

## Ecocriticism in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and Michelle Paver's The Soul Eater

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigates the occurrence of eco-critical thought in two canonical fantasy fiction, The Hobbit by J. R. R. Tolkien and Michelle Paver's The Soul Eater. Using current ecocritical theory as well as writers and critics of speculative fiction to study the primary works from a marginalized angle, this paper argues that fantasy fiction, more than other literary genres, has an intrinsic exploratory potential for ecocritical ideas because the strong immersive aspect of the genre entices the reader to open up for a less anthropocentric view of the world. Ecology and Ecocriticism are now the significant aspects for the literary study and research. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary calling for collaboration between natural scientists, writers, literary critics, anthropologists, historians and soon. Ecocriticism examine the way we interact with and construct the environment which is both "natural" and "man" made. Ecocriticism is the study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyze the environment and arrive at possible solutions for the correction of the contemporary environmental situation. The title of the present research Paper is Eco criticism in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and Michelle Paver's The Soul Eater. The researcher intends to make a comparative study of select works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Michelle Paver and try to bring out Eco critical Approach exploited by above mentioned Novelists.*

**Keywords:** *ecocriticism, ecocentrism, anthropocentrism, fantastic literature*

In order to answer the questions of why Eco critically read The Hobbit and The Soul Eater, and why an ecocritical reading of The Hobbit and The Soul Eater is necessary at this point in time, Researcher does not believe that researcher must try very hard to scrounge for an answer. To

answer the first question, the works of J.R.R. Tolkien have experienced a remarkable rise in popularity in the twenty-first century, thanks largely to the film adaptations of The Lord of the Rings, and the more recent film adaptations of The Hobbit. In reading The Hobbit, it is possible to come away with a set of environmental ethics that the text seem to abide by or advocate on behalf of. It should be noted here that the ethics that The Hobbit may advocate on behalf of might not in fact be those of its author, J.R.R. Tolkien. It is the answer to the second question that may be more important for the purposes of this Research.

The Lord of the Rings is an epic and fantasy novel written by the British Fantasist J.R.R. Tolkien in three volumes The Fellowship of the Ring (1954), The Two Towers (1955), and The Return of the King (1956). Tolkien preferred to take the opposing extreme, that of the old and traditional. In addition, unexpectedly, Tolkien's The Hobbits, and The Lord of the Rings gained a very large popularity; he was hailed as the father of modern fantasy, and the author of the century. His best seller The Lord of the Rings has sold more than 140 million copies; this exhibits its wide influence on modern readers. Indeed, Tolkien believed that through raising a sphere of old mythologies and literary images one could achieve the eternal truth. He invented lands and creatures from medieval mythologies and Nordic sagas.

As to why The Hobbit specifically will serve adequately for this task, aside from its modern popularity, there exists previous scholarship that has examined at The Lord of the Rings trilogy through an ecocritical lens.<sup>6</sup> However, the scholarship regarding The Hobbit is not as dense, and I believe that this single book is equally as valuable to be examined ecocritically

as the trilogy. I wish to contribute in a meaningful fashion to the work that has been completed, and the work that will no doubt follow in the years to come.

The Hobbit was first published in September of 1937, and was the culmination of work on the novel that J.R.R. Tolkien had started in 1932, when he decided to write the opening line to the book while grading papers one day in his role as a professor at Oxford. It marked Tolkien's first foray into Middle-earth, and his first creation of the modern high fantasy genre. There are many elements in the text here that can be read ecocritically. In the second sentence, then arrant or speaks

To the reader, relating how the fictitious thunders or min the text might be similar to a thunder storm in the world of the reader. The narrator does not draw a distinction between the world of the text and the world of the reader, suggesting that they are one and the same. The text then transitions into a colorful description of the sights and sounds of a thunderstorm along amountainside.

The Hobbit personifies nature often, suggesting that nature, that is the environment, may be as sentient being itself. If this is the case, then it comes as no surprise that in the next paragraph, we see that in addition to the thunderstorm, there are two stone-giants, playing a game of catch with rocks. These stone-giants, depicted in a particularly striking fashion in the film adaptation, represent a manifestation of nature in a form that the audience might identify with. Humans play catch, and so do these creatures of stone. Just as the thunderstorm is personified, so too are the stone giants, as the text humanizes the various elements of nature in Middle-earth. This entire example is show a close reading of the text might result in an ecocritical reading of The Hobbit: an analysis of all and any environmental language that explains the presence and role of the environment within the text.

The Hobbits might be most easily identifiable with notions of home simply because The Hobbit opens with a lengthy description of Bilbo's Hobbit-hole of a home. Upon first glance, it is striking that the titular character might live in a whole, though as the

text states, it is, not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a Hobbit-hole, and that means comfort. Immediately, the text associates a Hobbit-hole with comfort. But what is most interesting about the Hobbit-hole is how it is seemingly integrated into the environment around it. The Hobbits, in their construction of homes, place an emphasis on the environment, and view habitation as taking place within the context of their environment, as opposed to beyond it.

Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist of The Hobbit, as the other being in the text whose sense of piety results in selfless action at the intersection of time and eternity. It is also Bilbo and his fellow Hobbits who provide an ideal model of living with in an environment, as opposed to living set upon an environment, according to Scruton's objective aesthetic model.

Michelle Cohen Corasanti is a Jewish American, Michelle has BA from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a MA from Harvard University, both in Middle Eastern Studies. Gifted with intelligence, she also holds a law degree. She has lived in many countries like France, Spain, Egypt and England. She has spent seven years living in Israel, so she is a close witness of Israel-Palestinian issue.

'Soul Eater' is the third in the highly popular 'Chronicles of Ancient Darkness' series. Set 6,000 years ago, in the Stone Age, the books tell the story of Torak, his friend Renn and a wolf cub; Torak can communicate with Wolf after spending some months in a wolf den as a baby. The world is populated by different clans; Torak is from the Wolf clan, Renn from the Raven clan and in this story they are joined by Inuktiluk who is from the White Fox clan. Together their quest is to defeat the Soul Eaters, a clan who want to use magic powers to destroy the forest and take over all the clans. While the Harry Potter series was continuing to take center stage at the beginning of this century, it would have been easy to forget that other British writers were also working their own kind of magic away from the Rowling media spotlight. One such writer was Michelle Paver, whose Chronicles of Ancient Darkness series has now been published in thirty-eight countries, with

sales in the UK alone amounting to one million copies. The six books in the series, *Wolf Brother* (2004), *Spirit Walker* (2005), *Soul Eater* (2006), *Outcast* (2007), *Oath Breaker* (2008) and, finally, *Ghost Hunter* (2009)-winner of the 2010 Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, a rare feat for a book that is part of a series- have garnered a very strong fan following and receive considerable media acclaim. As Elizabeth Thiel and Alison Waller have observed, "Nature and the natural world have long been inherent features of children's literature"

The series is set after the end of the last ice age, in the Northern Europe of six thousand years ago, and begins with *Wolf Brother*, where there a deity is introduced to the world of the Forest in which almost all the events of the series take place. However, this forest is not a traditional or symbolic motif of the kind found in folk and fairy tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Hansel and Gretel," nor is it simply a passive backdrop for the playing out of events as is, for example, the Forbidden Forest outside Hogwarts. Paver animates the Forest and gives it a life of its own. She uses a capital F to foreground the subjectivity of the Forest, enhancing the sense that the Forest has an identity equal to that of the human inhabitants. Paver's positioning of the Forest, and nature in general, in this way asks us to reconsider the position of human beings within the natural environment, a move I will consider in more detail.

In order to maintain the proper balance between humans, nature and the spirit world in the Forest, there are natural rules which, if broken, will result in ecological disaster. This is most strikingly seen in the actions of the Soul Eaters, a shadowy group of Mages (shamans), who persistently break or ignore these important rules in pursuit of their personal goals. These are not, however, the stereotypical wand-wielding magicians of standard fantasy fare; their powers operate in ways that are more attuned to the spiritual and the natural. The Soul Eaters once referred to themselves "the Healers," and their effort had been for the good of all of the clans but, by the start of *Wolf Brother*, their purpose has changed: they wanted power. That's what they lived for. To rule the Forest, To force everyone to do their bidding. If the Soul Eaters succeed, the natural harmony will be broken and the Forest destroyed, along

with everything and everyone that lives within it. Their desire is to stamp their authority over nature, in what is a largely Western, Judeo-Christian, anthropocentric point of view. It does not take a huge leap of imagination to see how the Soul Eaters' methods resemble the way that modern human beings have removed themselves from that idea of harmony with nature in favor of dominion over it.

To advance the idea of nature as a subject in its own right, Paver ensures that her world is not a simple backdrop for the playing out of plot. This world is not a passive place, for as Paver herself says of it, "I've used the rather eerie Sami idea that everything-including rocks, rivers and trees-is alive and has a spirit; not all of them can talk, but all can hear and think" ("Author"). Through this animism, Paver attempts to give the natural world a voice. In doing this, the series falls largely within a less-trendy area of children's literature, noted by Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, where nature is depicted as "a 'character' with a consciousness of its own, with interests not necessarily coinciding with those of humans and their progress-and indeed, with interests often at odds, or imperiled, by human activity, against which it has little defense" (144). At the same time, living in Paver's animated world, particularly in the Forest, are small clan groups of hunter-gatherer peoples, human characters who both survive by finding food, shelter and various material goods from the Forest and the natural world around them, and whose very existence is an integral part of the ecosystems from which they draw that sustenance and shelter.

The idea of human beings as integral parts of nature rather than masters of it is seen in the way each clan is as different as the area it inhabits. Clan children are taught that they should not seek to master nature, but to live in harmony with it. Thus, these peoples offer an alternative approach to existing in the natural world, and they survive not in spite of nature, and not by controlling and subduing it, but through an intimate knowledge and understanding of the flora and fauna of the Forest and by paying due respect to the non-human life around them. Each clan is intimately connected to the nature and character of its specific local environment, and so the clan members, young and old, know what is best to eat and drink and where to do so, and they understand the need to treat all animals,

even prey, with the utmost respect.

Thus, Paver does not depict the human in habitants of the Forest as noble savages and, more importantly, nor does she make use of the stereotypical caveman and woman figures. These are not ignorant people dressed in animal hides, who grunt in order to communicate, and who carry oversized clubs to beat each other over the head with. Such representations, common in popular culture, would trivialize the complex prehistoric society she depicts. In a very obvious way, this ties the world of Paver's Chronicles to the deep ecology approach to the environment, which opposes the dominant worldview of technocratic-industrial societies which regard humans as isolated and fundamentally separate from the rest of Nature, as superior to, and in charge of, the rest of creation.

The investigation has concluded that Tolkien uses myth and imagination as a process of defamiliarization to present the authentic and the rational that could help recover the eco-centric view of the world. Moreover, it has been found that a damaged environment is likely to cause physical and psychological alteration in human beings. Whether Paver's series is an important direction for green children's literature. Paver continues to write the environment in this way remains to be seen, but her new series for children, Gods and Warriors, will also have a similarly ancient setting, the early Bronze Age, with characters befriend animals as they journey around the Mediterranean region. This research suggests that Fantasy and children's literature genre could have pedagogical implications on the teaching of post-War II English literature at university level.

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