From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the Aesthetic Trouble with Harry Potter

John Pennington

“Broaden your minds, my dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” (277). So explains Professor Trelawney in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the third book in the projected seven-part Harry Potter series. And readers and critics have certainly looked past the mundane: Harry Potter is, quite simply, a crosscultural phenomenon with critical kudos to boot. Janet Maslin, in a review for *The New York Times*, writes of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: “This time Ms. Rowling offers her clearest proof yet of what should have been wonderfully obvious: what makes the Potter books so popular is the radically simple fact that they’re so good” (B1). *The New Yorker* is equally enthusiastic. In her review, Joan Acocella contends that “the great beauty of the Potter books is their wealth of imagination, their sheer shining fullness” (76). With the impending publication of book five in the series and now the release of *The Sorcerer’s Stone* film, we can imagine that Harry Potter will remain in the forefront of popular cultural taste, defining the parameters for successful children’s literature, particularly fantasy literature.¹ With continued projected sales, the Harry Potter books may in all likelihood sell more overall volumes than those touchstones of modern fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*.

But do the Harry Potter books “broaden” our minds and allow us to “see past the mundane”? Or are they simply mundane entertainment? Jack Zipes identifies the Harry Potter phenomenon as a complex cultural intersection of competing impulses: “Phenomena such as the Harry Potter books are driven by commodity consumption that at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste” (172). This taste, argues Zipes, is quite ironic, for the Harry Potter phenomenon is a return to the strictly conventional: “What appears as something phenomenal
turns or is turned into its opposite through a process of homogenization: the phenomenal thing or occurrence must become a conventional commodity that can be grasped or consumed to fit our cultural expectations” (174). Thus some questions: Is Harry Potter a phenomenon because it is great, or even good, literature? Or is it a phenomenon because it provides readers with simple escape, a conventional quick-read? Is this conventionality, then, merely mundane? Or does Harry Potter tap into the societal need for magic? Acocella contends that “part of the secret of Rowling’s success is her utter traditionalism. The Potter story is a fairy tale, plus a bildungsroman, plus a murder mystery, plus a cosmic war of good and evil, and there’s almost no classic in any of those genres that doesn’t reverberate between the lines of Harry’s saga” (74). But is this utter traditionalism merely, as Zipes posits, a homogenization of the fantasy tradition that Rowling has seemingly reinvigorated?

My trepidation over the Harry Potter series is founded on the disconnect between what the books attempt to say—those significant archetypal themes Acocella elucidates—and how Rowling says them, a disconnect between form and content. No matter how popular Harry Potter remains, I argue that on aesthetic grounds the series is fundamentally failed fantasy. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Barty Crouch reminds us that “we must follow the rules, and the rules state clearly that those people whose names come out of the Goblet of Fire are bound to compete in the tournament” (277). But the tournament’s rules have been violated, we find out; in fact, Mad-Eye Moody tells Harry that “cheating’s a traditional part of the Triwizard Tournament and always has been” (343). The rule-bending/breaking in the Triwizard Tournament is a metaphor for Rowling’s basic violation of fantasy literature ground rules—she violates the integral rules of the fantasy game, never capturing the integrity of the very fantasy tradition that she is mining for riches. And thus the aesthetic trouble with Harry Potter.

Kathryn Hume suggests that the two impulses that define literature are mimesis—the “desire to imitate”—and fantasy—which “desires to change givens and alter reality” (20–21). Consequently, Hume defines fantasy as “any departure from consensus reality, an impulse native to literature and manifested in innumerable variations, from monster to metaphor” (21). On a fundamental level, Rowling is unwilling—or unable—to depart from this consensus reality; her novels, for all their “magical” trappings, are prefigured in mundane reality, relying too wholly on the real from which she simultaneously wants to escape. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, for example, is essentially a realistic description of common British schooling practices, with the magic an awkward touch.
sprinkled in. This magic, in turn, is primarily grounded wholly in the real—the various potions classes replicate boring school curriculums. Magic is defined by its relationship to the real. For example, the Nimbus Two Thousand and the Firebolt, conventional broomsticks from witch lore, are described in no more fantastical ways than a Sharper Image advertisement for its Razor scooters:

The Firebolt
This state-of-the-art racing broom sports a streamlined, superfine handle of ash, treated with a diamond-hard polish and hand-numbered with its own registration number. Each individually selected birch twig in the broomtail has been honed to aerodynamic perfection, giving the Firebolt unsurpassable balance and pinpoint precision. The Firebolt has an acceleration of 150 miles an hour in ten seconds and incorporates an unbreakable braking charm. Price on request. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 51)

Exclusive Rugged™ Razor with Big Tires
Razor’s Rugged™ model boasts real air-filled tires that roll smoothly over rough roads, cracks and curbs. Its sturdy, non-slip deck is 16 3/4 inches long and a wide 4 inches for optimal stability. Steering column adjusts from 23 to 38 inches high. Features a rear fender friction brake. Weighs just 7 lbs.; steering column folds to a compact 4 x 12 x 22. Attached clip secures the grips when folded. . . . $89.95. (The Sharper Image 38)

Which toy seems more magical and enticing? The Firebolt’s “aura” of magic is parasitic, the host being conventional commodities that are found in popular culture. In fact, throughout the Harry Potter universe the Muggle world overpowers the wizard world: wizards go to work at toiling jobs, have the same governmental bureaucracy, have newspapers and radios and rock groups, and spend their leisure time like any Muggle, infatuated with earning money, worshipping sports heroes, and participating in masculine athletic competition. A case in point, the centerpiece of all books, is Quidditch. Though the game has “Chasers,” “Bludgers,” a “Quaffle,” a “Keeper,” a “Seeker,” and a “Snitch,” the game is, as Harry remarks, “sort of like basketball on broomsticks with six hoops, isn’t it” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 167). Quidditch is also an amalgam of soccer, cricket, baseball, and hockey (real and virtual versions); the game is certainly not fabulous or inventive, signaling Rowling’s inability to depart from consensus reality and change givens so she can fabricate an original fantasy world. Tolkien reminds us of the “connexions of fantasy with fantastic: with images of things that are not only ‘not actually present,’ but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there” (“On Fairy-Stories” 47).

Such a grounding in reality, however, does not necessarily exclude a work from being a successful fantasy. It does, though, when a work is not
true to its genre or mode. Brian Attebery in Strategies of Fantasy argues that fantasy can be productively classified as a fuzzy set “defined not by boundaries but by a center” (12), The Lord of the Rings being that center by which we judge other fantasies. Attebery contends that we should evaluate a fantasy’s success according to three fundamental principles: content, structure, and reader response. Content is, according to Attebery, defined by a “violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law” (14), which parallels Hume’s belief that fantasy is any “departure from consensus reality.” In other words, fantasy must not simply replicate the real. In terms of structure, Attebery argues that fantasy is “comic”: “it begins with a problem and ends with resolution” (15). Finally, and most important to our discussion, is the effect of fantasy on reader response. Attebery evokes Tolkien’s notion of eucatastrophe, the good catastrophe that achieves the “effect of joy or consolation” (15), the primary human desire for “wonder,” a magical estrangement from the ordinary. As Tolkien argues, eucatastrophe “does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies . . . universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (68). The peculiar quality of the ‘joy’ in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth” (On Fairy-Stories 70–71). Another Inkling, C. S. Lewis, adds to Tolkien’s vision: “If good novels are comments on life, good stories of this sort [the marvelous and fantastic] (which are much rarer) are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience” (66).

The very British Rowling is absolutely indebted to Tolkien; he is that Harold Bloomian anxiety of influence for all fantasy writers. Like Tolkien’s Middle-Earth books, and many classic fairy tales in general, the Potter books are clearly comic in their overall structure: Harry and his friends face various trials and tribulations in each book and restore order to their magical world, symbolized by the end of the school year, which finds the students returning home. Yet as Zipes reminds us, this conventional structure as evoked by Rowling does not provide for any thematic sophistication: “[Rowling] remains within the predictable happy-end school of fairy-tale writers. You know from the beginning to end that Harry will triumph over evil, and this again may be one of the reasons that her novels have achieved so much popularity” (182). These conventional plots, one could argue, do not allow Rowling to achieve that wonder or joy that is essential to Tolkien’s notion of fantasy. Certainly,
the Potter books do not enlarge potentiality as Lewis suggests. Consequently, Rowling is not necessarily true to the Tolkien fuzzy set that seems to be at the heart of her books.

In addition, Rowling’s fuzzy set of influence constantly shifts. More than with Tolkien, perhaps, Rowling follows in the tradition of C. S. Lewis in *The Chronicles of Narnia*; once Harry and his friends enter the portal to an alternative world that is Platform Nine and Three-quarters, they are in the realm of Narnian influence, where children become self-sufficient and embark on perilous quests that help define their true character. Such a fuzzy set would also include Ursula K. LeGuin’s *Earthsea Books*, Lloyd Alexander’s *Chronicles of Prydain*, and Robin McKinley’s *The Blue Sword* and *The Hero and the Crown*. But before exploring such a realm in much detail, Rowling’s fuzzy set mutates: we can also be, at times, in the ironic and satiric realm of E. Nesbit’s *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, or *The Story of the Amulet*. We do not stay too long in this realm, however. Soon we are not even in any fantasy fuzzy set—sprinkle a bit of Nancy Drew with the Hardy Boys, and add a dash of rugby-inspired competition from Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*. Furthermore, Rowling is most certainly indebted to film and television—*The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, *Labyrinth*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch*, to name only a few, resonate in the fabric of Harry Potter’s world. Some critics have even aligned Rowling with Roald Dahl and Lewis Carroll. As Yeats predicts, the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the Potter world. With no real center, the Potter books become adrift, often merely piling up conventional—and trite— fantasy clichés: various portals including railway terminals (Lewis’s Narnia), chimney flues (Kingsley’s *Water Babies*), broomsticks (Baum’s *Wizard of Oz*), and magic cars (Fleming’s *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*). Yet there seems nothing particularly original about Rowling’s borrowings.

Rowling also seems to purchase her marvelous assorted creatures from the Sears catalogue of fantasy clichés: poltergeists, longing ghosts, dragons, hippogriffs, giants, humongous spiders, vampires, werewolves, trolls, unicorns, centaurs, leprechauns, merpeople, elves, talking snakes, a phoenix, a sphinx, sirens, Pegasus horses (and I am certain that I have missed some). With such a menagerie, Rowling is unable to develop any of the fantastical creatures; in fact, she seems to expect the readers to bring that magic to her creations, a dubious technique at best. The Dementors are a prime example: they are, in fact, no more magical or mysterious or horrific than Rita Skeeter, the tabloid journalist who will write anything for a juicy story. Quite simply, Rowling does not have a
firm footing in fantasy; her Potter creations are never certain about fantasy content, structure, theme, and how these components are essential to the reader’s response to the fantastic.\textsuperscript{3}

In the essay “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” written in 1973, Ursula LeGuin concerns herself with writers who desire to transport readers to Elfland. LeGuin writes: “A great many people [readers] want to go there [to Elfland], without knowing what it is they’re looking for, driven by a vague hunger for something real. With the intention or under the pretense of obliging them, certain writers of fantasy are building six-lane highways and trailer parks with drive-in movies, so that the tourists can feel at home just as if they were back in Poughkeepsie” (79). LeGuin’s comments are an uncannily accurate prediction of the Harry Potter phenomenon.\textsuperscript{4} Her argument centers around the importance of style to create that wonder that is Elfland of the Secondary World. “The general assumption is that, if there are dragons or hippogriffs in a book,” argues LeGuin, “or if it takes place in a vaguely Celtic or Near Eastern medieval setting, or if magic is done in it, then it’s a fantasy. This is a mistake” (90). “Elfland is not Poughkeepsie; the voice of the transistor is not heard in that land” (92). Pick up any of the Harry Potter books and you will be hit with Poughkeepsie prose, not a style that generates the allure of Elfland.

Let us look at the style of a typical passage, this one from The Prisoner of Azkaban. And let us evoke those Dementors once again. Professor Lupin describes the odious and evil creatures to Harry:

Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope, and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can’t see them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself . . . soul-less evil. You’ll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of. (187)

Except for the “foreign-sounding” nouns Dementors and Muggles, this passage could be about gang members in some dangerous inner city, their “sucking” of happy memories metaphoric rather than literal. Such a metaphoric reading, interestingly, would have more depth than Rowling’s literal meaning: underprivileged teenagers are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and violence. Rowling’s Dementors, however, have no such power. She tells but does not show; she does not create that estrangement
that evokes wonder in her description. The Dementors remain ordinary, a clever thought not artistically realized. Simply telling us that they are “soul-less evil” does not necessarily make them so. Even Rowling’s names seems to be at odds with each other, for Dementors evokes the notion of something demented or someone cursed with dementia, while Muggles connotes something silly, someone mugging for a camera.

Let us compare a similar scene from LeGuin’s A Wizard of Earthsea (1968). The teaching mage Gensher tells Ged about the dangers of the gebbeth, a prototype of a Dementor:

Nothing protects you but the power of the Masters here and the defenses laid upon this island that keep the creatures of evil away. If you left now, the thing you loosed would find you at once, and enter into you, and possess you. You would be no man but a gebbeth, a puppet doing the will of that evil shadow which you raised up into the sunlight. You must stay here, until you gain strength and wisdom enough to defend yourself from it—if ever you do. Even now it waits for you. Assuredly it waits for you. Have you seen it since that night? (65)

Gensher’s quiet alliterative “s’s” create a cadence of concern—he speaks from Elfland, not from Poughkeepsie—and the style suggests a seriousness that is lacking in Rowling’s example. There is a real danger in the LeGuin passage, the darkness of evil pitted against the sunlight of Ged, and Ged must undertake a horrible burden to defeat that evil, with much more serious potential than simply falling off a broomstick. As LeGuin writes of successful fantasy writers: “They know instinctively that what is wanted in fantasy is a distancing from the ordinary” (85), a distancing that is predicated on stylistic grace and integrity—and exactness. Rowling’s passage contains 119 words, LeGuin’s 106.

By choosing only one example to support my contention, some may argue that I am generalizing too much about Rowling’s style. So let us look at another example, this one focusing on a stock fantasy creation that is, as Tolkien muses, at “the heart of desire of Faërie” (“On Fairy-Stories” 41)—dragons. In The Sorcerer’s Stone, Rowling introduces “Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback” (228), an infant that Hagrid intends to raise: “The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn’t exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body, it had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes” (235). Except for the simile of the black umbrella (too reminiscent of Lewis’s Dufflepuds?), the description remains flat, “it wasn’t exactly pretty” a compilation of “weasel words” that ultimately evokes nothing concrete. This description, in turn, reflects the fact that the dragon has no central
thematic purpose in the narrative other than to give Harry and his gang something to do—to move Norbert from Hogwarts so Hagrid will not get into trouble for housing an illegal creature (and to allow the children to use the invisibility cloak once again).

However, Rowling returns to dragons in *The Goblet of Fire*; they are the first test in the Triwizard Tournament. When Hagrid spies them for the first time, Rowling intends for the reader to have the same reaction as Hagrid—“his mouth fell open” (325):

Four fully grown, enormous, vicious-looking dragons were rearing onto their hind legs inside an enclosure fenced with thick planks of wood, roaring and snorting—torrents of fire were shooting into the dark sky from their open, fanged mouths, fifty feet above ground on their out-stretched necks. There was a silvery-blue one with long, pointed horns snapping and snarling at the wizards on the ground; a smooth-scaled green one, which was writhing and stamping with all its might; a red one with an odd fringe of fine gold spikes around its face, which was shooting mushroom-shaped fire clouds into the air; and a gigantic black one, more lizard-like than the others, which was nearest to them. (326)

Does this passage induce wonder? Does the reader’s mouth fall open in awe over the magical description? Does Rowling’s description add to the stock description of dragons?

Now let us return to LeGuin’s *Wizard of Earthsea* for a description of a young dragon:

The young dragon made no answer. He was not large of his kind, maybe the length of a forty-oared ship, and was worm-thin from all the reach of his black membranous wings. He had not got his growth yet, nor his voice, nor any dragon-cunning. Straight at Ged in the small rocking boat he came, opening his long, toothed jaws as he slid down arrowy from the air: so that all Ged had to do was bind his wings and limbs stiff with one sharp spell and send him thus hurtling aside into the sea like a stone falling. And the grey sea closed over him. (87)

When the adult Dragon of Pendor confronts Ged, LeGuin describes the dragon as follows: “His scales were grey-black, catching the daylight like broken stone. Lean as a hound he was and huge as a hill. Ged stared in awe. There was no song or tale could prepare the mind for this sight” (89). Rowling dragons appear to have no central purpose in her books; they are mere props that move the plot along. In LeGuin’s universe, however, dragons have an essentiality, an identity that is brought to a brilliant conclusion in *Tehanu* (1990), the final book of Earthsea. I cannot envision Rowling’s dragons performing more sophisticated uses
in her next three books. The tally for the above block quotations: Rowling, 122 words; LeGuin, 119.

This tally reflects the growing longwindedness of the Potter series. *The Sorcerer’s Stone* is 309 pages; *The Chamber of Secrets*, 341; *The Prisoner of Azkaban* inflates to 435 pages; and *The Goblet of Fire* comes in at a staggering 734 pages. With such exponential growth, we can expect the next Potter book to top 900 pages! Because Rowling’s books become increasingly long, her style (as we have just seen) becomes prosaic from Poughkeepsie, her language often sloppy. A key example is Rowling’s overuse of the awkward verb *magicked*, which is an attempt to create magic by simply transforming the noun into a verb. But even Humpty Dumpty cannot make a word do so much, no matter how much he pays it. Furthermore, Rowling has no discrimination in her description of the way characters talk—Harry does not sound unique; he speaks no differently from Ron or Hermione—or Voldemort, for that matter. A central case in point: Rowling’s overuse of the verb *hissed*. In *The Goblet of Fire*, by far the longest and most tedious of the four books, Harry often “hisses” his commands (he also “growls” and “snarls”). Thus in Chapter 39—“The Death Eaters”—when Harry faces Wormtail and Voldemort, the two enemies are described as “hissing” (*e.g.* 644, 646). Does this suggest that Harry, Wormtail, and Voldemort are similar? Because Harry can speak Parseltongue (or snake), such a convention may be symbolic and justifiable, but no such sophistication seems conscious on Rowling’s part, for Snape also hisses (*e.g.* *Goblet* 470, 472, 516), as does Ron (*e.g.* *Goblet* 513). In effect, Rowling is not sensitive to the integrity of style, for Harry, the developing hero of the series, should not particularly hiss, for that is a characteristic of snakes and other evil creatures (Milton has Satan hissing regularly in *Paradise Lost*, but the archangels never do). Harry Potter continues to reside in Poughkeepsie.

Maybe I am mistaken. Maybe Harry is supposed to be grounded in Poughkeepsie. Maybe the Harry Potter books are doing something other than aligning themselves with those so-called “high fantasy” worlds defined by Tolkien, Lewis, and LeGuin. For example, Acocella writes: “So Rowling’s books are chock-a-block with archetypes, and she doesn’t just use them; she glories in them, plays with them postmodernly” (74). Or as Brooke Allen writes: “Witty, ironic and self-referential, J. K. Rowling’s books are the first postmodern school stories. But what makes them appealing is that they manage alongside this contemporary knowingness to maintain all the wholesome and innocent appeal of their predecessors. If the Harry Potter series amounts to almost a parody of the genre, it is one inspired by affection rather than the urge to mock” (14).
It appears that that catchphrase *postmodern* is being bandied about much too loosely. “Postmodernism is a return to storytelling in the belief that we can be sure of nothing but story” (40), writes Attebery about the turn in postmodern fantasy. More specifically, Brian McHale contends that postmodernism has an “ontological dominant” (10) that foregrounds the “problems of *modes of being*” (10). This ontological dominant is “‘post-cognitive’”: “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which selves are to do it.” Other typical postmodernists’ questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontations, or when boundaries between worlds are violated? . . .” (10). In *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, Cristina Bacchilega suggests that “postmodern fictions, then, hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale, playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices” (23).

A key component to this postmodernism turn is self-reflexivity and self-referentiality—that postcognitiveness or contemporary knowingness—that we label metafiction,

which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 2)

But where is this selfconsciousness in the Harry Potter books? Where is that mirror that exposes the various literary artifices in the books? How do the books offer the reader any discussion of that ontological dominant of being? And how are the books a commentary on the relationship between fiction and reality?

On the level of self-reflexivity, Rowling seems unaware that there is a history of children’s fantasy literature. LeGuin has a wizard school in *A Wizard of Earthsea*, but there seems to be no awareness of such a fact in the Potter books. Instead, Rowling seems oblivious to any influence and tradition, so she certainly is not postmodern—there is no real play of narrative at all. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, for example, chapter 7 is titled “The Boggart in the Wardrobe,” and one would expect to find some selfconscious reference to Lewis’s wardrobe. But we find nothing. In *The Sorcerer’s Stone* a secret passageway is guarded by a curious “monster”:
“They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog that filled the whole space between ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs” (160–61). Such writing finds Rowling, it appears, creating something new and original, yet we find a similar (and more oddly magical) dog in the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, “The Tinder-Box.” And what of the house-elf, Dobby, who refers to himself in the third person? Has Rowling never heard of Gollum? Or what about Rowling’s indebtedness to Lewis Carroll’s Alice books? Certainly Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass are classic early metafictional fantasies—Alice is continually aware that she has fallen into a nonsensical world where language breaks down, where fictional creatures such as Humpty Dumpty and others from nursery tales become “real” in this topsy-turvy world. There is an imaginative play that makes the Alice books quite “writerly” (to use Roland Barthes’s phrase), that allows the reader to participate in the game of metafiction, both author and reader aware of the selfconscious referents that are parodied, and so forth. Readers become active participants in Carroll’s world, a dialogic world that defies Carroll’s conservative and sentimental “frame poems” and his desire to explain away Alice’s journeys as dreams. But Rowling’s books are staggeringly “readerly”: she manipulates the plot to guide the reader (especially in the long sections of background exposition where narrative loose ends are tied-up, the final chapters of The Goblet of Fire, for example). Readers of Potter are passive in such a monologic narrative. Rowling’s manipulation of reader and fantasy conventions seem hermetically sealed from precursors. Take Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans, those magical candies that contain every flavor—“you know, you get all the ordinary ones like chocolate and peppermint and marmalade, but then you can get spinach and liver and tripe. George reckons he had a booger-flavored one once” (The Sorcerer’s Stone 103–04). Cute and clever, but nothing more. Compare to Carroll’s description of Alice, who is aware that a young girl should never drink from a strange bottle because it might be poison: “However, this bottle was not marked ‘poison,’ so Alice ventured to taste it, and, finding it very nice (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast), she very soon finished it off” (Alice 11). The humor here is subtle, but it is also selfconscious, a parody of children’s educational warnings on how to be safe; it is also quite nonsensical and achieves an estranging effect that is magical.
If the tone of the Potter books appears to be fundamentally comic and satiric, that tone is not sustained for very long as the books take on a more serious note. Rowling’s Mirror of Erised most certainly alludes to Carroll’s *Looking-Glass*, but a reader would be hard pressed to see such a reflection. In Carroll’s fantasy, the mirror reflects an alternative, reversed reality from the staid world Alice resides in; it is also a portal to Looking-Glass Land where Alice’s notions of the real are skewered, fragmented, and stretched beyond normal ways of knowing the self and the world, that ontological dominant. The mirror is literally one of desire, or potentiality, an estranging device that inserts Alice once again in an absurd wonderland experience. Rowling’s Mirror of Erised is just another fantasy prop in her attempt to create wonder in her fantastical narrative world, but the mirror has no essential magic about it, though Harry is able to see his parents in the reflection. The mirror does not become a “bound motif” that is instrumental to the narrative theme; it is no real portal to another world, experience, or identity. Nor does the mirror become a “free motif,” one that adds artistic depth to the narrative. In fact, the magic mirror is explained away quickly in Dumbledore’s exposition to Harry: “It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible” (*The Sorcerer’s Stone* 213). So that explains the mirror. Rowling can now move on to more important concerns, following Harry as he practices for an upcoming Quidditch match.

The connection to the Carroll books is an important one, for it suggests how important consistency of tone can be in the creation of a fantasy world. We should be reminded of Tolkien’s admonition in “On Fairy-Stories”: “There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away” (10). The Alice books have a consistency of tone in their lunacy; Carroll is not writing about good versus evil in the classical fantasy sense, but he is parodying the whole concept of what we can know internally—Alice has an ontological slipperiness that is integral to the book’s meaning. Furthermore, Carroll is parodying the whole didactic tradition of children’s writing, creating in the Alice books an original fantasy world that ridicules past narratives and conventions, a literary play with a postmodern
turn. Rowling’s attempts at Carrollian humor, unfortunately, create a further disconnect in the tone and purpose of the Potter series. The wonder that leads to joy and consolation—to eucatastrophe—in the Tolkien and Lewis fuzzy sets cannot be easily sustained in an imitative Carrollian nonsense world of magical gimmicks and clichés. T. H. White tends to succeed in The Once and Future King, as does Peter S. Beagle in The Last Unicorn.

But the archetypal theme of good versus evil appears to be what the Potter books are about. Harry’s education is cemented in this ultimate dichotomy that Tolkien, Lewis, and LeGuin privilege in their texts. So just what are the Harry Potter books about? We can see the narrative confusion clearly in her latest book, The Goblet of Fire. There is certainly evil in the novels, represented by Tom Riddle, Wormtail, and, of course, Voldemort. Harry’s scar begins to pain him again at the outset of Goblet to remind us of this evil. Death Eaters, those minions of Voldemort, leave the Dark Mark in the sky at the World Cup Quidditch match. All is ripe for the good old-fashioned battle between good and evil. But that tone is quickly undercut—Harry is often more interested in being able to visit Hogsmeade and practice Quidditch than he is in fighting evil. Hermione takes center stage in her political quest to free the enslaved house-elves. Rita Skeeter, the tabloid journalist, publishes articles about Harry’s parents and his attempt to get a date for the Yule Ball, a major dance. In fact, Rowling’s concerns are no more sophisticated than what a teenager might encounter in middle and high school. Yet there is that nagging concern over good versus evil, and the Goblet plot attempts to combine this archetypal encounter with the Triwizard Tournament, which is nothing more than a variation of the Quidditch matches. Zipes astutely reminds us that the two kinds of evil in the novel—“the vicious sickness of Voldemort and the cruel vindictiveness of the Dursleys” (180)—tend to cancel each other out, for the Dursleys’ evil is finally impotent, nonthreatening, while Voldemort’s darker, universal threat becomes, ironically, no more dangerous than that found in the Dursley household.

Acocella contends that the great theme of “the Harry Potter series is power, an important matter for children, since they have so little of it” (77). The books’ “main virtue,” she continues, is “their philosophical seriousness” (78). One wonders if Acocella is grafting wish-fulfillment onto the books—she wants to find some great theme that makes the Potter books have that philosophical seriousness. But how is power used in the novel? Harry and his friends have virtually no power; they are controlled and guided by the Hogwarts instructors at virtually every stage of their quests. Many times Harry succeeds simply because he is
lucky, or someone tips him to the proper action (think of the help Harry has in the Triwizard Tournament). Or Harry learns a new spell that conveniently comes in handy to get him out of his next escapade. The children do seem active to some degree: they free Norbert, Buckbeak, and the house-elves, but when they are truly tested by the great forces of darkness, they remain passive, with Dumbledore, that noble knight, coming to the rescue. When Harry has the climatic battle with Voldemort in *The Goblet of Fire*, he is saved not necessarily by his acumen with his magic wand, coincidentally made from the same phoenix feather as Voldemort’s, but by the fact that his wand unleashes the spirits of Cedric Diggory, James Potter, and others. Harry does not win on his skill or goodness alone. In effect, all the children in the series are passive, merely reactive to major challenges. They certainly are not like Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—or Alice, or Ged, or Bilbo.

In addition, the power that is magic is never analyzed. Tolkien takes pains to show his readers that the invisibility ring can corrupt: Gollum’s “precious” ring in *The Hobbit* corrupts him because power can corrupt absolutely. The Ring of Power, which magically makes invisible whomever wears the ring, is dangerous, a temptation to the corrupting power of magic. Wear the ring too long and your Self will be in danger, thus the ontological concerns of being. Gollum’s use of “we” to talk of himself symbolizes this identity concern. Compare this ring to the invisibility cloak that Harry has. The cloak is nothing more than a convenient magical prop. Harry can become invisible without any impact; there appears no larger theme about notions of being and individuality. Thus the entire realm of magic has no real power or centrality in terms of the larger thematic structure of the series. Voldemort’s corrupted power does not appear to be a result of magic misused. In effect, if Rowling would take the magic out of the Potter series with some fine-tuning revision, her books would remain fundamentally the same, the children attending a boarding school, getting into mischief, playing practical jokes, and competing in various classroom and sporting events. Furthermore, there is no danger in any of the magic—spells gone wrong can always be righted, bones can be regrown with another potion, those turned into stone can be made human again. Rowling’s magical world becomes a kiddie chemistry lab where the most dangerous substance seems to be baking soda.

Finally, what ultimately is the role of the archetypal good versus evil dichotomy in the series? Voldemort represents the darkest of evil. But what of the good? Is there an overarching figure of good—a supreme
being, for example, not necessarily God—whom Harry and his friends follow? They certainly are in a Christian universe, for they celebrate the Christmas season.\textsuperscript{7} If there are the Dark Arts, are there the Light or White Arts? Dumbledore is a Merlin and Gandalf figure, but Dumbledore does not achieve any grandeur; his name evokes \textit{bumble} and \textit{bumbling}, reminiscent of Tweedledee and Tweedledum, those foolish characters. There seems to be a good in the novel, but that goodness seems individual rather than archetypal. Thus the archetypal evilness in the Potter universe has no real antidote other than Harry and his friends (who do not seem to take that evil too seriously). And what of death? Does death exist? Is there an afterlife? The poltergeist Peeves, Nearly Headless Nick, and Moaning Myrtle suggest that there is no final resting place, and the Mirror of Erised suggests that the good—Harry’s parents particularly—are somehow stuck in limbo, or a kind of purgatory. So where does that leave Cedric Diggory? Is he truly dead? Is there an afterlife? Or does existence just end with death? These larger concerns are left unexplored, not because Rowling wants readers to contemplate such concerns; rather, she does not seem interested in serious speculation, which is a hallmark of the Tolkien, Lewis, and LeGuin fuzzy sets. My point is that Rowling’s fantasy universe is not consistent, thus failing to evoke the estrangement and wonder that can lead to any good catastrophe. Rowling is not true to her fantasy creation.

So what are the Potter books really about, then? Well, monetary success primarily. A sampling from the 2001 Harry Potter calendar asks the following:

\textbf{Sat./Sun. March 24/25:} Harry has a scar shaped like a lightning bolt; what is your most interesting feature?

\textbf{Sat./Sun. September 8/9:} The curses found in the Vindictus Viridian classic, Curses and Counter Curses, include hair loss, jelly-legs, and tongue-tying. What other kinds of curses might you come up with to befuddle your enemies?

\textbf{Sat./Sun. October 20/21:} What would be your least favorite flavor of Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans\textsuperscript{TM}? There seems to be no larger thematic import than these childish concerns.\textsuperscript{8} And notice how Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans is trademarked. If Rowling is out simply to make a buck, then she has succeeded spectacularly. And more power to her. That she is donating the profits to Comic Relief U.K. from spinoff books, \textit{Quidditch Through the Ages} (by Kennilworthy Whisp) and \textit{Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them} (by
Newt Scamander)—which have already become number-one best sellers—may take some of the sting out of my critique of the Harry Potter series. But as Jack Zipes reminds us,

I am certain that the phenomenal aspect of the reception of the Harry Potter books has blurred the focus for anyone who wants to take literature for young people seriously and who may be concerned about standards and taste that adults create for youth culture in the West. How is it possible to evaluate a work of literature like a Harry Potter novel when it is so dependent on the market conditions of the culture industry? (171–72)

“Phenomena such as the Harry Potter books are driven by commodity consumption that at the same time sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste,” continues Zipes (172). I am afraid that Rowling will begin to define the aesthetics of successful contemporary fantasy literature—works, I am sad to state, that will remain derivative, thematically inconsistent, and stylistically flawed.

Finally, a caveat about such aesthetic taste. I am always reminded of a statement Kurt Vonnegut once made about book reviewers: “I have long felt that any reviewer who expresses rage and loathing for a novel is preposterous. He or she is like a person who has just put on full armor and attacked a hot fudge sundae or banana split” (qtd. in Henderson). I would like to report that the Harry Potter series is nothing more significant than a confectious banana split. However, Rowling’s engagement of that archetypal fantasy theme of good versus evil suggests a seriousness that merits a full meal, rather than just dessert. One famous adventurer once said something to the effect that reading fantasy adventures can be a nasty undertaking because they can make one late for dinner. While I expect Bertie Bott’s Every Flavour Beans to evoke the magical gourmet delicacies of, say, Mario Batali, when I actually bite into those beans my tastebuds are assaulted by the cartoonish cuisine of the Mario Brothers. Magic, we realize, must be nourishing food. Give me some Roast Mutton! Or some Turkish Delight! Or just some soup, some “Beau-ootiful Soo-oop!”

John Pennington is an associate professor of English at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin, where he specializes in Victorian fairy tales. He has published various works on John Ruskin, Lewis Carroll, and George MacDonald, and is currently working on a full-length study of these three writers.
Notes

1 The Potter phenomenon is spawning its own culture industry, which includes calendars, games, and scholarly studies. Beacham’s Sourcebook for Teaching Young Adult Fiction: Exploring Harry Potter by Elizabeth D. Schafer is a case in point: Schafer’s book is intended for the general reader, teachers, and parents. The amazon.com Book Description describes the work as follows:

If you are reading, teaching, or parenting Harry Potter fans, this is the indispensable guidebook to take you behind the Potter legend, into the life of its author, and to give young readers many more hours of enjoyment beyond reading the novels themselves. Explore the origins and mysteries of Harry’s world, its history, science, magic, mythology, setting, characters, themes, food, and sports. The sourcebook includes projects and activities for young readers, questions that generate lively discussion between parents and children, websites for internet research by young surfers, lesson plans for teachers, and resources for librarians.

It is interesting to note that Beacham’s next sourcebook published is Beacham’s Sourcebooks: Exploring C. S. Lewis’ The Chronicles of Narnia. In addition, Scholastic Paperbacks is publishing its Harry Potter Literature Guide for each book, thus further legitimizing the Potter series as classic fantasy in the Narnia tradition. At my college, the Adolescent Literature course now includes The Sorcerer’s Stone on its syllabus, but not any works by Tolkien or Lewis.

To respond to Pottermania, which includes a marketing bonanza of all things Potter, HarperCollins wants to remake Narnia in Hogwarts’s image, creating various Narnia toys and games. In a more unsettling turn of events, HarperCollins, with apparent blessing from the Lewis estate, intends to downplay the Christian foundation of the Narnia books. As Gregg Easterbrook states: “What’s in progress is a struggle of sorts for the soul of children’s fantasy literature” (46).

2 In an AOL Live chat, Rowling admits her admiration of Tolkien but suggests that she is doing something different: “Well, I love the Hobbit, but I think, if you set aside the fact that the books overlap in terms of dragons & wands & wizards, the Harry Potter books are very different, especially in tone. Tolkien created a whole mythology, I don’t think anyone could claim that I have done that. On the other hand . . . he didn’t have Dudley).” I will argue in the essay that Rowling’s tone is problematic, especially with her reliance on the fantasy mode.

3 In the same live chat, Rowling also admits to a very unsettling fact. When asked why she focused on magic for the Potter books, Rowling responds: “It chose me. I never really sat down & thought ‘What shall I focus on?’ and in fact, I don’t really read fantasy—it’s not my favourite genre.”

4 LeGuin has been curiously silent about Harry Potter. In an interview for Book she says:

I’m glad kids are reading. But when grownups sit around saying that there’s never been anything like Harry Potter, well, gee, I had a wizard school in 1968 (in A
When asked about Tolkien, LeGuin states emphatically: “The top. Anyone who wants to write fantasy has to have read him.”

5 LeGuin does not have a monopoly on original dragon descriptions. In The Hobbit, Tolkien describes Smaug as follows:

Smaug lay, with wings folded like an immeasurable bat, turned partly on one side, so that the hobbit could see his underparts and his long pale belly crusted with gems and fragments of gold from his long lying on his costly bed . . . . To say that Bilbo’s breath was taken away is no description at all. There are no words left to express his staggerment, since Men changed the language that they learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful. Bilbo had heard tell and sing of dragon-hoards before, but the splendour, the lust, the glory of such treasure had never yet come home to him. His heart was filled and pierced with enchantment and with the desire of dwarves; and he gazed motionless, almost forgetting the frightful guardian, at the gold beyond price and count. (206)

And we could compare Rowling’s dragons to a more contemporary work, The Hero and the Crown, by Robin McKinley:

Damar had dragons still; little ones, dog-sized, nasty, mean-tempered creatures who would fry a baby for supper and swallow it in two gulps if they could; but they had been beaten back into the heavy forest and the wilder Hills by Aerin’s day. They still killed an occasional unwary hunter, for they had no fear, and they had teeth and claws as well as fire to subdue their prey, but they were no longer a serious threat. Arlbeth heard occasionally of one—or of a family, for they most often hunted in families—that was harassing a village or an outlying farm, and when that happened a party of men with spears and arrows—swords were of little use, for it one were close enough to use a sword, one was close enough to be badly burned—went out from the City to deal with them. Always they came back with a few more unpleasant stories of the cunning treachery of dragons; always they came back nursing a few scorched limbs; occasionally they came back a horse or a hound the less. (29)

LeGuin, Tolkien, and McKinley create dragons of mystery that have a mythology in their works—dragons are central to the fantasy world, both for plot and for theme.

6 For more detailed information on “bound” and “free” motifs, see Tomashevsky 61–95.

7 Controversy has arisen because of Rowling’s magical world of witches and magic spells. In fact, books such as Richard Abanes’s Harry Potter and the Bible and Connie Neal’s What’s a Christian to Do With Harry Potter? discuss these
concerns. Rowling seems genuinely puzzled, for she admits in the AOL Live interview that she cannot understand conservative Christian complaints: “Well, as it happens, I believe in God, but there’s no pleasing some people!”

8 My overall argument is one of aesthetics; I have tried to persuade the reader that the Harry Potter series violates the fundamental groundrules that define the fantasy tradition. Other critics, specifically Zipes, have pointed out some troubling thematic implications in the series: sexism, for example.

Works Cited


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