



# Revision, recreation and infusion of ancient mythological/legendary symbolism in the popular modern children's fiction - the Harry Potter canon by J.K. Rowling

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**Abstract**— The Harry Potter books written by British author J.K. Rowling has been the most widely read of all contemporary children's fiction surpassing all sales records of the genre. Set in modern times but in a magical world co-existing with the non-magical, one of the most noticeably prominent characteristic of the Harry Potter canon is the clever use of ancient myths/folktales/legends in the magical world of Harry Potter, revising and bringing them to life for youthful modern readers. The paper seeks to study and compare the earliest records of the myths/legends and the incorporation and recreation of the very same by J.K. Rowling into the Harry Potter universe. The titles of two of the books- 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' and 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix', carry obvious references to two mythological symbols- the philosopher's stone and the mythical bird called the phoenix, with their unique presentation in the books bringing something obscurely hidden in the past into the forefront of the popular literary landscape. J.R.R Tolkien, fellow British author and her predecessor, was remarkable in the creation of his own unique myths into 'Middle Earth' in his landmark children's book 'The Hobbit', but J.K Rowling goes a step further- not only creating her own myths but also channelling myths already in use from ancient times from many other sources and mingling them together seamlessly in her narrative. Celtic, English, Greek, Roman, Asian myths and legends are dug up and laid at the table side by side. Rowling, after completing her seven Harry Potter books, went intentional in her reinvention of mythology through her 'guide book' called 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them' - a guide to the magical creatures in the Harry Potter universe, the original version illustrated by the author herself. David Colbert and Virginia Allyn in their 'The Hidden Myths in Harry Potter: Spellbinding Map and Book of Secrets' even tries to organise the hidden references and the facts behind Harry Potter. The myths in Harry Potter have been powerful enough to embed themselves in the mind of the readers and thus has popularised age-old mythological symbols leading to its influence in popular culture.



**Keywords**— Harry Potter, mythology, legends, symbolism, folktales.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Harry Potter books written by British author J.K. Rowling has been the most widely read of all contemporary children's fiction surpassing all sales records of the genre. Set in modern times but in a magical world co-existing with the non-magical, one of the most noticeably prominent characteristic of the Harry Potter canon is the clever use of

ancient myths/folktales/legends in the magical world of Harry Potter, revising and bringing them to life for youthful modern readers. The titles of two of the books- 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' and 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix', carry obvious references to two mythological symbols- the philosopher's stone and the mythical bird called the phoenix, with their unique

presentation in the books bringing something obscurely hidden in the past into the forefront of the popular literary landscape. J.R.R Tolkien, fellow British author and her predecessor, was remarkable in the creation of his own unique myths into 'Middle Earth' in his landmark children's book 'The Hobbit', but J.K Rowling goes a step further- not only creating her own myths but also channelling myths already in use from ancient times from many other sources and mingling them together seamlessly in her narrative. Celtic, English, Greek, Roman, Asian myths and legends are dug up and laid at the table side by side. Rowling, after completing her seven Harry Potter books, went intentional in her reinvention of mythology through her 'guide book' called 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them' - a guide to the magical creatures in the Harry Potter universe, the original version illustrated by the author herself. JK Rowling draws her inspiration from the early records of the myths/legends and cleverly undertakes the incorporation and recreation of the very same into the Harry Potter universe. The myths in Harry Potter have been powerful enough to embed themselves in the mind of the readers and thus have popularised age-old mythological symbols leading to its influence in popular culture.

## II. HARRY POTTER AND MYTHOLOGY

The presence of certain mythological symbols in ancient writings have piqued the interest of people across centuries. Most of these mythological symbols have been present in the hands of the public through hearsay and rumours. Some of these accounts have been written down and documented by ancient writers, leading to its felt presence in the present day. One of the most notable examples of this is the presence of the 'alchemist' or the practice of alchemy. Over centuries people have been fascinated with gold and the idea of turning any metal into gold and clubbed along with that the fantasy of attaining immortality through some kind of magical 'elixir of life' fascinated the mind of humankind. This fascination continues to the present day with one of the bestselling books of modern literature being none other than Paulo Coelho's "The Alchemist", a fascinating account containing the search for this much rare alchemist, who had rare powers and who, instead of gold gives wisdom leading to the protagonist also becoming an alchemist in the end.

This kind of revision and incorporation of the ancient myth of the alchemist can be clearly seen in modern British children's fiction in none other than J K Rowling's first book in her Harry Potter canon - "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone/Philosopher's Stone". The Philosopher's Stone or the Sorcerer's Stone is the main treasure of the alchemist and Rowling expertly uses this ancient symbol into her canon.

Like Paulo Coelho, she weaves in the thirst for the alchemist and his secrets. She expertly brings in one of the most notable names in alchemy, "Nicholas Flamel", a real 14th-15th century person, a French scribe and manuscript seller, who gained a posthumous reputation as an alchemist. The Testament of Nicholas Flamel records,

*"I Nicholas Flamel, a scrivener of Paris, in the year 1414, in the reign of our gracious Prince Charles the VIth, whom God preserve; and after the death of my faithful partner Perenelle, am seized with a desire and a delight, in remembrance of her, and in your behalf, dear nephew, to write out the whole magistery of the secret of the Powder of Projection, or the Philosophical Tincture, which God hath willed to impart to his very insignificant servant, and which I have found out, as thou also wilt find out in working as I shall declare unto you."* (Flamel 3)

Written in the name of Nicholas Flamel, this testament recounts the hunt for the "Philosopher's stone", the alchemist's search for the "elixir of life", that not only purifies any metal into gold but also grants one illness-free extended life or immortality. Flamel gives detailed instruction on the alchemical processes thereafter. JK Rowling capitulates on this legendary alchemist and revises his legend into something of her own. The first book of Harry Potter incorporates Nicholas Flamel as being alive and in possession of the philosopher's stone. JK Rowling further adds to the myth of the famous alchemist Nicholas Flamel, bringing him into the wizarding world of Harry Potter, extending his life for centuries with the philosopher's stone and finally deciding to give up his immortality. Harry Potter's enemy, Lord Voldemort wants the Philosopher's Stone for himself to bring himself back to life from being bodiless and powerless living in a tiny shell of life, called a 'horcrux' in the book. The Philosopher's Stone of ancient legends becomes a focal point in the fight of good and evil, between Voldemort and Harry Potter, with the prophecy of disastrous consequences if the Stone falls in the wrong, evil hands.

This recreation of the legend of the Philosopher's Stone by this expert storyteller JK Rowling, grips the reader; no other treatise related to alchemy points to the dangerous consequences if the desired end of the stone of all stones is achieved and then used unwisely to the wrong ends. The thirst for the ultimate knowledge, like the knowledge of alchemy, with the capstone represented in the Philosopher's Stone - "the elixir of life", is a legitimate quest but the dark side must also be questioned, what if this quest leads to the rise of the evil depravity of man? 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' ends with the voluntary giving up of

immortality by Nicholas Flamel - the maker and possessor of the Philosopher's Stone and the destruction of the Philosopher's Stone to prevent its misuse by the wrong hands. Some valuable quests and treasures must be given up for the greater good. The writer of Harry Potter recreates the dark side of the science of alchemy in her fictional narrative, the misuse of knowledge and discovery, as can be seen in real life, in the destructive use of the invention of the dynamite leading to Alfred Nobel famously bequeathing the Nobel Prizes or in the destructive use of the secrets of atomic energy in the atom bomb. JK Rowling writes through Albus Dumbledore regarding the true nature of the Philosopher's Stone in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* like this:

*"The Stone was not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you wanted, the two things most human beings would choose above all. The trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them."*  
(Rowling 320)

JK Rowling revises the myth of the Philosopher's Stone and through this, offers the younger generation lessons that can be learnt from the legends of ancient times.

Alchemy, the word originating from Arabic, had tremendous legendary status in its practice in Asia then gained hold in Europe. This unearthing of ancient myths and bringing in a real life person- Nicholas Flamel and presenting it in a seamless narrative for young readers in her Harry Potter books provide greater interest and fascination over legends and mythological symbols in the popular reading landscape. A new generation of readers embarked on a fascinating history of alchemy with a renewed interest in the legend of Nicholas Flamel and the mythological symbol -the Philosopher's Stone.

In the second book of the Harry Potter series, called "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets", JK Rowling brings in another infusion of ancient mythology, the mythological monster - the basilisk, created as a bizarre hybrid, a snake with a crown, hatched from the egg of a rooster and incubated by a toad. Different places give different shapes to the basilisk, certain ancient drawings give it the wings of a bat, the upper body of a rooster, the tail of a serpent etc. Ancient Roman texts record the creature called the basilisk in the writings of Pliny the Elder and Lucan. The myth of the basilisk then transports itself all over Europe, and there are written records of roosters being killed in various places by the public for fear of creating a basilisk. One interesting account is of the 'Warsaw basilisk' of 1587 by Jan Bondeson in his *"The Feejee Mermaid and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History"* where the disappearance and the consequent death of two children in

an underground cellar by a supposed basilisk led to the capture and killing of the same with the wearing of protective leather and mirrors to escape the deadly basilisk gaze on the pressure of the public.

In one of the ancient records of that myth, Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, describes the basilisk:

*"There is the same power also in the serpent called the basilisk. It is produced in the province of Cyrene, being not more than twelve fingers in length. It has a white spot on the head, strongly resembling a sort of a diadem. When it hisses, all the other serpents fly from it: and it does not advance its body, like the others, by a succession of folds, but moves along upright and erect upon the middle. It destroys all shrubs, not only by its contact, but those even that it has breathed upon; it burns up all the grass too, and breaks the stones, so tremendous is its noxious influence. It was formerly a general belief that if a man on horseback killed one of these animals with a spear, the poison would run up the weapon and kill, not only the rider, but the horse as well. To this dreadful monster the effluvium of the weasel is fatal, a thing that has been tried with success, for kings have often desired to see its body when killed; so true is it that it has pleased Nature that there should be nothing without its antidote. The animal is thrown into the hole of the basilisk, which is easily known from the soil around it being infected. The weasel destroys the basilisk by its odour, but dies itself in this struggle of nature against its own self."* (Pliny)

This terrifying monster is resurrected in popular modern children's fiction in the Harry Potter canon. JK Rowling reinvents the mythological animal, the basilisk, in that the basilisk is able to be controlled in 'Parseltongue', a language for communication with serpent-like creatures that is known and understood by particular persons called Parselmouths, and the heir of the particular basilisk's creator, Slytherin. In JK Rowling's later 'guide book' to the magical beasts of the Harry Potter universe, *'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them'*, she gives her own wizarding world history of the origins of the basilisk through Newt Scamander:

*"The first recorded basilisk was bred by Herpo the Foul, a Greek Dark wizard and Parselmouth, who discovered after much experimentation that a chicken egg hatched beneath a toad would produce a gigantic serpent possessed of extraordinarily dangerous powers."* (Rowling)

Basilisks originate from the wizarding universe, bred by wizards, according to JK Rowling's recreation and



reinvention of the basilisk myth. The particular basilisk that comes up in her second book *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is an ancient animal bred by Salazar Slytherin, one of the great ancient wizards and one of the founders of Hogwarts School of Wizardry. While mediaeval European myth says that a weasel is required to kill a basilisk, a painting even depicting a weasel biting a basilisk, JK Rowling puts another twist by enabling the killing of the basilisk through the Sword of Gryffindor, a legendary sword of the wizarding world by the hands of Harry Potter. She further goes on to employ powers to the basilisk fang even after its death, so much that in the last and seventh book of the Harry Potter series, Ron and Hermione (Harry's friends), go down to the Chamber of Secrets to get the dead basilisk's fang in order to kill one of Voldemort's Horcruxes. Whereas Pliny the Elder mentions that there is no antidote for the basilisk's poison, JK Rowling, in her recreation of the basilisk myth says something else:

*"It doesn't have to be a basilisk fang. It has to be something destructive, so the Horcrux can't repair itself. Basilisk venom has only one antidote, and it's incredibly rare-"(Hermione Granger)*

*"-phoenix tears," (Rowling)*

JK Rowling recreates and reinvents the myth of the basilisk in her wizarding world and intertwines it to another thread of mythology- that the only antidote to its deadly venom are to be gained from another mythological symbol - the phoenix. The mythical Fenghuang bird, in Chinese mythology is described in the *Shuowen jiezi* (1st or 2nd century CE; "An Explication of Written Characters") describes the bird as having the breast of a goose, the hindquarters of a stag, the neck of a snake, the tail of a fish, the forehead of a fowl, the down of a duck, the marks of a dragon, the back of a tortoise, the face of a swallow, and the beak of a cock. It is reportedly about 9 feet (2.7 metres) tall. Its tail is red, blue, yellow, white, and black—the five sacred colours. In systematised mythology, it is considered female and is paired with the dragon (male); together the two creatures symbolise marital harmony. Herodotus, ancient Greek historian in 5th century B.C., writes:

*"[The Egyptians] have also another sacred bird called the phoenix which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt, only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in five hundred years, when the old phoenix dies. Its size and appearance, if it is like the pictures, are as follows:— The plumage is partly red, partly golden, while the general make and size are almost exactly that of the eagle. They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible:*

*that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball and puts his parent inside, after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first; so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun. Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird." (Herodotus)*

JK Rowling's favourite mythical animal seems to be the phoenix, as she revealed, and no wonder, she litters the acts of the phoenix all over the Harry Potter canon. A phoenix named Fawkes, rescues Harry Potter from the basilisk by blinding it, healing Harry from basilisk venom with its tears and flying him out of the chamber with its tail. The phoenix in Harry Potter has magical powers, in that it can disappear and reappear in a burst of flames, carrying people with it. The fifth book of the Harry Potter series is named 'Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix', the Order of the Phoenix being a secret organisation under the leadership of Albus Dumbledore, named after his pet phoenix Fawkes, who carries messages and people secretly to escape the enemy's gaze. JK Rowling not only keeps the traditional myth of the phoenix- bursting in flames in its death and its rebirth from the ashes, but further adds to the legend of the phoenix by ascribing to its tail feathers magical powers such that it is used in wizard's wands as a wand core fuelling the spell casting powers from the wand. Harry Potter and his arch enemy- Voldemort, both have wands having phoenix feather from Fawkes (Albus Dumbledore's pet phoenix), as its wand core, complicating matters when they duel.

JK Rowling is a master in infusing myths into popular children's fiction. Apart from the above myths, she puts in many magical characters from ancient records into her books, notable among them are the centaurs from ancient Greek mythology - half-man, half-horses, who inhabit the forests. Firenze, the centaur taught at Hogwarts, centaurs being experts in Divination, watching the stars for knowing the fate of what is to come.

Rowling also alludes to other myths through subtle hints, for example, she names the pet snake of Voldemort as 'Nagini', the name being clearly Indian and cleverly referring to the 'naginis' of Indian mythology. Rowling even brings in a three-headed dog guarding the Chamber of Secrets resembling Cerberus, the guard dog of the underworld. Not to mention, the use of dragons in Harry Potter as can be seen in use in plenty in modern literature.

Modern children's literature has been greatly enriched through the use of ancient mythology in Harry Potter bringing in a new trend in modern children's fiction with many writers following suit, like the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riordan, where Percy Jackson is a demi-god.

The use of mythology is a powerful tool in literature. C. S. Lewis said,

*"But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could,"* (Lewis)

showing how mythology is a powerful tool in the hand of the author to "steal past those watchful dragons" and enter into the reader's world. Truths are made easily understandable through the reinvented colourful myths. JK Rowling colours the imaginations of young readers with the use of already available myths and transforming them to interesting narratives that would grip them across decades as the Harry Potter series progressed from the first book to the seventh book and then with the further addition of companion books like 'Tales of Beedle the Bard', 'Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them', 'Quidditch Through the Ages' etc. So many allusions to ancient myths are made in Harry Potter that it has led to a renewed interest in modern day readers.

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