



Constructing the Realm of the 'Hyperreal': Rowling's Art of Storytelling

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Abstract

The paper concentrates on the operation of the two worlds, magic and the muggle, in Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The 'overlapping territories' of the two worlds, as the paper argues, lead to both the 'disappearance' and the 'murder' of the real. Rowling's text thus, is not merely written for children but also for the entire postmodern generation who experience a slice of their postmodern condition while reading the novel. The creation of the 'hyperreal' world, as the paper further shows, is done by Rowling's deft handling of the narrative. Her narrative strategies are built by closely following Gerard Genette's concept of Narratology as delineated in his book, *Narrative Discourse*. She overlaps the two worlds through her narrative strategies, blurring the division between the real and the imagined. Thus Rowling's vision is in perfect harmony with her design.

Keywords

Baudrillard, real, hyperreal, simulation, order, duration, frequency, mood, voice

While launching any new author, generally speaking, an established publishing house, as a part of their marketing strategy, use comments from eminent personalities at the back cover of the book. With this in mind, Bloomsbury sent 'bound proofs' of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) to notable critics, authors and book sellers of children literature for feedback. Praises came flooding in. David Morton of Daisy & Tom – the one stop children shop in London – perhaps best predicted the reason for the impending Potter mania: 'Splendid stuff! It's got just the right mix of normal life versus magic to make it extraordinary and hugely readable' (qtd. in Eccleshare 18). Julia Eccleshare extends Morton's observation and perceptively concludes that: 'There are no clear barriers that separate the areas of magic from the rest. Instead, she *allows* her world to overlap...' (68, emphasis mine). This 'overlapping territories' of the muggle and the magic in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (hereafter *HPPS*) distinctly separates it from other fan fictions. Unlike other fan fictions which are too much concentrated on a certain era, frozen in time, so to speak, Rowling in *HPPS* deliberately juxtaposes two distinct worlds. Moreover, the magic world not only exists along with the muggle world but also develops with the same velocity as the latter. Thus the two worlds do not have different time zones. This novelty in approach systematically worked to transform anybody's normal, hackneyed afternoons into something spellbindingly enigmatic and magical. No wonder *HPPS* was an overnight success.

The interplay of the muggle and the magic in Rowling, interestingly enough, leads to what Jean Baudrillard's views as 'disappearance of the real' in the postmodern world. For Baudrillard, the collapse of the universalist, metanarrative (Lyotard) of reality in postmodern times is due to the pervasive images from the media that blurs the distinction between reality and imagined. In other words, such images have pervaded our everyday life with the ideological myths of advanced capitalism to such a great extent that reality itself ceases to exist. In such a situation, one passes from the real to the hyperreal and our understanding of reality comes from a culture based on images. Like Lyotard, Baudrillard observes that we have entered a new postmodern era of simulations governed by information and signs and a new cybernetic technology:

According to Baudrillard signs no longer correspond to, or mask, their "real-life" referent but replace it in a world of autonomous "floating signifiers"; there has been an implosion of image and reality". This implosion [...], leads "into the simulated non-space of hyperreality". The "real" is now defined in terms of the media in which it moves. (Selden 205)

The demarcation between simulation and reality implodes, and along with this collapse, the very experience of the real world disappears and a 'hyperreal' world emerges:

[. . .] the word 'hyperreal' is used to signify more real than real, where the real has been produced by the model. Hyperreality is the state where distinctions between objects and their representations are dissolved, and one is left only with simulacra. (Barry 26-27)

Rowling's novel portrays this collapse of the real world and the subsequent emergence of a 'hyperreal' world. She uses elements of the muggle world to build up the magic world and vice versa, blurring the dividing line between the two. Moreover, in the 'hyperreal' world of text, the reality of the muggle world is not viewed as the only reality. The magic world too is alive and kicking. The activities of the magic world confirm its kinetic nature. Thus one is forced to admit that there is no ultimate reality as such but 'one is left only with simulacra' (Barry 27). Moreover, since the real becomes hyper, more than real, there remains no way left to return to the previous state of less real than the hyper. Thus throughout the novel no attempt is made to portray a world prior to the existence of the magic world or vice versa. Moreover, the two distinct worlds do not coalesce to form a new world, which might have a tendency to signify the ultimate reality and not hyperreality. Once the 'hyperreal' situation is established, it becomes absolutely impossible to return back to the earlier stage. In "The Murder of the Real", Baudrillard says that the murder of the real is not symbolic, but extermination:

Here it is both literal and more metaphorical. "Ex-terminis": it means that all things (and all beings as well) pass beyond their own end, beyond their own finality, where there is no reality anymore, nor any reason for being, nor any determination. Extermination means that nothing is left, no trace, not even a corpse. The Real has purely and simply disappeared. In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer be posed. (Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* 61-62).

The world of Harry Potter is a representation of such extermination of the concept of real world, for here magic, fear and violence coexist with a recognizable world of everyday from the beginning to the end. Such coexistence is an insignia of the 'murder of the real'. Therefore, the emergence of the 'hyperreal' generates an image of a world without any real origin.

Interestingly enough, the 'hyperreal' world of *HPPS* is constructed by Rowling's deft handling of the narrative which confirms a harmonious relationship between her vision and her design. She overlaps the two worlds by taking the raw materials from the muggle world to build the magic world and vice versa. Rowling's art of storytelling is to be understood by analyzing the narrative *a la* Gerard Genette's concept of Narratology. In his *Narrative Discourse*, French narratologist Gerard Genette distinguishes in narrative between 'recit', 'histoire' and 'narration'. 'Recit' denotes 'the actual order of events in the text', 'histoire' is the 'sequence in which those events actually occurred' and 'narration' is the 'act of narrating itself' (Eagleton 91). To shuffle the two worlds in *HPPS*, Rowling takes a hardcore real story – a child maltreated by his Uncle and Aunt after his parent's death – and presents it in a magical way. That is why whenever Harry is really tortured by any of his relatives, some magic takes place and Harry, unconsciously though, strikes back. For instance, a visit to a zoo is a real event, but how a deadly caged snake is suddenly freed to attack Dursley for maltreating Harry is something that logic cannot explain. As the novel progresses, the focus shifts from 4 Private Drive to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. What strikes one is the fact that this magic world does not appear as an alien universe. Rowling perfectly draws up the simulacra, for the Hogwarts School is just like another English Private School. Hogwarts has a library for its students, the students are divided into different houses, they wrestle with their homework, they indulge in various pranks and are severely punished. The most popular sport of the magic world, Quidditch, is a combination of soccer, cricket and basketball, popular games of the muggle world. However, owing to its fantasy flavour, this game is played in the air with broomsticks and not in the field or court with bat or ball. It must be stated that despite certain uniqueness of the magic world, one can hardly draw a clear cut dividing line between the two worlds. Lest readers attempt to make a distinction between the reality and the imagined, Rowling overlaps the two worlds by juggling the time order of the narrative. As a result, the two opposite worlds become interdependent and thus the sharp edges of a divider fail to leave its mark.

While analyzing the act of narration, Genette, in his book, has pointed out five categories of enunciation: Order, Duration, Frequency, Mood and Voice. These categories are used as tools for blurring the dividing line between the two worlds. The first category, 'Order', examines the time order of the narrative. Genette holds that a narrative sometimes anticipates an action which he calls 'prolepsis', at times flashes back to narrate past events or incidents which he calls 'analepsis'. Added to these, a reader may also discern discordances between story and plot in the narrative or 'anachrony'. In *HPPS* the whole episode of

Harry's parent's death is analeptically narrated to Harry by Hagrid, long before Harry goes into the magic world. Immediately, therefore, a connection between the worlds is established. So much convincing is the narrative discourse that during the analeptical narration, one literally travels back to the magic world and comes back again to the muggle when the narration ends. The proleptical narration, however, is more useful in the mingling of the two. The novelist's conviction about the success of Harry Potter novels is presented in an interesting way. That Harry would be a famous wizard someday is anticipated by Prof. McGonagall in her conversation with the headmaster of the magic school. She says Harry will be 'famous – a legend [...] there will be books written about Harry' (Rowling15). This can also be interpreted as Rowling's conviction about the success of Harry Potter novels. The reality of Rowling's conviction is stressed when this prediction takes place in the muggle world and not in the magic world where there is easy solutions to problems. But the connection between the two worlds takes place when Rowling voices forth her real conviction through a non-real being – a Professor of the wizards.

The transference of level is so swift and fast that a reader seldom gets time to position himself in one of the worlds. No sooner he prepares to settle himself in the muggle world, he is told to pack his bags for journeying into the magic. Rowling, therefore, keeps his readers always on their toes as she never dwells for long in one particular sphere. True, in *HPPS*, the main action unfolds in the magic world; but there are continuous references back to the muggle world. This is why a reader cannot concentrate wholly on one of the worlds. As a result of this, neither the narration becomes monotonous nor does distraction take place.

The most prominent factor that makes the narrative taut is the application of variety in the pace of the narrative. Instead of narrating at a same pace from the first to the last, Rowling gives separate time periods for describing separate events, depending on the priority of events. To do this she plays with the duration of different events in her narrative. Duration, as Genette says, signifies 'how a narrative may elide episodes, expand them, summarize, pause a little and so on' (91). In case of *HPPS*, Rowling deliberately expands her narrative when she has to describe Harry's heroic activities. The fight with a troll to rescue Hermione, the game of Quidditch and Harry's mission to save the Philosopher's stone from going into the wrong hands are all elaborately described. Contrastively, the early years of Harry's life where nothing much happens except the same routine of torture is summed up in a gist. The first paragraph of the second chapter, 'The Vanishing Glass', says it all: 'Nearly ten years had passed since the Dursleys had woken up to find their nephew on the front step, but Private

Drive had hardly changed at all' (Rowling 19). Realizing the fact that too much dragging can make the narrative thread loose, Rowling cleverly elides certain events, which are referred to while describing another event, as a passing comment. The expulsion of Hagrid from the Hogwarts School is never shown but is mentioned as a part of Harry's enquiry about the identity of Hagrid. What is stressed is Hagrid's present occupation as the 'Keeper of the Keys' at Hogwarts.

Rowling's method of referring to some events deserves special mention. This is because it involves her strategy of convincing the readers, causing in them a 'willing suspension of disbelief', to such an extent that they gladly accept that there is another world, apart from their own, but developing like their own. Certain events are described repeatedly throughout the novel until a reader is fully convinced that magic coexists with the muggle even today. If any reader is initially sceptical about any strange event, continual reference to that event compels them to accept that such a thing might have happened. As for example, Rowling innumerable times refer to the extra-ordinary power of Harry who as an infant was able to prevent an evil wizard from killing him. In that power struggle, though Harry could save himself, his forehead was wounded. As an insignia of that event, Harry has a scar on his forehead. Now whenever any character meets Harry for the first time, he/she is thunderstruck to see that scar on his forehead and Rowling gets a chance to narrate the event again and again. Evidently, this is Rowling's strategy to convince the reader into accepting their postmodern culture of "hyperreality" where it is possible for a coexistence of witches, wizards and magic along with any normal human being. This frequent narration of an event that happened once is one of the criteria of Genette's third category, 'Frequency'. Genette says that in a narrative analysis, 'Frequency' examines whether an event has happened once and is narrated once, or whether an event has happened once but is narrated several times or whether an event has happened several times and is narrated several times and lastly whether an event has happened several times but is narrated only once. Understandably, Rowling in *HPSS* strongly follows the second option as we see her repeating an incident several times that happened only once.

Rowling's view of a world where the muggle and magic coalesce is represented in such a way that a reader can feel and see what she purports to say. They are never intellectually distanced from what they are reading. In doing so, Rowling turns Booth down who claims that 'only immature readers ever really identify with any character, losing all sense of distance and hence all chance of an artistic experience' (Booth 200). Contrastively,

Rowling shares a harmonious relationship with her materials. There is no gap between what she tells and what she shows. For instance, she clearly says at the outset that Harry possesses some extraordinary power. When she represents Harry's magnanimity, there is no discrepancy between her telling and showing. Rather her showing becomes more interesting than her telling. Harry is not seen to be proclaiming himself as all powerful and superior, but grand things themselves choose Harry. This is best described when Harry goes to buy a magic wand for himself. In the magic world it is normally believed that wands choose their own wizards. After trying various kinds of wands, Harry gets hold of a wand with a phoenix feather and suddenly begins to feel warmth in his fingers. This wand is a grand wand. That Harry feels comfortable with a grand wand bears out the fact that Harry is no ordinary wizard but one from whom great things are expected.

It should be noted that Harry chooses a wand similar to the one that Voldemort had. Thus one may be tempted to conclude that Harry and Voldemort are somehow placed on the same platform. This will be a deceptive conclusion as Rowling reminds us that Voldemort couldn't kill Harry – he is made of a different mettle. Voldemort can, at best, wound him. The readers thus are shown what they were told. There remains no gulf to be bridged between telling and showing. Rowling's narrative thus acts as a site for the perfect amalgamation of the 'mimetic' and 'diegetic' elements, very much like her world vision. So one can safely infer that Rowling shares a harmonious relation with her materials. Genette terms the relation that a narrator shares with his/her material as 'Distance'. It examines whether a narrator is simply recounting the story or representing it. 'Distance', however, is a subdivision of Genette's fourth category, 'Mood'. Genette believes that a good narrative contains both the diegetic and the mimetic elements and Rowling's narrative perfectly corresponds to Genette's notion. 'Distance' also examines how the narrative is told: is it using direct speech or indirect speech or free-indirect speech to describe the events. In *HPSS* Rowling uses free-indirect speech while describing events from both the worlds. This is intentional as free-indirect speech is a 'midway point between Direct, and Indirect (or Reported) Discourse...or [is] a combination of the two which blends their grammatical characteristics in a distinctive mix' (Hawthorn 130). Evidently, this is a deliberate use and her real intention is to emphasize the linguistic connectedness of the two worlds. The second part of 'Mood' is known as 'Perspective', that is, the examination of the perspective from which the tale is told. Modifying the traditional concept of points of view, Genette introduces a new concept known as 'Focalisation'. In a narrative, Genette says, there can be different kinds of

focalization: 'external focalisation', 'internal focalisation', 'Zero focalisation' etc. Elaborating 'internal focalisation', Genette says that if the story is narrated by internally focusing a particular character, then that character becomes the 'focaliser' of the narrative. In *HPSS*, Harry is, undoubtedly, the focalizer as we are told everything from his perspective. Be it his desperateness to escape the tortures of his relatives in the muggle world or his amusement of suddenly becoming Harry Potter whom everybody seems to hold in high esteem in the magic world, the narrator says it all, keeping Harry at the centre of her narration. This focaliser of Rowling's narrative plays the focal role in establishing a connection between the two worlds. Harry can neither get rid of the magical happenings in the muggle world – 'letters form no one' keep pouring in – nor can he forget the muggle world when he is comfortably settled in the magic. The novel ends with Harry back in the muggle world – London's King's Cross – to spend his summer holiday with his cousin. Thus Harry moves in and out of the two worlds as if there is no distinction between them.

Rowling, however, is seen nowhere in the narrative. She remains a covert narrator as her focaliser carries out the tasks on her behalf. This makes the narrative of *HPSS* a 'heterodiegetic' one in contrast to a 'homodiegetic' narrative. While describing the fifth category, 'Voice', Genette concentrates on the role of the narrator. He says that a narrative can be primarily 'heterodiegetic' or 'homodiegetic'. According to Genette, in a 'homodiegetic' narrative, the narrator is present as a character in the story he narrates and in a 'heterodiegetic' narrative the narrator is absent from the story he narrates. So while 'heterodiegetic' narrative is 'other telling', a 'homodiegetic' narrative is 'same telling'. In *HPSS*, whenever Rowling has to convey anything, it is Harry who thinks and speaks aloud on her behalf. Therefore, Harry and Rowling are opposite sides of the same coin, just as Rowling's two worlds – a Simulacrum, identical copies without any metanarrative of absolute reality.

The most interesting fact is that the muggle world is scattered with magical elements while the magic world is based on a real foundation. The platform nine and three quarter at King's Cross, though fanciful, is rooted firmly in a modern railway station: placed invisibly between platforms nine and ten at King's Cross, London. The best example is the presence of Diagon Alley, the magical shopping mall, at the heart of the London city. When Harry enters the Leaky Cauldron, a magical pub, Rowling shows her readers that another world is prominent inside their so called real world. On the one hand, Diagon Alley is a preparatory step of Rowling for preparing the child wizard to experience the magic at Hogwarts, on the

other, it is Rowling's caution to her readers against any over simplification: it is, as if, Rowling is making her readers aware of their 'hyperreal' situations where reality and the imagined coexist. The same caution is carried forward in the magic world. Rowling here revises the concept of magic by injecting elements of reality in it. The house of Hagrid at Hogwarts, for instance, is an epitome of the real world present within the magic world. There is no magic within his cabin and he has to really strive hard for his existence. His inedible cakes are in sharp contrast to the abundant stream of mouth-watering meals enjoyed by the privileged in the Great Hall. This is done because Hagrid epitomises any ordinary man who has to pay for his faults.

The real and the imagined in *HPPS*, therefore, brilliantly intersect with each other, complementing and not standing aloof distinctly. Rowling's narrative strategies bring the muggle and the magic on a similar plane. Readers experience the collapse of reality and an emergence of a realm of a hyperreality. The result is that both the worlds operate 'along a roller-coaster continuum' (Storey 152). It is neither a technically perfect, scientific world nor a mysterious world where there is no logic and rationality. Rather Rowling's text is a *chiaroscuro* of the muggle and the magical, a world 'even better than the real thing' (Storey 152). No wonder Rowling enthralls not merely the children but also the entire postmodern generation who experience a slice of their postmodern condition while reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

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