

THE LANDSCAPE OF TYRANNY AND THE SANCTUARY OF THE BODY: AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S THE LORD OF THE RINGS AND TAHEREH MAFI’S SHATTER ME

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Abstract

This thesis presents a comparative ecocritical analysis of J.R.R. Tolkien’s classic high fantasy epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, and Tahereh Mafi’s contemporary dystopian young adult novel, *Shatter Me*. Despite their generational and generic differences, both books express anxieties regarding the exploitation of the natural world by oppressive political structures. Using a literary approach called ecocriticism, I examine how villains in both worlds like Sauron destroying forests in Middle-earth, or The Reestablishment ruining the sky and weather in *Shatter Me* destroy nature to build their empires. The paper also looks at how a dying planet effects the characters personally. I contrast Juliette’s dangerous, lonely touch in *Shatter Me* with Tolkien’s heroes, like Samwise Gamgee, who find mental strength just by staying connected to the soil. Finally, I show that untamed, wild spaces like hidden elven valleys or underground rebel bases are the only places where the heroes can safely heal, train, and plan their revolutions. Ultimately, this thesis argues that in both classic and modern fantasy, human freedom and a healthy earth are completely tied together; you cannot save one without saving the other.

Keywords: fantasy literature, fiction, dystopia, environment, Ecocriticism.

Introduction

Most readers think setting is just a background noise the scenery you usually past to get to the plot. But some authors use landscape as something far more complex than that. The world their characters walk through tells you everything about the forces crushing them, the wounds they carry, and what it might take to heal.

That’s what inspired me to read Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* alongside Tahereh Mafi’s *Shatter Me*. At first, people might think they couldn’t be more different one is a sprawling high fantasy epic written in the mid-twentieth century, the other a claustrophobic YA dystopia from 2011. But both books are filled by the same fear: that greed and authoritarian control they wrote in their books about don’t just break people, they break the earth itself.

My framework for reading them is ecocriticism a way of analyzing literature that takes the physical environment seriously as a site of meaning, not just atmosphere. Through the whole message, I argue that in both texts, tyranny announces itself through environmental destruction and the alienation of the human body. And crucially, both books suggest that wild, uncorrupted natural spaces aren’t just pretty they’re where resistance begins, and where people start to become “alive” again.

The Scars of Empire: Environmental Destruction

The most obvious thing Tolkien and Mafi share is this: their villains destroy nature, and they do it deliberately. Sauron is the clearest example in Tolkien. He doesn’t see Fangorn Forest as ancient or alive he sees timber. He tears it down to fuel Isengard’s furnaces, and Tolkien describes the destruction with a grief that feels almost personal. It probably was personal. Tolkien watched industrial England devour the countryside he loved, and he fought in a war that turned French fields

into mud and corpses. Perhaps those tragedies are what inspired him to write the series. Mordor reads like that trauma given form a landscape of ash, slag, and poisoned air where nothing grows and nothing can.

Mafi does something similar but pushes it further. In *Shatter Me*, environmental collapse isn't incidental it's a tool. The Reestablishment, the novel's authoritarian regime, has let the world rot and then positioned itself as the only thing standing between humanity and total extinction. The main character Juliette describes a sky that's the wrong color, weather that behaves like it's been broken, birds that have forgotten how to migrate because there's nowhere left to go. The natural world isn't just damaged but broken. Both authors are making the same uncomfortable point: you can't have a functioning dictatorship and a healthy planet at the same time. Domination requires destruction. The earth is always the first casualty.

The Fractured Self: The Body as Landscape

What makes the environmental destruction even more interesting is how it shows up in the characters themselves in their bodies, their relationships, and their sense of self.

Juliette is the most wrecking example. Her touch is lethal she drains the life out of anything she makes contact with. It's a condition that kept her locked in asylum for years, completely cut off from other people and from the natural world. When her emotions spiral out of control, she cracks the ground beneath her. That image is hard to forget her body and the broken earth responding to each other, both pushed past what they were meant to endure.

It doesn't feel like a coincidence. Mafi seems to be saying that Juliette's psychological damage and the planet's ecological damage are the same wound, just expressed differently. She can't touch anything living because she's been treated as a weapon rather than a person — and the world around her can't sustain life because it's been treated as a resource rather than something worth protecting.

Tolkien thinks in a different way, but makes the same point. In *Middle-earth*, the characters who hold up best under pressure aren't the strongest or the most powerful they're the ones most connected to the nature. Sam is the perfect example. He's not a hero at all many people think. He's a gardener who spends half the journey worrying about his garden back home. But he's the one who keeps going when everyone else falls apart. He carries Frodo. He resists the Ring. Meanwhile, kings and warriors crumble under its weight. Then there are the Ents ancient creatures whose whole purpose is tending trees and Tom Bombadil, who lives so deeply inside nature that the Ring can't even touch him. Tolkien keeps coming back to this idea: the closer you are to the earth, the harder you are to break. Compare that to Juliette, whose touch kills living things, who has never been allowed to feel grass under her feet or sunlight on her skin, Sam grows things. Juliette destroys them not because she wants to, but because a broken world made her that way. Both books are quietly saying the same thing: how you relate to the natural world says everything about how whole or broken you are inside.

Wild Sanctuaries as Spaces of Resistance

There's a clear pattern in both books whenever the characters finally find safety, it's never in a city or a fortress. It's always somewhere wild. In Tolkien, the Fellowship recovers in Rivendell and Lothlorien. These aren't military strongholds. They are places where nature can make you feel safe. When the characters arrive there exhausted and falling apart, what puts them back together isn't weapons or walls it's just being somewhere peaceful and alive. And Fangorn Forest, which Sauron tried to destroy, eventually fights back on its own terms. The Ents march. The trees remember what was done to them. I think Tolkien seems to genuinely believe that nature can't be destroyed forever

only angered. Mafi builds the same idea into her story through places like Omega Point and the Sanctuary. They're hidden, off the grid, away from The Reestablishment's cold and controlled world. And they're the only places where real life still exists. More importantly, they're where Juliette starts to change. Away from the regime's walls, she begins to understand her own power not as something monstrous, but as something she can actually control. Both authors seem to agree on one thing: humans can't fully conquer something wild. Forests don't follow orders. Rivers don't care about politics. That untamable quality is exactly what makes these places dangerous to tyrants and exactly why the characters who need to be free always end up there.

Conclusion: Two Styles, One Warning

Tolkien and Mafi write completely differently, but they're warning us about the same thing.

Tolkien writes slowly and carefully, like he has all the time in the world. His sentences are long and his descriptions of nature feel ancient, like the Earth itself. Mafi writes fast and sharp. Her sentences are short. She even uses strikethrough text words Juliette starts to think but can't let herself finish. One style feels like deep roots, the other feels like cracked pavement. But they're both describing the same wound. In both books, the only real path to freedom goes through the natural world. Healing yourself and healing the earth aren't two different things — they're the same thing, happening at the same time. Both Tolkien and Mafi say that you can't be truly free in a world you've destroyed. And honestly, given everything happening around us today, that's not just a story point. It feels like something worth paying attention to.

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