

Learning to Die with the *Harry Potter*

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Introduction

In 1997, the best-selling children's book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) by J.K. Rowling (1965-) was released. This series were made into movies with success all over the world. In this thesis, it will be analyzed about the elements of this book as a beginning of children's literature.

I . Books for Children

Children's literature is one of the genres of literature especially recommended for readers aged zero to twelve. It involves various social issues reflected in the plots. Although children's literature has been undervalued, nowadays, it is not only read by children but also by adults and we should reconsider our views of the genre not undervalue it. Children's books often serve as text books for children. Looking at the role of children's literature as school books, Gillian Avery, a novelist and critic of the genre states that,

'But before we consider what children read for amusement before they had their own books, we should look at their schoolbooks. Historians of children's literature customarily brush these aside, but this is to jettison much of what formed the literature adult, and is particularly obtuse if applied to the pre-eighteenth-century period, when children had little else.' (1-2.Avery.Children's Literature an Illustrated History.1995.)

In this way, one of the roles of children's literature was to educate. Before reading a story for children, children need to learn the ABCs and after that, they can read stories and learn new words. It is indispensable to encourage literacy in children.

II . The Beginning of the Children's Book

After children learned grammar, they would read novels. The first children's books'

form was called the Chapbook. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the Chapbook was “A modern name applied by book-collectors and others to specimens of the popular literature which was formerly circulated by itinerant dealers or chapmen, consisting chiefly of small pamphlets of popular tales, ballads, tracts, etc.” In 1842, it was called the Chapbook for the first time while it used to generally be called Story Books or Penny Histories. Penny came from the fact that the book was sold for 1 penny, and History means the stories of that era. In short, this was a story book that could be bought for 1 penny. 12 pence (plural for penny) was 1 shilling so the price was 1/12th of a shilling in that era. In the early 18th century, the cheapest Chapbook was the same price as 1 liter of milk. Then, in the late 18th century, the most expensive one was the same price as 100 grams of bread and cost four to five times the price of the cheapest book, 4 or 5 pence. Akio Kobayashi who is known as a *Chapbook* (1988) advocate argued that the origin of the word Chapbook comes from “a book which is sold by Chapmen”, Chapmen being merchant.

Kobayashi also mentions that one of the characteristics of the Chapbook is its size of about 15 centimeters long by 10 centimeters wide. The book’s form, which fits easily in children’s hands, reminds us of Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902). It was made of paper printed on both sides and the pages were folded in two to make a book of 12 to 16 or 24 to 32 pages long, which made it so easy to produce. The most typical subjects of the Chapbook were rewritten nursery rhymes and epics. Some examples of popular titles that are still well-known today are *Jack*, *Giant Killer*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Cinderella*. As mentioned above, Kobayashi says that the Chapbook was used as a text book for reading, and it was also reading material for adults featuring history, magic, jokes, humorous stories, practical manuals, villain stories, fool stories, marriage stories, and love-stories.

III. Children’s Population and Disease in the 1700s

Most stories in the Chapbook for children were moral stories. On this subject, Kobayashi explains that during the Puritan Revolution in the middle of the 17th century in particular, many Chapbooks with the aim of intensifying Christian faith and morality were published. Margaret Kinnell, who is a professor of Loughborough University in the U.K., points out that the smallpox epidemic in the 1700s led to the death of many poor children who could not get necessary treatment. In that era, children’s deaths were a part of daily life, so it was not an uncommon thing. According to Thomas Malthus, who wrote *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), children’s deaths were due to an increase of the child population in the 1700s. This fact caught adults’ attention.

It was common to see large numbers of children in Puritan families; they were the expression of God's blessing on the faithful and their care and education was a sacred trust. The family stood under God's special protection so that the very first words taught to children had to have religious significance: phrases like 'God alone can save me' or 'learn to die'. The first words read by the child were also permeated by religious significance. (26. Kinnell. 2001.)

This implies that the Chapbook spread widely as a book to 'learn to die' in the 1700s, that the era was one where death was always close at hand for children and that the book was closely related to Christianity. In the same era, John Newbery wrote *Little Pretty Pocket-Book* (1744) which was one of the most popular children's books in the 1740s. (The Newbery Medal which is a Prize for children's books comes from it.) Unlike the Chapbook, it did not sell well due to the social climate of the time as it cost 6 to 7 pence, which was too expensive for poor children. These things lead us to easily imagine the Chapbook as a prototype of Children's Literature involving factors of Christianity to 'learn to die', and also as a prototype of the Moral Story.

IV. The Story of Learn to Die

For missionaries, the Chapbook was a good item to 'teach death' to children. This section will analyze 'life and death' in the *Harry Potter* series. These books involve many 'learn to die' elements.

The first book starts from the scene where Harry escaped being killed because of his parents' sacrifice. The 'Philosopher' mentioned in the title is Nicolas Flamel who lived long, but finally receives his death therefore, this is a 'receiving death story'. Then Harry killed Professor Quirell, parasited by Voldemort which brought a year of peace to the Wizarding World. Killing brings about a new spring.

In the second book, an anniversary party was held for the day when ghosts died. Subsequently, Harry saw that Dumbledore's Phoenix had burned and died to be reborn from the ashes. It can be considered as foreshadowing that everybody will die. Knowing that even the 'Phoenix' can die, readers are shown that the ending should come to everything but at the same time, this ending is expected to bring new life. Finally, Voldemort tried to be reborn through Tom Riddle's Diary, his Horcrux. However, Harry destroyed it, which can be thought of as killing his soul and that brings another peaceful year to the Wizarding World.

In the third book, Peter Pettigrew, who betrayed Harry's parents, turns out to be alive.

He was one of Voldemort's subordinates, who fed information about Harry's parents to Voldemort. Afterwards, Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, who had been falsely accused of, proved his innocence. Though it was not literally 'life' and 'death', Peter lost his 'life' as a human by betraying his friend and then lives as Ron's pet rat. On the other hand, though Sirius lost his social 'life', he finally obtained it again due to Harry's efforts which got him released from Azkaban, the social 'death'. This can be seen as Sirius' new 'life'. In addition, there is Buckbeak, who was also a falsely accused Hippogriff rescued from execution with Harry, Ron and Hermione's help.

In the fourth book, Pettigrew performed a ceremony to bring back Voldemort and from that, Voldemort was completely revived. At that time, Cedric Diggory, who was Harry's friend, was killed because he was an unexpected guest. This scene also depicted 'death' and 'rebirth'. In the fifth book, Sirius was killed during the fighting with Death Eaters by his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, showing everybody that Voldemort was reborn. However two years later, Sirius appeared as a ghost when Harry tried to use the Resurrection Stone. Here also, the ideas of 'death' and 'rebirth' are addressed.

In the sixth book, although Dumbledore was killed by Snape, he appeared again at the platform of the King's Cross station after Harry's death in the seventh book. Then Harry had a word with Dumbledore, and they looked at Voldemort suffering under the bench but Dumbledore said that nobody could save him. According to *The Interpretation of Dreams*, by Sigmund Freud who was a psychiatrist from Austria, the train is a symbol of 'death'. If you missed the train, it means you will not die yet. Though Dumbledore rode the train to death, Harry did not and was reborn.

Voldemort was suffering and near death from the Horcrux magic. Harry died at once, but he was reborn by using the Resurrection Stone. Voldemort missed the chance of killing Harry twice while Harry avoids the danger of death and survives again as 'the boy who lived'. Furthermore in the first book, King's Cross is where Harry found out that he was a wizard and it meant Harry's rebirth and death as a wizard.

Following quotes are of the scene where Harry chooses to die and meets Dumbledore at the platform of the King's Cross. It shows that Harry could finally get to the Deathly Hallows in the end. In this scene, Harry chooses to die and meets Dumbledore at the platform of the King's Cross.

'Master of death, Harry, master of Death! [...]' (Rowling, 2007, 782)

'You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.' (Rowling, 2007, 790)

As Dumbledore says, the Deathly Hallows are for people who are not frightened by their own death. Harry could choose without fear to die, so he finally was able to get to the Deathly Hallows. This can also be said of the Philosopher's Stone too: death comes to everybody. It is what Harry learned from the fight with Voldemort. About that, Dumbledore said, '[...] death is but the next great adventure.' (Rowling, 1997, 215)

This series was also a death story for the author, Rowling. In 1990, she lost her mother, and she became depressed. The plot of suffering, facing, receiving, and overcoming of a parent's death, is itself a characteristic of Harry and Rowling, who both deal with their parents' death.

In the seventh book, Hermione narrates the 'inner story' of *The Tales of the Three Brothers*. Here, the seventh book is the 'flame story' and *The Tales of the Three Brothers* are the 'inner story'. To summarize *The Tales of the Three Brothers*, it is a story about 'Death' and three brothers. The Characterized 'Death' schemes to get the three brother's lives by giving them items which they want. Although the eldest brother gets the Elder Wand, he is beheaded in his sleep. In the end, his life is taken by 'Death'.

The second brother gets the Resurrection Stone and he tries to restore his fiancée' to life, but she is not suited to the world of the living. Later then, he killed himself his life also taken by 'Death'. However, the youngest brother wants to have something which can let him escape from 'Death', so 'Death' gives him the Cloak of Invisibility. The youngest brother could escape from 'Death' for a long while. After that, he gives the Cloak of Invisibility to his son, and receives 'Death' as a friend when he gets old. Finally, 'Death' could have the three brothers' lives, however the youngest brother's death was different. Unlike his brothers, he died of old age, receiving 'Death' of his own will. In this way, the eldest brother was killed and the second brother killed himself due to going mad which can be thought of as death from an illness. The third brother receives 'Death' as his old friend, and he lives out his natural life span.

These three forms of death, being killed, illness and senility can be taken as children's typical deaths in the eighteenth century, so it can be said that *The Tales of the Three Brothers* is 'the receiving death story'.

The third brother was frightened of 'Death' but finally receives it willingly and defeats his fear of death. This plot resembles that of the Chapbook, the basis of children's literature.

Conclusion

From these arguments, it is clear that the plot of the *Harry Potter* series as children's literature are stories of 'learning to die'. Although children's literature has been

undervalued, it has dealt with many social issues. One of the roles of children's literature was as a text book. In 1700s, children's population has increased. It saw the rise of the Chapbook, which is the prototype of children's literature as activities for missionary work after the Puritan Revolution.

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