

**Research and work plan for the doctoral thesis *Harry Potter and the world of myths – mythological creatures, persons and names, and their function in the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling.***

This is rather a brief introduction to my work plans and ideas in general because the actual work on my thesis is still at the start – due to intense studies of the new subsidiary subjects - and did not proceed very far yet. Nevertheless, I appreciate introducing and discussing my plan, and any comments and criticism are welcome.

One striking feature of the successful Harry Potter-series by J. K. Rowling is the appearance and use of mythology of different parts of the world. The author introduces various creatures, persons, mythical names and places to the readers of her books. I would like to make a catalogue of these with reference to their origin and I would like to examine their function and their symbolic value in the texts themselves. I do not want to publish another “Who is who in Harry Potter”, of which already exist quite a view, but I want to focus on mythology’s value and position in literature on a very popular and new example. This work would combine the major fields of my interest and studies, mythology, especially of Scandinavia and Greece, and children’s literature. As the background and basis for this examination I would use works on fantastic children’s literature and its issues, works on intertextuality and some works on psychological interpretation of literature. So far, I rely on information from seminars I attended concerning fantastic elements in children’s literature and psychology as an instrument for literature interpretation. I mainly attended seminars on children’s literature at the Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe-University in Germany and I will use works on fantasy in children’s literature on international level with a focus on British literature I got to know during these seminars. I have also the works of Karl Kerényi and Mircea Eliade as basis for research on mythology, especially Greek, on my mind. The biggest lack of knowledge I have in the area of British mythology and folklore traditions. During various courses of my studies this area was touched every now and then but I may not have more than an overview or blurred ideas. I found Celtic elements in Rowling’s work, as well as such elements like giants, which are sure to be found in any European folklore. I am determined to study British literary traditions because I believe they influenced the author of the Harry Potter books a lot.

As the first step I started making a catalogue of definition of the creatures, persons and names deriving from mythology and I will present their origin. This catalogue or list serves as a background rather than an individual work and helps to combine mythological references with similar features. So far I came to the conclusion that Rowling used parts of Greek, Scandinavian, British and Celtic mythology for her novels, but I do not see any patterns for the use yet. There are also mixed forms in the meaning of creatures, etc. that belong to the mythological realm, as for example dragons, but get a new interpretation in the Potter books. I do not intend to write mainly about the author's intention of using mythology but I want to analyse its function and symbolic representation in the books, and I want to show that it was done on purpose in one way or the other. The author's intention may become interesting when looking at the fact that the Harry Potter books are children's literature and the appearance of mythology and folklore might very well be put there by the author in order to introduce the readers to such literary forms. For the analysis of function and symbolism I need the background of the origins of different mythological items. The primary sources are the first four Harry Potter novels and two small books *Fantastic Beast and where to find them* and *Quidditch through the ages* by Rowling.

As secondary sources I would use various books from different countries – currently I know about American, British and German versions - about the world of Harry Potter and its inhabitants, and diverse literature on mythology, mythology in literature and especially children's literature. This secondary literature about the HP-series seems to be growing fast and new outputs appear in the shelves of book stores nearly every month. Other sources may be works on mythology combined with psychology. It is my aim to focus on the original text, though. I am aware of the danger of getting lost in interpretations when dealing with mythology.

I find the direct secondary literature for the Harry Potter series the most interesting because they show the attention of other writers, publishers and critics for Rowling's work. One of the German books (Langenscheidts Grosses Zauberwörterbuch Englisch-Deutsch) is for example an English-German dictionary with comments on creatures, persons and names from the books, that gives a nice example of a combination of a book for learning (language and mythology/folk tradition) and interest in reading. Some of the books look rather like attempts to jump on the fast "Harry-Potter-fever"-train in order to make money, others show a real interest with detailed information and secondary sources.

The fascination of mythology in the Harry Potter series lies for me in the different levels of reading it creates. The creatures, persons and names the author introduces fit well into the magical world of wizards as it will mesmerize children when reading, but they create another ground for those readers who have read about mythology before and have a knowledge about it. Those readers may be adults and the author may try to influence and entertain them as well. Mythology and fantasy, and the question whether or not the Harry Potter books are fantasy literature will certainly find its place in my work, go very well together and in the case of the Harry Potter series they create a parallel world to ours that is easy to believe in – at least in that respect that the reader wishes it would exist. That holds true for both children and adults.

When the catalogue of mythological creatures, persons, and names and their origin starts to take a clear shape, I would like to continue with articles and essays on the function and symbolic character of the entrances of this list. I intend to write articles already parallel to the list of defined characters in order to group those mythological references with similar features right away. It might be possible to find some of them belonging to the same category, for example representing powerful forces beyond human understanding or simply representing good or evil. I want to examine closer the relation between the origin of a mythological character and its function or role in the Harry Potter books. They may be close to one another or then contradictive. Some are certainly used as a parody; others create a level of intertextuality for those who are familiar with mythology and old story telling. I want to concentrate on those referring only to mythology and story telling, and leave the references to other literary works, such as novels, poems, etc. out. It is clear, though, that if a mythological person or creature, etc. refers to an “original” text, i.e. texts where it probably appeared first, it at the same time refers to many other text that have been using it. Then we deal with various levels depending on the background of each single reader and I want to show that this is one of the “tricks” an author may use intentionally or intuitionally to make her books fascinating. Wherever possible I want to stay as close to the original place of the Harry Potter text to show what the examined character, item, place, etc., really does and what it may represent or mean to the reader.

I would like to give a short and simple example of a reference to Greek mythology with a parodistic function. In the first Harry Potter book (Harry Potter and the philosopher’s stone) appears a monstrous guard dog with three heads, which rather obviously leads to the dog of

the Greek underworld Hades named Cerberus. Not only the look of the monster creates the parallelism but also the fact that it falls asleep when listening to music (Orpheus myth). In the case of the Harry Potter dog the parody comes in with its name “Fluffy” and the fact that it is a pet dog of the gamekeeper. If we have a look at the text in the book the appearance of this dog creates tension and horror in the first place, which is released by the fact that it can be handled with music. Only for the reader on the second, the reference, level it creates an undertone of humour and parody. It may also awake a certain pride in the reader of knowing the background of the Fluffy figure. Currently, I am working on the images of horror in the HP-series for a seminar and I hope to finish the essay during April 2004. It may become an essential step stone towards one category of mythological creatures and therefore an important basis for my analysis. Not all creatures evoking horror in the reader are dissolved in a parody, which may lead to the need of a sub-category of purely horrifying creatures, like for instance Lord Voldemort himself or the basilisk of books two.

Other figures are much more complex and difficult to analyse, as for instance the person of the school’s headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. Behind this figure could be an archetype in the Jungian interpretation (the wise old man), a guide and protector in a dangerous world. This may even more so hold true because of the fact that the hero, Harry Potter, is an orphan.

The role and position of mythological characters in the books are various and very interesting. They may underline the importance of a fact or a situation, or they may represent certain features connected to the happenings and their history. Others are used for humorous interludes and may create a contrast to the excitement and danger of a situation. Another aspect is the psychological presentation mythology offers traditionally or is adapted by the author for her own use. The author may have invented characters, beings, places and things for amusement and entertainment.

Rowling uses ancient mythology from for instance Greece as well as folk traditions, fairy tales and myths from her own British background. The latter may represent a feature most valuable to readers with the same background, which enables them to recognise characters, names, etc. On the other hand, those features may be very interesting for readers unfamiliar with them because they are new and exiting. The author may have the wish to educate her readers in folklore and literature in general. I still strongly believe that Rowling created the

main personnel of her books herself out of her literature knowledge repertoire as individual persons and only some side characters have a stereotypical role.

My work is directed to people interested in children's literature and the use of mythology and fantasy in it. It is supposed to be a practical reference work and should offer suggestions and ways for understanding the importance of mythology and fantasy in books for children. I am planning to write articles about the functions of mythology in the Harry Potter books. These articles should stimulate discussion and lead to new ideas concerning mythology in literature and especially in children's literature. With the new wave of success of fantasy in literature and movies this subject should be worth examining.

Alongside Harry Potter there is of course the newly discovered world of J.R.R. Tolkien, currently available as three full-length motion picture movies done by Peter Jackson and as various new prints of the original works and secondary literature (including dictionaries and picture books). It might be worthwhile examining similarities of Rowling's and Tolkien's works because figures like the wizard professor Dumbledore of the Potter books and the wizard Gandalf in Tolkien's books "The Hobbit – or there and back again" and "The Lord of the Rings" have definitely a lot in common. Of course, fantasy literature may always show certain features like a rather clear definition of good and evil, certain creatures, like dragons, giants, dwarfs, etc. and powerful but slightly tragic heroes and heroines. On the other hand, Tolkien has a great influence on British fantasy literature and Rowling might refer to his works as she does to others. Besides Tolkien there are the very successful works of Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett, currently invading the shelves of bookstores also in Finland. There are many more fantasy others of fantastic children's literature as well, as Eoin Colfer and Philip Pullman, and books that look like copies of Harry Potter and have pretty similar titles.

It would be interesting to keep in mind the question why exactly the fantastic world of Harry Potter has such a great success in times of computer games and an overload of visual entertainments. I suspect that the fascination of fantasy, myths and folklore is cunningly lasting over the ages, whereas new action and cyberspace heroes lack a tradition and real new ideas. That makes them so easily replaceable when dragons will apparently never vanish from the face of the literary world.