

Contemporary Themes in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter Fantasy Universe

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Abstract

Harry Potter is considered a fantasy literature series written by J.K. Rowling, comprising seven books, with the first released in 1997. It narrates the life of an orphan boy who loses his parents at one year old, victim of a dark wizard's deeds. This research delves into the elements that have contributed to Harry Potter's status as a contemporary cultural icon in the fantasy world. It conducts a literary examination of the Series as a notable contemporary fantasy work, particularly significant in the two decades before this paper. The study analyzes critical aspects like settings, characters, plot, themes, narrative structure, and language to understand the widespread acclaim of Rowling's creation. The results indicate various factors behind the series' contemporary success, such as the development of engaging events and the impact of technological progress in the contemporary era on enhancing the success of J.K. Rowling's work.

Keywords: Harry Potter, J.K. Rowling, Widespread, Contemporary, Fantasy

1. Introduction

The "Harry Potter" series by J.K. Rowling is a staple in the fantasy literature genre, marked by the consistent presence of magic throughout its narrative. This Series consists of seven books, starting with "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" in 1997 and concluding with "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" in 2007. The other titles in the Series include "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets," "Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban," "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire," "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix," and "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince." This collection forms a cycle, a structure commonly seen in contemporary culture and frequently adapted in cinema. Each book in this cycle revolves around the same protagonist.

Moreover, the Series falls under the Bildungsroman tradition, a narrative style that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. Rowling incorporates various elements typical of this genre, such as mentors, a group of student characters, and an educational setting. However, she uniquely blends these with fantastical elements, creating an alternate world. Throughout the seven books, the story chronicles the protagonist's life, highlighting his journey as an orphan searching for his identity and place in the world. His quest to overcome the loss of his parents and his experiences growing up are quintessential elements of the Bildungsroman genre.

Over the past two decades, Harry Potter has ranked among the top-selling books worldwide, with its publisher selling approximately 450 million copies by 2011. J.K. Rowling's novel has evolved into a global sensation, significantly impacting popular culture. Various strategies have been employed to appeal to a broad readership. This includes the use of diverse cover art by the publisher to attract both adult and young readers. Additionally, the language in the story has been tailored to cater to a wide audience, with modifications like altering British terms to their American counterparts.

Harry Potter, the main character, is an orphan who lost his parents to a dark wizard at the age of one. Initially, he is led to believe they died in a car accident and raised by his aunt and uncle, the Dursleys, in a household where he is disliked, especially by his cousin. Harry's life changes on his eleventh birthday. On this day, a peculiar creature reveals to him that he is a wizard, and he is subsequently invited to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry begins to uncover his true family history and magical abilities at Hogwarts. He forms close friendships with Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. The school's headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, enlightens Harry about the real circumstances of his parents' deaths and the identity of their murderer, Voldemort. Harry's journey at Hogwarts involves encountering Voldemort in various guises and navigating numerous perilous situations.

Every book in the Harry Potter series features a distinct storyline. For instance, in *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, the inaugural book, Harry and his companions ultimately safeguard the titular stone. Conversely, in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the sixth instalment, the narrative revolves around the enigma of the Half-Blood Prince. The series' antagonist, Voldemort, is introduced early on and consistently plays a pivotal role in complicating the story, adding intrigue. As Harry's foremost adversary, Voldemort manages to elude defeat repeatedly. Hagrid first mentions Voldemort to Harry in the fourth chapter of *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, marking the start of Harry's first year at Hogwarts:

"Nah-can't spell it. All right-Voldemort." Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this-this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin fer followers. Got 'em, too, were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches...terrible things happened. He was takin' over. "Course, some stood up to him-an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon

Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway"?(p.42)

In this narrative approach, the author strategically includes early story details that assist both the characters and readers in uncovering the plot's mystery later on. A prime example is found in the third book, where Ron's rat Scabbers, who ultimately turns out to be an adversary of Harry, is mentioned. Additionally, the author employs classical rhetorical techniques, such as *hysteron proteron*, in constructing the plot. This technique provides early information crucial for understanding subsequent events in the story. This method is also evident in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Rowling further enhances the narrative by incorporating sensory experiences, suspense, and tension, adding depth and appeal to the story. These aspects are particularly prominent in the portrayal of the main character (Havířová, 2007).

In J.K. Rowling's writings, characters adhere to the conventional roles found in high fantasy literature. The characters are categorized into two types: major and minor. The minor characters are typically non-magical beings. True to the norms of fantasy fiction, the protagonist, Harry, possesses magical abilities, enabling him to perform extraordinary feats. As is common in fantasy stories, the main characters, or heroes, are pitted against forces of evil. In the Harry Potter series, Harry and his allies symbolize the forces of good, while Voldemort and his followers embody evil (Martin, 2009).

Voldemort, the Dark Lord, is the primary antagonist in the Series. His main objective, along with his followers, is to recruit others to their cause and wage war against the forces of good. These characters play a crucial role in the narrative, both in the plot and in providing educational value. Notably, most of the characters in the Series are students, which adds an element of relatability and intrigue to the story. The narrative is crafted with young readers in mind, often showcasing the classic struggle between good and evil, typically concluding with the triumph of good. Such positive outcomes make the novels particularly appealing and engaging for children and teenagers (Kidd, 2007).

Setting plays a pivotal role in high fantasy, a sub-genre of fantasy literature. Typically, these stories unfold in an entirely imagined world. There are three common approaches to creating these secondary worlds in high fantasy. One approach involves crafting a completely detached world without links to reality, as seen in *The Lord of the Rings*. Another method involves the use of a portal to transition from the real world to the fantasy world, exemplified by *Alice in Wonderland*. The third approach merges the primary (real) world and the secondary (fantasy) world but keeps them distinct, often through a physical barrier, as demonstrated in "The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel." In such narratives, the ordinary world's inhabitants remain oblivious to the occurrences within the fantastical realm (Gamble, 2013).

The significance of the setting in a narrative cannot be overstated, as it greatly enhances the mood and experience of the reader. An effectively crafted setting evokes a sense of curiosity and wonder, enriching the reader's imagination. Moreover, when the setting is depicted in a

manner that feels tangible and real as the story unfolds, it has a more profound impact on the reader, deepening their engagement and immersion in the narrative. (Martin, 2009).

In the Harry Potter series, the primary (real) and secondary (magical) worlds exist side by side. This magical realm resembles our own in many ways, with similar structures like shops, markets, railways, and educational institutions, such as Hogwarts School. However, this world is distinct in its absence of modern technology like computers or phones. In the story, ordinary people, called ‘muggles,’ are unaware of this magical world. A notable example is Mr. Dursley, who perceives magical behaviour as typical for young people, as depicted in the first chapter of “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone.” J.K. Rowling introduces unique portals for transitioning between these worlds. Examples include the use of floo powder in “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets” and the method of passing through a solid barrier by tapping a wall in “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone.” Specifically, the narrative highlights Harry’s use of floo powder to travel to the magical world in “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.”

‘Well all right ...you go after .Arthur, ‘said Mrs Weasley. ‘Now, when you get into the fire, say where you’re going – “And keep your elbows tucked in,’ Ron advice, ‘And your eyes shut, ‘said Mrs Weasley. ‘The soot – “Don’t fighter,’ said Ron. ‘Or you mightwell fall out of the wrong fireplace – ‘But don’t panic and get out too early, wait until you see Fred and George.’ Trying hard to bear all this mined, Harry took a pinch of Floo powder and walked to the fire’s edge. He took a deep breath, scattered the powder into the flames and stepped forward; the fire felt like a warm breeze; he opened his mouth and immediately swallowed a lot of hot ash. ‘D-Dia -gon Alley,’ he coughed. [...] And old wooden street sign over a shop selling poisonous candles told him he was in Knockturn Alley. This didn’t help, as Harry had never heard of such place (p. 41).

The theme of a literary work represents the core concept or message that the author intends to communicate through their writing. Various literary elements like the plot and characters are employed to craft and evolve this central idea. Common examples of literary themes encompass concepts such as betrayal, love, and the classic dichotomy of good versus evil (James & Amendlesohn, 2014).

A central theme in J.K. Rowling’s “Harry Potter” series is the classic conflict of good versus evil. Harry and his friends embody the forces of good in these stories, while Voldemort and his followers represent evil. Throughout the narrative, these two factions are engaged in a battle, culminating in the ultimate triumph of good, a theme that is especially prevalent in fantasy literature. In addition to this overarching theme, the Series explores various sub-themes, including death, love, race, and the journey of growing up. Incorporating multiple themes within the same narrative broadens the series’ appeal to diverse readers. (Suljic, 2013).

2. Discussion

The narrative structure of the Harry Potter series follows the rules of high fantasy. The author uses travel and quest motifs consistent with this genre. Keep in mind that there is a distinct

structural design to each of the stories in the Series. Take “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone,” for example. It covers both the trip to Hogwarts and the search for the Philosopher’s Stone. Various narrative frameworks give the story a breath of new air and make it more attractive to the reader. Also, the author uses kid-friendly language that everyone may understand. This style of writing draws readers into the plot and the characters’ relationships, drawing them more into the enchanted world of Harry Potter.

The Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling, a contemporary literary phenomenon, employs a complex narrative structure and a distinctive use of language that has significantly contributed to its widespread appeal and delves deeper into these aspects.

3. Narrative Structure in Harry Potter

- A. Chronological Narrative with Flashbacks: The Series is primarily chronological, each book chronicling a year in Harry’s life. Rowling intersperses this with flashbacks, such as Tom Riddle’s history in “The Chamber of Secrets” or Snape’s memories in “The Deathly Hallows,” providing depth and context (Rowling, 1998; 2007).
- B. The Hero’s Journey: Rowling’s narrative aligns with Joseph Campbell’s concept of the Hero’s Journey, which is evident in Harry’s call to adventure, crossing the threshold, and eventual return (Campbell, 1949). Each book represents a cycle of this journey, culminating in “The Deathly Hallows,” where Harry confronts and overcomes his ultimate challenge (Rowling, 2007).
- C. Interwoven Subplots: The Series is rich in subplots that intersect with the main narrative. For example, the story of the Marauders adds a layer of history and complexity, significantly impacting the main plotline in “The Prisoner of Azkaban” (Rowling, 1999).
- D. Told from a Third-Person Limited Perspective: While centred on Harry, the narrative occasionally shifts to other characters, providing varied perspectives. This technique is used effectively in the opening of “The Half-Blood Prince,” where the narrative briefly shifts to the Muggle Prime Minister (Rowling, 2005).

4. Language in Harry Potter

1. Inventive Lexicon: Rowling invents words and phrases that have become iconic, such as “Horcrux,” “Apparate,” and “Pensieve” (Rowling, 1998-2007). These terms add to the unique vocabulary of the wizarding world.
2. Symbolic Names and Wordplay: Many names in the Series carry symbolic meanings or wordplay, like Albus Dumbledore (Albus meaning white in Latin, indicative of wisdom) or Diagon Alley (a play on diagonally), enriching the narrative and adding layers of meaning (Gupta, 2003).
3. Descriptive and Engaging Narration: Rowling’s narrative style is richly descriptive, creating vivid and immersive settings, from the cozy Gryffindor common room to the ominous Forbidden Forest (Rowling, 1997-2007).

4. Character-Specific Dialogue: The dialogue in the Series is tailored to each character, reflecting their background, age, and social status. Hagrid's colloquial speech, Dumbledore's wise and measured tone, and Hermione's intellectual dialogue are examples of this (Rowling, 1997-2007).

Moreover, the Harry Potter series exemplifies excellence in narrative construction and linguistic application. J.K. Rowling skillfully combines classic narrative methods with original components, crafting a complex, multifaceted story that resonates with a diverse audience. This Series goes beyond just narrating an enthralling tale; it showcases the effectiveness of language and narrative frameworks in forging a convincing and captivating realm of fiction. The Harry Potter series has become a cornerstone of contemporary literature, enthralling a diverse global audience. This article explores the key elements contributing to its widespread appeal: narrative structure, character development, thematic richness, imaginative world-building, universal appeal across age groups, and cultural impact.

5. Significant Aspects Contributing to the Series

Since its inception in 1997, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series has captivated readers worldwide, transcending cultural and age barriers. The series' blend of fantasy, adventure, and coming-of-age narratives has established it as a literary phenomenon. It has captivated a global audience for several reasons, many of which are grounded in its unique narrative structure, character development, thematic depth, and the imaginative world it creates. We can explore why the Series is so appealing:

- **Engaging Narrative Structure:** Rowling's use of a linear narrative interspersed with flashbacks and multiple storylines keeps readers engaged. The structure, while complex, is easy to follow and adds depth to the story (Rowling, 1997-2007).
- **Rich Character Development:** The Series is renowned for its well-developed characters who grow and evolve over time. Characters like Harry, Hermione, and Ron showcase significant development, making their journeys relatable and compelling (Rowling, 1997-2007).
- **Thematic Depth:** Themes such as the battle between good and evil, the importance of choice, friendship, love, and death resonate with readers of all ages. These themes are woven throughout the Series, providing a deeper level of engagement (Rowling, 1997-2007; Nel, 2001).
- **Imaginative World-Building:** Rowling's creation of the wizarding world, with its own rules, history, and magical creatures, offers an escape to a fully realized fantasy world. This level of detail in world-building contributes significantly to the series' appeal (Rowling, 1997-2007).
- **Universal Appeal Across Age Groups:** The Series appeals to both young and adult readers. It starts as a children's story but matures with its audience, dealing with more complex issues in later books (Granger, 2009).

- Cultural Impact: The Series has considerably impacted popular culture, influencing everything from literature to theme park attractions. This cultural footprint has only increased its appeal (Anatol, 2003).

Unquestionably, the Harry Potter series is regarded as a cultural icon in pop culture, and it has various fantastic elements, including unusual settings, mystical beings, and peculiar creatures. As Feldt (2016) points out, the most captivating fantasy novels are those that deeply embed and explore their fantastical themes. Such books provide extraordinary and insightful experiences. Rowling's narrative is woven around magical themes, incorporating elements like the journey of growing up, which resonates particularly with teenage readers. Simultaneously, it also evokes a sense of nostalgia in adult readers, bringing them back to their youth. While set in a fantastical realm, the narrative mirrors our reality by blurring the lines between the two worlds. This connection engages readers as Hogwarts, the central setting of the Series, mirrors our world with its own versions of food, education, and governance. In this context, aspects like food link fans with the characters and represent cultural identities, thereby drawing in a broader readership.

It's important to recognize the value of engaging in novel reading. Delving into novels like "Harry Potter" enables individuals to reflect on their own thoughts and experiences, enhancing reading and vocabulary skills. Many readers turn to the fantasy genre as a form of escapism from the mundane aspects of real life. Over the past two decades, "Harry Potter" has expanded its reach through television movies, novels, and video games, further elevating its prominence. Additionally, technological advancements in the postmodern era have facilitated easier access, reading, and dissemination of such stories. Adapting the Series using modern technology, including 3D effects, advanced camera techniques, and editing, has created a captivating and mesmerizing cinematic experience. These factors collectively contribute to the significant standing of "Harry Potter" in postmodern society.

6. Conclusion

The present study revealed that Rowling's narrative is enriched with symbolism and allegory, inviting readers to uncover deeper layers of meaning beneath the surface storyline. Whether contemplating the significance of the Deathly Hallows or the symbolic resonance of the Horcruxes, the series abounds with symbols that offer profound insights into the human experience. On the other words, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series transcends mere fiction to become a timeless exploration of contemporary issues. With its vibrant characters, intricately crafted world, and profound storytelling, the series continues to captivate and inspire readers worldwide, urging them to embark on a journey of introspection and ethical contemplation.

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