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The Shape of Water in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

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Abstract

Water is omnipresent in many shapes and forms in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. To most critics, this water symbolizes melancholy, hope, and salvation—but then these scholars treat all water as if it were the same. In contrast, I demonstrate that there are six always intertwined and overlapping aspects or facets of representations of water: instrumental (to move the plot forward), geographical (to set up distinctions and boundaries), figurative (images of water employed in rhetorical devices), mystical (magical incarnations of water), pathetic (mirroring the emotions of characters), and intentional (creating meaning by prefiguring and intensifying character's ideas and decisions and by developing the plot). In addition, I trace similarities between representations of water in *The Lord of the Rings* and the symbolism of water in our primary world. In the interaction of the six aspects, for instance in the chapter "Helm's Deep," representations of water in *The Lord of the Rings* show that there are always good and bad possibilities in every situation, and they encourage readers to take responsibility and make the best of these possibilities.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; The Shape of Water in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*; Norbert Schürer; water; Tolkien, J.R.R.; *The Lord of the Rings*; ecocritical approach; object-oriented ecology; nature; environment; forests



THE SHAPE OF WATER IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

NORBERT SCHÜRER

WATER IS UBIQUITOUS IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. Throughout the novel, we encounter water in flowing and standing bodies of all shapes and sizes, mist or fog in various forms, clouds and storms, intermittent rain, snow on the mountains, and the ocean. As early as the prologue, Tolkien distinguishes the Stoors from other breeds of hobbits because they prefer riversides and “lingered long by the banks of the Great River Anduin” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] Prologue 3), and the book ends with Frodo sailing to the West across the High Sea (VI.9.1030). In between, the hobbits splash around in baths; they encounter the “daughter of the River” Goldberry (I.7.123); Frodo is saved by the Bruinen river; the Fellowship is rejected by the snow on Mount Caradhras and tarries at Mirrormere after the loss of Gandalf; Frodo, Sam, and Sméagol witness the lights in the stagnant waters of the Dead Marshes; the Ents flood Isengard; and Aragorn, Gimli, and most memorably Legolas travel to the ocean shore and sail a fleet up the Anduin.

Surprisingly, however, considering that some form of water is mentioned on just about every other page of *The Lord of the Rings*, there is relatively little scholarship on the topic. There are quite a few Tolkien critics who are interested in nature and the environment in Middle-earth, from Patrick Curry to Liam Campbell to Susan Jeffers, with Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans's *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* perhaps the seminal text. Yet most of these ecocritics focus on forests, cities, and industry rather than on water—as a matter of fact, one recent ecocritical collection is titled *Tolkien: The Forest and the City* (ed. Conrad-O'Briain and Hynes), and four of the nine essays in *Representations of Nature in Middle-earth* deal with trees or forests. Dickerson claims that “the role of water (symbolic and otherwise) in the Middle-earth writings of J.R.R. Tolkien has been mentioned by various scholars” (15), but indeed these scholars hardly go beyond mentioning the element. For instance, a chapter *Defending Middle-earth* is titled “The Sea: Spirituality and Ethics,” but after the first paragraph Curry never mentions the ocean again in his wide-ranging argument on religion, ethics, evil, and myth. In his later collection of essays, *Deep Roots in a Time of Frost*, Curry gives a brief summary of his earlier book: he writes that (in his argument) *The Lord of the Rings* recognizes the hopes and fears that readers associate with modernity and casts them into “three broad forms,” the third

being “ultimate spiritual values [symbolized by] the Sea” (192)—but the argument seems to be more abstract than actually steeped in water. Similarly, Campbell has twenty-three references to water or water pollution in his index to *The Ecological Augury in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, but in most instances here water is one in a list of various aspects of nature such as forests, rivers, and grasslands. He writes that in Middle-earth “the natural landscape is animate and not merely a backdrop against which the action occurs. The land is possessed of a waking consciousness” (179), but his examples are the forests and the mountains, not water.

Fortunately, more recently three essays focusing on water have been published: Dickerson’s “Water, Ecology, and Spirituality in Tolkien’s Middle-earth” (which is the source of the quotation above), Gabriela Silva Rivero’s “‘Behind a Grey Rain-Curtain’: Water, Melancholy, and Healing in *The Lord of the Rings*” (in the previously mentioned *Representations of Nature in Middle-earth*), and Robin Markus Auer’s “Sundering Seas and Watchers in the Water: Water as a Subversive Element in Middle-earth.”

Dickerson argues that although there are many negative images, water actually plays a positive symbolic role in Middle-earth. Water is not alive like animals and plants, but it has profound spiritual value. Tolkien reminds readers, says Dickerson, that we should not take water for granted, associates the pollution of water with evil, and suggests that those who want to fight evil need to protect and preserve water. Dickerson concludes that, because water is the clearest reminder of the Music of the Ainur and the clearest communication with Ilúvatar, it serves as a symbol of hope in Tolkien’s fallen world: “water symbolizes hope [...] true hope comes from the sea, but the way back to that hope is also over the sea” (28). Water has powers of salvation, and it should be treated with humility, awe, and respect.

Dickerson’s argument is clear and well-argued, and his conclusion is similar to the one Robin Markus Auer arrives at (in discussing *The Silmarillion* in particular): the echo of Ulmo in water “must be like a promise of hope and salvation, felt, even if not understood” (242). Indeed, Ulmo plays an outsized role in Tolkien’s mythology. From the beginning of the creation of Eä, Ulmo turns his thought to water, and after Ilúvatar describes the various forms of water to him (fountains, pools, snow, clouds, mists, rains) Ulmo responds, “Water is become now fairer than my heart imagined” (9). In contrast to the other Ainur, Ulmo rarely takes on human (or Elvish) form, but rather prefers to move through all forms of water: “all seas, lakes, rivers, fountains and springs are in his government” (17). From these bodies of water, Ulmo speaks to all, either through “the music of water” (17)—as a reminder of the Music of the Ainur, as Dickerson writes—or through his white shell horns, the Ulumúri, creating the sea-longing that we see throughout Tolkien’s mythology and that

Curry is probably referencing. In a significant metaphor, Tolkien writes that “the spirit of Ulmo runs in all the veins of the world” (17), so the world (Middle-earth) is figured as a body with water as the blood that gives that body life. Ulmo arguably *is* or at least *represents* water, so all of the arguments I will make in this paper could potentially be applied to him as well.

To some extent I agree with Dickerson and Auer: some forms of water in Middle-earth certainly have a spiritual dimension (for instance through Ulmo as a god), and sometimes they signal hope. At the same time, I see water slightly differently in at least two (related) respects. For one, the symbolism of water might simply be more complicated than Dickerson proposes. In her entry on the “Elements” in the *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, Cecilia Barella asserts, “It would be wrong to make a distinction between good elements and evil elements” (146), which might be reformulated to say that the elements, including water, don’t actually have a moral valence, but are morally neutral and can be used for good or evil ends. In that case, it would be too simple to associate water just with hope and salvation. Yet Barella also goes on to write that “the four elements as a whole stand for nature and for life” (146), and, for that reason, the Nazgûl particularly fear fire and water. Then again, fire and water can also be used for destruction, and nature and life are not necessarily good—so again the situation might be more complicated than Dickerson, Auer, and Barella acknowledge.

My second concern with Dickerson’s argument is that it seems to me that he cherry-picks his evidence, i.e., that he identifies excellent examples of where water has a profound spiritual value—but ignores or dismisses too easily instances where water plays a different role or has a different symbolic meaning. In this context, it is perhaps interesting that Gabriela Silva Rivero offers an entirely different interpretation from Dickerson and Auer. She identifies a “relationship between water, memory, and lack. Water seems to reflect what is lacking from the land” (69), or lost, and thus brings up memories. Water “represents both the loss and melancholy that is prevalent in Middle-earth, as well as the potential healing it brings” (50). Of course, this could be interpreted as merely an inversion of Dickerson and Auer’s focus on hope and salvation, but at least in the first quotation Rivero’s analysis is much less optimistic.

To make my own argument, then, I compiled a more or less complete catalog of all references to water in *The Lord of the Rings*. (Dickerson and Auer include *The Silmarillion*, but that expands the corpus beyond what is possible to examine in one article.) In my compilation, I used something like the method of analysis Magne Bergland suggests in “Descriptions of Nature in *The Lord of the Rings*”: he proposes that we should “mark all words pertaining to descriptions of nature, then do some statistics on them and see what the results are” (142). Bergland wants to develop a complex system of tags of things like word-class, syntactic function, and semantic function, but I proceed in much less detail here:

as Bergland recognizes himself, the complete task of tagging would “no doubt [be] a huge one” (144).

After I compiled my catalog, I tried to interpret this evidence inductively rather than approach it deductively with a preconceived thesis, so I was not discounting Dickerson, Auer, Barella, or Rivero from the outset. In the course of coming to an understanding of the roles of water in Middle-earth, however, I realized that some of my evidence did not fit their theses. In this article, then, I will offer some description and differentiation of how and where water appears in *The Lord of the Rings*, and I will propose some interpretations of my observations. My first realization was that we need to distinguish carefully between at least six ways that water is represented in *The Lord of the Rings*. I should immediately clarify, however, that these six ways of representing water are hardly ever distinct, but usually overlap—it might even be argued that they are layered and that any representation of water contains different layers. For that reason, I call these six ways of representing water ‘aspects’ or ‘facets’: they may be simultaneously present in the same word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or scene depending on the perspective. Interpretation is as mutable as water itself; in its possibility of transformation between solid, liquid, and gaseous forms, water’s meaning can never quite be pinned down. In any case, I call these six aspects instrumental, geographical, figurative, mystical, pathetic, and intentional, and it seems to me that each representation has a slightly different symbolic value, but that all combine to a meaningful whole. Then, I look at one chapter in *The Lord of the Rings*, “Helm’s Deep,” in some detail to explore the water imagery in these terms. Throughout the essay, I correlate my findings to the way various forms of water have traditionally been interpreted as symbols in our primary world.

INSTRUMENTAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WATER

In my classification, the first important way in which Tolkien uses water in *The Lord of the Rings* is instrumental. By this, I mean instances where water itself doesn’t really carry any meaning, but merely serves a practical purpose (at least in one facet). Perhaps the most important example of the instrumental use of water is the story of Númenor. Obviously, this story doesn’t happen in *The Lord of the Rings*, but it is invoked many times, most memorably in Faramir’s dream “of the land of Westemne that foundered, and of the great dark wave climbing over the green lands and above the hills, and coming on, darkness unescapable” (*LotR* VI.5.962). In *Interrupted Music: The Making of Tolkien’s Mythology*, Verlyn Flieger talks about the fall of Númenor extensively (87-104 and 125-30), and the cover of her book has a beautiful image by Ted Nasmith titled “The Incoming Sea at the Rainbow Cleft,” but Flieger does not recognize any significance (as I don’t) in the fact that Númenor is submerged

under water rather than, for instance, just destroyed by an earthquake or fire. In a footnote to his article on “Saruman’s Sodomitical Resonances,” Christopher Vaccaro writes that the medieval theologian and philosopher Alain de Lille (aka Alan of Lille) “points out that water is frequently used to punish the proud” (142 n42), which might suggest that in Christianity water could be a specific punishment. The quotation Vaccaro gives in support, however, does not quite warrant his claim: Alan merely asks, “Let water break Lysaeus’ [Bacchus’s] pride and an abundance of it temper Bacchus’ rage” (194), and nowhere else in his work does water play a significant role. In addition, water in the Christian Bible serves many purposes, the main example perhaps being the Flood. The reason given in Genesis for the flood is, “The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence” (Genesis 6:11, King James Version), so here water is a punishment for corruption and violence. In other words, the reasons for the drowning of Númenor are certainly not that different—Númenor also suffers from pride, corruption, and violence—but of course stories of landmasses being submerged by water are abundant in many other mythologies as well.

Similarly, the Anduin or Great River serves an outsized role in *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance in transporting the Fellowship south and in bringing Aragorn’s relief fleet north from Pelargir in the nick of time. As Juan Eduardo Cirlot writes in his *Dictionary of Symbols*, rivers can have a variety of symbolic meanings, signifying anything from time and fertility to loss and the passage of time (274). It seems to me, however, that the Anduin does not carry a strong symbolic meaning here, but fulfills a more practical role in moving characters from one place to the next. In the same vein, islands always imply water, clouds always suggest rain, mountains are white when they carry snow—but in my assessment the water in these examples is not primarily significant in itself. The Brandywine is at first simply a river that “flowed slow and broad before them” (*LotR* I.5.98) and needs to be crossed to get to the hobbits’ destination. When it rains at Tom Bombadil’s house, Frodo “blessed the kindly weather, because it delayed them from departing” (I.7.129), and after the loss of Gandalf the Fellowship follows various tributaries and rest where “the stream flowed noisily over shining pebbles” (II.6.335). The water to submerge Isengard comes from “making great pools and dams, gathering all the waters of the Isen and every other spring and stream that [the Ents] could find” (III.9.569), and when it fills the valley, it creates “a dense fog” (III.9.571). These scenes are all dramatic, but arguably the water does not carry a significance beyond the function it fulfills in each case. At the same time, as mentioned previously, the instrumental representation may only be one aspect here, with the examples also carrying meanings like the cleansing function of rain (at Tom Bombadil’s house), leaving the familiar behind (by crossing the Brandywine), a reminder that life goes on

even after tragedy (the noise of the stream), or the uncertainty of the future (the fog at Isengard).

GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WATER

Next to instrumental representations, Tolkien offers geographical representations of water. By this aspect, I mean that bodies of water serve as demarcations of some sort. To some extent, this is similar to the instrumental functions of water, but I would argue that the geographical representations have a stronger symbolic significance. Auer gives what I would consider one example when he writes: "The breaking of the Fellowship and the death of Boromir separate the remaining Fellowship by placing them on opposite sides of the river" (249). In this function, he designates water as one of Tolkien's "structural landscapes" (239), not unlike the way Tom Shippey characterizes the organization of Tolkien's stories as a "cartographic plot" (94).

Indeed, rivers serve as borders, markers, or obstacles throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, from the Shire demarcated by "the Brandywine Bridge" (*LotR* Prologue 5) to Osgiliath, where the bridges are destroyed and the Anduin and the small Gondorian garrison form a (weak) barrier to the forces of Mordor by "holding all the west shores" (II.2.245). In the former case, the Brandywine symbolically separates the (perceived) peace and comfort of the Shire from the dangers of the outside world; at Osgiliath, Boromir's and Faramir's defense of the western shore of the Anduin is a metonymy for the threat of Sauron against the entire west of Middle-earth. Similarly, the Nimrodel forms the border to Lothlórien that the Fellowship must cross, and that is defiled when Orcs follow: "curse their foul feet in its clean water!" (II.6.345), as Haldir says. Water in this geographical aspect of representation can be dangerous without necessarily carrying more meaning. Frodo almost drowns in the Withywindle, but the danger emanates from Old Man Willow rather than the river, and similarly the rapids of Sarn Gebir and the Rauros Falls on the Anduin are revered, but dangerous. The falls are associated with noise almost every time they are mentioned, and they are regularly connected with adjectives and phrases like "great" (II.8.368, II.9.394) or "mighty" (II.10.397). Rauros is almost personified with a "roar" (II.9.394, II.10.407, III.1.417), and apparently the waterfall has a "voice" (II.9.394, II.10.397), but this is certainly metaphorical rather than literal.

At Rivendell, water also mostly seems to carry geographical significance. As with Rauros, the volume of the noise of the river and perhaps waterfalls gets mentioned several times: "[t]he sound of running and falling water was loud" (*LotR* II.1.226), Frodo walks along "the loud-flowing Bruinen" (II.1.239), and on his way to the Council of Elrond "[t]he noise of the bubbling waters came up from the foaming river-bed" (*ibid.*). Perhaps, the loudness of the river and waterfalls drowns out the noise of the rest of the world—so that might

be a different facet of representations of water—or it is simply a function of the geographical location of Rivendell in a deep valley. Later in *The Lord of the Rings*, the Gondorian outpost of Henneth Annûn is hidden behind a waterfall—an instrumental representation of water, but also a geographical one. Sam and Frodo descend along a tiny stream that turns into a small river, and then “the noise of the running water was on their right hand, and it grew nearer and louder” (IV.5.673). Finally, “they heard the water again, loud now, rushing and splashing. All round them it seemed, and they felt a fine rain on their hands and cheeks” (ibid.), and they find themselves behind “a thin veil of water” (IV.5.674). This scene is imbued with spiritual significance later when the Gondorian soldiers perform a kind of religious ritual, but initially the water serves mostly as a cover for the outpost so that the enemy cannot discover them. For that reason, Sméagol’s trespass into the Forbidden Pool is an infraction punishable by death.

But perhaps the most important geographical use of water is the profusion of references to the sea. In this context, it is important to remember Curry’s argument that the ocean symbolizes “ultimate spiritual values” (*Deep Roots* 192), even if he hardly discusses the element that forms the sea. Dwayne Thorpe articulates a similar idea more explicitly when he describes the sea-longing that many characters in Tolkien’s *legendarium* experience. Theologically, according to Thorpe, this longing expresses a longing for another world; in a more worldly sense, it is “a message of community. [...] [T]hose on the side of good are moved by a sense of belonging to a larger thing” (317), so the ocean identifies a longing for belonging. Charles Huttar adds that this sea-longing in Middle-earth seems to be natural, especially to Elves, but also to hobbits such as Frodo. At the same time, Huttar notes that “the western sea has an ambiguous meaning, inviting but potentially sinister” (11)—it brings the Elves home, but it can also be an impenetrable barrier that reinforces the expulsion from paradise.

Either way, the ocean does not receive a designation or name in the maps in *The Lord of the Rings*, but is often referred to in the text as the “Western Sea” or “Sundering Seas.” Interestingly, all references to the “Western Sea” occur in songs (*LotR* I.3.79, II.4.316, VI.9.1028), so that term is more poetic—and relational, since the ocean is only “Western” in relation to the inhabited areas of Middle-earth. The term “Sundering Seas” (always in the plural) is also employed in songs, but Aragorn (I.11.194) and Pippin (III.11.599) use it in regular conversation as well. This term can be interpreted as a form of demarcation, since it describes the sea that separates Middle-earth from Valinor, or Beren (potentially) from Lúthien. Here, then, as Auer also recognizes (254-56), water symbolically represents the mortal or fallen state of the world of Middle-earth and its inhabitants, or the fact that we readers (especially Catholics like

Tolkien) live in a mortal and fallen world—much more than just a geographical representation.

Furthermore, as various critics have pointed out, Tolkien bases his representations of the ocean and his representations of trips *on* the ocean on the motif of the sea voyage, more specifically the Saint Brendan story in the Irish *immran* tradition. As Kris Swank details, Tolkien uses and adapts a series of stock episodes and motifs from the *immrama*, including “a frame narrative, a crime which results in exile, a magical figure who sanctions the voyage, a barrier of mist or clouds, golden apples of youth, and a circular journey which ends where it begins” (77). Swank concentrates her interpretation on *Roverandom*, but of course these episodes and motifs appear frequently throughout Tolkien’s *legendarium*. Norma Roche finds them in *The Lost Road*, *The Book of Lost Tales*, *The Silmarillion*, and especially Tolkien’s 1955 poem “Imram,” which specifically takes up the story of the Irish St. Brendan. As Roche’s analysis shows, the story told to the reader is often presented as based on another, older story unknown to the reader, creating a feeling of authenticity, reviving the dream of a deathless land in the West, and inspiring travelers in general. For Eleanor Farrell, sea voyages such as St. Brendan’s—but also voyages in the classical and Biblical traditions as well as Celtic, Norse, and Germanic mythology—have a spiritual component and often lead to some form of enlightenment. These voyages can bring hope as “potent metaphors of change, magic, destiny,” or they can illustrate “the negative character of the ocean voyage: isolation, hardship, fear of the unknown and the alien” (Farrell 44). This is perhaps not surprising, since the ocean traditionally symbolizes both “the generation of all life” (Ciriot 241) and the destruction of life, while the ship is both “emblematic of joy and happiness” and also implies “the desire to transcend existence—to travel through space to the other worlds” (294-5). Historically, the sea voyage represented a turning to God, Farrell argues, but literature more recently “began to focus on more internal journeys: braving the terrors of the psyche instead of those deeps” (Farrell 45). As her examples from Tolkien, Farrell uses *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Together, these critics demonstrate that the geographical representation of water may also bring out another facet related to water, namely the hardship, inspiration, transformation, and enlightenment of the sea voyage.

FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF WATER

In addition to instrumental and geographical representations of water, Tolkien uses water in *The Lord of the Rings* in figurative ways, i.e., in metaphors and similes. Even though this is perhaps the most prevalent representation of water in the novel, I only give a few examples here. Late in the novel, as Frodo looks towards Minas Morgul, he sees “floating as it were on a shadowy sea, the

high dim tops and broken pinnacles of old towers" (*LotR* IV.7.697). This is a complicated combination of metaphor and simile (made even more complex by the fact that Frodo is next to an actual stream): the sea may reference the mountains with the broken towers of Minas Anor floating on it, but "sea" also implies that there are depths below, perhaps the remainders of old Gondor. A sea can't really be "shadowy," raising the question of whether something else is casting a shadow—maybe Sauron in Mordor beyond. Flieger notes similar complications when in *A Question of Time* she examines Frodo's use of "the image of time as a river" (98), which also occurs in a "conversation [that] is held on a river, thus physically proximating the actuality of water to what appears to be the metaphor of time" (*ibid.*). Flieger's argument, however, is really about time, not water.

In another example of the figurative use of water, at the very end of Book 3 of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf explains to Pippin that they are riding towards Minas Tirith to arrive "before the seas of war surround it" (*LotR* III.11.600). This is a character rather than the narrator invoking water in figurative language, here in a metaphor rather than a simile, and associating water with the dangerous experience of war. Then, when the Rohirrim arrive at Minas Tirith at the Battle of Pelennor Fields, they are described as "pouring in slowly but steadily, like the rising tide through breaches in a dike that men have thought secure" (V.5.837). Again, there is metaphoric language in the "pouring" of the cavalry, followed by the simile of "like the rising tide." This simile is interesting because the tide is a natural aquatic phenomenon that is regular and unchanging, so it is futile to try and stop it. But then, the "men" in the simile are really Sauron's army, who had imagined that the Rammas Echor would keep them safe as they attack Minas Tirith. The simile also indicts men and orcs for believing that anything they construct could stop the inevitable power of nature, or of history. Thus, water in its figurative facet is slippery, not necessarily achieving the goal its speaker seeks, but activating other aspects of water and opening up new possibilities.

MYSTICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WATER

Just a step beyond figurative representations is the aspect of mystical (or mythical or magical) representations, i.e., situations where water in *The Lord of the Rings* goes beyond the 'reality' of Middle-earth and performs a task that would certainly not be possible in our primary world, and is even unusual within the secondary world. If we were discussing *The Silmarillion*, an exploration of the role of Ulmo would be appropriate here. For the present argument, the two most prominent examples of this representation of water are the Mirror of Galadriel and Mirrormere outside of Moria.

Mirrormere is first introduced by Gimli in his song about Durin, which says that Durin “saw a crown of stars appear” (*LotR* II.4.316) in the lake, already a somewhat mystical idea. When the Fellowship arrives there, the lake starts out as geographical water with a more instrumental description: “It was long and oval, shaped like a great spear-head thrust deep into the northern glen; but its southern end was beyond the shadows under the sunlit sky” (II.6.333). Then, the text introduces a contrast (“Yet”) and a simile: “Yet its waters were dark: a deep blue like a clear evening sky seen from a lamp-lit room. Its face was still and unruffled” (*ibid.*). The simile positions the Fellowship and the reader in the safe inside looking out at nature (personified with a “face”), which is somewhat ironic considering that they have just lost Gandalf and fled Moria, and the stillness of the water forms a contrast to the turmoil they must be feeling in this situation. When Aragorn gives Gimli permission to take a quick look, Gimli brings Frodo and Sam with him. Frodo doesn’t just follow, but is “drawn by the still blue water in spite of hurt and weariness” (II.6.334)—the water exerts a physical and mental attraction. Looking at the lake proceeds in two steps: first, the visitors see nothing; then, they see the mountains reflected “like plumes of white flame above them” and the stars “like jewels sunk in the deep” (*ibid.*). This serves as a reminder of Gimli’s mystical introduction of the lake in song, and Gimli articulates the belief that the dwarven forefather Durin will arise again and reclaim his crown. But finally, there is a hint that there may even be more when Pippin asks Sam, “What did you see?” (*ibid.*) and Sam does not answer. Thus, the first mystical representation raises the possibility that more might be visible in water than just a (visual) reflection, but does not confirm it.

In that sense, the Mirrormere episode serves as a prefiguration of the Mirror of Galadriel, when the mystical potential of water is on full display. Campbell writes that “in ‘The Mirror of Galadriel’ we may find the very essence of, or a defining symbol for, the ecological augury which I contend radiates from the pages of Tolkien’s fiction” (24-25)—but it is not entirely clear whether he means the object or the chapter, and his argument is about what Sam and Frodo see in the Mirror rather than its liquid contents. The water in the Mirror comes from a “silver stream that issued from the fountain on the hill” (*LotR* II.7.361), i.e., a fresh spring. Galadriel breathes on the water, but insists that neither she nor Sam nor Frodo touch it. She is at a loss to explain the functioning of the Mirror: “this is what your folk would call magic” (II.7.362), though it remains uncertain whether that magic resides in the water, in her breath, in the basin, in Nenia, the water-associated ring of Adamant that is revealed at the end of the episode, or in something else. That makes sense, however, since part of the definition of the mystical is that it is not explained. When Sam looks into the Mirror, “the stars went out. As if a dark veil had been withdrawn, the Mirror grew grey, and then clear” (*ibid.*). In response to the figure of Frodo and the

destruction of the Shire he sees, Sam concludes, “I don’t want to see no more magic” (II.7.363). For Frodo, the mirror moves into its mystical mode immediately, and it actually gives representations of water within water: Frodo sees a mist, and then something he has never seen in reality: “the Sea. Darkness fell. The sea rose and raged in a great storm” (II.7.364). This is followed by a vision of a river, i.e., the Anduin near Minas Tirith. Here, then, water has mystical and magical qualities that do not set the hobbits on a particular path, but force them to reflect on their situation and alert them to possible outcomes of their actions. Galadriel encapsulates this sentiment perfectly when she says that her Mirror “shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be” (II.7.362). Of course, she is speaking about what individuals see in the Mirror—but what she says, especially the conditional “may be,” applies to representations of water as well. Ciriot actually draws a parallel between the symbolism of the lake and the mirror when he writes that “the lake—or, rather, its surface alone—holds the significance of a mirror, presenting an image of self-contemplation, consciousness and revelation” (175)—which is exactly what Frodo, Sam, Gimli, and Galadriel experience at Mirrormere and in the Mirror of Galadriel.

Arguably, Gimli’s passionate speech about Aglarond, the Glittering Caves at Helm’s Deep, qualifies as mystical as well, especially since Gimli himself draws a direct connection to Mirrormere. While he describes the cave walls and precious stones embedded in them, he focuses on how these geological features are refracted through water. Before he even gets to the details, he mentions that the caverns are “filled with an everlasting music of water that tinkles into pools” (III.8.547). He goes on with the simile that the walls and gems are “fine as frozen clouds” (ibid.) and calls the scene “glistening” and “glimmering” (ibid.). In a sentence with complex figuration, Gimli continues, “Still lakes mirror them: a glimmering world looks up from dark pools covered with clear glass” (ibid.): the mirror here becomes the original, from which the cave is viewed and is now itself the mirror image. On the one hand, the surface of the water becomes glass; at the same time, the pool is imbued with agency, or at least sight. Finally, the water in the Glittering Caves gives the rest of the scene life: “the round wrinkles in the glass make all the towers bend and waver like weeds and corals in a grotto of the sea” (ibid.). Here, the language establishes a mystical connection between the water in the dark caves and the sea, reminding the reader of the significance of the ocean throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.

PATHETIC REPRESENTATIONS OF WATER

Somewhere between figurative and mystical representations of water are pathetic representations. This is “the effect John Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy, the projection of human emotions onto the phenomena in the natural

world" (Lodge 85). In this aspect, water reflects a theme or mood that has already previously been established in the narrative. For instance, when the Fellowship is feeling hopeless, it rains, and when hope returns, the clouds break. After Frodo has been stabbed by the Morgul blade, the Fellowship has to "pick their way through a pathless country, encumbered by fallen trees and tumbled rocks" (*LotR* I.12.202). On top of that, then, "the weather turned wet," and in a double dose of water, "[t]he wind began to blow steadily out of the West and pour the water of the distant seas on the dark heads of the hills in fine drenching rain" (*ibid.*). The mood is already somber, and now the company's soaking expresses the malaise. While I interpret this primarily as a pathetic representation of water, of course it also partakes of the geographical facet (the ocean is indeed to the West of the Fellowship) and the mystical aspect (the West beyond the ocean is the home of Middle-earth's gods in Valinor). In addition, as Ciriot describes, rain symbolizes life and purification and is sometimes "regarded as a symbol of the 'spiritual influences' of heaven descending from earth" (272).

Similarly, after leaving Lothlórien, the group is not exactly "eager to hurry southwards" (*LotR* II.9.380), which is represented in the movement of the water of the Anduin, where "they let the River bear them on at its own pace, having no desire to hasten towards the perils that lay beyond" and "Aragorn let them drift with the stream" (*ibid.*). Even within the pathetic facet of water, this might invite different interpretations, for instance aimless drifting vs. inevitable movement towards destiny, or at least war. Much later in the story, as it seems to be Frodo and Sam's destiny to die in Mordor on their quest, the water they find is "the last remains, maybe, of some sweet rain gathered from sunlit seas, but ill-fated to fall at last upon the walls of the Black Land and wander fruitless down into the dust" (VI.2.920)—as they are hopeless, they project that emotion onto the water. Finally, after his departure from Middle-earth Frodo imagines the rain at Tom Bombadil's house one more time; in contrast, Sam is back at the shore, and "as he looked at the grey sea he saw only a shadow on the waters that was soon lost in the West" (VI.9.1030). Frodo has left for a better place; Sam has stayed behind to an uncertain, unknowable, invisible future, like the impenetrable sea.

INTENTIONAL REPRESENTATIONS OF WATER

In its final aspect, water appears throughout *The Lord of the Rings* in intentional representations. By 'intentional,' I don't mean Tolkien's intent: authorial intent in my opinion may be interesting, but it is mostly irrelevant to the interpretation of literature. I also don't necessarily mean that the water has intent, i.e., that water turns into a conscious agent with a purpose of its own. Tolkien certainly endowed nature with intent, most obviously with the Ents,

who represent the needs and desires of trees, but water is different: as Dickerson points out, plants and animals are alive, but water “is still not alive in a biological sense” (24). There are some more recent ecocritical theories, like the object-oriented ontology (OOO) of Timothy Morton or Stacy Alaimo’s transcorporeality, in which it wouldn’t matter if water is alive. One application of these theories to Tolkien’s work is Christopher Roman’s interesting essay “Thinking with the Elements: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Ecology and Object-Oriented Ontology” in *Representations of Nature in Middle-earth*. Unfortunately, Roman mentions water only briefly and only in the context of the poetic form of the story of Beren and Lúthien in *The Lays of Beleriand*. But more generally he argues that *The Lord of the Rings* presents a non-hierarchical world in which humans are enmeshed (a key term in OOO) with other life forms and objects at an equal level. Thus, Tolkien’s work suggests “the need for communities to come together and reflect enmeshment, and, perhaps, avoid ecological catastrophe” (Roman 115). In my assessment, however, Tolkien’s work doesn’t quite conform with these theories because the text does imbue some non-human forms with intentionality, but not others.

There are certainly a few moments in *The Lord of the Rings* when water appears to take on agency, for instance at the Ford of the Bruinen and on Mount Caradhras. In the former case, the water ‘attacks’ the Nazgûl and thus saves Frodo; in the latter, the snow seems actively malignant in forcing the Fellowship to turn around. But Gandalf is crystal-clear about the flood: “Elrond commanded it [...]. The river of this valley is under his power, and it will rise in anger when he has great need to bar the Ford” (*LotR* II.1.224). In other words, the agency lies with the Elf-lord, though in a kind of free indirect discourse the phrase leaves it uncertain if the “anger” is Elrond’s or the river’s. Gandalf also adds his own touch in “the form of great white horses with shining white riders” (II.1.224), but there is certainly no agency on the side of the river Bruinen. Here I differ in my interpretation from Campbell’s, who asserts that “the waters of the river at the Ford in Rivendell, in harmony with the enchantments of Elrond and Gandalf, rise in flood” (272n65)—rather than “in harmony with the enchantments” (which would add a mystical layer), they rise *because* of the enchantments. In the mountains, Gimli claims that “Caradhras has not forgiven us [...]. He has more snow yet to fling at us” (*LotR* II.3.291), and the narrator speculates that with a last flurry of snow “the malice of the mountain seemed to be expended, as if Caradhras was satisfied that the invaders had been beaten off” (II.3.293). In other words, the intent, if there is any, lies with the mountain, although the simile (“as if”) suggests that the mountain does not actually have agency here. Instead, the snow is once again merely an instrument to achieve the goal, here that of repelling the Fellowship.

What I mean by intent, then, is that the motif of water has intent, i.e., that there is a strong symbolic significance to water. This puts Tolkien in a venerable tradition: as Northrop Frye writes, and Barella quotes, “earth, air, water and fire are still the four elements of imaginative experience, and always will be” (146). Similarly, Cirlot writes that the four elements “have been conceived in the West from pre-Socratic days onwards as the ‘Cardinal Points’ of material existence” (95). The intentional representation of water creates something similar to what Auer calls a “cognitive space,” which “constantly creates choices with which the protagonists are faced” (241) and where they can think and reflect. In the end, Auer argues that because of water “there is undoubtedly reason for hope” (257), but that conclusion seems to me unwarranted even by his own evidence, which includes the Withywindle, the Watcher in the Water, and the brook at Helm’s Deep.

Still, Auer and I agree that in many instances in *The Lord of the Rings* water moves the narrative forward actively, i.e., water establishes a situation that is then realized in the plot or in conversations (in a sense the inverse of the pathetic fallacy). For instance, the journey into the Dead Marshes starts with a stream “that trickled down from the hills to feed the stagnant pools and mires beyond” (*LotR* IV.2.620), then “the gully became ever shallower” (IV.2.624), and finally “the stream gurgled and fell down into a brown bog and was lost” (IV.2.625). Here, the water prefigures the hobbits’ and Sméagol’s stagnation, not to mention their near loss by falling into the lights in the marshes, which is not unlike the interpretation Cirlot describes, where “marshlands are a symbol of the ‘decomposition of the spirit’ [and] the fusion of the two passive elements (water and earth)” (204-5).

This is not unlike the pool where the Watcher in the Water dwells before the gates of Moria. The approach to the pool contrasts a clean, powerful stream with stagnant, standing water: previously, the Sirannon “ran” (II.4.300) and “flowed” (II.4.301), including down a waterfall that was “strong and full” (*ibid.*); now it only contains “a trickle of water” (II.4.300) that merely “dripped” (II.4.301) because of “drying up” (*ibid.*). These descriptions come from the narrator and from Gandalf, so they constitute more than just one perspective, and the water has intent in the sense of strong symbolic significance. Subsequently, the pool is given agency when it is described as “sullen” (*ibid.*), and the impression it creates in the Fellowship is that the water is “ominous” (*ibid.*). Of course, it is not really the water that is dangerous, but the being living *in the water*. The Fellowship has to cross a creek that is “green and stagnant [with a] slimy arm” (II.4.302)—again anthropomorphizing water—and the shallow water creates “weedy pools” (*ibid.*). Throughout the episode, the water is described as “dark” (II.4.301, II.4.302, II.4.306, II.4.307), and in addition it is “unclean” (II.4.302)—the opposite of the original Sirannon. The Watcher is of

course disturbed by the stone Boromir throws, and the ripples on the lake turn out to be not just the reverberations of the stone but the awakening of the beast. Now, the water seems like it is boiling (“seething,” II.4.306), and it is “pale-green and luminous and wet” (II.4.306). The point for my argument is that the series of descriptions of water here draw attention to the fact that the Fellowship is at a crossroads where they must make a difficult choice; in addition to that idea being articulated by narrator and characters, it is symbolically represented in different aspects of water. Neither choice is easy, but the consequence could be more like the dark, unclean water of the pool or more like the strong, clean flow of the Sirannon.

Similarly, the condition of water is always a bellwether for the state of a community: where beings live together in peace and harmony, water is plentiful and clean; conversely, a ruined community has dirty or no water. Here I agree with Campbell, who notes one of the symptoms of the desolation of Mordor is that “water too [...] has been polluted” (144). The Shire at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings* has plenty of usable creeks, streams, rivers, and pools (even if most hobbits generally avoid them), but after his takeover Saruman intentionally pollutes the waters of the Shire. Sharkey and his men, perhaps including Ted Sandyman, “pour out filth a purpose; they’ve fouled all the lower Water, and it’s getting down into Brandywine” (*LotR* VI.8.1013), so the Water is “fouled with a steaming and stinking outflow” (VI.8.1016). The hobbits’ response is a different form of water, namely tears, but eventually of course they manage to clean, restore, and even improve the Shire.

Interestingly, the most frequent form of water that is represented intentionally in *The Lord of the Rings* is mist, or fog, or vapor, or clouds. Of course, these phenomena all physically involve much more than just water, but I would argue that their defining characteristic in Tolkien’s work is the involvement of water. The mist around the ferry across the Brandywine (*LotR* I.5.98) might be interpreted as a representation of the hobbits’ uncertainty about their path and mission at this point, perhaps to some extent a pathetic representation, and the mist at Crickhollow when only Fatty Bolger is there (I.11.176) prefigures the attack of the Nazgûl. After the knife attack at Weathertop, Frodo sees as if through a mist (I.12.204, I.12.206, I.12.210, I.12.213), though this mist is arguably not associated with water. As analyzed above, the description of Rivendell offers geographical representations of water, but there are also figurative and intentional aspects interspersed: as Frodo is entranced by the music at Rivendell, “the firelit hall became like a golden mist above seas of foam that sighed upon the margins of the world” (II.1.233), opening Frodo’s eyes and mind to new places and possibilities in the world. The fog on the Anduin as the Fellowship approaches Argonath hides various new perspectives: on the positive side, Aragorn soon after reveals himself as “proud and erect, [...] his hood was cast

back, and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, a light was in his eyes: a king returning from exile to his own land" (II.9.393); on the other hand, the fog allows the orcs on the eastern shore to conceal themselves and launch attacks on the Fellowship. This fact (as well as Sméagol's following them) throws doubt on Auer's contention that the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* "are usually safe from outside interruption while actually travelling on the water" (253). This fog is partly instrumental, but its heavy symbolism also makes the representation intentional.

Jumping to the end of the novel, "the mists of Mordor" (*LotR* V.10.887) make it difficult for Aragorn's small army to organize their assault on Sauron, and "great rolling clouds" (VI.3.933) obscure the view for Sam as he tries to plan their route to Mount Doom. This is perhaps closest to Cirlot's reading of mist as "symbolic of things indeterminate [and] the inevitable obscuring of the outlines of each aspect and each particular phase of the evolutive process" (212). Sauron's end is marked by a "swirling cloud" (*LotR* VI.3.947) for Sam, while in Minas Tirith "a great wind rose and blew, [...] and the Sun was unveiled, and light leaped forth; and the waters of Anduin shone like silver" (VI.5.963). What connects these intentional representations of water, I would argue, is a sense of possibilities, either for characters to make choices or for events to unfold. Yes, there is hope in many images of water, but there is also often what Dickerson calls "negative (or at least dangerous) images" (16), including things that are hidden and sometimes, but not always, revealed. Just to be clear: the difference between hope and possibility to me is that possibility is a more open term, while hope is more specific and positive. Hope is a kind of good possibility, but representations of water suggest just as many bad possibilities.

"HELM'S DEEP"

The chapter "Helm's Deep" in Book III of *The Lord of the Rings* can serve as a case study of how the various representations of water can be located and interact in close proximity to each other. Janet Brennan Croft recognizes the significance of this chapter (and others) when she writes in *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* that "Tolkien [uses] natural imagery extensively in his major set-piece battle scenes at Helm's Deep, the Battle of Pelennor Fields, and at the Black Gate" (37) and cites some of the same passages I am about to quote. However, Croft does not focus on water, but rather makes a larger argument about how Tolkien fits into post-World War I literature as characterized by Paul Fussell. In this section, she is describing how Tolkien embraces pastoral moments, and specifically the themes of 'death in arcadia' and the pastoral oasis—and uses natural imagery (including water) to show that war "is almost a normal part of nature or at least a natural occurrence" (38).

In my present argument, in contrast, water is particularly important, and “Helm’s Deep” demonstrates how the different aspects of the representation of water often overlap or overlay, adding more complexity and significance to Tolkien’s use of water as a symbol. The chapter starts with the army of Rohan with Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, and (at this point) Gandalf travelling at high speed from Edoras to the fortress of Helm’s Deep. On this journey, they are “crossing small swift streams by many fords” (*LotR* III.7.526), which could be simply an instrumental representation of water, or an intentional or pathetic foreshadowing of the important role that water will play in this chapter. Similarly, the Fords of Isen (III.7.526, III.7.528) have a practical function in allowing the company to pass, but of course also echo the name of Isengard, where the enemy Saruman lives. In both cases, fords symbolize challenges and possibilities: they are necessary only because there are rivers blocking the path, but the fords suggest that this obstacle can also be overcome. The Deeping-stream (III.7.528) starts out by fulfilling mostly a geographical function by providing safety and creating a border between the forces of Rohan and Saruman’s army, but it also turns into somewhat of a pathetic representation when it gets personified: “The Deeping-stream, swollen by the rain, churned and fretted in its choked path, and spread slowly in cold pools from cliff to cliff” (III.7.536). The stream is not actually a conscious actor, but it can still be threatened (“choked”) and is imbued with agency in that it “fretted” (in the sense of “to vex oneself, chafe, worry”; Definition 9a in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Figurative representations of water are quite prominent in this chapter as well, and a few keywords (storm, pour, sweep, hail, tide) establish metaphoric patterns that pervade the text. The entire build-up and battle are framed as “a great storm” (*LotR* III.7.526), which Gandalf characterizes as “a very storm of Mordor” (III.7.527). In contrast, Aragorn wants to confront the enemy and “ride down upon them like a storm out of the mountains” (III.7.530). In other words, the storm in itself is not good or bad, and its moral valence depends on its origin and intent. Similarly, Saruman’s army is described as “pouring over the Dike and through the breach” (III.7.532), but later the Rohirrim counterattack uses the same word: “Out poured all the men that were left upon the Rock” (III.7.541). ‘Sweeping’ (as in water sweeping) occurs frequently: the Orcs are “swept away” (III.7.534) by Aragorn, but then, in two consecutive sentences, “the last assault came sweeping like a dark wave upon a hill of sand. The defence was swept away” (III.7.537). Aragorn explains to Legolas that “the enemy swept us apart” (III.7.538) and then has to repeat to Théoden that “all the defence [is] swept away” (*ibid.*)—but then in the last sally, “Down from the gates they roared, over the causeway they swept, and they drove through the hosts of Isengard”

(III.7.540-41). Once again, figurative representations of water are used on both sides, emphasizing the actions of the characters rather than the element.

Along the same lines, descriptions of weaponry use water imagery. In the space of just a few paragraphs, the orcs attack with “a cloud of arrows” (*LotR* III.7.533), and the defenders of the Hornburg respond with “a storm of arrows” (*ibid.*) (in the middle of an actual storm) and “a hail of stones” (*ibid.*). In return, the orc army shoots “a hail of darts” (*ibid.*), and a few pages later they go after Aragorn with “a hail of darts and arrows” (III.7.540). The back and forth of battle is couched in maritime and tidal imagery, starting with “the hosts of Isengard [who] roared like a sea” (III.7.535). That army is described as a “dark tide” (III.7.532, in a potentially racist phrase), and their actions are characterized in similar language (both metaphors and similes): “They wavered, broke, and fled back; and then charged again, broke and charged again; and each time, like the incoming sea, they halted at a higher point” (III.7.533). A few sentences later, “The enemy surged forward” (*ibid.*). As in the example above, the tidal imagery is complicated because it suggests an immutable and morally neutral natural force, which stands in contrast to the portrayal of the enemy as morally deficient. In turn, of course, the Hornburg is “like an island in the sea” (III.7.536).

In addition to instrumental, geographical, and figurative representations of water, there are some instances in “Helm’s Deep” that might be construed as mystical. The ocean is invoked twice for no apparent reason: the Hornburg was built by “the sea-kings” (*LotR* III.7.528), and the top of the Deeping Wall is compared to “a sea-delved cliff” (III.7.531). In both of these cases, the sea seems to gesture towards particular importance or power, but without any real explanation. It also seems mystical that the Huorns are “not mist or cloud,” but “flowing downwards from the hills” (III.7.527). Interestingly, the text actually places this movement next to “the bank of the river,” and the forest “marches slowly down stream” (*ibid.*).

In terms of pathetic representations of water, the small streams at the beginning of the chapter might be an image of smaller forces coming together ultimately to defeat Sauron’s army. The storm framing the chapter may be a representation of the difficulty of the situation, and in that context it is no surprise that the enemy “[a]rrows [come] thick as rain” (*LotR* III.7.532). The strongest intentional representation in “Helm’s Deep” comes at the beginning of the battle (and storm), where one paragraph is particularly saturated with water imagery (and light and lightning accompanying the storm). Right before the attack, “the heavy air foreboded storm,” and “the clouds were seared by a blinding flash” (III.7.532), giving the defenders (and the reader) the opportunity to prepare. The lightning allows the defenders to see that the ground in front of the walls “was boiling and crawling with black shapes” (*ibid.*)—which employs water imagery, but of water that has been manipulated or shaped (brought to a

boil). In examples already mentioned above, in a movement from metaphorical to literal water, the attackers now “were pouring over the Dike,” “[t]he dark tide flowed,” and “[r]ain came lashing down” (ibid.).

In the interaction of these aspects of representations of water, “Helm’s Deep” demonstrates throughout that the meaning must be constructed in collaboration rather than simply understood, and that the outcome of any event or action is always uncertain. This uncertainty is expressed and developed in the various instrumental, geographical, figurative, mystical, pathetic, and intentional representations of water. In the case of this particular situation and battle, the interaction leads to a positive result—the defeat of the armies of evil—but there is no guarantee for that particular outcome. In this “tempest of war” (*LotR* III.7.533), there is opportunity for the defenders of the Hornburg, but individuals need to fight for it.

WATER AND RESPONSIBILITY

Different facets of the representations of water, then, have different symbolic meanings in *The Lord of the Rings*. These meanings resonate strongly with some definitions articulated by Cirlot in his *Dictionary of Symbols*, where he writes that water can “symbolize the universal congress of potentialities, the *fons et origo*, which precedes all form and all creation” (365)—so in a sense it is pre-ethical. It is “an expression of the vital potential of the psyche, of the struggles of the psychic depths” (366), but it does not influence how that potential develops or what the outcome of those struggles is. Similarly, water can be seen as “liberating the elements which will later be recombined in new cosmic patterns” (365), and it is neither good nor bad: “water stands as a mediator between life and death, with a two-way positive and negative flow of creation and destruction” (ibid.). In Middle-earth and in our world, Tolkien suggests (according to my argument) that we determine the direction of that flow through our choices and decisions.

To return to my terminology, then, instrumental representations to me have the least significance overall beyond the specific use in a passage. Geographical representations indicate separation and distance, and specifically the separation of the fallen world from the paradise of Valinor. In some cases, these demarcations take on greater symbolic significance. Figurative uses of water, for instance in metaphors or similes, depend very much on the specific passage, but are usually problematic because of the slipperiness of figurative language more generally. Mystical representations suggest options and possibilities, but give no certainty. Pathetic representations are more like projections of the protagonists, so they carry less meaning with regard to the water. Intentional representations, I have argued, focus on a sense of open possibilities. In chapters such as “Helm’s Deep,” these various types of

representations are interwoven to create a web of meaning that gives this chapter in *The Lord of the Rings* particular depth and significance.

At the same time, all of these different functions beg the question of whether there is really a unified meaning to water in *The Lord of the Rings*, as previous scholars have suggested: the hope and salvation of Dickerson, the lack and melancholy of Rivero, or the cognitive space of Auer. In contrast to these critics, I would bring all of these overlapping aspects together and propose that water in *The Lord of the Rings* is not so much about hope, melancholy, or cognitive space as it is about possibilities and options, good or bad. Water in *The Lord of the Rings* is changeable in all senses: it takes on many forms, it takes on the various functions described above, and it takes on various symbolic meanings. In my interpretation, this means that water ultimately suggests that all existence can be transformed in the sense of a renewal, but also in the sense of destruction. In addition, water symbolizes the transitory nature of all existence: water might be present at one moment, but it can be gone or poisoned just as quickly. Water is morally neutral, and in its variety of forms and potentialities of moral impacts, it serves as a reminder that it is our responsibility to change the world around us for the better. Middle-earth is a fallen world with Christian echoes, and water shows that it can turn better or turn worse—but it is ultimately our responsibility as individuals to engage in actions that will shape our world in a way that we would consider improvement.

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