

## **From Convention to Insurgency: JK Rowling's Critique of Childhood Innocence in the Harry Potter Series**

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Rowling's Harry Potter series, though often categorized as fantasy, would be more profitably viewed as a generic hybrid, blending elements of fantasy, social realism, satire, and principally, mystery. Rowling's ability to create suspense, both within individual works and across the series as a whole, helps to explain the lasting popularity of the novels and the veritable frenzy of speculation that occurs as readers await the midnight release of each subsequent installment.

Central to the mystery is Harry Potter, whose first eleven years are characterized by faint glimmerings of a previous existence far from his aunt and uncle's mundane suburban home. Dreams of flying motorcycles, fuzzy memories of a violent struggle ending in a flash of green light, and other inexplicable phenomena, including the ability to communicate with snakes — all seem to point to an exciting past, just beyond Harry's reach. Although he believes himself to be an unremarkable boy, Harry soon learns that he is the most well-known citizen of a world about which he knows nothing. In this respect, Harry is the quintessential *innocent*. Through his wide-eyed exploration of wizard society, Harry draws the reader into Rowling's fictive reality, a highly structured domain in which information is a valuable and an evasive commodity.

In an essay concerning Rowling's treatment of epistemology, Lisa Hopkins observes that "knowledge, which is crucial to [Harry's] survival, must always be acquired slowly, painfully, and over a period of time" (25). Thus, while Harry may, in the opinion of Hogwarts' Sorting Hat, have a "nice desire to prove [him]self" (SS 131), his lack of information regarding magical society renders him dependent upon adults, most notably upon Professor Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who seems quite eager both to perpetuate Harry's innocence and to orchestrate the manner in which Harry gains access to sensitive information. Within the narrative framework of the series, Dumbledore's reticence furthers the plot and enhances the reader's enjoyment of the mystery; after all, an implicit feature of the mystery genre is the uneven power relationship between those individuals who possess key information and those individuals who attempt to uncover it. Given that young readers of the Harry Potter series are likely to experience daily conflicts with adult authority regarding access to knowledge, the appeal of the series rests upon Rowling's interest in childhood innocence, a concept with which her intended audience is only too familiar.

The narrative arc regarding childhood innocence begins in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, when Harry asks Professor Dumbledore to tell him the truth about his background. Dumbledore becomes guarded, noting that the truth "is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution" (SS 298). When Harry presses the point further, asking why he is the target of Voldemort's wrath, Dumbledore replies, "Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day...put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older...I know you hate to hear this...when you are ready, you will know" (SS 299). From this starting point,

Rowling returns repeatedly to the theme of childhood innocence, with a particular focus on these three questions:

- What motivates adults to perpetuate the notion of childhood innocence?
- What dangers arise from preventing a child's access to information about the adult world? and
- What insights might readers derive from a consideration of the way adults struggle with the concept of childhood innocence?

In order to address each of these questions in turn, it would be useful first to examine the history of the term "childhood innocence." According to researchers such as Phillippe Ariès and Henry Jenkins, the concept of "childish innocence" entered our vocabulary as the result of economic and political changes that occurred in Europe and the New World during the Enlightenment (Ariès 45). Members of the bourgeois class recognized early on that the transition towards representative democracy and industrial capitalism depended upon the existence of an educated populace. For this reason, the sanctity of childhood as a site for social instruction gained unprecedented cultural currency. Prior to this era, children had been an integral part of the adult world. Through their employment as farm workers, apprentices, and servants, they were privy to adult discourse and were expected to exhibit adult behavior (45). However, the passage of mandatory education and child labor laws ensured that children were increasingly to be found in the classroom rather than in the factory or in the fields. In this way different behavioral codes and expectations for children emerged, solidifying the divide between the realm of childhood and the realm of adulthood. According to social historian Stephen Kline, throughout this transitional period

children were being excluded more and more from the crucial arenas of life and the inherent conflicts and struggles that had shaped so much of the rest of history. They were similarly being denied the value and power such participation might bestow. (98)

The philosophers of the Romantic era, most notably Rousseau and Emerson, also shaped modern attitudes toward childhood. Their view that children were "pure and innocent beings, descended from heaven and unsullied by worldly corruption," added credence to the idea that childhood should inhabit a separate sphere from that of adulthood (Calvert 152). As historian Hugh Cunningham notes, "the more adults and adult society seemed bleak, urbanized, and alienated, the more childhood came to be seen as properly a garden, enclosing within the safety of its walls a way of life which was in touch with nature" (43).

In the modern era, childhood has become, in the words of sociologist Nikolas Rose, "the most intensively governed sector of personal existence," as adults attempt to protect children's innocence by monitoring and carefully shaping their development (88). The emergence of children's literature as a distinct genre arose, in part, out of this impulse to regulate the information flow from adults to children, an impulse that has become so much a part of Western culture that the overwhelming majority of children's book authors take for granted their function as moral guardians and cultural gatekeepers. Viewed from this perspective, children's literature has been correctly classified as a conventional genre which, according to critic Roberta Seelinger Trites, "is designed to teach adolescents their place in the power structure" (480). Those few authors who have

used their novels to question the usefulness of a concept such as childhood innocence are more likely to be censored and, not surprisingly, to be the favorites of young readers. I would argue that JK Rowling, following in the example of such authors as Mark Twain, Judy Blume, and Lois Lowry, is one such rebellious author. Her novels have an insurgent quality insofar as they question the status quo. Attempting to explain the popularity of the Harry Potter series by focusing exclusively on Harry's epic battle with Lord Voldemort misses the point; it is Harry's quotidian struggle to cast aside innocence and naiveté that best explains his enduring appeal to young readers.

In order to explore the trope of childhood innocence, Rowling traces the motivation of three adult characters, all of whom attempt to keep vital information from Harry Potter. The first, Albus Dumbledore, venerable headmaster at Hogwarts, acts *in loco parentis* for all of the students, but he demonstrates a special interest in the welfare of the orphaned Harry Potter. During the first war against Voldemort, Dumbledore witnessed a prophecy that predicted the birth of a child who would possess "the power to vanquish the Dark Lord" and who would be marked by Voldemort as his rival (*OotP-US* 841). When Voldemort murders the Potters and tries to murder their son Harry, Dumbledore realizes that Harry meets the specifications of the prophecy. Unfortunately, the prophecy also indicates that Harry's destiny would continue to be linked to that of Voldemort. The phrase "either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives," seals Harry's fate (*OotP-US* 841). Thus, moments after the attack on the Potters, Dumbledore designs a plan to shield Harry from harm and to afford him the best chance of surviving his future confrontation with Voldemort.

One aspect of Dumbledore's plan involves providing Harry with abundant information regarding the mechanical aspects of magic. Beyond the standard curriculum that includes Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, Herbology, and Divination, Harry learns a number of advanced skills from his professors. Dumbledore teaches Harry the secret behind the Mirror of Erised and provides him with James Potter's old invisibility cloak, a garment that enables Harry to explore the Restricted Section of the library in his quest for information regarding the origins of the Sorcerer's Stone, a key to the plot of the first novel. During his third year, Harry attends a special tutorial with Professor Lupin that enables him to perfect the Patronus Charm, which he uses to defend himself against the Dementors of Azkaban. Even professors who loathe Harry are encouraged to provide him with valuable instruction. Barty Crouch, Jr., masquerading as Mad-Eye Moody, may not have the best motives for teaching Harry how to block the Imperius Curse or for helping him to meet the challenges of the Triwizard Tournament, but the information Harry learns does help in his confrontation with a reanimated and vengeful Lord Voldemort. A year later, Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape, though unpleasant, provide Harry with valuable insight into his parents' schooldays, as well as an understanding of the principles of mind control.

The other part of Dumbledore's original plan involved informing Harry about the contents of the prophecy so that he would understand his destiny. However, when answering Harry's questions after the young wizard's first encounter with Voldemort, Dumbledore tells himself that "the knowledge would be too much" for Harry to bear "at such a young age" (*OotP-US* 838). This feeling only intensifies during the intervening

years, so that Harry remains ignorant — innocent, if you will — well into his middle teens. As Dumbledore tells him later,

I cared about you too much.... I cared more for your happiness than your knowing the truth, more for your peace of mind than my plan, more for your life than the lives that might be lost if the plan failed. In other words, I acted exactly as Voldemort expects we fools who love to act. (*OotP-US* 838)

In an essay on information and control in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Jennifer Flaherty observes that Dumbledore's reluctance to tell Harry the truth "is in keeping with the tendency among the adults in the book to equate ignorance with safety, believing that children will be kept from harm if they are kept from knowledge" (101). Like Professor Dumbledore, Molly Weasley, motivated by fear and love, subscribes to this idea. During the first war, she lost her relatives, Gideon and Fabian Prewett, and she fears losing her loved ones in the wake of Voldemort's return. Harry bears witness to Mrs. Weasley's anxiety, when he finds her collapsed in the drawing room at Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, attempting to rid the house of a Boggart that manifests itself into her greatest fear:

[The Boggart turned into Bill's body], spread-eagled on his back, his eyes wide open and empty. Mrs. Weasley sobbed harder than ever.... Crack. Mr. Weasley's body replaced Bill's, his glasses askew, a trickle of blood running down his face.... Crack. Dead twins. Crack. Dead Percy.... Crack. Dead Harry.... (*OotP-US* 176)

Thus, when Mrs. Weasley schools Harry's godfather, the more permissive Sirius Black, in the importance of maintaining childhood innocence, reminding him that "Dumbledore must have had his reasons for not wanting Harry to know too much," she is really trying to forestall the awful truth (*OotP-US* 90).

Although Professor Dumbledore and Molly Weasley utilize the concept of childhood innocence to justify repressive actions, Rowling invites the reader to interpret their behavior as the result of a deep love for the children in their care. As such, Rowling implies that though misguided, their desire to perpetuate innocence is understandable. However, in Dolores Umbridge, Rowling creates a character whose motivation is not love, but power. Although Professor Umbridge claims that "the education of young witches and wizards [is] of vital importance" (*OotP-US* 192), she attempts to purge the Hogwarts curriculum of any instruction that prepares students to practice defensive magic in the adult world — to do so would be to admit that Voldemort had returned and that he represented a genuine threat to the safety of the magical community.

In addition to patronizing the senior students by calling them "boys and girls" and promising that their lessons will revert to "age appropriate levels," Professor Umbridge takes great pleasure in enforcing the doctrine of childhood innocence through discipline (*OotP-US* 239). As Jennifer Flaherty points out, Umbridge sees Harry as "an insubordinate child who has the audacity to challenge the Ministry of Magic. She is able to convince herself that by persecuting Harry and restricting the education that the children receive at Hogwarts, she is protecting 'Ministry security'" (95). Professor Umbridge's employer, Cornelius Fudge, shares her desire to control the children, and in a

projection fantasy laced with paranoia, actually allows himself to fear a rebellion by Hogwarts' students more than he fears the rise of Voldemort.

The attempts to control Harry's access to information, regardless of motivating factors, produce dangerous results. During his first year at Hogwarts, Harry's status as an uninitiated wizard tempers his desire to learn more about his past. Simply put, Harry does not yet know enough to discern whether or not he is being deprived of valuable information. When he joins with Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley in an effort to protect the Sorcerer's Stone, Harry actually celebrates what he believes to be Dumbledore's willingness to provide advanced instruction. As he tells his friends,

“He's a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he more or less knows everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help. I don't think it was an accident that he let me find out how the [Mirror of Erised] worked. It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could....” (*SS* 302)

At first glance, it is easy to understand how Harry might believe that, unlike most adults, Dumbledore has faith in the ability of young people to handle sensitive information. However, while Harry is willing to accept Dumbledore's judgment that he is too young, at age eleven, to learn the truth about his connection with Lord Voldemort, he becomes increasingly frustrated by his lack of knowledge. In the absence of any concrete information, Harry develops an identity crisis that manifests itself during his second year, when he fears that his ability to speak Parseltongue marks him as the Heir of Slytherin. Voldemort's subsequent claim that “there are strange likenesses between [the two of us]” (*CoS-US* 317) only adds to his anxiety.

By the time he is fifteen, Harry has witnessed Voldemort's return and has discovered firsthand that Voldemort plans to kill him. Harry is understandably shocked, therefore, when Professor Dumbledore distances himself and remains reluctant to share information with Harry regarding the secrets of his past or the war plans of The Order of the Phoenix. Devotees of the Harry Potter series have coined the phrase “CAPS LOCK!HARRY” in reference to the diatribe that Ron and Hermione endure when Harry arrives at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, after a summer in exile at the Dursleys' house, without access to information. Feeling that Dumbledore has favored everyone but himself with news of the war effort, Harry shouts his resume, at the top of his lungs:

“I'VE HANDLED MORE THAN YOU TWO'VE EVER MANAGED AND DUMBLEDORE KNOWS IT — WHO SAVED THE SORCERER'S STONE? WHO GOT RID OF RIDDLE? WHO SAVED BOTH YOUR SKINS FROM THE DEMENTORS?...WHO HAD TO GET PAST DRAGONS AND SPHINXES AND EVERY OTHER FOUL THING LAST YEAR? WHO HAD TO ESCAPE FROM HIM? ME!... BUT WHY SHOULD I KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON? WHY SHOULD ANYONE BOTHER TO TELL ME WHAT'S HAPPENING?” (*OotP-US* 66)

Although Ron and Hermione are able to convince Harry that they are equally uninformed regarding the inner workings of The Order, Harry's persistent lack of knowledge

encourages him to maintain an immature and even careless attitude, towards those most interested in his welfare. For instance, by nursing a childish grudge against Professor Snape and putting little effort into his Occlumency lessons, Harry provides Voldemort with increasingly easy access to his mind.

Indeed, the most serious consequence of Harry's innocence is that it renders him vulnerable to manipulation by Lord Voldemort, who exploits Harry's desire to obtain knowledge by using a false vision to trick him into entering the Department of Mysteries and finding the prophecy that spells out their destiny — the prophecy about which Harry is entirely unaware. As Dumbledore explains after-the-fact, "If I had been open with you, Harry, as I should have been, you would have known a long time ago that Voldemort might try and lure you to the Department of Mysteries, and you would never have been tricked into going there" (*OotP-US* 825–826). The knowledge that Sirius Black dies in the attempt to rescue Harry only underscores the psychic damage caused by keeping Harry innocent of the truth.

Albus Dumbledore's apology to Harry, which extends beyond 20 pages of text, does much more than resolve plot points; it also includes a very direct critique of childhood innocence. As the lengthiest *mea culpa* in children's literature, it serves what I believe to be Rowling's ultimate purpose in directing attention to the theme — her desire for readers to think carefully about the power relationships that occur between children and adults.

While the children who read the Harry Potter series may have no trouble identifying with Harry's frustration over being kept from adult information, they also, like Harry, do not always possess the ability — or the inclination — to view things from the perspective of authority figures. The poignancy of Dumbledore's confession, the tears he sheds based upon the full import of Harry's destiny, and the clear desire he has to protect Harry from pain combine to encourage young readers to feel empathy for an adult. They are shown that adult motivation is often complex and goes well beyond a simple desire to exert control. Moreover, young readers are introduced to the idea that childhood innocence may have some benefit to them. For instance, at one point in the interchange between Harry and Dumbledore, the younger wizard is galled when Dumbledore "buries his face in his long-fingered hands" because "this uncharacteristic sign of exhaustion or sadness" suggests Dumbledore's frailty (*OotP-US* 834). Commenting on this scene, critic Donna C. Woodford argues that prior to this point, Dumbledore "seemed god-like and invincible, the wise old man who, it seems, can guide Harry through the tasks he faces. He is the only one that Voldemort ever feared, and he is the most powerful wizard alive. His confession at the end of book five, however, reveals that he is not infallible" (71). Even though adolescents need to overcome innocence in order to mature, it is nonetheless a frightening prospect. Harry's realization that it is his responsibility alone to vanquish Voldemort is both empowering and terrifying. While he would certainly not wish to remain an innocent, he realizes that maturation comes at a cost.

Dumbledore's revelations also have the potential to impact Rowling's *other* intended audience for the Harry Potter series — adults. Consider, for example, Dumbledore's assessment of his own fallibility when he tells Harry that he has made "an old man's mistakes[:]. . . I see now that what I've done, and not done, with regard to you,

bears all the hallmarks of the failings of age. Youth cannot know how age thinks and feels. But old men are guilty if they forget what it was to be young...I seem to have forgotten lately” (*OotP-US* 826). Here, Rowling invites older readers to practice empathy, as well, by remembering that young people are usually quite capable of handling sensitive information. The concept of childhood innocence encourages adults to ignore the fact that maturity cannot be achieved without shifts in status. By focusing so intently over the course of five novels on the negative effects of childhood innocence, Rowling gives voice to young readers’ desire to be treated with respect and trust, and she identifies herself as an “insurgent author,” one who views children’s literature as a platform for social and cultural criticism.

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