

**Defending the *Harry Potter* Series from its Detractors and
Defenders**

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Pro gradu -tutkielmani käsittelee J.K. Rowlingin *Harry Potter* -kirjasarjaa ja tavoitteeni on puolustaa sarjaa niin sen arvostelijoilta kuin puolustajiltakin. *Potter*-kirjat ovat saaneet osakseen ennennäkemättömän määrän kritiikkiä, jonka perusteet vaihtelevat laidasta laitaan. Sarjaa on kritisoitu mm. uskonnon esittämisen puutteesta, uskonnonvastaisuudesta, noituuteen houkuttelemisesta ja raakuudesta. Lisäksi *Potter*-kirjoja on pidetty "huonona" kirjallisuutena sen kielenkäytön, suosion ja "yksilotteisuuden" vuoksi. Suurin osa *Potter*in kohdistuvasta kritiikistä on lähtöisin Yhdysvalloista ja perustuu uskonnollisiin syihin: Raamattu yksiselitteisesti kieltää noituuden harjoittamisen. Toinen ääripää ovat sarjan puolustajat, jotka vertaavat Harrya Jeesukseen ja näkevät yhtäläisyyksiä kirjojen ja uskonnon välillä pienimmissäkin yksityiskohdissa.

Olen jakanut tutkielmani osiin *Potter*-kirjojen saaman kritiikin perusteella: sarjan puolustuspuheenvuoro on jaettu kolmeen osaan: kirjojen sopivuus lapsille, kristinusko ja teosten klassinen arvo. Aiheet, joita käsittelem ensimmäisessä osassa ovat kuolema/väkivalta, fantasia/todellisuus ja noitus/taikuus. Toisessa osassa (kristinusko) käsittelem uskonnon poissaoloa *Potter*-kirjoissa, raamatunkohtia, jotka tuomitsevat noituuden ja noituutta/taikuutta kristinuskon näkökulmasta. Kolmas ja viimeinen osio (klassinen arvo) puolustuspuheenvuorossa sisältää seuraavat aiheet: lastenkirjallisuuden arvo, kirjojen suosio, kielenkäyttö ja tarinoiden monilotteisuus. *Potter*-sarjan puolustaminen sen puolustajilta on aiheena vai yhdessä luvussa ("Harry Jeesuksena") mutta olen sitä mieltä, että aihe vaatii oman lukunsa, koska sarjan puolustaminen uskonnollisilla syillä on yhtä pahasti hakoteillä kuin sen kritisoiminen samoilla syillä.

Suurimmat ongelmat lastenkirjallisuudesta puhuttaessa ovat sen aliarviointi ja aliarvostus; suuri osa kriitikoista lukee kirjallisuutta, joka on suunnattu lapsille siitä alkuasetelmasta, että se ei voi sisältää mitään merkitsevää, jotain, joka olisi lähemmän tarkastelun arvoista. Lisäksi se, että kirjaa myydään kymmeniä miljoonia kappaleita riittää useimmille syyksi teoksen ohittamiseen puhuttaessa kirjallisuuden klassikoista.

Lastenkirjallisuus ei itse asiassa ole lasten omaa vaan näitä kirjoja tuottavat, arvostelevat ja arvottavat aikuiset. He sanelevat, mitä lasten tulisi lukea, mikä on "hyvää" lastenkirjallisuutta ja mitkä aiheet eivät ole sopivia näihin kirjoihin. *Potter*-kirjojen tarkastelulla pyrin osoittamaan, kuinka tämä erittäin suosittu (lasten)kirjasarja voi sisältää terävääkin yhteiskuntakritiikkiä, käsitellä vaikeita aiheita ja olla realistinen. Näin ollen, se että miljoonat lapset, jotka muuten eivät koskisikaan kirjaan, lukevat 500-sivuisen teoksen muutamassa päivässä, ei välttämättä johdu ainoastaan siitä, että se olisi "helppo" lukea.

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1. Introduction

[T]he existence of an impossible and damaging ideal of childhood and the growth of children's literature are inextricably enmeshed with one another.¹

Children's literature is one of the most intriguing genres of literature in that it is mostly regarded as less valuable than any other literature and at the same time it can create immense controversy resulting in the banning of books from libraries and even bonfires where allegedly dangerous books are burnt. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are no exception; they are constantly included in both of the categories mentioned above: insignificant and dangerous.

I will not even attempt to define the term 'children's literature' because the concept is and has been going through major changes, as has been noted by numerous scholars, and which I also will discuss in this thesis. David Gooderham asks a central question concerning the development of children and 'their' literature: "Is there some actual change in the consciousness and behaviours of children, or are we witnessing an ideological collapse of public assurance in the Romantic concept of the child?"² This concept includes characteristics like 'innocence' which is used to criticize the handling of certain issues in children's books. I place the word 'their' (referring to 'children') in quotes above, because children's literature is not actually theirs at all; it is almost entirely defined by adults, as is the whole idea of childhood. This creates problems for the discussion about suitable topics for children's books which plays a major part in this thesis. Rosalind Coward sees "the perpetuation of the concept of childhood innocence as an ideological device deployed by

¹ Warner, Marina. "Managing Monsters – Six Myths of Our Time" (the 1994 Reith Lectures), London: Vintage, 1994 as cited by Watson, Victor. "Innocent Children and Unstable Literature" *Voices Off. Texts, Contexts and Readers*. Eds. Styles, Morag, Bearne, Eve, Watson, Victor. London: Cassell, 1996. p. 2.

² Gooderham, David W. "What rough beast..? Narrative relationships and moral education" *Journal of Moral Education*. March 1997, Vol. 26, Issue 1.

the middle classes to confirm their practices of child-rearing and education.”³ This is also partly the reason why the discussion on children’s literature is complicated; there are as many motives for criticism as there are detractors of children’s books and the motives are not always obvious.

What I wish to accomplish by writing this thesis is to shed light on the reasons why the *Harry Potter* series has been under such an attack for its themes and representation of certain subjects and I will defend the series from these accusations. I will also attempt to offer some answers to the question why children’s literature is undervalued. These are important themes because I agree with Peter Hunt who is of the opinion that “books for children are in a sense an introduction to the life that lies ahead of them.”⁴

I have structured my thesis mainly on the basis of the distribution of the criticism towards the *Potter* series; the arguments of the detractors divide quite naturally into three groups: suitability for children, Christianity and classical value. The Defenders section includes only one chapter.

I start the defense of the *Potter* series with a section on the books’ suitability for children. This section includes three chapters: 2.1.1 Death and Violence, 2.1.2 Fantasy and Reality and 2.1.3 Witchcraft and Magic. In chapter 2.1.1, I discuss the issues of death and violence in children’s literature in general and how this compares to their presentation in the *Potter* books. In chapter 2.1.2, I use theories of child development and examples from the *Potter* books to illustrate the importance of fantasy as a tool for reflecting reality in children’s literature. Chapter 2.1.3, the discussion focuses on the function of magic in the *Potter* series.

³ Gooderham citing Coward, Rosalind. “Kids on the Loose” *Guardian*, 2 December, 1994.

⁴ Hunt, Peter. *Criticism, Theory & Children’s Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. p. 30.

Section 2.2 (Christianity), discusses criticism towards the *Potter* books made from religious standpoints. What has to be mentioned here is the fact that most of the criticism towards the *Potter* series, especially the criticism based on religion, originates from the U.S.A., where religion is used even by the president as an excuse for actions, whereas in Britain, the ‘home’ of Harry Potter, God is not mentioned in public speeches by government officials and religion is less visible altogether. The chapters included in this section are: 2.2.1 The Absence of Religion, 2.2.2 Deuteronomy and 2.2.3 Christianity, Witchcraft and Magic. The widely noted fact that religion is not practiced at all in the books and the possible reasons for this are dealt with in chapter 2.2.1. In chapter 2.2.2, the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy is discussed because it is the most used text (where Christians are concerned) in the argument against the *Potter* series’ magical aspects. In chapter 2.2.3, I attempt to argue against probably the most visible criticism directed at the books; the claims according to which the *Potter* series propagates witchcraft and is thus dangerous for children.

The last section dealing with the detractors of the books, 2.3. (Classical Value), includes four chapters: 2.3.1 Children’s Books, 2.3.2 Popularity, 2.3.3 Language and 2.3.4 Missing the Other Level. In chapter 2.3.1 I discuss the under appreciation of children’s literature and the fact that today’s literature for children is in some ways quite different from the literature that the adults, who now criticize the *Potter* books, read as children. Chapter 2.3.2 deals with the aspect of popularity and its effects on the possible literary value of books in general. The language of the *Potter* books and the use of language in children’s literature altogether are discussed in chapter 2.3.3. Finally, as the last chapter relating to the detractors of the *Potter* series, the different levels (entertainment, didactic, political engagement) of the books are explored in chapter 2.3.4.

In addition to defending the *Potter* series from its detractors, I feel that there is a need to argue against some of the defending voices as well. What I discuss in chapter 3 is Harry's alleged Christ-like characteristics that are suggested by some writers, who defend the series against claims of its 'poor quality' and 'lack of morals.' Another defending argument for the *Potter* series, which is in my opinion argued against throughout my thesis, is its influence on children who usually do not read at all; usually these defenders are of the opinion that it does not matter if the *Potter* books have nothing more than entertainment value as long as children are reading *something*. There are, of course, those as well, who criticize this argument by saying that reading just *anything*, like *Harry Potter*, is not enough;

Bearing in mind that these kids are commonly referred to as the "PlayStation generation", and presented as unwilling illiterates who will happily while away the hours with a keyboard mouse or TV remote but would not be seen dead with their noses in a book, the fact that they hungered to read about Harry was assumed to be nothing short of a miracle.⁵

I think that my thesis argues against both views concerning this "PlayStation generation"; 'as long as they are reading something' is not a fair statement in that there is more than the entertainment aspect in the *Potter* series; the same argument is fitting for the other view in this matter. For example, the above quoted Jennie Bristow is of the opinion that "our expectations of children have plummeted"⁶ and that the *Potter* books are examples of this. Again, my discussion on the different aspect of the series, i.e. my thesis in its entirety, is an attempt to argue against such claims.

My contribution to the scholarly discussion surrounding the *Potter* books includes bringing together the different arguments that detract the *Potter* series, offering

⁵ Bristow, Jennie. "Harry Potter and the Meaning of Life" *Spiked*, 19 June, 2003.
<<http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000006DE0C.htm>> Last accessed 20.1.2006

⁶ Ibid.

reasons (suggested by other scholars and myself) for these arguments, adding to this the defending voices which in my opinion are far-fetched and in some ways as one-sided as most of the detracting arguments and thus, giving as diverse a look as possible (in the scope of this thesis) into the significance of the *Potter* books.

In the text, I refer to Rowling's *Harry Potter* books as indicated in the parentheses: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (*Stone*), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (*Chamber*), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (*Azkaban*), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (*Goblet*), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (*Phoenix*) and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (*Half-Blood*).

2. The Detractors

2.1 Suitability for Children

2.1.1 Death and Violence

I, along with Harry, closed my eyes to avoid a horrifying mutilation, combined with gratuitous violence and murder, at the end of the fourth book. How could a children's book end like this?⁷

The issues of death and violence raise questions among concerned parents, teachers and scholars when discussing children's entertainment; the *Harry Potter* series is no exception. Many believe that exposure to violence through, for example, television or video games increases violent behavior and that violence can be seen as a problem-solving device. To answer the question whether television/video game violence increases violence in the everyday lives of children, several studies have been made and the results vary from one end to the other.⁸ Whatever the case may be, the truth is that violence and death are realities which cannot be overlooked; the problem here is how (not whether) they should be discussed in children's literature.

Many adults are not aware of the factors affecting children's literature in general; the changes in attitudes, other literature and in the world altogether. Margaret P. Esmonde demonstrates this when she says that "death, which had been a staple of children's literature in earlier centuries became a taboo in the children's fiction by mid-twentieth century."⁹ This is surely one of the reasons why some parents feel the need to

⁷ Oliver, Anita. "What do we do with Harry Potter?" *South Pacific Division's Record*, December 1, 2001. <<http://www.adventistreview.org/2002-1547/story1.html>> Last accessed 24.1.2006

⁸ Media Awareness Network: "Research on the Effects of Media Violence" <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/violence/effects_media_violence.cfm> Last accessed 10.1.2006

⁹ Esmonde, Margaret P. "Beyond the Circles of the World: Death and the Hereafter in Children's Literature" *Webs and Wardrobes: Humanist and Religious World Views in Children's Literature*. Eds. Milner, Joseph O'Beirne, Milner, Lucy Floyd. Lanham: University Press of America, 1987. p. 35.

protect their children from the depiction of death; it was not present in the books of their childhood, why should it be discussed now. After this general ‘trend’ of not writing about death in children’s books around the mid-twentieth century, a “death renaissance”¹⁰ has taken place according to Jane Abramson, among others. However, Abramson

concluded that a large number of the “death” books recently published for children of various ages...are unsatisfactory because they are either “problem-solving” books...or “mediocre, soap operatic” sermons. With few exceptions these books avoid mention of an afterlife, preferring to depict death as “the great fertilizer.” Dead pets (and dead relatives?) “help flowers grow.”¹¹

In light of this quote, the criticism directed at the *Potter* books seems hypocritical at best; what is the excuse for using “the great fertilizer” story to explain death and a possible afterlife to children? If anything, it could be seen as more harmful than the depiction of death (even death caused by magical causes, which can, and should be explained to children who are old enough to read for themselves) in children’s books. Perhaps the “fertilizer” explanation is easier because there is no need to inconvenience oneself with deliberation over death and questions of afterlife. This brings me to another problem concerning the death discussion; many complaints concerning the presence of death in the *Potter* books are based on the fact that no afterlife is implied. Not only is this false (which I will discuss later in this chapter) but also a feeble attempt to protect children from adulthood and its ‘horrors’; children must be convinced of the fact that there is life after death so as not to scare them. Many parents use religion to fall back on, regardless of the depth of their own religious conviction. This leads to one of the main problems of the death

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Esmonde, p 35, citing Abramson, Jane. “Facing the Other Fact of Life: Death in Recent Children’s Fiction” *School Library Journal*, 21:4, December 1974. pp. 31-33.

discussion: parents who have no clear opinion on death themselves are trying to teach their children how to cope with it.

A rather ironic example of dealing with death is the cover-up attempt of the circumstances surrounding the death of Harry's parents. The fact that Harry's mother died defending her son was not revealed to Harry for a long period of time but as the readers sympathize with Harry and his anger and confusion when the truth comes out, it clearly reflects the feelings of children who have been shielded from the world's realities by protecting parents who shy away from discussing difficult topics with their children by telling the "the great fertilizer" story and by forbidding non-conventional reading. What is often used as an excuse not to talk about death and such matters with children is protecting children from adulthood. This presumably means that adulthood is something to be afraid of and that children should enjoy themselves while they can and deal with troublesome issues later in life. This is probably the most naïve viewpoint possible and it can be argued that this method does more harm than good. According to Taub and Servaty, the lack of discussion about death between children and their parents leaves children to make sense of death on their own with the help of television, video games and other media. Since many parents do not have a clear view on death themselves, they are afraid to go into discussion about it with their children.¹²

The growing body of literature focused on the childhood experience of death is virtually unanimous in its recommendation for straightforward discussions about death at an early age, prior to the occurrence of a death-loss crisis.¹³

¹² Taub, Deborah J., Servaty, Heather L. "Controversial Content in Children's Literature: Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children?" *Harry Potter's World. Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Heilman, Elizabeth. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003. p. 64.

¹³ Ibid.

The question then is not, whether death should be discussed in children's literature but how.

Taub and Servaty state that death should not be equated with violence. "Death is not 'dark' in and of itself."¹⁴ The reality is that it is becoming more and more difficult not to equate death with violence nowadays as this can be seen on television every day. Thus it is highly unlikely that a *Harry Potter* book, or any other children's book for that matter, is a child's first exposure to death and violence as "most children have a mature understanding of death by the age of seven years."¹⁵ The fact that according to U.S.¹⁶ statistics up to 87% of adolescent experience a death of a peer¹⁷ also demonstrates a certain realism in the *Potter* books as, for example, Cedric Diggory, a young boy is killed in *Goblet*. Also, the death of Dumbledore in *Half-Blood* could reflect the loss of a grandparent, another quite common experience in a child's life. What Taub and Servaty do criticize about the handling of death in the *Potter* books is the fact that most deaths in the books are caused by dark, evil forces and this according to them mystifies death.¹⁸ But it can be said that death has been mystified by different religions for centuries, and would you not say the same about the "fertilizer" story as well?

The possible existence of an afterlife plays a considerable part in this mystification of death. In connection with the death of Sirius Black, an afterlife is implied: "he [Sirius] fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as though in high wind...people hid behind that curtain; Harry had

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 63.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 64-65.

¹⁶ Of course, the U.S. statistics cannot be applied universally because of the high number of adolescent deaths in America but I think it is fair to mention this percentage here, as most of the criticism towards the *Potter* series originates from the U.S.A.

¹⁷ Taub&Servaty citing Schacter, S. "Adolescent Experiences with the Death of a Peer" *Omega* 24 (1991): 1-11.

¹⁸ Taub&Servaty. pp. 63-64.

heard them whispering the first time he had entered the room.”¹⁹ In *Stone*, Nicholas Flamel and his wife die because the Philosopher’s stone is destroyed. Dumbledore says: “After all, to the well-organised mind, death is but the next great adventure”.²⁰ Death is seen as a natural part of life and not something to be afraid of. But because this afterlife is not named as a Christian one, complaints are to be expected. Nevertheless, when writing about death, J.K. Rowling is continuing a tradition that is according to Esmonde has always been that of the fantasists: “No realistic novelist has attempted to describe ‘what happens next’...the mysterious land of death has been left to those writers whose stock-in-trade is unknown lands and metaphysical realities – the fantasists.”²¹

Richard Lettis says that if we prevent children from reading ‘controversial’, troublesome books, we are preventing them from living: “if the convictions youngsters have been given are to become truly theirs, they must make them so by refining, modifying, developing and testing them. To do this, they must read books which are sometimes troublesome, challenging, controversial, argumentative.”²² Maybe this is the main reason for the objections to books discussing difficult subjects: as Lettis points out, children are “given” convictions, beliefs and viewpoints, mainly by their parents. Most parents must feel threatened and insecure when these values are challenged and thus the parents are more eager to criticize books that do so. In fact, Rowling’s discussion on death presents quite a progressive view whose rise can also be seen in the field of the literature on grief and bereavement. Rowling’s progressiveness can be seen in that she depicts a bond between Harry and his deceased parents through, for example, the mirror of Erised and his wand,

¹⁹ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003. pp. 711-712.

²⁰ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 215.

²¹ Esmonde. p. 35.

²² Lettis, Richard. “The Book Is Not for Burning” *Young Adult Literature. Background and Criticism*. Eds. Lenz, Millicent, Mahood, Ramona M. Chicago: American Library Association, 1980. p. 454.

both of which remind Harry of his ancestry but neither promises to bring the dead back to life. “The continuing bonds movement within the field acknowledges the human need to maintain, albeit in an altered state, a connection with deceased loved ones”²³ and it has been proven that in real life situations children who maintain these bonds are more likely to cope better with loss than those who stick to the “Freudian notion” of severing the ties to the dead in order to start the healing process.²⁴

²³ Taub&Servaty. p. 66.

²⁴ Ibid.

2.1.2 Fantasy and Reality

These characters live in our world and in our time period. They play with the same video games, use the same computers, and drive the same cars. They have a Quidditch “World Cup,” just like our soccer World Cup. The teams competing in the “World Cup” are Bulgaria and Ireland, real countries...the problem here is that by weaving reality through a “fictional” work, confusion inevitably ensues.²⁵

There seems to be a number of theories concerning the development of children’s perception of fantasy and reality, some of them quite contradictory to each other. According to Woolley, by the time children reach the age of three, they have a basic ability to tell the difference between fantasy and reality²⁶ whereas Rosengren and Hickling argue that “magical reasoning emerges during the preschool years rather than existing as a cognitive operation present from birth.”²⁷ Even without in-depth knowledge about child development, the latter seems more plausible; a child old enough to understand what is being read to him/her, who watches television and interacts with other children does seem more likely to possess fantastical thinking patterns than an infant. Piaget has put forward a notion that “children experience a time in development when they believe that they can modify reality through their thoughts, actions, or desires...children struggle with this confusion up until the age of eleven or twelve.”²⁸ In light of this, it seems reasonable to

²⁵ Stoltz, Andrea M. “Harry Potter” *The Angelus* (A Journal of Roman Catholic Tradition), September 2001. <http://www.sspcx.ca/Angelus/2001_September/Harry_Potter.htm> Last accessed 24.1.2006

²⁶ Woolley, J.D. “Thinking About Fantasy: Are Children Fundamentally Different Thinkers and Believers from Adults?” *Child Development* 68 (1997), pp. 991-1011.

²⁷ Rosengren, K.S., Hickling, A.K. “Metamorphosis and Magic: The Development of Children’s Thinking about Possible Events and Plausible Mechanisms” *Imagining the Impossible: Magical, Scientific and Religious Thinking in Children*. Eds. Rosengren, K.S., Johnson, C.N., Harris, P.L. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. pp. 75-98, cited by Taub, Deborah J., Servaty, Heather L. “Controversial Content in Children’s Literature: Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children?” *Harry Potter’s World. Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Heilman, Elizabeth. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003. p. 58.

²⁸ Piaget, J. *The Child’s Conception of the World*. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1929, cited by Taub&Servaty, p. 58.

suggest that it is the parent's responsibility to discuss topics that possibly cause confusion with their children.

What is it about the *Potter* books that could blur the border between fantasy and reality and would require such discussion between children and their parents? According to Rebecca Stephens, the criticism the *Potter* series has received on confusing children about what is real and what is not is largely due to the fact that in the books the two worlds, the magical one and the real one co-exist, not even side-by-side but intertwined whereas in the *Narnia* series, with which Stephens compares the *Potter* books, a clear distinction is made between the two: "*Narnia*, in Lewis's stories serves a variety of functions that do not cross over into this 'real' world, and parts of Narnia can never be brought back into our nonmagical reality."²⁹ Nevertheless, it must be admitted that it is equally easy for children to try to make broomsticks fly and try to find a way to Narnia in the back of their closet. Thus, I fail to see the problem in *Potter* as both of these series, *Narnia* and *Harry Potter*, and many other children's books for that matter suggest the existence of a fantasy world alongside the 'real' one.³⁰ Some fantastical stories, such as traditional fairy tales which include magical and fantastical elements seem safe because it is easy to establish them as fantasy, often because of the distance in space and/or time.³¹ In the *Potter* books, however, the two worlds are intertwined: Hogwarts, although hidden by spells, is located in Great Britain and the events take place now, in this time. *The Lord of the Rings*, which is considered to be more serious and thus better literature than, for

²⁹ Stephens, Rebecca. "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority" *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p. 54.

³⁰ E.g. *Charlotte's Web, Five Children and It*

³¹ Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

example *Harry Potter*, is recognizable³² to us but not in any connection with the real world we live in³³, like the *Potter* series is and Middle Earth and its events also seem distant in time. In addition to this distance, there is a reference to an afterlife in *The Lord of the Rings*³⁴ and it is one of the reasons why there no major controversy about it, despite it being also filled with violence and wizardry.

However, a completely opposite point of view is presented by Suman Gupta about the distinction of the magical and the real world in the *Potter* books: “What is interesting about the *Potter* books is that the magic world is so carefully distinguished from the Muggle world that any question of hesitating between a natural and a supernatural explanation is pretty much out of the question.”³⁵ He bases this argument on the behaviour of the characters who are not part of the magical world; they try to explain mysterious events by logical means which is quite natural for human beings. I disagree with Gupta; these magical, mysterious events, people and places *are* part of the Muggle world, just as the Muggle world is a part of the magical world as well. They remain separate only for Muggles who keep them apart by denying the existence of anything supernatural.³⁶ Ideally, this would encourage children who are reading the books to apply the idea of “seeing past the mundane”³⁷ to real life, real situations and thus, to create new ways of thinking and living but often the very fear of deviance (e.g. a child who actually does not distinguish

³² in that its world consists of trees, mountains, lakes, etc; in fact, the story of *The Lord of the Rings* could take place, for example, in Great Britain

³³ the Middle Earth is not a place that we can see at a real map where Great Britain can also be found

³⁴ “And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water...he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.” Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. London: Allen&Unwin, 1966. p. 310.

³⁵ Gupta, Suman. *Re-reading Harry Potter*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 56.

³⁶ One of the tasks of the Ministry of Magic is to hide the magical world from Muggles but the Ministry is certainly not infallible, just as real ministries and governments are not.

³⁷ “Broaden your minds, dears, and allow your eyes to see past the mundane!” Rowling, J.K. *The Prisoner of Azkaban*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999. p. 81.

fantasy from reality/a ‘deviant’) is what blocks the possible mind-broadening aspects from view.

Apart from conveying some idealistic views on life, Rowling makes several comments on the real world by using fantasy as her tool. The fantasy versus reality positioning can be used to illustrate numerous points about life and how things are and how they should be. The portrayal of families in the *Potter* books provides a fine example. The only ‘real-life family’ that we see are the Dursleys, whose ‘keeping-up-appearances’ mentality is true of most real families as well. In contrast, the Weasleys, a ‘magical’ family is the one Harry and the readers prefer, certainly to the Dursleys. The fact that the desired family, the Weasleys are fictional/fantastical and the Dursleys are ‘real’, can be taken as a jab at the reality of today’s family life. Also reflected in the books are dark, scary feelings that children have when growing up; children’s relationship with their parents and the duality of that is described by the Dursleys and Harry’s real parents. Harry’s real parents are dead and thus glorified; they can never discipline Harry, thus they are free of the ‘hating the parents’ aspect of childhood whereas the Dursleys who represent the opposite image of Lily and James Potter, are in fact, more realistic than we care to admit. (E.g. child abuse.³⁸) “The despised parents who discipline or ignore the child must be separated from the idealized parents who love and care for their offspring. That both qualities can exist in the same parents is too complex for a child’s understanding.”³⁹ Complex as it may be, it is also a part of reality and Grimes explains that stories that allow children to detest one set of

³⁸ “Harry paid dearly for his moment of fun... Aunt Petunia knew he hadn’t really done magic, but still he had to duck as she aimed a heavy blow at his head with the soapy frying pan.” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998. p. 13.

³⁹ Grimes, Katherine M. “Harry Potter: Fairy Tale Prince, Real Boy, and Archetypal Hero” *Harry Potter’s World. Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Heilman, Elizabeth. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003. p. 91.

parents and love another comforts them.⁴⁰ The reality of parenting is reflected in the Weasleys as they both love and discipline⁴¹ their children. Ron is also often embarrassed because he has to wear his brothers' old clothes and because others know that his family is not wealthy.⁴² In reality too, every child is embarrassed by his/her parents at some time. Rowling's depiction of Muggles' behaviour towards supernatural things is also reflective of reality. When Harry escapes death in connection with the murder of his parents, witches and wizards start flocking in the streets and everywhere for Muggles to see, owls are spotted in great numbers in the day time and other strange things occur. These events are explained by logical means or dismissed completely by Muggles, who exclude the possibility of anything supernatural. This could be compared to people criticizing the *Potter* books for blurring the line between fantasy and reality; they object to using one's imagination, which is one of the saddest features of adulthood: "imagination, which, though it receives prominence in childhood, often gets lost along the way to adulthood."⁴³ Perhaps this is why today's culture is largely one of repetition and re-inventing the old; if an imagination too vivid is frowned upon, how is anything new ever created?

While the world of imagination is largely reserved for children, control and authority remain with adults. That is, in the real world. The fact that often in fantastical children's literature this authority is trampled on or even reversed must have an effect on parents' perception of 'suitable' literature for their children. In the *Potter* books Harry is, in a way, even superior to Dumbledore, if not the magical world entirely. Stephens also

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ E.g. Ron's Howler in *Chamber*.

⁴² "No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles and more children than they can afford." (Draco Malfoy meeting Ron for the first time.) Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 81.

⁴³ Natov, Roni. "Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 130.

discusses this issue at length and concludes that “in Rowling’s books, traditional power structures are actively subverted, as are paradigms of hierarchy and rule-centered behaviour.”⁴⁴ This does create an interesting dilemma; while parents are assuring their children of magic’s unreality, they have at the same time an opportunity to deny their children the possible empowerment that the subversion of hierarchy in the books offers.

On the whole, the issue of fantasy versus reality is indispensable in children’s literature. A writer can illustrate the injustices and flaws of reality through fantasy and comment on subjects via imagery and puns, which makes the reading experience more appealing, especially to children. According to Natov, the two worlds in the *Potter* books represent the two planes that we all actually live on: imagination and everyday life; “the realm of fantastic, based on the unconscious, is firmly and inevitably a reconfiguration of everyday reality. Transformed and disguised though it may be.”⁴⁵ This duality is also represented in Grimes’ interpretation of the *Potter* books: “Rowling’s books allow for a combination of the fantasy world of childhood with a more realistic world that children in early adolescence are beginning to manage with fewer layers of distance than younger children need.”⁴⁶ Rowling combines fantasy and reality in a bold manner which is bound to raise objections just as easily as it does fascinate readers.

⁴⁴ Stephens, p. 58.

⁴⁵ Natov, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Grimes, p. 99.

2.1.3 Witchcraft and Magic

I'm not suggesting that Harry Potter is recruiting children for paganism, but I do think that children might be interested in the fact that there are people who call themselves witches in the real world.⁴⁷

Most of the criticism directed at the *Potter* books stems from a religious point of view, especially the critique concerning the presentation of witchcraft and magic in the books. Because I discuss the religious aspect later in this thesis, in this chapter I shall consider the functions and purpose of witchcraft and magic in the *Potter* books, and in children's books in general, and in this light, the importance of 'magical' subjects in children's literature generally.

Magic plays an important part in many, if not most stories written for children. What seems to disturb adults most about the use of magic in the *Potter* books is that "Rowling suggests the existence of witches and wizards in the world we inhabit here and now."⁴⁸ This, however, is not as grave a problem as some concerned adults make it seem because children's comprehension of reality develops more rapidly than the general conception seems to be. Rosengren and Hickling's research on children's perception of magic shows that children's understanding of what magic is seems to change as they grow older; children were presented with impossible events and many four year olds described the events as 'magic', whereas five year olds said these events to be 'tricks.'⁴⁹ Since most five year olds are able to understand magic as something fictional on their own, the alleged

⁴⁷ Richert, Rebekah quoted in "Lots of Magic in the Movies. UC Riverside Psychology Professor Says Fantastic Worlds Can Be Life Lessons for Children" University of California, *Newsroom*. December 9, 2005. <<http://www.newsroom.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/display.cgi?id=1206&type=email>> Last accessed 25.1.2006

⁴⁸ Cockrell, Amanda. "Harry Potter and the Secret Password: Finding Our Way in the Magical Genre" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 15.

⁴⁹ Rosengren, K.S. Hickling, A.K. "Seeing is Believing. Children's Explanations of Commonplace, Magical, and Extraordinary Transformations" *Child Development* 65 (1994), pp. 1605-26.

danger of children being lured into the world of witchcraft can be seen as rather minimal. Furthermore, as most five year olds are *read to*, it is fair to assume that they are not left alone to make sense of magical events in literature; again, it seems to be parental responsibility that the discussion around alleged ‘harmful’ issues in children’s literature lingers.

In addition to Rosengren and Hickling’s research on children’s perception of magic, one of the few scholars whose views can be used as explicit counter arguments in objection to the witchcraft propagation claims that are made against the *Potter* series is Maria Nikolajeva. She explains the appeal of the *Potter* series by showing how Harry fits the description of a hero in the books. However, her argument remains vague, on account of her unclear explanation. She argues that because Harry is not “a mythic hero in the conventional sense of the word since the stories are not based on belief” the books cannot be said to be “propagating witchcraft” because “the most important mythic figure is the cultural hero, who teaches his people to use fire, to hunt, and to cultivate land.”⁵⁰ What is Nikolajeva saying then, in reference to *Potter*? Which “belief” is Nikolajeva referring to? Is she saying that because magic is not seen as a religion in the books and thus Harry is not a ‘preacher’, a spreader of ‘the good word’, children will not have the urge to follow his example? Or that because Harry does not present his classmates with anything profoundly new like these once seemingly magical things such as fire and hunting, he is not a hero that children look up to? It is unfortunate that Nikolajeva does not discuss this further because her argumentation on the subject, based on the history of children’s literature, is interesting.

⁵⁰ Nikolajeva, Maria. “Harry Potter – a Return to the Romantic Hero” *Harry Potter’s World. Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Heilman, Elizabeth. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003. p. 126.

In spite of this shortage of scholarly support, I shall attempt an explanation of the importance of witchcraft and magic in the *Potter* books.

When discussing witchcraft and magic in the *Potter* books, one of the main issues (if not *the* main issue) is the struggle between good and bad. On the surface, the distinction between good and bad wizards/witches can be made; for example, Dumbledore versus Voldemort and the Aurors versus the Death Eaters, the core difference being the purpose of magic, to which I shall return in the next paragraph. However, this difference and a number of characters in the *Potter* books are not easily defined as either good or bad. Harry himself is on the side of the good and mostly uses what is considered good magic but his potential for ‘the Dark Arts’ is suggested on many occasions: Harry is able to talk to snakes, a quality that is equated with dark magic and he shares a part of his wand and also his mind with Voldemort. Also, the Sorting Hat is unsure whether to place Harry in Slytherin, or Gryffindor. Harry has learned that most of the ‘bad’ witches and wizards have been in Slytherin⁵¹ and by whispering “not Slytherin”⁵² to the Sorting Hat, Harry is choosing the ‘good side’ and as Dumbledore also points out, that is what matters: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”⁵³ Professor Snape is another problematic character, who Dumbledore insists on trusting throughout the series despite Snape’s unfair treatment of pupils and his past as a Death Eater. The fact that at the end of *Half Blood* it seems that Snape is in fact on Voldemort’s side, calls into question Dumbledore’s judgment (in the most extreme way of course, because Snape murders Dumbledore) and thus, also the perception of ‘good’ and ‘bad’. A child might think: if

⁵¹ “There’s not a single witch or a wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin.” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 61-62.

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 90-91.

⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 245.

Dumbledore (i.e. someone people admire and look up to) cannot distinguish one from the other, who can? This is quite reflective of reality where the definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are seldom unambiguous terms. Witchcraft and magic in the *Potter* books function as vehicles for understanding the relationship between good and bad, which is hardly as ‘black and white’ a subject as the phrase ‘good and bad’, and in fact, the whole discussion in this chapter, suggests.

The purpose of witchcraft and magic in the *Potter* books is a central issue in defending the series; on one hand, the purpose it serves in the books for different characters and on the other hand, its purpose for children’s literature altogether, both of which function as devices for reflecting reality. For characters on Voldemort’s side, the purpose of magic is the pursuit of power⁵⁴ and for Voldemort himself, the ultimate power is “to conquer death.”⁵⁵ The purpose of magic for the characters who are ‘good’ is more problematic; magic is used as a defense against evil forces but also in everyday chores to make life easier. There is no explicit mention by any (authority) character in the books of the core purpose of magic. In reference to children’s literature altogether, in addition to being a mirror for the relationship between good and bad, magic in the *Potter* books reflects reality in its insistence on obeying rules; at the beginning of each school year, Dumbledore lays down rules for the pupils on how to conduct themselves while at Hogwarts, the Ministry of Magic functions as an authority on the use of magic and the Aurors are ‘the police.’ Everything has rules, official or informal, like in reality: school, work, games, traffic, relationships etc. Harry himself is a good example of this: “Harry learns enough magic to wreak havoc on the family were he so inclined but his Potter heritage calls him

⁵⁴ “There is no good and evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it.” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 211.

⁵⁵ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. p. 566.

instead to go beyond the obtuse and angry Dursleys to seek a more important fate.”⁵⁶ Exceptions are to be expected, of course, as they are in real life. There are situations in the books where magic is used against the rules and although it seems justifiable, for example, in *Azkaban*, in the case of Aunt Marge who after insulting Harry’s parents and is turned into a balloon by Harry, there is still the threat of punishment, which Harry is also very aware of: “What was going to happen to him? Would he be arrested, or would he simply be outlawed from the wizarding world?”⁵⁷ As Harry is scared of being sent to Azkaban for his ‘crime’, children reading the book sympathize with him and are relieved when Harry avoids punishment. Explaining that some illegal things should go unpunished must be difficult for some parents. These questions of morality will be further discussed in chapter 2.3.4.

Where the scholars mentioned earlier in this chapter failed to provide solid arguments for defending the *Potter* series, writers quite unrelated to *Potter* have proven to be useful in the attempt to defend the use of magic in the books. One of them is Nachman Ben-Yehuda who has researched deviance, including witchcraft, in the field of sociology. According to Ben-Yehuda “magic has been compared with science through history...it has been pointed out that science resembles magic in that for both nature provides the background for experimentation and manipulation of environmental elements.”⁵⁸ Like the relationships between ‘real’ (Muggle world, where magic allegedly does not exist) and ‘magical’ life in the *Potter* books, the relationship between ‘science’ and ‘magic’ is rather

⁵⁶ Pharr, Mary. “In Medias Res: Harry Potter as Hero-in-Progress” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 57.

⁵⁷ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999. p. 29.

⁵⁸ Ben-Yehuda, Nachman. *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences and Scientists*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987. p. 43.

complicated.⁵⁹ In a way, magic can be seen merely as a science among others such as alchemy which also in reality was considered at one time a legitimate form of science and which in the *Potter* books is an acknowledged discipline. ‘Science’ is “the study of the nature and behaviour of natural things and the knowledge that we obtain about them”⁶⁰, and ‘nature’ is “all the animals, plants, and other things in the world that are not made by people, and all the events and processes that are not caused by people.”⁶¹ Magic in the books is something that exists despite wizards and witches and their spells; in other words, it is ‘natural’. Thus, because magic itself is not “caused by people” (although spells, the ‘acts’ of magic, are), it could be argued that children’s active interest, i.e. their attempts to practice magic after their alleged ‘desensitization’ to supernatural things by the *Potter* books does not concur with the view of magic in the books; magic itself, as a ‘discipline’ or as a ‘force of nature’ cannot be created, it has to exist despite human beings. For those of us who do not believe in the existence of magic in our world, this argument should be taken into account when criticizing children’s books about the use of magic. For those who are convinced that magic exists and witchcraft can be practiced, the argument that the spells, flying broomsticks and dragons in the *Potter* books are rather easily proved imaginary in our world can be offered as a defense of the *Potter* series. Because most people who believe in the existence of magic in our world base this belief on religion, I shall continue discussing this issue in section 2.2.

⁵⁹ This is seen from early on, as Snape teaches the children “the subtle science and exact art of potion-making.” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 102. In reality, people talk of ‘exact science.’

⁶⁰ *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Another theory that complicates the nature of magic in the *Potter* books, is that of Bruce Vogel whose view on the supernatural ties this chapter to the following section of this thesis, the Christianity aspect:

The author who introduces magic into a tale does not do so merely to evoke gasps of surprise from the reader. She does so in order to posit a world in which there are more powerful forces than humanity, a world in which events are controlled by providence, destiny or fate, or by forces of good and evil.⁶²

Vogel equates the use of magic and supernatural elements as signs of God's presence in a story. Although he states that all uses of magic do not have to have a greater significance in children's literature, he still mentions God when arguing that "Mary Poppins, for instance, employ[s] quite astonishing magic just to teach children small lessons in manners and morality"⁶³ when he goes on to say that

one of the facts about the supernatural which is repeated over and over again in folklore is that children are more entitled to a helping hand from the world of magic than are adults. God does not show his power to adults lest they abandon their own efforts, but...will from time to time pull off a small miracle for a child when no one else is watching.⁶⁴

In the *Potter* books, magic is used on a much larger scale than merely "to teach children small lessons in manners and morality", which is why Vogel's theory would categorize *Potter* as mythic/religious literature. However, Vogel is adamant in his view that a truly good writer never mixes science and magic; in other words, a story must reside in either the world of logic, or in the world of the supernatural. The *Potter* books, however, include both. In case Vogel would not dismiss Rowling as a poor writer, it would be highly

⁶² Vogel, Bruce. "Science, Magic and the Test of Luck" *Webs and Wardrobes. Humanist and Religious World Views in Children's Literature*. Eds. Milner, Joseph O'Beirne, Milner, Lucy Floyd. Lanham: University Press of America, 1987. p. 113.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

interesting to see how he would categorize the *Potter* books which include the allegedly contradictory aspects of the supernatural and science.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The *Potter* series is hardly the only one that does this; e.g. in *Charlotte's Web*, Charlotte, the spider, lists the sections of her legs in Latin and also spins webs with English words on them.

2.2 Christianity

2.2.1 The Absence of Religion

“It bothers me that so much emphasis is on Harry’s inner strength, his own abilities”, says Sue Kramer, mother of three. “I want my kids to realize that our power comes from God, not ourselves...Harry might have behaved differently if he was a Christian.”⁶⁶

Milner and Milner cite Edmond Fuller, who “in *Modern Man in Fiction* argues for the importance of recognizing the departure of much late nineteenth and 20th century literature from the ‘vast, centuries-old accretion of our literature heritage...based on the premise that there is a God.’”⁶⁷ Harry Potter does not go to church, he does not pray and religion is not a subject taught at Hogwarts. Although this is the case for numerous children’s stories, the *Potter* series poses a problem for many parents and teachers, probably because of its popularity. Unless this parent or teacher him/herself truly believes in God, the hypocrisy itself is the problem. Andrew Blake illustrates this point when he says that “the sign above Ollivander’s shop in Diagon Alley says ‘Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC.’ But there is no hint, there or anywhere else, of the significance of that ‘C’; it is there for our amusement, not our belief.”⁶⁸ The same can be said of Christmas and Easter, holidays that are fundamentally Christian. In the *Potter* books they are celebrated in a secular manner, Christmas is for gift-giving and Easter merely means a rest from school work. Is this not true of real life today? Christ in ‘BC’ is a historical character rather than ‘the Messiah’. The commercialism of Christmas and other holidays continues to grow

⁶⁶ Lehmann Sorenson, Anita. “The Return of Harry Potter” *Christian Parenting Today*. September/October 2000, Vol.13, No.1, p. 44. <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/cpt/2000/005/4.44.html>> Last accessed 10.1.2006

⁶⁷ Milner, Joseph O’Beirne, Milner, Lucy Floyd. Preface. *Webs and Wardrobes. Humanist and Religious World Views in Children’s Literature*. Eds. Milner, Joseph O’Beirne, Milner, Lucy Floyd. Lanham: University Press of America, 1987.

⁶⁸ Blake, Andrew. *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter*. London: Verso, 2002. p. 95.

every year. In relation to the *Potter* books, it seems then, that describing the world in its imperfection is the problem for some. Then again, a parent who is a true believer and who criticizes the *Potter* books for lack of religion has, of course, that prerogative but not the right to ask for the removal of the books from library shelves just because they do not want their own children to read the books.

Gupta makes a point that should be considered before addressing the religion issue in the first place. Gupta has trouble approaching the *Potter* series from a religious perspective because in that case, the world of *Harry Potter* would have to be taken as seriously as a religion is meant to be taken.⁶⁹ Gupta himself does not believe in God: “I do not need to justify why I am unreligious any more than I ask or expect anyone who is religious to justify why they are so.”⁷⁰ Kimbra Wilder Gish, who according to many *Potter* detractors and defenders as well, articulates the concerns of Christians the best, agrees with Gupta when she says that “to one of my faith, the magic of the *Potter* books cannot compare to the supernatural power in a true Christian life”⁷¹ (in the same context Gish also says that “witchcraft is as real to us as any other religion” but I shall return to this in the next chapter.) Here an atheist opinion and a Christian viewpoint join together to ask what I think are two crucial questions on the religious aspect of the *Potter* books; first, how can the *Potter* series (allegedly meant for children, residing in a fantasy world) challenge the almighty God and his teachings? Second, since when has it been Christian policy to disregard opinions that differ from those of Christian believers? A personal belief in the

⁶⁹ Gupta, Suman. *Re-reading Harry Potter*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 73.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* p. 70.

⁷¹ Gish, Kimbra Wilder. “Hunting Down Harry Potter: An Exploration of Religious Concerns about Children’s Literature” *Horn Book Magazine*, May/June 2000. pp. 262-71.

harmfulness of a book does not justify the demand to deny access to this text from everyone else as well.

Humanism is a major threat to children according to many Christians. Their slogans like: “Is humanism molesting your child?”⁷² and claims such as: “devils, demons, and witches are real and pose the same threat as, say, a child molester”⁷³ should be addressed. Placing a physical threat on the same line as an ideology that is supposedly dangerous to a child shows lack of thought on the part of a Christian criticizing the books; a child does not choose to be molested but a child can choose what s/he believes in. Supposedly, the critics start off from the assumption that children are not developed enough to make judgments about beliefs that are ‘fed’ to them. However, the act of child molestation is wrong from both viewpoints, humanist and religious, whereas ‘choosing’ between an ideology is a matter of opinion. The fact that one’s child might grow up to embrace a different viewpoint than his/her parent, is admittedly a difficult concept for parents but that possibility should, in theory, be available. If it is this freedom of choice that worries parents who want to prevent children from reading *Harry Potter*, the problem hardly is in the books but in these people themselves and their understanding of God.

Can the *Potter* series be said to be humanist? “Humanism’s function has been to provide concerned human beings with an acceptable alternative to the traditional religious imperatives. Humanism offers the reasoned view that human beings alone shape their own destinies.”⁷⁴ I think we can say that Harry is shaping his own destiny by doing

⁷² Milner&Milner.

⁷³ Whited, Lana. “Harry Potter. From Craze to Classic?” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 3. Whited citing *Potter’s* detractors.

⁷⁴ Milner&Milner.

heroic things as well as making mistakes. It is true that great things are expected of him but this greatness is not preordained. Harry can be seen as a ‘chosen one’, even Christ-like but I will return to this subject later and thus, at this point I will argue on behalf of Harry’s ‘humanism’ and argue against his religious qualities in chapter 3. “Paradoxically, fantasy, descending from the old form of allegory, myth and religious parable, can actually be the vehicle for a more vigorous affirmation of self – the humanist ideal – than the realistic novel.”⁷⁵ I think that this is true in the case of the *Potter* series; the books are categorized as fantasy and the stories deal mostly with Harry’s growth, his fears and desires and there is no (explicit, anyway) ‘higher power’ guiding Harry or anyone else. Donovan argues that if a children’s book does contain a strong religious perspective, the book “cannot sufficiently arm a reading child to face his greatest doubt: his adequacy.”⁷⁶ Harry certainly has his doubts about his adequacy to fill the big wizard shoes that are laid out for him.

The Christ-like view is fairly common among people who defend the *Potter* books against accusations of the stories lacking religious aspects. They tend to go straight to the other extreme: “Despite the omission of religious ceremonies, Hogwarts and the magical world expect students and adult wizards to accept high standards of moral conduct, of how to live virtuously, dutifully, and purposefully to aid others and rid the world of evil.”⁷⁷ Schafer seems to be saying that moral and good behaviour is automatically derived from religion. Does she mean to say that without a religious authority of some kind, human beings do not know right from wrong? Schafer argues that “Harry and the Hogwarts community reflect numerous archetypal patterns and religious values, although there is no

⁷⁵ Donovan, Ann. “Alice and Dorothy: Reflections from Two Worlds” *Webs and Wardrobes. Humanist and Religious World Views in Children’s Literature*. Eds. Milner, Joseph O’Beirne, Milner, Lucy Floyd. Lanham: University Press of America, 1987. p. 26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Schafer, Elizabeth. *Exploring Harry Potter*. London: Ebury Press, 2000. p. 164.

mention of religion.”⁷⁸ I think we can accept that most stories, children’s or adults’ can be seen as archetypically religious if we look hard enough. We cannot deny religion’s effect on our culture since religion has been the foundation for governments and communities throughout history. But in today’s world, where religion usually functions as a smoke screen for other purposes rather than being an actual guiding force of people’s lives, good and moral behaviour can be and is expected without the influence of religion. Schafer’s view and other similar perspectives will be discussed further in chapter 3. Katherine Grimes seems to offer a refreshing view on the religion issue when she comments on Harry’s relationship to Dumbledore: “Dumbledore is to Harry what God is to Jesus, what Zeus is to Hercules, what Mars is to Remus.”⁷⁹ Regardless of whether we agree with her on this juxtaposition or not, what we can see from it is that God, Jesus, Harry, Dumbledore and Mars all fit onto the same list. On one hand, it is a good approach because it shows the interconnectedness of everything; old myths, religions, tales and stories, all of which can be ancient or current. On the other hand, *Harry Potter* is put on the same level as religion, which is exactly what, for example, Gupta warns against. Religion, which is meant to be taken seriously and is meant to guide a person through life, should not be compared to fantasy literature. In the end, Grimes turns out to be a biased party after all; “those same works [the *Potter* books] help us, whether we are aware of it or not, to face our animal nature and still have faith that we are children of God with souls that transcend this world.”⁸⁰ This is quite acceptable; if someone gets reinforcement for their faith from the *Potter* series that is their prerogative. It does not matter whether the writer meant it so. But

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 163.

⁷⁹ Grimes, Katherine M. “Harry Potter: Fairy Tale Prince, Real Boy, and Archetypal Hero” *Harry Potter’s World. Multidisciplinary Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Heilman, Elizabeth. New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003. p. 114.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 122.

creating problems from the fact that the rest of the world does not see it the same way sabotages any attempts of bringing your opinion, Christian or not, out as a valid one. It is quite surprising how a writer can at the same time complicate one issue to an extreme and simplify another by compacting it to one sentence: John Pennington, who discusses Rowling's works as failed fantasy in great detail, concludes where religion is concerned that "they [people at Hogwarts] certainly are in a Christian universe, for they celebrate the Christmas season."⁸¹

There are also critics who think it wise not to have religion present in the *Potter* books:

Rowling appears to reveal something of her own values through this situation: the belief that despair is a part of being human, but also that it can be countered by what might be termed as an act of faith and hope...in religious literature of the nineteenth century the equivalent of this would be an act of faith in God, but this kind of reference to the divine would be out of place here.⁸²

Pinsent does not explain this in any more detail but seems to be saying that the world of *Harry Potter* merely does not need religion. If religion was present in the books, Rowling might have a difficult time explaining why Harry does not use Christian methods to fight evil. Actually, I do not think she would have to answer much criticism at all after writing such a book; it would have not sold millions.

What is the ideology that replaces religion in the *Potter* books then? According to most critics mentioned in this chapter, having no explicit ideology in a story is an ideology in itself.

⁸¹ Pennington, John. "From Elfland to Hogwarts, or the Aesthetic Trouble with Harry Potter" *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Vol. 26, January 2002. pp. 78-97.

⁸² Pinsent, Pat. "The Education of a Wizard: Harry Potter and His Predecessors" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 30.

Most of the major classics...specifically of children's fantasy have been rooted in systems of authority and belief....Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are rooted in a distinctively English liberalism that is marked as much by its inconsistencies and contradictions as by its insistence that it is not ideological but only 'fair'.⁸³

The world of *Harry Potter*, just as the real world, is certainly not fair; Harry never gets to know his parents, Hagrid is falsely accused, the hippogriff is executed due to no fault of its own. Although Hagrid is proven innocent, he is looked down upon by many while the readers know how loyal and good he actually is. And although the hippogriff is saved from execution by Harry, Ron and Hermione, the means (turning back time) can hardly be described as 'fair.' However, for most people, the goal is to be fair, like in the real world. Exceptions, such as cheating in the Triwizard Tournament, can be found in the *Potter* books, to say nothing of real life. It seems quite fair also to discuss Quidditch, *the* sport in the magical world since it is given quite a significant role in Harry's life. "In the latter half of the century [1800] sport became the main nurturing ground for what were regarded as 'typical' British values of never-say-die competition and fair play."⁸⁴ John Beynon's account of British culture thus also corroborates the existence of an ideology based on fairness in the *Potter* books.

⁸³ Mendlesohn, Farah. "Crowning the King: Harry Potter and the Construction of Authority" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 159.

⁸⁴ Beynon, John. *Masculinities and Culture*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002. p. 42.

2.2.2 Deuteronomy

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord, and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God.⁸⁵

Deuteronomy (Hebrew: ‘a copy of this law’, ‘a second statement of the law’) is the fifth book in the Bible and it includes the Ten Commandments and other various laws and injunctions. According to Gabel and Wheeler “Deuteronomy is notable for its style...again and again it hammers home the requirement of total obedience to Yahweh.”⁸⁶ In Deuteronomy, God speaks via Moses, to the people of Israel, who are on their way to the Promised Land. Supposedly, only the Decalogue was heard by all the people directly from God. The abrupt style and the dramatic effects of the book’s discovery in 621 B.C. made sure Deuteronomy “immediately became a religious standard.”⁸⁷

For a Christian fundamentalist the Bible is literally God’s work; the people who wrote down these words were guided by God and thus, there is no question about the authenticity or the authority of the book. These believers I cannot convince of anything else here in my thesis; they will refuse to read *Harry Potter* and deny their children access to it because the Bible forbids witchcraft and sorcery. They do not need any other reason or justification for this prohibition, other than the Bible and their faith. However, I will attempt to find reasons. I am doing this in benefit of those who see the Bible as a useful

⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 18:9-13. *The Holy Bible. New International Version*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980.

⁸⁶ Gabel, John B., Wheeler, Charles B. *The Bible as Literature. An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 94.

⁸⁷ Bade, William. “The Canonization of the Old Testament” *The Biblical World*. March 1911, Vol.37, No.3, p. 154.

guide on how to lead a good life (which it obviously is) but who read it in what I consider to be a sensible way; important issues such as love for fellow human beings should not be equated with questions of acceptable food or proper clothing, questions which are also dealt with in Deuteronomy. Understandably, witchcraft and magic disturb parents more easily than trivial questions on the practicalities of everyday life, but my goal is to shed some light on the history of the Bible, of Deuteronomy, in particular, and thus give alternatives for interpreting this particular part of the Bible.

As mentioned earlier, Kimbra Wilder Gish is praised for her reasonable explanation of the concerns of conservative Christian parents regarding the *Potter* books. I do not find her helpful in this chapter where I am looking at Deuteronomy specifically because although she does explain in detail each verse of the above quoted section of Deuteronomy, her comment on *Harry Potter* is “since...Deuteronomy specifically states that witches and wizards are an abomination unto the Lord that will be driven out, one can see why someone who firmly believes this scripture might not want his or her child reading *Harry Potter*.”⁸⁸ This reaffirms my goal; I need reasons. ‘Because it says so in the Bible’ does not suffice. However, Gish proves to be very useful in the next chapter.

For a book that is called ‘a religious standard’ and which includes the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy is rather peculiar in that “a dialectic of forgetting and remembering, loss and recovery, is so frequently depicted in the text and enacted by the text that it informs each of the ‘scenes of writing’ the Bible offers.”⁸⁹ According to

⁸⁸ Gish, Kimbra Wilder. “Hunting Down Harry Potter: An Exploration of Religious Concerns about Children’s Literature” *Horn Book Magazine*, May/June 2000. pp. 262-71.

⁸⁹ Schwartz, Regina. “Joseph’s Bones and the Resurrection of the Text: Remembering in the Bible” *The Book and the Text. The Bible and Literary Theory*. Ed. Schwartz, Regina. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. p. 46.

Schwartz “the injunctions of Deuteronomy are forgotten, the text is lost.”⁹⁰ When the book is allegedly found again in 621 B.C. during a restoration of the temple in Jerusalem, it immediately made such an impression on king Josiah that a considerable religious reform began. It seems almost too perfect that such a fundamental and life-altering book is found right after a horrible time-period preceding king Josiah; apparently, king Manasseh’s goal was to rid the Jewish state of the worship of Jehovah altogether. Batten (who himself obviously does believe in God’s guidance in the creation of the Bible) asks many important questions which not only challenge the assumption of the divine source of Deuteronomy (if not the whole Bible), but which also suggest a quite common secular phenomenon concerning the origin of Deuteronomy; the pursuit of power. Batten asks

if Hilkiah [the chief priest] actually found it [the book of Deuteronomy], how long had it been lost? Was it an ancient book which had been known before Manasseh’s time...or was this ‘a needful illusion’, the book having been just written to guide Josiah’s reforms?⁹¹

The central idea of Deuteronomy and thus, the idea of the great reform was the ‘centralization of religion.’ All other places of worship were to be destroyed except the temple in Jerusalem (although “the code of the covenant expressly allows a multiplicity of altars”⁹²) in order to purify religion and unify people. It surely is easier to control a society that is unified in its belief, thus a claim that “Josiah’s reform was inspired by the prophetic wing of the Judean religious body, by whom centralization was accepted, possibly not without protest, as offering the best possible means of realizing their high spiritual and

⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 46.

⁹¹ Batten, L.W. “The Origin and Character of Deuteronomy” *The Biblical World*. April 1898, Vol.11, No.4, pp. 247-248.

⁹² Ibid. p. 247.

social ends”⁹³ seems quite believable. Some however, like I, might have doubts about the ‘highness’ of all of these ends.

How does this relate to witchcraft and its condemnation in Deuteronomy? As Josiah’s reforms “were carried out with much severity, cruelty, and bloodshed”⁹⁴ the targets of ‘purification’ were altars and places of worship other than that of Jerusalem’s main temple; “the people, inclined to postulate a different Yahweh at each high-place, were to be taught by the adoption of *one sanctuary* that there was but *one Yahweh*.”⁹⁵ It is quite possible that this potential polytheism in some places was considered as sorcery or witchcraft and that these words appear in Deuteronomy for this reason. Adeney even mentions witchcraft in his “Story of King Josiah and the Lawbook. Told for Children”; “all these things [the laws in Deuteronomy] were so directly contrary to the idol-worship and witchcraft and the other vile practices that used to go on in Jerusalem under the name of religion.”⁹⁶ Thus, I would suggest that the sorcery and witchcraft in the Bible are quite different from what we understand them to be today; a person who did not worship Yahweh, or a ‘different’ Yahweh than the alleged ‘real’ Yahweh in Jerusalem, could be called a sorcerer or a witch; even prophets, who are said to be in direct connection with God as they can tell about future events were mistaken for witches: “a wise woman whom those who believed in her knew for a prophetess, though, no doubt, people of different opinion took her for a witch.”⁹⁷ If you try to apply this view of witchcraft to today’s world, you might call anyone who believes in anything but the same god as you yourself do, a

⁹³ Graham, William. “The Modern Controversy about Deuteronomy” *The Journal of Religion*. July, 1927, Vol.7, No.4, p. 399.

⁹⁴ Batten. p. 249.

⁹⁵ Bade, William. “The Growth of Ethical Ideals in Old Testament Times” *The Biblical World*. September, 1909, Vol.34, No.3, p. 183.

⁹⁶ Adeney, Walter. “The Story of King Josiah and the Lawbook. Told for Children” *The Biblical World*. February, 1899. Vol.12, No.2, pp. 107-108.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 107.

witch. The witchcraft spoken of in the *Potter* series, is fantasy and cannot, in my opinion, in any way be equated with the witchcraft spoken of in the Bible.

I do understand that it “would be a bold Christian (though there are such) who would claim that it does not matter whether Jesus actually existed or not.”⁹⁸ But as Trigg continues “accepting them [the Gospels in this case but I think this can be applied to the whole Bible] at face value, however, involves accepting the Virgin Birth, miracles, the Resurrection and so on as literal events.”⁹⁹ Perhaps it also takes a bold Christian to consider what is behind such words as ‘sorcery’ and ‘witchcraft’ in the Bible rather than taking them at face value.

⁹⁸ Trigg, Roger. “Tales Artfully Spun” *The Bible as Rhetoric. Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility*. Ed. Warner, Martin. London: Routledge, 1990. p. 118.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

2.2.3 Christianity, Witchcraft and Magic

Harry Potter is just one of the many entry points into a world where the fascination with wickedness creates an addiction that perverts the innocent mind and obscures what is good.¹⁰⁰

The reason why I am mostly using author Michael O'Brien's article¹⁰¹ to demonstrate the views of conservative Christians is that he expresses his opinions about the harmfulness of *Harry Potter* in an articulate manner, he states reasons for his arguments and he considers the *Potter* series in relation to the real world as well. My views on what the real world is actually like differ significantly from O'Brien's but there is enough common ground to use his article in this section of the study. Kimbra Wilder Gish's article¹⁰² is commended on its neutral approach on the subject. Gish explains, without pointing fingers, the concerns of some Christian parents regarding the *Potter* series.

Hierarchy and religion go hand in hand. God is the ultimate authority for those who believe in him: "the absolute acceptance of authority is inherent in the doctrines of most of those who publicly protest against *Harry Potter*."¹⁰³ In the *Potter* books, there is no predominant witch or a wizard who is in charge on the side of the good. Dumbledore is in many ways a leading good wizard but he is not omnipotent: "significantly while the forces of good are nonhierarchical, the forces of evil have a central controlling figure in Voldemort"¹⁰⁴ who in the minds of conservative Christians is the equivalent of Satan. What

¹⁰⁰ Wood, Steve. "Harry Potter: An Entry Point into the World of Occult/New Age Movement" *Christian Fatherhood* <<http://www.dads.org/article.asp?artId=150>> Last accessed 11.1.2006

¹⁰¹ O'Brien, Michael. "Harry Potter and the Paganization of Children's Culture" *Catholic World Report*, April 2001. <<http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Igpress/2001-04/essay.html>> Last accessed 12.1.2006

¹⁰² Gish, Kimbra Wilder. "Hunting Down Harry Potter: An Exploration of Religious Concerns about Children's Literature" *Horn Book Magazine*, May/June 2000. pp. 262-71.

¹⁰³ Stephens, Rebecca. "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority" *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003, p. 59.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p.58

is problematic about the conservative view on bad and evil is again, the issue of control. Satan is in control when a person commits immoral acts. Magic and wizardry are depicted in a positive light in the *Potter* books and this according to O'Brien is of Satan because "the evil spirits seek to attract us to evil behaviour by first offering us evil thoughts disguised as good."¹⁰⁵ It is the triangle of 'good', 'bad' and 'free will' that needs to be addressed when discussing religion and literature which does not necessarily stem from faith in God. As was discussed earlier, Harry himself makes choices to be good, while others choose to be Death Eaters and side with Voldemort. Some of them do this out of fear¹⁰⁶; this could be seen as criticism towards a religion that sanctions the concept of 'fear of God' which is directly connected to the idea of free will, especially in Deuteronomy: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him."¹⁰⁷ O'Brien seems to miss one of the core themes in the *Potter* books; witches and wizards are faced with the same temptation of 'evil' (Voldemort) as human beings face in the real world (for O'Brien, Satan) and the leading character, Harry sets an example, just as Jesus.¹⁰⁸ (However, I do not equate Harry with Jesus, which will be further discussed in chapter 3.) O'Brien also has a problem with the mixture of bad and good in the *Potter* series:

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien.

¹⁰⁶ "You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail." Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. p. 563.

¹⁰⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19-20. *The Holy Bible. New International Version*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980.

¹⁰⁸ "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God''.'" Matthew 4:1-4. *The Holy Bible. New International Version*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980.

the archetype of “misuse” is Voldemort, whose savage cruelty and will to power is blatantly evil, yet the reader is lulled into minimizing or forgetting altogether that Harry himself, and many other “good” characters, frequently use the same powers on a lesser scale, supposedly for good ends.¹⁰⁹

I disagree completely. When Harry’s classmates discover that he can speak Parseltongue¹¹⁰, they are frightened (as is Harry himself) and the reader also realizes that Harry has potential for both good and evil (as the sorting ceremony also shows) and Harry chooses to be good. This suggestion that human beings possess both bad and good qualities and it is up to us to choose the right side, is admittedly quite frightening, not only for conservative Christians. “The wizard world is about the pursuit of power and esoteric knowledge” and this implies a rebellion against God.¹¹¹ O’Brien equates the pursuit of power with Gnosticism,

[a] cult that came close to undermining Christianity at its birth...the so-called ‘Christian Gnostics’ of the 2nd century were in no way Christian, for they attempted to neutralize the meaning of the Incarnation and to distort the concept of salvation along traditional Gnostic lines: man saves himself by obtaining secret knowledge and power.¹¹²

Too often it seems that spats between different interpretations of the Bible or principles of a certain religion outweigh the main message of a text or a teaching. It is interesting that O’Brien seems blind to the fact that to numerous people, life is about the pursuit of power and the growing specialization of jobs and studying could easily be called ‘esoteric.’ At the same time, one person’s knowledge in many fields is considered an asset, why can this not be applied to the ways in which we look at other things as well, in this case, children’s literature? An individual reader of a *Harry Potter* book can hardly imagine all of the ways

¹⁰⁹ O’Brien.

¹¹⁰ “All he [Harry] knew...that he had shouted stupidly at the snake, ‘Leave him!’ And miraculously – inexplicably – the snake slumped to the floor.” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998. p. 145.

¹¹¹ O’Brien.

¹¹² Ibid.

in which this particular text could be understood in different parts of the world but this cannot mean that this reader should limit these possibilities to the ones that are obvious only to him/her. O'Brien does recognize some aspects of the *Potter* books as reflecting reality: "Some, like Harry, are likable; others are snobs and bullies. This is our world, but one in which supernatural powers are redefined as human faculties, needing only the proper learning in order to be used rightly."¹¹³ Again, O'Brien's seeming obsession with magic in the books surpasses the possibility to look at other 'human faculties' that are dealt with in the books; friendship, loyalty and others somewhat more difficult to handle, like the border between good and bad, revenge and hatred. O'Brien's views on human nature seems unreal as he says that although Harry "hates' his enemies...the reader soon finds himself forgiving Harry for this because the boy's tormentors are vindictive and mocking."¹¹⁴ These, if any, are basic human faculties. As beautiful as the thought is, how many of us actually 'turn the other cheek'? It is, of course, a respectable goal that is worth aiming for but how believable would Harry Potter be, if he felt no anger or hatred? O'Brien and critics of the same mindset are fighting a losing battle. What seem to bother them is a realistic description of the world we live in. These critics cling to the props such as magic and witchcraft that are used to colour the stories that basically tell our story in the modern world. Why cannot O'Brien use the critical thinking he expects of people on, for example, the magic described in the *Potter* books? "We now imbibe a massive amount of impressions in small bites that demand of us neither sustained attention nor critical thinking, thus rendering us vulnerable to manipulation."¹¹⁵ This comment with his views on

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

sympathizing with Harry when he hates his enemies illustrate perfectly why people have lost interest in religion; according to these Christian views, human beings are weak and they should repress their natural instincts, such as feelings of anger. O'Brien is right about many things; today, many subjects are no longer taboos, they are discussed daily in the media and no one can deny the cruelty of the world. I do think that people like O'Brien are disappointed that it is no longer religion that people look to when they need help or guidance. But the alternatives 'tolerance' and 'self-fulfillment'¹¹⁶ are not the worst replacements, although O'Brien makes them sound like curse words.¹¹⁷

It must be especially difficult for conservative Christian parents to accept that they might lose authority and control over their children and that 'outside' sources influence their children's thinking since "in our faith, the spiritual education of children is considered crucial. This stems largely from attention to Proverbs 22:6: 'Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.'"¹¹⁸ Even if you do not have a problem, like I do, with believing in that a child blindly follows his or her parents' beliefs and ways, you still might question whether giving your children the option of looking at things from a different viewpoint than your own is necessarily harmful to them. Perhaps it is this problem of balancing the ever-changing society and religion that O'Brien, too, is referring to when he says that "we have cooperated with it [the rise of neopaganism] extensively, consuming its products and funding it generously, while authentic Christian culture has been left comparatively undeveloped."¹¹⁹ It is a shame that he does not

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ "...religion's compromise with secular culture has produced not so much an atheistic or agnostic culture as it has an *irreligious* culture, one that pays lip service to religion, but mutates it in the service of what are considered to be higher 'values' such as tolerance or self-fulfillment." O'Brien.

¹¹⁸ Gish, Kimbra Wilder. "Hunting Down Harry Potter: An Exploration of Religious Concerns about Children's Literature" *Horn Book Magazine*, May/June 2000. pp. 262-71.

¹¹⁹ O'Brien.

elaborate because I would be very interested to know how he thinks the Christian culture should have been developed and by who. One, quite central, development in Christianity is seen in the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament; “The New Testament...is focused narrowly on a single historical event: the giving of a ‘new covenant’ to all the people of the world, replacing the ‘old covenant’ between Yahweh and the descendants of Abraham.”¹²⁰ The ‘new covenant’ allegedly shifts the emphasis from reliance on the written word and thus, from a ‘blind’ obedience to rules, to a more internalized (and possibly more ‘free willed’) view on religion: “Paul, writing before any New Testament existed, emphatically asserted that the new covenant exists in men’s hearts, not in written records of any kind.”¹²¹ A possibility that O’Brien here overlooks is that of a more ‘free-willed’ flock (though smaller in numbers than at a time when the ‘fear of God’ gathered more of a crowd to churches) of ‘true’ believers.

Another view on witchcraft and religion that is worth discussing is Kimbra Wilder Gish’s. Like several other critics, O’Brien cites Gish but he distorts her views on the *Potter* series. O’Brien claims that Gish “comes down firmly against J.K. Rowling’s *Potter* series”¹²² when in fact, Gish merely explains why some Christian parents and teachers are so concerned about the portrayal of witchcraft in the books. Gish says

I’m not sure keeping children away from *Harry Potter* is the answer...discuss your family’s beliefs with your child. Rather than simply saying, “You can’t read those things and that’s final,” talk about what you find of concern in these books and why.¹²³

¹²⁰ Gabel, John B., Wheeler, Charles B. *The Bible as Literature. An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. p. 182.

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 183.

¹²² O’Brien.

¹²³ Gish.

Gish provides a detailed explanation of Deuteronomy and the significance of each injunction separately but because I have already made my position clear on Deuteronomy in the previous chapter, I will not go into that portion of Gish's article more deeply. As was said in the case of Deuteronomy, there is no point in trying to convince conservative Christians of anything else than their strong beliefs which is why arguing against statements such as "witchcraft is as real to us as any other religion"¹²⁴ is in my opinion fruitless. But what I do agree upon with Gish is her objective approach in spite of her own strong convictions:

We could never fence ourselves completely out from each other, even if we wanted to do so...the desire to provide excellent literature for children unites us on certain points, and though we may not always agree as to what constitutes excellence, it may be that on this road we discover one another's strengths as well as understand one another's differences.¹²⁵

As naïve as this sounds, it is a much better solution than banning books and preventing children from reading them. My attempt to argue this from a Christian perspective is this; what else would attract their interest more than the 'forbidden fruit'?

The fact that the *Potter* books are being criticized by religious groups and people, some of whom claim the books to be satanic, others saying they are anti-religious and some complain about the lack religion altogether, makes my point for me; there are as many perspectives on the possible meaning/s of the *Potter* series as there are readers of them and that is what 'freedom of choice' (whose "original advocate"¹²⁶ God himself is) means.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

2.3 Classical Value

2.3.1 Children's Books

It's about time Potter was pipped (narrowly defeated). His creator, Ms. Rowling, deserved the lesser award she received for best children's book. But let us not exalt Potter, either, as a cultural icon. Adults make a part of their lives only the works that have meaning.¹²⁷

This comment by William Safire on the Whitbread Book of the Year controversy in 1999¹²⁸ illustrates one central point about children's literature; it is almost entirely defined, produced and evaluated by adults. Therefore, so are the classics of the genre. This is why it is hardly surprising that "even if we accept the view that the classics have literary value or significance within society, this does not necessarily mean that children themselves will automatically find them interesting."¹²⁹ In the case of *Harry Potter*, the situation is reversed; because so many children enjoy reading the books, some critics conclude that they therefore cannot have much literary value; "if 'the children like it' becomes the sit-stay command of children's literature criticism, then we don't need critics."¹³⁰ Many texts are left out of discussion on the basis of this kind of narrow-mindedness and children are severely underestimated. The amount of studies and criticism that the *Potter* books have received cannot be ignored, as "scholars are likelier to discuss books about which they have something to say."¹³¹

¹²⁷ Safire, William. "Besotted With Potter" *The New York Times*, January 27, 2000.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/library/opinion/safire/012700safi.html>> Last accessed 13.1.2006

¹²⁸ Both Seamus Heaney for his translation of *Beowulf* and J. K. Rowling for *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* were nominated for the Whitbread Book of the Year prize. The judges were split in two, Heaney winning in the end.

¹²⁹ Maynard, Sally, McKnight Cliff, Keady, Melanie. "Children's Classics in the Electronic Medium" *The Lion and the Unicorn*. April 1999, Vol. 23, No. 2. p. 189.

¹³⁰ Sutton, Roger. "When Harry Met Dorothy" *The Horn Book*, January/February 2001.

¹³¹ Stevenson, Deborah. "The Impossibility of Recovery in the Children's Literature Canon or, The Drowning of The Water-Babies" *The Lion and the Unicorn*, January 1997, Vol. 21, No. 1. p. 113.

It is true that according to standards by which classics are defined, *Harry Potter* is not aged enough to be considered a classic work of literature. Most of the children's books deemed as classics have been written prior to 1950 and many of them before 1900. This of course illustrates one of the basic criteria for a classic: it has to endure the test of time. Even books published in the 1950s that are deemed as literature of sufficient value are called 'modern' classics. Other merits required of classics are still under discussion concerning *Potter* as well. Thus I am not suggesting the canonization of the *Potter* series either. Not only do the *Potter* books have to face "the recurrence of a long-standing prejudice, the notion that even a highly regarded and phenomenally successful children's book could not be measured against critically acclaimed books for adults"¹³² but also criticism about the enormous hype evolving around the phenomenon. What does make the *Potter* books quite exceptional and thus possibly hard to categorize and handle is the fact that both children and adults are reading them in great numbers. Instead of declaring *Potter* as a classic extending both children's and adults' literature, I will argue that the *Potter* series does not fall into the category of 'traditional' children's literature but it actually shows signs of a newer version of the genre which I will refer to as 'modern children's literature' and this genre is much closer to 'mainstream', in other words, literature written for adults. This is not to say that the *Potter* books do not have characteristics associated with traditional children's literature, because they do, quite clearly even, which is probably one of the reasons why some critics are reluctant to even consider *Potter* having literary value beyond pure entertainment.

¹³² Whited, Lana. "Harry Potter. From Craze to Classic?" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 6.

If we look at *Harry Potter* merely as children's literature, as most people, including William Safire, do, it is in order to consider the books in light of what Perry Nodelman states as the characterizing features of children's literature:

- simple but not necessarily simplistic
- action-oriented rather than character-oriented
- presented from the viewpoint of innocence
- optimistic with happy endings
- didactic
- repetitious in diction and structure¹³³

I will look at the *Potter* books in relation to these features with the help of Maria Nikolajeva who also discusses these characteristics. Nikolajeva quite rightly questions the validity of these features in reference to modern literature for children and as we look at *Harry Potter* in light of these traditional definitions, we will see signs of this modern genre of children's literature. Thus the *Potter* books do have potential for more attention than critics such as Safire would give them. I think that not only is *Harry Potter* certainly more challenging than traditional children's literature but it can also be enjoyed by adults without being labeled as 'simple.' I support this argument with Nikolajeva's view on how we must "re-define our notion of children's literature"¹³⁴ as "children's literature is transgressing its own boundaries, coming closer to mainstream literature, and exhibiting the most prominent features of postmodernism"¹³⁵ which I will discuss further in this chapter. It seems that Safire and others who share his opinion do not consider this transgressing of boundaries a positive development and insist on sticking to the traditional division between children's and adults' literature.

¹³³ Nodelman, Perry. *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*. New York: Longman, 1992.

¹³⁴ Nikolajeva, Maria. "Exit Children's Literature?" *The Lion and the Unicorn*. April 1998, Vol. 22, No. 2, p. 221.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 222.

Nikolajeva suggests the following descriptions for ‘simple’ narrative:

- concrete and familiar subject matter
- settings familiar to children such as the nursery, home, school, playground, summer camp, etc.
- clear distinction between genres and text-types (adventure story, family story, school story)
- one single, clearly delineated plot without digressions or secondary plots
- chronological order of events
- a limited number of characters who are easy to remember
- “flat” characters—that is, characters composed basically of one typical feature to whom can be readily ascribed either the quality “good” or “evil”¹³⁶

Most subject matters in the *Potter* books are concrete and familiar. Going to school, lessons, dormitory life, friendships and sports are concrete and familiar subjects to children. Even the magic in the books could be seen as a familiar subject since children read about magic in many, if not most stories that they encounter as they are growing up. Characteristics that might also make *Harry Potter* ‘a simple story’, thus making it traditional children’s literature, is the familiarity of the setting. Anyone can relate to a school surrounding, the magical world does not differ from ours so much that we would feel alien in it; broomsticks may fly, staircases move and portraits talk but they are objects from the real world.

Which characteristics of this list would make the *Potter* series like more modern children’s literature? The *Potter* books can be seen as belonging to all the genres mentioned in Nikolajeva’s characterization, not only one: adventure story, family story, school story. In addition, the books are clearly about Harry’s growth and learning about the

¹³⁶ Ibid.

world and himself and also, especially *Stone* and *Chamber* can be seen as detective stories. Following from this multiplicity of stories, it is quite logical to separate several different plots in the books, many of which extend beyond one book; Harry's family history, the rise of evil and Hermione's anti-slavery campaign to name a few. During the course of the series, steps back in time are not uncommon; in *Chamber* Harry is swept away to the school days of Voldemort and in *Phoenix* Harry uses the Pensieve on several occasions to look to past events. Thus, the chronological order of events does not apply to the *Potter* books.

I would also argue that the *Potter* books are both action and character oriented and at the same time quite the antithesis of traditional children's books which according to Nikolajeva includes "flat characters." The action is obvious: casting of spells, fighting trolls, saving the world. But the stories also describe Harry's thoughts and readers, both children and adults can identify with his feelings of loneliness, surprise, excitement, etc. Other characters (whose number in the *Potter* series is certainly not limited) are also a bit deeper in meaning than one might expect of characters in a traditional children's book; they certainly are not all "composed basically of one typical feature to whom can be readily ascribed either 'good' or 'evil'". Some characters are more easily labeled; Dumbledore is obviously a good, just wizard and Voldemort is truly evil but characters such as Snape, Filch and many others are not as easily judged. Also, as was discussed earlier, Harry himself has potential for both good and bad, as does everyone in the real world as well.

The narrative structure is in a way traditional in the *Potter* books in that there is a clear beginning, development of the storyline and an end. In all of the books, Harry starts off from Privet Drive and he ends up there in the end. ("Home to departure to

adventure to homecoming.”¹³⁷) However, Nikolajeva discusses polyphonic narrative as a more developed narrative style that is becoming common in children’s literature. In this narrative structure

the story may seem to be an arbitrary cut-out from the character’s life...in most such novels, we seek in vain for the character’s background, “all that David Copperfield crap,” to quote Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, one of the models for contemporary teenage novel.¹³⁸

The Harry *Potter* books do include “all that David Copperfield crap” but in a different form. We learn about Harry’s past as he does and we yearn to know more, just like him. This curiosity about Harry’s history is one of the driving forces that keep the reader interested.

As we continue down Nodelman’s list, the notions of children’s literature being “presented from the viewpoint of innocence” and being “simple” in the case of the *Potter* series can be argued against. According to Nikolajeva, the attempts to produce children’s books “from the viewpoint of innocence” are usually unsuccessful: “the result being an artificial address which we today chiefly associate with Victorian children’s literature in which children are portrayed as sweet, naive, uneducated, unspoiled, and incapable of self-reflection.”¹³⁹ In this light, the *Potter* books are presented from quite a realistic view as the popularity of the books illustrates; both young and more mature readers relate easily to Harry, through whose eyes we mostly see the world. If this view was sugar-coated, or overly simplified, it would certainly alienate a number of readers and I have not come across such claims during the writing of this thesis.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 225.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Nikolajeva, p. 229, referring to Wall, Barbara. *The Narrator’s Voice. The Dilemma of Children’s Fiction*. London: MacMillan, 1991.

The issue of ‘simplicity’ divides into ‘how’ and ‘what’ is narrated.¹⁴⁰ Because the question of ‘how’ is discussed above and in chapter 2.3.3 (Language), I will concentrate here on the question of ‘what’ is narrated. Suman Gupta’s view on children’s literature is useful. Gupta says that children’s literature is used to transmit “idealized aspirations of existing social and political positions”¹⁴¹ of adults onto children in hope of a better future. As this is logical and all of these quite significant issues are loaded into children’s literature, I cannot see how one can trivialize its value by saying that these books cannot be compared to literature written for adults. Gupta suggests a reason: “the construction of ‘children as implied readers’ absolves people from making certain aspects of their socially and politically effective positions clear, or dealing with the difficult connotations therein.”¹⁴² As I understand it, Gupta is referring to writers and parents who decide what is appropriate literature for children because he also says “‘children’s literature’ books become sites where people do not have to take responsibility for their social and political claims, but can present these as claims being made by adults for and on behalf of children.”¹⁴³ Is Gupta saying that some critics refuse to analyse, for example, *Harry Potter* because they are afraid of what that analysis might tell about adults, about themselves? If this is the case, it is not surprising that there is a strong reluctance to evaluate the classical value of these books. Furthermore, Rowling does make “certain aspects of [her] socially and politically effective positions clear.” They will be also discussed further in chapter 2.3.4 which, in addition to the discussion above, support the

¹⁴⁰ Nikolajeva, p. 222.

¹⁴¹ Gupta, Suman. *Re-reading Harry Potter*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. p. 54.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* p. 53.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

argument that after a deeper look into the themes and structures of the *Potter* books, they cannot be qualified as ‘simple’.

The *Potter* books certainly include “shifts in tone”¹⁴⁴ which Nikolajeva suggests as one of the features of modern children’s literature. As discussed earlier, topics such as violence, death and betrayal are discussed and witnessed throughout the series. Actually, the tone shifts as the series proceeds; the latest book, *Half Blood* is much darker and more serious than the first book, *Stone*. Additionally, the mood within a book changes following Harry’s state of mind. The characterization “optimistic with happy endings” could perhaps be applied to the first two *Potter* books, disregarding things such as Harry’s longing for a family and his return to the care of abusing relatives but from *Azkaban* onwards the endings include a clear disappointment alongside the resolution to the mystery and adventure. In *Azkaban*, the traitor Peter Pettigrew escapes, in *Goblet* Cedric Diggory dies and Voldemort is reinstated in his body, in *Phoenix*, Sirius Black dies and the magical world is embarking on a war and in *Half Blood Prince* the magical world suffers perhaps the greatest loss of all, Dumbledore. These are obvious ways of ensuring readership for the next book but they also follow the growth of youngsters and their changing interests which evidently, grow darker.

When it comes to the “degrees of narrativity”¹⁴⁵ the *Potter* books show signs of both traditional and contemporary children’s literature. “Subjective realism”¹⁴⁶ means that “we see reality reflected in the subjects mind”¹⁴⁷, in this case, Harry’s. Everything that is described in the *Potter* books, events, surroundings and situations are such that they are

¹⁴⁴ Nikolajeva, p. 227.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 226.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 229.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

accessible to Harry; we see what Harry sees, we are introduced to the magical world at the same pace as he is, we are inclined to draw the same conclusions as he does. Harry is the only character (aside from Voldemort, whose mind is connected with Harry's) whose thoughts are occasionally revealed to the reader. But at the same time, there is one authoritative, sometimes also didactic, voice that often reveals truths and teaches Harry and the reader; this is the voice of Dumbledore. Thus, the *Potter* books, as most children's books are didactic but not in the traditional sense (as in having an authoritative narrator, who constantly explains to the reader what is happening and why) and the lessons learnt and the solutions are not always straightforward¹⁴⁸ or easily acceptable¹⁴⁹.

Metafiction, which Nikolajeva also states as one of the characterizing features of contemporary children's literature, is also present in *Harry Potter*; the reader's attention is drawn to "literary conventions"¹⁵⁰ right at the beginning of the first book, as if to get it out of the way early on; "there will be books written about Harry – every child in our world will know his name."¹⁵¹ This is hardly a subtle way (which Nikolajeva claims to be a common way of expressing metafiction in modern literature for children) of recognizing "the self-consciousness of literature about its own status as a literary construction"¹⁵², nevertheless, it is there.

I fail to see how children's literature can be less valuable than that of adults'; it is the literature that is supposed to educate and help children grow into intelligent adults.

¹⁴⁸ "The best of us must sometimes eat our words." Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998. p. 243.

¹⁴⁹ "Harry closed his eyes. If he had not gone to save Sirius, Sirius would not have died." Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003. p. 744.

¹⁵⁰ Nikolajeva. p. 232.

¹⁵¹ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 15.

¹⁵² Nikolajeva, p. 232.

I personally do not have a problem calling *Harry Potter* a classic but I see why some are reluctant to do so. However, they do have to realize that *Harry Potter* does not fall into the category of traditional children's literature and that this traditional children's literature is becoming more of an exception than a rule; the characteristics of modern children's literature are drawing nearer to those of 'mainstream' literature. Nikolajeva goes as far as saying that "we must acknowledge that sooner or later, children's literature will be integrated into the mainstream and disappear."¹⁵³ But considering all of these new features of children's literature (genre eclecticism, shifts in tone, character orientation) this does not reflect "the infantilization of adult culture"¹⁵⁴ but actually the exact opposite. Children's literature is becoming more and more like adults' literature in its choice of subject matters. Are children then becoming more and more like adults and is that a desired development? As mentioned earlier, Gupta suggests that because the term 'children's literature' and everything that it entails is defined by adults, it cannot truly reflect anything of children. Gupta quotes Jacqueline Rose on the subject: "Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space between."¹⁵⁵ Maybe this convergence (character-orientation, multiplicity of plots, shifts in tone) of children and adults' literature is an attempt to enter this space and it might explain some of the confusion about which books should be considered having 'enough' literary value.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 233.

¹⁵⁴ Hensher, Philip. "Harry Potter – Give Me a Break" *The Independent*, January 25, 2000.

¹⁵⁵ Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984.

2.3.2 Popularity

Sales of the first five Harry Potter books have topped 250 million worldwide...the books have been sold in more than 200 countries and translated into 60 languages.¹⁵⁶

Many critics discussing the *Potter* books start their articles by adding to the hype that they then later in their analysis object to. Jack Zipes articulates a concern that most of these critics have: “I am certain that the phenomenal aspect of the reception of the *Harry Potter* books has blurred the focus for anyone who wants to take literature for young people seriously.”¹⁵⁷ This comment illustrates two important problems in assessing the quality of children’s literature; first, as mentioned numerous times before, it is not a given that children’s literature is taken seriously in the first place and therefore its value is to many of no significance, and second, there is the “fairly common critical stereotype...that works of great literary or artistic value do not enjoy commercial success.”¹⁵⁸

Some critics, like Andrew Blake, do recognize that the first *Potter* book did not come out accompanied with the kind of hype and popular interest that is nowadays linked with anything to do with *Harry Potter*. The fact is that the word about the first *Potter* book spread from mouth to mouth, not via a massive advertising campaign. Blake comments on the subject as he is trying to find reasons for *Potter*’s popularity:

Even if all this is yet another capitalist con, using hype to explain the phenomenon is much too easy. It does not explain how a book for children that was first published in a print run of 500 by a smallish UK ‘quality’ publisher without any hype at all comes to the world’s attention in the first

¹⁵⁶ The Hogwarts Wire “Harry Potter sales reach 250 million worldwide”

<<http://www.hogwartswire.com/archives/000480.html>> Last accessed 13.1.2006

¹⁵⁷ Zipes, Jack. *Sticks and Stones. The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York: Routledge, 2001. p. 171.

¹⁵⁸ Whited, Lana. “Harry Potter. From Craze to Classic?” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 7.

place, nor why that book, and the subsequent series is so appealing to adults.¹⁵⁹

It is quite natural in today's consumerism-filled world that everyone who thinks they have the slightest chance of making money on a product jump at the opportunity at once, thus creating the hype. Not only does it underestimate readers of all ages to explain a book's popularity entirely by mere marketing hype but it also overlooks the writers' abilities to produce the kind of texts that keep the readers coming back for more, which is certainly the case with the *Potter* books. As mentioned in chapter 2.3.1., many of the plots expand over several books in the *Potter* series and the endings are left quite open, especially in *Goblet* and *Phoenix*.

When we talk about the canon of literature, the first association for many is the scholarly appreciation of certain texts, thus it is likely that books named as classics are not necessarily read in great numbers by the 'general public.' People are certainly aware of these books and think of them as texts that they ought to read but see it as a strenuous task. This applies especially to children and the complaint that children do not read anymore is at least partially strengthened because children do not read the books which are seen as classics and this is, naturally, considered to be an 'uncivilizing' phenomenon. According to Stevenson, however, especially in the field of children's literature, two canons can be distinguished: the academic canon and "the canon of sentiment,"¹⁶⁰ i.e. "the popular canon."¹⁶¹ The latter is a group of texts that

ultimately defines children's literature in the popular understanding of the term. Whereas the academic canon of significance exists to justify,

¹⁵⁹ Blake, Andrew. *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter*. London: Verso, 2002. p. 3.

¹⁶⁰ Stevenson, Deborah. "The Impossibility of Recovery in the Children's Literature Canon or, The Drowning of The Water-Babies" *The Lion and the Unicorn*, January 1997, Vol. 21, No. 1, p.115.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

document, chronicle, or explain, the canon of sentiment exists to preserve — to preserve the childhood of those adults who create that canon.¹⁶²

These two canons can contain the same books according to Whited's view on classical value: "Of course, enduring literary value cannot be assigned by referendum but occasionally the general public does recognize a book of quality"¹⁶³ but what actually brings these two canons together is the adult: in both cases, adults decide what the classics of children's literature are; scholars and critics on the academic canon and adults reminiscing about their childhood on the canon of sentiment. In this light, the *Potter* books must be problematic for critics and scholars. They are very popular among both children and adults, thus they could be said to belong to the canon of sentiment already and therefore they are almost automatically dismissed from the academic canon in many scholars' eyes. But judging by the scholarly interest, both negative and positive, in the *Potter* books, the books do have the potential for carrying "universal meaning"¹⁶⁴ and being explorers of "the human condition"¹⁶⁵, which according to Evelyn Winfield are characteristics that define classic texts.

While millions of children are reading *Harry Potter*, the popularity of the classics is at an all time low; "a generation of school students has actually been taught to hate the classics by the very process that was meant to engender a love of them."¹⁶⁶ The classics are seen by children as tedious and hard to read; this is no surprise since the classics are chosen by adults, who then force these books on children. According to Deborah Stevenson "there are both old and new children's books that are more significant

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Whited, p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ Winfield, Evelyn. "Why children should read the classics" *PTA Today*, 7(6), 1986. pp. 26-27.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Sarland, Charles. "Revenge of the Teenage Horrors. Pleasure, Quality and Canonicity in (and out of) Popular Series Fiction" *Voices Off: Texts, Contexts and Readers*. Eds. Styles, Morag, Bearne, Eve, Watson, Victor. London: Cassell, 1996. p. 59.

to adult readers than children.”¹⁶⁷ This is because the books link these adults to their childhood and this gives the books meaning. The children of today do not even factor into the process. According to Sarland “the traditional, supposedly child-centered approaches to English teaching had, in fact, created a hierarchy of pleasures, based on a simple equation: the more people liked something, the less worthwhile the pleasure.”¹⁶⁸ This hierarchy obviously affects the critical assessment of the *Potter* books as well. Roger Sutton echoes my view on the subject (although his main point is that children cannot define good children’s literature) when he says that

Harry’s success could be seen as evidence of a welcome unbuttoning of critical standards that were too tight to begin with. It could also be argued that he shows us that children have better taste than we’ve given them credit for. Harry has called into question any number of myths that govern our ideas of what children “like” – for starters, that they like short books.¹⁶⁹

We should re-consider our standards of children’s literature. We should take into account the books that children enjoy reading and consider their value to the child reader. Also, many critics mention a ‘breathtaking’ ignorance of the nature of children’s culture today; “children’s novels exist in a different relationship now with the wider popular culture at large. Any serious consideration of children’s literature, I believe, must take account of the enormous and perhaps overwhelming changes that are taking place.”¹⁷⁰ I agree and think that this is exactly why there is such disagreement over the *Potter* books. There are critics who hang on to the traditional ideas of ‘class’ and ‘quality’ and abhor the media circus encircling the *Potter* phenomenon and there are critics who recognize the transition that we are in the middle of and take that into account, as it should be.

¹⁶⁷ Stevenson, p. 120.

¹⁶⁸ Sarland, p. 57.

¹⁶⁹ Sutton, Roger. “When Harry Met Dorothy” *The Horn Book*, January/February 2001.

¹⁷⁰ Watson, Victor. “Innocent Children and Unstable Literature” *Voices Off: Texts, Contexts and Readers*. Eds. Styles, Morag, Bearne, Eve, Watson, Victor. London: Cassell, 1996. p. 13.

2.3.3 Language

Rowling is not a subtle writer, and one of the tiresome things about this book [*The Order of the Phoenix*] is how routinely it resorts to turning up the volume, rather than describing anything vividly.¹⁷¹

Yet another divide can be seen when we discuss the perception of language in children's books. On one hand, children's literature is seen as a genre that has the most latitude; it can deal with a multitude of issues, especially through fantasy and the language has many possibilities for inventive usage and many agree with the view that the language of the books should "enrich a child's heritage of words."¹⁷² On the other hand, because children as an audience are considered inferior, "the blend of cliché, spoken idiom and simplification have typified writing for children since the early nineteenth century, and writers unconsciously follow these patterns."¹⁷³ Following this logic, Rowling would have no reason to deviate from these patterns as they are unconscious and since the books are primarily directed at children. However, I do not think clichés or idioms make the *Potter* books any less linguistically valuable than, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*, or the *Narnia* books, to which *Potter* is constantly compared and declared inferior to. As has been discussed earlier, the preference of older texts, such as Tolkien and Lewis, stems from the rooted appreciation of texts that have aged enough and their alleged connection to Christian values. Thus the, in this case linguistic, similarities with modern texts seem to be overlooked.

¹⁷¹ Hensher, Philip. "A Crowd-pleaser but No Classic" *The Spectator*. June 28, 2003.

<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3724/is_200306/ai_n9265272> Last accessed 13.1.2006

¹⁷² Godden, Rumer. "An Imaginary Correspondence" *Children and Literature*. Ed. Haviland, Virginia. London: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1973. pp. 136-7.

¹⁷³ Hunt, Peter. *Criticism, Theory & Children's Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. p. 107.

When discussing the vocabulary of children's books, Peter Hunt heavily criticizes the simplification of language in children's literature because language should be "adventurous and mind-expanding"¹⁷⁴ and not "a mind-closing parade of clichés."¹⁷⁵ I do not think Rowling's use of clichés reaches the definition of a 'parade' but they certainly are present in the *Potter* books ("pouring rain"¹⁷⁶, "scrambled to his feet"¹⁷⁷, "Hermione was checking the coast was clear."¹⁷⁸) But the books also include numerous inventive notions such as ("his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins"¹⁷⁹) not to mention Rowling's own coining and deriving of words such as 'Muggle' (of which everyone can have their own connotations, possibly, for example, 'muggy'), 'Spellotape' and 'hippogriff' (which seems like a word that blends into the English language almost unnoticeably.) Roni Natov argues that one of the ways in which Rowling negotiates the "two poles" of "imaginative writing" ("the force of the imagination of childhood to illuminate reality") is her tendency to make mythical creatures tangible by, for example, describing a baby dragon as "a crumpled, black umbrella."¹⁸⁰

Even Hensher admits that "J.K. Rowling does not obviously simplify her vocabulary, and smaller children will regularly be taxed with 'amphitheatre', 'pyrotechnical', 'forthcoming', 'regurgitation' and 'imperturbable'."¹⁸¹ I would also argue that a children's book that deliberately avoids the use of idioms and ignores clichés

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 30.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003. p. 496.

¹⁷⁷ ----- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. p. 293.

¹⁷⁸ ----- *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998. p. 125.

¹⁷⁹ ----- *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 16.

¹⁸⁰ Natov, Roni. "Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon* Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 132.

¹⁸¹ Hensher.

altogether, runs the risk of sounding quite ‘arty’, in other words, much like some adults’ view on ‘quality’ literature and as I have argued numerous times already, this is the wrong way to approach children and their reading habits. A good example of the short-sightedness of simplification was the decision to ‘translate’ the *Potter* books to American English. How can Americans be perceived as anything but self-centered rednecks if their views are never challenged or opportunities to learn something outside their own culture are always eliminated?

According to Hunt, children’s texts are often ‘closed’ ones because children are perceived as reading “below capacity”¹⁸², in other words, the writer gives the reader “experience ready-packaged.”¹⁸³ Hunt is referring to adjectives from an example passage from Betsy Bryars’s *First Term at Trebizon* such as ‘beautiful’, ‘striking’ and ‘hawk-like’ which are “pre-programmed” and thus they leave no room for interpretation for the reader, whereas judgments filtered through a character’s mind, or interpreted from a character’s speech are made by the reader him/herself.¹⁸⁴ Looking at *Harry Potter* in light of these features of ‘closed’ and ‘open’ texts, the writing in them seems to be ‘closed.’ Adjectives such as ‘darkly’, ‘pretty’ and ‘odd’ are very common and according to Hunt’s argument, these words indicate a “pre-programmed” writing style. I do think that it must be added that each reader does have an individual perception of ‘prettiness’ and ‘oddness’, nevertheless, even Harry’s thoughts are quite explicitly expressed and there is no great need of interpretation. Having said this, if we look at, for example, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the writing does not differ from that of Rowling’s in the slightest;

¹⁸² Hunt, p. 81.

¹⁸³ Ibid. p. 82.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. pp. 82-83.

“Go on!” said Frodo faintly.¹⁸⁵

“What do you mean?” asked Pippin, looking at him, half puzzled half amused.¹⁸⁶

The hobbits listened with delight; and Frodo was glad in his heart, and blessed the kindly weather...¹⁸⁷

Harold Bloom criticizes Rowling’s writing by saying that her style is “heavy on cliché”¹⁸⁸ and that “in an arbitrarily chosen single page -page 4- of the first *Potter* book, I count seven clichés, all of the ‘stretch his legs’ variety.”¹⁸⁹ Hunt’s review of C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* gives an interesting comparison:

An author who lets his heroine ‘find’ herself three times in a hundred words or whose adjectival imagination goes no further than ‘strange’ or ‘little’, whose fires are ‘wood’, whose ground is ‘rough’ and whose heroine can only ‘blink’ is hardly stretching himself or his readers.¹⁹⁰

I cite these examples not in attempt to bring down texts or to elevate others but to ask whether the allegedly more (Christian) didactic style of Tolkien and Lewis outweigh everything that has been published after them despite their unoriginal use of language.

Finally, to comment on Hensher’s criticism on *Phoenix*, I need to elaborate on what he says about Rowling’s writing: “There is a great deal of shouting in capital letters; it is terribly lazy to write “NO; IT RUDDY WELL IS NOT ALL!” bellowed Uncle Vernon.’ The exclamation mark and the verb making absolutely sure the point has been

¹⁸⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: Allen&Unwin, 1966. p. 107.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 144.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 130.

¹⁸⁸ Bloom, Harold. “Can 35 Million Book Buyers Be Wrong? Yes” *Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2000.

<<http://wrt-brooke.syr.edu/courses/205.03/bloom.html>> Last accessed 13.1.2006

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Hunt, pp. 108-9.

made.”¹⁹¹ I think that here Hensher himself misses the point entirely; why would one expect imaginative speech of Uncle Vernon who “didn’t approve of imagination.”¹⁹²

Hensher offers Ursula K. LeGuin’s writing as exemplary children’s literature:

At the entrance so great a weight of blind and dire hatred came pressing down upon her, like the weight of the earth itself, that she cowered and without knowing it cried out aloud, ‘They are here! They are here!’ ‘Then let them know that we are here,’ the man said, and from his staff and hands leapt forth a white radiance that broke as a sea-wave breaks in sunlight, against the thousand diamonds of the roof and walls: a glory of light, through which the two fled, straight across the great cavern, their shadows racing from them into the white trceries and glittering crevices and the empty, open grave.¹⁹³

I can see why Hensher would prefer this text to *Harry Potter*; it is because Hensher is not a child. Yet he expects a child to appreciate the same text that he does. This brings me back to the central issue of children’s literature that affects every aspect of it, also language; adults never cease the attempt to force their own ideas of excellence on children who are, in general, much more receptive to “high-energy verbs”¹⁹⁴ such as “zoomed, tore, ripped, swooped”¹⁹⁵ that Hensher describes as “complete slackness”¹⁹⁶ in Rowling’s writing. Looking at Le Guin’s text, its phrases such as “leapt forth” and words like “racing” do not differ in any significant way from Rowling’s “high-energy verbs”. It could be argued that these verbs are, in fact, very descriptive of modern children’s culture in general and thus the *Potter* books reflect the world as it is in the field of language as well: “They [classics]

¹⁹¹ Hensher.

¹⁹² Rowling, 1997. p. 10.

¹⁹³ Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Tombs of Atuan*. (The Earthsea Cycle, Book 2) New York: Atheneum, 1970.

¹⁹⁴ Hensher.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

must use language in a way that calls readers' attention to language itself and to how language reflects culture and cultural values."¹⁹⁷ Rowling's usage of Latin based words such as 'Silencio' and 'Accio', her sarcastic notions such as 'de-gnoming the garden' and the names of the magical world, like Malfoy ('bad faith') certainly draw the readers' attention to language and no matter what we might think of the values of modern culture, its pace and superficiality are clearly present in the books, as are more meaningful things, such as morals. This is an important point because "surely any books that will be deemed 'classics' must reflect something about the values of the age and society that produce them."¹⁹⁸ I find that making a text appealing to children is not as grave a sin as force-feeding them books that they find hard and tedious and which might ultimately alienate them from reading altogether.

¹⁹⁷ Whited, Lana. "Harry Potter. From Craze to Classic?" *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 9.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

2.3.4 Missing the Other Level

Unlike *Huckleberry Finn* or *Alice in Wonderland*, the *Potter* series is not written on two levels, entertaining one generation while instructing another.¹⁹⁹

In the article quoted above, William Safire offers his opinion on *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* on the basis of reading the *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. When commenting on Safire's text, Lana Whited points out that "I don't mean to suggest that we can't talk about literature we haven't read. I have students who do it regularly. The people who make Cliffs Notes expect us to want or need to talk about works we haven't read."²⁰⁰ But as Whited also admits, Safire's comments reveal his undervaluing attitude towards children's literature in general.

There are two points that must be made based on Safire's argument above. First, a point which has become one of the central issues in this thesis: books such as *Huckleberry Finn* (which according to Safire "is a classic because it used the device of a boy's coming of age to illuminate a nation's painful transformation"²⁰¹) are labeled as children's books because adults do so, not because children are reading them in great numbers (at least, willingly.) 'Forcing' idealized notions of what children should read on today's youth and not taking into account the current culture and the changes in it compared to the world twenty or thirty years ago will not help grow children into intelligent, critically thinking adults. Second, Safire does not bother to look whether Rowling's books say anything about the nation the stories take place in. Safire seems to be

¹⁹⁹ Safire, William. "Besotted with Potter" *The New York Times*. January 27, 2000. <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/opinion/safire/012700safi.html>> Last accessed 13.1.2006

²⁰⁰ Whited, Lana. "Could Harry Potter Rescue the Eminent Columnist?" *The Roanoke Times*. February 12, 2000. <<http://www.roanoke.com/columnists/whited/021200.html>> Last accessed 13.1.2006

²⁰¹ Safire.

oblivious to the transformation that the world is in now and for that matter, constantly. In fact, the *Potter* series does illuminate “a nation’s painful transformation”, as

the wizarding world struggles to negotiate a very contemporary problem in Britain: the legacy of a racial and class caste system that, though not entirely stable, is still looked upon by a minority of powerful individuals as the means to continued power and control.²⁰²

The class system is hard to miss in the *Potter* books. Elves work as slaves, werewolves and giants are looked upon as ‘freaks’ and some pureblooded wizards consider themselves to be on top of the food chain. Perhaps Safire has reasons for ignoring all this, other than the common habit of many critics, glorifying the past and its literary products.

Another issue where the idealization of the past is evident is the constant comparison that is made between the *Potter* books and, for example, Lewis’ *Narnia* series: “Lewis’ books...are reminiscent of a time where order, authority, and proper hierarchies of power prevailed.”²⁰³ The issues of authority and control, which have already been discussed in this thesis, are related to the subject of ‘two levels’ as well. In this sense, the *Potter* books reflect reality, (thus include ‘another level’; other than a purely entertaining one) as a number of people are not in control of themselves or of others; in *Stone*, Quirrell is not in control of himself because Voldemort ‘takes over’, the same happens to Ginny in *Chamber* and in *Phoenix* the Dementors stop taking orders from the Ministry. In all of these cases, Voldemort can be blamed for the lack of control; in reality, Voldemort could be seen as the reflection of alcohol, drugs, capitalism, or whichever point of view one might represent; conservative Christians would say Satan. Relating to the issues of authority and control, the

²⁰² Westman, Karin E. “Specters of Thatcherism. Contemporary British Culture in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 306.

²⁰³ Stephens questions whether “such a time ever existed.” Stephens, Rebecca. “Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority” *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p. 62.

depiction of political power and justice in the *Potter* books is reflective of reality, even though the impression that is given about them is denied both in the real world and in the world of Harry Potter; people are arrested and put in prison without proper investigations²⁰⁴ or trials²⁰⁵, certain countries or groups are labeled as criminals or dangerous²⁰⁶ based on a few individuals' behaviour and governments and politicians do not tell the general public the truth about certain situations.²⁰⁷ Sirius Black is wrongly imprisoned, Harry's hearing in *Phoenix* is a travesty of justice²⁰⁸ and Hagrid's account of his time in Azkaban, the prison for wizard and witches, speaks quite clearly:

“But you were innocent!” said Hermione.
Hagrid snorted.
“Think that matters to them? They don' care. Long as they've got a couple o' hundred humans stuck there with 'em, so they can leech all the happiness out of 'em, they don' give a damn who's guilty an' who's not.”²⁰⁹

This kind of criticism towards legal systems is likely to cause such complaints that are made against the *Potter* series. Rowling also points out the 'ethics' of the press in Rita Skeeter's character, especially in *Goblet*.

One of the most important features of the *Potter* books that speak for the existence of the two levels in them, is their power to reflect the feelings of children, especially the feelings of injustice and anger: “Every child feels...that she is on her own, unacknowledged, unappreciated, unseen and unheard, up against an unfair parent, and by

²⁰⁴ An example from real life that has possibly influenced Rowling: The Birmingham Six. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birmingham_Six> Last accessed 1.2.2006

²⁰⁵ E.g. what the U.S.A. is doing in Guantánamo Bay. Amnesty International. “Guantánamo Bay – a human rights scandal” <<http://web.amnesty.org/pages/guantanamobay-index-eng>> Last accessed 26.1.2006

²⁰⁶ ““Did you know?” he [Ron] whispered. ‘About Hagrid being a half-giant?...they're just vicious, giants.’” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. p. 374.

²⁰⁷ “When Hermione returned from the trolley and put her money back into her schoolbag, she dislodged a copy of the Daily Prophet which she had been carrying in there...’There's nothing in there...They didn't even mention Cedric. Nothing about any of it. If you ask me, Fudge is forcing them to keep quiet.’” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000. p. 630.

²⁰⁸ As, for example, there is an attempt to prevent Dumbledore's (i.e. Harry's defense) arrival at the hearing by not informing him about the time change of the hearing.

²⁰⁹ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999. p. 164.

extension, an unfair world.”²¹⁰ Harry fits this description with a twist; in the beginning Harry is, in a way, on his own because his parents are dead and the substitute caregivers do not qualify as family in the emotional sense, he is treated unfairly or as if he is “unseen” and “unheard”. He is not, however, unacknowledged for long. The whole magical world knows who he is. First, the attention is positive; he is treated like hero. But as the story progresses, the fame shows its ugly side as Harry is suspected of practicing dark magic, cheating in the Triwizard tournament and being snotty, in other words, questions of morality.

Morality, if anything is an aspect on which every writer has to at least touch upon when writing a story. Rowling certainly discusses questions of morality as also Lana Whited and Katherine Grimes note during their investigation on how Lawrence Kohlberg’s “Theories of Moral Development”²¹¹ manifest themselves in the *Potter* series.²¹² Whited and Grimes look at every stage of moral development according to Kohlberg comparing each stage’s characteristics to the traits of the characters in the *Potter* books and come to the conclusion that not only do the *Potter* books present clear examples of all the different stages but they do so in quite realistic ways.

There are representatives of nearly all of the six stages of moral development in the *Potter* books: from the ‘Punishment and Obedience’ stage where “young children learn to do what adults and older children want them to do in order to

²¹⁰ Natov, Roni. “Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 125.

²¹¹ Kohlberg, Lawrence. *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice. Essays on Moral Development*. Vol. 1. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981.

²¹² Whited, Lana, Grimes, Katherine. “What Would Harry Do? J.K. Rowling and Lawrence Kohlberg’s Theories of Moral Development” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 182.

avoid punishment”²¹³ to the ‘Prior Rights and Social Contract’ stage where “they [people] are willing to break rules if they feel a higher principle is at stake [and where] people realize that rules and laws exist for mutual benefit and by mutual agreement.”²¹⁴ According to Whited and Grimes, the lowest stage includes characters such as a young Draco Malfoy and Vernon Dursley.²¹⁵ What is interesting that even Draco, as well as Dudley, do develop into at least stage two; the “you scratch my back; I’ll scratch yours”²¹⁶ stage and they do show signs of stage three, where “children learn to do what earns them praise”²¹⁷, but both of them lack of the ability to “put [themselves] into another person’s place in the sense of the Golden Rule”²¹⁸, another aspect of stage three. Whited and Grimes also point out that some characters may function on high levels of moral development but still, they occasionally stoop to behaviour characteristic to, for example, stage two.²¹⁹ There are a few characters (Dumbledore, Sirius Black and occasionally Harry) in the *Potter* books who, according to Whited and Grimes, have the ability to function on the highest stage of the moral scale (‘Universal Ethical Principles’) but as Kohlberg himself has not provided clear examples of stage six behaviour, it is difficult to assess this kind of behaviour in people in general.²²⁰ But judging by the extent of Whited and Grimes’ study into the issue of moral development in the *Potter* books, it can be said that children are offered a wide range in models of behavior and their consequences. Roni Natov goes as far as saying that “the

²¹³ Ibid. p.185.

²¹⁴ Ibid. p. 195.

²¹⁵ Ibid. p. 185.

²¹⁶ Ibid. p. 186.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 188.

²¹⁸ Ibid. p. 182.

²¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 201-202.

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 196.

Harry Potter stories center on what children need to find internally – the strength to do the right thing, to establish a moral code.”²²¹

Class and race are among the most thought-provoking and current issues in the world today and they are connected to the earlier discussion in this chapter on Safire’s claims. Rowling tackles the subjects of race and class in a very realistic way which seems to miss some critics’ perception completely. For example, Elaine Ostry is of the opinion that the *Potter* books fall into the fairy tale category and because this genre is “simultaneously radical and traditional, [Rowling] often contradicts herself.”²²² As examples of this Ostry criticizes Rowling for, for example, mentioning minorities but not making them heroes²²³, and for only “casually mentioning race”²²⁴ and for claiming that “race does not matter.”²²⁵ Rowling, however, does quite the opposite. What is the tension between ‘purebloods’ and wizards who have Muggle-ancestry, if not racism? ‘Bigotry’ is mentioned by Hermione in reference to giants and werewolves²²⁶, the word ‘Mudblood’ is abhorred when it is uttered by Draco Malfoy in *Chamber*²²⁷ (Ostry does realize that “it is the N-word for the wizarding world”²²⁸) and werewolves and half-giants must hide their true identity in order to be tolerated among ‘normal’ people. Actually, the attitude towards werewolves resembles the attitude towards, for example, AIDS, as “the prejudice against werewolves has robbed Lupin of work even though his condition can be controlled.”²²⁹

²²¹ Natov, p. 137.

²²² Ostry, Elaine. “Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision of J.K. Rowling’s Fairy Tales” *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p. 90.

²²³ *Ibid.* p. 93.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 94.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ “They [giants] can’t *all* be horrible ... it’s the same sort of prejudice that people have towards werewolves ... it’s just bigotry, isn’t it?” Rowling, 2000. p. 377.

²²⁷ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998. p. 86.

²²⁸ Ostry, p. 92.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 95.

Rowling discusses the issue of race thus quite obviously, not in connection with students of Hogwarts who judging by their names, might be of non-English ancestry (Cho Chang, Parvati Patil) but in a way that leaves it to the children to make the connection. Also, the treatment of slavery in the *Potter* books is cleverly done; a ready-made description or a solution is not given but “Rowling’s decision to place the slavery issue in such close proximity to other questions of race in the novels is one that allows children to develop their own understanding of the problem.”²³⁰ In reference to the slavery issue, Ostry says “once again...Rowling’s social vision proves ambivalent”²³¹ because it is only Hermione, who wants to do anything about the situation and the other children “mock her efforts.”²³² Would Ostry really prefer not ambivalent children’s texts? How would children develop into intelligent, questioning adults if they were offered seemingly straightforward storylines where there would be no room for doubt? Where members of minorities would be heroes no matter what the circumstances would be, when in the real world many minorities have no such opportunities as members of the majority to succeed and where people who strive for change are often ‘mocked for their efforts.’ These kind of texts would be naive and unrealistic. Rowling’s strength lies in her realistic description of a partially unfair world which needs changes and new solutions.

I quote Whited on classics again: “Surely any books that will be deemed as ‘classics’ must reflect something about the values of the age and society that produce them.

²³⁰ Carey, Brycchan. “Hermione and the House-Elves: The Literary and the Historical Contexts of J.K. Rowling’s Antislavery Campaign” *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p. 113.

²³¹ Ostry, p. 96.

²³² Ibid.

They must conjure a real world or one that parallels the real world in intriguing ways.”²³³ Rowling discusses race, class and consumerism in addition to other topics which reflect the current culture and this is probably one of the reasons the *Potter* books are not considered by some as worthy of all the attention they receive; the books are seen as a part of the capitalist system they describe. But how could they not be? In addition to recognizing their own place in today’s culture, the *Harry Potter* books speak to the children of the age: “the Harry Potter stories chronicle the process of the child’s movement from the initial consciousness of himself as the central character in his story, a singular preoccupation with self, to a sense of his own power and responsibility to a larger community.”²³⁴ This describes the evolution of Harry Potter quite accurately and in *Phoenix*, this progress is taken to the extreme as we find out about the prophecy²³⁵; Harry certainly has a “responsibility to a larger community.” Saving the world in such concrete terms as Harry does, is not something a real child ever encounters but it does reflect the reality in the sense that children are the tools for ‘saving the world’ if it still is possible.

²³³ Whited, Lana. “Harry Potter. From Craze to Classic?” *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter. Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*. Ed. Whited, Lana. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002. p. 9.

²³⁴ Natov, p. 126.

²³⁵ “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives.” Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003. p. 741.

3. The Defenders – Harry as Jesus

...the Potter mythology...is not only dependent on the Christian understanding of life and the universe *but actually grows out of that understanding and would have been unthinkable without it.*²³⁶

The *Potter* series has generated discussion, in which viewpoints vary from one end to the other, and one of the most striking differences of opinion is the issue of religion in the *Potter* books. As was discussed earlier, many complaints stem from the fact that religion is absent from the world of *Harry Potter* altogether and at the other end of the spectrum, there are defenders of the series, such as John Killinger, who equate Harry with Jesus and derive greater, religious meanings from the tiniest details in the books²³⁷. I think that this should be addressed as seriously as the arguments on *Potter*'s alleged antireligious qualities.

Some of the characteristics linking Jesus and Harry together suggested by, for example, Killinger, do reveal a resemblance between them; attempts to murder both Jesus and Harry are made when they are infants²³⁸ and actually, there are prophecies made about both Jesus and Harry, which Killinger does not mention (because his book came out before *Phoenix*, where the content of the prophecy is revealed) but which would strengthen his argument considerably. Killinger argues along the same lines as I have done in chapter 2.2.3 (Christianity, Witchcraft and Magic) about free will²³⁹, the struggle between good and

²³⁶ Killinger, John. *God, the Devil and Harry Potter. A Christian Minister's Defense of the Beloved Novels*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002. p. 11.

²³⁷ "Perhaps it isn't important, but Voldemort's wand is made of oak, while Harry's is fashioned of holly, a wood often associated with Christ, and even, according to one legend, called 'Christ's thorn' because it sprang from Christ's footsteps on earth, and its thorny leaves and berries like drops of blood were believed to be symbolic of his suffering." Killinger. p. 103.

²³⁸ Killinger, p. 16.

²³⁹ "Throughout the history of the Christian church, there has been an emphasis on the believer's choice as the all-important factor in his or her conversion and transformation as a person." Killinger, p. 95.

bad²⁴⁰, etc, themes that are strongly present both in the Bible and in the *Potter* books. Killinger and others (e.g. Elizabeth D. Schafer²⁴¹), who suggest religious allegories in the *Potter* books are right in the sense that religion has been such a powerful influence in the history of the world that it is bound to have an effect (at least, an unconscious one) on stories told even today. However, even though Killinger does admit the books to contain other mythical structures than Christian, I disagree with him on his insistence on the fact that Christianity is in the *Potter* books “a conscious or unconscious framework for everything.”²⁴² What should be kept in mind when discussing religious issues or allegory in literature is that “all texts in English have inscribed a culture determined in some part by the biblical collection of narratives and saws.”²⁴³ As was already discussed briefly in chapter 2.2.1 (The Absence of Religion), a religious allegory of some kind could quite possibly be found in any randomly selected Western text because of religion’s importance in the history of the world. What I attempt to argue here is that this Christian heritage is only a part of the mythical background rather than the “framework for everything.”

Schafer supports the idea of looking beyond religion when she cites Jung: “Jung argued that the collective unconscious in society is expressed through ‘archetypes’ that embody a primordial, preconscious, instinctual expression of mankind’s basic nature. Because people undergo essentially the same kind of basic experiences, the expression of the collective unconscious is universal.”²⁴⁴ It is this “collective unconscious” that has

²⁴⁰ “The major plot device in the entire Harry Potter saga is the dangerous, abiding menace of the Dark Side.” Killinger, p. 36.

²⁴¹ Schafer, Elizabeth, D. *Exploring Harry Potter*. London: Ebury Press, 2000. pp. 159-173.

²⁴² Killinger, p. 162.

²⁴³ Stocker, Margarita. “Biblical Story and the Heroine” *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility*. Ed. Warner, Martin. London: Routledge, 1990. p. 81.

²⁴⁴ Schafer, pp. 160-161.

created the monomyth²⁴⁵, as which the story of Jesus is also named. The monomyth “is an endlessly variegated structure of fairly constant components”²⁴⁶, and thus, also universal. This is why, in my opinion, it is not be equated solely with the life of Jesus Christ, as is often done. My argument is supported by Gerald Vann’s account of the monomyth:

You find it [“the pattern of the monomyth”²⁴⁷] in nature, in the cycle of day and night, the sun dying and going back to his mother the sea to be reborn the next day at dawn; and in the cycle of the year, high summer followed by the “fall” of autumn and the death of winter and then the rebirth of spring. You find it in myth and folklore and fairy tale and poetry; you find it in dreams; you find it in the teachings of the mystics, in ascetical theology, in the catholic doctrine of purgatory; you find it in the words of Christ when he speaks of the grain of wheat dying or tells Nicodemus that a man must be reborn of water and the Spirit and that if he would find life he must first lose it.²⁴⁸

The story of Harry Potter can said to be yet another version of this myth. However, because Jesus has become such a powerful figure and an idea, even for those who do not actually believe in a Christian God, any tale of a hero is quite easily related solely to Jesus. It is important to note that he is not the only possible, nor the ‘original’²⁴⁹, source.

The comparison between the *Potter* series and the *Narnia* stories has already been made so many times, both by myself in this thesis and by numerous scholars and writers, many of whom I have cited during this research, that I will discuss it only briefly in one paragraph here. The purpose of the comparison between the two series in this section is to suggest that *Narnia* can explicitly be seen as Christian and thus, many of the similarities between Jesus and Harry noted especially by Killinger seem far-fetched to say the least; in

²⁴⁵ “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons to his fellow man.” Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949.

²⁴⁶ Kerr, Hugh T. “The Christ-Life as Mythic and Psychic Symbol” *Numen*, Vol. 9, Fasc. 2. (Sep., 1962), p. 144.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Vann, Gerald. *The Paradise Tree*. Lanham: Sheed and Ward, 1959.

²⁴⁹ Not that one ‘original’ source of the monomyth could ever be defined.

Narnia, Peter and Edmund are called ‘Sons of Adam’, Lucy and Sarah are ‘Daughters of Eve’, Aslan dies and is resurrected and ‘the Deep Magic’ that is the ultimate law in Narnia, is rather easily equated with the power of God. Also, as has been noted by many writers²⁵⁰, C.S. Lewis is known for being a devout Christian. However, as Stephens also notes, the *Narnia* stories and their possible Christian allegories are not likely to open up to children and Lewis himself has “recommended not explaining the Christian symbolism in the Narnia series to children until they were older.”²⁵¹ Once again, the authority of adults over children’s reading and their interpretation of stories emerges; because it is unlikely that children themselves are able to understand the references to ‘higher powers’, books such as Killinger’s are supposedly directed at parents in order for them to convey these Christian ideals to their children.

Killinger’s account of *Potter*’s Christ-like features seems quite forced at times²⁵² (compared, for example, to the *Narnia* series) and thus, somewhat futile; if a reader does not derive the Christian allegories from the *Potter* books him/herself, Killinger’s occasional over-interpretation will possibly have the opposite effect. He also discusses many issues such as love²⁵³ and hope; “just as Jesus was important to his followers in the

²⁵⁰ E.g. Stephens, Rebecca. “Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority” *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p. 53.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² “...in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry lies in a trance or coma for three days following his violent struggle with Professor Quirrell and Voldemort. Is this in itself a symbol of resurrection?” Killinger, p. 154.

²⁵³ “In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry’s power to forgive is tested by his friend Ron’s refusal to believe that Harry didn’t put his own name into the goblet as a candidate for the Triwizard Tournament ... [When] the whole episode is over...the two boys begin to chatter together with the same affection they have always shared. Would it be pushing the envelope too much to say it is reminiscent of the reunion of Jesus and Simon Peter in Galilee after the crucifixion? Peter denied Jesus three times on the eve of his master’s death. Three times, afterward, Jesus asked him, ‘Do you love me?’ And three times Peter answered, ‘Lord, you know I love you.’” Killinger, p. 181.

first century as the symbolic opponent of evil and darkness in the world, Harry is important to the good people who know him in Rowling's fictional world."²⁵⁴ Both love²⁵⁵ and hope are admittedly present in the books and surely are important issues but not exclusively derived from the Christian religion; Killinger *is* pushing the envelope. Furthermore, there are aspects in the *Potter* books which are in direct opposition to the Christ-like picture that Killinger paints of Harry. Probably the most important difference is that Jesus, unlike Harry, acknowledges his destiny as the savior of mankind: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."²⁵⁶ Harry, on the other hand, is doubtful from the very beginning: "Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be?"²⁵⁷ In *Phoenix*, after Sirius has been killed, Harry is overwhelmed by the events that have taken place and lashes out at Dumbledore who is trying to explain the situation to him: "I'VE HAD ENOUGH, I'VE SEEN ENOUGH, I WANT OUT, I WANT IT TO END, I DON'T CARE ANYMORE –"²⁵⁸ Also, 'turning the other cheek', a central concept in the Christian religion, is certainly not practiced by Harry and it would seem quite unrealistic, if he did. One of the most striking aspects of Killinger's book, in addition to its sermon-like text, is his conscious ignorance²⁵⁹ of typology, which is an acknowledged aspect of Bible

²⁵⁴ Killinger, p. 172.

²⁵⁵ What Killinger actually seems to refer to with the word 'love', is friendship in the *Potter* books, as can be seen from the quote above on Harry and Ron. Killinger does mention different forms of love ("agape (generous love)...philia (love for a friend or sibling), ...eros (sexual or acquisitive love)" Killinger, p. 182) but does not go deeper into the subject; he concludes that it is 'agape' ("real love", love that "overcomes all barriers, accepts and dissolves all opposites, embraces all contraries" *ibid.* p. 183) that e.g. Harry and Dumbledore would understand and thus, the *Potter* series is a clear representation of Christian faith. I consider this as rather weak argumentation.

²⁵⁶ John 8:12. *The Holy Bible. New International Version*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980.

²⁵⁷ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997. p. 47.

²⁵⁸ Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003. p. 726.

²⁵⁹ I think it is safe to assume this because Killinger has a doctorate in theology.

studies: “In typology, meaning is conferred retrospectively; those early instances have a provisional status until, at last, a last one confers their ultimate meaning. The emphasis on ‘fulfillment’ in patristic typology is frequent and explicit.”²⁶⁰ This is to say that there is lot of concurrence between the Old and the New Testaments, not least of all in reference to Jesus. The idea that the production of the New Testament is thus quite ‘compromised’, does present people like Killinger with many problems in such argumentation that he uses when defending the *Potter* series with Christian allegories. Considering this, it is not surprising he does not mention it at all.

To conclude my discussion on the alleged Christian aspects of the *Potter* series, I must emphasize that while many features and events of the *Potter* books, and today, many other books for that matter, do bear a resemblance to people and situations on the Bible, they do so mostly because of an unconscious pattern, i.e. ‘out of a habit’, rather than out of religious conviction.

²⁶⁰ Schwartz, Regina. “Joseph’s Bones and the Resurrection of the Text: Remembering in the Bible” *The Book and the Text. The Bible and Literary Theory*. Ed. Schwartz, Regina. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. p. 41.

4. Conclusion

The Harry Potter debate is a microcosm of our cultural debates about how to live with diversity and change.²⁶¹

What many of the discussions in this thesis centre on, is the question of authority. It emerges during the discussion on religion, classical literature, the relationship between fantasy and reality and magic's role in children's literature, to name but a few. However, the issue of authority, or better the fear of losing any of it, is never mentioned by the detractors of the *Potter* series; 'substitute' reasons (that often seem forced) for criticizing the books are given instead of admitting the desire to preserve the status quo, where adults/parents are in control. Ironically, as has been discussed, for example, in connection with the issues of death and a possible afterlife, parents are often not in control of themselves in the sense that they have not formed a clear understanding of difficult issues for themselves, let alone a way to explain these matters to their children. Also, while children's literature is seen by many as a venue for reinforcing traditional values and social norms, at the same time it has great potential for promoting change, especially through fantasy. Elaine Ostry sums up the difficulty of assessing literature for children: "The popular response to Harry Potter seems to reflect a truth that we adults do not want to own up to: when it comes right down to it, we do not really know what we want from children's literature, comfort or change."²⁶²

It could be argued that the *Potter* books provide both: comfort in that we recognize ourselves in Harry and the world of the *Harry Potter* in general and change in

²⁶¹ Stephens, Rebecca. "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority" *Reading Harry Potter. Critical Essays*. Anatol, Giselle Lisa. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003, p. 63.

²⁶² Ostry, Elaine. "Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision of J.K. Rowling's Fairy Tales" *Reading Harry Potter, Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Liza. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p . 90.

taking up issues that are hard to explain and justify: Brycchan Carey goes as far as saying that “the Harry Potter novels are among the most politically engaged novels to have been written for children in recent years”²⁶³ when referring to the antislavery campaign in the books and the way Rowling leaves it to the reader to draw conclusions of the situation rather than providing answers. This is what children’s books should do; make children think for themselves and thus, ‘mold’ them into people who are willing to change things.

Children’s literature is in need of new perspectives on its production, assessment and appreciation and I think that the investigation of the *Harry Potter* series provides tools for such development. What especially should be paid attention to, are the children, who read the books we discuss:

The...failure to take into account the cultural lives of today’s children within the contemporary video culture is breathtaking, and we need always to bear in mind that if teachers are required to teach a literature which *excludes what children actually experience as pleasurable reading*, the consequence is likely to be that prejudice, alienation and cultural fragmentation will be reinforced.²⁶⁴

In my opinion, the issues and problems that have been discussed throughout this thesis demonstrate how children’s books, that are primarily seen as merely entertainment, i.e. “what children actually experience as pleasurable reading”, can include strong social viewpoints, teach lessons and mirror reality in ways that adults can also appreciate. The fact that both children and adults enjoy reading the same books has wider implications as David Gooderham suggests: “the very concept ‘child’, in so far as it is constituted by its

²⁶³ Carey, Brycchan. “Hermione and the House-Elves: The Literary and Historical Contexts of J.K. Rowling’s Antislavery Campaign” *Reading Harry Potter, Critical Essays*. Ed. Anatol, Giselle Liza. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003. p . 105.

²⁶⁴ Watson, Victor. “Innocent Children and Unstable Literature” *Voices Off. Texts, Contexts and Readers*. Eds. Styles, Morag, Bearne, Eve, Watson, Victor. London: Cassell, 1996. p. 10.

differentiation from ‘adult’, must be called into question.”²⁶⁵ The fact that childhood itself seems to be changing constantly, cannot leave children’s literature untouched. This change must include the realization that children are constantly underestimated and thus, my main point remains that which Thomas Day has also emphasized²⁶⁶: “the book was intended to form and interest the minds of children; it is to them that I have written; it is from their applause alone I shall estimate my success.”²⁶⁷

My discussion on the *Potter* series hopefully provides readers, both critical and approving, with a multitude of perspectives on the books and thus, opens some minds to new possibilities of reading the *Potter* novels. Also, my defense of the series’ discussion on difficult issues speaks of the contemporary ideas of ‘children’ and ‘childhood’ which no longer carry such connotations as ‘simple’ and ‘innocent’ on the same scale as in the past; if children are, in fact, constantly ‘growing up faster’, it is necessary that the difficult issues that they are faced with in real life are also discussed in the literature they read. The *Potter* series does this in realistic ways which also leave room for individual contemplation.

²⁶⁵ Gooderham, David W. “What rough beast..? Narrative relationships and moral education” *Journal of Moral Education*. March 1997, Vol. 26, Issue 1.

²⁶⁶ when discussing his text for children dealing with the issue of slavery

²⁶⁷ Day, Thomas. *The History of Sanford and Merton, A Work Intended for the Use of Children*, 6th ed., 3 vols., London: John Stockdale, 1791.

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