulty, as they seem to dismiss the genre’s qualities and related traditions, to leap to presumptions of inefficiency. Ghosh seems to assume that readers of speculative fiction are incapable of distinguishing between fact (climate change) and fiction (dragons or zombies), which places extremely little faith in the capabilities of these readers. He quotes Margaret Atwood, who describes fantasy as “draw[ing] from a deep well: those imagined other worlds located somewhere apart from our everyday one: in another time, in another dimension, through a doorway into the spirit world, or on the other side of the threshold that divides the known from the unknown” (Atwood 8), and uses her as a way to argue that this unknown world is therefore unable to convey realistic problems to a general audience. Whereas Ghosh is weak in his presumption that readers cannot distinguish between these issues of facts and fantasy, Suvin’s argument lacks strength due to his idea that a work of literature should always present a solution, and disregards a text’s ability to simply ask a question, or make readers aware of a problem. They argue that environmental literary fiction and non-fiction are better suited to convey ecological messages.

Suvin and Ghosh are not alone in their praise of realistic literature and literary fiction: these genres in particular play and have played an important role in the development of ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. However, the role of fantasy in this development has so far been largely overlooked. In this thesis, I will therefore argue for fantasy literature's place in the ecocritical debate, and explore to what extent canonical fantasy literature has participated in the literary ecocritical tradition over the past seventy years, and what its contribution to the discussion of environmental consciousness has been. I will use three of fantasy's canonical works to support this research: J.R.R. Tolkien's classical fantasy *The Lord of the Rings*, Ursula K. Le Guin's ecofeminist *The Earthsea Cycle*, and George R.R. Martin's modern *A Song of Ice and Fire*. These works are not only representatives of their genre, but also reflect the time and ecological issues that plagued their authors' contemporaries. Whereas Tolkien addresses the influence of industry on nature after the Second World War and the role of pastoral society, Le Guin engages the ecocritical debate through the lens of ecocritical feminism which sprung up in the 1970s, and questions in what manner wilderness can serve as an alternative for the pastoral tradition. Martin incorporates the threat of ecological apocalypse in his novels and asks whether mankind is willing to pay the ultimate price if it does not solve the ecological question of climate change.

These fantastical novels all use different methods to approach their ecological topics, but are similar in their pedagogical attempt to educate their readers about the looming environmental threats. Literary fiction, which *is* already seen as beneficial to environmental awareness by many ecocritics,³ follows this same pedagogical concept, but mostly has narratives that take place on Earth, feature real locations and recognizable periods of time, and follow the laws of nature as we know them. Fantasy differs in these latter regards, but

³ Though some of my secondary sources dismiss fantasy's role in the ecocritical debate, almost all of them acknowledge literary fiction as a solid contribution. See Buell, Garrard, Clark, etc.

J.R.R Tolkien, an obvious advocate for the fantasy genre, sees these differences as beneficial, for “fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make” (*On Fairy Stories* 9). To Ursula Le Guin, the shortcomings of realistic literature are found in the idea that: “the imagery of mathematical limits highlights the abstraction of the ‘rational’ approach to utopia and resonates with historical examples of hubristic and misguided techno-scientific projects” (Le Guin 270) and she argues that fantasy is free of these limitations. George R.R. Martin states that “there is something old and true in fantasy that speaks to something deep within us, to the child who dreamt that one day he would hunt the forests of the night” (*On Fantasy*) and says that dreams of a utopian world in fantasy can open up minds which realistic literature might not.

Brian Attebery lovingly jokes about the contemporary fantasy tradition in *Strategies of Fantasy*, by presenting a recipe for all fantasy: “Take a vaguely medieval world. Add a problem, *something more or less ecological*, one villain with no particular characteristics except a nearly all-powerful badness; pour in enough mythological creatures and nonhuman races to fill out. [To] the above mixture add one naive and ordinary hero who will prove to be the prophesied saviour. [...] Keep stirring until the whole thing congeals” (10, emphasis mine). The ecological aspect in his quote is key to the fantasy genre, and though all three authors add many of these ingredients to their stories, they also add components to the ecocritical debate by playing with this recipe in varying ways. In this thesis, they will therefore be analysed individually on their literary ecological tropes, narratives and positions.

The first chapter, which houses the theoretical framework, will focus on the theories regarding environmental literature, the ecocritical debate, and ecological literature’s genres and tropes. After this, the first chapter of literary analysis in fantasy will focus on J.R.R. Tolkien

and his epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* from 1954. Often seen as the grandfather of all popular fantasy literature and analysed much for his interest in the natural world, Tolkien is the ideal starting point for my argument about fantasy and ecology. His incorporation of the pastoral tradition and the dangers of industrialization will be key in this chapter. Following Tolkien, I will analyse Ursula Le Guin's *The Earthsea Cycle*. With her roots firmly planted in the ecofeminist movement, her incorporation of the wilderness trope, and her status as one of the most influential fantasy writers, her role as a representative of fantasy literature's function in the ecological discussion seems undebatable. The final chapter of this thesis focuses on *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin. The book series so far consists of five novels out of a planned seven. Though the books are fairly recent, with the first book written in 1996 and the last in 2011, much has been written about the series already, though surprisingly little of ecocritical value. However, through its apocalyptic trope, the constant threat of a never-ending winter, and the many allusions to Children of the Forest and anthropomorphism, I will make a case for an ecological reading of the works, and place it in the ecocritical tradition.

Arguments by literary critics such as Ghosh and Suvin are detrimental to the inclusion of the fantasy genre in the ecocritical debate, and furthermore seem to misconstrue the nature of literature and its way of apprehending the world; even some forms of literary fiction should be dismissed from the ecocritical debate if we were to follow their reasoning. The research in this thesis is relevant, for if the fantasy genre *were* to be —or stay— disregarded as a potential source for ecocritical analyses, literary scholars would miss out on an important participant in the environmental discussion. A work of fantasy, though often set in an alternative world, can raise awareness of real ecological problems, without being held back by the limiting conditions that are in place in “real world political, social or cultural climates” (Hopkins 174). After all, having readers be aware of a problem is the first step to making a change: the actual solutions follow after.

Theoretical Framework:

Ecocriticism, Environmental Literature, Tropes and Traditions

Cheryll Glotfelty states in her anthological *The Ecocriticism Reader* that ecocriticism is “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xix). Though texts can be interpreted from viewpoints of feminism, post-humanism, Marxism, etc., literary ecocriticism takes “an earth-centred approach” (xix) to bodies of literature. Ecocritics are intent on tracking environmental ideas and representations in written works, and seek “to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (Kerridge 5). Modern ecocriticism has the goal to make crucial contributions to politics and culture by analysing literature through a green lens, and attempts to raise environmental awareness, create public and political discourse and stimulate positive environmental change.

A factor that provides extra urgency to literary ecocriticism is that its issues often overlap with the ‘hard’ sciences of ecology (Garrard 5). An ecological problem regarding industrialization, for example, can be studied mathematically by looking at affected layers of the Earth, the increase in carbon monoxide, water’s pH values in areas surrounding factories, etc. Ecocritics, however, analyse the cultural and political effects of this same industrialization through literature and the arts. John Passmore writes about this overlap, and distinguishes between the aforementioned ‘hard’ scientific problems and ecological issues that are “features of our society, arising out of our dealings with nature” (44). Literary ecocriticism mostly works with the latter definition, as it does not work from a position of scientific analysis, but incorporates cultural concepts to indicate what the effects on society and nature are. By analysing an environmental problem through ecocritical readings and arguments, the issue can evolve from being something solely scientific, to a literary problem

of ecology that can be debated politically, culturally and legally.

Many ecocritics actively seek to deconstruct the dichotomy between humans and nature, or culture and nature (Bertens 225), which would lead to a cooperation between the two 'sides' and the annihilation of the juxtaposition. The most effective way to achieve this, according to Garrard, is to study environmental literature through a lens of the "relationship of the human and the non-human" (5), i.e. humans and nature. Instead of distinguishing what the differences between nature and humans are, ecocritics argue that environmental literature should focus on what these two have in common. This sentiment is echoed by American literary scholar Lawrence Buell, who in *The Environmental Imagination* lays down the criteria for what a work of environmental literature should adhere to. In it, he attempts to signify the voice and interests of the non-human position, which places nature as a player in the ecological conversation and which could lead to an eventual cooperation between the two. His criteria are:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant of a given is at least implicit in the text. (Buell 7-8)

According to these criteria, the defining feature of an environmental text is that it abolishes the clear distinction between human history and natural history, and show how humans are not fundamentally separate and distinct from nature. Furthermore, such a text must conceive of nature as its own entity, with its own interests, rather than only reacting to the progress or

whims of humankind. An environmental text also shows in what ways its characters are responsible for and connected to the state of the earth upon which they live, while it also needs to show how the environment is not stagnant, but a process, and always in motion. Though seemingly quite comprehensive in its application, Buell writes that “though many books qualify for some of the criteria, few do so completely” (8). Regarding those works of literature that do meet all the criteria for environmental literature, Buell writes that “most of the clearest cases are so-called nonfictional works, hence my concentration on them here” (8), indicating the non-fictional stories he studies in his book *The Environmental Imagination*. He claims that though “American nature poetry and fiction about the wilderness experience have been studied much more intensively than environmental nonfiction” (8), the non-fictional works he discusses fit the criteria for environmental literature much better due to their exact portrayal of nature as it is, instead of as a simple representation of nature (10).⁴ My attempt to show to what extent canonical fantasy literature should be considered relevant in the ecocritical debate — as it too attempts to break down the dichotomy between nature and humans — is therefore not only an attempt to waylay the aforementioned Ghosh and Suvin, but by applying Buell’s criteria to my chosen works of fantasy, I argue against his interpretation of environmental literature as well.

Besides my different interpretation of which bodies of literature are subject to the categorical environmental literature, Buell’s list is a helpful tool to exclude ecological texts that do little to abolish the aforementioned dichotomy. By applying Buell’s criteria to literary texts — without his assumption that it mostly adheres to non-fiction — I can distinguish whether a text is suitable for ecocritical analysis, and through what methods it narrates the human and non-human voices. As was stated in the introduction, the fantasy novels I chose to

⁴ This is exemplified in the following quote: “The forest of American scholarship is the far more blurry and highly symbolic delta landscape of William Faulkner’s [fictional] ‘The Bear’, built from chant-like reiterated and generalized images: a forest where treeness matters but the identities and the material properties of the trees are inconsequential” (Buell 10).

analyse in this thesis were picked due to their environmental relevance, but it is useful to analyse them in regard to Buell's theory of environmental literature nonetheless, as this will highlight their environmental characteristics. Therefore, each chapter will illustrate how Buell's points *are* incorporated into my chosen works of fantasy, which positions them as environmental literature, regardless of whether Buell himself agrees with the assessment.

In addition, I will also research in what manners these novels follow literary ecocritical traditions, and how they differ from non-fiction or literary fiction. Garrard writes that much of modern environmentalism relies on "a series of tropes that are heavily indebted to the Euro-American Judaeo-Christian narrative of a fallen, exiled humanity seeking redemption (...) 'Pastoral', 'Wilderness' and Apocalypse" (15); I will use these tropes as a way to link my works of fantasy to traditions of modern literary environmentalism.

The pastoral trope derives from an idealization of rural life and its landscapes, in which interference by humans is minimal (Buell 32). In literary pastoral traditions, this romanticized way of life is often threatened by an outside factor that wishes to disrupt it, and leaves it up to 'good people' to uphold nature's harmony. The trope has been a popular literary genre for centuries, and "to refer to 'pastoral' up to about 1610 was to refer to poems or dramas of a specific formal type in which supposed shepherds spoke to each other, usually in pentameter verse, about their work or their loves, with (mostly) idealised descriptions of their countryside" (Gifford 1). The idea of a perfect rural life in modern literature has changed, and now resembles aspects of the literary and poetic Romantic movement that was resurrected after the Industrial Revolution. Our generation's way of perceiving nature was shaped during the foundation of this period, with the countryside as opposed to cities; grass and trees as contrasted to works of metal and electricity; and, quite simply, the divide between nature and culture (Garrard 33).

The wilderness trope differs from the tamed and rural pastoral landscape, and regards

nature as something that is not to be domesticated, but should remain wild. Garrard writes that “if pastoral is the distinctive Old World construction of nature, suited to long-settled and domesticated landscapes, wilderness fits the settler experience in the New Worlds (...) with their apparently untamed landscapes and the sharp distinction between the forces of culture and nature” (60). Bertens refers to wilderness as a place that can carry special significance, “a place of healing and redemption, or of evil and danger where the individual’s moral resolve is severely tested” (225). Laura Rival indicates a different approach, and uses the examples of the Earthly Arctic and the Australian Outback as indicative for wilderness: “what westerners take for pristine wilderness is more often than not the result of abandonment” (199). These varying interpretations of the same trope spring from the different associations a reader might have with the concept of wilderness, and “brings to light the various discourses regarding our natural environment that we have produced since we became consciously aware of it” (Bertens 225).

The third trope that I will analyse in my chosen works of fantasy literature is that of the apocalypse. This trope focuses on the end of the world as we know it (Wojcik 137), and is more radical in its narrative and in the ecological discourse. It is described as “a genre born out of crisis, designed to stiffen the resolve of an embattled community” (Thompson 13-14), and most environmental books that incorporate this concept focus on a threat that would annihilate not only individuals or nations, but implement a destructive end for the world as a whole. Buell states it is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has as its disposal” (285), as it appeals to the imagination to a sense of an ending and might spur its readers into action. The apocalyptic trope offers an effective method of finality, as it shows the most extreme consequence of environmental destruction or inaction there is: the end of all life for both non-humans *and* humans on planet Earth. Albert Schweitzer maybe summarizes the trope best when he writes: “Man has lost the

capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth” (Schweitzer in Carson, *Dedication*).

These genres, or literary tropes, are indicative of the way an author imagines nature as it is presented in his or her novels. Ecocriticism looks at these tropes, investigates environmental discourses and analyses their history as social constructs. After all, what the tropes of pastoral or wilderness mean now, has changed and continues to change as the interpretations of these terms changes at the same rate culture changes. By analysing how these tropes are incorporated into the fantastical book series, it becomes clear to what extent fantasy has been a participant in the ecocritical debate since its creation, and how it has seemingly been ignored in favour of non-fiction and literary fiction. Furthermore, by establishing that these tropes are used in fantasy literature, the genre’s role in the literary ecocritical tradition is more strongly rooted. My analyses show what elements of fantasy literature fit in these traditions, but also highlights what the genre has at its disposal that has been missing, or can be strengthened, in the ecocritical debate, by considering fantasy literature as an addition.

Chapter One:

The Pastoral and the Threat of Industrialization in Environmental Fantasy Literature

Many ecocritics generally seem to agree that modern environmentalism began with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (Garrard 1, Bertens 224, Buell 10) in 1962, due to its incorporation of ecocritical literary tropes such as the pastoral and as its highlighting of the dangers of industrial 'progress' to the reading public. The fictional story called "A Fable for Tomorrow" (Carson 1) that her book opens with, concerns a perfect and rural landscape that is suddenly plagued by death and disease which stem from the use of chemicals and pesticides. Buell refers to this as 'toxic discourse' in his article by the same name (639). When *Silent Spring* was published, it not only raised general environmental awareness, but led to "firmer state regulation and the development of less persistent agricultural chemicals" (Garrard 2). Though her book is a work of nonfiction, it actively incorporates terms such as "witchcraft", "shadows of death", "evil spells" (Carson 1) and other supernatural terms to strengthen her ecological message, through imaginative vocabulary and symbolisms. Her work shows that ecological literature can indeed have a positive influence on the environment, but also complicates the question of the effectiveness of fiction and non-fiction: was it the mythical fable at the start of her book that led to these political and cultural interventions, or was it the non-fictional text that followed?

Published almost a decade before *Silent Spring*, *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien deals with many of the same issues that Carson alludes to, and uses much of the same fantastical vocabulary. However, Tolkien's works of fantasy did not lead to as much political environmental change as Carson's work did, and is hardly referred to as being the start of modern environmentalism in the ecocritical debate. Even though Tolkien's works have been analysed quite often in regards to environmentalism, as will be shown in this chapter, his

works do not even closely match Carson's claim. This might be due to the lack of non-fictional information in his works — which would answer the question in the previous paragraph — but might also spring from the fact that the genre of fantasy has hardly been seen as consequential in the ecocritical field in the first place.

Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* as a sequel to his popular children's book *The Hobbit*, which was published in 1937. After spending many years working on the intricate storylines, elaborating imaginary languages, and tying it into his other written works, he finished his opus in 1954. At the time of publication, Britain was recovering from two Great Wars and many connected Tolkien's fantasy trilogy to this period, with Middle-Earth's Orcs and Goblins posing as direct allegories for the Nazis (DiPaolo 47). Tolkien denied these relations, as he had a strong distaste for allegory and said that this was not the reason he wrote the trilogy. Once people started reading environmental messages into his novels, however, he wrote to his publisher that he "would not object to readers finding a moral" in his works of fantasy (*Letters* 121). His books have been read by people from all over the world and are the interest of many literary studies, ranging from analyses into themes of racism (Young) gender (Vaccaro), colonialism (Fabrizi) and others that I will unfortunately not have time to delve into for this thesis.

The Lord of the Rings follows Frodo Baggins and some friendly Hobbits⁵ who are set upon a quest to save the world. Frodo, the reluctant hero, has come into possession of a Ring which needs to be taken into the land of an enemy to be destroyed. Along the way, these Hobbits encounter many friends — such as Tom Bombadil, an ancient forester who can communicate with all plants and animals; Treebeard, a walking and talking giant shepherd of trees; and Elves, who live in magical forests and help the Hobbits in their adventure — and foes — like Sauron, a tyrant who wants to use the Ring as a tool for his evil intentions to rule

⁵ Small creatures who are described as friendly and peace-loving.

Middle-Earth⁶, and Saruman, a wizard who uses machinery and magic to destroy and enslave both nature and all the people of Middle-Earth. An accompanying work called *The Silmarillion* works as an anthology of the world this story takes place in, and shows the histories of all the races and lands. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, the Hobbits manage to destroy the Ring and the forces of good prevail. Buell's four criteria are met in these novels,⁷ and clearly indicate this trilogy as belonging to the genre of environmental literature.

The Pastoral World and Nostalgia in *The Lord of the Rings*

Carson's *Silent Spring* was particularly praised for its incorporation of the pastoral trope which was threatened by mysterious forces. This chapter will analyse in what manner *The Lord of the Rings* follows this pastoral tradition, and how it juxtaposes industrialization against it. The clearest indication that these fantasy novels could be read in the pastoral tradition, comes in the form of the Shire; a peaceful green land of rolling hills and little work, where no one worries about anything other than food, drinks or the enjoyment of peace and nature; the peril that looms is yet unfamiliar to them. The Shire is described as 'a pleasant corner of the world' where so little happened that its inhabitants 'came to think that peace and plenty were the rule in Middle-Earth and the right of all sensible folk' (*The Fellowship of the Ring* 6-7). The Shire's perfect rural life serves as an example of the Romantic pastoral tradition, which was resurrected after the Industrial Revolution, and which glorified this type of living.

This pastoral tradition is characterized by nostalgia, and differs per generation and location (Williams 12). In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien indicates this nostalgia

⁶ Middle-Earth is the name of the world these adventures take place. It is hinted at that this is the same planet as Earth, but set in a different age.

⁷ The Ents, Elves and Tom Bombadil serve as embodiments of nature, and are thus not simply frameworks, but have active voices which show their interests and links to human history. The negative impact of humans on the natural world is shown by the evil works of Sauron and Saruman, and environmental progress is read about in *The Silmarillion*: it shows what Middle-Earth used to be, and how it has changed.

when he writes: “Certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and are constantly glimpsing it” (*Letters* 110). Tolkien suggests that though he might have lived in this type of Paradise on Earth once, he no longer recognizes this in his London of 1945, which he describes as a “Mordor in our midst (Tolkien in DiPaolo 7). This dissatisfaction towards the world he lived in led to his incorporation of the pastoral into his *The Lord of the Rings*, as a way to remember the greenery of the English countryside and his nostalgic feelings towards this time (DiPaolo 53).

This form of the pastoral is thought of as elegy, which looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia. Two other types exist within this tradition: *idyll*, which celebrates a bountiful present; and the *utopia*, which looks forward to a redeemed future (Garrard 37). In Tolkien’s works, most of the pastoral follows the elegiac type, as the Shire and forests of Middle-Earth reflect a green past that no longer seemed realistic in Tolkien’s industrialized, post-war England. By incorporating the story of the Hobbits and their quest for the destruction of the Ring, however, Tolkien offers a chance of redemption and promises a preserved and green world, of utopian pastoralism, but only if the outside threat is halted. Tolkien demonstrates that this halting of the momentum of the forces of evil will not be an easy task, and not without alterations to the lands as they were known. Tolkien’s narrative, however, always indicates that there is a chance for anyone to accomplish a certain form of utopia, though it might be different from the elegiac pastoral land that was left behind, by fighting against the hardships they face. Frodo’s fellow Hobbit, Samwise Gamgee, demonstrates this hopefulness when, during one of their trying times, he says:

And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started.

But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs (...) I suppose they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if

they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on [and] came home, and finding thing alright, though not quite the same. (*The Two Towers* 931-32)

Through this passage, J.R.R. Tolkien indicates that though the Hobbits might still win out in the end to go back to their pastoral Shire to “have some rest and some sleep (...) and waking up to a morning's work in the garden” (932), the world they knew might have been altered in their absence. Nonetheless, the reluctant heroes eventually work together with the forces of nature, such as Ents, Elves and Eagles, destroy the Ring, vanquish the forces of evil, and utopia seems imminent.

Tolkien does not conclude the story after the destruction of the Ring, however. Though Peter Jackson, director of *The Lord of the Rings* movies, did not include this part in his famous movie trilogy and ends the films with a utopian return to an unchanged Shire, the books differ in this respect. A chapter called “The Scouring of the Shire” takes place sometime after the Ring is destroyed, when the Hobbits return to their homeland. What they find there is not utopian, and the pastoral landscape they knew is ruined by machinery and pollution, resulting from the corruption of the Hobbits by Saruman. Tolkien does not adhere to the assumption that the destruction of the Ring would solve every problem, and shows two things: that a fight for nature is seldom a fight simply between the forces of good and evil, and that the battle for (Middle-)Earth's preservation will continually need to be fought, even when it seems like it is heading in the right direction. Even the goodly Hobbits are shown to be susceptible to corruption and partake in the pollution of their own land. By doing so, Tolkien complicates the dichotomy between good and evil, by showing his readers that such a divide does not truly exist: anyone, including the seemingly good people, can be corrupted and unintentionally contribute to the downfall of the natural world.

When the powerful wizard Gandalf leaves the Hobbits right before the battle for the Shire to solve this problem by themselves, he indicates that the bigger powers are no longer up to the task of solving environmental change, and how it is now up to the small Hobbits to stand up for themselves and do something about it. “When Gandalf says this to the hobbits, we can hear Tolkien saying something similar to his readers. Like the hobbits, we must settle the affairs of the realms we live in, unaided in any direct way by Tolkien himself. If we cannot apply anything of what we have learned from *The Lord of the Rings*, then our reading of the books, though entertaining, is ultimately pointless. However, if, like the four hobbits, we have learned our lessons from the great tale, we should need no further help” (Dickerson 256). This is what Tolkien sets out to accomplish in his epic and environmental story: he hands over the torch to those ‘small people’ who read his works, implores them to make a similar change as those fighting in his trilogy, and shows that the strife for a better world is worth undertaking. By alluding to a changed world, Tolkien might have insinuated that the pastoral ideals we have also need to change. If ecocriticism calls for a need to oppose the dichotomy between nature and humans, humans should no longer be seen as stewards of nature, as the pastoral tradition implicates, but as “participants in nature — seeing themselves as belonging to nature” (de Groot 326).

Industrialization and Magic in Middle-Earth

It is clear how the elegiac and utopian pastoral traditions are followed in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, but it is essential to research in what manner Tolkien applies the threat that is posed against this tradition too. Tolkien’s companion work, *The Silmarillion*, serves as an anthology of the world of Middle-Earth and historicises the lands, races and threats that Tolkien imagined for story of *The Lord of the Rings*. The book indicates that even though Middle-Earth was once as ecologically pure as the garden of Eden (*Silmarillion* 11), pollution

was brought upon it by the creation of humans, dwarves and the other fantastical races. Though this companion work shows that corruption and greed were causes of pollution, it remains vague on how this actual pollution was achieved. *The Lord of the Rings*, however, no longer solely focuses on evil forces attempting to gain power, but narrates how it is attained: through industrialization and the abuse of tools, which leads to pollution of the lands. Sauron's Ring is seen as a metaphor for the tools that are made to disrupt nature (DiPaolo 49), and it is used in the attempt for complete dominion over Middle-Earth. Saruman's machines, such as siege engines and drills, as well as his destruction of the forests surrounding his base, are clear depictions of what destructive effects machinery and technology can have on the natural world.

Though his books might seem to indicate otherwise, Tolkien was not necessarily opposed to technology and science as a given. However, he and the famous literary discussion group called The Inklings⁸ were afraid of the negative effects modern technology *could* have on the planet. At the end of the Second World War, the atomic bomb had shown them that man now had the capacity to destroy life on Earth, and, though they had hoped differently, the “veterans of World War I were heartbroken that it had not been, after all, the war to end all wars (DiPaolo 68). These Inklings had witnessed the development and the accelerated industrialization during their times, had lived through both wars, and were concerned of what would become of the world they had once known if technology kept up its current rate of development. For this reason, they had decided to only “read and write narratives calling for a concerted effort to restore the world to its more blessed, preindustrial state” (DiPaolo 68). Tolkien contributed to this ideology by incorporating the evils of

⁸ The Inklings consisted of famous English writers, that included members such as Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams, and others. They encouraged the writing of fantasy literature and discussed the role that literature should play in cultural debates. They met up to listen to works in progress read aloud and commented on them.

industrialization in his novels and allowing his protagonists a chance to break the chain of destruction.

Though Tolkien clearly did not perceive all scientific progress as being beneficial to the health of the natural world, he did not actively oppose it either. In one of his letters he makes a point about magic as a link to the mechanical world: “By [Magic] I intend all use of external plans and devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills” (*Letters* 145-146). With this text, he clarifies that he does not believe that magic (i.e. machinery and technology) are evil in itself, but can be used to be so. The evils of Saruman and Sauron are made possible by technology — and thus magic — but those who attempt to defend the natural world, such as Gandalf and the Elven queen Galadriel, use magic to defend it as well. When the Shire is ravaged in the chapter “The Scouring of the Shire”, it is Galadriel’s gift to Sam, magical seeds, that replenish and restore the greenery of the lands back to its original pastoral form. When magic or machinery is used not as detrimental, but beneficial to nature, Tolkien welcomes it. This echoes an ideology that had already emerged in the seventeenth century, which considered the utility of science and exploitation of nature to only be done when it was beneficial to humanity, as can be seen in the writings of Francis Bacon, according to whom: “The ideal of human service is the ultimate goal of scientific effort, to the end of equipping the intellect for a better and more perfect use of human reason” (Bacon 441).

Tolkien’s Contributions Through Fantasy

Through these analyses, it becomes clear that Tolkien inserted ecological topics into *The Lord of the Rings* which have fit into the ecocritical tradition for over seventy years, but has been largely ignored by many in the debate. However, there is much of ecological relevance

that Tolkien was able to implement into his fantastical works that non-fiction or literary fiction often do not.

For one, Tolkien was able to use living and breathing representations of nature, such as Ents and Eagles, who can speak with their own voices and thus share nature's interests and perspectives, as an effective method to directly speak to the readers' environmental imagination. In his essay "On Fairy Stories", Tolkien writes about this concept "as the desire to converse with other living things (...) Other creatures are like other realms with which man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance, being at war with them, or on the terms of an uneasy armistice" (13). By placing beings of nature side by side with those fighting against industrialization in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien uses anthropomorphism to link these non-humans more closely to their human brethren, and though they often voice different interests, this battle for the preservation of Middle-Earth breaks the dichotomy. Ulrich Gebhard et al. write that anthropomorphism places both humans and non-humans in "the same semantic category [and] the observer's knowledge about him- or herself can be better employed to better understand the nonhuman object" (92), which evokes feelings of empathy for trees, animals, and other embodiments of nature. This method of giving humanlike features to nonhumans is predominant in the fantasy genre — as this and the next chapters will exemplify — and is used to make nature an active and understandable character in the stories.

Furthermore, *The Lord of the Rings* not only shows the cohabitation with nature that is possible, but indicates that the time has come for humans to become one with nature themselves. The aforementioned embodiments of nature are leaving Middle-Earth — The Ents are diminished in numbers and seem unable to find wives to create offspring with; Tom Bombadil refuses to participate in any human affairs; and the Elves leave Middle-Earth at the end of the trilogy — and indicate a necessary closer relationship between the natural world

and humans than was needed before. When these embodiments leave, humans need to stop seeing themselves as masters over nature, but as the aforementioned participants in nature. Tolkien's indication of lands such as the destroyed Dead Marshes and corrupted Mordor serve as warnings of what will happen to our world if we do not accept this collaboration.

Chapter Two:

The Rise of Ecofeminism and Tropes of the Pastoral and Wilderness

J.R.R. Tolkien — though following a literary tradition of medievalism and inspired by authors such as George MacDonald (Anderson ii) — is to this day seen by many as one of the founding fathers of modern fantasy (DiPaolo 71) and serves as an inspiration in his own right to many authors in the genre.⁹ However, fantasy remained “one of the most male-dominated arenas of literature” (Thomas 62) for a long time, and few fantastical novels featured strong women or had female authors once the genre grew in popularity. Even J.R.R. Tolkien, who admittedly wrote a few strong female characters into his novels,¹⁰ wrote almost exclusively about male heroes and antagonists. When female authors of fantasy participated in the fantastical literary tradition during this time, they were expected to follow the traditions that were set in this male-dominated culture, and female characters were “forced to take on male characteristics in order to (...) enter the world of men that is ‘war’ to defeat the evil of men” (Skeparnides qtd. in Thomas 64). This ‘evil of men’ was intent on the dominion of nature, and, according to a new form of criticism that emerged in the 1970s, was similarly intent on the dominion of women.

This ecocritical school of thought was called ecofeminism and brought awareness to the connections between the oppression of both nature and women, and argued that both could be liberated together (Merchant 5). Different forms of ecofeminism, such as liberal, cultural, social and socialist positions, “have all been concerned with improving the

⁹ George R.R. Martin writes: “There were thousands of years of fantasy before Tolkien, but the way it is shaped as a modern commercial publishing genre and the fantasy books that have been written in the past half century have all been influenced by Tolkien. So [Tolkien] still sort of defines the playing field.” (Martin in Berwick)

¹⁰ One such is Eowyn, who disguises herself as a man to be able to fight in the wars that threaten the world, and who eventually kills one of the main antagonists

human/nature relationship” (5) and have contributed to the debate in their own ways.¹¹ One of the most well-known advocates for ecofeminism in fantasy literature and science fiction has been Ursula Le Guin, who used many of her works to lay bare the connections between women and nature, humans and nature, and highlighted the dichotomy that remains between nature and culture (Buse 266).

Though her most famous fantasy book series is marketed as *The Earthsea Cycle*, the aforementioned distinction between the first three and last three novels in this hexalogy is important. Whereas the first three books focus mainly on some of fantasy’s classic topics and echo the male-dominated genre, the final three incorporate more ecofeminist material: *The Earthsea Cycle* is therefore often referred to as consisting of two separate trilogies (Suvín 488). All six books take place in the imagined lands of Earthsea and follow Ged, a young goatherd, who is shown to be a powerful mage in the making. The first trilogy does not slowly take the reader through all the steps in Ged’s life, but jumps forward quickly through time. In the first book Ged is only a boy, in the second he is an adult, and in the third he has become an old man. In the middle of these leaps in time, he learns about the natural world from his teacher Ogion, encounters many trials and foes that befit fantastical stories, and wins out through all of them in the end.

In her book *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Sara Lefanu points out that these first three books by Le Guin only feature women that are either ignorant or less powerful magicians than their male counterparts (Lefanu 131). Le Guin has admitted that these books lacked a strong feminist stance, as “gender ignorance is part of the tragic fact that most women writers of [my] generation wrote unconsciously within a male literary tradition”

¹¹ “Liberal ecofeminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature from within existing structures (...) through the passage of new laws and regulations. Cultural ecofeminism analyses environmental problems from within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature. Social and socialist ecofeminism ground their analyses in capitalist patriarchy (...) They seek the total restructuring of the market economy’s use of both women and nature as resources” (Merchant 7)

(*Dancing* 234). In 1989, Le Guin published one of her most famous theories called “The Carrier Bag of Fiction”, and through this she diverged from the male tradition, and called out for a necessary change of narrative. The male literary tradition, she wrote, is based on culture being synonymous to “Man the Hero” using “long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing”. She explains how the time has come for this to be aggressive male narrative to be adapted into a more feminine, receptive one: “It is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, the subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story (*Carrier Bag* 152). A year after this theory was proposed, she published the first book of the ‘second’ Earthsea trilogy.

These books differ much from the first three. They depict Ged as a powerless, old man, and show much more of the domestic life he leads, the connections between nature and humans, and his —much less fantastical — struggles. It also highlights the relationship between him and Tenar, the woman he saved in the first trilogy, and their connection to each other and nature, to which they dedicate their lives. Though this second trilogy takes a complete turn regarding the active roles of women, it retains the ecological messages of the first, placing it in the ecofeminist tradition (Warren, Merchant), as ecofeminism acknowledges the cultural construction that exists between ‘male’ culture and ‘female’ nature (Garrard 23) which Le Guin refers to in her Carrier Bag theory.

Karen Warren writes that an ecofeminist ethic “builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses” (Warren 151) which includes both women and nature. Le Guin seemingly adopted a ‘cultural feminist’ stance for the second part of *The Earthsea Cycle*, as this position focuses largely on the “sphere of consciousness in relation to nature — spirituality, goddess worship and witchcraft” (Merchant 11). With its fourth to sixth books having a clear focus on the inherent natural powers of women, Le Guin alludes to this strong sense of spirituality. The female

witches, who are shown to be more closely related to the earth,¹² indicate that they do not use their magic to overpower others — neither male nor natural entities — but use it to protect and nourish their lands: “All the teachers of the art of magic on Roke were women (...) it was their spells that had protected Roke Island (...) it was men’s ambitions that had perverted all the arts to ends of gain” (*Tales from Earthsea* 86). The dichotomy between men who want to dominate earth and the women who want to protect it, becomes most apparent in the second trilogy, and highlight Le Guin’s own ecofeminist position. By alluding to the female conservation of the natural world as a beneficial in these stories, and the male’s destruction as detrimental, she not only incorporates her own telling of a new, feminine story, but also illustrates that the attempt to oppress both women and nature does not lead to anything worthwhile: working together with nature *and* women is what eventually ushers in peace in all three books of the second trilogy.¹³

The Pastoral and Wilderness Tropes in *The Earthsea Cycle*

Whereas Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* mainly works within the pastoral tradition, Le Guin mixes both the pastoral and wilderness tropes into her Earthsea novels. Garrard describes this latter concept as “the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism” (58), and is defined by “nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation” by Carolyn Merchant (40). However, there is a clear distinction between the use of these tropes in her first and second trilogy.

The first trilogy almost exclusively deals with the pastoral tradition, as is researched by Katherine Buse in her essay “Genre, utopia, and ecological crisis: world-multiplication in

¹² *Tehanu* includes a passage that indicates that the only thing holding a man together is power. For a woman, it is different; she has “roots... roots deeper than this island. Deeper than the sea, older than the raising of the lands” (*T* 528)

¹³ In *Tehanu*, Tenar maintains the lands surrounding their house, and is able to care for herself and her family; in *Tales from Earthsea*, Ogion’s teacher saves Gont Port by becoming one with nature; and in *The Farthest Shore*, peace is achieved due to a human collaboration with dragons.

Le Guin's fantasy". She refers to the aforementioned fable of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*¹⁴ as being synonymous to the outset of the story in Le Guin's *The Farthest Shore*. In this third book of the first trilogy, Le Guin not only works with Buell's third criterion to show that humans are accountable for many of the disruptions of the environment, but applies the pastoral trope to do so. When Arren, an envoy from a formerly pastoral, prosperous country comes to tell Ged about his land which is now plagued by failed crops, dying flocks and a failure of magic, Ged responds:

Nature is not unnatural. This is not a righting of the balance, but an upsetting of it. There is only one creature who can do that ... We men ... By an unmeasured desire for life ... When we crave power over life — endless wealth, unassailable safety, immortality — then desire becomes greed. And if knowledge allies itself to that greed, then comes evil. Then the balance of the world is swayed, and ruin weighs heavy in the scale (*The Farthest Shore* 333-34).

The greed of men is shown here to be the cause of a disruption of the balance. Le Guin was an avid Taoist (Tsai 150) and incorporated this philosophy — which focuses on balance and equilibrium — into her novels quite openly. *The Farthest Shore* uses this philosophy to display how humans have disrupted the balance of nature once more and how both Earthsea and its inhabitants have to suffer the consequences. The method she uses to attain this result is interesting for this research, for "both [*Silent Spring* and *The Farthest Shore*] begin with a crisis in the pastoral, both take as their conflict a scorched-earth campaign of ecological destruction motivated by human greed, both meditate on the role of human beings in the non-human world, and both present a (metaphorically) 'silent' spring" (Buse 265). By using a

¹⁴ See chapter one.

pastoral landscape as the starting point which is threatened by an outside evil, both Carson and Le Guin let their readers see how good the world could be, but in what way humans stop this natural collaboration. Le Guin's third book was partially inspired by Carson's work (256), as it was published a decade later and Guin was by this point an active member of the modern environmentalist movement that sees *Silent Spring* as its foundational text.

Le Guin's second, ecofeminist, *Earthsea* trilogy still incorporates this pastoral tradition — an elderly Ged and Tenar live near a few farms, tend their garden and keep a simple house — but also offers an alternative to this relation with nature: wilderness. This tradition of the wilderness trope is attained through the character of Therru: a burnt, deformed and abandoned girl whom Ged and Tenar raise as their own. She is shunned by the pastoral society that they are a part of, as she does not fit into their perfect picture of what the good life should look like. As wilderness means the absence of civilization, and civilization entails other citizens and thus their judgements, the wilderness trope in Le Guin's novels offers hope for a character like Therru. By implementing an imperfect protagonist in a 'perfect' world, it opens up a path for the importance of the wilderness trope in these novels. As the *Earthsea Saga* is a work of fantasy, this trope is presented in the form of dragons.

When Le Guin writes about dragons, she connects these creatures to the natural world, as is exemplified at the start of the fourth book, *Tehanu*: "When Segoy¹⁵ raised the islands of the world from the sea in the beginning of time, the dragons were the first born of the land and the wind blowing over the land" (*Tehanu* 491). Similar to the Tolkien's usage of the Elves in *The Lord of the Rings*, Le Guin links these first creations to purity and attunement to the natural world. She goes on to write that "in the beginning, dragon and human were all one ... beautiful, and strong, and wise, and free" (492), indicating the former

¹⁵ In the appendix to *Tales from Earthsea*, Le Guin describes Segoy as "one of the Old Powers of the Earth. It may be that Segoy is a name for the Earth itself" (*TFE* 391), indicating Earth's role as an active character in the series.

link that humans and nature once shared. According to Le Guin's story, humans eventually diverged from dragons, as the dragons wanted freedom and wild nature, whereas humans hungered for wealth and learnedness. This interconnectedness demonstrates that the non-human elements are not only used as simple scene settings, but works as proof of the ancient relationship between humans and nature, from which humans chose to diverge. These embodiments of nature flew west centuries ago to get away from civilization, and have only been seen seldom since. Whereas the humans chose society, the dragons "became more and more in love with flight and wilderness ... and wanted only to fly farther, uncaring, seeking more freedom" (*Tehanu* 492). Though their part of the world is only described in short fragments, it is written that the dragons simply float around on the other wind (*The Other Wind* 187) in a pure connection to the natural world.

This differs from the utopian idea one might have when relating to the concept of wilderness, as Le Guin portrays a place that is not attainable by humans, but only welcomes those with wings. Le Guin does, however, make an exception for Therru; the deformed girl turns out to be one of only two half-dragon/half-women, and is allowed to access these western lands, signifying the slight possibility of reaching this land of wilderness. Using dragons as embodiments of nature, Le Guin showcases an alternative for those who connect strongly to nature and do not feel at home in a pastoral landscape to actually have a chance to reach true natural wilderness and freedom. Interestingly, the only embodiments of nature to reach this wilderness are women, which Edward Abbey, a much-debated American environmentalist author, would not have agreed with. He writes that not only are women not a part of the wilderness, but are part of the civilization that wilderness helps a man to cut himself away from (Abbey 155). Le Guin's opposing views connects to her aforementioned ecofeminist position: both women and nature need to be released from the oppression of men, and Le Guin offers wilderness as an option to achieve this.

Dominion of the Earth

Both ecofeminism and the wilderness trope argue for a release from the domestication and dominion of the Earth. Ecofeminists argue that the both women and Earth should no longer be subject to the whims of those seemingly in charge, whereas the wilderness trope works from a position which is only effective if dominion does not occur; a conquered, domesticated or industrialized wilderness is no longer truly wilderness, after all. Le Guin only seems to offer this wilderness to those who already embody the interests of the natural world for this reason, and who see no benefit in dominating the bountiful wilds.

This dominion of the Earth is an important theme throughout all of Le Guin's Earthsea novels, as she indicates man's urge for power over the planet as the cause for most of the troubles that occur in her fantastical world. In the first book, Ged disregards Ogion's lessons and attempts to take power from the earth, leading to personal and natural destruction; in the second, a religious group abduct a child to use her for their own interests, which leads to a break with nature; in the third, the antagonist is a wizard who changes the nature of life in his search for immortality, leading to a disruption of the equilibrium and a fight between humans and dragons. However, though the first three novels indicate only problems of nature's abuse, and present fighting the threats as the only way to beat these problems, the second trilogy strays from this spread of oppositions and offers solutions instead. It works from a position of cohabitation between humans and dragons, men and women, and humans and the Earth. The female Tenar and Therru function as ambassadors for the human race, and instead of fighting the dragons of nature, they see them as equals — which in the case of Therru is actually true — and attempt to converse with them.

By employing ecofeminism, wilderness and the theme of Earth's dominion in the *Earthsea* novels, Le Guin participates in several literary traditions within the ecocritical

debate. She uses fantastical elements such as anthropomorphising the Earth,¹⁶ to highlight the fact that it too has a voice and interests; dragons as the embodiments of wilderness that is threatened by the invasions of men; and the search for powerful magic as symbolizing the attempted dominion over the planet which will only lead to negative environmental change. By doing so, she not only meets all of Buell's for environmental literature, but also follows the fantasy tradition, *and* incorporates ecofeminism as a way to distinguish her ecological message from those in the same genre who do not signify this relation between oppressors and oppressed. Katherine Buse writes that "while the world of *Earthsea* is entirely *impossible*, Le Guin's use (and variation) of the fantasy genre's conventions shows how generic expectations shape real-world understandings and how non-mimetic texts nonetheless offer insights into contemporary scenarios" (Buse 266). Le Guin's works indicate the fantasy genre's ability to change, how it is relevant to contemporary literature, and in what ways it can benefit from the incorporation of her "Carrier Bag of Fiction" theory and ecofeminism, while also showing that her works of fantasy clearly suit certain ecocritical traditions and add fantastical narratives to the pedagogically environmental approach.

¹⁶ "The bones of the earth ached to move... he was in the bones of the mountain now. He knew the arteries of fire, and the beat of the great heart" (*Tales from Earthsea* 227-28).

Chapter Three:

Apocalypse, Climate Change and Hopelessness in Modern Environmental Fantasy

Both J.R.R. Tolkien and Le Guin worked from positions of a certain hopefulness of a better world in their novels, and though their characters have to face adversities, they eventually overcome all of these in the end. Furthermore, their embodiments of nature are represented by powerful creatures that can actively fight the threats that face them — in the form of Tolkien’s Ents, Elves and Tom Bombadil, or in Le Guin’s dragons — and are presented in sufficient numbers to fend for themselves. These two authors show that by cooperating with nature, there is always a chance to topple the threats that man creates. Their tropes of the pastoral and wilderness promise a chance of a better future that can be found in romantic ideas of farmlands and rural forms of civilization, or in the wild places which are desired exactly because they lack this civilization.

George R.R. Martin operates from a less hopeful position altogether, and applies the apocalyptic trope in his fantasy series, which Garrard refers to as “the imminent end of the world” (85). Apocalypse can be interpreted in many ways, and as literary critic Frank Kermode writes: “In fashionable use, the word apocalypse has no very precise meaning, only vague connotations of doom” (Kermode 84). This is due to the apocalypse having different connotations depending on the time period it was used in, as well as the hopefulness it offers. Apocalyptic imagery has existed for a long time “as an integral part of Western thought, first of Christianity and later emerging as the underbelly of fast-forwarding technological modernization and its associated doomsday thinkers” (Swyngedouw 218), but has changed in recent times. Though former apocalyptic tropes may have suggested redemption through God’s love, or with appropriate political and social revolutions, modern apocalyptic narratives seldom offer redemption as an option. Martin Jay writes that environmental

apocalyptic imaginaries are “leaving behind any hope of rebirth or renewal . . . in favour of an unquenchable fascination with being on the verge of an end that never comes” (Jay 33). George R.R. Martin seems to work from this same fascination, and proposes little hope of a happy ending for any of his characters, or readers.

A Song of Ice and Fire is the epic tale of the struggles in Westeros, a country divided into several great Houses that each rule a portion of the land, and of which many crave the Iron Throne that symbolizes kingship over it all. The civil war that follows this desire wrecks the land and as famine and war claim thousands, the Houses fight to become rulers of a country that grows weaker with every passing day. The novels focus strongly on House Stark, a fiefdom in the north that traditionally held the duty to guard against northern threats, such as Wildlings, a tribe of savages, and the mysterious “Others”. These Others are a mythical enemy that once threatened to destroy the world of the living, but which are now considered by many to have been no more than scary bedtime stories. However, through the Children of the Forest — embodiments of nature who refer to themselves as “those who sing the song of earth” (*A Dance with Dragons* 175) — and the Night’s Watch — a group of sworn brothers who are bound to defend the realm from outside threats — the reader learns that these Others are indeed real and intent on the destruction of all life in Westeros. The book has alternating point-of-view chapters which follow a total of twenty-four characters who are subject to a wide variety of quests, of which the chapters on Bran Stark are the most ecological in essence. As the characters struggle to survive a war-torn world and navigate the increasingly unstable political landscape, they find themselves locked in a struggle not only for the throne, but for their very survival.

Martin’s books have hardly been positive in their hopefulness of a better world so far: many of the characters that are ‘good’ get killed off quickly by opposing forces, while rape, destruction and death seem the rule in the world of *Ice and Fire* (Ferreday 22). In several

chapters of the second book of the series, *A Clash of Kings*, the reader follows Arya who “surveys destroyed towns, burned-out lands, and spoiled food stocks . . . War is sung about and romanticized, but the real cost of war is an entire green country turned to ashes” (DiPaolo 254). These chapters indicate the results of the wars not only on its people, but on nature as well. Martin’s embodiments of nature, the Children of the Forest, also differ from Tolkien’s and Le Guin’s representations. Though theirs were partially destroyed by human intervention as well, they were still able to muster sizable forces to fight back the threat of men. Martin’s Children do not follow in this tradition; when Bran encounters a sparse group of them for the first time and asks what happened to the rest, the Children of the Forest reply: “Gone down into the earth . . . into the stones, into the trees . . . The direwolves will outlast us all, but their time will come as well. In the world that men have made, there is no room for them, or us” (*A Dance with Dragons* 453). Martin implies that humans will go on ravaging the earth until all other creatures are extinct, and places no hope in his embodiments of nature to be able to stop the momentum of men or the apocalypse that would follow it.

When Jacques Derrida, an Algerian-French philosopher of post-structuralism, wrote about the nuclear threat in the 1980s, he wrote about this type of apocalypse: “Here, precisely, is announced – as promise or as threat – an apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without vision, without truth, without revelation . . . without message and without destination, without sender and without decidable addressee . . . an apocalypse beyond good and evil” (Derrida 66). This is the sense that one gets when reading *A Song of Ice and Fire*: though you can certainly root for some characters, the Others represent a threat that is beyond good and evil. As it remains unclear what will happen in the final books of Martin, it is still a very realistic possibility that the author will end the series with the annihilation of mankind and the ‘victory’ of this apocalypse without vision.

However, should the apocalypse in *A Song of Ice and Fire* be diverted, it would

mirror Garrard's idea on what the only effective use of apocalypse would be, for "only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future... are we likely to take responsibility for it" (Garrard 107). Though the Others are described as a force that is almost impossible to defeat, Martin foregrounds the fight against them over the wars for the Iron Throne.¹⁷ He places an abandoning of political games to confront the apocalyptic threat head-on as the only possible option for victory, which indicates a slight, but hopeful chance of turning the apocalyptic tide aside. Envisioning the possible end is useful because by contemplating the end humanity may find a way to avert it. As Lisboa states in *The End of the World Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture*: "and what could be more urgent than the imperative of understanding the possibility of an end?" (12). The apocalypse in *A Song of Ice and Fire* shows its readers a world devoid of 'the good life', a world wherein the true antagonist, the Others, can win completely. In this sense the narrative and threat differs even more from the threats in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Le Guin's *Earthsea*. Whereas a 'bad ending' in either of these novels would merely imply a change in regime, ideology or dominant species, life in Westeros would come to a complete end as the apocalypse heralds the end of all living things. It is the change in the nature of the apocalypse in Martin's stories when compared to the other two series, that allows for a shift in its reading as a work of ecocritical literature.

Winter is Coming: Climate Change and the Responsibilities of Men

The book series of *A Song of Ice and Fire* has not been finished yet — and some worry it never will — making it impossible to say in what direction Martin will take the eventual storyline. The author has stated that even though he did not originally intend his books to be read ecologically when he started writing them, he has accepted an ecocritical reading of

¹⁷ "Martin points to the idea that this central question of the main narrative, "Who will sit upon the Iron Throne?" is a red herring. The real response might be: "Who cares? What about the zombies?" (DiPaolo 253).

them in a similar fashion to Tolkien.¹⁸ In an interview in 2014, Martin stated that his books carry contemporary relevance, because negative influences to the environment are “ultimately a threat to the entire world. But people are using it as a political football instead of ... [getting] together (Martin qtd. in DiPaolo 12). Manjana Milkoreit uses her essay “Pop-cultural Mobilization: Deploying Game of Thrones to Shift US Climate Change Politics” to highlight that the world of Westeros can be analysed through an ecocritical lens, and she investigates the possible connection between the threat of the Others and that of apocalyptic climate change. She does so by placing the Others, who are described as “cold things, dead things that hated iron and fire and the touch of the sun, and every creature with hot blood in its veins” (*A Game of Thrones* 233)” as a symbol of this climate change, as they bring a change of temperature and season with them. The aforementioned Night’s Watch serve as climate scientists in her analysis, who are completely certain of the danger that looms, but cannot convince the political houses, who are busy with their game of thrones, to send help to stop the oncoming enemy (Milkoreit 70).

Similar to the threat of climate change in our own world, this fantasy series places humans as the reason for its apparition in Westeros. The creation of Others is fuelled by men’s need for self-containment and lust¹⁹, which indicates that, in one way or another, humans are responsible for whatever is coming for them. However, in a research by Zoe Leviston et al. on the effects of imagining climate change, they show that many people feel “that those responsible for climate change in the first place are big industry, not ‘us’. This

¹⁸ See chapter one: Tolkien did not want his books to be read allegorically, but did not mind if people found an ecological message in his works.

¹⁹ One of the Others’ origin stories involve Craster’s sacrifices of his sons. His wives say these baby boys are turned into Others (*A Clash* 459). Another story alludes to a member of the Night’s Watch, called the Night’s King, giving “his seed and his soul” to a woman with white skin, blue eyes, and skin as cold as ice, who was later called the corpse queen. This Night’s King was caught sacrificing to the Others, and the story is implied to be a source for the creation of Others (*A Storm* 762). The HBO TV-series *Game of Thrones* differs in this regard, as they show that Others were created as a defence against humans. However, as this thesis focuses on literary analysis, for now I deem it irrelevant to my argument.

combination of moral and affective distancing (...) might work in tandem to allow the individual to morally disengage from climate change” (451). This research showcases the assumption that ‘small people’ are unable to have any large impact on the ecosystem. However, in George R.R. Martin’s work, it is not big companies or industries that destroy nature and cause the creation of Others and climate change, but regular people who do not foresee the damage they are causing.

In his article “Climate Change and Individual Responsibility” Avram Hiller attempts to diffuse the distancing that is apparent in Leviston’s research. He writes that though it is true that big companies cause much of the change in our environment, “we should be aware of the expected harmful effects of many of our actions (Hiller 366). What *A Song of Ice and Fire* does, and what effectively all three cases examined in this thesis do, is indicate how small players in a big world actually *do* affect the environment. Tolkien’s tiny Hobbits avert industrialization; Le Guin’s women, even without the use of magic, make a peace treaty with dragons and find wilderness; and Martin shows that it was not any big industry that caused the downfall of nature, but a small group of humans that assumed they should dominate the Children of the Forest. Fantasy in this way incorporates ecological problems and shows its readers that humans and nature should work together (Tolkien and Le Guin) or at least become aware of our own harmful actions (Martin) regarding nature. Hiller concludes with the idea that “providing people with data about the overall harms of climate change may not spur people to action, but putting it on a human scale might” (365), and this is exactly what fantasy does.

Fantasies of the Impossible

The apocalyptic trope is put to destructive effect in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and seeing the works through the concept of climate change opens up a newly imagined ecocritical reading. The apocalyptic, however, seems to leave little space for other tropes. While this is certainly true for the pastoral tradition —due to the constant wars, peaceful territories with people living happily in accordance with rural lands and each other seem impossible — Martin does in fact incorporate a form of the wilderness trope into this story of apocalypse. Whereas Le Guin incorporated the wilderness trope as an alternative to the pastoral tradition, Martin showcases wilderness to be an impossibility due to the apocalypse. The trope is represented by the Wildlings in Martin’s novels, who are seen as a threat to the lands of Westeros. Wildlings, who call themselves the free folk, embody the wilderness lifestyle, as they consciously chose to depart from society, live as nomads and refuse to follow the ideology that the rest of Westeros is subject to. One of the Wildlings, Ygritte, speaks of this ideology of the societal people: “The gods made the earth for all men t’ share. Only when the kings come with their crowns and steel swords, they claimed it was all theirs” (*A Storm of Swords* 558). By refusing to kneel to these kings, they remain banished in the wilds north of the Wall, and are therefore also the first to be threatened by the oncoming apocalypse that the Others symbolize. They attempt to flee the wilderness into the lands of society, for “the Others grow stronger as the days grow shorter and the nights colder. First they kill you, then they send your dead against you” (*A Storm of Swords* 1019). Where Le Guin showed that wilderness was only attainable by those who were willing to live in nature’s harmony without interfering in its wild state, Martin shows that even this type of wilderness is impossible when humans work towards their unavoidable apocalypse.

Greg Garrard writes about this impossibility of real-life wilderness, for whenever humans approach it, there invariably follows a moment of colonization and domestication

(63). However, traditionally speaking, the fantasy genre has always dealt with impossibilities that were made possible in their narratives: if dragons and magic are possible in Martin's works, how can the wilderness not be? As I stated at the start of this chapter, Martin seems to work from a position that is less hopeful of the future than his predecessors in the fantasy genre were, and this lack of pastoral ideals and destruction of the wilderness indicate this hopelessness. If the game of thrones that is played in our world and the competitiveness between people continues, Martin positions apocalypse as the only possible outcome. The destruction of the Children of the Forest is indicative of Martin's idea that it is too late to go back to a cooperation with nature's embodiments, which Tolkien and Le Guin still had hope of, but that the time has come to halt the destruction of nature at the point that we have arrived at now.

Through the analyses made in this chapter regarding the tropes of apocalypse and wilderness and the literary tradition which focuses on climate change, it is shown that Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* can indeed be read as following the literary traditions that benefit the ecocritical debate. Furthermore, the text's environmental orientation is met through the Children of the Forest; not only do they directly link to ecocriticism as they echo the title of a seminal book of literary ecocriticism by Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, but in fact fit into all the criteria set by Lawrence Buell for environmental literature. Through the Children it is shown that humans and nature share a common history,²⁰ that nature has an interest of its own,²¹ that humans are responsible for the changes in nature²², and how nature

²⁰ When the humans first came to Westeros, they cut down many of the trees. Though the Children — placeholders for the natural world — at first welcomed these outsiders, their opinion changed when the humans started destroying too much nature which led to a war that lasted thousands of years, and which was eventually resolved in an uneasy peace treaty.

²¹ Their priority is voiced to concern the conservation nature and the 'three-eyed raven', who serves as the memory of the world.

²² The aforementioned war between Children and humans has led to destruction of almost all the Children and the forests they wanted to protect.

is a process instead of stagnant.²³ In this way Martin follows the traditions of environmental literature, whether he originally intended for his books to be read in this way or not.

²³ The seasonal changes in Westoros indicate a change in climate and nature. Furthermore, though the Children of the Forest were the first to be created — similar to Tolkien's Elves and Le Guin's dragons — they no longer rule the lands. The era of humans has come and this changes the environment.

Conclusion

At the start of this thesis, I laid out Ghosh's and Suvin's arguments regarding fantasy novels for not being as well-suited to convey ecological messages with the same effectiveness that literary fiction or non-fiction could, due to their fantastical nature. Through theoretical analyses and examples from the chosen novels, this thesis indicates the ecocritical literary traditions that canonical fantasy literature of the past seventy years has followed, and shows in what ways it has contributed and can continue to contribute to the ecocritical discussion.

In the case of Buell's criteria for environmental literature, which supposedly match mainly non-fictional literature, this contribution was found in the personification of the natural world. Elves, dragons and Children of the Forest are fantastical imaginations that embody an idea of ecocritical thought in a way that a 'realistic' character never could. By placing these creatures of nature against their destructive opponents, the canonical works of fantasy that are researched in this thesis reveal what the environmental dichotomy exactly is and how it should be eliminated; through cooperation or, at the least, passive non-destructiveness. By illustrating in what ways humans share a history with these natural creatures, and by highlighting the negative influence humans have on the ever-changing natural world, these book series show that fantasy has its own unique method to follow the theoretical criteria by Buell.

The canonical fantasy literature that was researched in this thesis also shows in what manner it reflects the issues that held the ecocritical debate busy during their times of writing. After the Second World War, it was industrialization that kept environmental literature in its thrall (Clark 1); during the 1970s, ecofeminism and the dominion of both women and the earth were among the discussions held in the ecocritical debate (Merchant 5); and the ecological issue many environmental authors have been concerned with for the past few

decades is climate change (DiPaolo 12). My chosen bodies of fantasy literature deal with these issues respectively, and incorporate clear indications of their critiques regarding these ecological problems.

Besides addressing the issues that were relevant to their times, they also incorporate essential literary ecocritical traditions, such as the pastoral, wilderness, and apocalyptic tropes. These tropes are indicative of the hopefulness that these authors wanted to convey. Tolkien had hope that the utopian pastoral — which sprung from his elegiac ideas of what the world once was — might still be possible for generations to come if they worked together with nature; Le Guin incorporated the wilderness trope, but offered it only to those who would be able to completely coexist with nature, instead of wanting to dominate it; and Martin suggests that neither of these tropes are still options in the time we live in: we can hold out hope for a deflection of apocalypse if we ignore our political games, but Martin no longer sees a place for idealizations of the pastoral or wilderness.

A further element that speculative fiction can contribute to the ecocritical debate, is the anthropomorphism of antagonists. As Max Brooks, the author of *World War Z*, points out: “As much as Al Gore tries, you can’t picture global warming ... But you can picture a slouching zombie coming down the street” (Max Brooks qtd. in DiPaolo 235). By giving a face and a voice to a threat, it makes it more real, and thus presents an enemy to fight. Thus, when climate scientists and theoretical presentations are no longer effective, fantasy literature, which makes up for a significant worldwide readership (Fabrizi 2), can prove to play an essential role. Milkoreit writes that “Creating and maintaining awareness and understanding of the issue among diverse groups of voters is an important component—often the first essential step—towards mobilizing for climate action” (Milkoreit 76). By keeping the threshold for an ecocritical reading low, which fantasy often does, readers are likely to become more aware of the environmental problems they face. Carpenter echoes this

sentiment, when she indicates how speculative fiction can “sneak past existing mental barriers that might be rooted in political differences” and how it has the capability to “ease into challenging conversations where others disagree, dampening the resistance to a particular viewpoint by removing it slightly from real-world stakes” (Carpenter 62).

The idea that people are not able to differentiate between reality and fiction in the case of ecocriticism, might best be waylaid by one the authors discussed in this thesis, J.R.R. Tolkien, who writes: “Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it... If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings would not have arisen” (*On Fairy Stories* 9). He argues that the worlds in fantasy literature are based on the world as we know it, but incorporate fantastical elements to convey pedagogical meanings and, in this case, ask questions about environmental issues. Fantasy literature might not have the actual answers to solve ecological problems, but it *can* raise awareness and ask questions that create discourse. Furthermore, readers of fantasy are surely capable of distinguishing between the real elements a story is based on, such as climate change, and the fictional elements, such as the knights, dragons and zombies that might accompany it.

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that though fantasy literature uses different approaches than the accepted non-fictional and literary fictional narratives, it follows many of the same traditions that are inherent to literary ecocriticism, such as the pastoral, wilderness and apocalyptic tropes. I have also shown that fantasy literature has been participating in these traditions for over seventy years, that its contribution to environmental consciousness has been largely overlooked, and that the elements that are inherent to the genre can be beneficial to the ecological discussion. Whatever other arguments against fantasy’s inclusion to the ecocritical debate there may have been for all these years, the simple fact that these

authors and their works (can) have a positive pedagogical effect on the environmental consciousness of their readers should be enough to warrant its placement in the discussion. After all, even though we may feel small like Tolkien's Hobbits, oppressed like Le Guin's women and dragons, or doomed to fail in the face of Martin's apocalypse, we owe it to ourselves and the environment to try and make the world a better place.

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