De anéis mágicos e leões falantes: A função social dos contos de fada de acordo com J.R.R. Tolkien e C.S. Lewis

Of magic rings and talking lions: The social function of fairy tales according to J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis

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RESUMO: Este artigo discute os postulados de J.R.R. Tolkien e C.S. Lewis sobre a função social dos contos de fadas. Atinge-se o assunto através do exame de "Sobre Histórias de Fadas", ensaio de Tolkien, e de *Sobre Histórias e outros ensaios sobre literatura*, livro de Lewis. Para ilustrar os argumentos desses estudiosos, esta pesquisa utiliza-se de exemplos das obras ficcionais *O Senhor dos Anéis* e *As Crônicas de Nárnia*. Ao final do texto, oferta-se argumentos quanto ao duradouro apelo e relevância dos contos de fadas porquanto de sua ligação a características específicas inerentes ao gênero.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Contos de Fadas; C.S. Lewis; J.R.R. Tolkien; "Sobre histórias de fadas"; *Sobre histórias.*

ABSTRACT: This article discusses J.R.R. Tolkien's and C.S. Lewis's understanding of the social function of fairy tales. The topic is approached through the study of Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" and Lewis's book *On Stories: and other essays on literature.* To illustrate these scholars' arguments, this research draws on examples from their fictional works *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia.* At the end of the work, it is argued that the everlasting appeal and relevance of fairy stories are connected to specific characteristics inherent to the genre.

KEYWORDS: C.S. Lewis; Fairy tales; J.R.R. Tolkien; "On fairy stories"; *On Stories.*

Introduction

Understanding the roots and functions of fairy tales has been the subject matter of several scholars and writers since the publication of Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, in 1697. Academics such as Jack Zipes (2006b) have argued that even though there are several studies concerning the origin of such a genre, there has not been conclusive proof about the matter yet. What is already known, however, is that the literary fairy tale has evolved from stories of the oral tradition in a process that Zipes calls incremental adaptation, which consists of the oral tales being shaped by tellers and writers through time and space, resulting in the tales, in their multitude of forms, that are given to us in the present day. As these stories were changed over time, their function has also changed; in this sense, the social function of the oral tales told by our ancestors in a remote time differ from the literary tales of Perrault's tradition and also from the highly adapted tales that we read today.

This work discusses the understanding of fairy stories proposed by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, as well as its social relevance to these writers' time and the present day. These two twentieth-century authors were deeply concerned with the role literature plays in society, mainly in times of great change and turmoil, so much so that a number of their most important scholarly texts, such as Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy Stories" and Lewis's book *On Stories: and other essays on literature*, deal chiefly with the topic. Interestingly enough, both these scholarly texts argue for the importance and relevance of a very specific literary genre: fairy tales. Therefore, in this article, I analyse these writers' propositions while contrasting them with examples from their fictional works, namely *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I intend to illustrate how Tolkien and Lewis's scholarship concerning fairy stories dialogue with their literary fairy tales and how such dialogue casts light on their understanding of the social function of this genre.

It is important to notice, however, that Tolkien and Lewis's concept of fairy stories differ considerably from that of the canon established by the works of writers such as Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy. For Tolkien (2001), fairy stories are not necessarily about fairies, but rather about what the author calls

the *aventures* of men in the perilous realm of *Fäerie*[2]. For Lewis (2002), on the other hand, fairy tales tend to be, at times, the better literary genre to convey one's ideas. In addition to that, both these scholars agree that fairy stories, rather than being simply escapist fancies written to entertain children, are a powerful form of art that uses fantasy to discuss and comment on real-world matters.

Fairy stories are about fairies, or are they?

The term "fairy tale", as Zipes (2006a) points out, was made popular in the seventeenth century much due to the French writer Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, who gave the name *Les Contes de Fées* to her collection of fictional stories. It is also during that century that the fairy tale was established as a literary genre. Even though most stories of the genre do not deal with the diminutive and magical beings often called fairies, the name stuck. Tolkien (2001), in his essay "On Fairy Stories", argues that the term "fairy story" is not connected to any definition or historical account of the creatures we call fairy, but rather to the nature of what he calls *Fäerie*. For the author, "a 'fairy story' is one which touches on or uses Fäerie, whatever its main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy." (TOLKIEN, 2001, p. 10). *F*äerie, Tolkien believes, is a perilous realm, filled with pitfalls and dungeons; it is the realm in which fairies have their being. Such realm, however, is not limited to that:

> *Fäerie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted (TOLKIEN, 2001, p. 9).

In this sense, fairy tales are not necessarily tales about fairies, for the realm of *Fäerie* is much broader and not limited to that. The realm of *Fäerie*, in which Tolkien argues fairy stories take place, is the realm of imagination. In such setting, fantastic events are made possible, and this is, Tolkien argues, one of the fundamental functions of fairy stories: the potential of

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2   Further attention will be given this idea in the following section.

giving to the imagination and imagined things what he calls secondary belief. Secondary Belief, Jay Ruud points out, is "[...] a belief that accepts the inner reality of the story and believes in its "truth" as long as the reader's mind is there within that story's bounds." (RUUD, 2011, p. 344). Such kind of belief, produced through artistic effort, is not easy to be attained, for it depends on the capacity of the artist of giving to their works an inner consistency of reality.

> Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say *the green sun*. Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough – though it may already be a more potent thing than many a 'thumbnail sketch' or 'transcript of life' that receives literary praise. To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode (TOLKIEN, 2001, p.49).

By inducing such belief, Tolkien argues, fairy stories satisfy a variety of human desires, namely that of glimpsing different worlds and conversing with other living things. Such idea is evident in both Tolkien's and Lewis's fairy stories: in *The Lord of the Rings* and in *The Chronicles of Narnia* the protagonists are seen moving from their own world and into an entirely different one, with a whole new set of characteristics and rules. In Lewis's narrative, such movement is more evident and readers tend to recognize the change more easily throughout most of the chronicles: in "The Magician's Nephew", the protagonists Digory and Polly are transported to a different world by the means of a magic ring, while the Pevensie Siblings enter Narnia for the first time in "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" through a magic wardrobe. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is often some kind of wondrous device that enacts the transition from world to another that makes sure that readers perceive the change. In *The Lord of the Rings*, however, such transition between worlds is more difficult to be noticed and this happens because, differently from the protagonists in Lewis's narrative, the ones in Tolkien's work, the hobbits, already inhabit the world in which the adventure takes place. Curiously, as Verlyn Flieger (2017) argues, there are multiple secondary worlds inside Tolkien's works. From the readers' perspective, Middle-earth, as a whole, is already a secondary world, in which we enter

> by way of the famous sentence: "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" [...]
> At once we know that we are out of this world and into another marked (indeed,
> almost created) by the unfamiliar word *hobbit*, and the succeeding paragraphs lead
> us deeper into that world. It is an otherworld, a secondary world, but one so firmly
> grounded in the primary one that we can recognize the links. It is a world where
> imaginary creatures called Hobbits live dull boring lives, get letters in the mail, enjoy
> pipe-smoking but neglect the washing-up (FLIEGER, 2017, p. 38).

On the other hand, for the hobbits from the Shire who live in almost complete isolation from the rest of Middle-earth, the regions beyond the borders of their homeland are, it may be argued, perceived by them as a secondary world. Life in the Shire, as Flieger (2017) points out, is filled with recognizable elements from our primary world[3]: domestic chores, such as collecting the morning letters and tending to gardens, as well as everyday activities, such as drinking tea at four in the afternoon and smoking a pipe, are common in the hobbits' lives. Therefore, hobbits may be seen as unfamiliar creatures living in a familiar environment: when readers start reading *The Lord of the Rings* they are immediately transported to the secondary world of Middle-earth through the arresting strangeness of hobbits; however, as they read on, they realize that not only the place hobbits live in is a familiar one, grounded in the primary world, but also their customs and traditions are recognizable. Thus, when Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry leave the Shire, readers enter another secondary world with them. This second secondary world, however, comes with a different effect: since it is seen as unfamiliar by both readers and hobbits, it is perceived with double strangeness. Such transition from a less unfamiliar world to a highly different environment is well marked in the narrative, and it happens at the beginning of the chapter "The Old Forest":

> 'Good-bye!' they cried, and rode down the slope and disappeared from Fredegar's
> sight into the tunnel. It was dark and damp. At the far end it was closed by a gate
> of thick-set iron bars. Merry got down and unlocked the gate, and when they had
> all passed through he pushed it to again. It shut with a clang, and the lock clicked.

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3   Mainly from Tolkien's Victorian childhood world.

The sound was ominous. 'There!' said Merry. 'You have left the Shire, and are now outside, and on the edge of the Old Forest.' 'Are the stories about it true?' asked Pippin. 'I don't know what stories you mean,' Merry answered. 'If you mean the old bogey-stories Fatty's nurses used to tell him, about goblins and wolves and things of that sort, I should say no. At any rate I don't believe them. But the Forest *is* queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you. They are usually content merely to watch you, as long as daylight lasts, and don't do much. Occasionally the most unfriendly ones may drop a branch, or stick a root out, or grasp at you with a long trailer. But at night things can be most alarming, or so I am told. I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge. I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind. They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in. In fact long ago they attacked the Hedge: they came and planted themselves right by it, and leaned over it (TOLKIEN, 2007, p. 144-145).

The supernatural description given by Merry warns his fellow hobbits, and the readers as well, that advancing beyond the gate means setting foot in a perilous realm, filled with unknown pitfalls and dungeons. In fact, Merry's considerations concerning the Old Forest are notably similar to Tolkien's description of *Fäerie* in the essay "On Fairy Stories", in which the scholar argues that "[m]ost good fairy-stories are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches" (TOLKIEN, 2001, p. 9-10). The adventures of the protagonists from both Tolkien's and Lewis's narratives take place, as it may be argued from the evidence above, in the realm of *Fäerie*, which makes these narratives, if one accepts the Tolkienian theory, fairy stories. As such, one of their functions is fulfilling the human desire of glimpsing different worlds; such function, as it may be argued form the passages above, is attended both in *The Lord of the Rings* and in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As for the fulfilment of our desire to converse with other living things, again such aspect is more evident in Lewis's work: when Digory and Polly first set foot on Narnia, they hear a voice that calls their attention:

> [a] voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. (LEWIS, 1994, p. 106).

Such voice, as they soon discover, belongs to the creator of Narnia: a powerful talking lion named Aslan. Later, in the chapter "The Founding of Narnia", Aslan grants the gift of speaking to all other living things in that fictional universe:

> The Lion, whose eyes never blinked, stared at the animals as hard as if he was going to burn them up with his mere stare. And gradually a change came over them. [...] Then there came a swift flash like fire (but it burnt nobody) either from the sky or from the Lion itself, and every drop of blood tingled in the children's bodies, and the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying: "Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters." (LEWIS, 1994, p. 125-126).

From that moment in *The Chronicles of Narnia* on, all non-human living things are granted the capacity to converse amongst themselves and also with human beings, which they are seen doing in all seven chronicles. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the human desire of talking with other beings is satisfied through the *Ents*, ancient tree-like creatures that possess a voice of their own. In addition to these talking trees, the Tolkienian narrative also presents an ancient race of talking eagles, the "Great Eagles". Both eagles and *Ents* are friendly towards the heroes of the narrative and they aid them in their journeys through Middle-earth.

There is yet one aspect concerning the social function of fairy stories that I would like to address, and it is connected to Tolkien's (2001) idea that a further role of fairy tales is that of providing readers with three things: escape, recovery, and consolation. Escape is intrinsically connected with the wish-fulfilling function of fairy stories mentioned above: when a writer is capable of creating a fictional universe that is internally consistent, they create a secondary world in which readers can enter and in which the narrated events seem real. Thus, by indu-

cing secondary belief, internally consistent fairy stories have the potential of fulfilling a series of human desires. Recovery, on the other hand, concerns what Lewis (2002) calls the main advantage of fairy stories: that of better saying what has to be said. On his essay "Sometimes fairy stories may say best what's to be said", the scholar explains such a claim:

> Everything began with images [...]. Then came the Form. As these images sorted themselves into events (i.e., became a story) they seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. But the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale. And the moment I thought of that I fell in love with the Form itself: its brevity, its severe restraints on description, its flexible traditionalism, its inflexible hostility to all analysis, digression, reflections and 'gas'. I was now enamoured of it. Its very limitations of vocabulary became an attraction; as the hardness of the stone pleases the sculptor or the difficulty of the sonnet delights the sonneteer. On that side (as Author) I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say. Then of course the Man in me began to have his turn. I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could (LEWIS, 2002, 92-93).

According to Lewis, fairy stories have the potential of, somehow, recreating reality and presenting it to readers under a new light, thus making them regain a clearer view of things in the real world. That is probably why the author, on the same essay, argues that one of the functions of fairy stories is their capacity of making readers undergo experiences they never had; thus, rather than simply commenting on life, these stories can enrich it. Tolkien, as a great

connoisseur of the genre, was well aware of such claims and expressed them in his essay "On Fairy Stories": "We should look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red. We should meet the centaur and the dragon, and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses - and wolves." (TOLKIEN, 2001, p. 57). Therefore, for these authors, fairy stories both restore and expand perspective: the stories mirror reality and make readers perceive aspects of it that were, thus far, unnoticed or forgotten. In other words, fairy stories help readers reach a clearer understanding of the world around them by providing Recovery.

As for the consolation fairy stories provide, it is related to what Tolkien (2001) calls "the joy of the happy ending", which is the mark, he believes, of all good fairy stories. To explain such argument, the author coined the term *Eucatastrophe4*. For the author, this consolation, which is characterised by a sudden and miraculous grace that is bestowed upon the characters in the narrative in the face of imminent defeat, is the highest function of fairy stories. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the *Eucatastrophe* is present in all seven tales, often representing the sudden triumph of the good forces over the bad. However, for the purposes of this work, I address only one of the *eucatastrophic* moments in Lewis's narrative, the one taking place at the end of "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The *Eucatastrophe* in such tale takes place when Aslan, who had been executed by the White Witch previously in the narrative, resurrects. The resurrection of the talking lion represents what Tolkien (2001) calls "the sudden joyous turn" in the face of imminent defeat, for Aslan is the character responsible for putting an end in the war the Pevensie siblings had been fighting against the White Witch; it is in the precise moment that the tide of the battle is against the Pevensie's that Aslan arrives and ensures that the evil forces the White Witch had mustered are defeated:

> Lucy could hardly make out what was happening; she only saw the stone knife and Peter's sword flashing so quickly that they looked like three knives and three swords. That pair were in the center. On each side the line stretched out. Horrible things

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4   As Verlyn Flieger (2017) points out, Tolkien's *Eucatastrophe* is derived from the Greek word *katastrephein*, *kata* (down) and *strephein* (turn). By adding the prefix "*eu-*" (good), Tolkien changed the negative meaning of the original word to a positive one: the "good catastrophe".

were happening wherever she looked. "Off my back, children," shouted Aslan. And they both tumbled off. Then with a roar that shook all Narnia from the western lamp-post to the shores of the eastern sea the great beast flung himself upon the White Witch. Lucy saw her face lifted toward him for one second with an expression of terror and amazement. Then Lion and Witch had rolled over together but with the Witch underneath; and at the same moment all war-like creatures whom Aslan had led from the Witch's house rushed madly on the enemy lines, dwarfs with their battleaxes, dogs with teeth, the Giant with his club (and his feet also crushed dozens of the foe), unicorns with their horns, centaurs with swords and hoofs. And Peter's tired army cheered, and the newcomers roared, and the enemy squealed and gibbered till the wood re-echoed with the din of that onset (LEWIS, 1994, p. 176-177).

With the White Witch overthrown, peace returns to Narnia once again. In *The Lord of the Rings*, on the other hand, the *Eucatastrophe* is considerably more complex because it ensures the happy ending of all characters in Middle-earth, but the one of Frodo, one of the heroes of the novel. After the One Ring is destroyed and peace returns to Tolkien's fictional universe, Frodo keeps suffering the effects of having borne the Ring through most of the narrative; the hero cannot be healed, neither physically nor mentally. Rather than enjoying the restored peace of his homeland, his fate is to head to the Undying Lands, a territory that is beyond the reach of any race in Tolkien's narrative, except for the elves and a few characters, like Frodo and Bilbo, who are granted passage to it due to their having been Ring bearers, where he will spend the rest of his days. In the chapter "The Gray Havens", Frodo explains to his friend Sam why he has to leave:

> 'But,' said Sam, and tears started in his eyes, 'I thought you were going to enjoy the Shire, too, for years and years, after all you have done.' 'So I thought too, once. But I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger: some one has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them (TOLKIEN, 2007, p. 1346-1347).

In both *The Lord of the* Rings and *The Chronicles of* Narnia the happy ending has to be earned; the heroes in these narratives have to struggle so that it can take place: the Pevensie siblings, as well as the other heroes in Lewis's narratives, all fight in the Narnian wars or take part of some dangerous quest, while the ones in the Tolkienian work go on a perilous journey to destroy the One Ring. The main difference in these authors' narratives is, however, the fact that in *The Lord of the* Rings the happy ending is earned by a hero that will not directly benefit from it, as it is the case with Frodo. Tom Shippey (2001), Theresa Nicolay (2014) and Flieger (2017), argue that the double facet of the *Eucatastrophe* in Tolkien's narrative is largely associated with the way the author felt towards two specific kinds of narrative: the ancient and the Biblical. Nicolay suggests that through his works, Tolkien sought to revive virtues that, for him, were fundamental to the building of a society that could thrive in the face of great adversity. The scholar proposes that by putting his characters against entities that represent the most potent evil imaginable and then having them rise above their differences and weaknesses as a means to cast such evil down, Tolkien is underscoring the importance of fellowship, courage, hope and a set of other virtues. Shippey points out that this confrontation between the forces of "good" and "evil" is present not only in the Biblical narratives but also in the ancient ones. The main difference between these narratives relates to the aftermath of what the scholar calls their "Day of Doom": in the Bible, for example, such day is represented by the Apocalypse, in which the "good" forces, represented mainly by the Christian God and his angels, overthrow "evil" (Satan and his followers). If, on one hand, the forces of "good" prevail in the Bible, in ancient narratives the opposite is often true: in the Norse "Day of Doom", the Ragnarök, for example, it is the Gods who perish in the battle against the monsters; similarly, Beowulf dies after his confrontation with the dragon. Tolkien embraces these two facets in his narratives: there is the (veiled) presence of the providential help of a greater invisible force, which helps the heroes reach the happy ending, but such ending is mostly possible because of the struggles and sacrifice of a hero.

Some Considerations

At the beginning of this article, I argued that the (social) function of fairy stories has changed over time in order to better meet the demands of the context these stories are inserted in. Zipes (2012b) claims that the survival of literary fairy tales through the centuries has been possible, to a considerable extent, due to their adaptive trait. To another extent, the scholar believes, such survival has been achieved due to the inherent quality of this genre of communicating feelings efficiently by the use of metaphors that help readers envision solutions to their problems. Such characteristic fairy stories posses is connected to Brian Attebey's (2014) claim regarding fantasy, in which he argues that the metaphorical quality of fantasy allows writers to deliver their messages more powerfully since, "[b]y renouncing claims to report directly on reality, fantasy acquires the potential (not always realized) to generate powerful symbols. Like dream or myth, it uses symbols to tell the truths that the conscious mind cannot grasp or fears to face." (ATTEBERY, 2014, p. 35). Fairy stories are, in their essence, fantasy stories, therefore, Atterbey's proposition applies to them. In this sense, when answering the frequently asked question "why do fairy tales stick?", one could simply say that it is because the characteristics of this genre allow writers to address and comment on real-world matters in a more accessible way. That is why Lewis (2002) argues that fairy stories, at times, can better say what is to be said: the universe in which fairy tales take place, the realm of *Fäerie*, is different from the readers' world; however, the dilemmas and difficulties the characters face (and often overcome) are frequently bound in the primary world: "what is the right thing to do?", "what does this all mean?", "what difference does it make if I give up or carry on?", and other questions of this sort are often posed by the heroes in fairy stories. In other words, characters in fantasy stories often voice anxieties common to many human beings; thus, when the heroes get the answers to their questions, readers also have, somehow, their own dilemmas solved. Through the *Eucatastrophe* in fairy stories, one is reminded that the happy ending in the real world is not so elusive as it seems.

All things considered, through their scholarship and literary works, Tolkien and Lewis emphasized an important notion concerning the genre of their narratives: fairy stories are necessary. In times of crisis, fairy tales offer us, through their metaphoric and mimetic trait

and the imaginative constructs of their authors, a new perspective through which to see the difficult moments we are forced to go through, thus aiding one regain a clear view of the world around them and, consequently, giving one extra strength to face things with a new heart. In periods of stability, conversely, fairy stories remind us that all our deeds are meaningful and raise our awareness to the often-disregarded notion that our actions and decisions may have a profound impact on the course of history.

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