

Applications in the Classroom: The Potential of Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter in Higher Education

Anne Collins Smith

Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, Texas, USA
acsmith@sfasu.edu

Of what use is a book about the Harry Potter series that was published before the series was complete? Having taught an upper-division college course on Philosophy in Harry Potter multiple times, I believe that the early publication of *Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter* actually increases its potential utility in the classroom. Not only does this book include thoughtful and insightful scholarship, but it is also pedagogically valuable. It raises thought-provoking topics that can serve as the basis for research papers and class presentations, as well as providing important resources for students to use while conducting such research.

Because the book was published before the last two books in the series, a number of the chapters lend themselves naturally to assignments in which students study the later books in the Potter series carefully to see whether the claims made by the chapter authors still remain valid. Students may write papers on *Half-Blood Prince* and *Deathly Hallows* (the sixth and seventh books of the Harry Potter series), addressing questions such as “Does vision feature significantly in Rowling’s ongoing description of the boundaries between the Muggle and Wizarding worlds?” (Chapter 3) or “Do Fred and George continue to enact the dual role assigned to the harlequin?” (Chapter 6). Moreover, the chapters address a wide range of topics and can be used for students from various disciplines and at various stages in their educational careers. For instance, some would be accessible to college freshmen and sophomores, while others would provide a challenging read for juniors and seniors. I find this diversity of levels especially appropriate because the students in my course on Harry Potter range from first-semester freshmen to last-semester seniors.

Most of the chapters that are especially conducive to student assignments are in the first portion of the book, “Serious Scholarship and Academic Hocus-Pocus.” The second portion of the book, “Conjuring Harry Potter into the Canon,” is less directly useful to students, but by offering lively examples of the ways in which the Potter series has been used in the college classroom, may provide inspiration to teachers who wish to use the Potter texts in their courses.

PART 1: SERIOUS SCHOLARSHIP AND ACADEMIC HOCUS-POCUS

In the opening chapter “Educating Harry Potter: A Muggle’s Perspective on Magic and Knowledge

in the Wizarding World of J.K. Rowling,” Sarah E. Maier raises a number of issues. Some topics, such as those addressing the physical space of Hogwarts in relation to themes such as the challenge of education and the architectonic of magical disciplines, are clearly and thoughtfully elaborated; others, however, are mentioned only briefly and not fully developed. For example, Maier claims that the Potter books exhibit what Tolkien called “arresting strangeness” but does not discuss it. She raises, but does not answer, ethical questions regarding dangerous knowledge in the Hogwarts curriculum. While the lack of development of these topics may seem like a weakness in the chapter, it offers an opening for student research. Students could write very interesting papers by choosing and unpacking one of these underdeveloped topics.

Ron W. Cooley’s chapter, “Harry Potter and the Temporal Prime Directive: Time Travel, Rule-Breaking, and Misapprehension in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*,” is well-focused and clearly structured. The transgressive elements of children’s literature, Cooley asserts, link such literature to civil disobedience. Drawing specifically on *Prisoner of Azkaban*, he argues that “the time travel rule . . . is a special kind of rule with a double function that generally illuminates the politics and ethics of rule-breaking in the Harry Potter books” (35). I have noticed that students in a class in which they learn to analyze a text such as Harry Potter are often eager to transfer their developing critical skills to other works they have enjoyed. This chapter’s discussion of civil disobedience provides an excellent lens for examining other texts, especially those in which heroic young characters combat an oppressive dystopia, from the Tripods to the Hunger Games.

Jonathan P. Lewis’s chapter “If Yeh Know Where to Go: Vision and Mapping in the Wizarding World” offers an excellent analysis that demonstrates subtle, careful reading. I shared some of Lewis’s insights with students in my Philosophy in Harry Potter class while traveling in London, and they were intrigued. For instance, the fact that one of the sites used for filming the Leaky Cauldron is now a shop selling eyeglasses dovetails beautifully with Lewis’s analysis of the significance of eyesight, both literal and symbolic, in the Wizarding World. Lewis also connects Rowling’s deliberate vagueness regarding the whereabouts of places like Hogwarts and Diagon Alley to the pleasure that readers derive from being able to imagine themselves somehow stumbling across or into these magical worlds. With its tight focus on vision, this chapter affords students a springboard to construct parallel research of their own to determine whether Rowling’s treatment of eyesight is unique or whether she imparts similar significance to other senses such as hearing.

Peggy Huey’s chapter “A Basilisk, a Phoenix, and a Philosopher’s Stone: Harry Potter’s Myths and Legends” is at once promising and frustrating. The piece opens with a suggestion of a rich theoretical backdrop in the analysis of mythological symbols by 20th-century poet Juan Eduardo Cirlot, but the analysis does not refer back to Cirlot’s framework. Instead, the author focuses discussion on several mythological figures that appear in the novels and offers a variety of historical background and commentary on each one. This chapter was of particular interest to me because I include a unit in my class on the ways in which Rowling adapts mythological elements. As part of this unit, I require each student to give a short class presentation on a chosen mythological object, creature, or person, addressing both its traditional origins and its use in the Harry Potter series. In addition to learning quite a bit about mythology and myth analysis, the students come to appreciate Rowling’s craft in transforming these elements for her own story-telling purposes. This chapter would provide students working on such projects with a valuable starting-point for their research.

In the next chapter, “Death and Rebirth: *Harry Potter* & the Mythology of the Phoenix,” Sarah Gibbons offers a detailed, well-researched, and penetrating reading of the multiple aspects of the phoenix that are woven through the Harry Potter text and that extend from the text into its commodification. I found this to be an especially strong and interesting chapter, as Gibbons interweaves her historical account of the mythology of the phoenix with an analysis of the commodification of the Potter series and its symbolism, arguing vigorously that culture and commerce not only co-exist but reinforce one another. This chapter would appeal to highly able students, particularly juniors and seniors. It offers a theoretical background that students can apply to

researching examples of commodification that have arisen since the chapter was written, such as the Warner Brothers Studio's "Wizarding Worlds" and the Pottermore site.

Rebecca Whitus Longster's chapter on the Weasley twins, "The Harlequin in the Weasley Twins: Jesters in the Court of Prince Harry (and J.K. Rowling)," investigates the role of Fred and George, not only in providing comic relief, but in working behind the scenes to provide unexpected assistance, traits that she links to the traditional role of the harlequin or court jester in works such as *King Lear*. The author develops her point thoroughly with numerous canonical examples, shedding new light on the significance of certain events. This chapter is less theory-intensive than some of the others and would be accessible to students earlier in their academic careers.

The final chapter in this section, Casey Cothran's "Lessons in Transfiguration: Allegories of Male Identity in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series," examines the manner in which Harry travels through adolescence toward manhood in books 1-5. She analyzes his relationship with Cho, his masculine role models both positive (such as Lupin and Dumbledore) and negative (such as Voldemort), and the ways in which Harry shows that he is tempted by the violent exercise of power. While there are numerous academic and popular books and articles available on feminism in Harry Potter, this chapter provides a rare and welcome focus on the study of masculinity, an important and often-overlooked aspect of gender studies. During the "Self and Other" unit of my Harry Potter course, I have found male students to be generally responsive to feminist philosophy and especially engaged by issues of masculinity. Students who wish to pursue this topic in more depth would find this chapter a useful resource.

PART 2: CONJURING HARRY POTTER INTO THE CANON

The six chapters in this section of the book examine the Potter series as literature, as the subject matter of college classes, and in relation to other literary works. With the exception of the first chapter in the section, they do not lend themselves naturally to student assignments. Rather, they are directed towards scholarly readers and college-level teachers.

Ernelle Fife's essay on "Reading J. K. Rowling Magically: Creating C.S. Lewis's 'Good Reader'" takes on the challenge of identifying the role that Rowling sets out for the reader as "hermeneutic narratee." She defines hermeneutic narratee as an active reader who fills in blanks, notices clues, and guesses the answers to built-in puzzles. Fife describes a number of instances in which re-reading—which young readers love to do—is rewarded by subtle clues that Rowling has woven into her text. The active reader can also recognize deeper spiritual allegories and meanings within the series. While the other chapters in this section are less conducive to use for class assignments than those in the previous section, Fife's thesis of the hermeneutic narratee, as well as her discussion of spiritual allegories, would be a rich topos for students to explore in the later books.

Beginning with the next essay, the book transitions to chapters that are less conducive to classroom applications, though useful as stand-alone readings. In "The Problem of Identity in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*," Leigh A. Neithardt asserts that Harry's travels parallel his internal journey of self-discovery, which may be helpful to both children and adults. To children, his journey can provide an exemplar, while adults can also extend their own self-discovery. Neithardt also discusses some parallels between the writing of E. Nesbit, especially her novel *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, and the Harry Potter series.

Steven Barfield's essay "Of Young Magicians and Growing Up: J.K. Rowling, Her Critics, and the 'Cultural Infantilism' Debate" explores a common criticism of the Harry Potter series. Barfield offers background on the term "cultural infantilism," the notion that contemporary adults are resisting intellectual and emotional maturity, and explains how the Harry Potter series has entered the discourse. Barfield argues that the Potter series has been vulnerable to this criticism because of the way in which Rowling blends genres and confounds

genre expectations, which can lead her books to be misjudged. He also argues that the concept of cultural infantilism itself rests on problematic definitions of the categories of adult and child. This latter discussion is frustratingly brief, but the former is thoughtful and well-developed and sheds light on the new place that Rowling has carved out for the Potter series.

The next two essays will be of particular interest to those who teach, or plan to teach, courses that include the Harry Potter series. In “High-Brow Harry Potter: J. K. Rowling’s Series as College-Level Literature,” Laura Baker Shearer offers inspiring examples of her use of the Harry Potter books to engage college students successfully. Class discussions and course assignments based on Harry Potter clearly demonstrate the students’ growing skills in literary analysis and criticism, skills that are transferable to later courses on figures such as Shakespeare. Shearer stops short of arguing that the Potter series belongs in the traditional literary canon, instead describing the series as a useful “gateway” to canon.

William Wandless also describes classroom experiences using Harry Potter in the provocative “Hogwarts vs. ‘The ‘Values’ Wasteland’: *Harry Potter* and the Formation of Character.” Wandless juxtaposes the Potter series with a text commonly used in composition courses, Charles’ Sykes’s “The ‘Values’ Wasteland.” While I found Wandless’s argument that the Potter series effectively depicts Harry as someone who is “ethically self-determined” in a manner that calls objective moral principles into question problematic, I found his insights into the psychological usefulness of a fictional work in exploring the basis of ethical decision-making highly valuable. As Wandless observes, a fictional milieu offers students an opportunity to debate ethical issues in a context that reduces the anxiety that can result from the discussion of real-world issues that hit too “close to home,” as well as the anxiety that can result when students feel that they are revealing too much of themselves in discussing real-world issues.

In the final chapter, “Metaphor and MetaFantasy: Questing for Literary Inheritance in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*,” Evelyn M. Perry explores Rowling’s acknowledged inheritance from classic British fantasy. The central portion of Perry’s article is an insightful unpacking of the legacy of T.H. White’s *Sword in the Stone* as found in Rowling’s *Sorcerer’s Stone*. Perry explores the complex pedagogy afforded each young hero and its fruition at each book’s climax, both in terms of the action portrayed in the story and in terms of the effect on the hero’s developing character.

In the future, I plan to use this book next time I teach the class on Harry Potter. Because the course focuses on the philosophy of Harry Potter, the texts that I currently require students to purchase are entirely philosophical. I appreciate, however, the wider range of disciplines and topics represented in this book, and I believe it offers valuable resources to students looking for engaging ideas for research projects. I would put this book on reserve and direct students toward it, perhaps even listing it as a recommended (though not required) book.

If I had never taught a course using the Harry Potter books before and were thinking about doing so, I would find this book highly affirming. The chapters that actually describe using Harry Potter in the classroom are geared toward English composition and literary analysis; college-level English instructors will find them especially useful.

AUTHOR BIO:

Anne Collins Smith is a Professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. She enjoys teaching a course on Philosophy in Harry Potter and also uses excerpts from Peter Needham's superb translations of the Harry Potter books into Latin for the delectation and edification of her Latin students. She has published articles on Harry Potter as well as other popular-culture products such as *Star Trek*, *The Prisoner*, and *Tin Man*. She also co-edits the ethics textbook *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Moral Issues* and has co-written and translated graphic novels for children and young adults.

REFERENCE CITATION:

MLA:

Smith, Anne C. Applications in the Classroom: Review of Hallett, Cynthia Whitney, ed. *Scholarly Studies in Harry Potter: Applying Academic Methods to a Popular Text*. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005. Print. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy* 3.1 (2016). Web and Print.

APA:

Smith, A. C. (2016). Applications in the classroom: The potential of scholarly studies in Harry Pottery in higher education. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*. 3(1).<http://journaldialogue.org/issues/applications-in-the-classroom-the-potential-of-scholarly-studies-in-harry-potter-in-higher-education/>

