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# ‘Abandoned Boys’ and ‘Pampered Princes’: Fantasy as the Journey to Reality in the Harry Potter Sequence

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With the publication of the seventh and final novel in the Harry Potter sequence, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), it is at last possible to judge not only the thematic agendas of the sequence but also its overarching narrative strategy. The early novels of the Harry Potter series were derided, among other things, for an apparent formulaic quality, effectively identified by critics such as Zipes. Not only did *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997) demonstrably owe a large debt to the structure and characterisation of the conventional early twentieth-century British school story, but its two sequels, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998) and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), closely imitated the structure of the first, as Zipes has shown in some detail (Zipes, 2001, pp.176-77).<sup>1</sup> To such critics as Zipes, this imitative structure made manifest the poverty of Rowling’s invention and the consequent unoriginality of her writing.

The later novels of the sequence, however, introduced more disturbing elements at both plot and emotional level, and moved away from the cosy pattern so effectively established in *Philosopher’s Stone*. The return of Voldemort in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000) was accompanied by the sudden death of a likable if minor character. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), admittedly the longest of the sequence, Harry did not reach Hogwarts for over two hundred pages, and when he did it was to discover that Hogwarts was no longer the safe home he had generally found it, despite the unpleasantness of Severus Snape and the betrayals of Quirrell and the fake Moody, across the first four novels. If *Goblet of Fire* proved that Harry could in fact be abducted from within Hogwarts, *Order of the Phoenix* turned Hogwarts itself into a place of physical and emotional pain as well as of a much more threatening, because all-encompassing, injustice than the malice of Snape. But Rowling was to go further than this. The deaths of Cedric Diggory in *Goblet of Fire* and even of Sirius Black in *Order of the Phoenix*, for example, upsetting as these were, did not prepare readers either for the much more shocking death of the apparently omniscient and omnipotent Dumbledore at the end of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005) or for the bloodbath of *Deathly Hallows*, in which I count over twenty deaths of named characters.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper I wish to consider the implications of the final Harry Potter novels, especially *Deathly Hallows*, for understanding the pedagogic strategies of the sequence as a whole. Several educators have pointed out ways in which Rowling’s novels can be used illustratively for the teaching of various topics, from the trauma of Holocaust survival (Katz 2003) to the operation of Latin etymology in English (Nilsen & Nilsen 2006). I argue here that Rowling’s developing narrative not only describes Harry’s moral journey, as is made very explicit in the later texts and which I therefore shall not belabour, but requires the reader to enact a journey from the cosy and clichéd fantasy derided by Zipes (who says Rowling ‘remains within the predictable happy-end school of fairy-tale writers’ [Zipes 2001, p.182]) to a readiness for moral and intellectual encounter with reality. While the early novels do provide easy satisfaction, I argue that the sequence as a whole leads us beyond them and invites us to interrogate their pleasures not only through the development of the action but through Rowling’s changing narrative strategies.

The opening chapter of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* offered a clear demonstration of Rowling’s interest in the adolescent experience both of her protagonist and of her readers.<sup>3</sup> Whereas earlier novels opened with a glimpse of a lonely, resigned, or upset Harry, *Order of the Phoenix* depicts the protagonist seething with adolescent frustration. Harry is here portrayed also as nasty to his cousin Dudley unprompted for the first time. Whereas in *Philosopher’s Stone* he responded to Dudley’s jibes about practising for future sufferings at the local state school with a witty reply, in *Order of the Phoenix* he accosts Dudley and teases him both with the opposition of friend and family nicknames and a sneer at his boxing victories (Rowling 2004e, pp.20-21).

The change in Harry as a character is to some extent mirrored in a gradual change in Rowling’s narrative voice between these novels. Although A. S. Byatt has derided the depiction of Harry’s emotions in *Order of the Phoenix* as coming from a perspective that is ‘still child’s eye . . . Harry’s first date with a female wizard is unbelievably limp’ (Byatt 2003, p.A13), I would argue that Rowling is well aware of the limitations of Harry’s understanding of his emotions and is attempting to negotiate them in a diction that connects his

and the reader's childhood simplicity with the confusing complexities of increased maturity.<sup>4</sup>

This is especially clear if we look at the narratorial framing of the earlier and later novels. The voice that opens *Philosopher's Stone* is the cosy voice of the adult reading to a child. For example, the first eight sentences all have as subjects the Dursleys ('Mr and Mrs Dursley', 'They', 'Mr Dursley', 'He', 'Mrs Dursley', 'The Dursleys', 'The Dursleys', 'They' [Rowling 2004a, p.7]), and in each case the subject is also the first phrase in the sentence. The result is a readily accessible continuity of meaning such as is frequently found in books intended for younger readers. It is noteworthy that the subsequent sentences, which include a focus on Harry Potter and his parents, are grammatically complex, inviting the child reader to associate sympathetic characters with sophisticated sentence structure and so promoting development of reading skills.

This is not to say that the voice that tells us of the Dursleys is narratorially or socially simple. The first sentence, for instance, offers us the Dursleys from their own perspective but with the distance of a third-person observation: 'Mr and Mrs Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much' (Rowling 2004a, p.7). However, it also evokes the possibility of an alternative vision to that of the 'perfectly normal' and assigns this to the personified reader who is thus opposed to the Dursleys, 'They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense' (Rowling 2004a, p.7). The repeated ventriloquism of the Dursleys, 'thank you very much', '[don't] hold with such nonsense', places the Dursleys as at this stage of the sequence simply amusing stereotypes of a particular social and cultural position that itself has a history in English fiction—notably in such works as P.L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* series, which similarly, though generally more affectionately, locates the Banks' neighbours in the suburban mundane.

By the later novels we have reached a quite different level of both content and description. A noteworthy example is this sentence from *Order of the Phoenix* describing Harry's fear of discovering news of the return of Voldemort: 'Every day this summer had been the same: the tension,

the expectation, the temporary relief, and the mounting tension again . . . and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of *why* nothing had happened yet' (Rowling 2004e, pp.9-10). Here the appeal to the reader's understanding is expressed through the repeated deictic 'the' that assumes a shared awareness of both what Harry's tension feels like and why it exists. Unlike in the opening of *Philosopher's Stone*, we are projected directly into Harry's consciousness, in a move characteristic of the later novels. At the same time, the rhythms of the first half of the sentence place the tension as indeed familiar in the adolescent experience—not the familiarity of anxious listening to the news, in which Harry is as usual unusual, but the familiarity of more or less constant sexual arousal. This is, again, a far more subtle appeal to reader empathy than the impersonal recounting of fact that dominates the early pages of *Philosopher's Stone*.

Broader narrative strategies change as well. Whereas all the first five novels except for *Goblet of Fire* open with a portrait of Harry at home with the Dursleys before his departure to Hogwarts, in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* we open, unexpectedly, in a different space: Number 10 Downing Street, surely the ultimate site of British Muggle power, startlingly invaded here by the magical world that has remained aloof from it, the "bubble" world of Manlove's description (Manlove 2003, p.180). *Deathly Hallows*, meanwhile, offers an opening chapter that plunges *in medias res* making no attempt to introduce its characters to new readers as the previous novels, more characteristically of series fiction, have done. This opening highlights the extent to which the final novel depends on events, knowledge, and understanding derived from the previous novels: whereas *Prisoner of Azkaban*, for instance, could be read without much difficulty by a reader who had skipped *Chamber of Secrets*, *Deathly Hallows* is the culmination of the sequence as a whole, and a number of apparently casual details in the earlier novels gain full significance here.<sup>5</sup>

Further, the opening chapter of *Deathly Hallows* is significantly preceded for the reader by a page of epigraphs from Aeschylus and William Penn. It is these that signal the expectation of a maturing reader. The first epigraph is arrestingly elliptical in its evocation of the Furies; the

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second offers a poetic and consolatory meditation on the nature of death in seventeenth-century diction (Rowling 2007, p.vii). The elevated and archaic phrasing of this passage demands a very different level of literacy from the language of *Philosopher's Stone*. Although a younger or less sophisticated reader can skip the epigraphs and engage with what is still a comparatively straightforward narrative style in the novel, the maturing reader who has, like Harry, gained literary adulthood is being invited to respond on a very different level from the reader engaged by the opening of *Philosopher's Stone*.

J.K. Rowling told a *Time* interviewer in December 2007 that she could not openly discuss her religious beliefs before the publication of the last novel in the sequence: 'Talk too much about her faith, she feared, and it would become clear who would live and who would die and who might actually do both' (Gibbs 2007, p.100).<sup>6</sup> The epigraphs to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, philosophically and linguistically challenging as they are, likewise revealingly encode the content of this novel. The epigraphs thus invite the reader both in their content and in their form into a sophisticated literary space far removed from the cosy simplicity of *Philosopher's Stone's* sentences about the Dursleys. They enact at the literary level the development from simplicity to complexity that is experienced by Harry as a character and by the reader engaging with Harry's dilemmas (how to think of Dumbledore? Hallows or Horcruxes?) in situations where there seems no possibility of a good, let alone a fairy-tale, outcome.

The underlying self-consciousness and purpose of the sequence's literary pedagogy can be illuminated by observing the contrasting portraits of certain of its young male characters. At the end of *Order of the Phoenix* Dumbledore reminds Harry that when he arrived at Hogwarts from his aunt's house he was a normal boy, perhaps less well cared for than was desirable, but not 'a pampered little prince' (Rowling 2004e, p.919). This is an important image. Harry himself frets from *Chamber of Secrets* onward that he is like Tom Riddle, the orphan gifted with Parseltongue who should be in Slytherin, and although Dumbledore supplies him with increasingly powerful explanations (framed in effect as excuses) for the connection between Harry and Riddle, the disturbing fact

of their similarity remains. The sequence actually offers a number of figures like Tom Riddle and Harry Potter, 'abandoned boys' (Rowling 2007, p.558) who are orphaned or rejected or neglected by their families: Rubeus Hagrid, the orphaned half-giant; Sirius Black, the Gryffindor from a Slytherin and Death-Eater family; and as we discover in a late and highly revelatory chapter of *Deathly Hallows*, Severus Snape, the conspicuously neglected child of a family described as 'arguing' (in fact possibly the only all-wizard family we see in the series at risk of divorce). Severus dreams of himself as 'The Half-Blood Prince' because, like Harry, he is not a pampered little prince in his own home. Harry's extended identification of himself with the Prince in the novel so titled confirms the likeness between them—a likeness already made explicit by Hermione, who points out the similarity of their approaches to Defence Against the Dark Arts (Rowling 2005, p.172).<sup>7</sup> Each of these boys makes a different choice about his path through life, but each is clearly aware of that choice, and reminded of it on a regular basis by the difficult circumstances of his life. It is to the credit of Harry and still more of Severus Snape that they can review and in Harry's case reaffirm, in Snape's case even change to, a choice that is personally difficult and painful from moment to moment.

Contrasted with this group is another the shape of which again emerges only gradually. From the beginning of the series we have been invited to dislike and despise the spoiled Dudley Dursley, his mother's 'Dinky Duddydums' (Rowling 2004a, p.30), who is portrayed for six books as a stupid brute and bully. Dudley is swiftly joined by the sharper-tongued Draco Malfoy, whom Harry thinks of as even worse than Dudley (Rowling 2004a, p.156), and who at least appears to be a spoiled boy, although his father turns out to be less fatuously uncritical than Dudley's. These boys could be described as the 'pampered little princes' that Dumbledore notes Harry is not, and one of the series' most troubling revelations to Harry is that his own father might be placed in this group. Harry's strong identification with his father accompanies his sense that if it were not for Voldemort he himself might have had a pleasant life as an adored child; but Rowling casts doubt on the moral desirability of this not only through Dudley and Draco but also through her sketch of the young James.

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In *Order of the Phoenix* Harry sees Snape's memory of his torment by James and of James's arrogance, and is duly horrified (Rowling 2004e, p.715). Still more powerfully, in one of *Deathly Hallows'* many verbal echoes of the earlier novels, the eleven-year-old James Potter, who has 'that indefinable air of being well cared for, even adored, that [the child] Snape so conspicuously lacked' (Rowling 2007, p.538) is recalled saying to the young Sirius, 'Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?' (Rowling 2007, p.538)—a phrase that closely recalls Draco Malfoy's comment to Harry when they first meet in Madam Malkin's in *Philosopher's Stone*, '... imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I'd leave, wouldn't you' (Rowling 2004a, p.88). Harry reacts to Malfoy's comment not only by feeling depressed about his own outsider status but also by rejecting Malfoy's snobbishness, as is shown later when Malfoy makes overtures to him on the train, "'I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks,'" he said coolly' (Rowling 2004a, p.120). The identification of James Potter with Draco Malfoy is important then not only in offering a model but in making clear how that model must be rejected: both are, at least to some extent, the 'pampered little princes' that Harry and the reader should not be. The fact that it emerges through verbal repetition is also significant: by inviting the reader to recall the language and action of the earlier novel, in which the moral responses required were simple, this passage underlines the psychological and ethical distance that Harry and the reader have travelled from that point. Not only is James associated with moral crudeness, but that crudeness is identified with the diction of the early novels themselves.

There is a risk in pampering: it can produce self-satisfaction and arrogance, the clear certainty that one's own situation, beliefs, and affiliates are the only right way to be. Even Ron Weasley, the youngest son haunted, as Voldemort's locket-Horcrux realises, by his fear that he is 'second best always, eternally overshadowed' (Rowling 2007, p.306), has been sufficiently pampered by the cosiness of The Burrow to accept without question the prejudices of his status and society. Ron comfortably assumes, for instance, as Hermione exasperatedly discovers, that house elves exist simply for the benefit of humans and prefer this:

'They *like* being enslaved!' (Rowling 2004d, p.247). It is this complacency that Rowling's narrative invites us to question. Although Mendlesohn has dissected Rowling's conservative ideology as it emerges in the first four novels with scathing precision, the extent to which the final novel reflects on and interrogates the earlier ones, frequently through exact or near-exact echoing, demonstrates an underlying concern with conservative complacency. Rowling's fiction implicitly takes issue with those who advocate protecting children from the knowledge of violence or pain.

As noted earlier, critics such as Steege have pointed out that the early Harry Potter novels imitate the generic conventions of the British public school novel, which in its own time was in any case usually a fantasy in its deployment of stereotypes and obliteration of the grimmer realities of childhood interactions (*Tom Brown's School Days*, discussed by Steege, is in fact an exception here). What irritates some readers is in part Rowling's belatedness in the genre and hence the unreality (as opposed to fantasy) of her writing. Any connection those earlier novels had with reality for their young readers—a number of whom might have attended or expected to attend either such schools or day schools modelled on them—is long gone for the children now avidly reading and being read the Harry Potter stories in the anarchic urban state schools of contemporary Britain, as Manlove has noted (Manlove 2003, p.185). Thus Rowling's writing may be said to represent a negative model of fantasy, fantasy as escapism: stereotyped and unimaginative in its dependence on existing modes and models, as Pennington argues (Pennington 2002, pp.81-82), and predictable and cosily remote in its consolatory vision of the school as family for the unwanted orphan boy who despite being small and skinny can be even a sporting hero. Rowling seemed deliberately to invite such criticisms by offering the consistent parallel elements in the earlier novels identified by Zipes. But the gradual disintegration in the later novels of both the genre conventions and Rowling's own internally established conventions underlines the importance for the sequence as a whole of personal growth and progression, a growth hampered, if not stopped off altogether, by 'pampering'. (In this sense Tom Riddle becomes self-pampering in his

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denial of death; Trites describes him as ‘a teenager run amok’ [Trites 2001, p. 481].) It takes Dudley Dursley, Draco Malfoy, James Potter, and even Albus Dumbledore seventeen years to move beyond the limited self-seeking fostered by their pampered childhoods. Harry Potter and even Severus Snape recognise the value of love much faster than this, though they do not always act on this value until adulthood. It is significant that the epilogue to *Deathly Hallows* depicts Harry attempting to foster understanding and tolerance in his sons, at least to the point of accepting the possibility of value in Slytherin House.

Near the end of the main action of *Deathly Hallows* Harry observes that Hogwarts has been ‘the first and best home he had known. He and Voldemort and Snape, the abandoned boys, had all found home here’ (Rowling 2007, p.558). Rowling of course has stripped away the ideal homeliness of Hogwarts across the last three novels; in *Deathly Hallows* it becomes a sort of concentration camp, with the heroes among its pupils forced to live in hiding (the life of guerrilla warfare described by Neville itself owes a debt to a minority strand of the school novel genre [Rowling 2007, pp.461-63]). The delay in return to Hogwarts in *Deathly Hallows*, in which Harry finally arrives at the school on page 464 (of 607) only to set off a miniature Armageddon, makes evident the extent to which the sequence insists that both the school and the school story are inadequate to the fullness of human experience. The boredom, pain, and frustration Harry and Ron and Hermione endure instead for so much of the novel—and the reader with them—are far closer to the reality of the human condition. Rowling provides here a vastly different reading experience from the charming, if moving, adventure of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*.

The necessity of a different narrative, a different language, for this growth in experience is underlined in the dénouement of the novel, when Peeves the school poltergeist invents a characteristically reductive doggerel to celebrate Harry’s victory and Ron comments acidly ‘Really gives a feeling for the scope and tragedy of the thing, doesn’t it?’ (Rowling 2007, p.598). Where doggerel in the early novels frequently appeared as an appropriate way of breaking up the narrative to mock authority (Peeves) or providing information (the Sorting Hat), it is recognised here as a lame and inadequate

response to the extreme mixture of triumph and pain Harry feels following the near-Pyrrhic victory of good over evil. Mixed reader reactions to the epilogue to *Deathly Hallows* further demonstrate the difficulty involved in providing a conventional sense of closure to readers fully educated by the sequence.<sup>8</sup>

As I have demonstrated, the development of the sequence educates Rowling’s readers not only in moral complexity, wherein the god-like Dumbledore confesses to weakness and the perpetual villain Snape may be revealed as at least in part a tragic hero, but also in a corresponding complexity of narrative experience. The Harry Potter sequence has lured a generation of children to take a journey from the consolatory fantasy of the orphan boy rewarded by becoming the hero at a magical school to the reality of the human condition.



#### NOTES

1. Zipes includes the fourth novel in his analysis, although I would argue that there are some modifications at the local level here.
2. Burn quotes two child readers anticipating that ‘the series of books will end with a death’ and that ‘it will be the death of Harry or of a friend, so that there can be some grief but then a recovery,’ with a third predicting that ‘Harry’s going to die to save everyone’ (Burn 2004, p.13) — but no one predicting the bloodbath.
3. Trites has authoritatively demonstrated how the Harry Potter novels operate as adolescent literature in their examination of the protagonist’s changing relationship to the power of institutions, parents, sex, and mortality.
4. Hermione’s expert interpretation of Cho Chang’s complex emotions demonstrates Rowling’s awareness of such complexity (Rowling 2004e, pp.504-06).
5. The observation in *Order of the Phoenix* that the barman of the Hog’s Head, which ‘smelled strongly of something that might have been goats’ (Rowling 2004e, p.372), ‘looked vaguely familiar to Harry’ (Rowling 2004e,

p.373) seems a pointlessly distracting comment until the discovery in *Deathly Hallows* that the barman is in fact Albus Dumbledore's brother Aberforth. Aberforth had first been referred to in *Goblet of Fire* as having been 'prosecuted for practising inappropriate charms on a goat' (Rowling 2004d, p.495); in *Deathly Hallows* he shields Harry from discovery by pretending that Harry's stag Patronus was in fact his own goat Patronus.

6. Their eventual revelation, and the action of *Deathly Hallows*, supports the arguments of critics such as Griesinger that the earlier novels endorse a Christian world-view (Griesinger 2003, p.316).
7. The title of the final volume's crucial chapter 'The Prince's Tale' accords Snape the status and respect that the chapter's action reveals he has always lacked (Rowling 2007, p.529).
8. The epilogue struggles to serve several functions: among other things it reassures the reader as to the lasting quality of the relationships between Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Ginny; it underlines the message of tolerance; and it emphasises the discovery revealed through 'The Prince's Tale' that, as Harry says in the epilogue, Severus Snape 'was probably the bravest man I ever knew' (Rowling 2007, p.607), thereby also underlining an apparently belated message about the moral complexity of individuals. While these latter points may be important to stress, the unlikelihood of the first, and the trite and flat final sentences, 'The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well' (Rowling 2007, p.607), disappoint those readers who have grown beyond the needs satisfied by the narrative action of *Philosopher's Stone*.



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