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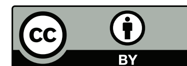

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“Yer a Wizard”: How Fantasy Fiction Facilitates Playing with Emotions and Reinforces Magical Thinking

Abstract:

In this paper, the author argues that fantasy literature serves as a cognitive playground that helps us practise and reaffirm our magical-thinking intuitions. He demonstrates how, just as in magical practices, magic in fantasy fiction becomes a tool for overcoming difficulties and restoring a sense of balance, security, and control. He contends that supernatural agents can be seen as emotional correlatives, giving faces and voices to emotional states and describing a phenomenon from the perspective of how it feels, rather than from a rational viewpoint. This opens up a possibility to articulate those aspects of our emotional lives that are difficult to express in terms of mimetic representation. He posits that, through distancing, fantasy fiction creates a safe environment for engaging with such emotional states, in which magic restores our intuition that no matter how dark our situation appears, we have an inner capacity to overcome it. The main example that is used in the paper is J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series.

Key words:

children’s and young adult literature, emotions, fantasy, *Harry Potter*, magic, magical thinking, supernatural phenomena

„Jesteś czarodziejem”. Jak literatura fantasy pomaga oswajać emocje i wzmacnia myślenie magiczne

Abstrakt:

Celem artykułu jest analiza literatury fantastycznej jako poznawczego placu zabaw, który pomaga nam ćwiczyć i wzmacniać przejawy myślenia magicznego. Autor artykułu ukazuje, jak magia w fantastyce, podobnie jak w praktykach magicznych, staje się narzędziem do przezwyciężania przeszkód i przywracania poczucia

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równowagi, bezpieczeństwa oraz kontroli. Nadprzyrodzeni pośrednicy mogą być postrzegani jako emocjonalne korelaty, które nadają formę stanom uczuciowym zamiast ukazywać zjawiska nie z racjonalnego punktu widzenia, lecz przez pryzmat emocji. Otwiera to możliwość przedstawienia tych aspektów naszego życia uczuciowego, które trudno ująć w ramach reprezentacji mimetycznej. Autor uważa, że dzięki zachowaniu dystansu fantastyka tworzy bezpieczne środowisko do oswajania stanów emocjonalnych, w których magia przywraca intuicję, że niezależnie od tego, jak ponura wydaje się nasza sytuacja, posiadamy wewnętrzną siłę do jej przezwyciężenia. Głównym przykładem, który zostaje wykorzystany w artykule, jest seria J. K. Rowling o Harrym Potterze.

Słowa kluczowe:
literatura dziecięca i młodzieżowa, emocje, fantastyka, *Harry Potter*, magia, myślenie magiczne, zjawiska nadprzyrodzone

Introduction

Forbes reports that the sales of fantasy and science fiction books doubled in 2010 (Rowe, 2018). David Brawn, a director at HarperCollins and publisher of J. R. R. Tolkien’s works, estimates that *The Lord of The Rings* books (1954–1955) have sold 150 million copies worldwide. Along with that, 50 million other Tolkien’s works have been sold (Collett-White, 2007), while *Scholastics* (2018) discloses that over 500 million copies of the *Harry Potter* books (1997–2007) have been sold. Moreover, book sales are only a small part of fantasy franchises. All around the world, you can find stores, coffee shops, thematic parks, and various items and events that bring much more money than book sales alone. It seems that the fantastic is present in all pores of popular culture.

In this paper, I argue that our interest in fantasy literature, films, and related media and attractions extends beyond its fun and exciting nature and gives us an opportunity to practise our magical-thinking intuitions. The first part of the paper explores the connection between magic and religion. Drawing upon historical, anthropological, and psychological accounts of magic, I demonstrate that both magic and religion are related to the same psychological phenomenon of interest to this paper – magical thinking. By discussing theories about the function of magic, I argue that stories featuring supernatural elements can be seen as cognitive playgrounds that allow us to reaffirm our magical-thinking intuitions that are suppressed by religious and scientific education. I then proceed to show how supernatural agents, spaces, and objects can be understood as emotional correlatives, giving faces and voices to those

aspects of our emotional lives that cannot be represented mimetically. Building on what was previously said about magic, I further develop my argument by demonstrating how magical thinking in the *Harry Potter* novels is used as a means to overcome emotional difficulties represented as supernatural creatures. In the final part of this article, I discuss the *Harry Potter* novels (Rowling, 1997/1998–2007) and contextually films (Columbus, 2001, 2002; Cuarón, 2004; Newell, 2005; Yates, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011) to show how fantasy fiction creates a cognitive playground that facilitates interaction with emotions. In doing so, I argue that fantasy fiction, as well as other forms of supernatural storytelling, play an important role in our cognitive development and should have a greater presence in school curricula. Fantasy fiction, especially the *Harry Potter* series, provides a safe environment in which children, young adults, and adults can interact with emotional states that are relevant to them, particularly those that are not easily expressed in our everyday emotional vocabulary.

Magic between Science and Religion

Magic is notoriously difficult to define. When thinking about magic, the images of witches, wizards, and spells usually come to mind. However, historical, anthropological, and psychological perspectives reveal that these phenomena cannot be easily categorised under a single label, often overlapping with notions like superstition, religion, supernatural, science, etc. This confusion stems from a long and entangled history of magical practices. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (2019, pp. 148–149; 2005, p. 240) showed how, in the West, those beliefs and practices that did not fall under institutionalised religious and scientific orthodoxies were condemned by Christianity as heretical, demonic, pagan, and idolatrous, and by Enlightenment science as irrational, delusional, and superstitious. From a psychological standpoint, Eugene Subbotsky (2010, p. 17) demonstrated that even in today's schools, religious education often portrays magic as pagan and dark, attacking it on an emotional basis. By contrast, scientific education typically portrays magic as superstitious, challenging it on a rational basis.

The distinction between magic and religion is a challenging one because both encompass the same type of phenomena. Drawing on Keith Thomas's studies of the mediaeval English Catholic Church, Nikola Pantić (2021, pp. 54–56) argued that the distinction between religion and magic is related to licit and illicit practices. Or, as 19th-century occultist Eliphas Lévi (1873/1922) put it: "Religion is magic sanctioned by authority" (p. 1). Pantić (2021, pp. 54–56) made a comparison between Catholic and Islamic practices of condemning

rites that did not follow prescribed orthodoxies. Just as the Church condemned rituals that did not follow its norms as devil worship, in 18th-century Syria, any divergence from the rules set by the Islamic authorities was seen as a sign of *kufr* [infidelity]. Moreover, Pantić posited that “with medieval and early modern Catholic and Muslim theological sodalities, the boundaries between magic and religion helped to maintain the boundaries between an exclusive group of religious professionals and the rest of the common people” (p. 56).

As I mentioned earlier, magical beliefs and practices are not solely influenced by institutionalised religions. Subbotsky (2010, pp. 118–119) demonstrated how children before school age verbalise magical beliefs that coexist with rationality. However, during their school years, science education is used to suppress the verbal expression of magical thinking. Contrary to the popular belief established by Jean Piaget (1925/1928, pp. 369–374) – that children grow out of magical thinking into rationality – Subbotsky’s research suggests that this shift is more due to social pressure (Piaget, 1925/1928, pp. 369–374).[1] To be more specific, when children start school, they stop expressing magical beliefs. In a series of experiments, Subbotsky observed that unlike pre-school 6-year-old children, 8- and 10-year-olds demonstrate cognitive and emotional defences when faced with magical situations, such as an object disappearing from a box.

Following these propositions, we can see that the distinction between magic and religion is not related to the type of belief, rite, or ritual but to power. We can conclude that both terms – when referring to a group, its beliefs, symbols, and practices – cover the same phenomena. Moreover, the different strategies of representing these phenomena point to a struggle for power. In this framework, magic is used as the Other by religious institutions to establish the discourse of orthodoxy, and by scientific institutions to establish the discourse of rationality. For this reason, the *Harry Potter* novels and films were

[1] Piaget (1925/1928, pp. 369–374) understands magic as an aspect of a child’s first (out of three) stage of development, where the child initially conceives the world as animated and connected to human will. In this stage, the moon, the sun, and stars are created for humans and can be influenced by the human mind. In the second stage, beginning around the age of 7–8, the child becomes capable of understanding simple mechanical operations. However, it is not until the third stage (age 9–10) that Piaget notes the complete disappearance of the notion that nature is subject to or created by humans. In the third stage, nature is understood to be governed by laws beyond human control. Piaget argues that magic is a primitive way of thinking that is eventually replaced by scientific rationality in later stages of development.

also a victim of religious discourse when the Church tried to ban books and remove them from school curricula (Cockrell, 2006; Hjelm, 2006; Šarić, 2001).

I use the term 'magic' in a neutral sense; not in contrast to the term 'religion', but as a phenomenon that underlies religious thought. In his study of children's attitudes towards magic, Subbotsky (2010, p. 12) drew a distinction between non-institutional and institutional magical beliefs. The former is related to witchcraft, astrology, and palm reading, and the latter to beliefs accepted by religious authorities. However, Subbotsky noted that this distinction lies solely in the institutional rejection of one and acceptance of the other. Moreover, he posited that both are related to the same psychological processes that are the focus of this paper – magical thinking and magical belief.

Subbotsky (2010, p. 4) coined the term 'magical reality' to encompass our interactions with a variety of phenomena, including folk characters like Santa Claus, supernatural beings, religious rites and rituals, palm reading, UFO, meditation, reincarnation, astrology, and even practices like positive thinking and wearing a lucky shirt on a game day. For the purpose of this paper, I will adopt Subbotsky's definition of magical thinking (p. 5) as a mind-over-matter phenomenon – intuition that the mind can affect matter. However, magical beliefs, both institutional or non-institutional, are acquired and can be changed. Mathew Hutson (2012) in the *Epilogue* of his book, for example, divided magical thinking into seven laws, suggesting that while magic may be an illusion, it is an illusion that keeps us sane and happy. Or as James E. Alcock (1995) brilliantly phrased it, "We are magical beings in a scientific age" (p. 64).

In this paper, I argue that stories about magic, especially the *Harry Potter* stories, can be seen as cognitive playgrounds that reinforce our magical-thinking intuitions. I assert that the *Harry Potter* series is so popular in part because it provides children and adults around the world the chance to freely explore magical thinking. This form of play can be especially important in societies where children are taught that they are not rational if they express magical thinking. And what better way to do it than to tell them that in spite of all their misfortunes, they are wizards!

Functions of Magic

The relationship between emotion and magic was first notably explored by Bronisław Malinowski (1948). He argued that magic serves to establish a sense of security and control in challenging, dangerous, and transitional situations. In his study, Malinowski illustrated this with an example from the Trobriand

Archipelago: Melanesians use spells during dangerous deep-water fishing, whereas magic plays no role in the comparatively safe shallow-water fishing (p. 14). Therefore, magic, in the form of spells and rituals, emerged as a tool for handling difficult situations where danger is imminent. To overcome the fear and anxiety of dealing with situations necessary for the group’s survival, yet potentially leading to injury or death, Malenesians used magic to establish a sense of control over the unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of their lives but also to express emotions related to specific events. Dark magic, in that sense, is interpreted as an expression of violent emotions.

Stewart Elliott Guthrie (1995, p. 13) dismissed Malinowski’s argument that supernatural phenomena can be explained by the practical use of magic or interaction with the supernatural to overcome difficulties and establish a sense of security. He asserted that many religions have “wrathful and capricious deities and demons” instead of comforting beliefs. Supporting Guthrie’s argument, Pascal Boyer (2001, p. 147) suggested that seeing agents all around you is more frightening than reassuring. However, a more careful reading of Malinowski’s ethnography reveals that he did not consider magic simply as wishful thinking where one closes eyes and conjures a sense of security and control.

For Malinowski (1948, p. 52), magical rituals are much more elaborate and facilitate the expression of emotions – this enables both the caster and participants to channel their negative emotions into actions, which can result in a restored sense of balance and confidence. According to Stephen Mithen (1996, p. 198), based on archeological evidence, human interaction with the supernatural dates back to the Upper Paleolithic period. Michael Winkelman and John R. Baker (2016, pp. 135–136) viewed shaman’s cave rituals (40.000–50.000 years ago) as our earliest attempt to symbolically represent the other world and reinforce group cohesion. In shamanistic rituals, emotions are evoked through the use of symbols, music, drumming, drugs, vapours, dance, or a special setting, such as a dark cave, or a nighttime forest. All of these facilitate the emergence of alternative states of consciousness, or at least diminish perception, thereby increasing alertness.

In literary studies, there is also a tradition of interpreting the supernatural as an ideological or emotional representation. Rosemary Jackson (1981, pp. 31–32), for instance, viewed supernatural evil as a representation of the Other. She argued that in a secularised world, rather than projecting our otherness onto hell, we construct and engage with literary fantastic realms. J. Halberstam (1995, pp. 131–134) analysed Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula, Hyde, and Dorian Gray as the Other in relation to Englishness. He read them as representations of sexually transmitted diseases, Orientalism, disability, consumer culture, and racism.

Drawing on Sigmund Freud's conception of ghosts as representations of the culturally invisible, and Jackson's notion of the fantastic as a repressed drive, Paulina Palmer (2012, pp. 6–7) argued that repressed gay sexuality is often represented as the queer uncanny. Moreover, in her study of Gothic literature, Emma Liggins (2020), showed how "Female Gothic has traditionally been associated with women's terrors at confinement within the home" (p. 7). In literary studies, ghosts and apparitions are commonly interpreted as manifestations of specific social anxieties.

My argument, although built on propositions made by Malinowski, Subbotsky, and Carol Nemeroff and Paul Rozin (2000), differs in the sense that I am more interested in magical storytelling than magical practices. While these phenomena share psychological roots, I argue that magical storytelling reinforces our magical-thinking intuitions without requiring us to commit to a particular body of ideas and practices that are usually associated with a specific institution or tradition.

I draw on the idea that art is a cognitive play, introduced to literary theory by Brian Boyd (2009, p. 15) and later developed in Mathias Clasen's interpretation of horror fiction (2017, "Fear for Your Life," para. 9). Therefore, magical storytelling acts as a more universal playground for exercising cognitive faculties related to magical thinking. Malinowski's ethnography demonstrated how magical rituals work and what function they serve. A task of literary scholars is then to show how magical stories work and what function they play in our lives.

Some benefits of this type of cognitive play have already been explored by Eugene Subbotsky, Claire Hysted, and Nicola Jones (2010). In their experiment, they showed two groups of children 15-minute clips from the *Harry Potter* films. One group watched clips featuring magic, while the other saw clips without any magical elements from the same movies. The group of children who watched clips with magical elements had significantly higher results on the creativity test. Notably, both groups had similar levels of creativity before viewing the clips. It should also be mentioned that the experiment did not change children's magical beliefs. The authors concluded that magical thinking is a different phenomenon from magical beliefs. While magical beliefs are acquired through education and experience, magical thinking is a cognitive development related to creativity, imagination, and symbolic thinking.

I build my argument on Malinowski's proposal, later developed by Nemeroff and Rozin (2000, pp. 26–27), which posited that magical rituals bring a sense of control in challenging and dangerous situations. This is what Subbotsky (2010, p. 138) called the auto-therapeutic function. My main argument stems from two independent but related statements:

1. Stories about magic reinforce our intuition that mind can affect matter.
2. The supernatural elements of stories (agents, objects, and spaces) represent the world as we feel it, rather than as it is filtered through the rational mind.

Consequently, stories featuring supernatural elements give faces and voices to our emotional states, especially to those that feel overwhelming, abstract, or do not fall into our emotional vocabulary, and are thus difficult to express. Magical thinking, in this sense, restores our belief that no matter how dark and hopeless our situation may appear, we have an inner capacity to overcome it, which is a common element of fantasy literature.

Supernatural Beings as Emotional Correlatives

Brian Boyd (2009, pp. 141–145), Jonathan Gottschall (2015, p. 142), Nancy Easterlin (2012, p. 48), and Lisa Zunshine (2006, pp. 6–10) demonstrated how our theory of mind and mirror neurons facilitate our interaction with fictional characters, so when we read a novel, watch a play or a film, we feel what characters feel. The authors argue that interacting with the media gives us an opportunity to refine our cognitive and social skills. Building on this, I posit that stories about magic help us practise our magical-thinking skills.

I also argue that supernatural agents, objects, and spaces emerge when we perceive an event in such a way that we prioritise our emotional responses over rational processing. In this sense, the supernatural can be defined as an emotional correlative. For instance, when negative feelings are associated with a particular object or space, we tend to perceive them as haunted or cursed. Most of the time we cannot precisely explain why we feel this way, but our emotions affect our perception, and sometimes, especially when overwhelmed by feelings, boundaries of the real may shift. Carlos M. Coelho, Andras N. Zsido, Panrapee Suttiwan, and Mathias Clasen (2021, pp. 408–409), Dan Sperber (1994, p. 60), Pascal Boyer (1955, p. 144), Scott Atran (2006, p. 188), and Stewart Elliott Guthrie (1955, pp. 43–44) argued that humans have a tendency to see the world as a place inhabited by human-like entities. As Coelho, Zsido, Suttiwan, and Clasen (2021 pp. 408–409) claimed, this anthropomorphic bias can be seen as an adaptive mechanism, enabling us to survive and better adjust to environments populated by unknown humans and predatory animals. Our detection system is hyperactive as the cost of failing to see predators hiding in the grass is far greater than overreacting to moving branches. Therefore, I propose that, especially when we are

overwhelmed by negative emotions, and the boundaries of the real become blurred, our emotional states may manifest as supernatural agents.

In my view, it is important to differentiate between the supernatural and the imaginary. Most agents and spaces in fantasy worlds fall under the category of the imaginary. They are violations of ontological categories, yet they do not necessarily defy our intuition about the laws of physics. Animals get bigger, or an animal is constructed from two or more different animals, like a griffin or a chimera. Some creatures are a combination of animal and human categories like sirens, centaurs, and the Minotaur. Most of the spaces in fantasy and science fiction are created by combining or exaggerating landscapes that mirror our world. Beautiful forests and waterfalls in *The Lord of the Rings* are similar to those on Earth. Frank Herbert's Arrakis is a big desert with a big worm.

On the other hand, the supernatural emerges when ontological categories are combined in such a way that a being, object, or space cannot exist. I argue that its emergence is due to our focus on how something feels. Therefore, a description of an event in terms of how it feels will give a supernatural explanation. In this view, the supernatural is a way to represent the invisible emotional side of a character's lives, facilitating interaction with emotional states that cannot be expressed through mimetic representation. Atran (2006, 190), for example, illustrated how ghosts, devils, and deities are in many ways similar to our psychological states like emotion, desire, promise, etc.

This would imply that engaging oneself with fiction with supernatural elements can improve emotional clarity and emotional health in general. However, this is still an empirically unexplored area and research needs to be conducted to support this hypothesis. My proposal is to view supernatural agents, objects, and spaces as expressions of our emotional lives, especially overwhelming negative emotions, and magic as a means to establish a sense of control, security, and meaning when facing such challenges. In the following discussion, I will demonstrate how the *Harry Potter* stories serve as a cognitive playground that facilitates this process.

The Boy Who Lived

In the opening chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Dumbledore and McGonagall leave baby Harry at the doorstep of Harry's aunt Petunia, uncle Vernon, and cousin Dudley. Ten years later, we find Harry, a very lonely child, an orphan. He lives in a cupboard, facing neglect and abuse from his family, and often fantasises about escaping to anywhere but there. Harry's

dreams come true as Hagrid arrives to take him to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, famously telling him: “Harry – yer a wizard” (Rowling, 1997/1998, pp. 50–51). This day marks a turning point for Harry. He learns that his parents did not die in a car crash, as his aunt and uncle told him, but were instead killed by the dark wizard Voldemort.

Harry discovers not only that he is a wizard, but also that he is quite famous in the wizarding world. Transitioning from an isolated poor orphan, mistreated by his family who views him as an abnormal kid, Harry becomes the most famous wizard in the world. He flies to the magical bank Gringotts, where he finds out that he inherited a fortune from his parents. His next stop is Diagon Alley, a magical marketplace, where he shops for school essentials like books, robes, and other magical items. It is during his search for a wand that we first see the connection between magic and one’s inner world. After several attempts, the right wand finally finds Harry. “The wand chooses the wizard,” says Ollivander (Rowling, 1997/ 1998, p. 85). He finds it curious that the wand that chose Harry has a twin. This twin wand, sharing the same core, belongs to the wizard who killed his parents when Harry was a baby.

Much of the *Harry Potter* world, just like any fantasy world, is purely imaginary. Brooms fly, books open by themselves, portraits talk, and staircases move. At platform nine and three-quarters and in the Hogwarts Express, Harry meets his future friends. Ron comes from a poor family and struggles even with the simplest magic. Hermione, whose parents are not magical, is often described as a know-it-all. Neville, just like Harry, grew up without his parents. They were tortured into insanity by Voldemort’s followers: Death Eaters Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband, brother, and Bartemius Crouch Jr. Therefore, our heroes are not the typical popular school children.

From Harry’s aunt Petunia’s perspective, wizards and witches are considered freaks, something dangerous and abnormal (Rowling, 1997/1998, p. 53). However, at Hogwarts, they are welcomed as special. And their inner capacities are cherished, explored, and allowed to flourish. At Hogwarts, their differences and shortcomings are set aside, and they are united in their common identity as witches and wizards. This conveys a powerful message to children who read the *Harry Potter* novels and watch films that no matter how different they are, their inner world is important and worthy of appreciation.

To show the role that supernatural agents play in fantasy storyworlds, I will consider a scene from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*:

> Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin’s hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden

> beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water…
> But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of its black cloak.
> And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings.
> An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart…
> Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though of water. He was being dragged downward, the roaring growing louder…
> And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't… a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him […] (Rowling, 1999b, pp. 83–84).

This is Harry's first encounter with a dementor, a wraight-like dark creature who can suck the happiness out of its victims, forcing them to relive their worst memories. Their very presence lowers the temperature and brings despair. Not only is Harry overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions, but he is also forced to relive the death of his mother. He was just a baby when his mother was killed in front of his eyes by Voldemort. As the dementor fed on Harry's happy memories, it forced him to relive his worst experience. This shows that dementors can delve deep into their victims' souls and bring out events from their infancy. The scream, the pleading, the terrified scream that Harry heard in this scene was his mother's. As is often the case with trauma, Harry does not immediately recognise it.

His next encounter with dementors is even more dangerous:

> At least a hundred dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were standing beneath him. It was as though freezing water were rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again… Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head… a woman…
> "Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"
> "Stand aside, you silly girl… stand aside, now…."
> "Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead –"

> Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain… What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her… She was going to die… She was going to be murdered…
> He was falling, falling through the icy mist.
> "Not Harry! Please… have mercy… have mercy…."
> A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more (Rowling, 1999b, pp. 178–179).

In the aftermath of this event, Harry recognises that the screams he heared while reliving his traumatic memories were his mother's.

As readers follow our heroes in their adventures, they identify with their feelings and choices. Unlike in mimetic representation, these emotional correlatives do not have to define the emotion they represent. This allows readers to understand the supernatural creatures with respect to the emotional difficulties they are facing. Amber Leigh Francine Shields (2019) argues that the fantasy genre is very promising for representing and discussing trauma: "As these tales move between worlds, they intertwine narratives, histories, and dreams that create a provocative and multi-layered experience troubling the known and the familiar" (p. 10). This is certainly the case with the *Harry Potter* novels and films. A dementor's kiss becomes a way to represent drowning in negative emotions when trauma is triggered. By not addressing trauma directly but rather through a distancing effect, it also brings the discussion about trauma to children, young adults, as well as adult readers.

Casting Spells: Expressing Emotions

Creating an opportunity for the discussion of the difficulties of growing up, I argue, is an important factor in the global success of *Harry Potter*, especially among younger readers. These stories touch upon many important issues that children face – bullying, trauma, loss of parents, loneliness, loss, war, and torture. While traditional school curricula tend to present an idealised view of childhood, omitting these harsher themes, the *Harry Potter* series portrays childhood as fun, but also as challenging, difficult, and often painful. This resonates with children and young adults around the world, as it reflects the problems they and their friends face every day, allowing them to evaluate and integrate their own experiences.

What are the *Harry Potter* stories about, anyway? They revolve around a boy whose parents were killed when he was a baby, leaving him with darkness. When Voldemort attempted to kill Harry, the killing curse rebounded

and instead killed Voldemort. At that time, Voldemort was in the process of creating Horcruxes, a form of dark magic enabling a person to hide a piece of one's soul in an object and thus continue living even after their physical body is destroyed. Consequently, upon his death, a piece of his soul latched onto Harry. That night, Harry got a scar on his forehead that burns when Voldemort is near, giving him the ability to talk to snakes and connecting him with Voldemort's mind.

There are many magical ways in which readers learn about Harry's trauma. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry sees his parents in the Mirror of Erised. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Dementor's kiss overwhelms him with negative emotions and forces him to relive the screams of his dying mother. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, during a duel with Voldemort in the graveyard, Harry sees his parents who help him escape. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry uses the Resurrection Stone to see people whom he considered family but were dead, including his parents, Sirius, and Remus.

The only known defence against the dementor's attack is the Patronus charm:

> Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the dementor feeds upon – hope, happiness, the desire to survive – but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."
> "What does a Patronus look like?" said Harry curiously.
> "Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."
> "And how do you conjure it?"
> "With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory" (Rowling, 1999b, p. 237).

Wizards and witches who lack happy memories, like most Death Eaters, are unable to cast the Patronus charm. This inability reflects how an interest in dark magic is directly related to the lack of love and happiness. The only Death Eater who was able to cast a Patronus charm is Severus Snape, whose Patronus took the form of a doe, just like the patronus of Lily, Harry's mother, whom Snape has loved since they were children. His happy memories with Lily allow him to cast the charm. So, when facing difficulties, no matter how dark the creature is, Hogwarts students learn to develop a capacity to tap into an inner place to overcome it. Or as Dumbledore says in the film: "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light"

(Cuarón, 2004). However, mastering this charm, as Lupin points out, requires practice.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry casts a torture curse, but the curse does not work. This moment illustrates how spells and magical abilities in the HP novels and films express wizards' and witches' emotions:

> "Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?" she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. "You need to mean them, Potter! You need to really want to cause pain – to enjoy it – righteous anger won't hurt me for long – I'll show you how it is done, shall I? I'll give you a lesson […]" (Rowling, 2003, p. 810).

As Bellatrix explains, the curse is related to the wizard's feelings. To successfully use it, one must genuinely intend to cause pain. The division between light and dark magic stems from the wizard's intention and personality. Witches and wizards who seek power, dominance over others, and take pleasure in inflicting pain deal with dark magic. Among Death Eaters, Voldemort's followers, there are many who show the dark triad traits: narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Furthermore, the series delves into the backstories of various characters, revealing why they became dark wizards. Interesting parallels in that respect can be drawn between Harry and Voldemort.

Both Harry and Tom Riddle, who later became known as Lord Voldemort, grew up as orphans. They were lonely, isolated children without friends, and both were invited to Hogwarts, becoming famous wizards. However, their paths diverged significantly. Voldemort saw magic as a means to become powerful and dominate others; even in the orphanage where he grew up, he tortured other children. By contrast, Harry placed a much greater value on friendship and kindness towards others. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore tells Harry that he is not drawn to dark arts because he is protected by his ability to love (Rowling, 2005, p. 511). One can speculate that Voldemort's lack of love stems not only from growing up as an orphan but also from his mother using the love potion to seduce his father. When she stopped giving him the love potion, he abandoned her, and she died giving birth. However, in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry and Dumbledore discuss the similarities between Harry and Voldemort, Dumbledore emphasises that it is our choices, rather than our past or our abilities, that show who we really are (Rowling 1998/1999a, p. 333).

On the other hand, Harry was loved by his parents as a baby. The power of this love is depicted in a magical way. The reason why Voldemort could

not kill Harry on the night he murdered his parents is due to his mother's casting a sacrificial protection charm and sacrificing her life to protect her son. That is the only known defence against the killing curse, and Harry is the only known person to survive it. This tension between love and cruelty as two modes of living emerges as a central theme of the *Harry Potter* novels and films, weaving the events into cohesive stories. In a dialogue, in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore and Voldemort discuss the power of love. It is clear from their conversation that Voldemort does not understand the power of love (Rowling, 2005, p. 444). This eventually led to his downfall. Not only was he surprised by Lily Potter's sacrificial protection, but his blindness toward the power of love led him to make the same mistake twice. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Harry defeats Voldemort with the same charm his mother did all those years ago. By sacrificing himself to save others, Harry created a powerful charm that protected all the students and teachers of Hogwarts.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that stories featuring supernatural elements can be viewed as cognitive playgrounds in which: (1) magic reinforces our intuition that the mind can affect matter and (2) supernatural agents, objects, and spaces are emotional correlatives that describe the world as we feel it, rather than through the rational mind's filter. This leads to the conclusion that supernatural stories give faces and voices to emotional states that are difficult to express using mimetic representational technique and thus can help us better understand our emotional world from the perspective of how it feels.

I have defined magic as a mind-over-matter phenomenon, a concept that underlies both magic and religion. Moreover, I have demonstrated how magic often faces prejudice that comes as a result of our education system where it is condemned as heresy from a religious point of view and as superstition from a scientific point of view. For this reason, fantasy literature is still underrepresented in school curricula. However, it should be noted that religious stories are based on the same mechanism that I described.

I have demonstrated that engaging with media that represent magic is related to our understanding of emotions, emotional clarity, and emotional resilience. While rites and rituals can offer a sense of security and control in difficult times, they also require us to accept a set of beliefs and practices. By contrast, fantasy fiction involves more open-ended, playful behaviour, allowing

the reader to project their own associations. I argue that this is a very important aspect of fantasy fiction.

While in my analysis, I focused primarily on fantasy fiction and the *Harry Potter* series due to space constraints, the same logic applies to other stories featuring supernatural elements, like science fiction, dark fantasy, and supernatural horror. However, the darker the story becomes, the more difficult it becomes to use magical thinking to overcome danger. For example, *Pet Sematary* by Stephen King (1983) functions more as a cautionary tale, illustrating that not all emotional states should be overcome with magic. There are some situations where wishful thinking should be avoided and grieving is the only option.

In our interaction with mimetic representations of events, we practise our theory of mind and social understanding skills. Reading fantasy novels and watching fantasy films offers these opportunities. However, as the genre is not bound by the rules of mimetic representation, it can represent those aspects of our lives that are invisible and thus otherwise unrepresentable. At the same time, engaging with fantasy literature is a playful, entertaining, and fun activity.

I have demonstrated how supernatural beings in these narratives can be understood as emotional correlatives. The advantage of fantasy literature lies in its ability to evoke various emotional states without explicitly defining them, thereby creating space for a multiplicity of emotional responses among readers. This is important because frightening beings can then embody those emotions and concerns that are of relevance to a particular reader. Fantasy media, therefore, has the power to communicate emotions without forcing a reader to confront them directly by naming them. Instead, depending on the reader's capacity, it creates circumstances in which it is possible to interact with, understand, and feel the emotions. Moreover, these stories can provide access to those emotional states that do not fall neatly into our verbal emotional categories.

I argued that magical abilities, spells, curses, and charms can be viewed as expressions of emotions and an attempt to restore balance, security, and control when confronted with danger beyond our capacity. This opens up the possibility to interact with even the darkest emotional states represented as supernatural beings by tapping into spells as our inner capacities to overcome them. Literature and films in which we identify with characters who have magical abilities can facilitate practising these skills even when we are not facing difficulties, providing a safe environment to keep our emotion regulation skills in check.

Applying this approach to the *Harry Potter* novels and films, I posited that a key factor in the global multimedia popularity of Harry Potter is that these

books and films allow their readers to discuss topics that are usually filtered out of the school curricula: death, torture, trauma, breakup, depression, loneliness, loss, anger, frustration, war, and sadism. The protagonists of these books and films are children who encounter a myriad of challenges during their journey to adulthood. Instead of portraying childhood as carefree and ideal, Rowling depicts it as demanding and challenging. This resonates with children and young adults around the world, as they also face numerous challenges to overcome in their daily lives. Suppressed in school education, magical thinking finds its expression in fantasy fiction.

Fantasy literature, much like other media, offers readers the opportunity to interact with pertinent topics and to exercise social skills by following characters through their adventures and taking their position in various situations. In addition to that, fantasy can also represent those aspects of our lives that are invisible. By giving faces and voices to our emotional states, it creates an opportunity to interact with, understand, and feel them in a safe and secure environment, tailored to the individual needs and capacities of the reader. Therefore, I argue that literature involving magic should have a greater presence in school curricula. This is especially true for children and young adults who are in the process of learning how to regulate and express their emotions.

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