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Article Title

Fiction as an Escape from Postmodern Existential Dread: How Fantasy Responds to Disillusioned World

Abstract

The primary intent of this research is to investigate how fiction especially fantasy series like those of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter, offers to be a means to escape from the postmodern existential and pragmatic anxieties. Postmodernism is characterized by intertextuality and subjectivity in every domain of life leaving human beings in an abyss of searching for meaning and identity. The study examines how these fictional works through fictional plots and settings, irregular and unreliable narrations, and deep sketches of character arcs, provide the postmodern man with a coping mechanism against alienation, disillusionment, and existential dread. The magical idealism created by the postmodern authors navigates through the human journey of identity and existence. This paper explores how the postmodern narratives infuse a sense of disillusionment and discomfort for the readers and affirms how fantasy offers solace.

Keywords: Harry Potter, Hobbit, Postmodernism, Fantasy

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The primary intent of this research is to investigate how fiction especially fantasy series like those of J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter, offers to be a means to escape from the postmodern existential and pragmatic anxieties. Postmodernism is characterized by intertextuality and subjectivity in every domain of life leaving human beings in an abyss of searching for meaning and identity. The study examines how these fictional works through fictional plots and settings, irregular and unreliable narrations, and deep sketches of character arcs, provide the postmodern man with a coping mechanism against alienation, disillusionment, and existential dread. The magical idealism created by the postmodern authors navigates through the human journey of identity and existence. This paper explores how the postmodern narratives infuse a sense of disillusionment and discomfort for the readers and affirms how fantasy offers solace.

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Contents

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Introduction

With the advent of the postmodern ideology of life and literature, man finds himself in a constant struggle to brush off objective binaries of ideas and values. In the grandiosity of narratives and the universal yearning for The Truth, a sense of uncertainty and skepticism looms over human existence. The postmodern school of thought has proposed the fluidity of Truth and identity conceptualizing these facets of life as derivational and relative to the surroundings. The increasingly prevalent demand of society to deal with certainties to counter the feeling of uncertainty as the world continues to change at an unprecedented rate has led many people to feel a sense of disorientation as they struggle to define who they are. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, 1984 famously described postmodernism as being marked by an

"incredulity toward metanarratives" (1984) as religion, science, progress, or nationalism were all abandoned and even viewed with incredulity. Yet it did not change how these narratives had provided human beings with a sense of belonging, a larger community, and purpose in life, and their palpable loss led to a sense of fragmentation, as people began navigating the world and creating larger narratives for their individual lives. In discarding all previous ideals that had been passed down to create collective identities, spaces for belonging, and larger goals, the postmodern world began to insist that there was no absolute or objective truth. While this shift did allow for individual perspectives to gain greater importance in the social landscape, it also greatly contributed to confusion and anxiety as everything began to take on meaning. Any notion of truth became relative and constructed through language, culture, and individual perspectives.

Postmodernism's Influence on Fantasy Literature

In a world defined by rapid technological advancement, globalization, and the rise of mass media, individuals often experience what philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994) refers to as "hyper-reality," where the distinction between reality and simulation blurs. While media and digital technologies have created artificial worlds and added to a feeling of disconnection, fantasy worlds have subverted the technological impacts to create worlds devoid of the postmodern influence and with a return to natural and grand narratives. In fictional worlds such as those that will be under discussion in this paper, the protagonist returns to a search for a larger purpose within a grand narrative, with an identity that is secure in a universal understanding of truth and goodness. In essence, the fictions under discussion in this paper, position the protagonists and the worlds they have created in opposition to the postmodern world. Instead of navigating a landscape marked by ambiguity, pluralism, and constant change, the heroes in these stories navigate worlds where truth and meaning exist in absolutes, identity is central and a large purpose is certain. By exploring works such as J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, this study will affirm the significance of fiction in rejuvenating a sense of purpose and provoking essence in human existence.

Postmodernism as proposed by well-known theorists named, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Frederic Jameson, 2016 finds its roots in the deconstruction and destructuralization of grandiosity of narratives which aided in the formulation of meanings in human life. In the absence of these hardcore narratives, postmodern man swayed away from its pivotal point. Feeling adrift from his core values, man strived for the lost meaning. This fueled the situation by adversities clothed in consumerism, media, and subjectivity in The Truth values. Everything combined to infuse existential anxieties in a postmodern man who now struggles to formulate a structure for his core values and traces the absurdity of life in its absence.

Fantasy literature offers its readers an ideal world that paves the way for escape from reality and real problems hovering over man. Such fictional settings often people resolve problems in a way that the psychological implications of the circumstances soothe the external anxieties temporarily. Fictional creation aids the readers to seek escape from the existential dread such as in *Harry Potter* and *The Hobbit*. The disillusionment caused by the modernity and modern period is often sought to be rehabilitated in these fictional texts. The human cry for help to traditions, social structures, and order is often reimagined in these ideal worlds. The social binaries that were long forgotten are embraced again in these fantasies keeping human nature and behavior constant. The dichotomy of good and evil can be visualized in the war events narrated in *Harry Potter.* Human connection with the idea of death is rebuilt in the face of these dichotomies. The series records the life of the protagonist who has to face challenges, solve mysteries, and ultimately kill the antagonist (Voldemort). There are no grey areas as proposed by the postmodernists. Likewise, Tolkien's *The Hobbit* imagines a world that is devoid of existential dread and uncertainty of the modern era. The series is reminiscent of the places and locations that offer solace to human beings especially the Shire where Bilbo Baggins, the protagonist, begins his journey. There are undertones of yearning for structure in a disoriented space that mirrors the postmodern reality.

Fragmentation of Identity

Scattered identity with its derivational and relative nature is also the product of postmodern ideology as

proposed by Derrida (1976) and Gordon and Foucault (1980) who argue that identity is not a fixed or stable entity rather it is fluid and relative to sociopolitical settings. More significantly, Foucault emphasizes how politics and power dynamics translate into identity concerns encouraging people to embrace diverse personalities often contextualized with the settings. However, this constant shifting of identity aggravates the existential dread and sways individuals away from a firm sense of the self.

In *Harry Potter*, the journey of the protagonist is one of reclaiming and stabilizing his identity, despite the external forces that seek to define him. He is defined by and marked in the narrative (lightning scar) by his history, and his physical characteristics, which constantly position him as an orphan of war and a child whose parents died to protect him. Harry's journey to seek revenge and freedom for the wizarding world and physically woven into his character to make those the most dominant parts of his personality. At the end of the first book, *The Philosopher's Stone* (1999), Harry faces the moral dilemma of having accidentally led to someone's death knowing they were out to cause him harm. While an accident, it sets the tone for the series as Harry continues to face situations in which he positions himself on the right sight, always through a conscious choice, such as when he insists not on revenge but on punishment for Peter Pettigrew for having directly led to the killing of his parents. The journey of the hero is shown in his growth from abstract moral dilemmas to actionable choices in the midst of conflict, primarily in his use of a disarming spell to counter the killing curse.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's works, particularly *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, both Frodo Baggins and Bilbo Baggins undergo profound transformations as they venture from the safety and comfort of the Shire into the wider, more dangerous world. Their journeys serve as powerful metaphors for personal growth and the development of identity. The novel begins in a typical fantasy style where Bilbo is seen enjoying his serene life at the Shire deriving his identity from this serenity as well. Later on, the tensions escalate, hinting toward personal growth and the fear of the unknown. Frodo just like Bilbo begins his journey in the same fashion but he carries the burden of perplexing emotions portrayed as a ring. The ring aids in symbolizing the manipulation of emotions drawing the dark forces in the story

superseded by the charming environment. His identity is seen fluctuating and deviating from the context of his position in the fiction indicating his complex personal growth.

As the story proceeds in *The Return of the King*, Frodo is portrayed to have gone through a journey that has been dreadful for him in a way that he has existential anxiety by the closure of the series. This journey actually mirrors the human course of history over centuries. Zygmunt Bauman names this phenomenon as Liquid Modernity: "We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of settlement... Individuals now move freely and nomadically from one identity or set of relationships to another." (Bauman, 2013) This idea of "liquid modernity" captures the relativity of identity in the postmodern period that leads to a sense of alienation. Ultimately, the transformative journeys of Frodo and Bilbo offer readers powerful metaphors for navigating personal growth. Their stories illustrate that while the path to self-discovery and identity formation can be difficult, it is through these struggles that individuals find their true selves, grow stronger, and learn how to cope with adversity. Frodo's increasing alienation from the Shire and even from his companions as he carries the Ring parallels Fromm's idea of modern alienation. Though surrounded by others, Frodo becomes emotionally distant, reflecting the postmodern individual's struggle to feel truly connected to the world. His ultimate inability to fully reintegrate into the Shire at the end of his journey mirrors the alienation that often accompanies profound personal transformation. "The alienated person feels himself to be in touch with the world, while actually, he is not; he may be in touch with people, with nature, with his work, but he has no deep experience of connection, of unity, of belonging." (Fromm, 1955)

Countering Alienation Through Community

However, fantasy literature, like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Rowling's *Harry Potter*, uses the theme of community to counter modernist alienation and fragmentation as "the theme of friendship and shared suffering is vital to the success of the Quest. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Fellowship functions as a microcosm of a united world, a response to the alienation inherent in modernity's fragmentation." (Shippey, 2005) This emphasizes

how Tolkien's depiction of the Fellowship illustrates a collective effort to overcome personal and societal challenges by presenting a united front against evil instead of giving in to defeat. "To feel at home in a "world of randomness and ambiguity" is to be comfortable with a different kind of truth, one that contains shades of mystery" (Gilligan, 2023). Both *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* may center on one person but through their epic narratives, end up addressing "the disillusionment and isolation characteristic of modernity by offering a vision of community and shared purpose. His works propose that overcoming evil requires cooperation across cultural and personal boundaries, suggesting that alienation can be resisted through solidarity." (Shippey, 2003) This highlights how Tolkien's narratives deliberately counter the disillusionment of modern life by offering a vision of unity, where communities of diverse beings come together to face common challenges.

"In Rowling's, 2015 *Harry Potter* series, the formation of close-knit communities, whether it's the trio of Harry, Hermione, and Ron, or the broader alliances such as Dumbledore's Army, serves as a response to the isolating forces of fear and tyranny in the wizarding world. The series reflects a desire for collective strength in a world that feels increasingly fragmented." (Gibson, 2010) Gibson's reading of the series highlights how the narrative uses communities to create bonds that resist the forces of isolation. Jasper Fforde claims in one of his interviews, "The inspiration comes from everywhere; from what I grew up with. There's so much silliness and nonsense in the world that we regard as normal working procedures. The satirical point of view may be to counterpoint that. The way we look at classics has been hijacked by the intelligentsia, Shakespeare is highbrow and seen as something clever people do, which isn't right at all" (Atamoglan, 2020). While the narrative mirrors the disintegration of community in the postmodern world to present absences in social spaces, it also provides comfort in the assurance that whatever Harry does, he does not do alone. Whether from the shadows as Dumbledore does or directly as his friends do, the destiny of destroying the evil force is one that all of the characters in the series, including Draco Malfoy, contribute to. In a world increasingly marked by existential uncertainty, *Harry Potter* offered an entire generation a mythic structure that "exemplifies a cooperative model of shared fate,

where individual contributions are vital, yet subsumed within the larger goal. This reflects a need for social cohesion in a fragmented, modern existence." (Flieger, 2002) Flieger focuses on how the mythic and communal aspects of The Lord of the Rings serve as an antidote to modern fragmentation, providing readers with a model of how to work together in an alienating world.

Jane Chance (2001) highlights how the Fellowship's collective journey and shared purpose serve as an antidote to the alienation brought about by modern life, offering readers a sense of comfort in belonging to a greater cause. "Tolkien's portrayal of characters who band together for a common cause, as seen in the Fellowship of the Ring, reflects a yearning for unity in the face of modern society's individualism and alienation. The camaraderie of these characters acts as a balm for the fragmentation experienced by many in the post-industrial world." (Chance, 2001) Similarly, McGlothlin (2007) emphasizes how Rowling's narrative resists the isolating pressures of modernity, showing how collective action and shared goals in the wizarding world provide a sense of comfort and belonging in times of adversity. "Rowling's portrayal of communal efforts in the fight against Voldemort, particularly through groups like the Order of the Phoenix and Dumbledore's Army, mirrors the need for community in facing the overwhelming challenges of contemporary society... that overcoming isolation is possible through collective effort."

The Growth of the Bildungsroman in Postmodernism

At the heart of these narratives, is the bildungsroman class of novel that depicts and follows the moral and psychological growth of the protagonist develops morally and psychologically. It began as the folklore tale of the adventure seeker going out into the world and learning wisdom the hard way. It traditionally ended on an optimistic note as the grandiose dreams of the hero's youth were over, along with many of their foolish mistakes and painful disappointments. In the 20th century, however, the bildungsroman more often began to end in resignation or death such as *Great Expectations* (1861) by Charles Dickens, *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery, and others.

While both of these fantasy fiction novels focus on the hero's journey, they also focus on developing the hero to accept communal help and while they may begin as outsiders, they end the story as leaders. In these novels, the personal growth of the protagonists is intertwined with their development within a community. "The contemporary man is subjugated by conformity limiting his sense of self. This results in the working-class angst which stems from the subsequent loneliness and isolation" (Anjana, 2020). The individual's journey of self-discovery becomes a process of finding identity, belonging, and purpose through relationships with others. For both Frodo and Bilbo, the Shire is a space where the protagonists have not yet forged their identities in the context of a greater community. Frodo's journey from the Shire to Mount Doom marks his coming-of-age as he steps out of this sheltered world. His journey dawns so many confusing and scattered experiences and thoughts that he is forced to isolate himself from the world. This character arc of Frodo shattered his vision of a structured world where he enjoyed life as shown in the beginning. Frodo's character arc also signifies the existence of trust and cooperation (in Sam) and reliance on friendships. Both Frodo and Bilbo embrace knowledge and experience as they embark on this journey and go through certain events that shape their personalities. Some of these events hold significance since they offer counter-reality to the postmodern world in the form of structure, order, and association with other human beings. "The Bildungsroman in Tolkien's work is a journey not just of the individual, but of the individual within the context of larger communities and causes. Frodo's growth is inherently tied to the success and bonds of the Fellowship." (Flieger, 2002)

On the contrary, Harry finds himself isolated in Dursleys where he is alone both emotionally and physically. His Bildungsroman ignites when he finds out his 'magical reality' causing his transformation from the small muggle's world to that of Hogwarts. Certain social inclusions and integrations helped him rebuild his identity and transit through his personality into a better one by becoming a part of Dumbledore's group of soldiers. "Escape is one way of dealing with real dangers, escapism is a failure to deal with real dangers, and escapology invents techniques to deal with artificial dangers" (2022). Harry also forms allegiances with other groups but his friendship with Ron and Hermione plays a vital role in his character development and especially in surviving the burden of being "the chosen one". His character arc is focused on the communal effort that he acknowledges as well as his coming-of-age with these allegiances to form the "Order of Phoenix" in Dumbledore's army. Harry ends up leading a community that affirms the need for collective effort in killing the evil or the antagonist. The organization of his community rejects the very idea of postmodernism that stresses scattered and disoriented values in human society. "In Tolkien's mythological worlds, every creature has its own distinctive power simply by virtue of being who they are, human beings, animals, elves, dwarves, or hobbits. On the other hand, in Rowling's world, the only creatures that have power are those that have (or can develop) magical abilities" (2022). McGlothlin notes that Harry's "narrative is not just about individual heroism, but about discovering the self within a communal context. His friendships with Ron and Hermione, and his leadership of Dumbledore's Army, reflect the importance of community in navigating modern anxieties and the search for meaning." (McGlothlin, 2007)

Magic & Meaning

The postmodern era is also marked by the overwhelming pace of technological and societal change. The rapid rise of digital technologies, globalization, and the 24-hour news cycle has left individuals struggling to keep up with an ever-changing world. In the postmodern context, individuals often feel as though they are living in a state of perpetual uncertainty, unable to ground themselves in any one moment before being swept into the next. Marion Gibson reflects that "the fantasy worlds created by Rowling and Tolkien provide a contrast to the alienation of modernity by offering spaces where the protagonists can grow, not in isolation, but as part of a larger community that encourages their personal development." (Gibson, 2010)

In a world where grand narratives have been deconstructed, fantasy literature reintroduces a sense of wonder and meaning through the use of magical elements. Magic, in fantasy, often fills the void left by the collapse of religious or ideological systems in the real world. Joseph Campbell's concept of the Hero's Journey (2008) suggests that myths and symbols provide a structure for meaning-making, helping individuals to navigate life's challenges. In

The Hobbit, Bilbo's journey is not only a physical adventure but also a quest for personal meaning. The existence of 'magical creations' or 'magical reality', the character development is maintained for both Bilbo and Harry in *The Hobbit* and *Harry Potter*, respectively. This magical element infuses purpose and a sense of meaning in these characters by helping them discover their objective identity. 'Magic' in these fantasies mirrors human yearning for meaning and essence in the real world which they are devoid of owing to the postmodern narratives.

Conclusion

Fiction in postmodern literature not only affirms the need for escape from contemporary reality but also offers a critical overview of the scattered world by highlighting its shortcomings. In *Harry Potter*, a critique is offered on administrative corruption and incompetence due to the lack of order and structure that ensures the division of labor for smooth proceedings. The element of 'magic' highlights the underlying threat of alienation and the search for identity that results in existential dread. Moreover, Tolkien, 1966 also criticizes the destructive outcomes of modernization resulting from the industrial revolution. Feeling adrift from his core values, man strived for the lost meaning. This fueled the situation by adversities clothed in consumerism, media, and subjectivity in The Truth values. Everything combined to infuse existential anxieties in a postmodern man who now struggles to formulate a structure for his core values and traces the absurdity of life in its absence. He depicts his disillusionment with modernity and sets the undertones of nostalgia for order and structure of community. Fiction imbibes both utopian idealism and that of dystopia as well. The fictional world intertwines the dystopia with a resolution by community and associations among human beings to transform it into a utopia which ultimately is a door to escapism. The magical idealism in these fantasy worlds created by the postmodern authors

navigates through the human journey of identity and existence. More significantly, the postmodern narratives infuse a sense of disillusionment and discomfort for the readers for fantasy to ultimately offer solace and highlight blurred boundaries of good and evil by creating the grey area of contextualization.

To sum up, fiction in postmodern literature offers a mutually amalgamated model for the postmodern man offering a fusion of modern and postmodern concerns dismissing the traditional oppressive power structures. For instance, in *Harry Potter,* the dismantling of pure blood is an indication of the rejection of traditional oppressive structures and a call for modern structures that are harmonious and inclusive for all. This hybrid model of modernism and postmodernism allows fiction to offer a resolution to the problems raised by postmodern ideology while not reverting back to the conservative and problematic past. Fiction before giving the solutions offers transcendental avenues to its readers along with not taking responsibility for change. A sense of association and familiarity is significantly evoked in the readers but it offers no room whatsoever for them to take any practical actions thus being an avenue for escapism but not for change. It aids the readers to navigate through stories and the ideal world to find relatable 'shared spaces' dismantling the fluid identity, alienation, and existential dread. Both series offer a critique of modern and postmodern life offering escape and a space for reflection on the past. The series also affirms the shortcomings and drawbacks of modernity that have disoriented the world and human beings in general. While offering a space for escapism, the fictional world navigates the deep-rooted problems of sociopolitical systems and human existence that need urgent resolution. The postmodern existential anxieties that have subjected man to the constant dilemma of absurdism and nihilism are also temporarily catered by the transcendental experience offered by the ideal world of fiction.

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