

Medievalism and Re-invention of Gothic in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.

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Abstract : The paper intends to focus on the J.K Rowling's revisiting, re-instating and re-invention of the two genres of the past ages .i.e-medieval and gothic, in the modern age in her debut novel Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. This work explores how Rowling has diffused the traditional medieval and gothic setting into the modern setting and how she dealt with the elements of past to develop a unique novel.

Keywords : Gothic, medieval, re-invention, romance, past, tradition.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone is the first novel in the Harry Potter series and J.K Rowling's debut novel, first published in 1997 by Bloomsbury. The novel though falls under the category of 20th century fiction, but it runs disarray from other 20th century contemporary fictions. The major literary movements in the twentieth century are Modernism (circa 1900-1940) and Postmodernism (circa 1960-1990). The 20th century writing is marked by fragmented structures and fragmented perspective and thereby rejecting the traditional forms and narrative techniques of novel writing. In Modernist writing there is the awareness of new psychological insights while with Post-Modernists, there is suspicion of master narratives, rejection of traditional myths and theories such as the Grand Theory; there is also social pluralism, a perspective from a decentered self; fragmentation and a subverted order and lack of control. In many ways, Postmodernism rejects established modes of writing and thinking and mixes identities. However J.K Rowling falls outside other contemporary writers. Her novel is marked by a strange uniqueness that led to a worldwide acceptance.

Rowling's Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone participates extensively in medievalism, at the same time the novel is also singled out for the re-invention and diffusion of gothic elements in it which further reassures the fact that Rowling's mind has been conjured up with the fantasy and literature of the past ages before

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she conceived the idea of novel writing. To talk about medievalism it is quite a difficult term to define precisely because it denotes a vast array of meanings. In a nutshell medievalism is the system of belief and practice characteristic of the Middle Ages and also the literature that roughly covers the period 5th to 15th century. Its polysemic nature is evident particularly when one considers Harry Potter culture. The book participates in medievalism through their interlacement of plotlines and motifs drawn from medieval narratives and through the recreation of social and cultural life of past, in areas such as clothing, food and crafts. Other prominent elements of medieval romance and medieval culture appear in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone such as forest, feasts, confraternities and tournaments. In the medieval romance, the protagonist's departure from the civilized space of court to the uncivilized space of forest typically signals the beginning of an adventure. Similar enough is Harry's journey from the muggle world to the world of wizardry, to the exotic, unfamiliar and distant which is typical of medieval genre. Alessandra Petrino remarks, Rowling's depiction of the Hogwarts castle and the Forbidden Forest is replete with 'complex Arthurianism'. Both settings are liminal; they exist as crossroads between the magical and the mundane, and they are spaces to the hero's development and eventual success. The forest, in particular, is dangerous in which Harry meets 'adventures, or particularly terrifying animals'. Petrino also suggests that the ceremony of feasting and the setting of Great Halls evoke the high table and hall arrangement of Camelot, and thus identify Dumbledore and Arthur as kings in their respective realms. Harry's first feast at Hogwarts is gastronomic nirvana that recalls scenes from medieval Arthurian narratives. Kathryn Lorenz and Heather Arden confirm Rowling's indebtedness to the medieval romance tradition. They also examine Harry alongside French medieval heroes and emphasize Harry's orphan status and his lightning-bolt scar, both of which mark him as different and give him a 'special status' that is similar to the outsider status of his medieval predecessors, as well as the physical challenges he encounters in this novel as he departs from and returns to the society. However, Rowling's repeated placement of Harry with the confraternity-like environments counters this outsider status and continues to build this sense of belonging. Other confraternity-like communities emphasize the influence on Rowling's work of medieval practices such as tournaments. In Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Harry joins the Gryffindor Quidditch team, and his participation in this community develops his

flying, teamwork and leadership skills, as well as his later success in the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Rowling also bestows knightly attributes upon Harry. Damsel in distress and simultaneously rescuing the distressed damsel by the knight is one of the common characteristics of medieval romances. The entrapment of Hermione in the toilet and rescuing her from the troll by Harry is a similar case as well. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone tells us about two quest which is another feature of medieval romance -the quest for the Stone, as well as Voldemort's quest to kill the boy who has been prophesized to be the only one who can be his undoing. As Galahad's seat is marked with his name, signifying that he is the only one who can find the Grail, Voldemort's attack on Harry as a baby leaves him marked with the scar that signifies Harry as Voldemort's equal and as the only one who can vanquish Voldemort. Another medieval literary genre upon which Rowling draws is the bestiary. Harry encounters some bestiary-derived beings within the wizarding world. In the Forbidden Forest Harry encounters Centaurs- magical creature whose head, torso and arms appear to be human and are joined to a horse's body and unicorn. In the novel there is also another creature called Fluffy- a three headed giant dog who guarded the sorcerer's stone. The use of manuscript and books, the Hogwarts library-its collection of older, advanced magic and dark magic volume and student's use of parchment and quills all are highly evocative of medieval practices. It is very much coherent in the novel that the author has drawn from the medieval world as popularly conceived.

Rowling's re-invention of Gothic tradition in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone is much evident throughout the entire novel. The story of Harry Potter becomes gothicized because of its representation of many settings, characters and themes as evidently Gothic. J. K. Rowling's narrative certainly belongs to the literary genre of the fantastic, a genre which shares some of its thematic concerns and structural characteristics with the Gothic. Gothic genre laid its foundation with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Some common elements that we find in a gothic genre are gloomy decaying setting, haunted houses or castles with secret passages, trapdoors, and many other mysterious architectures. Along with it there must be the existence of supernatural beings or monsters -ghosts, zombies, vampires, giants. Also this genre abounds in curses or prophecies, damsels in distress, heroes, romance, intense emotions and obviously an atmosphere of mystery and suspense. Rowling has diffused most of the above features of gothic genre quite efficiently in her novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The

novel is characterized by several Gothic elements and preoccupations. Indeed, as some critics have suggested, the text is permeated by the "themes of evil, darkness, destruction and murder" and depict a very dark world that is introduced by the murders of Lily and James Potter and the attempt on the life of Harry by Lord Voldemort. The atmosphere and setting in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is marked by the features that are evidently gothic. The atmosphere or mood of the novel is usually dark and threatening. Something horrible could happen at any moment. As Jerrold E. Hogle explains in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, "a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space castles, old churches, graveyards, and ancient ruins add to the darkness of the novels". In the novel the Hogwarts, the Forbidden Forest, the graveyard, and the restricted section of the library, the third floor corridor all evoke the feeling of menace and darkness common to Gothic novels. These spaces are dark and creepy in part because they have an element of the unknown. Like *The Castle of Otranto*, Hogwarts is a historic building which represents centuries of tradition and it also is the repository of all things magic and important to the life of the wizarding community. In Hogwarts, a staircase could suddenly move or one can find himself or herself in a mysterious and dangerous room. The forbidden forest is dark and dangerous; all kinds of strange creatures live there. Of course, there is also certain amount of Gothic imagery in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, such as in the representation of the encounter with the hooded figure drinking unicorn's blood (which reproduces a vampire-like gesture) in the misty Forbidden Forest, or in the depiction of the silent corridor forbidden to the students that is guarded by a three-headed dog (an allusion to Cerberus, guardian of Hell according to Greek and Roman mythology). Gothic novels often deal with the past in some form. This can mean anything from that the plot takes place in previous centuries, that the setting (a castle, graveyard, church, ancient ruins, etc) evokes a feeling of history or age. The past does not just reappear for background information, but it is "secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story." In *Harry Potter and Philosopher's Stone*, Harry and the trio have to research the past i.e. to discover information about Nicholas Flamel and the Stone.

The supernatural like ghosts, haunted castles, and magical events abound in gothic novels. Tzvetan Todorov separates the supernatural occurrences in the Gothic novel

into two types. With "the supernatural explained" events are rationally explained as not supernatural at the end of the novel, and in "the supernatural accepted" events appear to be actually supernatural. When Harry Potter and Philosopher's Stone is examined as a gothic novel, supernatural events fall into Todorov's second category of "the supernatural accepted" because the readers accept magic and the supernatural as valid explanations for what occurs.

Gothic novels usually have a hero or heroine, but do not always have a clear-cut villain. The heroes and heroines do not choose to become heroes or heroines. Instead, their circumstances force them to act in brave or heroic ways that they would normally avoid. For example, Jonathan Harker travels to Dracula's castle for his job, not to look for adventure or the supernatural. Quite unwillingly, Harker and his friends back at home are drawn into the mysteries surrounding Dracula and end up defeating him. Harry Potter is very similar to the reluctant heroes and heroines found in Gothic novels. Harry never chooses to be a hero; he hates the fame and attention his accomplishments have brought him. But it is the hidden villain that with his dark desires and activities create circumstances that force him into action. With Gothic novels the villain can be harder to determine. In other words, boundaries between good and evil can be fuzzy. For example, who is the true villain in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein? Should we call Victor Frankenstein or his creation the monster? With some of her villains, Rowling blurs the boundary between good and evil. Gothic is concerned both with preserving history and also destroying it; it has been described as a 'family romance' in which the family is both good and evil, and this is clearly true in traditional Gothic novels such as those of Ann Radcliffe in the eighteenth century. The battle for good and evil continues throughout the novel, with figures mostly clearly identified as good or bad. Snape is horrible to his students, but he has tried to protect Harry. Voldemort's emphasis on pure-bloods and his destruction of those is very frightening. More historically speaking, Voldemort could remind readers of Hitler and the horrors associated with World War II. Voldemort also plays into our current fears about terrorism. With Voldemort, Rowling has created a villain that each new generation of readers will be able to fear for a different reason.

Finally, Gothic novels usually have some sort of mystery that must be solved by the hero or heroine. The villain may have a secret about their past that must be uncovered before they can be defeated. With Harry Potter, the trio usually ends

up solving a mystery that relates to Voldemort. The trio worked together to solve an important mystery that leads to Harry's triumph over Voldemort at the end of the novel. Throughout the novel, mysteries involving the past, dreams, and current events must be solved for the trio to triumph against Voldemort or his Death Eaters. The novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is a great work of literature because of Rowling's use of multiple genres. The novel defies attempts for easy classification and operates on multiple levels. She integrates elements of fantasy, Gothic, mystery, myth, comedy, and history to develop a unique novel. One of the finest aspects of the book is that we get to two - count 'em - two worlds. J.K. Rowling is successful in mixing traditional medieval and gothic settings with the modern world. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the Gothic is thus re-instated and transposed into the medium of the fantastic. Thus it can be said that J.K. Rowling is a creator of Modern Epic.

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