

“THE WAND CHOOSES THE WIZARD”: AN INVESTIGATION OF INANIMATE AGENCY IN *HARRY POTTER*

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a study of the agency possessed by magical things found in the world of Harry Potter books. Before embarking on this analysis, the paper charts the origin and theoretical background of a recent turn in critical theory – new materialism. The paper places itself in a tradition of analyzing previously overlooked materiality in literary texts. The aim is to highlight how objects are turned into things due to their refusal to co-operate with intended human-centric use. Through the use of new materialist lenses, it is proposed that agency exists beyond the traditional anthropocentric subject-object relationship. The Harry Potter book series by J.K. Rowling provides a litany of such illustrative instances, overturning one’s humanist expectations and teaching us to cherish things for what they are.

KEYWORDS: *Fantasy, Children’s Literature, New Materialism, Thing Theory, Post Humanism, Materiality*

INTRODUCTION

The paper begins by delineating the development of new materialist trend in recent critical theory, charting its genesis from materialism to various strands that have hitherto emerged to form the collective ‘new materialism.’ Along with exposition on new materialism, its origin, and its various fissures, the paper also scrutinizes magical objects from JK Rowling’s fantasy series *Harry Potter*. The goal of the paper is to investigate, specifically, the agency of magical things through the lens of new materialism. The study places itself in the post humanist tradition of analyzing previously overlooked objects in literary studies. In this case, the paper attempts to posit that magical things do not require humans (especially, magic folk like wizards) to function. Thereby, subverting the humanist expectation that materiality is subservient to people and only exists to serve them.

Children’s literature such as the *Harry Potter* series proves to be a fertile ground where young learners have their first tryst with the world of objects and things – magical and full of wonders. It becomes imperative that children are taught to respect and cherish these material forms, not just for their functional and use value but also to inculcate a sense of respectful co-existence. The current climate crisis is the result of various inter-connected and complex factors but it can be safely said that disregard for one’s things and their indiscriminate consumption and abuse can be pinned as a contributing factor with exponential powers. Through this paper, the aim is to present a study of the magical agency of things, highlighting their quirks and eccentricity to instill a sense of empathy for even the nonhuman.

DEVELOPMENT OF NEW MATERIALIST THOUGHT

The distinctively twenty-first-century epiphany that the human no longer retains the limelight has led to substantial

alterations in the paradigm of humanities and has consequently ushered in new critical approaches. These lenses reject anthropocentrism, and take up a concern of the nonhuman as the focus of their critique. This twenty-first century "low theory" centers on objects and subjects, rejects "-isms," and comprises of a panoply of approaches that are representative of the recent trends which concentrate on nonhuman and other-than-human entities such as materiality, things, environment, animals, affect, and technologies amongst many others (Di Leo 4, 5). An acknowledgement of the essential role of nonhuman life and nonhuman materiality is imperative for our viable coexistence on the planet. Arguing in this vein, Richard Grusin, the editor of *The Nonhuman Turn*, addresses the need to establish a meaningful relationship with the nonhuman as the issues which plague us now can no longer be remedied by concerning ourselves with finding a self-centered solution to the current climate crisis (Introduction vii). Our predicament is entangled with other life and non-life on the planet. Jane Bennett, political theorist, philosopher, and the architect of vital new materialism goes so far as to declare that her brand of materialist theory serves as a means to an end, which is the sustainable coexistence with all life and nonlife on the planet ("Systems and Things" 235).

Materialism is a key concept in philosophy and critical theory that valorizes matter and perceives it to be the primary force of the universe. Earliest instances of materialism can be traced back to Aristotle's physics, the debate around body and nature in Baruch Spinoza's philosophy, and Nietzschean vitalism. Materialist discourse also encompasses Marxist materialism, Darwinian evolutionary biology, interpretations of the body in psychoanalysis, phenomenology, post-phenomenological thought, and cultural studies (Breu 296). A group of theoretical approaches arising out of their discontent with the neglect of the material in the discourse of twentieth-century theory have been working hard to bring materiality back into the fold of theory and are hence collectively known as new materialism.

Traditional materialism and new materialisms are both defined in opposition to idealism, which is the philosophical tenet that the ideas are the primary forces in the world and deserve priority over the material world. Both forms of materialism focus on the study of matter and try to interpret the world through its materiality instead of speculating about the world of ideas and Platonic forms. Earlier forms of materialism consider matter and objects to be inert entities which do not possess any innate force and need to be subjected to an external force to assert themselves. However, newer materialisms believe objects to be inherently in possession of force (specifically, vital new materialism). Traditional materialisms tend to come across as more anthropocentric due to their belief that objects require humans to recognize and validate material existence. They look towards and analyze only anthropocentric materiality, whereas new materialisms reject the human-centered vantage point and look at material, matter, and materiality through a nonhuman framework.

As discussed above, the phrase 'new materialisms' is an umbrella term for various approaches which refuse to uphold linguistic and social constructivism as primary lenses for understanding the world. These approaches shun anthropocentrism to take account of previously-neglected objects and nonhuman subjects. They theorize under the influence of philosophers like Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Brian Massumi amongst others (Bennett "Systems and Things" 227). Holding close to their hearts a relational ontology, these thinkers engage in new materialist study and disapprove of the strictly epistemological takes on the more-than-human entities and beings. They favour assemblage theories, the realm of becoming (the material world), agency of matter, and reject stringent dualisms symbolizing hierarchy and supremacy of everything human over nonhuman (Breu 300). These critical approaches arose out of gaps left by the "linguistic turn" and the "cultural turn" in critical thought. They believe

that twentieth-century theory was marked by its obsession with two major signifiers – language and culture. These two “master signifiers” reigned “high theory” (Di Leo Introduction 4) and this led to lacunae which mainly pertained to an ontological access to material reality and materiality (Breu 297). The work in new materialisms posits materiality as the primary signifier and finds new ways of looking at the world which does not consider just language or culture to be the locus of social construction. Instead, new materialist approaches place these constructivist approaches in a larger materialist framework, not wholly discarding the power of language and culture.

New materialist approaches favor ontological investigation over epistemology. The representatives of new materialist thought privilege “what is” over “what humans construct” and thus ontological questions are prized over epistemological inquiries (Breu 300). They consider the emphasis on “what is” in the ontological inquiry to be more object-friendly and therefore, try to look at material objects and the condition of materiality as they are, instead of as they are perceived by humans. They tend to discount the epistemological questions due to the concern that knowledge tends to be stained by anthropocentric constructs which may obstruct their intention to perceive things as they are. Another important characteristic of new materialisms is their rejection of dualisms – they discard the human hubris-feeding binary of subject/object, thus discouraging an outlook mired by hierarchies. New materialist thought does not subscribe to the humanist tenant which discriminates between objects and subjects because they endorse Deleuzian horizontal thought. A horizontal framework postulates that all beings, whether organic or inorganic or material or non-material are interconnected and on a level plane wherein there is no favoring of the (human) subject over the (non-human) object.

MAGICAL THINGS AND THEIR AGENTIC POWERS

In this paper, the purpose is to look at the agency of things from two connected perspectives under new materialism – vital new materialism and thing theory. The things that the paper shall concentrate on would be delimited by magical things found in the Wizarding World of the modern fantasy series *Harry Potter* written by J.K. Rowling. The reason for selecting magical objects as opposed to non-magical or everyday objects is to address the gap that was witnessed during the literary review on objects that are usually scrutinized under these approaches. Magical things are vastly different from everyday mundane things which are customarily ignored in our quotidian life. The case, here, is to understand how some objects which are obviously in possession of the ability to perform, create, and transform can hold up under the aforementioned lenses, which have vowed to rescue normal non-magical things from being treated merely as human properties. The role played by the uncanny, the unexplainable, the magical, and the fantastical in our cultural narratives is widely acknowledged and this is one of the underlying reasons why the paper telescopes on magical things, instead of actual things and objects of everyday use based in the ‘real’ world. The tales of haunted mansions; animals with the ability to speak; ghosts, ghouls, spirits; and natural events that appear revengeful have always been circulated in our cultures and tell a tale of the agency that extends beyond the human (Chodat 365).

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock proposes that in an “enchanted world,” the black-and-white distinction between subject and object becomes disarrayed and ambiguous. Weinstock chooses the literary works of H.P. Lovecraft to analyze the things belonging to that universe – haunted gothic mentions, forbidden books, and enchanted paintings. Taking a cue from this, the paper attempts to analyze how the Wizarding World and its enchanted things subvert the orthodox dichotomous hierarchy of human subject and non-human object, in which reside various “animated objects” and “de-animated subjects” (63).

In the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, which is the magical counterpart to the non-magical Muggle World, there exists a multitude of magical and enchanted things that continuously affect the witches and wizards as well the Muggles, "the non-magic folk" (Rowling *Philosopher's Stone* 43). This results in a "confusion of ontological states" for those involved as is experienced by Harry for the first time when he becomes acquainted with the weird things happening around him (Weinstock 63), particularly when a Boa Constrictor in the reptile house could understand what Harry was saying and even spoke to him, bidding him adieu (Rowling *Philosopher's Stone* 22). In accordance with the co-existence subscribing tendencies of thing theory and vital new materialism, Harry is sympathetic to the snake and its captivity, which resonates with the abuse he suffered at the hands of the Dursleys, his extended family with whom he lives after his parents' demise. When the snake stops being a passive nonhuman entity, a mere object in the reptile house to be gawked at and poked; Harry acknowledges it as an other-than-human agent, a subject, if you will. Bennett echoes this in her book *Vibrant Matter* when she says non-human agents can function as "forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii).

The Harry Potter universe possesses a litany of such objects which reverse their role as mere objects to be consumed or used for fulfilling their designated role and assert their status as not just things but as "ontologically diverse actants ... thoroughly material." The term "actant," appropriated from Bruno Latour which Bennett employs to refer to "a source of action" can be both human and nonhuman and it can do things, produce modifications in the course of events, and possesses the power to make a difference and have effects (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* xvii, xviii). The objects in this magical universe assert themselves when they stop functionally like they are supposed to and this elevates them to the level of a thing. Brown postulates that "we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" ("*Thing Theory*" 4) and this materializes when wands intended to assist witches and wizards in casting spells and performing magic, stop working properly. Ron Weasley's broken wand discontinues being an object to be taken for granted and consequently, becomes not just a thing but an actant with agency and will of its own, and ends up saving their lives and memories (Rowling *Chamber of Secrets*). Bennett reiterates this as "vitality" of matter when she proposes that things "not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans" but also express their own intentions of not serving humans all the time (*Vibrant Matter* viii). The magical things in this Wizarding World proclaim their right to be looked at as agents when they refuse to be duplicated or conjured out of nothing. In Harry Potter's world, there are certain rules surrounding the conjuring of objects and food is the first exception. No witch or wizard can conjure food out of thin air. Additionally, conjured items tend to be prone to easy deterioration, elucidating the fact that human wizards and witches do not possess the ultimate control over magical things. At most, they can coax, persuade, and maneuver around their things but they cannot complete own or tame them.

The dark corrupting powers of a horcrux can also be perceived as a rather twisted form of agency and vitality that manifests in the form of an evil which engulfs the wearer or the possessor of it. In the second instalment of the series, Ginny Weasley is completely under the influence of Tom Riddle's diary which is one of Voldemort's horcruxes. She begins attacking her fellow students, when she is in possession of the diary. She loses her sense of subjectivity and there is a reversal of the subject-object relation, as Ginny formerly the human subject switches place with the non-human diary. When she displaces the diary and transforms into the human object, the diary becomes the non-human subject whereas Ginny is now the passive inactive object that is, in turn, used by the diary (Rowling *Chamber of Secrets*). The horcruxes are infused with a part of the soul of their creator, who creates them by committing murder and this highlights a morbid account of how human is composed of not only organic human components but of more-than and other-than-human

components that consist of nonorganic parts as well (Rowling *Half-Blood Prince*). A horcrux can be comprehended as a reified form of the distributive agency that Bennett posits runs through the universe, and is always found in a confluence of a “human-nonhuman working group” (*Vibrant Matter* xvii). The agency of the human can never exist in isolation and can only come into being because of its relations to all those around them, be they human or non-human. Bennett proposes that all life and non-life on the planet exists in a rhizomatic network, consisting of complex inter-dependent relations. Therefore, horcruxes may be viewed as the darker manifestation of such a network of relations which connects both objects and other living beings to the wizard or witch who creates the horcrux, all of whom now exist in a state of symbiotic co-dependence.

Other than asserting their position as things by refusing to function, wands react and participate in the Wizarding World through their other active powers. Garrick Ollivander, the acclaimed wandmaker of the British magic world, mentions something similar to Harry during their first meeting. When Harry goes to the wandmaker’s store to purchase his first wand, Ollivander communicates it to him that wands decide who their wielder would be and not the other way around – “it’s really the wand that chooses the wizard, of course” (Rowling *Philosopher’s Stone* 63). One cannot simply walk into a wand shop and choose the wand they like. They have to form a pact with the wand which accepts that wizard or witch. These wands possess not only commanding agency but also fiercely express allegiance. They may reject a certain witch or wizard if they are defeated, disarmed, or killed in a duel as is in the case of the infamous, Elder Wand, one of the three Deathly Hallows. The act of switching allegiance renders them as “quasi-sentient” entities (“Wand”). The wands play an essential task of channeling magic through them and a witch or a wizard is rendered incompetent without them. It is rare to see any member of the magic folk perform a charm, or a curse, or a simple incantation without the assistance of a wand. It is the wand that makes one a witch or a wizard. The only beings able to perform magic without wands are one of the sparse few highly advanced wizards and non-human magical beings – centaurs, house elves, and goblins.

Furthermore, Barad’s notion of “intra-actions” as “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” also applies to the relation between a wand and its human since it suggests that individual entities cannot exist outside of their relationships (Barad 33). The nexus of magic that runs from the witch through a wand highlights the significance of assemblages of human and non-human elements. The two constitutive components of this assemblage cannot function without each other and the network of relations between them manifests their magic. The agency of this assemblage of heterogeneous entities of human and non-human is expressed in the books as magic. Another important material manifestation of the assemblage is the Patronus, “a partially-tangible positive energy force” (“Patronus Charm”). The Patronus is a spirit guardian made of magical force that protects a witch or wizard in grave danger and is considered to be a very advanced feat, not achievable by many. To conjure a Patronus, one must access the inner affectual flows, summon a happy memory and its impact to materialize this semi-material force field, which often takes the shape of another non-human being. The Patronus is not just an assemblage of a witch and her emotions but also an affective materialization of her happy memories. The conjuring of this protective shield is limited to very few highly skilled wizards and witches who know how to tap into their affective states, so much so that Remus Lupin expects Harry (a teenager then) to fail to cast a fully corporeal Patronus when he’s teaching him. The Patronus entity, constituting an affective-material assemblage, is so intricately linked to one’s psyche that when a witch or a wizard suffers traumatic events, their Patronus withers away or changes. When Nymphadora Tonks falls in love with Lupin and is unable to express it to him, her Patronus changes from a jackrabbit to a wolf because Lupin is a werewolf. A “sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and

inside the human body" is required by a witch to be able to conjure this quasi-material guardian, an assemblage of human affect and nonhuman vitality (Bennett *Vibrant Matter* xiv).

Representative of the rhizomatic network of distributive agency, in which vital force flows from one actant to another, there exists a hidden space in the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry that materializes when someone needs it. The Room of Requirement responds to those in need, and in the process of materializing, it constructs itself in the manner that suits the person in the need of it. This nonhuman actant provides shelter to various generations of witches and wizards residing and studying at Hogwarts, ranging from providing simply a safe space to a hidden practice area for Harry and his friends learning to defend themselves against the Dark Arts (Order of the Phoenix).

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, magical things and their overtly apparent agency and anthropomorphism may help us comprehend the vitality of the nonhuman easier than theorizing about non-magical things. The paper does not wish to insinuate that magical things rank above non-magical things as the two utilized theories warn strictly against reinforcing such hierarchies. The objective is to aid in understanding agency that lies with all nonhuman life and nonhuman matter and to urge the reader to challenge the narcissistic humanist idea of only humans possessing subjectivity. To understand that one is a part of intricately connected set of networks and that all participants have equivalent status and impact will help us usher in an era of peaceful co-existence with not just other species, but also with things, environment, and nature.

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