

Harry Potter and the Enchantments of Literature

Today, we hear over and over again how young people hate going to school; they hate reading “boring” books. Educators make school laborious and uninteresting by not incorporating texts that appeal to young adults or have relevance in their lives. I babysit children who clamor and shout for story time. I join in my teenage cousin’s rabid consumption of the Twilight series, sighing over the sappy romance of it. I watch my sister flip through her guitar catalogues, reveling in the musical potential, while my brother studiously researches video game cheat codes, online or in books, for access to hidden weapons on *Call of Duty: Black Ops* to gain an advantage over his opponents. Young people do enjoy reading.

Why, then, doesn’t this attitude transfer to the reading they do in school? In Wolk’s (2010) article, “What should students read?” he takes up the argument that teachers should bring what students read outside of class into the classroom. If we as educators take an interest in what students enjoy reading, we can utilize their eagerness about the texts to teach the elements of literature we want them to learn and more. Admittedly, not everything written has the potential to be used as literature for classroom instruction, but many texts outside of the established, worn-out canon do merit further attention, like the Harry Potter series.

J. K. Rowling’s books have been the cause of so much controversy over the last 10 years that they still top the charts for most challenged books; they have also been so successful that the *New York Times* created a separate “children’s” bestseller list to accom-

modate the monopoly. So why not invite *The Boy Who Lived* into our classrooms? J. K. Rowling has masterfully crafted a work of great literature with the richness of language and literary devices. Reluctant students who balk at terms like *allusion* or avoid eye contact at the mention of *themes* in books that they either did not relate to or just could not understand may be able to extract and enjoy these same elements from Harry Potter, simply on the grounds that it interests them. By introducing Harry Potter into the English classroom, teachers will observe their students becoming enchanted by literature and, hopefully, through merely tracing the allusions found in Harry Potter, will choose to pursue the original alluded-to texts.

The Wonder of Allusions

The Wizarding world, forced to go underground with the International Statute of Secrecy in 1692 due to trouble with Muggles (non-magic folk), establishes an apt setting to learn a new curriculum—one of wandlore, care of magical creatures, and the history of magic, vastly different from the Muggle education. In this context, students gain a fresh perspective on learning, one that becomes magical again. The Wizarding world not only holds its own history, it also references ours. The Harry Potter series is rife with allusions to Greek, medieval, and Biblical literature, as well as other folklore. Students will recognize familiar mythological creatures, such as unicorns, goblins, dragons, and giants. Mostly, the associations for good and bad follow the established norm of legends. Unicorns still reign as majestic beings, goblins still scheme with cunning

treachery, and dragons still embody adventure and great danger. However, a deeper study will lead us to notice close ties with ancient texts that we can use to introduce our students to other works, from Ovid to Malory to the Bible.

Greek Mythology

In Greek mythology, Cerberus is a three-headed dog who guards the entrance to the Underworld. When Orpheus visits the Underworld to retrieve Eurydice, he lulls Cerberus to sleep with his gift of music. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Fluffy is a three-headed dog who guards the entrance to an underground maze that leads to the Sorcerer's Stone. Playing a whittled flute that Hagrid gave him, Harry and friends lull Fluffy to sleep and gain entrance to the trapdoor he guards. Another dog in Greek mythology is Sirius; Sirius was the dog of Orion, who the goddess Artemis falls in love with. When Artemis unknowingly kills Orion, she places him in the heavens as a constellation with his faithful dog, Sirius, at his heels. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, we learn that the character Sirius Black is an Animagus (a wizard who can transform into a certain animal at will). His animal form is a dog and, fittingly, he is the faithful friend. As Harry's father's best friend, Sirius soon joins him in death, protecting Harry. Students who do not know the story of Orion may still question the connection between Sirius Black and Sirius satellite radio, whose logo is a dog with a star-shaped eye—Sirius is the Dog Star. This particular example reinforces the idea that understanding literature is relevant to students' lives. They are surrounded by these remnants of thought and beliefs, these connotations, in their everyday lives. Reading Harry Potter brings it all together in the classroom.

The names of some of the characters also pertain to some Greek predecessors. Professor McGonagall, deputy headmistress to Albus Dumbledore and professor of Transfiguration, keeps her class at attention with a stern look. She is set as the rational character against Professor Trelawney, the professor of the mystical art of Divination. Professor McGonagall's first name, Minerva, is the Roman counterpart for the Greek goddess Athena, the goddess of wisdom and craft. Professor Trelawney's first name, Sybil, also derives from an allusion to the ancient gods. Sybil was the name for the high priestesses of Apollo, the

god of prophecy. The school caretaker, Argus Filch, shares his first name with a mythological figure as well. Zeus, who often strayed during his marriage to Hera, became enamored of Io, eventually transforming her into a heifer to protect her from his wife's potential wrath. Always suspicious, Hera sets Argus of a hundred eyes to watch over Io so that she cannot resume her former shape as a beautiful young woman. Likewise, Filch is set over the student body, always watchful to catch students out of line. With his cat, Mrs. Norris, as a second pair of eyes, he sees every misdeed committed by students in the castle.

Nymphadora Tonks, spritely and cheerful for an Auror (dark wizard catcher), reminds the reader of the nymphs that haunt the woods and waters of Greek mythology. As a Metamorphmagus (a wizard who can change appearance at will), she

inherits the gift of the nymphs to change forms. Her name means gift of the nymphs, *dora* being the Latin word for gift. Interestingly, her mother, Andromeda, also has a Greek history. She was the daughter of an arrogant woman, and was sentenced to be punished for it before being rescued by Perseus. In Harry Potter, Andromeda is the sister of Narcissa (who like Narcissus is in love with outer vanity) and Bellatrix, from a highly arrogant "Pureblood" family. She is saved from the same bigotry by her marriage to a Muggle-born man. (Another shape-shifter in Greek mythology was Proteus; Hermione uses a protean charm on coins to announce meetings for their secret gathering.)

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Arthurian Legend

Arthurian legend has become so ingrained in our social consciousness that even though I had never actually read the medieval tale until college, I was able (via Disney, among other sources) to recognize the most important symbols: the sword in the stone, Excalibur, Merlin, Knights of the Round Table, the Holy Grail, King Arthur, Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot. After studying Malory's account of King Arthur, I was able to read *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, if not the entire series, in a new light. As Prinzi (2009b)

asserts in his book, *Platform 9 ¾—Harry Potter & Imagination: The Way between Two Worlds*, “The Wizarding world is an Arthurian world” (p. 86). While I noticed Merlin’s appearance on the Chocolate Frog wizard trading cards in *The Sorcerer’s Stone*, I counted it as a clever insert rather than as part of the richness of Arthurian allusions in the text. However, Prinzi’s (2009b) extensive list of Arthurian influences in Harry Potter (pp. 86–87) certainly merits attention:

- Harry and Arthur were both orphaned, taken from their parents at an early age.
- Both became orphans as a result of some kind of prophecy.
- Both returned to their original “worlds” with no idea of their own special status—Harry as vanquisher of Voldemort and Arthur as heir to the throne.
- Both were protected by a wise old wizard (Dumbledore/Merlin).
- Dumbledore and Merlin were both very powerful and wise, but when they made mistakes, they made monumental ones.
- Accomplished wizards are given the “Order of Merlin”; the secret society of wizards fighting evil (Voldemort) was the “Order of the Phoenix.”
- Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone (and is given Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake), and Harry pulls the Sword of Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat. In both cases, it is their special status that allows them to be able to pull the sword (heir to the throne and “a true Gryffindor”). Later, Ron would also pull the sword out of a small body of water, and Neville will pull the sword out of the hat.
- Both stories employ the symbolism of a griffin as well as a white stag.
- Arthur marries Guinevere; Harry marries Ginny (Ginevra, an alternative spelling of Guinevere).

The Wizarding world is indeed an Arthurian world. Apart from Prinzi’s observations, the young reader will note that the Hogwarts castle itself fits into the medieval setting. The halls are lined with suits of armor; at least one painting of a knight-errant is mentioned, Sir Cadogan; the Great Hall mirrors those of old with a high table set at the front. Also, the wizard trading cards found in the Chocolate Frogs wrappers feature medieval figures (see http://www.hp-lexicon.org/wizards/card_wizards.html). For instance, Merlin

is a popular card and Morgan le Fay, referred to as Morgana, also appears on the cards. Wizard children collect these cards, they expand their knowledge of the world, and our students may follow their example, collecting and sharing allusions and references as if they were valuable trading cards.

Deathly Hallows can be read as an Arthurian quest structure, also. It was customary for knights-errant to take a year to seek adventures in the forests; Harry, Ron, and Hermione leave before their last year of school to seek Voldemort’s Horcruxes (items that hold pieces of a dark wizard’s soul to preserve his immortality), visiting and hiding in various forests around the country. In the legends, errant knights always happened upon some great adventures throughout the forest, meeting giants and fellow knights alike. In *Deathly Hallows*, we find a parallel. As Harry, Ron, and Hermione move through forests hoping to chance upon some clue of hidden Horcruxes and how to destroy them, they find it. They discover the identity of the mysterious “R.A.B.” and manage to obtain the real locket Horcrux with the help of Kreacher, the house elf.

A mysterious symbol found in the book Dumbledore leaves Hermione in his will leads them to both Godric’s Hollow, where Harry’s parents lived and danger awaits, and to Xenophilius’ home, where they learn of the Hallows and again are forced to make a narrow escape. As Harry follows the doe Patronus (King Arthur chases a stag) into the woods, he chances upon the very sword they are looking for, but they must prove they are worthy of obtaining it, which Ron does. Even in the forest, with no signs of civilization, our quest seekers find their way through unexpected adventures; it is an established archetype that we have been taught to recognize, even more so through a pop-cultural transformation of the Arthurian legend.

Christian References

When Harry Potter took his first stroll down Diagon Alley, it brought him back into the wizarding world his parents had inhabited, but in this world, so far, he was just as alone as he was in the Muggle world with the Dursleys. He was still an orphan. On this trip, Hagrid buys Harry a white snowy owl, whom Harry decides to name Hedwig. She is loyal and con-

stant, and always knows where he is, even when he doesn't know himself. Over tedious summers spent with his Muggle relatives, Hedwig provides a source of comfort, a source of hope; she brings good tidings. It comes as no surprise then to find out that in the Catholic canon of saints, St. Hedwig is a patron saint of orphans (Paulsell, "A saint for hard times," 2009). In the beginning of *Deathly Hallows*, Harry is not alone anymore, and he can look after himself. Rowling emphasizes his maturity by having Hedwig give her life for Harry, making it easier for him to escape Voldemort's clutches once again. He is no longer the little lost orphan boy we meet in book one; he will be fine without his patron saint.

Another bird from *Harry Potter* with religious connotations is the phoenix. This mythological bird was said to burst into flames at death and be reborn from its own ashes. Also, according to one website that discusses the meaning behind phoenix tattoos, "Jewish legend describes the phoenix as the one creature that did not leave paradise with Adam, and that its legendary longevity is due to abstaining from the forbidden fruit that tempted the 'first man'" (www.thevanishing-tattoo.com/tattoos_designs_symbols_phoenix.htm). As such, it was a symbol of rebirth and resurrection, of victory over death—a figure reminiscent of Christ rising from the tomb.

As students recall the story of Adam and Eve and their encounters with Satan in the form of the serpent in the garden, a certain scene in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* becomes more poignant. When Harry, representative man, fights the Basilisk, King of Serpents, down in the Chamber of Secrets, he fails; like Adam, he is overpowered by the serpent. In an attempt to combat the Basilisk, he lunges with Gryffindor's sword and a Basilisk fang pierces his arm, injecting deadly venom. Harry feels his life ebbing. Just as God tells the serpent in Genesis 3:15, "he shall bruise thy head, and thou shall bruise his heel," foreshadowing the coming of Christ, Fawkes, the phoenix, fulfills the promise as the Christ figure in the novel. He appears on the scene with a weapon for Harry and disarms the Basilisk by pecking out its eyes, its source of deadly power. But Harry has already fallen, he's already dying from the serpent's sting, and the phoenix must save him with his tears (phoenix tears are the only known antidote for Basilisk venom). As man is saved from death by Christ's suffering, so the passion

of the phoenix also restores Harry to life. Imbued with new life from the Christ-Phoenix, a regenerate Harry then is able to rise victoriously from the depths of the Chamber with Ginny in his arms.

Harry is also given a Christ-like status in the novels. Again, Prinzi (2009b) points out the descent/resurrection scenes that Harry goes through in each book, to name a few: descent through the trapdoor in *Sorcerer's Stone*, awakening *three days later* in the hospital wing; descent into the Chamber of Secrets, saved by Fawkes who carries him out; descent into the Ministry in *The Order of the Phoenix*, where he again is saved by Dumbledore and Fawkes; and descent into Voldemort's cave in *The Half-Blood Prince*, where he is saved from the *Inferi* (corpses

animated by a dark wizard) by red and gold flames (phoenix imagery) conjured by Dumbledore (pp. 108–109). Hopefully, pointing out these parallels in the books will capture a student's attention. Young people like knowing the answers and finding things that they think no one else has. Given just a few examples, they will often try to find the rest.

In the chapter, "The Forest Again," Harry willingly walks into Voldemort's lair. This solitary walk through the forest toward his death is reminiscent of Christ's willingness to walk to his death. While Harry does not bear the weight of other people's transgressions, he is burdened by the need to save them from the evil of Lord Voldemort. By allowing himself to die for others, Harry ensures that Voldemort kills only the part of his soul that he unknowingly left on Harry—a part that would have enabled him to return to life. Just like it had to be Christ who died on the cross, it had to be Harry who died at Voldemort's hands to fulfill the prophecy. Harry's sacrifice physically protects the castle he died for, just as his mother's sacrifice covered his skin so that evil could not touch him, another reference to Christ's sacrifice that spiritually covers the Christian believer.

Conclusion

Students are reading *Harry Potter*. They are being exposed to a wealth of cultural history, even if they

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do not realize it at first. It is our job as educators to bring interest back into learning and equip our students with “literacies” to help them better understand the world we live in and how it came to be. In the textbook, *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* (2009), Nilsen and Donelson quote Van Biema who asks, “Wouldn’t the thrill of recognition have been more satisfying if students knew enough to ask for it on their own?” (p. 97). Young people are naturally inquisitive; as educators we *must* continue to nurture their minds by teaching these valuable popular texts that are relevant and stimulating. I hope I have shown just through following the richness of classical allusions in the Harry Potter series that popular texts can be used to augment the education of young adults, and possibly even pique their interest in reading the original “classics.” We need to keep them enchanted with literature.

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