

Representations of Knowledge – Ignorance Binary Opposition in the Text of the *Harry Potter* Series by J. K. Rowling and in Fairy Tales

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Abstract

The present paper explores and compares the representations of knowledge - ignorance dichotomy in the text of the *Harry Potter* series and in classic fairy tales. In the novel the binary opposition undergoes complicated development in the direction of deconstruction. The concept of the “right school” represented by Hogwarts, the school of Witchcraft and Wizardry is subjected to a process of gradual subversion through the representation of: some of its rules as absurd or “senseless”; penalties of students used by some teachers as a means of personal revenge; some characters of incompetent and/or vengeful teachers. The strongest undermining of the dichotomy comes from the fact that both systematic and empirical knowledge could be used for evil purposes. In fairy tales the category of knowledge is limited to the knowledge achieved empirically. The knowledge - ignorance opposition is usually contained both in some archetypal characters and in the moral at the end of the tale, which in concentrated form represents the message of the “correct” / “incorrect” behavior as a result of following of or deviating from the requirements of the patriarchal society and its ideology. The binary opposition remains intact in fairy tales.

Key words: knowledge, ignorance, fairy tales, fantasy novel, deconstruction

1. Introduction

In respect to the genre the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling could be defined as a Bildungsroman, i.e. a novel about the growth and formation of a personality, and, therefore, it is related organically and inevitably to the theme of school. Just like the theme of the personal free choice, it passes through all the seven books of the series. The philosophy of the entire text is based on it and in reality under the general opposition of **knowledge – ignorance** there are several united oppositions: “right” school – “wrong” school, “real” teacher – “false” teacher, and the related opposition of “right” – “wrong” education. The knowledge – ignorance binary opposition is one of the most frequent dichotomies contained in the fairy tales. The concept of knowledge in fairy tales is usually associated with people's beliefs, with the explanation of cosmogony, natural phenomena and human's relationships with nature in an understandable language. The purpose of the present paper is to determine the nature of the relationship between the two members of the discussed dichotomy in the text of the novel and in selected examples of classic fairy tales and in result to define whether the opposition remains or is subjected to a process of deconstruction.

2. The Nature of **Knowledge - Ignorance** Opposition in Fairy Tales

Before discussing in details each of the mentioned already oppositions, let us turn to the fairy tale. What is the nature of knowledge that people centuries on end seek and find in it? Part of the answers to this question could be found in Jack Zipes' study, *Fairy Tale as Myth / Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994). In the introduction to the book, he explains that Mircea Eliade's work, *Myth and Reality* (1963), in particular the essay, functioning as an afterword, “Myths and Fairy Tales”, gave him the reason for writing his own book.

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Zipes says he was struck by one of Eliade's conclusions, according to which the fairy tale is "an easy to perceive duplicate of the initiation myth" (Zipes, 1994, p. 3). It is that assertion Jack Zipes adopts, develops and extends, so that it becomes the cornerstone of his book. What is an object of interest in the present work is Zipes' position on the issue of knowledge contained in the tale. In this regard he says: "Certainly, myths and folk tales blended very early in the oral tradition, and in many modern oral and literary narratives it is very difficult to tell them apart. They seem to be invested with an extraordinary mystical power so that we collapse the distinctions and feel compelled to return to them time and again for counsel and guidance, for hope that there is some divine order and sense to a chaotic world. Myths and fairy tales seem to know something that we do not know. They also appear to hold our attention, to keep us in their sway, to enchant our lives. We keep returning to them for answers. We use them in diverse ways as private sacred myths or as public commercial advertisements to sell something. We refer to myths and fairy tales as lies by saying, "oh, that's just a fairy tale", or "that's just myth." But these lies are often the lies that govern our lives" (Zipes, 1994, p. 4). In other words, the knowledge for which we time and again return to the tales (and to the myths as well) is universal in nature, and its main function is to codify and sort out our life and to take it, generally speaking, from chaos to harmony and rationalization. From the above considerations it also becomes clear that the fairy tale is closely related to the myth and the inherited knowledge is neither received from books, nor from a special institution, created for the purpose, like school. The knowledge contained in the fairy tale is associated with people's beliefs, with the explanation of cosmogony in an understandable language, as well as of natural phenomena and human's relationships with nature. Otto Rank confirms the assertion expressed by both Eliade and Zipes on the relations between myth and tale and on the nature of the contained in them knowledge. Commenting on the cultural-historical approach applied by Wilhelm Grimm to the interpretation of fairy tales, Rank explains that this method "<...> allows us to see in the tales hidden residues of the theogonies and folk beliefs expressed in the myth. In general, the modern research recognizes the myths about heroes and gods as primordial and more primitive formations, **while fairy tales are seen as a higher and a later stage of development.**" (my emphasis) (Ранк, 1998, p. 151). Yeleazar Meletinsky also recognizes the connection between fairy tales and myths and outlines the plot lines inherited from myths in fairy tales: "The storylines about extraction (abduction) of antique things, potions, magic objects originate undoubtedly from the myths of cultural heroes. Tales about visiting of "other worlds", releasing of women captives there remind the myths and legends of the wanderings of shamans or magicians after the souls of sick or dead." (Мелетински, 1995, p. 366)

Practical examples from some of the most popular fairy tales will serve a good illustration of the representations of the opposition **knowledge – ignorance** in them. In *The Red Riding Hood* the mother's recommendations to her daughter form the dominating member of the opposition, that of the empirical knowledge concerning the possible negative consequences if they are not kept to, while her daughter's non-compliance and defiance of them construct the subordinate member, that of ignorance and the evolving unfavorable outcome. As a result of her disobedience, the girl is punished (to a didactic effect) suffering the well-known negative consequences, leading to a terrible end. In Charles Perrault's version it is final and irreversible. When discussing the innovations that Perrault introduces in the poetics of the traditional fairy tale, Zohar Shavit observes about the tragic end, resulting from the ignorance and naivety of the girl in his version: "The tragic end indicates that the text was a satire about "gentlemen" of the town who do not hesitate to take advantage of poor naïve country girls." (Shavit, 1989, p. 14). In Grimm's version the tragic end is mitigated, not because of the actions of the girl, but as a result of another agent – the hunter, representing the "father figure" and, accordingly, the knowledge and abilities of the adults, e.g. of the figures of authority in patriarchal society. The didactic message is obviously that had not been his interference the girl's destiny would have been a terrific and sad one. The opposition **knowledge – ignorance** is present in both versions, but it represents different types of knowledge or, respectively, the absence of it. With Perrault's version the members of the opposition point at a very specific direction, warning that naive and inexperienced girls need to be protected in order not to become easy "victims" to experienced "wolves"-seducers because of their ignorance. In the case with Brothers Grimm's version the represented knowledge has more general, universal character, referring to the need of keeping to authority's instructions (in this case – those of Red Riding Hood's mother) and it is also implied that the authority of mature and experienced people (represented by the hunter) is the one that immature and inexperienced persons should rely on in critical situations. A similar example of the binary opposition in question could be found in *Snow White*.

The stronger member of the dichotomy is formed by the dwarfs' recommendations to Snow White not to open the door to anyone (this time the dwarfs represent the experience of older / mature people) and, respectively, the disobedience of the inexperienced girl, stemming from her ignorance, leads to endangering of her life. Almost identical situation could be identified in the very popular in some Slav countries tale, *The Wolf and the Seven Kids*, in which the Mother Goat represents the authority of the mature, wise people and, correspondently, the seven kids embody the naïvety and ignorance of the young and inexperienced. If we turn again to *Snow White*, we could also note that in one of the early episodes the character of the hunter is present again as the figure of the "knowledgeable", benevolent adult person. Having knowledge and experience, he rescues the girl, doomed to death by her evil stepmother, while Snow White, having no knowledge and experience, walks through the woods to her end as a humble victim, not knowing what to expect. On the other hand, the central characters of Snow White and her stepmother, can be interpreted as possessing among other elements of their characteristics ignorance (Snow White) and, respectively, knowledge (her evil stepmother). For instance, in the chapter "Snow White and Her Wicked Stepmother" of the study, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that the story of Snow White is driven by the relationship between the two women, "one beautiful, young, pale; the other equally beautiful, but older, and cruel; one daughter, the other parent; one is sweet, ignorant, passive, the other is ingenious and active; one is an angel, the other – undoubtedly a witch." (Tatar, 2003, p. 234). Maria Tatar comments on the above statement: „Gilbert and Gubar rather than interpret the story as Oedipus one, in which the mother and the daughter become sexual rivals for the approval of the father (embodied by the voice of the mirror), suggest that the story reflects our cultural division of the femininity in two components." (Tatar, 2003, p. 234). Seen from this perspective, the opposition **knowledge – ignorance** enters as a constituent the complex of another, broader opposition, coming from the patriarchal tradition, that of **activity – passivity**. On the one hand, knowledge is a part of the paradigm of the active stepmother figure who is perceived as threatening to a great extent because she manifests knowledge in various aspects; on the other hand, ignorance, is the prerogative of the passive femininity, perceived almost as a virtue of women in patriarchal society.

In *The Sleeping Beauty* the entire narrative is driven by the opposition of **knowledge – ignorance**. In respect to the discussed opposition the plot is similar to the above examples, with some variations. The king, who wants to protect her daughter from the ominous prediction, prohibits the use of a spindle in the kingdom as **he already knows** what will happen. The princess, who **does not know of the curse**, performs the prohibited act and suffers the consequences, but this time not only she, everybody is affected by her disobedience. The multiplication of the negative outcome emphasizes the message that the actions resulting from ignorance and inexperience can lead to a negative end. The opposition **knowledge – ignorance** in this tale may be interpreted from a lot of different perspectives. For instance, the psychoanalytic point of view could be highlighted in Bruno Bettelheim's widely cited work, *The Uses of Enchantment*. He consistently reads the centennial dream of the princess as a time of passivity and "waiting", characterizing certain periods of puberty through which individuals accumulate knowledge of themselves and mature sexually: "Adolescence is a period of great and rapid change, characterized by periods of utter passivity and lethargy alternating with frantic activity, even dangerous behaviour to "prove oneself" or discharge inner tension. <...> Those fairy tales which, like "The Sleeping Beauty", have the period of passivity for their central topic, permit the budding adolescent not to worry during his inactive period: he learns that things continue to evolve (my stress)." (Bettelheim, 1977, p. 225)

The last example, used as evidence in the present study, is an original English tale, *Jack, the Giant Killer*. In the relatively short narrative the protagonist Jack manages to kill seven giants thanks, on the one hand, to his prior knowledge of the treacherous and cruel nature of his opponents and, on the other hand, to the knowledge he gets in any particular situation of the intentions of the enemy, and, in effect, he undertakes anticipating actions. The giants, in turn, represent a complex image of stupidity, ignorance, cruelty and destructiveness, because of which, possibly, in the people's comprehension they are outwitted and punished quite fairly. The opposition **knowledge – ignorance** is preserved, and the member of knowledge has empirical nature. As already mentioned, the knowledge of the fairy tale is not "bookish" in character, it is contained in both the archetypal characters which represent it and in the messages addressed to the audience. Often a fairy tale ends with a moral, which expresses the concept of the "right" or "wrong" behavior in a concentrated form, in accordance with the human experience gained over the centuries, as well as with the moral values at a particular stage of the social development.

In the case with the discussed opposition the messages of most of the tales, in which the archetype of the wise father / old man / mother/old woman is present, can be summarized in the sense that: knowledge and experience is an advantage of the old age and maturity; they are characteristic of the patriarchal authority; young / immature / inexperienced people must obey or trust the figures, embodying patriarchal wisdom in order to succeed in life. Otherwise, those who dare to disobey the patriarchal authorities are doomed to inevitable failure or even death. What is common to all these tales, and to many others alike, including in respect to the opposition **knowledge – ignorance**, is that the binary opposition in them retains its validity, its poles are not undermined or subverted, nor there are any indications of transforming the dominating member in the weaker one and vice versa. This is natural, since the patriarchal ideology present in fairy tales, is an ideology of confrontation and hierarchies.

3. The Nature of **Knowledge - Ignorance** Opposition in the *Harry Potter* Series

What issues related to school and knowledge does the *Harry Potter* novel raise? The text of the first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, initiates the dialogue in this direction with Chapter Three, "The Letters from No One", in which the theme of school and learning appears for the first time. The presentation of the "Muggle" schools (of the non-magic folk) at beginning of it brings forth a lot of messages associated with them. Firstly, the names of the schools that Harry Potter and his cousin Dudley go to are quite indicative in this respect. They are named "Stonewall" (Dudley's school) and, respectively, "Smeltings" (Harry's school) (a hybrid word, formed of the verbs "smell" and "melt"). They arouse several associations and forward them to neighbouring sign systems: those signifying the school conservatism, the nature of the "teacher – student" relationship and even the quality of the received education there. This multitude of meanings refers mainly to the idea of the quality of knowledge transferred to the students, suggesting that it probably disappears as quickly as it is received or that something in the system as a whole "smells". In general, the play on words or forging new ones with various acoustic, phonetic and semantic associations is a quite characteristic strategy of the text of the novel. We cannot also overlook the corresponding symbolism in this regard. For instance, one of the "accessories" of the school uniforms at Dudley's school are: "<...> knobby sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life" (Rowling, 1998, p. 29). In this regard Julia Eccleshare notes: "The irony of the description dismisses life at Smeltings as both disagreeable and morally unsound." (Eccleshare, 2002, p. 20). It can be also added that the text almost literally tells about the violence in schools, accepted with a tacit consent as something "normal" and even encouraged by those who are supposed to be role models, i.e. the teachers. The possible answers to all questions raised by the text undermine the meaning of the concept of "school" and build up the weaker member of the opposition in this case.

Hogwarts, the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, is represented as a natural antithesis to the Muggle schools in the parallel fantasy world. Initially, this kind of school gets the halo of an institution where it is interesting and responsible to study. The fairy tale symbolism assigns four animals to be emblems of Hogwarts: a lion, an eagle, a snake and a badger. For the first three of them it can be said that they have always been present in various mythologies and tales as symbols of strength, freedom and wisdom; for the fourth one, the badger, it can be assumed that it is associated with hard work. The first reaction, and the easiest one, with decoding of their symbolic meaning, is to suppose that the text relies on the mirror transfer of these qualities to the students and the overall philosophy of education there. But the mirror logic, as it is well known, is a reversed one. Each of these animals has another possible interpretation and meaning: the lion – as a fierce and ruthless animal; the eagle is notorious for his predatory and cruel nature; the snake from Adam and Eve's time is well known for its deceit and hypocrisy, as well as a quiet and sneaky killer with its poison; the badger is not only a hardworking animal but also a ferocious and ... stinking one. All these connotations are present in the readers' experience fund, and as they are quite popular, they are easily recognizable even by the readers with little experience like children. Through this ambiguity in the meanings on the symbolic level, the text lays the foundation for a future subversion of this member of the opposition, which in the beginning is manifested as the positive pole of the antithesis. The location through which the school of Hogwarts is consistently represented could also be assigned to the paradigm of the dominating member of the opposition: "*The narrow path had opened suddenly to the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers.*" (Rowling, 1998, p. 83). The image of a building, crowned a hill takes its roots in antiquity and mythology. The earliest example of this archetype, which we can think of are the pyramids in Mesopotamia, celebrated in Sumerian-Accadian epic, the pyramids in Egypt and Mexico, and many others alike.

All of them are considered to be a link between the heaven and the earth in the cosmogony of various religious systems and the accompanying epics. In this respect Northrop Frye notes: “*A city or building so situated would be a kind of a keystone for the world, so that its removal would release the forces of chaos.*” (Frye, 2006, p. 179). Indeed, the text emits signals that Hogwarts establishes a relationship of order in the complex system of magic, spells and incantations in the parallel world. On the surface of the discourse it is manifested that this institution seeks to instill a moral code of the use of these special skills in the students, teaching and warning them of the potential hazards associated with the “improper” handling of esoteric knowledge. In other words, Hogwarts is implicitly recognized to have the status of the regulator or of the “foundation stone” in the system of order and in the eternal struggle against chaos. Among the other semantically charged loci, gravitating in the paradigm of the “right” school of Hogwarts, the locus of the ladder should be specifically highlighted. This is again an archetypal image obtaining contrastive meanings through the ages, associated, on the one hand, with the “climbing” in the sense of success, improvement, progress, and, on the other hand, with the “fall” / failure as a result of one’s pride or inflated assessment of his / her own abilities or personality. Commenting on this symbol in the *Bible*, Fry observes: “Some of the later Psalms are called Psalms of “ascents” or “degrees”, and seem to be connected with ritual processions up the hill to the temple. The ascent is not said to be winding or spiral ascent, but if it were it would be an interesting addition to a very widespread symbolic pattern, extending in literature through Dante’s *Purgatorio* to the winding stairs of Eliot and Yeats and Pound. The most notable example in the *Bible* is the “ladder” of Jacob’s vision in Genesis 28: 12, which, as angels were going both up and down on it, was clearly a staircase rather than a ladder” (Frye, 2006, p. 179)

The above quote deserves attention in several respects: firstly, because in a concentrated form it represents the key moments in the development of the symbol; secondly and more importantly, there is a potential for a discussion, stemming from the idea that the ascent or descent may not necessarily follow a straight line; thirdly, the ascent is represented “in steps”, i.e. the process is not viewed as an entirely irreversible or unconditional in this symbolism. The school of Hogwarts astounds with intentionally great abundance of staircases (one hundred forty-two), but what is more interesting is that the staircases have the insidious quality to change suddenly their direction and move with a loud noise, threatening the life of everybody stepping on them. In this sense it could be asserted that, on the one hand, the text of the novel intensifies the implied in some literary texts interpretation of the image of the ladder as the position one occupies in life, not necessarily reached in a straight line; on the other hand, the new element, contributed by the text, is the assumption that this position could be changed. The assumption that a change could happen in the direction “up” or “down”, as well as the admission of the very possibility of this change, (supported by the fact that one of the houses of Hogwarts is a potential “incubator” of future “dark” magicians), reinforces the subversion of Hogwarts as the positive / dominant member of the opposition in question.

Like any educational institution the magical school has its own set of rules. What is interesting in this case is that most of the characters of students are represented in the process of their violation. This is due not so much to the revolt against any restrictions, characteristic of this age group, associated with the formation of the personality, as to the fact that most of these rules are defined as “absurd” or “senseless”. In other words, this “exemplary” School of Wizardry and Magic does not avoid the rigidity of the Muggle schools. And any violation of the rules leads to penalties. In this respect Michel Foucault observes: “A small penal mechanism acts at the heart of all disciplinary mechanisms. It enjoys a privilege of justice, has its own laws, specifies misdemeanor by itself, has its own forms of sanctions and own courts.” (Фукко, 1998, p. 186). Of course, there must be rules (especially at school), because otherwise each system would be reduced to a state of anarchy and chaos. The question is whether these rules are thought within a given system deliberately restrictive, meaningless or downright humiliating personalities. One of the possible implications of the text is that the easiest way to discourage a person or make him / her rebel (depending on the temperament) is to take away the meaning of his / her actions.

Penalties have their branched hierarchical system. Foucault explains in this regard:

“In the workshop, *at school*, in the army there is indictability on the micro level of: *time* (delays, absences, interruptions of work), *activity* (inattention, negligence, lack of diligence), *behavior* (bad manners, disobedience), *speech* (talking, discussing), *body* (“incorrect” positions, unauthorized gestures, lack of hygiene), *sexuality* (immodesty, lack of decency). At the same time a whole series of well-measured actions are used as punishment, starting with light physical punishment and finishing with minor privations and small humiliations.

The point is to make punishable the smallest deviations of behavior and simultaneously to impart a function of criminal function to elements that seemingly have no relation to the disciplinary system; ultimately everything could be used as a punishment for the slightest thing; each subject could be taken captive by a criminal-punishing universality (my emphasis).” (Фуко, 1998, p. 187). All parameters of delinquency and misconduct, pointed out by Foucault as a reason for punishment, are present at the school of Hogwarts. The question is which ones are considered the most dangerous and, therefore, are the most persecuted and most severely punished. Some teachers (most of them) really execute the penalties as a reasonable educational and deterrent means or as “well-measured” sanctions, according to Foucault, sincerely believing that these measures will contribute to rethinking of the offense and in the long run – to the improvement of students’ personalities. Others, such as Professor Snape (at least it seems so in the beginning) and Professor Dolores Umbridge, take advantage of their position in the hierarchy and, accordingly, the power that this position gives them and openly use it for personal revenge. Of all the parameters of delinquency listed above the most infuriating one for the second type teachers is that of behavior, the disobedience, in particular. It is consistently perceived as an act aimed at undermining their authority or as threatening their areas of activity. As mentioned above, a penalty should be “well-measured” in order to perform its instructive function, which, in its turn, raises the question of the degree of the punishment – it should not exceed the delinquency itself. But when penalties transform from “well measured” to subtle inquisition and / or outright cruelty, they undermine the foundations of the concept of the “good” teacher, and thus it converts into its other. In this context an iconic character is Professor Dolores Umbridge, who certainly deserves her title, the “Great Inquisitor”. It could be mentioned here that the overall association connected with the character is completed by the meaning of the Great Inquisitor’s first name, which is of Spanish origin, means “pain”, and, thus, it assists the reader in decoding her character. Harry Potter is compelled to write hundreds times “I shall not lie” in his own blood because of his claim that Lord Voldemort is not dead and that he has returned to destroy all dissidents, contrary to the official statement of the Ministry of Magic, whose representative at the school is Professor Dolores Umbridge.

This particularly powerful scene definitely undermines the positive status of Hogwarts in the binary opposition. When not everything is positive in the positive / dominating member of the dichotomy (as in this case), the conditions for constructing of a new antitheses are created, thus referring to other secondary sign systems. The reference bond in this case questions the foundations of the whole parallel world. Refusing to believe in the intended for the wide public soothing disinformation, disseminated by the ministry of magic, Harry Potter demonstrates disobedience, threatening the status quo in general and the careers of great many office-seekers of the magical world in particular, and that is why he is punished severely. The reader sees how the deconstruction process of the positive member of the opposition, the “right” school of Hogwarts, consistently undermines the constituent of the dominant element of the binary opposition in question, the “good” teacher. Thus, the process of subversion raises also the questions about the nature of another, neighbouring sign system – that of the governing-hegemonic apparatus of the parallel world, manifested in the beginning as totally unproblematic and absolutely idealistic. In this respect, the character of Gilderoy Lockhart, the new teacher in Defense against the Dark Arts, introduced in the second book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, supplies an interesting aspect of the paradigm of the “teacher”. If we look into the meanings emanating from its name, we can easily interpret the associations born by them.

The first name, Gilderoy, can be divided into “gilde”, having very little spelling, but not phonetic difference from “gild” and “roy”, which is not usually used separately in the modern English language, but is preserved in some complex words such as “viceroys”, for example. His surname, Lockhart, consists, on the one hand, of “lock” and, on the other, of “hart”, in which “heart” can be easily recognized, all the more both words sound the same way (Fenske, 2008, 222). After this necessary linguistic excursion, let us return to the forming semantics. There is, on the one hand, “gilded king”, but not gold and the created association could lead to Andersen’s “naked king” and the idea of discrepancy between the manifested and the real situation; anyway, the implication of something artificial, false, of forgery or of a replacement of the original by a surrogate remains. Adding the fact that one of the characteristics of the character is his enormous narcissism and vanity, the possible reasons for the selection of the name are clarified. On the other hand, the phrase “locked heart” raises the question: “What is his heart locked for?” It turns out that a lot of doors are locked for him: that of professionalism, as he is a completely incompetent teacher; that of sympathy and compassion, because of his immense selfishness; ultimately, the door to goodness is locked for him forever.

The figure of the teacher, who used to be adored and worshipped by frenetic crowds of students and parents, has been debunked to a pitiable surrogate in the course of the narrative. As we can see, the “teacher” signifier constructs new meanings, time and again subverting what has been manifested as obvious on the surface of the text. And how is the very concept of knowledge represented, being in most immediate relation to the figure of the teacher and the institution of school? The narrative unfolds against the background of learning, learning, learning ... on thousands of pages of the series. One has the feeling of a world completely focused on knowledge, in which various markers of this process fascinate with their unexpectedness and diversity. The reader is present at a variety of odd classes in such subjects as “Potions”, “Transfiguration”, “Defense against Dark Arts” and even “Care of Magical Creatures”. Most of the fictional time students either study or do homework (measured in centimetres!), sit for exams or wait for the results apprehensively. And all this is told with a lot of humor winking to the reader and with a lot of details, lifting the veil off the wizards’ lives. It is the fascinating details and the many-sided representations of knowledge as a continuous and never ending process that add veracity and persuasiveness to the narrative. Moreover, the text of the novel emits persuasive signals to its potential readers, most of whom, understandably, are expected to be children and adolescents, suggesting that knowledge must be valued highly as it broadens human’s mind and enriches soul.

The character, that most of everybody else is associated with the theme of learning and knowledge is that of Hermione Granger, Harry Potter’s classmate and closest friend, an inseparable part of his friendly circle, an outstanding student and a brilliant mind. It should be specially noted the great attention that is paid to the high status, attributed to the outstanding achievements in the educational process, as the narrative repeatedly focuses on such honorary titles as: “outstanding” / “brilliant” student, “prefect”, awarded to some of the best students at Hogwarts. These titles are valued as most prestigious and the respective honorary insignia are described in details. This speaks for itself about the central place in the narrative, allotted to the excellence in the field of knowledge, and in the value system of the fictional text. There are several scenes with Hermione in the centre which represent the character as a significant factor both in the situation of learning, and in the overall philosophy of the novel. Hermione Granger is driven by such a strong “hunger” for knowledge, that uses a special device – ‘time-turner’, with the help of which she can attend several classes in different subjects simultaneously. She, according to Ron Weasley, Harry’s closest friend, is “overzealous” and “studying is her normal state”. The highlighting of this “hunger” for knowledge and of the spiritual search for “herself”, as well as of the “truth” about the world, focuses on some of the values in the axiological system of the text that are transmitted to the reader. No wonder then, that it is Hermione has been chosen to proclaim some of the key messages of the text concerning knowledge and learning:

“How are you getting through all this stuff?”

“Oh, well – you know – working hard,” said Hermione.” (Rowling, 1999, p. 272), as well as:

“Excuse me, I don’t like people just because they’re handsome!” said Hermione indignantly. (Rowling, 2001, p. 259).

The text also reveals the varied nature of knowledge: it can be scientific / systematic / bookish, but it can also be derived from the direct contact with nature and life in a purely empirical or intuitive way, as represented in fairy tales. It is Hermione who has been delegated the right to be aware of the difference between the systematic knowledge and the life values, derived directly from life experience. She spontaneously reacts to Harry’s words that she is already very skillful witch:

“Me! said Hermione. ‘Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be careful!’” (Rowling, 1998, p. 208), as well as:

“But I’m not talking about test results, Harry. Think what you’ve done!” (Rowling, 2003, p. 292).

Gradually the text transfers its focus to another kind of knowledge – that cannot be learned from books, but from life. Although Hermione is immersed in books, she has matured to be a “teacher” in worldly knowledge to her friends. Here is her advice to Ginny, who is hopelessly in love with Harry Potter:

“I never gave up on you,” she said. ‘Not really. I always hoped ... Hermione told me to get on with life, maybe go out with some other people, relax a bit around you, because I never used to be able to talk if you were in the room, remember? And she thought you might take a bit more notice if I was more - myself.’” (Rowling, 2005, p. 603).

What is of interest here is that **the subversion of the concept of knowledge comes from the fact that both the systematic and the empirical knowledge can be used for evil purposes.** And then how is it better than ignorance? Thus the text brings forth another question: How should knowledge be used? Harry Potter receives perhaps his most important lessons from the principal of Hogwarts, the great wizard Albus Dumbledore. When he gives Harry back the invisibility cloak, the only thing left from his father, he writes a note to the boy: “*Use it well.*” (Rowling, 1998, p. 150). This phrase, recurrently present in Harry’s mind, refers not just to one specific thing, but could be viewed as a moral imperative, applied to the use of magical knowledge in general. The message, repeated many times in the course of the narrative, implies that knowledge (magical or not) should be used only for good, noble purposes, in the name of life, not against it. Knowledge that Dumbledore passes down to Harry is also connected with other key issues – those of life and death. Teaching Harry not to be afraid of death, he says: ‘There is nothing to be feared from a body, Harry, any more than there is anything to be feared from the darkness. Lord Voldemort, who of course secretly fears both, disagrees. But once again he reveals his own lack of wisdom. It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death, nothing more.’ (Rowling, 2005, p. 529). Suggestions as the one above, that **“the fear of death is basically fear of the unknown”** is just one of the many examples in the text of novel, when such issues are attempted to be discussed with the predominantly young audience in an appropriate educational way. In result the traumatic influence is avoided, as the readers’ attention is not focused on the tragic emotion caused by the event, but is directed to the rational explanation of the life cycle.

4. Conclusion

The knowledge contained in the fairy tales is not derived from books or the institution of school; it is acquired in life in an empirical way. It is mainly represented in the archetypal characters (the wise father / old man / mother / old woman) and in the implied messages. Particularly common message is that expressing the concept of the “right” / “wrong” behavior in accordance with both the experience gained over the centuries of human existence and the morality and values of patriarchy. The discussed here opposition is retained without any questioning / subverting of its poles; its dominating member usually embodies the knowledge of patriarchal authority, while the subordinate member represents the ignorance of the young / immature / inexperienced. In the *Harry Potter* series the dichotomy of **knowledge – ignorance** undergoes complex development. In the beginning, Hogwarts, the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is viewed as the positive member of the opposition as opposed to the Muggle schools. Gradually the image of the “right” school in the parallel world undergoes a process of deconstruction through: the representation of some of its rules as “absurd” or “senseless”; the account of penalties, which in some cases are examples of downright revenge and do not perform the function of necessary pedagogical means; the representations of various practices of subjection and humiliation of individuals; the characters of teachers, depicted as mediocre instructors, careerists and vengeful people. The strongest subversion comes from the fact that both the systematic and empirical knowledge can be used for evil purposes. The implied message is that knowledge should be used in the name of life, not against it.

Through the deconstruction of **knowledge – ignorance** dichotomy, the text of the *Harry Potter* series consistently demonstrates that nothing can be taken for granted or accepted as a fixed rule; that individuals, events and facts in relation to the discussed dichotomy should be assessed in their context and that ultimately they can not be approached with ready-made labels or formulae taken from the arsenal of the stereotypical thinking. The subversion of the **knowledge - ignorance** antithesis is one of the many cases in the novel, in which the diversity of the meanings and the creation of new ones leads to semantic versatility of the text and therefore to a denial of binary oppositions and binary thinking.

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