

## **CHILDREN’S FANTASY IN HARRY POTTER’S NOVELS; RELEVANCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Fantasy this is appropriate for a post-modern text, being open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Their contemporary appeal is the return and celebration of enchantment through re-sacrilization. The mass appeal and phenomenal success of *Harry Potter* in recent times and the renewed focus on *The Lord of the Rings* have not only widened the awareness and appreciation of fantasy but also transformed children’s fantasy literature into big business. Thus fantasy and violence are antithetically related, one taking the reader to a secondary world of enchantment and the other shocking him into the reality of a disenchanting world. Our ability to read metaphorically has made fantasy directly relevant to our times. Tolkien and Rowling provide antidotes to present despair by holding on to traditional values in a fantasy world and by re-introducing those values into the literary world.

### **1.1 Introduction**

Children need the experience of fantasy as an essential part of growing up. The strong emotions and the moments of triumph or despair that they identify with and respond to are a part of their inner lives, lives which are richer and more complex than we might have imagined, on both an unconscious and conscious level. They teach him to expect and relish the unlikely, to miss none of life’s surprises and to be astonished by nothing, to leap spontaneously from one way of thinking to another, which is the heart and soul of humour.

The present study aims to analyze the contemporary relevance of the fantastic in today’s reality in the light of the current status of fantasy. Children the world over are frightened by the violence of evil, which is why they are fascinated by stories which overcome this fear. When good triumphs and evil is vanquished, they gain control over their terror of “learned helplessness” (1). For the child, the victory of the hero is not over his opponents, but over oneself and over villainy, mainly one’s own, which is projected as the hero’s aggressiveness. Through this, a reading child will be able to adjust better to life than one denied of such release of

negative energy. The more realistically and courageously a person can face violence and suffering, the more effective he will be against them. Children can use their fantasies to master their fears by viewing them fully as fantasy, by having their fantasy as *fantasy*. Understanding the difference between what violent entertainment means to children and what it means to adults alone will help make sense of children's love for imaginative aggression.

Contemporary social issues of young adults do not appear in Harry's world; instead old-fashioned issues raised by malicious teachers, scheming rich bullies and terrifying villains make it in an alternative magical world clearly marked by good and evil powers. By returning to heroism, melodrama, moral certainty and wish-fulfillment, Rowling has breathed new life into the traditional form of fantasy writing for children. The racial distinctions and the fascist politics of the wizard world parallel the racial hierarchies in much of contemporary society which make Rowling's views about racism almost propagandist.

An essential value of fantasy in a technological society is the opportunity it provides for children to recognize the connection between individuals and society. In an era of virtual friends, television talk-shows and video games that seem more real than their own relatives or living rooms, stories of heroes like Frodo and Harry, who are so closely bound with their respective societies, provide for an increasing need for children to find such personal connections.

The experience of fantasy to which a young mind respond to and identify with, is an essential part of growing up and the best way to enlarge from within, putting as flexible a frame as possible around whatever world he will inhabit as an adult. The quest for identity and self-knowledge that a fantasy story embarks on, the escape that it allows from the limitations of reality while interconnecting the ordinary and the wonderful, and the fundamental truths of man's existence that it underlines all account for its mass appeal. It is obvious that *Harry Potter* and the recent renewed focus on *The Lord of the Rings* have done a lot to widen the awareness of fantasy in general. Fantasy acquires for the reader, the potency of the familiar and the commonplace by removing the veil of familiarity and by achieving recovery or "regaining of a clear view" (2) which is, viewing the world like a child does. As Peter Hollindale points out, adults who read a children's book, are not in fact reading the same book as children are, by virtue of their different reading experiences( 9). But over a long period of time, a complete change in point of view as well as in pedagogy brought about by an awakening of feeling and of consciousness of the rights of the individual, resulted in introducing some element of pleasure in reading matter for children.

The books provided the bridge so that the transition could be made" (Watson 3). The child reader is never forgotten; and the adult reader is *not* asked to become childish or childlike. Any reader young or old is being invited to become a better reader.

The study also examines the question of evil that fantasy addresses through its theme of good versus evil. The depiction of violence which is a direct outcome of the struggle between good and evil, conversely serves a positive function, providing great therapeutic values and coping skills in the present day world. While the texts used in this study are by two Caucasian British writers, their fantasy aspects can be widely employed to read a variety of other fantasy works.

The dissertation undertakes this study in the background of the selected fantasies of two of the most popular fantasists of modern times, namely J.R.R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, both of whom have enjoyed immense popularity, phenomenal literary success and a cult fan-following in

their respective ages. Tolkien was the rage of the American college campuses of the sixties, while Rowling has become the vogue half a century later. Tolkien revived the fantasy genre from its ‘sword and sorcery’ status by creating *The Hobbit* which can be said to be the ‘prequel’ of his masterpiece and perhaps, the first adult fantasy in English literature, namely *The Lord of the Rings*. He became the father of modern high fantasy; all later fantasists were either his imitators or followers. Rowling became its ‘mother’ by rediscovering for the modern cyber-generation the fantasy world of books, through the immensely successful Harry Potter series. Both are representative writers of the cross-over fiction as also popular culture; and both were derided by the intellectual elite and the literati of their times, as ‘juvenile’.

## 2. An Overview of Children’s Literature

Children’s literature is not a past time, an entertaining interlude, set apart from the real business of living, but the cultural foundation for it. The history of children’s literature reveals the changing attitude of society toward children and changing cultural values. The stories of realistic children in lifelike situations and daring adventures also brought joy to the children of this period. George Cruickshank, Richard Doyle, Walter Crane, Randolph Caldecott and Kate Greenaway are the great writers of the century who used colour with skill, imagination and originality in children’s books.

The study of children’s literature involves a complex relationship between three elements- the literature, the children and the adult critics, partly because childhood and ‘child’ are difficult to define, partly because adults need to ‘construct’ the child to talk about the books, and partly because, the literature is assumed to be ‘good’ for children in some way. For children are a race whose experience of life is different from that of adults and “the thing that makes a book a good book to a child is that it is an experience” (Smith 4). What children’s literature means is fundamental for every critic who uses the term:

Surely *Robinson Crusoe* was not written for children, and does not have Alice books appeal at least as much to grown ups ?. If *Tom Sawyer* is children’s literature, what about *Huckleberry Finn*? If the *Jungle Books* are children’s literature, what about *Kim* or *Stalky*?. If *The Wind in the Willows* is children’s literature, What about *The Golden Age*? And so on (Townsend qtd. in Hunt. *Understanding* 5).

Thus children’s literature can be defined as literature that in itself is good for children – that affects children better or more than non-literature – and this of course implies a world of assumptions about what the reading ‘child’ is and how it reads (Lesnik-Oberstein. “Essentials”6).

It was an age of the family and books were written to appeal to a wider age range, perhaps because of the very general family habit of reading aloud.

Within this type of thinking the ‘classics’ of children’s literature are often being described as being avant garde or exceptionally perspicacious with respect to the ‘child’. Barbara Wall, for instance, explains the classic status of *Alice in Wonderland*, thus:

Alice’s became the first child-mind, in the history of children’s fiction, to occupy the centre ... No narrator of a story for children had stood so close to a child protagonist, observing nothing except that child, describing, never criticizing, showing only what that child saw” (5).

“Parents and teachers were beginning to recognize the importance of literature for children” (Huck8).

Modern fairy tales predominated the decade while sea-stories, aviation stories, romantic adventures and foreign background stories made their entry into fantasy. With the improvements in graphic processes and photo-offset lithography new explorations were done in children’s book illustrations and illustrated books became cheaper: the result was an avalanche of picture books. The impact of the changing trend was manifold:

No longer were children limited in their reading to the few books which by fortunate accident held something that they could enjoy. No longer were books seen as merely teaching tools or children as immature people who quickly be transformed into the pattern of their elders. Children were individuals, worthy of special attention (Meigs 9).

By 1940 children’s books were accepted as a branch of current literature. New and original methods for the promotion of them were found in radio and television. Drastic changes came about in the publishing scene too. Paperback editions flourished and by 1967, books were so cheap that children could buy them and start their own home libraries. Suddenly children’s books became big business – and a commodity: “[t]he problem once of not enough books for children, became suddenly the problem of too many” (10). The addition of children’s departments to publishing firms and the starting of children’s rooms in public libraries and of libraries in schools indicated the growing importance of literature for the young.

Publishers started realizing that adolescents deserved books written not just *about* them, but for them – books with characters they could identify with, books about modern teen problems and woes, books just as good as that written for adults.

Greater understanding of young people’s needs, the mass-media attention to youth culture, a tendency to admire rebels and a wide spread reluctance to ‘hang up their rock’n roll shoes’ have meant that much of the earlier ‘rubbish’ is now officially approved and purchased by parents (Reynolds 11).

Childhood is the time to learn bridging the immense gap between inner experiences and the real world. An adult who was deprived of fantasy in his own childhood and so has not achieved an integration of the two worlds of reality and imagination may consider them as senseless, fantastic, scary and totally unbelievable. “When violent story telling is not allowed to serve its function, or is connected in young people’s minds with transgression and self-destruction it can begin to churn obsessively inside without catharsis or resolution”(Jones 12). Bettelheim emphasizes on the vicarious function of fantasy stories:

When the entire child’s wishful thinking gets embodied in a good Fairy; all his destructive wishes in an evil witch; all his fears in a voracious wolf; ... all his jealous anger in some animal that peeks out the eyes of his archrivals – then the child can finally begin to sort out his contradictory tendencies. Once this starts the child will be less and less engulfed by unmanageable chaos (13).

The incredible success of the *Harry Potter* books have raised the fear of corporate consumerism targeting child culture and also the cultural commercialization of childhood by the media creating a cultural hegemony. (Vorbeck 13-24, Zipes 170-89). However, the renewed interest in children's literature the Potter books have fostered has made its author J.K. Rowling a power too great to ignore, inviting scholarly attention to her books, which can be measured in the number of books, academic papers and conferences that explore Harry's connection to the Stoics, St. Augustine, Beowulf, Jung, Freud and what not.

Imbibing or adapting from specific earlier texts, well-known stories, archetypes, genres, conventions, traditions and other discourses, and recombining and subverting the various traditional elements in a non-traditional way, Rowling has brought forth a freshness to story-telling which is testified by her huge fan-following of both adults and children of a range of age groups and also by the huge potential of critical analyses her books stimulate. Fantasy stories, when dealing with fictional violence makes for the young people similar connections. It offers a wider framework for understanding, thus becoming an important part of the total cultural experience of a young reader, prompting him to opt for positive causes.

These are some of the lessons that adults learn from fantasy and so they too turn to authors like Tolkien, Lewis and Rowling in an effort to 'sort things out'. With nerve gas, terrorism, potential nuclear holocaust and ecological pollution blighting the real world, the hope for the future is fantastic (Patrick 18).

Rowling says that she was not really aware that it was a children's book: "I really wrote it for me. It was what I found funny and what I liked" (*News Week*, qtd. in Shapiro 14). The books are upbeat, humorous and light-hearted, making them very different from much of the children's and young adult fiction currently published, and turning non-readers into book lovers. This conviction, which is further endorsed by reassurance time and again from Dumbledore, emboldens him to counter Voldemort's jeer that he was 'the boy who has survived by accident':

Accident was it, when my mother died to save me?' asked Harry ...  
'Accident, when I decided to fight in that graveyard? Accident, that I didn't defend myself tonight, and still survived, and returned to fight again?' (*Deathly Hallows* 15).

The novels are replete with descriptions of horror, incidents of violence, scenes of terror and vile and fearsome creatures.

Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake (16).

Fantasy stories can be appropriated as a psychological strategy creating meaning in the midst of violent conflict such as the world is faced with today and serving as protective powers against chaos which become ironic sites of growth. They "help young people face reality, however distasteful that reality may be" (Whitehead `7).

Like all other cultural elements, children's literature, too have been subjected to "adultification" in the changing perspectives of the various social institutions and the merging of the tastes and styles of children and adults. In a world where childhood erodes at a pace fast enough to meet an adulthood which is already retarded into an extended childhood, fantasy provide coping skills. It gives a new perspective, an altered mirror that reveals our world of

reality and its experiences in a metaphorical way and also addresses the psychological needs of readers. So the changing literature for the young including dark matters such as violence and injustice is a healthy response to a different world. Stories of fantasy, abundant in the basic virtues of resilience, empathy, self-control and a respect for others help children to combat increased aggression, fear, desensitization and an appetite for violence which are the four main effects of viewing violence.

### 3. Conclusion

Modern novelists have turned to fantasy as an appropriate idiom for contemporary fiction, which points to an important function of children's literature in culture. Childhood and children's literature are defined by the culture's need and desires for the next generation. In times of anxiety, transition and change, fantasy becomes a medium for writers to explore their own restlessness and that of the historical moment they live in. A young adult fed on the cultural experience offered by thoughtful books would be the one to bridge human gaps his parents and elders may have failed to achieve, the one to expand his consciousness without drugs or other stimulants and the one to fight injustice out of strong compassion rather than strong passion without reason. When genres fall out of favour in mainstream fiction, in the realm of children's literature, they subtly metamorphose into modes suitable for the new readers. It is on the part of critics to examine whether this is true, whether it is to the advantage of young readers and also whether this has helped children's literature to come of age.

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In a way, Harry Potter is just a children's fantasy. The story of a boy who lived under the cupboard, growing up to be famous, and strong and a wonderful person, in that order. It is the story of just about any little boy/girl that was bullied in primary school but suddenly, during a summer break, discovers that he has a knack for playing football.Â C.S. Lewis is an author of a classic children's series of novels in The Chronicles of Narnia, as well as several highly regarded grown-up volumes, both fiction and non-fiction. I think Lewis answered this best with the following quote, prophetic as it may be, since Lewis died long before the Potter series was published Contemporary fantasy, also known as modern fantasy or indigenous fantasy, is a subgenre of fantasy, set in the present day or, more accurately, the time period of the maker. It is perhaps most popular for its subgenre, urban fantasy. Strictly, supernatural fiction can be said to be part of contemporary fantasy - since it has fantasy elements and is set in a contemporary setting. In practice, however, supernatural fiction is a well-established genre in its own right, with its own distinctive conventions. Contents.Â Contemporary fantasies are set in the real world but may also include distinct fantasy settings within it, such as the Harry Potter series, in which case they would be high rather than low fantasy. Examples[edit].