



ORIGINS OF SEMI-HUMAN AND HUMANOID CREATURES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Mermaids, centaurs, goblins and elves, are fantastical creatures in children's literature that have existed for centuries now and thus it is imperative we find the source of these long-standing friends of the young readers in the legends and mythologies of different cultures. Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Babylonian and several other cultures and civilisations have their own brand of mythological humanoids and semi-humans that were induced into the fantasy literature meant for children. Exceptionally popular children's fiction rife with these creatures include Lord of the Rings trilogy by J. R. R. Tolkien and Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling.

Keywords: *Children's literature, mythology, folklore*

INTRODUCTION

For centuries children's literature has portrayed humanoid and semi-human creatures. The distinction between the two has been quite unclear as traits of both overlap significantly. For

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the purpose of this paper, humanoid creatures have quintessential human qualities of thought and expression but faintly resemble humans in their mammalian features and form, for example, goblins and elves whereas semi-humans are those creatures that possess half and half body parts of an animal and a human to make a whole, for example centaur or merman.

It is not too far to think that these have emerged from the human psyche of our ancestors and might have been a result of their imagination on coming across a deformed human or merely a conjecture how humans would look and feel if they could explore the depths of the unreachable places on this earth. Either way, their ideas and imaginings have lent us some really fascinating creatures that we are fond of because of the writers who brought them to life for us through fiction. The origins of these fantastical beings is not limited to the imagination of our ancestors as we find staggering similarities between these and the ancient creatures mentioned either in mythology or popular folklore. Most of these creatures are considered sacred in their animal forms by different communities that follow the same belief or culture and a lot of similarities are found in the pagan religions of the contemporary and ancient civilisations.

Mer-folk

Mer-folk are the fantastical creatures that are half human and half fish, believed to reside in the depths of water bodies and would only come up during times of dire need. They are believed to be singers, very similar to the rhapsodes of ancient Greece, differing only in the fact that they probably sing to communicate and express themselves. In most tales the half human body is that of a sensuous, provocative female thereby being popularized as mermaids instead of mer-people or merfolk.

A very direct link between mermaids and zoology would be the manatee: a coastal waters and river dwelling creature that is also known as the sea-cow because of its mammalian characteristics. These are viviparous vegetarians that breastfeed their calves and come up to the surface every few minutes to breathe, even while asleep. (National Geographic) These characteristics of a manatee make it very likely that it might have been the true inspiration for the mermaids that we find in popular fiction.

‘Mythological water spirits have been depicted in the art of numerous cultures over millennia.’ (Viscardi) Mesopotamian male fish-god, Oannes, has been discovered by the archaeologists in mythology accounts that dates back several thousand years. They have also discovered Atargatis' figure on ancient temples, statues and coins. The tale of Atargatis is one of the earliest extant legends about mermaids. She was a very beautiful goddess who wanted to transform herself into a fish but the gods did not allow her to forgo her sensuous beauty and thus she remained under water transforming half into a fish while retaining the torso of

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the beautiful goddess. Another example is of the Celtic folklore that have legends of mermaids but fail to furnish any illustrations for the same. (Royal Museums Greenwich)

Mortensen discussing the folklore and mass culture extant about the merpeople writes,

Sea cattle belong in later Nordic folklore to the merpeople and were therefore associated with mermen and sea giants, who were believed to be the cause of accidents at sea- a magical element that was respected for the sake of fertility. Nordic folklore also describes bipartite bodies that were half woman and half fish. They are first mentioned in medieval folk ballads and later become part of the fabric of the legends of feudal traditional culture in which they were most often depicted as the friendly helpers of sailors.

Mortensen's comment on the Nordic and medieval folklore would ring a bell with anyone who has read Rowling's description of merpeople in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Rowling's merpeople lived in a community in the Great Lake and as Harry saw them they were were ' . . . watching him eagerly, pointing at his webbed hands and gills, talking behind their hands to each other.' (Rowling GF 420) Their physical attributes are vividly described as, 'The merpeople had greyish skins and long, wild, dark green hair. Their eyes were yellow, as were there broken teeth, and they wore thick ropes of pebbles around their necks. . . . their powerful, silver fishtails beating the water, spears clutched in their hands.' (Rowling GF 420) This draws up a picture of a group of hostile creatures who are ready to attack as they fear being attacked but eventually, they do not harm any of the characters because of their understanding of the rules of the game.

Although different in their physical appearance from the popular mermaids, Rowling's merpeople are very similar to the merpeople of the folklores and mythology.

Centaurs

Creatures with the top half body of a human and the lower half of a horse are popularly called centaurs. They have found their place in children's literature over a course of centuries but have other, more varied functions apart from their fictional world. The most famous centaur till date is the Greek Chiron, one of the residents of the foot of mount Pelion, who unlike his brethren that were savage and violent happened to be wise and just. Chiron also has the knowledge of medicine. (Britannica) Chiron is also an important part of astrology since it was placed as a constellation of stars called Centaurus. (Britannica)

On closely reading Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* similarities can be found between her centaurs and the Greek Chiron. Rowling's centaurs are also wise creatures like Chiron, interested in stars and planetary movements, but they talk in riddles, are



generally savage and violent and lead a comparatively quiet life away from humans and other animals. Hagrid describes them to Harry and his friends as, “Never, try an’ get a straight answer out of a centaur. . . . star-gazers. Nothing interested in anything closer’n the moon. . . . Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they’re good enough about turnin’ up if ever I want a word. They’re deep, mind centaurs . . . they know things . . . jus’ don’t let on much.” (Rowling PS 273)

According to Pindar’s fourth Pythian Ode, owing to his high birth and wisdom, Chiron was given the responsibility of the Greek ruler Aison’s son Jason so that he could reclaim the usurped throne when he comes of age. (Hard 381) Firenze happens to be the Chiron of Potter-world, an exception because unlike his brethren he helps Harry by protecting him, giving him a ride on his back and finally by being appointed as a divination teacher at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. (Rowling *Order of the Phoenix*)

Elves

J. R. R. Tolkien’s elves in his Lord of the Rings are creatures that are noble, above death, possessing ethereal beauty, residing in an abode that is remote and enchanted, even though their real home is far across the sea from the Middle Earth. (Simpson) Tolkien’s elves are wise and are almost sinless in their portrayal. Simpson compares them to angels in Christianity as they are respected and feared by the hobbits and humans alike and further draws a contrasting picture of elves in Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. (Folklore)

Tolkien’s elves were probably inspired from the Germanic mythology. By limiting himself only to the positive qualities of the elves, he has reinforced the idea of the Old Icelandic and Old English lore of elves as powerful magic beings capable of and thus considering it their moral duty to help humans during crises. (Simpson) Snorri Sturluson, a mythographer, in his 13th century work *Edda* states that there are two different types of elves- Light and Dark. Light Elves live in ‘Alfheim’, a land of light and radiance whereas the Dark Elves dwell in darkness, under the surface of earth, in caves. Tolkien has used this information in creating his Elves (Light Elves) and contrasting them with the Dwarves (Dark Elves). Tolkien has given a further twist to his dark elves by creating a malicious variation, Orcs.

Rowling has presented house-elves in her series and they can hardly be even compared to the servants in a household as they are maltreated by their masters and are passed on as heirlooms from father to son. House-elf is analogous to slave according to Rowling’s portrayal of them. They are ugly, with exaggerated human features and live a sad, miserable life with one piece of clothing. House-elves know and use magic but are generally employed for menial jobs. ‘Rowling’s "elf" is a drastically simplified version of a figure known throughout Europe - the house-spirit who takes up residence in human farms.’ (Simpson)



House spirits, of which Rowling's house-elf is probably a variation, are revered guardian spirits as they are believed to be helping the humans residing in a house and their farm. There is one redeeming quality of Rowling's elves that they can be freed from their masters if they are presented with a piece of clothing.

Trolls

Muriel C. Bradbrook defines trolls: "A troll is humanity minus the specifically human qualities, at once a hideous parody of man and yet only the isolation of his worst potentialities. . . . The troll is the animal version of man, the alternative to man: he is also what man fears he may become." (56) Both Rowling and Tolkien have adhered to this definition in their portrayal of trolls. Their trolls are immensely huge humanoid creatures that can be easily persuaded to cause havoc owing to their lack of propriety. Stephen S. Stanton notes that the trolls in fiction are a manifestation of Freud's concept of id. He builds on the psychological distinction of these humanoids from the humans and writes, "If man is commonly associated with rational thinking, organization, formal restriction, civilization, and societal order, trolldom represents the opposite." (543)

In the *Philosopher's Stone*, the troll that Harry and his friend fight is described as, 'Twelve feet tall, its skin was a dull, granite gray, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.' (Rowling 187)

Tolkien's trolls in the *Fellowship of the Ring* have been noted to become more vicious and surprisingly cunning as a result of Mordor's impact and had outgrown their naturally dull wit. (Tolkien 57) His trolls are also averse to daylight and stay in damp, dark places because sunlight turns them into stone. (Tolkien 269)

Ancient origins of trolls include the Norwegian, Icelandic, Swedish and Danish folklore. The trolls in these folklores can be grouped as either ogre-trolls or humanoid-trolls. (Attebery 62) The ogre-trolls are derived from the Nordic folk narrative and are probably the inspiration behind both Tolkien's and Rowling's fictional trolls. Attebery describes ogre-trolls as ugly or deformed, dangerous, vicious but dimwitted and thus easy to outdo by a witty person. (62) She propounds further that ogre-trolls tend to burst into or turn into stone on exposure to sunlight. (63) Works like Asbjornsen popularized the trolls to the wider world where writers started delving into the fantasy of trolls and incorporating them into literature. (Attebery 65)

Attebery further argues that Tolkien's trolls were inspired from the Icelandic mythology and are a part of the ogre-troll tradition. (65)



CONCLUSION

When observed closely, children's literature is found to be rife with traditional folklore and is rich in mythological content. The pagan mythological deities, heroes and even the villains are presented in a palatable form that attracts and entertains the young readers while educating them on what is morally right and wrong because practically all children's literature is educative in essence.

The fantastical creatures that the writers of children's literature use to further their plots and to make it interesting, are almost always related to some mythological being whether it be a beast or a deity. The detection of these connections between the ancient and the contemporary is necessary to assess the depth of cultural growth. This discovery also points to and can be attributed to Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious through which we understand how the mythological stories are a part of our being human and that these form a part of our human ancestry.

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