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Reifying Consciousness:
A Biocultural Perspective of Supernatural Storytelling in the Harry Potter Universe

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Declaration

I, the undersigned Armin Stefanović, hereby declare that the present dissertation is the result of my research carried out under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Emer. György Endre Szönyi and Prof. Dr. Anna Kérchy. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where appropriately cited, and the papers previously published by myself are clearly indicated. This thesis contains no material accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program in English or any other language.

Armin Stefanović,
Szeged, July 17, 2025.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Merima and Dragan Stefanović
for all their sacrifices that made it possible.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I examine human interaction with the supernatural, with a focus on its narrative representations. I utilise a biocultural theoretical framework, which draws on evolutionary theory and cognitive science, to explain why humans have been drawn to the supernatural throughout their long process of evolutionary development. I argue that human behaviour of telling and consuming stories about the supernatural, *supernatural storytelling*, is a result of the process of *reifying consciousness*, where abstract and emotional aspects of our experience become materialised and woven into a narrative. Supernatural storytelling, I argue, is an adaptive behaviour that co-opts cognitive tendencies, such as magical thinking and agent attribution, to elevate a sense of perceived control and establish a sense of psychological order, thereby reducing anxiety over domains over which humans have no control. I employ this theoretical framework to interpret the role of supernatural elements in narratives. The primary case study of this thesis is J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter universe. I interpret Harry Potter novels and movies to argue that through magic, Rowling reified abstract concepts like good, evil, love, death, and power. Giving them presence within a narrative facilitates understanding, highlighting, and modifying them. Magic then becomes a tool for navigating difficulties and fostering self-empowerment. Contextualising the popularity of the Harry Potter stories, I argue that the representation of magic in the Harry Potter universe reflects the sentiments of the period, specifically the shift towards an individualistic and pragmatic form of spirituality, known as the New Age. I argue that alignment with the New Age is a crucial factor in the global popularity of the Harry Potter universe, alongside the commodification of cultural products, effective marketing strategies, and the use of transmedia storytelling.

Key words: supernatural storytelling, reifying consciousness, fantasy fiction, Harry Potter, magic, religion, re-enchantment, perceived control, biocultural theory, evolutionary theory, cognitive narratology.

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Introduction

I have always been fascinated by the phenomenon of human interaction with the supernatural. Especially in today's so-called secularised West, the popularity of magical practices, both in terms of beliefs and rituals as well as media representations, astonishes. Whether identifying as atheist or religious, individuals worldwide enjoy horoscopes, Tarot readings, magic tricks, and fantasy fiction. Mothers scare their children with ghost stories to get them to come home early. Sportsmen wear their lucky shirts or socks, believing they will bring them good fortune on game day. From these observations, the main research question of this thesis has developed: Why are humans interested in the supernatural? For an evolutionary thinker, this phenomenon is even more puzzling. If we evolved to survive and reproduce, we must learn how to adapt to the real environment. Why, then, are we interested in unreal agents and spaces? Why do they have the power to capture our attention?

The answer might seem obvious for believers – they believe in supernatural phenomena. However, irrespective of their beliefs, individuals worldwide are amused by magic tricks and scared by ghost stories. This thesis explores the form of behaviour beyond belief – the interaction with stories that contain supernatural elements. Although the exposure to stories from one's traditions, such as those about demons and jinns, can undoubtedly make them more convincing, it does not explain why even atheists find fantasy fiction and supernatural horror compelling. A contemporary example that encapsulates this phenomenon is the global appeal of the Harry Potter stories written by J.K. Rowling. From 1997, when *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was published, up to today when the Harry Potter series is being filmed, children and adults around the world immerse themselves in this magical wizarding world, read books, watch films, play video games, visit costume parties, various theme parks, as well as buy branded items. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina is a multireligious community, as I was growing up, I saw kids from all denominations as well as those from atheist families engage in pretend play where they flew on a broom or cast spells. Studying abroad and meeting international students, I realised that children from all cultures experience the same thrill.

To explain this phenomenon, I was looking for a theory in literary and cultural studies that can shed light on the reader's interest in supernatural elements of stories. The first problem I faced

was that poststructuralist theories, which still dominate literary studies, reject notions of *universal behaviour* and *human nature*. This stance stems from poststructuralist criticism of essentialism, particularly in relation to categories such as class, race, and gender. The argument is that these categories do not possess inherent, timeless, or fixed qualities, but are shaped by cultural and historical processes. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks inspired by poststructuralism, such as gender studies and postcolonialism, revealed that essentialism reinforces stereotypes and maintains systems of power. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that literary studies focus on a particular phenomenon and understand how it emerges from a specific socio-historical context. However, arguing that everything is socially constructed also limits the scope of literary studies, as we become blind to aspects of human nature and culture which are cross-cultural and cross-temporal. Our interest in supernatural stories is one of such aspects.

During the 1990s, a theoretical framework of biocultural theory emerged using evolutionary theory and cognitive science to study the role of storytelling in the evolutionary development of the human species. Under this theoretical framework, the notion of *human universals* was revived to study aspects of human nature common to all members of the species, but also how these aspects are shaped by individual cultures and traditions, as well as the differences between works of individual authors. As such, biocultural theory does not fall into the trap of essentialism but also avoids the pitfall of social relativism. In literary studies, biocultural theory seeks to return to the possibility of truth claims and empirical research, making research in literary studies relevant to other disciplines across the humanities, social and natural sciences. The biocultural theoretical framework makes it possible to ask questions such as Why do we need stories? And why supernatural stories?

The Main Terms and Concepts

This thesis encompasses a range of interrelated literary theoretical concepts, which include *supernatural*, *magic*, *fantasy fiction*, *science fiction*, *supernatural horror*, and *the fantastic*. Since the Harry Potter universe falls within the fantasy fiction genre, it would be a logical choice to take this genre as an object of analysis. This would involve creating a history of the concept of *fantasy fiction* and incorporating an evolutionary perspective into this body of knowledge. However, this idea encounters a problem at its very outset: how to define fantasy fiction? Even more problematic is that, depending on which definition we choose, our object of analysis becomes something

entirely different. To me, the insistence on precisely defining a concept that does not have its correlative in reality is like chasing a ghost.

Therefore, I approach this dissertation with the same attitude that Mendlesohn asserts in her introduction to *Rhetorics of Fantasy*: "This book is not about defining fantasy" (2007, XIIV). This thesis is not about defining fantasy fiction or producing yet another of its histories; numerous volumes have already been written on this topic. Where we stand today is that we have a range of definitions of fantasy fiction with no possible consensus even concerning literature, let alone across media. The main reason is that we define fantasy as a binary counterpart to mimetic narration. However, fantasy fiction is as rich, if not richer, than its mimetic twin. This leads Hume to propose viewing literature as a blend of mimetic, a desire to imitate, and fantasy, a desire to change modes, rather than in terms of binaries (2014, 20).

Although, as I said, there are many definitions, what usually falls under the fantasy fiction umbrella is "the fairy story, quest myth, fable, epic fantasy, nonsense narrative, sword and sorcery, talking animal fantasy, political fantasy, including the utopia and dystopia, and erotic fantasy" (Armitt 2020, 3). In enumerating these subgenres, Armitt is very aware of the impossibility of reaching a consensus on such a heterogeneous concept (3). Clute and Grant's view overlaps with what Armitt proposed: "The term 'fantasy' to cover a very wide range of texts, movies, visual presentations and so on. Tales involving dreams and visions, allegory and romance, surrealism and magic realism, satire and wonderland, supernatural fiction, dark fantasy, weird fiction and horror – all of these and more sometimes expressing the conflicting nature of fantasy" (1996, viii). They also express the impossibility of clearly defining the genre. Moreover, they say that establishing borders with other speculative genres is impossible.

I also join the line of scholars who see it as a futile effort to insist on a strict definition of something that is constructed: "Armitt could, perhaps, be thought of as a kind of spokesperson here in her claim that any attempt to shoehorn a text into a binding yet artificial category is a "travesty" of compartmentalisation, a 'death wish' of division and subdivision" (Rayment 2014, 10). … "To take *The Wizard of Oz* again as an example, we might want to question whether it is a children's film, fantasy film or musical, but we must also anticipate that a reasonable answer to such an enquiry would be 'yes.'" (Walters 2011, 74). In this thesis, I will also avoid theorising about the differences between genres, subgenres, and media versions *per se*. I will discuss the differences between speculative fiction genres only in relation to the thesis argument.

Therefore, I propose a concept with a long and storied genealogy that has not received much scholarly acclaim: *supernatural storytelling*. The reasons for this choice will be explained throughout the dissertation, but I will outline the main ones here. Firstly, I define *supernatural storytelling* as an observable behaviour of producing and consuming stories that include supernatural elements. This behaviour is the object of analysis in this dissertation. With this, I emphasise the process, not the product. And so, while analysing literary works, I will have in mind the process of meaning production that is actualised when a reader interacts with a novel or a film. Although no object is without its problems, what is essential is that this object is an observable, objective phenomenon, not just an academic concept. Moreover, because this thesis aims to produce falsifiable claims, the object of analysis must be observable and not merely conceptual.

Another reason for choosing this concept is that the historical horizon of this thesis spans an evolutionary scale of 100,000 years. This requires a concept much broader than *fantasy fiction*, which is, at best, a relatively recent invention. This does not mean that, as a term, it cannot be applied to earlier periods of human evolution; however, the fact is that this is not how it is defined by scholarship. Clute and Grant, for example, argue that fantasy in its modern form emerged in the decades just before the 19th century (1996, ix). For my argument, it is important to note that fantasy fiction is a genre that falls entirely under the category of *supernatural storytelling*. However, many of the above-mentioned genres also incorporate supernatural elements and fall into this category as well. Of these, two major ones are science fiction and horror. Another popular term for these stories is *speculative fiction*. *Supernatural storytelling* is, therefore, a part of speculative fiction, which encompasses works that incorporate supernatural elements.

However, I wish to clarify that I am not arguing that genre concepts are useless. They are labels that we assign to a group of stories to signal some commonalities and differences. Moreover, they emerge within a specific period and, as such, carry historical significance. Therefore, fantasy fiction and its subgenres are very useful categories when referring to a particular group of works situated within a specific period. However, when examining the behaviour of producing and consuming stories with supernatural elements as a universal human phenomenon, it is essential to introduce a concept that circumvents the historical and functional implications of genre categories. Furthermore, each genre of *supernatural storytelling* will treat the supernatural differently, bending it to its form and reflecting the sentiments of the period. More attention will be given to this in Part III.

The Main Argument

The main argument of this thesis is that *supernatural storytelling* is a form of play, a result of the process I will call *reifying consciousness*, where the content of the mind is externalised and woven in a form of narrative. *Reification* comes from the Latin root *res* – "a thing." Its literal meaning is "to make something abstract material." Through the storytelling technology, reified consciousness, or its contents, become visible and palpable, making it possible for us to engage with them, modify them, and ultimately share them. Weaving the *reified consciousness* in narratives produces a sense of psychological order (see Carroll 2004, 115). In biocultural theory, storytelling is seen as a simulation of reality. We engage in story simulations to learn social skills or prepare for danger (see Oatley and Mar, 2008; Gotschall, 2012; Clasen, 2017). *Reifying consciousness* enables us to simulate the most abstract, conceptual, and emotional aspects of our lives.

The adaptive benefits of supernatural storytelling can be further broken down into three categories.[1] Firstly, this form of play facilitates learning about the constituents of reality in terms of its ontological categories. Jackson demonstrated that in fantasy, elements of reality are broken down and reconstructed in a different manner (1981, 4). These unusual reconstructions of reality are building blocks of supernatural storytelling. We use them to reify the content of consciousness into physical reality. Exaggerating or modifying aspects of our culture can make them more memorable and transferable. Importantly, strange combinations of elements also have a distancing effect, giving us another perspective on something familiar (see Attebery 2021, Chapter I; Rayment 2014, 24, 53). Depersonalising and highlighting cultural traits can lead to seeing ourselves from another perspective, consequently questioning and improving cultural codes. A variety of races in Tolkien's Middle-earth, for example, reflect different human traits.

Secondly, reifying conceptual and emotional aspects of our consciousness: hopes, dreams, affects, good, evil, and power, or, in other words, understanding them in terms of physical processes and agents, giving them faces and voices, facilitates discussing and managing subjective and abstract aspects of our lives which do not correlate to real world events. As Rayment (2014) and Armitt (2020) suggest, fantasy manifests or gives presence to the abstract and subjective (53; 169). Death, for example, is a simple physical process of cessation of life functions. Nevertheless,

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[1] *Adaptation* is an evolutionary process by which individuals, populations, and species become better suited to a particular environment. *Adaptive traits* are qualities that help individuals better adapt (see Gregory 2009, 161).

our understanding of death is also informed by experiences of the death of others as well as the realisation of our own mortality. Due to the vast gap between the reality of the event and our subjective experience of it, expressing it within a framework of mimetic narration is impossible (see Aradi 2022, 71). Violating consensus reality, supernatural storytelling enabled us to verbalise, and therefore share, transfer, discuss, and manage very subjective aspects of our experience.

Thirdly, supernatural storytelling presents human beings as empowered by supernatural abilities or divine protectors. This, I argue, elevates the sense of security and control. In real life, magical practices rely on *magical thinking* to create a sense of control (see Malinowski 1948, 14; Seligmann 1971, 322; Nemeroff and Rozin 2000, 26-27; Subbotsky 2010a, 136-139).[2] Supernatural storytelling, I argue, reifies *magical thinking*, co-opting in a way that aligns it with the group morality.[3] For example, magical practices such as child sacrifice and burying a living being in the foundations of the building are cross-cultural phenomena, once considered necessary to ensure the stability of the building and appease local deities or spirits. Contemporary supernatural storytelling will warn against such magical practices, aligning magic with social norms. Aster's *Midsommar* can therefore be read as a cautionary tale, warning against such sacrificial practices. Unable to accept practices like suicide morally, even if they are a part of the Hårga people's beliefs, the reader is disgusted and horrified. These emotions are then intensified by juxtaposing elements that signal happiness: summer daylight, smiling and welcoming villagers, and beautiful nature, with suicide, rape, and murder. The Hårga villagers commit atrocities with a smile on their faces.

The above-listed aspects of supernatural storytelling are intertwined. When projected onto a large scale, they entail the universe and human existence with a special role, meaning, and purpose. This property is unique to supernatural storytelling. Some supernatural horror stories, such as King's *Pet Sematary* or Aster's *Midsommar*, where evil ultimately triumphs, can be seen as a challenge to the final part of my argument. However, I see these stories as a subversion of the principle of empowerment. They reify those aspects of the consciousness related to fear, not to empower, but to tell a cautionary tale (see Coelho 2021). My argument also applies to those science fiction stories where the supernatural is an integral part of the narrative. For example, topics such

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[2] Magical thinking is a form of imagination which is not constrained by the laws of physics, like magical events, dreams, stories, play, and fantasies (see Subbotsky 2010a, 7).

[3] Co-option is an evolutionary process through which a trait can develop another evolutionary purpose (see Buss et al. 1998, 539).

as time travel and psychic powers appear in both fantasy fiction and science fiction. The latter attempts to provide a rational, scientific explanation, while the former explains them in terms of magic or divine power. As Clute and Nicholls point out, the principle of rationality and scientific method in explaining phenomena can be used to define science fiction (1993, 321). However, as they say, many works do not neatly fit this explanation.

The Interdisciplinarity of the Problem

Jackson criticised Todorov for his "reluctance to engage with psychoanalytic theory" (1981, 36). Her argument that Todorov fails to account for the psychological and ideological aspects of fantasy fiction notwithstanding, I find her overreliance on Freud to be the weakest part of her seminal book. Freud's theories were, for the most part, rejected by modern psychology (see Clasen 2017; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Clasen 2023). Jackson was so influential in the theory of fantasy that all those who came after heavily relied on the Freudian discourse of repression and phallus (see Hume 2014; Rayment 2014; Armitt 2020). I propose that biocultural theory, which draws on cognitive science and evolutionary theory, has greater explanatory potential in addressing the question of how the literature about the supernatural operates, why it captivates us, and whether this interaction has any benefits. Moreover, the interdisciplinarity of biocultural theory will enable me to broaden the theoretical scope and draw on contributions from across the social, natural sciences, and humanities to tackle the phenomenon of human interaction with the supernatural.

Moreover, I am very sceptical of Jackson's central argument that the fantastic has the power to subvert social order. She claims that the fantastic has always been "obscured and locked away, buried as something inadmissible and darkly shameful" (100). To construct such an argument, Jackson sets aside a vast number of supernatural stories that belong to the category of religious stories or those inspired by religious narratives, such as those by C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Ursula K. Le Guin. To argue for subversion, Jackson focuses just on the stories with "disturbing, anti-social drives" (1981, 5). Although subversion and criticism are integral to the fantastic, many fantasies reflect and fortify traditional ways of thinking. Kiss and Szőnyi rightly point out the heterogeneity of the forms of the fantastic, as well as their media representations and functions. Drawing on iconology, they show how many of its forms relate to traditional and conventional themes, symbols, and images (2002, 20). Drawing on semiology, informed by poststructuralist thought, they demonstrate how, although the fantastic has subversive potential, it can also reinforce

dominant ideology (21-23). The example they give is the relationship between fantastic and commodity fetishism in the consumer-oriented capitalist society (28). The Harry Potter universe can serve as an example here, as its popularity is closely related to its commodification and marketing strategies (see Blake 2002, 77).

The turn of the millennium scholarship recognised the interrelatedness of fantasy, religion, and magic (see Partridge 2004, 45). During the 1990s, Western Esotericism emerged as an academic field that studies Western esoteric practices and their art representations. For example, Szőnyi uses the term "esoteric fiction" to denote the heterogeneity of stories connected "by the ambition of humans to experience epiphany, to partake in the divine or even to deify themselves" (2024, 10). I propose that studies of fantasy fiction would benefit from an interdisciplinary discussion on the supernatural, religion, and magic. Furthermore, I propose that understanding the function of the supernatural in a narrative can contribute to this discussion in literary studies.

Examining the role of supernatural elements in fiction from a cognitive and evolutionary perspective allows us to tackle how and why these aspects of human cognition evolved, as well as their function in the ecology of contemporary society. To do so, I will rely on theories from literary studies, as well as contributions from other disciplines that study human interaction with the supernatural, including history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, cognitive science, psychology, ethology, and biology. Once again, I wish to emphasise that understanding the evolutionary role of the supernatural and the cognitive mechanisms underlying it does not imply that these agents, abilities, and spaces possess unchanged essences. Avoiding reductionism, biocultural theory posits that every culture and each individual's worldview will shape supernatural elements, giving rise to new meanings. As Clasen points out, vampires in *Twilight* are different from those of 18th-century Eastern Europe, because their readers are contemporary Americans (2012, 226).

Overview of the Chapters

This thesis is divided into three parts. Part I will introduce biocultural theory as the primary theoretical framework, which integrates an evolutionary perspective on human culture and cognitive science into the body of theories we call cultural studies. I will present its main theoretical contributions to the case of storytelling's adaptiveness. I will analyse *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, focusing on how the reader uses theory of mind to engage with stories and how

this play can teach about morality, heroism, and altruism.[4] The purpose of the first part of the thesis is to present biocultural theory as a foundation upon which I will build the main argument of the thesis. Part II of the thesis will extend biocultural theory in the direction of *supernatural storytelling*. Exploring the question of why stories with supernatural elements appeal to readers and whether engaging with them has any adaptive benefits. I will interpret Harry Potter novels and films, focusing on how the supernatural helps *reify consciousness*, weave it in a narrative to produce a sense of order, and presents humans as empowered. In Part III of the thesis, I will examine the historical factors that contributed to the popularity of the Harry Potter universe. I will review Blake's (2002) "Potter formula" argument, adding a change in religiosity we trace from the 1960s, the New Age, as a vital element to the case of the popularity of the Harry Potter universe.[5]

To support my theory with examples, I will draw on various stories incorporating supernatural elements. The purpose of drawing on a range of works that fall into the *supernatural storytelling* category is to show the theory's applicability. To provide a coherent interpretation of a work of fantasy fiction, I will focus on the Harry Potter universe as the primary object of my analysis. My argument is based on the premise that interaction with *supernatural storytelling* is a universal human behaviour. Given its global popularity, it was necessary to focus on the equally universal object of analysis, which makes Harry Potter stories a good case study. Furthermore, I see interaction with fantasy fiction as a socially acceptable form of engaging with magic, especially in the West, where religion stigmatises magic as heresy and science as superstition (see Hanegraaff 2005b; Subbotsky 2010). Finally, the focus on the Harry Potter universe also arose from the realisation that literary studies need to account for the phenomenon of their global popularity. In the digital age, when teachers report a lack of interest in books, children wait in lines to buy a new Harry Potter book. To this day, the Harry Potter stories are the best-selling book series of all time and the most translated book after the Bible (Blake 2002, 1).

This thesis aims to further develop biocultural theory in the direction of stories with supernatural elements and to contribute to the interdisciplinary debate on the adaptiveness of the supernatural, where findings from literary studies can enhance understanding by examining supernatural elements as part of a narrative. It is within a narrative, I argue, that the supernatural

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[4] *Theory of mind* (also known as *mentalising* or *intentional stance*), is the ability to attribute beliefs, thoughts, emotions, intentions, and desires (see Dennett 2006, 108).
[5] The "Potter Formula" refers to Blake's (2002) argument that the success of Harry Potter stories can be explained by rebranding English past considering contemporary issues and selling to the world as a commodity.

element actualises its meanings. Moreover, within narratives, they can have adaptive values, not in themselves. This is usually overlooked by traditional approaches to the supernatural, where an element of narrative, such as God, is extracted and its adaptiveness is discussed concerning the concept itself. Moreover, by understanding fantasy fiction and religious stories as a part of a common category: *supernatural storytelling*, the thesis avoids falling into the pitfall of labelling fantasy fiction as something of a lesser value, as a form of literature primarily meant for children, as childish make-believe. I will demonstrate that, for generations of its readers, the Harry Potter stories have been and remain as influential and transformative as other forms of storytelling.

By discussing the adaptive benefits of supernatural storytelling and the revealing mechanism by which it captures the attention of its readers, I also hope to raise awareness of how these stories can be misused by organisations and charlatans who prey on those who need empowerment and stories that entail a worldview in which humans have a special role and purpose. Finally, the theory can also benefit the entertainment industry by answering what makes supernatural agents convincing and why some remain compelling while others lose their attractiveness.[6]

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[6] Chapters of this thesis were published in the form of articles. For details, see references.

PART I:

Evolutionary and Cognitive Theory in Literary Studies

"Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord!" said Snape savagely. "Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily — weak people, in other words — they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!"
"I am not weak," said Harry in a low voice, fury now pumping through him so that he thought he might attack Snape in a moment.
"Then prove it! Master yourself!" spat Snape. "Control your anger, discipline your mind! We shall try again! Get ready, now! Legilimens!" (Rowling 2003, 536)

1. Biocultural Theory

Biocultural theory investigates interactions between human biology, cognition, and culture. The research program draws on evolutionary theory, cognitive science, and cultural studies to explain the function and development of arts and culture, as well as their biological and cognitive underpinnings. Insisting on the *evolutionary* and *literary* aspects of biocultural theory, Carroll (2004) initially proposed the term *literary Darwinism*. Brett Cooke (1999) and Brian Boyd (2012a), the two other literary scholars and proponents of biocultural theory, suggested *biopoetics* and *evocriticism,* respectively. In putting forward *evocriticism*, Boyd criticised Carroll's *literary Darwinism* label, arguing that "evolutionary biologists and psychologists do not call themselves biological Darwinists or psychological Darwinists" (2012, 394, footnote 1).

The debate over the *biocultural* label reveals the efforts of literary scholars to integrate biocultural theory in three overlapping academic discourses. Firstly, they introduce biocultural theory to the field of literary studies. Hence, Carroll's (2004) term *literary Darwinism*, Cooke's (1999) *biopoetics*, and Boyd's (2012a) *evocriticism*. Secondly, they engage in debate with scholars from neighbouring fields within the humanities and social sciences to tackle the evolution of culture and arts. And thirdly, they endeavour to contribute to transdisciplinary debates on evolutionary and cognitive theory together with their colleagues from the natural sciences.

Proponents of biocultural theory demonstrate that evolutionary theory can be beneficial for understanding literature by analysing individual works of literature from a perspective that takes into consideration not only historical and cultural outputs, but also evolutionary, cognitive, and ecological ones. Boyd introduced the term *biocultural* (approach, view, model) to literary studies to designate the shift from the "sociocultural model" that dominates humanities (2005, 1).

Although I agree with Carroll, Cooke, and Boyd in their use of *literary*, *poetics*, and *criticism*, I argue that we should strive for a single term with more variants to describe different types of activities within the field. An example can be taken from gender studies, an interdisciplinary research field that literary studies are a part of. Gender criticism, on the other hand, describes an activity within this field that better reflects a type of analysis literary scholars do. And so, I use Boyd's *biocultural* to describe:

- biocultural studies – an interdisciplinary field that researches interactions between human biology, cognition, and culture, integrating cultural studies with evolutionary theory and cognitive science;

- biocultural theory – a theoretical model that draws on evolutionary theory and cognitive science to tackle the question of the development and function of literature, arts, and culture;

- biocultural criticism – an application of biocultural theory in the analysis of works of literature, film, and art.

This is consonant with developments in the field: *Literature and Evolution: A Bio-Cultural Approach* (Boyd 2005), *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation* (Easterlin 2012), "Biocultural Theory and the Study of Literature" (Carroll 2015), and "Biocultural Theory: The Current State of Knowledge" (Carroll et al. 2015).

Another reason for the *biocultural* label is that although evolutionary theory is the foundation of biocultural theory, it often incorporates analysis that is not evolutionary *per se*. For example, in their explanation of supernatural fears, Coelho et al. draw on both evolutionary theory and cognitive science. They demonstrate how our irrational beliefs are rooted in default cognitive processing, while also highlighting that monsters possess attributes of predators, which tap into our evolved defence mechanisms (2021, 407-409). The integration of evolutionary and cognitive perspectives is possible because the two are consonant. As Carroll points out, "Because evolutionary psychology draws heavily on cognitive developmental psychology, all evolutionary

literary critics are in some measure de facto cognitivists" (2008, 107). The synergy of cognitive and evolutionary approaches is evident in the founding texts of cognitive narratology, such as *Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction, and the Arts* by Tooby and Leda Cosmides. Ecocriticism is another example.[7] Although Carroll asserts that "ecology cannot, by itself, generate a theory of literature or serve as the basis for a theory of literature," he demonstrates how ecocriticism can be integrated into biocultural theory (2004, 86). Congruity between evolutionary literary theory and ecocriticism is evident in essays of one of the founders of ecocriticism, Harold Fromm, titled *The New Darwinism in the Humanities,* in which he gives an overview of the development of evolutionary studies in humanities, advocating scientific thinking and understanding human beings, their culture, and art, as an integral part of nature (2003a; 2003b, 326).

Therefore, biocultural theory integrates perspectives on literature and the arts that do not primarily focus on evolutionary theory but are consonant with it, such as cognitive narratology, ecocriticism, human-animal studies, and human-plant studies. These theoretical models contrast with modes of understanding literature that only consider social and historical aspects, ignoring biological ones (Carroll et al. 2015, 2). From my perspective, in striving for a holistic understanding of culture that integrates human culture, cognition, biology, and ecology, the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in literary studies can contribute to the development of biocultural theory. Therefore, I employ *biocultural theory* to describe an interdisciplinary research program or theoretical model that examines the function and development of literature, culture, and the arts. I use the term' biocultural studies' as an umbrella for approaches within the humanities and social sciences that draw on both cultural (historical, social) and biological (evolutionary, cognitive) contributions to support their arguments.

With this, I do not propose merging or erasing boundaries. It is clear that even within literary studies, various trends have emerged, each with its own particular modes of analysis and problems to address. As Carroll recognises, ecocriticism is very political (2004, 85). I might add, so are human-animal and gender studies. What binds biocultural approaches together is that, in relying on both cultural and biological inputs, they can engage in meaningful discussions and adjust their positions and practices in light of broader interdisciplinary theoretical debates and

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[7] Ecocriticism is a theoretical school in literary studies which studies representations of nature with a particular focus on environmental concerns.

empirical evidence. This opens up the possibility of fact-checking and keeping up the pace with other academic fields. At the turn of the century, Stuart Hall already pointed out the limitations of cultural studies and its difficulties in contributing to the world we live in by answering the questions that matter: "unless and until one respects the necessary displacement of culture, and yet is always irritated by its failure to reconcile itself with other questions that matter, with other questions that cannot and can never be fully covered by critical textuality in its elaborations, cultural studies as a project, an intervention, remains incomplete" (Hall 2010, 1906-1907). I contend that critical textuality will remain at the heart of literary studies, but to answer "other questions that matter," a move from cultural to biocultural studies, as a theoretical framework that offers opportunities to reconcile cultural theories with social and natural studies, is the next step to be considered in the evolution of literary studies as a discipline.

1995 marks the publication of *Evolution and Literary Theory* and the beginning of the modern evolutionary approach to literature that we know today under biocultural theory. Carroll's monograph remains the cornerstone of a biocultural theory thirty years later. He is not just the first to situate a comprehensive evolutionary theoretical framework within literary studies, but also the scholar who is most creditable for tracing the changes in the debate on evolution, literature, and arts over the three decades, integrating and refining the most important contributions from literary studies, art history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cognitive studies with a clear intent to revolutionise the field of literary studies (see Carroll 1995, 2004, 2011, 2012).

However, Carroll was not alone in his efforts to apply the evolutionary approach to the understanding of literature and culture. Brett Cook co-edited a volume, *Biopoetics: Evolutionary Explorations in the Arts*, published in 1999 with Frederick Turner. It included contributions from two conferences held in 1990 and 1995 and materials previously published in journals that tackled literature, film, theatre, and arts from an evolutionary perspective and endeavoured to ground evolutionary approaches within the humanities and social sciences. Another such effort was a book by Robert Storey, *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (1996) that is structured similarly to other publications in biocultural theory: (1) against poststructuralism, (2) evolution and literary theory, and (3) interpretations and literary criticism. Storey (1996) argues that the capacities for imitation and representation are not just cultural artefacts, but are rooted in cognitive structures shaped by natural selection.

Although they are not literary scholars, two other pioneers, biologist Edward O. Wilson and anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake, played a pivotal role in the development of a biocultural theory in the 1990s. In *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* (1990), Dissanayake uses an evolutionary approach to theorise about the origins and functions of art in human evolutionary development. Dissanayake argues for *species-centrism,* an understanding of the role and function of art which is not limited to a particular group but takes into account the universal human nature (1990, 196-198). She points out the bias in studies of culture and art – the short period that philosophers, literary scholars, and art historians typically consider when constructing their hypotheses. Humans developed into a separate species over the cca. Over the last 4 million years, the majority of this period was spent in a hunter-gatherer way of living. Taking into account only the last 2,000 years to hypothesise about the development and function of the arts will inevitably lead to incorrect conclusions (Dissanayake 1995, 4-5). Human societies have undergone dramatic changes over the last 2,000 years. Art forms from this period reflect these changes, but say nothing about the role of art in the long period of human evolution.

In his book *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, Wilson called for the consilience of natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. He defined consilience as "'jumping together' of knowledge by the linking of facts and fact-based theory across disciplines to create a common groundwork of explanation" (1998, 8). The spirit of biocultural theory is condensed in this idea. Wilson argues that the humanities and social sciences "can also be part of science, and the science part of it" (230). They can strive for common theoretical frameworks and serve as a corrective to each other. However, beyond biocultural theory, consilience is at the heart of every successful enterprise. As Pinker notes, we are prone to biases. Thus, it takes a great deal of effort to establish a fact-checking and peer-reviewing system that allows us to rely on others to overcome our individual biases (2018, Chapter 10). Science, academia, and journalism become potent tools for building a society when they adhere to the principles of consilience. However, if a discipline chooses to isolate itself from broader theoretical and methodological discussions, it risks falling into pseudoscience and charlatanism.

Although the 1990s are often regarded as the beginnings of biocultural theory, this does not mean that there were no attempts to apply an evolutionary approach within the social sciences and humanities before. For example, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a philosophical trend known as Social Darwinism emerged. One of its leading representatives, British polymath Herbert

Spencer, argued that the social world of humans is governed by the principle of "survival of the fittest" where the strong thrive and those who find themselves materially in need are "on a high road to extinction" (Spencer 1898, 500). Darwin's works inspired Spencer. However, the phrase "survival of the fittest" is Spencer's. Darwin drew on Spencer's *Principles of Biology* and incorporated them into his later works. Spencer's theory paints the human social world as a competition for dominance and power. His theory was discredited after World War II. The modern evolutionary approach to literature recognises that the human species began to thrive when it started to cooperate. Boyd and Richerson argue that over the last million years, humans increasingly evolved into cooperative cultural animals. This gave rise to the development of moral systems that favoured individuals who better cooperate with others (2009, 3281-3282). Therefore, it was cooperation and tending to weaker members of the group that propelled the human species, not domination and cruelty.

Biocultural theory emerged as a significant component of anthropological research during the late 1950s and early 1960s; however, the term itself did not gain widespread use until the 1970s. In the 1960s, anthropologists recognised that human biology is shaped by its environment (Wiley and Cullin 2016, 555). Moreover, since humans produce, destroy, and modify their environment, they can influence the conditions in which they live and thus their biology. Lewontin and colleagues argued that "the nature of the society in which we live profoundly affects our biology" (1985, 273). In other words, human biology is shaped by both its natural and cultural environments. A biocultural theory of literature and the arts examines how these arts developed in response to their biological, psychological, sociological, ecological, and cultural conditions, and how they, in turn, shape, modify, and create new cultural conditions.

By the 1990s, the evolutionary approach was established in biology, anthropology, psychology, and cognitive science. Thus, it is no wonder that literary scholars like Carroll, Cook, Boyd, Clasen, Gottschall, Flesch, Vermeule, Easterlin, and Zunshine built their theories on the foundation of these disciplines. However, they did not merely apply knowledge from the social and natural sciences to the understanding of literature and culture; in many respects, they challenged and revolutionised established evolutionary perspectives on literature. For example, Pinker (1997) viewed literature as "pleasure technology." On the other hand, Carroll argued that although literature produces pleasure, its adaptive role cannot be reduced to mere pleasure-producing technology. To explain storytelling, we must elaborate on evolutionary mechanisms that

are unique to this behaviour (2004, 115). Pleasure motivates many human behaviours, such as reproduction, sports, and socialisation. Nevertheless, their adaptive values cannot be reduced to mere pleasure. The efforts of scholars who adopted a biocultural approach in the 1990s and early 2000s were twofold: they endeavoured to introduce the evolutionary approach to the field of literary studies and to establish an interdisciplinary dialogue with the social and natural sciences.

1.1. Nomina Sunt Odiosa: Literary Darwinism, *Biocultural Theory*, *Biopoetics*, *Evocriticism*, *Ecocriticism*, and *Cognitive Narratology*

My account of biocultural theory so far has been one that integrates a variety of approaches, taking into consideration both cultural and biological data to support their arguments. Now, I will focus on accounts of scholars who perceive a significant gap between the modes of analysis in literary studies and those proposed by proponents of biocultural theory.[8] In her introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, Lisa Zunshine draws on Nancy Easterlin and Ellen Spolsky to convey how the program of cognitive narratology is different from biocultural theory (in her introduction referred to as "Literary Darwinism"): "The division between the sciences and the humanities, far from ideal in many ways, reflects meaningful differences in ways of thinking about the world. Consilience with science, moreover, though an attractive ideal theoretically, in practice often comes down, as Nancy Easterlin has observed, to 'assimilating literature to [the] epistemic prerogatives' of science" (Zunshine 2015, 2). Her main objection here is that consilience means that literary criticism will somehow drown in scientific epistemology.

In other words, in striving for common cross-disciplinary theoretical frameworks, theories and methods of cultural studies will be replaced by scientific ones. Furthermore, drawing on Easterlin, Zunshine points out that the nature of literature, in its production and consumption, is interpretive, which, according to her, contradicts the scientific approach. She quotes Boyd's criticism of English and related disciplines to conclude that proponents of biocultural theory believe science offers better explanations than English studies. Drawing on Spolsky, Zunshine asserts that biocultural theory rejects cultural construction and thus fails to see how empirical facts do not speak for themselves but must be interpreted (2015, 2).

[8] In this section, I have endeavored to explicate the contemporary criticism of biocultural theory. For a summary of criticism in the last decades, see Clasen (2012, 16-22). For a more detailed response to criticism and questions about adopting an evolutionary perspective on literature and film, see Boyd et al. (2010, 5-9).

I draw attention to Zunshine's criticism not because of the strength of her arguments but because it summarises the fundamental misconceptions about biocultural theory. To borrow a phrase from Asad, "How sensible this sounds, yet how mistaken, surely, it is" (1993, 128). Zunshine takes Easterlin and Boyd out of context to paint the divide between so-called Darwinian and cognitive approaches to literature. However, in so doing, she addresses a problem central to biocultural theory – the position of evolutionary and cognitive approaches within literary studies. The issue I have with her account is that she oversimplifies the arguments to create a false divide between cognitivists and evolutionists, debating for and against consilience and empiricism. Upon closer inspection, there are no identifiable groups but rather individual authors who hold diverse positions on these issues. The claim that they can be categorised into two groups is unattainable. In the introduction to her book, Zunshine does a marvellous job of providing a brief history of literary and English studies, outlining the problems that the humanities face today, and outlining the most important arguments of the complex debate on consilience and empiricism.

However, reducing Easterlin's introduction to half a sentence gave the impression that she is against the evolutionary approach. In contrast, a consideration of her 40-page introduction reveals that Easterlin takes a middle ground in the aforementioned debates. She draws on evolutionary theory and cognitive science to integrate biocultural theory in literary studies:

> Nevertheless, as departments of English came to focus more fully on literature and interpretive criticism rather than philology through the first half of the twentieth century, they settled on a set of practices that speaks to the complexity of literary phenomena, strives for a degree of analytic distance from the object of study, and acknowledges as well that a relative degree of absorption into the subject is constitutive of the critical process. Literary history and close reading address reader-text and text-world dimensions of the reading process. Today, evolutionary and cognitive research is already expanding greatly our knowledge of all three dimensions of the unimaginable complexity of reading and interpretation. (2012, 23)

The debate over the project of consilience, the role of interpretation and criticism, and empiricism in literary studies is ongoing, as is the question of the humanities' role in the modern world. To these questions, those who use a biocultural approach have different answers. However, we should not be hasty in concluding that there are two separate groups.

For me, the project of consilience does not imply that literary studies will be assimilated into scientific epistemology, but rather that the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences have a great deal to learn from one another. Therefore, theoretical models that have been disproven

(in any of these areas) will be abandoned and replaced with more effective ones. The proponents of biocultural theory took issue with theoretical frameworks in literary studies that do not uphold modern academic standards. This is to say, they criticised the works of authors who deliberately made vague and unfalsifiable claims (Carroll 2004, 23-24; Boyd 2009, 2; Clasen 2017, 16-18). In the natural sciences, we observe similar efforts. For example, Gabor Mate is a medical doctor who writes on the topic of how modern medicine must integrate analysis of psychology and culture to answer questions of addiction, depression, autoimmune disease, cancer, and other medical conditions. He argues against the traditional medical approach, which views humans as a sum of their organs and studies each part separately (Mate 2003).

However, I do agree with Easterlin and Nordlund's criticism of Carroll's notion of "scientific objectivity in interpretive criticism" (2012, 22). More than any other biocultural scholar, Easterlin takes the middle ground, understanding where and when to apply scientific rationalism and literary relativism, never proposing that interpretations should be objective or that, on the other hand, the meaning is endlessly deferred (22-23). This is also where I stand. Interpretations, in my opinion, belong to the domain of subjectivity. In other words, there is no objective interpretation or objective aesthetic judgment. This does not, however, mean that subjective explorations are any less valuable than questions in literary studies that can be examined objectively, such as the period the writer belongs to, the number of novels he wrote, and whether he primarily relies on the metaphor of metonymy. This is the precise reason why Zunshine's worry is misplaced. The fact that interpretation cannot be empirically verified does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that it will be rejected and replaced by empirical methods of investigation.

The exploration of domains of subjectivity can be more valuable than forms of research that rely solely on objective methods. In political science and ethics, we often must navigate complex situations that lack an objective solution. Finding a solution, therefore, requires experience, historical awareness, and the ability to contextualise the problem, proposing a solution that is theoretically grounded, logical, coherent, and convincing. Furthermore, the subjective nature of the problem and its complexity often require teamwork and consideration of other perspectives to avoid personal biases. The interpretation of a work of art is such an effort that requires professional training, just as any other form of research. The fact that its results cannot be objectively verified to provide a definitive answer to what the story means should not lead to the

conclusion that it is less valuable. On the contrary, it highlights the complexity of the system and, therefore, the skill and experience required to navigate this complexity.

Where I disagree with Easterlin is her insistence that the meaning cannot be objectively explored and that any attempt to do so will lead to reductionism (2012, 22-23). Easterlin falls into the objective-subjective binary trap, arguing that objective research methods have no place in the humanities because certain aspects of literary studies cannot be objectively explored. This is what Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2024) refers to as "the subjectivist fallacy," the notion that subjectivity cannot be objectively studied. He not only spells out the fallacy but also expresses concern that in rejecting objective methods, we leave this area of exploration to scientists who often do not understand the medium of literature. I also share this concern. In my view, the two epistemologies, or more precisely, modes of analysis — subjective and objective — can coexist and support one another. Research in digital humanities clearly shows how objective research methods can enlighten the analysis of literary works. Part III of this thesis employs a combination of close reading and distant reading to interpret religious terms in the Harry Potter novels. In my opinion, much more experience and skill are needed in the analysis of those aspects of literary work that cannot be quantified.

Clasen's interpretation of the film adaptation of *The Exorcist* shows how relying on a combination of objective information and symbolic interpretation is key to understanding how the meaning production works. Clasen detects the symbolic relationship between Regan, the girl possessed by a demon, and the hippie movement to argue that the film resonates with its cultural context and therefore expresses cultural anxiety that "an all-American girl suddenly infected with an obscene, out-of-control evil" (2021, Chapter 8). Now, this is Clasen's subjective interpretation of the film. He then supports his interpretation with objective historical claims, such as the fact that the hippie movement was a countercultural movement that subverted the traditional American way of living. *The Exorcist*, therefore, can be read as a cautionary tale against the perverse and seductive cultural forces and as a return to traditional American values and faith. This is one possible interpretation of the film. Evidence can support the interpretation, but that does not mean it is objective.

On the other hand, a study by Scrivner and colleagues (2021) found that fans of horror films showed more emotional resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study relied on a self-report questionnaire with clearly defined and quantifiable measures. The fact that their data

must be interpreted does not imply that the study is subjective; instead, it suggests that the study is rigorous and objective. Therefore, as Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2024) points out, the meaning of literary work can be objectively studied. We can support our claims with historical (contextual) or psychological (reader-oriented) evidence. This does not mean, however, that the interpretation will be reduced solely to aspects that can be objectively explored, and that we will refrain from subjective claims.

Even more problematic is that Zunshine paints biocultural theory as exclusive and cognitive narratology as inclusive: "In contrast to the Literary Darwinists, who turn to science to "separate themselves from the traditions behind the last fifty years of literary theory," cognitive literary critics are committed to issues animating literary and cultural studies. This commitment means that, more than ever before, cognitive approaches to literature today flourish at unexpected intersections, drawing into their orbit fields that used to be perceived as irrelevant or even inimical to a cognitivist inquiry" (2015, 2-3). This is true insofar as some cognitive narratologists have attempted to integrate poststructuralism with cognitive studies. In her article *Darwin and Derrida: Cognitive Literary Theory as a Species of Post-Structuralism*, Spolsky asserts "that the assumptions that emerge from the study of evolved human brains in their successive contexts, far from being inconsistent with post-structuralist thought, actually extend and enrich it" (2002, 47).

However, other voices in cognitive narratology are not so optimistic about the marriage with poststructuralism. In the same volume for which Zunshine wrote this introduction, Vermeule writes about the *new unconscious*, pointing out that

> The picture of the unconscious had been drawn largely from Freud but also from Lacan. …
> The decline of psychoanalysis is by now a familiar story. Freud called himself a scientist.
> Yet he shied away from evidence that might cast doubt on his theories. In fact to many
> doubters, psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience. In a pseudoscience, hypotheses count when
> they are confirmed but not when they are disconfirmed. We now know enough about
> confirmation bias to recognize that Freud vaccinated his system against evidence that might
> disconfirm parts of it. Scientific hypotheses do not count unless they can be tested. None of
> Freud's particular theories have been falsified or verified. (2015, 467)

Vermeule recognises that literary studies and cognitive narratology must move in other directions and align their analysis with modern approaches to the unconscious. Clasen arrives at the same conclusion in his analysis of horror, an area of literary studies previously dominated by psychoanalysis (Clasen 2017; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Clasen 2023). Once more, even in the poststructuralist debate, the line between cognitivists and evolutionists cannot be drawn so easily.

However, as Vermeule (2015, 467-468) and Boyd (2009, 387-388) point out, moving toward more promising theoretical frameworks becomes difficult when a discipline focuses on fascination and discipleship towards a personality like Freud and Lacan. Then, rather than falsifying and testing their claims, scholars take them for granted. The purpose of their academic work becomes unscientific, and literature becomes a Rorschach inkblot, where the genius of the master, instead of being questioned, is repeatedly verified. Then, it becomes impossible to abandon the theoretical framework even if it becomes apparent that it is built in such a way that it is unfalsifiable. Spolsky (2002) is a cognitivist who attempted to integrate poststructuralism into cognitive narratology, while Carroll (1995, 2004) is an evolutionist who rejected poststructuralism. They fundamentally disagree concerning poststructuralism and its role in literary studies. Still, from my perspective, it does not follow that other scholars can be categorised into two camps. There are many different voices, both among those who operate under the *cognitive narratology* label and among those who prefer the *biocultural theory* label.

Zunshine's concern that literary studies will somehow drown in scientific epistemology is twofold. So far, I have addressed it only on the theoretical level. However, according to Zunshine, it is not only the theoretical framework that is in danger but also literary interpretation and criticism — the central modes of analysis in literary studies. The concern is that, in adopting a scientific perspective, interpretation and literary criticism in general will be abandoned at universities because they cannot be subjected to scientific inquiry. Although initially proponents of biocultural theory engaged primarily in theoretical work, which made sense as they strived to establish biocultural theory in literary studies, they did not fall short of interpretative work. Moreover, in positing three objectives of biocultural theory, Carroll insists on the analysis of individual works by authors or groups of authors (2006, 46). In identifying major clusters of biocultural theory, Carroll and colleagues assert that "they examine the individual identity and worldview of authors by using concepts from evolutionary social psychology, personality psychology, human life history theory, and cognitive and affective neuroscience" (2015, 6).

Over the years, proponents of biocultural theory dedicated much attention to analysing the individual works. In *Human Nature in Utopia* (2002), Cooke analyses *We* by Zamyatin. In *Shakespeare and the Nature of Love* (2007), Nordlund analyses *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Tempest*. In *The Rape of Troy* (2005; 2008), Gottschall analyses Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In *Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens* (2009),

Saunders analyses *The House of Mirth*, *The Custom of the Country*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Age of Innocence*. In *Why Lyrics Last (2012)* Boyd analyses Shakespeare's sonnets, and in *On the Origin of Stories (2009) he analyses the Odyssey and Horton Hears a Who!* Jonsson (2020) analyses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Clasen's "Why the World Is a Better Place with Stephen King in It" (2020) analyses King's *Pet Sematary* and *It*. The goal of all the aforementioned works was to apply biocultural theory to the interpretation of works by individual authors. In so doing, they demonstrate that interpretation and criticism are at the heart of biocultural studies.

The final remark made by Zunshine was that biocultural theory is blind to the fact that human culture shapes its biology. Nevertheless, this could not be further from the truth. Biocultural theory acknowledges that biology influences culture and that culture, in turn, influences biology. In his criticism of poststructuralism, Boyd clarifies that he opposes cultural relativism and biological determinism (2009, 25). This does not mean that he fails to acknowledge that our culture shapes our biology, but that this shaping is not a one-way process. However, since Boyd is a literary scholar, he is more vocal about criticising the extremes characteristic of literary and cultural studies. Zunshine takes Boyd's criticism of English studies out of context: "English and related disciplines will continue to be the laughingstock of the academic world" (Boyd 2006, quoted in Zunshine 2015, 2). Let us put his sentence back in its proper context:

> Until literature departments take into account that humans are not just cultural or textual phenomena but something more complex, English and related disciplines will continue to be the laughingstock of the academic world that they have been for years because of their obscurantist dogmatism and their coddled and preening pseudo-radicalism. Until they listen to searching criticism of their doctrine, rather than dismissing it as the language of the devil, literature will continue to be betrayed in academe, and academic literary departments will continue to lose students and to isolate themselves from the intellectual advances of our time. (Boyd 2006, 19)

It becomes evident that Boyd's criticism is intended to address the most significant anxiety of our field – the role of the humanities today, and to revolutionise English studies so that they keep up with the demands of modern society. His claim is not a mockery of English studies but a call for improvement of the field to which he dedicated his life and career.

In practice, however, not so vocally, cognitive narratologists are also rejecting theoretical models that have been surpassed by science and align themselves with cognitive science and evolutionary theory. Thus, I argue against Zunshine's proposition that cognitive narratology fundamentally differs from biocultural theory. From my perspective, the two movements in literary

studies are consonant. Their differences are not evident in theory or their application to individual works, as shown by major works in the field (see Tooby and Cosmides 2001; Carroll 2004; Flesch 2007; Vermeule 2010). The differences are in two distinct academic circles with different strategies for changing the theoretical paradigm of the field. One is silently moving in the other direction, and the other is taking up the task of challenging theoretical notions that still dominate our field. And it is precisely for this reason that Zunshine wants to distance herself from biocultural theory. By going against the mainstream of literary studies and challenging its orthodoxies, proponents of biocultural theory have gained a negative reputation within the field (see criticism by Deresiewicz 2009; Kramnick 2011).

1.2. Troubles with Poststructuralism: Biocultural Theory Beyond Genetic Determinism and Cultural Relativism

In literary studies during the 1990s, dissatisfaction with poststructuralist theories led to a search for alternative theoretical perspectives. The biocultural approach to literature emerged in response to the limitations of the poststructuralist approach, which dominated the field of literary study until the turn of the century (Carroll 1995, 49-92; Boyd 2009, 22-23). Overrelying on theories revolving around cultural relativism and social constructivism has distanced literary and cultural studies from projects in the social and natural sciences that rely on notions of truth and empiricism. Biocultural theory emerged as a critique of the limitations of poststructuralism, seeking to reconcile the theories of cultural studies with those from the natural sciences. Moreover, it sought to return the possibility of empirical research, fact-checking, and falsifiability to literary studies.

Modern proponents of biocultural theory argue that storytelling is an aspect of universal human nature and, therefore, a valuable object for studying *adapted minds* and *human nature*. Conversely, they argued that by understanding human cognitive capacities and how they developed over the long period of human evolution, we can gain a new understanding of the products of adapted minds – individual texts and cultures. This approach was modernised in literature by Joseph Carroll, Brian Boyd, William Flesch, Mathias Clasen, Jonathan Gottschall, Lisa Zunshine, Nancy Easterlin, Blakey Vermeule, and others.

Carroll's criticism emphasises that "The central doctrines of poststructuralism are *textualism* and *indeterminacy*" (1995, 3; 2004, 15). By *textualism*, Carroll highlights the poststructuralist assertion that the world is constructed through language and that the logic of

language is reflected in the world. *Indeterminacy*, on the other hand, implies the self-contradictory nature of language. For Carroll, the problem with such theories lies in presenting their arguments in a way that makes them immune to criticism. If meaning is in constant deferral, truth claims cannot be made. Moreover, it is incoherent because it is internally conflicted. Carroll sees this theoretical position as akin to the authority of the priesthood. If an academic enterprise cannot and should not produce truth claims or fact-check research, then poststructuralist positions do not have to hold any empirical validity and must be taken for granted. Moreover, he shows that poststructuralists assume the position of moral superiority by criticising any attempt to understand reality as a power play (2004, 16).

Carroll analyses the works of Derrida, Foucault, Greenblatt, Fish, Lacan, Jameson, and Brook Thomas to demonstrate how their theories, as well as those of their followers, are constrained by textualism and indeterminacy. Moreover, he points out that their theories "eliminate the notion that human beings recognise and understand something that exists independently of their own linguistic and cultural constructions. Both ideas are thus textualist in the sense that they regard human mental experience as wholly determined and preconstituted by language or cultural paradigms that transcend individual minds and particular perceptions" (1995, 7). Carroll notices that even the dominant theoretical trends of literary studies, such as psychoanalysis, reader-response criticism, postcolonialism, and gender studies, are predominantly poststructuralist and, therefore, deeply affected by relativism and constructivism. He concludes that poststructuralists seek not only to propose a theory and, therefore, constitute a trend in literary studies, but also to posit poststructuralism as the dominant epistemology. Their discourse is often called the Theory and is associated with the French school, as outlined by its most influential theorists, including Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan.

The extremism that characterised the development of social constructionism in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a schism between philosophy-based and science-based fields. To demonstrate the extremism that poststructuralist philosophy took form, which was the impetus for the advent of biocultural theory, I draw attention to Bruno Latour's article, in which he criticises scientists for their conclusion that Ramses II died of tuberculosis. I highlight this article both because it exemplifies the extreme constructionist claims of the age and because of its influence:

> The great advantage of this picture is that it renders visible, tangible, and material the expense at which it is possible for us to think of the extension in space of Koch's bacillus, discovered (or invented, or made up, or socially constructed) in 1882. Let us accept the diagnosis of "our

brave scientists" at face value and take it as a proved fact that Ramses died of tuberculosis. How could he have died of a bacillus discovered in 1882 and of a disease whose etiology, in its modern form, dates only from 1819 in Laënnec's ward? Is it not anachronistic? The attribution of tuberculosis and Koch's bacillus to Ramses II should strike us as an anachronism of the same caliber as if we had diagnosed his death as having been caused by a Marxist upheaval, or a machine gun, or a Wall Street crash (2000, 248).

Latour argues that because tuberculosis was socially constructed by doctors in 1882, it is impossible that a pharaoh died from it in 1213 BC. With this radical statement, the whole project of the scientific method was called into question. As a result, a vast schism still remains between the humanities and the natural sciences. Aligning themselves with the project of poststructuralist relativism, the humanities have lost touch with the natural sciences, which are based on principles of objectivism, empiricism, and fact-checking. For this reason, evolutionary theory, which has been in its modern form for more than a century and a half, is still struggling to find its place in literary studies departments.

Drawing on ethologist Konrad Lorenz, Carroll asserts a different perspective on the production of meaning than the one offered by poststructuralists: "From this specifically biological perspective, meaning is determined, in the first place, not by linguistic and cultural codes that obey only their internal principles but rather by physiological structures such as 'the sense organs and central nervous system' (p. 6). Such structures 'enable living organisms to acquire relevant information about the world and to use this information for their survival'" (2004, 18). A biocultural perspective in literary studies seeks not only to return to the possibility of truth claims and empirical studies but also to contribute to studies of *human nature*.[9]

Carroll has devoted much of his work to this concept (1995, 2004, 2011). Brett Cooke, another pioneer of biocultural theory, wrote about studying "our shared human nature" (1999, 5). Brian Boyd devoted a subchapter of his seminal book *On the Origin of Stories* to this concept (2009, 19-30). Scholars from psychology, cognitive studies, ethology, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, and other disciplines have gathered information about the aspects of human nature that we can trace diachronically, from our early communities to the present day, and synchronically, by comparing a variety of cultures present today. If literature is a product of the

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[9] In biocultural theory, the concept of *human nature* implies that there are dispositions universally shared by all members of the human species. However, these dispositions are not seen as essences but are shaped by specific socio-historical conditions, giving rise to a multiplicity of expressions.

human mind, then it reflects the contents and structures of the mind and is, therefore, a valuable object for studying *human nature*.

Boyd addresses some common misunderstandings about the concept of human nature, stating that "our minds and behaviour are always shaped by the interaction of nature and nurture, or genes and environment, including the cultural environment" (2009, 19). Understanding what is common to all humans does not exclude or in any way diminish the importance of differences among cultures. He also stresses that the project of understanding human nature has nothing to do with the trend of social Darwinism and the survival of the fittest theories. Drawing on Barthes, Boyd demonstrates how the concept of human nature was exploited to portray bourgeois culture as a natural state of being. This is why this concept was criticised as essentialism in the first place (20-22).

Boyd concludes that the criticism of the concept did not allow social studies to develop in the same direction as natural studies, toward understanding human nature within the context of evolution (2009, 22). He insists that:

> The best way to critique Western bourgeois assumptions about human nature is not to deny that human nature exists, but to apply the hard tests of science, examining humans against other species; in many cultures, from hunter gatherer bands to modern industrialized states; in many ages, in their history and their arts, especially the arts of orature (oral literature) and literature: to investigate human universals and human particulars, similarities and differences. (23)

Boyd disputes cultural relativism, but also, drawing on Dawkins, rejects biological determinism: "A biological view of human nature stresses that individuals are free agents endowed with the flexibility that evolution provides and are active strategic choosers rather than passive products of their place and time" (25). Just as Carroll (1995, 2004) does, he calls for an approach that avoids extremes. The two claims – that we are biologically predisposed and that our cultures shape us do not contradict. Our culture is a part of our biology because we have brains predisposed to learning culture. We have genes that are shaped by both the natural environment and our culture.

Or, as Dissanayake puts it: "To say that there is a human nature is not to say that there is an immutable and determined human essence. The most sensible way of putting it is to propose that human nature consists of a certain range of powers or abilities and tendencies, a repertoire that is inherited and that forms a fairly characteristic human pattern that will be brought out under favorable circumstances—circumstances that resemble those that obtained during the greater

period of human evolution" (1988, 17). What Dissanayake offers is a view in which nature and culture are not binaries; rather, culture is seen as an integral part of human nature. This does not mean that there are no differences between cultures. However, it is also evident that all humans are naturally predisposed to be "cultural animals" (23). In what follows, I present the main arguments of proponents of a biocultural theory of art, culture, and storytelling. The purpose of the next chapter is not only to provide a literature review of biocultural theory but also to elaborate on the arguments that this thesis builds upon. Thus, before we can delve into supernatural fiction, I will present a case for storytelling as adaptive behaviour.

2. Evolutionary Theory: Culture, Art, and Storytelling

2.1. Evolution by Natural Selection: Darwin's and Wallace's Brilliant Idea

Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace independently discovered the theory of evolution by natural selection and first proposed it in the article "On the Tendency of Species to Form Varieties; and on the Perpetuation of Varieties and Species by Natural Means of Selection" (1858). The article comprised Wallace's *On The Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type* and an extract from Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), which was published a year later. Darwin expanded on the idea in his book, describing it in more detail (Gregory 2009, 157). Over the years, the primary arguments of the theory have remained largely unchanged. Over the years, the newfound evidence for their proposition only strengthened the theory. However, the mechanisms underlying natural selection still spark debate. The discovery of DNA by Friedrich Miescher in the 1860s paved the way for Watson and Crick to show that DNA was a three-dimensional double helix in 1953. This marked the beginning of a new era in understanding natural selection at the genetic level.

What Darwin did not know about genes is the mechanisms by which genes affect traits. The new era of genetics was championed by Richard Dawkins and his mentor, Denis Noble. What still astonishes today is the precision with which Darwin and Wallace described natural selection, such that both the evidence on the macro level of organisms and the micro level of molecules follows the principles laid out by Darwin and Wallace. This led Daniel Dennett to assert: "If I were to give an award for the single best idea anyone has ever had, I'd give it to Darwin, ahead of Newton and Einstein and everyone else. In a single stroke, the idea of evolution by natural selection unifies the realm of life, meaning, and purpose with the realm of space and time, cause and effect, mechanism and physical law" (1995, 21). Over nearly two centuries, Darwin's and Wallace's ideas were refined, initial mistakes were corrected, and the theory was thoroughly documented. Due to its explanatory power, evolutionary theory has permeated various academic disciplines, often altering the prevailing mainstream paradigm. In what follows, I will not attempt to describe the theory of evolution by natural selection, as it is so widespread that it is considered commonplace. However, I aim to explicate some of the main principles that underlie it and, in doing so, explain some of the key concepts on which this thesis relies.

Darwin's (1859) initial revolutionary observation was that species reproduce exponentially. For example, from a single pair of elephants, in only 750 years, we would theoretically have 19,000,000 offspring (Gregory 2009, 157). However, due to limited resources, many of them die, and the elephant population numbers reach and maintain relative stability. He also observed that offspring are not identical but vary and that many of these different traits are heritable. Those who possess more favourable traits are more likely to survive long enough to reproduce, thereby ensuring that these favourable traits are passed on at a higher rate. In Darwin's words: "This preservation of favourable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest" (1859, 86). So, evolution by natural selection involves competing with other organisms of one's species and other species for resources. Organisms compete by developing traits that enable them to acquire resources more effectively than their competitors. If a trait, or a group of traits, helps an organism acquire resources more effectively and/or survive dangerous competition, this organism will live long enough to reproduce. Thus, traits that improve fitness are more likely to be passed down.

What Darwin was not aware of was the mechanism that underlies inheritance. The traits are passed on to the new generation by replicating parts of DNA. However, due to errors (mutations) and the recombination of variants, the newborn organism is not a blind copy but a unique individual (Gregory 2009, 158). Whether a mutation will result in the emergence of a favourable trait or will lead to illness can never be anticipated, as individual variation is a random process. Nonetheless, those organisms that, through this process, acquire favourable traits will showcase better survival skills and have a greater chance of passing these traits to the new generation. Organisms that develop less favourable traits, or traits that impede survival, will not live long enough to reproduce and thus have a lower chance of passing on these less favourable traits.

And so, evolution by natural selection is a numbers game: "But let the destruction of the adults be ever so heavy, if the number which can exist in any district be not wholly kept down by such causes—or again let the destruction of eggs or seeds be so great that only a hundredth or a thousandth part are developed—yet of those which do survive, the best adapted individuals, supposing that there is any variability in a favourable direction, will tend to propagate their kind in larger numbers than the less well adapted" (Darwin 1859, 92). The chance that, through mutation, an organism will develop a less favourable trait might seem like a risk. However, the

exponential reproduction of species ensures a large number of offspring. For a species to survive, only the best-adapted individuals have to survive. Competing for resources, most individuals will die, and the species will reach relative stability in numbers over time. If the species cannot reach relative stability in numbers, it will perish.

Many of these observations were made even before Darwin. His revolutionary idea of evolution by natural selection was to combine these observations. He demonstrated that natural selection is not governed by mere chance, but rather that some individuals are better adapted to their particular environments than others, making them more likely to survive long enough to reproduce and thus increase their average number of offspring. Conceived this way, evolution is a two-step process. The first part of genetic mutation is random. Through this process, new traits emerge. Nevertheless, the second part is not random, as traits that emerge influence the survival and reproductive success of an individual, its *fitness* (Gregory 2009, 158). On a genetic level, we distinguish between genotype, which refers to the DNA sequence, and phenotype, which refers to the expressed characteristics of a gene that manifest in an individual. *Fitness* should be understood in technical terms. If an individual has a gene that, in phenotype, expresses strength or speed, it does not follow that it confers high fitness, as strength or speed are not always adaptive in every environment. Therefore, the number of offspring is typically used as a crude measure of Darwinian fitness, as it implies that an individual possesses particular traits that make it well-suited to a specific environment, allowing it to reproduce and protect its offspring. As such, Darwinian fitness can be measured (Gregory 2009, 159).

Another important concept in evolutionary theory is *adaptation* — the process by which individuals, populations, or species become better suited to their environment. An *adaptation* is a trait or feature that improves an organism's ability to survive and reproduce. Adaptations evolve, shaping fitness and increasing the chances of reproductive success. Because individuals with adaptive traits are, on average, more likely to survive and reproduce, they are also more likely to pass their traits on to subsequent generations. This is how a single adaptive trait can become fixed in a species (Gregory 2009, 161). It is worth noting that the environment plays a crucial role in evolutionary theory. Organisms adapt to a particular environment. As such, their adaptiveness cannot be measured in itself but compared to their relative success in a particular environment.

That also means that a change in environment can render certain traits *maladaptive* (harmful in terms of *fitness*) that were adaptive before. Here, the distinction between our *genotype*

and *phenotype* is important. A gene (genotype) can have more than one expression (phenotype). Some of them may be *adaptive*, while others can be considered *by-products* – traits that do not affect fitness or traits that negatively affect fitness (are *maladaptive*): "The whiteness of bones, for example, is an incidental by-product of the fact that they contain large amounts of calcium, which was presumably selected because of properties such as strength rather than because of whiteness" (Buss et al. 1998, 537). Nonetheless, as the gene is passed on, these traits are inherited together.

A trait is only considered *adaptive* or *maladaptive* in relation to an individual's relative success in survival and reproduction within a specific environment. This means that traits can change, and an *adaptive* trait can become *maladaptive* due to a change in the environment. For example, our sweet tooth was adaptive in environments with scarce resources. When our hunter-gatherer ancestors encountered a large amount of fruit, they would eat as much as they could to store energy. Our insatiable appetite for sweets was adaptive in that particular environment (Dennett 2006, 63). Today, however, most Westerners are constantly surrounded by sugary food and beverages. Lustig and colleagues argue that "Added sweeteners pose health dangers that justify controlling them like alcohol" (2012, 27). Therefore, in the new environment, our sweet tooth is maladaptive, leading many individuals to develop health problems and die prematurely.

On the other hand, a trait can develop another evolutionary purpose. The feathers of a bird, which evolved for thermal regulation, were later co-opted for flight. This is an example of a *co-opted adaptation* (Buss et al. 1998, 539). This term will be significant since language is viewed as an adaptation that facilitates better communication and, consequently, organisation. Storytelling, therefore, can be seen as a *co-option*. For the sake of simplicity, I will not use terms like *exaptations* and *spandrels* (See Buss et al. 1998). I use *co-option* in the sense of "The process by which the trait switches function" (McLennan 2008, 249). Therefore, an adaptive trait can acquire another function, and a trait that was initially a byproduct, maladaptive, or neutral can also become adaptive. This process will also be important when we discuss the evolutionary theory of the supernatural, as our belief in ghosts and other supernatural agents in psychology and cognitive science is seen as an evolutionary byproduct (see Guthrie 1995, 45; Barrett 2000, 31; Atran 2002, 59; 2006, 188; Boyer 2001, 146).

Finally, Darwin's idea was that traits can arise that do not seem adaptive on an individual level, but are on a group level: "Natural selection will modify the structure of the young in relation to the parent and of the parent in relation to the young. In social animals, it will adapt the structure

of each individual for the benefit of the whole community; if the community profits by the selected change" (1859, 91). Today, natural selection is understood as a multi-level process. The three levels – genetic, individual, and group level can work in opposing ways. This will be important for the later discussion on morality, where there is a tension between individualistic free riders and a group pressure to contain such behaviours for the benefit of the group. Furthermore, Dawkins (1976) proposed that natural selection is best understood on the gene level, arguing that the gene is "using" an organism to replicate itself. In this view, an organism is compared to a computer, which responds to its programming (genes). On the other hand, Noble (2006) criticised this *biological reductionism*, arguing for biological relativity, which recognises multiple levels of natural selection, not privileging any of the levels. Frank (2025) demonstrated that combining models based on each level yields better results across different time scales than focusing on a single level.

2.2. Culture and Art as Extended Phenotype and Memes

Not all traits are transferred genetically; some traits are transferred culturally. Although biological predispositions for language are genetic, language itself is an example of cultural transmission. Humans are the most advanced animals in this type of transmission, but there are also some rare cases among animals, such as monkeys and birds. Dawkins (1976) draws on research by P. F. Jenkins on a bird called the saddleback that lives on the islands of New Zealand. Jenkins grouped the saddleback males into dialect populations that sang a unique song to attract females. Young males learn the song by imitation, a process similar to how humans acquire a language. Jenkins discovered that there is a fixed number of songs among the saddleback population. However, his revolutionary discovery was the creation of a new song when a male made a mistake in imitation. The new variant was then learned by other males, creating a new group of singers. Jenkins referred to this cultural mutation as described by Dawkins (1976, 189-190). Jenkins insisted that the new song was created due to a mistake in imitation. Interestingly, as Gregory points out, mutation on the genetic level is considered an error in the process of DNA replication (2009, 158).

To denominate a unit responsible for cultural transmission, just as a DNA molecule called a gene is responsible for genetic replication, Dawkins coined the term *meme* for a unit of cultural transmission: "Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads

about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain" (1976, 192). *Meme* is an abbreviation derived from *mimeme*, which in turn comes from the Greek *mīmēma*, meaning "imitated thing" and "imitation." Examples that Dawkins initially provided include "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (1976, 192). In his next book, Dawkins (1982) clarified that these should be regarded as meme products, "the phenotypic effects of a meme," and that memes should be seen as units of information in the brain (Chapter 6).

Another example he provides is a God meme that survives through replication, mutation, and cultural transmission via speech, literature, music, and art (Dawkins 1976, 192-193). Meme products of the God meme would be all the particular verbal, visual, and auditory iterations of gods. Just as genes compete in a gene pool, that is the total collection of genes within a population, so too do memes compete in a meme pool, a total collection of memes from one culture. Some memes enhance an individual's or group's fitness and can thus be considered adaptive. Those have a higher chance of being transferred to the next generation. Again, "the goal" of the gene is not to enhance the organism, but to spread to other organisms and replicate. Thus, Dawkins's book is titled *The Selfish Gene*. However, to survive, a gene must persist in the gene pool.

One way to "accomplish" this task is to mutate. This is also true about memes. Zipes understands *Red Riding Hood* as a complex meme. He reads the oral *Red Riding Hood* story as a tale about a brave young girl who showcases skills of coping with the world (2006, 35). However, in Perrault's and Grim's versions, Zipes finds a different version of the Red Riding Hood meme. He asserts that the key idea of *The Little Red Riding Hood* is "that women are responsible for their rape, an idea not central to the oral tale" (37). Zipes argues that the Red Riding Hood meme has mutated to survive in the meme pool that we call patriarchal culture.

The totality of expressed genes in an individual is called the *phenotype*. The expressed traits can be physical characteristics, such as body hair, or an ability or skill, like holding one's breath underwater, or a condition, like resistance to venom. In all these cases, it can be experimentally shown if the trait is genetic. Beavers, for example, have a unique set of adaptations. Their large incisors continue to grow throughout their lives, enabling them to cut down trees. Their front paws are digitigrade, enabling them to manipulate wood, and their rear feet are webbed, helping them swim. They have a stocky body to conserve heat and a flat, scaly tail to facilitate

faster swimming. This phenotype is a result of a particular gene pool that all beavers inherit. Dawkins (1999) expanded this idea, arguing that animal artefacts, such as spiders' webs, can be seen as *phenotypic tools*. Another, even more extended example is a beaver's dam. For beavers, travelling through water is safer than by land. Dawkins speculates that beavers build dams to flood the area and thus create safer conditions for further travel and the collection of wood. This leads him to propose that spiders' webs and beavers' dams are examples of an *extended phenotype* (1999, Chapter 11).

Humans do not take their surroundings for granted; instead, they destroy, modify, and recreate them (Wiley and Cullin 2016, 556). One way of modifying one's surroundings is through art. By 'art,' Dissanayake does not imply something that belongs to galleries and museums. The contemporary notion of art as aesthetics is an 18th-century Western invention. For 40.000 years, art had a practical use in decoration, ritual, socialisation, healing, and remembering the past (1995, 48-50). She argues that the purpose of art is to reinforce the importance of the modified object. She calls this process *making special* (41-42). The terms she uses in her later books are *to elaborate* and *to artify*, insisting that art is a process, a verb, not a noun (1995, 51; 2000, 129; 2018, Chapter 1).

I have already written that Joseph Carroll is the father of biocultural theory in literary studies, but Dissanayake's book, *What is Art For?* can be seen as a first step toward what we now know under the label "biocultural theory," which she referred to as the *biobehavioral view* (1988, 11). Dissanayake introduced the two conceptions of the adaptive role of art that would later become central to biocultural theory, further developed by the two most vocal proponents of biocultural theory in literary studies – Joseph Carroll and Brian Boyd. Namely, Dissanayake (1988, 1995) saw art as a form of play, a formalised experience that imposes a sense of order, and a way to extend mutuality. Both assertions imply that art serves a social role – uniting individuals in groups, acting as a social glue, and helping to convey what is essential to pass on to new generations.

To demonstrate how art fulfils these roles and passes on important skills to the next generation, Dissanayake devotes a chapter of her book to describing the mother-infant relationship. Despite a variety of childbearing traditions, human infants and their primary caregivers—typically mothers—exhibit an innate readiness for mutuality. Babies are born expecting someone with whom they can share their emotional states, and human adults respond to babies' needs with tenderness. These innate predispositions are then further developed through the relationship

between a baby and a caretaker. Dissanayake describes a complex set of behaviours through which infants and mothers achieve mutuality. These include feeding, singing, smiling, humming, rocking, touching, and kissing. Infants are predisposed to react with positive emotions to these, and mothers are predisposed to derive a sense of gratification from performing these actions (2000, 36-38). Thus, to achieve a sense of mutuality with our caretakers, we are exposed to multimodal input—content that we feel, see, and hear, organised in a rhythm. This leads Dissanayake to conclude that we are born with an innate predisposition for "rhythmic-multimodal sensitivities and competencies that enable matching, turn-taking, synchrony, and other indications of sharing an emotional state" (48).

Dissanayake describes various ways to build and sustain this mutuality. In some traditions, the mother is the primary caretaker, but in other traditions, such as among the Aka Pygmy, other adults and older children also share the responsibility of caring for the baby. Firstly, through the mother-infant relationship and then through the relationship with our caretaker(s), we develop a sense of mutuality and intimacy that becomes a foundation for future building relationships (2000, 49-50). This feeling of mutuality is then further developed through our sense of belonging to a group. Therefore, from our bonding with our mother to the relationships we develop with our family, friends, and partners, all the way to belonging to a larger group, mutuality plays a central role in human lives. As an ultrasocial species, our survival depends on the strong bonds we form with one another. Thus, mutuality is a basic human need: "Mutuality with other individuals and belonging to a group are as necessary to human life as food and warmth. They are emotional food and warmth" (Dissanayake 2000, 52).

Studying the Khoisan of southern Africa, the Aborigines of Australia, and the Congo pygmies, Dissanayake demonstrates how members of hunter-gatherer societies effortlessly transition from mutuality with their mothers to bonding with other members of the society (2000, 52). She draws attention to the pattern consistent in all humans and other mammals. They all use *rhythms and modes* to build and sustain mutuality. Infants demonstrate a predisposition to learning, but they develop these skills through relationships with their mother and later other caregivers. Mothers exhibit rhythmic and multimodal behaviour, characterised by repetitive sounds and movements in touch, sound, and sight. Humming, singing, caressing and carrying a baby become signs of mutuality. These behaviours then translate into ways to express and sustain mutuality, firstly with a close circle of individuals and later with larger groups (57-58). As I have already

pointed out, Boyd and Richerson (2009) demonstrated that humans became a dominant species by cooperating and caring for weaker group members. Therefore, we can understand mutuality as the crucial adaptation that ensures the survival of our species.

Dissanayake argues that art is an extension of this adaptation—a way to reinforce belonging and mutuality. In one of her examples, she draws attention to Karelian *itkuvirsi*, a ritualised lament women perform. She interprets this stylised crying as a collective expression of sorrow. Many elements of this ritual are derived from mother-infant mutuality: repetition, intensity, expression, and resolution. Another example she gives is the courtship dance of the Medlpa of Papua New Guinea, where a couple sits side by side and sways their bodies while adults sing in the background. They then touch their foreheads and roll their heads, creating their unique rhythm. "Here, kinesis, or movement, is the main medium that allows physical and rhythmic communion between a performing pair, and as in mother-infant mutuality" (2000, 62-63). These behaviours extend our sense of mutuality to other group members, resulting in a feeling of belonging and allowing us to derive a sense of identity and purpose. Once these bonds are created, they are almost unbreakable. Just as parents are prepared to die for their children, once belonging is extended, team members (special operations, gangs, rescue units) are prepared to die for their friends (68).

An evolutionary perspective on the arts provides a distinct account of meaning production compared to a poststructuralist one. Here, *meaning* refers to value and importance, rather than a specific reading or perspective. A baby responds to a smile, touch, kiss, and food because they are biologically significant for its survival. They signify "security, warmth, physical and emotional nourishment" (Dissanayake 2000, 73). These needs become central throughout human life. What is important to note here is that Dissanayake lays the foundations of a model of meaning production that is now known as biocultural theory. She begins by describing what is meaningful in terms of our biological needs. She then extends this model onto our social life, showing how we use the same rhythms and modes to form bonds with members of our group. Finally, she builds an account of culture, a system of meanings. The purpose of culture, therefore, is to highlight and guide us in fulfilling fundamental needs: "finding, preparing, and assuring the continuance of food; rearing children; and maintaining social relationships, social practices, health, safety, prosperity, and competence" (73).

Because humans do not take their surroundings for granted but modify and recreate them (Wiley and Cullin 2016, 556), they have developed an ability to impose their sense of meaning

and order on the world: "They mentally transform the stuff of nature into "meaningful," culturally usable systems and stories, and then they make these even more elaborate and extravagant by vivid description, repetition, and other rhythmic and modal devices of emphasis, added figuration, or intensification" (Dissanayake 2000, 134). This argument will become the cornerstone of Carroll's theory of the adaptive role of literature. Carroll notices that evolution is a slow process, and humans today live in very different conditions from their hunter-gatherer ancestors. The behaviours that were adaptive in one environment can be maladaptive in another. Carroll views literature as a tool to modify our evolved motivational dispositions in response to the demands of contemporary society (2006, 43). To return to Dissanayake's argument, the arts guide us in understanding what is relevant, what poses a danger, and what creates an opportunity; they also allow the next generation to modify the meaning to fit the new natural and cultural demands better. We are biologically predisposed to derive meaning in mutuality, communication, and culture. We learn and expand this predisposition through rhythms and modes. Culture and art facilitate such *cultural transmission*, taking up the role that initially belongs to a caretaker.

In evolutionary terms, therefore, art can be seen as an *extended phenotype* which humans use to impose a sense of meaning and order onto their surroundings. Human houses, just like beaver lodges, are examples of *extended phenotypes*. Moreover, we are not the only animal that decorates their home. Many birds signal their competence and attract mates by decorating their nests. However, human ecology is not just physical. Our large brains enable us to create maps and simulations of reality and worlds beyond it. We do not just live surrounded by physical individuals, objects, and spaces. We have mental representations of these that constitute our psychological ecology. Furthermore, we have mental objects that belong solely to our psychological ecology. Ancient Greek gods, Nordic gods, or modern political ideologies only exist in our psychological ecology. And just as we organise our physical surroundings using our rhythmic-modal sensitivities, we impose a sense of meaning and order on our psychological world.

Dissanayake highlights the practical aspect of this ordering. The human brain processes a vast amount of information. This requires simplification and patterning. However, patterns not only help store and retrieve information but also shape and transform experience, information, and emotion. Some examples of this ordering are rituals, myths, and narratives: "Narrative, for example, is a peculiarly human formalizing or structuring device that belongs to life as well as art. Barbara Hardy in her literary criticism stresses that man is "a story-telling animal," that human life

is made up of narrative, and that the special aesthetic activity known as novel writing is an intensification of what we all do all the time" (Dissanayake 1988, 114-115). In what follows, I will focus on the role of storytelling in human lives. However, I wish to highlight the key idea that will serve as a foundation for Carroll's (2006) understanding of literature's adaptive role and my theory of supernatural storytelling. Humans do not perceive reality as it is, but modify and organise it. Just as they organise their physical surroundings, they modify, mould, structure, organise, and order the content of their minds. Moreover, because rhythms and modes instil a sense of meaning, purpose, mutuality, and security, they become organising principles to produce a sense of psychological security.

2.3. Storytelling Animals

Sugiyama suggests that "storytelling is a universal human behavior" and a "cross-cultural phenomenon" (2021, 8). She asserts, "Literate or not, all societies practice some form of storytelling" (2001, 222). She has also shown how storytelling emerged in the hunter-gatherer context as a way of transferring knowledge. She distinguishes between genuine and fictional stories, as well as between true stories and fabrications that contain elements of untruth. Moreover, she claims that the latter are more efficient in conveying the message as they can be tailored for a specific purpose (2021, 10). In the case of caution tales, for example, special emphasis might be put on the mistakes characters made and the rules they broke that led to disaster. Moreover, the disaster can be magnified to underscore the importance of adhering to the rules.

For our early communities, much like today, it was essential to distinguish the two modes of telling a story. Sugiyama notes that various communities use the "distant time" aspect to signal the fictionality of the story, either by telling a story about animals that can talk and possess supernatural powers or by using a different grammatical feature of the language. Moreover, drawing on experiments by Boyer and Ramble, she notes that attaching supernatural or other counterintuitive elements may serve as a mnemonic strategy, as these elements are attention-grabbing and thus more memorable (2021, 9-10).

This resonates with Dissanayake's (1988, 1995) principles of art – to highlight what is essential and to organise information. Tooby and Cosmides have reached a similar conclusion. They see beauty and terror as aesthetic principles that are attention-summoning and memorable, drawing our attention to the features of our surroundings that have evolutionary significance (2001,

17-18). Once again, the quantity of the information we can store presents us with a problem. In a sea of information, how do you sift out what is essential? For Tooby and Cosmides, aesthetics solves this problem. Our brains do not simply store information as true, but use various categories to manage their complex information libraries. They can then decouple the information depending on the situation and use (20). This is consistent with Sugiyama's observation regarding the "distant time" aspect (2021, 10). Thus, narrative guides our attention to evolutionarily significant aspects of human lives and highlights important aspects of a story by making it emotionally salient. The story allows for the recording of experience and its successive refinement (Tooby and Cosmides 2001, 25).

For ultrasocial animals like humans, the most attention-grabbing aspects of the story are the characters. Gottschall summarises arguments by Boyd, Pinker, and Sugiyama to argue that "story is where people go to practice the key skills of human social life" (2012, 64). Drawing on Oatley and Mar, he compares stories to flight simulations where humans practice mastering a dangerous situation without taking significant risks (66). He points to the research pioneered by psychiatrist Marco Iacoboni (2009), which shows that mirror neurons, cells in our brains that facilitate empathy, also react to characters in films and literature as they enable us to walk in their shoes, see what they see, and feel what they feel (Gottschall 2012, 68). This led him to propose that "people who consume a lot of fiction should be more capable social operators than people who don't" (72).

Here, Gottschall draws on an argument by psychologists Oatley and Mar, who had pointed out an experiment by Peskin and Astington, where one group of children read stories that included information about characters' mental states, and the other read stories that did not provide such information. When their theory of mind skills were tested, the group that read stories without information about the character's mental states outperformed the other. This led Oatley and Mar to propose that the more successful group had to put in the effort to understand the characters, while the other did not. They suggested that effort led to a significant increase in their theory of mind abilities (2008, 186). However, both Gottschall and Oatley and Mar warned against drawing final conclusions based on this research and called for further testing. Moreover, Gottschall's assertion that individuals become better "social operators" does not follow from this experiment (2012, 72). At best, we can say that individuals become more proficient in understanding others. Although the theory of mind is an essential skill for managing social situations, other skills are

also necessary. One could, for example, be proficient in "reading" others' minds but fail to act in a socially acceptable manner. Moreover, following Gottschall and Oatley's simulation metaphor, there must be a point at which pilots transition from simulation to practising with real aeroplanes, I argue.

For me, a more accurate concept for understanding storytelling than a simulation is the concept of play introduced by Boyd, who examines play as an animal and human adaptation that refines skills without exposing them to danger. Since the development of skills acquired through play is essential to one's survival and reproductive success, individuals who engage in play are more successful in their activities, especially those that require rapid reactions in situations involving danger (such as hunting, fighting, or fleeing from a predator). Unlike simulation, play is an open-ended activity that involves a great deal of improvisation. Moreover, one of the main aspects of the play is fun. Thus, Boyd brings an essential element to the account of the adaptive value of storytelling. So far, one could get the impression that humans are motivated to read stories to learn about the world and themselves. However, experience confirms this is not the case. We read stories because we find them interesting and fun. The pleasure we derive from art motivates us to engage in this adaptive behaviour (2009, 14-15).

Therefore, the distinction should be made between proximal and ultimate evolutionary mechanisms. Ethologist Tinbergen asks two sets of questions to understand behaviour. The first set of questions is related to the proximate mechanisms that explain its immediate causes. The second set of questions is related to the ultimate mechanisms that explain the adaptive value (1963). For example, animals engage in play because it is enjoyable; however, the adaptive value of play lies in its ability to develop essential skills, which in turn lead to improved survival and reproductive success. This is an important distinction in the theory of adaptivity of storytelling, as well as in my theory of adaptivity of supernatural storytelling. This will be discussed in the following parts in detail, but stories engage their readers by proximal mechanisms such as pleasure, curiosity, and exploration. However, they cannot be reduced to these. Their adaptive value lies in understanding the ultimate mechanism. In Boyd's words, the play evolved as self-rewarding behaviour because animals learn skills they will later need. The proximate and ultimate mechanisms complement each other, providing a fuller understanding of a behaviour.

This leads Boyd to define art as a *cognitive play*: "Just as play refines behavioral options over time by being self-rewarding, so art increases cognitive skills, repertoires, and sensitivities.

A work of art acts like a playground for the mind, a swing or a slide or a merry-round of visual or aural or social pattern. Like play, art succeeds by engaging and rewarding attention, since the more frequent and intense our response, the more powerful the neural consequences" (2009, 15). Boyd views fictional stories as an art form that emerged later than body decorations, dance, and music. He notes that the advantage of fictional stories over factual ones lies in their power to engage us using information-rich patterns (2009, 189-190).

Stories are not just piles of information. They are organised in a pattern, a narrative, or, in Dissanayake's terms, modes and rhythms. This organisation makes them appealing to the human mind (Boyd 2009, 6-13, 74-87, 52-61). In other words, aesthetics is a call for the mind to play. Consider, for example, Shakespeare's "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." If the message were expressed as information, we would say that the speaking self describes his mistress as a monster, yet considers his love to be valuable and rare. Nevertheless, it is the form of the sonnet, the parallelisms, comparisons, contrasts, and rhymes that are the "meat of the poem," attracting the reader and giving fullness to this simple idea.

Like Oatley and Mar, Boyd argues that stories present us with social situations that we solve together with characters without exposing ourselves to danger, improving our ability to interpret social events (2009, 191-194). This, Boyd notes, should not be taken in a literal sense: "We may never be shipwrecked on a desert island like Robinson Crusoe, but we can learn from the example of his fortitude, resolution, and ingenuity" (194). Oatley and Mar reach the same conclusion:

> Even novels with fantastical themes and settings (e.g., science-fiction or fantasy novels) strive for verisimilitude with respect to human emotions and interpersonal interactions (Oatley, 1999); in short, writers attempt to create characters that possess a recognizable psychology. Books that fail in this regard are derogated as "cheesy" or not believable, whether the setting is a faraway planet or downtown Toronto. It is this psychological realism, not the superficial characteristics of the setting, that determines whether we can learn useful social information and processes from a work of fiction. A science-fiction novel that takes place on a distant space station may have greater psychological realism than does a pulpy novel set in modern times in a familiar locale. (2008, 185)

This provides a fresh perspective on the aesthetic value of a literary work. From an evolutionary perspective, literature must highlight the critical aspects of our (social) lives. Moreover, since the key skills for survival are our social skills, failing to capture the depth and nuances of a character can lead to a feeling of incompleteness.

Although many horror films deal with unreal scenarios, they simulate situations that never happened and hopefully never will; these situations can be translated into real ones: "Although zombies do not exist and thus represent no real threat to humans, situations that occur in zombie movies may be analogous to situations that would occur in real-world events. The widespread chaos that occurs in zombie films is, in many ways, similar to the chaos that can occur during real-world disasters. Thus, the information we obtain vicariously from an imagined zombie apocalypse may serve us in analogous situations in the real world" (Coelho et al. 2021, 2). The evolutionary perspective on literature and culture focuses on how evolutionarily relevant information is presented. It assumes that readers have specific motivations to focus on the aspects most relevant for survival. For ultrasocial species, the key aspect of stories is the character. Even in Coelho's research, characters' reactions to apocalyptic scenarios serve as a measure of psychological realism. Creatures from King's *Mist* might not be real, but the panic and reactions of characters as they spend time confined to the shop certainly are. Thus, both mimetic and fantastic scenarios simulate actual events because they accurately present human reactions in given scenarios.

Recent research has strengthened the argument that fiction is much more than entertainment. Wilbanks and colleagues (2022) suggest that fiction creates scenarios for us to solve problems and can serve as a glue to maintain group cohesion, thereby forming the foundation of a shared identity. Lawrence Sugiyama found that fiction attracts attention because it presents information relevant to the survival of our species: "Those who are skeptical that imaginary worlds can impart practical knowledge need to look no further than Samwise Gamgee: when headed for unfamiliar lands, take a pot, a blade, a light, a rope, emergency rations, and, if possible, a steadfast friend" (2022). Sarah R. Beck and Paul L. Harris (2022) provide evidence that children's preference for fantasy increases with age, suggesting that fantasy is not something to be outgrown and that it can serve as a tool for problem-solving. They show how children reenact familiar situations through pretend play. The example they give is from *Harry Potter,* where children can learn about morality. Richard Moore and Thomas Hills (2022) also contend that agents who can simulate scenarios before acting can anticipate the consequences of their actions and therefore better prepare.

To sum up, a story is an evolutionary tool—a constellation of memes that replicate through cultural transmission. It organises information in a way that engages the reader's emotions and directs their attention toward those aspects of the world that are evolutionarily significant. It serves

as a container, a vehicle, a sieve, and a tool to categorise important information, skills, and values. They serve as a social glue, uniting group members under a common identity and extending our mother-infant mutuality. As such, stories are memorable and easily transferred. Notably, they can be modified to fit the new meme pool and, consequently, the new social context. Those memes (elements of stories) and constellations of memes (stories) that fail to meet the expectations of new readers and offer no value in adapting to cultural ecology will perish or mutate. Stories perform these tasks by simulating social situations. Reading can, therefore, be understood as a form of *cognitive play*, an activity through which we develop skills, and it is also an intrinsically enjoyable and rewarding experience.

In his famous Bali ethnography, Geertz described Balinese cockfights as ritualistic events which are seemingly just a form of entertainment, different from everyday life. However, what he shows is that during the cock fights, social relations, hierarchies, and statuses are highlighted. The function of these fights, for Geertz, is that they simulate social relationships, highlighting hierarchies, and provide an opportunity for participants to interpret them: "it is Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (1973, 448). The act of participating in and observing a cockfight teaches social norms and fosters a shared identity. What Geertz showed is how a seemingly trivial aspect of a culture can prove to be rich with cultural meaning and reveal hidden social relations. The same can be said for storytelling. Although usually perceived as a pastime, stories highlight important aspects of our lives and enable us to see ourselves from a different perspective — to learn what it means to be human and what it means to belong to a group. Analysing stories, how they change, and how they are interpreted, therefore, reveals underlying social and cognitive structures.

3. Evolutionary and Cognitive Underpinnings of Morality in the Example of the *Harry Potter* Triwizard Tournament[10]

3.1. Reading Books, Reading Minds

Our brain contains a specialised type of cell called mirror neurons, which enable us to approximate how others feel. By observing their behaviour and facial expressions, we can narrow down the possibilities to guess their intention or feeling, and determine whether they are happy, in pain, or sad. When someone extends their hand towards a glass of water, we immediately understand they are thirsty. But mirror neurons do much more than that. When we see someone act, we also mentally perform that action. This is why watching sports is fun. As sportsmen play, we play with them, even though we sit in armchairs far from the football court (Iacoboni 2009, 4-5). This neurological capacity gives rise to the *theory of mind* (also known as *mentalising* or *intentional stance*), which is the ability to attribute beliefs, thoughts, emotions, intentions, and desires (Dennett 2006, 108). Observing the behaviour of those around us – their gestures, movements, and facial expressions - we attribute a mental state or intention. Since humans are ultrasocial animals, the *theory of mind* is crucial for navigating the social sphere. We predict the behaviour of others unconsciously and effortlessly and make decisions about whom we want to cooperate (Zunshine 2006, 6).

This capacity evolved during the Pleistocene, 1,8 million to 10,000 years ago, to enable us to manage living in groups of up to 200 individuals and make sense of their behaviours. Unlike animals, whose behaviour can be predicted because it is instinct-driven, humans are a unique species that can learn and change their behaviour, which makes us complex and unpredictable. Attributing a mind is a quick way to reduce complexity and predict a group member's behaviour (Zunshine 2006, 7). Mithen suggests that archaeological evidence indicates a cultural explosion approximately 40,000 years ago, which suggests a change in the human brain that previously had three separate, specialised intelligences: social, natural history, and technical intelligence. The change resulted in *cognitive fluidity*, interaction between the intelligences, which enabled us to

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utilise aspects of one intelligence in areas previously reserved for the other, giving rise to symbolic thinking, representation, and the arts. For instance, it enabled us to use the logic of social intelligence in natural history intelligence domains. We were now able not only to attribute the mind to other humans but also to animals (1998, 184-185).

When comparing hunting methods, it becomes clear that Modern Humans possessed significantly better hunting skills than Neanderthals. Especially c. 18.000 years ago, there is archaeological evidence that Modern Humans could kill many more animals than Neanderthals and Early Humans. Mithen argues that this occurred because humans could predict the behaviour of animals by attributing a mind to them. Therefore, they could ambush animals during large migrations, which significantly increased their hunting potential (1998, 184-185). Thus, our capacity to attribute intention enabled us to live and cooperate in large groups, and cognitive flexibility gave us the ability to apply this skill to hunt and domesticate animals, create art, and perform rituals. Theory of mind and mirror neurons explain how we connect to real individuals. Still, the question remains: why do we care about characters in fictional stories? We know well that these characters are not real, and yet we find ourselves weeping when Dumbledore and Snape die and cheering when it turns out that Harry is not dead. Is this merely an unintended byproduct of this evolved capacity, or can caring for fictional characters be viewed as an adaptive behaviour?

Zunshine argues that fictional stories provide an opportunity to test our theory of mind skills: "by imagining the hidden mental states of fictional characters, by following the readily available representations of such states throughout the narrative, and by comparing our interpretation of what the given character must be feeling at a given moment with what we assume could be the author's own interpretation, we deliver a rich stimulation to the cognitive adaptations constituting our Theory of Mind. Many of us come to enjoy such stimulation and need it as a steady supplement to our daily social interactions" (2006, 24-25). Although a novel is not a substitute for real social interactions, it does simulate reality, thus creating a safe playground for us to practice theory of mind skills (Mar and Oatley 2008, 173-192). Moreover, it enables us to enter social situations that are not currently available. We can then use these skills, sharpen, and expand them in real-life situations.

Modern fiction consumption also presents a challenge: how much fiction is beneficial for our theory of mind development? When reading a novel or watching a film, we will not be penalised for misinterpreting a character's emotions. Moreover, readers' opinions can vary in their

assumptions about the character's intentions, and many of these assumptions can be plausible. A part of reading pleasure is discussing different interpretations with other readers. In contrast, in real-life social situations, misreading intention can have serious consequences. Real situations thus provide more feedback but also come with more significant risks. Balancing the two is as essential as practising the theory of mind. If we rely only on the low-cost theory of mind practice that the literature offers, we may never develop the skills necessary for real-life situations. Moreover, consuming literature or films seems unnecessary for a person who already has a lot of social activities during the day. Tooby and Cosmides argued that the brain-improving activities, such as reading books, will be more appealing when our basic needs are satisfied. Otherwise, natural selection programmed us to feel more intense gratification from activities that require us to apply learned skills in the real world (2001, 16).

Thus, fiction can be seen as a risk-free form of play, where we practice the theory of mind (Mar and Oatley 2008; Gottschall 2012; Boyd 2009). Drawing on Dissanayake, Carroll argues that literature has more adaptive benefits than just practising the theory of mind. Cognitive fluidity has brought many advantages to the human species, but it has also introduced a problem of complexity. With all intelligences interacting, the possibilities of the human mind became almost endless. Carroll argues that literature helps manage this complexity by organising elements of human experience to produce a sense of psychological order:

> Literature is satisfying—moving or disturbing—not in the degree to which it fulfills fantasy expectations—though it can do this—but in the degree to which it provides a sense of psychological order. It provides order by depicting the particularities of time and place—of cultural context, individual circumstance, and personal character—and by integrating these particularities with the elemental structures of human concerns. Through literature and its oral antecedents, we recognize the elemental structures of human concerns in our own lives and in those of others. We filter out the trivial and the tangential aspects of experience and see into the deep structure of our nature. And we not only 'see'—not only understand objectively. Through stories and verse and dramatic enactments—whether written or oral— we realize our deeper nature in vividly subjective ways. Through such realization, we situate ourselves consciously within our environments and organize the feelings and thoughts through which we regulate our behavior. Literature produces pleasure, but it is not merely a 'pleasure technology' equivalent to recreational drugs (Pinker, 1997b, p. 528). It is one of the primary means through which we regulate our complex cognitive machinery. It contributes to personal and social development and to the capacity for responding flexibly and creatively to complex and changing circumstances. (2004, 115)

By consuming stories, we absorb patterns of human culture and focus our attention on its evolutionarily relevant aspects. Moreover, since our social and ecological environments are

changing, literature can simulate new scenarios and propose solutions to emerging problems, creating a possibility of adapting to our rapidly changing cultural environment.

One significant change that occurred in human evolution is that, approximately 100,000 years ago, humans began living in groups ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand members (Boyd and Richerson 2009, 3286). Managing large groups and maintaining cooperation with increasing numbers of individuals has been and continues to be a challenge. Thus, practising the theory of mind not only helps to understand their intentions but also generates empathy for others. By assuming the point of view of someone different from us, by seeing what they see and feeling what they feel, we come to understand that we are not as different as we might appear.

This is especially important, as the human mind is naturally inclined to assume danger first. Dealing with agents whose behaviour is incomprehensible prompts us to be alert for danger. Our hypersensitive danger alarms are adaptive, as they focus our attention on potentially hazardous elements in our environment (Clasen 2017, 26). Evolutionists often describe the advantage of this behaviour as "better safe than sorry," as it is better to have an overreactive system that quickly prepares us for action than failing to react quickly and risk being eaten by a predator. The cost of dying or being injured due to a slow reaction is much greater than the cost of dissipating energy. Cooperation in larger groups and between groups would be impossible if we were constantly worried about what others would do. Literature, by providing us with a perspective on others, can help correct this bias and facilitate cooperation in larger groups and between diverse individuals. Walking in the shoes of a character, we learn that he is not incomprehensible or foreign as we initially thought.

Carroll's proposition is that literature is not just a playground for our theory of mind skills, but also provides a sense of psychological order to complex and rapidly changing social, cultural, and natural environments – (1) by presenting us with patterns of essential aspects of human nature we reduce this complexity and adjust our behavior accordingly; (2) by giving us a chance to take the perspective of a stranger we develop the skill to accept members of our society as well as members of other societies, thus laying grounds for sympathy and cooperation (2004, 179). In an increasingly complex and evolving society, literature remains an irreplaceable playground for the human mind.

To explain how literature can serve as a tool for regulating behaviour, Carroll adds that, unlike other types of discourse that also conceptualise and organise human experience (science, philosophy), the arts tap into emotions: "Works of literature thus form a point of intersection between the most emotional, subjective parts of the mind and the most abstract and cerebral. This feature of literature is not incidental to its adaptive function. Literature provides imaginative structures within which people can integrate the ancient, conserved elements of their nature—elements conserved from pre-mammalian systems of approach/avoidance, mammalian affectional systems, and systems of primate sociality—with the conceptual, thematic structures through which they make abstract, theoretical sense of the world in which they live" (2006, 43). We can thus tap into our evolutionary programming – our motivations, impulses, and desires - but channel and shape it to be functional in our present cultural setting. By presenting a sense of order and a hierarchy of principles, morals, and values, literature helps us adjust our behaviour.

This process of learning and adjusting can be seen as a form of play, as it is open-ended, intrinsically pleasurable, and fun (Boyd 2009). Using the theory of mind, we take a character's perspective, see what they see, and feel what they feel. Following a hero in his adventure, we learn about appropriate ways of expressing intentions and desires in cultural settings and derive guidelines for cooperation, morals, and values. We apply our theory of mind skills to understand the diverse characters presented in the novel's world, striving to comprehend their motives and intentions, as well as predict how their various interests will ultimately unfold. By equipping the reader with the skill to understand a variety of different characters, literature facilitates sharpening these skills for use in real-life situations. Thus, it strengthens the foundation on which we develop cooperation and empathy.

Keen understands empathy as a precursor to sympathy. She posits that empathy is an affective experience that occurs when witnessing another's emotional state. In empathy, we believe we feel what others are feeling. Sympathy arises from empathy and involves having supportive feelings towards someone. She points out that although our propensity for empathy is inherited, our experiences and cultures influence how we understand the feelings of others and how we express our feelings (2007, 208-209). She argues that "Narratives in prose and film infamously manipulate our feelings and call upon our built-in capacity to feel with others" (209). She demonstrates how the oral storyteller trains its listeners, particularly community members,

including children, to understand emotions in relation to cultural values (209). This then becomes a basis for understanding, expressing, and sharing emotions.

3.2. Survival of the Kindest: Evolution of Morality

Literature is not only about empathising with characters. Some characters are presented in such a way that they disgust us. While it is true that we feel happy when our hero overcomes adversity, it is also true that we feel happy when the villain is punished. Empathy seems reserved for certain types of characters only and does not extend indefinitely. In the *Harry Potter* stories, we do not sympathise with Voldemort. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, we learn that Voldemort's mother, Merope Gaunt, used a love potion to seduce Tom Riddle, Voldemort's father. So, Voldemort was not conceived out of love. When Voldemort was a baby, his mother stopped giving Him love potions, and he abandoned her and their child. Merope died after several years, and Voldemort went to an orphanage (Rowling 2005, 213). There are several ways in which Voldemort and Harry share similarities. Both grew up without their parents. Harry was not happy with the Dursleys, and Voldemort was even less happy in the orphanage. We are familiar with the tragic backstories of both characters. Why does our empathy extend only to Harry and not to Voldemort? Furthermore, why are we so invested in Harry's victory and Voldemort's demise?

Keen showed that we tend to empathise with those we perceive as alike, mainly with the members of our community. Just as Carroll (2006, 43) suggests, she notes that studying narratives is important because reading can lead from empathy to altruism and sympathy (2007, 2014). However, Flesch argues that a crucial element is missing from this theoretical perspective (2007, 10). If stories are about conveying lessons, why do some characters elicit such strong emotions in their readers that they can influence our lives as real individuals? "Fiction makes us care about characters and their fates as though we were anxious about real people of real importance to our lives. If narrative were primarily a vehicle for learning about the world around us, we would do a lot better learning its lessons dispassionately. (Flesch 2007, 11). Indeed, investing strong emotions into unreal scenarios and towards imaginary characters seems like a waste of resources. What do we gain from our emotional investment? It certainly does not help the learning process. On the contrary, liking a character might hinder it. If we become fans of Harry, we might overlook so many instances where he makes mistakes. We might even be tempted to conclude that as long as

you are a hero, you cannot fail, which would be a wrong lesson to teach if the purpose of the story was to transfer information about life scenarios.

Among all the elements of a story world, characters prompt the most potent emotions from us. As I have already discussed, we use the theory of mind to predict the intentions and behaviour of others, to understand with whom to cooperate and who poses a danger. Intense emotions, Flesch argues, are a part of this social game (2007, 18). They help us navigate the social space by encouraging us to approach those we perceive as allies and avoid those we perceive as enemies. Our moral emotions depend on our observation of others' behaviour. We use the theory of mind to attribute intention and make judgments about their personality. Our judgment elicits positive or negative emotions, prompting us to become closer or to stay away. This implies that we have an unconscious template against which we judge their behaviour and morality. Flesch demonstrates that we do not simply become disinterested in members of society that we perceive as immoral, but we generate strong negative emotions against them. This is also true for literary characters. We generate positive emotions towards characters we perceive as good and negative emotions towards those we perceive as evil.

This explains why our goodwill does not extend to Voldemort. After learning that he committed so many crimes, our capacity for empathy is inhibited. Moreover, when characters like Bellatrix, Voldemort, and Fenrir die, we feel a sense of relief, even happiness. The heroes who risk their lives to punish wrongdoers score high moral points in the reader's eyes. To explain this complex behaviour, Flesch adds a critical argument to the evolutionary case on the theory of mind and human cooperation:

> Humans cooperate, and continue cooperating, because we monitor one another's cooperation vigilantly. To give us an incentive to monitor and ensure cooperation, nature endows us with a pleasing sense of outrage at defection and a concomitant sympathy for the victims of defection—an endowment demonstrated by the prevalence of strong reciprocators. We all monitor the behavior of others and often punish and reward in response to what we ourselves track or to what we learn about them. Emotional involvement is the proximal or efficient cause of our tendency to reward or (more likely and more intensely) to punish. Such rewarding and punishing is altruistic. (2007, 50)

Therefore, our empathy does not extend blindly to anyone. Moreover, we are not just observers of other members of our community; we actively nudge them in the direction that we consider right, good, and moral.

Those who behave morally are rewarded with a positive attitude from members of the community. Heroism, or altruistic behaviour, is even more rewarded and generates strong positive feedback. We generate negative moral emotions towards transgressors and seek punishment for their misconduct. Flesch refers to this form of punishment as altruistic punishment (2007, 43). He points out that when punishment is proportionate to the crime, it generates positive emotions. In other words, we feel good when the wrongdoer is punished.[11] Humans are free to act as they wish, but at the same time, they are monitored by other members of the community. Moral behaviour is reinforced, and immoral behaviour is punished. To combine this with Zunshine's idea of the novel as a theory of mind training, by reading, we do not just train theory of mind skills; we also train the skill to react with positive moral emotions to altruism and altruistic punishment – to feel good when a hero exhibits moral behaviour and when the villain is punished. Keen points out that literature suggests that narrative strategies such as *character identification*, describing a character, and the *narrative situation*, describing a character's point of view, foster empathy in the reader. However, these hypotheses were still not successfully tested (2007, 2016).

Altruism, especially true altruism—the behaviour of doing good without expecting anything in return—is regarded as the highest form of moral behaviour. Heroes signal their heroism by exhibiting such behaviour. Intuitively, altruism contradicts evolutionary theory. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Spencer's Social Darwinism reflected such intuition (1898, 500). Its modernised version, albeit without the Darwinian framework, can be seen in the works of Marx and Foucault, who saw society as a struggle for power. Within such a theoretical framework, altruism—defined as self-sacrifice for the benefit of others—can only be viewed as irrational behaviour.

If our nature is to dominate the weak, why would anyone go out of their way to help those in need? Furthermore, why would we see those who help others as heroes? Vermeule introduces the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis, claiming that much of our intelligence has developed to manage social allegiances. For her, literary characters are tools—hooks we identify with—to practice mind-reading skills and social norms. However, Vermeule integrates her argument with Carroll's assertion that literature serves as a tool that orients us toward other individuals' motivations and behaviours, claiming that the mind-reading-based techniques authors employ are the techniques that orient us on the moral map of society (2010, 245-246). Vermeule's argument

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[11] This resonates with Aristotle's view that in tragedy we derive pleasure from pity and fear (1998, 25).

aligns with Flesch's. Theory of mind is a tool we developed to monitor the behaviour of others and punish those who do not follow social norms.

By true altruism, Flesch (2007) does not mean just a display of moral behaviour that may result in a better status or reproductive success. True altruism is helping others without expecting anything in return. It implies embodying moral values so that you enact them, whether or not someone is watching. It is precisely this behaviour that refutes the argument of Social Darwinism. The modern evolutionary approach to literature recognises that humans began to thrive when they started to cooperate. Boyd and Richerson argue that over the past million years, humans have undergone a gradual evolution into increasingly cooperative cultural animals. This led to the development of moral systems favouring individuals who cooperated more effectively with others. Among other mammals, they note, cooperation is limited to relatives, and weaker individuals, such as the sick and disabled, must care for themselves. In humans, language enables high-level cooperation, enabling more effective and organised division of labour and attending to the needs of weaker members of society. Cooperation fosters a culture of learning from one another, enabling rapid adaptation to a changing environment (2009, 3281-3282).

Carroll and Flesch are literary scholars who are at the forefront of the debate on the evolution of cooperation, while simultaneously developing an argument for the role of literature and the arts in the development of humans as moral beings. It should be noted that morality is not taken here as an essentialist, universal category. A group defines morality, and so the behaviours that deserve reward and punishment. Carroll's (2004) argument is important here, as literature may have the power to extend our sense of kinship beyond our immediate group. However, this argument should be taken with caution, as books can also spread hatred. Written as an autobiography, the reader of *Mein Kampf* takes the moral position of the protagonist, who describes Jews as responsible for all his private problems as well as damaging Germany. Keen's argument is critical here. She points out that empirical studies do not support the thesis that literature develops empathy. Moreover, she asserts that the link between empathising with literary characters and helping people in real life is especially weak. Nonetheless, she does not deny the novel's power in role-taking; she contends that transferring this to the social sphere requires more than just reading (2007, 145-146).

Humans evolved into cooperative animals and developed a culture of learning. Tomasello cites empirical evidence indicating that infants are born predisposed to cooperate, being "helpful,

informative, and generous in the right situations" (2009, 44). Furthermore, he also demonstrates how caretaking, as well as our culture, shapes these predispositions. From an evolutionary perspective, cooperation has given our species an advantage over other mammals, particularly those that lack cooperation. Curry developed the idea of morality as cooperation and defined morality as a "collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation and conflict recurrent in human social life" (2016, 29). Based on a game theory model, he demonstrated how people develop moral consciousness, make moral choices, and regulate their behaviour to benefit from a good reputation in a society and avoid punishment (12-13). Since morality is a collection of solutions, it evolves and requires group members to participate in this change.

Literature, therefore, plays a crucial role in moral development, as it organises and simulates life scenarios, providing a model of moral behaviour that prompts our moral and emotional systems to react positively to certain types of behaviour and produce negative emotions toward others. Literature and its oral antecedents prompt readers to identify with characters through the theory of mind, enabling them to track the behaviour of others and foster cooperation (Flesch 2007; Vermeule 2010). Cooperation is central to the development of humans as a species, and individuals who cooperate are rewarded with positive feedback from their community. In other words, a display of altruism extends possibilities for mating and cooperation. If one exhibits altruistic behaviour, they will prompt positive moral emotions from other community members, gaining value and status. This will increase his chances of developing friendships as well as his mating possibilities.

Nevertheless, what about true altruism—the behaviour of a person putting themselves in danger to help another? Doctors Without Borders, firefighters, and soldiers put their lives at risk to provide help. We instinctively recognise and appreciate these behaviours as acts of altruism. Individuals who exhibit these qualities are often regarded as heroes and receive positive feedback from their community, but at what cost? Is it not the case that behaving this way is so costly that it ultimately does not pay off? Especially in cases where one risks one's life to help another. An example of adaptation that seems too costly in evolutionary theory is the peacock's tail. The evolutionary debate on the peacock's tail and sexual selection goes back to Darwin and Wallace. For our argument, we can say that peacocks have developed beautiful tails to attract peahens. But one must wonder if the tail itself is worth the risk that comes with it. It is difficult to walk and fly with such a large tail. Moreover, the colourful tail attracts predators. Zahavi modernised Darwin's

argument by positing the *handicap principle*. Amotz Zahavi and Avishag Zahavi argue that peacocks develop such a large and beautiful tail to signal that they are so strong that they can carry this "handicap" without being eaten by predators. If the peacock is not strong enough to carry this "handicap," it will die; therefore, its tail is an example of *honest signaling* (1997, 81-82).

Flesch uses this example to argue that true altruism and altruistic punishment are examples of *costly signalling*. In other words, if someone undertakes a significant risk to help another person or to punish those who do not follow societal rules, they showcase that they are strong enough to take the risk. Flesch adds that on an individual level, exposing oneself to risks will most likely lead to injury or death, but if it attracts a mate and ensures the passing of genes, it is worth the risk. "You need survive only long enough to reproduce, while long life without reproduction is an evolutionary dead end. Costly signaling, especially in situations where people have a great deal of choice in mate selection, is the best way to advertise yourself as a fit cooperator in the task of sending genes down the generations. Organisms have therefore evolved an enormous variety of costly signals" (Zahavi and Zahavi 1997, 56). Since costly signalling spotlights an individual, it increases his chances of mating, thus ensuring that his genes will be passed on. Additionally, it increases the chances of cooperation with other group members, which helps protect the offspring. However, attracting attention is a two-edged sword. Costly signalers become more visible to possible mates, but also to competition.

There is no room for faking the signal when it comes to costly signalling. If the individual does not have what it takes to bear the "handicap," he will most likely die before gaining any advantage. If a peacock develops a large tail but lacks the skills to avoid predators, it attracts attention; it will most likely be killed before it can utilise its "signal." Those who survive for extended periods despite repeatedly putting themselves in danger to help others or to punish wrongdoers likely possess a genetic makeup that enables them to thrive in the most challenging conditions. Police inspectors or journalists who repeatedly risk their lives to bring criminals to justice signal not only that they can catch them, but also that they possess a genetic makeup that enables them to stay alive even though they are in a dangerous business. This is why Flesch insists that this type of signalling is referred to as *genuine signalling* (2007, 60). On a group level, he notes that societies with costly signalers outcompete those without them, as they have individuals who are willing to risk their lives to ensure that members of the society abide by the rules. Furthermore, since cooperation was the key adaptation that ensured the survival of our species

(Boyd and Richerson, 2009), altruists and altruistic punishers play a crucial role in society, serving as role models of cooperative behaviour and as punishers of those who do not cooperate.

Flesch's argument is based on two evolutionary theories of narratives, Pinker's "docere et delectare" and Carroll's sympathy extension arguments. Pinker demonstrated that our interest in fiction evolved because it teaches us about essential life scenarios and produces pleasure by allowing us to experience a simulation of the world from our perspective (1997, 539-543). Carroll proposed that narratives extend sympathy that is otherwise restricted and reserved for members of our group. By assuming the point of view of a character who is not a member of our society, we step outside the limitations of our own particular identities and local cultural values (2004, 179). Unlike Zunshine and Carroll, and more like Pinker, Flesch is more interested in explaining why we feel drawn to fiction rather than in its adaptive value. Thus, he focuses on fiction as a pleasure-producing technology and endeavours to explain the mechanisms by which we derive gratification when reading stories. However, he acknowledges that literature may evoke empathy.

For Flesch, both Pinker's and Carroll's theories fail to explain why fiction produces intense emotions (2007, 10). He argues that our interest in narratives evolved because we derive pleasure from monitoring individuals and seeing wrongdoers punished (154). I should add that Carroll makes a larger argument for the adaptive role of literature than Flesch presents. According to Carroll, narratives organise human experience and enable us to regulate our behaviour. By tapping into mammalian emotional systems, literature enables us to integrate our ancient impulses into the demands of a rapidly changing culture, thus helping us adapt quickly (2006, 43). In my understanding, these theoretical perspectives are complementary, and when integrated, they generate a more comprehensive understanding of the evolutionary and cognitive perspectives on narratives.

By creating scenarios that evoke powerful moral emotions, in which a hero exhibits altruism and punishes the villain, literature helps engineer morality. Here, it is helpful to reiterate Dissanayake's and Carroll's notion that literature fosters a sense of psychological order. An essential part of this order is a moral order. Our morality is rooted in our biology–we are born with predispositions for cooperation. However, these predispositions must be developed within a culture. As we grow, we learn how to cooperate to prevent others from taking advantage of our kindness. Moreover, we learn about social norms and learn to respect and reinforce them as a sign of belonging to a group (Tomasello 2009, 44-45). We judge others, as well as literary characters,

according to the moral template of our culture. Literature is a simulation — a thought experiment that presents us with moral dilemmas. It prompts us to identify with characters and experience intense emotions, allowing us to feel the consequences of their actions. In the best cases, literature does not straightforwardly produce a template of morality but helps negotiate moral values.

In real-life situations, we witness that corruption, theft, and abuse often go unpunished. Altruistic punishers are not easy to find and often go unnoticed. In literature and other storytelling technologies, altruists and altruistic punishers are focalised. The reader's attention is directed at the heroes' dilemmas, choices, and behaviours. In the Harry Potter stories, our attention is directed at the problems Harry, Ron, and Hermione face and the choices they make to overcome them. In real life, we would not be interested in the daily activities of the three underage children. However, because they are focalised, they are given significance, which signals to the reader to pay close attention to their behaviours, thoughts, and emotions. Furthermore, literature can condense multiple virtues into a single hero-meme, which can be easily transferred and replicated through multimedia stories across various cultures.

As protagonists, heroes take the central stage in the narrative and therefore prompt the reader to identify and empathise with their choices. Literature and other storytelling arts teach what behaviours are acceptable and which ought to be punished by manipulating our perspective to prompt strong moral and emotional reactions. By walking in the hero's shoes and feeling what he feels, our moral templates are challenged not only on a cognitive level, but also on an emotional level. We learn moral lessons as though we have experienced them. Literature, therefore, does not produce a mimetic counterpart of the world, but a simulation which reflects the author's worldview, including values and morals. By focalising a hero, an author proposes a moral role model. The task of the reader is then to identify, criticise, accept, or reject the moral choices of the protagonist. Literature, therefore, stages a dynamic process, a debate which questions the reader's values. Identifying with a character allows the reader to experience his dilemmas on a deeper, experiential, emotional level, rather than just as an abstract cognitive moral dilemma. Moreover, literary characters are disposable. They can die and be resurrected to highlight their cause.

This is not true only for heroes. Readers will develop relationships with all the characters of the story. These relationships are far more complex than the for–against or protagonist–antagonist binaries. The story of Severus Snape is paradigmatic in this regard. Through seven novels, readers cannot decide whether he is a friend or foe of Harry. Shape has a terrifying

appearance: "greasy black hair, a hooked nose, and sallow skin" (Rowling 1998, 126). He has been compared to a bat and a spider. Students are afraid of him because he is a strict and sarcastic teacher. He never jokes or smiles. In *The Goblet of Fire*, the reader is informed that Snape was a Death Eater in his past. Rowling successfully employs cues to instil mistrust and dislike in the reader. These cues are effective because humans tend to perceive danger when they are unsure. In *The Deathly Hallows*, the reader's suspicions are confirmed when Snape kills Dumbledore, and mistrust turns to hate. The chapter "The Prince's Tale" is so powerful because it challenges the reader's moral template. This chapter reveals that Snape worked for Dumbledore and risked his life every day to bring about Voldemort's downfall. It confronts the reader with mistakes in his moral judgement.

Snape was a harsh teacher, with a peculiar appearance and a troubled past. Nevertheless, does that make him a Death Eater? Rowling's mastery of writing about Snape's character is evident in her ability to provide the reader with cues as to why Snape might be a villain and many reasons to believe he might not be. This reveals the complexity of emotions readers have towards characters, which change throughout the reading process. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, Harry believes Snape was the one who tried to kill him by knocking him off his broom, as well as the one who helped Voldemort. Ultimately, we discover that Snape was attempting to save Harry. Harry, Hermione, and Ron mistrust Snape throughout the seven novels, but his actions prove otherwise. Repeatedly, Snape does everything in his power to save them. Even when the reader discovers that Snape's anger toward Harry stems from the abuse he endured at the hands of Harry's father when they were schoolmates, the mistrust toward Snape endures (Rowling 2003, 645). The reader chooses to view Snape as a villain, despite evidence to the contrary. Snape's death and Harry's posthumous discovery of how he dedicated his whole life to protecting him because of the love of his mother elicits an intense feeling of sadness and regret in the reader.

Invested emotionally, the reader is faced with a bias in their moral judgement to hastily judge those who do not speak, look, or behave according to our expectations. Literature, therefore, invites us to challenge and negotiate our moral templates. This is especially important as human morality develops and our understanding of which behaviours are appropriate in what situations changes. By simulating new scenarios, literature helps us test and refine our moral templates in new environments with new challenges. When we connect emotionally with characters, we feel the consequences of their actions as though they were happening to us. In the final chapter of *The*

Deathly Hallows, as Harry talks to his son, Albus Severus, as he is about to board his first train to Hogwarts. He tells him that he was named after Dumbledore and Snape. Regret gives way to gratitude, eliciting a cathartic moment as Harry calls Snape "the bravest man I ever knew" (Rowling 758, 2007).

3.3. The Triwizard Tournament

In what follows, I will apply this theoretical model to the reading of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. I read books and other storytelling media as reflections of the values and morals of society, but also as a battleground where these values are practised, affirmed, and subverted. In applying the theoretical model, I will focus on how Rowling develops her hero, the moral virtues he displays, and the forms of altruism and altruistic punishment evident in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. In doing so, I argue, Rowling presents her model of morality and heroism. A novel should be viewed as a debate on morality rather than a political manifesto; nevertheless, by focusing on the hero who exhibits certain moral traits and by punishing the villain, the author conveys her idea of the moral landscape. Readers are, then, motivated to accept or reject behaviours by narrative techniques that trigger their moral emotions.

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore gives a brief history of the Triwizard Tournament:

> The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The schools took it in turns to host the tournament once every five years, and it was generally agreed to be a most excellent way of establishing ties between young witches and wizards of different nationalities — until, that is, the death toll mounted so high that the tournament was discontinued. (Rowling 2000, 187)
> …
> There will be three tasks, spaced throughout the school year, and they will test the champions in many different ways . . . their magical prowess — their daring — their powers of deduction — and, of course, their ability to cope with danger. At this last word, the Hall was filled with a silence so absolute that nobody seemed to be breathing. 'As you know, three champions compete in the tournament,' Dumbledore went on calmly, 'one from each of the participating schools. They will be marked on how well they perform each of the Tournament tasks and the champion with the highest total after task three will win the Triwizard Cup. The champions will be chosen by an impartial selector: the Goblet of Fire.' (Rowling 2000, 255)

A limitation was imposed on this year's tournament participation to protect students from danger, allowing only students aged seventeen and above to participate. This is Harry's fourth year at

Hogwarts, and he is fourteen years old. Despite the magical protection that prevented underage students from entering the competition, in addition to three champions from each of the magical schools, the Goblet also chose Harry to compete as a fourth participant. How Harry bypassed Dumbledore's magical protection is a mystery. Still, the judges agree that the decision of the Goblet is final, as putting one's name in the goblet forms a binding magical contract; therefore, Harry must compete (Rowling 2000, 278-280).

Professors and students did not know that Death Eater Barty Crouch Jr., a follower of Voldemort, took the Polyjuice potion to magically disguise himself as the newly appointed Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Alastor Moody. Crouch Jr. put Harry's name in the Goblet and helped him solve the Tournament tasks, enabling Harry to be the first one to reach the Triwizard Cup, located in the centre of the labyrinth, in the third and final task. The Cup is a Portkey, a magical object that, when touched, will teleport Harry to the location where another Death Eater, Peter Pettigrew, is performing the ritual to revive Voldemort. The strategy behind this elaborate procedure is to transport Harry to Voldemort, kill him, and, by using the Portkey again, return his body to the labyrinth. This way, everyone would assume that Harry died competing. The Triwizard Tournament is a suitable occasion because it is infamous for the number of students who have died competing. No one would have assumed that Voldemort had returned and killed Harry. In addition, for the ritual, Voldemort needed the "Blood of the enemy … forcibly taken…" (Rowling 2000, 642). He wanted Harry's blood because he believed it would empower him and provide the protection that Harry's mother had given him, the protection that had rebounded the killing curse and kept Harry safe as a baby (Rowling 2000, 657). This, in brief, is the plot of the Harry Potter novel and film series.

The Goblet is the fourth book in the *Harry Potter* series, marking a transition from children's to young adult literature. Manlove argues that in the 1990s, horror became the dominant genre in children's literature, consequently influencing other English children's literature subgenres (2003, 174). This is also true about Harry Potter novels. The majority of the plot in The Goblet, like the previous three volumes, revolves around Harry, Ron, and Hermione getting into trouble and finding their way out. In the first volume, they solve tasks to reach the philosopher's stone and prevent Voldemort from reviving. In the second volume, they figure out how to get into the Chamber of Secrets, defeat the Basilisk, and destroy Voldemort's diary. In *The Goblet*, Harry

must win the Triwizard Tournament. Even though Ron sacrifices himself in the chess game and Ginny is petrified by the Basilisk, in the end, no one is seriously harmed.

The tone of the Harry Potter novels changes when Harry and Cedric solve the final task and touch the Triwizard Cup. We are, along with Harry and Cedric, transported to the graveyard, where Peter Pettigrew is performing a ritual to revive Voldemort. This is not to say that the tasks from the first four volumes were not dangerous. Our heroes come very close to danger, but, much like in other children's literature stories, they return home unharmed. These changes in *The Goblet,* where Cedric's death marks a transition from children's literature to a young adult work with dark fantasy elements. Considering characters central to the plot, in the subsequent volume, *The Order of the Phoenix*, Sirius Black, Harry's godfather, is killed in front of Harry's eyes. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore is killed in front of Harry. In *The Deathly Hallows*, the war is at its peak, and the darkness engulfs the plot of the novel as we witness torture, sadism, and the deaths of many characters. These deaths have an incredibly profound impact on children who grew up with the novel and its characters over the 10 years from 1997 to 2007.

In addition to Harry, Rowling builds another character, Cedric Diggory, during the Triwizard Tournament as an altruistic hero. Cedric is a Hufflepuff, so he is naturally inclined to be a fair-game player. When the plot of *The Goblet of Fire* takes place, Cedric is in his sixth year at Hogwarts, so he is sixteen, two years older than Harry. Because the tournament rule stipulated that underage wizards and witches could not compete and that each school could have only one champion, Harry's participation was perceived as cheating by the audience, which was predominantly composed of other Hogwarts students. On the other hand, Cedric was seen as the true champion of Hogwarts. *The Goblet*, although it focalizes Harry, challenges the protagonist's hero status by introducing a competitor. Because Harry's actions are perceived as cheating, they elicit negative moral emotions, whereas Cedric is promoted to a hero and deserves positive feedback. Harry must, therefore, prove his heroism by solving the Tournament tasks. The two heroes compete and help each other resolve the tasks, displaying their altruism. I propose that developing Cedric as an altruist and a hero with whom the reader sympathises is a narrative strategy that justifies Harry's transition from an altruistic hero to an altruistic punisher. The end of *The Goblet*, when Cedric is murdered before Harry's eyes, marks the beginning of Harry's transformation into an altruistic punisher, resolved to do anything to stop Voldemort.

The Triwizard Tournament consists of three complex tasks, for which judges award champions points based on their performance in each task. Nevertheless, Rowling builds her hero not only on values such as strength, cunning, agility, wit, and resourcefulness but also on cooperation and kindness. Even though Harry and Diggory compete against each other, they prove their heroism by the costly signalling of their altruism. Before the first task, Harry, with Hagrid's help, finds that champions will fight dragons. Furthermore, although he has nothing to gain from it and will only lose if Cedric wins more points, he shares this information with him. To reciprocate, Cedric informs Harry that he should put the Golden Egg under the water to find out about the second task. By exhibiting altruism, both characters prompt positive moral emotions in the reader. The Tournament becomes a platform on which Rowling puts forward her model of the hero.

Harry Potter scholarship recognised the centrality of the hero motif in the plot of Rowling's novels. Steveker sees Harry's heroic identity as rooted in the Victorian Gothic tradition of divided or fragmented masculine subjects. She demonstrates how the central theme of the Harry Potter novels is the development of a hero, who embarks on a quest to become a hero through knowledge. Harry overcomes his double nature and becomes a hero by learning about the Horcruxes and the connection between his and Voldemort's minds (2011, 79-80).

Many scholars have noted that the Harry Potter novels follow Campbell's (2020) hero's journey model. For example, drawing on Campbell and Jung, Boll demonstrated how Rowling incorporated elements of the hero's journey, including separation, initiation, and return, and produced characters corresponding to archetypes. She argues that the second half of the twentieth century saw numerous examples of novels that returned to traditional narrative forms in fantasy, such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (2011, 86-87). Drawing on Nikolajeva's portrayal of Harry as a romantic and straightforward hero and Campbell's notion of the hero's journey (2003, 125-140), much like Boll, Schütz posited that the success of *Harry Potter* novels can be seen in the return to the traditional hero after a period that subverted the traditional hero narrative. Moreover, he showed that just like the novels, the *Harry Potter* films, with camera and music, also followed traditional techniques of hero building – low camera position, zoom on the hero, prominent hero position in a group scene, crescendo, and hero theme with major key and timbre (2011, 106-107).

An example of this is provided by Böhm, who analyses the Patronus scene on the lake from the *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* film. In this scene, Harry and Sirius are attacked by

dementors, ghost-like creatures that suck happiness out of their victims, leaving them in a state of anxiety and despair. Böhm shows that the camera moves away from Harry when he first attempts to cast Patronus, the magical guardian that protects the caster from dementors. It captures the full scale of the dementor's attack, portraying Harry as a victim and signalling that his Patronus charm will fail (2011, 130). Harry and Sirius are saved by someone who cast Patronus from the other side of the lake. Neither the audience nor Harry knows who cast the spell. However, since the Patronus takes the shape of a stag, Harry believes it is his father. Patronus takes an animal shape unique to the wizard that reflects his character, much like Pullman's daemons in adults. In his other attempt to cast a Patronus, when Harry and Hermione use a Time Turner to change the past, they come to the lake to see who is on the other side of the lake that saved them. As Dementors started their attack, Harry and Hermione realised no one was coming to the rescue.

An analysis of the film medium is interesting, as it reveals the visual strategies employed in Harry's transformation. For example, Böhm analyses Harry's facial expressions, portrayed by Daniel Radcliffe, as his mind changes from "my father is coming to save me" to "no one is coming." At that moment, Harry assumes the role he attributed to his father, that of the saviour, and casts the Patronus charm from the other side of the lake, saving Harry and Sirius from the past. By focalising Harry's face, Böhm argues, the camera captures the moment when Harry switches from waiting to be saved to being the saviour. Drawing on Lacan, he shows that this is the moment when he becomes a hero and steps into his father's symbolic role, which is represented by Harry's Patronus taking the shape of a stag, just like his father's. Böhm deepens this interpretation by pointing out that a stag is a symbol of Christ, a motif that Rowling will revisit in the final volume (2011, 130-132). I would add that the spell "Expecto Patronum" itself adds another layer of meaning. It translates from Latin as "I am waiting for a guardian." Harry's attitude in this scene shifts from one of waiting for a guardian to becoming a guardian.

Berberich demonstrates how Rowling incorporated the trope of the British school genre, as seen in works such as Hughes's Tom Brown's Schooldays, yet in a manner that conveys gentlemanly values. She paints the genealogy of the trope of the gentleman from the Middle Ages, arguing that the Victorians further developed it: "Harry Potter can, in that light, be read as a twenty-first-century manifestation of the traditional English gentleman in a new guise" (2011, 142). Berberich shows how Harry develops into a hero and a true gentleman by embodying moral values. As Böhm (2011) proposes, it is in *The Prisoner* that we witness Harry becoming a hero; however,

it is in *The Goblet*, the subsequent volume, where Rowling presents her model of the hero and, with that, her model of morality. Kern argues that Harry Potter can teach his readers lessons in morality as his decisions come from solving serious moral problems. He demonstrates how Rowling presents morality as ambiguous and complex rather than straightforward, rule-following. Harry is a hero, Kern asserts, because he has to make difficult choices. Eccleshare (2002) demonstrates that Harry embodies fortitude and stoicism, whereas Kern illustrates how Harry gradually develops Stoic values, including self-discipline, reason, empathy, solidarity, and sacrifice, as he matures (2003, 111-115). He applies Kohlberg's model of morality to argue that Harry exhibits stoic moral values, particularly when he employs reason to resolve the dilemma between rule-following and rule-breaking (125-126).

The 1994 champions in the Triwizard Tournament were Viktor Krum from the Durmstrang Institute, Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, Cedric Diggory, and Harry Potter, representing Hogwarts. The first task was to steal the Golden Egg guarded by a dragon. Harry took advice from Barty Crouch Jr., masked as Alastor Moody, to play on his strength, summon his broomstick, and steal the egg from the Hungarian Horntail dragon. Although helped by Hagrid and Crouch Jr., Harry demonstrates outstanding flying skills and retrieves the Golden Egg. Moreover, he signals that he is a true hero by telling the other Hogwarts competitor, Cedric Diggory, that the first task will involve dragons. After the task, the judge, Ludo Bagman, informs the champions that the clue to the second task could be found inside the Golden Egg they had retrieved (Rowling 2000, 361). This time, it is Cedric who, with Crouch Jr.'s help, discovers that to hear the song of the Egg, one must submerge it. Crouch Jr. helped him because he knew Cedric would pass the information to Harry. Listening to the song in the Prefect's bathroom, Harry learned that he would have to stay underwater for an hour in the second task. Once more, with the help of Crouch Jr. and Dobby, Harry obtained the gillyweed, the plant that would give him the ability to breathe underwater.

In the second task, Dobby instructs Harry to enter the Black Lake, where merpeople reside, and retrieve his friend Ron (Rowling 2000, 490-491). Harry was the first to bypass the dangers of the lake and reach where Ron, Hermione, Cho Chang, and Gabrielle, close friends taken from each champion, were held hostage by the merpeople in enchanted sleep. When Harry freed Ron, he could not leave without helping other hostages. This is where Harry displays genuine altruism, serving as an example of costly signalling, and resolves a complex moral dilemma between rule-

following and rule-breaking. If he had just freed Ron and left the lake, Harry would have been the first one to solve the second task. Instead, he waited to see if the other champions would come. He tried to save Hermione, but the merpeople would not let him (Rowling 2000, 499). Cedric soon came and freed Cho, and after him, Viktor freed Hermione with Harry's help.

Fleur was not coming because she had been attacked by grindylows and eliminated from the task, so Harry fought merpeople to save Ron and Flo's sister, Gabrielle (Rowling 2000, 504). When he got out of the water, Harry found out that the hostages were not in real danger and that they would not die if their champion did not arrive. However, this was not something Harry could have known. He did not want to take the risk. He disregarded the tournament rules, did not prioritise winning the task, and focused on saving the hostages. The judges awarded Harry second place in this task, rather than third, for demonstrating "moral fibre" (Rowling 2000, 507). Harry's decision to stay underwater longer, risking his victory and potentially his life to save others, triggers positive moral emotions in the reader and signals his true hero status.

The third task was to navigate the maze full of obstacles and reach the Triwizard Cup. At this point, Harry and Cedric are tied for first place. Once again, Crouch Jr. was helping Harry become the first to touch the Triwizard Cup. He used the Stupefy spell to stun Fleur and the Imperius curse to take control of Krum. He ordered Krum to use Cruciatus, the torture curse on Cedric. In the maze, Harry had to deal with Boggart in the form of a Dementor, a Blast-Ended Skrewt, and solve the riddle of the Sphinx. Nevertheless, when he heard Cedric yelling, he rushed to find Krum torturing him. Harry used the Stupefy spell on Krum, saving Cedric once more and demonstrating that saving another student was more important to him than winning the competition (Rowling 2000, 634-635). Harry and Cedric defeated Acromantula, a giant spider, together and reached the Triwizard Cup at the same time. They briefly discuss who should take the Cup, as both had helped each other during the Tournament. In the end, Harry suggests touching the cup together and claiming victory for Hogwarts. As they touched the Cup, they were transported to the graveyard, where Pettigrew waited for them to start the ritual. Pettigrew cast Avada Kedavra, the killing curse, and Cedric died (Rowling 2000, 638). The ritual to revive Voldemort begins, and with that, Harry Potter novels take a dark turn.

The character of Cedric is built as an altruistic hero for a different reason than Harry. His hero-building was a preparation for his death, which acts as the hero's death and elicits powerful moral emotions, on the one hand towards Cedric as a true altruist and on the other towards

Voldemort as the villain who ought to be punished. Triggering positive moral emotions and building Cedric as a hero can be seen as a narratological technique to trigger strong negative emotions after he is killed. This is what Dumbledore says after Cedric's death: "Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to choose between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory" (Rowling 2000, 724).

This also marks the beginning of Harry's transformation from an altruistic hero to an altruistic punisher. This becomes especially clear once we adopt an evolutionary perspective on morality and cooperation, which explains how heroes arrest our attention, not only by their display of altruism but by risking their lives to punish the villain. In the following volume, *The Order of Phoenix*, Harry's godfather, Sirius, is killed by the Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore is killed by Severus Snape. These murders and many others in *The Deathly Hallows* solidify Harry's conviction that Voldemort must be stopped and that he is the one to do it.

It is essential to clarify that when discussing a character's emotions and the emotional responses of readers, I am suggesting only potential effects. Although it would be interesting to perform empirical research on the reader's responses in the future, this thesis aims to explore the topic conceptually. As Horvath notes: "it is important to stress that we can only speak of potential emotional effects and that no stable stimulus-response patterns can be identified for reading literary texts. A text may offer stimuli specific to a certain emotion, but whether the reader reacts with the expected emotion depends on several individual and cultural factors. Even so, it can be stated that the same key stimuli elicit the same emotions in most readers" (2022, 28). Therefore, the arguments concerning readers' emotional responses in this thesis should be taken hypothetically.

I have argued that it is possible to integrate the notions proposed by Flesch (2007) and Carroll (2004, 2006) to arrive at an evolutionary model that explains the role literature and other storytelling technologies play in human moral development. Flesch (2007) argued that literature evokes strong emotions because it taps into our moral system, which is wired to generate positive moral feelings toward altruism and negative moral feelings toward those who transgress societal rules. Flesch endeavoured to explain our interest in literature and how writers can capture their audience's attention by focalising a hero on a mission to sacrifice himself to punish the villain.

Drawing on the evolutionary theory of moral cooperation, Flesch demonstrated that the handicap principle can explain this behaviour and is an example of *genuine signalling*.

I demonstrated that Flesch's model can be applied to Harry Potter novels and films, explaining why Harry's face appears on T-shirts and mugs worldwide. Throughout the novels, Harry morally develops into an altruistic hero who often breaks the rules and sacrifices his success to help others, thereby winning the hearts of his readers as a true hero. I have focused on the examples in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, as the Triwizard Tournament provides ample opportunities for Harry to prove himself an altruistic hero. However, examples can be found in all the other volumes, especially in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, where Harry sacrifices his life to protect other students and teachers at Hogwarts, destroys Horcruxes, and kills Voldemort, becoming a true altruistic hero.

Carroll argued that literature creates a sense of psychological, conceptual, and thematic orders. Moreover, he demonstrated how literature engages with our ancient emotional systems, linking them to cerebral parts of the mind that involve abstract thinking and moral reasoning (2006, 43). This creates an opportunity to learn, modify our minds, and regulate our behaviour to adapt to a rapidly changing culture quickly. With changes in society, we must learn new, appropriate ways of expressing ambitions and emotions, for example, sexual interest and anger. The evolutionary process of adaptation is a slow one. Adaptation takes several generations to thousands, even millions, of years. By walking in a character's shoes and feeling what they feel, we learn how to express elements of our ancient nature in new cultural contexts. An important aspect of society is its rules and norms, which are also subject to change and require practice and learning. Literature offers an opportunity for rapid adaptation.

Carroll and colleagues empirically tested this model, which they refer to as *agonistic structure*, asking their survey participants to rate their emotional reactions to characters. They divided literary characters into the four categories: protagonists, protagonists' helpers, antagonists, and antagonists' helpers. They found that, on average, readers attributed positive emotions to protagonists and their helpers, while negative emotions were attributed to antagonists and their helpers (2016, 201). They build their argument on the proposition made by Boehm (1999), who argued that around 100,000 years ago, humans developed norms to punish cheaters and free riders who would take advantage of cooperators, thereby enabling the emergence of an altruistic culture. Carroll et al. assert that literature serves as a tool that fosters egalitarian social dynamics,

prompting its readers to adopt egalitarian social values (2016, 215). Integrating Flesch's proposal into this model explains how we learn moral lessons from literature by prompting intense moral emotions. Storytelling technologies, therefore, are not simply teaching about evolutionary essential aspects of life, nor do they produce pleasure just by simulating reality (Pinker 1997); they have a much more crucial adaptive role in shaping our morality.

Boehm's (1999) and Carroll et al.'s (2016) studies also show that, although humans are predisposed to cooperate, cooperation must be taught and reinforced. Cheaters and free riders who bypass regulations and exploit the system for their benefit are a part of every society. Literature, by focalising altruists and altruistic punishers, plays an important role in reinforcing cooperation. Stories tap into our theory of mind skills, aptitude towards altruism, and moral emotional systems to help our minds regulate themselves and fulfil the demands of our rapidly changing cultural surroundings. Today's globalised world requires a vastly different moral skill set than that of hunter-gatherer groups, typically consisting of 100 to 200 individuals. As our moral systems evolve, literature can be viewed as a platform where we integrate new moral lessons and where authors propose their moral blueprints for society. These blueprints can be viewed as complex constellations of memes that enter cultural production and compete for the attention of the interpretative community, which then shapes the meanings of these texts, allowing them to regulate their behaviour according to the moral lessons learned. I have argued that stories about *Harry Potter* teach readers about heroism and altruistic values worldwide.

However, it should be noted that Rowling's take on morality is much more complex and more nuanced than a simple good–bad, hero–villain binary. As I showed in the case of Professor Snape, the perspective of the heroes toward him changes throughout the novels. Snape provokes a variety of emotions from fear and disgust to admiration and bravery. Moreover, the introduction of the history of a character often results in a change of perspective. Draco Malfoy is the school bully who later joins Voldemort and becomes a Death Eater. But again, the situation is far more complex. He knows that if he disobeys, his family will be killed. Even then, he is not able to murder Dumbledore and flees from the final battle. Dumbledore is a protector figure throughout the novels, but in *The Deathly Hallows*, we learn about his dark past. Together with dark wizard Grindewald, he wanted to acquire the Deathly Hallows and rule the world. This mission led to the death of his sister Ariana. Learning about Dumbledore's past, Harry begins to wonder if he even knew him at all. As the reader learns more about the characters, their perspective changes together

with the protagonists. However, we should always keep in mind that the reader's emotional responses are much more nuanced than switching from good to bad or vice versa. A villain can provoke admiration because he is skilful. Rowling successfully utilises the complexity of emotional reactions by portraying Death Eaters like Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort as powerful, creative, inventive, and resourceful and protagonists like Neville and Ron as clumsy, jealous, untalented and unskillful.

PART II:

The Evolutionary and Cognitive Underpinnings of Supernatural Storytelling

"Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?"
Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry's ears even though
the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.
"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is
not real?" (Rowling 2007, 723)

4. Reifying Consciousness

The main argument of this thesis is built upon several evolutionary considerations of art and literature that I have explicated so far. To sum up, Dissanayake proposed that humans have an intrinsic need to perceive the world as explainable, organised, and known, which gives a sense of meaning and security (1988, 197). She argued that art provides this sense of organisation and channels our attention to highlight evolutionarily significant aspects of our lives (1988, 113-115; 2000, 73). Drawing on Dissanayake, Carroll demonstrated how stories transform our everyday scenarios into narratives, thereby creating a sense of psychological order (2004, 115). More importantly, Carroll argued that literature taps into evolutionarily older parts of our brains, which manage our instincts and emotions, and connects them to the evolutionarily younger cerebral mind responsible for abstract thinking (2006, 43).

Literature, therefore, facilitates a point of connection between older survival-driven and social systems, with parts of the brain for abstract and theoretical thinking, meaning, and purpose (Carroll 2006, 43). By walking in the shoes of imaginary characters, seeing what they see, and feeling what they feel, we can learn new socially appropriate ways of expressing our instincts and emotions like anger, fear, disgust, sexual attraction, love, and competition. We can also anticipate and prepare for danger (Clasen 2017) and extend sympathy toward individuals and cultures that are distant or different (Carroll 2004, 179). This leads Carroll to argue that literature is a unique human adaptation that helps us adjust to rapidly changing social and natural environments (2006,

39). Most animals do not survive a change in their environment. Passing on lessons via stories and modifying their behaviour accordingly enabled humans to adapt quickly.

Stories can, therefore, be seen as an important evolutionary tool that helps us modify our behaviour in rapidly changing social environments, understand the needs and motivations of others, and extend sympathy. From hunter-gatherer groups of 10-200 members, today, some cities exceed 30 million inhabitants. Thus, it was a curious mutation of language – a narrative that facilitated more efficient collaboration and helped us manage an increasingly complex social world. Literature is not just a library of information. It codes, reduces, systematises, and organises human experience in patterns. Its readers have a cognitive machinery to unpack the code (Tooby and Cosmides 2001, 22). This implies that stories often direct our attention to important things by triggering emotional responses. To explain how the reader engages in this process, Dissanayake (1992, 43) and Boyd (2009, 80-98) proposed that art should be seen as a form of play.

Like animals that engage in playful behaviour to learn new skills in a safe environment, humans create simulations of experience to prepare for various what-if scenarios. Like animals, this behaviour is intrinsically rewarding, pleasurable, and fun, motivating readers to engage. Drawing on Oatley (1999, 2008), Gottschall (2012) argued that we expose ourselves to these simulations to learn how to navigate life better. Like Carroll (2006), Gottschall emphasises that human minds are shaped not only for stories but also by stories (2012, Chapter 3). Engaging with story-simulations, we mobilise our emotional systems and experience scenarios that we otherwise might not. For an ultra-social species like ours, navigating the social sphere is the priority. This is why we often find ourselves inspired and moved by fictional characters as if they were real. Moreover, stories can pack many traits in a single memorable character, something we rarely encounter in real life. Such a character can be immortalised and serve as an example to generations of readers.

In the previous chapter, drawing on research that shows how we engage with fiction to practice our theory of mind skills (Zunshine 2006; Flesch 2007), I endeavoured to show how Harry Potter novels and films propose a set of virtues and morals embodied in the hero, who is an altruist and altruistic punisher. As such, Harry and his friends inspire potent emotions and motivate moral behaviour. Walking in their shoes, thousands of readers felt pain, sadness, and anger when Cedric, Sirius, Dumbledore, and Snape died and felt satisfaction when Bellatrix and Voldemort were killed. This motivated them to accept the behaviours enacted by the heroes and reject those of the villains.

Moreover, Harry Potter stories are so convincing primarily because of the colourful diversity of their characters, set in everyday-like situations that face real-life problems, making it easy for a diverse readership worldwide to identify with them. In this regard, Harry Potter stories serve as effective social simulators, facilitating playful learning.

If the evolutionary argument for the adaptiveness of stories I have explicated so far is valid, literature should be about finding love (reproduction), solving problems/avoiding danger (survival), understanding culture and nature (learning), and forming friendships (identity and belonging). Indeed, across millennia, from Gilgamesh to Harry Potter, these topics are central to literature. However, there is an element of stories that does not fit into the evolutionary narrative. If stories are about organising and transferring essential aspects of human experience, speculative fiction challenges the evolutionary theory of storytelling. If stories simulate significant evolutionary aspects of our lives, we should not have stories with elements that have nothing to do with reality. And yet, supernatural storytelling is as old as storytelling itself. Moreover, all present and past civilisations we know about tell stories that include elements of the otherworldly. If the role of stories in human life is to better adapt to our environment, what do we get by introducing elements to stories that have no basis in reality? To explain this, I will introduce the term *reifying consciousness*.

Reifying comes from the Latin root *res* – "a thing." Its primary meaning is "to make something abstract material." To explain the meaning of *reifying consciousness*, I will borrow concepts of *implicate* (enfolded) and *explicate* (unfolded) *order* from physicist David Bohm. To explain the *implicate order*, Bohm gives an example of the television signal carried by a radio wave. This television signal carries an image of a house. In this house, the two windows might be near each other, but far from the doors. However, these points are neither near nor far in the radio signal. It becomes near or far only when the signal is translated into an image. "The function of the receiver is then to explicate this order, i.e., to 'unfold' it in the form of a new visual image" (1980, 188). Bohm suggests thinking of consciousness in terms of the *implicate order*. When unfolded, we get affects and emotions, sensations, and thoughts. *Reifying consciousness* is a third part of this process and implies translating affects, sensations, and abstract thoughts into something visible and palpable. This is the primary role of supernatural storytelling, I argue. When the reader engages in the process of meaning production of supernatural storytelling, he *reifies consciousness*. Furthermore, supernatural storytelling weaves the *reified mind* into a narrative to produce a sense

of psychological order. The act of engaging with supernatural stories can be seen as a type of cognitive play that renders the contents of our mind visible.

In Part II of the thesis, I will explain the process of *reifying consciousness* that defines supernatural storytelling. To illustrate this process, I propose examining elements of supernatural storytelling on a spectrum ranging from *composites* to *the fantastic*. Composites are supernatural agents and spaces built from elements of reality in such a way that they do not violate intuition about laws of physics. For example, animals like a gryphon, races like dwarves, and spaces like planet Arrakis would not violate our consensus reality if they existed. The fantastic agents, spaces, items, and abilities, on the other hand, are not just imaginary but also defy the laws of nature. The examples are ghosts, demons, gods, and magic. *Composites* can be seen as building blocks of supernatural storytelling. Jackson proposed that in fantasy, elements of reality are broken down and reconstructed in some other way (1981, 4). This reconstruction, as Attebery points out, can reveal aspects of the world and the previously invisible self (2021, Chapter 1). Rayment calls this *parallax view* or *seeing again* – shifting elements against the new background helps us see reality from another perspective (2014, 24, 53). Various races in Tolkien's Middle-earth reify invisible aspects of human culture—attitudes, ways of living, and waging war.

On the other hand, *the fantastic* reifies abstract concepts, affects, and emotions like hope, love, fear, death, destiny, power, meaning, and purpose. Fantasy comes from the Greek word *phantasia* – "making visible" (Prickett 2005, 5). Giving aspects of our inner world faces and voices and integrating them into narratives facilitates conceptualising them in terms of something visible and tangible. In Rayment's words: "to take the abstract and manifest it as palpably real" (2014, 53). This creates an opportunity to interact with aspects of our cognition which do not find their correlatives in reality. For example, our subjective experience of death is loaded with affects and does not match the external reality of a simple event of cessation of life functions. Supernatural storytelling, therefore, becomes a tool for externalising inner reality when it does not match with the physical one. An example Rayment explores is how Pullman's *His Dark Materials* materialises the abstract concept of original sin through daemons and Dust (2014, 60-64). Armitt called this "giving imaginative presence to … philosophical, historical, political, unconscious desires and fears" (2020, 169).

Supernatural storytelling transcends our notion of consensus reality, presenting human beings as significant, powerful, and capable of communing with and controlling natural forces.

Although an orphan boy initially, Harry, in the end, defeats Voldemort, the most powerful dark lord. Frodo, arguably one of the weakest members of the fellowship, was the one who did the impossible and destroyed the ring. Supernatural storytelling presents humans as powerful to produce an elevated sense of control and power. This function can be performed directly and indirectly. Characters themselves can wield magic, magical items, or magical companions that help them overcome difficulties, or they can be aided by powerful forces acting as their overseers, protectors, and advisors. Supernatural storytelling anthropomorphises elements of nature and culture to establish a relationship with the forces beyond our control. If there is a mind behind the sun, rain, or death, we can use our theory of mind to understand it and communicate with it, thus creating a feeling that we can do something about things we have no control over. In this sense, supernatural storytelling *reifies* an aspect of the mind called *magical thinking* to produce an elevated sense of perceived control and empowerment.

To reify a subjective experience which does not match the physical reality, we combine different ontological categories. This is why the reification of the mind results in the supernatural. In Part I we have seen that stories function like simulations. To add our abstract, conceptual, and emotional aspects of our lives to these story-simulations, consciousness needs to be reified. Weaved in a narrative, the constructed worlds do not conform to consensus reality but depict the world in an order in which human beings play a unique role in creating their destiny. Creating and consuming supernatural stories, therefore, can be seen as a form of play where reality is dismantled, its constituents are recombined in some other way, and human beings are described as powerful agents with a role and purpose in the universe. In what follows, I will describe the process of *reifying consciousness* and show how Rowling uses it to project an image of the universe governed by the ultimate power of love. Nevertheless, first, I will turn to the evolutionary theory to show how this capacity developed.

4.1. Evolutionary Development of Supernatural Consciousness

Based on the archaeological evidence, so-called "stone tools," fossils, and cut marks on animal bones, we know that our hominin ancestors lived in Africa about 2,5 million years ago. More complex tools appeared approximately 1,4 million years ago, with the emergence of *Homo erectus*. Drawing on the work of psychologist Merlin Donald, Winkelman and Baker point out that the tools of the Acheulean tradition, dating back around 1,7 million years, are evidence that Homo

erectus had already developed *mimetic consciousness*. Our newfound mimetic ability led to the later development of other capacities, including dances, rituals, customs, and symbolization, as a new way of forming and reinforcing group identity and recognising members of one's group (2010, 128-129). The earliest possible evidence for the representation, the Venus of Berekhat Ram, dates back to 280,000 – 250,000 years ago.[12]

Winkelman and Baker assume that the ritual dances of *Homo erectus* were already driven by a desire for spiritual experiences and did not just serve as bonding activities. By that time, *Homo erectus* had already discovered ways to achieve alternative states of consciousness: starvation, exhaustion, pain, stress, and psychedelic mushrooms (2010, 131). Although the evidence suggests the presence of religious thinking in the life of Homo erectus, the first indication of a belief system can be found in Neanderthal society. They lived approximately 130,000 – 40,000 years ago. They left ample evidence of their burial activities, so-called "grave goods," items that a person would need to continue living after death (132). These items indicate that Neandertals had spiritual lives, as these symbolic representations are evidence of an early understanding of death and the first notion of an afterlife.

Winkelman and Baker show how Neandertal shamans performed ceremonies to escort souls to the afterlife. They also used art for decoration and discovered plants with psychedelic and medicinal properties. Ochre paint was used 77,000 years ago to decorate bodies for religious activities. Neanderthals' cave rituals are undisputed evidence of their elaborate religion, as evidenced by the unique, symbolic roles and meanings assigned to objects like skulls (2010, 131-135). Based on anatomical criteria, modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, appeared about 200,000 years ago. However, evidence of a widespread, elaborate modern symbolic culture dates back approximately 40,000 years. The most common representations found in caves are of animals, and the less common ones are of humans. A combination of human and animal bodies can also be found. The purpose of the cave, a dark place with symbolic representations on its walls, Winkelman and Barker argue, is to induce an alternative state of consciousness (137).

I already drew attention to the archaeological research of Mithen that indicates that c. 100.000 years ago, the barriers between three separate specialised intelligences – social, natural

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[12] The Venus of Berekhat Ram is a pebble that resembles a human shape: "The Berekhat Ram figurine may be the earliest known representation of the human form" (Winkelman and Baker 2010, 124). However, the first unambiguous representation of the human form (of female) is The Venus of Hohle Fels, 42.000 – 40.000 years ago.

history, and technical intelligence started breaking down, giving rise to *cognitive fluidity* around 40,000 years ago (1998, 184-185). Each of the intelligences specialised to fulfil one purpose only: to manipulate tools, manage social life, or hunt animals. It was the emergence of a modern language, Mithen argues, that broke down barriers between previously separate intelligences, enabling Modern Humans to use the logic of one intelligence to understand the domain of the other (211-215). The evolution of the human brain in Homo sapiens gave rise to *cognitive fluidity*, which formed the basis for the later development of our symbolic representational capabilities and, consequently, the supernatural.

The interaction between previously separate intelligences gave rise to other cognitive capabilities that enhanced hunting, social bonding, organisational skills, healing, and emotional well-being. From an evolutionary point of view, shamanistic rituals (around 100,000 years ago) were our first step towards a coherent model of the supernatural. From them, more complex forms of religion developed (around 40,000 years ago). Our early symbolic representations were simple combinations of everyday images. In later phases of our development, they became more abstract, giving birth to the first supernatural beings. From our early development as a species to the present moment, we still create and interact with supernatural beings.

C*ognitive fluidity* gave Modern Humans the ability to apply social intelligence to understand animals and led to a significant increase in hunting skills. They could predict animal routes and ambush their prey, leading to more successful hunting (Mithen 1998, 184-185). Theory of mind (*mind-reading* or *intentional stance*) was previously reserved for socialising and understanding other humans. Now, this skill could be applied to animals to predict their migrations and behaviour, leading to better hunting skills and the domestication of animals. However, theory of mind did not extend only to animals. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors began understanding the world around them as inhabited by agents. They saw trees, rivers, and mountains as living things that had a soul. This phenomenon is called *animism* (from the Latin *anima* – a soul).

Guthrie asserts that our perceptual system, just like the perceptual systems of other animals, is not perfect. It cannot register all aspects of our surroundings. Furthermore, animals use various tactics to remain undetected. Guthrie argues that while scanning our surroundings for danger and opportunity, we are prompted to search for what is most important to us – agents (1995, 62-63). The *agency detection* adaptation gave humans the ability to react quickly to potential dangers that came from predators. However, as our perception systems are imperfect and operate with limited

energy, we can never be sure we are not missing a predator lurking in the grass. Therefore, we evolved a mechanism to quickly scan our environment and make bets about the presence of an agent. Because of the limitations in our perceptive system and the necessity of making bets, *agency detection* systems are hypersensitive – it is better to mistake moving branches for a bear and mobilise emotion and energy to quickly react to potential danger than to conserve energy, ignore the threat, and risk being eaten (45). Barrett calls hyperactive agent detection devices (HADD) (2000, 31).

Drawing on Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel's experiment with moving triangles, Guthrie comments on how individuals readily attribute social relations like conflict and sexual rivalry to moving triangles on the screen.[13] This leads him to propose that, subsequent to detecting agency, attributing personality (also known as *anthropomorphism* or *agent attribution*) is also a part of default human perception. The two faculties of our perception and cognition, *agency detection* and *agent attribution*, often lead us to assume that we are surrounded by invisible agents (1995, 65-66). Following Guthrie's argument, Atran proposed that supernatural beings arise from the need to manage the *agency detection* and *agent attribution* systems and control imagination. They can, therefore, be understood as coping mechanisms that individuals use to soothe themselves and mitigate the negative emotions that come with HADD (2002, 78-79).

Furthermore, Sperber argued that human brains have distinct cognitive modules (for animals, plants, objects, and people) that form our basic intuitions about the world (1994, 62). Sperber and Hirschfeld showed that supernatural concepts violate these basic intuitions because the elements of one ontological category are transferred to another. They called this attribute of the supernatural *counterintuitivity*, as combinations from different ontological categories violate our intuitions about the world. For example, the talking tree belongs to the plant category but has an attribute of the human category. Supernatural concepts stick out against the backdrop of concepts that fall into our intuitive understanding of the world. They also pointed out that combining elements from different ontological categories has a *superstimuli* effect (2004, 44-45).

The notion of *supernormal sign stimuli* originates from ethologist Tinbergen, who argued that animals respond more strongly to an exaggerated stimulus, even when that stimulus is

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[13] In 1944, Fritz Heider and Marianne Simmel performed an experiment where they produced a short film with moving geometrical shapes. They then asked participants to watch the film and describe what they see. 97% of the participants interpreted moving triangles as a story. Most of them saw a love story where a triangle and a circle were lovers, chaised by the larger triangle (Gottschall 2021). See the experiment here.

artificial. For example, he demonstrated that the bird oystercatcher prefers to incubate larger eggs. If presented with a choice, they will therefore prefer to sit on another bird's larger egg, or even more on a larger artificial egg than their own smaller egg (1951, 44-46). This will be important as supernatural storytelling often presents its readers with supercharged monsters and empowered heroes (see Clasen 2012, 381).

Boyer (2001) further developed the theory of *counterintuitivity*, proposing that religious concepts are attention-grabbing and memorable, thus effortlessly transmitted to the next generation. Boyer and Ramble experimentally tested this theory and found that items with limited violations are better retrieved in memory than bizarre items. In other words, a few violations of ontological categories make an object memorable. But too many violations do not. They proposed that bizarre items have too many violations that block the natural meanings of the ontological domain (2001, 558-559).

The problem with the counterintuitivity theory is that items are tested outside of their natural context – a story. This is where I think expertise in literary studies can bring new insights into this discussion. For example, Norenzayan et al. found that although minimally counterintuitive concepts predict better long-term recall, the number of supernatural concepts does not follow a linear but a curvilinear function. In other words, in folk tales, supernatural concepts are limited. They do not increase indefinitely over time. If minimally counterintuitive objects help with information retention, the rule should be "the more, the better." However, the more recent folk tales do not contain more supernatural beings. Their study discovered that "only folktales with a few counterintuitive elements facilitated cultural success" (2006, 550). And so, focusing not on individual supernatural concepts but on their function within a narrative, Norenzayan et al. discovered that counterintuitivity does not play a central role in the success of supernatural storytelling. The function of the story in society plays a far superior role. For example, they point out the evidence that supernatural beliefs help humans deal with awareness of mortality. Therefore, supernatural concepts persist, not just because they are counterintuitive, but because they solve adaptive problems (2006, 550-551). This will be the key idea on which I will build my theory.

The highly sensitive *agency detection* and *agent attribution* made our ancestors think that invisible agents surrounded them. Dennett argued that with the advent of language, we began to discuss these strange experiences and attribute agency, creating stories about the lady in the woods and a man standing in front of our house in the dark. Once created, these stories enter a cultural

competition. Those more memorable or those that proved helpful were retold, shared, and passed on to the next generation (2006, 120). For example, Boyer argued that telling stories about invisible agents who see everything we do enhanced group participation; it ensured obeying the rules even when other members were not watching (2001, 189). Supernatural agents, therefore, enter a cultural arena and battle for our attention. Dennett contends that these stories arose from a need to explain our strange experiences (2006, 120). However, as Boyer showed, supernatural stories do not explain strange events but complicate them (2001, 13). If the presence of a ghost explains the moving of a window, we are then compelled to explain something even more complex than movement – a ghost. Therefore, positing gods or ancestors does not simplify or explain the world around us; instead, it presents it as more complex and often more dangerous.

As Boyer points out, religion does not provide explanations of reality. In many cultures, witchcraft is often blamed for misfortune. One could then jump to the conclusion that witchcraft explains the misfortune. What, then, explains witchcraft and witches (2001, 11-13)? Instead of explanation, religious systems make the phenomenon even more complex. A simple phenomenon, such as lightning, is transformed into a more complex one, like an angry god. We now have not only one but a pantheon of gods and their intricacies to explain. I argue that religious stories are not evidence of a need to explain but a need to weave phenomena into narratives that reflect, or *reify*, the human way of perceiving the world. Understanding a storm as an angry god says nothing about the storm but reflects a human way of understanding the world as governed by agents with human-like qualities. Anthropomorphising lightning and death enabled humans to apply their theory of mind to non-living things. This created a feeling that we can communicate and negotiate with things outside our control, opening a possibility for an action that elevates a sense of control.

I argue that storytelling can be seen as a co-opting mechanism. Through storytelling, cognitive processes such as *agent attribution* (*anthropomorphism* or *animism*) are co-opted for another purpose. Supernatural storytelling coopts these cognitive tendencies to produce supernatural agents, objects, and spaces. It weaves them into organised systems we call narratives to produce a sense of psychological order, a worldview in which humans have a specific role and purpose. In this worldview, humans are presented as beings that can interact with and, therefore, influence natural phenomena they have no control over. This adaptation, I argue, led to inducing a sense of perceived control, hence, reducing anxiety over the uncontrollable.

4.2. Composites and the Fantastic: The Building Blocks of Supernatural Storytelling

To better understand the process of *reifying consciousness* and weaving it into a narrative, *supernatural storytelling*, I propose distinguishing between elements that I will call *composites* and those that I will call *the fantastic*. Many agents and spaces in supernatural storytelling are constructed from elements of reality. Even though they do not exist in the real world, some of them, like gryphons and centaurs, do not violate the laws of physics. To denominate such agents, Wengrow proposed the term *composites*: "In violating some limited part of intuitive biology, composites thus typically affirm many of its underlying structural principles. Legs are still positioned for walking, eyes for seeing, wings for flying, fins for propulsion" (2013, Chapter 2). I will extend Wengrow's notion of *composites* to spaces. Many fantasy and science fiction chronotopes, like Lothlorien or Arrakis, are a combination or exaggeration of places from Earth. In horror, Clasen argued that scary monsters are built from components that signal danger: claws, fangs, and jaws (2017, 44). Playing with such elements teaches about the function of the elements of reality. Highlighting aspects of reality and categorising them reduces their complexity. Claws and fangs can be seen as a heuristic for danger, so we do not need to memorise all the predators.

However, not all aspects of supernatural worlds can be explained by a combination of elements of reality. Many beings like gods, fairies, demons, and ghosts, as well as powers and abilities like telekinesis and magic, violate our laws of physics. I will use the term *the fantastic* to denote such aspects of supernatural storytelling, agents, powers, objects, and spaces. *Composites* and *the fantastic* are building blocks of supernatural storytelling; we use them to *reify consciousness*. *Composites* are reconstructed from aspects of nature and culture to defamiliarise or highlight their constituents. They are related to the external reality we can perceive. *The fantastic*, on the other hand, *reifies* our inner reality. *The fantastic* does not mime the real but reflects a way of perceiving reality that is not constrained by the rational, analytical mind. Because affects often mediate it, *the fantastic* is aligned with what Pennycook et al. (2012) called intuitive cognitive processing.[14]

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[14] "The first, sometimes referred to as Type 1 processing, is characterized as intuitive, fast, unconscious, associative, and heuristic. Alternatively, problem solving and decision-making sometimes proceeds in a more analytic manner, sometimes called Type 2 processing, which tends to be more time-consuming, deliberative, and effortful. An analytic cognitive style will typically involve a broader assessment of problem elements as well as an examination and critical evaluation of intuitions" Pennycook et al. (2012, 336).

My understanding of supernatural storytelling in terms of *reified consciousness* is inspired by Zusne and Jones who argued that the reification is a universal aspect of our cognition: "The reification of the subjective, the attribution of physical qualities to that that is merely the experience of a state or a process, is a universal phenomenon and unavoidable" (1982, 267). In recent decades, studies in cognitive poetics and cognitive linguistics have shed light on how we conceptualise abstract notions like death. Drawing on Turner (1996), Turner and Fauconnier (2002), and Kövecses (2002), Aradi argues that:

> From a cognitive linguistic view then, our relentless pursuit to understand death and afterlife can be understood as a matter of pairing and re-arranging our conceptual domains in a way that fits both universal concepts of life and death and our own subjective worldview… (69) … by using metaphors, the mind tries to bridge the yawning gap between the unsayable and the desire to verbalize the unsayable, making it possible for us to talk about death euphemistically. (2022, 71)

The examples she gives are "death as a journey" and "death as the end of the journey," where the abstract concept of death is described in terms of a journey, which has temporal and spatial dimensions (Aradi 2022, 71).

Aradi's contribution here is crucial. In reality, death is just a moment of cessation of life functions. But from our subjective perspective, death is much more. The conceptual domain of death is informed by our life experiences and involves memories of losing loved ones, anxiety about our own mortality and strong affects that come with loss. There is a huge gap between the reality of death and our subjective experience. *The fantastic*, I argue, emerges from a desire to conceptualise and verbalise an event from the perspective of our subjective experience of it, not in terms of the simple physical reality of it. When we wish to verbalise this, we reach for available conceptual domains. But because of the vast difference between the reality of the event and our subjective experience, what comes out does not correlate with the physical description of events. What we get is *fantastic*.

The fantastic gives faces and voices to the inner reality: our affects, emotions, and abstract concepts, thus *reifying* them.[15] For example, demons in Christianity can be associated with negative emotional states like pride, greed, envy, lust, and wrath. In contrast, we can associate angels with virtues: justice, mercy, protection, healing, harmony, guidance, peace, and wisdom.

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[15] Affects are units from which the brain constructs an emotion. From the same affects, the brain can construct a variety of emotions depending on the context and interpretation. Emotions are larger categories that the brain builds based on the available information in order to prompt an action (see Barrett 2017, Chapter 2).

The religious supernatural narrative sees an individual as influenced by inner invisible forces and advises overcoming the negative emotional states and seeking protection in higher cognitive aspects associated with the evolutionary younger part of the brain, the neocortex, which is responsible, among other things, for processing and regulating emotions.

The fantastic is an aspect of everyday human cognition. Ancient Egyptians saw their pharaohs as divine intermediaries between humans and gods. Even Alexander the Great was considered a god in Egypt and Persia (Figgis 1914). Both Jesus and Mohammed draw their authority from their relationship with the divine. Some kings, like Louis XIV of France, legitimated their authority by claiming a relationship with the divine (Rule 1969). Although post-Enlightenment scholarship understands this way of perceiving a bias, a glitch, or a cognitive mistake, I will argue that supernatural storytelling can be seen as a technology that renders our thoughts and emotions visible. In the above-mentioned example, the significance and hierarchical position are *reified* in the image of a divine ruler. Furthermore, this externalisation creates an image of reality in which human beings interact with forces beyond their control, elevating the sense of perceived control.

It is also important to clarify that I am not proposing an understanding of *the fantastic* as a figure of speech in a narrow sense, as a way of saying, as personification or prosopopoeia. Subbotsky suggested our everyday language reveals animism: "the sun is rising, the rain is coming" (2010a, 137). In these examples, although "rising" and "coming" are taken from the conceptual domain of an agent, they do not imply agency. In this sense, figures of speech are examples of the economy principle, where language tends to minimise the means while maximising the communication potential. And so, it is easier to borrow a concept from another conceptual domain than invent a concept for each domain. On the other hand, I argue that *the fantastic* resembles descriptions of lived, embodied experiences. The difference is that in saying "the sun is coming," we do not understand the sun as an agent who is making a conscious movement. In contrast, the Greek god Helios reflects an understanding of natural phenomena as governed by supernatural agents. For Ancient Greeks, Helios was not a metaphor.

Let us take ghosts as an example. Clasen defined a ghost as "a disembodied mind," arguing that ghosts are a result of overattributing agency and mind-body dualism, which makes us believe that the human spirit persists after death (2012, 226). For me, the key aspect of ghosts lies in their affective nature. It is the affective load that gives substance to our experience and facilitates the

overriding of the rational mind. For example, walking through a park in the evening, our hyperreactive agency detection will prompt negative affects and make us mistake agents for shadows and branches. We may not believe in ghosts, but our brain is informed by the totality of our experiences, not just by the rational interpretation. The strong negative effects ensure the long-term recall of the experience, regardless of how unreal it is (see LaBar 2007). In other words, in our experience, ghosts exist. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that they traditionally appear at night, in dark places, when our perceptual skills are diminished and our emotional systems are heightened.

Coelho et al. suggested ghosts evoke fear of the unknown (2021, 410). I wish to add that ghosts and demons are convincing because they resonate with something familiar. They share several characteristics with emotional states. They appear and disappear without our control, can influence our thinking and behaviour, and, in extreme cases, make us do things that are not in our interest and distort memory. In these situations, our perception is overwhelmed by negative affects. If we combine this idea with our hyperactive *agent attribution*, we get an agent who can follow us without being seen, standing in a dark hallway, disappears when we look, and brings a feeling of dread and despair. Humans retain images of the deceased in their minds even after their deaths, so the belief that their spirit persists, as Clasen notes, "requires no great leap of faith" (2012, 226). We can think about them, dream about them, and in some cases even hallucinate them. In those who experienced traumatic events, this can be even more expressed: "After traumatic events that contribute to the death of someone close, a survivor may 'see' or 'feel' his dead friend or family member" (Terr 1985, 507). In this case, also, the affects play a key role. It is our emotional attachment to people that makes us cling to their image after death.

Drawing on Boyer, Clasen posits that supernatural agents can target the fear system more effectively than natural agents because they are built from minimally counterintuitive ontological categories (2017, 47). What I would like to add is that the combinations of unusual categories, such as "being" and "non-being," that we find in ghosts and demons are brought together by the desire to verbalise something abstract, invisible, and intangible, like affects, emotions, and memories. To do so, we reify it in terms of something physical. Terr argues that the brain achieves this "by transforming nonvisual memories into visual ones," suggesting that dreams can be seen as a prototype for this brain activity (1985, 500). What makes ghosts and demons particularly convincing, therefore, is that they are reified emotional states to which we attribute agency. Just

like strong emotions, they appear and disappear at will. They are not easy to rationalise as they are often guided by a single motive that aligns with affects that build the emotional state, which is destructive and often unstoppable. Just like emotions, ghosts, and demons can influence thinking and can take control over our actions.

Humans have vibrant inner lives that do not always easily correlate with outside events. Expressing aspects of our inner lives through mimetic narration can be challenging. The narrator may *tell* the character's thoughts or feelings, but it is challenging *to show*. One way to achieve this is to find what Washington Allston called the *objective correlative* (1850, Introductory discourse). Eliot explained this term in his essay on *Hamlet*: "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (1920, 100). Nevertheless, how do we find an *objective correlative* when the outside elements do not correlate with a feeling? Liggins, for example, suggests that Gothic literature portrays women as being trapped within the home (2020, 7). I would argue that it describes how a woman feels in a home, enslaved by forces beyond her control and often beyond her understanding. Since what is happening in the home does not suffice as an objective correlative, the fantastic becomes a means to *reify* the state of consciousness we call emotion.

For example, Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" captures women's medical treatment and enslavement in the home in the 19th century. The stunning stillness of the atmosphere generates a feeling of the uncanny. Nothing particularly thrilling is taking place. The narrator is cared for by her husband, John and his sister Jennie. Because of her "medical condition," she has to stay in a room and rest. The woman trapped behind the wallpaper is an expression of this confinement. The fantastic here solves a problem of expressing conflicting states of being – in danger and safe, taken care of and enslaved. Her husband does not physically abuse the narrator, nor is the husband's motivation to abuse. Nonetheless, she is being abused. The fantastic here reifies this feeling of being pulled by invisible forces beyond our understanding and helplessness in dealing with them. In Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, Voland and demonic forces reflect a feeling of being lost and trapped in a Soviet society where invisible ideological forces control their faith. The demonic forces operate in broad daylight and do things that are beyond logic, but everyone carries on with their own lives.

One way to test the thesis that the fantastic reifies emotions would be to see if the new forms of the supernatural reflect new anxieties. Indeed, this is the case. New weird, for example, criticises modern society and reifies the anxieties of living in urban spaces. In *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville, the city of New Crobuzon is filled with monstrous technologies and its citizens are attacked by slake-moth. This mutated insect feeds on the minds of its victims, resembling brainwashing by relentless marketing and fake news. Like in many other new weird novels and tales, the supernatural reflects a decaying metropolis where inhabitants constantly fear capitalist oppression, exploitation, Kafkaesque bureaucracy, and constant surveillance.

4.3. Reifying *Magical Thinking*: Empowerment and Perceived Control

In his study of the Trobriand Archipelago, Malinowski showed that magic serves to establish a sense of security and control in challenging, dangerous, and transitional situations. He illustrated that Melanesians use spells during dangerous deep-water fishing, whereas magic plays no role in comparatively safe shallow-water fishing (1948, 14). Therefore, magic, in the form of spells and rituals, emerged as a tool for handling difficult emotions when danger was imminent. To overcome the fear and anxiety when dealing with situations necessary for the group's survival, yet potentially leading to injury or death, Malenesians used magic to establish a sense of control over unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of their lives. Magic is also used to express emotions related to adverse events. Dark magic, in that sense, is an expression of violent emotions that emerge when facing war or a dangerous hunt (53).

Inspired by Malinowski's ethnography, Seligmann concludes: "Magic was a stimulus to thinking. It freed man from fears, endowed him with a feeling of his power to control the world, sharpened his capacity to imagine, and kept alive his dreams of higher achievement" (1971, 322). The argument that magic has several adaptive benefits was adopted by modern psychologists (see Nemeroff and Rozin 2000, 26-27; Subbotsky 2010a, 136-139). In recent decades, researchers supported this argument with empirical evidence. Boden argues that "supernatural peculiar, religious/spiritual, and fate beliefs are similar in several regards" as they facilitate understanding oneself and the world around us (2015, 230). He highlights that supernatural beliefs are associated with perceived fulfilment and understanding. He points out several other studies that show that supernatural beliefs contribute to positive affect, increased clarity, and decreased depression (see Kay et al. 2010; Norenzayan and Hansen 2006; Specht et al. 2011).

Guthrie, on the other hand, dismissed Malinowski's argument that supernatural phenomena can be explained by the practical use of magic or interaction with the supernatural to overcome difficulties and establish a sense of security. He asserted that many religions have "wrathful and capricious deities and demons" instead of comforting beliefs (1995, 13). Supporting Guthrie's argument, Boyer suggested that seeing agents around you is a frightening rather than a reassuring experience (2001, 147). However, a more careful reading of Malinowski's ethnography reveals that he did not consider magic simply as wishful thinking, where one closes one's eyes and conjures a sense of security and control. For Malinowski, magical rituals are much more elaborate and facilitate the expression of emotions – this enables both the caster and participants to channel their negative emotions into actions, which can result in a restored sense of balance and confidence (1948, 52).

I wish to propose that supernatural narratives have a similar function. They reify *magical thinking* to elevate a sense of perceived control. Subbotsky made a critical distinction here between *magical thinking* and *magical belief*:

> Immersed in the imaginary world of Harry Potter while reading the book or watching the movie, we dream of witches and wizards who practice mind-over-matter magic, and of all sorts of other magical events. Magical events that we entertain in our dreams, narratives, arts, play, and fantasies are instances of magical thinking, not of magical beliefs. Whereas magical beliefs are in contradiction with the view that perceived physical reality strictly conforms to the laws of physics, magical thinking is not. One can think or dream about getting a nice house or a car by just thinking about it or saying a magic spell, yet one knows that in the real world this is impossible. (2010a, 7)

Therefore, the play aspect of supernatural stories comes from their alignment with magical thinking, a form of imagination which is not constrained by the laws of physics. By playfully engaging with simulated scenarios, through theory of mind, the reader identifies with the protagonist and, together with him, performs magical actions. As magic empowers the protagonist, the reader also experiences a sense of elevated control.

The sense of empowerment and optimism amidst a world in crisis is a defining feature of fantasy fiction, the modern successor of supernatural storytelling. So much so that when this principle is betrayed, we read a story as a dark fantasy or supernatural horror. Fantasy fiction does not present the world as harmless; it incorporates elements of danger, but ultimately, the darkness is defeated, often with the aid of some magical help. What I propose is a falsifiable claim: long-term fantasy fiction consumers will have an elevated sense of perceived control and optimism.

Although we still lack empirical research on the relationship between fantasy fiction, perceived control, and optimism, I argue that this is what makes fantasy fiction so attractive to children and young adults.[16] Although fantasy is not only about overcoming things magically, more than any genre, and similar to its predecessor, the fairy tale, it highlights the role of magic and magical help in our lives.

When they overlap with supernatural storytelling, other speculative genres achieve this as well. In Herbert's *Dune*, Paul avenges his father with his mother's Bene Gesserit training, becoming Kwisatz Haderach. In *Star Wars*, the Jedi use the Force to defeat the Sith. In *Poltergeist 2: The Other Side*, a Native American character named Taylor offers Native Spirit magic protection to repel the evil spirit of Reverend Kane. However, unlike fantasy fiction, science fiction and horror do not totally fall into the supernatural storytelling category. Moreover, supernatural horror often subverts the principle of empowerment. Instead of an organised universe in which humans have a purpose, Lovecraft paints a universe as governed by powerful agents to which humans are insignificant and worthless, challenging our feeling of anthropocentrism. In King's *Pet Sematary,* the desire to resurrect their son using the Native American burial ground turns into a horror when he comes back. It shows that, no matter how tragic our fate, at times we can only accept it and grieve. These works reify the dark aspects of consciousness: "A good horror story is one that functions on a symbolic level, using fictional (and sometimes supernatural) events to help us understand our own deepest real fears" (Stephen King, quoted in Scrivner 2021).

Supernatural storytelling co-opts *magical thinking*, aligning it with the evolutionary principles relevant to survival. Fantasy fiction cautions against the misuse of magic, where an individual prioritises their own selfish goals over the well-being of society. Dark wizards like Saruman in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Voldemort in Rowling's Harry Potter are punished for using magic for selfish ends. Magic in supernatural storytelling, therefore, reinforces social norms and promotes altruism. When it aligns with cooperation, empowerment, and helping others, it is good white magic that gives results. Harry Potter stories, for example, emphasise the difference between Harry and Voldemort. Harry cooperates with his friends and risks his life to protect them. On the other hand, Voldemort uses his followers to achieve his ends, often killing them when they

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[16] Comparative studies have found that young individuals report more negative emotions than the elderly (see Thomsen et al. 2005). Even longitudinal studies show a decrease in negative emotions with age (see Charles, Reynolds, and Gatz 2001).

are no longer needed. In the TV series *Charmed*, the three sisters defeat demons and warlocks not by their individual powers but by standing together. In Japanese *Yu-Gi-Oh!* manga, the power of friendship is the ultimate power, not the magic of the millennium items.

When magic betrays these evolutionary principles and goes against them, is used for selfish ends, or is used to achieve what is considered unnatural, it is dark magic and results in punishment. Dune books and Paul Atreides' journey from man to God can be read as a warning about what happens when power seduces. Sauron and Saruman were Maiar, divine spirits that fell to corruption, power, and ambition. Voldemort's journey to immortality can also be read as a cautionary tale about domains of magic we should not tackle. Even Gilgamesh was told by Utnapishtim that immortality is something that only gods can grant. The only exception to the rule of immortality is an intervention of a force above humans. Ilúvatar brings back Gandalf to fulfil his task. Harry Potter also returns from the in-between to defeat Voldemort. In all cases, divine intervention reinforces the magical thinking that the universe is organised so that good must triumph over evil. These characters were brought back to life by the hand of a higher power, not because of their own ambition.

The power of fantasy fiction to elevate a sense of perceived control and optimism could be measured by the Perceived Control Scale (PCS) and the Optimism–Pessimism Short Scale–2 (SOP2). The problem in designing such a study is defining "fantasy fiction readers." Many works of literature elevate the sense of control and power, but belong to other genres that we do not traditionally associate with fantasy. For example, Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a superhuman for all practical reasons. He solves tasks by deduction, but his intellectual abilities are so well-developed that he outsmarts everyone. Moreover, he does not achieve this through a slow analytical process but presents it to the reader as much more intuitive. Batman, although just an ordinary human, also falls into this category. His intelligence, cunning, technology, and wealth, for all practical reasons, make him superhuman. So, carefully designing the control group by understanding that the argument applies to the principle of perceived control and empowerment that reaches beyond fantasy fiction is very important.

Rigorous scientific research has been conducted in the past five decades on the health benefits of perceived control and mindfulness. Pagnini and colleagues draw on scientific research from the 1960s to 2010 to demonstrate how greater perceived control is associated with a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease, neuroendocrine dysfunction, immune system impairment, and

several cognitive functions, including memory and processing speed (2016, 92). Pagnini and colleagues point out that regardless of health status, those who perceived their health to be poor were six times more likely to die than those who perceived themselves to be in excellent health (92-93). Moreover, they show that perceived control over pain in those with chronic pain is the strongest predictor of the reported pain level. Anxiety and depression were also correlated with low levels of perceived control (92-94).

In another study, Park and colleagues performed an experiment with individuals with type 2 diabetes, a chronic disease characterised by low insulin and high blood sugar levels. They gave them beverages with equal sugar levels but put labels indicating that some drinks had higher sugar levels and others had lower. The results showed that the sugar levels in individuals who believed they were drinking high-sugar beverages were significantly higher than those who thought they were drinking beverages with low-sugar labels (2020, 6). Park and colleagues also cite other research that suggests our expectations can strongly influence our psychology and biology, potentially improving vision, inducing influenza-like symptoms, and impacting weight loss (1).

Over the past 50 years, medical research has emphasised the connection between positive thinking, perceived control, and overall health. Supernatural storytelling, I argue, violates consensus reality to elevate the sense of control. It is no wonder that we intuitively give fairy tales and fantasy to children and that children, in turn, read them with great pleasure over and over. The sense of joy they derive from fantasy is not just because it is fun, but because it empowers them. Gilpin and his colleagues found that fantasy-oriented children have better emotion regulation skills (2015, 923). Taylor argued that imaginary friends are a normal part of growing up and help children cope with adversity (1999, 63).

Subbotsky and colleagues have already explored some benefits of this type of cognitive play. In their experiment, they played 15-minute clips from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* to two groups of 4-year-old and 6-year-old children. One group watched clips featuring magic, while the other saw clips without any magical elements from the same films. Their creativity was measured before and after watching. They concluded that "exposing children to a film with highly magical content would increase their creativity scores" (2010, 269). The group of children who watched clips with magical elements had significantly higher results on the creativity test. Notably, both groups had similar levels of creativity before viewing the clips. In another similar study, which also included children watching clips of the *Harry Potter* film, Subbotsky and

Salter concluded that watching clips with magical content helps children to better discriminate between realistic and fantastic content (2011, 607), contrary to the widespread prejudice that watching fantasy will confuse their notion of reality.

4.4. Lure of the Supernatural

The main argument of this thesis is that supernatural storytelling can be understood in terms of reifying consciousness. To do so, we construct a variety of agents and spaces on the spectrum from *composites* to *the fantastic.* Worlds of speculative fiction are mostly built from composites. No matter how distant Narnia or Middle-earth appear, the majority of agents and spaces we find are such combinations of ontological categories that either do not violate our intuitions or have minor violations of ontological categories. Such violations create a distancing effect. For example, some animals can talk in Narnia, and in Middle-earth, elves are almost immortal. Nonetheless, we understand them as human-like agents. Some of them, like elves, have an exaggerated attribute of extended mortality. Nevertheless, in other respects, their existence follows natural laws. They feel emotions, they remember events, they reason, feel pain, and can be killed.

Elements that fall into *the fantastic* category are rare even in fantasy fiction. Although students learn magic in the Harry Potter novels, the majority of the plot concerns mundane relationships between students, teachers, friends, family, and enemies. In *His Dark Materials*, characters travel to another world with their daemons. However, most of the plot concerns dialogue and relationship development. I have argued that engaging with composites creates a distancing effect, helping us reify elements of our culture and see them from another perspective, learn about their components, and highlight their most important aspects. Engaging with its fantastic aspects helps reify our abstract concepts and emotions and understand them in terms of something visible and tangible.

Additionally, reifying magical thinking elevates a sense of perceived control, presenting the world as influenced by the mind. To clarify, combining elements of ontological categories, humans have created a variety of creatures and invented stories about them. These stories then entered a cultural competition. Those stories in which the supernatural had adaptive benefits have survived. Some benefits explored in this thesis are modelling reality, highlighting its important aspects, better understanding of abstract thoughts and emotions, and an elevated sense of perceived

control. What is left then is to explain why we feel drawn to agents and worlds we know do not exist.

The Australian jewel beetle (*Julodimorpha bakewelli*) almost went extinct because males were not interested in mating with the females. Instead, they went to "mate" with beer bottles that Australians threw near their haunts. The beer bottles were shiny and the same shade of brown as the females. If Australia had not changed its bottles, the beetles would have gone extinct (Hoffman 2019, Chapter 2). Why did jewel beetle males prefer beer bottles over females? Hoffman argues that the optic systems did not evolve to help animals see reality but to enable them to look for its aspects relevant to fitness (2019, Chapter 4). He compares what we see to icons on the desktop. Icons are not real; they are there to simplify complex computer software and highlight functions relevant to users (Chapter 9). Those who know programming understand the illusion the computer interface creates. However, when it comes to reality, there is no way to glimpse into our programming or see the real nature of our reality. For jewel beetles, the programming for mating is apparently "shiny," "a particular shade of brown," and "the bigger the better."

Humans also make similar mistakes. But they are difficult to spot since we all use the same species-specific tools to verify reality. Hoffman posited the Fitness Beats Truth (FBT) theorem, which states that optic systems did not evolve to see reality. He tested his theory in simulations based on game theory, which involved animals that varied in their relationship with reality, as measured by the concept of Truth. Some animals can see reality very clearly, while others cannot. In almost all simulations, organisms that saw reality as it was became extinct. On the other hand, organisms that were high in Fitness but low in Truth survived. The organisms that did not see all the reality, but their optic system was designed in such a way that it highlighted aspects relevant to fitness, were successful in surviving and reproducing (2019, Chapter 4).

Drawing on animal research, Sjolander argues that there is no evidence that the human perspective on reality is in any way more accurate than the perspective of any other animal. The model of reality we have, the way we see it, helps us better adapt to our environment (1997, 598). We cannot see what reality looks like beyond our senses; what we see with our senses is there to help us survive and reproduce, not to understand reality as it is. However, building a model of reality that can help us navigate the world is essential for survival. This model must simultaneously simplify the complexity of information and direct our attention toward aspects relevant to fitness. Stories help shape a mental model of reality, prompting us on what to look for and avoid. This

reinforces evolutionarily significant aspects of our model. No matter how fantastic the world is, love and friendship are always essential. Furthermore, exploring elements of the model through the medium of story can lead us to imagine aspects of reality previously hidden, such as electricity, oxygen, or magnetism, which may prove advantageous.

Our model of reality is not perfect and all-inclusive, but it is built on our personal experience and the shared experiences of others. What we hear and see, and the stories we tell each other, help shape our collective reality. This implies that those aspects of reality that do not fit our model will draw attention to integrating them into our reality model. This explains why our attention is easily hijacked by events that contradict our consensus reality. We are always on the lookout for ways to improve our model, seeking information that will enable us to refine our worldview and create new adaptive opportunities. During the Medieval period, magnetism, for example, was understood to be an influence of demonic forces. It was practitioners of *magia naturalis* (natural magic) who pointed out that the cause of magnetism is in *occult* (Latin hidden) forces (Hanegraaff 2013, 22). The interest in something that seems to violate our intuitions can spark curiosity and lead to the discovery of laws of physics we did not understand before.

Magic tricks are a perfect example of arresting attention because what is presented violates our intuitive understanding of reality. We are then faced with a choice: either to modify our model to include the observed phenomenon or to integrate the observed phenomenon into our existing model, to explain it. Furthermore, it is this tension on the verge of reality, I argue, that draws readers to supernatural storytelling. This is why many horror stories play with the ambiguity of supernatural and psychological explanations, a phenomenon Todorov referred to as *hesitation* (1970). The psychological explanation involves integrating the observed phenomenon into our consensus reality, providing us with a sense of control and security. Failing to do so exposes us to the frightening realisation that reality is not as safe as we would like to believe.

In a series of experiments with children and adults, Subbotsky (2010b) showed that when faced with several unexplainable situations, participants tend to engage in explanatory behaviour the most when it involves the supernatural, more than when it involves novelty or counterintuitivity. From experiments 1 and 2 of this study, it is clear that both children and adults are more drawn to impossible events that are not counterintuitive than a counterintuitive possible event. However, from experiments 2 and 3, we can see that participants were most curious when it involved the possibility of the supernatural, even more than when it was novel or

counterintuitive. Subbotsky explains this phenomenon by positing that supernatural phenomena like magic allow us to break away from the mundane world (2010b, 498). Although I agree that distancing is an important aspect of magic, I would argue that curiosity here is primarily driven by facing the gaps in our model of reality. The explanatory behaviour in Subbotsky's experiments then reveals a desire to integrate the supernatural into the consensus reality. No matter how novel or counterintuitive, new technology will not generate this effect because we do not see it as a threat to our model of reality.

Focusing on the case of Harry Potter magic, Shtulman (2022) shows that, although impossible, magic follows specific rules. Heavier objects, for example, are more difficult to lift than lighter ones. Based on this, I would suggest that we are most interested in events that are just across the border of our consensus reality but not too far away. Something that drastically violates our model of reality is perceived as improbable and thus not worth investigating. However, something that is just on the border of the consensus reality and calls for a modification of our model will generate curiosity. This is also compatible with Boyer and Ramble's (2001) *minimal counterintuitivity* argument. However, Subbotsky's experiments show there is more to the supernatural than the combination of counterintuitive ontological categories. Items draw more attention when they involve a possibility of the supernatural than when they are just novel or counterintuitive (2010b, 498). Many of the new technologies are both novel and counterintuitive. ChatGPT is a program that can talk and give advice. But because the Western sense of consensus reality comes from science, we do not believe that a spirit has possessed our computer.

This suggests that the concept of *the supernatural* is a cultural construct and cannot be explained simply by combining different ontological categories. If we see someone in front of the mirror saying, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all," we would assume something supernatural is at play. However, when we say it to the screen of our phone or laptop, even though we do not understand how we are able to see and speak to a person on the other side of the globe, we do not assume the supernatural. Upal et al. criticised the notion of minimal counterintuitivity by arguing that it assumes that what is counterintuitive in one culture must be counterintuitive in another. Their experiments show that the memorability of a concept is not just a result of its counterintuitivity, but also of the context in which it is presented and the background cultural knowledge that the reader has about the concept (2007, 433).

When it comes to other forms of information gathering, we find out about people, new objects, and spaces mostly by direct experience. However, our interaction with the supernatural is primarily mediated by story. Supernatural storytelling, therefore, offers us an opportunity to explore supernatural realms and, at the same time, offers stories that provide a sense of psychological order on a large scale – a worldview that reflects a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and significance. Fantasy fiction and religious stories offer us a glimpse into the otherworldly, while generating an organised image of the world that entails a specific human role and purpose. Other supernatural experiences, such as drugs, rituals, and magic tricks, are rare and often must be integrated into a narrative to make sense.

The two aspects of supernatural storytelling, *composites* and *the fantastic* are intertwined and make it possible for humans to reify aspects of inner reality and project them onto a much larger scale of the universe, what Asma called *mythopoetic cognition*: "A mythopoetic paradigm or perspective sees the world primarily as a dramatic story of competing personal intentions, rather than a system of objective impersonal laws" (2021, 1). This is where religious stories and fantasy fiction excel. They generate a hierarchically structured universe that entails human position, purpose, meaning, and destiny. Once more, I return to Dissanayake's notion that humans have an intrinsic need to perceive the world as explainable, organised, and known, which gives a sense of meaning and security (1988, 197). Supernatural storytelling facilitates a play with elements of reality, often anthropomorphising them to project the image of the world as influenced by the human mind.

Since humans are adapted to using their theory of mind skills, seeing the world around them as agents with minds creates a feeling that they can be understood, negotiated with, or even controlled. The human mind tends to see the world as inhabited by agents and influenced by invisible forces. I argue that supernatural storytelling reifies this cognitive tendency, co-opting it to align with group morality. Weaving *reified consciousness* into narratives produces a sense of a world as organised, safe, meaningful, and purposeful. Just as beavers create dams to flood the area and expand the space where they feel secure, humans use imagination to create a narrative that entails a sense of order, security, and control in the universe.

4.5. Casting a Wide Net: Entertainment, Pleasure, and Exploration

An alternative account of the question of why supernatural storytelling attracts was given by Dubourg and Baumard (2022). They hypothesised that books, TV series, and graphic novels like *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Avatar*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Final Fantasy*, *One Piece*, *Naruto*, *Star Trek*, and *Game of Thrones* hijack our curiosity for exploration for entertainment purposes. Although I agree that many fantasy worlds offer the exploration of unknown lands for entertainment purposes, they cannot be reduced to our need to explore. Similarly, arguing against Pinker's and Freud's notion that we are attracted to stories because they are pleasurable fantasies, Carroll showed how stories cannot be reduced to mere pleasure technology and serve many more roles to help us better adapt to our natural and cultural environment (2004, 115). Many of our activities, like shopping, sports, and dating, involve entertainment, pleasure, and exploration. However, if we reduce these activities to mere pleasure, entertainment, and exploration, we fail to account for the functions that are specific to literature (Carroll 2004, 114).

However, Dubourg and Baumard's (2022) proposal ran into much bigger problems. Perhaps the most troubling one is that their concept of *imaginary worlds* is vague and changes to fit the argument and evidence. Sobchuk (2022), as well as Norman and Goldstein (2022), contend that the examples that Dubourg and Baumard provide are from science fiction and fantasy. However, fictions that are set in the past, like Renaissance Europe, are equally *imaginary*. Therefore, It is unclear why authors focus on speculative fiction only if their objects of analysis are *imaginary worlds*. Travel literature or the travelogue genre that seems to fit their thesis is omitted, as it did not generate popularity. When it fits their argument, Dubourg and Baumard call speculative fiction "a proxy for fictions with imaginary worlds" (2022, 9). However, when it does not, they exclude works of speculative fiction. For example, they do not tackle E. A. Poe's tales because they do not provide background information to explore (Dubourg and Baumard 2022, 3). Dunk and Mar (2022) suggest that the authors' definition of *imaginary worlds* is circular and excludes religious narratives and stories like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* because they do not fit into their explanation. Dubourg and Baumard define *imaginary worlds* as fiction that allows readers to explore new places, and then posit that readers are attracted to these fictions because they offer an opportunity for exploration (2022, 2).

The spatial exploration theory also does not explain the phenomenon that fans frequently engage with the same fantasy world rather than seeking a new one. I have, on the other hand, argued that curiosity toward events and agents which contradict our consensus reality, as well as a need to integrate these experiences into a coherent and psychologically organised world that entails a significant role and purpose of humans in the universe, drives our attention toward supernatural storytelling. If fantasy fiction helps us to generate a model of the universe with a sense of psychological order and to elevate a sense of perceived control, the return to Hogwarts and Middle-earth makes sense as it reinforces the feeling of empowerment. It is a return to a safe place of possibilities where good triumphs over evil.

Fantasy fiction explores themes such as love, friendship, danger, growing up, and parenting, offering readers a sense of a higher order in human life, meaning, and purpose. If a fantasy world offered its reader an organised world and a feeling of empowerment, the reader would then develop an attachment to this particular world and wish to return to it. This explains why the novel content like *Fantastic Beasts*: *The Secrets of Dumbledore* (Worldwide Box Office $407 million) received less popularity than the original *Harry Potter* like *Deathly Hallows 2* (Worldwide Box Office $1,3 billion) (The Numbers A). It also explains why *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* play is a sequel to the original Harry Potter novels and features a return to Hogwarts, as well as why, in 2025, the production of the *Harry Potter* TV series will start, once more adapting the books.

Dunk and Mar (2022) contend that "the evidence cited in support of empirical questions is non-empirical in nature, or unpublished and not available for examination or critique." They also find that, contrary to the evidence presented in the article, extraversion is negatively correlated with the appeal to imaginary worlds. Dunk and Mar (2022) state that this negative correlation cannot be explained by the position that exploration drives our interest in imaginary worlds. Moreover, several authors have shown that fiction is more than just entertainment. It serves as a social glue, uniting members of a community under one identity, simulates real-life problems, and, however fantastic, conveys practical knowledge (Wilbanks et al. 2022; Sugiyama 2022a; Sugiyama 2022b; Sarah and Harris 2022; Moore and Hills 2022). I agree with Dunk and Mar (2022), who argue that there is a distinction between real-world exploration and the exploration of imaginary worlds. The latter is related to cognitive exploration and provides a better explanation for our appeal to fantasy fiction. This is in line with my proposition that, in the case of the

supernatural, curiosity is sparked by a need to integrate the phenomenon into our consensus reality. However, this curiosity is just what initially draws us to the supernatural. It does not encapsulate its adaptive benefits.

Norman and Goldstein (2022) suggest that fantasy provides emotional distancing and, therefore, safety. Nissel and Woolley (2022) also emphasise distancing and safety by drawing on research by Sanders from the Institutes of Health (NIH) that "estimated that 89% of children who experience sexual abuse create imaginary companions." Furthermore, they point out evidence that children who engage in pretence explore more options and perform better in real life. Contrary to Dubourg and Baumard (2022), Beck and Harris (2022) show evidence that children's preference for fantasy increases with age, which helps them solve problems. This contradicts Dubourg and Baumard's (2022) claim that the interest in imaginary worlds decreases with age. However, the study cited by Dubourg and Baumard only dealt with adults; the youngest participant was 18 (see Purhonen, Gronow, and Rahkonen 2009, 40). Another problem supporting their arguments with this study is that it reports a decrease in interest for "thrillers and whodunits and science fiction, fantasy and horror" with age (45), but only some offer explorative opportunities.

To summarise, I have argued that speculative fiction is the modern successor to supernatural storytelling. Of the speculative family, fantasy fiction is the only genre that completely falls into the supernatural storytelling category. However, the supernatural often plays a vital role in horror and science fiction. My argument was that constructing and consuming stories about unreal worlds and agents is not just a form of entertainment but can be seen as an adaptive behaviour. Breaking reality into its constituents and rebuilding it can lead to a better understanding of what constitutes reality, boost creativity, and help find new solutions to problems. Creating a variety of races distances us and highlights elements of human culture, enabling us to see ourselves from another perspective, to question and negotiate aspects of our culture. Furthermore, presenting humans as empowered and creating a structured world governed by the mind establishes a worldview in which human beings have a role, a purpose, and a meaning, elevating a sense of security and perceived control.

This begs the question: if supernatural storytelling is such a powerful tool, why are not all stories with supernatural elements? Why is speculative fiction often looked down on? The historical aspects of this question will be explored in Part 3 of the thesis. Still, here, I would like to point out two answers, one considering storytelling in general and the other more specific to

supernatural storytelling. In Part 1 of the thesis, I explored storytelling as an exercise of our theory of mind skills. Through stories, we transfer knowledge and gain unavailable experiences, with the aim of better adapting. But practising learned skills in real-life settings is much more critical than just engaging with story simulations. Spending a whole life reading stories and avoiding real life is far from adaptive. Supernatural storytelling comes with even greater risk. It can be and has been used to manipulate the sense of reality. Individuals who are curious about the otherworldly or have more need for control, especially in times of crisis, can fall victim to those who abuse these stories for their selfish ends.

Societies we know about usually draw a clear distinction between stories and reality, and even more so between fantasy and reality. Wiessner studied 174 stories of the !Kung, Bushmen of southern Africa, comparing the types of conversations they had during the day and at night during fireside gatherings (2014, 1). Stories (fiction) constituted only 6% of their daytime discussions but 81% of the firelight talks (3). Moreover, it is only during the nighttime that they tell stories about the supernatural (6). This suggests that distancing is an essential aspect of supernatural storytelling, which is required to be an effective cognitive playground. The nighttime for the !King is a signal to approach these stories differently, similar to what Sugiyama called the "distant time aspect" (2021). Many fairy tales begin with "once upon a time," and *Star Wars* with "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away." Tooby and Cosmindes argued that we do not store information just as information, but as "might-be-true, the true-over-there, the once-was-true, the what-others-believe-is-true, the true-only-if-I-did-that, the not-true-here, the what-they-want-me-to-believe-is-true, the will-someday-be-true, the certainly-is-not-true, the what-he-told-me, the seems-true-on-the-basis-of-these claims" (2001, 20). In this case, nighttime is also part of the signal that prompts us to read the story as fantasy.

This explains my insistence on the play aspect of storytelling, as introduced by Dissanayake (1992, 43) and Boyd (2009, 80-98). Engaging with these stories playfully can be seen as adaptive behaviour. However, supernatural storytelling can turn maladaptive if the storyteller confuses the reader's notion of reality. The audience might be deceived into believing what the storyteller says is true. The storyteller might abuse the audience's need to generate an organised model of the universe, which entails human purpose and value, or their need for a sense of empowerment and control that supernatural storytelling offers. All around the world, children read, watch, and play video games, dressing up as Harry Potter characters, attending costume parties,

casting spells, and feeling like wizards and witches. Walking in the shoes of characters who are just like them, but wield magic, elevates their feeling of confidence and control. Children read Harry Potter in pretend play mode. They do not jump out of the window with the broom, thinking they can fly. As Subbotsky and colleagues (2011) showed, magic in the Harry Potter films does not confuse our sense of reality, but helps us better understand what is real and what is not. I would add that it is fun and play.

Tapping into this feeling through stories facilitates the exploration of these neural pathways, which are relevant to real-life activities, such as wearing our lucky socks or a favourite t-shirt on a game day or during an exam. Taylor and Brown (1988) provide a literature review on research that highlights the benefits of purposefully distorting reality. They conclude: "the mentally healthy person appears to have the enviable capacity to distort reality in a direction that enhances self-esteem, maintains beliefs in personal efficacy, and promotes an optimistic view of the future. These three illusions, as we have called them, appear to foster traditional criteria of mental health, including the ability to care about the self and others, the ability to be happy or contented, and the ability to engage in productive and creative work" (1988, 204). However, believing too much in mind over matter can be detrimental to psychological well-being. Obsessive-compulsive patients report that they believe that if they think something bad, something bad will happen. Furthermore, fantasy fiction, the modern successor to supernatural storytelling, can be seen as a socially acceptable way of practising magical thinking in societies where magic is stereotyped as heresy or superstition.

I have argued that supernatural storytelling reifies *magical thinking*. It coopts this cognitive tendency to teach how to manipulate the sense of security and control. More importantly, fantasy fiction aligns *magical thinking* with socially beneficial forms of behaviour. This will become clear in the following chapters, where I give examples of magical practices in fantasy fiction. What is important for my argument is to view storytelling as a mechanism through which cognitive tendencies, such as *magical thinking* or *agent attribution*, are co-opted. These cognitive tendencies can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the context. However, in fantasy fiction, they are structured and formulated in a way that aligns with social rules and moral norms. This is why I insist on the "consciousness" part of *reifying consciousness*. Our mind is not a set of disconnected boxes. In our conscious experience, *magical thinking* will be informed by other conceptual

domains. Therefore, its reification in the form of a narrative will result in a product that is informed by other aspects of our conscious experience.

This is true for other types of supernatural storytelling, not just fantasy fiction. King's *Pet Sematary* is paradigmatic in this regard. In one of the scenes, Louis has a dream or fantasy in which Gage never died, and his family is happy. But the dream does not last. Could King's novel end in Gage's revival and a happy ending? Why does King not reify the fantasy of the revival of Louise's and Rachel's son? What would that teach? That we can use magic to solve our problems and resurrect our loved ones? This does not happen even in the Harry Potter series. The contrast between the dream and the horrifying reality of Gage's return shows that sometimes it is best if our dreams do not come true. In storytelling, magic is not presented as an all-powerful force that humans can use to fulfil all their wishes. King's novel reifies magic to teach that although the human mind has a propensity to fantasise, sometimes the best and the only solution is to accept reality, no matter how difficult.

5. Harry Potter Stories as a Supernatural Playground[17]

In what follows, I will apply the proposed theory to the reading of Harry Potter novels and films. My reading will focus on the stories as a type of cognitive playground that includes elements of the supernatural, what I will call a *supernatural playground*. Furthermore, I will be interested in what supernatural elements add to the narrative from a biocultural perspective. I have suggested that supernatural storytelling consists of *composites* and *the fantastic*. However, these should not be seen as binaries, but elements on the spectrum. In *true composites*, reality is disassembled. In reassembling it, elements retain their original function. This is the worldbuilding function of supernatural storytelling. These supernatural agents do not exist, but their existence would not violate the laws of physics. In other words, they could exist. These unusual combinations and exaggerations of elements of reality signal fictionality and spark curiosity. As we move toward the fantastic end of the spectrum, fantasy worlds can be understood as *reified* aspects of the human mind. Their violations of the laws of physics stem from our subjective experience not always correlating with the real-life event. Therefore, grasping for a conceptual domain related to physical things (shapes, forms, colours, agents, processes) to *reify* an aspect of inner reality produces such violations that we understand the result as *the fantastic*.

Dubourg and colleagues proposed that we are attracted to fiction because it mimics evolved cognitive mechanisms (2024, 7). Their model, however, treats fantasy fiction like any other story. Harry Potter stories, for example, are understood in terms of romantic love, parental love, predator detection, etc. Although I agree with the general assertion that stories "activate evolved cognitive mechanisms" (22), I propose building an evolutionary model of fantasy fiction (and other stories with supernatural elements) that focuses on what makes fantasy distinct from mimetic genres. Focusing on magic, I argue that Harry Potter stories attract readers because they provide a sense of empowerment and perceived control. As readers walk in the shoes of a colourful diversity of Rowling's characters, they share the characters' sense of magical empowerment. I will also discuss how these elements come together to generate an image of the universe that externalises concepts

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[17] Parts of this chapter are published in the form of an article: Stefanović, Armin. 2023. "'Yer a Wizard:' How Fantasy Fiction Facilitates Playing with Emotions and Reinforces Magical Thinking." Childhood. Literature and Culture 5 (2): 114–133. https://doi.org/10.32798/dlk.1204.

like good, evil, love, and power and entails psychological order where humans have a specific role and purpose.

5.1. From *Composites* to *the Fantastic* in the Harry Potter Universe

Reifying consciousness, we reach for available concepts from various ontological categories and combine them. These combinations can be imagined on a spectrum from composites to the fantastic. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, we meet Buckbeak, a male hippogriff. Hippogriffs are *true composites* consisting of a combination of elements from two animal ontological categories: a horse and an eagle. In its composition, each element retains its original function: legs are for running, and wings are for flying. The *true composites* do not violate our intuitions about the laws of physics, but because they do not exist in the real world, they are a signal to understand the story as a fantasy. I have argued that creating and consuming composites facilitates a form of play with reality to teach about its constituent elements (in this case, parts of an animal). Combining parts of different animals can also have a *superstimulus* effect.[18] Defeating such an animal, conversely, signals a hero's bravery and strength. Adding up elements from different animal categories or enlarging them makes the animal more dangerous.

Moving on the composite – the fantastic spectrum, when elements from entirely different ontological categories are combined, we get an agent that not only does not exist in the real world but also cannot. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Harry's first task in the Triwizard tournament is the Hungarian Horntail, a dragon. Although the image of the dragon varies from culture to culture, it usually consists of a combination of elements of mammals, reptiles, and birds. In addition, dragons breathe fire in many cultures and the Harry Potter universe. It is this element that makes them magical. Dragons can have different magical abilities in other story worlds, like in *Eragon*. Nevertheless, we intuitively recognise that breathing fire is not an element of the animal ontological category and, therefore, register dragons as something more than an ordinary composite. However, the violation is still not significant enough to call it *fantastic*. The added element still functions as a *superstimulus*. Many superheroes also fall into this category, as they are built from "human" plus an element that does not belong to the human category, which gives them mastery over fire, electricity, or ice.

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[18] See *superstimulus* in Sperber and Hirschfeld 2004, 44-45, *supercharged predator* in Clasen 2012, 381 and *super agent* in Barrett and Keil 1996, 224.

Returning to Hogwarts in *The Order of the Phoenix*, for the first time, Harry noticed that the carriages that take students from the train station to the castle were pulled by some animals – horses with wings of a bat, a skeletal body, and a face with reptilian features. Harry asked Ron what these animals were, but Ron could not see them even when he was face to face with the horse. On the other hand, Luna could see them from the first year (Rowling 2003, 197-199). It is only later in the novel that Hermione explains that "The only people who can see thestrals ... are people who have seen death" (Rowling 2003, 446). Luna could see thestrals because she saw her mother die. In the previous year, Cedric was killed before Harry's eyes at the end of the Triwizard Tournament. That is why now he can also see thestrals. This violation is not only an "invisibility" element added to an animal category. The added element relates to the abstract category of death. This makes thestrals the *true fantastic*.

Technically, the fantastic is also a composite; it consists of different ontological categories, but in this case, the violations of ontological intuitions are such that we understand them to be impossible or even unnatural. Unlike in previous cases, where an element from one category is simply added to another or the existing element is enlarged, the *true fantastic* reifies aspects of consciousness, such as abstract ontological categories like good, evil, life, death, love, and sacred. Zusne and Jones discussed the phenomenon of reification in terms of understanding abstract categories as physical processes (1982, 267). Aradi demonstrated how conceptual metaphors facilitate our understanding of abstract concepts by describing them in terms of something tangible, palpable, and visible. This is illustrated in the cross-cultural metaphor of the Grim Reaper, which helps us understand death in terms of "ceasing of vital biological functions" (2022, 71). *The fantastic* is the result of these cognitive faculties, giving faces and voices to internal aspects of our cognition.

This facilitates understanding them in terms of something familiar. Weaving them into narratives generates a sense of psychological order. The Grim Reaper image is constructed from several categories and borrows their denotative and connotative meanings. The reaper is associated with the harvest season, which embodies this concept as a natural process. Life is then seen in terms of a cycle, so it is not just natural but also inevitable. Death is an abstract category here represented as an agent. I have argued that humans, as ultra-social animals, are most comfortable with agent-related categories as they create an opportunity to apply our theory of mind skills and generate a feeling of communicability and familiarity. Something vague and misty, like death, now

has a face and a voice. Many cultures have a supernatural agent that guides souls to the afterlife. In Nordic mythology, Valkyries take the souls of those who die in battle to Valhalla. In Greek mythology, Hermes escorts souls to the entrance of the Underworld, and Charon, he ferryman, takes them across the river Styx.

In *The Deathly Hallows,* to explain what the Deathly Hallows are, Xenophilius Lovegood gives a book to Hermione to read to Harry and Ron. "The Tale of the Three Brothers" is famous among wizards and witches. It begins in fairy tale style: "There were once three brothers who were travelling along a lonely, winding road at twilight" (Rowling 2007, 406). The brothers arrived at the river and used their wands to make a bridge across the water. "They were halfway across it when they found their path blocked by a hooded figure. And Death spoke to them. He was angry that he had been cheated out of three new victims, for travellers usually drowned in the river" (Rowling 2007, 407). Instead of punishing them, the death congratulated the three brothers and offered a prize for their success. The oldest brother demanded the most powerful wand. The second brother asked for a stone that could bring back the dead. The youngest brother, suspicious of Death's offerings, asks for something he can use to hide from Death so he cannot follow him, and Death gives him his own invisibility cloak (Rowling 2007, 407-408).

The three brothers continued with their lives. The eldest brother boasted that he had a wand that made him invincible, so one day, when he was drunk and asleep, a thief came, slit his throat, and stole his wand. The second brother brought back his dead love to life, "Yet she was sad and cold, separated from him as by a veil" (Rowling 2007, 409). She did not belong to the mortal world and suffered there, so he killed himself to join her in death. This is how Death tricked two brothers to punish them for escaping him on the bridge. But Death could not find the youngest brother: "It was only when he had attained a great age that the youngest brother finally took off the Cloak of Invisibility and gave it to his son. And then he greeted Death as an old friend and went with him gladly, and, equals; they departed this life" (Rowling 2007, 409).

This story is relevant to the macro narrative of the Harry Potter novels, but here, I will focus on the analysis of the tale itself. Firstly, death is represented as an agent, a cloaked figure. It is a mysterious entity, depicted in terms of an agent, which facilitates understanding it as something familiar. Death is described as cunning and someone you can bargain with. He was angry because the brothers used magic to cross the river and felt cheated. Anger and cunning are human traits. Even Harry was surprised when Death spoke: "' Sorry,' interjected Harry, 'but Death spoke to

them?' to which Hermione replied: "It's a fairy tale, Harry!" (Rowling 2007, 409). The story is about cheating death, which resonates with the general theme of the novels. The eldest brother was driven by his pride, so he wanted to be the most powerful wizard. The second brother wanted to humiliate Death and nullify his work. The youngest brother, typical of fairy tales, was wise. He did not trust Death, but did not act out of vice. Even though he prolonged his life with this bargain, living until his old age, ultimately, he was claimed by Death. The tale shows that in the end, death cannot be cheated. Moreover, the story is about accepting death, as the youngest brother "greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals, they departed this life" (Rowling 2007, 409).

Something that is beyond human understanding, an abstract concept like death, is reified in a supernatural agent. Because it is an agent, we can understand it in terms of the ontological category of "human." This brings about a feeling of familiarity with the distant and abstract concept. Assigning a voice to this entity facilitates bargaining. Thunder, fire, ocean, and death are not influenced by language. Conversely, agents can be bargained with, prayed to, pleaded with, and sometimes even cheated. Supernatural storytelling transgresses the rules of our ontological categorising; notwithstanding, essential laws of nature remain – death cannot be cheated; sooner or later, everyone dies. Nevertheless, the central message of the tale is about acceptance – arguably, the central theme of the Harry Potter novels. Death is here reified into an agent and woven into a narrative so it can be accepted. In the end, death becomes an equal, an old friend. Something abstract, distant, and horrifying is translated into a cognitive category with connotations of familiar and safe, generating a sense of psychological organisation. This is the chief function of *the fantastic*, I argue.

We are pulled into fantasy worlds by composite agents and spaces. As violations of ontological categories are not significant, composites form a bridge between the real and the fantasy. In *The Philosopher's Stone* (or *The Sorcerer's Stone* in the American version), we find Harry living with his aunt Petunia, uncle Vernon, and cousin Dudley. The narrator describes them as normal individuals living everyday, ordinary lives: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much. They were the last people you'd expect to be involved in anything strange or mysterious, because they just didn't hold with such nonsense" (Rowling 1998, 1). The first chapters of *Philosopher's Stone* give

the reader the impression that Harry does not belong with the Dursleys. In contrast to their "normality," Harry dreams of flying cars and talks to snakes.

The narrator paints the vast gap between Harry and the Dursleys. Harry lives in a cupboard under the stairs, while his cousin Dudley is a spoiled kid who gets thirty presents for his birthday. Harry receives no attention; in fact, he tries to stay invisible, not to provoke his family. When letters from Hogwarts started arriving for Harry, the Dursleys made sure to destroy them. In one scene, letters start flying into the house, and as Harry tries to catch one of his letters, Uncle Vernon grabs him and throws him into the hall (Rowling 1998, 41). The abuse and humiliation Harry must endure make the reader sympathise with the young protagonist. Harry is an orphan living in a family that does not love him, and he is abused verbally and physically by his uncle and cousin. His only getaway option is invitation letters from Hogwarts that the Dursleys destroy.

Everything changed for Harry's eleventh birthday. In contrast to Dudley's thirty presents, Harry usually gets "a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks" (Rowling 1998, 43). However, this time Harry is visited by Rubeus Hagrid, the Keeper of the Keys at Hogwarts, who brings him a chocolate cake and a letter of invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Hagrid does not use magic to overpower Uncle Vernon, but strength. Being larger and stronger, he takes Vernon's gun and folds it. This scene is a parallel to the one where Vernon, being larger and stronger, grabs and throws Harry. Hagrid does not use strength to punish Dudley, but he magically gives him a pigtail. Even though Hagrid is a giant, his appearance is not frightening to the reader as he acts as Harry's protector. It is Hagrid who introduces Harry to the magical world, telling him that his family lied to him – his parents did not die in a car accident; the dark lord murdered them. He also tells Harry he is famous in the magical world and, most importantly, a wizard (Rowling 1998, 50-51).

Hagrid takes Harry to the magical bank Gringotts, where Harry's parents left money for him and to Diagon Alley, where he buys items he will need at Hogwarts: black robes, a pointed hat, a wand, a cauldron, and an owl (Rowling 1998, 66-67). Their conversation reveals that there is more to the world than Harry ever dreamed; just around the corner lies a world of magic, goblins, and dragons. Our protagonist still had to live with Dursleys, but now he knew that in one month, he would go to the magical school of Hogwarts (Rowling 1998, 88). At King's Cross station in London, Harry finds Platform Nine and Three Quarters with the help of the Weasley family, whose son Ron is also a newcomer to Hogwarts.

A contrast is drawn between his uncle Vernon, who tells Harry that such a station does not exist and leaves him alone to find it, and Molly Weasley, Ron's mother, who kindly helps Harry to find the platform: "Don't talk rubbish," said Uncle Vernon. "There is no platform nine and three-quarters" (Rowling 1998, 90) … "Not to worry," she said. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous. Go on, go now before Ron." (Rowling 1998, 93) Harry goes through the in-between the platforms and finds himself boarding the Hogwarts Express. So, the magical world for Harry is not just a world of spells and fantastic beasts; it also marks a point in his journey from an abused orphan in a cupboard to a powerful wizard. What is more, it is a change from being unloved, abandoned, and ignored to finding friends and becoming a part of the Weasley family.

In the Hogwarts Express, Ron and Hermione introduce Harry to the magical world. They share chocolate frogs, discuss Albus Dumbledore, try to cast a spell, and talk about Quidditch, a famous sport of the wizarding world. After the train, the trio and other Hogwarts students take small boats for two and glide across the lake toward the castle of Hogwarts (Rowling 1998, 111-112). Although Harry hears about many magical things during his travels to Hogwarts, it is when he arrives at his school that magic truly comes alive: "Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place" (Rowling 1998, 116). At Hogwarts, there is a talking hat, ghosts fly around, candles float midair, stairs move, and portraits are alive. Rowling builds her world as a composite to signal the difference between Harry's mundane life and his new home. The violations of ontological categories are minor and have an effect of distancing: stairs move, candles and brooms fly.

From a cognitive perspective, the first two novels are for children. These minor violations create a playground for young brains to juggle ontological categories. They are, however, sufficient to produce a distancing effect even with an adult reader. Moving portraits and ghosts are more complex composites as they are a projection of Hogwarts' past. However, this aspect is not explored in the first two novels, so their function remains ornamental. Nevertheless, even in the first novel, Rowling introduces *the fantastic*: "It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame, standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: *Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi*" (Rowling 1998, 207). In the mirror, Harry saw his parents and other deceased family members. The inscription translates as "I show not your

face but your heart's desire." Dumbledore explained how the mirror works: "It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you" (Rowling 1998, 213). In other words, the mirror reifies desires. This is important as it is the first time we glimpse Harry's traumatic past from his perspective.

In *Philosopher's Stone*, Voldemort attempts to return using the philosopher's stone. He almost succeeds, but while strangling Harry, his arms and face started burning (Rowling 1998, 294-295). Magic in *Philosopher's Stone* mainly reifies the intention of the wizard. It is either telekinesis, moving objects with the mind, or transfiguration, transforming one thing into another. However, at the end of the novel, Rowling introduces magic as a reification of the more abstract content of consciousness:

> "Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good." (Rowling 1998, 299)

The Sacrificial Protection charm that Harry's mother cast to protect him from Voldemort when he was a baby will be further explored in the later novels. But already in the first novel, Rowling uses magic to reify the feeling of a mother's love as a power that protects her child from evil, even when she is not there anymore. Because such a feeling exists only in consciousness, reifying it appears as *the fantastic*.

5.2. *Reified Consciousness* in the Harry Potter Universe

Much of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is about worldbuilding. We learn that witches and wizards have house elves, that cars can fly, and that trees can move. The element of danger is introduced as the Chamber of Secrets is opened, and the Basilisk, a giant snake, roams around Hogwarts. The familiar and safe place is now turned into a place of danger. Basilisk is almost a true composite, an enlarged snake. The only violation is that it has a magical ability to kill anyone it looks at. However, during the events of *The Chamber of Secrets*, it did not kill anyone. Its victims did not face Basilisk directly, but caught its reflection, which caused paralysis. The novel, therefore, follows the cognitive development of children, to whom it would be traumatic if

Hogwarts students were killed. In the end, victims were given Mandrake Restorative Draught and recovered from the paralysis. More directly, the death of the student, Cedric Diggory, will be introduced only in *The Goblet of Fire*, the fourth volume.

Just like Harry, before he was known as Voldemort, Tom was a student at Hogwarts. When he opened the chamber, a fellow student, Myrtle Warren, also known as Moaning Myrtle, found herself there and was killed. She is the only known person to have been killed by the Basilisk. During the events of *The Chamber,* Myrtle is a ghost at Hogwarts. She informs Harry about these events (Rowling 1999a, 299). So, the killing does not actually occur during *The Chamber's* events. But the character of Myrtle is important to us because she is not a simple composite. She appears as the disembodied mind of a girl who was killed in Hogwarts. As such, she is a reified memory of a person. The fantastic space of Hogwarts further explores our cognitive capacity of retaining the image of individuals after their death. Mrytle talks to Harry and reveals she was killed in the second-floor girls' bathroom, which gives Harry a clue to where the entrance to the chamber is.

The Chamber introduces the fantastic item relevant to the narrative's macro level—the diary of Tom Riddle. During the events of *The Chamber*, Harry finds Tom's diary. We do not yet know that the diary is a Horcrux, an item into which Voldemort has sealed a part of his soul to become immortal. However, we learn that through the diary, Voldemort could possess Ginny, open the Chamber of Secrets, and release the Basilisk. Harry does not know that Riddle is Voldemort, so he keeps playing with the diary, intrigued by the messages that keep appearing. It is only when Harry finds the Chamber and meets the ghost of Tom Riddle that he learns that the voice from the diary is Voldemort. So, the reified past, a memory, in the form of supernatural agents, returns to help or to harm. In both cases, it is unresolved past events that summon the ghosts. In the case of Myrtle, it is her unresolved murder, for which Tom framed Hagrid. In the case of Voldemort, it is Harry's traumatic past.

The Prisoner of Azkaban further explores the reification of consciousness in terms of the fantastic. The novels become progressively dark. The abuse Harry suffers in the Dursleys' home from Vernon's sister, Aunt Marge, at the novel's beginning is much harsher compared to the scenes from the first two novels. Talking about Harry's parents, Marge says: "It's one of the basic rules of breeding," … "You see it all the time with dogs. If there's something wrong with the bitch, there'll be something wrong with the pup" (Rowling 1999b, 25). Then she further comments on Harry's mother: "It all comes down to blood, as I was saying the other day. Bad blood will out.

Now, I'm saying nothing against your family, Petunia" — she patted Aunt Petunia's bony hand with her shovel-like one — "but your sister was a bad egg. They turn up in the best families. Then she ran off with a wastrel and here's the result right in front of us" (Rowling 1999b, 28). After that, Marge insults the memory of Harry's father: "As I expected!" said Aunt Marge, taking a huge swig of brandy and wiping her chin on her sleeve. "A no-account, good-for-nothing, lazy scrounger…" (Rowling 1999b, 28).

When Harry revolts and says that his parents did not die in a car crash, she retorts: "They died in a car crash, you nasty little liar, and left you to be a burden on their decent, hardworking relatives!" screamed Aunt Marge, swelling with fury. "You are an insolent, ungrateful little" (Rowling 1999b, 29). At this moment, Harry could no longer control his anger and magically inflated Marge like a balloon. Marge floated in the dining room while Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia tried to catch her. The novel opens up by portraying magic as the reification of the emotion of anger.

Harry was trying to control his anger because Uncle Vernin promised that if nothing weird happened during Aunt Marge's stay, he would sign a letter allowing Harry to visit Hogsmade for Christmas. Rowling explores other narratological tools to express both Harry's suppressed and expressed anger. To distract himself, Harry tries to remember lessons from the handbook for flying brooms. He even goes out into the hallway to take deep breaths. Nevertheless, when he could not suppress his anger, he jumped to his feet and yelled in defence of his parents: "'They didn't die in a car crash!' said Harry, who found himself on his feet" (Rowling 1999b, 29). The power of anger to influence his behaviour, despite his efforts to control himself, is expressed by the phrase "found himself." These narratological tools serve as objective correlatives, translating emotions to the reader. However, *the fantastic* reifies the intention of the mind under emotion. Unable to suppress his anger, Harry first blew up the wineglass Aunt Marge was holding. The incident was overlooked as Marge did not suspect Harry. However, when she continued to insult Harry's dead parents, his anger exploded, and he inflated her. He then went to his room, picked up his things, and ran from Dursley's home, deciding never to return (Rowling 1999b, 25-30).

The novel opens with the news about the killer Sirius Black on the loose, followed by the abuse in the Dursleys' family and running away from home. Just before Harry boarded the Knight Bus, he felt someone was following him, watching him. When he cast Lumos to see who or what was hiding in the gap between the garage and the fence, he saw "something very big, with wide,

gleaming eyes" (Rowling 1999b, 33). With the killer on the loose and nowhere to go, Harry boards the Knight Bus. While riding the bus, he reads more news about Black, who is described as a supporter of Voldemort. Finally, Harry finds his way to the Leaky Cauldron and, with the help of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, gets a room to stay there until he boards the Hogwarts Express. The reader is relieved as Harry boards the train to Hogwarts, surrounded by his friends. But the relief did not last. The lamps in the train go out, and the trio finds themselves in darkness. The atmosphere slowly intensifies:

> Standing in the doorway, illuminated by the shivering flames in Lupin's hand, was a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downward, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, grayish, slimy-looking, and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water…
>
> But it was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of its black cloak.
> And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it were trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings.
> An intense cold swept over them all. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart…
> Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though of water. He was being dragged downward, the roaring growing louder…
> And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't… a thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him… (Rowling, 1999b, 83–84)

This was Harry's first encounter with a dementor, a wraith-like dark creature who can suck the happiness out of its victims, forcing them to relive their worst memories.

The very presence of dementors lowers the temperature and brings despair. Not only is Harry overwhelmed by unpleasant emotions, but he is also forced to relive the death of his mother. He was just a baby when his mother was killed in front of his eyes by Voldemort. As the dementor fed on Harry's happy memories, it forced him to relive his worst experience. This shows that dementors can delve deep into their victims' souls and bring out events from their infancy. The scream, the pleading, the terrified scream that Harry heard in this scene was his mother's. As is often the case with trauma, Harry does not immediately recognise it. This time, Harry was saved by the newly appointed professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Remus Lupin.

The dementors are guardians of the magical prison, Azkaban, from which Sirius Black escaped. In their third year, during the events of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, dementors roam around

Hogwarts to protect students from Black. However, during the Quidditch match, Harry is attacked by not one, but a hundred dementors:

> At least a hundred dementors, their hidden faces pointing up at him, were standing beneath him. It was as though freezing water were rising in his chest, cutting at his insides. And then he heard it again… Someone was screaming, screaming inside his head… a woman…
> "Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"
> "Stand aside, you silly girl… stand aside, now…."
> "Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead –"
> Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain… What was he doing? Why was he flying? He needed to help her… She was going to die… She was going to be murdered…
> He was falling, falling through the icy mist.
> "Not Harry! Please… have mercy… have mercy…."
> A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more (Rowling, 1999b, 178–179).

Harry lost consciousness, fell off the broom, and if there were not Dumbledore to magically slow down his fall, he would be dead. In the aftermath of this event, Harry recognised that the screams he heard while reliving his traumatic memories were his mother's.

As readers follow our heroes in their adventures, they identify with their feelings and choices. Unlike in mimetic representation, the fantastic does not have to define the emotion it reifies. Dementors are examples of the *true fantastic* – emotional states and affects reified in the form of an agent. Shields argues that the fantasy genre is very promising for representing and discussing trauma: "As these tales move between worlds, they intertwine narratives, histories, and dreams that create a provocative and multi-layered experience troubling the known and the familiar" (2018, 10). This is undoubtedly the case with *Harry Potter* novels and films. A dementor's kiss becomes a way to reify drowning in negative affects when trauma is triggered. This is how Krystal defines traumatic response: "a paralyzed, overwhelmed state, with immobilization, withdrawal, possible depersonalization, evidence of disorganization" (1978, 90). Furthermore, he describes a state of being overwhelmed by unbearable affects under which a subject feels helpless as indicative of trauma: "In this situation, the patient experiences himself as "flooded" by emotion and dreads that the emotion not only will be "endlessly" violent and unbearable and overwhelm all executive functions, but will go on to destroy him" (Krystal 1978, 92). This is exactly what happened to Harry as he was experiencing a demenor's kiss.

Mate argues that "Trauma is not what happens *to* you but what happens *inside* you" (2022, Part I). Or as Kolk says: "All trauma is preverbal" (2014, Part I). Because of this, Kolk asserts,

those who suffer trauma have difficulty speaking about it. The challenge for a narrator is how to express something that happens inside, something we cannot discuss. Interestingly, Kolk gives an example of this speechlessness by quoting Shakespeare: "Shakespeare captures this state of speechless Terror in Macbeth, after the murdered king's body is discovered: 'Oh horror! horror! horror! Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee! Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!'" (2014, Part I) Therefore, the description of the traumatic event does not do justice to the experience of trauma, as what the subject feels does not correlate with what happened. In that case, *the fantastic*, which transgresses the boundaries of the real, becomes a potent tool for reifying trauma, describing reality in terms of how one feels, not how it looks, filtered through the rational mind.

The fantastic, by definition, has a distancing effect on the reader, and so it can be a tool to introduce difficult topics to children. In *The Order of the Phoenix*, Professor Umbridge tortures Harry. Her method of punishing students is to give a magical quill to a student and tell him to write "I must not tell lies." As the student writes the sentence on a parchment, the same sentence appears on his hand "cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel" (Rowling 2003, 266-267). There are many torture scenes in the Harry Potter novels, but perhaps the most difficult one is in *The Deathly Hallows*, when Bellatrix tortures Hermione. The reader is already informed about the sadism of Bellatrix, as she was the one to torture Neville's parents into insanity. This scene is especially difficult because Harry and Ron are trapped in the basement and can hear Hermione's screams.

The scene's intensity is achieved by a combination of what Horváth calls *felt* and *perceived* fear (2022, 33). The narrator switches between the *perceived fear*, describing how Ron and Harry feel when they hear Hermione being tortured upstairs, as well as Hermione's screams themselves, and the *felt fear* as the reader enters the sinister place of Malfoy Manor, crowded with Death Eaters. The reader is there, witnessing the torture as well as the characters' reactions to the torture: "Hermione was screaming again: The sound went through Harry like physical pain. Barely conscious of the fierce prickling of his scar, he too started to run around the cellar, feeling the walls for he hardly knew what, knowing in his heart that it was useless. "What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!" Hermione's screams echoed off the walls upstairs, Ron was half sobbing as he pounded the walls with his fists" (Rowling 2007, 466). However, the reader is aware that Bellatrix tortures Hermione magically with the Cruciatus curse. The curse reifies Bellatrix's

sadistic intentions but also provides a distancing effect. The reader is aware that the scene is not real. The fantastic nature of the scene reinforces this awareness, making even a difficult scene like this appropriate for children.

5.3. Spells and Curses in the Harry Potter Universe

Magic in fiction, although typically falls into *the fantastic* category, also ranges from simple violations to more complex reification of abstract categories. Superheroes are usually created by adding an ability to the ontological category of "human." Or by enlarging a natural human capacity. Elijah Price, also known as Glass, has superhuman intelligence in *Eastrail 177 Trilogy*, Logan, also known as Wolverine, has rapid regeneration in *X-Men*, and DC Comics' Flash has superspeed. These minor violations of extending a capacity are closer to the composite end of the supernatural spectrum. Still, they reify the elevated feeling of importance and power. During the events of *The Philosopher's Stone*, in the Charms Class, students are learning the levitation charm, Wingardium Leviosa – they are attempting to make a feather fly (Rowling 1998a, 170-172). This ability is also known as telekinesis. Such abilities reify the aspect of consciousness called *magical thinking*: moving an object, making something disappear, or changing its form. Moving toward the fantastic end of the spectrum, like agents, magic can reify emotions.

Both in a mimetic and fantastic way, Harry Potter stories discuss the difficulties of growing up, touching upon many important issues that children face – bullying, trauma, loss of parents, loneliness, war, and torture. While traditional school curricula tend to present an idealised view of childhood, omitting these harsher themes, the Harry Potter series portrays childhood as fun, but also as challenging, difficult, and often painful. This resonates with children and young adults around the world, as it reflects the problems they and their friends face every day, allowing them to evaluate and integrate their own experiences. Harry Potter stories revolve around a boy whose parents were killed when he was a baby. When Voldemort attempted to kill Harry, the killing curse rebounded and instead killed Voldemort. At that time, Voldemort was in the process of creating Horcruxes, a form of dark magic enabling a person to hide a piece of one's soul in an object and thus continue living even after their physical body is destroyed. Consequently, upon his death, a piece of his soul latched onto Harry. That night, Harry got a scar on his forehead that burned when Voldemort was near, giving him the ability to talk to snakes and connecting him with Voldemort's mind.

There are many magical ways in which readers learn about Harry's trauma. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, Harry sees his parents in the Mirror of Erised. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, a Dementor's kiss overwhelms him with negative emotions and forces him to relive the screams of his dying mother. In *The Goblet of Fire*, during a duel with Voldemort in the graveyard, Harry sees his parents, who help him escape Voldemort. In *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry uses the Resurrection Stone to see his dead family: his parents, Sirius, and Remus. But magic is not only presented as a way to reify trauma, but also as an empowering force. The only known defence against the dementor's attack is the Patronus charm:

> Patronus is a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the dementor feeds upon – hope, happiness, the desire to survive – but it cannot feel despair, as real humans can, so the dementors can't hurt it. But I must warn you, Harry, that the charm might be too advanced for you. Many qualified wizards have difficulty with it."
> "What does a Patronus look like?" said Harry curiously.
> "Each one is unique to the wizard who conjures it."
> "And how do you conjure it?"
> "With an incantation, which will work only if you are concentrating, with all your might, on a single, very happy memory" (Rowling, 1999b, 237).

Wizards and witches who lack happy memories, like most Death Eaters, are unable to cast the Patronus charm. This inability reflects how an interest in dark magic directly relates to the lack of love and happiness. Harry masters his Patronus when he masters his emotions. In the beginning, Harry is overwhelmed by fear. Slowly, he learns to tap into positive emotions amidst danger.

The only Death Eater able to cast a Patronus charm is Severus Snape, whose Patronus took the form of a doe, just like the Patronus of Lily, Harry's mother, whom Snape has loved since they were children. Snape's happy memories with Lily allowed him to cast the charm. His emotions are, therefore, reified in his Patronus. When facing difficulties, no matter how dark the situation is, Hogwarts students learn to develop the capacity to tap into an inner place to overcome them. Or as Dumbledore says in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* film: "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light" (Cuarón, 2004). However, mastering this charm, as Lupin points out, requires practice. In *The Order of the Phoenix*, Harry casts a torture curse on Bellatrix because she killed his godfather, Sirius Black, but the curse does not work. This scene illustrates how spells and magical abilities in the Harry Potter novels and films express wizards' and witches' emotions: "Never used an Unforgivable Curse before, have you, boy?" she yelled. She had abandoned her baby voice now. "You need to mean them, Potter! You need to

really want to cause pain – to enjoy it – righteous anger won't hurt me for long – I'll show you how it is done, shall I? I'll give you a lesson" (Rowling 2003, 810). As Bellatrix explains, the curse is related to the wizard's feelings. To successfully use it, one must genuinely intend to cause pain. The division between light and dark magic stems from the wizard's intention and personality. Witches and wizards who seek power, dominance over others, and take pleasure in inflicting pain deal with dark magic.

But the distinction between light and dark magic, good and evil, is not black and white. In Part I of the thesis, I have argued that seeing Cedric Diggory killed before his eyes at the end of The Goblet of Fire, Harry begins the transformation from a boy to an altruistic punisher who will stop Voldemort. *The Order of the Phoenix* further explores Harry's transformation. It is here that we hear Sibyl Trelawney's prophecy and find out that Harry is the chosen one:

> The one with the power to vanquish the dark lord approaches…. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies… and the dark lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the dark lord knows not… and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives….The one with the power to vanquish the dark lord will be born as the seventh month dies…. (Rowling 2003, 841)

The relationship between the hero and the villain becomes more complex. Both Harry and Neville were born at the end of July. However, as Dumbledore points out, Voldemort marked Harry as his equal because they were both half-blood wizards. In other words, Voldemort saw himself in Harry.

By the end of *The Order of the Phoenix*, it becomes clear to Harry and Voldemort that one has to kill the other. Despite their similarities, the novel draws a sharp distinction between the two. At the end of the Battle in the Ministry of Magic, Voldemort attempts to possess Harry. At that moment when Voldemort penetrated Harry's mind and spoke from his body, Harry remembered his godfather, Sirius Black, who was killed by Bellatrix moments ago before Harry's eyes (Rowling 2003, 815-816). This is how Dumbledore explains why Voldemort's attempt to possess Harry failed:

> "There is a room in the Department of Mysteries," interrupted Dumbledore, "that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than forces of nature. It is also, perhaps, the most mysterious of the many subjects for study that reside there. It is the power held within that room that you possess in such quantities and which Voldemort has not at all. That power took you to save Sirius tonight. That power also saved you from possession by Voldemort, because he could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests. In the end, it mattered not that you could not close your mind. It was your heart that saved you." (Rowling 2003, 843-844)

Their similarities notwithstanding, Harry and Voldemort are distinct because Harry understands love. Rowling employs magic to portray love as the ultimate power, something that Voldemort never grasped, which ultimately leads to his downfall.

Both Harry and Voldemort grew up as orphans. They were lonely, isolated children without friends, and both were invited to Hogwarts, becoming famous wizards. However, their paths diverged significantly. Voldemort saw magic as a means to become powerful and dominate others; even in the orphanage where he grew up, he tortured other children. By contrast, Harry placed a much greater value on friendship and kindness toward others. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore tells Harry that he is not drawn to the dark arts because he is protected by his ability to love (Rowling 2005, 511). One can speculate that Voldemort's lack of love stems not only from growing up as an orphan but also from his mother using the love potion to seduce his father. When she stopped giving him the love potion, he abandoned her, and she died giving birth to Voldemort. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, when Harry and Dumbledore discuss the similarities between Harry and Voldemort, Dumbledore emphasises that it is our choices, rather than our past or abilities, that show who we really are (Rowling 1999a, 333).

In contrast to Voldemort, Harry was loved by his parents from birth. The power of this love is reified through *the fantastic*. The reason Voldemort could not kill Harry on the night he murdered his parents is due to his mother's sacrificial protection charm. She sacrificed her life to protect her son. At the same time, that is the only known defence against the killing curse in the Harry Potter universe, and Harry is the only known person to survive it. This tension between love and cruelty as two modes of living emerges as a central theme of the Harry Potter novels and films. In a dialogue in *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore and Voldemort discuss the power of love. It is clear from their conversation that Voldemort does not understand the power of love (Rowling 2005, 444). This eventually leads to his downfall. Not only was he surprised by Lily Potter's sacrificial protection, but his blindness toward the power of love led him to make the same mistake twice. In *The Deathly Hallows*, Harry defeats Voldemort with the same charm his mother did all those years ago. By sacrificing himself to save others, Harry created a powerful charm that protected all the students and teachers of Hogwarts.

5.4. *Unfolding* **the Harry Potter Universe: Death, Love, and Power**

I have argued that elements of supernatural storytelling can be categorised on a spectrum from *composites* to *the fantastic*. On the composites end of the spectrum, these agents and spaces have minimal violations of ontological categories, and their primary function is distancing. By making small violations of reality, the storyteller signals the fictionality of the story. Composites can also have a *superstimulus* function. A feeling of a more enormous monster can be reified by enlarging it or composing it from different animal categories. On the other hand, defeating such a monster can signal the hero's bravery and strength. It is difficult to overpower a lion or a bear; nevertheless, it is possible. To signal that the hero is capable of doing what no human has ever done, or, in other words, to reinforce our sense of the hero's power, aspects of these animals can be exaggerated. For example, Gilgamesh defeats the Bull of Heaven, and Hercules defeats the Nemean lion. Composites are building blocks of supernatural storytelling.

Moving toward the other end of the spectrum, *the fantastic*, the content of consciousness, abstract thoughts, affects and emotions are reified as supernatural agents, abilities, and items. Fantastic spaces can also reify emotions. Haunted houses, heaven, and hell are affects projected onto the spatial dimension. Dante's *Inferno* is an example of reified moral emotions, as each inhabitant of hell endures suffering according to their actions during their life. I have argued that externalising minds facilitates understanding abstract categories and emotions in terms of physical, tangible objects and processes. Furthermore, I have shown how magic in the Harry Potter universe is presented as an empowering force. Identifying with characters who are just like a reader, but empowered by magic, elevates a sense of perceived control. This aspect of fantasy fiction is then projected on the world level, as the darkness is overcome, the order is reestablished, and love and justice triumph over evil.

The magic of Rowling's world is in the colourful diversity of its characters. Many readers will identify with the trio, but others will find other characters interesting, such as Neville, Luna, Malfoy, Dumbledore, or Snape. Walking in their shoes, using theory of mind skills, the reader will experience magic as an empowering force. Whether fighting a dementor, battling a dark wizard, or solving obstacles to protect the philosopher's stone, magic gives a sense of elevated perceived control in challenging situations. It therefore structures and fortifies a natural aspect of human cognition, *magical thinking*. Identifying with a student who faces an impossible obstacle and uses magic to overcome it, fantasy fiction teaches the reader to persist, because even in the most

challenging situations, magic —whether in terms of internal capacity or external help —will come to the rescue.

As the world of Harry Potter becomes increasingly darker, the ability to tap into the power within becomes more crucial. By the end of *The Order of the Phoenix*, Cedric and Sirius have died in front of Harry's eyes. The last chapter of *The Order of the Phoenix* is titled "The Second War Begins." Harry is now aware that the only way to stop Voldemort is to kill him. *The Half-Blood Prince* explores Voldemort's past and his quest for power and immortality. The reader finds out that Voldemort managed to do what no wizard had done before him. He created Horcruxes, a dark magic that allows a piece of the soul to be placed in an object so that the caster can return when the body is killed. By killing others, Voldemort ripped his soul into pieces and hid them in the five objects, the sixth in his pet snake Nagini, and the seventh accidentally in Harry when he killed his mother. But the process of creating Horcruxes mutilates the soul. As Dumbledore explains, Voldemort became less human each time he made a new Horcrux (Rowling 2005, 501-503). *The fantastic* here becomes a tool to reify the corruption of power and lust for immortality.

Power and corruption can also be expressed in mimetic mode, but then we speak about simulation, not reification. *Game of Thrones*, for example, captures human greed and power lust. Nevertheless, it does not reify these aspects of consciousness. It just simulates human interactions. On the other hand, Tolkien's rings of power reify power and its effects on the bearer. *Lord of the Rings* and *Silmarillion* reify the cosmic battle between evil–corruption, power, and chaos, and good–order, harmony, and peace.

During the events of *The Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore teaches Harry about the Horcruxes and how to destroy them. By this time, Dumbledore had already destroyed Marvolo Gaunt's ring with the Sword of Gryffindor, and Harry destroyed the Diary of Tom Riddle with Basilisk's fang. Harry and Dumbledore travel together on a mission to discover the third Horcrux, Salazar Slytherin's Locket, which Voldemort hid in a cave. However, upon their return, they discover that Hogwarts is under attack by Death Eaters. To protect Harry, Dumbledore immobilises him. In that moment, Draco Malfoy enters the room and disarms Dumbledore. Death Eaters surround Dumbledore and kill him. Hidden on the platform beneath, unable to move or to speak, Harry witnesses another friend being killed by Voldemort's servants. With the only wizard who could stand up to Voldemort now dead, all hopes are lost, and the world of Harry Potter plunges into darkness.

The relationship between Voldemort and Harry through the seven novels (and eight films) becomes more entangled. In *The Goblet of Fire,* in his arrogance, Voldemort used Harry's blood to resurrect himself, thus extending Harry's mother's Sacrificial Protection spell. Just after the resurrection, we discover that Harry's and Voldemort's wands share the same core. They can injure but cannot kill each other. During *The Deathly Hallows*, Death Eaters rule Hogwarts, and the trio is on the run. Their mission is to find and destroy the remaining Horcruxes. However, Death Eaters discover them and launch an attack. Voldemort attempts to kill Harry but fails, which leads him to look for an alternative way to kill Harry (Rowling 2007, 61). Voldemort realises that he made mistakes that allowed Harry to survive multiple attacks; nonetheless, in his pride, he is adamant about killing Harry himself and does not allow other Death Eaters to interfere. Ultimately, Voldemort underestimates the layered connection between him and Harry.

Unable to kill Harry and looking for a solution, Voldemort searches for the elder wand, one of the three items that Death gave to the brothers who crossed the river. If he had the most powerful wand, he thought, he would finally be able to kill Harry and prove that his defiance all those years was just a lucky coincidence. Voldemort finds out that Dumbledore owned the Elder Wand, desecrates his grave and steals it. However, he is still unable to perform spells properly, as if the wand rejects him. This leads him to realise that because Snape killed Dumbledore, he must be the actual owner of the wand. After killing Snape, Voldemort is finally ready to face Harry: "I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour." (Rowling 2007, 658) Harry, on the other hand, finds out that he carries Voldemort's Horcrux within and therefore must sacrifice himself to give others a chance to kill Voldemort once Horcruxes are no more. The war is raging, Hogwarts is under attack, and students and professors are dying.

Walking through the Forbidden Forest, Harry now has two Deathly Hallows, the cloak and the Resurrection Stone. On the way to sacrifice himself, Harry uses the Resurrection Stone to talk to his dead loved ones. They brave him and promise they will be with him until the end. Harry kept walking until he reached where Voldemort and the Death Eaters were waiting for him. Voldemort casts the Killing Curse, hitting Harry. After that, Harry wakes up at the strange place

that looks like King's Cross station, where he meets Dumbledore: "'But you're dead,' said Harry. 'Oh yes,' said Dumbledore matter-of-factly. 'Then . . . I'm dead too?' 'Ah,' said Dumbledore, smiling still more broadly. 'That is the question, isn't it? On the whole, dear boy, I think not.'" (Rowling 2007, 707). Harry and Dumbledore meet in the in-between, and Dumbledore reveals the complex connection between Voldemort and Harry. In taking Harry's blood upon his resurrection, Voldemort extended Harry's mother's protection, tethering Harry to his own life force. While Voldemort was alive, Harry could not die. The Killing Curse destroyed the part of Voldemort's soul that lived inside Harry. This is why Harry could return and defeat the dark wizard, who was much more powerful than he was. Ultimately, Voldemort's dark magic could not be used against Harry because he was protected by the power of love given to him by his mother.

Therefore, *the fantastic's* primary function is not ornamental, and fantasy fiction is undoubtedly not just escapism. *The fantastic* enables us to reify our inner world and project our sense of psychological order on the universe's large scale, generating a sense of meaning, purpose, security, and control. The *fantastic's* distancing effect helps us understand the story as not-literally-true but as true-in-some-other-sense. Perhaps in the real world, magic will not solve problems, but developing an intuition that we have a magical capacity within can elevate a sense of perceived control and optimism, and is therefore helpful in managing anxiety. Fantasy fiction *reifies consciousness* to reinforce and structure *magical thinking*.

In the first novel, we found Harry, an orphan boy living with his aunt and uncle in a cupboard. Through the seven books, we follow his development into the wizard who, in the end, overpowers the most dangerous wizard. Magic helped Rowling reify the two types of minds. Voldemort sought to become the most powerful wizard, immortal, and rule the world forever. In his conquest for power, he killed, abused, manipulated, and tortured others. On the other hand, Harry always helps those who cannot fend for themselves. He made friends and even sacrificed his life to save others. Their minds were reflected in the magic they used. While Voldemort used dark magic, in his very blood, Harry carried his mother's love as protection. Rowling uses *the fantastic* to reify love as the ultimate power. Mother's love lingered in Harry's whole life, protecting him from danger. By sacrificing himself in the Forbidden Forest for his friends, Harry recreated the Sacrificial Protection spell and protected all the students and professors from Voldemort.

Cultural and Historical Context of the Popularity of the Harry Potter Universe

Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old indeed when he had fallen asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up.
(Rowling 1998a, 133)

6. How the New Age Facilitated the Popularity of the Harry Potter Stories[19]

The Harry Potter universe is not just a series of books. The story about the lives and adventures of witches and wizards is also narrated via film and video game adaptations (2001-2011). Additionally, Rowling wrote other books elaborating on the Harry Potter storyworld, including *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001), *Quidditch Through the Ages* (2001)*, The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (2008), *Hogwarts: An Incomplete and Unreliable Guide* (2026), *Short Stories from Hogwarts of Power, Politics and Pesky Poltergeists* (2016)*,* and *Short Stories from Hogwarts of Heroism, Hardship and Dangerous Hobbies* (2016). In 2006, the first *Harry Potter* prequel, the *Fantastic Beasts* series, was released, followed by two more in 2018 and 2022. In 2012, the interactive website *Pottermore* was unveiled to the public and was subsequently rebranded as Wizarding World in 2019, offering additional information about the Harry Potter universe. In 2016, the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* premiered in London theatres. In 2023, the video game *Hogwarts Legacy* was released. Additionally, the Harry Potter franchise boasts numerous attractions, parks, and resorts in Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Australia, Poland, and Switzerland. In 2021, the *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Tournament of Houses* quiz competition was released on TV.

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Harry Potter novels begin as children's fantasy books, magical school stories, and gradually become progressively darker, introducing more psychologically challenging topics such as death, torture, betrayal, and sacrifice, thereby venturing into the realm of young adult literature. Curthoys notes that the form of the novel is a hybrid "of school and fantasy literature, but drawing on many other literary traditions as well, including fairy tale, folk tale, myth and legend, as well as incorporating classical, biblical and medieval allusions. Several have noted the books' use of the genre of the bildungsroman" (2011, 8). This Bildungsroman series follows the maturation of Hogwarts students, while also tracking the cognitive development of many readers who first read the first book as children and finished the seventh as teenagers. In the end, to defeat the dark wizard, Harry overcomes the darkness within him by learning to trust his friends, family, and his powers.

Commenting on the success of the Harry Potter books, Brown and Patterson refer to their author, Joanne Rowling, as "one of the richest and most influential women on the planet, with a personal fortune greater than that of the Queen of England" (2010, 543). Rowling managed to achieve something that was regarded by many as impossible: becoming one of the wealthiest and most influential individuals on the planet solely by writing novels. Considering that she achieved this in a very short period, as a woman author of fantasy books for children, her success story is even more impressive. Brown and Patterson estimate that by 2006, the seven books in the Harry Potter series had sold 450 million copies worldwide, and the six Harry Potter books that had been released, the films had grossed $5.4 billion at the global box office.[20] At the same time, the Harry Potter franchise made approximately $1 billion in merchandise, including toys, DVDS and theme parks, such as the one in Florida. Rowling's Wizarding World brand was worth $4 billion in 2006 (2010, 543).

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallow*s was published in 2007 and sold 15 million copies on the first day (BBC News 2000). The Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows film adaptation made over $1.3 billion at the global box office (Box Office Mojo). In total, The Wizarding World, the company behind the Harry Potter brand, generated over $9.5 billion at the box office (The Numbers B), over $8 billion in book sales (Stewart 2016), and over $7 billion in toys and merchandise (Grimmer et al. 2020). By 2011, Vogel estimated that the Wizarding World brand made $3.9 billion in home entertainment and over $1.5 billion in video games (2015, 184). In

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[20] In 2003 Ladd estimated Harry Potter movies made $5.6 billion at the box office.

2018, Pesce estimated the Harry Potter franchise's worth to be $25 billion. The exact figure was reached by Grimmer and his colleagues (Grimmer et. al. 2020). The Harry Potter novels have been translated into over 80 languages (Scott 2022; Pesce 2018). How is it possible that, in an age where teachers complain that students do not read but spend too much time on online social media platforms instead, children worldwide are lining up to buy the new Harry Potter volume, despite its considerable length as a literary work?

In Part III, I summarise the attempt to understand the popularity of Harry Potter as part of the project of reinvention of Englishness and the commodification of British cultural products, which Blake refers to as the "Potter formula" (2002). I argue that the reason for the worldwide lure of the Harry Potter universe is not to be found in Harry's rebranded Englishness but in presenting magic in a New Age style – a religiosity and a lifestyle characterised by individual spirituality, a free combination of religious beliefs and practices, and a loose relationship to religious authorities. I show how the New Age, together with the continuous transmediation and production of new content – including video games, real-life attractions, new books, a theatre play, a quiz show, interactive websites, and relentless marketing campaigns provides a more comprehensive explanation of the global success of the Harry Potter universe.

Although commodification, marketing strategies, and transmediation explain the global scale of the Harry Potter hype we see today, they fail to account for the immediate success of the novels. I argue that the New Age style of Harry Potter explains the lure of the novels, published in the UK and the US, countries from which the New Age originated. In other words, Part III examines how the context profoundly influences the *reification of consciousness*. To reify love, kindness, and bravery as tools for overcoming darkness, Rowling presented magic as a creative and empowering force one can tap into to overcome difficulties. The cultural context informs our conceptual domains. Therefore, even though Rowling incorporated many existing memes from fairy tales and mythology, writing in the UK, the cradle of the New Age, memes like magic mutated to adapt to the context. This is why the supernatural storytelling reflects the sentiments of the period and why Rowling's reifications immediately resonated with the audience.

In Part III, I present a case for the historical development of the New Age, as well as a textual analysis of the Harry Potter novels, to argue for the striking similarities between the two. Furthermore, in the historical context, exploring *reified consciousness* reveals power dynamics in the religious field, which attempt to control the kinds of supernatural stories that can be told and

who can tell them. I shed light on the case of the backlash to the Harry Potter universe, to show how, due to the process of secularisation, the church is unable to dominate the discourse on the supernatural.

6.1. The "Potter Formula:" The Magical Success of the Harry Potter Universe
To understand what made Harry Potter books irresistible, Blake sheds light on historical processes that led to their emergence. He points out significant historical changes in the United Kingdom in 1998, specifically a movement towards political autonomy in the cases of Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. However, for England, Blake notes, no such changes have occurred. Hence, he concludes, "Politically, England does not exist. The imagined centre of the UK has begun to lose its periphery, without gaining a legal identity of its own" (2002, 6). He reads the Harry Potter novels as a part of an attempt to return to the past and rebrand the new English present. Victorian London, new houses that attempt to resemble country cottages, and the Highlands boarding school are just a few examples of this antiquation from the Harry Potter universe (7). This rebranding, however, does not simply mean a return to the past, but instead reshaping the past in consideration of the new multicultural English present.

Harry is a product and an agent of the project of rebranding Englishness. He lives in a typical English suburb, immersed in the English past. He goes to Hogwarts, English past-in-present – a magical, multicultural place without technology. This style is not limited to the Harry Potter novels. The viral American TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a contemporary of Harry's. Blake notes that in *Buffy,* too, historical references (the past) are mixed with new feminist attitudes (the present). Therefore, he suggests that due to the propagation of the English language and culture around the world, which is a product of British imperialism, the "Potter formula" was easily sold to the world as a commodity.

To illustrate why it was crucial to commodify Englishness, Blake draws attention to the political developments in England in 1997. This year marks the beginning of Harry's and Buffy's story, as well as the election of the New Labour Party to power (2002, 22-23). Blake does not read this political change as a new party's constitution but as an attempt to modernise Britain by presenting the party as a reinvention of the Labour party that existed for a century. For him, the Harry Potter hype reflects political, historical, and cultural changes in Britain at the end of the twentieth century: "New Labour needed a magical transformation, and they found it in Harry

Potter" (2002, 24-26). At the time, the New Labour party faced challenges in education and literacy. But more importantly, it was part of the political program that emphasised the need for culture and creativity to motivate individuals to engage in creative work within the "cultural industry" and stabilise the economy (2002, 51). This was a part of a more elaborate strategy to rebrand British cultural products for export in the contemporary capitalist marketplace, reorient the country's economy toward culture, and address financial issues the Labour Party was facing.

These historical and political changes affected the book market. Bookselling chains like Barnes & Noble and Borders relied on the mass production of books, setting up cafeterias in their stores, and linking reading with the purchase of other leisure-time products. Waterstones and Blackwell organised events, book signings, and readings. Interaction with readers was also encouraged through internet platforms such as Amazon. Bloomsbury Publishing, the publisher of the Harry Potter books, followed all these trends. They had an e-magazine, Blumsburrymagazine.com, with a section devoted to Harry.

With the intrusion of consumerist capitalism into every aspect of society, reading and purchasing became intertwined. Bloomsbury Publishing and Scholastic, the publishers of the Harry Potter books in the UK and the US, are excellent case studies of the effective employment of marketing strategies. Selling DVDs, toys, sweets, and other items with Harry Potter designs was the primary strategy for attracting children's attention. Adults and young adults were also targets of their campaigns, featuring book covers that differed from those for children. The new bookstores offered coffee and pastries for adults. Harry's face suddenly started appearing on all kinds of products, even on Coca-Cola cans (79).

Suman Gupta, one of the most vocal critics of the Harry Potter novels and the Harry Potter phenomenon, published his book a year after Blake. Gupta's view complements Blake's historical analysis with textual criticism, pointing out problems in the representation of class, race, and gender to argue that the books reproduce, reinforce, and reflect the dominant ideology of global capitalism and British identity (2009, 46). Just as Blake does, he shows the striking similarities between the representation of consumerist habits of wizards in the novels and the marketing of the novels (2009, 133-140). He also sheds light on the role that the translation industry, film adaptations, and merchandise had on popularising the novels. However, focusing on the texts themselves allows Gupta to detect narrative strategies, such as structural repetitions (for example, the school year cycle), and reliance on archetypes and myths to generate a sense of familiarity.

According to Gupta, this allows young readers to easily settle in as they satisfy a sense of security through familiarity (2009, 93-96).

Another vocal critic of the Harry Potter phenomenon, Jack Zipes, compared Harry Potter novels with Disney films and Barbie dolls, which are popular because they conform to cultural conventions (2001, 172). He also points out that the success of the novels is related to the commodification and reliance on the fairy tale patterns. However, he does acknowledge that Rowling's novels are much more complex than fairy tales, being influenced by genres such as mystery novels, adventure films, and sports championships, calling them "a hodgepodge of these popular entertainments" (177). Most importantly, Zipes attributes the success of the novels to the novel's message that the good must triumph over evil, which generates a sense of security. What is problematic for him is that the novels hypnotise readers into believing that the protagonist will come and save the world, while the fundamental problems of children around the world remain unaddressed (182-183).

Richard Bernstein, one of the earliest critics of the Harry Potter novels, was the first to point out that Harry represents vulnerability and powerlessness that all children feel: "Harry's story, in other words, with its early images of alienation, rejection, loneliness and powerlessness leading to its classically fairy tale ending" (1999). He also attributes the success of the Harry Potter novels to the fairy tale assurance that one can succeed despite the odds, but deems them not as good as *The Hobbit* or *Alice in Wonderland* (1999). Despite the overly pessimistic critical acclaim, the popularity of the Harry Potter novels, as well as the later films and video games, continued to grow. The Harry Potter series is scheduled to premiere in 2027 on HBO and HBO Max. This demonstrates that, almost 30 years after its publication, the story continues to captivate readers worldwide.

Even though I am more interested in explaining the success of the Harry Potter novels, especially in the context of Europe and America, where magic is rejected by religion as heresy and by science as superstition, the debate on the aesthetic value of the novels and criticism of the capitalist commodification machine is relevant because it reveals the cultural selection novels undergo. This pressure is a force that shapes cultural products. In Part II, I showed how magic in supernatural storytelling is aligned with societal rules and norms. One could argue that this is not always the case. An author can reify magical thinking according to their personal view to write a story in which dark wizards win and good ones are punished. Although it is possible to write such

a story, the question is what effect would it have on the reader? Would it withstand the cultural pressure and survive long enough to replicate? Would it cause the reader to change his morality, or would it rather be read as a cautionary tale?

Even in the case of the Harry Potter novels, films, and theatre play, we saw many mutations due to the criticism voiced by kind Blake, Gupta, Zipes, and many others. The attempt to diversify the Harry Potter universe led Rowling to Tweet that Dumbledore is gay in 2007. Ten years later, the role of Hermione was played by Black actress Noma Dumezweni in the *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* theatre play. The upcoming Harry Potter TV series has caused controversy as it was revealed that a Black actor, Paapa Essiedu, will play the role of Severus Snape. These decisions still spark debates and splits among Harry Potter fans, especially after Rowling voiced her opinion on trans people. On the other hand, all the controversies kept Harry Potter products at the centre of public attention for all these decades.

6.2. Enter the New Age: The Religious Context of the Harry Potter Novels

What popular forms of supernatural storytelling have in common is that they reflect the sentiments of the period, particularly the shift in the religious field known as the New Age. I argue that Harry Potter novels and other popular forms of supernatural storytelling received immediate attention because they fell into the fertile ground of New Age culture. Reifying magic in a New Age style resonated with the readers' supernatural intuitions shaped by the New Age zeitgeist. The most significant impact of the New Age was felt in the UK and the US, which were, coincidentally, the two largest consumers of Harry Potter products.

The New Age is a type of spirituality that encourages a free combination of beliefs, practices, and values from multiple religious traditions, as well as a rejection of a single authority (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996). With the advent of the internet and the possibility of quickly searching for religious content and freely combining beliefs and practices to create one's spiritual path, this often results in appropriating the most exciting ideas from various religious traditions and replacing them with new ones without a serious commitment. York criticises the New Age, calling it "an outgrowth of liberal Western capitalism" (2001, 364). New Age seekers explore the religious field almost without boundaries, sometimes switching from Paganism to Druidism in a matter of days. Without a formalised religious structure, authority, and code, the New Age often becomes a ride through a theme park.

The New Age is an umbrella term used by scholars to denote a variety of religious beliefs and practices, including meditation, healing, positive thinking, mind-body-spirit techniques, interest in a horoscope, and crystals, that emerged in the public sphere after the Second World War as a counterculture (Hanegraaff 1996; Heelas 1996; Sutcliffe 2003). Hanegraaff (1996) argues that the beginnings of this religious counterculture movement can be found in the UK in the 1950s, with UFO cults drawing on former Theosophists like Alice Bailey. Hanegraaff refers to the first groups and communities of the 1960s as the New Age *sensu stricto* [in a restricted sense]. The teachings and beliefs of this period were characterised by the narratives of millennialism and apocalypticism (1996, 95-96). He shows how these groups substituted the passive Christian attitude of waiting for the Kingdom of God to come with an active participation in manifesting it.

In their narratives, the expected cataclysm is followed by the total transformation of the world, ushering in a new era, the Age of Aquarius – the New Age. Hanegraaff argues that the expectation of a better world is the central idea of the New Age *sensu stricto*. This belief is connected to astrological calculations, according to which the last 2,000 years are considered the Age of Pisces, dominated by Christianity. The next age, the Age of Aquarius, is an era of bliss and harmony, where divisions based on class, race, gender, and religion are ended. In this age, an individualist approach to religion will replace an institutional one (100-102). The New Age *sensu stricto* emerged from the Theosophy and Anthroposophy of the English counterculture (97).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the New Age movement evolved into a diverse body of beliefs and practices, including Neopaganism, New Age science, New Age healing, the growth movement, and channelling (Hanegraaff 1996, 103). Hellas adds esoteric Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism, Druidism, Mayan, Native Indian traditions, meditations, Wicca, Shamanism, and various forms of positive thinking (1996, 1). The *New Age* concept was criticised for its vagueness, as it does not refer to a particular group, institution, or set of beliefs. Sutcliffe (2003) argues that the New Age is not a movement nor a religion. Moreover, groups and individuals subsumed under this term do not identify as "New Agers" (2003, 24, 3). Critics of the concept, like Sutcliffe (2003), also pointed out that groups and individuals encompassed by this term do not identify themselves as "New Agers" (3). Sutcliffe concludes that "there is and has been no 'New Age Movement'" (2003, 208).

Sutcliffe (2003) describes the New Age as a collectivity, the concept proposed by Turner and Killian, to argue that the New Age is best described as a "diffuse collectivity."

> Although a collectivity has members, it lacks defined procedures for selecting and identifying [them]. Although it has leaders, it lacks defined procedures for selecting and identifying them. The members are those who happen to be participating, and the leaders are those who are being followed. (Turner and Killian 1972 in Sutcliffe 2003, 208-209)

Chryssides proposed the concept of the *Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network* (SPIN) introduced by Luther P. Gerlach and Virginia H. Hine. One example of the use of this concept is Corrywright's notion of the New Age as a web of groups and institutions connected by the same ideas, worldview, and mission (2017, 18). Furthermore, Chryssides agrees with Sutcliffe that the New Age is not a unified movement and proposes considering these phenomena as a *Zeitgeist* or a SPIN (22).

Answering the criticism of his concepts, Hanegraaff explains that the New Age is not a religion in the sense that it is embodied in a particular institution, but "It does, however, qualify as 'religion,' and it manifests itself as a multiplicity of individual 'spiritualities'" (2005a, 42). He also defends his use of the term "movement," arguing that we speak about the New Age movement in the same way as the feminist or ecological movements. The main point that Hanegraaff (2005a) is making is that the New Age phenomenon is related to a paradigm shift, where religious groups that draw on Western esoteric traditions are not necessarily rooted in Christianity, as was the case before the eighteenth century, but in secular culture (42-43).

The New Age religiosity, religious discourse, and style of living can be traced back to the 1950s UK teachings of Theosophists like Alice Bailey and the 1960s communities (Hanegraaff 1996, 95-96). The New Age almost instantaneously spread to the US and later to other countries. However, the communities in the UK attracted individuals worldwide, propagating this mode of religiosity characterised by individualist spirituality, lack of authority, and a combination of beliefs and practices from various religious traditions. The period from the 1960s to the 1980s can be seen as a development of the New Age. In the 1980s, the New Age was fully developed in the UK and the US, influencing the mainstream publishing industry, music, and merchandise (Hanegraaff 1996, 12). This is the context in which Harry Potter novels were published and received at the turn of the millennium.

The Findhorn community in Scotland is one of the first New Age communities in the world, founded by Eileen Caddy in 1962. She arrived in Glastonbury in 1953 with Peter Caddy and Sheena Govan (Draper 2004, 188). The story of the founding of this community begins in Glastonbury, Somerset, England (Gallagher 2014, 188). Glastonbury is a pilgrimage site where a

variety of spiritualities coexist: "paganism, ceremonial magic, Buddhism, Druidism, Sai Baba, yoga, neo-shamanism and myriads of established and not so established complementary and alternative healing and medicine traditions" (Draper 2004, 145). This place is renowned for its 'spiritual properties,' which are described in numerous stories about Glastonbury; one of them recounts Jesus' alleged visit to this location.

These stories are the reason why so many Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, members of other religions, as well as those who identify as spiritual or non-religious, come and visit this place. With numerous religious communities in a small area, a sense of universalism has emerged, allowing them to find common ground. Members of all religions participate in events organised by members of other faiths. One memorable event Draper described was Rumi's whirling Dervishes event (2004, 154-155). The popularity of Glastonbury, the adjacency of religious practices, and the movement of visitors from one event to the next allow us to regard Glastonbury as the cradle of the New Age.

Eileen Caddy is one of the most significant figures in the development of early New Age communities. She arrived in Glastonbury in 1953 with Peter Caddy and Sheena Govan. From that moment until founding a Findhorn community in Glastonbury with Peter, Eileen claimed that she received instructions from God regarding the establishment of a group, leading daily activities, and tending a garden (Draper 2004, 188). The first words she heard were quotes from the Bible, so she was convinced that the God she had heard was the God of the Bible. Sheena, Peter's ex-wife, insisted that Eileen work hard and even record her messages, visions, and dreams. She would meditate with her notebook, waiting for God to address her. Although initially, Sheena acted as a spiritual mentor for Eileen, both Eileen and Peter soon broke up with her and continued to build the Findhorn community on their own.

During this process, Eileen believed that God was building the community by working through her, so she provided oral instructions to community members on meditation and how to conduct their daily activities, such as work, attending to nature, and maintaining relationships with other community members. She believed that her message was a continuation of Jesus' work in bringing about a peaceful world—the New Age. Eileen reports that she was told that God needed a channel to build this New Age. This was, in her description, her primary role. In October 1971, she stated that God instructed her to print her messages and cease giving oral instructions to community members. This marked the beginning of a total transformation of the community. Upon

receiving the message to step back and let the community take responsibility for its spiritual development, Peter left the community. At the same time, Eileen stayed, assuming a role equal to that of any other member (Draper 2004, 188-194).

In his study of the Nottinghamshire network, Wood finds that "what they [New Age communities] have in common is the relativisation of multiple authorities, such that no single authority (or range of authorities) exerts a formative influence within the life of a group or individual" (2007, 71). Participants of these groups draw on multiple relativised authorities because they do not have a formal function. They have an inner core of devoted members and hierarchy, but having open space for multiple authorities attracts a broader circle of changeable clientele (72-73). Wood asserts that the studied groups are involved in authority relations, but in a different form from the formative ones. Wood agrees with Hanegraaff in understanding these phenomena in the context of secularisation. He states that as the church lost its power to dominate the public sphere, in some regions of the religious field, the single authority dissolved into multiple authorities, giving rise to the mode of religiosity characterised by a loose relationship to authority – the New Age (Wood 2007, 162). Importantly, Hanegraaff explained how these diverse groups became perceived as a "movement" because popular media adopted the "New Age" label from New Age *sensu stricto* groups and writings, as the label proved catchy (2005, 47).

This phenomenon of rejecting a single authority, emphasising the individual and unique spiritual path, and freely combining beliefs and practices is what I will refer to as the New Age. Wood and Hanegraaff argued that this phenomenon is related to the secularisation and dissolution of the church's authority. This has opened up the possibility of places like Glastonbury, where individuals can come and learn about and explore a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices. With the advent of the internet, this exploration became much more accessible, as one could explore the religious field from the comfort of one's own home. Even in those cases like Findhorn, where Eileen's words were written down and gained the status of scripture, they were not recognised as the primary source of divine inspiration. Instead, community members remained open to other scriptures and forms of inspiration from groups and religions outside the community.

The term "New Age" became pejorative and meaningless at the turn of the century. This is a consequence of the criticism the New Age movement faced as a form of easy, fast, and market-oriented religiosity. Its counterculture elements, the optimism towards the coming of a better age, and the desire to form a community are absent in the late 1990s and early 2000s. There are no

individuals or groups that identify as "New Agers." The New Age seemed to have disappeared as a distinct label or group, instead dispersing into a culture of individualistic religiosity – a lifestyle. As Hammer puts it, "the New Age appears to have metamorphosed from a vaguely coherent network into a form of collective behaviour (2001, 74).

This is what makes the New Age difficult to document historically. Hammer notes that the aspects of the New Age were very much alive and widespread in the UK and US public, even though they were not labelled as such. This becomes evident when we examine cultural production at the turn of the century (74-75). To denote the popularisation of the occult in the popular sphere, Partridge coined the term *occulture*. He implies that, unlike before the Second World War, when the occult was a counterculture, it emerged in the public sphere as part of the mainstream after the war (2004, 45). The case of Harry Potter hype is one of the most vocal examples.

6.3. The New Age Style of Harry Potter

The New Age represents a paradigm shift in the approach to religion, encompassing its beliefs, traditions, practices, norms, and authorities. This change is important for understanding the immediate attention Harry Potter books have received. With the church losing its grip on public space, New Age ideas gained popularity, especially among generations seeking sources of spirituality but reluctant to conform to the single authority, rules, and discipline of traditional religious traditions. Even in the first New Age communities and networks, authorities were multiple and loose; there was no central institution, and members freely chose from various beliefs and practices. During and after the 1980s, when the New Age movement emerged from these communities and became a global phenomenon, it continued to elude scholarly attempts to define it coherently.

The multiplicity of forms the New Age has taken has in common only an individualistic approach to a spiritual path and a free combination of beliefs, practices, and authorities that one deems conducive to their spiritual journey. This led Prince and Riches to define the New Age as a lifestyle (2000, 5). In other words, even though at the turn of the millennium we do not find individuals and groups that identify with the "New Age" label, what we do find is a change in a lifestyle where one uses and combines beliefs and practices of a variety of religious traditions to produce his unique spiritual path. One can, for example, believe in reincarnation and karma, pray

to Jesus Christ, and meditate with the sound of shamanistic drumming and the smell of incense to achieve a positive change.

The New Age emerged in the UK, but it almost simultaneously spread in the US and then across Europe and the world. So, it is no wonder that the book, published in 1997, in which a boy goes to a special school to learn magic, was readily embraced in countries where the New Age was born and grew. Harry Potter is not the only example. Halliwell sisters from Charmed, Lyra from *His Dark Materials*, and Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are also Anglophone characters whose universes' magic, demons, vampires, and witches are combined with feminist attitudes that empower women. In these books and TV series, women are agents who not only protect themselves but also save the world. Like his peers, Harry is also a child of the New Age – a boy unbounded by a religious tradition, who does not conform to any form of religious authority, never prays, and does not go to church.

However, he is interested in the world of the supernatural and endeavours to learn magic, creating his unique path. At Hogwarts, students have common core subjects: Astronomy, Charms, Defence Against the Dark Arts, Herbology, History of Magic, Potions, and Transfiguration. Nevertheless, by mastering these skills, some students become more interested in one aspect of magic, while others discover other spells that better suit their talents. Moreover, when they arrive at Hogwarts, students are sorted into one of the four great houses: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin, which are matched to their character and intentions. However, even then, they are not bound by their house, and they can freely explore the wizarding world and strive to improve those aspects of magic that they are inclined to.

In contrast to the passive Christian attitude of waiting for Jesus to come and bring about the Kingdom of Heaven, the early New Age actively manifests this brave new world (Hanegraaff 1996, 102). When it became apparent that the era of peace and harmony was not forthcoming, the New Age discourse shifted. Instead of discussing the pursuit of equality and harmony by transforming the world, the focus shifted to transforming the Self. The New Age does not imply the rejection of religious practices but assumes acceptance of those beliefs and practices that one finds empowering. Whether they involve Wicca spells, yoga, meditation, Christian prayer, shamanistic journeying, Nordic drumming, chanting, incense, or tarot, one feels entitled to the freedom to choose and combine elements from various religious traditions and transform them to

fit their unique style. This is precisely what students at Hogwarts do. They venture to the magical school and discover a variety of magical practices, spells, and creatures.

In the Harry Potter universe, magic is hidden. This invites the reader to explore the wizarding world together with its heroes. As Asprem notes, the world of Harry Potter reveals "that the disappearance of magic may have been more apparent than real. In the Harry Potter universe, magic was not eradicated once and for all; instead, it evacuated into a separate "wizarding world," hidden from the disenchanted "Muggle world." We may be stuck in the Muggle world, but somewhere in the shadows, there is a portal to a place where magic is still very much alive" (2017, 27). This captures the spirit of the New Age. As Hanegraaff (1996) and Wood (2007) pointed out, the New Age movement emerges from a magical milieu rooted in secularised culture, rather than Christianity. The New Age is characterised by scepticism towards accessing the divine through traditional religious authority. Therefore, one lives a life in a modern secular culture but occasionally engages in meditation, yoga, prayer, Wicca spells, Nordic and Native American drumming, and shamanistic rituals to experience a world that waits hidden, not in the afterlife but just around the corner – the fantastic and magical.

This is also true from the narratological perspective. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the reader, along with Harry, is guided by the narrator in discovering a world of magic and a school. We follow our hero as he finds Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station and boards the Hogwarts Express. The reader, just like Harry, discovers that magic exists and ventures to explore this new and exciting world. Moreover, we discover that magic has always been there, just around the corner. At Hogwarts, students learn magical spells and abilities without considering that they should refrain from engaging with magic due to their religious background. However, the Harry Potter universe is not devoid of religion. Hogwarts students celebrate Christmas, and in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, we find two quotes from the Bible on tombstones in Godrick Hollow.

These elements notwithstanding, religion does not play an important role in the plot. They are just a cultural background of the UK. There is nothing particularly religious about the Christmas celebration. Harry and Hermione do not pray in the graveyard scene. The passive attitude of waiting for a saviour is replaced by an active attitude of using magic to protect oneself. Before the Battle of Hogwarts, the professors did not protect themselves with the Lord's Prayer. Instead, in the book version, Flitwick casts the *Protego Horribilis* charm (Rowling 2007, 501). In

the film version, Flitwick, Molly, and Slughorn cast "Protego Maxima, Fianto Duri, Repello Inimicum" (Yates, 2011). Moreover, in the Harry Potter universe, wizards develop those aspects of magic to which they are inclined. They can always learn new spells and improve their abilities. Just like the New Age, magic in the Harry Potter universe is practical and individual. Not only can students combine spells to create a unique duelling style, but those more talented can also create new spells. For example, as a student, Severus Snape invented many spells, including "Levicorpus" and "Sectum Sempra."

Just like the approach to religious beliefs and practices in the New Age, the description of the system of magic in the Harry Potter universe is vague. Except for the names of subjects at Hogwarts, we do not understand where magic comes from and how it works. The reader accepts that some individuals possess magic and that wands amplify their magical abilities. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, when Harry buys a wand, Olivander tells him, "The wand chooses the wizard" (Rowling 1998, 85). But why is it that the wand chooses the wizard, and not the other way around? Furthermore, how does a wand choose a wizard? We never find out. The reader is also introduced to the differentiation between dark and light magic; however, there is no explanation of what distinguishes a spell as dark magic. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Barty Crouch Jr., masked as Alastor Moody, demonstrated to students of Hogwarts the three unforgivable curses Imperius, Cruciatus, and Avada Kedavra (Rowling 2000, 211-215).

But neither he nor the narrator explains why these curses are dark magic. He tells students that they are illegal and that whoever uses these three curses ends up in Azkaban prison. Why, for example, is the Gubraithian Fire that Dumbledore casts to repel the Inferi in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* considered a charm, while the Fiendfyre from Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows is classified as a curse, or a dark charm? Both are fire spells that cause devastating effects. Why is *Protego Diabolica*, introduced in *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald, considered a dark charm, even though its use is intended to protect* the caster (Yates 2018)? In the version of the Battle of Hogwarts, we see that the protection charm over Hogwarts also has devastating effects on those who attempt to physically penetrate it. My point is that the Harry Potter universe does not provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of magic, its various types, and their classifications.

As we follow Harry, Ron, and Hermione on their adventures, we learn new spells, discover new magical objects, and encounter new fantastic creatures. Harry Potter novels bombard their

readers with novel, shiny, magical things. To name a few, the Cloak of Invisibility was introduced in *The Philosopher's Stone,* along with wands, brooms, and chocolate frogs. The Chamber and Basilisk are central to *The Chamber of Secrets* storyline, and the Marauder's Map and Time Turners were introduced in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. The same pattern can be seen on the level of transmediation and commodification of the Harry Potter universe (see Kérchy 2018). From 1997, when the first book was published, the Harry Potter franchise followed all the media trends – in addition to seven novels, Rowling published additional books, and video game adaptations were created, followed by the *Pottermore* (later *Wizarding World*) interactive website, and then the new *Fantastic Beasts*.

At the same time, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* theatre play premiered in London. In recent years, the Harry Potter quiz show and *the Harry Potter Reunion were released*. The Harry Potter TV series is set to premiere in 2025. The Harry Potter marketing campaign ensured worldwide sales of toys and merchandise, relentlessly producing new wands and character figures. The Harry Potter attractions, including the Hogwarts Express, theme parks, escape rooms, and sets, have become a global phenomenon. Thus, it is not just transmediation, but following all the digital and media trends, from books to video games. With the increasing popularity of the internet and the possibility of owning a computer, the *Pottermore*. The *Fantastic Beasts* and *The Cursed Child* play attracted viewers, the former by promising to return to the past when Dumbledore and Grindelwald were young, and the latter by taking them into the future, where Harry's children attend Hogwarts, and Voldemort returns. The micro-perspective of presenting magic, magical creatures, and items in a New Age style, combined with the macro-perspective of transmediating the Harry Potter universe to follow all the digital and media trends, made the Harry Potter story so attractive to children and adults around the world for almost thirty years.

The parallel between Harry Potter and the New Age becomes increasingly evident as the reader consumes more novel content, but none necessitates an in-depth analysis. Just like in Glastonbury, where you can meditate in the morning, go and see whirling dervishes in the afternoon, and take part in shamanistic rituals in the evening, without burdening yourself with the history of these practices or committing to their authorities, the Harry Potter universe also offers magic primarily as diverse and fun. Rooted in the secularised culture, magic is devoid of any religious authority. It is an inner capacity to be developed individually. Moreover, Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist children can enjoy it alike. Even though students must spend years

learning magic, especially the demanding spells, the reader is not troubled by details about how a wizard progresses in learning such a spell.

Even in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Harry attempts to learn the Patronus charm, we are not told what makes this charm difficult. "For a thirteen-year-old wizard, even an indistinct Patronus is a huge achievement," Remus explains (Rowling 1999b, 246). From him, we learn that the wizard must think of a happy memory, wave his wand, and say "Expecto Patronum" (Rowling 1999b, 238). However, we never find out what exactly makes the spell difficult, and how Harry manages to master it. Just as in the New Age, one does not have to commit to learning the entire system of Hinduism or Buddhism to believe in reincarnation and karma; similarly, in the Harry Potter universe, the reader does not have to learn the system of magic to understand the concept of reincarnation and karma. With a willing suspension of disbelief, one accepts that the spell does what it is intended to do and moves on to the next one.

Another parallel between New Age and Harry Potter is that the magic in the Harry Potter novels is transformative, individualistic, and practical. By learning magic, students create their unique path. This makes the world of Harry Potter so interesting – not the Englishness of its main character, but the diversity of its characters. Students learn magic to defend themselves and defeat Voldemort. In the New Age, individuals freely combine religious practices to empower themselves, to experience the transcendental, and to apply this empowerment in everyday life. This is why New Age was aligned with the self-help culture of the 1980s.

In the Harry Potter novels, Harry is the protagonist and often the focalizer of the narrative; it is through him and primarily from his perspective that we discover the wizarding world. He is a boy whose parents were killed when he was a baby. In the attempt to kill him, a part of Voldemort's soul became a part of Harry. From that moment, Harry carries evil within him and wrestles with the trauma of losing his parents. As we follow Harry on his journey, we learn that to defeat Voldemort, Harry must come to terms with his traumatic past and defeat the evil within him. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Snape teaches Harry Occlumency, a magical skill that protects the caster's mind from access or influence. However, it is in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* that Harry accepts death and loss and therefore can get rid of the part of Voldemort that lived inside him.

Thus, through magic, love, and friendship, our hero, once a tiny orphan in a cupboard, transforms into a powerful wizard and saves the world. The juxtaposition of love and power further

emphasises this transformative aspect of magic. Just like in the Star Wars universe (whose popularity also aligns with the New Age), where Jedi and Sith battle, or another Harry's contemporary, the TV series Charmed, where good witches and white lighters fight against evil warlocks and demons, in the Harry Potter novels good witches and wizards transform themselves through the selfless use of magic. In contrast, the evil ones use dark magic to dominate others. Following Harry's example, complete transformation is only possible through the magic of love, selfless sacrifice, and friendship.

Nevertheless, why did Rowling's novels outperform contemporary stories about magic, which also resonate with New Age sentiments, such as Pullman's *His Dark Materials*? The answer is not simply transmediation. As I have shown, Pullman's novels have also been adapted into theatre plays and TV series. The key lies in the relentless pursuit of all digital and marketing trends, publishing new Harry Potter content for almost thirty years, and renewing interest with additional books, merchandise, theme parks, websites, and social media, which created a global ripple effect. The turning point was the release of Warner Bros starting in 2001. After that, there were video games, websites like Pottermore and Wizarding World, amusement parks, the *Fantastic Beasts films, the Harry Potter and the Cursed Child play, the Hogwarts Tournament of Houses, the Hogwarts Legacy video game, and soon, a new Harry Potter TV series will be streaming*. These are all media products signed by Rowling and the Wizarding World franchise. They also sell various other commodities and tours with the Harry Potter brand. So, it is magic wrapped in the spirit of the New Age, the transmediation of the Harry Potter universe, relentless marketing campaigns, and the commodification of Harry Potter products (wands, toys, robes, chocolate frogs) that set the Harry Potter universe apart from other cultural products.

7. Harry Potter as a Competitor to Religion[21]

If we understand the New Age in terms of a *Zeitgeist*, a shift in modes of spirituality influenced by secular culture (Chryssides 2007, 22; Hanegraaff 1996, 517-518), then it is understandable that the supernatural storytelling of the age will reflect these changes. McAvan argues that postmodernism collapses the distinction between profane and sacred. Focusing on like *The Matrix*, *Harry Potter, The DaVinci Code*, *The Lord of the Rings* and TV series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Stargate*, *The X-Files,* and *Battlestar Galactica*, she argues these texts are consumed "for an experience of the transcendent ambivalently situated on the boundary of formal religious and spiritual traditions" (2010, 7). These texts are created for capitalist entertainment and profit-making purposes, yet are saturated with spiritual signifiers. The fantastic postmodern sacred, McAvan argues, is characterised by a virtual, electronic, and globalised culture of pastiche and emerges from New Age religiosity (2010, 8). In what follows, I will focus on the aspect of the New Age – its antagonism toward the authority of organised religion. I will demonstrate how the rootedness of Harry Potter in the New Age can be traced on both historical and narratological levels. In other words, if the change in modes of religiosity influences stories about the supernatural, the new stories should stand in opposition to institutionalised religion but retain their spiritual signifiers.

7.1. History: Challenging Religion

Magic is notoriously difficult to define. The images of witches, wizards, and spells usually come to mind when thinking about magic. However, historical, anthropological, and psychological perspectives reveal that these phenomena cannot be easily categorised under a single label, often overlapping with notions such as superstition, religion, the supernatural, and science. This confusion stems from a long and entangled history of magical practices. Hanegraaff (2019, 148–149; 2005b, 240) showed how, in the West, those beliefs and practices that did not fall under institutionalised religious and scientific orthodoxies were condemned by Christianity as heretical, demonic, pagan, and idolatrous, and by Enlightenment science as irrational, delusional, and

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superstitious. From a psychological standpoint, Subbotsky demonstrated that even in today's schools, religious education often portrays magic as pagan and dark, attacking it on an emotional basis. By contrast, scientific education typically portrays magic as superstitious, challenging it on a rational basis (2010, 17).

The distinction between magic and religion is a challenging one because both encompass the same type of phenomena. Drawing on Keith Thomas's studies of the medieval English Catholic Church, Pantić argued that the distinction between religion and magic is related to licit and illicit practices (2024, 54–56). Alternatively, as 19th-century occultist Eliphas Lévi put it: "Religion is magic sanctioned by authority" (1922, 1). Pantić compared Catholic and Islamic practices of condemning rites that did not follow prescribed orthodoxies. Just as the Church condemned rituals that did not follow its norms as devil worship, in 18th-century Syria, any divergence from the rules set by the Islamic authorities was seen as a sign of kufr [infidelity] (2021, 49-50). Moreover, Pantić posited that "… with medieval and early modern Catholic and Muslim theological sodalities, the boundaries between magic and religion helped to maintain the boundaries between an exclusive group of religious professionals and the rest of the common people" (50).

As I mentioned earlier, magical beliefs and practices are not solely influenced by institutionalised religions. Subbotsky demonstrated how children before school age verbalise magical beliefs that coexist with rationality. However, during their school years, science education suppresses the verbal expression of magical thinking (2010, 118–119). Contrary to the popular belief established by Piaget (1928, 369–374) that children grow out of magical thinking into rationality, Subbotsky's research suggests that this shift is more due to social pressure. More specifically, when children begin school, they tend to stop expressing magical beliefs. In a series of experiments, Subbotsky observed that, unlike preschool 6-year-old children, 8- and 10-year-olds demonstrate cognitive and emotional defences when faced with magical situations, such as an object disappearing from a box (120).

Following these propositions, we can see that the distinction between magic and religion is not related to the type of belief, rite, or ritual but to power. We can conclude that both terms cover the same phenomenon when referring to a group, its beliefs, symbols, and practices. Moreover, the various strategies for representing these phenomena suggest a power struggle. In this framework, religious institutions use magic as the Other to establish the discourse of orthodoxy and scientific institutions to establish the discourse of rationality. For this reason, the *Harry Potter*

novels and films also fell victim to religious discourse when the Church attempted to ban them and remove them from school curricula (Cockrell 2006; Hjelm 2006; Šarić 2001).

In 1937, an official American poll, Gallup, measured US church membership (as well as synagogue and mosque membership) at 73%. In 1999, the number decreased to 70%. In 2018, the rate was 50%, and the numbers continued to decline, reaching only 47% in 2020 (Jones 2021). The statistics provide evidence of the crisis in the church's authority within the American religious landscape. Meanwhile, the popularity of fantasy fiction books and featuring magic, like *Harry Potter*, has increased since the turn of the millennium. Pesce (2018) estimated that Rowling and the Wizarding World created a franchise worth $25 billion. The attention that Harry Potter books attracted resulted in a backlash from religious institutions, labelling them as witchcraft, satanism, and the occult. Rowling's Harry Potter novels are not the only example of fantasy fiction becoming a competitor to religion. Although appearing on various top ten book lists, Pullman's His Dark Materials was rated second on the US Banned Books list. The reaction to Pullman's novels included calls to burn the books (Boucher and Charlotte 2022, 26, 28).

In 2000 and 2001, Harry Potter books were first on the US list of banned books, often labelled as promoting witchcraft and satanism, attacked by religious groups, and demanded to be removed from school libraries. A religious group, Freedom Village USA, for example, wrote that Harry Potter groups are designed to recruit children for Wicca. A school in East Toronto decided to restrict access to Harry Potter books (Šarić 2001, 7). In 2002, the Cedarville school board restricted access to Harry Potter after a parent, Angie Haney, claimed they promoted witchcraft and a disregard for rules. In 2006, in Mallory, Atlanta school, Georgia: "It's mainstreaming witchcraft in a subtle and deceptive manner, in a children-friendly format. … The kind of stuff in these books — murder and greed and violence. Why do they have to read them in school?" (NBC News 2006). In 2007, the National Coalition Against Censorship reported that the Gwinnett County (GA) school board rejected a parent, Mallory's, plea to take Harry Potter books out of school libraries (2006).

In 2019, a Catholic school in Nashville, Tennessee, St. Edward's, removed Harry Potter books. Father Dan Reehil, pastor of the church and school who ordered its ban, asserted: "These books present magic as both good and evil, which is not true, but in fact a clever deception. The curses and spells used in the books are actual curses and spells; which when read by a human being risk conjuring evil spirits into the presence of the person reading the text. I have consulted several

exorcists, both in the United States and in Rome, and they have recommended removing the books from circulation" (Meyer 2019).

But it is not only a Christian church that sees fiction as a competitor. In 2005, Al-Mukhtar Al-Shinqiti, Director of the Islamic Centre of South Plains, Lubbock, Texas, said: "Traditionally, there is almost consensus among Muslim scholars that learning magic is haram. They base their argument on the verse mentioning people who learn magic: ‚And they learn what harms them, not what profits them. And they knew that the buyers of (magic) would have no share in the happiness of the Hereafter. And vile was the price for which they did sell their souls, if they but knew.‘ (Al-Baqarah: 102)" (Islam Online). Moreover, the US is not the only example of religious institutions banning *Harry Potter*. In 2022, the UAE banned the Harry Potter series from schools because it contained material deemed by the authorities to be offensive to the Islamic faith (BBC News 2002). My informer, who went to a Hungarian Calvinist-Protestant elementary school, reports that in 2002 in Hungary, his school tried to ban Harry Potter to protect students from "occult" and "satanic.". From 2009 to 2018, Saudi Arabia had anti-witchcraft police that banned Harry Potter and other fiction containing 'satanic themes' (Iaccino 2017).

Stark and Bainbridge hypothesise that religious institutions compete with one another in the religious marketplace by attracting believers with *rewards* and *compensators*. A *reward* is a benefit gained in this world for adhering to a particular religious tradition. Religions offer rewards to their followers in terms of money, power, status, belonging, identity, or position. In addition to *rewards*, religions promise a future benefit, a *compensator*. Stark and Bainbridge argue that, unlike other institutions competing for followers (i.e., political, economic, and national institutions) that also use *compensators*, religions use s*upernaturally based general compensators*, such as happiness, eternal bliss, paradise, and meeting with loved ones after death (1985, 23). This is why, in their account, secularisation in the sense of cessation of religion is impossible. Naturalistic systems, such as political or national institutions, cannot supplant supernaturalistic ones because they cannot offer a sense of otherworldliness (1985, 3). Instead, Stark and Bainbridge propose the view of secularisation as a recurring process.

They suggest that, unlike other types of institutions, religions attract followers primarily by offering *supernatural general compensators*. However, as religion becomes established, dealing more with worldly aspects of politics, organisation, and money, it becomes progressively *thisworldly*. Its followers begin to perceive it as any other institution. They become disenchanted

and stop believing that it can provide *supernatural compensators*. Searching for another source of the supernatural inspires the emergence of new religions (cults) or a schism in the body of a religious institution (a sect). These initially smaller religious groups attract followers by offering a newfound sense of *otherworldliness* that the mainstream religion has lost (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 2). Once they become established and gather infrastructure, money, followers, and status, they invest considerable effort in managing their worldly aspects. From the perspective of some of its followers, they lose the sense of otherworldliness, and the process of secularisation starts again. Therefore, for Stark and Bainbridge, secularisation is a process that is followed by revival and inspires religious innovation.

The axiom of the theory of religious economy, as proposed by Stark and Bainbridge, is that religion exists in all societies and, therefore, humans are naturally drawn toward the otherworldly; they seek institutions that will provide them with a sense of the otherworldly. Stark and Bainbridge draw attention to historical, sociological, and anthropological accounts of religion; however, they say nothing about why humans are interested in the otherworldly. Moreover, the argument that naturalistic systems cannot compete with supernaturalistic ones calls for an explanation. Given that their theory is based on rational choice, they argue that members of a society are presented with offers by various institutions, including religious institutions, which specialise in offers called *supernatural compensators*.

But Stark and Bainbridge do not elaborate on why these offers appeal to followers. In the case of naturalistic general compensators, such as wealth and status, one could argue that the promise made by the institution can be rationally explored. One can deduce whether the institution has the means to fulfil its promise before committing to its beliefs and practices. Religious institutions demand a big commitment but seem to offer no rationale for their supernatural promises. Should we accept that its members take their claims for granted? This seems to contradict the rational choice theory. I argue that a historical perspective is not enough to solve their problem. To explain this, I propose to turn to biocultural theory.

As I have argued in Part II of the thesis, supernatural stories are powerful tools that capture human curiosity toward the otherworldly by introducing elements that reveal gaps in our model of reality. Furthermore, our interest in supernatural stories reflects a need to integrate and organise aspects of human experience that cannot be explained by the rational mind, such as destiny, the afterlife, and a sense of divine justice. I have demonstrated how supernatural storytelling reifies

consciousness, providing a worldview that assigns a specific role and purpose to human beings in the universe, thereby fulfilling our need for meaning and security. Moreover, it elevates the sense of perceived control in presenting human beings as special, powerful, and worthy of divine attention. Thus, religious institutions specialised in capturing attention with supernatural compensators. In other aspects, religious institutions are similar to other forms of institutions. They are communities with a body of beliefs, symbols, rites, and rituals. They give their followers a sense of identity, belonging, and status. However, they differ insofar as they produce stories about the supernatural. In this respect, for a long time, the only competitor to a religious institution was another religious institution. Due to the process of secularisation after the Second World War, the church was increasingly losing its power over the public sphere. This led to the emergence and strengthening of a new competitor, fantasy fiction.

I return once more to Bohm's notion of implicate (enfolded) order (1980, 188). If we see consciousness as an implicate order which becomes explicate by taking a form of a particular experience: a form, an image, a sound, a sensation, an emotion, then supernatural storytelling solidifies (and organises) consciousness through the process of reification. Supernatural stories, therefore, can be seen as snapshots of states of consciousness woven in a narrative. Cultures and individuals used various tools and media to reify consciousness.

In describing the variety of mystical experiences, Katz argued that the subjective feel of the experience is shaped by learned linguistic patterns, so that what the mystic sees during a mystical experience conforms to their culture (1992, 5). On the other hand, Forman argued and documented that mystics experience "pure consciousness" (1999, 11-12). The implicate and explicate orders reconcile the two opposing theories. What Katz describes is the state when mystics are in touch with the explicate order, and what Forman is arguing for is the experience of the implicate order.

The next step is when this experience solidifies, what I have called *reified consciousness*. Since the birth of the ability to represent, humans have *reified consciousness*. This is the constant process of taking snapshots of experiences that do not correlate with reality and, therefore, cannot be simulated. We can imagine this process as the constant unfolding and crystallisation of consciousness in the form of stories. We are attracted to *reified consciousness* because it allows us to explore our minds. Strange combinations of ontological categories produce an agent, space, or object that does not correlate with those in reality, sparking curiosity. Individuals and organisations

can then use supernatural stories to attract their followers, fight for control over the religious field, arguing that their version of reified consciousness is true and that the others are false.

The religious marketplace in the West has undergone considerable changes since the Second World War. The magical culture that had been suppressed since the 17th century by religious and emerging scientific institutions was now reemerging in the public sphere, not simply as a counterculture, as it had been before the war, but as part of the mainstream (Hanegraaff 2019, 149-150; Partridge 2004, 40). This is mainly due to the process of secularisation, most evident in the decline of the church's power to dominate the public sphere. In this vacuum, a new form of religiosity has emerged, the New Age.

Although I agree with McAvan (2010) that globalised digital culture creates new opportunities to experience the sacred, I would add that speculative genres are inherently filled with supernatural signifiers, as they set their plots on the borders of consensus reality. This is not a postmodern phenomenon. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, the witches highlight the supernatural dimension of historical events, reminding us that our destiny is not only shaped by our actions but also influenced by higher powers. Similarly, in Homer's *Iliad*, Thetis informs Achilles that he will not see the fall of Troy. Should he return to the battle, he will die, earning eternal glory. Both scenes are filled with supernatural signifiers. Introducing fantastic elements to stories, therefore, captures our curiosity and also allows us to organise and reify abstract concepts like destiny, good, evil, and power within an organised narrative structure. After the Second World War, the church's power to dominate the supernatural economy waned, leading to the rise of a diverse range of supernatural stories across various media. The backlash against *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* reveals discursive strategies that religious institutions used to expel other sources of the otherworldly from the religious field, thereby dominating the religious economy.

7.2. Narrative: Close and Distant Reading of the Harry Potter novels

The opposition of *Harry Potter* stories to religion can also be detected on the narrative level. Here, religion is defined in a narrow sense, as an institutionalised discursive tradition (see Asad 1986, 14). The New Age is opposed to the institution's authority, not the entirety of the discursive tradition. Therefore, this argument is not in contradiction with Biblical readings of *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Matrix*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *His Dark Materials*, or *Harry Potter*. However, in all of these texts, the authority of the institutionalised religion is omitted or subverted. To support

my argument, I searched keywords in context in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire –* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) using Voyant Tools and AVOBMAT.

The New Age is characterised by what Strathern called *translatable universalism*. Drawing on Assmann's notion of the *translatability* of polytheistic religions (2010, 18-19), Strathern argues that even though gods of *immanentist* religions are local, they are tied to particular cities, temples, landscapes, and customs, and they are easily *translatable* to other cultures. This allowed a form of flexibility to these religions that Abrahamics did not have. Gods of *immanentist* religions could become more local in a tribal environment but more universal in spreading culture (2019, 27).[22] A god of death, war, or thunder is easily translated into other cultures, even though he or she may have distinct local features (Assmann 2010, 45-47). This cannot be said for *transcendentalist* religions, such as Abrahamic ones, for example. As Assmann puts it, "Jupiter cannot be translated to Yahweh" (2010, 19).

Religious attributes in the Harry Potter universe are *translatable* to aspects of various world cultures with which readers are familiar. As I have shown earlier, in communities like Glastonbury, individuals from around the world shared their notions of spirituality and relied on the concepts' translatability. In other words, it is the *translatability* of spiritual signifiers that results in universalism. There is nothing particularly Christian about the Christmas festivities in the Harry Potter novels and films. It can be translated to any other celebration – free time to spend with friends and family, receive gifts, and enjoy food. There is nothing about these attributes that would cause confusion or require further elaboration, thus disturbing the flow of the narrative.

Throughout the Harry Potter novels, words with religious origins do not typically describe religious beliefs or practices. Even when facing certain death, Harry does not pray; instead, he relies on magic – specifically, the stone of resurrection- to communicate with his deceased parents (Rowling 2007, 703). When Voldemort attacks Hogwarts, professors and students never call on

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[22] Strathern defines religion with two opposing terms. *Immanentism* designates those forms of religion where supernatural forces coexist with the believers. They are able to interact with them for their benefit. Most indigenous religions fall into this category. *Transcendentalism*, on the other hand, designates forms of religion that rely on separating the world of believers and supernatural forces. Examples of these religions include Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, among others (2019, 27-106).

God but use protective magics to form a shield around the castle and bring statues alive to defend the school (Rowling 2007, 501-502). Once again, I use the term *religion* in a narrow sense as an institutionalised tradition.

The plot of the Harry Potter books is set in the United Kingdom, so the religious elements I will be exploring here come from the Christian religious tradition. In the *Harry Potter* books, we learn about religion through the celebration of Christmas. However, in the Harry Potter universe, there is no mention of denominations, prayer, or any other belief, rite, or ritual that would directly imply a religious affiliation. However, I do not claim there is no religion in the Harry Potter universe. As a fantasy, the Harry Potter world contains all aspects of the real world. Moreover, on an allegorical level, Harry can be read as an allegory of Christ, just as Frodo, Neo, or Aslan. However, in removing institutional religious perspectives, these stories are easily translated into the code of another culture.

To test my arguments about the absence of words with religious connotations, I have created and cleaned a corpus of seven text-format *Harry Potter* novels with the generous help of Prof. Robert Peter. AVOBMAT (Analysis and Visualization of Bibliographic Metadata and Texts) lemmatised the novels (Péter et al. 2020). In the first search, I used AVOBMAT's NGRAM option to create a chart related to the occurrences of the words religion, pray, God/god, Jesus/jesus, and *church*. The results show that the words *religion* and *jesus* are not mentioned even once in the entire Harry Potter corpus (or any other derivatives of these words). The search also reveals the words *pray*, *god* and *church* throughout the Harry Potter series.

I used another digital tool, Voyant Tools, to double-check my results. Voyant Tools is also useful because it displays the number of occurrences of each derivative of the root word. For example, the root "pray" does not appear as the verb "to pray" but appears 12 times in the forms "praying," "prayer," and "prayed" (Graph 1).

The results of the search are as follows:
  o pray (12): praying (9), prayer (2), prayed (1)
  o god (21): god (19), god's (2)[23]

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[23] I did not show the following words because of their irrelevance: *godric, godric's, godfather, godfather's, godelot, godson.*

- church (25): church (21), churches (1), churchgoers (1), churchyard (1), churchyards (1).
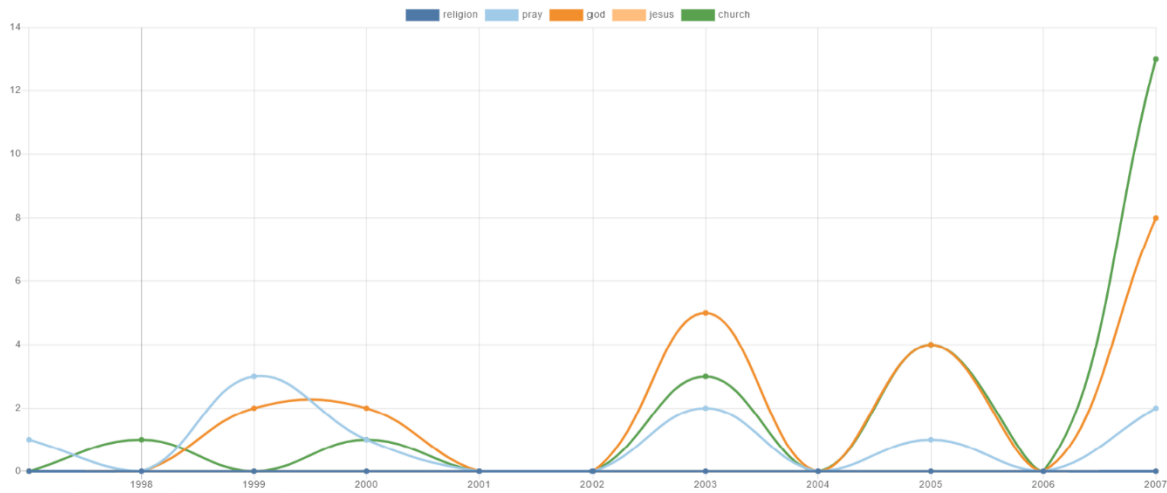
Graph 1

After the search revealed that the Harry Potter corpus contains the above-listed words, I used AVOBMAT and Voyant Tools to look up these words in context. After researching each of these derivatives, I concluded that my hypothesis is confirmed. There is not even one case where a word is used to explicitly denote a specific religious tradition, such as a rite, ritual, or belief.

When it comes to the word *God/god* and its derivatives (Image 1), it is used as a phrase, most commonly as an exclamation to express the emotion of surprise, amusement, excitement, or fear:

- "Thank God," shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air (Rowling 2005, 245).
- My God, my father told me about it ages ago… heard it from Cornelius Fudge (Rowling 2000, 159).
- "My God — Diggory!" it whispered. "Dumbledore — he's dead!" (Rowling 2000, 571).
- "But why didn't you — oh my God — you should have said" (Rowling 2005, 99).

- "My God, what an eyesore!" (Rowling 2005, 209).

Joanne Rowling	Without title	1999	So I'll go an' get 'em. Hang on…" He strode away from them into the forest and out of sight. "*God*, this place is going to the dogs." said Malfoy loudly. "That oaf teaching classes, my father'll have
Joanne Rowling	Without title	1999	transform? And the caption said the boy would be going back to Hogwarts… to where Harry was…" "My *God*," said Lupin softly, staring from Scabbers to the picture in the paper and back again. "His front paw…"
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2000	he said delightedly. "You've got a father and brother at the Ministry and you don't even know? My *God*, my father told me about it ages ago… heard it from Cornelius Fudge. But then, Father's always associated
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2000	" The face of Cornelius Fudge appeared upside down over Harry; it looked white, appalled. "My *God* — Diggory!" it whispered. "Dumbledore — he's dead!" The words were repeated, the shadowy figures
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	heard the front door open and then close. "Snape never eats here," Ron told Harry quietly. "Thank *God*. C'mon." "And don't forget to keep your voice down in the hall, Harry," Hermione whispered. As
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	felt like joining in as they heard Sirius tramping past their door toward Buckbeak's room, singing "*God* Rest Ye Merry, Hippogriffs" at the top of his voice. How could he have dreamed of returning to
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	Dumbledore ever taught you how to count?" "He's dot alone!" shouted a voice from above them. "He's still *god* be!" Harry's heart sank. Neville was scrambling down the stone benches toward them. Hermione's wand
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	results would be arriving today!" "Today?" shrieked Hermione. "Today? But why didn't you — oh my *God* — you should have said —" She leapt to her feet. "I'm going to see whether any owls have come…"
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	sounds, his expression hungry. Merope raised her head. Her face, Harry saw, was starkly white. "My *God*, what an eyesore!" rang out a girl's voice, as clearly audible through the open window as if she had
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	was mercifully open, and Harry and Hermione staggered in his wake into the crowded shop. "Thank *God*," shivered Ron as they were enveloped by warm, toffee-scented air. "Let's stay here all afternoon."
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	what's he telling all these… all these…" Harry's voice tailed away; he was staring at the fire. "*God*, I've been stupid," he said quietly. "It's obvious, isn't it? There was a great vat of it down in the
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	removed the front door open and then close. "Snape never eats more… He's alive." "Yeah," said Harry. "Did I hear someone else in the yard?" Ginny asked. "Hermione and Kingsley," said Harry.
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	few feet from them. Bill and Fleur slid from its back, windswept but unhurt. "Bill! Thank *God*, thank *God* —" Mrs. Weasley ran forward, but the hug Bill bestowed upon her was perfunctory. Looking directly
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	said Ron, mopping his forehead on his sleeve. "She used to come for Christmas every year, then, thank *God*, she took offense because Fred and George set off a Dungbomb under her chair at dinner. Dad always
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	"Well, as long as it doesn't get them into trouble, though they might've been arrested already, *God*, that's revolting," Ron added after one sip of the foamy, grayish coffee. The waitress had heard; she
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	Reg Cattermole was all that quick-witted, though, the way everyone was talking to me when I was him. *God*, I hope they made it… If they both end up in Azkaban because of us…" Harry looked over at Hermione
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	keeping the sword. Snape caught them as they were trying to smuggle it down the staircase." "Ah, *God* bless 'em," said Ted. "What did they think, that they'd be able to use the sword on You-Know-Who? Or
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	that's little Scorpius," said Ron under his breath. "Make sure you beat him in every test, Rosie. Thank *God* you inherited your mother's brains." "Ron, for heaven's sake," said Hermione, half stern, half amused

Image 1

The word "pray" is mainly used as a synonym for "hope" (Image 2). The derivative "prayer" is used to describe the way someone is holding their hands or head:

- "He stumbled forward and sat down on the bed again, staring at his hands, his head bowed as though in prayer" (Rowling 2005, 271).

- "The Dumbledore in Harry's head smiled, surveying Harry over the tips of his fingers, pressed together as if in prayer" (Rowling 2007, 483).

- "Harry swerved again as the serpent lunged at him; he soared upward and straight toward the place where, he prayed, the door stood open: Ron, Hermione, and Goyle had vanished; Malfoy was screaming and holding Harry so tightly it hurt" (Rowling 2007, 534).

- "They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it" (Rowling 1998, 174).

- "Praying that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward it" (Rowling 1999, 13).

Authors	Title	Publication year	Text
Joanne Rowling	Without title	1997	lock it in." "Good idea," said Ron nervously. They edged toward the open door, mouths dry, *praying* the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam
Joanne Rowling	Without title	1999	across the room. Harry followed it stealthily. The book was hiding in the dark space under his desk. *Praying* that the Dursleys were still fast asleep, Harry got down on his hands and knees and reached toward
Joanne Rowling	Without title	1999	and the Marauder's Map. Snape picked up the Zonko's bag. "Ron gave them to me," said Harry, *praying* he'd get a chance to tip Ron off before Snape saw him. "He — brought them back from Hogsmeade last
Joanne Rowling	Without title	1999	sentence. He shuffled forward on his knees, groveling, his hands clasped in front of him as though *praying*. "Sirius — it's me… it's Peter… your friend… you wouldn't…" Black kicked out and Pettigrew
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2000	He raised his wand. "Accio Firebolt!" he shouted. Harry waited, every fiber of him hoping, *praying*… If it hadn't worked… if it wasn't coming… He seemed to be looking at everything around him through
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	it! And if either of you ever —" "Hem, hem." Professor McGonagall closed her eyes as though *praying* for patience as she turned her face toward Professor Umbridge again. "Yes?" "I think they deserve
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	through the only door still open, the one through which the Death Eaters themselves had come. Inwardly *praying* that Neville would stay with Ron — find some way of releasing him — he ran a few feet into the new
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	find the right page: at last he located it and deciphered one cramped word underneath the spell: *Praying* that this was the counter-jinx, Harry thought Liberacorpus! with all his might. There was another
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	his head bowed, and his white hands folded over the Elder Wand in front of him. He might have been *praying*, or else counting silently in his mind, and Harry, standing still on the edge of the scene, thought

Image 2

In the case of the word "church," the connotations are spatial (Image 3). The church is always a place, a building. The word "churchgoers" refers to characters going to church:

- "Harry looked around, worried, thinking of dementors, then realised that the carols had

finished, that the chatter and flurry of churchgoers were fading away as they made their way back into the square" (Rowling 2007, 327).

- o "According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight" (Rowling 2005, 59).

- o "The Riddles were buried in the Little Hangleton churchyard, and their graves remained objects of curiosity for a while" (Rowling 2000, 4).

- o "I'm sure it is," said Hermione, her eyes upon the church. "They… they'll be in there, won't they? Your mum and dad? I can see the graveyard behind it" (Rowling 2007, 323).

- o "He looked out over a valley blanketed in snow, distant church bells chiming through the glittering silence" (Rowling 2007, 350).

| Authors	Title	Publication year	Text
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2000	gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small **church** was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	retired from public life after being struck in the ear by a turnip at a concert in Little Norton **Church** Hall nearly fifteen years ago. I recognized him the moment I saw his picture in the paper. Now, Stubby
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	far end... It too opened at his touch... And now he was in a dimly lit room as high and wide as a **church**, full of nothing but rows and rows of towering shelves, each laden with small, dusty, spun-glass
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2003	back at the door and pushed. It swung open. They were there, they had found the place: high as a **church** and full of nothing but towering shelves covered in small, dusty, glass orbs. They glimmered dully
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	He set off at a brisk pace, past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was almost midnight. "So tell me, Harry," said Dumbledore. "Your scar... has it been hurting
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	Harry quickly. "Hermione Granger told me." "And she is quite right. We turn left again." The **church** clock chimed midnight behind them. Harry wondered why Dumbledore did not consider it rude to call
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	him: Neither can live while the other survives... Dumbledore had stopped walking, level with the **church** they had passed earlier. "This will do, Harry. If you will grasp my arm." Braced this time
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2005	them, Harry could see a village, undoubtedly Little Hangleton, nestled between two steep hills, its **church** and graveyard clearly visible. Across the valley, set on the opposite hillside, was a handsome manor
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	magical families, and this accounts, no doubt, for the stories of hauntings that have dogged the little **church** beside it for many centuries.' "You and your parents aren't mentioned." Hermione said, closing
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	obscured by a windblown Christmas tree. There were several shops, a post office, a pub, and a little **church** whose stained-glass windows were glowing jewel-bright across the square. The snow here had become
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	and pop music as the pub door opened and closed; then they heard a carol start up inside the little **church**. "Harry, I think it's Christmas Eve!" said Hermione. "Is it?" He had lost track of the date:
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	date: they had not seen a newspaper for weeks. "I'm sure it is," said Hermione, her eyes upon the **church**. "They... they'll be in there, won't they? Your mum and dad? I can see the graveyard behind it."
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	his forehead... "C'mon," said Harry, when he had looked his fill, and they turned again toward the **church**. As they crossed the road, he glanced over his shoulder; the statue had turned back into the war
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	war memorial. The singing grew louder as they approached the **church**. It made Harry's throat constrict; it reminded him so forcefully of Hogwarts, of Peeves bellowing rude versions of carols from inside
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	open as quietly as possible and they edged through it. On either side of the slippery path to the **church** doors, the snow lay deep and untouched. They moved off through the snow, carving deep trenches behind
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	they walked around the building, keeping to the shadows beneath the brilliant windows. Behind the **church**, row upon row of snowy tombstones protruded from a blanket of pale blue that was flecked with dazzling
Joanne Rowling	Without title	2007	of churchgoers were fading away as they made their way back into the square. Somebody inside the **church** had just turned off the lights. Then Hermione's voice came out of the blackness for the third

1 to 20 of 21 |< < Page 1 of 2 >

Image 3

In addition to these words, I explored the word "Christmas." Again, I compared the results of AVOBMAT and Voyant Tools. Both tools show that the word appears 209 times in the corpus and is present in each of the Harry Potter novels: *Philosopher's Stone* (25), *Chamber of Secrets* (15), *Prisoner of Azkaban* (31), *Goblet of Fire* (30), *Order of the Phoenix* (51), *Half-Blood Prince* (32), *Deathly Hallows* (25). Graphs are normalised; AVOBMAT shows relative frequencies per year, and Voyant Tools per book (Graphs 2 and 3). In all cases, the word "Christmas" has a temporal meaning. It appears as a festival or a school break. There is no explicit description of a religious rite or ritual involved in celebrating Christmas. The relationship with the Christian religious tradition is pushed to the background and presented symbolically through decorations and singing.

- o "I'm warning you now, boy — any funny business, anything at all — and you'll be in that cupboard from now until Christmas" (Rowling 1998, 24).

- o "Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on

the front; also a dozen home-baked mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle" (Rowling 1999, 222).

o "You told me at the Yule Ball a house-elf called Dobby had given you a Christmas present" (Rowling 2000, 677).

o "'Well, we know what to get you next Christmas,' said Hermione brightly" (Rowling, 2000, 546).

o "Now you've got to buy me a Christmas present, ha!" (Rowling 2000, 105).
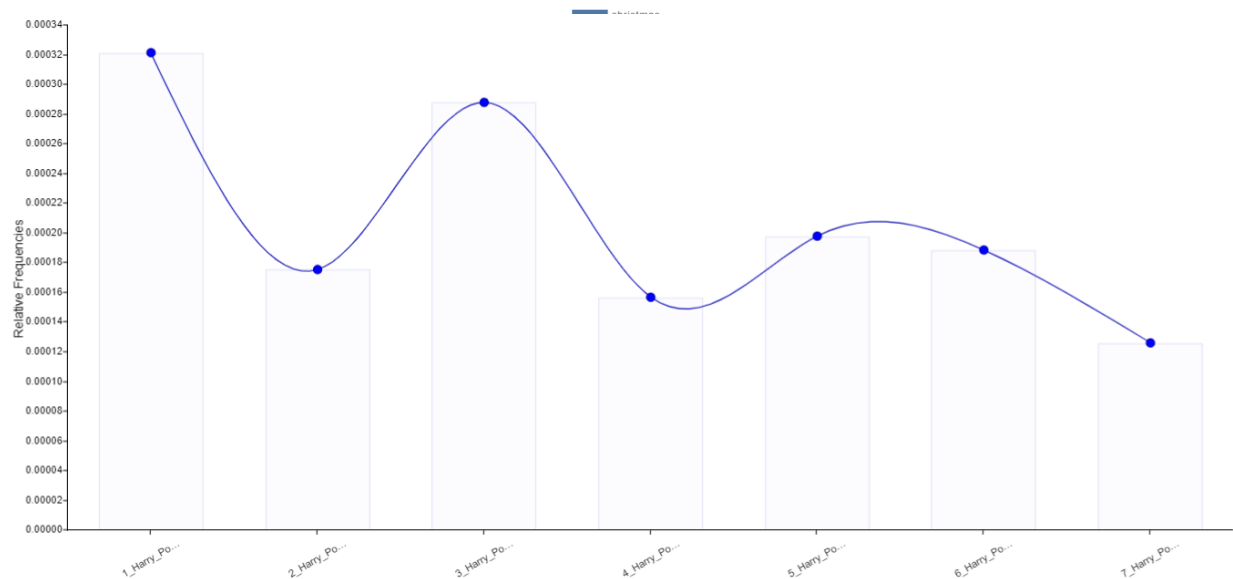
Graph 3

7.3. Harry Potter Re-enchanting the World

I argue that pushing religion to the background resonated with the New Age sentiments of the UK and the US, but also made it possible for readers worldwide to identify with the Harry Potter novels and feel a sense of belonging to the Harry Potter universe. This argument, however, should not be confused with the claim that religion is absent in the Harry Potter novels. As a low fantasy, the world of Harry Potter encompasses all the religions, ethnicities, and nationalities found in the real world. We encounter elements of Christian religious tradition, such as Christmas celebrations, quotes from the Bible, resurrection parables, and others. However, these do not play a significant role in the plot. Moreover, a reader who misses noticing them will not have problems understanding the storyline.

I am also aware of the scholarship that explores the Harry Potter universe concerning the Christian religious tradition, highlighting Christian allegories, allusions, parables, and symbolism. In arguing for universalism, I do not reject their findings. However, the fact that these allusions

are not immediately apparent and require identification and argumentation only strengthens my argument that religion is pushed to the background of the Harry Potter universe. In most examples elicited by advocates of a Christian interpretation of the Harry Potter novels, Christian elements are presented in a symbolic and allegorical manner (Granger 2006; Groves 2017; Strand 2019).

The example often evoked by those who argue that Christianity plays an important role in the Harry Potter series is the scene in The Deathly Hallows, where Harry and Hermione visit Godric's Hollow to find the grave of Harry's parents. There are many elements from the Christian tradition in that scene, including Christmas, carols, a church, a churchyard, and two quotes from Matthew 6:21 and 1 Corinthians 15:26 inscribed on tombstones (Rowling 2007, 328). Nevertheless, what are Harry's and Hermione's reactions to this setting? If not for carols, they would even forget that it is Christmas (Rowling 2007, 328). Upon reading the inscription on the tomb of his parents, "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," Harry's first impression is – "Isn't that a Death Eater idea? Why is that there?" (Rowling 2007, 328). It is Hermione who recognises that these words refer to a life after death. However, this idea offers no comfort to Harry: "But they were not living, thought Harry: They were gone. The empty words could not disguise the fact that his parents' moldering remains lay beneath snow and stone, indifferent, unknowing" (Rowling 2007, 328). For Harry, the words of the Bible are empty.

Groves interprets this scene differently. She only comments on Hermione's understanding of the quote, omitting Harry's comments. Instead of an argument, she relies on the *argumentum ad auctoritatem:* "Rowling has placed great emphasis on these two quotations (which are the only direct biblical quotations in the Harry Potter novels), saying that 'they almost epitomise the whole series'" (2017, 61). However, an author's emphasis on quotations is unimportant when interpreting their works. Moreover, Groves completely overlooks Rowling's statement that they are the only biblical quotations in seven volumes. Is it uncommon to find a quotation from the Bible on a tombstone, or for individuals to sing carols and attend church during Christmas in England? In the opening of her chapter, to support her claims, Groves notes that Christianity is an important aspect of Rowling's life and that she openly stated that the Harry Potter novels are full of Christian parallels, falling once more into the authority fallacy (2017, 60).

The religiosity of an author or their opinion about the novel is of little importance and does not replace an argument. In her interpretation of the two epigrams to *The Deathly Hallows*, Groves focuses on the quotations written by William Penn, a Christian religious thinker, but altogether

omits the Ancient Greek one, written by Aeschylus (61). If a conclusion is to be drawn from these quotations, it should be one related to universal human truths that stem from different cultures and religions, rather than a particular religion. The juxtaposition of the Christian and Pagan is a hallmark of the New Age.

Christian interpretation is certainly one possible reading of the novels. British culture, which is to say architecture, literature, morality, and art, reflects many intertextual relationships with Christian spirituality. In that sense, an interesting view on Harry Potter novels is offered by Strand: "As in Tolkien's Middle-earth, there is no mention of God or religion in the series. However, there is a transcendent power that hovers over characters and events, lending them meaning and motivation to do good. That power is love. Magic in the Harry Potter universe is at its best and most powerful when it is at the service of love, for Christians know that 'God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.' (1 John 4:16)" (2019, 12). Strand's perspective is informed by the works of John Granger, who, at the turn of the century, argued for understanding the Harry Potter universe in terms of Christian spirituality. Granger asserts that because the Harry Potter books challenge a materialistic worldview, they do not advocate occult practices but a spiritual life (2006, 9). By understanding the Harry Potter novels in the context of the culture and tradition in which they are rooted, Granger argues against the exclusively secular view of the books and interprets them as part of the Christian spiritual tradition of England (13).

However, my argument does not support exclusively Christian or exclusively secular readings of Harry Potter novels. I am concerned not with whether religion is present in the Harry Potter universe, but rather with the function of words that come from religious traditions in the Harry Potter novels. Thus, the results of my research indicate that the searched words do not refer to a specific religious practice; their function is solely to depict the real-world backdrop of the United Kingdom in which the plot is set. Based on this finding, I argue that it made it easy for children and adults worldwide to connect with novels and develop a sense of belonging to this magical world. I argue that the portrayal of religion in the background of Harry Potter novels is particularly related to the emergence of New Age spirituality and the process of re-enchantment.

Stark and Bainbridge posit that secularisation is not a single event like Weber considered it, but a recurring process through which established religions become *thiswordly* and thus cannot satisfy the needs of their followers for *otherworldliness*. In this way, secularisation inspires new forms of religiosity (1985, 1-2). Drawing on Stark and Bainbridge, Partridge argues that modernity

brings about a cultural shift characterised by the return of the magical culture, not just as a form of counterculture but also as part of the mainstream (2004, 45). A similar, albeit Foucauldian, perspective on the process of secularisation as disenchantment and re-enchantment is offered by Jason Jopherson Smith, who deconstructs modernity as a "distinct and original tradition" by undermining one of its main pillars – disenchantment. He argues that scholars have often overlooked the rich and vibrant traditions of spiritualist and magical movements in Europe, producing what he calls the "myth of disenchantment" (2017, 303-304).

The results of my research align with the above-mentioned considerations of secularisation as a shift in modes of religiosity. While institutionalised religion is pushed into the background of the Harry Potter novels, magic is presented as a natural force that heroes practice daily to defeat the villain. Young wizards and witches attend school, where they learn to use spells, create potions, and interact with fantastic beasts. McAvan demonstrates how various aspects of popular culture, including novels and series such as *The Matrix*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Buffy*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter*, facilitate a type of spirituality that straddles the boundary between the sacred and the profane, which she terms "the postmodern sacred." Stemming from the New Age milieu, although primarily produced for entertainment, these novels and video games are replete with spiritual signifiers from various myths and religious traditions (2012, 6). Her findings are significant as they highlight that in postmodern art, the distinction between spirituality, magic, and religion is blurred. Even in Granger's and Strand's Christian interpretations of Harry Potter novels, magic is spirituality, and God is Love (Strand 2019, 12; Granger 2006, 13).

So, the biological and historical perspectives complement each other. Once we understand that humans are drawn to supernatural storytelling because of their curiosity about agents and spaces on the border of their consensus reality, and because of the sense of empowerment and psychological order these stories provide, then the tension in the religious field between different modes of supernatural storytelling becomes understandable. In portraying magic as a New Age empowering force, Rowling influenced generations worldwide to imagine themselves as wizards and witches who cast spells. Due to the process of secularisation, religious institutions are struggling with church attendance and react to other forms of supernatural discourse, seeing it as a threat. However, the new forms of supernatural storytelling flourish because of their diminished power over the public sphere. Moreover, Granger's (2006) and Strand's (2019) perspectives on the Harry Potter novels, which align with the Christian spiritual tradition, demonstrate that new modes

of supernatural storytelling influence and transform the Christian discursive tradition. In other words, if the Harry Potter universe cannot be ignored, Christianity will adapt to integrate it.

Conclusions

It has been thirty years since Carroll published his seminal book *Evolution and Literary Theory* (1995), which marks the beginning of the project of biocultural theory in literary studies. In 2024, the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES) conference was hosted by Mathias Clasen, a professor in the Department of English at Aarhus University. After thirty years of research, a dream of Carroll was fulfilled – researchers in literary studies presented their findings alongside colleagues across disciplines and worldwide who endeavour to understand human behaviour from an evolutionary perspective. This thesis aimed to contribute a small piece to this research project, expanding biocultural theory in the direction of human interaction with stories that incorporate supernatural elements.

The main argument of this thesis is that our interaction with supernatural storytelling can be understood as a form of play, an adaptive behaviour that uses elements of reality to *reify consciousness*. The origins of this form of play can be traced back to the development of *cognitive fluidity*. Consciousness remains a mystery, and science has yet to explain it fully. Nevertheless, through the supernatural storytelling, we can crystallise aspects of our consciousness so they become visible and palpable. Giving voices and faces to abstract concepts and emotions helps us understand them in terms of physical processes and agents. Then it becomes possible to integrate them into narratives, projecting a universe that entails psychological order, meaning, and purpose. Sitting around the fire, under the starry skies, and telling supernatural stories enabled our ancestors to reify, and then learn about, modify, organise, and share aspects of their consciousness. The newfound sense of mastery over the inner dimension led to decreasing anxiety and an elevated sense of control and security. Those compelling supernatural stories were adapted, modified, and transformed to fit new environments. Therefore, it is no wonder that these stories have attracted readers for thousands of years and remain at the foundation of our cultures.

Relying on magical thinking, these stories present humans as powerful agents or in communion with supernatural forces. My argument strictly applies to fantasy fiction, the modern successor to supernatural storytelling. However, other genres, such as science fiction and horror, also include supernatural elements. In science fiction, magical powers are usually explained in terms of scientific rationality. In Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the Voice is described as extended mental

abilities that can be developed through practice. In *Star Wars*, the Force results from midi-chlorians, a microscopic life form. Even though the explanation of magic differs from that found in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*, its adaptive value remains the same. Even *Star Trek* features god-like beings, such as Q, who can influence space and time. On the other hand, supernatural horror reifies aspects of our inner reality related to negative emotions. Understanding fear, death, and trauma in terms of physical processes can facilitate discussing them and lead to an elevated sense of mastery over them. This finding aligns with Andersen et al.'s (2020), Scrivner et al.'s (2021), and Bønnelykke-Behrndtz et al.'s (2024) results, which suggest that interaction with horror can be seen as a form of play with fear, leading to mastery over the emotion and greater emotional resilience.

Part I of this thesis introduced biocultural theory and the adaptationist case for storytelling, highlighting the theory of mind as an essential mechanism for engaging with stories. This laid the foundation for my argument in Part II. It is via the theory of mind that we connect with characters. Walking in their shoes, when characters are magically empowered, we train our minds to experience the same. My argument here is that, in real life, through magical thinking, we can intuitively tap into the same neural pathways to reach a state of elevated perceived control. This sense of empowerment and security is why stories that weave magic, such as fairy tales and fantasy fiction, are a gold mine for children. However, we still lack empirical studies that would test this hypothesis. Part III examined the historical reasons for the popularity of the Harry Potter novels, specifically their alignment with the New Age movement, to illustrate how the sentiments of the period influenced our conceptual domains and consequently shaped the reifications. I have demonstrated that the backlash against the Harry Potter novels reveals the power dynamics within the religious field. As supernatural stories are the source of the feeling of otherworldliness, religious institutions throughout history clash over which version of reified consciousness is accurate.

I have also presented the debate on the relationship between Harry Potter and Christianity. As I have shown, fantasy fiction stories are often seen as religious allegories. In his 1966 foreword to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien writes about his distaste for allegory (xxviii). I also find it oversimplifying to juxtapose Harry and Frodo to Jesus. Navigating the challenging path of sacrifice is a universal theme. Heracles was also deified and rose to Olympus after his death. The similarities between these stories, I argue, stem from their common source – our shared human

consciousness. However, like our subjective conscious experience changes from moment to moment, each literary iteration that captures it will be different. We can then see supernatural stories as historical artefacts that trace the development of the human consciousness and its constant process of unfoldment and change.

Sadly, supernatural stories were often used as a tool for manipulation, abusing the need for the otherworldly and the universe, which entails order, meaning, and purpose. By explicating their evolutionary and cognitive underpinnings, I hope to dispel the illusion that any one of these stories can be more true than another. Identifying with any of them is like identifying with an object of consciousness and forgetting its elusive nature. Nevertheless, each can offer a glimpse into the otherworldly aspects of consciousness, allowing us to engage with aspects of our subjective experience that do not have correlatives in reality, such as death, power, chaos, order, peace, and love. For humans, these aspects are as valuable, if not more valuable, than real objects.

As I write, the new *Harry Potter* TV series has been announced, which will once more adapt the original novels. The updates on the cast reach twenty, forty, and seventy thousand viewers on YouTube. The Harry Potter universe is a complex constellation of memes that has adapted to all media platforms and cultures and continues to do so. I have argued that its popularity stems from multiple factors, including New Age influences, transmediation, commodification, and marketing strategies that have resulted in a constant renewal of interest, producing an avalanche effect. Nevertheless, these factors only amplified its initial popularity. Had stories not produced a strong sense of empowerment in their readership, they would not be well received from the moment of their publication. Although critics like Gupta (2009), Zipes (2001) and Bernstein (1999) saw the sense of familiarity and security instilled by the novel's repetitive structure and its Disney-like powerless boy overcoming the forces of darkness as a cheap trick, the sense of empowerment that the novels and films provide makes them attractive to children and adults around the world even thirty years later.

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