

WHERE THE MAGIC THINGS ARE: FORESTS IN FANTASY LITERATURE

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- **ABSTRACT:** This paper analyses the portrayal of forests in modern fantasy literature as the source and dwelling of magic and magical beings, with a close look at five important works by J. R. R. Tolkien, Peter Beagle, Ursula K. Le Guin, George Martin, and Patrick Rothfuss. A connection between nature and the fantastic can already be seen in early works of literature, folklore, and traditional fairy tales. In modern fantasy literature, following the path set by Tolkien, the motif of magical forests remains, with constantly shifting boundaries, a different perception of time, fantastic creatures, miraculous cures, superior wisdom. Given the, at least ideological, human-nature distancing and antagonism, characteristic of civilization (HARRISON, 2009), and considering that fantasy can have a recovery function (TOLKIEN, 2009), these fantastic forests can help humankind marvel at and reconnect with nature, possibly aiding in the development of a new and much necessary environmental awareness.
- **KEYWORDS:** Fantasy. Ecocriticism. Nature. Literature. Forests.

There's magic in nature. When Dr. Jane Goodall was living alone in the middle of the forest of Gombe, Tanzania, a fly landed on her finger. Recalling the moment in an interview, she said: "Magic! ... I realized [then] how we destroy a lot of the magic in the world by always wanting to label everything ... we just put things in boxes and then we don't sometimes see the magic" (GOODALL, 2017, 56"). The magic in a fly, in a forest, in the smallest grove.

But fantasy authors often do see the magic, and help us recover it. Many modern fantasy works portray forests as the source of magic and dwelling of magical beings. Be it a refuge for elves as in Tolkien's *The lord of the rings* and Paolini's *Inheritance cycle*, a home for unicorns as in Beagle's *The last unicorn*, a gateway to faerie as in Rothfuss' *The kingkiller chronicle*, Lewis' *The chronicles of Narnia* and Gaiman's *Stardust*, or the center of all power, life and magic in the

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world as in Le Guin's Earthsea cycle. In fantasy, a forest is never "just a forest", the "real-world" label doesn't bind it and the magic is set free.

And it has been so since at least the "oldest literary work in history" (HARRISON, 2009, p. 14), The epic of Gilgamesh, in which the hero Gilgamesh must venture into a forest and face its guardian, a demon called Huwawa. Though how forests are depicted, as antagonist, sanctuary or a living biome of its own intrinsic value, has changed over time along with the human imagery and relationship with it, the magical forest is recurrent through time.

A few quick examples include the Volsunga saga and its many forests with magical artifacts, horses, deities, shape-shifters; Beowulf and the monster's lair in the wild; Shakespeare's fairy forest in *A midsummer night's dream*; and the many magical forests in traditional fairy tales, of which those collected by the Brothers Grimm are good examples. Regarding these last, the fairy tale specialist and folklorist Jack Zipes (2002, p. 65) writes in *The Brothers Grimm*:

Inevitably they [the characters] find their way into the forest. It is there that they lose and find themselves. It is there that they gain a sense of what is to be done. The forest is always large, immense, great, and mysterious. No one ever gains power over the forest, but the forest possesses the power to change lives and alter destinies. In many ways it is the supreme authority on earth and often the great provider. It is not only Hansel and Gretel who get lost in the forest and then return wiser and fulfilled.

Actually, the reader can also return wiser and fulfilled from its journey into the wild. According to Professor J. R. R. Tolkien (2008), fairy stories have three main functions: Recovery, Escape, Consolation. Escape, he notices, should not be treated with the scorn usually directed to it by critics, but as a prisoner's attempt towards freedom, a necessary escape from a harsh condition, from a wrecked world, from death. Consolation regards satisfaction of ancient desires, such as talking to other creatures, and a glimpse of joy, a hope of a happy ending.

But it is the first one, Recovery, that has the deepest implications to magical forests. Professor Tolkien (2008, p. 373) defines Recovery as "a regaining of a clear view ... so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity — from possessiveness", stating that "by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory" (Tolkien, 2008, p. 375). And so do forests when they are the dwelling of fairies and unicorns.

Tolkien's theory of Recovery is in close agreement with Goodall's ideas. According to Chris Brawley (2007, n.p.) in "The Fading of the World: Tolkien's Ecology and Loss in *The Lord of the Rings*", "what Tolkien means is that we appropriate our world through language acquisition and familiarity, and we lose

a sense of total participation in the natural world”. The author adds that language abstraction contributes to a loss of the sense of wonder towards nature, which can, again, be *recovered* by Fantasy, which has the potential to make the reader engage with the non-human and “subvert normal categories of thought” (BRAWLEY, 2007, n.p.).

This is one of the reasons why the genre proves so interesting to an analysis of literature and the environment. Gry Ulstein (2015, p. 7) notices in “Hobbits, ents, and dæmons: ecocritical thought embodied in the fantastic” that “the strong immersive aspect of the genre entices the reader to open up for a less anthropocentric view of the world”, quoting Le Guin in that fantasy can set the nonhuman as essential, and Elgin who claimed that fantasy can offer a way to reintegrate humanity to the natural world and help it revisit its relationship with other creatures and reconnect with nature.

Thus, looking closely into modern fantasy works that portray forests as the source and/or dwelling of magic and magical beings can shed some light into our current imagery of nature, our possible relationship with it and how fantasy can help humanity recover its lost respect and amazement towards it.

The lord of the rings

Entire books could, and have¹, been written on the portrayal of nature in Tolkien’s work. While that is not the focus of this article, any general analysis on modern fantasy would be incomplete without mentioning the father of the genre, whose work has set “a crucial precedent for modern immersive fantasy” (STABLEFORD, 2009, p. xxx).

One of the most magical and striking descriptions of nature in Tolkien’s legendarium are the Two Trees of Valinor, Telperion and Laurelin, who brought light to the ancient world and whose flower and fruit would become the moon and the sun, respectively. The trees had such power that the elves of Arda were divided into those who had seen their light (High Elves) and those who had not (Elves of Darkness). The Silmarils, that play a large role in the history of Middle Earth, were crafted from the lights of the Two Trees and “the fates of Arda, earth, sea, and air, lay locked within them” (TOLKIEN, 2004, p. 30).

There are also many magical forests in Middle Earth. In *The hobbit*, the ominous and ever-dark Mirkwood has a single path and all who leave it get lost and trapped in the forest forever. There is also an enchanted stream, giant spiders and

¹ To name a couple: *Arda Inhabited: Environmental Relationships in The Lord of the Rings* by Susan Jeffers; *Ents, Elves, And Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J. R. R. Tolkien* by Matthew T. Dickerson; and countless papers.

cobwebs, black squirrels, weird noises, bright eyes in the darkness, and Wood-elves with strong magic.

In *The lord of the rings*, the most intriguing character is Tom Bombadil, who lives with Goldberry, possibly a water-nymph, in the Old Forest, a place feared by almost every hobbit. Even Merry who is not so much afraid of it admits that “the forest *is* queer. Everything in it is much more alive ... than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers ... there are various queer things living deep in the forest” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 110).

At the end of the first book, the fellowship arrives at Lothlórien, another enchanted wood, with “a secret power ... that holds evil from the land” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 338). It is the dwelling of Galadriel, one of the most powerful elves in the Third Age, and the last place in which mallorn trees still grow in Middle Earth. Time works differently inside of the forest, maybe not counting, according to Sam, or maybe being an entirely different time, according to Frodo, “a time that has elsewhere long gone by” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 388). Regarding magic in Lothlórien, Frodo says that “you can see and feel it everywhere” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 361).

But even so, it is feared throughout the land. Boromir claims that in Gondor “it is said that few come out who once go in; and of that few none have escaped unscathed” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 338). To that, Aragorn claims that “if you say *unchanged*, then maybe you will speak the truth”, and later agrees that it is a perilous land, “fair and perilous; but only evil must fear it, or those who bring some evil with them” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 338).

Lastly, another crucial forest in *The lord of the rings* is Fangorn, where Ents, the tree-herds, live. In Fangorn, according to the character Treebeard, one of the three remaining of the first Ents, “most of the trees are just trees, of course; but many are half awake. Some are quite wide awake, and a few are, well, ah, well, getting *Entish*” (TOLKIEN, 2012b, p. 468). Ents are extremely powerful creatures. Again based on Treebeard, “we are stronger than trolls. We are made of the bones of the earth. We can split stones like the roots of trees, only quicker, far quicker” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 486). And Treebeard himself is said by Gandalf to be “the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the sun in this Middle-earth”² (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 499).

One of the most powerful environmental images in *The lord of the rings* is the deforestation of Fangorn by Saruman and the subsequent march of the Ents to war against him. Treebeard says “many of those trees were my friends, creatures I have known from nut and acorn; many had voices of their own that are lost forever now”

² Tom Bombadil says to the hobbits that he himself is “eldest”, which is in accordance to Elrond’s claim in the council that Bombadil is known as “oldest and fatherless”. Even though, be it Bombadil or Treebeard, the oldest living thing in Middle-earth certainly lives deep into a forest.

(TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 474) and the young Ent Bregalad tells Merry and Pippin that “orcs came with axes and cut down my trees, I came and called them by their long names, but they did not quiver, they did not hear or answer: they lay dead” (TOLKIEN, 2012a, p. 483).

The Ents and trees of Fangorn then march to Isengard, Saruman’s tower, to stop the killing and destruction, and play an important role in reestablishing balance in Middle-earth, even if not choosing a side as they themselves claim. It is important here to notice that Tolkien disliked allegories (TOLKIEN, 2014, l. 3791, 4765, 6416), so this passage must be viewed as it is³, and not some hidden message of any kind. Even so, the striking image of nature taking a stand against one’s greed remains.

The last unicorn

In Peter Beagle’s *The last unicorn*, forests become magical when unicorns live there, and the magic affects and spreads to all living things in it: there’s never snow, it is always spring, animals live longer and it is even possible that they are protected somehow. At the beginning of the book, two hunters enter a unicorn forest and one of them says: “I dislike the feel of this forest ... Creatures that live in a unicorn’s wood learn a little magic of their own in time, mainly concerned with disappearing. We’ll find no game here” (BEAGLE, 1969, p. 2).

Unicorns are powerful magical creatures, being able to heal, and even revive, with the touch of their horns. They live alone in their forests and never age, being immortal, rarely mating and giving birth, though “no place is more enchanted than one where a unicorn has been born” (BEAGLE, 1969, p. 2). Besides, “they are a little vain, knowing themselves to be the most beautiful creatures in all the world” (BEAGLE, 1969, p. 2).

The book is about an ancient unicorn who finds out she might be the last of her kind and departs from her lilac woods to look for the others. She finds them at last, trapped in the sea by a greedy king who imprisoned them for their beauty and the joy of looking at them. The story is deeply complex, with many possible interpretations, falling into C. S. Lewis’ (2002, p. 131) definition of “a myth points, for each reader, to the realm he lives in most. It is a master key; use on what door you like”.

One of the realms the master key of *The last unicorn* can be applied is that of nature, of its magical immortal essence being pursued and imprisoned by man’s greed, and wishing only to be set free and return to the wilderness. At the end,

³ When asked what the book was about, Tolkien himself claimed “It is not ‘about’ anything but itself. Certainly it has *no* allegorical intentions, general, particular, or topical, moral, religious, or political” (Letters l. 4765)

pretty much like the Ents, the unicorns, immortal, being here for way longer than men, are set free and destroy the king and his castle – the old powers of nature, again, fighting back.

The Earthsea cycle

In Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea cycle, it is not only magical beings that live within forests, but magic itself. The wizardry school that plays a major role in the books is located in Roke Island, "the heart of Earthsea" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 84), precisely because in it the Old Powers of the earth, thus all magic, are strong. And that is due to a Grove, as revealed in *Tales from Earthsea*:

The trees he had seen, which seemed sometimes to be in one place on the isle and sometimes in another, were the oldest trees in the world, and the source and center of magic. If the Grove were cut, all wizardry would fail. The roots of those trees are the roots of knowledge. The patterns the shadows of their leaves make in the sunlight write the words Segoy spoke in the making. (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 84)

As in other magical forests, the Grove in Roke Island is not restricted by time, "time passed as always in the Grove, not passing at all, yet gone" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 371), nor space, being "bigger inside than outside" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 342). When a young wizard asks his master how far the forest goes, she answers: "as far as the mind goes" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 88). For that and its always shifting shapes and paths, the Grove is both respected and feared, "the strangeness of Grove frightened him" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 89). And so are the Old Powers: "in the time of Medra and Elehal the people of Roke, men and women, had no fear of the Old Powers of the earth, but revered them, seeking strength and vision from them. That changed with the years" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 100).

Since the Grove holds a great wisdom and knowledge, one of the seven masters of the school, the Patterner, lives there. But not even a Patterner can teach its secrets, as they themselves state: "you can learn about the Grove only in it and from it" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 87), "my words are nothing. Hear the leaves" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 341). Thus, the Patterner's real function is to act as a bridge between men and nature, "to link human arts and acts to the older sacredness of the earth, reminding the wizards and mages that their power was not theirs, but lent to them" (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 412).

And the power and magic of the Grove in Roke are not restricted to it there, though it is stronger in it. Actually, "all magic was in the roots of the trees", and they are "mingled with the roots of all the forests that were out might yet be" (LE GUIN,

2012, p. 340), which makes every single forest in Earthsea a place where magic is strong (LE GUIN, 2012, p. 62), a source of magic.

A song of ice and fire

In George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, in the North beyond the Wall of the so-called civilized world is the Haunted Forest, the dwelling of the free folk (the Wildlings), of the mysterious and feared white-walkers (the Others) and of the children of the forest, or as they call themselves, "those who sing the song of earth" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 3470).

It is this last race that most interests the study of magic and forests. Even though they are called children by men because of their small stature, they live for hundreds of years, possibly thousands when merged with weirwood trees, and are very wise and powerful. As explained in *A dance with dragons*, they see and hear things men cannot, their language is "the True Tongue that no human man could speak" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8739), and some have the gift of *greensight* to merge into the conscience of trees. Since trees are not constricted by time as men are, the greenseers can see past, present and future through eyes carved in their barks, and so acquire a "wisdom deep as the roots of ancient trees" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8810).

Regarding the term "children" of the forest, the character Bran says that "little wise men of the forest would have been closer" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8836). And, given their long lives, one of them even says that it is men who are actually the children. They have no need for libraries, paper or written files: their memory is stored by and with the trees, who are their teachers and also to where they go when they die, for tress will always be there, even before and after they themselves are gone (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8756). "Men forget. Only the trees remember" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8752).

But like Ents, unicorns, and many "real-life" creatures, the singers are vanishing by the time of the events in the books. Their voice, "as pure as winter air" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8810), and their songs of the earth are now full of sorrow, "a sadness that he [Bran] thought might break his heart" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 3463). The cause is, again, man's greed, or, as Leaf, a singer, puts it, "in the world that men have made, there is no room for them [great lions, unicorns, direwolves, mammoths], or us" (MARTIN, 2011, l. 8842).

The singer's tale is told to Bran by Master Luwin in the first book, *A game of thrones*, at which point they were even believed extinct by those South of the Wall:

[...] they were people of the Dawn Age, the very first, before kings and kingdoms
[...] there were no men at all. Only the children of the forest dwelt in the lands
[...] They lived in the depths of the wood, in caves and crannogs and secret
tree towns [...] their wise men were called *greenseers*, and carved strange faces

in the weirwoods to keep watch on the woods [...] but some twelve thousand years ago, the First Men appeared from the east [...] As the First Men carved out holdfasts and farms, they cut down the faces [in the trees] and gave them to the fire. Horror-struck, the children went to war. The old songs say that the greenseers used dark magic to make the seas rise and sweep away the land, shattering the Arm, but it was too late to close the door. The wars went on until the earth ran red with blood of men and children both, but more children than men, for men were bigger and stronger, and wood and stone and obsidian make a poor match for bronze. (MARTIN, 2003, l. 13205)

After many deaths on both sides, a peace treaty was forged between the First Men and the singers. Men could keep some of the land, but “the woods were to remain forever the children’s, and no more weirwoods were to be put to the axe” (MARTIN, 2003, l. 13227). The peace lasted for four thousand years, until a second race of men, the Andals, came and “burnt down the weirwood groves, hacked down the faces, slaughtered the children where they found them” (MARTIN, 2003, l. 13242).

Thus, the children fled to the woods North of the wall, where they now live in sorrow. As Bran again perceives, “men would not be sad. Men would be wroth. Men would hate and swear a bloody vengeance. The singers sing sad songs, where men would fight and kill” (MARTIN, 2003, l. 8842).

The kingkiller chronicle

In Patrick Rothfuss’ ongoing high fantasy series, the world of Temerant has its own mythologies and fairy tales, and the majority of its people tend to think these are only made-up stories and that the *Fae*⁴ do not exist. But the Fae are real and dwell mostly in a secondary world of their own, save for some folk who choose to live disguised among humans.

The two worlds have been torn apart when old namers (magical beings) wanted to change and control things with their power, so the Fae and mortal world are now substantially different, but have permeable frontiers that allow one to move from one to the other, especially during certain moon phases, for even if stars are different, the moon is one and the same and connects the boundaries.

The main character in the series, Kvothe, is able to access the Fae while roaming a forest and hearing the song of Felurian, one of the Fae folk. He spends some time with Felurian in this secondary world, for he states that “there were things I could learn here. Strange things. Powerful things. Secret things” (ROTHFUSS, 2011, l.

⁴ The term is used both to describe the secondary world where “fairy” like creatures dwell and the creatures themselves.

12609). The places he visits in the Fae are always in the wilderness, being the three main locations Felurian's lair, which is a clearing in an "ancient, untouched piece of forest" (ROTHFUSS, 2011, l. 12703), covered on butterflies; a path through darkness with old trees and hundreds of luminescent moths; and, finally, the grassy plains where in a huge and strange tree, surrounded by dead butterflies, lives the Cthaeh.

The Cthaeh is an enigmatic character, Kvothe hears his voice coming from the top of the tree, but never sees him and the creature denies being a tree, though it is trapped or locked in there, for it cannot leave. The tree's flowers are said to cure all illness and the Cthaeh is said to know all things past and all possible futures, and uses this knowledge to manipulate, torture, disturb the mind and change the course of things. One of the Fae tells Kvothe that "there is nothing in my world or yours more dangerous than the Cthaeh" (ROTHFUSS, 2011, l. 13324).

As in other stories mentioned so far, time passes differently in the Fae. Given that the sun doesn't rise and set in there, Kvothe doesn't have a clue on how many months he spends with Felurian, maybe more than a year — but when he goes back into the mortal world, he finds out only three days have passed. There are stories of boys who sleep in the Fae and wake up as old men, and stories of girls who vanish into the Fae and reappear years later looking exactly the same and claiming only minutes passed. The Fae also has this strange awareness lingering in the air, as Kvothe describes:

There is a great difference between being in a room that is empty and being in a room where someone is sleeping. A sleeping person is a presence in a room. They are aware of you, even if it is only a dim, vague awareness. That is what the Fae was like. [...] It felt as if I had moved from an empty room into a room where someone was asleep. Except, of course, that there was no one there. It was as if everything around me was deeply asleep: the trees, the stones, the rippling stream that widened into Felurian's pool. All these things felt more solid, more present than I was used to, as if they were ever so slightly aware of me. (ROTHFUSS, 2011, l. 12709)

At last, another similarity is the dangers the Fae poses to humans. Not only the Cthaeh, but all Fae folk and land are dangerous. Felurian warns Kvothe of the perils of wandering on a moonless night, when the boundaries of the Fae can be easily crossed from the human world, for if a man falls into Fae, "on such unfamiliar ground, how can a mortal help but drown?" (ROTHFUSS, 2011, l. 13031). Kvothe himself describes that the Fae and human are as different as water and alcohol: "one will burn, the other will not [...] the same is true with humans and the Fae. We forget it at our peril" (ROTHFUSS, 2011, l. 12697).

Closing thoughts

Though the stories, the settings and the messages change, magical forests are not only recurrent, but share many similarities: they are feared and can be dangerous to those who are dangerous to them; time works differently under the trees; their boundaries are not what they seem; they are older and wiser than men; they are powerful and hold incredible knowledge that only nature can teach; and most of them are vanishing.

Even Patrick Rothfuss' (2011, l. 13023) Fae-folk, who are a world apart, are mostly afraid of men, Felurian herself says "we know enough to not be seen" l.and in Earthsea, where the Grove is still standing, there's a constant concern with equilibrium and monitoring wizardry, being one of the primary lessons that a wizard must learn the fact that every magic, no matter how small, changes the world and might affect the balance, so power must be used with extreme care. When it is not, well... Ents, unicorns and magical creatures make their last stand.

These stories seem to be a reflection of humanity's guilt and feeling of loss, the "trauma" of our relationship with nature, as Robert Harrison (2009, p. 2) puts it. The author writes that there is an ages-old antagonism, even if imaginary, between man and nature, one that sets us apart from the animal kingdom, defines forest as an abomination and civilization by its conquest over it. Or as Professor Tolkien (2008, p. 377) puts it: "other creatures are like other realms with which Man has broken off relations, and sees now only from the outside at a distance, being at war with them, or on the terms of an uneasy armistice.

And indeed the fact that nature is often defined in opposition to the human world is by itself a reminder of this separation. As Jonathan Bate (2001, l. 656) defines it, "once you invent the category of the 'human', you have to make nature its 'Other'"l. This separation and distancing, along with a rise of the capitalist mind has inevitably led to the environmental collapse we are now going through.

But it could be through the Recovery function of Fantasy that humanity rekindles its sense of awe and respect towards nature. Reading about a magical grove, all-knowing trees, powerful forest creatures, miraculous cures by a unicorn horn or a flower can lead to a new perception of "real life" groves, trees, forest creatures and flowers. As defined by Chris Brawler (2007, p. 292), fairy stories can become "a viable means whereby this separation from the natural world may be mended through a sense of wonder at what is perceived as other".

And maybe there is indeed some magic in nature, not elvish or Fae, but the magic of things too small, too large, too old and far from our comprehension, that are intricate in a vast web of connected life, that have seen history pass by, that grow and live in a time of their own away from your constant rush and control, things that have been here for longer than any of us, and, hopefully, if we learn to see and respect the magic, will remain here long past we're gone.

Where the magic things are: forests in fantasy literature.

CHINELLATO, G. Onde vive a mágica: florestas na literatura de fantasia. **Itinerários**, Araraquara, n. 51, p. 127-138, 2020.

■ **RESUMO:** *Este artigo analisa a representação de florestas na literatura moderna de fantasia como fonte e morada de seres mágicos e da mágica em si, com análises de obras de cinco autores importantes para o gênero: J. R. R. Tolkien, Peter Beagle, Ursula K. Le Guin, George Martin e Patrick Rothfuss. Uma conexão entre a natureza e o fantástico já podia ser vista em antigas manifestações literárias, folclóricas e contos de fadas. Na literatura moderna de fantasia, seguindo o precedente de Tolkien, a representação de florestas mágicas se mantém, com limites em constante transformação, percepção diferente do tempo, criaturas fantásticas, curas milagrosas, sabedoria superior. Dado o distanciamento e antagonismo humano-natureza, ao menos ideológicos (HARRISON, 2009), e considerando que a fantasia pode ter a função de recuperação definida por Tolkien (2009), essas florestas fantásticas podem ajudar a humanidade a se maravilhar e reconectar com a natureza, possivelmente acrescentando ao desenvolvimento de uma nova e necessária consciência ecológica.*

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Fantasia. Ecocrítica. Natureza. Literatura. Florestas.*

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