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Tolkien's Best Gardener

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For The King - Rocky Ramsey

This is an article I wrote for jrrjokien.com

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Transcript

Hello, For The King listeners. I am not your host, Rocky Ramsey. My name is Will Drzymski, a brother-in-Christ and friend of Rocky's, whom he has generously invited onto the show in order to verbally showcase my artwork to you in 50 seconds.

As an artist, I strive to accurately reflect the glory of God and everything that I paint, and through that process, I hope to flood as much of the earth as possible with paintings, which accurately proclaim the undeniable fact that Jesus is Lord and the creation which he made commands us to worship him. So if you would like to join with me in distributing clean, refreshing artwork showcasing the creativity of the God who made us, I would be overjoyed to have your help. I run my own website called Reflected Works, where I showcase the artwork I've done in the past, sell original paintings and prints, and take requests for unique commissions.

Once again, that's ReflectedWorks.com, all one word, and I'm looking forward to helping you further the kingdom of God right now here on this earth by putting some of your free wall space to productive use. Thank you very much for your kind attention, and now, enjoy the show. And I'll not apologize for this God of the Bible.

Toulken's Best Gardener, developing an environmental ethic from Toulken's works by Rocky Ramsey. Air, iron, was found, or tree was hewn. When young was mountain, under moon.

Air, ring was made, or rot was woe. It walked the forests long ago. Gandalf Two enigmatic characters in The Lord of the Rings are the White Wizard, Saruman, and Tom Bombadil.

These characters both boast immense strength and power and play pivotal roles in the quest to destroy the ring. However, the goal of this article is not to look explicitly at their interactions with the Ring of Power, but rather to explore their methods of gardening. Throughout this article, I will use the term gardening more expansively, focusing on the principles and ethos of gardening rather than just the cultivation of plants.

Keep an eye out for extractive principles throughout the article. Saruman the Int Slayer Quote, They come with fire, they come with axes, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning, destroyers and usurpers, curse them. End quote.

And, quote, Quick Beam gave a cry, the tree killer, the tree killer. Quick Beam is a gentle creature, but he hates Saruman all the more fiercely for that. His people suffered cruelly from orc axes.

End quote. I want to discuss Saruman first and use him as the backdrop for Mr. Tom Bombadillo. The light shines brightest in the darkness, so let's explore the once white wizard, turned ally of the enemy, and how his interactions with nature change for the worse.

If you are familiar with the story of The Lord of the Rings, you will know the pivotal role the Ents play in the destruction of Isengard. This invasion doesn't generate out of thin air, but stems from Saruman's gardening method of Fangorn Forest. Treebeard, one of the chief Ents, recounts a time when Saruman was a lover of the things of old.

Quote, But Saruman now, Saruman is a saber. I cannot overlook him. I must do something, I suppose.

I have often wondered lately what I should do about Saruman. Who is Saruman? asked Pippin. Do you know anything about his history? Saruman is a wizard, answered Treebeard.

He was reckoned great among them, I believe. He gave up wandering about and minding the affairs of men and elves a very long time ago, and he settled down at Isengard. He was very quiet to begin with, but his fame began to grow.

He was chosen to be head of the White Council, they say. But that did not turn out too well. I wonder now if even then Saruman was not turning to evil ways.

But at any rate, he used to give no trouble to his neighbors. I used to talk to him. There was a time when he was always walking about my woods.

He was polite in those days, always asking my leave, and always eager to listen. I told him many things that he would never have found out by himself, but he never repaid me in likekind. I more like that.

His face, as I remember it, I have not seen it for many a day, became like windows in a stone wall. Windows with shutters inside. As one of the oldest pieces in Middle Earth, the Ents view Saruman as young.

Saruman once sought them for wisdom, companionship, and love. However, Treebeard recognizes that Saruman's demeanor towards nature changed. His heart grew cold, and he viewed the Ents in Fangorn Forest no longer as intrinsically valuable.

Instead, he viewed them as worthless and used them as a means to his end. Consider our first principle to extract from the story. Principle number one.

Love the old things in and of themselves because they are a creation of Eru, God. They are ends in themselves and not means to an end. Fangorn Forest was a sprawling, mature, old garden.

The Ents were tree herders and directed this garden. Saruman himself was a gardener, accompanying Treebeard through the ages in the task of gardening. He may not have shepherded the trees himself, but he played a part in the whole task of gardening from his fortress or think.

Every person is tasked with being a cultivator of living things, whether actively gardening proper or passively gardening via one's environmental ethic. To apply this, consider our second principle. Principle number two.

Every person ought to have an established ethic for approaching the environment. As a Christian, Tolkien derived his ethic from the Bible and wove it into the Lord of the Rings. Saruman once upheld these two principles throughout the ages of Middle Earth.

During the Third Age, when the Lord of Set, he is enticed by the Ring of Power and changes his environmental ethic completely. He changes his approach to gardening Fangorn Forest, violation of principle number two. He once walked with Treebeard and approved of.

Nay, loved the old things, but now Saruman is only concerned with the present. He is concerned with productivity, results, and ultimately power. When he begins amassing an army to destroy the people of Rohan, he knows he cannot do it without sacrificing something.

He surveys the resources of his footsteps and settles on Fangorn Forest. How else will the furnaces remain lit for days on end to create an army ready to destroy the insubordinate horse-living fools of Rohan? Rather than sacrificing for the benefit of others, Saruman sacrifices others for his own benefit, violation of principle number one. We will revisit this motif when we consider Bombadil.

Quote, I think that I now understand what he is up to. He is plotting to become a power. He has a mind of metal and wheels, and he does not care for growing things except as far as they serve him for the moment.

And, quote, wizards ought to know better. They do know better. There is no curse in elvish, entish, or the tongues of men bad enough for such treachery.

Down with Saruman. Treebeard. Bombadil the master.

Now let's turn to the crowd favorite. Timothy Bombadillo. We first meet Tom as the hobbits travel across the Shire in an attempt to reach Bree.

They stop to rest under a tree on their journey. However, it is no ordinary tree. This is Old Man Willow, and he's got quite an attitude.

The forest knows this, but the hobbits, unfamiliar with this neck of the woods, are

completely unaware of his reputation. Suddenly, Mary and Pippin find themselves entangled by Old Man Willow on the verge of being consumed. Quote, Help! cried Frodo and Sam, running towards him with their hands stretched out.

Whoa, whoa, steady there! cried the Old Man, holding up one hand, and they stop short as if they had been struck stiff. Now, my little fellows, there be you a-going to Puffin like a bellows. What's the matter here? Now, my little fellows, where be you a-going to Puffin like a bellows? What's the matter here, then? Do you know who I am? I'm Tom Bombadil.

Tell me what's your trouble? Tom's in a hurry now. Don't you crush my lilies? My friends are caught in the willow tree, cried Frodo breathlessly. Master Mary's being squeezed into crack, cried Sam.

What? shouted Tom Bombadil, leaping up in the air. Old Man Willow? Not worse than that, eh? That soon can be mended. I know the tune for him.

Old Grey Willow, man. I'll freeze his marrow cold if he don't behave himself. I'll sing his roots off.

I'll sing a wind up and blow leaf and branch away. Old Man Willow. End quote.

We see Tom Bombadil come to the hobbits rescue, not in any conventional way. Samwise suggested a more Saruman-like approach and using an axe to hue Mary and Pippin out or a fire to burn them out. Frodo and Sam kindle a small fire but Old Man Willow squeezes his victims all the more to disincentivize the hobbits crude hope for salvation.

How does Tom Bombadil provide salvation? He surprises us with song and dance. Notice the intense care that Bombadil has for the forest. Evidenced first by the lilies, he warns the hobbits not to crush and then by his honorable treatment of Old Man Willow.

He bent the will of the tree to the will of his own to free the hobbits. However, Saruman also bends the will of Fangorn Forest to his own. So what is the difference? The answer lies in Goldberry's response to Frodo's questioning at Tom's Woodland home.

Quote. Who is Tom Bombadil? He is, said Goldberry, staying her swift movements and smiling. Frodo looked at her questioningly.

He is as you have seen him, she said, an answer to his look. He is the master of the wood, water, and hill. Then all this strange land belongs to him? No, indeed, she answered, and her smile faded.

That would indeed be a burden. She added in a low voice as if to herself. The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves.

Tom Bombadil is the master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest,

wading in the water, leaping on the hilltops under light and shadow. He has no fear.

Tom Bombadil is master. End quote. Tom is the master of the woods.

Saruman is the dominator of the woods. Both are exercising authority, but the fount and source of that authority comes from radically different places. Bombadil bends the forest to his will in such a way that each living thing in the forest is still oriented to its greatest good and exercising its own will.

They still belong to themselves, but Tom helps them achieve their greatest good. Saruman detracts from fangorn forest natural telos and disrupts its nature. Tom builds the forest, but Saruman destroys the forest.

This will help us revisit that point I teased earlier. Bombadil cultivates his garden for its own appointed end. He doesn't hijack its design for his own personal gain, but rather directs the forest and his wife Goldberry to their greatest appointed ends and joy.

He sacrifices his time and energy for the betterment of others, which does not neglect his own betterment, rather than forcing others to sacrifice for his own personal gain. Quote. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in loneliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

Let each of you look not only for his own interests, but also the interests of others. Philippians 2-3-4 in KJV. Quote.

As a devout Catholic, Tolkien was riffing on a biblical concept. To truly exercise dominion, especially as a gardener of God's created world, we must become masters and not dominators who are myopically concerned with power. This is part of why Bombadil could care less about the Ring of Power and why he treats it as a silly little gimmick because he understands his true power.

He is a master and masters are enticed by distortions of power. Modern day applications. As we look around us today, we can clearly see massive ecological issues.

This ties into the idea of power that Tolkien so masterfully encapsulates and signifies in the Ring of Power. When we see humans destroying the environment for their own gain, we can probably find a root desire for power. The gardening method of modern man is pure domination of the environment.

We dominate plants and their associated pests via herbicides and pesticides. Just like sorrow man, we decimate entire ecosystems for productivity and power. Let's ponder a few more examples.

Please keep in mind that these are my own specific points of application based on the principles above. I fully expect differences in application and I welcome your inquiry into

these matters. Clear cutting neighborhoods for cookie cutter homes.

The elves of Lothloyan or Mirkwood and the hobbits of the Shire built their homes integrated into the environment rather than cutting everything down. Yet in modern day we plow through the environment so we can maximize every square inch for efficiency. The modern neighborhood has no character but is full of cookie cutter homes.

We love the Shire in part because each house is unique and the contents within are unique. When Bilbo comes back to his home after the tale of the hobbit, he finds his belongings are being pawned off under the presumption that he is dead. Quote, in the end to save time, Bilbo had to buy back quite a lot of his own furniture.

Many of his silver spoons mysteriously disappeared and were never accounted for. End quote. These belongings were irreplaceable things in an irreplaceable dwelling.

Our modern day development creates replaceable things with replaceable dwellings and a replaceable environment. Sorrow man's devastating works extend into the scourging of the Shire when many of the old trees and dwellings are destroyed. Modern homes have sorrow man's imprints all over them.

To avoid being misunderstood, I want to clarify that I believe it is permissible to cut down trees. For instance, beavers innately cut down trees without doing anything wrong. But I do believe that we must approach an ecosystem with a designated framework to assess whether to cut down a tree.

If we are to mimic Bombadil's mastery, then we ought to only cut down a tree that orients an ecosystem to its greatest good. We prune plants all the time for the flourishing of the plant. We can also do this at the forest level and prune the forest by cutting down a few weak trees to make way for greater flourishing.

We can even cut down perfectly healthy trees like the elves would have done for development. I want our development to be guided by Bombadil's mastery rather than sorrow man's dominion. Both mastery and dominion involve cutting down trees but to what extent and what end makes all the difference.

City development. Men who above all desire power build magnificent structures and cities but usually at the cost of the environment. I postulate that with intentional planning we can build large cities integrated into the pre-existing environment.

There's nothing wrong with cities, they just need to be sculpted correctly. The glory of Minas Tirith was that the city was built into a mountain, an application of Bombadil like mastery rather than a sorrow man like domination. Uber efficient monocropping farming.

Modern-day agriculture is purely for efficiency and mechanization. Every field is designed for a harvester to come through driving between the rows to harvest as much

crop as possible. There is nothing beautiful about a farm field, not to mention the yearly destruction of the soil.

This bears more semblance to sorrow man's dealings with the Ents than Bombadil's mastery of the woods. Bombadil garden the old forest in such a way that no bare soil was ever seen. Modern farming techniques create a 100-year cataclysmic event driving an ecosystem back to primary succession on a yearly basis.

Concluding remarks. As we draw to a close I think it is fitting to wrap up with the other master gardener in Tolkien's story, lest we leave any stone unturned. Samwise Gamgee, brave Sam, was Frodo's gardener on Bag End.

It was the act of gardening that led Sam to drop eaves on Gandalf and Frodo which eventually led to a grand adventure. It is fitting that Sam's adventure starts in a garden as gardening itself is an adventure. Each year's growth requires humble submission to the whims of nature.

You are at the weather's bidding and at the mercy of the local rabbits, insects, birds, and other creatures that wander into your garden. In essence all you can do is hope, just as Sam maintained an abiding hope throughout his journey with Frodo. We may never be perfect masters like Tom or Lord forbid dominating tyrants like sorrow man, but we are all like Sam.

Dependent, lowly, lacking much authority, but if we are faithful and little we may destroy the rings of power that well up in our own hearts and society every day. My hope is that this article helps you envision a new dimension of Tolkien's tales of Middle-earth. You may be wondering if Tolkien intended any of the things that drew out above.

Based on some of his personal writings I truly believe Tolkien had these principles in mind. Quote, it is full May time by the trees and grass now, but the heavens are full of roar and riot. You cannot even hold the shouting conversation in the garden now, save about 1 a.m. and 7 p.m. unless the day is too foul to be out.

How I wish the infernal combustion engine had never been invented, or more difficult still since humanity and engineers and special are both nit-witted and malicious as a rule that it could have been put to rational uses, if any. End quote. Tolkien hated the effects of industrialization and modernity especially on the environment.

We have definitely missed the mark in many ways and I think Tom Bombadil and Sam can help us recover them. For the King. Rocky.

Footnotes. One, for more on this topic read the book in the House of Tom Bombadil by C.R. Wiley. Two, J.R.R. Tolkien, The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, Harper Collins, publishing page 77.

I hope that everyone enjoyed this article that I wrote. It was a lot of fun to put together. I love thinking about Tolkien's works and The Lord of the Rings in general.

Just an amazing story. Read it. Read it again.

Read it with your kids. It's just an amazing story. It's always fun to think about so I appreciate you guys listening and if you have any thoughts based on this, would love to hear your thoughts you can reach me at fortheKingpodcast.com and I'm hoping to develop this thought process more.

Thinking about how Tolkien considers the environment. He just a little background on just the Lord of the Rings in general and why he was thinking the way he was in this article. He, you know, lived throughout World War II.

He's seeing the decimation of Europe and this desire of power. So the Ring of Power is really representative of like the struggle of all the nations in World War II. We see modernity hitting pretty hard during this time, industrialization.

In World War I, we have a lot of advances in the kind of weaponry we can use especially like chemical warfare. So we see the environment being impacted by a lot of this and just how much we can destroy not only human life but nature through new technology post-industrialization and Tolkien really does lament that throughout his story. So as you read Lord of the Rings you can consider that element of things and his quote at the end of my article that I bring up.

He very much disliked the combustion engine, not necessarily because you could get more work done with it. I think he would have recognized that it's beneficial in that sense. The amount of horsepower in a combustion engine as opposed to you know just a horse.

It's crazy how much power that an engine can put out. So I don't think he would disregard that but I do think what he dislikes is how we just use it as a catch-all to get done whatever we think we need done at the expense of peace and quiet, at expense of the environment, the ability to destroy trees at such a high capacity through the combustion engine. You used to have to use a bandsaw or a like a hatchet or an axe to cut down a tree and it took a while but now you know you can go get a steel chainsaw that runs off of a combustion engine and you can I mean you can just chop down tons of trees all by yourself.

So I think Tolkien's recognizing this kind of power we've been given through machinery and technology and I think he wants to see that more balanced. He has in that quote he says humanity engineers in special as a subset of humanity engineers are knitted and malicious in the rule of how the engine should be used. They just want to see efficiency and productivity which is what sorrow man's all about efficiency productivity he just

wants to get the job done and he doesn't matter what he has to destroy in the process to get it and Tolkien's playing on that and definitely how that interacts with the environment.

He talks about in that quote how he's in his garden and he can't even hear himself think especially just at really specific times of the day when there's no people out driving with the combustion engine in their cars making lots of noise. So yeah noise pollution is definitely a thing it makes life much less pleasant constantly being bombarded with sounds you can't hear birds chirping or the rustling of the leaves when wind passed through the trees. You can't hear those things anymore in the modern world and Tolkien was on the beginnings of that I guess so he's really struggling with that because he's a good thinker he's gonna actually contemplate is this good or is this not good.

So let's just pick up the torch where he's leaving off and continue to consider these things in modernity and industrialization and try to be better. Definitely not a Luddite where I think you should disregard technology but I do think it has to harmonize well with our personal values as Christians so you can't just adopt technology all willy-nilly as Christians we're always supposed to be first principle thinkers operate off of principle so if for instance in the book digital minimalism by Cal Newport he talks about how the Amish interact with technology and it's not that they don't adopt technology they do they have adopted some things into their life that's based on technology but they only do it they do it very slowly they only do it if it still corresponds and upholds the valley values of their community okay so the reason why they don't drive cars it's not because they're against technology they don't drive cars because when you have cars that your teenagers start driving away to hang out with their friends and they never hang out with their family the family disintegrates and then your community falls apart because there's nothing holding them together right because well if my family's annoying then I have a car out in the in the front parking lot my house in the driveway and I could just hop in that bad boy and go see somebody that's actually fun somebody actually want to hang out with and you historically never had that option same thing with church attendance you never got to pick and choose your churches there was one church in town and he went to that you went to that church so we need to be able to select technology based on principles if it detracts from Christian community or the way Christians should live if it entertains undue temptation like there's some people that are weak with pornography and technology in that way so they do not have the maturity to handle that kind of technology therefore they therefore they shouldn't have it so that's what that digital minimalism the way the Amish are thinking about technology I think Tolkien would have greatly appreciated that that we can use the combustion engine and select circumstances to get a lot of work done but we ought not to do it in such a way where it detracts from our ability to live as humans if it doesn't distract from our humanity and the liberal arts and leisure that destroys leisure I mean that's a big big problem and I think that's what he's lamenting in that quote he can't even think in his garden anymore

it's it's destroying his ability for leisure and Tolkien's leisure is what produced the Lord of the Rings okay that's enough wild one thank you for reading and just keep on the lookout for me to develop this more you can go over to heritage permaculture as well if you're if you're interested in some of this thought process and like what can I do to do things differently on my property at you know what I can control my jurisdiction as a person as a Christian person what can I do to reject and assimilate technology properly this is kind of the one of the hallmarks of the discipline of permaculture and me and a few other permaculture consultants that are Christians are starting to work on a side project where we're like writing about these things and considering these things and if you want to hire us as consultants that's also a service we offer to kind of think through how you can orient your property or household in a way to be productive from the home and you know restore humanity's interaction with nature rather than the destruction of it so it's got to start somewhere and I think the best place and easiest place to start is to make your own property like Lothloram to make it like an elven kingdom or like the Shire where there's old trees and the trees aren't just trash trees like Bradford pears or river birches that you're planting that are gonna be blown over on one hard storm when they're you know ten years old right we don't want that we want to build a legacy we want to pass on an inheritance to our children's children and that can come through just your property being you know having fruit trees and having old oak trees and having a thriving ecosystem where there's animals attracted to your property and the soils rich and you can grow things and cultivate things that that's like Tom Bombato right there so if you're interested just go to heritage permaculture there's a sub stack page that we're writing on thinking about these things and we do offer some consulting services if anyone's interested in that okay now I'm gonna really wrap it up to the king of the ever-never-amen Soli Deo, Gloria Thanks for watching!