A Parallax Reading of *Leaf by Niggle*:

Documenting 'Picture' and 'Tree' in harmony as a biography of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* years

The approach

So-and-so suggested, to wide acclaim, that *Leaf and Niggle* could be interpreted as a story of allegory of blahblah purgatory blah. For Niggle is meant to be an 'allegory' of a characteristic." (CITE). We perhaps can see it as a morality story, much like the morality plays of the Medieval era, which Tolkien likely studied – think of *Everyman* and his quest to climb to heaven. Everyman represents an idea, that of *every man*, every Christian. Other morality play characters are named in this fashion; think of *Castle of Perseverance's* Belial, World, and Good and Bad Angel. In this paper, therefore, I will read *Leaf by Niggle* as it is presented, and assuming the story to be reflective of a journey through earth/mortal life to heaven. I am interested in the two topics of *picture* (that is to say, the *painting* by Niggle) and *tree*. They are not, on the whole, in opposition with each other, despite one being a mere representation of the other. They work orthogonally, because from the tree comes the picture, and from the picture Niggle is drawn to the tree. There is no one without the other; without heaven, one cannot dream.

On the whole, I will be approaching this short study using distant reading mixed with close reading, also called parallax reading. The computer program R will be used to identify where *tree* occurs and where *picture* occurs in *Leaf by Niggle*, and in what quantities. I myself will then use close reading observations to draw conclusions from the quantitative analysis. The combination of the distant reading and close reading styles means that we have a parallax view, a term coined by so-and-so. Because this method is something new to Tolkien studies, I consider this to be an exploratory, documentary research project, rather than one which responds to previous research. But of course I also hope this brings something new to our close reading of *Leaf by Niggle*. At the end of my analysis, I also explain what natural language processing can bring to the field of Tolkien studies, and how texts outside of *Leaf by Niggle* could benefit from being studied computationally and from a parallax view.

The close reading

The Presbyterian pastor named Timothy Keller wrote a book called *Connecting your work to God's work.* In it, he cites Tolkien, who was Catholic. All of Tolkien's worldview is shaped by his Catholic faith, even *Lord of the Rings*, the trilogy he'd written. Keller makes an argument that is is essentially a religious work. It has extensive symbolism. One of the things thatKeller pointed out about Tolkien was that he was a perfectionist; he was never done with his work. [PROOF CAN BE FOUND IN THE MANY DRAFTS THAT WE CURERNTLY SEE IN THE TOLKIEN COLLECTION AT THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY. THERE'S 40 COPEIS OF *SILMARILLION, THERE'S 25 COPIES OF NIGGLE]* So to keep tweaking your work is to 'niggle' at it. It shouldn't be a surprise, therefore, that our character takes on the name of his character trait. So at one point, Tolkien is working on LOTR, a massive volume: it has languages, it has genealogy, it has geography … and he wasn't making any forward progress, so he took a break to write a short story, *Leaf by Niggle.*

Commented [CN1]: The Presbyterian pastor named Timothy Keller wrote a book called *Connecting your work to God's work.* In it, he cites Tolkien, who was Catholic. All of Tolkien's worldview is shaped by his Catholic faith, even *Lord of the Rings*, the trilogy he'd written. Keller makes an argument that is is essentially a reglious work. It has extensive symbolism. One of the things thatKeller pointed out about Tolkien was that he was a perfectionist; he was never done with his work. So to keep tweaking your work is to 'niggle' at it. It shouldn't be a surprise, therefore, that our character takes on the name of his character trait, just like in Medieval morality plays.

[Insert *Leaf by Niggle* summary]

Leaf by Niggle is as close to a biography of Tolkien as we can get. His first love, as we know, was linguistics and philology [ADD STUFF TO PROVE THIS, LIKE FROM YOUR PHD THESIS]. When he creates his languages, particularly Qenya, he's constantly going back to revise them [CITE PROOF], *and* he's concurrently going back to revise the mythology to support the mythical languages. That's a lot of work, and potentially is work that has no end. And that's the leaf and the tree of his life during these years. He starts out creating the few leaves, the few beautiful languages which came to him, but he eventually feels a deep need to illustrate the whole tree, the history of his worlds, and this overwhelms him.

And any moderate fans of Tolkien will know that Tolkien spent many drafts and many years to get *LOTR*, and any other work, just right. Even in the end, he wasn't fully satisfied (letter he wrote saying he wasn't pleased CITE SOURCE). A Christian might look at this as a lived experience of the promises of heaven. The lesson that Tolkien is conveying to us, and that Timothy Kelle rhas pointed out, is that Christians may devote our lives to a great vision that never becomes fulfilled, that never finishes being accomplished. And a little reflection, if I may. Many of us don't see the fruits of our labour; a life well-lived or a life poorly-lived. We live and live and live until we die. We only have one leaf to show for our entire life, when we had reached for an entire tree. And this is where Tolkien's message becomes clear; that our faith helps us realize our dream of a whole tree in eternal life. We cannot ever finish painting the tree – we see the tree – but it will be realized only with faith.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OdiCz3JwHA

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwRpsPhiun8

The distant reading

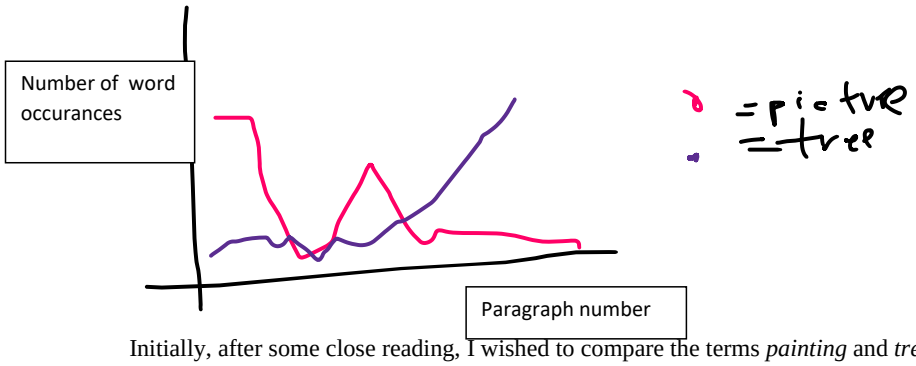
Step 1. Import the corpus into R using function BLAH and clean the text by removing all punctuation.

Step 2. Make each paragraph a token in R, which basically means that it is a separate unit we can deal with independently.

Step 3. Count the occurrences of *tree* in each token (or paragraph).

Step 4. Count the occurrences of *picture* in each token.

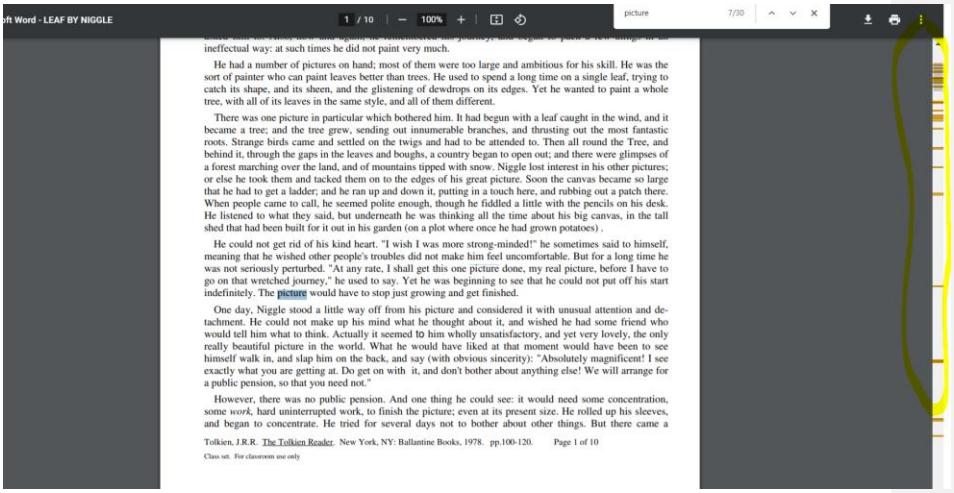
Step 5. Graph the occurrences of *tree vs. paragraph #* and *picture vs. paragraph #* on a single line graph.



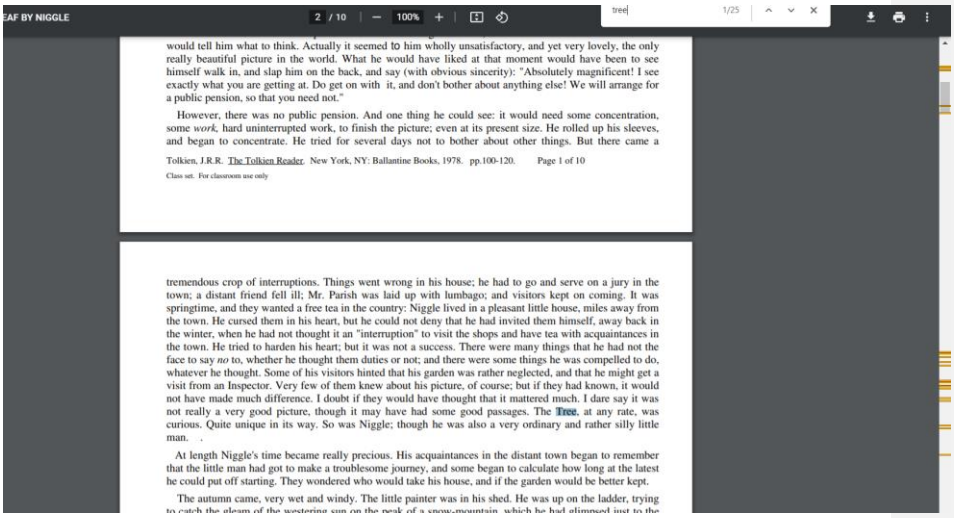
Initially, after some close reading, I wished to compare the terms *painting* and *tree*, because it appeared that those were the main topics in the story, constantly moving towards each other. But the word *picture* is more often used to reference the painting, so I adjusted my search to *picture* and *tree* instead. As one can see, *tree* (and its variants, like *Tree*, singular) occurs more frequently in the second half. *Picture* occurs more frequently in the first half. A tentative argument could be made, subject to close reading analysis, that Tolkien shifts from emphasizing the more artificial word *picture* to the realized vision, *tree*, chronologically as our Niggle travels from his imperfect home to a vision of perfection.

Combining close and distant in parallax

We can clearly see an inverse relationship: as the number of *picture* goes down, the number of *tree* goes up. An argument could be made that when picture becomes less important to the plot, tree's importance rises, and so it is mentioned more and more as Niggle encounters the realized vision.



^see? Picture is clustered at beginning



What I have observing about using parallax for Tolkien

I have said in the introduction that this project was documentary and exploratory, rather than a demand for rigious reading. So, on using distant reading for fantasy studies. Franco Moretti, the father of distant reading, famously made the case that *blahblah.* Given that *blahblah*,

it should come as no surprise that works of fantasy, like stories from Tolkien's legendarium, are ripe for distant reading and parallax studies.

But we too have to be careful about using distant reading as a tool.

Some critics have vociferously voiced their criticism for distant reading: and maybe rightly so. Distant reading on its own, missing the flavour of context or close reading, can make erroneous conclusions. Take, for example, the fact that "eat poison" appears 89 times in *A fictional text by MeMeMeTheGreat*, while "eat well" appears only 20 times. A scholar who looks at this statistic could summarize, wrongly, that "eat poison" is thus weighted more than "eat well" in *A fictional text by MeMeMeTheGreat*; and that Tolkien wished the reader to think of dying by poisoning rather than living healthily. What they forgot to search for, however, was the word "not": "*not* eat poison," "*not* eat well," which completed reverses the sentiment of the phrases searched for. In this paper on *Leaf by Niggle*, I have tried to avoid the following errors of distant reading by combining them with close reading:

1. Counting the word "picture" instead of the word "painting." In my close reading, I have noticed that though Tolkien uses these two words to reference the same object (the painting), he uses the word "picture" on a greater frequency. Indeed, "painting" only occurs X times, and "picture" appears X times. After careful consideration, I find that there is no context lost if we choose to search for "picture" instead of "painting," so no statistical errors based of context will occur in the final comparison study either.

As I mentioned in the introduction, other Tolkien texts could benefit from parallax reading. Long stories, like those in the *Lord of the Rings*, are an obvious first choice, because of the sheer quantity of text to be processed and analysed. For example, it certainly would not do to sit and highlight all the Germanic, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon words in *LOTR* with a highlighter nor to count them. However, a program in R, using packages like <quanteda> or <wordcount>, could do very well. The less obvious choice for parallax reading, however, like *Leaf by Niggle*, are short stories. Trends are easier to spot when close reading, erroneous distant reading conclusions can be quickly verified by a second or third close reading.

It comes altogether as a surprise to me that little work has been done in bringing distant reading, natural language processing, or parallax reading to Tolkien. Such sagas as he writes are ripe for study under a different lens, to bring out all nuances that we had previously not seen.