

The Harry Potter Series: A Reawakening and Retelling

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In this paper I attempt to tackle the issue of how one incomplete series, produced by a single unrenowned author, has awakened a reading revolution world-wide and redefined our twenty-first century notion of a best-seller. Was the world awaiting its literary hero in despair, or are Harry's character and adventures so associated with our own that he has unconsciously forced us to look deeper into everyday realities, seeking the fundamental truths? Whether the world was on the look out or taken by storm, the fact is that Harry is here, and if book sales are anything to go by, he's here to stay!

Good as the series is, it is not easy to explain Rowling's phenomenal success. She is certainly not the first writer to deal with ordinary children caught up amongst magical creatures and adventures. Writers such as Mary Norton, E. Nesbit, C.S. Lewis and others all published classics, but none of these authors ever reawakened such an interest in fantasy fiction to the point of pushing the adult top five off the charts. Literary critics have been intrigued by the success of the Harry Potter series and many have come up with theories to justify the millions of copies sold all around the world. Jack Zipes, among others, ascribes their success to an excellent marketing campaign and a manipulation of the book market, whilst Peter Appelbaum states that Harry Potter's attraction lies in its treatment of magic as a commodified technology. On the other hand, Anne Hiebert Alton credited Rowling's intermingling of a number of popular genres, amongst which are pulp fiction, ghost and horror stories, mystery and detective as well as the school and sports story, claiming that Rowling also does an excellent job of combining common fantastical motifs with other traditional fairy tale elements. According to Jann Lacoss a 'reason [why] children easily relate to the Harry Potter series is that the books mirror a plot and structure form that they recognize from very early childhood: the folktale' (85). But according to J.K. Rowling herself, the stories have become so popular because readers discover a child who is abused and powerless but who, given a way out, succeeds in combating and winning over evil. Likewise in my MA thesis, 'Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea Quintet and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series: A Narratological and Structural Analysis', I contend that Harry is an old-fashioned hero and that there is enough human frailty in him for people of all ages to identify with him; thus the story appeals to adults too because Harry has to accept adult burdens in his life even though he is a child.

After the publication of the third book, the series seemed to be taking the path of a high fantasy saga following the child's quest for knowledge and self-identity. The Harry Potter series also developed an intricate underlying battle of good versus evil. In the first novel, *The Philosopher's Stone*, Harry seeks to protect the philosopher's stone and to stop the arch villain from attaining immortality. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, Harry stops a basilisk from attacking students, whereas in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* he must learn to face Dementors. In *The Goblet of Fire* Harry must get through the Triwizard Tournament and combat Voldemort at the end; in *The Order of the Phoenix* he must stop Voldemort

from possessing his mind and killing wizards or muggles. Harry's quests are also typically linked to philosophical dilemmas, and as the series progresses, the issues assume a more macrocosmic twist, fitting in perfectly with the structures and thematics of contemporary high fantasy series such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Earthsea Quintet* (1968-1990) and *The Other Wind* (2001), Tamora Pierce's *The Immortals* series (2004), and Catherine Fisher's *Book of the Crow* series (2001).

Maria Nikolajeva, commenting on heroes and their quests, states that the romantic hero rather than the mythical hero is highly present in children's literature and that Harry seems to be part of the former group. Whereas myth seemed to be based on belief of some sort, the romantic heroes are characters empowered in a way that makes them superior to other humans. This, Nikolajeva states, reminds one of Bakhtin's Theory of Carnival in which he says that by putting social hierarchies into question, the carnival achieves a subversive effect. Applying this theory to literature, Bakhtin views it as 'a narrative device used to describe reality in a distorting mirror, in a state of temporary deviation from the existing order, as well as a total freedom from societal restrictions' (Nikolajeva 129). This, Nikolajeva claims, is particularly relevant to the fantasy genre and Harry Potter in particular as:

An ordinary child is empowered through transportation to a magical realm, through possession of a magical agent (object or helper), and through, acquisition of a set of heroic traits or magical force, impossible or at least improbable within the existing order of things — what we normally call “real world.” (130)

In spite of being located within the fantasy genre, Harry Potter is a straightforward hero, and readers know what to expect thus:

After decades of parody, metafiction, frame-breaking, and other postmodern games, it may feel liberating for the readers, young and old alike, to know where to place their sympathies and antipathies [...] Harry Potter provides the sense of security for the reader that characters such as Lyra or Christopher Chant have subverted [...]. It seems Harry Potter is a child of serendipity. He appeared at the time when the international children's book market was in acute need of a new type of character. The flat, one-dimensional, mind-numbing characters of formulaic fiction, though satisfying the basic desires of less sophisticated readers, had for decades vexed conscious critics, librarians, and teachers. The ambivalent, ironic, postmodern characters, praised by critics, have often been rejected by young readers as too complex and demanding. The fortunate blend of the romantic and the ironic, the straightforward and the reasonably intricate, the heroic and the everyday in Harry Potter appeared as a response to these contradictory needs, and, sarcastic voices notwithstanding, seems to have reconciled the incompatible desires. (138-140)

Aside from combining the romantic and ironic in terms of characterization, I also believe that Rowling applies a similar strategy of incorporating the idyllic and the technological in terms of setting because she combines traditional magic with modern

technology. In many of the worlds created by contemporary fantasy writers, the arrival of industry and technology heralds the fall of society, the values of which are overcome by consumerism. In Tolkien, the hobbits destroy the one ring and Sauron's industrial hell to restore a pastoral, peaceful serenity, and likewise in the works of C.S. Lewis, Diana Wynne Jones, Susan Cooper and Lloyd Alexander, magic is natural and inborn, or if man-made it is antique, and normally given as a gift. In Pullman avant-garde technologies are celebrated and in fact feature as the titles of *The Dark Materials*, but ultimately they are weapons of war and paradise, for Pullman's world is also a place where the most elaborate technology is a fishing net and the wheel. When one takes note of the considerable amount of memorabilia which came with the Harry Potter books and the criticism levied their way in terms of the consumerist attitude of the main characters, the question as to whether the books are merely a twenty-first century commodified fantasy series starts to surface. Le Guin in *Tales from Earthsea* comments on commodified fantasy when she states:

Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivializes. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude. Heroes brandish their swords, lasers, wands, as mechanically as combine harvesters, reaping profits. Profoundly disturbing moral choices are sanitized, made cute, made safe. The passionately conceived ideas of the great story-tellers are copied, stereo-typed, reduced to toys, molded in bright-colored plastic, advertised, sold, broken, junked, replaceable, interchangeable. (xvi)

However, although Jack Zipes feels that the series is a hodgepodge of popular entertainment, according to Elizabeth Teare, the Harry Potter books 'offer instructions on how to live in commodity culture' (329), thus still enlightening and guiding the young reader towards making the right choices. Lockhart's book-signing sessions and frequent photo shoots as well as international sporting events, such as the Triwizard Tournament and the Quidditch World Cup, and the Muggles in the story, such as Dudley, who receives piles of videos for his birthday, as well as the international Gringotts bank, represent the commercial, technological world of today. Ultimately, however, Hogwarts students board the Hogwarts Express, powered by a steam engine, to get back to the school, which is set in a pre-industrial setting and seems to be devoid of technology. Dumbledore voices his repugnance of the Dursley technological materialism when in *The Philosopher's Stone* he explains the reasons for destroying the stone to Harry when he says, 'As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all – the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things which are worst for them' (*PS* 215). Yet perhaps the lack of technology is not linked with a belief in negative consumerism but with the logical conclusion that it is not needed in a world full of wizards and witches who can produce blazing fires and luminous torches with merely the wave of a wand.

Peter Appelbaum states that throughout the series magic and technology are confused. Arthur Weasley, an employee of the Ministry of Magic, collects electric plugs and batteries and secretly owns a flying car. The Dursleys want nothing to do with magic,

yet Dudley's room contains a computer, a Playstation, two televisions, a video recorder, a computerized robot and a working model tank, amongst other things. Ultimately, it is Vernon Dursley who points out the strange place of technology in the arts of magic as he wonders why the students must take the train to get to Hogwarts. Although his question is never directly answered, the series shows that technology / magic has to do with who one is and what one does. Appelbaum claims:

And because who one is and what one does is so intertwined with the technologies of magic and the magic of technology in the service of self-knowledge and self-care, who one is and what one does is a technology of morality and an essential node of the construction of ethics. (48)

Thus I believe that as in the traditional tale, what this high fantasy series seeks to do is to actually prepare the reader to make the right choices when the big moments come. Ultimately, in this series, magic seems to be treated like a commodified technology, just as in the real world video games and television cyborgs treat technology as magic. Therefore, the fact that literature acknowledges technology is not a lack or vice and does not reduce the work to merely a commodified fantasy, but rather it is a positive narrative strategy, as the readers are exposed to a story which relates to the actual world around them. Therefore, once the series is read and becomes part of the past literary experience of the reader, it will truly be a literary experience that could be of use and serve as a guide to present and future life experience.

Appelbaum declares that because of these issues, the twenty-first century gave birth to a new kind of hero, one that he calls a 'gundam' child.(29) 'Gundam' is a term from the Japanese animation genre for the hero who dons technology in order to fight the unleashed threats resulting from previous human efforts with technology and science. This kind of hero inherits technological havoc, and as critics, parents and teachers resist the technological input to the Harry Potter series, the comparison to the gundam hero becomes even more adequate as in the latter's case the hero must save the world even as the adults sit passively in the side lines, not comprehending what needs to be done. At least, in the Harry Potter series, there is a reassurance that some adults are aware of what is happening and can provide support when needed. Dumbledore, McGonagall, Black and Hagrid, whom, I believe, Vladimir Propp would classify as the helpers of the tale, are always aware of what the children are up to, and they can always provide assistance at the most critical moments. Ultimately, however, as with the gundam hero, it is only the child who can and must save the world.

One of Harry's greatest discoveries about himself, similar to Ged's, is that who he is is not nearly as important as what he chooses to do with his powers. His wand shares the same phoenix feathers as the strongest villain in the tale, and the Sorting Hat is torn between placing him in Gryffindor or Slytherin, yet Harry himself chooses the former, and this is what really makes him different to Voldemort: he chooses to do good. Thus the books present a transformation of the self by one's own means or with the help of others, and as Harry comes to embody a combination of self-care and self-knowledge, the books become a celebration of individual self-enhancement. Mary Pharr notes that like other heroes and many adolescent readers themselves, the skills he is born with only come to fruition at key moments through some new leap in his moral and emotional

development:

Despite his youth, the Potter heritage calls Harry to become a seeker whose episodic quests for knowledge are unified by the grand themes of self- discovery and selfless valor[...]. Harry must use his burgeoning knowledge for the good of others, whether in defense of a solitary groundskeeper unjustly accused of infamy, or in defense of the remains of a murdered boy whose ghostly wish is to be returned to his grieving family — or in the defense of the whole world of wizards and Muggles against the Dark Lord’s absolute evil. In other words, Harry must not only be powerful but also empathetic, able to feel as well as to do. (56)

In my opinion, Rowling’s insight into human nature is clearly demonstrated when she shows that the product of suffering and exclusion can be mercy and peace, not rage and violence. In Harry Potter’s world, the villains are powerful at times but ultimately they are losers, and the heroes may remain scarred, but they can remain morally whole, which is the greatest victory. Harry, the hero, becomes nearly divine because he has traveled past ignorance and develops a growing feeling that the Dark Lord will not defeat him. As Dumbledore tells him at the end of *The Goblet of Fire*, ‘You have shouldered a grown wizard’s burden and found yourself equal to it’ (*GoF* 606-7). The hero has won the freedom to live because he has conquered the fears that prevent him from living fully. Fear is Harry’s greatest enemy, even greater than Voldemort. Professor Lupin did not let Harry practise fighting the Boggart because he did not want an image of Voldemort flying through Hogwarts, but Harry tells him, ‘I did think of Voldemort first [...] But then I — I remembered those Dementors’ (*PoA* 117). Lupin is impressed by Harry’s insight and replies, ‘That suggests that what you fear most of all is - fear. Very wise, Harry’ (117).

And in *The Order of the Phoenix* when faced with the stark and harsh truth that he must either die or become a murderer, Harry does not break down but accepts his destiny bravely. Thus, I believe that the patterns that appear in Rowling’s books are those which have featured in mythology and folklore for centuries, because the quest of the heroes, the battle against nihilism and the quest for identity remain the same, and only the settings and contexts have changed. To battle the dark forces in the world, the heroes must face the dark forces within and rediscover in each adventure that they are worthy of victory. Ultimately, the reader understands Harry because, as Campbell says, ‘every one of us shares the supreme ordeal’ (391). Like Ged in *Earthsea*, Daine in Tamora Pierce’s *Tortall* and others, including the readers themselves, only once Harry has achieved mastery, and learnt to look deep within himself, will he be ready to name his shadows and be rid of them. Each book of the series takes us closer, but as the prophecy states, only once he has vanquished Voldemort completely can he restore complete wholeness to himself and his world. And thus as Campbell states, the tale of the hero protagonist is one that has been told and retold through the ages to the point where the reader ‘knows the tale; it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind’s coming to maturity’ (387).

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