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# Into the Wild Woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction

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### Into the Wild Woods: On the Significance of Trees and Forests in Fantasy Fiction

#### **Abstract**

Surveys trees and forests in fantasy literature, paying particular attention to works by Charles de Lint and Robert Holdstock and their evocations of the sacred, the numinous, and the mythologically potent through arboreal imagery.

#### **Additional Keywords**

Borders in fantasy; Jones, Diana Wynne. Hexwood; Landscapes in fantasy; Nix, Garth. Old Kingdom series



## INTO THE WILD WOODS: ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TREES AND FORESTS IN FANTASY FICTION

WERONIKA ŁASZKIEWICZ

AMONG THE VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF THE NATURAL WORLD which in fantasy fiction become invested with otherworldly powers, trees and forests particularly often undergo transformations which elevate them from the domain of the natural into that of the super-natural. Consequently, their appearance in fantastic narratives as animated characters and magical woodlands strengthens the enchanting and estranging appeal of a story. Yet it is a misconception—born, perhaps, from too many formulaic fantasy novels (the likes of which which Diana Wynne Jones mocks in her *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* [rev. ed. 2006], for their ubiquitous “Forests of Doom” [73])—to perceive the trees and forests of fantasy as hardly anything else than amusing, but otherwise insignificant characters or as secretive groves (a staple element of fantastic world-building), preferably inhabited by elves whom every hero is obliged to visit during his/her journey. In the following paper I wish to explore how numerous fantasists—particularly those writing in the subgenres of high/epic fantasy and mythic fiction—draw upon and creatively reconstruct arboreal imagery present in myths and fairy tales not only to enrich their secondary worlds, but also to investigate issues pertaining to psychology and religion, to question mankind’s relationship with the environment, and to convey their own deep appreciation of nature. The analysis of a number of examples will illustrate the variety of roles and functions ascribed to fantastic trees and forests. The proposed analysis will be preceded by a brief summary of arboreal imagery appearing in myths and fairy tales, and followed by an inquiry into the meaning behind the genre’s persistence in depicting fantastic trees and forests.

Various mythologies from across the world account for sacred trees which serve as a link between mankind and the numinous. In *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (1958), Mircea Eliade identifies certain recurring themes among the multiple variants of the sacred tree. First of all, Eliade declares that “[n]o tree was ever adored for itself only, but always for what was revealed through it, for what it implied and signified” (268). In other words, the tree was often associated with a particular deity (270-280) or, together with an altar and

a sacred stone, it formed a place of worship, which Eliade calls a “microcosm,” because its nature reflected the nature of the cosmos. As the cosmic “inverted tree,” whose roots were in the sky and branches reached the earth, the sacred tree functioned also as a representation of the Universe (273-275). Moreover, the location of the tree was often perceived as the center of the universe, and the tree itself became the *axis mundi*—a link between heaven and earth (299). Because of its cycle of shedding and regeneration many cultures regarded the tree as symbol of life, fertility and resurrection (283-296), and numerous myths insisted that human life was connected to or, in fact, originated from trees and other plants (300-303). Today, some of the most recognizable examples of sacred trees are the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Tree of Life appearing in the Old Testament as well as in numerous other traditions (the universal motif of the *arbor vitae*), and Yggdrasil—the cosmic ash<sup>1</sup> tree of Norse mythology. From the various vegetation gods and other mythical beings connected with trees, the ones which have most strongly imprinted upon popular imagination are the Greek dryads and the Green Man. Though originally the word dryad denoted an “oak spirit” (Sherman 461), which was only one among the many tree spirits recognized by ancient mythology, today the name is ascribed to any nature spirit dwelling in a tree.<sup>2</sup> The Green Man is an enigmatic figure whose face, encompassed by or created from leaves and vines, has served as an architectural motif in European churches. The mystery surrounding his origins and identity<sup>3</sup> became a lasting inspiration for artists in different fields, including fantasy fiction.

As far as forests are concerned, as early as in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* the forest has been depicted as a place of testing, survival, and sacrifice. The image of Gilgamesh venturing into a cedar forest where he is challenged by its monstrous guardian (Doniger 379) has been reflected by numerous other traditions whose heroes need to face the threats of the wild woods to fulfill their quests; the Norse *Myrkviðr*—Mirky Wood (Duggan et al. 368) and the magical forest of Broceliande appearing in legends of questing knights are but two examples. Also folktales and fairy tales frequently depict the forest as a threatening territory from which the heroes—who either willingly seek refuge in the wild woods or are forced into their exile by the antagonist—can emerge only thanks to their cleverness and perseverance. Those heroes who actually manage to leave the forest do so stronger and wiser than they had been at the

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<sup>1</sup> Naturally, across different cultures and climates the sacred tree was associated with different tree species.

<sup>2</sup> In some traditions, the motif is reversed and the tree becomes a prison in which the hero is trapped against his will, just like Merlin was trapped by the sorceress Vivien according to some Arthurian legends.

<sup>3</sup> See Hutton, pp. 314-316.

beginning of their stories because the wilderness is a place of growth and transformation. The liminal nature of one's journey into the green depth has been addressed also outside myths and fairy tales, e.g. Dante's *Inferno* begins with the hero lost in the dark woods, in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (which reflects the Puritans' perception of the wilderness as the abode of evil) the forest is the place where the protagonist (apparently) discovers the shocking truth about his community, and in Robert Frost's haunting poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the forest becomes a symbol of eternal rest. This ubiquity of images in which the forest is depicted as a—potentially dangerous—place of transition and transformation can be partially explained if we recognize the forest as a symbolic representation of the unconscious. Following Jung, J.E. Cirlot explains: "the sylvan terrors that figure so prominently in children's tales symbolize the perilous aspects of the unconscious, that is, its tendency to devour or obscure the reason" (112).<sup>4</sup> Thus, a journey into the wild woods becomes a symbolic representation of a journey into one's self, which can uncover the secrets and desires locked in a person's mind.

Yet not all myths and tales depict the woods solely as a place of dread and horror. The sustenance and protection which people could find in the forest gave rise to many positive images. The mythic Arcadia of Greek mythology—the domain of the wild god Pan—is a blissful land where people can live in harmony with nature and the wilderness. In Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the woods become the stage for a comedy of errors involving mortals and fairy creatures. The poets of Romanticism unanimously expressed their worshipful admiration of the natural world, which they perceived as imbued with genuine spirit. Finally, in the unfailingly popular tales of Robin Hood and other outlaws the forest is a haven offering freedom from a corrupted reign. Thus, throughout the ages the menace of the wild woods has been countered by images which depict the forest as a place of liberty and deliverance, and as an entity with which man can commune.

While some writers of fantasy fiction use fantastic trees and forests only as staple elements of their world-building, numerous others have recognized the potential locked in the imagery of myths and fairy tales. As a result, in modern fantasy trees and forests also become a vessel of the numinous, a liminal space of trial and testing, a catalyst of the hero's physical and psychological metamorphosis, and an active agent in the resolution of a conflict. Moreover, they are frequently presented as the last vestige of myth and faerie in the modern world, and their portrayal may be an allegory through which the author intends to convey a salient message about mankind's relationship with the

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Jung's thoughts on trees and forests see Mann, pp. 39-49.

natural world. Below is a selection of examples which illustrate the genre's complex arboreal imagery.

The sheer abundance of sacred trees and forests appearing in fantasy narratives reveals the degree to which the imagination of their authors has been captured by mythological imagery. Numerous secondary mythologies feature ancient, otherworldly trees which are a key element of creation and divine order, and therefore function as an extension of the numinous. For instance, Tolkien's *Silmarillion* describes the Two Trees of Valinor—Telperion and Laurelin—which were created by Yavanna of the Ainur and served as sources of light. When the trees were destroyed by the evil Melkor, their last fruit and flowers were transformed into the sun and the moon, whereas the last of their light was hidden in the Silmarils. Arguably, it was partly due to the popularity of Tolkien's Middle-earth that other writers of fantasy fiction also felt obliged to equip their worlds with sacred trees and ancient woodlands inhabited by elves, thus gradually turning these elements into clichés which Jones mocks in her *Tough Guide*. Some of her mockery echoes in John Clute and John Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) in which forests are contrasted with woods in the following way: "Not only are they bigger, and thus more of a barrier, but they have existed almost forever, and are thus more likely to contain creatures or spirits from the dawn of time" (362). Nonetheless, since sacred trees and groves hold a prominent role in numerous myths and tales predating modern fantasy, it is a mistake to regard them solely as one of the many clichés perpetuated by the epigones of Tolkien's creation.<sup>5</sup>

After all, several fantasists writing after Tolkien managed to establish their own distinct worlds in which sacred trees are bestowed with original traits and functions. In Stephen Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*, which are set in an imaginary world called simply "the Land," sacred trees—Revelwood and the One Tree—are not only the object of worshipful admiration, but also a source of fear. While the enormous tree-city of Revelwood is, together with a city-fortress called Revelstone, an embodiment of the intimate bond between the Land and its inhabitants (who deeply cherish their world),<sup>6</sup> the One Tree is an *axis mundi* of Donaldson's imaginary realm and a resting place for an apocalyptic beast, The Worm of the World's End. As such, it is an incarnation of the Holy, and therefore evokes deference and fear. A different version of a sacred tree appears in Terry Brooks's *The Elfstones of Shannara* (the second volume of *The Sword of Shannara* trilogy). Ellcrys, a sentient tree with silvery bark

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth remembering that Tolkien's creation was, in turn, inspired by the works of William Morris and George MacDonald, whose prose romances also feature enchanted woodlands inhabited by strange creatures.

<sup>6</sup> Even the names of the cities contain unmistakably positive connotations.

and red leaves, serves as a linchpin of the Forbidding which keeps demons at bay. The waning of Ellcrys's powers threatens the safety of the imaginary Four Lands, and only its rebirth can restore order. The well-being of the sacred tree is, therefore, the main catalyst of events, and the restoration of the tree becomes the goal of the quest. The goal is eventually achieved by the sacrifice of another life: Ellcrys is referred to by the pronoun "she," because it is created from the life of elven women (the Chosen). The connection between females and trees is a theme that has been explored also by other fantasists, particularly by Robert Holdstock and Charles de Lint, whose works will be discussed further on.

Brooks's Ellcrys might have inspired the weirwood trees that appear in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, because like Ellcrys, they have white trunks and red leaves. According to the ancient history of Westeros, the weirwood trees were initially held in reverence by the Children of the Forest (a non-human race that lived in harmony with nature), who adorned their bark with faces. Because of the trees' blood-red sap, the faces seem to be shedding tears of blood,<sup>7</sup> which transforms the trees into disturbing otherworldly entities that mediate between the human and the divine. Not surprisingly then, subsequent inhabitants of Westeros continued to approach the weirwood trees with reverence and to perceive them as the embodiment of divine powers—the Old Gods—to whom the people of the North still send their prayers. What is more, in Martin's world some exceptional individuals are born as the greenseers, which means that they can merge their consciousness with the ancient trees and observe the world, including its past and future. Thus, the sacred trees become a channel through which a person can ascend to a different—divine-like—state of existence. Finally, a very original concept of the sacred tree appears in Robert Holdstock and Garry Kilworth's short story "The Ragthorn" (1991). The narrator of the story explores the mystery of the eponymous tree which—according to some 'lost' fragments of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the Book of Revelation—can resurrect those buried under its roots (provided that certain formal requirements are fulfilled). The ragthorn is a sacred tree of chthonic nature, whose roots symbolically reach into the Underworld. The supposed connection between the ragthorn and Christianity is a particularly intriguing idea, and one of the many cases in which Holdstock employs arboreal imagery to enter into a dialogue with Christianity. The protagonist of the short story, obsessed with the promise of immortality, 'discovers' that Christ's Crown of Thorns and His Cross are, in fact, symbols pointing to the role of the ragthorn tree in the resurrection, and that Christ resurrected Lazarus also through the power of the tree. One of

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<sup>7</sup> Ferber observes that the motif of a bleeding tree has appeared in various cultures and works, and that it can be traced back as far as to Virgil's *Aeneid* (22).

the 'lost' texts even states that "*The Lord is in all things and He is in the One Tree*" (58), which suggests that the ragthorn is both part of divine creation and an embodiment of the Holy.<sup>8</sup> All in all, the entire story becomes a provoking synthesis of myth and Christianity.

It should be noted that many sacred trees of fantasy fiction are reconstructed versions of Yggdrasil—the great World Tree of Norse mythology on which Odin hung, pierced by a spear, in order to obtain secret lore. For instance, in Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* the kings of Brennín may invoke the help of their sky-god, Mörnir, by offering their lives as sacrifice on the sacred Summer Tree. Since the current king, Ailell, is unwillingly to fulfill his duty, Paul (one of the five heroes transported to Brennín) volunteers to take his place. The three days and nights which Paul spends tied to the tree cleanse him of grief and transform him into the sky-god's earthly intermediary. Another reworking of Odin's tale appears in Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series. According to the series' secondary mythology, during the Age of Legend the Aes Sedai created the magnificent chora trees that emitted a sense of peace. The trees were mostly lost during the Breaking of the World, and two surviving ones—Avendesora ("Tree of Life" in the fictional Old Tongue) and its sapling, Avendoraldera—become revered and sacred entities. The cutting of Avendoraldera by the king of Cairhien, who intended to make a throne of its wood, resulted in a war with the Aiel from whom the kingdom originally received the sapling.<sup>9</sup> Avendesora, on the other hand, was preserved in the Aiel's sacred place, Rhuidean. At some point in the story, one of the protagonists, Mat Cauthon, is found hanging from a spear placed among the branches of the tree after he bargained for knowledge and power with the mysterious Eelfinn. Naturally, Mat's experience of death and resurrection, as well as the 'gifts' he gained from the bargain, significantly alter his status and perception of the world. In Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* the protagonist's sacrifice on the sacred tree is likewise depicted as a revolutionary and cathartic experience. Shadow, entangled in a scheme devised by Loki and Mr. Wednesday (an incarnation of Odin), eventually subjects himself to the agony

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<sup>8</sup> The ragthorn is described as "the One Tree," which is a name that appears also in Donaldson's *Chronicles*. By and large, fantasists frequently use names modified with the adjective "one," which points to the primordial and mystical nature of the entity described.

<sup>9</sup> The story of Avendoraldera was most probably inspired by Tolkien's account of the White Tree of Númenor. After the destruction of the Two Trees of Valinor, Yavanna created a copy of Telperion, whose sapling produced Nimloth, the White Tree of Númenor (whose fruit, in turn, gave life to the White Tree of Gondor). Tempted by Sauron, the last king of Númenor destroyed the Tree in an act of sacrifice to Melkor.

on the World Tree. It is only because of his visit to the Underworld and subsequent resurrection that the man discovers his true identity and the real motivation behind the antagonists' actions.

In several cases fantasists combine the motif of the sacred trees with a reworked image of the Green Man. In Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* the Green Man, whom the heroes encounter at the end of their first quest, is revealed to be a member of an ancient artificial race, the Nym, that took care of plants during the Age of Legends. In the short story "Thorn" (1986), Holdstock playfully reverses the motif of the Green Man serving as church decoration, and instead presents him as a scheming nature-deity that intends to challenge Christianity. The protagonist, Thomas Wyatt, a village mason, is secretly asked by Thorn to sculpt his face in a newly built church. The god insists that his face should be finished before the sculptures representing the Apostles, so that he can have control over them and the church. For reasons of his own, Wyatt eventually rebels against the task, but his rebellion turns into a futile attempt which does not diminish Thorn's power. Drawing on the unknown origins of the Green Man motif, Holdstock depicts him as a rather sinister figure whose appearance on church walls is far from accidental. The ambiguous nature of the Green Man is a motif which later returns in *The Hollowing* (1993)—the fourth novel in Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* cycle. When Alex Bradley's soul is locked in Ryhope Wood, the mythic heroes littering the boy's memory are given flesh. The Green Knight (the Green Man) functions as a benevolent figure aiding Alex's recovery, but his efforts are hindered by a malicious being known as the giggler. Eventually, it is revealed that the Green Knight (the legendary Sir Gawain) and the giggle are but aspects of one figure. The Green Chapel, which in medieval sources is a place of testing for courage and loyalty, in Holdstock's reconstruction becomes a place situated between worlds, where the boy can be restored to wholeness. Alex's restoration is completed only when he reabsorbs the mythic figures; his father notes afterwards that "there was something *whole* about the boy, now: trickster and conscience had come back. The two faces of the Green Knight had returned" (303).<sup>10</sup>

Holdstock's renditions of the Green Man are clearly developed in a dialectic between mythology and Christianity, and emphasize the figure's dual nature. A similar approach appears in Charles de Lint's *Forests of the Heart*. When Donal agrees to don an ancient mask of the Green Man in order to become the Summer King (the seasonal hero who is sacrificed in autumn and then

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<sup>10</sup> During their search for the boy, the heroes of *The Hollowing* discover the Mask Tree whose trunk is marked with numerous carved faces that represent the figures and archetypes stored in Alex's memory. The Mask Tree is, therefore, clearly indebted to the Jungian perception of the forest as a symbolic reflection of the unconscious.

reborn in spring), he does so not for the benefit of his community, but for the sake of exacting revenge for all the real and imaginary insults he has suffered. Thus, the Glasduine's (as de Lint calls the Green Man) restorative aspect is corrupted by the man's petty malevolence, and the creature becomes a monster that has to be confronted and defeated. Interestingly, at one point de Lint combines the Green Man with Christian imagery. Prior to his transformation, Donal creates a disturbing, yet fascinating painting:

A naked man wearing a mask of leaves hung Christ-like from an enormous oak. His body was clothed in a nimbus of gold light that was picked up again in the leaves of his mask and the trunk of the tree behind him. Green blood poured from his mouth, the palms of his hands where they were nailed to the tree, and a gaping wound in his abdomen. [...] Not blood. What poured out of the wounds was a liquid spill of finely detailed leaves and spiraling vines. (121-122)

Though the painting might be an evidence of Donal's fleeting glimpse into the mystery of the Green Man (and into the different guises of the savior figure appearing in various traditions), this mystical knowledge does not save him from his self-destructive obsession, and there is no promise of resurrection to a man that sacrifices himself not for the well-being of others, but for personal gain. In de Lint's novel *the Green Man*, though hidden from sight and largely forgotten by the contemporary world, proves to be a powerful entity that should be approached with fearful respect—he is the numinous still present in the natural world.

Another significant element of the genre's arboreal imagery are marvelous forests. These are usually depicted as ancient woodlands which might be protected by divine guardians or gifted with some form of sentient awareness that often manifests itself as hatred for mankind. Despite such dangers, the heroes of fantasy fiction repeatedly journey into the wild woods, because the forest is a liminal space of testing and transformation. For instance, in C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* the young protagonists are at one point transported to the mysterious and deceptive Wood between the Worlds<sup>11</sup> whose many ponds can lead them into other realms. In Tolkien's fiction, a journey through an intimidating forest is a standard element of the quest: Bilbo and the dwarves need to pass through the ominous Mirkwood, whereas Frodo and his company are first forced to venture into the hostile Old Forest where they are rescued from Old Man Willow by Tom Bombadil, then they explore the beautiful Lothlórien, and later Pippin and Merry seek refuge in Fangorn where they discover the ents. In Kay's *Fionavar*, the heroes are also drawn into a

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<sup>11</sup> The name is clearly reminiscent of William Morris's *Wood Beyond the World*.

sentient woodland, the Pendaran Wood, whose centuries-old hatred for mankind—since a man was the reason for the demise of Lisen, the most beloved of all dryads—is a death sentence to all trespassers. Jack Vance’s *Lyonesse Trilogy* features the forest of Tantrevalles inhabited by strange beasts and fairy creatures that pose a threat to carefree travelers. In Celia S. Friedman’s *Coldfire Trilogy* the malevolent Hunter has his abode in the heart of what is known as the Hunter’s Forest—a corrupted, monster-filled woodland in which the man chases women to their death. In J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series Hogwarts lies near the Forbidden Forest inhabited by all sorts of magical creatures. Kvothe, the trickster protagonist of Patrick Rothfuss’s *The Kingkiller Chronicle*, visits the woods of the Fae, where he discovers a tree possessed by an ancient malicious spirit, Cthaeh, who uses its gift of clairvoyance to torment those that dare to approach it. These examples are but a fraction of all the strange and unfathomable forests sprawling over the pages of fantasy fiction. Their abundance implies that there is an inherent connection between the realms of fantasy and arboreal wilderness, similar to the one existing between the forest and the fairytale. Arguably, fantasy fiction is the contemporary means through which writers can recapture the perilous forests of fairy stories and allow modern readers, often disconnected from nature, to experience the transformative dread of a venture into the heart of the wild woods.

In fact, some fantasy narratives explicitly depict trees and forests as portals to other realms and as the last vestige of myth and faerie in the contemporary world. In Lewis’s *Chronicles*, the Pevensie children are able to enter Narnia through a wardrobe (of all means) only because the wardrobe was made from the wood of a magical apple tree that had grown from the seeds of an apple originally brought from Aslan’s realm by Digory Kirke (in the volume *The Magician’s Nephew*). Yet though for the Pevensie children Narnia becomes the source of holy revelation and eternal joy, the connection between the real world and the marvelous one is not always something desirable and beneficial. In Raymond E. Feist’s *Faerie Tale*, the Hastings family is haunted by fairy creatures dwelling in the ancient woodland that surrounds their newly bought farmhouse. More than once the family members are forced to confront the dread and horror lurking in the forest. Still, their ordeal seems far less harsh than that awaiting the heroes of Robert Holdstock’s *Mythago Wood* series. *Mythago Wood*, which harnesses Jungian theories on archetypes and the unconscious in a most original way, follows the protagonists’ exploration of Ryhope Wood, a solitary fragment of ancient British<sup>12</sup> woodland. Due to its mysterious nature and

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<sup>12</sup> In *Merlin’s Wood* Holdstock depicts a similar forest located in France—Broceliande. The entire novel revolves around the motif of Merlin’s imprisonment in a tree/forest. Faced

powers, the wood is filled with mythagos, i.e. manifestations of legendary people and landscapes, whose archetypes are extracted from the unconscious mind and given life within the confines of the forest. George Huxley, and later his two sons—Christian and Steven—become so captivated by this perilous land that they forsake everyday life in order to explore the mysteries of the Wood and to be reunited with Guiwenneth, a mythago girl all three come to love. Their journeys into the heart of Ryhope, whose spatial and temporal dimensions follow their own patterns, thus defying comprehension, put to test the men's determination and perseverance, change them into hunters and warriors, and force them to confront the shadows which usually lie dormant in the human mind, but which in Ryhope come to haunt their creators. Every journey into the woods becomes an intense and stimulating experience, because the beauty and mystery of Ryhope is counterbalanced by its chaotic nature and the threat of sudden death. Thus, Holdstock's forest is, on the one hand, a setting for a Jungian drama in which the male heroes chase after their anima, flee from the overbearing presence of the father, and face their own fears, and on the other, it is the source and the embodiment of the sublime (Oziewicz 81-95).

While the Huxley men are struggling to secure their happiness with Guiwenneth, Tallis from the volume *Lavondyss* (1988) is called into the forest by her lost brother. The climax of her quest comes when she embarks on a spiritual journey in which trees play the key role. While the woman is resting in a castle made of petrified wood, she is gradually pierced by branches and eventually her human body perishes, yet her consciousness lives on. According to the oneiric logic characteristic of Holdstock's narratives, the castle turns into a living forest—the first forest—with Tallis as one of its trees. When the woman dies in her tree form, her wood is fashioned into a totem. The totem is eventually burned down and its coals are buried with the remnants of people and animals, from which Tallis reemerges as a female Daurog (Holly-jack). The Daurog—another of Holdstock's reworkings of the Green Man figure—are man-shaped tree creatures who are generous during spring and summer, but feral and blood-thirsty in winter. After her rebirth as one of them, Tallis travels through the land and actually meets her human self meeting the Daurog. Eventually, she returns to the castle where she then sheds her green form and turns into an old woman, thus completing her journey. Discussing Jung's writings on trees, A.T Mann notes that the Swiss psychiatrist referred to the tree symbol as being "predominantly feminine and maternal" (48). Tallis's metamorphosis into a tree and a female Daurog (who mates with a male and even gives birth to birds) is

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with a family tragedy, the protagonist decides to venture into Broceliande and find Merlin's prison in order to free the wizard and ask for his help.

therefore clearly inscribed into the theories of the unconscious, like the rest of the *Mythago Wood* series.<sup>13</sup>

Yet Tallis is not the only Holdstockian hero whose body and mind are absorbed by the forest and united with its matter. This motif of union is further explored in *Avilion* (2009) which brings a resolution to the Huxleys' troublesome fascination with Ryhope. Jack and Yssobel, the protagonists of *Avilion*, are the children of Steven and Guiwenneth. As such, they consist of their father's human flesh and the 'green side' inherited from their mother. The green side is what binds them to the forest, but also grants them a greater understanding of its nature. Either side can be temporarily suppressed to enhance the other. At one point, for example, a dryad acknowledges Yssobel's heritage by referring to 'the tree' that is in her (233). In the children of Steven and Guiwenneth, forest and mankind are merged into one entity. Such melding of flesh and wood transforms Holdstockian heroes into hybrids, but only as hybrids can they experience the wilderness in a way inaccessible to regular people. All in all, the *Mythago Wood* series is both a fascinating continuation of the fairytale tradition of depicting the woods as a place of transition and transformation, and a thought-provoking exploration of the idea that forests may serve as the embodiment of the unconscious. Most of all, the deep wildwoods of Holdstock's imagination remind readers that forests are spaces that should be cherished and respected—for the freedom and beauty that they offer, and for the threat that might lurk somewhere inside.

In fact, the arboreal imagery of certain fantasy novels seems to be incorporated into the story with the explicit intention of directing the reader's attention to mankind's relationship with the natural environment, both in its physical and spiritual dimensions. For example, in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* the conflict between Saruman and the ents is an acute warning of what may happen if man forgets about his obligations towards nature. Obsessed with what he perceives as progress, Saruman continues to produce the Uruk-hai at the expense of the forests surrounding his tower. Enraged by the devastation, the usually peaceful ents destroy the wizard's work and bring about his downfall. The clash between Saruman's industrial ambitions and the ents' rage is an allegory whose admonishing message is still very up-to-date. Using the motif of fantastic animate trees Tolkien tells his readers that if they fail in their God-given role as stewards of the Earth, they will only accelerate their own destruction, and mankind will end as the ultimate victim of its own progress.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For an interesting analysis of femininity in the *Mythago Wood* series see Whittingam.

<sup>14</sup> Another of Tolkien's comments on the relationship between people and the natural world is present in the story "The New Shadow," published in the volume *The Peoples of Middle-Earth* (1996). In this piece, the heroes (young Saelon and old Borlas) discuss to what

Holdstock's short story "Time of the Tree" (1989) provides a similar warning, though the warning is delivered under an entirely different guise. After an accident, a scientist's body begins to function as a land whose evolution mimics that of the Earth: its existence starts with a glacial period, which is subsequently followed by various forms of vegetation and the development of human civilization. Civilization eventually degenerates into uncontrollable destruction in the name of progress, at which point the scientist, in the manner of a wrathful god, annihilates mankind, hoping that the forest—a form of life that he has particularly cherished—will eventually return. The moral of the story does not require explanation.<sup>15</sup>

While some fantastic narratives emphasize the significance of the natural world by operating with images that focus on the destruction and loss of forests, other texts choose a more positive way of delivering the same message. In these works trees and forests are active agents in the restoration of a community or even the entire world. For instance, in Steven Brust's *Brokedown Palace* (1986) a magical tree which grows inside the eponymous Palace is, for most of the story, perceived as a threat that should be somehow dealt with. After all, the Palace is a symbol of the royal family, so its collapse will undermine royal reign—so, at least, thinks King Laszló, and thus he is blind to the tree's beauty and true nature. The heroes eventually discover that the tree is indeed a threat, yet only because it is the catalyst of transformation: the old can be replaced by the new only when the old is first destroyed. Thus, destruction of the old order is the only remedy for its corruption, and the tree is the miracle that heals the kingdom by cleansing the royal family. When the old Palace crumbles, burying the King under the rubble, a new Palace emerges from the Tree and the ruins, and a new King is chosen. The wild magical tree—a threat to order and civilization—becomes the means through which Brust delivers salvation to his imaginary world. Similar restoration occurs in Donaldson's *Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. The series' secondary mythology states that long ago the Land was covered by the One Forest—a sentient woodland which was eventually severely diminished by mankind's pursuit of progress. Consequently, its remnants and their guardians become hostile to people. The guardians, known as the Forestals, are man-shaped beings originally created

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extent men are allowed to make use of trees for their own benefit and when their actions can be considered as exploitation and violation of the natural world.

<sup>15</sup> Another of Holdstock's science fantasies revolving around trees is the short story entitled "The Charisma Tree," which features a tree species enhanced with human DNA. Because of this modification, in one particular area the trees begin to transport people to a different time in the past or future—even to the imaginative time—because the DNA was taken from Stephen Hawking. Thus, the Charisma Trees become yet another portal into the depths of time and human mind.

from the essence of the One Forest.<sup>16</sup> By the end of *The Chronicles* Donaldson's protagonists learn that forests are the key element of divine Creation and that the lore<sup>17</sup> of their guardians is necessary for the preservation of the imaginary world.

The recovery of an intimate, personal relationship with trees and forests is a recurring motif in the works of Charles de Lint. Since his debut in 1984, de Lint has been steadily filling his imaginary worlds with heroes who are deeply affected by their relationship with nature, and with forests which are presented as a sacred mythic space permeated by the numinous. Over the years, these heroes and images, paired with evocative descriptions of the beauty and majesty of the wilderness, have coalesced into a sacramental vision of the natural world. A key element of that vision (which is central to de Lint's secondary mythology) is the First Forest existing in the world's mythic past. When de Lint's heroes are given even a brief glimpse of that Forest—which is full of light emitted by the magnificent “forever trees”—they are invariably awestruck and full of worshipful admiration.

Many of de Lint's works contribute to that sacramental vision of nature by focusing on an individual's bond with the natural world. Already in his early novels, e.g. *Moonheart* (1984) and *Greenmantle* (1988), the forest—be it that of the real world or the Otherworld—is presented as a dwelling of supernatural entities, and serves as a place of initiation and enlightenment. For instance, when Ali wonders about the half-man half-stag god whom she is supposed to free—the Greenmantle as she calls him—she realizes the following:

But I've known you all my life, haven't I? You're what makes the seasons change, the blood to flow. You taught me how to breathe when I left my mother's womb. You taught my body to grow and my heart to recognize you when I finally saw you. In the pages of a book. In the melody of a tune. In the spread of a branch against the sky. In the hop of a robin, the eyes of a cat, the scent of a blossom . . . (1988, 290)

By the end of the novel, Ali is able to defy her enemies (the monks who symbolize corrupted institutional religion) and assert her own free will only because she is able to partake, however briefly and incompletely, of the divine Mystery hidden in the wilderness.<sup>18</sup> *Greenmantle* presents the eponymous

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<sup>16</sup> New ones are created from mortal men, who become another example of a human/tree hybrid.

<sup>17</sup> Their lore is called “the forbidding,” which is reminiscent of Ellcrys's function in Brooks's *Shannara*.

<sup>18</sup> It has been already mentioned that in *Forests of the Heart* de Lint combines the Green Man with the image of Christ. A similar fusion appears in *Greenmantle*. In a moment of

figure—who is another variant of the Green Man—as a force of dual nature that can bring either restoration or destruction. Yet despite the potential threat, its existence is confirmed to be indispensable for the contemporary world.

Ali's appreciation of the natural world is a universal feature of de Lint's protagonists. Quite a few of them confess that they have been attracted to trees since their early childhood, and they still cherish or rediscover that connection later in their lives. Since most of de Lint's protagonists are females, his works suggest that women are particularly attuned to the natural world, and that they may derive emotional and spiritual fulfillment from their intimate relationship with nature. In the short story "Merlin Dreams in Mondream Wood" (1992) young Sara, who will later be the protagonist of *Moonheart*, befriends Merlin trapped in a tree located in her garden. When the girl wonders how it is possible for a figure of European myths to be imprisoned in Canada, she is told: "All forests are one . . . They are all echoes of the first forest that gave birth to Mystery when the world began" (15). This idea leads her to the following conclusion:

there were two forests for every one you entered. There was the one you walked in, the physical echo, and then there was the one that was connected to all the other forests, with no consideration of distance, or time. The forest primeval, remembered through the collective memory of every tree in the same way that people remembered myth—through the collective subconscious that Jung mapped, the shared mythic resonance that lay buried in every human mind. Legend and myth, all tangled in an alphabet of trees, remembered, not always with understanding, but with wonder. With awe. (15)

De Lint's words are clearly an echo of Holdstock's, and the Canadian writer similarly continues to inspire his readers with visions of myth-riddled forests that are a reflection of the long-lost primeval forest, the memory of which still lingers in the deep recesses of the mind (and which may sometimes return to haunt people as it does in another of de Lint's works—"Ghostwood"). Though

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trial, Ali is able to persevere only because she combines the two figures into one: "She saw Christ's face and smiled when she saw that He had the mystery's eyes" (313). Similarly, in *Spiritwalk* (1994) readers are told that "the Green Man had antlers—because a stag's tines are like the branches of a tree. Why so many of the early avatars were hung from a tree. Osiris. Balder. Dionysus. Christ" (16). However, at some point de Lint uses this imagery also to criticize Christianity. Lily from *Greenmantle* says: "I can remember the first time you told me about what the church did to the mystery. The one they called Jesus—the Green Man they hung from a tree in the desert. How St. Paul took the mystery and twisted it to make a religion of intolerance and self-torment" (196). In fact, many of de Lint's heroes disdain institutional religion and instead prefer a type of spirituality derived from their union with the natural world.

in the short story Sara's bond with the natural world might seem secondary to her relationship with Merlin, in *Moonheart* she is truly impressed by the majesty of the wilderness.

For other heroines of de Lint's fiction, their bond with trees enables them to deal with trauma and tragedy. Jilly from *The Onion Girl* reveals that during her childhood, when she was sexually and mentally abused by her family, she would often run to her favourite tree and find comfort in its presence. As an adult, Jilly still finds peace and pleasure in being close to trees. In the case of Eithnie from *The Wild Wood*<sup>19</sup> de Lint also presents a female's connection to nature as her means of coping with trauma, yet this time he explores the sexual nuances of such a connection. As a child, Eithnie was very fond of trees and even perceived herself as their kin: "She believed then that she belonged to one of the tribes of trees, but to which one, she could never decide" (37).<sup>20</sup> However, time and trouble weakened the bond and it is not until Eithnie is approached by some fairy creatures and their mistress—whose face is hidden under a mask of maple leaves, which is a fine blending of the Green Man figure with a Canadian symbol—that she remembers her childhood attachment. Though initially Eithnie is shaken by the encounter, eventually she begins to seek explanation, which allows her to communicate with the fairy creatures and deal with her own trauma—miscarriage. For years, Eithnie has felt guilty for miscarrying a child she did not wish to have, and though she tried to repress those feelings, they have had a very negative influence on her subsequent relationships. After she is approached by the fairy queen, Broceliande, Eithnie has to face her past and redefine herself as a woman and mother. Broceliande needs help because she and her tribe (her children) are decimated by pollution. Thus, the fairy queen desperately seeks a place in which she and her court can survive.

At some point in the story Eithnie arrives at a conclusion that fairy creatures are just a symbolic representation of the mysteries of nature and a reflection of human imagination. Thus, the act of 'seeing' the fairy creatures is such a frightening experience, because it is, in fact, a glimpse into the structures of the human mind and into the nature of the world (97-99). Eithnie's conclusions clearly follow the theory that the threat of the forest is but a

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<sup>19</sup> The title of this essay has been inspired by this particular novel and its powerful imagery.

<sup>20</sup> In de Lint's fiction trees are very frequently likened to people. Further in *The Wild Wood*, one of the fallen saguaro (which de Lint describes as the trees of the desert) is compared to a dead person: "Coming upon a stricken saguaro, stretched out upon the ground, the waxy green flesh blackening . . . It must be like coming across a dead body, Eithnie decided" (45). The loss of trees and saguaro is for de Lint's heroes often as poignant and upsetting as the loss of human life.

projection of the threat associated with the unconscious. Thus, it is easy to perceive the figure of Broceliande as the incarnation of the woman's guilt and distress. Yet Broceliande's presence becomes also the catalyst to Eithnie's recovery. To help the other woman, Eithnie agrees to take a fairy lover (who might be, in reality, her neighbor, but since he wears a mask of leaves, Eithnie is not sure and de Lint never dispels her uncertainty). A child born from their short union becomes the salvation to all of them. Lia's existence allows Eithnie to rediscover her femininity and find fulfillment in the role of a mother. It is also said that one day Lia will somehow rescue Broceliande and her court. Whether the fairy queen is real or just a projection of Eithnie's traumatized mind does not really matter in the end. What matters is the healing delivered when the protagonist opens herself to the wilderness.

The example provided in this paper do not exhaust, of course, the long list of marvelous trees and forests appearing in contemporary fantasy fiction. Nonetheless, they illustrate the genre's diverse arboreal imagery to a large extent grounded in the tradition of myths and fairytales. The sacred trees of fantasy fiction are the embodiment of the numinous and a significant element of divine creation. They may serve as the threshold between life and death, and those heroes who experience the agony of death on the sacred tree return to life with new knowledge and power. The loss of the sacred tree may disrupt the people's relation with their creator and signify the beginning of a transformative period in the history of their world. The forests of fantasy fiction are usually dangerous liminal spaces in which heroes may encounter something fantastic and marvelous, or undergo a painful yet necessary metamorphosis which will reestablish not only their identity, but also their relationship with their community and the world.

Moreover, the examples provided in this paper prove that certain names and motifs tend to reappear across fantasy fiction: Broceliande, the forbidding, the first forest, Merlin trapped in a tree, and forests hostile to mankind are the most obvious cases. On the one hand, this repetitiveness might be perceived by some as a sign that fantasists lack original ideas. On the other, it suggests that certain elements have particularly strongly imprinted themselves on the structures of the genre. If we opt for the latter, it becomes possible to perceive arboreal imagery as a network of ideas extending over the entire genre.<sup>21</sup> The reappearance of certain motifs does not necessarily diminish their significance in a particular story. When Tolkien refers to the Tree of Tales

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<sup>21</sup> The title of Tomasz Z. Majkowski's 2013 critical volume translates as *In the Shadow of the White Tree: The Fantasy Novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*—a metaphor pointing to Tolkien's influence on the entire genre. Yet there is a second layer of meaning of which the author might not have been aware: the shadow of a sacred tree does, indeed, spread over fantasy fiction and its many worlds.

and the connections appearing between various fairy stories which incorporate (apparently) similar figures and motifs, he notes that though questions about origins and development are undoubtedly interesting, questions about the meaning and significance of particular tales are by far more fascinating and rewarding (“On Fairy-stories” 21-22).

At some level, the recurring arboreal imagery of fantasy fiction is, of course, only a generic trait which allows writers to produce marvelous worlds that will be immediately recognized by the reader as fantastic. Yet at a higher level, arboreal imagery is the means through which writers can direct readers’ attention towards the natural world. Today, many people treat our planet’s ecosystems as a commodity, and acknowledge only their material and practical value. Of course, forests have supplied people with sustenance and resources for centuries, yet now, more than ever, the environment is endangered by mankind’s progress, because not only does our growing population require more and more space and resources, but also because we are slowly ‘migrating’ into the cyberspace where it is easy to forget about our connection with the rest of the living world. In the past, that connection was preserved by stories. But today, as Sara Maitland writes, “The deep connection between the forests and the core stories has been lost; fairy stories and forests have been moved into different categories and, isolated, both are at risk of disappearing, misunderstood and culturally undervalued, ‘useless’ in the sense of ‘financially unprofitable” (18). Fortunately, fantasy fiction—the heir to the traditions of myths and fairy tales—may still remind us about the spiritual value of nature. In fantasy fiction, tree and forests play vital roles and are presented as entities fundamental to the well-being of the imaginary world and its inhabitants. Staying attuned to the natural world is shown as a deeply rewarding experience, because the natural world is filled with the essence of the numinous. As Chris Brawley argues, fantasists such as MacDonald, Tolkien, and Lewis (but many others as well—Charles de Lint is clearly a case in point) “seemed to perceive nature sacramentally in their own lives and used the vehicle of mythopoetic fantasy to convey this religious sensibility towards nature to their readers” (2). Such renditions of nature might grant readers a fresh awareness of the world around them, and inspire them to discard the prevailing anthropocentrism and commoditization of nature, which corresponds to the claims that have been made by ecocriticism and posthumanism. This process of regaining awareness is what Tolkien defines as Recovery, which he considers to be one of the four qualities of fairy stories. Recovery means that the experience of a secondary world and its marvels can positively affect the reader’s perception of his surroundings and of the things he used to take for granted (52-55). The rediscovery of the beauty and significance of the natural world can, therefore, also be recognized as a part of fantastic Recovery.

It is not my intention to suggest in this paper that fantasy fiction teaches us to venerate sacred trees, to be mindful of the deities that might be inhabiting them, or to hug trees in order to receive some of their positive energy (though some people claim that the last activity can be a rewarding experience). At the most general level, fantasy fiction teaches us to cherish trees and forests, to respect them, but also fear them (and who does not feel at least slightly apprehensive when venturing alone into the depth of the forest?). Trees offer us the shelter of their shade and the comfort of their rustling leaves. Forests are places of reprieve and mystery, which stimulate our imagination with their green shadows. To ignore all of that is to disrupt our connection with the world around us.

Fortunately, not all is yet lost. While commenting on the problem of deforestation, Maitland—who regards forests as a key element of European fairy tales—writes, “the forests that remain are strange and wonderful places with a rich natural history, long narratives of complex relationships—between humans and the wild, and between various groups of human beings” (10). A.T. Mann argues that

it is very important that we resuscitate many of the myths, stories, and legends about trees from former cultures, not because we realistically advocate returning to the ways of those “noble savages” of ancient times. Rather, in order to restore the health of our environment, we must rediscover the sanctity of trees, discover how to revere them again, and learn how central they are to our relationships to nature and between each other. Part of this process is to re-enchant the world of nature, to learn to understand its language. (6-7)

Similarly, Maitland ends her work on a very positive note: “We cannot go back to the beginning, but we can re-make woodland and create new woods where the old ones have been lost” (321). Fantasy fiction may aid modern people in recognizing the importance of trees, forests, and the entire natural world. But, to paraphrase Maitland’s last remark, we should not go on pining for the lost First Forest of myths and fairy tales, but use our past and our narratives as inspiration for doing something for our present surroundings and for the future.

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