

Locating Modern Hero:**Harry Potter as a Product of Popular and High Culture****Soumya. K.****Content developer****MA in English and Comparative Literature****Central University of Kerala,****Kasaragod****Abstract**

Heroes are integral components of culture. All those factors that are associated to the culture, affect its' heroes. Likewise, the actions and motifs of heroes replicate the values and beliefs of their culture. Harry Potter – “the boy who lived”, is a combination of several types of heroes. His familiarity makes him more acquainted with the public. The journey of this archetypal hero makes him what Campbell describes in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as ‘monomyth’, and attributes to him the traits of two different types of heroes. If popular hero is seen as the product of popular culture, and archetypal hero as the product of high or elite culture, one may see Harry Potter as a combination of both, and thereby a product of two cultures— the popular and the elite. This perspective helps one to examine the status of Harry Potter as a new age hero, created by Rowling's imagination. It also exhibits the motivation behind portraying Harry as a combination of two cultures—to attribute him with the freshness and familiarity of a popular hero and to present him with the profundity of a traditional or archetypal hero.

Keywords: hero, monomyth, popular hero, archetypal hero, popular culture, elite culture,
Harry Potter

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Millions of people have been bewitched by the young wizard Harry Potter, and the fantasy world crafted by Rowling. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter has become a popular phenomenon. The impact produced by Harry Potter in the world of fantasy fiction has influenced the whole entertainment industry and it resulted in Harry Potter movies, toys and video games. Terms such as 'Pottermania' and 'Potterism' created by journalists illustrate the sensational reaction caused by the series. J. K. Rowling has become the first author to become a billionaire through the publication of just one work in series. Harry Potter is raised to the status of the most financially successful story in the history of the fiction.

The hero in the series, which is considered to be Harry as intended by the author, is a complex character. For designating him, primarily it is inevitable to deal with the concept of hero. Since ancient times the position of hero has always been an idolized one. It is often associated with power and glory. The hero's normal occupation constituted war or perilous adventure. He is generous to his followers and merciless to his enemies at the same time. Courage, strength and skill constitute his valuable assets. In short, hero is conceived to be a composite of all the admirable qualities. These form the basic image of a hero. Besides this, what is a hero?

The concept of hero is not a fixed, well-distinguished and defined one. In a broad sense in literature, hero is the major character in a literary work. The emergence of heroes in literature marks a revolution in thought. It paved the way for shifting the attention from immortal gods to mortal human beings. These mortal men, though suffer pain and even culminates in death have left a deep mark in the minds of the readers through their

moments of glory. The common European perspective of a hero has been that, “Heroes were the men who did brave or noble deeds, who exhibited extraordinary bravery, firmness or greatness of soul, men fit to be the subjects of epics” (Clark 58).

Joseph Campbell, a renowned American comparative mythologist goes further by saying, “hero is a man of self-achieved submission” (15). The hero, irrespective of gender, is the one who has been able to battle over his or her limitations. The presence of danger is an essential outcome of heroic action. The hero’s daily life is a series of tests of endurance. His ordeals of endurance include feats, contests and trials. “Successful completion of a superhuman task or ordeal is proof of the hero’s character and status” (Klapp 19).

Heroes are of different types. There are many perceptions and hence, many have classified the concept into many divisions. A culture hero could be referred to an incarnation of god, who appears in epics and myths. This division include the great religious teachers. They are “considered manifestations of the god of their devotional preaching and their lives become part of mythology” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 20:539). Another broad category is the legendary heroes. They occupy princely class, which existed in an early stage of the history of a people. They excel the ordinary men in skill, strength and courage. To this classification belong the ancient legendary and epic heroes like Gilgamesh, Iliad, Beowulf and Arjuna (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 5:878:). This classification can be sub-divided further. Orrin.E.Klapp in his article, entitled “The Folk Hero”, he has mentioned about such a sub-division named “the Conquering Hero” (19). This is a composite that incorporates heroes such as Achilles, Beowulf and Cuchulain. They exhibit their strength in winning over opponents and with certain expectations, “appear to be invincible and invulnerable” (19). Based on the characteristic role, there are other classifications under this category like the Cinderella, the Clever Hero, the Martyr etc. There is another category, which include those who were admired by their contemporaries for their real superiority in natural endowments. Mary Sheridan, in her article “The Emulation of Heroes”, has described them as classical heroes. They need not be likeable people. “Achilles was such a hero by nature ” (Sheridan 56). Not only these, but there have been many classifications regarding the concept of hero. The difference in each hero occur due to his varied place, culture, age and civilization.

Out of several categories of heroes, the one that has acquired more recognition is the popular hero. It is a category that accommodates heroes from various fields such as novels, animation movies, cartoons etc. The creation of popular heroes includes many factors. Stories, rumours, publicity are some of them, which make it clear that the lives of these heroes consist of a considerable amount of public interest. And this nourishes their popularity and bestows on them a more realistic appearance. The audience and the readers tend to believe that these heroes emerged out of them. They conceive them as a hero of the present. Though, “a hero is defined as a person, real or imaginary ” (Klapp 135), the popular heroes are always thought to be heroes from the real society, no matter even if they are created out of an author’s imagination.

The term ‘popular’ is related to things that are concerned with the general public, which consists of common people only. Hence it carries all those qualities and features attributed to the mass. As popular has got everything to do with the mass, there evolved a new form of culture named popular culture. “Popular culture is energized in ‘moments of freedom,’ specific, local plays of power and flashes of collective imagination” (Shiach 72). The culture is termed ‘popular’ because it is the culture of ‘the people,’ the common folk, the poor and the powerless who constitute the majority of the society. Popular culture considers ‘popular classes’ as its subject and their traditions and everyday life of communities as its content. It can be summed up that popular culture is the style of the majority of the members of a community.

Popular culture is always sidelined from the core mainstream cultural life and values of society. This takes us back to the idea of the ‘popular’ as common, lowly, or founded in ignorance. Due to its association with the common folk that is, the poor and the powerless, it is particularly referred to as ‘low culture’ or ‘sub-culture’. Hence they are marked off from the ‘high’ culture of the privileged. Popular culture experiences this marginalisation in every field— social structures and also in cultural forms which include texts, language, literature, art forms etc. Popular hero, who is an integral component of popular culture, gets much affected by the factors and features affiliated to the term “popular”. Hence there is a general predisposition to categorize them as less-serious and trivial in nature. The popular hero is also overlapped with the ordinary persons except that they represent the concerns in exaggerated, entertaining versions. Due to their increased popularity, they lack the aura or veil of mysticism. They are believed to be in short of any intellectual or spiritual experience.

Basically, all the heroes are placed in a mythical context and by closely examining them the pattern of the mythical journey undertaken by the hero can be found. The popular heroes also share this fact. But most of them remain either as a popular hero or as a mythic hero. Since the word “popular” frequently gets associated with entertainment, there is a tendency to perceive the popular heroes as means of fun and entertainment. So attempts are hardly made to trace out the mythical patterns in them. This results in the categorization of popular heroes as corporeal, light, and less-intricate. Although the popular hero has no definite structure, it is only through the hero that the people talks about the story and its other constituents.

Just like the popular culture has high impact upon popular hero, the high or elite culture has considerable effect upon the mythic hero. High culture seems to be more sophisticated. “High culture is a term, now used in a number of different ways in academic discourse, whose most common meaning is the set of cultural products, mainly in the arts, held in the highest esteem by a culture” (“High Culture,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*). It is the culture of the privileged class such as aristocracy or intelligentsia. It is distinguished from the low culture or popular culture, which is the culture of the masses.

In the Western tradition, high culture has historical beginning in the rational and aesthetic ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. The writings in the Greek and Latin languages were treated as the classical or ideal texts, which has been praised as the texts that exhibit high form of literature and culture. They promoted elevated style of writing. The literature of this form was not meant for the masses. These classical texts were woven around myths and archetypes.

Hero is one of the common archetypes in myth. His or her duties are to serve and to sacrifice. The archetypal hero has to separate from the ordinary world and also has to sacrifice himself for the sake of the journey. The archetypal hero appears in all religions, mythologies, and epics of the world. The archetypal hero is not someone present outside in the world; rather he is an expression of people's deep psychological aspect of human existence.

Though heroes from various stories, cultures and periods possess different traits, all archetypal heroes share certain characteristics. One of the common factors that they share is the basic structure followed by their journeys. Joseph Campbell, an American comparative mythologist has utilized the term 'monomyth' to refer to the hero's journey. Campbell's book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* has presented a simple, three-part summation of the pattern the archetypal hero's journey. The monomyth or hero's journey comprises three segments: separation, initiation, and return. A hero steps out from his everyday life and enters into a place of supernatural wonder. There, he encounters extraordinary forces and has to win. Finally, he returns from this expedition, along with the new knowledge acquired to his fellow men. In Campbell's words, "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of monomyth" (28). Traditional hero archetypes provide ways to compare the heroes of the present with the heroes from the past. The monomyth is intended to cross space and time and this makes it crucial to any study of myth or heroes.

The major difference between the popular heroes and the mythic heroes is that popular heroes lack a definite structure or a pattern of their journey, whereas the mythic heroes possess such a pattern. Unlike that of the mythic heroes, the stages of their adventurous journeys are not scrutinized. One of the reasons of this could be said that the popular heroes include a variety of heroes because they represent the popular culture, which is the culture of masses. Meanwhile, the mythic heroes represent the high culture that belongs to a privileged group, which is smaller. The tales of these popular heroes are based on myths but this fact is seldom acknowledged. This might be due to the lack of a definite pattern in their journey.

Harry Potter could be seen as the product of two cultures— popular culture and high culture, which are opposite in nature. Popular culture "mobilizes the tactile, the incidental, the transitory, the expendable; the visceral" (Ians 12). It appeals to itinerant orders of taste,

sense and desire and hence, does not involve an elusive aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention. High culture on the other hand, demands refined tastes and a formally instructed knowledge. “It demands moments of attention that are separated from the run of daily life” (Ians 12) and so they are preserved in art galleries, museums, and university courses.

Heroes are interpreted as meaningful expressions of societal values, beliefs and behaviours. They form integral parts of culture and society. “Cultural values are reflected in both the actions of a hero and his motivations” (Lowrey 1). The exceptionality and freshness possessed by the Harry Potter series should be accredited to Rowling’s technique of creating a hero that would accustom to multiple cultures. Rowling has combined the chains of popular culture and high culture to depict the new age hero—Harry Potter, and his world of witchcraft and wizardry. “Blending boarding school and fantasy, Rowling has created a character who has been identified as a fairy tale prince, a real boy and an archetypal hero” (Behr 112).

All through the series, Harry undergoes a journey that exhibits his life from a baby to a seventeen year old boy. From an innocent boy, Harry evolves into a teenage wizard, who takes up the responsibility to avenge his parent’s death and also to save his community by destroying the evil wizard, Lord Voldemort. Harry identifies himself with the mythic hero, who undertakes the hero’s journey in search of the essence of his life—the truth. Here, the truth is the knowledge about his destiny as ‘the Chosen One’. Harry’s journey from the first book till the end of the fifth represents the journey of hero in quest of the knowledge about the self. It is in *Order of the Phoenix* that he gets access to the prophecy that reveals the truth about his destiny— “either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives” (741). But even that is only the information about his destiny. It has only given him the hint about his destiny. Harry is totally obscure about his power and capability of being the destined one. Harry comes to know about his self only in the final book that too, towards the climax.

Harry’s journey can be placed within the pattern drawn by Joseph Campbell, in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Harry performs the monomyth with all its components—separation, initiation and return. It could be said that the characterization of Harry Potter is based on the archetypal hero, which is well-illustrated by the basic story line of the series.

Besides the fact of him being a mythic hero, Harry Potter is also hailed as one of the most popular heroes in the world of fantasy fiction. Harry’s position as a popular hero is well-explained through different means—in the forms of movies, fan sites, fan clubs, and even video games. The history of the books’ commercial success and the numerous translations to several languages also mark the world-wide publicity gained by the series. The popularity attained by these books has paved the way for the enrichment of the language with few pop culture words like Muggle.

Though Rowling has created the series based on mythological stories, she has given it a touch of familiarity by linking Harry to the ordinary world. “The wizard world exists only in relation to the “real” world, echoing/mirroring all its customs and discourse, and thus reflects our Muggle world back to us, the Muggle readers” (Behr 123). The house and lives of the Dursleys and the premises where they live could be easily associated by the readers. They exhibit the normal life in London. The places where Harry visit such as the zoo, and the King Cross Station are real places in London. In a documentary created on the creation of Harry Potter series named “Harry Potter Revealed—Who Created Harry Potter”, Jim Dale, the voice actor of the Harry Potter series, says that everything that has been included in the books are descriptions of something, somewhere in England (2011). All the wonderful ancient buildings, the fantastic castles, and the woods portrayed in the series could be assimilated to those in the places where Rowling lived.

Even life in the Magic World is much analogous to that in the Muggle World, except for the magic. The customs, social values, boarding school, family set-up, and also the governmental rule by the ministry found in the Harry Potter series can be identified with those in the real world. Suman Gupta’s work, *Re-Reading Harry Potter*, talks about the worlds depicted in the series.

There are several obvious areas in which the ongoing concerns of our social and political world are played out in the wizard world. Some of these are: the nature of kinship, and the social and political significance of bloodlines; The exercise of power between different social groups and individuals; The construction of gender, and the characteristics of sexual desire; Consumerism and advertisement; The nature of human rationality. (91-92)

Not only the social and political systems, but even the characters resemble the ordinary human beings in the real world. Harry Potter is characterized as a hero with the mindset of a normal human being. Although he is often appreciated for his qualities of kindness and selflessness, Harry does exhibit characteristics of a normal, ordinary person at times. He has moments of infatuation, jealousy, love and regret. Just like an obsessed lover, Harry yearns for Ginny’s break-up with Dean and he even reserves the valuable potion, Felix Felicis for winning Ginny’s love—“vague and unformulated plans that involved Ginny splitting up with Dean, and Ron somehow being happy to see her with a new boyfriend, had been fermenting in the depths of his brain...” (*Half-Blood Prince* 441). He also attempts foolishly to take revenge on Bellatrix out of impulse that had almost placed him in grave danger. He also possesses moments of dilemma and annoyance. He too has weaknesses and obsessions that sometimes make him think like a normal boy. He wishes to lead a normal life with his dear friends and his love. Apart from his heroic qualities, Harry is very much akin to a normal boy of the ordinary world. These characteristics of Harry draws him more closer to the ordinary people and accounts to his immense popularity and hails him as a popular hero.

According to Suman Gupta, the Harry Potter series deal with three worlds: the Magic world, the Muggle world, and our world. “The Magic and Muggle worlds are overtly presented in the books; our world is implied through both these worlds” (85). By “our world”, Gupta implies a world that is somewhat coextensive with the Muggle world. These two are immediately distinguished by the sole fact that one is explicitly presented in these books, while the other is only implied. The ways in which Rowling presents the Muggle world with regard to the Magic world is considered to be substantive by Gupta. An illustration of this argument could be seen in beginning of *the Prisoner of Azkaban*, where an excerpt from Harry’s textbook, *A History of Magic* is : “Non-magic people (more commonly known as Muggles) were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times, but not very good at recognising it” (7). Gupta thinks that the Muggle world is presented within the embrace of the Magic world, and is so portrayed to draw the reader away from it and into the Magic world (89). It is true that Rowling had dominated the Magic world over the Muggle world for creating a sense of wonder and fascination among the readers. But she has very conveniently drawn extracts from the ordinary world for the building the foundation of her story and has furnished it with the help of mythological conventions and patterns.

Harry is a hero who teaches about the important aspects of life. However, he does not instruct these in a didactic manner. He tutors through his actions, thoughts and principles. He edifies the readers about the relevance of friendship (that too with those who have sense of social and moral values), the significance of choice, the importance of forgiveness and the nobility of sacrifice. Rowling intended to promote moral principles like truth, love and sacrifice. “The adventure of Harry and his friends spark the moral imagination of young readers” (Deavel 62). The novel implies through the hero that the sole reason for Harry’s victory is his choice, which is morally good. The value of sacrifice is also taught through Dumbledore’s conversation with Harry. He eulogizes the virtue of love out of which, Harry’s mother sacrificed her life. Dumbledore explains that Harry’s triumph over Voldemort is due to the love of his mother, who has shown it through the act of sacrifice.

Rowling utilizes the features of mythic hero to bring an air of legitimacy to these instructions of social and moral values. The archetypal hero, who has inseparable connections with myths, always tries to propose the purposes of the myths. Myths are those components, that allows human beings to solve the problems that they encounter in life and they conveys certain social and moral values which are essential for the well-being of the society. Campbell in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* says that myths reveal the problems and solutions directly, that are valid for all mankind (18).

Harry is regarded as a popular hero, because of the place he received among the common people. He is placed as popular hero not because he directly shares the features of the word “popular”, but because of him being the hero of the popular fiction. Rowling also assimilates Harry to the popular culture by relating him with the ordinary life of the

common mass. “J. K. Rowling’s first book is popular therefore, not because it presents an innovative story, but due to the fact that it tells the story with which everybody can identify themselves with” (Roche 11).

Rowling makes Harry the hero of a popular fiction by expecting him to fill up what a mythic hero lacks. The mythic hero, being a part of the elite culture, lacks the popularity and freshness enjoyed by the popular hero. Rowling wanted Harry to win the mass appeal of the popular hero. Moreover, she wanted him to bring in a wave of novelty and freshness, which could not have been possible had he remained solely as a traditional hero. Another reason for portraying him as a popular hero could be to diminish the graveness of the novels’ shortcomings. The Harry Potter series are often criticized “as diabolic stories encouraging occult practices, magic, and witchcraft” (Childs 119). If it were a novel completely based on mythology and archetypes, this accusation would have seriously affected its reception. But by incorporating the features of popular culture, this remains as an academic criticism and hence has not affected its commercial success, even in a slightest manner.

To conclude, this paper has, by deducing the reasons behind such a convoluted characterization of the hero, tried to bring out the various cultural aspects of the new age hero Harry Potter who is presented as a combination of the mythic and the popular hero. He embodies the features of both the high and the popular cultures. Rowling considered the series as a teaching tool to educate the readers on human virtues. The Harry Potter novels express Rowling’s concern about the social and moral values that should be taught to the readers, especially the children. Stories surrounded by mythological conventions perform the task of edifying the young people about moral conventions. Rowling has suitably chosen the mythic hero for this task and thus set Harry in the frame of the archetypal hero. The ambiance created by myths and magic in the series was enough for bringing in an air of obscurity. The more it is obscure, the more it generates legitimacy. Hence, the pattern of the mythic hero in Harry has endorsed him with authenticity and authority to guide others (the readers) in matters related to human virtue.

Although Rowling sketched Harry in the pattern of traditional hero, she has tricked the readers into believing him to be a unique hero, by adding the qualities of a common man. Harry Potter, being the hero of a popular series, elevates to the position of the popular hero. This makes him share a place in popular culture also, which showers on him, the benefits of the culture. The most obvious benefit of the popular fiction is its popularity received due to the familiarity provided by the novels in characterization, plot, thematic representation and narrative style. Here, in Harry Potter series, Rowling has focused on familiarizing the characters, especially the hero. By giving certain common, ordinary traits to Harry, Rowling familiarizes the hero and thus saves him from being typed as a traditional hero. Harry’s flaws and weaknesses are thus explained as that of an ordinary boy. This feature served the purpose of hailing Harry Potter as an exclusive hero. Harry Potter’s uniqueness is an outcome of his characterization as the product of two cultures.

Although the series was initially classified as children's literature, with the passage of time Harry began to arrest the attention of both children and adults because of the depiction of Harry Potter as a combination of heroes. It seems that Rowling did not want her books to be classified either as popular novels that are consumed to kill time, or to be marginalized as meant for certain section of the society. She wanted the series to be recognized universally. As different sections of the society consume books for different purposes, Rowling decided to introduce her books as a combination of cultures.

Hero is a product of culture. In order to elucidate the types of heroes present in Harry Potter, the features of the popular culture and the elite culture are analyzed. The traits of the popular hero and the mythic hero, the products of both these cultures, are found in Harry. The intention behind such a portrayal is that both these heroes complement each other. The flaws of the mythic hero are balanced by the popular hero and vice versa. Rowling wanted Harry Potter to be treated as a unique hero, who enjoys the authority of the mythic hero and the freshness and popularity possessed by the popular hero.

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