

## **HARRY POTTER – TRIVIAL OR NOT?**

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### **Abstract**

The article explores the extent to which the features of trivial literature appear in the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling. This is done in comparison with another popular children's series, *The Famous Five* by Enid Blyton, which was analysed by Igor Saksida. The main focus of the analysis is on the schematic representation of plot, characters and the exotic nature of the setting and time of the stories.

The *Harry Potter* books have been widely discussed in the past few years. Critical response was mainly fuelled by the unprecedented success of the series and too often the books themselves were considered marginal to the whole phenomenon. But when they were at the centre of critical assessment, one of the main issues was their triviality or non-triviality. I will try to establish whether they have the features of the former or the latter. To achieve this I will compare them to another series, *The Famous Five* by Enid Blyton, which Igor Saksida analysed and clearly established it as trivial in the layout of individual books as well as in their contents.

Critics have expressed a very wide range of assessments in regards to *Harry Potter*. Among those which are negative are such opinions as Anthony Holden's, "Disney cartoons written in words, no more" (Holden in Cowell), or William Safire's who believes that these books lead to "infantilization" of those adults that read them and that the result of it is not just "dumbing down; it is growing down" (Safire). Michael Winerip has a considerably more positive opinion, "[t]hroughout most of the book, the characters are impressively three-dimensional (occasionally four-dimensional!) and move along seamlessly through the narrative" (Winerip). Then there are those that acknowledge Rowling's talent for writing mediocre stories, "in terms of plot, the books do nothing very new, but they do it brilliantly" (Maguire).

A considerable amount has been written not just about *Harry Potter* but also about trivial literature but noticeably less about trivial children's literature. The phrase 'trivial literature' was first used by a Germanist Marianne Thalmann in 1923 (Saksida 212). Since children's literature is understood as a sub-type of literature in general and therefore has the same features as adult literature, we can suppose that trivial children's literature has the same or at least similar characteristics as its adult counter-

part. It does, however, have its specific features: i.e. the main character is usually a child, certain genres are not represented etc.

The understanding of trivial literature is very diverse. Opinions range from absolutely negative to the view that trivial literature is needed just as much as classic literature or even that the two are equal in their value. The main deficiency of trivial literature is its stylistic discrepancy which prevents it from achieving a level of classic literature (*ibid.* 214).

Aleš Debeljak sees a positive side in trivial literature: “The only step forward that metafiction actually managed to do, i.e. not only in principles and the apology of theoreticians, must be recognized in the activation of the inter-genre potentials of mass culture” (Debeljak 109)<sup>1</sup>. In post-modern understanding trivial literature can even be a way to express classic literature. Evaluation of trivial texts can therefore be questionable because we would need a criterion of quality to evaluate their value but there is no such measure. To frame and evaluate trivial literature we therefore need a different criterion.

Some critics see the main difference between classic and trivial literature in the fact that the latter offers the reader an escape from everyday life because no great effort is required for the understanding of this type of texts. Furthermore, the readers, through identification with the literary characters, experience things they could not experience otherwise (Kordigel 37). This explanation has been driven to such an extreme that some perceive trivial literature as a tool of the dominant ideology to simultaneously stimulate, satisfy and therefore pre-orientate consumer’s need of the imaginative (Jauss in Saksida 217). And even though the elements of ideological indoctrination are present in children’s trivial literature, it is nonsensical to claim that that is its primary purpose for “[i]dentification is only one of the phases in child’s development” (Saksida 217).<sup>2</sup>

The most characteristic feature of trivial literature is allegedly the schematic presentation of the characters and plot (Saksida 218). While reading, the reader knows in advance how the plot will develop, what will happen to the characters and what the ending will be. Because the story does not tell anything ‘new’ such books are redundant. This schematic representation is extended also to the level of motifs and themes. Trivial texts are therefore unlikely to contain allegorical themes, i.e. on the level of motifs the text is not a verbalization of a philosophical idea (*ibid.* 220). The expectedness that is characteristic of the development of the story is also characteristic of the themes. Škreb develops the typology of the themes in trivial literature: in an adventure story the omnipotent hero always wins and overcomes all obstacles; in a detective novel the theme is a hymn to the omnipotent human intellect which is able to return the world from apparent chaos back to order; and the theme of scientific and pseudo-scientific discoveries (Škreb in Saksida 188). This is not always valid, or at least not valid to the same degree, in the case of *Harry Potter*. I will try to show this with a comparison with the books from *The Famous Five* series by Enid Blyton which Igor Saksida used to illustrate the features of children’s trivial literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author of the article.

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I will analyse all six published books from the *Harry Potter* series, and five books randomly chosen by Saksida from *The Famous Five* series<sup>3</sup>: *Five on a Treasure Island (FTI)*, *Five go Adventuring Again (FAA)*, *Five go down to the Sea (FDS)*, *Five go to Mystery Moor (FMM)* and *Five on a Secret Trail (FST)*. The books have a suitable quality of language and a rich layout of the books (Saksida 223), but are otherwise trivial at first sight: the illustrations on the covers show key events or locations from each individual story and on each book cover there is an announcement of the next book that sets the right measure of suspense with an unfinished sentence, an exclamation or a question<sup>4</sup>: “Everything becomes even scarier because of the unexpected fog!” (*FDS*); “Did the two pilots betray their country? It all points to that but ...” (*FST*); “George’s friends immediately set out on a ‘chase’ ...” (*FMM*).

In *Harry Potter* the most obvious elements of trivial literature are the titles of the books and the book covers (Alton 142). All titles start with *Harry Potter and ...* and then continue with more or less catchy phrases. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* each in its own way stimulates children’s imagination. Especially, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* provide allusions to adventures and detective novels, while the others conceal a mystery which Harry will have to solve.

The book covers are different in American and British editions<sup>5</sup>, however all are colourful and have interesting images which mainly allude to adventures and exciting experiences. The American covers show Harry on a flying broom as he is trying to catch the snitch (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*); Harry clinging to a phoenix’s tail and flying past the Chamber of Secrets (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*); Harry and Hermione riding a hypogriff (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*); Harry trying to get past a dragon to the golden egg on a flying broom (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*); Harry in the company of older magicians who are watching something in candle-light (*Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*); and Harry and Dumbledore staring into a goblet (*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*). The British versions show Harry on the platform nine and three quarters in front of the Hogwarts Express; Harry and Ron in a flying car following the Hogwart’s Express on the ground; Harry and Hermione riding a hypogriff but with happier expressions than on the American version; Harry holding a golden egg and a wand with three teenagers in the background; a phoenix rising from the ashes; and Harry and Dumbledore caught in the midst of flames.

Even contents-wise the two series have some features of trivial literature: “the course of events, characters, space and time are formed on the basis of an evident cliché” (Saksida 223)<sup>6</sup>. The course of events in *The Famous Five* is divided into four arches:

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<sup>3</sup> The series altogether includes twenty-one books.

<sup>4</sup> This statement is only applicable to the Slovene editions and the sentences are translated by the author of the article.

<sup>5</sup> The Slovene editions have American covers, except for the fourth book which has the British covers.

<sup>6</sup> Translated by the author of the article.

1. first chapter (introduction),
2. second to fifth chapter (the location of the adventure is mentioned for the first time),
3. sixth to thirteenth chapter (describe the first adventures connected with the mysterious location),
4. climax (the solution of the mystery) and (a happy) ending. (*ibid.* 223)

The narration of the book always starts by one of the four friends (*FTI*: Julian, *FAA*: George, *FDS*: Dick, *FST*: George, *FMM*: George) and they either announce the start of an adventure or relate how bored they are. The second arch for the first time alludes to a possible adventure: a location can be mentioned (*FTI*: Kirrin island, *FST*: the archaeological site, *FMM*: Mystery Moor), an event (*FAA*: the bells that announce the escape of a prisoner, *FDS*: travelling group of actors) or a phenomenon which develops later on in the third arch. The third arch develops from the hints mentioned in the second arch and then continues into an adventure (*FTI*: discovery of an old shipwreck and a map, *FAA*: Dick gets an unusual message, discovery of the ruins, *FDS*: unusual light signals, *FST*: lights at night, people in the house, *FMM*: the gypsies and the story about the Bartle family). In the fourth arch the story reaches its climax and then descends into dénouement; in this part there are no retardations (longer descriptions of the surroundings, stories from the past). In the climax the plot is resolved (*FTI*: defeat of the impostors and discovery of the ingots, *FAA*: defeat of the thieves, discovery of the jewels, *FDS*: disclosure of the smugglers, *FST*: discovery of important maps, *FMM*: forged dollars).

Into the stories several retrospective tales are inserted and they function as explanations of the background (*FAA*: story about the escaped prisoner, *FDS*: Yan's great grandfather tells about the light signals and the looting of the ships, *FMM*: Ben tells about the moor and the Bartles, *FST*: Harry explains the secret about his identical twin Guy, *FTI*: George tells about the poverty of her family and about Tim). The closing sentences have a similar role as they comment on the finished adventure or announce a new one (“‘We’ll have more fun together, the five of us – won’t we?’ They will – but that’s another story!” (*FTI* 58); “Well, it wouldn’t be surprising if he did wink. He’s really had a most exciting time!” (*FDS* 181)).

Among the retardations are also detailed descriptions of food which appear only up until the second arch (“They had brought bread, cake, tins of fish, eggs, fresh fruit, tea, bottles of water and sweet drinks” (*FTI* 35); “So, after the children had had a dinner of cold boiled beef and carrots, with a dumpling each, and ‘lashings’ of peas and new potatoes, followed by a truly magnificent fruit salad and cream, ...” (*FDS* 51)) and the descriptions of nature which are excessively terrifying (“Dark clouds were flying low across the sky. The thunder came again. It sounded like a big dog in the sky” (*FTI* 19); “Thunder clouds had moved up from the west, gathering together silently, frowning and sinister. Then, from far off, came the first rumble of thunder” (*FDS* 66)). These descriptions appear mainly at the beginning of the third arch when the events start to lead into the beginning of an adventure and the stormy, dark weather and mysterious locations create a suitable atmosphere for the events.

I made a similar analysis for the *Harry Potter* series and the results showed that the structure is not so simple as it is in *The Famous Five* series. There is a big differ-

ence already in the size of individual books – the first three are considerably shorter than the last three, therefore the chapters cannot be divided into arches as simply as *The Famous Five* books. The story of the first two books starts with Mr. and Mrs. Dursely, only then is attention focused on Harry. In the fourth book the beginning is slightly different: the narration starts with Frank Bryce who is then killed by Lord Voldemort. The narration in the fifth book starts with Harry and in the sixth with the British Prime Minister and the Minister of Magic. The first arch consists of the first chapter in all books – they offer a sort of an introduction: in the first book the story starts ten years ago when Harry had lost his parents; in the second Harry is bored and can't wait till school starts again; in the fifth book the first chapter already foreshadows the later adventure because the story starts with an attack by the dementors, the creatures that can suck one's happiness out of them; in the sixth book the new Minister of Magic is introduced when he pays a visit to the British Prime Minister. The second arch consists of a varying number of chapters in each individual book. In the first book it extends from the second to the ninth chapter where Harry realizes who he is, and what Hogwarts is; he meets new friends and new professors. In the second book, the second arch also extends over a number of chapters. Dobby warns Harry not to go to Hogwarts but in spite of this Harry and Ron fly to the school in a flying car, beginning an adventure which is foretold by the use of insults targeting the young wizards and witches from muggle, i.e. non-magical, families.

In the fifth book the arches extend over a greater number of chapters because the book is bulkier than the others. Additionally, such division into arches may not be very suitable because the book does not relate one main adventure, instead the story includes several secondary stories that could be considered as retardations but when we consider the fact that there is no main story they actually form the essence of the novel. The three friends in this book do not have a task or a mystery to solve; it also seems that they are not as in control of the situation as they were in the previous four books; someone (i.e. Umbridge, Lord Voldemort) constantly manipulates them and directs them towards deeds that lead to the climax of the plot. The tale can nevertheless be divided according to the level of connectedness of the events to the climax of the plot: the third arch starts with the sixteenth and ends with the thirty-fourth chapter; in this part the students form Dumbledore's Army, Harry has a vision of an attack on Arthur Weasley, the Army is discovered and Dumbledore escapes, Harry has a vision about Sirius and the children go to the Ministry of Magic. The climax appears in the thirty-fifth and thirty-sixth chapters where the final battle takes place. The dénouement follows in the thirty-seventh and thirty-eighth chapters.

There is a very similar division for the sixth book. The second arch consists of chapters from the second to the ninth – they describe several events that will be important later on in the book: for example Snape's oath to the Malfoys, Harry meets the new professor, Harry, Hermione and Ron find out that Draco is planning something, Harry gets the book with the Half Blood Prince's commentaries at their first potions class. In the following chapters the plot thickens. With Dumbledore's help, Harry looks into the past and gets to know Lord Voldemort's beginnings and at the same time he follows Draco in the present and tries to discover what he is planning.

The plot reaches its climax in the twenty-seventh chapter which is followed by a denouement but without a happy ending.

The main retardations in the fifth book are Hagrid's tale of his trip to see the giants; the story of how Hermione convinces Rita Skeeter to write an interview with Harry; the piece of Snape's memory that partially explains the reason why Snape hates Sirius, Remus, and James Potter, and the vocational guidance which is offered to the students before their final exams. Similar retardations appear also in the other five books. Mostly they include descriptions of celebrations and feasts (food is just as important as in *The Famous Five* series), the five hundredth deathday of Nearlyheadless Nick, the history of the Chamber of Secrets, quidditch, the magical sport, the story about Harry's parents, Harry and Ron's problems with girls, Bill and Fleur's story, and other shorter stories that are abundant in *Harry Potter* because the books are also very detailed – the magical world is presented down to the smallest element.

The second element that Saksida analyzes in *The Famous Five* series is the characters. He divides them into passive and active characters and then adds several subgroups (Saksida 225).

In this series there are four main characters: George, Dick, Anne, Julian, and dog Tim to which are often ascribed human characteristics. The children are very resourceful and brave (except for Anne), even the dog seems to understand them when they talk to him. Saksida, further on, explains that the secondary child characters are not equal to them which is already shown in their physical appearance: Yan (*FDS*) and Sniffer (*FMM*) are dirty and disorderly and only the four friends manage to 're-educate' them (*ibid.* 227). The only active grown-ups are the children's adversaries who are characterized by rudeness and brutality and their physical appearance is somewhat eccentric (*ibid.* 228). All other grown-ups are passive because they don't hinder the children in their adventures but they do not help them either (their parents allow them to go camping (*FAA*, *FMM*), the police do not believe them (*FAA*)). We can conclude from this that characters are presented schematically, too, but we have to point out that the characterization is not black and white any longer but slightly more complex (*ibid.* 228).

The analysis of characters in *Harry Potter* is not so simple as in *The Famous Five*; in the six published books there are over one hundred characters presented altogether. Exclusively passive characters are few, the majority of them are active, the only difference is that in some books they are more active and in others less. Among the main active characters are children: Harry, Ron, Hermione, Malfoy as an adversary, in the fifth book we also find Neville, Ginny, and Loona. Among the grown-up active characters are not only adversaries as in *The Famous Five* but they also include Dumbledore, Sirius, Remus, Snape (he is shown as an antagonist only in the sixth book), and Hagrid. Additionally, this category also includes Lord Voldemort as the main foe and all his helpers: Quirrell, the Death eaters, Wormtail, Crouch jr. Also in this group are Umbridge, Slughorn, and Minister Fudge who are not real adversaries but they are not Harry's helpers, either. However, they are of major importance to the story because they influence the plot with their actions (i.e. Umbridge hinders Harry and his friends; Fudge refuses to believe that Lord Voldemort is back; Slughorn gives

Harry a fundamental memory for the understanding of Voldemort's plans and actions etc.).

The passive characters include mainly classmates and professors who are marginal to the plot development. Among children these are: Fred and George Weasley, Seamus Finnigan, Parvati and Padma Patil, Lavender Brown, Cedric Diggory, Cho Chang, Fleur Delacour, Viktor Krum and others. Among grown-ups these are Molly, Arthur, Bill, Percy and Charlie Weasley, prof. Sprout, prof. Flitwick, prof. McGonagall, prof. Binns and others.

From this division it is obvious that the arrangement and roles of the characters in *Harry Potter* are considerably more complex. And if Saksida says for the characterisation in *The Famous Five* that it is not anymore simply black and white, my analysis suggests that many characters in *Harry Potter* are three-dimensional and do not only represent types of characters. Among the three-dimensional characters are Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, Sirius, Hagrid, Ginny, Neville, Remus and Snape. The others are not represented in black and white, either since we learn a lot about the reasons behind their actions (i.e. Draco Malfoy and Lord Voldemort).

In *Harry Potter* the characters are therefore not schematic, they are elaborate, very realistically characterized and they develop and mature through individual stories which is especially valid for child protagonists.

The third element analysed is the time and setting of the stories which is supposed to be very exotic and unusual but with a homely atmosphere. The settings in *The Famous Five* are just like that: the ruins on Kirrin Island (*FTI*), the camp in the ruins (*FAA*), the abandoned lighthouse (*FDS*), the archaeological site and the ruins of a house (*FST*), and the camp on the Mystery Moor (*FMM*). Time is exotic from the point of view of the tales about the past: tale about the looting of the ships (*FDS*) and about the history of the Mystery Moor (*FMM*). However, Saksida believes the time of the main story is also "exotic" since it takes place during the school holidays (Saksida 229).

The setting in *Harry Potter* is significantly more static, the majority of books take place at Hogwarts, partly on Privet Drive and in the Burrow. More exotic is their fantastic nature: platform nine and three quarters, the Forbidden forest, Diagonal Alley, the moving stairs at Hogwarts, subterranean corridors and dungeons, Chamber of secrets, Ministry of Magic, Shrieking Shack, Hogsmeade, Little Hangleton, the scene of the world championship in quidditch etc. If we consider that fantasy is not a genre of trivial but of classic children's literature we can generalize this also on fantastic features of the settings in *Harry Potter* which means that in comparison to *The Famous Five* the locations do not have trivial features. Something similar could be said about the time of the stories: if we regard the time of holidays in *The Famous Five* as exotic then we can infer from this that the time of a school year is un-exotic. We can reach the same conclusion if we bear in mind that a school story does not belong among trivial genres, therefore the time of a school year as one of its fundamental characteristics cannot be considered a feature of trivial literature. *Harry Potter* differs from *The Famous Five* in the category of time and setting of the story in that it does not belong to trivial literature in regards to these two categories.

The *Harry Potter* series contains, with regard to the above analysis, only some of the elements of trivial children's literature. The most obvious are the book covers and the catchy titles of the books. But the series cannot be classified as trivial since it surpasses this label in several respects, among the most remarkable are the well-rounded main characters who develop over time and the fantastic nature of the setting of the stories.

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