

**THERE AND BACK AGAIN: TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* IN
THE MODERN FICTION**

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RESUMO: O presente ensaio objetiva apontar alguns aspectos relevantes de um dos mais celebrados autores do gênero Fantasia – J. R. R. Tolkien. O século XX testemunhou uma grande retomada da Fantasia nas artes e nos meios midiáticos, o que poderia ser encarado como uma fuga de um mundo ferido após duas Guerras Mundiais que trouxeram desolação e ausência de fé e de valores espirituais para as sociedades moderna e contemporânea. Ao invés de perceber a obra de Tolkien como um paliativo escapista, propomos que ela possa ser lida como uma poderosa metáfora de seu tempo, aludindo aos horrores de uma guerra que foi experienciada pelo próprio autor.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: gênero fantasia; J. R. R. Tolkien; metáfora do tempo.

ABSTRACT: This paper aims to disclose some relevant aspects of one of the most celebrated Fantasy authors – J. R. R. Tolkien. The twentieth century witnesses a huge claim for Fantasy in the arts and media vehicles. This can be seen as a way to escape from a fragmented world made worse by two World Wars that brought desolation and lack of faith in spiritual values to the modern and contemporary society. Rather than addressing Tolkien's fiction as an escapist device, we argue that it can be read as a strong metaphor of his own time instead, alluding to the horrors of the wars that have been experienced by the author.

KEYWORDS: fantasy genre; J. R. R. Tolkien; metaphor of time.

*Do we walk in legends or the green earth in the
daylight? A man may do both, for not we but those
who come after will make the legends of our time.
The green earth, say you? This is a mighty matter of
legend, though you tread it under the light of day.*

Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings

Fantasy Fiction has always found ways to manifest itself in Literature and Art. From Ancient mythological narratives, through fairy-tales, marking its presence in drama and poetry, it eventually reaches the presently most celebrated among literary genres – the novel.

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Fantasy Fiction occupies a very special place in what Carl Jung calls our collective unconscious. In this paper we deal with a literary genre which has not been much favoured by a number of theoreticians, who prefer to concentrate on the standard canon – that great creator of the paradigms and dogmas that rules the literary object. The genre we refer to is Fantasy, whose origins can be traced back to mythological narratives, expanding through fairy-tales – first at an oral stage and then in written registers such as those made by the Grimm Brothers and by Charles Perrault – to reach the current Fantasy Novel, represented by names such as Lewis Carroll, James M. Barrie, C.S. Lewis, Michael Ende, J. R. R. Tolkien or Katherine Paterson among many others.

In its roots, the word fantasy comes from the Latin word *phantasia* meaning the part of our imagination that is capable of creation. It also means, in its origin, “fantastic image, dream, daydream, utopia or *fiction*” (BRUNEL, 2005, p. 8). The word ‘fiction’ here reminds us of its root – *fingere* – that is, the act of pretending, deluding, misleading somebody deliberately. Is not that idea appropriate to the notion of literature? Does not literature delude, mesmerize the reader, suspending him in a parallel world which has its own rules, and its own logic of world building? Is not literature an act of *fingere*? I think it is. However, this conception of fantasy differs from the one we find in myth.

Mythology was born in a time ordered by orality, where the main word was the magic-religious word. The tradition those oral stories dealt with relied on religion, ritual and magic and could not be set apart from ordinary life. Joseph Campbell compares these stories to parts of a broken ceramic vase, which is widespread around the world (CAPMBELL, 2003, p. 14). According to him, these pieces of ceramic could preserve the main content of the stories – that are the symbols and archetypes – because as a part of the vase they contain it inside them. Campbell believes that the underlying structure of any myth is always the myth of the hero. And his purpose is to show that this myth is about every human being: each of us is the hero, struggling to accomplish his own adventure. As human beings, we join in our own journey to develop ourselves as individuals and to find our place in society. According to Campbell, by understanding the myths we get to understand our own lives,

the mythologies of the world compels us to view the cultural history of mankind as a unit; for we find that such themes as the fire-theft, deluge, land of the dead, virgin birth, and resurrected hero have a worldwide distribution—appearing everywhere in new combinations while remaining,

like the elements of a kaleidoscope, only a few and always the same. Furthermore, whereas in tales told for entertainment such mythical themes are taken lightly— in a spirit, obviously, of play—they appear also in religious contexts, where they are accepted not only as factually true but even as revelations of the verities to which the whole culture is a living witness and from which it derives both its spiritual authority and its temporal power. (CAMPBELL, 2003, p. 9).

The great advancement of Fantasy narrative in comparison to mythological narrative is that it presents itself in the written form from the start. Of course, thinking like that, we do not ignore the epic narratives from Greece as *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, written by Homer, or even the applicability of the cycles of Greek myths in the tragedies created by Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides, that are filled with mythical content. Still, they differ from Fantasy Novel because they are – as the fairy and folk-tales are – recollections of traditional and oral narratives shared by different communities from a determinate local and culture. They represent the birth of Literature, and register the passage from the magic-religious word to the laic one.

The laicisation of the word provoked a great change: through it man could retain what used to be lost with the end of oral tradition. Common knowledge was not passed from father to son any more. With the spreading of the written form, the concepts of art and religion were separated. The recollecting of old stories dealing with ogres, fairies, elves and all sorts of enchanted creatures that live in the bestiary complex conceived by European Imagery, found out a place in the world through the works of Charles Perrault, Andersen, Lady Wilde and the Grimm Brothers among many other folklorists. Thankfully, their huge efforts and researches provided us with a gigantic quantity of narratives known as the fairy-tales or folk-tales that were analyzed by the Russian Formalists to exhaustion. Vladimir Propp was the main researcher to look for a kind of typology to the fairy-tale and to the folk-tale, revealing the underlying structures of this kind of narrative.

Fantasy, as one can notice, has always found out a place in the world. In all literary genres we can find allusions to wonder creatures and their enchanted worlds. Be it in William Blake's poetry, in Shakespearian plays, in Greek epics, in medieval romance, and even in the most representative literary genre of the current days – the novel.

Fantasy novels are written by a range of authors who draw their magic lands from a wide range of historical, religious and mythical sources. To the aim and scope of this paper, however, we will concentrate on the foundation of a literary group called *The Inklings*, conceived by two British authors, Irish-born C. S. Lewis and one of his best friends, the South-African born Englishman J. R. R. Tolkien. The idea of this group, which got its meetings in a pub near Oxford University, in England, was to form a party of *literati* to talk about literature, philology, mythology and creative writing, since most of the members were also writers. Among the members who joined *The Inklings* during the years we have: Lord David Cecil, lecturer in English at New College; Neville Coghill, English tutor at Exeter College; James Dundas-Grant, Commander of the Oxford University Naval Division; Adam Fox, Dean of Divinity at Magdalen; Colin Hardie, Classical Tutor at Magdalen; R. E. 'Humphrey' Havard, Lewis's doctor; R. B. McCallum of Pembroke College; Father Gervase Mathew, OP of Blackfriars, C. E. Stevens, historian at Magdalen; Charles Wrenn, Lecturer in English Language; Christopher Tolkien (son of J. R. R. Tolkien) and John Wain, both students at the time.

The conversations held in this group gave birth, among several other things, to two of the most celebrated Fantasy Novels from the Modern Period of English Literature – *The Lord of the Rings*, written by Tolkien, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis. These two pieces of literature were created in the period between the two Great Wars, and both are marked by the wartime context that surrounded the authors. However, we must not think of *The Inklings* as anything like a mutual admiration society or men hungry for professional advancement – as Walter Hooper reminds us,

They were, first and foremost, Christians, who had in common something that was far more important than their jobs or their other interests. Nowhere it is better put than in the definition Lewis gave of Friendship in *The Four Loves*: 'In this kind of love,' he said, 'do you love me? Means do you see the same truth? Or at least, 'Do you care about the same truth?' (HOOPER, 1999, p. 5).

The Fantasy Fiction written in this warlike period created a kind of counter-culture literature. If we consider the aesthetic and thematic aspects privileged in European modernism, the dark existential perception that seems to lead the intellectual positions of the first half of the twentieth century is disrupted in Fantasy Fiction. The mythic approach to

literature offers some rest from the predominant atheistic, even nihilistic perception of things predominating in the intellectual circles of that period. As to the relation between internal and external verisimilitude, it seems that Fantasy Fiction is more committed to the rules of medieval Romance than to the fictional structure found in texts written by great modern novelists such as Virginia Woolf or Joseph Conrad.

Because it was widely bought and in a sense worked as a balm against anxiety, Fantasy Novels were underestimated as mere escapist fiction. The huge influence they began to have on their readers, especially the young ones, was often attributed to the fact that readers found in those stories a way to flee from reality. Narnia and Middle-Earth were seen as safe places to go when the ‘real’ world was in trouble. It was only in the second half of the 20th Century that the metaphors involving aesthetics and religiosity became more flexible and allowed a loosening of the restrictions imposed upon imagination. It was at that period that Fantasy Fiction started to be seen through a more favourable angle. In the United States, for instance, among the *hippies*, many fellowships were created, which called themselves “people from Middle-Earth”, living together in communities in the countryside. Those people argued they were living under the laws of Tolkien’s Mythology, following his precepts as caring about nature and living without machines and pollution. We can clearly see how far *The Lord of the Rings* could reach people’s mind through the glimmering of Tolkien’s writing.

Although some critics, as Germaine Greer and Joseph Pearce, have told us Tolkien’s novels lead into escapism and Tolkien’s readers are trying to flee from real life, hiding in the consolation of a magic land, my interpretation of the contribution of this author goes in a very different direction. Defining Tolkien’s literature as escapism is to ignore the main aspects that have built the appreciation for the mythological qualities exposed in his novels. The myths and the fairy-tales have always been present in literature; Tolkien only gives explicit directions to the symbolical thought, writing about the fairy world with a depth capacity of narrating it. And his attitude opened a new continent of imaginative space for many millions of readers, and dozens of writers – although he himself says that this continent was not but a merely rediscovering.

The year of 2001 witnessed a return of the same themes through the appropriation of the novels by the cinema. Tolkien, Lewis, Barrie or even contemporary authors as J. K.

Rowling with her *Harry Potter* saga had their stories adapted to the screen around the globe, fomenting a new movement towards to the mythical narratives, and as a consequence waking up the interest of legions of new readers. That was also the opening to a completely new generation of writers who joined the enterprise of narrating their own stories and creating their own magic lands. This phenomenon also triggered a new sort of critical approach to this kind of stories, which were no longer seen as escapist books, but as aesthetic constructions that should be understood as another kind of literary object, with aesthetic rules of their own.

Readers' yearning for fantasy founded a new mainstream of popular culture. Contemporary critics now regard this phenomenon as a resuming of folk motives of mythological thought. There are a new generation of critics who deal with Fantasy Fiction, represented by names such as David Leeming, Tom Shippey, Richard Purtill and Jane Chance. The facts that Fantasy novels are popular, and that they allow for magic and imagination, is no longer considered detrimental to the genre. Fantasy novels are as popular as mythical narratives and fairy-tales, and this is merely a peculiarity not a hindrance. These stories allow us to take a journey into an exciting and mysterious world – the world of fantasy. Inside them you can expect to encounter gods, heroes, monsters, exotic countries, and amazing adventures. In other words, Fantasy Novels take full advantage of the fact that they belong in the world of fiction. *Fingere, Phantasia*: this is the stuff Literature is still made of.

In many cultures, especially in the ancient ones, mythical narratives tended to present a sense of common identity where there was a branch of rules that was interiorized by all, without the necessity of being written or registered, because those myths were this register. They used to help people to understand the world and to accept the facts of life, as illness and death. But they were not only that. Those narratives belonged to what is philosophically defined as a magical and religious time that operates independently from the paradigms of time and space, working in a circular time, coming to people through legends, orally.

According to Joseph Campbell the myth has four functions: the mystic function that represents human amazement facing life; the cosmologic function, which wonders at the ways and paths of the universe; the sociological function, that gives support to a specific social order; and the pedagogical function, that helps people to react to human experience under any

circumstance (Campbell, 2005 p.32). These narratives work as metaphors to spiritual life and they offer a model of behaviour to be shared by all the community.

In this mythological context, fantasy has always found ways to manifest itself. Fantasy is an important element in Mythology, in Religion and in Literature, because it responds to a basic human need. In Tolkien's context, with the decrease of the religious zeal, in a materialistic society, as well as in our contemporary time, the Fantasy Novel reaffirms its place in the world, calling to itself the main function of the mythical narrative: that is the conduction of man to a higher sphere of feelings, different from the ordinary everyday life that is around us. That is, ultimately, the reason why Literature is such a vital element both on a personal level, for the individual to feel that life is worth living, and on a communal level, so that myth can be spread and societies can still stand.

The twentieth century witnessed a huge claim for the Fantastic and for Fantasy in the arts and media vehicles. British literature played a most representative role in this mainstream in books such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. That century was also marked by a return to mythological themes, although the form has suffered an aesthetic rearrangement. We can see this in Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, and in the mythical plays written by Yeats.³

Tom Shippey believes those authors found in the myth the means to explain the modern world, or to propose a change in the realistic modern novel. According to him,

Those authors of the twentieth century who had spoken most powerfully to and for their contemporaries have for some reason found it necessary to use the metaphoric mode of fantasy, to write about words and creatures we know do not exist, [...] (SHIPPEY, 2001, p. 8).

Tolkien lived from 1892 to 1973, so he lived through the two World Wars. He fought as a soldier and lost four of his best friends in World War One, and witnessed the effects of the misdirected logical political reasoning that led to authoritarian and racist regimens, into genocides, into the Second World War and into the atomic menace implied in the Cold War. Rather than addressing Tolkien's fiction as an escapist device, we propose that it can be read

³ William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) wrote *Representative Irish Tales* (1891) and *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892). He also conceived poems and plays related to the mythical cycles of Ireland as *The Wanderings of Oisín*.

as a strong metaphor of his own time, alluding to the horrors of the war that have been experienced by the author. We must grant, however, that Tolkien preferred the term “applicability” to the term metaphor, when the issue of connecting his work to the circumstances of their production was in question. (SHIPPEY, 2001, p.161.)

The Lord of the Rings, a popular novel from the fifties onwards, reaches the 21st century translated into several media as a colossal success. What is the reason for that? Why have people stood in protracted lines for hours to watch each part of Peter Jackson’s cinema adaptation? Why do people care more and more about stories dealing with characters that do not belong in a world as ours? Why would people’s interest in fantasy and magic lands inhabited by folkloric creatures that only exist in fictional world increase so much? For at least five years we have conducted our attention to such questions, trying to find a reasonable answer for them, and we believe we have got to some conclusions about the issue. We strongly believe the success of *The Lord of the Rings* relates to the extent of its mythological appeal, which ended up momentarily fulfilling the existential void resultant from the lack of fantasy and religiosity in our contemporary society.

This need was established progressively, along the progress of the different stages of our civilization when science and religion became separate concepts and fantasy and imagination were relegated to a secondary or inexistent position. Such elements, suppressed as they have been, still remain a vital part of this puzzling construct called Man. Spiritual values remain tightly connected with old mythological narratives. Imagination, fantasy, delusion, dreams, are all parts of the entirety of man. Suppressing them – noble as the causes for that might have been – has provoked some damage to important psychological structures in the individual, and has caused much social disturbance in our urban present-day society. To Carl Gustav Jung this phenomenon is called *disassociation*, or *splitting*, and derives from the situation created from the moment rationality started to predominate over feeling and buildings and machines started to predominate over nature. Loneliness and anxiety came as a consequence,

There are no longer any gods whom we can invoke to help us. The great religions of the world suffer from increasing anaemia, because the helpful numina have fled from the woods, rivers, and mountains, and from animals, and the god-men have disappeared underground into the unconscious. There we fool ourselves that they lead an ignominious existence among the relics

of our past. Our present lives are dominated by the goddess Reason, who is our greatest and most tragic illusion. By the aid of reason, so we assure ourselves, we have conquered nature. (JUNG, 1964, p. 91).

As a consequence of this mechanism of suppression, such layers of perception as related with the realm of myths and magic tales were confined inside our unconscious, and occasionally being revealed or expressed through a series of indirect mechanisms, such as dreams – which Jung called our particular myths. Another means of releasing such tension is reached aesthetically, when symbolic representations start presenting themselves in the work of the artists, writers among them, throughout time. Through a process that is disconnected from rationality, artists, the most sensitive men, re-introduce these sleeping symbols, archetypes and myths, into our daily life. J. R. R. Tolkien is one of these men who notice this lack and work to reintroduce the long lost balance into our current ordinary lives.

The Lord of the Rings was conceived and written during the very difficult times involving the two World Wars. The context of Tolkien's life says much of the anxiety, gloom and fear of an ailing society whose most of its ideologies had all vanished. In this scenery, the people would gladly seek refuge in a narrative about an extraordinary land, also facing very similar problems and a sad war, but where the old values still applied. In this sense Tolkien was able, as Shakespeare or Tolstoy in their time, to filter those despondent impressions – including his own loss of four beloved friends in World War I – and change them into hope through the writing of his fantasy novel. Tolkien was well acquainted with the common feeling of void. According to Jung,

In wartime, for instance, one finds increased interest in the works of Homer, Shakespeare, or Tolstoy, and we read with a new understanding those passages that give war its enduring (or archetypal) meaning. They evoke a response from us that is much more profound than it could be from someone who has never known the intense emotional experience of war. The battles of the plains of Troy were utterly unlike the fighting at Agincourt or Borodino, yet the great writers are able to transcend the differences of time and place and express the themes that are universal. We respond because these themes are fundamentally symbolic. (JUNG, 1964, p. 99).

By repressing his mythological fraction for so long man ended up creating what Jung calls our *Shadows*. Shadows are built in our unconscious through the dissolution of hidden desires, or even through the repressing of beliefs, hopes and the withdrawal of imagination. Before thinking logically, we imagine all the things we do not know or the things we judge to

know. People, for many reasons, grasp some of the feelings and daily happenings and change them into images – products of imagination. There was a tendency, now beginning to change, to label this phenomenon as alienation and instability, as if it was not worth being studied. This attitude was linked to different philosophical lines of thought which do not consider imagination as a healthy part of human knowledge.

Bachelard's Phenomenology of the Imaginary adopts an opposite position, which grants to imagination a central role in human knowledge. It is the study of the phenomenon of image creation on the human mind, which emerges into consciousness and creativity. People are naturally creative, because before explaining the world in a rational way, we first act creatively, attributing meanings to things, and inserting ourselves in the world. The Imaginary and the Symbolic are parts of this insertion in the world. They are determinant of our understanding of the chaos of life and they organize our representations of the world. As Philip Malrieu puts it, imagination is action:

Entre a função de abertura ao conhecimento desempenhada pela imaginação e sua função existencial existem laços profundos. Ela engloba, com efeito, um movimento duplo. A imaginação permite que o sujeito exista, que se comporte em relação às coisas e aos outros não já em função das suas necessidades mas em função de um modelo, que não é um modelo propriamente acabado mas que é elaborado pelo próprio ato de imaginar. O imaginário é a retoma, a situação das imagens espontâneas num quadro que lhe confere uma significação. Essa retoma é um ato de unificação do eu, de relação de condutas primitivamente separadas e pode ser efetuado em vários níveis. (MALRIEU, 1998, p. 237).⁴

The importance of imagination and the use that artists make of it to translate human values is one of the main interests of the Phenomenology of the Imaginary. It is strongly connected with the Theory of Symbols and Archetypes conceived by Carl Gustav Jung, the most widespread theory on the unconscious nowadays. This ramification of philosophy, psychoanalysis and ontology was adopted by many scholars worldwide, such as Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, David Leeming and Northrop Frye, among others, in an attempt to

⁴ Our translation: There are deep connections between the function of imagination as fosterer of an opening to knowledge and its existential function. Imagination performs, in effect, a double movement. Imagination allows the subject to exist, to act upon the world not only according to its needs, but in terms of a model, which is created in the very act of imagination. The imaginary is the recovery of a situation of spontaneous imagery within a framework that gives it a meaning. This recovery is an act of unification of the self, a reunion of relationships of behavior which have long been set apart, and it can be held at various levels. (MALRIEU, 1998, p. 237).

investigate different social representations in art, religion or mythology. Such studies have been called Studies of the Imaginary, because they contemplate different areas of knowledge, all put together in the search of an understanding of what human imagination really is and what its function in society is.

Analyzing a literary work making use of such theories certainly is an interesting way to perceive the object as a product conceived by the tension between imagination and reason. This tension is what is conveyed to call, in jargon, the *paradoxes* of the imaginary. The paradox relies exactly in the tension provoked by the clash of material and symbolic as they are presented in our society. Reason is highly valued in our culture, while imagination is relegated to a secondary position, generally seen in adults as alienation, day-dreaming or illusion – not as a way to perceive the world or to produce knowledge. Nonetheless, imagination and reason are inseparable, and one cannot exist without the other. The Studies of the Imaginary attribute a central position to imagination, as a means to understand human production of knowledge. Castor Bartolomé Ruiz⁵ argues for such studies saying that,

(...) estamos resgatando dos porões da exclusão aquela que foi habitualmente considerada a “louca da casa”: a imaginação. Pobre louca, tão vilipendiada durante séculos de filosofia ocidental. Ela é a dimensão humana que nunca se conseguiu controlar. Por esse motivo, foram estabelecidas as mais variadas formas de domesticação sobre ela. Em último extremo, quando se chegou à convicção de que era inútil o esforço para sufocá-la, foi enclausurada no mundo da falácia, pendurando sobre ela o epíteto de perigo; a imaginação é uma alucinação. Mas ela ressurgue outra vez desde todas as perspectivas possíveis na mente do cientista e da mão dos poetas, na reflexão do filósofo e na experiência dos místicos, na criação do artista e na práxis do revolucionário, no planejamento da gestão e na esperança da utopia. (RUIZ, 2003, p. 52).⁶

⁵ Prof. Ruiz has a PHD in Philosophy at Universidade de Deusto, in Spain, and is professor at Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos in Brazil. He wrote the book *Paradoxos do Imaginário*.

⁶ Our translation from the original in Portuguese: Imagination, which has been long considered “the madwoman in the house”, is now being rescued from the darkness of exclusion. Poor crazy thing, so reviled by centuries of Western philosophy, representing the human dimension that never managed to be kept under control. For this reason, the most varied forms of domestication were imposed upon it. As a last resort, when it became evident that it was useless trying to quell it, imagination was enclosed within the realm of fallacy, with the epitome of ‘dangerous’ hanging over it. Imagination means hallucination. Still it keeps reappearing, from every possible perspective, on the mind of the scientist, in the hand of the poet, in the thought of the philosopher, in the mystical experience, in the creation of the artist, in the revolutionary practice, in the management planning and in the hope of utopia. (RUIZ, 2003, p. 52.)

The plot of *The Lord of the Rings* centres upon a war in which what is at stake are the values respecting the sense of unity and integrity in human and non-human characters who are fighting to free Middle - earth from the evil forces of Sauron. The abstract qualities that are highlighted in the novel, such as friendship, brotherly love and courage, seem to perfectly fit the needs of the readers in those warlike times, and somehow seem even more welcome nowadays. *The Lord of the Rings* is still a success and has proved a rich source of inspiration to many writers all along.

Tolkien's fantasy fiction follows a different path from the intimist literature of his great modern fellow writers – such as Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, Ernest Hemingway or William Faulkner, for instance. Tolkien's world is public and politic, very similar to the ancient epics. And there is room for magic in his realm. In Tolkien's fictional world light and shadow are still well set apart, and Good and Evil still have their roles to perform. It is this mythological appeal that brings comfort to the reader, reconciling feelings that seem unable to coexist – materiality and imagination, war and peace, escapism and reality, Christian values and Paganism. In this sense, Tolkien is also paradoxical, writing a book full of religious values but without mentioning religion or making any direct reference to it during the entire novel, so as to resume the heart of the missing element without having to resume the old metaphors which no longer apply. From an intrinsic perspective, Tolkien's fictional world is organized according to the cosmogony presented in *The Silmarillion*. There is order in that world, and that order is controlled by a complex and delicate play of forces that work according to the structure of mythical narratives, based on the opposition of a set of values conventionally referred to as the opposition of Good and Evil.

In *The Lord of the Rings* we have an allegorical presentation of this binary opposition. Basically, the plot of the novel is a war between the forces of Good and Evil. On this matter, Professor Shippey starts his discussion through the analysis of the One Ring, which carries Sauron's evil power inside, exerting a strong control over its user. He resumes some traits in the plot, in which the dichotomies are presented in allegorical terms. The ring rises as a powerful weapon, deadly dangerous to all its possessors. It “will take them over, devour them, possess them, because the ring turns everything to Evil, including its wearers” (SHIPPEY, 2000, p.115). Hence, there is an agreement among the Council of Elrond that the One Ring

cannot be used, that it must be destroyed. This is an important part of the fellowship's adventure, because it defines its aim – they are embarking on an anti-quest: their purpose is to gain any treasure but to reject and destroy the evil treasure they carry with them. Shippey points three decisive assertions about the ring in the novel,

First, Gandalf says that the Ring is immensely powerful, in right or wrong hands. If Sauron regains it, then he will be invincible at least for the foreseeable future: “If he recovers it, then he will command [all elves], and all that has been wrought with them will be laid bare, and he will be stronger than ever” (TOLKIEN, 2003, p. 278). Second, though, Gandalf insists that the Ring is deadly dangerous to all its possessors: it will take them over. The process may be long or short, depending on how “strong or well-meaning” the possessor may be, but neither strength nor good purpose will last – sooner or later the dark power will consume him. Furthermore this will not be just a physical take-over. There is no one who can be trusted to use it, even in right hands for good purposes: there are no right hands and all good purposes will turn bad if reached through the Ring. Elrond repeats this assertion later on “I will not take the Ring”, as does Galadriel, “I will diminish and go into the West, and remain Galadriel”. But finally, and this third point is one which Gandalf has to re-emphasize strongly and against opposition in “The Council of Elrond”, the Ring cannot simply be left unused, put aside, throw away: it has to be destroyed, and the only place where it can be destroyed is the place of its fabrication, Orodruin, the Cracks of Doom. (SHIPPEY, 2000, p. 113).

Despite the power of the ring, the journey of the heroes to defeat the evil forces that scare Middle - earth is not related to counter weapons, organized arms, or using the enemy's weapon against himself. This is no common war, where the most powerful fighter wins. The success of the quest depends on more than swords and axes; it depends on intangible values such as love, friendship and courage. Basically, in *The Lord of the Rings* the Good forces are weaker because they are not united. Good is weak because its peoples are free and live freely in their lands spread through Middle - earth's territory. On the other hand, Evil is concentrated in Mordor, so it seems to be stronger because its people are united, although handcuffed to Sauron and his immoral wishes of conquering Middle - earth and destroying all Good and Beauty in it. The breach to be found in Evil lies in its pride. Being so proud of its strength it goes too far and spoils its own purposes. “Oft evil will shall evil mar” (TOLKIEN,

2003, p. 623) is a popular saying in Middle - earth and it seems intimately connected to the rules that organize the land.

To Boethius' philosophy, what we generally recognize as Evil powers can be merely interpreted as the absence of Good. This view is strongly connected to the idea of a divine presence that guides and conducts the path of man on Earth, so even when one believes that something is Evil, for him or for his fellows, it is, in fact, part of a divine plan to their advantage. Such ideas have been widely discussed in philosophy, especially in Great Britain, as Shippey observes,

All readers of Boethius have observed – and his translators into English have included King Alfred, Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth, the First – whatever one may think of the truth of Boethius's opinions, no one can deny his fortitude in writing them on Death Row while waiting for execution. His view of the non-existence of Evil has great authority, both in its own right and through its ramification by orthodox Christianity. (SHIPPEY, 2000, p. 130).

The trouble with this view is that it is both highly counter-intuitive, and in many circumstances extremely dangerous. One might, for instance, conclude that the proper response to it, if you accepted it, would be to become a conscientious objector, and to refuse to resist what appears to be evil on the ground that this is just a misapprehension. Evil, after all is, according to Boethius, more harmful to the malefactor than to the victim and those who do it are more to be pitied than feared or fought. (SHIPPEY, 2001, p. 133).

Although we accept that Middle - earth is guided by divine powers that decide its destiny, Evil in Middle - earth seems to be too concrete, it causes much harm to the land and its peoples. However, we trust that there are also some positive powers that help Frodo and his fellows in their journey. Shippey says such forces are Luck and Courage. Luck is, in fact, the help of the divine forces of Middle - earth that do not want it to be destroyed. Such forces helped Bilbo take the ring first, or Frodo to arrive in Rivendel, and to pass through many dangerous situations. On the other hand, the Courage of the characters is bound to their values and their conviction that they are doing the right thing. Courage takes a very important place in the story, and it is thanks to Hobbit's courage that Sauron could be trapped. Sauron, as an Evil leader, is proud, arrogant and very powerful. So, in his logic of world, the powers of Good must send the most valued and powerful warriors they have. Sauron is expecting

Galadriel, Gandalf, Élrond, or even the king of men, descendent of Isildúr, Aragorn. Sauron could never imagine that the Good forces would trust such an important task to a couple of powerless Hobbits from the Shire. It is this arrogance that ends up defeating his vice plans.

Even so, things never remain the same after this clash: everything will change in Middle - earth after Sauron's defeat. The heroes know they are about to lose important things, and that eventually another clash will come. This belongs to the natural movements of the universe. A new age comes to Middle - earth – an age of men – with no room for Hobbits, Ents, Dwarves or Elves. Magic and fantasy will be replaced by another order, under the command and dominion of men. This is not a typical happy ending, because the price to pay has been too high, leaving a feeling of void and misguidance in the survivors.

The Lord of the Rings is now known as possibly the most respected sample of this literary sub-genre known as Fantasy Fiction. However, in the time the work was published this expression did not exist yet. In a time when the great authors were writing books that were experimental in form, atheistic in mood and engaged in tuning internal verisimilitude and external verisimilitude, the literary production of people like J. R. R. Tolkien or C. S. Lewis might have sounded, to say the least, alienated and bizarre. This is the great paradox with *The Lord of the Rings*: on the one hand, it could not have been written in a worst moment for the acknowledgment of its literary qualities. On the other, it could only have been written at that precise moment in history, because of its philosophical underlying background. When Ezra Pound writes that famous passage about the artists being the antennae of the race, we are reminded that Art moves more freely than rational thought, and encompasses a greater range of experience. Thinking rationally, writing about Good vs. Evil during the first half of the 20th Century means receding into a line of discourse which has been discarded by a new, more sophisticated and complex order of things. As a consequence, *The Lord of the Rings* has been called a Manichean reactionary novel, easily leading to the idea that the world is a battlefield, torn between the powers of Good and Evil. This is a very imperialistic notion, if we consider that the “good ones” are the one who support our cause and the “bad ones” are the ones who think differently. According to Shippey, “one might say, there is no real difference between them, and it is a matter of chance which side one happens to choose.” (SHIPPEY, 200, p. 134).

If we return to Ezra Pound's comment about the artist as the antenna of the race, maybe we, dwellers of the 21st century, can see further dimensions to the issue of Good and Evil as our mid-twentieth century counterparts. To me, Tolkien is not merely receding into a dismissed line of thinking; he is doing more than that. The issue here reminds me of that popular saying: "don't throw the baby away with the dirty water." In the process of setting people free from the negative ideological implications of the belief in an immanent notion of Truth, it looks as if we have severed part of our own psychic structure. This is the kind of thing Tolkien and his mates discussed in the informal meetings of the Inklings. Some of the members were atheists, but even those believed in the value of fantasy and in the healing powers of literature.

This accounts for much of the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*, whose fictional world, so apparently detached from the actual world, is psychologically so realistic in the cathartic effect operated by the use of the metaphors it presents. The war in Middle - earth arguably makes more sense than World War II, an imminent attack from the Nazis is more frightful than reading about an attack by the Nazgûl. People haunted by genocide, gas chambers, families being set apart, these things take place in Middle - earth too – even in the docile Shire inhabited by the Hobbits. In a world of fantasy, fantasy mirrors reality in a way that is more effective than the use of external verisimilitude would be. Pippin professes "All shall fade"⁷, in the song he sings to Deneathor while the warriors are dying in the battle field – including Deneathor's son Faramir. It seems this fits very well in the plot and in Tolkien's society as well. By the way, it also seems our contemporary 21st century world as well. Tolkien has never been more read than now. With a distance of some few decades it looks as if some qualities of this novel which could not be properly appreciated in its time are now more visible. So many other authors have created their own sagas after Tolkien opened the first door that this kind of literature has got its own name, Fantasy Fiction, and its own space, a space where fantasy regains its legitimate claim to belong in literature, in the novel, because psychological truth belongs in the realm of imagination as much – or more – than it belongs in the realm of actual reality. Umberto Eco calls these two instances "the actual world" and

⁷ This scene is from the movie adaptation made by Peter Jackson. Such song is present in the book, but in another part found in the first book of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

“the world of fantasy”, and comments gladly on the fact that the frontiers separating them are no longer very clear.

Another thinker of our contemporary times is Zygmunt Bauman, who points that we have been living in a world of “liquid modernity” (as opposed to the notion of “solid modernity” that predominates in Tolkien’s times) where nothing is really concrete, sensible or organized, where things cannot easily be divided between “right” or “wrong”, where everything that is solid vanishes in the air. Therefore, I ultimately think of Tolkien’s fantasy works as a balsam, as powerful as religion and mythology. According to Shippey,

The authors are trying to explain something at once deeply felt and rationally inexplicable, something furthermore felt to be entire novel and not adequately answered by moralities of early ages (keen medievalists those several of these authors were). There is something connected with the distinctively twentieth-century experience of industrial war and impersonal, industrialized massacre; and it is probably no coincidence that most of the authors concerned (Tolkien, Orwell, Vonnegut, but also Golding and C. S. Lewis) were combat veterans of one war or another. The life experiences of many men and women in the twentieth century have left them with an unshakable conviction of something wrong, something irreducibly evil in the nature of humanity, but without any very satisfactory explanation for it. Nor can they find such an explanation in the literature of previous eras: Everything that was to know about life was in *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Feodor Dostoyevsky. But that was not enough anymore. Twentieth-century Fantasy can be seen as above all a response to this gap, this inadequacy. One has to ask in what ways Tolkien’s images are original, individual, and in what ways typical, recognizable. (SHIPPEY, 2000, p. 120).

There is still one relevant aspect to highlight in Tolkien’s fictional world – its capacity to fulfil the reader’s expectations and to address the reader’s deep psychological structures in a kind of rebirth of mythological narratives in his novels – *The Lord of the Rings* in particular. In his time, Tolkien is capable of filtering the warlike and hopeless European landscape, and of changing it into a symbolic construct of literary value, which also answered to people’s want of mythical structures. His work is done brilliantly, and his novels have been read by different generations through all these years. Tolkien has more to tell than his marvellous tales, permeated by astonishing quests – he reaches his reader’s heart in a way that is idyllic, if we take into account the delusions of modernity that have fragmented man into zillions of pieces. As we said in the beginning of this paper, there are many people who would be

grateful to find a world like Middle - earth in the midst of a confused and fragmented world as the one we live in today.

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