

The Element of Fear in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

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Abstract

One of the characteristics of children's literature is that the stories in this genre intensely involve the reader (the child), and the more they make her/him identify with the character(s), the more the reader enjoys the stories. One of the reasons for the popularity of Harry Potter stories lies in the fact that they evoke a psychological response in the readers by addressing their normal sense of fear and anxiety, hence creating a pleasurable tension while they are reading the book. The present study examines this pleasurable tension in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J.K. Rowling from a psychological point of view. Although the study refers to the responses of some children to the book at some points, it is not based on Reader-Response Theory. To invite science to the realm of literature, the approach relies both on child psychiatry and human anxiety in general discussed by a few psychologists who are not of course literary scholars. The aim of this study is both to know our children better, especially their normal fears and the way their fears grow and give way from one form to another, and to evaluate *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* one more time, but from a new point of view.

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1. Introduction

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone by Joanne Kathleen Rowling is available in many languages and is widely read in many parts of the world, including Iran. One of the reasons for this popularity lies in the fact that the book is based on children's collective beliefs such as their superstitions and rituals, and their emotions such as their preoccupations, anxieties, and fears. For example, the term 'you know who', by which characters avoid mentioning the name of Voldemort, the evil power in the book, is familiar for the child reader, because it is derived from her superstitious fears typical of her age. In other words, mentioning the name of Voldemort terrifies the child reader in the same way as stepping on the lines, made by edges of paving stones on the sidewalk does. Regarding these collective beliefs and emotions, the present essay studies the archetypal fears of the child reader from a psychological point of view. This approach is applied because children's fears are evoked in the process of 'reading' the novel, the process which could be defined as the psychological process of entering the text, during which the child reader fills the gaps in the text. Meanwhile, because of the nature of the approach adopted here, this study includes the opinions of real child readers about the book using a minor research done at Vahdat junior high school.

One of the reasons that *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* provokes a psychological response in the child reader is because the fear stimuli in the book are based on her/his normal and common fears, such as fear of animals, darkness, imaginary creatures, and staring fright, common in the pre-school period; and fear of injury, height, and test anxiety, common during school age. Some of these fears are innate, some of them common in early ages but likely to persist into later childhood, and some of them relevant to adults. Therefore, being compatible with the normal fears of the

implied reader, the book provokes fear in as many 'real child' readers as possible, because it provides what Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (1994: 112) calls "the discovered essential child"; hence, the reader is able to find herself, with exactly the same preoccupations, in the book. In other words, the child reader who is unconsciously aware of these fears easily can rewrite the text in her mind.

One of the factors reinforcing this process is that the book is a work of 'fantasy', which makes the interaction with the child reader easier for two reasons. The genre of the book is rooted in the real preoccupations of the implied reader as Peter Hunt (1994: 184) defines fantasy as the embodiment of radical revelations of the human psyche. Originating in the collective unconscious, the story calls on the reader's deepest feelings among which are her archetypal fears; Moreover, by bringing the magic and the irrational into our own world, the book can create the feeling of 'uncertainty' peculiar to a "postmodern school story" (Pennington, 2002: 87); hence, establishing a tense and fearful atmosphere, reinforced by feelings of the uncanny, which according to Judith P. Robertson (2001-2: 203), is present in the Gothic form of the book. Thus, the genre of the book makes the child reader susceptible to the fear stimuli present in the book.

Now, we realize that there are three types of 'fears' at work in the book creating:

1. A tense atmosphere by means of objects or situations – such as animal imagery and eye imagery – feared by children who are the age of the 'implied reader' of the book.
2. A pleasurable tension, which is usually accompanied by excitement (like the feeling we have while watching Horror films).
3. The feeling of 'empathy' followed by 'fear' in the child reader owing to the stimulation of her normal unconscious anxieties.

And one of the functions of the first factor is to reinforce the rest.

2. The Tense Atmosphere

To begin with, the numerous references to animals such as mice, owls, frogs, pigs, snakes, dragons, talking toads, trolls, werewolves, and three-headed dogs in the book contributes to the atmosphere of fear. Philip Graham et al. (1999: 210) observe that in the preschool period, and possibly even in later childhood, a fear of animals emerges. Moreover, fear of some animals is innate. Thus, the child reader who is already aware of this feeling, creatively responds to this stimulus, and imagines scenes according to her own preoccupations. In interviews with first and second grade students in January 2005, at Vahdat junior high school, some of the students felt that the book had aroused such a great fear in them that they were not able to sleep alone for a few days afterwards. And they believed that this fear had been greater after reading the book than watching the film version, because they said “you must imagine the scenes during reading while you are shown them when you watch the film”. This claim neatly supports all that has been discussed by so many critics (among whom, two eminent critics are Wolfgang Iser and Ronald Barthes) about the process of ‘reading’.

The interesting point is that sometimes this fear stimulus is linked with ‘staring’, which according to Isaac M. Marks (1978: 37) is another fear stimulus common in both children and adults, to create a tenser mood in the reader. The following citation from the book supports this fact: “They [Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Neville] were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, ... it had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes ... it was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them” (Rowling, 2000: 119). Here, staring eyes could be an important trigger of tension in both child and adult readers. However, this eye imagery is largely at work in the book in scenes where people are staring at Harry.

Images of darkness, sometimes mixed with blood imagery, abound in the book. All the references to Harry’s dark cupboard under the stairs, where he lives at the Dursleys’, or to the dark library with screaming books, one of which has “a dark stain on it that looked horribly like blood” (Rowling, 2000: 151), are among the examples in this category. Likewise, there are numerous dark images ascribed to the forbidden forest: “the forbidden forest,

whose trees were swaying darkly” (Rowling, 2000: 109), or “The forest was black and silent” (Rowling, 2000: 183), or “They walked on through the dense, dark trees” (Rowling, 2000: 185). This imagery arouses fear in the child reader since darkness is an innate fear stimulus in human beings (Graham et al., 1999: 210). And this fear is mostly manifested in the preschool period and possibly in later childhood, the age which is mostly associated with the age of the reader of the book. Sometimes, the darkness imagery is linked with the blood imagery to increase the intensity of the tension, since one of the functions of blood imagery is to arouse the fear of injury common during school age (Graham et al., 1999: 210). A vivid example of the blood imagery is the hooded figure drinking the unicorn's blood in the forbidden forest (Rowling, 2000: 187).

3. The Pleasurable Tension

So far the fears discussed are responsible for establishing the tense atmosphere in the book, since they are manifested in the form of imagery, as Rebecca J. Lukens (1976: 117) argues that imagery establishes the mood. However, the second kind of ‘fear’ is at work in the book to produce a pleasurable tension, which is usually accompanied by excitement, in the reader. Of course, it is obvious that this pleasurable tension is intensified against the background atmosphere of tension in the book.

Isaac Marks (1978: 8) believes that tension can be pleasurable, as some people like race car drivers, bullfighters, and mountaineers, actively seek anxiety and get great pleasure from their mastery of dangerous situations. He continues that this is also relevant to the game of peekaboo that babies so love to play. Furthermore, he argues that many people enjoy watching dangerous sports or thrillers to experience tension at second hand. This is also true of children. I remember once on a metro train two kids (one about 3 and the other around 8 years old) were next to me with a sheet of glass, framed in a metal bar, between us. While they were pushing their fingers through the narrow gap between the glass and the frame, I reached out my hand to touch theirs. Suddenly they withdrew their hands from the glass, all shocked and astonished. Calculating the safety of the situation, they realized I was playing

with them. Then, they started touching the glass enthusiastically, but upon my fingers drumming on the glass, or wriggling through the gap, they couldn't help withdrawing their hands again. After a while the bigger child was braver than the other, but still rather shy or afraid. Interestingly however, after a few minutes of approach and avoidance, the smaller child, excitedly started pushing her sister's hand and making her touch my wriggling fingers, protruding from the gap, something that she herself could not bear to do. In other words, the little girl, afraid to experience the situation herself, preferred to enjoy it at second hand.

This pleasurable tension derived from the stimuli which attract and repel, is widely experienced at second hand in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. It is usually accompanied by the feeling of excitement, which according to the children interviewed at Vahdat junior high school is greater than the excitement experienced at fairground. It is created through the encounter with the imaginary creatures, largely through test anxiety, and sometimes through experiencing height.

Imaginary beings can evoke fear in the child reader about the age of 10 and the fear of imaginary creatures starts at the age of 4 and can persist into later childhood (Marks, 1978: 8). The dominant background fear stimulus against which this fear is depicted is the 'fear of the novel situation' aroused by presenting the novel, strange, and unfamiliar settings like the school itself, animals like the three-headed dog, or imaginary beings like the nearly-headless ghost, all the brainchildren of fantasy. Other examples of imaginary creatures, responsible for arousing tension in the child reader, are dragons, trolls, the screaming books, and the sorting hat. But above all, as expressed by the children interviewed at Vahdat junior high school, there is the fear aroused by the man with two faces.

However, one of the commonest fears of children during school age is 'test anxiety', which Philip Graham et al. (1999: 210) believe is an anxiety about personal adequacy and achievement in children this age— and Marks (1978: 39) relate it to adults too. This is also associated with school phobias in children when they are exposed to a particular school for the first time. And Marks (1978: 148) insists that the greatest occurrence of this phobia usually happens at those

ages when there are changes of school in a given country's educational system. In America and Britain (and also in Iran), this is about age 11-12, which coincides with the period when most children move from a primary to a higher school.

Test anxiety is at the heart of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* – one of the genres into which the book fits is the boarding school narrative – and constantly challenges the normal preoccupations of the child reader. This vividly begins when Harry moves to his new school at the age of 11, and right upon arrival he faces “The Sorting Ceremony ... some sort of test” (Rowling, 2000: 86), and “Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school” (Rowling, 2000: 86)? Rowling (2000: 89) continues to add more intensity to the atmosphere: “He was starting to feel definitely sick now. He remembered being picked for teams during sports lessons at his old school. He had always been last to be chosen....” Thus, the child reader, sharing the same anxieties begins to worry: ‘What if he is not chosen’, or through identification: ‘What if I am not chosen’. This test anxiety is definitely pleasing for the reader, since being quite safe she experiences the tension at second hand (like the girl who was enjoying making her sister touch my wriggling fingers). Actually on the following page Harry asks this very question: “A horrible thought struck Harry, as horrible thoughts always do when you are very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all” (Rowling, 2000: 90)? This anxiety is mixed with the eye imagery to double the intensity: “The last thing Harry saw before the hat dropped over his eyes was the hall full of people craning to get a good look at him” (Rowling, 2000: 90).

The book abounds in test anxiety or anxiety about personal adequacy and achievement, like the questions Snape asks Harry at the very first session, the school final exams, the duel between Harry and Malfoy – it also challenges the adult readers since they are afraid of combat too– and the game of Quidditch. The game of Quidditch is also associated with ‘height’, which is, according to Marks (1978: 38), another common fear in both children and adults. And this makes reading the passages related to the game tenser.

However, it is worth noting that some of my students at Azad University, Karaj Campus, believed that the fear of height, or the

novel situations like the man with two faces, is associated with the feeling of excitement, not fear. But the point is that children cannot stand heights or the novel situation when they do not feel safe. We notice this through a procedure called ‘the strange situation’, which consists of a series of episodes in a laboratory setting. And it is worth comparing the following options: when the child is placed with the mother interested in the novel situation, or with the mother afraid of the situation, or completely alone. It sounds logical that the child may enjoy only the first option, and feels afraid of the others. Therefore, what is involved in the enjoyment of the novel situation is not solely ‘excitement’, but a mild anxiety accompanied by excitement, while you feel safe.

4. The Feeling of Empathy Followed by Fear

Most of the fears in the last group are those which are relevant to the older child reader, and possibly the adult reader of the book, usually accompanying the feeling of empathy and making the readers anxious lest they happen to them. They are, according to Graham et al. (1999: 210), the worries about friendships and bullying, social anxiety, and death, all relevant to the book. However, it is worth noting that social anxiety is an important fear stimulus solely for the adult reader in the book, which is established through social divisions and class snobbery, as Glen Mynott (1999: 23) argues that the rivalry or division is between ‘pure blood’ witches and wizards, and those who are born of Muggle parents. This anxiety is also reinforced against the blood imagery dominant in the book. As Suman Gupta (2003: 103) states: “The preoccupation with blood as a signification of magical races, and the identifiably fascist politics of the Magic world associated with that, cannot but resonate with the politics of race in our world.” Therefore, not only does blood imagery contribute to the atmosphere of the book, but it creates tension in adult readers, aware of the race discrimination in their society. Other fear stimuli of this kind are poverty, especially the references to Ron’s parents, and injustice, with all the references to the wrong punishments that Harry receives from the Dursleys and Snape. However, Roni Natov’s (2001: 311) rhetorical question “And what could be more

unfair than losing your parents as a baby?" suggests that the fact that Harry is an orphan could be another fear stimulus in this regard.

Meanwhile, there is another fear in this category called separation anxiety that according to Helen Bee (2000: 326) is applicable both to young children and adults. Separation anxiety, rooted in the baby's attachment to the parent right from the beginning of her/his life, is an important fear stimulus in the reader against the imagery of loneliness in the book. Preoccupation with the family is a dominant image, which runs through *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* with about at least 40 references to Harry's parents with "the Mirror of Erised" as the climax where his desire for his parents is vividly shown (Rowling, 2000: 153-7).

5. Conclusion

It has long been discussed that literature and life have a reciprocal relation: from one hand, literature is fed by the realities of life, and from other hand, life finds meaning through the insight gained by literature. In another words, although literature relies on life to create stories, life with no literature loses meaning because we arrive at truth when we read different experiences from different points of view. In the same way, reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* gives us a glimpse of children's normal fears. It introduces normal anxieties of children so that we will not get upset when for example; we realize our children are afraid of the dark. Moreover, we understand that tension becomes pleasurable to a child when (s) he feels safe. This helps us in two ways: to create pleasurable tension for fun, and more importantly, to help children to get over their fears because children can cope with their fears the moment they are told the fears are normal for their age.

Reading the book from this perspective also enables us to evaluate it from a new point of view. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, reinforced by the genre of the book, makes the child reader participate in the process of 'reading' the book largely through the psychological interactions. One of the factors responsible for these interactions is the compatibility between the common and normal fears of the child reader, and the fear stimuli in the book. This compatibility makes the child reader able to fill the

gaps easily while reading the book. Therefore, the child reader actively, rather than passively, engages with the world of the characters, and consequently enjoys it.

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