Equality in the magical world: How *Harry Potter* provides moral guidance for the 'real world'.

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Harold Bloom, in his now famous criticism of J. K. Rowling's first *Harry Potter* novel, asked "is it better that they read Rowling than not read at all?" (Bloom, WSJ, 2000). He later claimed that "(Rowling's) writing was dreadful; the book was terrible" (Bloom, Boston Globe, 2003). If one were to agree with his comments, then there would be little reason for children (or adults) to read the novel; not only would it not be a pleasurable experience, but it would also, according to Bloom's standards, serve no educational purpose.

However, in contrast with Harold Bloom's assessment, this essay will demonstrate, through an examination of the relationship between didactic messages and children's fiction, that *Harry Potter* is, in fact, both educational and enjoyable. It will argue that J. K. Rowling's novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (hereafter referred to as *Harry Potter*), provides the reader with moral guidance on recognized contemporary issues such as bullying and racial and social equality within the framework of an exciting fantasy world. Furthermore, it will show that the novel detracts from overt moralistic preaching. Instead, important didactic messages are disguised within the 'tried and tested' format of the traditional British boarding-school story and adapted for the consumption of a contemporary Western audience.

Whilst Harold Bloom clearly doubts the educational qualities of *Harry Potter*, other critics see 'fantasy' literature as an important sub-genre within children's literature. For it to be effective, however, it needs to be sufficiently believable to engage the reader. Rebecca Lukens, in *A Critical Handbook* (Longman, 1999), claims that, for the reader to accept the "other world" created within the work of fantasy, "this other world requires of the writer an ability to make the imaginary universe so credible, 'so grounded in reality,' … that we wish it were all true…" (Lukens, 21). This essay will show that Luken's comments can certainly be applied to *Harry Potter*. It will demonstrate how the realism of *Harry Potter's* primary world, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and of the novel's secondary world, that which exists outside of the school gates, is so effective and believable that readers, children of all ages and adults alike, willingly 'suspend their disbelief'. As they become fascinated by the fantasy world of the novel and its fictional characters and their various moral dilemmas, the reader acquires moral knowledge and information which is applicable in the world outside of the novel, as outlined in the following paragraph.

Although one might argue that the novel's over-riding theme is the 'timeless' battle between 'good' and 'evil', I will concentrate on the more concrete moral issues which concern the novel's protagonist and main characters. Firstly, I shall address the issue of racial equality, one of the more pronounced motifs within the novel. This issue will then be examined within the broader context of social equality, encompassing notions of class, wealth and gender. Finally, the essay will show how both of these issues converge through the novel's treatment of 'bullying' and its attitude toward other educational issues. At this point it must be stated that, although these three subjects are addressed separately, in order to identify their individual qualities, they are inextricably linked.

Furthermore, this essay will focus primarily on the novel's 'primary' world, that of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and upon specific events occurring within those walls which carry implicit didactic messages. It will identify some of the ways in which Rowling engages the reader with moral issues and how the novel's implicit didactic messages can be seen to have a practical application in the 'real world'.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone is a work of fiction written, primarily, though, not exclusively, for children. As such, many critics would argue that, in order for it to be considered 'good literature', it should contain some form of didactic message[1]. For the purposes of this essay, my working definition of 'didactic' will be aligned to those of Bruno Bettelheim and Perry Nodelman. Bettelheim states that, in addition to entertaining the reader and arousing his curiosity, the work must "stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions…" He claims that children's literature should "give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him" (quoted in: Griesinger, E. 'Harry Potter and the "deeper magic"', 459). Perry Nodelman makes a similar point when he writes: "Good children's books teach valuable lessons about life, but do so unobtrusively. They make learning fun." (Nodelman, 73). He also claims that "anyone who likes to read knows that, whether we are children or adults, we do so

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[1] This is not to say that 'adult literature' does not or should not itself carry didactic messages; there are, of course, many 'adult' texts, most notably of an allegorical nature, which also attempt to do this - Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, to name but three. Few would deny that these are allegorical works which contain implicit didactic messages.

primarily because we enjoy it, not because it's good for us". (Nodelman, 20) The importance of 'fun' and 'enjoyment' cannot be overstated as far as children's literature is concerned. Yes, *Harry Potter* does teach valuable moral lessons, as this essay will demonstrate, but this is not what leads children to choose this novel over any other. They choose it because it is 'fun' to read and because, first and foremost, it brings them pleasure, not because they believe that it will teach them something. Consequently, moral lessons are a by-product of the fictional world which Rowling creates, rather than the foundation on which the fiction is constructed.

From a historical point of view, the didactic messages found in traditional children's literature have frequently been presented in an explicit manner; furthermore, they have often been of an overtly religious nature. For example, in Louise M. Alcott's *Little Women*, many chapters conclude with a moral message. C.S.Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is another text which also presents overt moral messages. These two 'classic' children's texts present didactic messages which are very clearly based on moral standards found in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. In *Harry Potter*, however, the message is not overtly religious. Although Rowling is herself a member of The Church of Scotland and once said "I believe in God, not magic" (Nelson, 2002) she has also commented that "… I never set out to preach…" (Simpson, 1998) and this is evident in the way in which *Harry Potter's* didactic messages are presented.

If the novel is not overtly religious, it does however contain several important Christian symbols. The notion of self-sacrifice, for example, is evident through the acts of Harry's parents, who have previously sacrificed themselves so Harry might live. Furthermore, Ron 'sacrifices' himself in the game of wizard chess (*Stone*, 283) as does Nicholas Flamel, who puts an end to his immortality by agreeing, for the common good, to the destruction of the sorcerer's stone (*Stone*, 297). It is also possible to liken the actions of Dumbledore, McGonagall and Hagrid at the start of the novel to those of The Three Wise Men in the Christian Bible. Instead of watching over the baby Jesus, they watch over the infant Harry.

Although Rowling has never, to the best of the author's knowledge, openly stated that the novel has a moral agenda, she acknowledges that "undeniably, morals are drawn" even if "I never think in terms of What am I going to teach them? Or, What would it be good for them to find out here?" (Simpson, 1998). Even if there is no intentional moral

agenda, there are, however, distinct motifs within the novel which are treated in ways that provide specific advice and guidance to the reader. One of these is the motif of racial equality.

Racial equality

The racial issues within *Harry Potter*, unlike in the non-fictional world, have nothing to do with the colour of one's skin or one's ethnic background but, as Andrew Blake argues, "the questions around bloodedness are analogous to those around contemporary notions of citizenship…" (Blake, 2002, in Chappell, 2008, 288). The notion of 'bloodedness' to which Chappell refers - whether a witch or wizard hails from a 'pure' or 'mixed' wizarding family, is a recurring motif in *Harry Potter*. By highlighting characters' differing attitudes to this notion, the reader's attention is drawn to racial issues that occur in the non-fictional world; in Chappell's words, "Viewing Hogwarts and the teaching/learning of magic as metaphor, the wizarding world becomes a reflection of our own" (Chappell, 292). Hogwarts is a multi-cultural environment; students come from many different ethnic backgrounds and as such, Hogwarts mirrors contemporary British schools, where multi-culturality is now the norm. Having made all students equal, at least in terms of ethnicity, the wizarding race issue is therefore presented as one of fundamental importance and one which affects all students, regardless of their ethnic background.

Differing attitudes to the race issue are, largely, polarized within the two contrasting houses of Gryffindor and Slytherin. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy personify the attitudes of their respective houses. From the very start of the novel it is clear that Harry must make important decisions regarding his stance on the race issue. As he is the protagonist and will inevitably become a role model for some readers, his choices are of critical importance. As Drew Chappell argues, "Harry's worldview is the filter we read the books through" (Chappell, 289). Harry's first meeting with his nemesis, Draco Malfoy, clearly defines the two characters' different attitudes to race and prepares the reader to expect further confrontations between them.

> He turned back to Harry. "You'll soon find out some wizarding families
> are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends
> with the wrong sort. I can help you out there." (…) "I think I can tell who
> the wrong sort are for myself, thanks", he said coolly. (*Stone*, 108-109)

Draco's repeated use of "You" contrasts strongly with Harry's "I" response, setting the two characters apart, even at this early stage; furthermore, Harry's answer, "I think…" shows that his decisions and judgments will be made on the basis of thought and consideration, rather than the preconceived notions that Draco has willingly accepted without challenge. When Draco refers to "the wrong sort", he is implying that he himself is 'the right sort'; by echoing the phrase "the wrong sort", Harry infers that it is in fact wrong to refer to people as 'the right or the wrong sort'. The message here is clear:- that one should make one's own judgments based on knowledge and experience and, crucially, without prejudice. Draco's racist attitude is mirrored in the world outside of Hogwarts by both Mr. Dursley and his son Dudley, only this time of course it is a question of Muggles versus magical types, rather than 'pure-blood' magicians versus 'mixed-blood' magicians. Members of the magical community, and the practicing of magic, which are as distasteful to Mr. Dursley as mixed-blood magicians are to Draco Malfoy, are referred to pejoratively throughout[2], even though Dursley is largely ignorant of what really goes on at Hogwarts and of the magical world in general. It matters not to Mr. Dursley that Harry is not a 'pure' wizard; to him, it is enough that he is a wizard at all and therefore, in his view, "abnormal" (*Stone*, 53). Harry is, therefore, subjected to racial prejudice in both the magic and muggle worlds.

Returning to Hogwarts, at this point in the novel, the characters are yet to be allocated into their respective houses. After they have been 'sorted', it becomes clear that the two houses will represent two completely different approaches to achieving 'greatness' – approaches which will also be reflected in their differing attitudes to the race issue. The Sorting Hat tells us that those students that belong to Gryffindor will be "brave at heart" whilst those in Slytherin "use any means to achieve their ends" (*Stone*, 118). The implicit message here is that it requires bravery (an admirable quality) to be like Harry and come to your own conclusions. It also requires the exercising of personal choice or freewill, as is demonstrated by Harry's own 'sorting':

"…So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and thought, *Not Slytherin,*

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[2] "Good for nothing" (2), "weirdos" (3), "load of old tosh" (56), "CRACKPOT OLD FOOL" (59), "Barking… howling mad" (90), etc.

> *not Slytherin.*"Not Slytherin, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure?
> You could be great, you know, and Slytherin will help you on the way to
> greatness, no doubt about that – no? Well, if you're sure – better be
> GRYFFINDOR!" (*Stone*, 121)

The importance of Harry's decision is emphasized by the italicizing and repetition of "*Not Slytherin*" within Harry's thoughts; he is desperate not to be associated with Slytherin and all that it represents. Again, it is his thinking that differentiates him from Malfoy; Harry "gripped the edges of the stool and *thought*" (my emphasis), indicating a conscious mental process, whilst Malfoy is allocated to Slytherin after "the hat had barely touched his head" (*Stone*, 120), indicating no thought at all on Malfoy's part. The use of upper case characters and the exclamation mark in the Sorting Hat's pronouncement of Harry's membership in Gryffindor also reinforces Harry's strong desire to be associated with the 'good' and 'brave', rather than a house with more dubious qualities. Furthermore, the rhetorical expression "no doubt about that – no?" also underlines Harry's ability to analyse both sides of a problematic situation and to be capable of choosing the 'right' solution. He could also have been 'great' if he had chosen Slytherin, but he does not because membership of that house implies that his greatness would be the result of using negative qualities such as cunning, rather than the positive ones associated with Gryffindor. The message here is clearly that, if one is sufficiently single-minded, one can have a certain influence over one's own destiny – Harry chooses to be part of a house that represents bravery and contains his mixed-race friend Hermione (and subsequently Ron, who is, incidentally, a 'pure-blood' wizard) and willingly disassociates himself from Slytherin, the house which represents prejudice and which contains Malfoy and his 'pure-blood' friends, including his 'henchmen', the sinisterly-named Crabbe and Goyle.

Harry's friendship with Hagrid, who as a half-giant is therefore of mixed blood, is another example of how he freely chooses his own friends, regardless of their background; this again contrasts sharply with Draco Malfoy, who has an inbred hatred of Hagrid and any creature of 'unpure' blood [3]. It is not just Harry and Malfoy who provide racial messages

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[3] Interestingly, Harry's choice of friends also becomes racially open in a more traditional, non-magical way when, in later novels, he has a relationship with Cho Chang, a student of Asian background.

though. Hermione also conveys some very positive messages to the reader. She is herself of 'mixed' blood but shows, through her intelligence, diligence and application to her school work that it is possible for non-'pure-blood' witches and wizards to excel within an educational environment. Equally importantly, she also functions as Harry's moral conscience for much of the novel, advising caution in certain situations before she gradually gets drawn into Harry's world and becomes, as a result, braver and more impetuous herself. When she says to Harry, "So I suppose you think that's a reward for breaking rules?" (*Stone*, 166), her tone is almost that of one of the teachers and yet, only a few pages later, she breaks the rules herself and tells a lie to protect Harry and Ron (*Stone*, 177); by the end of the novel, Hermione has changed considerably as the following comment demonstrates: "Me!" said Hermione. "Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and…" (*Stone*, 287). The message here is, clearly, that sometimes rules need to be broken; like Harry, who is also of 'mixed' ancestry, she believes that loyalty to one's friends is far more important than adherence to any racially-motivated preconceptions.

Critics interested in *Harry Potter* from a biographical point of view will of course relate the novel's fictional events to Rowling's own views on the subject of racial equality or inequality. According to her own website, "the expressions 'pure-blood', 'half-blood' and 'Muggle-born' have been coined by people to whom these distinctions matter…" (www.jkrowling.com). Clearly, these distinctions do not matter to Harry, Ron or Hermione and, as it is possible that readers will identify more with these characters than those on the other side of the racial 'coin', it is this message which is likely to be absorbed, consciously or otherwise, by the reader.

By creating an all-encompassing and, ultimately believable racial conflict within the magical, fictional world of Hogwarts, Rowling does indeed situate her "child protagonists in a fantastical world side by side with present day British society" (Chappell, 281). In this way, racial prejudices are brought to the reader's attention - one of the very real problems which exist in the contemporary non-fictional world. This is of course a world in which magic cannot save them, for in 'reality' it does not exist; the lessons it teaches, however, can be of invaluable assistance in developing an understanding of the flawed nature of racial discrimination.

Social Equality

Any examination of racial equality, whether it is carried out within a fictional, literary world or the 'real world', must also take into account wider aspects of social equality. Racial equality is, after all, just one of many contributory factors that influence our notions of social status and self-worth. Karin Westman supports this view by arguing that "to be 'pure blood' means not to be of pure blood, per se, but to subscribe to a particular set of ideological beliefs based on social class and its concomitant power" (2002, 315). *Harry Potter*, by creating social conflicts in its fictional world, specifically those based on individuals' class, wealth and gender, highlights similar scenarios which also exist in the non-fictional world.

Critics are divided over whether the traditional boarding-school setting of *Harry Potter* is one that perpetuates elitist attitudes or dispels them[4]. On the one hand, critics such as Andrew Blake have criticized J. K. Rowling for having reinvented "that apex of class privilege, the English public school, a literary conceit that problematises (sic)[5] Harry Potter's status as a role model and raises important social questions about the state of Blair's Britain" (quoted in Liddle, The Times, 2007). On the other hand, Christopher Hitchens, in an article written at the time of publication of the final novel in the series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, sees the traditional setting from a different angle:

> …the English school story…was intimately bound up with dreams of wealth and class and snobbery, yet Rowling has succeeded in unmooring it from these considerations and giving us a world of youthful democracy and diversity… (Hitchens, New York Times, 2007)

In contrast to Blake, Hitchens is clearly suggesting that Rowling uses the traditional setting in a new way; by "unmooring" it from its "dreams of wealth and class and snobbery", he suggests that Rowling does not glamourize it through nostalgia. Instead, she uproots it from its traditional associations and uses it as a backdrop against which she can present a more

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[4] Readers interested in critics' attitudes towards the boarding school within literature are referred to N.Duffell's 'The making of Them' (London, 2000), Lana A. Whited's 'Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disaster' (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992) and Julia Briggs et al's 'Popular Children's Literature in Britain' (Farnham, 2008). Readers interested in finding out more about the British boarding school system are referred to T.W. Bamford's 'Rise of the public schools' (London, 1967).

[5] In this instance, (sic) has been inserted by Liddle to indicate what he sees as Blake's incorrect spelling of "problematises", a British English variant of "problematizes."

modern vision of what school *should* be:- an institution which embodies "youthful democracy" rather than one which harks back to old-fashioned notions of class and outmoded educational values.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry certainly reminds us of the type of institution represented in a previous generation of school stories such as Thomas Hughes's '*Tom Brown's Schooldays*'. Hogwarts has many of the characteristics of such public schools – quadrangles, common rooms, dormitories, prefects and a structured house system, for example. The curriculum taught also reminds us of a public school, albeit with a magical perspective. Classic subjects such as Latin, Greek and Algebra are replaced by magical ones such as Transfiguration and Charms; History is replaced by the History of Magic, Science by Potions, and so on. There is also an emphasis on sporting prowess but the traditional public school sports of cricket and rugby are of course replaced by Quidditch. Thus far, Blake's argument appears to hold up. However, there are many other aspects which differentiate Hogwarts from traditional public schools. Firstly, Hogwarts open its doors to students from a wide range of social backgrounds. It is not just a school for the rich but an educational establishment which welcomes all students with 'magical' ancestry; secondly, as previously mentioned, it is extremely multi-cultural. As Hitchens says, it has 'diversity'. Harry is an orphan, Ron comes from a large but poor family and Hermione is from a non-wizarding family. None of these factors prevent them from being successful at Hogwarts. Although Ron only has a moderate level of wizarding talent, he succeeds through persistence and hard work. Hermione is herself a paragon of diligence and Harry proves to be a remarkably talented wizard. The message is that it is the worthy that succeed at school, not just the privileged. Magical ability is more important than bloodline.

Social factors such as wealth, class and gender are present in *Harry Potter* but they are presented as being less important than qualities such as loyalty, bravery and dedication. Attitudes to social equality, like racial equality, are polarized within the two houses of Gryffindor and Slytherin. Differences in wealth, for instance, are displayed through the differing financial situations of the characters of Draco Malfoy and Ron Weasley.

Draco is clearly from a wealthy family. When we first meet him, he is shopping in Diagon Alley, intending to "drag" his parents "off to look at racing brooms" (*Stone*, 77),

surely a luxury item for a first year student. Another reason to assume that Draco comes from a privileged class occurs later in the novel when he, Harry, Ron, Neville and Hermione are punished for their part in the 'escape' of Hagrid's pet dragon, Norbert. When Hagrid explains to them that they will be going into The Forbidden Forest, Malfoy remarks "But this is servant stuff, it's not for students to do" (*Stone*, 250). Through this comment we assume that his family employs servants; this is not only an indicator of a certain degree of wealth but also shows his familiarity with a hierarchical class system.

Ron, on the other hand, is the sixth Weasley child to go to Hogwarts[6] and as such, his family have been forced to make economies, such as homemade Christmas presents and the handing down of clothes and other items from the older children to him: "You never get anything new, either, with five brothers. I've got Bill's old robes, Charlie's old wand, and Percy's old rat" (*Stone*, 100). The conflict between the two characters is introduced at their first meeting on the train:

> "And my name's Malfoy, Draco Malfoy."
>
> Ron gave a slight cough, which might have been hiding a snigger.
>
> Draco Malfoy looked at him.
>
> "Think my name's funny, do you? 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." (*Stone*, 108)

It is also restated later in the novel when Malfoy comments "You're in luck, Weasley, Potter's obviously spotted some money on the ground!" (*Stone*, 223); this latter comment leads, incidentally, to an actual fight between Ron and Malfoy. The character of Draco Malfoy represents an elitist attitude to social relations; he sees himself as a member of a superior class and as such attempts to dominate those whom he considers to be inferior to him. In the first instance cited above, Draco assumes himself to be Ron's superior on purely financial grounds. This is the first time Draco's name is mentioned in full and it carries with it several negative associations. 'Draco' reminds us of 'dragon', a creature usually depicted as evil and destructive, or possibly of Dracula, Bram Stoker's evil creation, whilst the 'mal' of Malfoy

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6 Ginny Weasley will, in subsequent novels, become the seventh.

also suggests something bad (malcontent, malodourous, malefactor, etc.). It is also an unusual and exotic, maybe even a pompous or aristocratic sounding name; this contrasts sharply with the simple, every-day and unpretentious Anglo-Saxon names of Potter and Weasley.

Harry, on the other hand, although he has recently found out that he is rich, at least, in the magical world, does not flaunt his wealth or use it as a basis for claims of superiority. Again, this sets him apart from Malfoy. Recognizing Ron's relative poverty, Harry generously buys an enormous quantity of chocolate and sweets on the train so that he can share them with him (*Stone*, 101). By comparing Draco's attitude to wealth to that of Ron and Harry, an emphatic message is imparted – that no-one is 'better' or 'worse' than anyone else purely because they are richer or poorer.

Malfoy also sees himself as superior in terms of his family background, not just because he is a 'pure-blood' wizard, but because he has a family at all. As he cannot attack Harry on financial grounds as he knows nothing of his financial situation, he uses the fact that he has a (living) family and that Harry does not to attempt to impress his superiority on him. He makes frequent reference to his own father and, in so doing, subtly but cruelly reminds Harry of his own orphancy. At the same time, it is possible that it is here that the character of Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father, also begins to be disliked by the reader, even before we meet him in subsequent novels.

If it is the negative qualities of Draco Malfoy that impart didactic messages with regard to the subject of financial and family equality, then it is certainly the character of Hermione Granger and the qualities that she possesses who fulfils this role on the subject of gender equality. As the main female student character in the novel and one of Harry's best friends, she plays an important role in the presentation of positive, gender-related guidance.

Some critics believe that the character of Hermione in *Harry Potter* is one that perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes. The feminist critic Deborah Thompson, for instance, claims that the novel contains "gendered images more common to the mid-twentieth century than to the twenty-first" (Thompson, 42). Whilst it may be true that Hermione displays several qualities which would be viewed as traditionally feminine (for instance, she exhibits maternal tendencies in her concern for Harry's safety, (*Stone*, 221 and 287)), she does, I believe, display at least as many qualities that would traditionally be viewed as

masculine.

Hermione is, by nature, extremely competitive – an attribute which is, arguably, more readily associated with boys than girls. She wants to be the best student, get the best results and prove that she can do equally as well as those from a non-Muggle background[7]. This competitiveness comes to the fore in the students' first Potions lesson, where she evidently knows the answers to all of Snape's questions and is extremely anxious to demonstrate this (*Stone*, 137-138). Having read all the Hogwarts textbooks before the start of the term, she is keen to demonstrate her knowledge and abilities but this desire manifests itself, initially, as arrogance, another attribute that is more readily associated with male characters[8]. When we first meet Hermione, she is talkative and extremely self-confident:

> I've tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked
> for me. Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a
> surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean,
> it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard – I've learned all
> our course books by heart, of course, I just hope it will be enough – I'm
> Hermione Granger by the way, who are you?"
> She said all this very fast. (*Stone*, 105-106)

Although the content of Hermione's opening speech exudes self-confidence, the manner in which it is performed suggests otherwise. She speaks quickly and there is one very long sentence, extended by the use of hyphens, which suggests that, under this brash exterior, she is, actually, quite nervous. There is also repeated use of the personal pronoun "I", which leads the reader, at this point in the novel, to view Hermione as arrogant and self-interested. As the novel progresses, Hermione's arrogance is 'softened' as she, primarily under Harry's influence, realizes that, sometimes, rules need to be broken. She begins to use her bookish skills for non-academic pursuits. By accompanying Ron and Harry in their adventures she becomes more than just a female 'sidekick'. Admittedly, she is the one who is 'saved' from the troll in chapter 10, but she is not a mere 'damsel in distress'; her very involvement in this

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[7] Both of her parents are dentists (199).

[8] Space restrictions prevent further discussion of this subject here; readers particularly interested in gender issues within *Harry Potter* are referred to Susan Lehr's 'Beauty, Brains and Brawn', (Heinemann, 2001) where such topics are discussed in more depth.

incident earmarks her as a non-typical female character and it is partly her actions (she teaches Ron how to perform the 'Wingardium Leviosa' charm (*Stone*, 171)) that help the three friends escape from this perilous situation. She becomes braver (another quality traditionally associated with boys rather than girls) as the novel progresses but her bravery manifests itself in a cerebral, intellectual manner, rather than in displays of physical prowess.

Harry, for instance, is an accomplished flyer; Hermione is not. Instead, it is her intellectual strength which helps Harry in his adventures and ultimately enables him to save the sorcerer's stone from the hands of the evil Voldemort. Through the application of logical reasoning to decipher the riddle in chapter 16 (*Stone*, 285) she demonstrates that bravery need not just consist of physical fortitude – mental strength and ability are equally as important. As such, Hermione is an inspiration to child readers whose intellectual prowess is greater than their athletic ability[9].

Another way in which Hermione communicates a positive gender-based message to readers is through her role as Harry's moral conscience. Authority figures within Hogwarts are primarily male (the exception being Professor McGonagall[10]) yet it is Hermione who provides ethical guidance to Harry on a day-to-day basis. Dumbledore also serves this function, but he is not involved with this as regularly as Hermione is; she does after all spend much more time with Harry than Dumbledore does. Hermione tries to persuade Harry (and by association, Ron) to stay out of trouble and to be conscientious with their studies, even helping them with their homework: "She would never let them copy ("How will you learn?"), but by asking her to read it through, they got the right answers anyway" (*Stone*, 182). She is a meticulous planner, colour-coding her notes and drawing up study schedules (*Stone*, 228). In so doing, she promotes honesty and diligence, even if she subsequently comes to realize that the 'truth' needs to be 'bent' slightly on occasions: "Ron dropped his wand. Hermione Granger, telling a downright lie to a teacher?" (*Stone*, 177) and "Harry was speechless. Hermione was the last person to do anything against the rules, and here she was, pretending

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[9] To the best of my knowledge, this is an aspect of Hermione's characterization which critics seem to have overlooked. Readers interested in a more in-depth analysis of Hermione are referred to Eliza T. Dresang's article 'Hermione Granger and the Heritage of Gender', which is reproduced in Lana A. Whited's *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter* (Columbia, 2002)

[10] And, in the later novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the Ministry of Magic's 'High Inquisitor', the appropriately named Dolores Umbridge.

she had, to get them out of trouble" (*Stone*, 178). Through her qualities of intelligence, diligence and bravery, Hermione presents several positive didactic messages, suggesting that the reader, male or female, can also succeed, given the correct combination of conscientious study, application and hard work.

The motif of social equality is of profound importance within an understanding of the nature of the didactic messages communicated in *Harry Potter*. The next section will examine how, by placing notions of racial and social equality within a specific, educationally-oriented context, namely, that of bullying, Rowling makes these messages particularly applicable for contemporary Western readers. It will also highlight several ways in which the concept of 'education' is presented to the reader.

Bullying and education

Webster's Dictionary defines 'bullying' as: "the act of intimidating a weaker person to make them do something" (www.websters-online-dictionary.org). As such, bullying is actually a practical application of social elitism. It presupposes that one party is stronger than the other and this belief manifests itself in one party attempting to dominate, ridicule or subordinate the other. The concepts of strength and weakness are, in this context, not purely physical attributes; they represent the feelings of superiority or inferiority which are essential to the concept of elitism. Although 'bullying' does not exist exclusively in schools, it is surely this context with which it is most frequently associated. The bullying motif within *Harry Potter* serves an important purpose. Not only does it highlight the 'wrongness' of bullying per se – an important issue in its own right, it also serves to remind us of similar types of social inequalities which exist outside of the fictional world of Hogwarts – inequalities brought about by one party attempting to exert their 'dominance' over another. Outside of Hogwarts these inequalities may take the form of another kind of 'bullying', perhaps intimidation in the workplace, racism or sexual harassment. *Harry Potter* carries the message that any such attempts at 'dominance' are wrong, whatever form they may assume.

As with the previously mentioned motifs of racial and social equality, bullying in *Harry Potter*, and its purveyors and recipients, are polarized within the houses of Slytherin and Gryffindor. Slytherin's representative, Malfoy, usually assisted by his thugs, Crabbe and Goyle, is the instigator of bullying activities and the recipients are members of Gryffindor

house. Some of the more memorable instances of bullying in the novel involve Malfoy and Neville Longbottom (another character, incidentally, with a pronounced Anglo-Saxon surname). Like Harry, Neville is an orphan[11] and is, as such, a natural target for Malfoy's malicious bullying. It is, however, his timidity, clumsiness and lack of self-confidence, as much as his 'inferior' family status, which single him out for attack. Although later novels will track his development into one of the series' major heroic characters, his first year at Hogwarts is plagued by accidents and mishaps which often cause him injury. Malfoy seizes upon Neville's apparent 'weakness' and often makes him the subject of his bullying. Malfoy's actions are a throwback to the 'fagging' system[12] which was once, apparently, rife in British public schools, even if these two students are the same age as each other. However, because Neville stands up to his aggressors, rather than meekly submitting to them, he presents a positive message to readers – that bullying can be fought and indeed that it is those 'doing' the bullying who are 'weak' and not the actual victims.

The first instance of Malfoy picking on Neville occurs shortly after he has fallen off his broomstick and suffered a broken wrist, when Malfoy steals his 'remembrall'. This cannot, however, be technically classed as 'bullying', as it is not an action directed specifically at Neville (he is not there himself when it happens). It is an indicator though that Malfoy sees himself as superior to Neville and subsequent events confirm this. Ironically, it is Malfoy's bullying that starts the transformation process in Neville. After Hermione releases him from the Leg-Locker Curse performed on him by Malfoy, Neville confronts his friends and, in so doing, himself, for the first time on the subject of bravery:

> "I don't want more trouble", he mumbled
>
> "You've got to stand up to him, Neville!" said Ron. "He's used to walking all over people, but that's no reason to lie down in front of him and make it easier."

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[11] We learn later, in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, that Neville's parents are not actually dead but insane, as a result of receiving the Cruciatus curse.

[12] For readers unfamiliar with this term, 'fagging' was a traditional practice in British boarding private schools whereby younger students were required to act as personal servants to the most senior students. For more information, please see the article 'Education: Eton Bids Farewell to Fagging' in Time, 26/5/80.

> "There's no need to tell me I'm not brave enough to be in Gryffindor,
>
> Malfoy's already done that," Neville choked out. (*Stone*, 218)

The verbs "mumble" and "choke" accentuate Neville's feeling of low self-worth at this point. They both imply a small sound and at this moment, Neville does indeed feel very small. Malfoy has made him feel inferior. Ron's response is one that suggests Neville should make himself larger and become active, by standing up, rather than remaining passive and lying down. Fortunately for Neville, he has friends who will give him good advice; the message here is that one should not be a victim and that it is important to listen to your friends in difficult situations.

Malfoy's bullying is often verbal, rather than physical. He avoids physical confrontations unless he has Crabbe and Goyle with him to provide a physical threat – the midnight duel with Harry (ch. 9), to which he fails to turn up, is a prime example of this. Instead, he attempts to intimidate those he sees as 'weaker' than himself by insulting them. An excellent example of the motivations that lie behind his bullying can be found in chapter thirteen, during the Gryffindor vs. Hufflepuff Quidditch match:

> "You know how I think they choose people for the Gryffindor team?"
>
> (…)"It's people they feel sorry for. See, there's Potter, who's got no
>
> parents, then there's the Weasleys, who've got no money – you should
>
> be on the team, Longbottom, you've got no brains." (*Stone*, 223)

Malfoy makes clear the grounds of his prejudices here, assuming himself to be superior to the three other students. Although Neville still "stammered" his response, (another 'small' sound) he has at least taken a small step in the right direction as he actively "*turned* in his seat to face Malfoy" (my emphasis) rather than just passively accepting Malfoy's slur. His opinion of his self-worth has also increased as he tells Malfoy that "I'm worth twelve of you" (*Stone*, 223). By the end of the novel Neville's change in attitude does of course pay dividends for it is his standing up to his friends that earns Gryffindor the extra ten points which secures victory for them in the House Cup. As Dumbledore says, just before he awards Neville the points: "There are all kinds of courage" (*Stone*, 306). Once again, as in the case of Hermione, the message is that bravery does not necessarily just equate to physical actions – it can also show itself in mental qualities such as self-respect and belief in one's own worth.

The inclusion of the motif of bullying within *Harry Potter* is not just a representation of one of the practical applications of social elitism, it is also one of several comments which Rowling makes on the subject of education in general. The novel also presents ideas on, for instance, the practicality of subjects taught and the concept of student punishment. These didactic messages appear to be aimed as much at adults (and, specifically educators) as they are at children.

Although the novel is set in an 'old-fashioned' school, it is 'progressive' in so much as the subjects taught give the students a practical, rather than just a theoretical grounding in areas which they will need in their post-school life. Harry and the other students learn skills in their first year at Hogwarts such as Transformation, Herbology and Charms which, although grounded in 'magical theory', are put to practical use in the novel. This contrasts with the description of Dudley Dursley's prospective private school in the Muggle world:

> That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family
> in his brand-new uniform. Smelting's boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange
> knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly
> sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking.
> This was supposed to be good training for later life. (*Stone*, 32)

The narrator's description of Dudley here is clearly ironic. Dudley's appearance is ludicrous – the wearing of brightly coloured tailcoats and knickerbockers would be extremely embarrassing for an eleven year-old, anywhere outside of an institution where they were 'de rigeur'. Maroon and orange are also two colours which particularly do not complement each other, making the description even more vivid. It is however Dudley's "knobbly stick" which provides the most telling message. Unlike Harry, who uses a wand in his studies – something that has a very real practical application, Dudley's stick serves no practical purpose whatsoever. It is nothing more than a tool with which to bully other students. Even the school's name, "Smelting", which is very similar to 'smoting', implies physical violence. Through this ironic tone, which is especially evident in the last sentence of the passage just quoted, the narrator clearly suggests that some of the traditions of old-fashioned public schools, such as the one Dudley is about to attend, have no place in contemporary education.

The idea of education having a practical application is, incidentally, continued in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* when Dolores Umbridge states that "…it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about." (*Phoenix*, 2003, 243). Again, the tone here is ironic and infers that "theoretical knowledge" and "examinations" are *not,* in the narrator's opinion, "what school is all about." Whilst the subjects taught at Hogwarts could not exactly be said to be 'vocational', there is a definite implication that theoretical tuition must be combined with the opportunity for practical application of the knowledge gained.

Harry Potter also advocates a practical approach to student punishment. As previously mentioned, when Harry, Hermione, Ron and Neville are punished, along with Draco Malfoy, for their involvement in the release of Hagrid's pet dragon Norbert (ch. 15), they are assigned a practical punishment, rather than lines, which Malfoy expects. This is another idea which is addressed in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.* Not only does Dolores Umbridge force Harry to write out "I must not tell lies" during his detention, (*Phoenix*, 2003, 274) but she makes him write it with a quill which inscribes his words into his hand in blood – a painful, rather than instructional, experience. There is a clear message in both these examples that corporal punishment, along with any punishment which serves no practical or instructive purpose, is out of place in a contemporary educational situation.

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In summary, *Harry Potter*, through its motifs of racial equality, social equality and bullying, presents the reader with important didactic messages which have a practical usage in the non-fictional world. By disguising the messages within the context of a captivating, magical world, they are absorbed at the same time as the exciting fantasy tale is enjoyed. In the words of Courtney B. Strimel: "through identification with Harry and his friends, young readers may come to terms with the terrors in their own lives and the ways that adults respond to them." (Strimel, 2004, in Chappell, 2008, 291). Although the scope of this essay prevents it, an interesting and potentially revealing area for future research would be the extent to which the didactic messages in the novels change or develop as the characters get older and discover new 'terrors' in their lives. The impact of sexuality on the characters, for

instance, and how guidance is offered to the reader on this and other 'adult' themes could prove enlightening. By looking at the later novels in the series, it may be possible to address, for example, the extent to which the didactic messages are modified to reflect the characters' changing personal situations and their relationships with each other. Research may also reveal that the messages are presented in a different manner as the characters mature in to young adults. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to look at the different critical responses to the later novels and to investigate whether there is a change in critics' attitudes to *Harry Potter* as the series progresses.

Anthony Holden is not himself positively disposed towards the *Harry Potter* series:- he describes Rowling's story-lines as "predictable" and the suspense as "minimal", (Holden, The Observer, 2000). However, his description of children's literature as "the invention of a captivating alternative world in which, at its best, home truths about adult behavior are glimpsed through the eyes of innocence" (Holden, 2000) is one which can be applied to *Harry Potter*.

In *Harry Potter*, there is, as I hope to have demonstrated, "a captivating alternative world" which does indeed offer "home truths" on the subjects of racial equality, social equality and bullying – subjects which can be related to social situations in the non-fictional adult world. Time will tell whether *Harry Potter* can be described as a 'classic' of children's literature or not. Its popularity today, which is nothing short of phenomenal, may or may not stand the test of time. Its didactic messages however, and the magical world in which they are presented, provide a solid basis from which to contradict Harold Bloom's claim.

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