Harry Potter: Last of the Breed

A Final Golden Age Work to Close the Door on High Empire Kid Lit

Troll statue in Scandinavian park *Credit: Wikimedia Commons*

by Tom Durwood

Now that we have a bit of distance, we can place the seven-book *Harry Potter* collection in its truest context, or at least have some fun trying to do so. Brother to *Peter Pan*, cousin to *The Hobbit*, it is a work that both sums up and closes the door on the Golden Age of Kid Lit.

I made that up. It sounds pretty good, I think. Now let's see if it might be true.

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone was unleashed on readers a generation ago, in June, 1997. Six subsequent novels and eight movies later, we can see the literary property more clearly for what it is: a member of the Golden Age family, along with *The Wind in the Willows, Winnie the Pooh*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, *Peter Pan* and *The Hobbit.* These books were written in what is often referred to as the Golden Age of Children's Literature. Not coincidentally, the authors were almost all British. The era also produced *The Secret Garden*, *Little Women* (American), *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, the first pony book, *Black Beauty*, and many more.

The *Harry Potter* body of work is authentically High Empire, like its brethren, and serves as a sort of compendium of British literary traditions. We can also imagine that *Harry Potter* closes that particular door. It is the last of its breed allowing the audience to transition to the present phase of literature, Stage Four, or Falling Empire, a stage filled with equal parts dystopia, celebration of a complex world, and counter-imperial or corrective narratives. *Harry Potter* mirrors the end of empire, depicting as much in its own storyline. Let us trace Harry's lineage through Brit Lit and Brit Kid Lit and see where he stands.

The Potterverse is Built on a Foundation of British folklore.

Like J.R.R. Tolkien, J. K. Rowling is an author steeped in tradition. She studied classics at the University of Exeter, and her knowledge of mythology and folklore shows through in her writing. The powerful yet

dim-witted **mountain troll** whom Hermione, Ron and Harry combat so fiercely in the dungeons comes straight from the Brothers' Grimm and European folk tales, as do Rowling's **goblins**, **giants** (Hagrid, of course), **elves, werewolves,** and even the **hippogryph,** half -eagle, half-horse. **The Phoenix** is a mythological beast which can reincarnate itself. Dumbledore's pet Phoenix, Fawkes, sheds tears with healing properties, from which Harry benefits. Another Potter creature with ties to mythology (Greek, in this case) is **the multi-headed dog, Cerberus.** He guards the entrance to the Underworld in Greek myth, the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets in Hogwarts. The **centaurs** who live in the Forbidden Forest and the mer-people, although seen only briefly, first appeared in myth. The list of such magical creatures with origins in folklore goes on and on.

Conclusion: This shoe fits, but it does not count for much, since the other Golden Age works have little to do with fairy tales. Also, Rowling borrows from a wide range of mythology and folklore, not just British.

"Harry Potter" both sums up and closes the door on the Golden Age of Kid Lit. That sounds good; now let's see if it is true.

Tom Brown's School Days In his Victorian era adventure, "Tom Brown's Schooldays," author Thomas Hughes laid down the contours of a sub-genre of the Coming of Age story, the schooldays saga. In this, a lonely boy from a broken family arrives at an imposing boarding school with strange customs, meets a best friend, and overcomes an arrogant bully. With his pluck, his good nature and sense of fair play, the hero (Tom Brown or

Harry Potter) shows up both his phony upperclassmen and his cruel teachers, all the while embodying the true spirit of the school (which had been falling into class corruption), saving it from itself. Think empire.

Conclusion: This shoe fits. *Booyah.*

J.R.R. Tolkien Rowling's Dementors seem closely related to Tolkien's Dark Riders, or Nazgul, the same with Dumbledore and Gandalf (and Merlin, perhaps the original wizard). But extended parallels between the sagas of Hogwarts and Middle Earth don't hold up. For one, Tolkien's interest in how magic works is almost incidental to his story, while it is at the heart of *Harry Potter*, particularly in the character Hermione (who may be, along with Snape, the overshadowed heroes of the series). For two, Rowling's keen interest in plot and plot twist and closed-door murder-mystery-style scenarios has little in common with the long-striding accumulation of literary value in JRR's epic quest.

Harry is a member of the British Gothic family.

The Gothic tradition first emerged in the 18th century with such authors as Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker and Edgar Allan Poe (American). Characteristics of the Gothic novel include: death and decay, haunted castles, family curses, madness, melodrama and romance among gruesome terrors, and the regular appearance of ghosts (and monsters like vampires). In a typical Gothic story, an innocent young woman arrives at a remote mansion. Omens and visions foreshadow bad things. A ghost or monster appears so everyone knows a malevolent force is about to strike, usually as an act of revenge for her ancestor's twisted deeds. The clergy appears and is unable to stop it. In

an overly dramatic climax, evil and passion are somehow connected. Buried secrets are finally revealed. Freed from her ancestral past, the heroine escapes with her handsome young love interest.

Literature … does its best work in reminding us perpetually of the whole round of truth and balancing other and older ideas against the ideas to which we might for a moment be prone.

-- GK Chesterton

Both dark and intensely romantic, Gothic literature involves decadence. It is a little like imperial guilt – we have all this property and architecture and abundance, yet it is somehow corrupted. We cannot be happy, due to our ancestors' sins (is this starting to sound familiar?). Uncanny events lead us to the truth about our own tormented souls.

There are certainly Gothic elements in *Harry Potter* -- the omens and visions, for one. The irritating ghost Moaning Myrtle plays a pivotal role in *Chamber of Secrets*, for another, and the community of ghosts trapped in wall paintings serve as a chorus. The mysterious structure of Hogwarts itself is a semi-Gothic character, with its dungeon, secret chambers, and Escher staircases. As in Gothic tales, death and the thin boundary between life and death is very much present in Rowling's text -- Kipling's *Jungle Tales* and, oddly enough, *Peter Pan* being two other works which share this.

Conclusion: This shoe does not fit, despite the common elements of foreshadowing, ghosts and the trademark gables of Hogwarts. At heart, the Harry Potter story is not Gothic. Rather than madness and dark romance, Rowling's core values are teamwork, courage and devotion. Love wins. It is the characters' love for one another which uncovers true magic and defeats all the monsters. The teen dating at this boarding school is naïve and strictly young-adult, not the carnal, adult-bordering-on-obsessional that we find in such core Gothic works as *Dracula* and *Annabel Lee.* There is a strong rah-rah Quidditch component to *Goblet of Fire* and the other books that could never make its way into "The Masque of the Red Death."

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Honorable Mentions

Wuthering Heights As we learn his whole backstory, we see that Severus Snape in the later Potter books comes to resemble Heathcliff, the brooding, dark hero of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights.* This is a solitary, deeply devoted yet jealous, almost abusive, suitor who tragically breaks with the bright-eyed object of his love (Catherine Earnshaw, Lily Potter). These two

glowering, black-haired figures lend both books a Gothic feel. We can see echoes of **George Orwell** and his opposite-talking ("War is Peace," "Freedom is Slavery") in the Potterverse Ministry of Magic ("Magic is Might"). **Agatha Christie** is a much more significant presence than Orwell in the Potter books, each of which is at heart a mystery. *Who is the Half-Blood Prince*? *Who saved Harry in 'The Prisoner of Azkaban'*? *Who opened the Chamber of Secrets*? Murderous doings in a civilized setting, with a closed cast of suspects (each with a hidden motive), misleading facades, an accumulation of clever clues -- these are all components of an Agatha Christie detective story. Like her literary aunt, Rowling loves narratives with secret passageways and dramatic reveals.

Jane Austen J.K. Rowling has told interviewers that "Emma" is one of her favorite books, and we can see why. While this 'novel of manners' aspect of the *Harry Potter* books is the hardest to capture – for me, at least – it is perhaps the most telling, in tying this work to its several Brit Lit influences. In her September, 2019 *Wall Street Journal* article, "Jane Austen Knows that Manners Make the Man," Paula Marantz Cohen writes that Austen's work "is now popular because of its eloquent portrayal of how politeness is tied to deeper morality." This idea, I think, has real resonance with the *Harry Potter*

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books. As much as J. K. Rowling is driven by the story's intricate plotting, the movements of her giant cast of characters, and the many rules of magic, it is

her effortless presentation of the manners and conventions of the Potter world that readers love. As in *Emma*, all of this correctness is tied to a deeper morality. It affirms a world order, and a polite one, unlike the chaotic, harsh, barely civilized world we live in today.

For example, when Dumbledore sets out to recruit retired Professor Slughorn, he must go about it in a very particular and indirect way, never letting on that he needs him. There are rules to the game, and if you abide by them, you win. When Harry flirts with a waitress in the underground station (in the movies, not the books), they both seem to know how this dance goes. Voldemort does not simply kill Harry in the graveyard after Cedric Diggory's death -- that would be bad form, and it would violate the hidden rules of the Great Game. Instead, he follows convention with a lengthy speech, thus allowing Harry and his ancestors time to regroup. Another example can be found in the character Dobby, who shows how lower-caste figures correctly (sacrificing their lives for the master) and incorrectly (self-flagellation) handle themselves. *Well played, Dobby.* The final example we have room to mention here is all the comedies of manners surrounding the Yule Ball – Hermione with Victor Krum, Ron with Lavender Brown, and Hagrid and his courtship of Madame Maxine. Heartbreak, misunderstanding, jealousy, misery and in the end joy. All of this could easily derive from the pages of a Jane Austen playbook.

Two Deliberate Omissions by Me

In my sad determination to prove my modest thesis, I am conveniently ignoring such non-British influences on *Harry Potter* as **Star Wars**. This

despite lengthy evidence collated by clever readers like Scott Chitwood of theforce.net, who finds strong parallels between Obi-Wan and Dumbledore, The Force and Magic, owls and droids (both are messengers), magic wands and light-sabres. He cites many other convincing similarities. I suspect that, rather than borrowing from one another, these two sagas are similar because they both cleave so tightly to the detailed coming-of-age matrix outlined by such scholars as Otto Rank and Joseph Campbell.

I am also ignoring the influence of the German composer Richard **Wagner and his Ring Cycle**, since I don't really understand it.

Does Harry Potter belong in the Golden Age?

What qualities does Rowling share with Milne and Barrie and Grahame? Four elements, I think:

> 1) deep friendships at the heart of each story -- a family or substitute-family
>
> 2) literacy: a love of language and wordplay
>
> 3) a fully-realized imaginary world. Meticulously imagined, logically sound.

The fourth and **possibly the most important** ingredient is a High Empire **Britishness,** an imperial sensibility. The tea that Badger serves Toad and Mole was grown in India, the British colony, perhaps at one of the Chabua plantations, in upper Assam, courtesy of the Raj; that spotless train running from London to Hogwarts runs properly, without fail or falter, on-time, with snack trays making the rounds. Invisible servers fill the Hogwarts dining hall with an apparently endless supply of food; washer-women must

be hidden in the dungeons, doing the laundry. The Gryffindor common-room carpets are Harshang Bidjars, from Persia, thank you very much. Life is good at the top of the pyramid. Smudge-faced working-class children in factories populate Dickens stories, not the hallways of Ravenclaw.

J.K. Rowling is a throwback, to British generations with an authentic high-empire sensibility. Her writing shares with 'The Wind in the Willows' that British Empire quality of self-knowledge, or self-confidence, a deep, inclusive sense of where one stands in the landscape, so strong that it borders on predestination. Americans are looking for their place ('Little House on the Prairie'); the British already know it; the French search for meaning ('The Little Prince') among their places.

Rowling's most powerful story isn't the battle of good vs. evil. It's the long and lovely explanation of Voldemort's weakness and Harry's strength.

-- Hank Green

Included under High British Empire is the celebration of food and fine merchandise: Toad's excellent motor-car; the Hawthorne, Acacia and cherry wands of the Diagon Alley wand shop; Ratty's picnic lunch:

> 'What's inside it?' asked the Mole, wriggling with curiosity.
> 'There's cold chicken inside it,' replied the Rat briefly; '*coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickledgherkinssaladfrenchrollscress*

> *sandwichespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonadesodawater—-'*
> 'O stop, stop,' cried the Mole in ecstacies: 'This is too much!'
> 'Do you really think so?' enquired the Rat seriously.

If the author had been Chinese, or Italian, or Hawaiian, would "Harry Potter" be a different narrative? A hundred times 'Yes.'

Sidebar: WWII motifs of spies, espionage, codebreaking

J.K. Rowling adds an extra vitamin of Britishness to her story by forging strong connections to World War II, more specifically the British experience of WWII. Such recurring motifs as the master spy (Snape), the turncoat (Marietta Edgecombe), the tortured prisoner (Charity Burbage), warring symmetrical hierarchies, codebreaking, hidden identities and love in desperate hours among the bombed ruins – all of these evoke familiar Churchillian scenarios, powerful images in the recent collective memory of British readers. Such elements and characters do not emerge from Russia's experience of World War II, nor America's, nor Japan's.

Sidebar: Harry is Definitely Not an American Hero

Each national culture and each age within that culture fashions a particular image of a hero. Sherlock Holmes belonged to the Age of Reason, breaking with a tradition of heroes who were simply powerful and brave. American schoolchildren learn about 'Honest Abe' Lincoln, Chinese textbooks might tell of Mao Zedong swimming the Yangtze, British youth all know the noble warrior King Arthur, while French fifth-graders can recite the story of peasant and martyr Jeanne D'Arc.

What kind of hero is Harry? Certainly not American, writes Ken Eckert, Associate Professor of English at Hanyang University:

> What I always find peculiar about the Harry Potter world is how Harry silently *endures* all the abuse he does, with a stiff upper lip, without complaining or rebelling.
>
> If 'Harry Potter' were set in the States, and somewhat also this is true for Canada, he wouldn't take all the crap he does from teachers, parents, and others. Americans love their heroes to be badasses who fight authority, and Harry wouldn't just grin when Snape cheats him on points, or there's some rule about what corridor he can walk down, or Hermione tells him about some school rule about the potion they need.
>
> When Harry saves the school *every time* from Hogwarts and still gets no thanks for it and gets yelled at by teachers, an American teenager would yell "F— you, you ingrates!" to them.
>
> Harry sneaks around rules, but he's no Holden Caulfield.

Added proof that Harry is not an American-based figure: the absence of fist-fighting, martial arts, gunplay and sword-fighting.

Conclusion

Our premise – that 'Harry Potter' is a legitimate member of the extended Golden Age as well as its gravedigger – is flawed. The Potter cycle may have more in common with adult Brit Lit – *Emma*, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd* and *Dracula* -- than it does with *Winnie the Pooh.*

Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, famously told a 2004 Newsweek interviewer that *Harry Potter* is "a nice story but there's nothing underneath it." The full question and answer is here:

> Have you read the Harry Potter books?
> I read one of them. It's a nice story but there's nothing underneath it. I don't want to be bothered with stuff where there's nothing underneath. Some people say, "Why do you read the Bible?'' I say, "Because there's a lot of stuff underneath."

Firstly, comparing any contemporary work to the Bible is an awfully high bar. Secondly, we can now refute what was perhaps an offhand comment by Ms. L'Engle with a wealth of evidence: there is in fact a great deal of stuff underneath the nice *Harry Potter* story.

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