

## J.R.R. Tolkien: an analysis of the english conservative political culture

### J.R.R. Tolkien: uma análise da cultura política conservadora inglesa

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#### ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien, author of *works such as The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit*, can be seen as an intellectual representative of England's conservative political culture of the late 19th and early 20th centuries? The present analysis, part of the ongoing Master's research, seeks to develop a study on political culture and the role of the intellectual and his socialization networks for the understanding of English conservatism. The objective is to investigate the political man, inserted in his time and with a mentality shared by his peers in the cultural segment. Starting from this question, Tolkien's correspondence and official biography will be analyzed to map the position of the writer as a conservative man representing a cultural and political context.

**Keywords:** tolkien, conservatism, political culture, intellectual history.

#### RESUMO

J.R.R. Tolkien, autor de obras como *O Senhor dos Anéis e O Hobbit*, pode ser visto como um representante intelectual da cultura política conservadora da Inglaterra do final do século XIX e início do século XX? A presente análise, parte da investigação em curso do mestrado, procura desenvolver um estudo sobre a cultura política e o papel do intelectual e das suas redes de socialização para a compreensão do conservadorismo inglês. O objectivo é investigar o homem político, inserido no seu tempo e com uma mentalidade partilhada pelos seus pares no segmento cultural. Partindo desta questão, a correspondência e biografia oficial de Tolkien será analisada para mapear a posição do escritor como um homem conservador que representa um contexto cultural e político.

**Palavras-chave:** tolkien, conservadorismo, cultura política, história intelectual.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien stands out in the intellectual panorama for his works *The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings*. A scholar who produced works of philology and medieval dialects, it was with his literary work that he achieved notoriety still in his

lifetime with the publications of *The Hobbit* in 1937 and the first part of the saga *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954; this one alone sold over 150 million copies and has been translated into over forty languages. A pop culture idol, this Oxford professor of Philology has generated numerous academic debates over the decades. Literary critic Harold Bloom in his book about *The Lord of the Rings* criticized the exaggerated writing and moralistic characters<sup>1</sup>. There were those who analyzed the religious character of the work, such as Philip Mitchell, who draws comparisons between Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton (Christian writer and inspiration to the philologist), both concerned about the loss of the Christian faith and the decay of the world.<sup>2</sup>

This work, however, focuses on the intellectual image of the Professor, with the aim of revealing his conservative traits, part of a conservative political culture, dominant in England. The purpose is to review some of the correspondence of Tolkien exchanged with family, editors and friends.<sup>3</sup> To support the proposal, the official biography written by Humphrey Carpenter will be used.

The historical analysis of personal sources such as correspondences is not recent and several historians have focused on the importance of analyzing personal texts so full of details. For Luciana Godoy, it is possible to contextualize a political culture from the analysis of messages, because whoever writes the letter reveals how moments of history influenced his or her life. Tolkien wrote numerous letters to other intellectuals, like his friend and famous writer Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), a figure still relevant to understanding English conservatism.<sup>4</sup>

According to Teresa Malatian, it is possible to map these social networks of the intellectuals from the letter's exchanges. However, it is important to point out that the control of what came out of Tolkien's correspondence was filtered and organized by his son, Christopher, along with Carpenter, his official biographer. The ongoing master's research takes into account that the published material is only a part of the intellectual's life, and much has been filtered by the concerned parties of Tolkien's intimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom, *Modern Critical Interpretations: J.R.R.Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*. (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Irving Mitchell, "Legend and History have met and fused". *West Virginia University Press. Tolkien Studies*, vol. 8, 2011: 9.

<sup>3</sup> The letters were selected from the anthology organized by Humphrey Carpenter and will appear with the corresponding number.

<sup>4</sup> Luciana Bertini Godoy. *Ceifar, semear: a correspondência de Van Gogh*. 2.ed. (São Paulo: Annablume; Fapesp, 2009): 97.

Nonetheless, intellectuals wrote letters that serve to understand pacts between friends, political debates with their peers, and information exchanged between family members.

Tolkien signaled his political views in correspondences written to the literary discussion group *The Inklings*, a project created by Lewis and that brought together Oxford intellectuals. In correspondence number 83 (October 1944), Tolkien relates to his son Christopher his encounter with the conservative poet Roy Campbell (1901-1957), a supporter of the Francoist dictatorship. The writer admires this Christian poet, seen as so different from the quarrelsome and elitist Left and recounts the hatred that Franco's supporters suffered for being Catholic.<sup>5</sup>

To aid the analysis, it was also necessary to look at his official biography written by Humphrey Carpenter. For Philippe Levillain, it is essential to see biographies as a source, because when studying a historical character, it is possible to analyze the collective behavior of a period: “if individuals are modeled by societies, they manifest preferences that must be explained”<sup>6</sup> To Malatian, it is possible to understand the historical dimension to which individuals belongs from their history, because their practices also exist in the collective<sup>7</sup>. It is noticeable in Tolkien's biography elements that make him relate to conservative culture, such as the fact that his wife was a member of the conservative group Primrose League<sup>8</sup>; Tolkien's belonging to the elitist universe of the public schools, among others debated in due course.

Tolkien was born in 1892 in South Africa, the former English colony, and had a prosperous childhood. After losing his parents at a young age, he was raised by a priest who secured his education at a prestigious public school. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were marked by the reign of Queen Victoria and King Edward, responsible for a golden period for the British Empire. This moment was politically controlled by a aristocratic elite that managed to stay in power and adapt to the changes that occurred after the Industrial Revolution, carrying out a series of social reforms to prevent popular uprisings.<sup>9</sup> Tolkien moved back to England as a child and as an adult participated in the

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<sup>5</sup> Tolkien uses the expression “Courduroy Panzers” to describe the left-wing poets who fled to the United States.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Levillain, Os protagonistas: da biografia. *Por uma história política*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2003): 168.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa Malatian. “A biografia e a História” *Cadernos CEDEM (Centro de Documentação e Memória da UNESP), ano 1, n. 1, janeiro de 2008: 23.*

<sup>8</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: uma biografia*. (Rio de Janeiro: Harper Collins, 2018): 66.

<sup>9</sup> Reforms such as: *Representation of People Act* (1867), which increased the number of people entitled to vote; *Employers And Workmen Act* and *Conspiracy And Protection of Property Act*, both from 1875 and

Great War. For the English the event represents a trauma, in which more than five million soldiers fought and almost half of these were wounded or killed. The Battle of the Somme, in which the man of letters participated, caused more than 60,000 soldiers to die. This war has marked Tolkien, who will witness the horrors of the trenches, in addition to feeling the loss of close friends.

The initial question was whether Tolkien, as an intellectual, could represent political behaviors of his time. However, what intellectual is this? The concept of intellectual worked in the text was taken from the analyses of Thomas Heyck and Jean-François Sirinelli. Heyck, in *Myths and Meanings of Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century British National Identity*, sees the intellectual as a man of letters away from most social problems. Tolkien, despite not being alien to politics, justified that his work deviated from political analysis.<sup>10</sup>

The other meaning of the intellectual term in Heyck is the functional, that is, all literate men, writers or academics of the nineteenth and twentieth century. This concept to understand the intellectuals is also discussed in Sirinelli, who sees as an intellectual a person who produces knowledge, that is, academics, writers and professors<sup>11</sup>. This intellectual does not need to have active participation in political life to be a source of study for the historian, because his opinions represent a view of reality shared by others<sup>12</sup>. One can observe this argument in a letter from Tolkien to his friend C.S. Lewis (n.49, 1943), in which he discusses the importance of Christian marriage and the rules of obedience and fidelity, denying civil marriage:

They were married before the witness of the Church (a priest) ... and making a vow of eternal fidelity (and the woman of obedience); then they remarried before the state as a witness ... and without taking vows of faithfulness or obedience. I felt that it was an abominable procedure.<sup>13</sup>

It is remarkable that Tolkien defended a certain worldview, being possible to see him as a representative of conservative political culture.

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which decriminalised the trade unions; *Representation of The People Act* (1894) which extended even more the suffrage.

<sup>10</sup> William Thomas Heyck. "Myths and Meanings of Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century British National Identity". *Journal of British Studies*, vol.27, n.2, 199-221, 1998: 207.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-François Sirinelli. *Os intelectuais. Por uma história política*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2003): 243.

<sup>12</sup> Sirinelli, 208.

<sup>13</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, *The Letters of J.R.R.Tolkien: a selection*. (London: Harper Collins, 2012): 70.

On conservatism, it is worth specifying that the English model emerged with Edmund Burke, a critical thinker of the French Revolution. In 1791, seeking to steer the country away from a revolution similar to that which had taken place on the continent, he wrote a series of letters demonstrating the conservative character of English politics. These letters were incorporated into the book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Classical conservatism is related to the aristocratic character of English society, since, for its defenders, politics is below values such as religion, family and aristocratic tradition. The English people, for Burke, preserved certain values, because: “we fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, [...] with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility.”<sup>14</sup>

Philosophers Russell Kirk and Roger Scruton also work on the main pillars of conservatism: tradition, family and religion. All these defended by Tolkien throughout his life. For the conservative, “tradition is sacred; through it the real social tendencies of Providence are displayed.”<sup>15</sup> Tolkien expressed categorical views on the preservation of tradition, defending social distinctions in society: “His worldview, according to which every man occupied or should occupy a specific 'position', whether high or low, implies, on the one hand, that he was a conservative.”<sup>16</sup>

For Kirk, religion is one of the fundamental pillars of conservatism, being essential to achieving a civilized society, something Tolkien also advocated<sup>17</sup>. In letter 310 (20 May 1969), to the daughter of his editor, the writer comments that Christian morality must lead human life: “Is there a God, [...] a Mind to which our minds are akin [...]. With that come to religion and the moral ideas that proceed from it. [...] So morals should be a guide to our human purposes, the conducts of our lives.”<sup>18</sup>

The last element advocated by conservatives, and by Tolkien, is the family. Kirk and Scruton debate that the core of a civilized society is the family, responsible for organizing affections and trusts among men.<sup>19</sup>

The conservative principles listed are reproduced by various strata of English society, regardless of social group. Peter Burke sees that many English people have the

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<sup>14</sup> Edmund Burke. *Reflexões sobre a Revolução Francesa*. (Campinas: Vide Editorial, 2017): 139.

<sup>15</sup> C. Wright Mills. *The Power Elite*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 284.

<sup>16</sup> Carpenter, 2018, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Kirk. *Breve manual de conservadorismo [recurso digital]*. (São Paulo: Trinitas, 2021): 23.

<sup>18</sup> Carpenter, 2012, 431.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Scruton. *Conservadorismo: um convite à grande tradição*. (Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2020): 39.

so-called “open and convinced conservatism”<sup>20</sup> and an aversion to change. Heyck analyzed the strength of the English tradition and how it aligned with the collective interest of preserving aristocratic values<sup>21</sup>; and Lowenthal exposed the English pride for their ancestors, tradition and conservatism.<sup>22</sup>

The relevance of the study is to realize that the individual represents values that are reproduced by others, because no one is isolated in society. According to Serge Berstein, the individual carries within himself elements that are passed on to him and reproduced (or denied). These elements are codes shared by others and represent a political culture within society. In order to understand it, it is essential to analyze the individual's trajectory in their socialization networks, which are formed by the subject's relationships with family, school, religion, university, army, work, friends, among others<sup>23</sup>. In the master's research, all these listed elements are analyzed. However, in this presentation will be discussed: school, religion, university and friendships; in search of understanding the intellectual and how these ideas circulated.

## 2 SCHOOL

Tolkien entered King Edward VI in 1900; the school was founded by King Edward VI in 1552 in the city of Birmingham and is part of the selected group of English public schools. Despite the name, they are independent schools and only a privileged minority can afford their fee-charging. According to Heyck, only 113,000 children were in British schools in the early 20th century.<sup>24</sup> Public schools trained the youngers following the ideals of masculinity and loyalty, being responsible for passing the appropriate standards to the upper social strata<sup>25</sup>. These schools are “frequently criticized for the elitism they represent”<sup>26</sup>, for being able to train young people for the best universities. In fact, Tolkien's entry into Oxford was only possible because of his high-level training.

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Burke; Maria L. G. Pallares-Burke. *Os ingleses*. (São Paulo: Contexto, 2016): 20.

<sup>21</sup> Heyck, 199.

<sup>22</sup> David Lowenthal. *The past is a foreign country – revisited*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 120.

<sup>23</sup> Serge Berstein, *A Cultura Política. Por uma História Cultural*. (Lisboa: Estampa, 1998): 352.

<sup>24</sup> Heyck, 236.

<sup>25</sup> Noel Annan. *Our Age: portrait of a generation*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990): 37.

<sup>26</sup> Burke; Pallares-Burke, 151.

### 3 RELIGION

Religion was an essential part of Tolkien's personality, who was Catholic, unlike most English Protestants. Carpenter declares that Catholicism came to occupy a decisive space in his life, outlining the way he saw the world: fallen and corrupted, with faith and respect for the Church's conduct code were the only sources of salvation.

Noel Annan argues that the practice of using religion to interpret the world has gained traction among English intellectuals<sup>27</sup>. It is through it that Tolkien justifies his conservatism. In letter 186 (1956), the writer reveals that he did not believe in democracy, because it tried to mechanize equality and humility, which are spiritual principles, leading man to corruption and pride.<sup>28</sup>

One can perceive in Tolkien's religious characteristics aspects of the political culture observable in various elements of society<sup>29</sup>. Carpenter himself reveals:

“His worldview, according to which every man occupied or should occupy a specific 'position', whether high or low, implies, on the one hand, that he was an old-fashioned conservative. (...) Tolkien was, in modern jargon, 'right-wing' because he honored his monarch and his country and did not believe in the government of the people.”<sup>30</sup>

### 4 OXFORD

Oxford and Cambridge are the most prestigious universities in England and those who have studied at Oxbridge (its nickname) have a privileged background. Peter Burke comments that “the ties created at the university are very important, especially if they are Oxford and Cambridge. Only 2% of British students go to Oxbridge”<sup>31</sup>. Once inside these universities, young people soon participated in a specific way of life, reproducing conservative values. Tolkien, of course, did not deviate from this pattern.

Annan sees that both public schools and Oxbridge are responsible for forming ideal models, like respect to institutions, conservatism and tradition.<sup>32</sup> Tolkien was part of an intellectualized middle class and soon began to follow the expected standards of an Oxbridge student, joining debate clubs.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Annan, 299.

<sup>28</sup> “I am not a 'democrat' only because 'humility' and equality are spiritual principles corrupted by the attempt to mechanize and formalize them, with the result that we get (...) universal greatness and pride (...)” (Carpenter, 2012, 263).

<sup>29</sup> Berstein, 359.

<sup>30</sup> Carpenter, 2018, 177.

<sup>31</sup> Burke; Pallares-Burke, 178.

<sup>32</sup> Annan, 16.

<sup>33</sup> “Joining clubs is the english people's favourite form of sociability.” (Burke; Pallares-Burke, 252).



The formation at Oxford in 1915 also reveals much of the cultural values reproduced by English society. By achieving “First Class Honours”, the author accomplishes what was expected of a young man from the early 20th century: the honor of earning a *first*<sup>34</sup>, proof that you were not only smart, but part of a selected group of students.

After his training at Oxford, Tolkien continued his academic career, becoming professor of English at the University of Leeds (1920–25) and returning to Oxford in 1925 as a chair in English Language and Literature. Retiring comments on the lack he felt from Oxford's intellectualized environment, in which Carpenter quotes Tolkien's words to his son Christopher: "I can't find men of my own kind." (2018, p.339). This life That Tolkien missed was intellectual life, which was dominated by people with *common attitudes, formed by public schools* and Oxbridge; and who later became, for the most part, prestigious figures.

After his education at Oxford, Tolkien continued his academic career, becoming Professor of English Language at the University of Leeds (1920-25) and returning to Oxford in 1925 as a Professor of English Language and Literature. Upon retiring, he comments on how he missed the intellectual environment of Oxford, in which Carpenter quotes Tolkien's words to his son Christopher: “I don't find men of my own kind.”<sup>35</sup> This life that Tolkien missed was the intellectual life, which was dominated by people with common attitudes, formed by the public schools and Oxbridge; and who later became, for the most part, prestigious figures.

## 5 FRIENDSHIPS

From Tolkien's friendships one can understand elements of the dominant political culture: in addition to friendships between intellectuals, it is clear that participation in men's clubs also contributed to the formation of networks. Since his teenage years at King Edward's School, Tolkien befriended people of traditional thinking, forming a literary debate group called the *Tea Club, Barrovian Society* with his peers. In this environment male friendship was cultivated, something that Tolkien defended throughout his life, especially because this friendship cultivated in *public schools* or universities was typical of English society.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Annan, 377.

<sup>35</sup> Carpenter, 339.

<sup>36</sup> Annan, 66



At Oxford, as a teacher, intellectual friendships continued to be part of Tolkien's life, with C. S. Lewis being the center of this network. The author, known for writing *The Chronicles of Narnia* and various religious texts, was one of the great representatives of this intellectual elite. Together they formed a men's and Christian club called *The Inklings*, whose goal was to debate literature and celebrate friendship. The club, like so many others, "[...] shared common values and political and cultural positions."<sup>37</sup> This kind of friendship that celebrated masculinity was a trait of the conservative culture, which valued everything that was honorable and discreet, despising anything that was not masculine. Oxford was a male environment and the formation of these groups of intellectuals was frequent. The *Inklings* brought together people with similar ideals, all Christian and conservative<sup>38</sup>.

## 6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the text, it was debated how the political man Tolkien inserted himself into a political culture associated with English conservatism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Even though he was not part of the aristocratic group, Tolkien had all the elements to be considered a member of a privileged group in England, which was very much influenced by that aristocracy. Although the analysis is centered on the figure of Tolkien, it is possible to notice, from his socialization networks, how the writer was influenced by the conservative political culture of the period. It is from the individual that the collective is captured, represented by all those who identified with the elements of this political culture. It is also noted how conservatism itself has survived over time, despite the possible changes being seen and analyzed.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Paulo Cristelli. *J.R.R.Tolkien e a crítica à modernidade*. (São Paulo: Alameda, 2013): 470.

<sup>38</sup> Annan, 179.

<sup>39</sup> Burke; Pallares-Burke, 181.

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