Common patterns in acclaimed and popular fantasy fiction

Based on
The Lord of the Rings
by J.R.R.Tolkien
and
The *Harry Potter* series
by J.K.Rowling

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Abstract

The apparent successes and international recognition and fame of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and recently Rowling's *Harry Potter* have given rise to the attention of media towards fantasy fiction based stories and programs. Fantasy fiction stories have been written throughout the ages however it seems that none have gained as much recognition as these two stories have, and the recent films based on these two books are evidence of that. Therefore the question arises whether these two novels have something in common in their style and pattern that have given them such public appeal. I have attempted to answer this question by dealing with various factors of the stories and comparing each author's styles and approach to them. Many factors are comprised in the stories, but I have dealt with only the major ones being the *Author's Background, Magic, Language, Characters, Symbolization and Imagery.*

If there is a common style and pattern in all these factors of the stories then the cause of their success is defined. However that is not the case. The research and study undergone, in fact denies such a pattern being maintained throughout all these factors. So the question to what is the cause of the worldwide recognition of these two novels out of all the novels of the same genre remains unanswered. I have provided the answer to this briefly in the *Conclusion* of the essay. To state very concisely, the reason lies in the effect made by each of the two stories on the audience. The impact being very deep is common. Both *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* reach out in their fascinating fantasy fashion towards the public and relate to their moods, emotions and feelings.

(283 words)

Introduction

During the past few years a change in the nature of the public appeal in entertainment can be observed. The demand for movies and TV programmes based on magic and fantasy-fiction has increased immensely. The movie *The Return of the King,* based on Tolkien's third novel of *The Lord of the Rings,* can be seen to head some of the Top-Ten lists in the U.K. and the U.S.. Children are crazy about the 'Potter hairstyle' and the Firebolt is now the most wanted form of conveyance. A bit of research will show us that the root and source of this 'change of taste' goes back to the publishing of the first Harry Potter book. J.K.Rowling became the fastest person to become a millionaire. Since then, a sort of fantasy-fiction craze has erupted among the masses. The Lord of the Rings trilogy came back to life with a new glamour, and many more TV series and movies of this genre were set to making. The world media has given a profound push to especially these two stories, *The Lord of the Rings,* and *Harry Potter,* and similarly has been the response of the public masses. Many fantasy-fiction stories have been told throughout the ages, such as the famous *Dragonlance* series and the *Shannara* series by Terry Brooks, however these have not been given as much fame and recognition as these two stories have. Fantasy-fiction no doubt appeals to the public as a whole, adults as well as youngsters. So why have some stories gained more fame and recognition internationally, than the others? Why hasn't Terry Brooks captured the hearts of the public as much as J.R.R.Tolkien and J.K.Rowling have? Although *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* vary considerably in their style, language, and plot – do they follow a certain pattern that appeals to the public? If they do, to what extent is this pattern followed throughout the various aspects of a fantasy–fiction novel? I have created and put forward these questions, and have attempted to answer them in this essay. I hope that you will

not misunderstand me as a mere fan of fantasy-fiction who is overawed by these two books, therefore chooses to write an extended essay on them. On the contrary, I am an interested and critical reader who has attempted to appreciate the literary values of these two fine pieces of work. I have also seen the impact and influence of these two novels on every age group of society, and I plan to perform an in-depth study to understand the reason of this. I hope I will do justice to both J.R.R.Tolkien, J.K.Rowling and their works.

1. Author's Background

I have considered the historical and professional background of the authors, because literature is said to be a product of the author's life, in which he/her reflects his/her experiences, emotions, pains and pleasures.[1] I have kept it foremost of the rest of the factors, because the author is the fountainhead of the product. But the background may not necessarily be a part of the pattern for fantasy-fiction has largely to do with a deep imagination. People from different backgrounds may have similar imaginations.

Tolkien experienced war. When he was a student at Oxford, World War I broke out. After finishing his degree, Tolkien joined the Lancashire Fusiliers as a second lieutenant. He was sent to France in 1916 where he witnessed the terrifying new mechanisms of modern warfare. Tolkien fought in the Battle of the Somme, a vicious engagement in which over a million people were either killed or wounded. In the trenches of World War I, Tolkien began recording the horrors of war that would later surface in *The Lord of the Rings (LOTR),* which I will discuss in the point about *symbolization.* J.R.R. Tolkien devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge, especially the study of language. He was an Oxford professor of Anglo-Saxon for much of his professional life.

Rowling however, has not experienced such a dramatic life. On the contrary, she lived a simple and initially unsatisfying life. She had a mediocre job, and was a freelance writer. She used to write in café's during her free time. She was divorced and had a child. She tried to publish her writings but she was at first rejected by many publishers. At last Scholastic accepted to publish her works, after which her wealth was compared with the Queen of England's.

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[1] *Al-Umdat* by Ibn Rasheeq

Thus, a significant pattern is not seen in the historical and professional background of the two authors. Tolkien was inspired by his experiences; however it seems that Rowling tried to find retreat from her upsetting beginnings through fantasy-fiction.

2. Magic

When first considering the magical factor in both the books, one might say that there is a definite pattern similar in both books; due to the assumption of most people that fantasy-fiction has everything to do with magic. However this is not the case.

Harry Potter has everything to do with magic. The story revolves around it. It is about an entire wizarding community kept secret from the so-called Muggles, who all pursue their academic lives in schools of wizardry all around the world. In England the school of wizardry, Hogwarts, is where the story is based. Children of magical origin or potential learn and excel in the field of wizardry and witchcraft. Even their sports, their commodities are all magical. It is a figment of the author's imagination, where she manifests her urge to find release from the limitations of life and its trivialities. The wizarding community also includes magical creatures such as Dragons, Pixies, Griffins, and Phoenixes.

In *LOTR* however every character does not possess magical powers. On the contrary, among all the races of Middle-Earth, only Elves and Men are associated with magic. Moreover, unlike in *Harry Potter* where it has got to do with the genes, magic in *LOTR* is more of an acquired knowledge and skill. It is practiced and learnt. With respect to Men, it could be said that Elves have magic in their blood. However with Men it is solely and acquired skill, and in LOTR, only Gandalf and Saruman are seen to have mastery in it. Therefore the magical factor is not parallel in both stories.

One might ask that despite the lack of magical practice in LOTR, isn't it filled with magical creatures?

The word 'magical creatures' is not correct semantically. Because the word 'magical creatures' implies such creatures that are figments of the imagination; creatures other than Men that have intelligence. However the word magic is defined as, "the use of secret forces to control events and people,"[2] Such a meaning does not apply to these creatures for they don't hold such power; not in Harry Potter or LOTR. I must add though however, that the effect magic has, and so-called magical creatures have on the readers is very similar, and that is of human fascination, which I will discuss hopefully in the appropriate context.

We may conclude on this point that with regard to magic, both stories do not follow a similar pattern. With regard to magical creatures however, both stories are parallel to an extent, containing Dragons, Trolls and Elves.

3. Language

In LOTR, the English language is refined and advanced. Although a fantasy-fiction story book, it was once a part of the English syllabus in England. Such is the quality of language, due to Tolkien's deep interest and knowledge of language and linguistics. Jane Chance, Professor of English states,

> "Tolkien well understood the power of the written and spoken word, philologist that he was—he knew that words were magic. ... For Tolkien, words provide the means to unify and extend the social community, to understand the various species of nature, and to cross the boundaries of time (past and present) and space (the equivalent of earthly supernal, and infernal in Middle-earth)."[3]

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[2] *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*

[3] http:/www.nationalgeographic.com/

Due to the advanced use of English, not to mention the seriousness of the story as well, LOTR is a novel for adults more than a children's book. *Harry Potter* is also taught and read to students as a part of the syllabus in England today, but for children. Rowling's use of language is not advanced, but of the spoken, everyday tongue in England. But the pattern dealing with linguistics, which coincides with both novels, is the creation of a new language.

Tolkien again surpasses Rowling in this pattern. His ability and interest in this field is fascinating. Throughout his life he created several of his own languages; from these, *Black Speech, Elvish (Quenya), and Dwarvish* are used in *LOTR*. The elvish high language *Quenya* holds its roots in Finnish. Names created in the text, such as Saruman, Sauron, Mordor, and Middle-earth are derived from Old Norse Icelandic and Old English tongues. His regard for language was so high that he once said, "The invention of languages is the foundation. The 'stories' were made rather to provide a world for the languages than the reverse."[4] For Tolkien, language was the beginning of a culture rather than merely a product of it. Thus, such linguistic tools have an immense affect on the readers. It helps them to feel that they are truly being drawn away towards a world of fantasy. The impact of this in fact still continues, where a recent newspaper stated that an academic institute in the U.K. provides students courses on the Elvish language, in order to promote the thought of acquiring knowledge for knowledge's sake.[5]

He has furthermore used this tool in the formation of songs and poems for each race in their language, thus creating a history and culture for each race. Poetry is written and read to create a fantasy out of the real world, but Tolkien has used it to create his fantasy into a real world.

Rowling has also created her own language, and consequently her own culture of wizardry. The extent of her

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[4] http:/www.nationalgeographic.com/

[5] Khaleej Times newspaper, March 2004

creation of a new language is not to the extent of Tolkien's, which may not have attracted her desired audience, the children. But with regard to vocabulary and terminologies, Rowling has managed to create an exclusive wizard tongue. For the wizard, a normal human being without magical potential is called a 'Muggle'. Wizards of non-magical origin are called 'mudbloods'. Thus, magical names are attributed to things of everyday wizard use. These new words are employed in the English language, but still, are successful in creating the effect of an exclusive magical society and culture, which draws and fascinates the reader.

A mild attempt is made by Rowling in creating an entirely new language, which is in the spell enchantments. Here she manages to bring out the mystery and magic of the wizarding society. Enchantments in a language other than English inspire the reader with a feeling of unexplained attraction.

In this field, evidence of a common pattern in both books is provided. Both authors have attempted, in their own style, to create a new language or set of vocabulary, that provides the reader with the sense of a society or culture that is out of the normal and overawing, giving him a ground for his own dreams and imagination.

4. Characters

In any story, the author focuses on sketching each character with a significant personality and particular attributes, more than the plot, because the characters are those who give the story life. And if reader finds themselves in any of the characters, then the author has hit the bull's eye. Because a story only becomes profoundly successful when the reader feels that he has become a part of the story; when he feels that he is living in the book. *LOTR* and *Harry Potter* have seemed to fulfill this task. Let us see if there is a common pattern in both the books.

We will consider the hero of the stories first. In *LOTR* Frodo Baggins has been portrayed as the hero of the book. He is given the suicidal task of being the ring-bearer, and to set out and destroy the ring in Mount Doom. He is young and shown to be vulnerable at times, and in need of advice from the wise Gandalf. He is not infallible as some stories portray their heroes. On the contrary, he is portrayed as a brave young man (for a hobbit), who learns from many of his mistakes. Similarly *Harry Potter*, who is the focus in Rowling's book, is not a complete personality. He is shown to have many faults. He is brave but very irrational, only to be quieted down and lectured by his friend Hermione Granger. In fact he is very weak in some of his spell casting, but bears various skills in which he is unique from the rest. He is also very emotionally disturbed, being an orphan, and the centre of attraction and criticism due to his historical scar. These various attributes greatly affect the appeal of the readers, which I will discuss in its appropriate place.

There is another significant similarity dealing with the personalities of both Frodo Baggins and Harry Potter. That is Harry Potter is greatly influenced by the image of his deceased father and his fame as a wizard. He strives to find out more about his parents, and at one place in the *Order of the Phoenix* where he learns about his father's arrogance, becomes very depressed. His innate bravery and valour are shown to be inherited from his parents. Similarly Frodo is deeply influenced by his Uncle Bilbo Baggins, the hero of *LOTR*'s prequel *The Hobbit*. His bravery and lust for adventure, and to defy the nature of the everyday hobbit is inherited by Frodo. Therefore, he is chosen by Gandalf to continue his uncle's legacy.

Both authors have given their heroes another common factor in their character. Both Frodo and Potter are strangely and directly bonded to the dark and wicked sorcerers of their own stories. Frodo is drawn towards the Eye of Sauron, through the power of the ring. Through it Sauron attempts to lead the Nazgul to him and ultimately possess him. Potter is similarly bonded with the dark wizard Voldemort. Through

the incident when he was attacked by him, and given his famous scar, a spiritual or magical bond is created the entities of good and evil. Potter can feel the wrath and pain of the Dark Lord in his scar. Later on in the story, Voldemort becomes fully aware of this, and attempts to possess him and lure him towards himself.

Speaking of the evil entities in both stories, there is a considerable similarity in both the Dark Lord's. Sauron is the powerful Lord, learned and all-mighty in the Dark-arts who has been defeated in a war ages before the story starts. He lives in a spiritual and insubstantial form that tries to redeem his original form by calling for the Ring of Power. But even though a type of wraith, he has immense power and has already gathered an enormous army to vanquish Middle-Earth.

In the same way, Voldemort is a Dark Wizard who has been defeated in his attempt to conquer the world, years before the story begins. He prevails in his spiritual form, trying to gather strength to redeem his bodily form. Even though he is insubstantial, his immense powers still allow him to live and recruit his broken army once again, but gradually. Later in the story he manages to acquire his material form and begins to continue his evil legacy.

Both stories further resemble each other in their character formation with the examples of Gandalf and Prof. Dumbledore. They resemble each other so much it seems that Rowling has been inspired by Tolkien's Gandalf to create a Prof. Dumbledore. Both have been described as having the same physical features, the same mixture of wisdom, silence, and sense of humour. Both of them are the most powerful forces of good in their respective roles, and the brains behind the plans to 'save the day'. They also are never there when they are most needed, until they appear most unexpectedly at the most crucial moments. For instance, during the invasion of Helm's Keep, when the Men are certain of their defeat, Gandalf surprisingly shows up with new hope for victory alongside an army of Men who were exiled by the previously possessed king. Similarly,

Harry Potter is in dire trouble in *The Chamber of Secrets* when he is confronted by Riddle, until when the Basilisk is about to strike him, he is helped by the Phoenix who is summoned by Potters faithfulness towards Dumbledore. Another case is when Dumbledore magically shows up at the Ministry of Magic, during the fight between Voldemort and his followers and the members of The Order of The Phoenix, just about when nothing could go worse.

Then we have the hero's best companion. Both stories have one, and they too follow an apparent pattern in their personalities. Frodo's partner is Samwise Gamgee, and Potter's pal is Ronald Weasley. Both of them are similar in the fact that they are not as outgoing as their companions, nor that smart or witty, however they are both a symbol of faithfulness, loyalty and steadfastness, despite their being overshadowed by the heroes of the stories.

Frodo however does not have a female companion like Hermione in *Harry Potter*. The female companionship provides a touch of passion and romance, and creates appeal through the pain and misunderstanding between males and females. This factor of the story is played by Aragorn and Arwen in *The Lord of The Rings.*

There is another similarity in the pattern of characters. The heroes in both stories are provided with moral support and some sort of guidance through a certain character. This character is a source of the feeling of backup and security for the hero throughout the story. Tolkien provides Frodo with Aragorn who plays this role. He is the heir of Isildor; wise and courageous who supports and believes in Frodo's quest. Rowling provides Harry with Sirius in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* who turns out to be the closest friend of his fathers and consequently, his godfather. He provides moral support and counsel to Harry in the story.

Another similarity that can't be ignored is between Dobby and Gollum. The match is definitely not absolute. Dobby is very fond and indebted towards Harry, whereas Gollum, wretched and foul, would kill Frodo if he had the chance. However the picture that is drawn of them both,

along with the sense of pity that the reader feels for both is a source of resemblance and similarity between them.

Other characters do not show any resemblance in their roles or personalities such as Hagrid, Gimli, Legolas and others.

Finally it may be concluded in this factor that there is a considerable pattern that both the authors have followed in their character selection. In fact all the characters that play a major role in the stories have their match in the respective book. The pattern and similarity is obvious.

5. Symbolization

I have based this factor of comparison on what I have found in my research, not on my own perceptions. If I had done so it would have been unjust for I would have been able to form any symbolization that I may have found parallel to the stories.

"An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience," Tolkien acknowledged once. [6] Critics have studied the implications of the story, and some have come up with their own ideas of Tolkien's symbolization. They say that *LOTR* is an allegory for World War I or II. It was written during World War II and follows the rise of a great evil threatening to envelope the world, and the ring was meant to symbolize the atomic bomb. Likewise, the characters Sauron and Saruman, both tyrants, are imaginary characters meant to represent Hitler or Stalin. However a professor Daniel Timmons notes, the beginnings, the processes, and the ends of The Lord of the Rings and World War II are wholly different.

In the foreword to the second edition of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien wrote, "By 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead." The reader cannot help but notice that

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[6] http:/www.nationalgeographic.com/

the Dead Marshes of Mordor is eerily reminiscent of World War I's Western Front and its utter devastation of life.

Unfortunately I have not been able to come across any piece of work that discusses symbolization in *Harry Potter*, which leaves me to say that there may be such a discussion later on, or that critics have not seen this factor relevant or significant to the story.

6. Imagery

The settings of a story create an effect on the reader as well. That is why authors tend to give detailed picture of the settings where the story takes place, even though it may be irrelevant to the direct story, because it gives the reader a feeling of the surroundings.

LOTR is rich of natural surroundings, varying from meadows to dense forests, plainlands to deserts, rivers to oceans and much more. Tolkien was a born naturalist. Rowling however has set her stories in two different backgrounds. One is the streets of Britain, busy with people and media and technology. The other is the school grounds which offer the ancient and culturally rich atmosphere, in order to create that old magical effect on the readers.

Conclusion

Six factors of the books were discussed and compared, in order to create a ground on which this essays research question may be answered. The factors which portrayed a certain pattern that both authors have apparently followed are *Language,* and *Characters.* They have not followed an apparent pattern in *Imagery, Magic, and Symbolization* and neither do the authors' backgrounds match. According to the research undertaken the two stories have not followed a certain pattern.

The worldwide success of both the books may be thus attributed to the effect both stories have on the audience in

their own styles. The pattern and style, in spite of differing in both books, achieve a common end with their audience. The world today has become computerized and mechanical. Technology has replaced the virtues of nature, and practicality and science try to thwart mankind's dreams and fantasies. Furthermore terrorism and war have only created havoc and devastation globally, without giving any satisfaction and rest to either side. The public has actively responded to both these stories for they offer surreal worlds in which the reader finds retreat from the monotony, machinery and modern complications of this world. The reader finds a setting in which he can live his dreams and fantasies, may it be to fly, defeat evil, live an immortal peaceful life, or set off on dangerous adventures, and the characters and plot relate to his inner emotions. Both books provide this feeling and situation for their audience's, thus resulting in public appeal and worldwide success. These two stories have outdone other books of the same genre by the way they relate to the audience through their defined plots, characters of varied personalities, and effective use of language.

Thus the question is answered that both authors have taken to their own roads in their works, yet,in order to reach the same fascinating and dreamlike destination, which the reader can hope to find in both the books undoubtedly.

(3895 words)

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