



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal



Harry Potter : A Modern Epic Hero and other Features of Epic

Priyaba B Sarvaiya

Assistant teacher, Government High school.

VIDHYAYANA



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

Abstract

An epic involves many things, such as a heroic character going on a quest or journey for the good of his people or traveling the world covering vast lands. By definition, an epic is a poem that celebrates a hero's deeds. Of course, Harry Potter is much too long to be a poem. It is a series of novels and movies. However, it celebrates a hero's deeds. This hero is a young wizard called Harry Potter. Stories such as The Odyssey, The Iliad, The Lord of The Rings and Beowulf all fall into the epic category. One adventure that is sometimes overlooked for its more modernism feel is the adventures of Harry Potter. Harry Potter, by J.K. Rowling, has all the characteristics as any traditional epic literary work and is a very exciting story for all ages. Harry Potter, although sometimes looked down upon by society for the witchcraft involved, is actually an epic that people of all ages can read, understand and enjoy, unlike the historical epics mentioned before. As the first and foremost feature of epic is to celebrate Hero's adventures with cosmic importance of it and in that line carry forward the story to involve all other tendencies of epic.

Key words : Epic, Modern epic

Introduction

'There's an important difference between setting trends and chasing them.' (Hollands)

The novel, as a form of art, owes its existence to the interest which men and women ubiquitously and at all times have taken in men and women and in the enormous panorama of human passion and action. This pursuit has always been one of the most general and most powerful of the impulses behind literature, and it has thus given rise, according to changing social and artistic circumstances, to various modes of expression- here to epic and there to drama, now to ballad and now to romance. Latest to develop of all these modes, **the novel** is also the largest and fullest of them. Marion Crawford happily used the phrase "pocket theatre" for it. (Hudson)

However, in any chronological study of literary forms the epic, the drama as the earlier to evolve, should of course take precedence of the novel. In this chapter, though the immediate concern of the researcher will be to estimate the features of prose fiction (fantasy fiction) and how they are closely associated with ancient forms like the epic and how they carry the epic proportions in their writings. C.S.Lewis points out in his 'The allegory of Love: A study in Medieval Tradition' ,

"Humanity does not pass through phases as a train through stations: being alive, it has the



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still. Neither the form nor the sentiment of this old poetry has passed away without leaving indelible traces in our minds.”(Lewis)

Epic in Modern Era

The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is- what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. Perhaps the easiest way of answering the question, ‘What is an epic?’ would be to say. ‘It is a poem like Virgil’s Aeneid or Milton’s Paradise Lost. But this would not be very helpful answer to those of us who have read neither. It can be termed as an extended narrative poem, usually simple in construction, but grand in scope, exalted in style, and heroic in theme, often giving expression to the ideals of a nation or race. To define it modestly, the epic poetry which is a species of narrative poetry is a long poem (similar to a book) about the doings of one or more characters from history or legend. These doings are usually war-like, and involve a large number of secondary characters, as well as a background of gods and spirits who join in the action from time to time. M.H.Abrams in his A Glossary of Literary Terms describes,

“In its strict sense the term epic or heroic poem is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race.” (Abrams)

There is a standard distinction between traditional and literary epics. Traditional epics (also called "folk epics" or "primary epics") were written versions of what had originally been oral poems about a tribal or national hero during a warlike age. Among these are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that the Greeks ascribed to Homer; the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*; the French *Chanson de Roland* and the Spanish *Poema del Cid* in the twelfth century; and the thirteenth-century German epic *Nibelungenlied*. "Literary epics were composed by individual poetic craftsmen in deliberate imitation of the traditional form. Of this kind is Virgil's Latin poem the *Aeneid*, which later served as the chief model for Milton's literary epic *Paradise Lost* (1667).

All epics deal, broadly speaking, with the same kind of subject-matter. Their themes are



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

furnished, in Homeric phrase, by the “deeds of heroes,” (Homer) generally the great legendary heroes of a race; and vast bodies of immemorial traditions provide the basis of their structures. As these traditions are almost invariably bound up with a people’s mythology, supernatural element is also more or less prominent; either it is distinctively religious in character and is everywhere interfused with the human interest of the action; or it appears occasionally in the background. Moreover, epics are highly conventional compositions which usually share certain features.

Unlike the other forms; which remain very much alive even today and became the part of popular culture, the epic as a form of literature is now dead. Nevertheless the term "epic" is often applied, by extension, to narratives which differ in many respects from this model but manifest the epic spirit and grandeur in the scale, the scope, and the profound human importance of their subjects. In this broad sense Dante's fourteenth-century *Divine Comedy* and Edmund Spenser's late-sixteenth-century *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96) are often called epics, as are conspicuously large-scale and wide-ranging works of prose fiction such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863-69), and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922); this last work achieves epic scope in representing the events of an ordinary day in Dublin (16 June 1904) by modeling them on the episodes of Homer's *Odyssey*. In a still more extended application, the Marxist critic Georg Lukács used the term **bourgeois epic** for all novels which, in his view, reflect the social reality of their capitalist age on a broad scale. In a famed sentence, Lukács said that "the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (Lukács)

In the 20th century, the genres have gone farther beyond their traditional roles. Instead of following their own characteristic and the writers even not being rigid to follow one form only, they have turned out to be interdisciplinary. To drive this point I would like to extract the view of Bakhtin. In his essay, ‘Epic and Novel: Towards a methodology for the study of the Novel’ (1941) Bakhtin seeks to delineate a theory of the novel and its unique properties by comparing it to other literary forms, in particular the epic. He proposed the idea of the flexibility of the novel to share the features of other literary forms. As he puts in,

“The novel parodies other genres... it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure reformulating and re-accentuating them. In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres.”(Bakhtin)



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

In the same line J.K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter series' which, though, falls under the category of fantasy fiction (the term encompasses novels and short stories) or bildungsroman carries certain elements of epic. By the end of the twentieth century there were few people in English speaking world who are not familiar with the name Harry Potter. Rather than evaluating these novels merely as fantasy or children stories critics in many ways have uplifted their importance as literary work with touch of Manichaeism. How all these theories and views find their platform and go hand in hand with the story of Harry Potter, particularly in the text can be seen further with illustrations from the novels.

Harry Potter: A Novel Epic Hero

An epic involves many things, such as a heroic character going on a quest or journey for the good of his people or traveling the world covering vast lands. By definition, an epic is a poem that celebrates a hero's deeds. Of course, Harry Potter is much too long to be a poem. It is a series of novels and movies. However, it celebrates a hero's deeds. This hero is a young wizard called Harry Potter. Stories such as The Odyssey, The Iliad, The Lord of The Rings and Beowulf all fall into the epic category. One adventure that is sometimes overlooked for its more modernism feel is the adventures of Harry Potter. Harry Potter, by J.K. Rowling, has all the characteristics as any traditional epic literary work and is a very exciting story for all ages. Harry Potter, although sometimes looked down upon by society for the witchcraft involved, is actually an epic that people of all ages can read, understand and enjoy, unlike the historical epics mentioned before. As the first and foremost feature of epic is to celebrate Hero's adventures with cosmic importance of it and in that line carry forward the story to involve all other tendencies of epic. The Harry Potter begins and simply goes on in the same way. For that Joseph Campbell's views about heroic figures are important and authoritative.

George Lucas is one of the most well known storytellers in movie making history. He credits Joseph Campbell's knowledge in mythology for helping him to finish his epic masterpiece Star Wars. Whether or not J.K. Rowling has read any of Joseph Campbell's work or not is not known; nevertheless, her hero, Harry Potter, follows the same mythological heroic path as described by Joseph Campbell in his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Critics have said that Rowling's books seem to be written for the big screen, because the books fit into Campbell's structure of the hero's journey so well. Campbell's guidelines for mythological storytelling have become synonymous in filmmaking. In his own study of the archetype hero Campbell discovered that all stories basically tell the same tale, retold in infinite variations. This is how Campbell developed the monomyth, a chart or map that shows the common stages through a story, most



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

commonly known as the hero's journey. Dr. Indick writes, "The monomyth refers to the basic elements of myth, the archetypal qualities of all legends and heroes, which transcend individual cultures and specific periods of time; the monomyth is universal and timeless"

In the way Cambell gives characteristics of the hero are similar in most way to epic heroes because Cambell's model is illustrated from mythical heroes. Besides, most of these features are found in Harry Potter. They can be charted out as below:(Campbell)

The concept of Free will and Choice

Another important tendency of the Epic which prevail throughout the novels is of Making Choice. It can be seen everywhere in general life also because the age old belief is that a person's fate is decided not only upon what comes in his way of life but depends upon what he chooses out of what is given. The concept of free will and choice is presented as a dominant factor in the Epic because upon the choice of path the destiny of the hero as well as his companions and sometimes the whole cosmos's fate is reliant. At that point the action, adventures and episodes all will be carrying forward with this dimension of what is selected. In the 'Paradise Lost' the concept of free will and choice plays vital role in deciding what should be the ultimate result of making right or wrong choice. In the Garden of Eden the tree of knowledge is planted by god, which was forbidden for Adam and Eve. Even after being aware about the prohibition Eve make a wrong choice and Adam follows, however they mend it lately by praying and suffering so they are on the right side. On the other hand Satan, though being intelligent and powerful rather being faithful to omniscient power rages his arms against almighty which turns out to be a mistake and wrong choice that leads to suffering in hell. This notion is universal. It has its place in Indian epics also. In Ramayana we have example of Vibhishana, who even if being sibling of Ravan chooses to support Ram during the war of Lanka because he was aware of the difference between rights and wrong.

Traditionally, Slytherin is considered to be the house for the most powerful, pure blooded (a wizard whose parents are also wizard and not muggles) and intelligent wizards. However, Harry wants to be in GRYFFINDOR house. Here the concept is illustrated that after making choice and working with dedication he could achieve the dream and his assigned challenged task and prove himself what he is. Further, this notion of free will and choice is explained by Dumbledore to Harry Potter when he fears that sometimes he feels himself resembles to Voldemort or feels that some evil power overshadows his strength. At that moment Dumbledore tells him that. In the world we all have both the powers of evil and goodness. It depends upon which we want to take up in life. He also adds that Voldemort, his father all had those powers. Voldemort uses it differently to overpower that is why he is in evil side. While Harry has done right



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

choice of house and carrying forward it by good deeds and earn pride for the whole wizard world and save them from danger also. Even in the game of chess, in Quidditch games, at the time of saving life of his friends etc. this notion follows and how the hero makes his choices becomes the cream of the cake. More often in such epic the alternative is given between two similarly important things what G.W. Hegel terms as “the conflict between two goods” where the preference becomes tough. Instead of stating two contrasting situations where the choice seems obvious, here, though the characters have freedom the choice becomes challenging and turning point of following events as well as the end.

Idea of Universal Religion

The epic being the monarch of all literature takes the whole universe into its consideration unlike other forms. In its subject matter the epic poet includes the topics that affect the entire race, nation and several times the whole universe. The epic is what Professor Tillyard calls its ‘choric’ nature. The poet is not only writing to express his own thoughts and feelings, but the thoughts and feelings of some large group or community. For example Dante in the Divina Commedia was in many senses a spokesman for the whole of medieval Christianity, and Milton for English and European Protestantism in his own time. In Harry Potter also intentionally or unintentionally Rowling states about the nub of what the whole world believes, follows, appreciates and agree with such aspects of the nature that takes the moral code of human beings or the whole human race into consideration. It is pleaded not in terms of any prescribed rules or religion that are fostered over the society, but those concepts are knitted so magnificently with the flow of the story that from a simple child of eleven years up to an old grandfather sitting with him to see Harry Potter or a mother doing house hold work and a father who buy a book or movie of Harry Potter for his child can simply understand the fact and virtues simply stated within it. At some places Rowling moves her steering to illustrate the importance of love, friendship and humanity, where in other way she implies the ideas of importance of action and occasional attitude to rebel against wrong. Dumbledore and other professors of the Hogwats School always directly or indirectly support Harry to fight against evil power of Voldemort. The instances that Dumbledore himself registers Harry’s name in the fight for which he was not adequate candidate or being in support by healing his wounds. Through the examples of Hermione and Ron it displays the power of togetherness, genuine relations and marvelous bond of friendship in achieving the success in life. Moreover, the idea of importance of humanity is displayed several times in the course of all the novels. Even after having the power and knowledge of his strength Harry never loses the basic virtue of humanity which puts him in the queue of epic heroes.



VIDHYAYANA

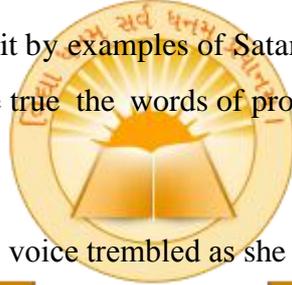
An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

All these aspects together come under the umbrella term of the philosophy Manichaeism. The basic underlying message that this philosophy asserts is to follow whatever is truth and virtuous in the world. It proclaims the truth, not in any prescribed manuscript or book that are the foundation of converting any idea into religion, but in simple straightforward way that is related to all and carry much importance in everyone's life. It proclaims truth that could be translated into diverse forms in accordance with the different cultures into which it spreads.

In Harry Potter the message of humanity, virtues of humanity, power of being good, some concepts of darkness, escapism, evil spirit which are the part of true knowledge and which affect and grow in the most of the people are included with simple example of growing child in magic world. In that way, by giving universal philosophy it turns out to be an idea and book of universal religion which can be accepted and followed by everyone wholeheartedly. This impulse of universal religion is predominant in the epic form as it affects the life of majority of the people. Even today we follow the virtues, ethics and morals of Rama and Yuddishthira and give the message of evil power and being aware of it by examples of Satan and Ravan. The same concept continues in Harry Potter and proves to be true the words of prof McGonnel who speaks at the time of Harry's birth,



"Professor McGonagall's voice trembled as she went on."That's not all. They're saying he tried to kill the Potter's son, Harry. But – he couldn't. He couldn't kill that little boy. No one knows why, or how, but they're saying that when he couldn't kill

Harry Potter, Voldemort's power somehow broke -- and that's why he's gone.

Dumbledore nodded glumly.

"It's -- it's true?" faltered Professor McGonagall. "After all he's done... all the people he's killed... he couldn't kill a little boy?

It's just astounding... of all the things to stop him... but how in the name of heaven did Harry survive?"(Rowling)

She also utters,

"He'll be famous – a legend – I wouldn't be surprised if today was known as Harry Potter Day in future – there will be books written about Harry – every child in the world will know his name!"(Rowling 15)



VIDHYAYANA

ISSN 2454-8596

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

These examples are sufficient to prove the epic notion of Harry Potter. In modern world such heroes have become ideals of children and in that way they learn virtues what-to-do and what-not-to-do from such characters. Thus, they gain virtue of humanity and universal religion.

Works Cited:

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 1993. Fontana Press, print.

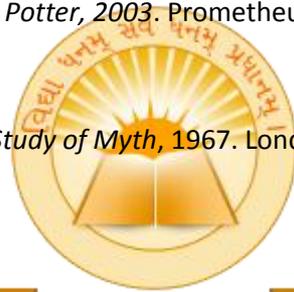
Hirschman, Elizabeth. *Heroes, Monsters, & Messiahs*, 2000. Andrew McMeel Publishing:
Kansas City, Print.

Kern, Edmund. *The Wisdom of Harry Potter, 2003*. Prometheus Books: New York. Print.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Structural Study of Myth*, 1967. London: Tavistock Publications.

Print.

New York Times Reort July, 2005.



VIDHYAYANA

O'Shaughnessy, Michael. *Media and Society*, 1999. Oxford University: New York. Print.

Tatlor, Beverly and Elisabeth Brewer. *The Return of King Arthur: British and American
Arthrian Literature since 1900*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983. Print.

Thompson, Raymond H. "Modern Fantasy and Medieval Romance: A comparative Study." *The
Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*. 1982. Ed. Roger Schlobin, Notre Dame: Uni. Of
Notre Dame Press