

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

Harry Potter's Simultaneous Existence with the Past, the Present and the Future

The arts, and those involved with the arts, as Rick Gekoski says, "do not like to be told what to do, whether by people or by formula" (Gekoski). Gekoski is a rare book dealer, at times a broadcaster and an enjoyable writer to read. Defining what a great book is, in an arena of artists who don't like guidelines defining their work, is rather like facing a crazed lion who hasn't eaten in several days: ridiculous and dangerous. Rarely do judges who award book prizes ever unanimously agree on a "best book", and yet the question is asked again and again: What makes a book a literary great? Some ingredients that Gekoski suggests contribute to the creation of a masterpiece include a high quality of language, universality, memorableness, re-readability, complicated themes and details, and a feeling that the way one views the world has shifted slightly, whether in specific areas or as a whole (Gekoski). However in his article, "What's the Definition of a Great Book", Gekoski animates that he, as an artist (as well as his fellow artists), "often rel[ies] on intuition, particularity, taste, and an individualized critical eye..." He makes it clear that it is dangerous to apply formulaic criteria when judging books because these guidelines will never entirely work. Great books are never identical, they cross genres and styles, themes and time periods. Yet there *are* great books out there. Books *do* stand out from the crowd. And one particular example is not only a book, but a series; one which is known across oceans.

The Harry Potter series has captured audiences worldwide and is up for debate on becoming a serious achievement in the literary world. J.K. Rowling built her stories in a fantasy world and in the freedom of fantasy stories Rowling has created spells, potions, creatures and complicated magic. However, in this abstract genre and in Rowling's imagination there are undercurrents to the story that come from a place of reality. Within the magical realms, within the "make-believe", there *are* truths to the story that reflect reality; truths that reflect powerfully

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

familiar themes of stories throughout history and truths about what speaks to people who live at the time the stories are published. Harry Potter will become a literary great because the books reflect a moment in our history that gives substantial insight into how our world is operating today and this insight is layered and supported by surrounding elements of timelessness. Unfortunately there aren't flying broomsticks, spells, witches and wizards in our world, like there are in Harry's. The truths aren't literal, but there are truths and insight hidden barely beneath the surface of Harry's magical world.

One tangible example of finding truth behind the fantasy, of building a bridge of connection, is the reality of an audience being able to connect with the characters in the story. The audience *feels* for Harry during the dismal days with the Dursley's, particularly emphasized with the image of Harry's birthday being ignored: "Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger...He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursley's would remember at all." ("Sorcerer's Stone" 45). How could we, as an audience, feel for those characters if there weren't undercurrents to the characters and the story that connected to our own lives, reactions and relations to the world around us? Harry's reality of being neglected, cold, hungry; they are all very real things. One can't feel emotional for something that has absolutely no relevance to one's life and no realm of context. Fantasy novels, although made up, come from a human mind that lives within a reality and therefore can't help but "taint" their stories with the environment from which they come.

In chapter three of Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry runs away from the Dursleys, a well depicted representation of a middle class suburban family trying their very hardest to be normal. After one fateful dinner party accident, Harry inflates his verbally abusive Aunt Marge into what resembled a "monstrous balloon" ("Prisoner of Azkaban" 29). Harry, fresh in his rage from the insults against his deceased parents, packs his trunk and leaves the Dursley's despite Uncle Vernon's bellowing for him to stay and deflate Aunt Marge. Instead

Meg John

English 105: Harry Potter

Final

Harry exclaims, “‘She deserved it,’ ... ‘She deserved what she got’” (“Prisoner of Azkaban”

30). This rebellious action is hardly fantasy. It reflects a constant struggle of justice and fairness in the midst of an unhealthy family dynamic. As a reader, Rowling sets up the situation so that we feel sympathy for Harry. We feel the unfairness of the Dursley's and are not particularly sorry for Aunt Marge and her verbally abusive tendencies. The brief feeling of victory after Harry leaves is immediately swallowed by the drags of a system which does not always stand by those who have been wrongly treated. In both Harry's world and our world this notion of inaccurate portrayal of one's character is true.

Crime in the United States, and particularly the systems in place to handle it, are still incredibly controversial which is evident with the recent and explosive Ferguson case through accusations of police brutality. One of the most negative aspects of getting caught in the flow of crime is that once one is in, it is very hard to get out. As a reader, one knows that Harry is not a bad kid, he does not mean to do harm to the world and yet under pressured circumstances he commits several crimes that are connected to each other. He accidentally inflates his Aunt Marge and in his anger runs from the house, a crime strong enough to have him expelled from the one place he loves, Hogwarts, and when Uncle Vernon tries to stop Harry, Harry threatens him. When he makes it to the street he feels forced to use magic again in order to begin getting on a better track and for his literal survival. In one block of Harry's thoughts, the reader watches Harry unpack a possible road to his journey that easily could become one of being accused as a criminal and always trying to stay ahead of the system. He thinks:

“He looked down at his wand, which he was still clutching in his hand. If he was already expelled (his heart was now thumping painfully fast), a bit more magic couldn't hurt. He had the Invisibility Cloak he had inherited from his father -- what if he bewitched the trunk to make it feather-light, tied it to his broomstick, covered himself in the cloak and flew to London? Then he could get the rest of his money out of his vault and...begin his life as an outcast. A horrible prospect, but he couldn't sit on this wall forever...”(32 Prisoner of Azkaban)

Meg John

English 105: Harry Potter

Final

Harry's predicament reflects a cycle of crime of many people today. It is not uncommon for a person who commits one crime to commit several others in order to keep their feet under them and to "get off the wall." Those in the clutches of poverty, for example, may be forced to avoid fines and to not pay bills so that food can be kept on the table, kids can be taken to school and a little space can be had to pay for odds and ends that are necessary for survival and dignity. We live amongst a criminal justice system that does not fully consider the goodness of one's character. Luckily Harry is able to escape his quickly accelerating spiral of crime and finds himself once again comfortably at Hogwarts. However, Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, is not as lucky and he stands for the reality that too often individuals lose their footing on the spiral of crime and become the criminal they were never meant to be.

Written of in the news as a horrific villain, Sirius Black, is outcasted from society as propaganda and popular news sources spread a fear to avoid Sirius at all costs. In order to survive, he can no longer live or abide by the law, so instead he becomes a fugitive to it. Sirius faces the Dementor's Kiss, a process in which a dementor sucks the soul from someone so that there is nothing left but mechanical organs (suspiciously similar to the Death Sentence of today). Rowling illustrates the controversy of the death sentence through Harry's first encounter with the notion of such a punishment: "Harry sat stunned for a moment at the idea of someone having their soul sucked through their mouth. But then he thought of Black. 'He deserves it,' he said suddenly. 'You think so?' Said Lupin lightly. 'Do you really think anyone deserves that?' 'Yes,' said Harry defiantly. 'For...for some things...'" (247) Harry is posed with a question that our society is tackling, is there ever a crime bad enough that the death sentence is justifiable? This issue that Harry confronts is one that people in our world are confronted with constantly: how do we want to enforce justice? For example, is Guantanamo Bay truly a symbol we want associated with our country? Even if a person commits an atrocious act, does killing them solve the issue or does it perpetuate a cycle and send a message that it is okay to kill? Harry

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

confronting issues parallel to those that our society still has not come to conclusions about, and Sirius' character, which reflects a side of society for those who aren't always victorious in finding acceptance and understanding in the eyes of the world, are perspectives that enhance and contribute to the greatness of the series by giving space for multiple people to connect to the stories.

Through finding channels of relatable and real edges of connection, not only is the story brought to us, we are brought closer to the story. The Hogwart's student body shows overpowering joy and happiness when winning the Quidditch Cup, which is very similar to the passion drawn from sports crowds across the world. We are brought closer to the story in the moment of joy and excitement, and feelings of exuberance when Rowling writes, "If only there had been a dementor around...As a sobbing Wood passed Harry the Cup, as he lifted it into the air, Harry felt he could have produced the worlds best Patronus" (313) Using that build up of elated passion and happiness Rowling illustrates what goes into the complicated and advanced Patronus spell. Suddenly, readers are there in Harry's world, we understand a real emotion needed to produce an advanced spell against a soul sucking evil. Rowling uses real emotions to connect her audience to the wizard world. This makes our connection to the story interactive, not only are we as an audience reading and being told a story, but we are *with* the story. Being *with* a story gives a re-readable quality as well as something unique, two elements Gekoski argues are ingredients in a literary great.

If a book can make us feel for a character in the story, but more importantly to feel *with* a character, then the book has a certain depth and meaning that holds a significant value.

Historians look for accounts of history that capture more than just historical events. They want what people were *feeling* during this time, what people were thinking about, what motivated individuals and groups to take action and what mattered to the people. Historians want to know what made particular moments of history alive in the sense of motivations, passions, and

Meg John

English 105: Harry Potter

Final

vibrancy. Textbooks don't capture what filled the events of history. An event means nothing without the realities of the people. History must then be reflected upon from a wide variety of sources. The Harry Potter series, even as a fantastical and fictionalized story has truths of history that historians can learn about various influences of our time period. The books preserve a small window of what people were thinking and feeling at the turn of a century. Specifically, a turn of the century that was prophesied to be the end of the world, a time where technology like no other has kicked off and an age where globally connecting to one another is more possible than ever before. The Harry Potter stories have been analyzed and deciphered by millions if not billions of people today as it is easily one of the most popular stories of our time. Reactions range from hatred to love and everywhere else with loads of reasons as to why. The Harry Potter series is an anchor that offers a place for people to express and bash their opinions and values against; an ideal center point for historians to observe the contrasts, the likes, and the dislikes of the people during a critical time of history.

Harry Potter connects to patterns of stories that have existed since the beginning of story telling as we recognize it. They are plots that our great great great relatives would recognize, that we recognize today and will most probably recognize in the future. These patterns transcend cultural boundaries, extending to great stories from across the globe. In a blog post, entitled "There are Only Seven Stories in the World", author Len Wilson comments on the seven tropes or themes incorporated in many writings. He states that throughout history almost all major stories follow at least one of seven common themes which he lists as: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, voyage and return, comedies, tragedies, rebirth, and the quest. Timeless unity on a global level combined with the powerful connections to reality today makes the Harry Potter stories applicable to multiple generations beyond those born around its publication and the general fame still rippling from the Harry Potter frenzy. In other words, the Harry Potter series connects to a chain of stories all deriving from powerful and

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

similar themes that have carried across generations. Harry Potter's connection to these greater themes combined with insight of today are substantial reasons as to why the series will be remembered.

Both the Ramayana, a timeless and beloved epic from India, and the Harry Potter series share this notion of *the quest* that Wilson talks about in his blog. Rama, the protagonist of the Ramayana embarks on a major quest and search for human values after being exiled from his kingdom. The word, "Ramayana", literally means "The march of Rama" depicting not only his literal march throughout lands but also the march of his spiritual and mental journey; a march that leads to various lessons, wisdom and growth (The Ramayana). When the epic originated is unknown, however, there is an argument that it probably was written around the third century B.C.E (Ramayana). Harry Potter, written hundreds and thousands of years later, depicts a similar quest and search for meaning. Harry's literal journey throughout the wizarding world is enriched by his experiences that are connected to his spiritual and mental development. Harry learns lessons of love, as he uncovers his mother's sacrifice, and also of friendship with Ron and Hermione and loyalty to the cause of the battle against Voldemort for justice. He seeks peace and happiness, which he finally acquires after Voldemort's defeat, as Rama does in defeating the demon king Ravana and returning to his kingdom resulting in the celebration of Diwali. This notion of the quest can be seen from some of the earliest stories and has continued through generation after generation, passing its torch all the way to today as we now see *the quest* reflected in the saga of Harry Potter.

Although themes of stories can be found throughout history and can be connected to Harry Potter it does not mean that connecting to the past immediately makes a book great. The Harry Potter series also managed to apply itself to the future. As Myers wrote in his article, "One way in which the Harry Potter books are almost certain to impact the near future is in the directions taken by technology" (Myers 2). It is difficult to claim that the Harry Potter series

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

applies to the future and has had an impact on technology as the future is the unknown. However, after reading about paintings with moving figures, the dining hall ceiling of Hogwarts reflecting a starry night and a magical and complicated brick wall that leads to Diagon Alley it feels like our world has begun to reflect these ideas.

Siri, like the journal of Tom Riddle, offers this notion of writing to someone or really something that has the capability of writing back. Although Siri still struggles at times to hold an in-depth conversation, Siri's influence in our world can be linked to the recent movie entitled, *Her*, directed by Spike Jonz (*name the director*), in which a man falls in love with his computer's operating system, resembling the common interactive Apple technology, Siri. This movie parallels the experience Ginny has with Tom Riddle's journal. She became obsessed with the journal to the extent of releasing her inner worries, ambitions and crushes. She "fell", in the emotional sense, for the diary as the man fell for Siri. A similarity can be drawn with the interaction between people and their electronic devices such as phones, computers, tablets, ipads et cetera. Remotes are capable of controlling an object not physically connected to them and are rather like a wand in its ability to influence our surroundings. Harry's jaw drops as he watches figures in paintings and photographs move and speak, an idea eerily similar to today's Vine, short movie clips, and even movies. Myers writes that "the internet owes some of its existence to the imagination of science fiction writers" (Myers 3). The world of Harry Potter offers tantalizing ideas of magic yet to be discovered. Madame Pomfrey's healing abilities is something yet to be achieved but Myer's mentions that with nano technology and cloning capabilities, who knows what is possible. Disapparating and Floo powder would revolutionize travel but we're probably still a ways off from transporting ourselves in split seconds. However, is it impossible? Not that long ago, plane travel was impossible One day, perhaps an incredibly perceptive individual or group will figure out the spell to such a feat. It appears very probable

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

that Harry Potter in connecting with people so deeply will inspire the imaginations of generations of the future and has already had some influence on emerging technology today.

Ultimately none of us who live today will truthfully know whether the Harry Potter series will become a literary classic, but the elements that lean in that direction of making the series remembered are strong. Its merit to offer messages of significance can be found in its intense popularity, a popularity that made J.K.Rowling a billionaire. Fantasy novels are written all the time, but sometimes there is a giant surge that causes a book, or in this case books, to become much more than an enchanting and delightful story. As Malcolm Gladwell might argue, the books passed a "tipping point", tipping into a dimension where Harry Potter became a social movement, a flare of inspiration, reflection, thoughts, and analysis'. And although popularity is not necessarily the only way to gage merit, it sends a powerful message. The books connect to our realities and our social structures and in doing so, connect people. If we think of our world and all that is in it as an interconnected web, where every strand, reflecting a slice of life, is fragile and yet overwhelmingly important and strong, then the books are "connectors". They are the intersections of where an overwhelmingly large amount of strands meet. They are a place where many of our world have come together and are a reflection of societal realities. These realities are layered with an aura of timelessness representing the past, the present and the future simultaneously and so the adventures of Harry will be remembered as a literary achievement of greatness.

#### Works Cited

Gekoski, Rick. "What's the Definition of a Great Book?" *Theguardian*. N.p., 23 Dec. 2011.

Web. 14 Nov. 2014.

Meg John  
English 105: Harry Potter  
Final

Myers, Jack. "The Hidden Messages Of Harry Potter (EXCERPT)." *The Huffington Post*.

TheHuffingtonPost.com, 23 July 2012. Web. 11 Dec. 2014.

"The Ramayana." *About*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2014.

"Ramayana: Summary." *Ramayana Summary*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Dec. 2014.

Rowling, J. K., *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: A.A. Levine, 1998. Print.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Arthur A. Levine, 1999.  
Print.

"There Are Only Seven Stories in the World." *Len Wilson*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Dec. 2014.

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=b2267d88-8842-4789-a30c->

[751ccd97d1ea%40sessionmgr113&hid=111&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d](http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=b2267d88-8842-4789-a30c-751ccd97d1ea%40sessionmgr113&hid=111&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d)

[%3d#db=a9h&AN=39027576](http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=b2267d88-8842-4789-a30c-751ccd97d1ea%40sessionmgr113&hid=111&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d#db=a9h&AN=39027576)