

Into Pan's Labyrinth: Childhood, Literature, and Intertextuality

Leccicia Pires Almeida.

^a Department of Letters, Federal University of Bahia, Bahia, Brazil, leccicia.pires@ufba.br

Abstract. The research object is the novel entitled *Pan's Labyrinth* (2019), written by Guillermo del Toro and Cornelia Funk. The book focuses on Ofelia, a 13-year-old girl who lives in Spain during a civil war. Her father dies and her mother remarries a Capitan of the totalitarian regime. Ofelia and her father shared a strong connection to fairy tales, and when the girl finds herself in an unknown and dangerous environment, Ofelia uses them as a foundation to develop her fantastical world. Consequently, the book contains multiple parallels between the narrative and various fairy tales and classics from children's literature, such as *Alice in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Snow White*, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, among others. Thus, this research seeks to identify and discuss in which ways this connection occurs, as well as to reflect about the concept of intertextuality, to debate how this concept is present in the narrative, taking into consideration that intertextuality consists in a characteristic of contemporary literature. Overall, it aims to analyze how the authors, using intertextuality to build a young character who breaks conventional models of childhood, create new ways of perceiving childhood.

Keywords. Compared literature, fairy tales, fantasy, children's literature.

1. Introduction

The book *Pan's Labyrinth* (2019), written by Guillermo del Toro and Cornelia Funke, focuses on Ofelia, a 13-year-old girl who lives in Spain in 1944, in the middle of a civil war that devastates the country. Her father dies in the war and her mother marries Capitán Vidal, moving to the countryside to a village that has become a base of the totalitarian regime. Ofelia and her father shared a love for fairy tales and when confronted by her father's death and all the sudden changes happening in her life, these stories become not only a comfort but also a refuge for the girl. Ofelia, in her new home, finds an abandoned labyrinth where she meets a Faun. The mythological creature tells the girl that she is not human, but the reincarnation of the lost princess of the Magic Kingdom, Moanna. To return to her world, Ofelia must go through three tasks to prove she did not lose her actual spirit while living amongst humans.

The book has multiple references to various fairy tales and classic stories for children. For example, the novel begins with the expression: "It is said that long, long ago", [1] as well as the description of the main character and her mother Carmen, that are compared to Snow White, both being: "As white as snow, as red as blood, as black as coal", [1] and the book repeats

this multiple times. Ofelia calls her stepfather, Capitán Vidal, as "Wolf", referring to *Little Red Riding Hood*. However, the intertextuality becomes more evident in the three tasks given by the Faun, as each one of them correlates to *Alice in Wonderland*, *Hansel and Gretel* and *Snow White*, respectively.

The goal of this research was to analyze the fairy tale references, as well as other classic stories of children's literature, in *Pan's Labyrinth*, focusing mainly on how these references appear in the three tasks before mentioned. These analyses became the foundation for a discussion to explore how these intertextual choices in the book contribute to the development of new ways of perceiving childhood.

2. Research Methods

This research is a study of compared literature, focusing on the intertextuality established between the research object and classic stories of children's literature. There was a critical reading of the research object, *Pan's Labyrinth*, accompanied by other texts to create a theoretical foundation for the discussion performed. This research used the book *A intertextualidade* (2008), by Tiphaine Samoyault as the main reference for analyzing the intertextuality within the research object. To delve into the studies of childhood and literature for children, specifically

to discuss the importance of literature for the development of children, the book by Bruno Bettelheim, *A psicologia dos contos de fadas* (1997), was the main reference, along with other supporting texts. Finally, the fairy tales referenced throughout the paper were taken from *The classic fairy tales* (1999), compiled by Maria Tatar.

3. Results and Discussion

The presence of fairy tales in *Pan's Labyrinth* (2019) is very evident since the beginning of the novel. Ofelia loses her father because of the war and having to move with her pregnant mother to a violent and remote place, she has to live under the rule of a cold and cruel stepfather. The love the girl shared with her father for fairy tales becomes a refuge and the foundation for her fantastical world to which she escapes from reality.

The scholar Bruno Bettelheim, in his book, *A psicanálise dos contos de fadas* (1997), tries to determine the importance of these tales for the psychological development of children. In relation to which children experiences aid in developing the feeling of importance and reflecting about the meaning of life, he affirms that the factor with the biggest impact is the influence of parents and caretakers and then cultural heritage. One example is fairy tales. According to Bettelheim, the child must be able to connect with the story and not have their hardships undermined by it. This assists the child when maturing their confidence in themselves and their future.

Bettelheim also points out that popular fairy tales are the most satisfactory and enriching content included in children's literature, for both infants and adults. These stories become tools to learn how to deal with common human internal struggles and how to find effective solutions for them. Fairy tales not only aid children in challenging boundaries of the imagination but also offer them images with which to give structure to their daydreams and consequently improve their lives. [2]

In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the story begins with "It is said that long, long ago" [1] and, throughout the narrative, there are constant references to famous characteristics of fairy tales, such as witch, princesses and evil creatures. Even though this paper focuses on the three tasks that the main character faces, it is still valid to comment on the presence of other tales across the novel.

For example, *Little Red Riding Hood*. Since the beginning of the narrative, Ofelia calls her stepfather "Wolf" in her head, along with the other soldiers from the totalitarian army, defending that "that's what they were [...]. Man-eating wolves. Her mother said fairy tales didn't have anything to do with the world, but Ofelia knew better. They taught her everything about it". [1] Fairy tales intrinsically relate to the way Ofelia sees the world. It also exhibits that such stories taught her how to notice subtleties that sometimes escape adults, such as her mother Carmen, who sees

Vidal as her prince charming instead of a threatening wolf.

There is also the moment in which Ofelia decides to leave the path her mother ordered her to follow and enters the forest: "[Little Red Riding Hood] left the path and ran off into the woods looking for flowers [...] and so she went deeper and deeper into the woods". [3] This scene relates to *Pan's Labyrinth* when Carmen and Ofelia are arriving at their new home, the car stops in the middle of the road and "Ofelia couldn't resist. She stepped off the road and walked toward it" [1] into the woods. This is the moment in the story when Ofelia frees a fairy from within a statue and her fantastical world starts to develop.

In relation to the first task, Ofelia has to go down the roots of an old tree that is rotting because of a giant Toad that lives there. The girl must face the Toad and make him eat three stones to get a key that is inside his stomach. The task presents parallels with the book *Alice in Wonderland*, written by Lewis Carroll in 1865. On a level of imagery, Ofelia wears a green dress with a white apron and clack shoes, very similar to the iconic outfit of Carroll's protagonist, Alice, with her blue dress, white apron and black shoes.

Both protagonists descend into a hole and enter a different world, following a creature from that place. Ofelia is also underground, searching for a key, which aligns with Alice's goal when she finds herself trapped in a room full of doors and unable to open them. Both girls also challenge an authority figure to achieve their objective: Ofelia, to get the key and complete her mission; Alice, to go back home before the Queen of Hearts cuts her head off. [4]

The first task, different from the others, draws parallels with a classic novel from children's literature, instead of a proper fairy tale. When Carroll published *Alice in Wonderland*, it marked a turning point in literature made for this audience. [5] While fairy tales were introduced to children as a tool to teach them morality, with famous figures such as Charles Perrault, the Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm editing popular tales to include moral lessons. Carroll, however, did not have this teaching goal when building his main character, Alice, who is a child with full certainty of how adults can be illogical and untrustworthy. This is a trait she shares with Ofelia, both often getting in trouble with adults for the confusing behaviors of their elders. Such a dynamic consisted of the opposite of the traditional expectations from children's literature until that point, and the novel shocked the Victorian system. For that, Carroll was essential for a revolution of the children's literature of his time and especially the change in the portrayal of children in literature. [5]

Ofelia presents a mixture of characteristics from different fairy tales' main characters: is often curious and naive and ends up in risky situations, other times is very insightful and capable of using her intelligence to leave said dangerous situations. The

girl also shows traits from Alice, mistrusting adults and commenting on their lack of logic. The narrative reflects this liminal space in which Ofelia resides, in the mixture of reality and fantasy, in the space between spaces. And, even though fairy tales work as the foundation of this story, the novel subverts these traditional molds of childhood since the very first task.

The second task happens differently from the first, and Ofelia ends up in greater danger. Carmen punishes Ofelia for destroying her dress while completing the previous task and makes her go to sleep without dinner. Her sadness and fear are so great she cannot eat and must go through the second task hungry. The Faun gives her a piece of chalk, an hourglass and orders her to take the key to an underground hall and face a dangerous creature. Ofelia only has minimal information: the chalk opens a door to this place; she must use the key correctly; she must finish the task and come back before the hourglass runs out of time and she must not, under any circumstances, eat any food from that place.

This quest correlates with the tale of *Hansel and Gretel*, one of the most obvious parallels being the villain. The Pale Man, the creature that resides in the hall underground, is surrounded by riches and delicious food, as well as a pile of children's shoes. This ravenous, cruel beast looks human and remains still, sitting in front of a table full of food, but the moment someone—a child—eats from the table, it wakes up and devours them. This monster is like the Witch from *Hansel and Gretel*. Both are dangerous and use their frail appearance to attract children with tempting food so they can eat them. The Pale Man, like the Blind Witch, also has his vision impaired, since his eyes reside in the palm of his hands. In the tale of Perrault, witches have red eyes and, therefore, cannot see from very far [6] and this ends up being her doom, since she cannot see that the siblings are deceiving her.

Comparing both tasks Ofelia has gone through, while the first one follows the molds of traditional fairy tales—the protagonist faces an evil character and wins by using their wits, defeating the enemy—the second one does not follow these stories beats too smoothly. Ofelia manages to defeat the Pale Man, since she escapes without being eaten and uses the key to get the dagger, but she breaks the rules about eating from his table and the monster eats three of the four fairies that were accompanying her. When she tells the Faun, he is furious and says that she failed and can never return to the Magic Kingdom. The girl may have survived, but in the end, she loses her rightful place as a princess. This is the further rupture from these traditional ideals presented by fairy tales.

The third task happens under very different circumstances from the previous two. Ofelia's brother is born, but her mother dies during the birth, leaving both children under the control of Capitán Vidal. Alone, hopeless and grieving once again, she stops believing in the existence of magic. The Faun,

however, appears to her and says she can still return to her kingdom, but she must steal her brother from her stepfather and take the baby into the labyrinth, along with the dagger she stole from the Pale Man.

After entering the labyrinth, the Faun explains that, to enter the magic Kingdom, the girl must offer innocent blood using the dagger: a blood from her brother's finger. This task subverts the tale of *Snow White*. Throughout the novel, Ofelia and her mother are described as being "as white as snow, as red as blood, as black as coal". [1] Such observation is reminiscent of the iconic description of Snow White: "a little girl, who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony". [3] However, this similarity between the two protagonists changes gradually. Ofelia, during the last task, ends up in a position closer to the Hunter. A powerful figure commands her to hurt an innocent person, and she has to choose between protecting her brother and remaining human forever or following the Faun's orders and hurting her sibling, returning to her home in the Magic Kingdom. Thus, as the Hunter, she is incapable of hurting an innocent person, even if only for a drop of blood, and she dies in the labyrinth.

There is another correlation between the sleep of Snow White and the death of Ofelia. While both exist in a moment between life and death—Snow White in a coma under a spell of the Evil Queen, and Ofelia, laying on the labyrinth and slowly wasting away—the former is revived and finds happiness in life, while Ofelia finds hers in death. The connection between reality and fantasy in *Pan's Labyrinth* receives even more tension. Ofelia's blood can open a portal to the Magic Kingdom, since she remained pure of heart for not hurting her brother. Her heavy limbs become light and she stands up, free of all the suffering, grief, and pain, and the girl enters the Magic Kingdom surrounded by warmth, happiness, and family. Ofelia can still hear the sounds of suffering coming from the human world, but she fully enters her kingdom, and the sounds disappear. [1] Finally, the connection between reality and fantasy is broken.

Maria Tatar, in her book *Contos de Fadas* (2013), talks about childhood books existing as sacred objects to many people. These books not only create opportunities for developing imagination but also mechanisms to understand and interpret common situations in life. Teaching ways to deal with fears, doubts, and the hardships of navigating a world controlled by adults that do not always pay attention to their needs. Fairy tales aid Ofelia in noticing things that escape even her mother, such as the cruelty of Capitán Vidal. They also provide a sense of control in a chaotic world, a safe space to confront and face their fears. [6]

Such stories have a specific and predictable style, with simple, one-dimensional characters. Said characters, when in critical situations, use their wits and intelligence or magic to overcome their hardships and defeat the villain. Tatar affirms that one of the most potent characteristics of fairy tales is

their ability to take pleasure from pain. Bettelheim, when talking to about amoral tales-such as *Jack and the Beanstalk* or *Puss in Boots*-, explains that their goal is not to teach morals to children, but to give them hope that, even when they have no power or control, they can succeed and find happiness. These stories aid children when feel insignificant to see hope in their futures and understand the value of choosing to be good people. [2] Even when you have a life with no privileges, your life still has meaning.

All reflections made in this paper are examples of intertextuality, since *Pan's Labyrinth* presents a multitude of literary references throughout its narrative, exercising a dialogue within itself and with the world. [7] Intertextuality, therefore, is the interaction of texts and its continuous development because of these exchanges. Samoyault also defends the view of intertextuality as memory and an exercise of union and remembrance that literature makes of itself. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, there is a constant reiteration of aspects from the tales of oral tradition that originated fairy tales. The working class shared stories in a pre-modern setting, as warnings for the common dangers of that historical context, from the higher social class of the time to the violence present in roads and forest of the time. [6]

The idea of memory is also present along the narrative since the characters are constantly forgetting who they are and their past. To Samoyault, there is a link between memory and literature, since literature has always been involved in the preservation of culture and traditions of the memories of people and their relationship with the world. In the book, memory and literature are connected, and this loss meant the death of literature, fantasy, and childhood. The creation of a fantastical world in the novel has as its foundation multiple famous examples of classics from children's literature. Intertextuality allows the renewal and preservation of historic information to deter their loss, and, over time, all text follows another, constantly creating knowledge. It must deal with this past and present, affecting each other and growing together. [7] Intertextuality is the act of addition, a constant interaction between art and life, fantasy, and reality. These contacts are one of the main points of *Pan's Labyrinth*.

Finally, the books ends after Ofelia's death. All the characters are forgotten. However, right after Ofelia's death, a white flower grows where the Toad used to reside in. A man, a long time after, visits the place and falls asleep under the flower, dreaming about the story of the princess who got lost and found her way back to her kingdom. He goes back home and shares the story with his village. The book ends with Ofelia's story outliving her. Her life becomes a story that is shared just like old fairy tales. The story feeds from itself, gaining strength in the memories of people and changing, but never losing the most important characteristics. [7] The story of the princess remains alive and intertextual, being renewed through time, because time is the only

certainty of transformation.

4. Conclusions

Throughout Funke and Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia slowly realizes that reality is not as predictable and straightforward as fairy tales and the tasks are the narrative points in which this rupture becomes evident. The authors use the subversion of these artifices from fairy tales to enhance their narrative. Ofelia starts the novel in a very traditional position for a young female character of fairy tales: one of her parents dead, powerless and forced into submission by her environment.

Throughout the tasks, the authors slowly use these fairy tale correlations to change these traditional parameters and turn Ofelia into a character with confidence and agency. Alice marked a moment of change in the entire literary genre, foreshadowing the character development that Ofelia will go through. *Hansel and Gretel* shows a divergence from these classic stories by stepping away from the expectations of those plots and, finally, Ofelia starts being compared to Snow White, the prime example of a young female character from fairy tales, and ends the novel by being in the position of the Hunter: independent and powerful enough to go against the nefarious orders they were given.

Literature becomes a self-reflection space for the girl. Contrary to her past, when she shared the activity with her father, reading becomes a lonely exercise for the girl after she dies. Through reading, Ofelia learns about herself and the world around her alone. When talking about intertextuality, Samoyault comments about how books become an inner mirror when faced with external negligence and the absence of opportunities. [7]

Samoyault affirms that, especially in literature compared to other types of art, intertextuality has a bigger focus on transforming the text of others by writing your own text parallelly. A displacement happens, the creation of a new context, more than just the union of life and art, founded by collectivity and the artistic power to create new worlds. [7] In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the fairy tales are as important for the survival of Ofelia, protecting her psyche, as the creation of the Magic Kingdom. As the concept of childhood changes throughout time, how people interpret fairy tales and connect with them also alters.

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