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Children's Literature or Adult Classic? The *Harry Potter* Series and the British Novel Tradition

Paige Byam

Often, great success brings controversy: such is the case for the *Harry Potter* series. After the first two novels in the series had been published, it was already very clear that their author, J. K. Rowling, had engaged a new generation of readers, especially among the elementary-school-age crowd. It was also apparent that adults were reading the books in huge numbers, and I became interested in this phenomenon—as well as eagerly anticipating each book in the series for my own part.

However, it is the cult status of the series among adults that has drawn much criticism and created controversy since that time. Many debates, inside of the academy and out, have focused on whether or not the *Harry Potter* books are "just" children's books, and whether they have literary merit. This controversy erupted most spectacularly in the *New York Times*'s placing of the *Harry Potter* books on its "Best Seller List."

Because the huge, long-term success of the *Harry Potter* books placed the books in the series atop the list and left little room for books aimed strictly at adult readers, the *New York Times* decided to put them into a newly created children's best-seller list. Commenting on this decision in July of 2000, Charles McGrath, the editor of the *New York Times Book Review,* stated:

> The sales and popularity of children's books can rival and, in the case of the *Harry Potter* books, even exceed those of adult books ... With a separate children's list we can more fully represent what people are reading, and we can clear more room on the adult list for adult books.[1]

Some regarded this as an attempt to quash adult interest in the series by sending out a message to readers that the *Harry Potter* books are really children's fiction and that adults were not supposed to read the series. Also, placement on the new children's list did a disservice to the series by

not reflecting how many copies of each book sold each week compared to "adult" best-sellers.

At the very least, the *New York Times*'s decision to create a separate children's bestseller list was a strategy to shift attention away from the *Harry Potter* series. At this point in time, 7 July 2000, "one or more of the three books in the J. K. Rowling Harry Potter series [had] commanded spots on the adult fiction bestseller list for 81 weeks to date."[2] Removing the *Harry Potter* books from the adult bestseller list was a marketing decision designed to obscure the fact that the series was still outselling top adult fiction and that no other children's book approached it in sales at the time.

I side with those who believe that the *Harry Potter* series not only deserves the attention it is getting because of its imaginative qualities and compelling storyline, but also because of its "adult" literary merits. I will argue here that the Harry Potter series fits well into "the great tradition" of British novels that is still taught in college classrooms, beginning with Samuel Richardson, continued by Jane Austen, and culminating in the efforts of Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens.

Perhaps it is the sense of "fun" and the comedic element that we encounter—especially in books one to four of the series—that makes some people think that the books are not for adults, and that they do not fit into the "great tradition" of the novel. In many cases, the problems and even tragedies that Harry encounters are resolved or diminished and not left for readers to ponder, as in many other classic British novels. While this pattern of resolution is less typical of "adult" classics, it should not be used as a reason for knocking the *Harry Potter* series out of the "adult" fiction category. Critics may have judged the series by the first two or three books, prematurely placing it in the children's literature category. The *New York Times*'s decision came in July 2000, before *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* could be properly digested, and three years before the publication of the most "adult" book—in terms of content—to date, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*.

Another reason some critics think the *Harry Potter* books are not for adult readers is simply because the hero is not grown up. True, the character of Harry is an adolescent—but so are Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, and Charles Dickens's Pip and Esther Summerson when we first meet them, to name a few. As of yet, the series has not followed Harry to adulthood, but this should not be a "requirement" for adult fiction either. Furthermore, with the publication of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Rowling has introduced us to a "new" Harry—one who is entering turbulent teen years and experiencing all the angst, doubts, and troubles that we see in "classic" British novels.

In fact, the *Harry Potter* novels can be linked to many "adult" literary traditions. To begin with, Harry fits into the hero archetype described by

Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.[3] Simply by being himself, Harry is a heroic figure in the wizarding world, known to all. Furthermore, Harry is Christ-like in his status of being marked from birth by the snake-like Voldemort and destined for greatness since he has "saved" the wizarding world. As revealed in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is like Jesus Christ in that his life, too, is the subject of prophecy. Harry's life also parallels that of another hero-savior: King Arthur. Both Harry and Arthur are raised away from danger or attention until they are of age, or ready for challenges. Arthur is raised in his foster brother Kay's shadow, not realizing that he is special—King Uther Pendragon's son—until he inadvertently pulls the sword from the stone. Once this sign occurs, Arthur is taken under the tutelage and guardianship of the wizard Merlin. In a similar way, Harry is raised as an underling to his cousin, Dudley Dursley, and does not realize that he has special powers until he inadvertently sets a snake free to threaten Dudley (*SS* 28).[4] This magical outburst signals contact with the wizarding world and his acceptance to Hogwarts, where he comes under the tutelage of the great wizard Albus Dumbledore.

A central topos that links the *Harry Potter* series not only to the archetypal hero in literature, but also to other canonical British novels, is the figure of the orphan. It is no coincidence that King Arthur and Harry Potter are both orphans. The orphan is also a common feature of the Bildungsroman, or novel of education or development, in which a character must develop in society, and find his or her own way in the world. The protagonist of the Bildungsroman is often an orphan, since being parentless enhances his or her necessary independence: the orphan can be exposed to unusual circumstances and is freer to act within them than a "normal" protagonist would be.

The orphan has audience appeal because he or she is alone in the world and has often suffered great trauma; the reader thus usually sympathizes with the character and roots for him or her. Harry Potter lives with his aunt, as do Jane Eyre and Esther Summerson (although she does not know it), while Pip lives with his sister. All of these children have a family connection to their lodgings, but they also live in misery because of how they are treated. They are often deprived of food (as in the cases of Harry and Pip) and enclosed both literally (Harry in the cupboard; Jane in the Red Room) and psychologically by their "families." They must endure cruel behavior: Harry is beaten by his cousin Dudley, Jane is struck by her cousin John, and Pip is physically abused by his sister, Mrs. Joe.

In the lives of these novelistic protagonists, and as we also saw in the life of the archetypal hero Arthur, there is usually a turning point that coincides with a coming of age. At this point in many of the novels, there is an interruption in the lives of the characters and often a direct intervention by an outside force. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, letters descend

in multitudes upon the Dursley's household and Hagrid arrives to rescue Harry and take him to Hogwarts; in *Jane Eyre*, the doctor who treats Jane after her experience in the Red Room recognizes Jane's predicament and recommends schooling, so Jane is sent to Lowood; in *Great Expectations*, Pip receives notice that he is to be educated to be a gentleman. There is an element of the fairy tale rescue in these novels, and the protagonists are then pushed to embark on a different course of education or development.

In the various worlds into which these characters are thrust, all of their norms are stripped away and they must learn to survive by their innate abilities. They must use their inner strength to read the situations and circumstances that they encounter. On one level, the different worlds that the protagonists encounter help prepare them to re-enter society in a more adjusted way. Harry learns to negotiate between the Muggle world and Hogwarts; Brontë's Jane must experience and emerge from the worlds of Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, and Ferndean before she is through with her quest; and Dickens's Pip must leave the world of Joe and Mrs. Joe and come to terms with Miss Havisham and Magwitch before he gains understanding.

It is also significant that the protagonists are usually introduced to different religions or philosophies. Harry learns to tap into his own powers, train his magic, and understand the relationship between the world of the Muggles and the wizarding world. He must use his wits to decipher the new world he encounters at Hogwarts, learn to avoid characters like Draco Malfoy, and follow in the footsteps of his parents, although he is uncertain of their path. Similarly, Jane Eyre must find the different possibilities for living available in the Christian world she inhabits—from the hypocrisy of Gateshead and Lowood to the cold, doctrinaire religious interpretation of St. John Rivers to the fairy-tale "reality" of Ferndean. Pip must learn to understand and reject the empty life of Miss Havisham and Estella. Throughout their ordeals, each central character must learn what *not* to be.

In this stage of their education, the protagonists must solve a mystery or decode an enigma in order to proceed, just as the reader must unravel, solve, and come to terms with each problem confronting the central character along the way. Harry Potter must come to terms with "He-who-must-not-be-named" (Voldemort) and solve the "riddle" of Tom Riddle; Jane Eyre must discover Rochester's secret and uncover the identity and relevance of the madwoman in the attic; Pip must be open to learning that his benefactor is Magwitch the convict—who is also Estella's father—and not Miss Havisham.

In another crucial novelistic motif, the character or characters to be unraveled are, like the protagonist, orphans. Each serves as a literary double or doppelgänger of the protagonist. The psychological double does what the other character would like to and acts on similar impulses; the dop-

pelgänger represents a spirit that can adapt its form (as Voldemort literally does). The double and doppelgänger functions represent a possible future for each protagonist.

The doppelgänger motif is prevalent in many "great tradition" novels. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha and Jane are psychological doubles in any number of ways, from drawing blood from their victims, to seeing their images in the glass, to their association with fire, and their connection with Rochester. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's doubles are Magwitch and Orlick. Perhaps Pip's greatest challenge is to acknowledge his psychological and literal connection with Magwitch, the banished criminal. Furthermore, Orlick's assault on Mrs. Joe is often interpreted as an acting out of Pip's psychological desire, just as Bertha's burning of Thornfield acts out Jane's own subliminal desires. In the *Harry Potter* series, Tom Riddle/Voldemort is a double for Harry—they both are parseltongues, they are of mixed muggle/wizard parentage, and they have "twin" wands, both cored with a feather from the same phoenix. Moreover, as developed in *The Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is privy to many of Voldemort's thoughts through the scar that Harry received from him. Finally, though James Potter, Harry's father, is dead, his memory serves as another double for Harry.

The protagonist orphans learn key information about themselves from their orphan doubles, but then they must sift through their various inheritances. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane must learn from Bertha—her rival, double, and antithesis—and decide how she needs to negotiate her place in Rochester's world. At the same time, she is given her inheritance from her uncle. Pip must come to terms with the criminal identity of his benefactor and the role of love in his life. The secret and tainted money from Magwitch that helps Pip also reveals the social hypocrisy underlying the social strata that Pip must negotiate.

In the *Harry Potter* series, Harry must keep trying to understand the literal and psychological scar that Voldemort has inflicted upon him, he must deal with his fame, and he must learn to traverse two worlds. Harry has tangible inheritances to help him, such as his unexpected fortune in wizarding currency, as well as the unanticipated advantage of the invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map. However, these tools only *lead* him toward understanding, they do not produce it.

The final message in each text involves what the central character learns in each narrative. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane must learn how to bring unarticulated passions to the surface, but may ultimately sublimate her understanding in the "Reader, I married him" ending; in *Great Expectations*, Pip must deal with what it means to be a gentleman beyond the obvious trappings that money can buy; in the *Harry Potter* series, Harry learns of friendship and the power of love through his relationships with people such as Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, and Sirius Black, while he must recognize enemies—both overt

and covert. Harry must understand the power within himself in addition to his magic, and he must face evil when he faces the deaths of Cedric and later Sirius.

While some of these issues have been tied up neatly in books one through four of the series, in *The Order of the Phoenix*, Harry's growth—in literal age and in psychological depth approaching adulthood—also makes the perspective of the book more complicated. Harry is learning that nothing is as simple as it seems: relationships are complicated and require work, communication, and acceptance to endure. Sirius Black's death shows Harry that he, again, must rely on himself and go on alone psychologically, although supported by loyal friends like Ron, Hermione, and Dumbledore. Understanding and forgiving James Potter's childhood weaknesses of vanity and cruelty may be a way for Harry to understand and, eventually, to conquer his anger and rashness.

By looking at the *Harry Potter* series as part of the British novel tradition, one can see how completely the books share, develop, and expand the tradition. The similarities that I have drawn here between the books and other novels in the Bildungsroman tradition are meant to demonstrate how Rowling's books demand serious attention from literary scholars. In offering a sketch of these similarities, I hope that more scholars will recognize the *Harry Potter* books as meriting a place among the canon of "adult" British novels. Although young readers can identify with a young protagonist, the issues developed in the series—some of which I have touched on here—are certainly complex enough to command an adult reading. I am sure many readers have devoured works by the Brontës and Dickens as young adults, but often find a new appreciation for classics such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield* when they reread these novels as adults.

Why, then, has there been such a controversy over the status of the *Harry Potter* books as both children's *and* adult literature? As I have already discussed, some of the attempts to categorize them as children's literature may be chalked up as marketing decisions. Some others may be premature critical decisions, based on knee-jerk responses to the first and, perhaps, second volumes in the series. Although I believe that sophisticated themes have already been developed in the *Harry Potter* series, it is important to remember that the series is not yet complete. Whether or not Harry matures or learns to deal with the coming-of-age adversities that Jane Eyre and Pip ultimately overcome is yet to be seen—although *The Order of the Phoenix* shows Harry making great strides in maturity. However, even for those critics who have kept up with Rowling's novels, the fact that the series is currently in flux may contribute to the feeling that the *Harry Potter* novels are not worthy of being identified as "adult" fiction. For many critics, the type of an ending a

novel has tends to dictate its classification, and the *Harry Potter* series eludes such placement because it currently lacks an ending.

In fact, the status of the novels as a series may also have influenced some critics and academic readers to dismiss it from consideration as adult literature. They may believe that its popularity is due largely to the crass commercialization and audience manipulation involved in serial publication. These critics see the serialization of the *Harry Potter* novels as placing them in the same category as other print and video series that are designed to attract, respond to, and exploit a popular audience. However, it is worth noting that *Great Expectations* was published in serial form, that the market was a driving force in Dickens's writing of *Great Expectations*, and that Dickens ended up writing two different endings to the text in an effort to please his audience. While some might argue that the example of Dickens shows how the novels in the British canon have never been completely divorced from commercial considerations, at the very least, one might conclude from it that great literature can be created within the confines of commercial form. Thus, critics are wrong to dismiss Rowling's books simply because they are designed to attract a popular audience.

Although we have yet to see the resolution of the *Harry Potter* series, its literary connections to the great tradition of the British novel, and specifically the Bildungsroman, make the books worthy of adult interest. Ultimately, the *Harry Potter* series is too popular and too important to the future of the novel to be defined exclusively as either children's or adult fiction.

Notes

1. "*New York Times Book Review* to Debut Children's Bestseller List," 7 July 2000, http://www.writenew.com/2000/070700_nytimes_children.htm.
2. Ibid.
3. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).
4. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1997).

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