

Gothic Disruption of Internal and External Narrative in Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban and Mary Poppins

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Abstract: We often picture children's books that contain fantastical nannies or magical schools as wholesome narratives where good triumphs over evil in straightforward storylines. However, closer examination reveals gothic themes in books like Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban and Mary Poppins. Both novels explore experiences of encountering the forgotten and unfamiliar, utilizing the gothic framework of the Unheimlich (The Uncanny) and Gothic disruption of personal spaces. This paper analyzes how gothic elements refine the protagonists' identities, arguing that while Harry Potter ultimately embraces a unique self-concept through his encounters with gothic disruptions, Mary Poppins integrates the uncanny into everyday middle-class life.

Keywords: Gothic Literature, Children's Literature, Harry Potter, Identity, Mythic Tradition.

1. Introduction

We often picture children's books that contain fantastical nannies or magical schools as wholesome narratives where the good achieve victory over the evil in uncomplicated, straightforward storylines, or sometimes the overall tale would contain no plot at all, but snippets of documented daily life in an imaginary world of peaceful English middle-class existence. However, upon closer examination, books in both genres, such as Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban and Mary Poppins, actually explore surprising gothic themes. In the third book of the series, Harry Potter grapples with critical tension arising from the final revelation of a long-lost family history and his teenage self-identity. Similarly, the clash between ancient animalistic traditions and Edwardian English middle-class values creates profound emotional undertones in Mary Poppins. Ultimately, both novels detail experiences of encountering the forgotten and unfamiliar in everyday life, such as momentarily confronting memories or ancient customs, within their respective emotional narratives, albeit varying in narrative emphases. Thus, it is possible to analyze both the novels' treatment of the protagonist's identity progress and moments encountering the forgotten past within frameworks from Gothic Literature, employing terms and concepts such as The Unheimlich (The Unhomely) and Gothic exploration into personal spaces to clarify further how encountering with the gothic refines character personhood. Ultimately, these sequences function in different roles within Harry Potter and Mary Poppins; as the adventure hero Harry Potter increasingly stabilizes his personal identity by responding to gothic disruptions of established family history, these sequences manifest as moments of tension between the uptight British middle-class and an animalistic mythic universe in Mary Poppins.

2. Defining Key Terms

2.1. The Unheimlich

The concept of the dichotomy between the Heimlich and its nominal opposition, the Unheimlich, defined by the

renowned psychologist Sigmund Freud to denote occasions where an incident prompts something in our psyche, resulting in a buried memory that has emerged to haunt the current space. In Gothic literature, the unheimlich often manifests in supernatural occurrences that abruptly upwell and render the familiar into something strange and menacing. A similar effect works in the field of history and politics as well; the sudden surge upwards of the unfamiliar introduces relativity to established truth, creating a sense of "we have once known but only in the remote past ... historically or psychologically" [6]

2.2. Privacy in Domestic Gothic

In the domestic Gothic tradition, the private home, a space typically associated with safety and intimacy, becomes the site of stress and intrusivity. The concept reflects a modern, urban individual's complicated anxieties regarding personal privacy and surveillance; the trope of missing or secretive rooms engenders fear inspired by the revelation of hidden memories or family history, which underscores long-lasting oppression existing in the domestic sphere. In Modern Gothic, the uncanny occurrence may originate from the failure to establish a "new domesticity" in the technologically advanced household compared to the idealized old homely home, which is expressed as psychological trauma.

3. Literature Review

The scholarship on Mary Poppins reveals Poppins's multifaceted role as a character that bridges the figure of a wise ancient spirit of nature with uptight working women of the middle-class household. Elick's chapter "Exploring the Mystery of Shared Origins: P. L. Travers's Mary Poppins Series (1934-1998)" [3] further explores Poppins's role as a translator between the sentient animals and their human counterparts. Despite this, Poppins is not portrayed as a radical advocator of animal rights; instead, her interactions with animals reflect a more casual, opportunistic approach. This characterization underscores the prevailing theme of the mystifying natural world that is heavily present within Mary Poppins's book. Complementing Elick's insights, Marosi's

article “Mary Poppins: The Subversive Magic Helper”[5] explores the character’s alignment with the archetype of the magical old crone found in fairy tales [3]. Marosi positions Poppins as a subversive magical helper figure by embodying both enchantment and a pragmatic, less overtly transformative role.

On the other hand, Holly Betty’s article “Harry Potter and the (post)human animal body” examines the representation of animal identities with human characters in the Harry Potter series. Batty’s analysis focuses on the symbolic adoption of animalistic identities undergone by several major characters within the series [1]. The mergence of human identity with an animal body or consciousness, especially undergone by the protagonist Harry Potter, signifies his transformation into a “posthuman body,” which Batty argues heralds a complex understanding of Harry’s changing body image and its relation to evolving identity. In contrast, Byler’s article “Makeovers, Individualism, and Vanishing Community in the Harry Potter Series” [2] examines the implications of personal transformation and the erosion of communal bonds within the Harry Potter narrative. Byler argues that the series’ focus on individual makeover experiences highlights the series’ utter refusal and disposes of community values despite superficial vindication.

4. Gothic Disruptions in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

In both J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Mary Poppins*, disruptive animal figures are instrumental in revealing long-term obscured unfamiliar or even frightful aspects of the protagonists’ identities. Harry Potter’s encounter with an ominous black dog, who is later revealed to be his escaped convict godfather, Sirius Black, serves to unearth stressful memories related to familial history. The spectral canine, Black’s animagus form, claimed by Professor Twelawney to be emblematic of death, “the Grim,” haunts Harry’s broader struggle with his identity; for instance, Harry witnesses the Grim during the Quidditch match in thunderstone that occurs at a time when his mind is still preoccupied with the traumatic memory of his encounter with the Dementors on the Hogwarts Express, where Harry is unprecedentedly forced to confront the repressed memory of his mother’s final scream, a haunting fragment of his familial past which he struggles to reconcile with his own identity. Against a storming sky flashing with lightning, “Harry saw something that distracted him completely: the silhouette of an enormous shaggy black dog, clearly imprinted against the sky” [7], which caused him to fall off of the broom, losing the game. In this scene, Harry’s struggle to confront his specialty is exemplified by the black dog, The Grim, who seemingly embodies the sinister aspect of Harry’s destiny and serves as physical proof of his unique role as the current saviour of the wizarding world, a reminder that his birth cast upon his parents their tragic, untimely death. As Punter illustrates, the exposure of “inevitably ‘misconceives’ itself as central to the universe, is that below, or athwart, the ‘grounding’ of our conceptions and self-conception [...] there is another force at work” [6] constitutes fear of the uncanny. This confrontation, which results in similar fears, forces Harry to acknowledge the inordinateness of his identity and the terrifying potential prospect of him never being able to conform to the norms of the wizarding world. A fear of not being able to maintain the familiar and the safe swiftly confirmed by Harry’s immediate

reaction upon regaining consciousness, asking whether the team has a replay. However, despite Harry’s persistent struggle to conform, the wizarding community exists in a constant state of heightened tension, manifesting in his frequent observation of discrimination and persecution, and thus resulting in his distinct identification with the disadvantaged individual. It is rare to find another novel in the series that showcases such a diverse range of magical creatures. From redcaps to werewolves, these creatures were often the symbol of savagery and trouble to the wizarding public, mirroring Harry’s own inner turmoil as he grapple with being considered an exception, an outcast of the wizarding community. As Batty explains, Harry gains the acute insight that “This parallel between the abuse of humans and animals recalls the intersectionality inherent in posthumanism; speciesism is employed to subjugate all bodies” [1], enabling him to be alarmed about the dire consequences of not aligning with societal norms in the wizarding community through Buckbeak’s death. The contrast between Harry’s realization of the unlawful actions taken against Buckbeak and Hermione’s unwavering faith in the system when he responds to Hermione’s exclamation, “They are bringing the executioner to the appeal! But that sounds as though they’ve already decided” [7] with logical analysis of Malfoy’s sneering behaviour. Harry’s deep empathy and personal identification with disadvantaged groups exemplified by animals exacerbate his struggle to reconcile his private selfhood with the expectations placed upon him.

Ultimately, Harry’s journey towards self-acceptance culminated in the successful casting of Patronus Charm, releasing a spectral animal protector against the Dementors, finally signifying the integration of these animalistic aspects into his identity, though notably, he is prevented from seeing the manifest animal. Harry’s achievements signify substantial character growth as he tentatively reconciles with his role as the iconic savior, Harry Potter, who inevitably stands perpetually at odds with conventional social norms. Betty configures this transformation in turns of Harry’s ever-maturing body, where despite learning the human-animal hierarchy with his attempts to fit into the system, “as his body and subjectivity persist in changing, it is rather difficult to pin down who he is precisely” [4] which signifies his body existing in a constant state of confrontation with the norm. In contrast, the enchanting excursions orchestrated by *Mary Poppins* to inspire her charges lead to the children’s embrace of the more primal, mythical realms, which are subsequently dismissed by Poppins as the adventures conclude with a return to their ordinary, middle-class existence. As discussed by Elick, this narrative suggests a shared cosmic origin among all beings, where magical experiences are ultimately reconciled with the mundane [3]. The structure in *Mary Poppins* thus reflects a harmonious return to everyday life, emphasizing that the mundane holds no less significance than the magical world. Therefore, this divergence highlights a fundamental contrast between the Gothic’s destabilization of identity in *Harry Potter* and, adversely, its harmonious integration into the mundane in *Mary Poppins*.

5. Gothic Disruptions in Mary Poppins

Building on an exploration of how disruptive animal figures reveal and challenge the protagonist’s identities in two novels, *Harry Potter* and *Mary Poppins* further contrast in the portrayal of open landscapes, with each shaping the

protagonists' experiences and identities in markedly different ways. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, open spaces, such as the Hogwarts grounds, are frequently associated with danger and psychological distress for Harry. As Liggings reminds us in her chapter, Gothic also includes terror happening within the place of safety, "more oriented towards questions of form and trauma," which reflects "modernist anxieties about the invasion of privacy" [4]. His experiences in these areas underscore instability and vulnerability within a supposed safe space. Most significantly, Harry's experience of agony during his first Dementor defence lesson with Lupin underscores a moment where his supposed private mental space officially under attack. The experience brought into focus Harry's fragile identity, already precarious due to his orphan status and is continually threatened by exposure and instability. Thus, Harry develops extreme sensitivity to the intrusion of his mental space, which is emblematic of his broader existential fears and his desire to maintain control over his fragmented identity. The open spaces of Hogwarts, while symbolizing freedom, also represent a battleground where Harry's sense of security and identity is constantly at risk. In contrast, *Mary Poppins*' cheerful transverse through the vast grounds outside the home with her proteges as the adventures and magical excursions often take place in environments that initially appear chaotic or unusual, and oftentimes a familiar city space rendered unfamiliarized, as Marosi suggests, "a world which actually belongs to their primary physical world during the day, but which shows its other deeper and magical side once Mary Poppins appears" [5] ultimately contributes to the children's understanding and acceptance of their place in the world. The open spaces encountered through *Mary Poppins*'s magical interventions serve as a catalyst for growth and discovery rather than fear and instability; in other words, she "lets them find their own answers and truth" [5]. For instance, by the end of a topsy-turvy day with the Hamadryad, the Banks' children find confirmation of their adventure with *Mary Poppins*'s new snake-skin belt [8].

Expanding on the exploration of identity and environmental factors, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* vividly illustrates Harry Potter's struggle with death instinct, embodied most prominently by the Dementors. As Punter points out, death was categorized as inspiration of uncanny precisely because it signifies "something which 'at once familiar . . . and absolutely unfamiliar, unthinkable, unimaginable', a point of ending which is always in some sense simultaneously 'survived' as the record of a life, real or fictional, continues to 'live on'" [6]. Throughout the novel, Harry grapples with this existential threat, initially struggling to repel the Dementors and failing to cast the Patronus Charm effectively. Furthermore, his struggle is also underscored by the narrative's unusual depiction of Buckbeak's death in an alternate timeline, a rare and significant exception in the series that highlights the dangerous place Harry occupies possessing a unique identity. Additionally, Black's method to preserve sanity through knowing his innocence further accentuates Dementor's association with soulless conformity, as Black explains, "It kept me sane and knowing who I am... helped me keep my power" [7], which shows the knowledge of one's self directly links to possession of magical powers. Thus, Harry's ultimate confrontation with the Dementors in an open field signifies a profound symbolic death, wherein he figuratively experiences obliteration and is ultimately resurrected. Despite recurring critiques from judgmental

characters who perceive Harry's behaviour as prideful and rule-breaking, the narrative ultimately endorses his individuality. This endorsement is encapsulated in Harry's capacity to face death and be resurrected, demonstrating that his unique identity can confront and transcend the death instinct. As Byler demonstrates, the novel ultimately champions "a person who cherishes choice and cultivates individualism," which "possibility of unrestrictive self-shaping" [2] foregrounds Harry's psychological acceptance of his private identity as a means of overcoming uncanny threat.

In contrast, *Mary Poppins* consistently returns to the constraints of middle-class existence, with each magical adventure ultimately reaffirming the boundaries of conventional British etiquette. Most significantly, as Elick notes, *Mary Poppins* is explicitly shown to possess the power to transgress social etiquette and status of the typical British middle class in mundane settings [3]; such as when she exercises grave authority towards Mr. Wigs and others before levitating into the air unprompted by the laughing gas, without any repercussions; while Miss. Persimmon admonishes Mr. Wigg for his breaching of social etiquette, exclaiming, "Such behaviour as this — having tea in the air with your guests — Mr. Wigg, sir, I'm astonished at you! It's undignified for a gentleman of your age" [8] *Mary Poppins* herself embodies a veneer of British propriety, her character primarily defined by an obsession with appearances and class etiquette. This continual return to middle-class norms highlights a contrasting approach to identity and transformation, where the magical elements are framed within the limits of conventional societal expectations, thereby reinforcing the facade of proper etiquette rather than challenging it.

6. Conclusion

This analysis of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Mary Poppins* through the lens of Gothic literature offers a nuanced understanding of how both novels explore themes of identity, the uncanny, and the confrontation with the forgotten or unfamiliar. By employing concepts such as *The Unheimlich* and the intrusion of privacy, the study reveals how *Harry Potter*'s journey destabilizes and refines his identity through gothic disruptions, while *Mary Poppins* integrates magical experiences into the mundane, reinforcing middle-class values. Compared to existing scholarship, this analysis deepens the exploration of animalistic and primal elements in both texts, highlighting their contrasting approaches to identity formation and societal norms. However, the study could further investigate the broader cultural implications of these narratives, particularly how they reflect or challenge contemporary anxieties about individuality and conformity. Future research might also explore the intersection of Gothic themes with postcolonial or feminist readings to uncover additional layers of meaning in these works.

References

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