Fantastic ecosemiosis: An analysis of Fantasy as nature-text in The Lord of the Rings

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Fantastic ecossemiosis: An analysis of Fantasy as nature-text in *The Lord of the Rings* 

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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I would like to thank my committee chair, Dometa Brothers, for her support and guidance throughout the thesis-writing process. Not only did Dr. Brothers provide valuable assistance in the writing and idea-shaping process, she is responsible for introducing me semiotics and its application to literary analysis. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Matthew Wynn Sivils and Daniel Coffey, for their expertise and guidance.

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ABSTRACT

The study of communication between natural environment and humanity—ecosemiotics—often proves perplexing for ecosemioticians and environmental critics alike. For a field of study meant to bridge the gap between human and environmental sign systems, the question remains: how do we write about nature with a fundamentally anthropocentric sign system yet not alter conceptions or the reality of natural sign? Timo Maran offers nature writing as nature-text, but he severely restricts which readers may understand that nature-text based on their shared experience with the author’s subject. Because all literature mediates sign, however, no amount of shared experiences between author and reader will provide an exact translation of natural sign to the reader when filtered through an author and text. By acknowledging that readers cannot have a direct interaction with the natural environment through a text, ecosemiotic literary analysis may instead focus on fictional portrayals of environmental sign that empower and elevate the ontology of the natural environment. This thesis aims to elaborate on the applicability of ecosemiotics in literary analysis, especially in regards to fantasy literature. To that end, this thesis asserts that a close analysis of “fantastic ecosemiosis”—the sign systems developed for fantasy creatures representing a fantasy realm’s natural landscape—in J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings illustrates the fantasy genre’s capacity for subverting human-centric perceptions of signs by substituting nature-centric perceptions of those signs in their place. Although the fantasy landscape does not exist in reality, fantasy realms like Middle-earth allow readers to connect with nature-like creatures that possess communicative abilities and complex social norms just like our natural environment. Thus, Fantasy authors like Tolkien may reform anthropocentric
sign into nature-centric sign to convey environmentalist themes and signify the natural environment as independent, culturally complex, and worthy of humanity’s respect.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In a discussion on common Fantasy characteristics, Ursula Le Guin writes, “To include an animal as a protagonist equal with the human is—in modern terms—to write a Fantasy. To include anything on equal footing with the human, as equal in importance, is to abandon realism” (87). Le Guin’s words ring true when considering other influential works of Fantasy: Richard Adams’s *Watership Down*, George Orwell’s *1984*, and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to name a few. Whether trees walk or animals talk, Fantasy consistently seeks to restore the voice of the natural world through language that endorses human-environment egalitarian partnership.

Though J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* commonly receives scholarly and popular attention for its powerful themes on morality, religion, and race among others, increasingly Tolkien’s language and depictions of Middle-earth’s natural environment has drawn more scrutiny and scholarship. From the hobbits’ love of gardening and the Shire’s idyllic pastoral setting to Treebeard and the Ents crushing Saruman’s forest-defiling machinery, Tolkien imbues Middle-earth’s natural environment with intelligence, emotion, and an independent voice.

Throughout *The Lord of the Rings*¹ Tolkien employs language that ascribes the same level of ontological significance to Middle-earth’s natural environment as the various representations of human culture². With a personal love of mythology and language and a professional career built

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¹ Hereafter abbreviated as *LotR*

² I use human culture as a term demarcating the difference between groups that define, interact, and communicate through verbal/anthroposemiotic sign systems—humankind—in contrast with groups that do the same through nonverbal/zoosemiotic sign systems—flora, fauna, and the larger natural environment. Because the text I primarily work with, Timo Maran’s “Towards an integrated methodology of ecosemiotics: the concept of nature text” (*Sign Systems Studies* 35.1/2 2007), assumes a synthesis of biosemiotics and cultural semiotics, I do not provide an in-depth inspection of anthroposemiotic cultures and zoosemiotic cultures here. For more information on cultural semiotics, consult Kalevi Kull’s “Semiotic ecology: Different natures in the semiosphere” (*Sign Systems Studies* 26,
on philology, Tolkien’s language in *LotR* constructs signs, metaphors, and symbols that not only reflect our own natural environment but also envisage the environment’s potential for influencing human perceptions of nature in a mediating fantastic realm.

The emphasis on the independent welfare of the natural environment is not unique to *LotR*, but themes of environmental conscientiousness, stewardship, and appreciation embedded in the epic tale have received extensive scholarship. As a result of *LotR*’s widespread popularity and explicit themes on environmentalism, academic journal and popular publications alike regularly publish articles discussing the symbolism of Tom Bombadil, Treebeard, and Middle-earth’s environment. As Patrick Curry observes, “The natural environment…is no mere setting for human (and quasi-human) drama but is treated in a way that clearly conveys a concern for its integrity independent of human interests” (“Environmentalism”165). Though these articles are as diverse as they are multitudinous, scant scholarship analyzes why, for instance, Treebeard represents environmentalism beyond the obvious fact that he looks like a tree and denounces the wasteful destruction of his forest home. Similarly, few scholars directly address the linguistic implications of Tolkien adapting verbal communication to suit representations of Primary World nonverbal creatures. By analyzing Tolkien’s translation of nature’s nonverbal transmissions to our human verbal communication, his contribution to the way collective humanity talks about and consequently perceives our natural environment appears far more influential than previously considered. Indeed, zoomorphic characters that differ with their human companions over the interpretation of events, language, and actions throughout the narrative have become tropes of fantasy literature. Beyond the literary genre, Tolkien’s

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3 As is common when discussing parallels between a fantasy realm and reality/Earth, I will occasionally refer to anything within the fantasy realm as belonging to the “Secondary World” and anything belonging to our reality as “Primary World.”
empowerment of Primary World nature has earned recognition for LotR’s potential in environmental education (Morgan 384).

Though most, if not all, works of Fantasy deserve a renewed scrutiny of their influence on human perceptions of the natural environment, I focus on exploring these themes in LotR for several reasons. First, LotR is one of the most popular books in the world; Forbes, The Telegraph, and The Guardian report that over 150 million copies of the fantasy epic were sold since George Allen & Unwin published the first installment of the novel, The Fellowship of the Ring, on July 29th, 1954. Second, due to copies sold, LotR’s enormous appeal in modern popular culture influences the fundamental conceptions of fantastic themes and characters in Fantasy consumers (Martin 140-6). Third, Tolkien writes with a precision and purposefulness consummate with the highest tier of conscious language usage; each passage in LotR can withstand word-level analysis and maintain the integrity inherent in his figurative and literal conceits. Finally, Tolkien produced a massive, well-documented collection of letters, essays, and lectures commenting on his own work. Large swaths of that collection explicitly detail Tolkien’s feelings and motivations regarding his love of the natural environment and the portrayal of Middle-earth’s natural world. This amalgamation of popularity, influence, precision of language, authorial commentary, and interest in environmental stewardship generates the ideal circumstances for a scholarly inquiry into LotR’s environmental themes by analyzing portrayals of human-environmental communication in the fantasy epic. Using integrated ecosemiotic methodologies to investigate LotR’s globally popular portrayal of human-environmental interaction, I argue that Tolkien and The Lord of the Rings represent Fantasy’s ability to encourage reevaluation of the way humans think and speak about Earth’s natural environment.
Reviving and Renewing Fantasy

Despite Le Guin’s evidence of Fantasy’s importance, many scholars dismiss the genre as juvenile. Le Guin points to Edmund Wilson as the leader of the modernist dismissal of imaginative fiction. In his criticism, Wilson nearly obliterated H. P. Lovecraft’s career because of Lovecraft’s adjective use and not necessarily the theme or exploration of the horror or Fantasy genre. Wilson becomes even further irate with his treatment of Evelyn Waugh’s attempt at “serious writing” in *Brideshead Revisited*:

> The writer in this more normal world, no longer knows his way: his deficiency in common sense here ceases to be an asset and gets him into some embarrassing situations, and his creative imagination, accustomed in his satirical fiction to work partly in two-dimensional caricature but now called upon for passions and motives, produces mere romantic Fantasy. (299)

Wilson implies deficiency in Waugh’s writing when Waugh attempts to produce writing that conforms to “a ‘serious’ novel in the conventional sense” (298). The scathing nature of the criticism explicitly aligns itself with a marked disgust for “romantic Fantasy.” Additionally, Wilson roughly handled J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*; he calls the popular Fantasy epic “juvenile trash” and compares Tolkien unfavorably to 1920’s escapist and fantasy author James Branch Cabell: “[Cabell] can create a more disquieting impression by a reference to something that is never described than Tolkien through his whole demonology” (55). For Wilson, a lack of veracity and history in the Fantasy genre overshadowed the complex, imagined, and “unrealistic” depictions of Middle-earth. Le Guin describes the legacy of Wilson and his ilk best: “In this school for anti-wizards, no fiction is to be taken seriously except various forms of realism, which are labeled ‘serious.’ The rest of narrative fiction is labeled ‘genre’ and
is dismissed unread” (83). This dismissal led many scholars and students to overlook features and analytical opportunities unique to Fantasy, especially in works like *LotR*, such as understanding alternatives to our relationship and communication with the natural environment.

For the urban reader, Fantasy literature provides an alternative, hopeful method for interpreting the natural environment. Whereas Nature essays describing specific natural environments remain inaccessible to readers hailing from a vastly different geographical or cultural region, Fantasy has universal appeal. In the preface to *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape*, Dr. Alfred Siewers highlights the importance of environmentally conscious narratives in urban areas such as his home, inner-city Chicago: “I came to see in practical terms the important role of cultural narratives that can engage human communities in responding creatively to environmental devastation” (xi). Here Siewers uses two phrases that apply directly to Fantasy, and more specifically *LotR*. The first phrase, “narratives that can engage human communities” could apply to a number of genres, but specifically applies to Fantasy because of its universal appeal, even to children. As Le Guin states, “Fantasy's green country is one that most enter with ease and pleasure, and it seems to be perfectly familiar to most children even if they've never been out of the city streets” (86). Wilson asserts that Fantasy is “juvenile,” but those juvenile qualities prove to be a strong reason to read and critically analyze Fantasy. As a genre and as a means of communication, Fantasy is accessible for any reader of any age. Siewers’s second phrase, “responding creatively to environmental devastation” closely adheres to the objectives of Fantasy. The concept of a response implies a degree of communication between the human population and the environment. In the Primary World, humans may speak to (or rather, at) the natural world, but the environment does not possess a similar mediated communication, like verbal language, to speak back. In ecodevelopment
study, scholars seek to identify alternative channels of communication between humans and the natural environment.

While investigating those communication channels, however, eosemioticians run into the seemingly insurmountable barrier of imbricating nonverbal messages and verbal responses without descending into human-centric pastoral writing and anthropomorphizing. Fantasy literature provides the answer to the quandary of translating a nonverbal system of communication to a verbal one; it provides narratives wherein the flora and fauna verbalize their emotions. Fantasy does not, however, enshrine its fantastical landscape with human-like qualities to suit human-centric interests. Instead, Fantasy authors characterize an imagined landscape capable of verbal communication to evoke the wondrous properties of Earth’s environment. Conjuring real nature through a metaphoric landscape illustrates an alternative method for communicating the importance of our natural environment to readers bereft of personal experiences with it. Therefore, Fantasy improvises a metaphorical landscape so all readers, regardless of background, may adapt the emotional attachments they make with, say, Middle-earth, and individually apply those feelings to any Primary World environment, even if they never experienced that real landscape. Fantastic landscapes influence a reader to seek out and appreciate their own natural environment through the mediation of the Fantasy text.

**Tolkien’s Relationship with Nature**

Enchanted by the mystery and wonderment of England’s natural environment, Tolkien developed an abiding love for nature, and he strove to express his love for the natural world through his depictions and treatment of Middle-earth’s landscape. Shortly after Tolkien’s father, Arthur Reul Tolkien, died in 1896 in South Africa, his mother, Mabel Tolkien, moved the impressionable young author and his younger brother to Sarehole in Birmingham, England. The
move to the small hamlet a mile south of the city entrenched the 4-year-old Tolkien in the midst of idyllic natural scenery that influenced Tolkien’s imagination for the rest of his life. Of this momentous move, Humphrey Carpenter writes, “The effect of this move on Ronald was deep and permanent. Just at the age when his imagination was opening out, he found himself in the English countryside” (20). Though Sarehole sat at the edges of the English countryside, the hamlet also housed a large mill operated by a father and son team. The millers terrified Tolkien: “As for knowing Sarehole Mill, it dominated my childhood. I lived in a small cottage almost immediately beside it, and the old miller of my day and his son were characters of wonder and terror to a small child” (Letters 390). Just as Tolkien began associating the English countryside with his burgeoning sense of imagination and freedom, so too did Tolkien develop a deep-seated distrust for machinery devoted to processing the environment for human consumption. Tom Shippey observes an explicit parallel between the stark distinction of human culture and natural environment in Tolkien’s childhood and its direct influence on LotR: “In his childhood [Tolkien]…feared the bone grinding millers he and his brother called ‘the White Ogre’ and ‘the Black Ogre.’ Sarehole Mill became for him an image of destructive technology, remembered in the scenes with the miller Ted Sandyman in the Shire” (170). Tolkien also enjoyed drawing, and much of his original artwork for Middle-earth derived from his childhood fascination with his home’s natural environment: “He took particular delight in landscapes and architecture…His greatest skill was in rendering flowers, trees, and other features of the natural world” (Hammond and Scull 8). While Tolkien states he “cordially dislike[s] allegory in all its manifestations” and, “any inner meaning or ‘message,’ it has in the intention of the author none,” Shippey and other critics make compelling arguments for the influence Tolkien’s childhood home exerted on environmentally conscious themes and language found throughout LotR (xvi-xvii).
Though parallels between Tolkien’s childhood and his treatment of Middle-earth’s natural environment appear compelling, the best evidence of Tolkien’s fascination with language, the natural environment, and Fantasy materializes in his letters. Responding to an article in The Daily Telegraph, Tolkien takes exception to the phrase “Tolkien gloom” used to describe a destroyed natural wilderness:

In all my works I take the pan of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the domination of a Power that hated all living things but was restored to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story. (Letters 419-420)

Given his love of flowery language and pleasant and polite discourse, the tone of his response implies that Tolkien took personal exception to the phrase “Tolkien gloom.” In a list formed of rapid, staccato sentences, Tolkien not only disparages the Telegraph’s characterization, but he also uses rhetoric that illuminates his belief in the necessity of an equitable relationship between humans and the natural environment. Lothlorien’s forests and other great trees thrive and “awaken to consciousness of themselves” because their region’s human culture treats them with admiration. Similarly, the Old Forest on the outskirts of the Shire and Fangorn Forest are “hostile” because of injuries suffered in the name of human-centric interests. Curiously, Tolkien switches between passive voice and active voice in describing his characterization of trees. This movement between passivity and activity breaks with language that a nature essay might use to
portray a human acting on their environment. Unlike nature writing that anthropomorphizes an imagined environmental response—a disingenuous move on the part of an author attempting to encapsulate a real wilderness—Tolkien’s fantastic environment has the capacity to actively respond to its human aggressors. Middle-earth’s natural environment avoids the jeers associated with pastoral writing and anthropomorphizing because Middle-earth’s wildnesses are not real. Tolkien can represent an imaginary environment acting independently and with its own voice because as a Fantasy author, Tolkien does not endeavor to offer real depictions of the natural environment. Rather, Tolkien and every other Fantasy author strive to depict an ideal of the environment they love.

On Environmental Criticism & Ecosemiotics

As environmental criticism continues burgeoning as a field of study, previously overlooked literature that literally or metaphorically addresses the relationship between human culture, language, and the natural world garners revived interest and scholarship. Because ecocritics cannot agree on a unifying fundamental principle for ecocritical study, the term ecocriticism may apply to “what some critics prefer to call environmental criticism, literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism, [or] green cultural studies” (Selvamony xix; Heise 506). Lawrence Buell observes that the most cited definition for ecocriticism derives from Cheryll Glotfelty’s characterization of the field: “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (“Ecocriticism” 88; Glotfelty xviii). Simon Estok provides a slightly narrower definition of environmental criticism:

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4 Because the main focus of this thesis centers on applied ecosemiotics theory in *LotR* as opposed to a larger discussion of environmental criticism, I use the terms “environmental criticism” and “ecocriticism” interchangeably. For a larger discussion of environmental criticism, reference Lawrence Buell’s *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the United States and Beyond* (HarvardUP, 2001); Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (HarvardUP, 2007) and *The Ecological Thought* (HarvardUP, 2010); and Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2004).
It is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds. ("Shakespeare and Ecocriticism" 16-17)

Though ecocritics may not wholly agree on the finer aspects that define environmental criticism, the general opinion is that ecocriticism examines portrayals of humanity’s relationship—whether it be literal, metaphorical, or allegorical—with the natural environment, and ecocritics analyze how that relationship applies to broader concepts of environmental stewardship, social justice, gender studies, etc. Regardless of the varying means for conducting environmental criticism, humanity’s relationship with the natural environment is a key subject of ecocriticism. Of the various literary modes suited for ecocriticism, Fantasy’s focus on the ontological significance of nature as equal to human existence directly appeals to ecocritical scholarship, especially regarding human-environmental language and communication.

When considering portrayals of the natural environment, environmental critics take a firm stance against pastoral writing because of its human-centric shaping of the environment. Pastoral writing, according to Buell, is “an ideological screen…to portray the green world as nothing more than projective fantasy or social allegory” (Environmental Imagination 36). Adapting the natural landscape as a setting for human events causes concern for environmental critics. Pastoralism portrays the natural environment not only in human-centric terms, but as little more than an object for humans to process, consume, or otherwise use for its purpose; it demeans the environment. Pastoral writing, which includes anthropomorphizing the natural environment, enlarges the communication gap between humanity and environment. Pastoral writing divorces the reader from the environment even as it seeks to describe it, and, as Joseph Meeker observes,
“inherent contradictions in pastoral values lead typically to frustration and despair” (91). Indeed, portrayals of humans conquering the natural landscape or blasting it to pieces for social or political value have little to do with engaging the natural world. Beyond physical acts of subjugation, pastoralism represents more than an idealized rustic setting for human growth: “‘pastoral’ has become almost synonymous with the idea of a (re)turn to a less urbanized, more ‘natural’ state of existence” (Environmental Imagination 31). This conception, too, proves problematic for understanding the natural environment; a more rural human community does not represent a “natural” state for nature, and pastoral as a sign and form of literature inherently presumes as much. According to Kalevi Kull, humanity cannot avoid altering nature because the act of describing or acting upon nature changes its meaning (359). Our anthropocentric language, then, subverts environmental autonomy as much as any physical act of destruction.

To discuss how human language and signs change the environment, the basic tenets of semiotics and ecosemiotics require clarification. Semiotics is the pragmatic study of signs, sign processes, and all the meanings and representations made in communication. A sign is:

a meaningful unit which is interpreted as ‘standing for’ something other than itself. Signs are found in the physical form of words, images, sounds, acts, objects…Signs have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when sign-users invest them with meaning with reference to a recognized code. (Chandler 260)

Thus, semiotics is the study of meaning and meaning making. Generally speaking, semioticians study how sign-users—any thing that communicates—imparts a message, why the sign-user chose the parts of its message, and what/how/why the message-receiver perceives in the message from interpretation of the signs within the message. Under the umbrella of semiotics study, ecosemiotics analyzes signs, sign-functions, and sign systems in relation to and from the
natural environment. In defining this field of study, recent scholarship synthesizes two approaches to ecosemiotics: biological ecosemiotics and cultural ecosemiotics. The biological approach defines ecosemiotics as “the semiotic interrelations between organisms and their environment,” and the cultural approach as, “the semiotics of relationships between nature and culture. This includes…the place and the role of nature for humans, that is, what is and what has been the meaning of nature for us, humans, how and in what extent we communicate with nature” (“Ecosemiotics” 333;Kull 350). Thus, the current conception of ecosemiotics, “explicitly describes and analyses the role of sign processes in the modification of environment, of environmental design by organisms; it focuses on the semiotic mechanisms of relations in ecosystems” (Lindström, Kull, and Palang 27). Within the communications analyzed in ecosemiotics, semioticians demarcate three particular sign systems: anthroposemiotic, zoosemiotic, and phytosemiotics. Anthroposemiotics concerns human and primarily verbal communication; zoosemiotics relates to animal and mostly nonverbal communication; and phytosemiotics addresses plants and vegetation and entirely nonverbal communication. Because humans primarily communicate through anthroposemiotic systems, ecosemioticians, like environmental critics, are concerned with “excessive anthropocentrism in the semiotic studies of landscapes” (Lindström, Kull, and Palang 29). Since the study of ecosemiotics focuses on both the nonverbal culture of the natural environment and verbal culture of humans, ecosemiotic analysis cannot be human-centric in observing sign systems between humanity and nature. When ecosemiotic scholarship already appears in an anthroposemiotic form, ecosemioticians must find a way to bridge the gap between human and environmental discourse without succumbing to human-centric thinking inherent in anthroposemiotic texts.

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5 The entire semiotic space of a given culture is called a semiosphere. So, communication in human culture could be referred to as the “human semiosphere.” Generally, I will pair semiosphere with anthroposemiotic, zoosemiotic, verbal, nonverbal, human, and environmental to indicate the culture’s primary mode of communication.
The inherent alterations caused by describing nature poses a unique problem for ecosemiotics, a study that seeks, “to help to diminish communication problems between human and nature, because from that viewpoint it becomes possible to speak about nature, as it seems to us in culture, and to speak with nature, because its ability of speech has been restored” (Keskpaik 50). Authors, then, must find an alternative way to describe the natural environment without altering its meaning. In this case, fantasy literature may hold the key. Fantasy provides more than an imaginative story depicting heroic deeds, fire breathing dragons, and acts of stupendous magic. According to Ursula Le Guin, “The literature of imagination, even when tragic, is reassuring, not necessarily in the sense of offering nostalgic comfort, but because it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives, and therefore offers hope” (87). Offering the concept of “alternatives” as the means to appreciate “hope,” we may comfortably call Fantasy the language of hope, or better yet, the language of expressing the “alternative.”

Because Fantasy has heretofore been dismissed as genre fiction, ecosemioticians have focused almost entirely on nature essays for ecosemiotic literary analysis. Timo Maran posits that reading literature as nature-texts will bridge the gap between nonverbal environment and verbal organisms (“Integrated methodologies” 269). He argues for synthesizing ecosemiotics with literary analysis, “to pinpoint the problems in our communicative relations with [nature], and maybe even explicate possibilities for the restoration of concordance” (“Integrated methodologies” 290). For this synthesis, Maran posits writing that speaks or points to nature and also textualizes nature should be analyzed as “nature-text” (“Integrated methodologies” 280). Reading writing as nature-text possesses several possibilities: acknowledging the importance and independence of nature from human culture, developing a system for measuring the quality of texts depicting nature, and creating and motivating readers to seek personal
experiences/interactions with the natural environment (“Integrated methodologies” 288-9). The ideal literature for nature-text, according to Maran, is nature essays. For an eosemioticians or any reader to consider a text as nature-text, however, Maran requires that the reader and author must have similar experiences with the same local environment: “If the nature experience of the reader is very different from that of the author or is absent altogether, then many meaning connections that point in the written text to the natural environment remain inaccessible to the reader” (“Integrated methodologies” 289). He acknowledges that such a restriction precludes large swaths of readers including “modern urbanized readers” from comprehending and competently relating “written text and textual natural environment” (“Integrated methodologies” 289). He assumes that nature writing or essays about a local environment will provide signs that local readers may interpret as precisely as signs derived from interacting with the described environment. Furthermore, he assumes that an accurate interpretation of environmental sign is necessary for readers to distinguish between authorial sign and nature sign, and when distinguished, readers will understand and appreciate nature’s complexity of communication and identity as separate from humanity’s.

If the inherent contradictions of Maran’s restrictions on nature-texts hinder authors’ system for accurately depicting environmental communication, then authors and scholars alike are bereft of the tools necessary to address, “analyses and observations regarding the conventions and operations through which literature (like other signifying practices) produces the meaning it does for readers” (Ankeny 86). Maran’s dependence on a shared environmental experience for maintaining veracity of natural sign violates semiotic thought on the mediating influence of texts. “A text is not simply a communicational apparatus,” Umberto Eco writes, “It is a device which questions the previous signifying systems, often renews them, and sometimes destroys them…It
is in this sense that the thematization of textuality has been particularly suggestive” (25).

Similarly, Robert S. Corrington calls textualizing or the textuality of nature, “a form of anthropocentrism that corrodes naturalism and writes the human process too large on the face of nature” (180). These scholars and others recognize that texts intrinsically act as sign mediators, and so, nature writing will not exactly replicate natural sign or its meaning for a reader even if the reader is intimately familiar with the described environment. The issue with Maran’s restriction centers on a difference between literary analysis of sign and an ecological analysis of sign. Because integrating ecosemiotics ventures into literary analysis, he must abide by the sign as constructed within the literary discipline (Eco 36).

Because literature will always mediate any nature signs, ecosemiotics in literary analysis should focus on whether the creation and representation of environmental sign depicts the natural environment as independent and culturally and socially complex. Of all literary genres, Fantasy holds enormous potential for ecosemiotic literary analysis because, “To include an animal as a protagonist equal with the human is—in modern terms—to write a Fantasy” (Le Guin 87). Tolkien in particular emphasizes this aspect of Fantasy in LotR because, “Tolkien’s is no add-on environmentalism. It suggests rather that whatever their differences, humans share with other living beings a profound common interest in life, and whatever aids life” (Defending Middle-Earth 28). Middle-earth’s creatures representing the natural environment act, perceive, and speak independently from the human cultures. Tolkien’s depictions of their signs and sign systems occur through human anthroposemiotic sign, yet their signs take nature-centric meanings. Because neither ecosemiotics nor environmental criticism has investigated Middle-earth’s environmental communication in this fashion, I use the term “fantastic ecosemiosis” to describe new environment-centric meanings supplanting anthropocentric ones within a fantastic
realm. This supplanting of human-centric interest within an anthropocentric language constitutes a shift in power, and semiotic study must observes this shift because, “the semiotic foundations of culture are connected to the important phenomenon of interpersonal control we are wont to call power” (Siefkes 256). Tolkien has altered our language for the natural environment in an imaginary landscape. As a consequence, our perceptions of nature have subtly shifted to regard the environment as a complex community worthy and integral to humanity’s own identity. By applying ecosemiotics to Fantasy, we may further explore how to give the environment its due. 

*Lord of the Rings* encapsulates many diverse relationships between human culture and the natural environment, and the success of each partnership relies upon the communication shared between representatives of human culture and nature. Noteworthy characters who depend on an equitable relationship with Middle-earth’s natural environment include enigmatic Tom Bombadil, Treebeard and the sentient tree-herder Ents, demigod wizard Gandalf, and hole dwelling, garden-loving hobbits. In each human-nature relationship, Tolkien emphasizes that the success or failure these affiliations hinge on both parties mutually attempting to understand communication across anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic communication systems. Therefore, Chapter 1 provides an overview of Timo Maran’s conceptualization of integrating ecosemiotic methodologies in literary analysis and how to read Fantasy as nature-text. Chapter 2 covers the relationship between Tom Bombadil and Middle-earth’s overarching natural environment. Chapter 3 addresses the power of Treebeard’s defining language and poetic verse in shaping Middle-earth’s overarching human culture. Chapter 4 discusses the necessity of polite language in forming an egalitarian and mutually beneficial heroic partnership between Gandalf and Shadowfax. Also, Chapter 4 analyzes Samwise Gamgee and the hobbit race’s devotion to gardening and environmental stewardship as the primary mode of communication with the
Shire’s natural environment. In each chapter I will critically analyze notable dialogue, narrative language, actions, and events that explicitly apply to human-nature communication. While this thesis does not endeavor to enjoin debate on theories and methodologies in wider environmental criticism, I use observations and analyses by prominent environmental critics especially when they address linguistic functions, signs and symbols, or communication processes. My larger argument, however, distinctly applies reading Fantasy as nature-text and resolving issues in Maran’s proposed integrated methodology for ecosemiotics in literary analysis. Because reading Fantasy as nature-text accomplishes the goals of Maran’s methodology, and because critics have heretofore dismissed Fantasy as unfit for serious analysis and discussion, I analyze Tolkien’s genre-defining *Lord of the Rings* to illustrate how fantastic tales and imagined places bring human culture and the natural environment into meaningful conversation and reconstruct their relationship into an equitable partnership.
In the broadest sense, semiotics seeks to identify the connotative powers of an object, and these objects are called *signs*. A sign connotes any number of particular meanings outside representing itself at face value. In *Basics of Semiotics*, John Deely observes that “at the heart of semiotics is the realization that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs” (5). Similarly, ecosemiotics analyzes the way our human culture interacts with our natural environment through interpretations of objects in the natural environment. As far as ecosemiotics concerns itself, the flora and fauna of the spaces we inhabit constitute the breadth of the term natural environment. Semiotics and ecosemiotics allow for a complex analysis of both literary and environmental texts because semiotics provide a system to decipher the way in which humans process metaphors, analogies, and symbols and how humans apply or map those figurative strategies onto portrayals of the environment. Coletta, Wiegand, and Haley phrase this concept best: “How is our thinking about rocks conditioned by those rocks? Or, better yet, how is our thinking about grass or about an old irascible professor, say, conditioned by our thinking about rocks?” (69). This line of logic makes us question where our preconceptions of nature come from and how we respond to nature in terms of human culture’s previous conceptions of nature in relation to its usefulness to humanity’s continued prosperity. This thinking proves valuable to a larger sense of environmental stewardship because addressing the process of how we think about the natural environment illumines decidedly human-centric logic; human culture understands parts of the natural environment in relation to how those parts
serve human interests. Such rationale implies that the ontological significance of the natural environment is secondary to the advancement of human cultural interests. Undoubtedly, the consequences of human-centric interpretations of the environment materialize in the widespread abuse and destruction of nature. Finding the means for elevating the importance of environmental existence and stewardship without altering the meaning of the natural environment provides the greatest challenge for eosemioticians and environmental critics.

Of the many ways human culture portrays the natural environment, the ever-growing volume of nature writing texts prove ideal for environmental critical analysis. These texts commonly focus on understanding the interactions between humans and nature and observe the beauty and innate importance of the natural landscape. Because nature writing intrinsically possesses commentary on the semiosis of the natural environment, eosemioticians have begun developing methods for applying eosemiotic theory to literary analysis of nature writing. In Timo Maran’s article, “Towards an integrated methodology of eosemiotics: The concept of nature-text,” he identifies a new way of integrating eosemiotic theory into literary analysis by treating writing about the natural environment as “nature-text” (Figure 1) : “in addition to the written text that speaks about nature and points to nature, it should also include the depicted part of the natural environment itself, which must be, for the relation to be functional, to at least some
extent textual or at least textualizable” (280).

Figure 1. Maran’s projection of components and relationships in nature writing as nature-text

Maran asserts that nature-text requires writing about the environment as well as the “depicted part of nature itself,” which indicates that the writing must accurately describe attributes of the environment. In short, nature-text requires writing about the environment accompanied by text that specifically provides precise descriptions of the natural environment’s characteristics. Maran further observes, “natural environment can be understood to be a result of common creative activity, “written” by individuals of many different species, each proceeding from their own sign system, umwelt, and life activities” (“Integrated methodology” 285). In other words, Maran posits that scholars may apply ecosemiotic theory to environmental criticism of literature because the natural environment encapsulates the habitat of all living things, and those creatures—both common flora and fauna as well as humans—transform the meaning of the natural environment with every action that somehow alters the state of the environment. Therefore, writing a book about the natural environment fuels the larger creative activity of altering the various symbols and connotations attached to any creature’s understanding of its habitat.

In treating nature writing as a means of communicating with the natural environment, Maran concludes three positive outcomes: appreciating and elevating nature’s ontological
significance in human thought, understanding nature writing’s importance within human culture, and encouraging readers of nature writing to go and personally experience nature. In the instance for appreciating and elevating nature, Maran writes: “Writing about nature is simultaneously a recognition that nature as such is worth writing and talking about…Every nature essay turns out to be an attempt to raise these natural foreign semiotic spheres above the interpretation threshold of human culture” (“Integrated methodology” 288). By writing at length about the natural environment and producing that text for consumption, human culture acknowledges the importance of understanding the natural environment. Also, when the nature writer recognizes the communications of the natural environment as both foreign and integral to human culture, we recognize the writing as an “aesthetical expression of the appreciation of the foreign semiotic spheres of nature” (“Integrated methodology” 288). Once human culture demonstrates its appreciation of nature writing as worthwhile nature-texts for interpreting the environment, scholars may analyze the valuation of the nature writing itself: “This thought can be expressed as the combination of generality and specificity (also as a combination of intelligibility and unintelligibility) of nature essays” (“Integrated methodology” 288). Recognizing nature writing as nature-texts allows for the development of a larger system for judging the quality of nature writing especially regarding its treatment and interpretation of the natural environment’s sign systems. Finally, with a developed system for gauging the quality of nature writing, the best nature writers may publish work that personally resounds with readers: “Nature writing leads readers to experience nature directly without any literary mediation, and personal nature experiences of individuals direct them back to nature writing to find out about similar experiences of other people” (“Integrated methodology” 289). Treating nature writing as nature-text results in a positive growth loop wherein an increasing number of people read nature
writing, feel motivated to develop a personal relationship with the natural environment by visiting it, and consume and recommend more natural writing as a result. Maran concludes that the cycle of increased appreciation for the natural environment derived from treating nature writing as nature-text speaks to the main objective of ecosemiotics: “to pinpoint the problems in our communicative relations with [nature], and maybe even explicate possibilities for the restoration of concordance” (“Integrated methodology” 290). The optimal resolution for ecosemiotic study requires describing and analyzing nature as represented in human culture, identifying the communication problems resulting from nature’s representations, and creating resolutions for restoring a balance between human cultural interests and environmental prosperity.

Maran’s argument for treating nature writing as nature-text, however, contains several problematic caveats that hinder fully integrating ecosemiotic theory in literary criticism. He propounds that ideal nature writing for his integrated methodology should cover only “immediate environmental experiences” (“Integrated methodology” 287). This assertion, however, poses a restriction on which readers may read nature writing as nature-text: “The adequate interpretation of the nature essay is only possible if the reader has a nature experience that is at least to some extent similar to that of the author” (“Integrated methodology” 289). For Maran’s argument, this issue poses the greatest hurdle for implementing his methodology and reaping the proposed benefits of great environmental conscientiousness. Given the unique character of any individual experience and the vast variety of regional cultures and regional natural environments that make up global human civilization, the group of readers who share a similar experience with a nature writer would account for an extremely small number indeed. With this requirement of a shared experience between nature writer and reader, Maran admits the inaccessible opaqueness of the
plentitude of meanings and symbols inherent in the nature-text (“Integrated methodology” 289). Similarly, Maran notes that modern day urban readers lack a means for easily developing a personal relationship through interaction with the natural environment: “In such a situation the nature writing that presupposes competence of interpreting and relating two types of text — written text and textual natural environment — remains feasible to few readers” (“Integrated methodology” 289). The consequences of these restrictions eliminate swaths of potential readers, and on from a logistical perspective, they hinder nature writers from producing environmentally conscious texts as a career due to the minute size of their potential audience. In his article, however, Maran focuses primarily on nature essays and belles-lettres, and he does not precisely define which essays or belles-lettres he means nor what he believes are the common characteristics of those forms. While Maran rightly observes that the restrictions for integrated methodology of ecosemiotics would disqualify reading a vast number of nature essays, stories, and poems as nature-text, he overlooks at least some nature writers with international appeal, and more importantly, he does not consider Fantasy as a viable writing form for analysis as nature-text. I identify three major problems with Maran’s assertion that integrated ecosemiotic methodology requires readers to experience a similar episode as a nature writer and enjoy unmitigated access to untouched environmental wilderness.

First, a personal relationship or experiences with the local natural environment might assist a reader in mentally conjuring the sounds, objects, smells, etc. described by the author, but a lack of experience does not necessarily impede a reader’s ability to appreciate a beautiful passage detailing migrating birds, a budding sapling, or any other textualized image of the natural environment. From an ecosemiotic standpoint, the major difference between the experienced reader and the inexperienced reader derives from their accuracy in interpreting the
symbol that the author wishes to attach to the sign. For example, if a nature writer indicates in
their story that they found an oak leaf, the experienced reader visualizes a dark green leaf with
smooth, curving edges, but the inexperienced reader may visualize the sharp, serrated edges of a
maple leaf. Unless the physical properties of that oak leaf are vital to the themes of the story and
the author foregoes describing the oak leaf’s physical attributes, then the consequence for the
inexperienced reader is merely an inaccurate interpretation of the physical object attached to the
word oak leaf. I will discuss the implications of accurate depictions of nature later, but if Maran
envisages nature-text as the key for motivating readers to conduct an adventure into the
wilderness, then nature writers’ depiction of the natural environment need only motivate the
reader to investigate on their own. Additionally, precluding urbanized readers in general works
counter-intuitively to spreading an appreciation of the natural environment. Many environmental
critics and nature writers may disagree because they value bioregionalism, a form of nature
writing devoted to characterizing the special qualities of a local environment for the sake of
community building (Christensen 19). But, such debate is irrelevant to the larger objective of
Maran and other ecosemioticians: to diminish communication problems between human culture
and nature on a global scale. Besides, Fantasy resolves the issue of familiar versus unfamiliar
environments because all fantastic realms possess environments unknown to the reader. When a
natural environment is entirely imagined, the Fantasy reader may adapt features and deep
emotional connections formed with the fantastic landscape and project such emotional gravity on
any real environment. Even Darko Suvin, who consistently railed against Fantasy as a useless
literary genre, admits that Fantasy permits shaping values and perceptions of reality in an

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6 The strengths and weaknesses of bioregionalism constitutes a much larger debate within environmental criticism
that I will not provide here because it would distract from resolving issues in integrating ecosemiotic methodologies
in literature. For more information on bioregionalism, consult Richard Evanoff’s Bioregionalism and Global Ethics
(Routledge, 2010), Gary Snyder’s A Place in Space (Counterpoint, 2008), and Peter Berg’s Envisioning
Sustainability (Subculture Books, 2009).
imagined space (211). Because Fantasy does not require accurate depictions of reality in order to shape a reader’s values concerning reality, then text describing a fantastic natural environment may serve as nature-text for any reader regardless of their experiences with the natural environment.

Second, arguing that only local nature writing may be analyzed as nature-text transforms ecosemiotic analysis of literature into an exclusionary and elitist form of study. Given the enormous number of local environments—Maran does not define his conception of “local”—not enough nature writers exist to cover every local environmental region in the world. Maran admits as much: “At the same time the writers and readers of nature writing form a small but quite well established and homogeneous group (for instance in the Estonian tradition there are a few authors, who, besides nature essays, also write belles-lettres)” (“Integrated methodology” 289). Small, homogenous groups of authors and scholars who perform all the nature writing and ecosemiotic analysis would prove disastrous for any effort to reconcile human culture’s relationship with nature. Michelle Balaev observes: “The act of locating knowledge in the relations between two worlds of meaning, a gesture of connecting parts to the whole that ties the individual to society and to nature, speaks to the linking of diverse disciplinary worlds that accompanies literary analysis” (1018). Creating a small, homogenized group of nature-text readers and critics would crumble the foundation of diversity in thought and culture that all fields of study concerning human and environmental relationships depend on. Indeed, Gary Paul Nabhan observed that “most biodiversity remaining on earth today occurs in areas where cultural diversity also persists. Of the nine countries in which 60 percent of the world’s remaining 6,500 languages are spoken, six of them are also centers of megadiversity for flora and fauna” (37). Because Fantasy speaks to an individual’s imagination, any Fantasy reader may interpret a
fantastic landscape to suit his or her own values. If individuals conceive highly diverse and even contradictory interpretations of a Fantasy text, all of their conceptions hold as valid interpretations within the larger group of Fantasy readers. As opposed to localized nature writing, Fantasy works permit the Fantasy reader to independently evaluate the truth of the story. Tolkien observes:

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… For creative 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.

(Tree and Leaf 51)

Fantasy encourages freedom and variety of thought because it acknowledges factual reality while simultaneously celebrating inventive reinterpretations of that reality. In that freedom, Fantasy readers may evaluate their emotional responses to an imagined landscape that evokes images and symbols parallel to diverse personal meanings, experiences, and realities of the individual Fantasy reader.

Third, when a nature writer anthropomorphizes the natural environment in an attempt to contextualize environmental sign systems in a human cultural lexicon, the nature author alters the natural environment and enlarges the communicative gap between humans and the environment. For ecosemioticians, the problems arising from anthropomorphizing the natural environment in nature writing derives from the difference between two communication systems governing human and environmental communication; anthroposemiotics is a sign system exclusive to humans who utilize complex speech functions in their communication, and zoosemiotics belongs to all flora and fauna—including humans—that communicate through their
life processes but not necessarily speech (“Animal Communication” 1007). In nature writing, this dichotomy makes perfect sense: none of us can talk to trees, or at least, the trees cannot talk back, so nature writers must find other ways to describe the whispers of the wilderness. According to Thomas Sebeok, understanding zoosemiotic communication requires attention to environmental context and the biological makeup of the source of communication (“‘Talking’ with animals” 90). In many instances, however, nature authors attempt to relate a collection of nonverbal emotions by imputing human interests and language to the nonverbal source. Anthropomorphization commonly receives condemnation from ecocritics and ecosemioticians alike. When nature writers anthropomorphize the natural environment—i.e. they apply anthroposemiotic communication to a zoosemiotic source—they undercut “establishing realistic, workable communication links” with “sentimental or outright mistaken notions [that] must be replaced with sound knowledge” (“‘Talking’ with animals” 94). Again, anthropomorphizing of the environment amounts to pastoralism, and as Buell observes, “[pastoral writing is] an ideological theater for acting out desires that have very little to do with bonding to nature as such” (Environmental Imagination 35). Indeed, those anthropomorphizing nature writers deserve some level of reproach because their anthropomorphizing has less to do with finding humanity’s place within nature and more to do with adapting nature to humanity’s purposes.

Not all nature writers, however, fall into the trap of the pathetic fallacy, but their strategy for avoiding sentimental whimsy attempts to mimic the same strategies and objectives of Fantasy writing. Aldo Leopold, widely hailed as a founder of nature writing, ponders the dilemma of characterizing the natural environment in a human cultural context in his epochal nature writing piece, A Sand County Almanac: “I wonder what [the skunk] has on his mind; what got him out of bed? Can one impute romantic motives on the corpulent fellow…I turn homeward, still
wondering” (24). Though Leopold avoids serious discussion of usurping the skunk’s motivations with human-centric concerns, his contemplation illuminates Leopold’s cognizance of the stark contrast between nature’s actual motivations and the human motivations he imputes upon the landscape. Similarly, in Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey acknowledges the inherent issues of portraying the natural environment in a human communication system:

> In recording my impressions of the natural scene I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact…Language makes a mighty loose net…Since you cannot get the desert into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets, I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as medium than material. Not imitation but evocation has been the goal. (xii)

This explanation of his work as an evocation over an accurate depiction of nature demonstrates that Abbey understands how portraying a nonverbal entity, nature, in a verbalized context transforms the meaning of the natural environment. Abbey understands that his sign, his language, conjures the symbolic image of the natural environment which may differ from person to person but does not actually render a physical manifestation of the environment.

Though Abbey explicates this position in his introduction, he often reminds his audience of his anti-pathetic fallacy stance when he anthropomorphizes nature in the body of Desert Solitaire. For example, Abbey overhears mourning doves calling to one another, and he imagines the doves in a dialogue that he describes as “the attempt by two separated souls to restore a lost communion” (16). Shortly thereafter, Abbey dismisses the fancy generated from this anthropomorphizing: “No doubt this line of analogy must be rejected. It’s foolish and unfair to impute to the doves, with serious concerns of their own, an interest in questions more appropriate
even though Abbey makes clear that *Desert Solitaire* should evoke the natural environment of Arches National Monument, he knows that *Desert Solitaire* appears as a nature text, and Abbey feels obliged to remind his readers not to mistake his language as striving for verisimilitude as much as a poetic reinterpretation of the Moab desert. Leopold, Abbey, and other nature writers aware of the missteps inherent in anthropomorphizing nature undermine their own flights of fancy because they do not want their readers to confuse the author’s romantic notions with accurate translations of the natural environment’s signs. Such is the weakness of nature writing and the strength of Fantasy; nature writing strives for *accuracy* or *verisimilitude* in describing the natural environment, but Fantasy eschews accuracy or reality in favor of *verisimilitude* or *truth*. In other words, the nature essayist attempts to draw a reader into appreciating a tree by describing every facet of that tree with both poetic and precise language, and the reader may or may not share the nature essayist’s sympathetic perception of the tree based on a number of variables that Maran describes. The Fantasy author, on the other hand, creates a fantastical tree in a Secondary World for the purpose of inspiring the reader to question their own perceptions and biases toward trees in general. In either a nature essay or Fantasy, a reader may come to comprehend the beautiful complexities of the environmental zoosemiotic community, but in Fantasy’s case, a reader enjoys more freedom in taking their positive emotional response to a fantastical environment and applying that emotion onto a familiar Primary World environment. Nature essays and realistic textual depictions of the environment are, without a doubt, absolutely valuable pieces of literature, but fantasy literature has a broader, more accessible appeal.

Maran’s rationale for endorsing only local environment nature writing as nature-text appears sensible if nature writing could provide an accurate, unmediated experience with nature.
When Maran asserts that nature writing should cover “immediate environmental experiences,” he reasons that immediate experiences are “most suitable for studying traces of zoosemiotic modeling” because, “The attention of the researcher can turn here to the perceptual properties of humans as biological species, to the ways how one can relate perceptually and bodily with the environment and to the possibilities to express these experiences” (“Integrated methodology” 287). If the nature author and reader have similar backgrounds and experiences concerning a mutually familiar environment, Maran assumes that readers and scientific researchers alike will interpret the nature author’s language precisely according to the author’s intent. For example, I originally hail from Eastern Pennsylvania where Pinus strobus, the eastern white pine, grows in abundance. If I write a nature essay and describe a pine tree as “old and gnarled” or “prickly to touch but sweet to smell,” then every reader of my nature essay who lives in Eastern Pennsylvania and has experienced an eastern white pine tree will, according to Maran, interpret “old and gnarled” or “prickly to touch but sweet to smell” just as I intended those phrases. The problem, of course, is that my conceptions of “old” “gnarled” “prickly” and “sweet-smelling” may widely differ from another individual’s conceptions of the same thing even if both myself and a reader spent years living in close proximity to eastern white pine trees.

By applying a triadic sign relation to my example, the sign (any word; “old,” “gnarled,” etc.) I choose for the object (eastern white pine tree) will almost never produce the same interpretant (the idea produced by the sign’s representation of the object) because language—especially language in a personal narrative or story—is my interpretant of the white pine tree. By mediating an object through language, readers are divorced several times over from actually experiencing the white pine tree: from the tree to my sensory organs, sensory organs to brain, brain to emotional perception, emotional perception to memory, memory to current thought,
current thought to language, etc. As Umberto Eco notes, this progression of interpretations, “so-called signifying-chain,” create texts fueled by their “recollection of intertextuality” (24). If a text relies on all of the author’s previous interpretations of an object to sustain the eventual textualizing of that object, then by default, no written text may provide an unmediated experience for its audience. Eco continues,

Texts generate, or are capable of generating, multiple (and ultimately infinite) readings and interpretations…A text is not simply a communicational apparatus. It is a device which questions the previous signifying systems, often renews them, and sometimes destroys them…The textual machines empties the terms which the literal dictionary deemed univocal and well defined, and fills them with new content figures. (24-25)

Literary scholarship assumes that literature itself, regardless of its genre, communicates an array of symbols in each text. That assumption explains why critics may have contradictory yet valid interpretations of an essay, story, poem, etc.

If we accept Maran’s proposal for integrating eosemiotic methodology into literary theory and analysis—and we absolutely should—then Maran cannot restrict those methods to interpreting a single sub-genre of literature. Instead of searching for “traces of zoosemiotic modeling” or humans’ bodily perceptual properties and the expression of their perceived physical experiences, Eco notes that texts’ ability to alter pre-existing sign-function makes “the thematization of textuality…particularly suggestive” (25). In other words, when applying semiotic theory to literature, semioticians should explore what, how, and why a text communicates themes and ideas because “The fluctuating object…called a ‘sign’…exists as a scientifically unified object, constructed by the discipline which studies it” (Eco 36). Because Maran seeks to integrate eosemiotic methodology in literary analysis, eosemioticians must
operate under the same conditions that the literary criticism discipline imposes on literary analysis conducted through feminism, environmentalism, social justice, etc. More critics should analyze portrayals and perceptions of anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic communication, and literary scholars may apply ecosemiotic analysis to literature—like Fantasy—that produces symbols of nature for the purpose of reinvigorating an appreciation for our natural world.

Fantasy’s immediate premise—the story seeks to provide truths about reality by acknowledging scientific veracity and offering an imagined alternative—fulfills Maran’s vision of motivating readers to develop individual relationships with the environment. By placing events, characters, and settings in an imagined realm, Fantasy relieves the Fantasy writer from the responsibility of supplying narrative asides that undermine fantastic images, actions, and objects portrayed in the text. Veracity is not the point of Fantasy. Through metaphor, Fantasy challenges falsehoods and deceptions, preconceived notions of how things are or must be, and the petty and mundane facts-of-life that obscure the sublimity and wonderment buried in the humdrum exterior of familiar places, people, and things. As Tolkien states, Fantasy is recovery:

Recovery… is a re-gaining—regaining of a clear view… the things that are trite, or (in a bad sense) familiar, are the things that we have appropriated, legally or mentally. We say we know them. They have become like the things which once attracted us…and we laid hands on them, and then locked them in our hoard, acquired them, and acquiring ceased to look at them. (*Tree and Leaf* 53-4)

For Tolkien, Fantasy reinvigorates the way that humans appreciate the things they consider familiar and trite. Human culture has appropriated the natural environment to fit its particular purposes with little regard for the destruction caused by its self-interest. Certainly groups espousing the virtues of environmental conscientiousness and stewardship have arisen in the past
several decades, but as William Cronon remarks, even environmentalists misinterpret the human cultural notions of natural wilderness: “It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear … wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us” (79-80). The issue, as Maran, Sebeok, and other ecosemioticians see it, arises from the muddying of nature’s sign systems when human language appropriates and misinterprets nonverbal communication. Humans confuse scientific fact with artistic fancy especially when a nature writer engages in anthropomorphizing the natural environment. Anthropomorphizing the natural environment in a text striving for realism indicates that the nature writer must cloud the factual representation of nature to make it appear more interesting. Or, perhaps worse, they anthropomorphize nature because they will not exert the time or energy to understand the sign of the environment within an environmental context; it is far easier to frame the natural environment in a human context than attempt to understand and relate to a context foreign to the author. Through Fantasy, humans recover an appreciation of the familiar tree, rock, or blade of grass because Fantasy inverts the reasoning for anthropomorphization. Tolkien explains,

And actually fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting. For the story-maker who allows himself to be “free with” Nature can be her lover not her slave. It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things. (Tree and Leaf 55)

Whereas nature writers begin with reality and use the pathetic fallacy to make something realistic unfamiliar and more interesting (producing a falsehood), Fantasy begins with fantastic imagery and landscapes and applies realistic characteristics to restore the initial sense of awe that humans
felt for familiar things in their own landscapes. In short, Fantasy motivates its readers to seek personal experiences with the natural landscape without falsifying depictions of the real natural environment, which would widen the communication gap between human culture and the nature.

The key to resolving the concerns raised by Maran’s methodology for reading nature writing as nature-text revolves around the conditions of the text’s genre and the author’s intentions. Just as Sebeok observes that humans may understand zoosemiotic communication through context, so too may ecosemioticians, literary scholars, and casual readers understand nature’s communications through the context of the mediating story, essay, or poem. As I discussed, readers may very well read nature writing as nature-text without the restrictive caveat that the readers share a similar experience with the author or have personal experiences with the environment that the author describes. The difference between acceptable or unacceptable anthropomorphizing—whether the author uses the technique in nature writing, Fantasy, or any other genre—hinges on why and how the author uses the pathetic fallacy. If an author anthropomorphizes the natural environment, then they must use the technique with the intention of evoking the natural environment instead of describing it. How an author makes their reasoning clear may vary across genres, but Abbey and Leopold, at least, demonstrate that acknowledging the anthropomorphizing for what it is—flights of fancy, romanticizing, imputing human interests on non-human organisms, etc.—provides a working strategy for writing metaphorically about nature without misrepresenting its signs. With a pact between Fantasy author and reader that the Secondary World landscape is fantastical and not an accurate depiction of the Primary World’s reality, Fantasy authors need not use nature writers’ strategies because Fantasy inherently evokes reality through metaphor. Unlike Leopold and Abbey, a Fantasy author does not have to keep intruding on the text to announce its mediation. Again, the battle between veracity and
verisimilitude surfaces, but if the constraints on nature writing’s usage of metaphor restricts analyzing that writing as nature-text, then the individual must decide whether they wish to learn facts about the natural environment in non-metaphorical nature writing or humanity’s perceptions about nature in Fantasy.
As a massive heroic epic set against a fantastic landscape, *LotR* possesses a multitude of mythic heroes and remarkable creatures, but Tom Bombadil, the mystical quasi-human residing in the Old Forest, appears as the most enigmatic character in *LotR* and Tolkien’s myth lore. Indeed, the question of who Bombadil is or what he represents has spawned wide-ranging speculation spanning literary scholarship to pop-culture fan websites. Even Tolkien appears contradictory on the topic; in one letter Tolkien states that he intentionally made Bombadil because, “even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas,” but in another letter, Tolkien refers to Bombadil as, “the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside” (*Letters* 174, 26). Beyond Tolkien’s apparent uncertainty, a number of critics, both older and recently, have generally dismissed the usefulness of including Tom Bombadil in *LotR*. Patrick Curry complains, “Personally, I find Bombadil’s verse and talk very trying,” and Roger Sale writes that Tom Bombadil’s part distracts from the rest of the narrative: “the unfriendly reader finds an easy stopping place in Tom Bombadil; forty pages of such dull stuff so early in a long work is hard to get over” (*Defending Middle-Earth* 181; 221). Peter Jackson defended his decision to omit Bombadil from his movie adaptation because, according to Jackson, Bombadil does not advance the story’s plot or create a sense of drama: “What does Tom Bombadil ultimately really have to do with the Ring? I know there's Ring stuff in the Bombadil episode, but it's not really advancing our story, it's not really telling us things that we need to know” (“Appendices Part 1”). Tolkien

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8 See tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Tom_Bombadil/Nature or lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Theories_about_Tom_Bombadil
acknowledges that Bombadil appears a “discordant ingredient,” but contends that Bombadil plays an important role in *LotR*, “because he represents certain things otherwise left out” (*Letters* 192). Considering the major arc of the *LotR*’s narrative surrounding the events of The War of the Ring, the breadth of narrative attributed to the Bombadil adventure seems incongruously large compared to the heroic actions and events surrounding other major characters. Bombadil receives the spotlight because the “things otherwise left out” refers to Tolkien’s explicit depiction of Tom Bombadil as a symbol for the benefits produced by the merger of anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic cultures in an individual.

Recent scholarship on Tom Bombadil highlights Bombadil’s importance in *LotR*’s influence on environmental sustainability, education, and appreciation. In their discussion on Tolkien’s influence on concepts of environmental sustainability, Habermann and Kuhn assert that, for Tolkien, “it was a function of fantasy…to provide (positive) ‘escape’, ‘consolation and ‘recovery’, which is achieved through a final vision of the successful preservation of the environment” (263). In achieving that function, Bombadil plays a vital role in explaining to the hobbits (and the readers) the importance of understanding the natural environment as an independent entity worthy of respect (Habermann and Kuhn 271). In a comparable vein, Alun Morgan argues that *LotR*’s story possesses potential for environmental education, and Tom Bombadil’s “non-instrumentalist” philosophy regarding nature acts as an important counter-point to Saruman’s “technical-scientific instrumentalist rationality,” that is, “unsustainable ethic that gives rise to both social and environmental injustice” (394). Michael Brisbois identifies Bombadil as comparable to the pagan representation of nature, the “Green Man” (209). Also, he observes that Bombadil does not adapt nature to his own interests. Instead, “Tom is immune to the draw of the Ring because he is disassociated from culture and any need for social power; he
is nature, Active and fantastic, but still just the image of the earth in motion” (Brisbois 209-210). Finally, Duckworth and Treschow identify the hobbits’ interlude adventure with Bombadil as what Tolkien terms “adventure on the way” (180; Letters 192). The “adventure of the way” with Bombadil serves as a necessary detour that holds back the narrative because, “Certain things need to be made clear before the main narrative can get underway again” (Duckworth and Treschow 180). The things that “need to be made clear,” as the scholars above observe, are Tolkien’s portrayal of Middle-earth’s natural environment as independent and separate from human-centric interests through Tom Bombadil’s affiliation with both anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic sign system cultures. In essence, Tom alerts the hobbits and readers to the independent and sentient facets of the environment. Joni Adamson states that such maneuvers that highlight the natural environment’s independence in a literary context calls attention to, living systems (mountains, rivers, forests, deserts) that may help inaugurate a politics that is more plural not because the people enacting it are bodies marked by race or ethnicity demanding rights, or by environmentalists representing nature, but because they force into visibility the culture–nature divide that has prevented multiple worlds and species from being recognized as deserving the right to maintain and continue their vital cycles. (Adamson 156) Though Middle-earth’s zoosemiotic culture would perish if Sauron conquered Middle-earth, Middle-earth’s verbal cultures cannot assume that the nonverbal environment will act as an ally, nor can the verbal culture bend the natural environment to its will. Instead, the hobbits and other representatives of human culture must engage the natural environment in zoosemiotic terms, and only then will both verbal and nonverbal cultures—the Free Peoples of Middle-earth and Middle-earth itself—work in cohesion. The responsibility falls to Tom Bombadil, a character
representing the intersection of anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic cultures, to explain the necessity of reexamining the way verbal culture thinks about, talks about, and interacts with the nonverbal culture of the natural environment.

When Old Man Willow, a pseudo-sentient tree, traps the young Hobbit, Pippin, in its trunk, Tom Bombadil’s appears to save the Hobbit from an untimely demise. Initially, Tom Bombadil does not possess an appearance that would immediately connect him to the natural environment: “With another hop and a bound there came into view a man, or so it seemed. At any rate he was too large and heavy for a hobbit, if not quite tall enough for one of the Big People, though he made noise enough for one, stumping along with great yellow boots on his thick legs, and charging through grass and rushes like a cow going down to drink” (I.6.117). At first glance, Bombadil appears to be another loud human merrily bustling along through the forest. He does not exude the environmental stealth of the elves—a race with an explicit connection with the natural environment—and he wears garish clothing. Tolkien hints at more to Bombadil with the phrase “a man, or so it seemed” and later we shall see more evidence that Bombadil does not belong to the human race. The second, more subtle reference to Bombadil occurs in the phrases “rushes like a cow going down to drink.” In this instance, Tolkien uses the image of an animal at home in their natural wilderness, as opposed to any number of metaphors that might lend further human characterization. The metaphor acts as an important literary sign for distinguishing Bombadil as a possessor of animalistic quality. Though he superficially appears as something resembling a man firmly in anthroposemiotic culture, characterizing Bombadil’s actions as a wild cow indicates that he possesses the ability to interact and communicate within a zoosemiotic cultural context.
Zoomorphizing Tom Bombadil at the outset sets a precedent for interpreting Bombadil as the idealized merger between anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic cultures. As I.A. Richards observes, “The effect of a word varies with the other words among which it is placed. What would be highly ambiguous by itself becomes definite in a suitable context. So it is throughout; the effect of any element depends upon the other elements present with it” (178-179). The juxtaposition of anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic qualities in Bombadil’s initial appearance provides insight in discerning the context of all of Bombadil’s future actions and associations. By characterizing Bombadil with both human and animal qualities, Tolkien introduces a character who immediately resembles a member of humanity but also possesses an inherent affiliation with the natural environment. Within this context, Bombadil assumes the role of a bilingual interpreter for the hobbits who lack the vocabulary for understanding or conversing with the flora and fauna of Middle-earth’s landscape. With each step into Bombadil’s home, the hobbits become increasingly aware that Bombadil’s home and physical appearance obscures his long and complex partnership with Middle-earth’s landscape.

At first glance, Bombadil may resemble a pastoral-loving hermit more than the voice of Middle-earth’s landscape. Michael Brisbois acknowledges this immediate, yet inaccurate, characterization of Bombadil as human: “The reader might consider Tom to be an aspect of civilization rather than nature, and the fact that his home is well tended and made of stone would support this. But Bombadil is much more complex than he seems” (209). When the hobbits travel to Bombadil’s house, they note the grass under their feet, “smooth and short, as if it had been mown,” and the eaves of the Old Forest, “clipped, and trim as a hedge” (I.6.107). Additionally, as Brisbois astutely observes, the walkway is “well-tended and bordered with stone,” and stone makes up the foundation of the house itself (I.6.119). Initially, these depictions
appear to be the result of human culture shaping the natural environment into a garden, or pastoral landscape. As discussed earlier, pastoral writing can divorce anthroposemiotic sign culture from better understanding zoosemiotic sign. Instead, authors seeking to depict the natural environment should endeavor to describe what Meeker refers to as a “picaresque environment.”

In Meeker’s definition, “The picaresque world is a natural system in which humans are one of the animal species. The picaro suffers from no conflict between society and nature simply because he sees society as one of the many forms of natural order” (qtd in Hickory 97).

Bombadil does not live high in the branches of a tree or deep within a cave; he maintains an abode and yard that appears so familiar to the hobbits that its tidy appearance seems out of place against the backdrop of the wild and overgrown Old Forest. Because Bombadil’s house does not appear at odds with the environment it inhabits, Bombadil and his home meets Meeker’s definition of a picaresque environment. Bombadil does not impose his physical will on the environment, but the Old Forest conforms to a structure and appearance suitable to Bombadil because the Old Forest benefits from his presence in the environmental community. The grass, hedge, and walkway look clean and clipped because Bombadil exists as another animal in the Old Forest, and his domicile remains a part of the natural landscape itself.

Despite the initial depiction of a garden, Tolkien explains Bombadil’s inhabitance as an example of his position as “Master” within, not of, the natural environment. Goldberry, Bombadil’s wife, describes Bombadil as, “Master of wood, water, and hill,” and when the hobbits ask whether all the land belongs to Bombadil, Goldberry replies, “No indeed…The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves” (I.7.122). By Goldberry’s explanation of each blade of grass as an independent part of the world, she implies that her and her husband’s natural surrounding changed itself into this current shape.
Additionally, this decision by the environment to alter its shape to accommodate Bombadil’s human form suggests a nonverbal communication of respect for Bombadil. Lacking the zoosemiotic vocabulary for understanding why the environment may independently shape itself to Bombadil’s benefit, the hobbits consider Goldberry’s explanation ambiguous and ask Bombadil outright about his identity. Bombadil responds:

“Don’t you know my name yet? That’s the only answer. Tell me, who are you, alone, yourself and nameless? Eldest, that’s what I am. Mark my words, my friends: Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving. He was here before the Kings and the graves and the Barrow-wights. When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside.” (I.7.129)

This response contains Tolkien’s clearest explanation for Bombadil’s existence in the *LotR* narrative, and knowledge of Tolkien myth-lore clarifies the flora and fauna’s communication of respect to Bombadil. Even without knowledge of Middle-earth’s history and creation as related in *The Silmarillion*, the revelation that Bombadil predates rivers, trees, and rain denotes his remarkable age and authority in Middle-earth. He refers to himself as “Eldest,” and since he existed prior to the creation of Middle-earth’s landscape, Bombadil likely assisted in defining Middle-earth’s geography as a force of nature unto himself. His non-human status also conveys the possibility that a tidy and shaped environment does not necessarily require human interference with the natural world. Bombadil, as a force of nature, may police its own growth and appearance out of environmental community concerns independent from humanity’s aesthetic conceptions of nature.
With *The Silmarillion* as context, Bombadil appears even more powerful; when he says that he knew the “dark under the stars…before the Dark Lord came from Outside,” Bombadil does not refer to a time before Sauron, rather he refers to Sauron’s master, Morgoth. If Bombadil existed prior to Morgoth’s arrival on Middle-earth, which would make Bombadil approximately 7,500 years old according to Tolkien’s calendar. Additionally, Sauron is a *Maiar*, a lesser god in Tolkien’s universe, and Morgoth is a *Valar*, the most powerful type of deity. Like Earth’s natural environment, Bombadil’s existence spans eras outside of time. This realization begs the question of why an immortal force of nature would assume the shape of a short, fat man who favors song and garish dress. Tolkien explains:

I do not mean him to be an allegory…but 'allegory' is the only mode of exhibiting certain functions: he is then an “allegory,” or an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, *because they are 'other'* and wholly independent of the enquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with “doing” anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany not Cattle-breeding or Agriculture. *(Letters 192)*

Tolkien’s explanation for including Tom Bombadil and portraying him as an unconcerned human connects with the ideal traits of an ecosemiotician; Bombadil recognizes that all living things possess a history and character independent from and equal to Bombadil’s own existence. Because the natural environment does not subjugate parts of itself or enslave humanity, Bombadil takes human form to educate anthroposemiotic cultures, like the hobbits, the lessons on zoosemiotic nature’s harmony in a verbal sign system they may understand. In fact, when Bombadil speaks, verbal and nonverbal life forms alike heed him.
Further examination of Bombadil’s process of saving Pippin from Old Man Willow enforces the emphasis Tolkien places on the way Bombadil communicates with representatives of both anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic cultures. Shortly after the hobbits, Merry, Pippin, Frodo, and Sam, fall asleep at the foot of Old Man Willow, a semi-sentient tree on the outskirts of the Old Forest, Sam and Frodo awake and find the tree devouring Merry and Pippin. When Sam and Frodo cannot free their friends from Old Man Willow with a hatchet or fire—common tools of human subjugation of the natural environment—Frodo calls for help and immediately thereafter, Bombadil appears. When Frodo apprises Bombadil of the situation, Bombadil promises his help: “Old Man Willow? Naught worse than that, eh? That can soon be mended. I know the tune for him. Old grey Willow-man!…I’ll sing his roots off. I’ll sing a wind up and blow leaf and branch away” (I.6.117). Because Bombadil can speak with the natural environment, he grounds his solution for saving Merry and Pippin in communicating a threat to the tree. He does not, however, say that he will yell at Old Man Willow or command the tree to stop. Instead, Bombadil frames his communication as acts of nature, “I’ll sing a wind up and blow leaf and branch away.” Because Bombadil understands the natural environment’s nonverbal communication methods, Bombadil may convey his displeasure to Old Man Willow without attempting to physically harm the tree like Sam or Frodo.

When Tom runs over to Old Man Willow, he places his mouth against a crack in the tree and “began singing into it with a low voice” (I.6.118). Merry’s feet begin to kick, but the tree does not regurgitate the hobbits. His attempt at reasoning with the tree a failure, Bombadil resorts to a verbal sign system: “Tom sprang away, and breaking off a hanging branch smote the side of the willow with it. ‘You let them out again, Old Man Willow!’ he said. ‘What be you a-thinking of? You should not be waking. Eat earth! Dig deep! Drink water! Go to sleep!
Bombadil is talking” (I.6.118). Although Bombadil never appears explicitly angry or irritated, his decision to command Old Man Willow to cease eating Merry and Pippin and strike the tree with a branch is uncharacteristic of jolly Tom Bombadil. Over the course of all his interactions with nonverbal life forms, Bombadil’s only instance of giving a verbal command occurs in his interaction with Old Man Willow. Of this interaction, Brisbois observes, “he does not attempt to reform Old Man Willow; he merely admonishes him (suggesting that there is nothing wrong with Old Man Willow’s feelings, only with the way he acts)” (209). Indeed, Tom admonishes Old Man Willow in much the same way as a parent scolds a naughty child. Old Man Willow certainly demonstrates a deeper understanding of verbal sign systems than the hobbits could conceive, but the most striking aspect of this interaction is Bombadil’s use of verbal command as punishment for Old Man Willow’s refusal to heed the Master’s initial communication. In fact, Bombadil’s entire interaction with Old Man Willow frames the anthroposemiotic sign system as a pejorative means of identifying with nature.

Naming and defining something provides a great deal of power to the definer, and Bombadil clearly possesses the power to name Old Man Willow. An anthroposemiotic name, however, is not necessarily flattering Middle-earth’s flora and fauna. Though Bombadil befriends a horse he names Fatty Lumpkin, that animal’s name closely resembles the proper name of a human. The name Old Man Willow, on the other hand, defines the tree in anthroposemiotic sign but not as a moniker that a respectable human may go by. The juxtaposition of two nouns, one representing the human community and another representing the natural one, indicates Tolkien’s construction of a tree literally possessing human characteristics, and those human characteristics define the tree. Because Old Man Willow’s actions do not coincide with later depictions of sentient trees, Tolkien anthropomorphizes the old willow with
“man” as a way to indicate the bad moral character of the tree. Only Bombadil, as Master and knowledgeable of all Middle-earth’s landscape, could define Old Man Willow in such terms, and Bombadil, acting as the natural environment, interprets the willow’s cruel actions, its signs, as human qualities. As a definer, Bombadil instructs Old Man Willow on its proper machinations within the natural environment. He orders Old Man Willow to “eat earth,” “dig deep,” and “drink water.” In the same manner as a supervisor might direct the roles of his or her employees, Bombadil outlines the acceptable actions for this particular tree, and none of those actions involve devouring hobbits. Tom reminds Old Man Willow that the tree is breaking with the natural laws governing trees in the environment community. Bombadil, as a force of the natural environment, demonstrates a complex understanding of its denizens, and he utilizes his knowledge of natural law for defining or limiting agency.

Tolkien provides a sophisticated system for nature’s judgment in enlarging or diminishing the liberty of its independent parts. Bombadil orders the tree to “go to sleep.” The concept of an awake tree may at first be confusing, because typically humans do not interpret trees as awake or asleep, but always in a state of passive being. Later in the story, Treebeard, leader of the Ents, provides some explanation for the degrees of wakefulness in Middle-earth’s trees: “Most of the trees are just trees, of course; but many are half awake. Some are quite wide awake, and a few are…getting *Entish*. That is going on all the time. When that happens to a tree, you find that some have *bad* hearts” (III.4.457). Here, Tolkien uses “awake” and “Entish” as synonyms for sentient, and in this passage, Treebeard addresses the malicious sentience of Old Man Willow. By telling Old Man Willow to “go to sleep,” Bombadil interprets the tree’s actions as indicative of bad character or evil intent, and his orders parallel a human prison system: locking away individuals of malicious intent through a system meant to limit criminal agency.
That the natural environment has a biological process for limiting malicious agency further demonstrates Tolkien’s environment as culturally sophisticated both in its understanding of anthroposemiotic communication and complex mechanisms for policing itself.

Though Bombadil demonstrates various levels of sophistication on behalf of the natural environment, his greatest strength derives from his apathy for the One Ring. In the hands of a normal human (i.e. not a leader of the elves or a wizard), the Ring simultaneously performs two tasks; the Ring cloaks its wearer in a veil of invisibility, and it slowly replaces all human wants and needs with an obsessive compulsion to possess the Ring itself. The Ring’s ability to engender obsession is so powerful that a mere glimpse of it may import murderous intention to steal and possess the Ring into the mind of the Ring’s beholder. The Ring may act as a metaphor for many things, but of all its interpretations, it is clearly applicable as a symbol for the corruptibility of absolute power. Gollum, Boromir, and Frodo, among others, all succumb to the Ring’s persuasion. Not even wise and powerful beings like Gandalf or Galadriel are willing to take the Ring for fear of its corruption. While Sam later shows some resistance to the Ring’s siren call, Bombadil alone displays complete imperviousness to the Ring’s seduction. Unlike the other peoples of Middle-earth, he does not crave power over any other creatures. He lives harmoniously within nature, as nature, and that is enough for him.

Bombadil’s apathy for power echoes the call from Shagbark Hickory for environmentalists to drop the title of “savior” because the title pulls them outside the values of acknowledging equal importance of all living things. Hickory expresses this call through the image of a two sided coin: “That coin being minted of those who understand themselves as superior to the nonhuman world, whether as ruthless exploiter or as savior. Fighting fire with
fire, in this case, just might spell disaster. Environmentalists should exemplify their values” (97). By seeking to exist without gaining mastery over nature, Bombadil becomes “Master.” He cannot be swayed by anything that might seek to upset the balance between his home and the forest surrounding it. This point in the tale characterizes Bombadil’s greatest strength: “The Ring swells to meet Tom's greatness of spirit, but is no match for his equanimity. Tom sees right through it…Two points of utter contrast have been brought together, and it is indeed alarming… At this moment things fall suddenly into a new perspective. The Ring can lose its terror” (Duckworth and Treschow 185). Bombadil’s strength in refusing the Ring’s power differs from Elrond of Rivendell or Galadriel of Lothlorien because the natural environment has no wish for power in the way the Ring promises it. Sauron forged the One Ring as a tool of subjugation, and Bombadil and the rest of Middle-earth’s flora and fauna have no interest in bending other creatures or things to their will. When The Council of Elrond, a meeting of the leaders of the Free Peoples of Middle-earth, discusses the prospect of sending The Ring to Bombadil for safekeeping, Gandalf objects, “The Ring has no power over him. He is his own master…And if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian; and that alone is answer enough” (II.2.259). Though Gandalf expresses dismay at the concept of tossing the Ring into the ocean or keeping it hidden in an Elven fortress, he provides only the most ambiguous reasons for keeping the Ring from Bombadil. Gandalf keeps his reasons ambiguous because Bombadil is a unique creature on Middle-earth. Not even Gandalf could find the words to explain Bombadil’s existence as a bridge between two cultures divorced by verbal and nonverbal speech.

Above all other characters, Bombadil demonstrates the greatest power in his ability to perceive things beyond their immediate appearance. When Frodo puts on the Ring while in
Bombadil’s house, Bombadil immediately surmises Frodo’s whereabouts: “Old Tom Bombadil’s not as blind as that yet. Take off your golden ring!” (1.7.131). Bombadil understands the nature and powers of the Ring, yet he treats Frodo’s irresponsible use of that power as a silly, childish game. Bombadil’s apathy despite his knowledge of the Ring’s danger illustrates Tolkien’s belief that power, especially power that enslaves or subjugates, becomes valueless when we appreciate things for their own sake. In his letters, Tolkien details the source of Bombadil’s resistance to the effects of the One Ring:

The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on; but both sides in some degree, conservative or destructive, want a measure of control. But if you have, as it were taken ‘a vow of poverty’, renounced control, and take your delight in things for themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless. (Letters 179)

As a representative of the natural environment, Bombadil represents a value that humanity commonly seeks but rarely attains; freedom. The Master has no use for war and combat, and for all his pacifism, he alone resists the power of the Ring with the utmost ease. Bombadil feels content in knowing and appreciating the natural world without wanting to control it. His primary concern, understanding the natural world, certainly represents Tolkien’s much larger theme about finding contentment in discovering the secret messages of our natural world.

Through Tom Bombadil, Tolkien constructs a character meant to change perspectives on the natural environment. Instead of viewing the environment as an entity only capable of
communication through its passive response to human culture, Bombadil provides an outlook of a harmonious relationship with nature if humanity accepts nature as equally important to humankind’s own interests. Bombadil conveys Tolkien’s ideology of nature and humanity as inseparable and interlocking parts that, together, show two thriving cultures mixed together in mutual respect. This ideology is particularly important because its Fantasy roots makes the ideology accessible to all readers, regardless of background—the story takes place in a world like our own, not explicitly our own—so no readers feel excluded due to the amount of “textualizing” that Maran calls for in nature-texts. In the ideology’s accessibility, all readers may come to understand a perspective that highlights the zoosemiotic sign system as enmeshed and inextricable from humanity’s interests and goals. With the assistance of analysis through literary ecosemiotics, we may understand and appreciate that the natural environment possesses its own way of communicating cultural values that influenced the same values the human species reveres. With the comprehension of these overlapping values, provided through the examples of Bombadil, readers will recognize that with closer attention and respect, we may understand the whispers of the trees and how our culture may work harmoniously within the natural landscape, not as a competing force outside of it.
CHAPTER 4

“IT TAKES A LONG TIME TO SAY ANYTHING IN IT”: RECOGNIZING SYMBOLISM IN TREEBEARD’S ADAPTATION OF ANTHROPOSEMIOTIC SIGN SYSTEMS

While Tom Bombadil illustrated freedom from power through his communication across sign systems, Treebeard with the other Ents and Huorns represent a more robust agency in their ethical, physical, and linguistic opposition to anthroposemiotic cultures attempting to subjugate them. Ike Reeder observes, “Tolkien’s love for trees moved beyond the point of character representation. This trope is not simply an allowance for non-human animals to talk…Tolkien places the trees in a position of communication and power” (107). Indeed, the Ents, Huorns, and trees of Fangorn forest—similar to but also more active than the flora and fauna of the Old Forest—are instrumental in crushing Isengard, denying Saruman’s routing forces from fleeing and reorganizing after their defeat at Helm’s Deep, cornering Saruman in Orthanc, and purifying the natural wilderness after Saruman defiled it. The Ents, however, do not merely move or fight. They also perceive the world and voice their perceptions as motivation for their actions. Action, voice, and perception, according to Reeder, enable the Ents to exercise “authentic agency” (110). Authentic agency (or sentience or independence) distinguishes the Ents and Hourns from trees corresponding to Primary World counterparts and Secondary World trees that possess only voice or perception (Cohen 91). Comparably, Brisbois identifies “Passive nature” and “Active nature,” and whereas Passive nature is static yet may speak “by understanding the symbols at work,” Active nature—made up of “Independent” and “Wrathful” factions—is “more obviously imaginary” but also “more directly involved,” and both factions are intelligent and separate from human culture (208). Based on these observations, we may comfortably assume that the Ents and
Horns deserve special attention as Tolkien’s signs for an active and sentient environment and as an environment that manages to write and speak its way into the anthroposemiotic sign systems.

For all the effort Tolkien expended in creating creatures that physically resembled Primary World trees that speak, feel, and move, the vast majority of scholarship surrounding Treebeard and the Ents focuses on general agency to the exclusion of analyzing the Ents as signifiers and sign functions. Like many other scholars, Matthew Dickerson characterizes Treebeard as representing “an important form of environmentalism” (Encyclopedia 678). In order to understand how Dickerson confines Treebeard to a very specific term, environmentalism, his conceptualization of environmentalism requires context. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, environmentalism is “1. A theory positing the primary influence of environment (freq. as opposed to heredity) on development, esp. that of a person or group,” and, “2. Concern with the preservation of the natural environment, esp. from damage caused by human influence; the politics or policies associated with this” (“environmentalism”). I do not argue the validity of Dickerson’s assertion, but I question how he leaps from Treebeard as signifying the Primary World nonverbal semiosphere to Treebeard as a symbol for the human-centric concern for natural environment’s wellbeing. Dickerson predicates his assertion on dialogue where Treebeard explicates distaste for Saruman’s wasteful and destructive treatment of Fangorn Forest. And, Dickerson’s rationale for underscoring Treebeard’s dialogue revolves around finding similarities between strong verbal language reserved for murderers and Treebeard’s language for describing things that kill trees. For example, a human being that extinguishes the life of another human could be called “a vile murderer.” When Dickerson observes that Treebeard’s denouncement of Saruman as “that accursed tree-slayer” parallels the way humans might characterize a murderer, Dickerson makes his leap from Treebeard as
signifier to symbol (VI.6.957). The symbolic assumption occurs because Treebeard’s expressed
disgust with the death of trees echoes the disgust humans might voice for a cold-blooded
murderer.

Making that leap based on a shared linguistic expression, however, becomes problematic
when Treebeard signifies the nonverbal semiosphere. Because Treebeard does not signify
anthroposemiotic sign culture, scholars cannot assume that linguistic similarities indicate
similarities of meaning. Treebeard, as an imaginary and typically nonverbal entity capable of
verbal communication, creates new signs and meanings with verbal communication in his
fantastic ecosemiosis. Furthermore, identifying and defining the authentic agency of the Ents
and Hourens distinguishes these creatures as “important.” But, the question remains of why their
capacity to feel, speak, move is so important besides the mere fact that our anthroposemiotic sign
cultures erroneously assume Primary World trees cannot assert authentic agency. Certainly
Primary World trees do not wage war or hold political meetings as actively or human-like as the
Ents. Zoosemiosis, however, “comprises a series of microcosms and species-specific objective
worlds as well, each one entangled in natural processes of physical interaction (secondness) as
well as in semiosic processes of objective interaction within and across species” (Deely 29).
Simply because Ents explicitly appear more active interacting with other nonverbal flora and
fauna and verbal cultures does not mean that exceptionally complex communications do not
occur between Primary World trees and the rest of the natural environment. The Ents’ agency
and understanding of anthroposemiotic sign systems does not make them remarkable or symbolic
of environmentalism because in the fantastic context of Middle-earth, Primary World
nonsentient/nonverbal beings regularly appear as sentient/verbal in Middle-earth. Rather,
Treebeard symbolizes environmentalism because he signifies the environment’s influence on
development of human culture and concern for environmental prosperity in the wake of destructive human practices. In order to identify Treebeard as those two signs, Treebeard’s actions and speech require contextualization. With an established context for Treebeard’s natural state of being, any actions or language breaking from his natural state may be identified as signaling Treebeard as a symbol for environmentalism.

In *The Silmarillion*, Yavanna, one of the mighty Valar, pleads with Manwë, chief of their kind, to create the Ents as protectors of the natural environment: “Shall nothing that I have devised be free from the dominion of others?…Would that the trees might speak on behalf of all things that have roots and punish those that wrong them!” (45). From their beginning, Tolkien saddles the Ents with a linguistic focus as their primary function. As Reeder observes, “There is an advocacy here that draws the Ents, otherwise known as the Shepherds of the Trees, into a close relationship with living things without voice. The Ents speak on their behalf, seeking to keep them from the dominion of the Children of Ilúvatar” (108). The deity Yavanna fears that the Children of Ilúvatar—i.e. anthroposemiotic dwarves, elves, hobbits, etc.—will subjugate the natural environment because nonverbal sign cultures cannot communicate with their verbal counterparts. Without the capacity to communicate, all flora and fauna would appear to lack sentience, and verbal cultures like the dwarves will harvest the natural environment without regard for its intelligence and sovereignty of self. Contradictory to Yavanna’s wishes, the Ents communicated via nonverbal sign in the infancy of their existence like the rest of the natural world. Treebeard remarks that the elves initially taught the Ents verbal communication: “Elves began it, of course, waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk. They always wished to talk to everything, the old Elves did…it was the Elves that cured us of dumbness long ago, and that was a great gift that cannot be forgotten” (III.4.457,461). The elves
rectified the Ents muteness, but Treebeard notes that shortly afterward, Morgoth, “the Great Shadow” came and the elves “passed away over the Sea” (III.4.457). Their absence allowed the Ents to evolve their own anthroposemiotic sign system, Old Entish, which only Ents and Middle-earth’s landscape can understand. By evolving their own sign system independent from another verbal sign culture, the Ents developed their own means for defining their world. This movement toward an independently developed sign system provides Ents with the language tools and freedom to define their own signs and sign functions to represent their surroundings. With a unique anthroposemiotic sign system, Tolkien lays the foundation for setting up textual implicatures that indicate symbolic significance in the Ents’ methods for verbally defining their environment.

After Merry and Pippin meet Treebeard, the old Ent provides a glance into the esteem Ents hold the natural environment through the linguistic construction of Old Entish:

“I can see and hear (and smell and feel) a great deal from this, from this, from this a-lalla-lalla-rumba-kamanda-lindor-burûmë. Excuse me: that is part of my name for it; I do not know what the word is in the outside languages: you know, the thing we are on, where I stand and look out on fine mornings, and think about the Sun, and the grass beyond the wood, and the horses, and the clouds, and the unfolding of the world.”

(III.4.454)

This passage provides enormous insight into the way Ents construct their signs and sign functions. The landscape feature Treebeard refers to, a hill, receives an extraordinarily long name by the standards of other anthroposemiotic cultures, and Treebeard renders the name only in part. When Treebeard tries to translate from Old Entish, he attempts to relate a specific state of contemplation and emotion as a sign function. He does not meditate on his own existence or the
individual trees in Fangorn Forest. Instead, the Old Entish hill, as Treebeard uses it, connotes thinking about nature outside of Fangorn because all of the signs—Sun, grass beyond the wood, horses, clouds, and unfolding of the world—signify objects outside his local environment. Also, we may assume that the Old Entish word would alter slightly if such contemplation did not take place “on a fine morning.” Old Entish words rely on emotional and mental state in conjunction with a contemplative awareness of the speaker’s relationship with other living things. An Old Entish word, then, relies on contextualizing the speaker against the wide world in order to convey a single noun. Placing such enormous import on relating context closely mirrors the actions a zoosemiotician must take to understand zoosemiotic communication: “Since any form of physical energy propagation can be exploited for purposes of communication, and many forms are, in fact, at the disposal of animals, one of his first tasks is to specify the sense, or constellation of senses, employed in the message processing situation he is observing” (“Animal Communication” 1007). The sign itself may appear short-lived or otherwise unimportant, but zoosemiosis requires significant anthroposemiotic contextualizing because the code for nonverbal sign works differently than verbal signs.

For those fluent in nonverbal signing, such as Treebeard or Tom Bombadil, receiving and understanding an emotional or sensory state is intuitive and instantaneous, but verbally explaining a specific emotional and sensory state resembles a narrative. And, as Treebeard explains to the hobbits, Old Entish works off a narrative structure: “my name is growing all the time, and I’ve lived a very long, long time; so my name is like a story. Real names tell you the story of the things they belong to in my language” (III.4.454). Old Entish speech structure, which is rhythmically implicated with the rest of the words’ signs, parallels natural growth, and the narrative structure resembles the closest approximation to indicating physical growth in speech.
As Eco noted, “texts”—that is, a chain of signs that move forward a larger message—rely on carrying forward the building set of meanings paralleled by the increasing number of signs (24). This signifying chain as text has the capacity to spawn almost infinite meanings, so in order to precisely identify the object represented by a word or name, Ents rely on verbalizing complex nonverbal communication as well as the structure of the word or name. The temporal facet of their speaking structure, then, acts as a signifier and code.

When Treebeard says, “it takes a very long time to say anything in [Old Entish], because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to,” Tolkien emphasizes the duration of speech as a signifier of importance and the exclusivity of those with time to listen as the code for the same (III.4.454). This emphasis on duration coincides with other scholarly work on the semiotics of temporality: “the amount of time we allow an event or activity to last is symbolically associated with the degree of significance we attach to it. That we are willing to spend a lot of time on a given activity is usually indicative of its great importance to us, particularly relative to comparable activities” (Zerubavel 344). Indeed, Treebeard’s speech meanders from one thought into the next as he communicates with Merry and Pippin. As the leader of the Ents and one of the oldest living creatures on Middle-earth, Treebeard possesses great authority, and he signifies this authority by expecting the hobbits to endure his ponderous language. Also, Old Entish must consume long bouts of time because Ents live exceptionally long, nigh on immortal lives. If Ents may interact over the course of thousands of years, then their language must extend longer than other nonverbal communications. Similarly, Treebeard declines to pronounce even part of his Old Entish name for the hobbits because the length of time required to pronounce his name acts as a code for identifying Treebeard’s intimates. “Given our association of exclusivity with intimacy,” Zerubavel observes, “we usually attach particular
significance to contacts that take place at times that are socially defined as more private” (346). The time required for speaking his full name would require a socially private setting, and since the hobbits are not yet friends with Treebeard, he refuses to give his name and uses the duration of time to speak his name as an excuse. As a polite compromise, the Ent provides Treebeard as a suitable name for the hobbits, a “hasty folk.” While Middle-earth’s realm abounds with strange and fantastic languages, Tolkien highlights Old Entish and Treebeard’s speech as particularly relevant to characterizing the Ents.

In context of hobbits discovering the existence of a giant walking, talking, sentient tree, Tolkien’s attention to Treebeard’s language and sign modality represents an excess of signification that reveals a movement into the symbolic form. The argument might be made, however, that Tolkien created Middle-earth as a place for his invented languages, and Tolkien’s focus on Old Entish simply follows the primary objective of the author’s intentions for creating Middle-earth. And, in a fantastic secondary world, the primary interpreter of symbols in *LotR*, the reader, should expect to find otherworldly creatures in the text, so Treebeard’s physical appearance should not seem jarring enough to create a surplus of signification. Such objections are fair to make, and the question remains as to where and why the Ents become symbols, particularly symbols of environmentalism. The rationale follows that signaling the symbolic mode requires a sign that should not appear relevant in a pre-ordered context. If the context for Treebeard’s speech is “slow, sonorous, agglomerated, repetitive, indeed long-winded; formed of a multiplicity of vowel-shades and distinctions of tone and quality,” then it is necessary to identify the places where Treebeard’s speech takes on a contradictory structure in order to determine why Treebeard becomes symbolic of environmentalism.
When Treebeard communicates in poetic verse, he completely divorces himself from the long-winded and ponderous speech we have come to expect. His verses do not rely on a complex narrative structure, duration or exclusivity of time, or a string of signs that precisely conveys an expression of all the senses. Rather, his poetry adheres to our Primary World structures and forms as a very compact means of expression, and within those forms, Treebeard redefines the signs that verbal cultures associate with the natural environment. The first such instance of Treebeard’s poetry requires that we retrospectively apply the context of his language. Merry and Pippin escape their orc captors running through the boughs of Fangorn Forest and encounter the formidable visage of Treebeard: “a large Man-like, almost Troll-like figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck” (III.4.452). Their shock quickly wears off, and both Treebeard and the hobbits fumble for the correct word to describe the other. Treebeard has lived for ages upon Middle-earth, and he feels disconcerted at his inability to identify the hobbits’ species. Thinking his memory failed him, Treebeard recites a poem that catalogues the lore of all living creatures in Middle-earth:

*Learn now the lore of Living Creatures!*

*First name the four, the free peoples:*

*Eldest of all, the elf-children;*

*Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses;*

*Ent the earthborn, old as mountains;*

*Man the mortal, master of horses.* (III.4.453)

Unlike Treebeard’s usual speech that he demonstrates on the next page, the first stanza (and the rest of the poem) appears uncharacteristically simple both in language and structure. Alliterative verse delineates each line of his poem, and each line contains at least one instance of alliteration.
before or after the comma splitting the line. Anglo-Saxon poets commonly utilized alliterative verse in their Old English texts, and as one scholar points out “Tolkien is interested not only in preserving ancient English poetry, but the ancient English poetic forms, as well” (Hall 45). Framing the poem in Old English verse sharply contrasts with Treebeard’s preference for his own long-windedness, and the form’s use constitutes a sign outside not only the semiosphere of Fangorn Forest but also the Secondary World of Middle-earth. In Primary World terms, the Old English poetic form signifies a message worth remembering, worth expressing. Tales of heroism and worthy deeds commonly found themselves cast into verse because the oral tradition demands that storytellers utilize mnemonic devices to keep the poem’s message in collective memory. The simple structure implies the poem will communicate this lore to other groups and not just Ents. Treebeard, then, becomes an educator of anthroposemiotic cultures. The structure of the naming poem, however, revolves around an aesthetic code that, especially in poetry, encourages various interpretations and connotations of the encoded signs. Encoding signs in an aesthetic poetic code appears counter-intuitive to the purpose of the poem: identifying and defining all the creatures of Middle-earth. Nonetheless, Treebeard qualifies the aesthetic code with another perceptual code, that of proximity. When Tolkien organizes the poem around Treebeard’s perception of the world, Tolkien inculcates terms that anthroposemiotic cultures use to define Middle-earth’s natural world with new nature-conscious content figures.

Although Treebeard recites the poem, he did not, in fact, create the poem, but his decision to amend perhaps the oldest poem in Middle-earth portrays how easily a zoosemiotic authority may alter fundamental definitions in an anthroposemiotic sign system. The difference between Primary World humans moving away the oral tradition and the Ents’ decision to stay with that tradition stems from the interpretation of the poem’s signs through a perceptual code.
“Perception depends on coding the world into iconic signs that can re-present it within our mind. The force of the apparent identity is enormous, however. We think that it is the world itself we see in our ‘mind’s eye’, rather than a coded picture of it” (Nicholas 11-12). While the aesthetic code for interpreting a poem’s contents and form results in multiple connotations and diverse interpretants, a perceptual code organizes the poem’s various interpretants in a way that lends insight into Treebeard’s impression of Middle-earth. Gestalt psychologists delineated multiple “fundamental and universal principles” for perception organization (Chandler 151). Of those principles, interpreting the poem through Treebeard’s perception based on the proximity of signs gives the most insight into the Ent’s conceptions of his own power. Treebeard, the advocate of all nonverbal living things, recites the poem. Ents initially could not communicate in the anthroposemiotic sign system, but Treebeard protects a relic of anthroposemiotic culture and uses it to his purpose. The Ent is most proximal in age and wisdom to the origins of both zoosemiotic and anthroposemiotic cultures. Within the poem, the Ents’ existence appears above and before Man’s. Though Treebeard values all living things, only a single line break between stanzas separates “Man the mortal” from “Beaver the builder,” and the proximity of Man to Beaver signifies how closely the two species may be associated under the umbrella of the Ents’ stewardship of Middle-earth. And, the proximity of signs to Ent and Man overrides connotative interpretations in favor of perceived univocal definitions that magnify the prestige and importance of the Ents in Middle-earth. In the verse on Man, the proximity of mortal, master, and horses signals Man’s short life span and his capacity for taming fauna. Man resides within the realm of fleeting mortality and momentary subjugation of fauna. In the verse on Ents, the proximity of earthborn, old, and mountains signifies Ents’ inherent connection to Middle-earth. They are immortal, ancient, and, like mountains, define the natural landscape.
The species of Middle-earth appear in the order of their creation in the Tolkien legendarium, but the poem also categorizes the named species according to their fluency across anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic semiospheres. Elves appear first in the poem because they possess the most eloquence in both verbal and nonverbal sign. Their mastery of anthroposemiotic communication is astonishingly obvious by the time the hobbits meet Treebeard; the vast majority of stirring poetry, ornamental prose, and penetrating wisdom derives from elvish song and lore. Similarly, their loquacity in nonverbal sign systems is equally apparent; the elves inextricably link a thriving environment with a thriving human culture, “‘They need more gardens,’ said Legolas, ‘The houses are dead, and there is little here that grows and is glad. If Aragorn comes into his own, the people of the Wood shall bring him birds that sing and trees that do not die’” (V.9.854). As Dickerson and Evans observe, a “glad” environment, “make[s] glad the hearts of those who perceive their beauty, and gladness of heart is part of the overall freedom from oppression that the surviving Elves of Middle-earth…strive to protect” (101).

After the elves, the dwarves appear in the poem. While dwarves do not love trees and plants, they possess a close and complex relationship with minerals and gems unlike any other species in Middle-earth. Just as elves intermingle elvish and environmental interests, so too do dwarves appreciate bedrock and boulders as their source of prosperity. When dwarves dug “too greedily” into the mines of Moria, they awaken the Balrog, a demi-god-like creature of fire that violently ejected the dwarves from their mountain home. Next, the Ents appear in the poem because even though they developed an anthroposemiotic sign system, their most eloquent communication resides in nonverbal speech. Man appears last, and closest to beavers, because men communicate entirely through anthroposemiotic sign systems, and similarly, beavers (and the rest of the fauna) appear afterward because they may only communicate vis-à-vis a zoosemiotic sign system. By
their proximity to each other in relation to fluency across semiospheres, Tolkien’s Ents have
greater ontological significance and authority than humanity.

Treebeard further cements his position as the preeminent authority on determining the
importance of Middle-earth’s Umwelt\(^9\) when he amends the naming poem. Finding that the
hobbits do not have a place in the poem, Merry proposes an addition: “Half-grown hobbits, the
hole-dwellers.” Treebeard’s response, “Hm! Not bad, not bad…That would do,” comically
captures what amounts to a rather serious development in Middle-earth; the environment
acquiesces to acknowledging hobbits as members of the “lore of Living Creatures” (III.4.454). In
this case, a hobbit, a representative of anthroposemiotic sign culture requests that the natural
environment interpret his race in the same way that hobbits interpret their own signs for their
community. When Merry and Pippin leave Treebeard’s company after the destruction of
Isengard, Treebeard extends his friendship to the hobbits with another addition to his naming
poem: “Ents the earthborn, old as mountains,/the wide-walkers, water drinking;/and hungry as
hunters, the Hobbit children,/the laughing-folk, the little people,” (III.X.572). This adjustment to
Merry’s initial suggestion carries several implications. First, Treebeard places hobbits above men
in the initial poem, and by doing so, he again decodes a culture’s importance through a
perceptual code of proximity. Treebeard’s decision parallels a later realization of the other
anthroposemiotic cultures: even the smallest, most overlooked people may change the world.
And, Treebeard’s interpretation of the hobbits’ existence as a crucial and valued member in
safeguarding Middle-earth signifies a change in the precedence of world view. Second,
Treebeard attributes much more flattering characteristics to the hobbits besides their identity as
“hole-dwellers.” Instead, hobbits become the bright, happy children of Middle-earth. Their

\(^9\) A term derived from Jacob von Uexküll’s semiotic theories and coined by Thomas A. Sebeok meaning, “biological
foundations that lie at the very epicenter of the study of both communication and signification in the human animal.”
And, as Deely amends, “and every other animal, for that matter.”
placement and description as children signal a parental role that the Ents, and especially Treebeard, have adopted for this derivative verbal sign culture. hobbits appear above men because they have shown they are much more closely aligned with all growing things. Treebeard represents “Father Nature” to the hobbits, and the Ents simultaneously become guardians and, to some degree, masters over both hobbits and men. Middle-earth’s anthropoid cultures exercise mastery over parts of the environment only at the acquiescence of the Ents.

By deviating from Treebeard’s preferred rhetorical structure, we may view this poem as infused with an abundance of signification indicating a symbolic representation. Superimposing the Old English poetic form on an ancient Shepherd of Trees presents Treebeard as a signifier of multiple interpretations: as a spirit of the English countryside (like Tom Bombadil), the natural environment’s capacity for creating art, the noble nature of trees, etc. But, because Tolkien possessed an avid interest in preserving English poetry and because Old English poetic verse follows an oral tradition for relating memories and experience, Treebeard signifies the natural environment’s role as a historian. The symbol of historian appears more probable as the author’s likely interpretant especially when considering that Primary World trees’ rings demarcate their history of growth. Similarly, the poem’s lore is ancient, and the antiquity of the form mirrors the antiquity of Treebeard’s existence. While the poem’s form signifies Treebeard as a chronicler, the alterations to sign within the poem indicate Treebeard’s authority over the verbal and nonverbal world. Through fantastic ecosemiosis, Tolkien inverts the way Middle-earth’s anthroposemiotic semiosphere interprets meanings in natural sign. Clearly, Treebeard’s expansively long existence enables him to interpret objects, events, and people in a context distinct from men, hobbits, and even elves whose comparative existences are quite fleeting or entangled with anthropoid-centric concerns. With no more than a few pieces of dialogue and a
rudimentary poem in a fantastic landscape, Tolkien eradicates the pre-existing sign-function of the term “natural environment” as a human-made concept. In its place, Tolkien reconstructs the natural environment as signifying an immortal and powerful terrestrial force from which anthroposemiotic sign cultures derive meaning of self. In this way, Treebeard signifies the first definition of environmentalism.

Treebeard’s concern for the preservation of the natural environment becomes evident in his battle poetry during the Last March of the Ents. Saruman, the treacherous wizard and master of Isengard, arouses the explosive rage of nature when he industrializes Isengard and carelessly plunders acres of Treebeard’s forest domain. When Treebeard observes the destruction of wide swaths of peaceful forest, he rouses the rest of the Ents to combat human industrial culture’s warlike encroachment of the natural world. Here Tolkien poses a radical image: the natural environment not only participates in a bellicose scenario but also becomes one of the primary belligerents in the fighting. After some deliberation in the meeting of Ents—called an Entmoot—Treebeard rouses the Ents to battle. Whipped into a fury, Treebeard calls on direct and simple poetic verse to construct a call to arms for nature’s counter attack:

*To Isengard! Though Isengard be ringed and barred with doors of stone;*

*Though Isengard be strong and hard, as cold as stone and bare as bone,*

*We go, we go, we go to war, to hew the stone and break the door;*

*For bole and bough are burning now, the furnace roars – we go to war!*  

*To land of gloom with trump of doom, with roll of drum, we come, we come;*

*To Isengard with doom we come!*

*With doom we come, with doom we come!* (III.4.474)
As shown in the first poem, Tolkien draws upon ancient and classical poetic devices to signal a moment of symbol-making. In the battle poem, Treebeard alternates between using *anaphora* and *epistroph*; these two rhetorical devices developed in ancient Greek culture as language devices meant to arouse emotion in a speaker’s audience. Treebeard uses *anaphora* in his repetition of “To Isengard!” at the beginning of successive lines to call attention to the subject of his wrath. In alternate lines, Treebeard repeats “with doom we come” to direct the action of the roused Ents. The poem’s meter plays with the traditional dactylic hexameter as a heroic meter. Tolkien uses the dactylic meter to approximate the longer length of time between the footfalls of the Ents. Treebeard has no interest in concealing the march of his Ent army; he purposefully uses meter suited to the crash of his march to signal Isengard that the natural environment marches for war.

Treebeard’s battle poetry provides several signs both in the repetition of language and the use of particular words. In the case of the repetitious use of “To Isengard!” and “with doom we come,” Treebeard is no longer acting as *only* an interpretant. Instead, he’s using mediated language to clarify the target of the warlike intentions of the natural environment. For all who hear Treebeard’s poetry, especially the orcs and humans in Isengard, the Ents’ purpose resounds loud and clear. The repetitious phrases speak to Riste Keskoia’s assertion of ecosemiotics most important task: “to diminish communication problems between human and nature, because from that viewpoint it becomes possible to speak about nature, as it seems to us in culture, and to speak with nature, because its ability of speech has been restored” (50). Tolkien obliterates any “communication problems” the industrialized city inhabitants may have when interpreting Treebeard’s war poetics. The natural world marches to undo the human city that encroached brazenly upon the free wilderness.
Further examination of the language itself provides another environmental sign for Isengard. Treebeard draws attention to the stone doors and walls erected to prevent intruders, and he inverts the imagery of a human made furnace. Treebeard juxtaposes the stone doors with the image of bones; he implies that the stone itself acts as the skeleton for Isengard’s foundation. However, Treebeard quickly dashes any hopes of such defenses hindering the natural environment because stones come from the very place that Treebeard represents. A tree’s roots may hew stone, and so, Treebeard and the Ents will perform the same task as naturally as it occurs in the wilderness. Next, Treebeard makes a play on “the furnace roars.” Here, Treebeard usurps a human cultural device to send a clear battle message to Isengard. In her article, "The Unique Representation of Trees in The Lord of the Rings" Cynthia Cohen observes Tolkien’s exploitation of another ancient Western European device that raises the ontological significance of the natural environment. “Trees with human characteristics can also be found in…Old Welsh…where trees are transformed into warriors. Taliesin names various familiar tree species and enumerates their military deeds…[after] the traditional Welsh practice of metaphorically describing kings and warriors in terms of trees and architecture” (94). Tolkien uses his philological experience to mirror Old Welsh instances of imbuing noble heroes with environmental adjectives and not the other way around. While humans build and utilize furnaces for the destruction of the natural environment and its resources, Treebeard uses the metaphor of a furnace to represent the angry feelings of the natural environment. In this instance, the environment adopts a human cultural commodity as a description of the Ents’ emotion so that the human community may accurately interpret the natural world’s wrath.

The destruction of Isengard is brutal, efficient, and merciless. The gentle wood of Fangorn cracks and breaks the stone blocks of Isengard in the same fashion that a mighty tree’s
roots may cleave a subterranean boulder. Once destroyed, Treebeard and his Ents undam a river to wash the putrid filth of the city’s last vestiges of industrialized human culture so that it may once again become a friendly wilderness. The Ents possess the communicative abilities to define the humans and creatures that inhabit the natural world, and they demonstrate their ability to commit acts of war to push back and erase parts of human culture. Besides communicating with human cultures, Ents have the capacity to adapt anthroposemiotic sign systems for iterating the history of their community.

Ents use poetic language and structure as signs to express their sorrows to each other, especially in regards to the historic loss of the Entwives. As Merry and Pippin speak with Treebeard, they eventually come to learn of the Entwives, the female counterparts to the Ents. According to Treebeard the Ents “lost” the Entwives; the Entwives did not die out or otherwise come to some unseemly end. Instead, Treebeard attempts to explain how the Entwives moved to a different part of Middle-earth to “tend their gardens.” Not the brightest members of the Company, Merry and Pippin express difficulty in understanding the concept, and Treebeard decides to recount the story in an Elvish dialectical poem between Ent and Entwife with the first exchange as follows:

ENT.  
When Spring unfolds the beechen leaf, and sap is in the bough;  
When light is on the wild-wood stream, and wind is on the brow;  
When stride is long, and breath is deep, and keen the mountain-air,  
Come back to me! Come back to me, and say my land is fair!

ENTWIFE.  
When Spring is come to garth and field, and corn is in the blade;  
When blossom like a shining snow is on the orchard laid;  
When shower and Sun upon the Earth with fragrance fill the air,
I’ll linger here, and will not come, because my land is fair. (III.4.466)

Close readers will quickly point out that Treebeard’s poem of the Ent and Entwives is not, in fact, an Entish creation. Instead, the elves of Middle-earth penned the verse. Treebeard admits that Elves created the poem, but he goes on to say, “It is Elvish, of course: lighthearted, quickworded, and soon over. I daresay it is fair enough” (III.4.466). Treebeard indicates that the Ents adopted the poem as their own, “It was never an Entish song, mark you: it would have been a very long song in Entish! But we know it by heart and hum it now and again” (III.4.465). Not only does Treebeard again demonstrate the power of Ents to adopt other cultures and form it to their will, he squelches any objections about the inauthenticity of an Elvish poem in Ent mouths. The poem in its entirety, which is too long for the purpose of its representation here, deploys a number of similar strategies Tolkien used in previous poems. Treebeard’s poem possesses several instances of anaphora, especially in the repetition of “when” and the echo of the season from Ent to Entwife in “Spring.” The usage of the season as a time marker—as opposed to days, months or years—makes sense for a timeless natural environment. Similarly, this echoing of time and season displays the Ent and Entwife’s ability to interpret the sign of the same object, “Spring,” to indicate a time marker in a language unlike their own. Besides the easy rhymes acting as a memory aid, the rhyme scheme (AABBCCBB) and iambic heptameter indicate that the poem is a ballad. Unlike the long, rhythmic utterances of Old Entish, Treebeard highlights a shorter and lyrical poem as something the Ents learned by heart and hum from time to time. Again, Treebeard breaks from the established context for his linguistic preferences, and this break signals another symbolic moment entrenched in the content and language of this dialectical poetic ballad.
The poem’s argument orbits around the Ent and Entwife’s insistence that their respective homes enjoy better environmental stewardship, and as a result of their dispute over who possesses the fairer region, they Ents and Entwives are lost to each other. The most striking aspect of this poem is its narrative format; it is dialectical. According to Raymond Williams, dialectical poetry’s earliest meanings derive from ancient Greece, "the investigation of truth by discussion," and Plato's definition, "the method of determining the interrelation of ideas in the light of a single principle" (107). Initially, Tolkien gave Ents the power to define the importance of various anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic cultures, but in this poem, Tolkien shows the environment struggling to define itself. Both Ent and Entwife have authority to define all the different parts and creatures of Middle-earth, and when the two parties have equal authority in arguing a lauded goal—environmental stewardship—the two sides tear asunder. Despite the Ents’ supposed connection to all living things, the divorce of the Ents and Entwives over stewardship of Middle-earth environmental community is highly incongruous with Treebeard and the Ents’ character. As one scholar observes:

Treebeard claims that Ents value a humility so profound that it leads them to meld their very bodies and minds with the things that they love and care for. The Ent and the Entwife of the song may indeed have this self-effacing brand of love for the lands under their stewardship, but they completely fail to show this kind of humility to each other. The song shows us how the Ents and the Entwives, in their relations with each other, were so exclusively “interested in themselves,” so incapable of “getting inside other things,” that they became estranged (Olsen 46).

Accepting that the Ents and Entwives symbolize environmentalism—both parties argue over the more proficient environmental steward—then this poem signifies the obfuscation of
environmentalist virtue when conservancy becomes a competition. More so than any other poem Treebeard recites, the poetic ballad of the Ent and Entwife paints the sentient trees as closely resembling humanity; the poem derives from an anthroposemiotic culture, portrays a frivolous argument over a single verbal sign, “fair,” and depicts the destruction of a relationship akin to a human marriage crumbling into divorce. The ballad of the Ent and Entwife conveys a straightforward interpretant: the pointlessness and damage of arguing over the best way to conduct environmental stewardship and appreciation. Besides Olsen, little scholarship addresses this poem even though Tolkien provides an explicit image of two environmentalists severing their ties over a matter of differing environmentally-friendly practices. The depiction of self-interest and ego causing a rift to the detriment of the environment over a verbal semantic quibble resembles a human-centric perception of the natural community. Of course Tolkien portrays the Ents in the most human fashion when they describe the most sorrowful loss in their history. Essentially, Ents sacrifice their ability to reproduce and thrive as a community when they drive off (Treebeard says “lose”) the Entwives because, like Primary World humans, they squander their most important relationship over a self-centered perception of the environment inherent in a flimsy, amorphous sign like “fair.” Treebeard and the Ents certainly symbolize environmentalism, but they also symbolize Tolkien’s distaste for dogmatism in environmental stewardship. Unlike a regional nature essay or any form of hawkish regionalism, environmentalism and Fantasy have universal appeal and form.

Tolkien surely communicates the importance of environmentalism in *LotR*. But, the way that scholars determine the message of environmentalism requires a more thoughtful approach in analyzing the process for identifying the symbols of environmentalism. By only focusing on Treebeard’s physical appearance, actions, and explicit dialogue, scholars gloss over the much
deeper implications of zoomorphizing anthroposemiotic signs. In order to understand the symbolism inherent in the Ents, the Shepherds of the Trees require context within the narrative. The superficial characteristics of the Ents as trees with authentic agency contrasts with the way anthroposemiotic sign systems identify Primary World trees, so we understand that Ents belong to a fantastic Secondary World. Within Middle-earth, Treebeard’s appearance and agency are not so unbelievable that his existence produces an excess of signification necessary for evoking symbolic interpretation; elves, hobbits, and dwarves do not exist in the Primary World, but scholars do not focus entirely on their physical traits or mere existence as symbols. Instead, scholarship addressing these human-like anthropoids investigates their actions, interactions, relationships, creative faculties, and communication. Scholarship of characters residing within the anthroposemiotic semiosphere receives nuanced and extensive analysis, and Tolkien’s strategies for creating and depicting the Ents deserve similar treatment, especially from semioticians. If we understand Treebeard and the Ents’ perceptions of language, then Tolkien’s strategies for representing the adoption, alteration, and final synthesis of a foreign sign system gain clarity of authorial purpose; bridging the communication gap between discursive sign systems is paramount for survival and prosperity.
Despite his misgivings that “very little about trees as trees can be got into a play,” Tolkien hinges the fate of Middle-earth’s human culture on the continued existence of mundane flora and fauna (*Tree and Leaf* 48). The non-fantastic flora and fauna are particularly interesting in this regard because, as some scholars note, the similarities between Middle-earth and Earth’s natural environment “offers a fictional exploration of sustainability which has also had a sustained cultural resonance” (Habermann and Kuhn 263). In other words, the easy accessibility of Tolkien’s themes of sustainability and environmental stewardship in Middle-earth appeals to a broad spectrum of people across various cultures. Human culture cannot survive without a thriving natural environment existing alongside it, and some scholars warn that environmentalism arising from self-interest is simply another form of subjugating the environmental culture (Evernden 10). Though Tolkien will not deny the importance of a thriving natural environment to the continued existence of human culture and values, he side-steps the pitfalls of self-interest by highlighting an egalitarian partnership as the ideal structure for the synthesis of verbal and nonverbal semiospheres. In *A Short History of Myth*, Karen Armstrong argues that humans require a mythic dimension to their cultural experience because myths express a “transcendent value” that challenge humanity’s “solipstic selfishness” and assist human culture in “venerate[ing] the earth as sacred…instead of merely using it as a resource” (143). Not only does Tolkien present a mythos in *LotR* that challenges selfishness and self-interest, but also his myth endorses the veneration of the natural environment by portraying the banal parts of Middle-earth’s nonverbal environment as capable of communication with verbal
human culture. Indeed, the various humanoid cultures must communicate with Middle-earth, or else they will perish.

Examining the actions and language as a symbolic communication between Middle-earth’s human and environmental culture provides a new perspective on *LotR*’s environmental themes because the foundation of nonverbal and verbal cultural sign processes share a close connection with concepts of control and power. The first section of this chapter explores Sam’s devotion to gardening and the flora of Middle-earth as Tolkien’s representation of ideal communication and interaction between anthroposemiotic humans and zoosemiotic environment. The second section examines the verbal and nonverbal communication shared between human culture and the fauna of environmental culture in conjunction with the basic tenets of politeness theory. The verbal and nonverbal communication and language shared between Tom Bombadil and Fatty Lumpkin and Gandalf and Shadowfax are specific examples of mutually beneficial relationships developed through polite and respectful discourse across sign systems. By focusing on specific language and actions as communication between Middle-earth’s human and environmental culture, Tolkien values cross-sign system communication as a necessary function for environmental stewardship and forming an egalitarian environmental-human partnership.

Tolkien represents idealized environmental stewardship and the importance of the natural environment’s prosperity through Samwise Gamgee, the consummate gardener. Throughout the Fellowship’s adventures, Tolkien continually highlights Sam’s love of Middle-earth’s environment, and, not coincidentally, Middle-earth’s Secondary World flora possess similar attributes to the multitudinous variety of Primary World flora. In their discussion of *LotR*’s cultural, geographical, and literary intersections, Ina Habermann and Nikolaus Kuhn explain the importance of Middle-earth’s varied plant and animal life: “Tolkien creates an intricate symbolic
topography, which manages to retain the complexity of our world while at the same time advocating a careful stewardship of the environment” (263). Sam’s occupation as an enthusiastic gardener proves particularly apt for Tolkien’s environmental message because gardens are ideal places for understanding the intersection between natural laws and cultural signs and norms mediated by individual perceptiveness and responsibility (“Gardens” 122). By focusing on gardens and gardening, Tolkien constructs his conceit for the ideal interaction and communication between modern human and environmental culture. An investigation of Sam’s role as a gardener would address Tolkien’s belief that “proper husbandry emerges as a task for the future, embodied in the figure of the gardener” (Habermann and Kuhn 272). Because hobbits in general and Sam in particular engage in a generally agrarian and environmentally friendly lifestyle, LotR abounds with examples rife with messages on environmental stewardship. However, Sam’s acquisition of Galadriel’s garden box and his subsequent use of the garden box to revive the Shire’s natural environment provides the most explicit examples of human and environmental culture’s interdependency. When Sam eventually recognizes the zoosemiosphere’s capacity for communication in the nonverbal signs of the Shire’s landscape, he finally understands the need for bridging the communicative gap between anthroposemiotic and zoosemiotic sign systems in order to form a mutually beneficial bond between hobbits and Middle-earth’s landscape.

When Sam first observes the elves of Galadriel’s wooded realm, Lothlorien, he becomes enamored with the vision of a perfectly synthesized human and environmental culture. Unlike hobbits, elves do not strictly represent human culture (Dickerson and Evans 98-9). However, the elves provide Sam with a new perspective on the shared welfare between the natural environment and the beings that inhabit it: “They seem to belong here, more even than the
hobbits do in the Shire. Whether they’ve made the land, or the land’s made them, it’s hard to say” (II.6.351). Though Sam comments many times on his appreciation for the Shire and its landscape, he cannot stifle his sense of awe for the perfectly harmonious relationship between the elves and their environment. A dichotomy does not exist between the elves and Lothlorien, rather the two cultures experience a seamless coexistence. The relationship between the elves and landscape is so seamless and egalitarian that Sam cannot actually discern if the elves exercise dominion over the forest or vice versa, which indicates equal reciprocity and exchange. Besides a lack of discernible manipulation of the environment, Sam also remarks on the tranquil silence of Lothlorien: “It’s wonderfully quiet here. Nothing seems to be going on, and nobody seems to want it to. If there’s any magic about, it’s right down deep, where I can’t lay my hands on it” (II.6.351). Of course, plenty of activity occurs within Galadriel’s woodland realm—it is a nation of elves, albeit a small one—but Sam does not possess the ability to communicate with the natural environment in the same way as the elves. Robert Siegel, a nature writer and poet, explains, “Legolas, the elves, and Lothlorien all seem to live in a constant contemplative awareness of nature, all time, and space” (Dickerson and Evans 109). The elves are constantly aware of the trees’ position of power and communication (Reeder 107). Bereft of this knowledge, Sam equates the tranquility and harmony between environment and its inhabitants with some mysterious magic. Despite his ignorance, Sam correctly guesses that the balanced relationship between elves and the natural environment—the magic—resides in a deep connection with Middle-earth itself. For Sam, the visit to Lothlorien offers a new way to consider his occupation as a gardener and the way he interacts with Middle-earth’s landscape.

Perhaps more than any other member of the Fellowship, Sam feels the most reticent to leave Lothlorien because the harmoniousness of elven and environmental culture greatly appeals
to his sensibilities for tending the natural environment. When the time comes for the Fellowship to leave Lothlorien, Sam announces, “I’ve often wanted to see a bit of magic like what it tells of in old tales, but I’ve never heard of a better land than this. It’s like being at home and on holiday at the same time, if you understand me” (II.6.351-2). Sam grapples with explaining his exact emotions regarding Lothlorien’s natural environment because his accustomed verbal communication process lacks the sign for expressing a nonverbal feeling or vibe. Indeed, Sam’s continual return to a concept of magic inherent in Middle-earth itself reflects Tolkien’s conviction that Earth, like Middle-earth, possesses a voice and sentience both wise and ageless. Patrick Curry expounds on this point: “Middle-earth itself appears as a character in its own right. And the living personality and agency of this character are none the less for being non-human; in fact, that is just what allows for a sense of ancient myth, with its feeling of a time when the Earth itself was alive” (Defending Middle-Earth 61). For Tolkien (and Sam), the natural environment possesses agency, personality, and a voice, and human culture must preserve the natural environment as another living thing capable of expressing itself in its own way. Sensing Sam’s reverence for the natural environment, Galadriel presents the hobbit with “a little box of plain grey wood…[filled with] earth from [Galadriel’s] orchard” (II.6.366). Galadriel hints that the box may reward Sam, especially if Sam finds “all barren and laid waste, there will be few gardens in Middle-earth that will bloom like your garden, if you sprinkle this earth there” (II.6.366). Though the gift seems impractical in Sam’s present situation, the contents of Galadriel’s garden box provide Sam with the means to heal the Shire and move the anthroposemiotic hobbit culture toward a deeper respect of the natural environment.

Tolkien illuminates environmental welfare as a necessity for human cultural prosperity when Saruman defiles the Shire in the hobbits’ absence. When Sam, Frodo, Merry, and Pippin
initially return to the Shire after Sauron’s defeat, they encounter a landscape drastically different than the one they knew. The hobbits look in horror upon a wrecked landscape:

The pleasant rows of old hobbit-holes…were deserted, and their little gardens that used to run down bright to the water’s edge were rank with weeds. Worse…a whole line of the ugly new houses…[where] an avenue of trees had stood…They were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road…they saw a tall chimney of brick…It was pouring black smoke into the evening air. (VI.8.981)

The culprit for the destruction is clear enough: images of human cultural interests supplant images of a thriving natural environment. The environment appears in a tortured, maltreated state, and the horror echoes Tolkien’s own feelings on human treatment of the environment: “I find human maltreatment of [plants and trees] as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (Letters 220). Ugly houses replace trees, and human neglect allows weeds to choke the life out of the gardens. Not even the sky above the Shire avoids pollution; a tall chimney, a symbol of human industrialization, mars the air with viscous black mire. The landscape appears savaged and devoid of any joy that it once possessed. Similarly, all the symbols of human culture—the houses, hobbit-holes, and the chimney—appear deserted, ugly, and far from producing anything worth the sacrifice of the environment that those human artifices usurped.

Tolkien shows how the destruction of the natural environment affects human culture’s understanding of its own history. As the hobbits continue inspecting the brutalization of their home, they arrive at the Party Tree where Bilbo gave his farewell speech. “They’ve cut it down…They’ve cut down the Party Tree!’ [Sam] pointed to where the tree had stood under which Bilbo had made his Farewell Speech. It was lying lopped and dead in the field.” (VI.8.993). The extermination of the Party Tree hits Sam particularly hard because its destruction
erases a physical marker of Sam’s own biographical history. Gardens and trees in particular serve an important function for human cultural history: “The changes in the appearance of home gardens, as for instance the growth of trees, are slow enough to provide important landmarks in one’s own biography. As personal and even intimate places, gardens often carry and evoke memories of one’s past and are therefore especially valued” (“Gardens” 124). Like Ents, hobbits are environmental historians in their own diminutive way. By defiling the natural environment, including impressive specimens of flora like the Party Tree, Saruman, the agent of wanton human-centric environmental consumption, erases the physical mediators of memory that made the Shire feel like home. Tolkien cleanly draws a parallel between the degradation of the natural environment and the loss of human biography.

The loss of the environmental prosperity in the Shire parallels the decline of human culture, and Tolkien demonstrates that Sam’s efforts to restore the health of the natural environment are necessary for human culture to prosper. Sam must treat the entire Shire as a garden so the hobbits may yet again communicate with their environment and re-forgo the interdependent relationship between habitat and inhabitants. Even after the defeat and death of Saruman and Wormtongue, the main proponents of environmental destruction, Sam recognizes the need for reinvigorating the environment: “I can’t call it the end, till we’ve cleared up the mess…And that’ll take a lot of time and work” (VI.8.997). Sam leads the Shirefolk in their efforts to rebuild natural environmental culture with alacrity by using Galadriel’s garden box. After an entire season of work, Sam’s efforts pay off:

Altogether 1420 in the Shire was a marvelous year. Not only was there wonderful sunshine and delicious rain, in due times and perfect measure, but there seemed something more: an air of richness and growth, and a gleam of beauty beyond that of
mortal summers that flicker and pass upon this Middle-earth. All the children born or begotten in that year, and there were many, were fair to see and strong, and most of them had a rich golden hair that had before been rare among hobbits. (VI.9.1000)

Just as environmental culture renews, so too does the human community that inhabits it. Tolkien superimposes the “richness and growth” of the natural environment on the health and new birth of hobbit children. The partnership between human and environmental cultures generates a revived welfare that outstrips any of the previous seasons seen on Middle-earth. The natural environment’s prosperity appears to possess a renewed sense of pride for the human culture inhabiting it. This new sense of possibilities for shared prosperity follows Bhatti and Church’s assertion about the benefits of environmental stewardship through gardening: “Individuals seeking a ‘deeper’ connection to nature in their gardens draw on real and imagined relations with family, friends, and neighbours to imbue their garden with a range of meanings and possibilities” (370). The collusion of the natural environment and human cultural interests produces a new sense of community. The renewed environmental stewardship of the hobbits creates a special meaning of regrowth for the hobbits themselves, and even Sam benefits individually from the newfound prosperity: “Sam Gamgee married Rose Cotton in the Spring of 1420 (which was also famous for its weddings), and they came and lived at Bag End. And if Sam thought himself lucky, Frodo knew that he was more lucky himself; for there was not a hobbit in the Shire that was looked after with such care” (VI.9.1001-2). Just as the destruction of the natural environment created a sense of lost history for human culture, the revival of the environment produces new opportunities for creating memories of love and care for both the environment and each other. Tolkien makes explicit that understanding environmental culture’s interests is necessary for a thriving human culture, and gardening and gardens constitute a communication
between humans and the environment. The natural environment must maintain a place as an equal partner to its human inhabitants, and that equal partnership must be upheld through communication in the form of active environmental stewardship.

Sauron’s downfall does not constitute the final victory in *LotR*; the story cannot happily end until the hobbits realize how closely their fate intertwines with the treatment of the natural environment, and the Shirefolk’s human culture thrives only when Sam and the rest of the hobbits restore the environment to its former health. Gardening, especially as an act of environmental stewardship, demonstrates a mutually beneficial communication between humans and their habitat. The hobbits thrive only after Sam’s restoration efforts communicate the hobbits’ interest in the welfare of the Shire’s natural environment. This communication occurs through the actions of environmental stewardship, and the subsequent bloom of both Shire and Shirefolk indicates Tolkien’s beliefs in proper husbandry as the means for the future benefit of human culture’s welfare.

An enlightened agrarian philosophy only makes up one facet of environmental-human relationships in *LotR*; Tolkien also spends immense time highlighting the relationship between humans and fauna. Of the many non-fantastical animals roaming Middle-earth, horses comprise the majority of description, mention, and even honor amongst the anthroposemiotic cultures. All of the anthropoid communities—whether they are elves, orcs, hobbits, men, and even dwarves on occasion—use horses as their primary mode of transportation and even as companions.

Tolkien provides vast detail to the relationships developed between humans and horses, especially Tom Bombadil and Fatty Lumpkin and Gandalf and Shadowfax. Because Tom and Gandalf spend so much time communicating in various ways with their equine counterparts, Fatty Lumpkin and Shadowfax symbolize the inherent potential for communication between
human culture and the common fauna of the natural world. These linguistic interactions between horse and human move both parties toward a more highly synthesized concept of their relationship. This synthesis occurs because of the bidirectional quality of semiotic processes (“Gardens” 123). And both humans and nature may mutually benefit in the synthesis derived from sustained interaction. This alliance between human and animal emerges from numerous instances of communication between Gandalf and Tom’s verbal sign system and Fatty Lumpkin and Shadowfax’s nonverbal system. Crossing sign systems, however, is not enough to build a friendship; Gandalf and Tom adhere to the basic facets of politeness theory when communicating with their horses. Because politeness theory delineates power, especially when “a power differential exists between partners,” the polite communication between human agents and environmental agents produces the image of human culture’s reliance on an egalitarian partnership with environmental culture (Knobloch, Satterlee, and DiDomenico 306). After Gandalf and Tom acknowledge Shadowfax and Fatty Lumpkin’s independence through polite discourse, the horses align their interests with those of Gandalf and Tom. This emphasis on the confluence rather than subjugation of interests between human and environmental representatives highlights Tolkien’s belief in the mutual benefit derived from elevating the natural environment’s ontology to an equitable partnership with human culture’s existence.

Fatty Lumpkin’s appearance and relationship with Tom Bombadil characterizes one of the earliest instances of the benefits shared from human-environmental communication. After Tom Bombadil saves Sam, Frodo, Merry, and Pippin from the Barrow-wights, the hobbits express their panic when they realize their ponies fled with all their provisions. Tom returns the ponies and brings Fatty Lumpkin, his pony, as well. The hobbits’ ponies, however, no longer appear as fear-driven beasts:
Behind [Bombadil] came in an obedient line six ponies... The last was plainly old Fatty Lumpkin... Merry, to whom the others belonged, had not, in fact, given them any such names, but they answered to the new names that Tom had given them for the rest of their lives. Tom called them one by one and they climbed over the brow and stood in a line.

(I.8.141)

This passage details specific instances of human-environmental cultural synthesis. First, Fatty Lumpkin possesses a name, and that name includes a given name and surname. Though the name sounds comic, Fatty Lumpkin’s name closely resembles the name of one of the hobbits’ close friends, Fatty Bolger. Tom’s decision to give Fatty Lumpkin and the other ponies a respectable name elevates the dignity of the animals beyond their role as subordinate tools. By providing names to the ponies, Tom communicates a face-saving message by upholding the ponies’ desired image by stressing their independence from obligation. Obviously the ponies cannot actually speak, so they show their approval for their new names by answering to their monikers for the remainder of their existence. Another instance of synthesis occurs when Tom calls for the ponies; the ponies individually approach and stand in a line formation in the order that Tom calls their names. Such obedience could imply a new subservience to Tom Bombadil, but it is far more likely that their compliance with Tom derives from Tom’s willingness to engage in respectful treatment of these ponies. Cooperation, not subjugation, is paramount for Tolkien, and Tom wants the hobbits to learn how to cooperate with their equine counterparts.

Instead of merely presenting the ponies as returned lost property to their hobbit masters, Tolkien has Tom act as a translator between the human and environmental sign system. Tom names the ponies and calls them into formation for the purpose of translating the ponies’
motivations into a verbal communication accessible for the hobbits or any member of human culture:

“Here are your ponies, now!’ he said. ‘They’ve more sense (in some ways) than you wandering hobbits have – more sense in their noses. For they sniff danger ahead which you walk right into; and if they run to save themselves, then they run the right way. You must forgive them all; for though their hearts are faithful, to face fear of Barrow-wights is not what they were made for. See, here they come again, bringing all their burdens!’” (I.8.141)

While Tom Bombadil and other characters—such as Gandalf, Treebeard, or elves—possess alacrity for understanding nuanced environmental sign, hobbits, who represent Englishmen and larger Western Europe, are far simpler folk. For Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, who have yet to leave the simplicity of the Shire, the ponies’ desertion of their masters appears more like the faults of a broken tool than a complex motivation for self-preservation. Observing the gap in the communication between hobbits and ponies, Tom feels obligated to explain the ponies’ behavior and praise their actions. Tom makes clear that the ponies’ actions were more sensible, and he orders the hobbits to forgive the ponies because the hobbits do not seem to grasp a clear communication of danger from their animals. When Tom explains the ponies’ actions and motivations, Tolkien gives a glimpse of directly rendering seemingly inscrutable nonverbal zoosemiotic sign into easily accessible verbal communication. In this scenario, Tolkien shows even more savvy by making the communication across different sign systems appear easy, especially when the human benefits from the environment’s message. Once Tolkien illustrates how the environment may communicate with a human and vice versa, he begins characterizing fauna such as Fatty Lumpkin with shared human traits like the capacity for wisdom or friendship.
Because demonstrating the confluence of interests between human and environmental culture is integral to Tolkien’s message for environmental stewardship, Tom’s relationship with Fatty Lumpkin encompasses more than mutual respect generated by comprehension across differing sign systems. Tom and Fatty Lumpkin share a friendship. Friendship, of course, requires that all parties act according to a state of mutual trust and interest. When Frodo asks, “Where does that other old animal, that Fatty Lumpkin, come from?” Tom responds: “He’s mine…My four-legged friend; though I seldom ride him, and he wanders often far, free upon the hillsides” (I.8.141). Tom emphasizes Fatty Lumpkin as his “four-legged friend” and Fatty Lumpkin’s wanderings as “free upon the hillsides.” Tom does not give Fatty Lumpkin permission to wander; the horse feels at liberty to move where he may. The implication, then, is that Tom provides safe passage to Fatty Lumpkin. Fatty Lumpkin explores the wilderness because Tom exercises his protection over Fatty Lumpkin’s life and liberty. In return, Tom explains how Fatty Lumpkin reciprocates in their friendship: “When your ponies stayed with me, they got to know my Lumpkin; and they smelt him in the night, and quickly ran to meet him. I thought he’d look for them and with his words of wisdom take all their fear away” (I.8.141). Though Fatty Lumpkin does not owe the hobbits or their ponies any obligation of assistance, he understands that the wellbeing of the hobbits and their mounts means a great deal to Tom. When Tom says that he “thought he’d look for them,” Tolkien illumines not only a deep mutual trust, but also Tom’s belief that Fatty Lumpkin would independently surmise the danger for the ponies and act according to Tom’s interests. Similarly, when Tom announces that he will escort the hobbits to the nearest road, Fatty Lumpkin proves an enthusiastic mount for his friend (I.8.143). Just as Tom Bombadil shows his friendship through the protection of Fatty Lumpkin, Fatty Lumpkin happily acquiesces to aiding Tom’s friends and serving as Tom’s mode of
transportation. The pivotal point for this relationship revolves around positive-face messages that continually emphasize approval sought from a friend, the image that Fatty Lumpkin wishes to uphold. This expression of friendship and confluence of interests and respect is not confined to Tom and Fatty Lumpkin; the partnership Gandalf and Shadowfax, further highlight the mutual benefit gained from the synthesis of human-environmental cultural interests through communication across the cultures’ respective sign systems.

Whereas Tom and Fatty Lumpkin’s relationship resembled a relaxed friendship between neighbors or colleagues, Gandalf and Shadowfax’s relationship corresponds to the bond between warriors, and their communication across human-environmental culture proves vital for the victory over Sauron and salvation of Middle-earth. As Dickerson and Evans observe, “Gandalf sees this [inherent worth of all things on Middle-earth]…and understands the value—even the necessity—of working to protect it” (43). The roles of both Gandalf and Shadowfax cannot be overstated in the greater context of *LotR*, and the subsequent requirement for their partnership further underlines Tolkien’s devotion to elevating the natural environment’s ontology to equal with human culture’s existence. The first part of this elevation, of course, requires someone with a verbal communication system to express the importance of nonverbal communicators such as Shadowfax. At the Council of Elrond, Gandalf remarks on the wondrous nature of Shadowfax:

“The horses of the Nine cannot vie with him; tireless, swift as the flowing wind.

Shadowfax they called him. By day his coat glistens like silver; and by night it is like a shade, and he passes unseen. Light is his footfall! Never before had any man mounted him, but I took him and tamed him, and so speedily he bore me that I reached the Shire when Frodo was on the Barrow-downs, though I set out from Rohan only when he set out from Hobbiton.” (II.2.256)
All of the images Gandalf ascribes to Shadowfax derive from the elements of nature. Shadowfax is “swift as the flowing wind,” his pelt “glistens like silver” or it is “like a shade,” and his stride is “light.” Gandalf provides a description more fit for a force of nature than a horse. As if the image of unbound natural strength is not enough, Gandalf then comments that the horse is essentially untamable. But, of course, Gandalf quickly announces that he tamed the animal, and then he describes riding Shadowfax with the speed of a tornado. The effect of Gandalf’s language empowers the image of both Gandalf and Shadowfax. Gandalf raises Shadowfax’s ontology to equal with an unconquerable natural phenomenon, before he claims he pacified him.

The term tame, of course, appears a loaded word, especially in regards to human-environmental interaction, but Gandalf’s treatment of Shadowfax does not mesh with an implication of subjugation; Gandalf’s proceeding actions and language regarding Shadowfax echoes rhetoric employed to describe the relationship between equals, not master and servant. It is Gandalf’s emphasis on providing face-saving messages of Shadowfax’s negative face image as autonomous from obligation to human culture and positive face image as an equal that wins Shadowfax over. Shortly after he summarizes Shadowfax and the subsequent tempering of the horse, Gandalf says, “I sent him back to his master; but a great friendship has grown between us, and if I have need he will come at my call” (II.2.258). Gandalf’s language mirrors the same language employed by Tom Bombadil describing his relationship with Fatty Lumpkin. Since Gandalf refers to Shadowfax as a friend, the question arises of how an equitable relationship may develop when Gandalf says that he tamed the horse as opposed to gentled, befriended, or earned Shadowfax’s trust. Again, Tolkien points to communication and mutual respect when, later, Eomer, the nephew of King Theoden, warns Aragorn about Gandalf’s reputation in King Theoden’s court: “Speak not the name of Gandalf loudly in Theoden’s ears! He is wroth. For
Gandalf took the horse that is called Shadowfax, the most precious of all the king’s steeds, chief of the Mearas, which only the Lord of the Mark may ride” (III.2.425). Eomer implies that Gandalf’s relationship with Shadowfax angered the king because Gandalf robbed Theoden of property that symbolized political power.

Because the local human culture treated Shadowfax as a piece of property as opposed to an intelligent being, Gandalf’s earlier testament at the Council of Elrond that “never before had any man mounted him” becomes much clearer: no human had ever mounted Shadowfax before because no man had ever thought of Shadowfax as more than a magnificent tool within human cultural context. Eomer continues, “For the side of their race was the great horse of Eorl that knew the speech of Men. Seven nights ago Shadowfax returned; but the king’s anger is not less, for now the horse is wild and will let no man handle him” (III.2.425). Clearly, Shadowfax understands verbal communication; his species of horse possesses the ability to understand human culture’s sign systems. Since this knowledge of Shadowfax’s comprehension is common knowledge to, at the very least, royal members of Rohirric culture, Shadowfax’s disinterest in acting as nothing more than a mode of transportation and a symbol of power human political power makes sense. Once Gandalf treats Shadowfax as more than a dumb beast—when Gandalf uses positive face-saving messages regarding Shadowfax’s role as a friend and equal—Shadowfax relegates his loyalty to the wizard. Through Shadowfax’s agency in deciding his role within human cultural context, Tolkien points to the importance of human culture’s responsibility in extending respect to the natural environment in order to earn that respect in return.

The success of this communication between human and natural environment resides in the expressions of mutual respect explicitly broadcasted by both parties within and across their
primary sign systems. Because Gandalf requires Shadowfax’s extraordinary swiftness to accomplish dangerous missions necessary for defeating Sauron, he must show every degree of politeness toward Shadowfax. When Gandalf must ride with Legolas, Aragorn, and Gimli to King Theoden’s court, he calls for Shadowfax: “Then lifting up his head he gave a long whistle. So clear and piercing was the note that the others stood amazed to hear such a sound come from those old bearded lips. Three times he whistled; and then faint and far off it seemed to them that they heard the whinny of a horse borne up from the plains upon the eastern wind” (III.5.492). Gandalf’s call for Shadowfax is a nonverbal summons that imbricates both zoosemiotic and anthroposemiotic sign systems. Even though Eomer earlier commented on Shadowfax’s ability to understand human culture sign system, Gandalf extends deference to Shadowfax’s native nonverbal sign system through a nonverbal call. Gandalf’s whistle is more than a casual, nonverbal sign employed as a parallel for an anthroposemiotic verbal command; the whistle’s particularly piercing quality mirrors the pitch of a swift gust of wind as evidenced by the parallel in Shadowfax’s whinny “borne up from the plains upon the eastern wind.” In other words, Gandalf’s whistle imitates the sound of an atmospheric phenomenon in order to alert Shadowfax to Gandalf’s presence. Similarly, Shadowfax’s return whinny acts as a nonverbal zoosemiotic communication to convey an anthroposemiotic message that he is coming to meet Gandalf. Both horse and rider communicate across semiospheres demonstrating the possibility for bridging the zoosemiotic and anthroposemiotic through a mutual show of respect. Because Shadowfax provides aid out of friendship and not servitude, Gandalf’s reliance on nonverbal communication acknowledges Shadowfax’s lack of obligation. In other words, Gandalf’s whistle is a face-saving message, because Shadowfax resented the obligations previously laid on him by King Theoden. As one of the noble emissaries of environmental culture, Shadowfax will not be beholden to
human interests. Because the wizard’s nonverbal call acknowledges Shadowfax’s lack of obligation, the horse’s answer demonstrates Shadowfax’s compliance as a matter of equitable friendship and not servitude.

Not only does Gandalf uphold Shadowfax’s negative face image through nonverbal communication, he also upholds Shadowfax’s positive face image in their friendship when Gandalf verbally addresses Shadowfax: “Time presses, so with your leave, my friends, we will ride. We beg you to use all the speed that you can…I will set Gimli before me, and by his leave Shadowfax shall bear us both” (III.5.493). The change from a lack of obligation to seeking approval occurs when Gandalf refers to Shadowfax and his companion horses, Hasufel and Arod, as “my friends.” Again, Gandalf understands the importance of emphasizing that Shadowfax’s aid derives from a mutually beneficial partnership between human and horse. Thus, Gandalf appeals to Shadowfax’s positive face image as an equal partner by seeking the horses’ approval in bearing human burdens. The egalitarian disposition of the partnership becomes more explicit when Gandalf acknowledges Shadowfax as a comrade-in-arms: “He has come for me: the horse of the White Rider. We are going to battle together” (III.5.493). When he rides Shadowfax, Gandalf does not use a saddle. Such a riding device would muddy the equality of their partnership dynamics. At this point in the epic, Gandalf has already changed from Gandalf the Grey into Gandalf the White; for Gandalf to become the White Rider—perhaps the most powerful hero opposing Sauron—he requires Shadowfax’s help and not the other way around. Humanity’s greatest hero requires nature’s assistance; Gandalf says, “He has come for me” not “He has come because of me.” The language implies that Shadowfax arrives to collect Gandalf for battle. Because Gandalf must convince Shadowfax to aid the wizard as an indispensable ally in the struggle against Sauron, Shadowfax and the natural environment’s culture that he
represents gains a greater degree of agency and importance that comes to fruition in Gandalf’s confrontation with the Witch-King of Angmar.

While Gandalf and Shadowfax do not actually engage in combat with the Witch-King, captain of Sauron’s feared Ring-wraiths, Tolkien highlights Shadowfax’s courage in the face of terror as heroism fit for remembrance in human cultural history. The confrontation unfolds at the height of the Siege of Gondor; Mordor’s forces beat back Gondor’s defenders and smash open the gates of Minas Tirith, the capitol city of Gondor.

In rode the Lord of the Nazgul, under the archway that no enemy ever yet had passed, and all fled before his face. All save one. There waiting, silent and still in the space before the Gate, sat Gandalf upon Shadowfax: Shadowfax who alone among the free horses of the earth endured the terror, unmoving, steadfast as a graven image in Rath Dinen. (V.4.811)

Tolkien places the importance of this moment squarely on Shadowfax’s actions: Gandalf cannot possibly hope to confront the Witch-King, let alone fight him, without a mount. The language of this scene pays special attention to Shadowfax’s agency; like the “free peoples” of Treebeard’s naming poem, Shadowfax is a “free horse,” and that freedom insinuates that Shadowfax makes a conscious decision to endure the nearly unbearable terror emanating from the Witch-King’s presence. Not only does Shadowfax independently decide to endure that terror, his endurance and courage is far greater than all the other human defenders fleeing the Witch-King’s presence. Tolkien draws a parallel between the horse’s unflinching bravery and a “graven image of Rath Dinen.” Rath Dinen is a street in Minas Tirith where Gondor laid to rest all its great kings and stewards; the street serves as human culture’s tribute to a select number of particularly virtuous, powerful, and important in their history. These tombs mirror the way indigenous peoples gather
and share knowledge. Anthropologist Tim Ingold observes, “It is through the activity of remembering that memories are forged. This activity, moreover, is tantamount to the movement of the person through the world. Memories, then, are generated along the paths of movement that each person lays down in the course of his or her life” (148). Rath Dinen records and displays the ideals that define and guide human culture. It is a monument constructed for the sake of continual remembrance into posterity. Through the juxtaposition of Shadowfax and Rath Dinen, Tolkien exhibits the possibility of environmental culture exuding characteristics worthy of remembrance and celebration. In essence, Shadowfax’s actions communicate zoosemiotic signs of alliance with humanity, and those actions deserve remembrance because his existence and movements through the world exceed the actions of many humans in Middle-earth.

Shadowfax alone receives the comparison with Gondor’s greatest rulers, and his actions as an environmental agent are worthy of remembrance in the annals of human history. If Gandalf had not exercised such respect for Shadowfax and the environment, he could not have rallied Rohan, arrived at Gondor in time, or stood before the Witch-King when all other defenders fled. Middle-earth would be lost to Sauron’s darkness if Gandalf did not recognize the importance of communicating with agents of the natural environment in a manner respecting the environment’s agency or interests. Through little more than recognizing environmental culture’s existence as equal to human culture, Gandalf protects and advances the interests of all living things. Between Gandalf and Shadowfax’s partnership and Tom Bombadil and Fatty Lumpkin’s friendship, Tolkien offers the infinitely beneficial possibilities for the synthesis of human-environmental culture through meaningful, respectful, and, above all else, equitable discourse.

Tolkien aggrandizes the natural environment’s existence because he believes that human culture places too high a value on its own self-importance. As Paul Kocher observes, “Tolkien is
sure that modern man’s belief that he is the only intelligent species on Earth has not been good for him” (125). Though Tolkien obviously cares for the natural environment’s well-being, he depicts the benefits in various forms of human-environmental communication for humanity’s sake. The hobbit community thrives because Samwise Gamgee, the local gardener, recognizes that the history, art, traditions, and existence of his culture—human culture—relies on the continued upkeep of the natural environment’s health. Similarly, Gandalf and Tom Bombadil require the willing partnership of Shadowfax and Fatty Lumpkin, agents of the natural environment, in order to help save Middle-earth from destruction, and Gandalf and Tom cannot gain their assistance without acknowledging the horses’ importance as partners through polite discourse across differing sign systems. Therefore, Tolkien appeals for an elevated appreciation and respect for the natural environment because humanity’s existence relies on the wellbeing of its collective habitat and the fellow creatures that inhabit it. The sustained success and cultural resonance of Lord of the Rings and its explicit themes of environmental communication and stewardship requires the continued study of the human-environmental cultural intersections in literature, especially within the context of fantasy genre fiction.
Placing more importance on sign systems with accessible codes does not necessarily seem unnatural or unfair. After all, I make all of my arguments through an anthroposemiotic sign system, and I encode all of my signs with the standard conventions expected of academic scholarship and modern American English. My argument about understanding the flexibility of our language to alter reality through the reconstruction of sign systems in an imagined landscape celebrates the complexity of anthroposemiosis without valorizing it. Fundamentally, Tolkien’s audience and prime beneficiaries of his epic Fantasy are his human readers. Tolkien understood not only the power of language to shape our Primary World reality but also the flexibility of language to shift meanings of reality depending on the context of the speaker, the object spoken of, and the listener among many other variables. Merely observing that Tolkien renders the virtues of environmental stewardship and appreciation is useful but superficial. The widespread success in concluding the same interpretations of these values is the greater achievement, and we must question why. How can a book that, in part, seeks “to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own” find an audience so large that *LotR* was translated into more than 40 languages (*Letters* 231; Li 21)? The answer resides within Tolkien’s understanding that Fantasy provides the ideal form for exploring how human beings conceive meaning from language.

Studying fantastic ecosemiosis or the semiotics of Fantasy in general has enormous potential for pinpointing different cultural valuations of differing signs and sign-functions. When a narrative begins in the context of an imagined Secondary World, the author exercises more
linguistic and symbolic control of signs and their meanings than an author constructing their story in a realistic world environment. Reading Fantasy implies a special contract between author and reader; the author will use familiar signs to provide readers with a point of reference, but the author will ultimately defy the preconceptions attached to those signs and reinvigorate them with new meaning inside their Secondary World. When the author strays from the imagined context of these signs, the reader senses the symbols and themes writhing underneath the text. Thus, the author leads the reader to discover new ways to interpret a sign by demonstrating how easily perceptions of reality fluctuate when hinged on the amorphous foundation of verbal-centric language.

Integrating ecosemiotic methodologies into literary analysis instigates another structure for analyzing the quality and function of literature, and its integration proves necessary for scholars specifically interested in understanding human perceptions of the zoosemiotic semiosphere. Buell, Meeker, Garrard, Cronon, and other environmental critics have done a great service in cultivating a growing discussion on textual representations of our natural environment. In particular, ecocriticism that observes or denounces the inherent contradictions of pastoral writing and anthropomorphizing environmental sign rightly decries the needless imputation of human desires on the Umwelt. Authors who engage in pastoral writing may anthropomorphize flora and fauna for the purpose of bringing the human reader to empathize with nature, but superimposing human ambitions on the natural world, in fact, divorces the reader from any empathetic connection with the nonverbal natural community. Gentling a horse or tending a garden might insinuate subjugation because the human appears as “master” of a nonverbal entity, but, as I have shown with Gandalf’s companionship with Shadowfax and the hobbits’ reliance on the natural environment for prosperity, taming and tending constitute a partnership founded on
mutual beneficence and respect. The real culprit is conceiving of the natural environment as inert objects because the Umwelt does not primarily communicate through a verbal or vocal channel, not the inability of zoosemiosis to easily convert into anthroposemiosis.

If all signs within an anthroposemiotic sign system culture yielded interpretants of the natural environment that defined nature as a thing bereft of sense or sentience, then anthropomorphizing nature would initiate a valuable first step toward acknowledging the environment as more than an inert object. Anthroposemiosis, however, allows humans to adapt their communication to acknowledge and respect swaths of verbal and nonverbal organisms outside their own semiosphere. Notwithstanding a preference for their own social conventions, codes, and signs, various individuals within differing human sub-cultures demonstrate their respect for a foreign sub-culture by learning and translating the foreign into the familiar. A faithful translation occurs when the translator learns not only the linguistic mechanics of the foreign culture but also the history, social conventions, mythology, icons, etc. of that foreign culture. In other words, the faithful translator learns the context of the signs within a foreign semiosphere in order to reconstruct the foreign signs into familiar ones that the translator’s culture comprehends and admires. By applying the same philosophy for translation to the zoosemiotic semiosphere, writers can textualize nonverbal sign in an anthroposemiotic sign system, but the strategies must change to inculcate empathy between the verbal and nonverbal entities.

Because texts act as mediating devices for experiential and emotional interaction, literature functions as the ideal canvas for drawing sensory-centric nonverbal signs into anthroposemiotic sign systems. And, just as Sebeok argued for understanding nonverbal sign, the author must establish the reader’s perceptions of the narrative so that the reader may deduce the
nonverbal communication by later subtracting those perceptions from the expressed nonverbal sign-relation. In other words, the author must initially construct a context for the reader and nonverbal organism and its sign system within the text. Once the author establishes a baseline for judging the nonverbal sign, the reader may interpret any weight given to communication outside that context as a dramatic and symbolic moment in the text. Tolkien frankly expresses his distaste for allegory and refutes any identification of allegory within *LotR’s*, yet Tolkien reluctantly admits that Tom Bombadil allegorizes seeking knowledge for the sake of appreciating foreign or unlike entities. Even without Tolkien’s admission, Tom Bombadil’s place in the story appears irrelevant at that point in the narrative yet Tolkien takes great pains to convey his seemingly silly and quaint interactions with the hobbits. So, when Tolkien reveals Bombadil as a force of and for Middle-earth, Tom’s human-like appearance, motivations, actions, and language violate the context of the character and indicate a symbolic representation of nature’s capacity for complex and intelligent communication and social behavior. Similarly, Tolkien contextualizes Treebeard and the Ents as trees with authentic agency and a unique verbal language that encodes sign importance in temporal duration and intertextuality of precisely conveyed senses and emotions. Once Treebeard engages in shortened poetic verse, the poetry’s language and form signals Treebeard as a symbol for the necessity of environmentalist philosophy in the Primary World. For much of the story, Samwise Gamgee and the rest of hobbit culture happily reside in a pastoral environment. They shape nature into little gardens and farms for aesthetic pleasure, agriculture, and commerce, but they do not consider Middle-earth’s flora as anything more than a resource—even if a valuable resource—until Saruman obliterates the Shire’s natural landscape. Depicted as timid and peaceful, the hobbit culture breaks from its established context when they battle Saruman’s ruffians upon realizing that a loss of natural
landscape means a loss of their cultural identity and history. In this instance, Tolkien again symbolizes the natural environment as a definer of anthroposemiotic culture. Finally, the relationship between Fatty Lumpkin and Tom Bombadil and Shadowfax and Gandalf receive an excess of signification. Unlike the many nameless horses in *LotR*, Shadowfax and Fatty Lumpkin require polite discourse in both verbal and nonverbal sign systems before they acquiesce to becoming mounts and valuable companions to their riders. Thus, Lumpkin/Bombadil and Shadowfax/Gandalf symbolize how Primary World humans must demonstrate respect toward flora and fauna to gain the cooperation necessary for the survival of Umwelt and Lebenswelt. As each of these scenarios show, an author from an anthroposemiotic culture can relate a verbal message via empathy-inducing symbol to their reader, and, simultaneously, the author can faithfully translate nonverbal sign by creating a context for the reader.

Tolkien is not the first or the last author to adapt anthroposemiotic sign functions to approximate zoosemiotic communication or elevate the zoosemiosphere, but his mastery of written expression compounded with his love of the natural environment and the tradition and evolution of languages makes him an ideal case study. Certainly, fantastic eosemiosis represents only one method for portraying nonverbal sign without a human-centric perception. As noted in Chapter 1, both Edward Abbey and Aldo Leopold contextualized the natural environment with precise language characterizing how they sensed nonverbal sign, and whenever they romanticized about the Umwelt, they either made a narrative aside to contradict their romanticizing (as with Abbey) or became introspective at the validity of imputing human desires and thoughts on a nonverbal entity (as with Leopold). If nature writing requires special scientific or ecological knowledge or experience to ride the knife-edge between anthropomorphizing and competently translating nonverbal sign, then Fantasy proves the ideal genre for writers with
strong environmentalist convictions but lacking vast experience with nature’s functions. Freed from modernist disapproval, accusations of unjust anthropomorphism, and the tyranny of the dictionary’s univocal definitions, the aspiring Fantasy writer may embark on a creative discovery. They can construct a fantastic alternative landscape—similar yet different from the Primary World—capable of acquiring anthroposemiotic signs of the natural environment and obliterating, reconstructing, growing, and nourishing those signs to empower the environment as a fully sentient and complex community of living organisms. Ecosemiotic scholars can ill-afford restricting any human expression that interprets the environment’s existence as teeming with life and purpose independent from human-centric concern. For every human sign, sign-function, text, and code that produces interpretants of the natural environment as a socially, behaviorally, and linguistically complex community, humanity moves ever closer toward attaining an equitable co-existence with all living organisms.
WORKS CITED


