

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban: The Examination of the Adult in Young Adult Literature

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore the changes necessary in pedagogy for a teacher when dealing with the emergence of a relatively new category called young adult literature. The study focuses on a close reading of the third book in the Harry Potter series, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* in its representation of certain themes, characters and treatment of magic, etc. It attempts to trace how the young adult novel continues certain conventions, and introduces certain divergences from what is known traditionally as the genre of children's literature. This series particularly cuts across readership categories demarcated by age specifications. The paper ultimately attempts to analyse whether today there is a need to address a change in the perception of the young adult reader as a separate and distinct consumer of texts from the traditional child reader and the ensuing research and teaching methodology that must be developed for such literature.

Keywords: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Children's Literature, Young Adult Literature, Magic

There has been a surge in literature for young adults in recent times. An exponential increase in the number of texts catering to young adults across platforms, shows a revised understanding of the category of the "young adult". It is now considered to be a developed category exhibiting a heightened degree of awareness with characters who possess the capacity to respond to their immediate context in many different ways. Literature for young adults addresses their readers in

various ways ranging from acquainting the reader with her/ his world to a more nuanced understanding of complex issues of sexuality, love, violence, etc.

In this regard the question to be asked is how is the teacher of literature to respond to this rapidly changing academic context? A literary text that focuses on young adults as their primary target audience, necessitates on the part of the teacher-researcher, the possession of certain methodological and research tools to enable a participative teaching-learning process. It is with this in mind, that the paper discusses J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), the third novel in the Harry Potter series, and from the frame of reference will generate questions related to both teaching pedagogy and methodology.

The category of a separate literature for children was a creation of the Victorian Age. It accompanied a reformulation in the perception of the child, the emergence of a separate toy industry as also the appearance of the nursery which took place between the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. It was around the 1820s that fairy tales became acceptable as appropriate reading material for children. Jack Zipes (2006) has traced this to an overhauling of the attitude towards children's imagination which was seen as a wholly malevolent thing in the previous ages. We have since then come to the understanding that children of different age groups need specialized literature which caters to their variegated intellectual and emotional needs. According to Nicholas Tucker, children in the age group of 11-14 start thinking in "...abstract as well as in more concrete terms. They may...start passing from acquiring or storing up knowledge to thinking about the nature of the knowledge...[and begin to] question some conventional morality" (Tucker, 1981, p. 144). These young readers start taking a more analytical and nuanced look at events around them. Thus it is believed that the literature that caters to them is or should be intellectually and emotionally more demanding than the one meant for younger children. Moving beyond the binary of good and evil, they become adept at handling more ambivalent shades in the literary characters they encounter. They are aware that adulthood brings with it not only the freedom they envy but certain duties and responsibilities which may seem unpleasant at the face of it. A large part of this readership is more interested in adult-seeming behaviour which makes it especially ripe for providing scope to agencies of socialization, a role played magnificently by children's literature at its inception. As

Jack Zipes states, "...fairy tales with clear didactic and moral lessons were approved as reading matter to serve as a subtle, more pleasurable means of initiating children into the class rituals and customs that reinforced the status quo" (Zipes, 2006, p. 223).

Jack Zipes has noted that the development of the "literary fairy tale" from the "oral wonder tale" marks the civilization of the protagonist of the fairy tale with their entry into the realm of codes and laws. However, as the tale developed it was individualized and diversified by certain artists "...who sympathized with the marginalized or were marginalized themselves" (Zipes, 2006, p. 218). So, while the literary fairy tale, bowdlerized for the nursery in nineteenth century England, initially voiced the hegemonic discourse, it has also been used as a counter-hegemonic tool; it is no surprise that the ruling authorities were suspicious of its subversive potential.

The category of Young Adult Literature is problematic and interesting at the same time especially with relation to the Harry Potter series because, it at once negotiates with both the existences, that of the child and the adult. This is probably the reason for the immense popularity of the books among readers of all ages. Hughes (2006) attributes the rise of the separate genre of children's literature in England as a direct result of the rise of the "Serious Novel" for the highly educated. This segregation was based primarily on the prejudiced notion that children have no sense of aesthetic pleasure; one that requires powers of discrimination, intelligence and imagination and which was thought to be located in the domain of the adult. Incidentally, the serious novel was to act as a counter to the frivolity and vulgarity of literature due to the presence of "ladies and children—by whom I mean, in other words, the reader irreflective and uncritical" (Henry James in Hughes, 2006, p.73). Since the white, privileged, educated males needed a literature of their own to deal with "serious issues" and of course rescue the novel from its rather plebeian associations, quite by accident, children ended up getting a literature of their own.

It is ironic that some hundred years after the above comment by the novelist Henry James, there is a new sub-genre called young adult fiction created to accommodate the changing tendencies of children's literature. The paper delves into this complexity particularly with regard to the concepts, characters and places introduced in *Harry Potter and the*

Prisoner of Azkaban explores whether the series continues the pattern of the old fairy tale or does it in fact deviate from it to accommodate the challenges of the young adult of the twenty-first century. This book is specifically chosen as it marks a clear shift in the series with introduction of themes and characters which have placed it in the young adult category in popular public perception.

Hybridity, Horror and Crime in Young Adult Literature

To begin with, the notion of hybridity¹ as an alternative to the simplistic “one character-one trait” notion existing in earlier children’s literature particularly the fairy tale is introduced and complicated in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. In the context of Harry Potter the concept is used to challenge monolithic constructions of identity. Within the binary of the Muggle or non-magic world and the magic world, a hybrid protagonist like Harry², who has both magic and non-magic blood, has the flexibility to articulate an identity beyond binaries. At the beginning of the novel, Ronald Weasley proves his incompetence at handling a Muggle³ tool of communication; the telephone which marks his limitation and functionality in the real world. Though the wizarding world and the Muggle world have distinct spaces in the series, there are times when the two overlap; the magic world is shown to have a direct impact on the Muggle world. On such occasions, Harry who is of mixed blood is more empowered to deal with both worlds rather than characters like Ronald who are pure-bloods. Similarly, Buckbeak the hippogriff is introduced in this novel, as a hybrid category, part-horse and part-eagle. A significant sub-plot is woven around his character in the novel to underscore the theme of marginalization of the hybrid and its subsequent triumph because of this characteristic. The animagi characters, introduced in this novel transfigure into hybrid categories. Remus Lupin, Sirius Black, James Potter, and Peter Pettigrew are characters whose background stories have a significant impact on the plot of this novel and in the series as a whole. Their alternate identities as Moony (a werewolf), Padfoot (a black dog), Prongs (a stag) and Wormtail (a rat) respectively allows them greater freedom to explore certain forbidden territories and create a chain of events that will have bearing on the series. Theorists like Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak and Paul Gilroy use the category of the hybrid to respond to the multicultural awareness of the early 1990s. Sirius’s identity as an animagus enables him to escape the

effect of the Dementors at Azkaban and helps him break into Hogwarts to succeed in his plans. Similarly, Peter as Wormtail/Scabbers manages to survive twelve years without detection. Thus, hybridization or in this case alternate/multiple identities helps these characters to elude the politics of polarity, binarism and totalizing notions to include and explore the otherness of the self. Lack of one fixed stable identity is constantly privileged in the series, and purity in this case becomes almost a handicap, this idea is first developed in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. This excess, sometimes empowerment of the characteristic of hybridity and what that represents needs to be underscored, highlighted and complicated when teaching this text.

Another element added in the third book which signals a shift in the tone of the series is the introduction of Dementors and the prison they guard, called Azkaban. This introduces horror in the tale, and this brand of nameless horror continues in the tradition of the fairy tales written after the World War II echoing the senseless destruction witnessed by the world. Dementors are parasitic creatures who induce dementia in their victims. They have been described in the book as "... [the] foulest creatures that walk the earth...glorying in decay and despair, they drain peace hope and happiness out of the air around them" (Rowling, 1999, p. 140). Their specialty lies in administering the kiss that sucks the soul out of their victim reducing it to a state worse than death "left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life" (p. 140).

The Dementors seem to be an unknown quantum, with the Ministry of magic exercising but a tenuous hold on them. They can be likened to nuclear weapons, a technology supposedly under the control of human beings but inherently ruinous. They are by temperament natural allies of the dark world rather than the world of Hogwarts and yet are used by the magical government as its repressive state apparatus. There is a unidimensional approach towards certain elements of darkness in the novel, the Dementors being the primary example. It is suggested that perhaps there are forces in this world that are pure unmitigated evil and need to be avoided. And though they are seen as necessary in the adult magic world, they represent a danger that can quickly unleash itself and intrude upon the young adult's seemingly ordered and benign world. The presence of horror and the function it serves needs greater attention in the exploration of young adult literature. For too long we have functioned on the mistaken assumption that young

adult/ children's literature needs to be sanitized of violence. However, the genre has freely explored adult themes using fantasy, magic and other-worlds, and has explored themes traditionally unconnected with the world of children/young adults.

Crime and Punishment, Magic as Justice⁴

Crime, punishment and the fallibility of the legal justice system forms an important concern in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. The crimes in this book range from misdemeanours to murder and more often than not we witness the evil wrongdoers being able to subvert the law while the innocent pay heavily for mild transgressions. Peter Childs in his essay, "Popular Novel: The Ethics of Harry Potter" has mentioned Richard Abanes, a Christian theologian, who takes exception to the Harry Potter series on the grounds that it has a protagonist like Harry Potter "... who lies and cheats and flouts rules (who) is the opposite of a good role model" (Childs, 2006, p.119). Harry Potter accidentally disobeys the "Decree for the Restriction of Underage Wizardry" by using magic against Aunt Marge, Buckbeak faces execution for injuring Malfoy, Sirius spends twelve terrible years at the Azkaban prison for a crime that Pettigrew committed. In all these cases the "crime" when committed is a misdemeanour at best and the "perpetrator" of the crime is usually a victim. Buckbeak's case demonstrates that the law already passes judgements without a trial. The case in point being the presence of the executioner at the trial itself. The defendant had already been marked as guilty before the commencement of the appeal. The legal system in the magic world is hopelessly inept at distinguishing the guilty from the innocent, inadvertently managing to punish the innocent and pardoning the guilty. Buckbeak's case also demonstrates how those in power can manipulate the system to their advantage to get rid of the people they consider irrelevant or dangerous.

In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the narrator in order to empower the child/ young adult protagonist and reader, seems to introduce the idea that if "law is an ass" then people have the right to subvert it "for the greater good". Ultimately it is justice which has to be dispensed whether it is coterminous with the laws or not. This is something that contemporary children's literature explores as a generic necessity because the very subversion of adult rules and systems are a way for the child/ young adult to empower themselves. The world of magic offers limitless possibilities

to explore the extraordinary, and to push beyond the limitations of the adult world. The existence of the wizarding world in itself is a subversion of all the laws of Muggle or the real world. However the laws of the real world, its iniquities and abuses extend into the magical world as well, threatening the collapse of the Enid Blytonisque innocence into an Orwellian nightmare. The marauders map, a magical “live” map which marks the known and the unknown entries and exits of the castle of Hogwarts, tracks the live movements of all creatures in the school at any given point, a dangerous tool in the hands of someone with malintentions. It can threaten the security that the Hogwarts School of magic provides to its students and can be used as a system of absolute surveillance. Magical items like the marauders map, invisibility cloaks, time-turners, etc. are tempting precisely because they offer the security that their users will never get caught. An instrument like the time turner has the potential if used carelessly to destroy the entire fabric of the magic world. The existence of these magical curios is at the same time a potential for subversion of the status quo and a grave threat to the well-being of society. These ideas are not shied away from in this series, they are in fact constantly underscored.

The attitude towards rule breaking is ambivalent in the book. Though there are warning labels when introducing these rule-breaking devices, but, if anything the narrator seems to encourage mischief. A warning flashes in Harry’s brain when he first receives the marauder’s map from Fred and George— “Never trust anything that can think for itself, if you can’t see where it keeps its brain” (Rowling, 2006, p. 145). Yet, Professor Lupin returns the map to Harry before leaving Hogwarts. Risk taking and being daring are qualities which Rowling seems to associate with initiative and this is privileged in the series. There are times when there could be dangerous consequences due to the risks taken by Harry and his friends, yet disaster is almost always averted. Professor Snape’s constant tirade against Harry Potter and Co. is that they get away with flouting rules because they are considered special. This attitude towards rule breaking is completely antithetical to the values promoted by the Cautionary or Exemplary stories popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which punished children with unspeakable cruelty for the most minor transgressions. According to Tatar (2006), these stories believed in the dictum that “the cardinal sin of youth is disobedience, and it is a sin that habitually demands the

death penalty” (Tatar, 2006, p. 237). A particularly gruesome branch of this variety of tales was the “awful warning school” which worked on the basic formula of prohibition/violation/punishment. This brand of story-telling was used to coerce and intimidate the child into complete complicity with parental demands. Incidentally, the formula failed abysmally for “the punishment was so disproportionate to the crime” (p.239). The effect produced was comical and what was intended to be repulsive ended up being morbidly fascinating to the readers. In fact, the more gruesome the details of punishments, death and torture, the more popular they were with the young people. The series nuances this subversive potential of transgressions in the world of young adults.

Grappling with the “Underdog”

A common thread in young adult literature is the idea that things are not really as simple as they appear, thereby challenging stereotypes. This concept is introduced in this book in the form of binaries of Crookshanks vs. Scabbers, Sirius vs. Peter Pettigrew and Professor Lupin’s case. The novel overturns the common practice of privileging the underdog, and seeks to expand the category to include characters that may not conventionally fall within it. The contemporary public is fed on and conditioned to believe in the triumph of Jerry, the mouse over Tom, the cat. Here, that is overturned; Crookshanks, the cat is morally superior to Scabbers, the rat and triumphs over him. Similarly, in the confrontation between Sirius and Peter, people naturally believed that Sirius being the powerful and competent wizard was the aggressor while it is shown that it was Peter Pettigrew who not only betrayed his friends but also killed twelve innocent by-standers and faked his own death. In Professor Lupin’s case, Rowling challenges his alternate identity as a werewolf, which is an inherently dangerous animal that cannot be managed; his otherness is accepted by his friends and Professor Dumbledore, who practise the politics of inclusion as the headmaster of Hogwarts. There could be an answer here to the charge by Peter Childs that the Harry Potter books don’t address the issue of the sensitivity to the other. However, the author does inject a little dose of realism by qualifying that while there are a few progressive people willing to take risks for the marginalized, by and large the magic community has the same prejudices as the Muggle world. The novel does not offer quick fix solutions. The author seems to indicate that as part of the process

of growing up, one needs to deal with the delays and fallibilities of the legal justice system. So, while the efforts of the hero aided by his friends manages to disrupt certain orders of the wizarding world, the victory at this stage is not complete, not what they had imagined it to be.

Conclusion

The controversies surrounding *The Prisoner of Azkaban* range from the assumption that the series promotes witchcraft and occult practices, that the elements of violence and destruction will have an adverse effect on the young, that the elements of fantasy will confuse the child reader who will not be able to connect with the real world and so on. As to the first, it is proved by many critics that the fear of magic and the occult have more to do with the politics of religion rather than any real concern with literature. Since witches have always been part of children's literature, this comment has not much to do with the Harry Potter series and more to do with the genre of literature of fantasy at large. The discussion of some of the instances in the book has already demonstrated that the magic world is very closely related with the real world, it has similar rules, establishments and systems. There are repressive structures, marginalizations and prejudices within the magical world as well. The only difference being that young adult/child readers are offered a hope that they can affect changes no matter how small and inconsequential they may seem. Perhaps they seek to highlight the Foucauldian⁵ idea that unlike the expectations of the "grand" revolutions small acts of subversion or redressal in regular everyday life can actually be the only change that is possible by regular people going about their everyday business. On the charge of the elements of violence and destruction, they have always been inherent in children's literature. The difference here lies in the approach; rather than trying to coerce children into accepting the status quo of the adult world, it challenges them to subvert the rules and take on the myriad elements of the dark world. The entire rhetoric of the Harry Potter series seems to promote "an ethic of free democratic pluralism" (Childs, 2006, p. 123), and one has to grant this is the privileged dominant ideology reflected in the novel. Tatar (2006) has commented how all fairy tales are ideology and contemporizing them or even making them ideationally pluralistic will still introduce the current privileged dominant ideology. However, to compare Harry Potter with the simplistic hero who has never faced ethical dilemmas

or moral choices is debatable. What might be simple ethics or clear moral choices for the critic need not be as simple or uncomplicated for the 13-year-old protagonist or his readers. Thus when teaching and researching texts of young adult literature we need to be sensitive to the treatment of received perceptions of the category of the child, themes considered child-friendly and see how each text/series negotiates these complex and “adult” issues. A revised pedagogic approach that takes into consideration such multifarious aspects of young adult literature will lead to both a dynamic teaching-learning process and generate new ways of researches into this sub-genre.

Endnotes

1. Hybridity is a notion associated with the work of Homi Bhabha and post-colonialist theorists. It is a key concept introduced by Bhabha in *The Location of Cultures* (1994) which allows for the possibility of articulating an identity beyond the structure of binaries.
2. It need to be stated that Hybridity in the Harry Potter series is not in itself a marker of heroism. However in this particular text it is certainly developed in particular instances as an extra potential for power.
3. Muggle in the world of Harry Potter refers to people who do not trace their descent from any magical family on either side. However, the series explores this does not mean that they are without magical ability.
4. Repressive State Apparatus is a concept developed by French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)* (1970). It consists of the army, the police and the prison system which operate primarily by means of physical and mental coercion and violence.
5. Michel Foucault in *Truth and Power* (1980) elaborates on the changed role and function of the specific intellectual who becomes the agent for specific and clearly demarcated arenas of social activity.

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