

The Features of *Harry Potter* Series: A Contemporary Classic in Children's Literature

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Abstract

As an outstanding representative in modern children's literature, the *Harry Potter* series has satisfactorily realized the literary function of children's literature in "education" in the way of "entertainment" and has opened the most beautiful dream in the soul of mankind in the world of "entertainment" full of sense of modernization and emotional creation. And thereby the soul has been purified bit by bit; and this kind of imperceptible influence has produced the power to constitute personality and mold a person's sentiment. This is the effect simply beyond the reach of pure preaching. The emergence of the *Harry Potter* series is not only pleasures for children, but also the blessing of children's literature. Its emergence is by no means accidental; instead, it is the inevitable outcome of the continuing grope and illuviation of writers of children's literature generation after generation as well as the inheritance, development and close link with the times of children's literature itself. At the same time, the respect shown by Madame J. K. Rowling to children in her works as well as the bold innovation in the way of artistic expression founded on that respect have provided the further development, reclamation of contemporary children's literature with many-sided useful enlightenments.

Key words: J. K. Rowling, children's literature, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

1. Introduction

The aim of a writer of children's literature, whatever times to which he belongs, is to let children know how to live a better life in his creation. In other words, the fundamental significance of children's literature resides in how to help children grow healthily. Works of children's literature whether long or short, are permeated with writers' sense and experience as well as unsuppressible emotion toward the world and life. Children can often consciously open a window to comprehend life and the way of conducting themselves through the works of children's literature. Hence, so long as a writer is of the sense of social responsibility, he would certainly elevate men's position in children's conception. Harry is like the innumerable traditional classical characters such as Cinderella, the Ugly Duckling, Thumbelina, Huckleberry Finn etc. Although they were growing in a wretched environment, they were neither transformed nor distorted by their living environment; instead, they still preserve a "healthy mentality" and vigorous attitude of life, and would not abandon themselves to despair in adversity. They are unsophisticated, kindhearted, upright; and the most outstanding point in their character is their yearning for an independent, liberal and happy life as well as their sincere sympathy for people.

J. K. Rowling has infused warmth between the lines of her works with her motherly heart-true feeling peculiar to feminine writer: the ingredient of fantasy is the basic skill that a life full of vigor and vitality must possess; the principle of joy is the best gift for children at their pure and innocent age; sense of humor and the beauty of cleverness is the new aesthetic requirement of

children in the new century. The *Harry Potter* series enable children to draw inspiration from the reading with cheers and happy laughter, and to intellectualize their soul in heartily laughing. In their reading, children have gradually learned that if they want to have a happy life with childlike innocence, they must try to learn to cultivate their own righteous quality, pure soul as well as optimistic mentality. Taking Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, their sincerity and enthusiasm in treating friendship as well as their bravery and quick-wittedness when confronting problems would exercise far-reaching influence over children's growth.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Image of characters

Traditional children's literature often convey such a conviction: only those girls who are so industrious, kindhearted, full of love and lenience as Cinderella, Snow-White are able to culminate in happiness. Only those boys who are so brave, independent, adventurous and aggressive as Sindbad, Aladdin and Robinson Crusoe are able to become real men with strong will and boundless charm. With the fast development of modern life as well as the change of children's psychology and aesthetic standards, either the creation of image of characters or fantasy is inclined to be close to reality and life. In comparison with the traditional distinct image of characters, Ms. Rowling has audaciously described the interpersonal harmony and conflict, human nature and barbarity, revealing the fear and horror toward the unknown world hidden deeply in people's heart of hearts. The personality of the image of the characters created in her fairy tales is quite complicated and presses more close to reality and authenticity, and is unlikely to be awe-inspiring. In the magic world, the leading character—Harry Potter—is a “very famous” character. However, just like ordinary children, he also has heaps of homework and exams; and also has to worry about being unable to finish his homework and worry about failure in examinations; he like campus life but is afraid of exams; he has either absolutely good friends or disgusting deadly enemies; he has either reliable teachers or headaches that would scare him away; sometimes he would make some trivial mistakes and get into mischief; he is of inexhaustible curiosity and spirit of adventure; he likes games and collection most popular among students. He is kindhearted, modest and polite; but sometimes he is lack of self-confidence and would tell a lie and get muddleheaded (yet to the extent of being lovely). What is “a little bit” different is that, besides have many qualities on which Gryffindor is laying stress such as bravery, courage and insight, straightforwardness etc., Harry Potter also possesses some rare natural gifts characteristic of Slytherin such as snake language, resourcefulness, strong will, a certain contempt for laws and regulations. Furthermore, there are jack-of-all-trades—Hermione, master of wizard chess—Ron, the one who always gets blamed—Neville, naughty boys—the twin brothers Fred and George, the expert of mischief—Peeves, the kindhearted and honest Hagrid, the eccentric leader—Dumbledore, the brave and lovely Dobby. Each has his/her own merits and demerits; the image of these characters is distinct and vivid, while the personality is well developed. Every character created by Ms. Rowling will also often make a reader become unable to refrain from associating it with his/her own experience in the campus in the process of reading.

In life, there are not only the true, the good and the beautiful, but also the false, the ugly and the wicked; and the true, the good and the beautiful are being developed in the course of their continuous struggle with the false, the ugly and the wicked. As a reflection of life, children's literature would certainly bring about the recurrence of the sparks bursting out of the collision

between the good and the wicked. Starting from her own aesthetic ideal, Ms. Rowling has aroused children's yearning for happiness and brightness through the image of series of negative characters such as the mean and shameless Draco Malfoy, Gilderoy Lockhart, who is so vainglorious as to be nauseating, the rude and harsh Snape, the ferocious and terrifying Dementor, the cruel and wicked Voldemort etc., with a distinct standpoint and emotion as well as incisive satirical technique. Essentially, this means that the author has approved the beautiful in the form of negating the ugly, indirectly arousing people's pursuit of the beautiful things and beautiful ideals.

In the creation of the appearance of characters, the Harry Pottery series no longer sedulously lay stress on handsome boys and beautiful girls like Prince Charming and Snow-White; instead, what counts more in the consideration is the loveliness of one's innermost being. The author has no intention to create the appearance of Harry, Hermione and Ron in the direction of being "handsome and beautiful"; children like them because words, deeds and manners are "cool".

2.2 Fantasy in association with real life

The most fundamental feature of children's literature is to have novel fantasy. Stories richly tinged with fantasy are able to arouse children's curiosity and imagination. Outstanding writers of children's literature are good at ingeniously joining fantasy with life; in their creative works, we may feel the pulse of the times, whether intense or feeble. Traditional works of children's literature have mostly created wonderlands with techniques such as magic power, treasures, hyperbole, metamorphosis etc. in old fairy tales and fables; that is, to envelop the reality with the shell of fantasy, so that the life may be put on the clothes of imagination and illusion. The Harry Potter series are full of emotional, free, and unconstrained imagination, not only abundant but also fantastic; for instance, to ride a flying broomstick and play balls in the sky, to use owls to deliver yelling mails, Voldemort's spirit to hide in a diary, Nearly Headless Nick's five hundredth death day party etc. often bring readers into one unexpected scene after another, satiating their curiosity and bring out their imagination. Ms. Rowling is good at ingeniously associating fantasy with real life; in her works, you may feel that all those science-fictional imaginations are infiltrated with the pulse of the times. Graded examinations with multitude of names, ever-escalating flying broomstick, personalized idolatry etc. have easily brought about consensus among kid readers and won children's identification. Ms. Rowling has created a world shared by magic and reality harmoniously interwoven through Platform Nine And Three-Quarters; and in the process of narrating the story, she helps kid readers to understand the joy and sorrow of life as well as the sunlight and shadow existing in life, imperceptibly training their sharp eyes, willpower and ability to adapt themselves to altering conditions.

2.3 English gentlemanlike humor

Each country has its own unique style in literature; and English children's literature has usually been good at humor. The delightful literary work that has been regarded completely children's reading material—Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*—is exactly the outcome of English style of humor. We may say that Ms. Rowling has inherited this light, rollicking style of writing; besides, combined with her own sense of humor as well as calling a spade a spade and intelligence in her natural disposition, she has enlisted a variety of knowledge, logic etc. in various kind of jokes, silly talk, witticism. Moreover, all those humor and marvelous wordplay, refined witticism, meaningful puns, personalized characters and languages, words of songs full of

meaning have enriched this work with fun and relaxation, flickering with the rays of wisdom concurrently. This humor, which could be seen anywhere in the books, has immediately aroused publishers' keen interest.

It is noteworthy that, instead of being bad, vulgar and rude, the humor in the *Harry Potter* series is the sort of English gentlemanlike elegant humor. The most classical is that Madame Rowling has created "Muggles", the name for those who do not believe in magic. "Muggles", are an extremely great satire upon the sort of the crowd who are obstinate, pedantic and in want of imagination. This sense of humor is not necessarily the sort that arouses uproarious laughter everywhere; instead, it sometimes makes one feel some kind of feeling that can be sensed. In reading, we may often greatly praise the author's narrating capabilities and personality charm. Because under a certain circumstances, the power of justice and uprightness comprehended through the inspiration drawn from laughter is more powerful and more positive than the influence produced by preaching or criticism spoken sternly out of a sense of justice. If we say that Andersen's style of poetic beauty can push children to move toward kindheartedness and nobility, then, Ms. Rowling's style of humor can rid children of mediocrity and ugliness. Life needs relaxation as well as quick-witted humor. And humor can cultivate children's moral character and attitudes of life in such a way that they may become magnanimous, lenient and quick-witted.

2.4 Multitudes of foreshadowing

Children nowadays live in an age explosive with information. They are no longer satisfied with reading books in a way of laying toy wooden blocks. They need an open space to taste the pleasure of soaring fancy. All the works of children's literature must contain voluminous plural information from interior to exterior; besides entertaining one mentally, well-knit astute reasoning and tense, thrilling plots are no longer only adults' requirements in reading. Well-knit, astute reasoning can often cultivate children's logic thinking and judgment. The *Harry Potter* series are worth pondering over and over again, because in the whole story suspensions are ingeniously contrived to push forward the development of the plots of the story, and we may say that there are multitudes of foreshadowing hints and one suspicion after another, firmly grasping characters as well as readers' curiosity in the process of their being solved on by one. For instance, the solution of the riddle of the chamber of secrets and the flight of the prisoner of Azkaban are figured out through the best experience of logic thinking and judgment. All these sparks of wisdom flashed by *Harry Potter* series can be regarded as another embodiment of the good taste of this novel. In each time of reading, we may have a new discovery and a more in-depth comprehension; and this would have a stronger appeal to adult readers with higher cultural attainments. There is one thing about the *Harry Potter* series rarely known to people. That is, Ms. Rowling has written seven books simultaneously in the form of literary sketches. She has designed life story for each character, although some of which are not adopted at all in the books. This rigid attitude in writing has shown where she is a notch above others.

Present-day children possess unprecedented opportunities to keep the whole world in view. They were tired of stories with dull, monotonous atmosphere and melancholic, sorrowful emotions long ago; they were utterly disinterested in paragraphs of spoken parts in a novel and static description of psychology; instead, they often have a preference for tense plots and scenes with thrilling actions. Harry Potter's independent, adventurous life as well as the process of growth in triumph over his opponents and himself each time has deeply fascinated children with heavy

burden of studies on their shoulders. Reading these classical works makes their childlike innocence find an outlet and lets their delight come back.

2. 5 Respect to children's individuality

What is more worth being concerned about is that, traditional children's literature is more likely to be a mode of relationship between teaching and studying, while the *Harry Potter* series show more respect to children's individuality and thoughts, and the relationship similar to those between friends guides children to make a gradual, thorough meditation over problems and derive their conclusions, so that their thinking may be more aggressive and active, and the conclusions thus derived may produce a more far-reaching influence upon their life. We are accustomed to using "a sheet of blank paper" to analogize children's ductility; adults would paint whatever they want on it, seldom giving children opportunities for their own choices. As an underprivileged group, children are powerless to resist their parents or adult society; hence, they have found in the *Harry Potter* series the world of delights, the ideal ego as well as the object of catharsis. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Headmaster Dumbledore cleared up the perplexity brought Harry by the Sorting Hat since two years ago:

"Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "because I asked not to go in Slytherin..."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "...It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, for more than our abilities." (p. 333, Rowling)

This is Harry's choice. To choose his/her own life is every child's dream, and is also a sort of cathartic satisfaction of a feeble call from his/her heart.

Harry is happy, because what is lingering around him more is love. There are fatherlike solicitude, fraternal love between friends; and at the same to love oneself and love others. And this kind of love is not the unidirectional protection and favor in traditional meaning; instead, it is omnidirectional solicitude, and is respect, trust and guidance. Madame J. K. Rowling used many fatherlike images to run through the whole novels, letting the leading character Harry grow freely: Albus Dumbledore who has given aid to Harry in wisdom and soul from time to time, Rubeus Hagrid who has shown his perfect and minute solicitude for Harry, as well as Young Sirius Black looked up by Harry as his godfather of life. Whenever children are in need of help, these adults obviate troubles for them, guide them to correctly analyze problems, and encourage them to brave challenges. Only such kind of solicitude and support are the real respect and trust to children as an independent individual, and are the yearning deep in children's heart.

When Harry failed to change the habit of calling Voldemort's name directly, only Dumbledore encouraged him and said:

"Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things.

Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself." (p. 298, Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*)

When Harry did not know the reason why Quirrell couldn't touch his bare skin without suffering terrible pain, Dumbledore answered:

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign.... To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good." (p. 299, Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*)

Dumbledore now pretended to be very interested in a bird out on the windowsill, which gave Harry time to dry his eyes on the sheet.

When the "incident of the Sorcerer's Stone" was over, Harry had his own comprehension of Dumbledore's having really given much thought to the matter:

"I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here. I reckon he had a pretty idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident he let me find out how the mirror worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could ..." (p. 302, Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*)

It is exactly such a "teaching" that has enabled children to make a thorough meditation over problems aggressively and actively and derive their own conclusions from the friendly guidance. Hence every present sent in the *Harry Potter* series gives us a feeling that it shows a great respect to a person's individuality. Ms. Rowling was frequently conveying such a conviction: always send what you like best, or what you believe others would certainly like it, or what is most needed by others; present is not a favoritism, nor can it be an alms. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry, who was clever, had finally in a moment of desperation taken off his filthy sock, inveigling Dobby's master—Lucius Malfoy—into throwing it to Dobby, who was hereby free. Dobby "was holding up Harry's disgusting, slimy sock, and looking at it as though it were a priceless treasure." "Got a sock," said Dobby in disbelief, "Master threw it, and Dobby caught it, and Dobby—Dobby is free." Every time when a reader is reading this paragraph, he will hail not only Harry's wit, but also his consideration and respect to individual freedom.

3. Conclusions

Just like adult's literature, children's literature is also the place wherein writers' thoughts and emotions reside. Therefore, a writer's consummate artistic accomplishment has decided that not only kid readers fondle excellent work of children's literature admiringly, but adult readers are also happy to read it; except that there is difference between the angles from which they appreciate it and the depths of their comprehension of it. The Mirror of Erised and the Dementor have, one after another, reflected the aspect most manifesting human nature in the *Harry Potter* series. When Harry was intoxicated with the mirage of having had a family gathering, Dumbledore awoke him:

"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.... It does not do to dwell on dream and forget to live.” (p. 213-4, Rowling, *Sorcerer's Stone*)

The Dementors in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* possess a dreadful magic power. They can compel others to recall the most painful portion of their life and to sink into the desperate mood, exhausted and unable to extricate themselves out of it. Harry, a child longing for his mother, does not like to become the focus of people's attention or the center of rumors; and he can't stand a single blow when the Dementors show up. The Dementors opened his shapeless, collapsarlike mouth widely, sucking happiness out of people and carrying away people's soul. Although they are ferocious and frightful, it is ludicrous that the effective remedy to dispel people's fears brought by the Dementors is exactly children's favorite chocolate.

Beside, a denouement full of hope, justice and love is not only in keeping with children's psychology and popular expectations, but also conducive to cultivating children's courage and resolution in the pursuit of a bright prospect. Madame J. K. Rowling, who is steadfast, persevering and optimistic by nature, has designed a soul-stirring denouement full of expectations for each of her novels. A yearlong effort and struggle has naturally got its well-deserved reward, giving emotional inspiration and stimulation, sensational comforts and joy to readers, who have thereby attained aesthetic satisfaction and delight. Traditional works of children's literature were used to employing a “joyous, satisfactory” denouement to serve as a brilliant period, but it had artificially terminated readers' thinking at the same time. In *The Tinder Box*, a wise, brave soldier had obtained the precious tinder box and came to the throne which had been too high to reach; in *The Six Servants*, an enthusiastic, selfless lad has won the lovely princess through the help of his fellow travelers; in *Thumbelina*, the delicately pretty Thumbelina, who is persisting in advancement, has finally had her wish fulfilled and plunged herself into the embrace of the light. Whereas the denouement of each of the *Harry Potter* series is often the beginning of a new story, just like life full of variables and expectations; hence, the education it has given children is of more meaning of reality.

As an outstanding representative in modern children's literature, the *Harry Potter* series has satisfactorily realized the literary function of children's literature in “education” in the way of “entertainment” and has opened the most beautiful dream in the soul of mankind in the world of “entertainment” full of sense of modernization and emotional creation. And thereby the soul has been purified bit by bit; and this kind of imperceptible influence has produced the power to constitute personality and mold a person's sentiment. This is the effect simply beyond the reach of pure preaching. The emergence of the *Harry Potter* series is not only pleasures for children, but also the blessing of children's literature. Its emergence is by no means accidental; instead, it is the inevitable outcome of the continuing grope and illuviation of writers of children's literature generation after generation as well as the inheritance, development and close link with the times of children's literature itself. At the same time, the respect shown by Madame J. K. Rowling to children in her works as well as the bold innovation in the way of artistic expression founded on that respect have provided the further development, reclamation of contemporary children's literature with many-sided useful enlightenments.

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