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Settings as Guideposts in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*

In a story's setting the author provides the backdrop for the entire piece. He gives information about the location, the weather, the scenery, and many other background details that seem insignificant, but prove to be essential in communicating the correct point or foreshadowing the purpose of the location. In *The Fellowship of the Rings*, Tolkien shows his mastery of creating perfect settings for each stage of his story. In comparing the Old Forest to Tom Bombadill's house, we can observe how Tolkien uses a setting to hint at whether the location will be one of hope or misery for the company.

The stark contrast between the Old Forest, where the hobbits are in danger and afraid, and Tom Bombadill's house shows early in the book how Tolkien uses his settings to paint a broader picture of the events that will happen there. Upon first entering the Old Forest, the hobbits could see only "tree-trunks of innumerable sizes and shapes; straight or bent, twisted, leaning, squat or slender, smooth or gnarled and branched; and all the stems were green or grey with moss and slimy, shaggy growths" (Tolkien 145). This grim description of the Old Forest gives a sense of confusion and suggests the possibility of the hobbits getting lost in the midst of such a tangled forest.

The Old Forest is indicative of the way Tolkien treats most of the forests in his tale. Unless Elves live in a section of a forest—whether it be the Old Forest, Mirkwood, or Fangorn—being in the forest amongst the trees is dangerous. Tolkien writes that the thoughts of trees are “often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers” (Tolkien 167). These attitudes in the trees are easily seen in Tolkien’s introduction of each forest, and it becomes immediately clear that a forest setting void of elves will prove dangerous for the story’s protagonists.

Tolkien’s description of the trees as being grey or green does not initially seem to make a difference to the overall setting. However, when those colors are considered against Tolkien’s involvement in World War I, and the use of those colors on foreign soldiers’ uniforms, it is evident that those colors mark elements of darkness and despair. Inside the Old Forest, that color pairing would camouflage the trees, causing them to seem even more entwined than they might be if they had a backdrop of colors like orange or red. The colors are therefore adding to the confusion and sense of entrapment that the Old Forest already possessed, making it an even more impenetrable setting.

The path to Tom Bombadill’s house—an interim setting as they travel from the Old Forest—provides a quick snapshot of the many differences between the two locations. In the Great Forest, “[g]reat shadows fell across them: trunks and branches of trees hung dark and threatening over the path” (Tolkien 157). As they neared Tom’s house, “the trees came to an end and the mists were left behind...[t]he river...was leaping merrily...[t]he grass under their feet was smooth and short...[t]he eaves of the Forest behind were clipped, and trim as a hedge. The path was now plain before them, well-tended and bordered with stone” (Tolkien 157). The clear

improvements in the landscape show a renewed sense of hope and show that the troop is about to be in a happy, relaxing, safe place.

Tolkien's description of Tom Bombadill's house fulfills the expectations created by his description of the path to the house. He writes that the house is a large, stone house, with a "long, low room, filled with the light of lamps swinging from the beams of the roof; and on the table of dark polished wood stood many candles, tall and yellow, burning brightly" (Tolkien 159).

Tolkien uses light throughout the novel as a symbol of hope and safety. Fire, found on the candles and in the hearth, staves off evil and is one of the only combatants to Sauron's forces.

A fire is not only a tool against the dark. In Tom Bombadill's house, "there is (or was?) a fire in the wide hearth...and it was "burning with a sweet smell, as if it were built of apple-wood" (Tolkien 162). Adding the hominess of cooking on a fire and appealing to the sense of smell increases the feeling of comfort for the hobbits at Tom's home. It also suggests that the hobbits will be well-fed there, which is important to a hobbit's comfort, and which becomes rare as the journey progresses and fire—essential for cooking—becomes less available to the group.

Surrounding the house "was a flower-garden, and a clipped hedge silver-netted" (Tolkien 165). Whenever Tolkien places flowers in a particular setting, he does so to indicate there is happiness and peace. The beauty of the flowers is an outward portrayal of the beauty of the hearts of those who live amongst them. Colorful flowers are prominent in settings such as Tom's house, Rivendell, and Lothlorien, while foreboding locations have only dark, dingy, slimy, and dank depictions. Tolkien later describes the flowers as being bright in reds and oranges. This color pairing is yet another piece of the setting that serves in contrast to the darkness of the Old Forest. The bright colors offer a glimpse of light, and the orange and red together are reminiscent of the color of the fire that, as discussed, is a symbol of hope throughout the story.

Tolkien is a master of his craft, and while he excels in the use of many literary devices, his use of settings is one of his most prolific. The descriptive, symbolic elements of his imagery of the Old Forest and Tom Bombadill's house continue to be used throughout the story. Elements of hope—light, fire, flowers, color—are indicators that a particular setting will provide comfort and assistance to the travelers. Elements of misery—darkness, brown or grey or dark green, clouds or mists—are indicators that a location is dangerous and will be difficult for the company to traverse. By filling his scenes with these elements, Tolkien successfully signals to his readers what the band of travelers is about to experience.

## Works Cited

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1965. Print.