

REALITY IN J. K. ROWLING'S *THE CASUAL VACANCY*

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Abstract. After the success of Harry Potter series, in 2012 Joanne K. Rowling published her first novel for adults that received mixed criticism in public sphere. The novel provides an eloquent depiction of contemporary England. Though intended to be a comic tragedy it more likely resembles a gloomy melodrama, and is written in a realistic and 'true to life' manner. While hardly providing pleasant emotions, the novel truthfully reflects numerous emblematic social problems of provincial life, like neglect and abuse of children, domestic violence, lack of likeable characters – the representation of which are further analysed in the present paper paying attention also to the first critical reviews the novel has received.

Key words: Joanne K. Rowling, *The Casual Vacancy*, reality

After the financial success of Harry Potter that has become the best-selling book series in history, Joanne Rowling can afford to write a book in which she does not yield to any literary clichés and widespread norms of how reality should be depicted to create a bestseller. Though in her interview with Decca Aitkenhead on September 22, just before the release of the novel, Rowling admits that she is a little bit scared of what the reception of her book is going to be, she openly admits: 'it feels great that I can choose' and also confesses that it is a pleasure to know that actually, even if no-one would like the book, then 'the worst that can happen is that everyone says, that's shockingly bad' (Aitkenhead, 2012). Indeed, nothing Rowling could ever create is going to rub out the fame and influence of her *Harry Potter* series, and she does not need to write to support herself and raise her income. Even more – despite the fact that her first book for adults *The Casual Vacancy*, though written with insight and talent, will hardly become a long term bestseller, the first week of the sales showed that it was just enough to be its author to make it popular. As Mark Brown, *The Guardian* arts correspondent, writes Rowling's new novel 'went easily to the top of the fiction charts on Tuesday with *The Casual Vacancy* notching up first week sales of 124,603', making it 'number one in the year to date hardback fiction table' (Brown, 2012).

Though Rowling is aware that her novel may receive negative criticism, this is not going to stop her from writing what she wishes. When reminded by Ian Parker, a journalist of *The New Yorker* magazine, in an interview before the publication of *The Casual Vacancy* that her novel is likely to receive 'scandalized objections to the idea of young Harry Potter readers being drawn into such material', Rowling

has stressed: 'there is no part of me that feels that I represented myself as your children's babysitter or their teacher. I was always, I think, completely honest. I'm a writer, and I will write what I want to write' (Parker, 2012). Thus, it is reasonable to believe that Rowling has allowed her imagination to create a novel in which she has depicted life as she sees it not worrying about meeting the audience's expectations that could have made the novel more widely acceptable as well as ignoring any literary traditions in case these did not fit her purpose. The aim of the present paper is to discuss some aspects of Rowling's novel, scrutinizing the representation of gloomy realism involving abused children and lack of likeable characters, at the same time providing evaluation of some of the first critical reviews of the novel.

Though in the fundamental edition *The Complete Handbook of Novel Writing: Everything You Need to Know About Creating and Selling Your Work* (2010), prepared by the editors of *Writers Digest* and including guidelines provided also by Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike and other literary celebrities, it is clearly stated that 'reality is not a good plot' Rowling's novel is very realistic and provides typical and believable characters of a country village. Decca Aitkenhead, a British journalist of *The Guardian*, says that 'Pagford will be appallingly recognisable to anyone who has ever lived in a West Country village' (Aitkenhead, 2012). Though Rowling considers the novel to be a 'comic tragedy' which provides a detailed depiction of a local parish with the structure typical 'of the nineteenth-century: the anatomy and the analysis of a very small and closed society', Parker defines it as 'a rural comedy of manners that, having taken on state-of-the-nation social themes, builds into black melodrama' (Parker, 2012). Though disagreement may arise whether the novel is a dark comedy or a mild tragedy, it realistically depicts subjects of social concern of the contemporary English society.

Since Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, it has been rather emblematic of English writers to be obsessed with the delineation of reality. A contemporary of Rowling, the English anthropologist Kate Fox, explains that the interest in and the necessity to observe the life of 'people who might easily be their next-door neighbours' lies in realism that is 'deeply rooted in the English psyche, and our related qualities of down-to earthiness and matter of factness, our stubborn obsession with the real, concrete and factual, pure distaste for artifice and pretension' (Fox, 2004: 213). At the same time, as Fox stresses, the English privacy rules require to 'know very little about the personal lives and doings of people outside our immediate circle of close friends and family' which hardly satisfies 'the extreme nosiness' of an average Englishman (ibid.: 213-214). Probably this is one of the reasons why Rowling's novel has received better critical response in the UK than in the USA as it gives the British audience a believable insight into the fictional lives of their contemporaries. Though Fox writes it about soap operas, also Rowling's novel lets the reader 'peer through a spyhole into the hidden, forbidden, private lives of' neighbours and social peers (Fox, 2004: 214), thus letting the English readers break the social norm which

requires minding one's own business and getting an insight into the murky secrets of Pagford citizens.

It is obvious that the reality of a typical English village, according to Rowling, is rather dark, gloomy and hopeless, or, as stated by Parker: 'this is a story of class warfare set amid semi-rural poverty, heroin addiction, and teen-age perplexity and sexuality' (Parker, 2012). At the very beginning of the novel, J. K. Rowling is rather straightforward about the fact that someone is going to die, most likely – very early in the plot. The epigraph, a quotation from the Local Council Administration guide book, explains the term 'casual vacancy' as 'deemed to have occurred [...] on the day of his death' (Rowling, 2012: 1), thus making the readers suspect that some death is inevitable. Already on the first page of the book the readers meet Barry Fairbrother, a man suffering from 'a thumping headache', and to reduce any doubt whether this is the character destined to die, Rowling with a slight touch of dramatic irony makes his fate clear pointing out that, as it often happens in real life, three out of four Barry's children will not even throw the last glance at their father at the moment of their last parting before he disappears from their lives forever: 'Barry and Mary's four children [...] were watching television when he said goodbye to them for the last time, and only Declan, the youngest, turned to look at him, and raised his hand in farewell' (ibid.: 1).

Rowling is not only aware that in real life people hardly manage to say the last good-bye to each other, but also foreshadows the general alienation between parents and children which is characteristic of all families described in the novel. In this dismal setting the readers learn that due to *casual vacancy* caused by the death of Barry Fairbrother, there are three candidates running for the post at the Parish Council: the paedophile teacher Colin Wall who works hard to overcome his sexual drive; Miles Mollison – a narrow-minded and snobbish son of the present Chair of the Parish Council; and the sadistic husband and father Simon Price who believes that a position at the Parish Council would provide wonderful opportunities for bribery and corruption.

Further on readers get a realistic insight into the lives of more than twenty Pagford citizens, none of whom is truly likeable. Though in an interview with Ian Parker Rowling has stated that *Casual Vacancy* 'is a book about responsibility [...] – how responsible we are for our own personal happiness, and where we find ourselves in life – but in the macro sense also, of course: how responsible we are for the poor, the disadvantaged, other people's misery' (Parker, 2012), it seems that actually the novel is about the loneliness and daily abuse of children which, sadly enough, is still a prevalent feature of the contemporary British society. As claimed by Fox, English generally have 'a certain cultural apathy towards children' and do not 'seem to value children as highly as other cultures do' (Fox, 2004: 360-361). Thus, the whole plot of the novel develops around the major turmoil, caused primarily by neglected adolescents who use the Parish Council's website to publish damaging posts about their parents, either candidates for or members of the Council. The first to apply his computer skills acquired during regular school classes is Andrew who, recurrently beaten by his father Simon

Price and seeing the daily physical and emotional violence towards his mother and brother, has a reason to hate:

‘Don’t hit her,’ he said, forcing himself between his parents. ‘Don’t—’ His lip split against his front tooth, Simon’s knuckle behind it, and he fell backwards on top of his mother, who was draped over the keyboard; Simon threw another punch, which hit Andrew’s arms as he protected his face; Andrew was trying to get off his slumped, struggling mother, and Simon was in a frenzy, pummelling both of them wherever he could reach (Rowling, 2012: 803).

The daily brutality teaches Andrew to distrust his vulnerable mother and detest his father. The author writes that ‘Andrew indulged in a little fantasy in which his father dropped dead, gunned down by an invisible sniper. Andrew visualized himself patting his sobbing mother on the back while he telephoned the undertaker. He had a cigarette in his mouth as he ordered the cheapest coffin’ (ibid.: 60), but instead of taking a gun, Andrew takes care that after his publication of nasty facts on the parish website, his father has no chance to win the election and his career is ruined. Though domestic violence is widespread in all societies throughout human history and Rowling is neither the first nor the last to describe it, definitely her depiction of reality is bitterly truthful – according to the *Daily Mail* the official crime figures provided by the European Commission prove that the violence rate in Britain is higher than in any other country in the European Union (Slack, 2009).

Andrew is just the first to strike – a subsequent attack is directed at the success driven Sikh doctor Parminder Jawanda, a member of the Parish Council who has always unyieldingly supported Barry Fairbrother. Her daughter Sukhvinder, being constantly abused by her peers and neglected by her mother, on the verge of emotional breakdown hardly being able to handle her daily life any more, is desperately looking for support from her mother, but has to listen to abusing, angry tirade:

What’s wrong with you? Are you proud of being lazy and sloppy? Do you think it’s cool to act like a delinquent? [...] I’m disgusted by you, do you hear me? [...] What is wrong with you, Sukhvinder? (Rowling, 2012: 902)

Though coming from a culture in which children are traditionally more appreciated, Paraminder Jawanda has adopted the English customs that ‘not only forbid boasting about one’s offspring, but specifically prescribe mock-denigration of them. [...] English parents must roll their eyes, sigh heavily, and moan to each other about how noisy, tiresome, lazy hopeless and impossible their children are’ (Fox, 2004: 362) even if they do not believe in that. It is not surprising that after these accusations are thrown at the unhappy girl ‘the dark lake of desperation and pain that lived in Sukhvinder and yearned for release was in flames’ (Rowling, 2012: 905), making her wish for revenge and deciding to

post an anonymous message about the actual feelings between her mother and Barry Fairbrother.

Also Stuart Wall (Fats), the adopted son of Colin Wall, Deputy Head teacher of the local comprehensive school, follows suit and betrays his adoptive father by stating that he is a paedophile. His main motivation, like for all other kids who denounce their parents in Pagford, is the lack of love and support in his family mixed with obsessive necessity to discover his own 'true authenticity' (ibid.: 2012: 1210). Though the tragic of Stewart's accusations lies in the fact that Colin Wall has always been fighting his desires, Stewart is right, suspecting that Colin has never also dared to love him:

Your father's spent his life facing up to things he never did. I don't expect you to understand his kind of courage. But,' her voice broke at last, and he heard the mother he knew, 'he loves you, Stuart.' She added the lie because she could not help herself. Tonight, for the first time, Tessa was convinced that it was a lie (ibid.: 2012: 1338).

These and other troubling events involving adolescents described in *The Casual Vacancy* point at serious problems of the contemporary English society. Thus, ignorance, neglect, lack of love and support tarnish the lives of almost every character in Rowling's novel and it seems that a bunch of skeletons is hidden in every cupboard of Pagford. Ian Parker who was among the first literary critics to read the novel considers that the central figure of the novel Barry Fairbrother 'remains the story's moral centre – had the same virtues, in his world, that Harry had in his: tolerance, constancy, a willingness to act' (Parker, 2012), but still he is not safe from criticism. Actually it seems that Parker, comparing Fairbrother to Harry Potter, has missed the point that there are at least two rather considerable drawbacks in this character: while taking care of everyone else, he neglects his family; and he chooses his goals poorly, and puts in a lot of effort where actually the results he expects cannot be achieved. After his death, his wife Mary summarizes on both issues:

'He thought Krystal Weedon was like him, but she wasn't [...] She got more of his time and his attention than his own daughters,'

'He thought everyone was like him, that if you gave them a hand they'd start bettering themselves.'

'Yeah,' said Gavin, 'but the point is, there are other people who could use a hand – people at home...'

'Well, exactly!' said Mary, dissolving yet again into tears (ibid.: 302).

One of Barry's basic aims in life has been to save Krystal Weedon, to give her the same opportunities he himself has got. The problem here lies in the fact that Krystal – Barry's wishful example of a scum made into man – actually is not made of the same fabric as Barry has been. While Barry himself 'had been a living

example of what they proposed in theory: the advancement, through education from poverty to affluence, from powerlessness and dependency to valuable contributor to society' (ibid.: 248), Krystal has not got such aspirations, and is dreaming of only getting pregnant so that she could get a new house from the Council and would be provided by the kid's grandparents:

When they rehoused her, because of her pregnancy, they were almost certain to give her another Fields house; nobody wanted to buy them, they were so run down. But Krystal saw this as a good thing, because in spite of their dilapidation it would put Robbie and the baby in the catchment area for St Thomas's. Anyway, Fats' parents would almost certainly give her enough money for a washing machine once she had their grandchild. They might even get a television (ibid.: 298).

Krystal, about whom Rowling says that she 'could barely read, who could not have identified half the vegetables in a supermarket' (ibid.: 291), does not crave for education and status in society, she will never even attempt to reach the goals Barry finds important. Barry Fairbrother, like many well-wishing people, mistakenly believes that if only he would give a chance to Krystal, she would become another person. This hardly could have been Rowling's idea, as in the interview with Decca Aitkenhead, Rowling stresses:

So many people, certainly people who sit around the cabinet table, say, "Well, it worked for me" or, "This is how my father managed it" – these trite catchphrases – and the idea that other people might have had such a different life experience that their choices and beliefs and behaviours would be completely different from your own seems to escape a lot of otherwise intelligent people. The poor are discussed as this homogeneous mash, like porridge. The idea that they might be individuals, and be where they are for very different, diverse reasons, again seems to escape some people (Aitkenhead, 2012).

It is a praiseworthy fact that in *The Casual Vacancy* these ideas are just implied, there is nothing like obvious moralizing. At the same time the common wish of the public to find at least one pleasant character may force the audience fail to notice that also Barry Fairbrother in his wish to settle Krystal's life is one of those intelligent people who does not understand that other people neither want nor are able to achieve the same goals as he has.

Though the first reviews of the novel range between mildly positive and strikingly negative, even Jan Moir, the *Daily Mail* columnist who is among the fiercest critics of the new novel, does not deny that the novel is realistic and reflects the reality of contemporary society, though rightly stresses that it provides 'bleak and rather one-sided vision of life in modern England' (Moir, 2012). This is a rather typical approach – instead of praising the author for what has been created and providing analysis whether it has been done with skill and taste, the criticism is aimed at what the author has decided not to portray.

Readers, contemporaries or Rowling, may wonder whether indeed Joanne Rowling, the richest writer in the world, sees life as being very gloomy. One could also study which tragedies experienced by the author may have caused such negative perception. But, whatever Rowling's reasons could have been, she definitely has the rights to choose her themes and the fact that many of her readers would have enjoyed 'a sprinkle of magic' and as beautifully formulated in the Holy See's official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* (Pontara Pederiva, 2012) it neither decreases nor increases the value of the novel.

It seems that Jan Moir has been so proud of her own bravery to openly admit that she does not like the novel written by 'the most successful author in the world' (Moir, 2012) that in her rush to express her view, she has missed several rather important aspects of the novel. Obviously, Moir has understood that the novel is about responsibility: 'Amid this relentless portrayal of unkindness, any saplings of hope or renewal in the Fields are smothered by the dung of middle-class indifference. It's all our fault!' (ibid., 2012) , but definitely she is not happy about such a reminder, as if it were herself, her parents and neighbours, 'more prosperous characters' for whom, as Moir says, 'Rowling reserves a special venom' making them 'obnoxious to a ludicrous degree' (ibid., 2012). Here for an outsider it is difficult to understand Moir's anger. If Rowling has depicted the reality untruthfully, then her failure of doing it should be brought out. If she has depicted the problems of real life in a condensed way – probably these problems should be addressed and solved so that the next novel Rowling writes could be about how happy life has become for all Pagford and British citizens. It is useless to criticise an author just for the fact that the darkest sides of middle-class lives have been revealed – if that has been the author's intention. Indeed the novel would have gained if such criticism were counterbalanced with more optimistic twists of the plot and more pleasant characters – but, alas, to portray such has not been the author's intentions.

In her wish to defend the middle-class which appears in a negative light, Moir fails to notice that actually Rowling does not idealize the lower-class life: 'From start to finish, J.K. Rowling's main area of conflict is between the selfish middle-class villagers and the noble savages on the poverty-stricken estate' (ibid., 2012). Actually, Rowling with equal sharpness reveals also the downbeat traits of the lower classes in no way treating them as 'noble' or concentrating on conflicts only between classes. Her brightest lower class representative is Krystal Weedon – a nasty girl with limited understanding, sexually provoking, promiscuous, rude and ignorant. Capable of improvement – that is true, but not beyond her own limits. Her only positive trait of character is her commitment to her three year old brother Robbie – when she is not busy elsewhere, like having sex with Andrew Wall, which eventually leads to a tragedy. Probably, what Rowling wants to stress is that it is very difficult to solve the problems of lower class people with the methods currently available to society. Thus, the greatest enemy of Krystal and Robbie is Kay, the social worker who cares too much for them – she is able to destroy the only family these kids have got, removing Krystal from her brother

and placing him in a foster family – which might be more harmful for those kids than the present situation: ‘Krystal had visited Robbie regularly at his foster parents during the month he had been away from them. He had clung to her, wanted her to stay for tea, cried when she left. It had been like having half your guts cut out of you and held hostage’ (Rowling, 2012: 316). At the same time Rowling makes it clear that with the drug addict mother Terri who is constantly tempted by her dealer and boyfriend Obbo, Krystal and Robbie should not be left alone to fight with their lives – neither of them is capable to scrape through without assistance. Still, Rowling does not give a readymade recipe of how to settle the problem. She just implies that the present approach is wrong as it allows intrusion and improvement of the lives of lower classes against their wishes while neglecting their attachments and often causing more pain than the initial problem.

It is interesting that Moir bitterly claims that no one can like the book except ‘you happen to be, like J.K. Rowling herself, the kind of blinkered, Left-leaning demagogue quick to lambast what she perceives to be risible middle-class values, while failing to see that her own lush thickets of dearly held emotions and prejudices are riddled with the same narrow-mindedness she is so quick to detect in others’ (Moir, 2012), thus admitting that, indeed, Rowling has managed to display the nastiest traits of middleclass and implying that by doing this, she has seriously injured those who find something too similar in the pages of her book. What Moir fails to see is that Rowling does not criticise the middle-class as a unified organism. Vice versa – Rowling stresses that the middle-class, like any other class, consists of individuals, thus these are the choices of those individuals to make their lives better or worse.

Joanne Rowling does not idealize the contemporary society and describes the present day Britain as a place of hopelessness – none of her characters is truly happy, none feels safe, none hopes for any justice. The novel opens with the death of Barry Fairbrother, a man of at least some ideals, and ends with the funeral of Krystal and Robbie – two children who could have been saved. Though some positive lines are devoted to the Sikh family, it is also characterized by the ugliness of strive for success at any price, neglect of those children who fail to excel, and gender inequality that let males be accepted while females are despised. Like William Thackeray claimed more than a hundred years ago about *Vanity Fair*, *The Casual Vacancy* is another novel without a hero, though Rowling has created vivid, plausible heroes making sympathetic readers care for all of them. Still the lack of truly pleasant characters and optimism may diminish the popularity of the novel, as probably most of the readers will at least hope that besides the realistic despair depicted by J.K. Rowling there are also other shades of life and that, in general, life is more fulfilling and promising.

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