

The Purpose of an Alternate Reality in Rowling and Carroll

By Jade Dor for CMN246: Writing for Children and Young Adults.

The aspect of creating an alternate reality is evident throughout children's literature, where the imagination "creates and renews all experiences, hopes, wishes, feelings and thoughts" (Spencer, 2003). By comparing J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland's* use of figurative language in order to drive imagination, and verisimilitude to drive notions of reality, I will relate this to my own short story 'Glaucous', and discuss a child's need to withdraw from the normalities of society and enter a new reality in which they not only feel superior but protected from the outside world.

Children do not just read to learn how to write and spell from an education perspective, but books that spark a reader's imagination can take them on a journey to other times and to unfamiliar places that make sense to those with a willingness to wonder (Johnson, Giorgis, Bonomo & Colbert, 2000). Harry Potter, J.K Rowling's protagonist in the *Harry Potter* series, is first shown to live a very unenjoyable life with the Dursleys, who often spoke about Harry "...as though he wasn't there - or rather, as though he was something very nasty that couldn't understand them, like a slug." (Rowling 1997:30). Harry also slept under the stairs in a dark cupboard, wore "Old clothes of Dudley's... Four times bigger than him", "Was used to spiders" and was "Dudley's favourite punch-bag." (Rowling 1997:26-27). Susan Cooper, author of the successful fantasy series *The Dark Is Rising* stated that:

Once the child's imagination is caught up in a book, particularly if it deals with experiences beyond his own world, beyond reality – then boundaries vanish, walls disappear, and he finds himself facing a wonderful space in which anything can happen (Cooper 1990:305).

Not only does *Harry Potter* engage the reader's imagination, but it links to verisimilitude in a child's everyday life. Verisimilitude can be defined as the sense that what one reads is 'real', or at least realistic and believable. Rowling has used this narrative element to characterise Harry Potter in order to relate to children all around the world. "It is no wonder that Harry appeals across genders, ages, races and ethnicities. We all have felt left out and misunderstood. We all have had to find the desperate courage to go on." (Black, 2003). Rowling's use of verisimilitude means that a child can identify themselves with the protagonist, imagine that they suffer with the hero his trials and tribulations, and triumph with him as virtue is victorious (Black, 2003). Rowling has created an alternate reality: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and in turn made the protagonist feel superior to "A Muggle... t's what we call non-magic folk like them." (Rowling 1997:62).

Similar to *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Alice, the protagonist in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, is also portrayed as having a very 'boring' life. This can be seen at the very beginning of chapter one, where "Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and having nothing to do." (Carroll 1993:1). The book "without pictures

or conversation” (Carroll 1993:1) also suggests the boredom and dullness of the adult world for Alice. In contrast to *Harry Potter* however, Alice escapes her reality by falling asleep and having a “Wonderful dream” (Carroll, 1993:141).

Not only is Alice’s Wonderland just a dream, but it is also a metaphor for Alice’s attempt to escape ‘time’, in other words, “She has lost her place between childhood and adulthood.” (Satoshi, 2008). Quite different from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, Alice goes through an identity crisis in Wonderland, where “She is frustrated by not being able to get into the garden and is perplexed with the repeated metamorphosis of her body.” (Satoshi, 2008). Alice does not feel as though she is superior in her alternate reality, but using Wonderland as an escape from “Being forced to face a discontinuous change.” (Satoshi, 2008). This can be seen when Alice asks the Caterpillar:

“When you have to turn into a chrysalis – you will, someday, you know – and then after that into a butterfly, I should think you’ll feel it a little queer, won’t you?” ... “All I know is, it would feel very queer to *me*.” (Carroll 1993:70).

When speaking to the caterpillar, Alice also points out that she can’t explain herself, because she “Can’t understand” herself and is not herself (Carroll 1993:70). This supports Satoshi’s statement that Alice has lost herself in a world where she is having an identity crisis, and can’t figure out if she is a child or an adult.

Although the protagonist in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* is female, Christopher Lane (2007) compares the events in the story to its author: Lewis Carroll.

How did Carroll come to this queer world? It is a world without real love. The queens and kings are either absurd or cruel or both. We would suspect that Carroll never got the full love of his parents ... Are some of the animals also representatives of the parents? ... Do the insects represent the many brothers and sisters who must have provoked jealousy in Carroll...? (Lane, 2011).

The author’s past experiences influence the way they write and see the world. Therefore, it is possible that both J.K Rowling and Lewis Carroll had bad childhoods and wished to escape their own reality by creating a fantasy world in which they could escape the norms of reality. Each author uses the narrative element of figurative language in order to drive the reader’s imagination when it comes to creating the alternate reality. Figurative language is language that is used to express ideas indirectly, and give the reader an image of what the story is about. This can be seen in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* when Rowling describes the Hogwarts Express train: “A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people.” (Rowling 1997: 104). When Harry arrives on platform nine and three-quarters, he saw “Smoke from the engine (that) drifted over the heads of the chattering crowd, while cats of every colour wound here and there between their legs.” (Rowling 1997:105). When the protagonist saw the garden for the first time In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, it is described as “The loveliest garden you ever saw.” Alice “longed to get out of that dark hall,

and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains...” (Carroll 1993:41).

In relation to both *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* and *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, ‘Glaucous’ involves the imagination of a child to drive the plot and create the protagonist’s alternate reality. Although the plot involves Joey’s imagination, the reality of Tofrea was only created due to his grief over his best friend, Elijah. “It was not my intention to start this journal... but my therapist insisted that I do.” Joey does not escape the real world in order to feel superior like the protagonist in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, but he escapes in order to spend time with Elijah – the only way he knows how. The river where they play and spend time together is symbolic because that is where they met. “My mother would always plan special days where we would go down to the river during the summer. I met Elijah there too.” In order to understand that Tofrea is an alternate reality, Joey must let go of Elijah – in both worlds – and understand that he is not alone.

When writing for children it is essential that the author is able to create characters that are relatable and believable in order to accurately express the story’s message. Each protagonist in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and ‘Glaucous’ knew that their current reality wasn’t as good as their alternate one. Their alternate reality was portrayed as a way to escape from their current boring life into a world where everything is different, which made them feel superior or content. Children’s stories such as these inspire to engage a child’s imagination and allow children a world all to their own.

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