

## **Elements of Magic Realism in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone***

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### **Abstract:**

The literary world changed in 1997 with the release of a book that was about a boy aged 11, who lost his parents when he was a little over a year old, and at 11 years of age, finds out he is a wizard. In 1997, the world met Harry Potter, the boy who lived and went on to live in millions of hearts. J.K. Rowling, the author of Harry Potter went on to write 7 books in this series and became a globally loved and read writer. This paper aims to discuss one of the key factors that make Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, the first book of the series, a favorite for kids and adults alike. The paper traces the elements of Magic Realism in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone and deep dives into the significance and use of this narrative strategy to show various important lessons of life and add an element of magical realism to the books.

**Keywords:** Magic Realism, Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Reality and Literature, Magic and Reality.

### **Introduction**

The world of Harry Potter is all about latches on the cupboard, pots, and pans up until the day he finds out that he is a wizard. What follows is a series of events that can easily be clubbed together under the term that describes them best - Magic Realism.

“Magic realism, chiefly Latin-American narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction.” (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica)

To put this simply would mean to see how using this strategy, authors can blur the lines between reality and fantasy, making the readers aware of a new reality that is full of fantastic elements.

In the modern world of fiction, this narrative strategy is used and mastered by none other than J.K Rowling, the author of The Harry Potter series. With her words and a story about a boy who finds out he is a wizard, she has created a world that every child wants to be a part of and every adult understands the delicacies of. The elements of magic realism make it all the more appealing as they make the impossible seem possible, and allow the readers to set aside their notions of what is right and what is real, only to accept that in these books, reality can look completely different and then go on to accept it for what it is.

### **Understanding Magic Realism**

In no world has J.K. Rowling introduced the concept/narrative strategy of magic realism. In fact, Magic Realism is a way of storytelling that has been around ever since the 1940s. Classified by its style of combining elements of reality and fiction, this method often uses instances that involve dreams and visions, fantastic creatures, and talking objects, which all work together to create a new, alternate reality. This way, the limits of what we humans call reality are pushed, and the readers are expected to allow this thought of a new, fantastic reality, take its place.

“Within a work of magical realism, the world is still grounded in the real world, but fantastical elements are considered normal in this world. Like fairy tales, magical realism novels and short stories blur the line between fantasy and reality.” (Staff)

In 1925, historian Franz Roh coined the term ‘Magic Realism’. The term was used to describe a visual arts movement emerging throughout Europe (Roh). According to Roh, magic realism was a movement to mark a return to realism and a reaction to expressionism’s abstract style. It is crucial to understand that magic realism and fantasy are two very different concepts. Magic realism does not involve superheroes or people with some superpowers in an otherwise

regular world. However, when elements of fantasy meet mythological creatures like elves, dwarves, goblins, etc, this sort of writing can be categorized as magic realism. (Santosh)

Homi Bhabha, a writer who has worked with the narrative strategy of magic realism, describes it as “the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (Bhabha).

*There are 5 characteristics of magic realism:*

*1) an element of magic is there*

*2) there is a fantasy world*

*3) the reader may be confused between two opposite events*

*4) there are multiple worlds*

*5) there is a disruption of space, time, and identity. (Santosh)*

When a writer or author implements these characteristics into their work, they are said to create a work of magic realism.

### **Use of Magic Realism by J.K. Rowling**

The Harry Potter books have been widely popular and have turned into a huge commercial market for fans. From movies to merchandise, there are endless ways in which J.K Rowling’s story has taken shape and reached almost every corner of the world. But what are these elements that fascinate the readers and viewers of this story so much? They are the bits of magic that people wished existed in real life. They are the bits of magic realism in her stories.

J.K. Rowling has used real-life experiences and examples, emotions and instances, and fused them together with elements of magic to convey a deeper and more layered meaning to the text. In fact, elements of magic are so organically woven into the narrative of the story that the reader expects them and is hardly caught off guard.

If the 5 characteristics of magic realism as listed by Santosh are considered, the Harry Potter series does have all required elements of Magic Realism. These can be traced in the way in which repetition, mythology, verbal magic, and metamorphosis are used by the author.

### **Magic Realism in Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone**

The world is aware of how it all started for J.K Rowling - from a train to Manchester to King’s Cross Station in London, she was inspired by the idea to write the book. Some years later,

in 1993, she was based in Edinburg where she went on to finish writing the first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is the story of a boy named Harry, who is an orphan. Living with his aunt and uncle in London, Harry has a life that can be described as abusive. He lives and sleeps in a cupboard under the stairs, he is given old clothes to wear, and also expected to do chores although he is just a child. His life turns around when he receives a letter from a school - Hogwarts. This school of witchcraft and wizardry has offered him a place and soon, he is off to Hogwarts, learning all about his parent's death and the world he belongs to from people in the wizarding world. At school, he learns magic and meets two of his best friends - Ron and Hermione. His story is that of mischief and learning, doing the right thing, and fighting the Dark Lord, all the while being a first-year student of 11 at Hogwarts. Lily James Potter, Harry's mother, died to protect him from Lord Voldemort. Her love creates a protective shield around Harry which makes it impossible for Lord Voldemort to even touch him. During his school year, Harry, tagged along by Ron and Hermione, comes across the Philosopher's Stone - a magical stone that works to keep the person who uses it immortal. Voldemort, weak and half-alive after attacking Harry all these years ago, comes face to face with him in search of this stone. The story ends on a note of optimism as Harry understands the complexities of being himself and starts to grasp the biggest magic that was ever-present in this world - love.

Here, one of the main narrative tools used is that of magic, and by extension, magic realism. From being a part of a muggle family (the people who have no magical abilities) to finding out that he is a wizard at 11, Harry's character struggles with his constantly changing reality. However, as a child, he is fascinated when he sets foot in Diagon Alley, the market where he goes with Hagrid to buy school supplies like his wand, books, robes, and much more.

Along with Harry, the reader comes across all the magical things existing in his world. The book specifically mentions that Diagon Alley is located in London. Here, we see wands that allow all witches and wizards to perform magic using spells, brooms that can fly, books that can talk, pots and pans that stir on their own, and so on. Harry enters this world that is vividly different from anything he has known so far and here; it feels like almost anything is possible.

This is also the part where Harry realizes the existence of other magical creatures like Goblins and their special powers. At Gringotts Bank, he withdraws money from his inheritance and goes on to King's Cross station from where he must board his train. But he has to board this

train from Platform No. 9  $\frac{3}{4}$ . Now, normally, train stations have platforms that are numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on. Having such a platform number assigned to his train is indeed a surprise. With the help of Mrs. Weasley, Harry runs at the wall between platforms 9 and 10, successfully reaching the platform from which his Hogwarts journey begins.

When Harry enters the Hogwarts express, he has a chance to make friends with Ron. He comes across Chocolate Frogs where there are magical portraits of different wizards. Harry opens one and gets a card with Dumbledore on it. Similar to the muggle world, kids in the wizarding world collect these chocolate frog cards. The only difference is that the people in the portraits of the Chocolate Frog cards appear and disappear at will.

When Harry reaches the school, he comes across the Sorting Hat. Here, there are simple elements that one can witness at first - it is a hat that sorts kids into different houses. However, when put into actual practice, the Sorting Hat is full of magic - it not only speaks but also has the ability to ensure that it reads your talents, wishes, and desires to make sure you end up at the right place, the right house that will help you become the best version of yourself by placing you with like-minded people. However, here is the place where magic realism meets the real world - even with the magical powers of the sorting hat, it listens to the person and their desire, allowing them to choose a path in life that they envision themselves on.

When Harry sits down to eat, he sees how the food “magically” appears in front of him and plates refill on their own. When climbing up to the Gryffindor common room, there is a Fat Lady who guards the doors and needs a password to allow them to enter. Later, Harry attends classes where they teach him charms that help channel the magic through the wands and spells they can use to life things and soar them high up in the air, turn water into flavored drinks, and so on.

Such instances where the real, non-magical world overlaps with the magical one create for us a story where one bleeds into the other as the reader is confronted with the idea of having the magical world as a part of the non-magical world. So much so that eventually, their separate existence is something that a reader cannot comprehend.

Throughout the books, such elements of magic realism turn this story into a layered, fun, and fantastic entity. Some images are striking - the chocolate frogs, moving pictures, the magical ceiling of the Great Hall, staircases that keep changing their position, portraits that talk, ghosts that talk and glide the halls of Hogwarts, spells that turn things from one to another, people possessing the power to turn into animals, and so on.

These elements, when imagined and visualized, create a world so fascinating, so intriguing, that the overall appeal of the book increases multifold. With the use of this narrative strategy, the author blends the elements of magic realism to give us a reality we wish we were a part of as it offers endless possibilities.

### **The popularity of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone**

When the first Harry Potter book was published by Bloomsbury, it became an international sensation. Not only was the book translated into multiple languages across the world but it was enjoyed by kids and adults alike. Over the years, all the Harry Potter books have had the same, if not more vehement, response from the audience. The question, then, is what contributes to the popularity of the books? One can argue that the novels are about things that will never happen in reality, like people flying around in the air on brooms.

However, this very possibility of a world that has magic so closely present makes these books appealing to kids as well as adults. Elements of magic and magic realism offer a chance for the author to share some important experiences and life lessons to a generation that got interested in the boy with a scar on his forehead and no parents. These books lead Harry into situations that teach values of friendship, strength, love, loyalty, loss, grief, and so much more.

As a literary text that started out as a children's book, the Harry Potter series soon became the preferred choice of readers who have forever preferred something new, something layered, and something fantastic, all of which was a major part of Harry Potter.

### **Traces of Magic Realism in Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone**

Looking at the actual book, there are many instances where we come across the use of magic realism. Here are some that stand out:

*"Umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley. There was a flash of violet light, a sound like a fire cracker, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers."*

(Rowling)

*"Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand and said "wingardiun leviosa". Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads."* (Rowling)

*“At that moment Neville toppled in to the common room, how he had managed to climb through the portrait hole was anyone’s guess because his legs had been stuck together with what they recognized at once as the leg locker curse. He must have had to bunny hop all the way up to Gryffindor tower. Everyone fell about laughing except Hermione who leapt up and performed a counter curse.”* (Rowling)

One can argue that the elements of magic realism add a new layer to the story which would otherwise lack a central feature. These descriptions from the book *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* go on to show how language, characters, imagination, time, words, and the narrative technique all come together to give us a combination of reality and magic, which is what every reader of the Harry Potter series loves so much.

### **The Significance of Magic Realism**

An argument can be made that the use of magic realism in the Harry Potter books is just a technique and nothing more. However, in their essay titled ‘More Than Moving Images: The Visual Culture of Harry Potter’, Tolonda Henderson and Amy M. Von Lintel mention how these elements of magic have a deeper significance.

“During Harry’s first ride on the Hogwarts Express, he quickly discovers the magic of images in the wizarding world. When examining a Chocolate Frog card that features professor Dumbledore, Harry registers surprise at the sudden disappearance of the headmaster’s image from the frame. (SS, p. 103) Ron responds to Harry’s obvious confusion by noting that Harry shouldn’t expect Dumbledore to hang around all day. Harry then summarizes for Ron - and all of Rowling’s readers - one key difference between the Muggle and wizard realms: people “just stay put” in Muggle pictures. Ron’s shock in learning about this immobility, which he qualifies as ‘weird’, underscores the expectation that wizarding images are magically animate.

Unlike our “motion pictures”, the movement in wizarding pictures is not based on the visual illusion of motion. What we experience as moving pictures are in fact still photographs projected in rapid sequence onto a screen, a technology descended from the Cinemetograohy invented by the French brothers Lumiere in 1895. Rowling’s magical images are, in contrast, animate in broader and less illusionary ways: they are not only visually mobile, but they are also independently responsive to the thoughts and actions of the wizarding viewers, often acting as narrative characters themselves.” (Henderson and Von Lintel)

The idea of playing with time, and eventually with death as a consequence, is very prominent when one observes how characters live and exist in pictures. The use of such a narrative technique offers the readers the opening of one of the strongest human desires - to live beyond one's years.

And yet, the story of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone ends with Nicholas Flamel letting go of the stone that was keeping him alive. Is it not, then, a glimpse at how human beings are chasing the things that will never bring them true happiness?

Such an in-depth, layered message comes in the form of a Philosopher's Stone that gives immortality to the person who possesses it. The elements of magic realism then slip into this narrative as devices to add meaning and layer to the story and drive the point home with an added layer of significance as compared to simply stating a fact.

These elements are also used to add humor to the story and make light of situations that are otherwise scary and quite heavy to read. There are various instances in the books where Harry is mocked by the people in various portraits, adding to the laughing bits in the novel.

The significance of such elements, when placed in the form of magic realism, increases the way in which the text is perceived and understood by people of all age groups, over all these years and in the coming years too.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, magic realism can be simply understood as an intriguing combination of reality and magical fantasy. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone opens the doors to a world of witchcraft and wizardry where life takes on a new meaning and magic becomes an everyday affair. However, for readers, it is a world where events happen with magic and reality holds a slightly different meaning.

The world has accepted and loved the phenomenon of having a magical side, the possibility of living in a world where magic exists and is a part of every single activity organically, is an achievement that Rowling has under her belt as she managed to create something that blends together a world of magical reality through magic realism.



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