

Kelly Budge

Eng 105.005

Monday, November 24, 2014

You're a Feminist Harry

The feminist movement is increasingly associated with aggression and isolation despite its roots with equality. Feminism is the belief that all women and men should be treated equally and given equal opportunities; however, equality is not always granted by today's culture. The UN Women Goodwill Ambassador addressed the issues of stereotyping and the early onset pressures of society on childhood development in her 'HeforShe' campaign. She stated, "when at 15, my girlfriends started dropping out of their beloved sports teams, because they didn't want to appear muscle-y, [and] when at 18, my male friends were unable to express their feelings, I decided that I was a feminist" (*Emma Watson*). While it appears so simple to take on this stance, society teaches men and women—even boys and girls—that feminists are aggressive "man-haters" and that females are inferior to their male peers. In truth, women feminists seek equal pay to their male co-workers, the right to make their own decisions about their body, the power to make crucial life decisions, and equal respect as men in general for all women in the world.

The greatest way to share and plant these ideas of equality is through literature. Therefore, we should commend J.K. Rowling for her success as a female author of the best-selling book series in history and for the way she portrays women in her *Harry Potter* series. Rowling provides young girls with strong female figures to look up to like Hermione Granger, Ginny Weasley, Professor McGonagall, Tonks, and even Bellatrix and Professor Umbridge. Susan Wolfram address the importance of these strong, female heroines as inspiration to young girls through their growth and maturation in the *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*. She

instructs parents to be mindful of pop culture which constantly aides and abides in the development of children's images and concepts of themselves. Due to the high popularity of the *Harry Potter* series, the strength of Rowling's female characters becomes even greater as more young female readers find inspiration from Hermione or Ginny without abandoning their gender identity. Furthermore, understanding the complexity of Rowling's female figures and how they are able to overcome and thrive in the environment they were placed in further promotes the relevant feminist movement of modern day society. It is only suitable that the UN member aforementioned is Emma Watson, better known for her role as Hermione Granger in the *Harry Potter* movie series. Like her character, Emma Watson takes a stand against the patriarchal "norms" of society in which she is surrounded by yet continues to thrive in. Although Rowling sets up a stereotypical world of male power, the strength of her female characters compensates for their struggle. Despite the patriarchal society Rowling sets her story in, the women of the *Harry Potter* series are able to overcome and transform because of the expectations and obstacles they suffer through; Professor Umbridge, Ginny and Hermione each stand as a visual representation of feminine strength in the male dominated wizarding world.

Rowling hinders the development of her strong female characters by placing them in the patriarchal society that is the wizarding world. The institutional level illustrates the most obvious discrimination through power relation of gender in the wizarding world. While studying the greater groups of wizarding society, one notices that male leaders are in charge of all of the groups: Voldemort leads the Death Eaters, Albus Dumbledore is the headmaster of Hogwarts, and Barty Crouch is the minister of the Ministry of Magic. Rowling noticeably appointed no women into positions of leadership in this blatantly patriarchal society. It is difficult for women to thrive in a society with very few other women succeeding.

Another representation of gender-inequality in *Harry Potter* is the dynamic between the three leading roles: Hermione, Ron and Harry. Although each member of this trio provides his or her own unique quality, it is Hermione's greatest characteristic for which the boys mock her. Harry and Ron roll their eyes at Hermione's over-preparedness for the first day at Hogwarts. Hermione explains that she has "tried a few simple spells just for practice and it's all worked for [her and she has] learned all our course books by heart, of course" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 82). Her classmates continuously mock her for her intelligence—something that she should be praised for. Although it is obvious that Hermione is the most intelligent student at Hogwarts, Schoefer argues that "there is something pathetic about [Hermione]. Maybe it's the way she works so hard to get Harry and Ron's approval and respect, in spite of the boys' constant teasing and rejection" (Schoefer). Because of the gender stereotyping that society has taught her friends, Hermione's position in the group's power dynamic is less than her male counterparts even though she provides equally (if not more) to the group's success. The ridicule continues throughout the series as even teachers promote the gender discrimination in the classroom as seen when Snape continued to pick on students not raising their hands while ignoring Hermione. Snape coolly says, "That is the second time you have spoken out of turn, Miss Granger. Five more points from Gryffindor for being an insufferable know-it-all" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* Ch9 PG). Even though Hermione is only a young student, the men completely disregard her impressive retention of knowledge and, more importantly, her feelings. Rowling's presentation of patriarchal norms in her *Harry Potter* series clearly encompasses the personal and institutional levels.

Rowling's system of patriarchy further extends to the relationship between married couples with the belief of the allotment of household duties based on gender. She demonstrates this with the Weasleys; Mr. Weasley works in the Ministry of Magic as the income based

provider while Mrs. Weasley takes care of the children at home and maintains a clean and comfortable residency. After his 'nine to five' job at the Ministry, Mr. Weasley expects to return home to a warm plate of food prepared by his wife, naive to all the preparations and happenings throughout the day with his seven children. Connell examines the gender division of labour and the concepts of paid versus unpaid work further. Connell "argues 'there is a larger division of labour between 'work' - the realm of paid labour and production for markets - and 'home'". This pattern tends to constrain women into 'social isolation and dependence on a male breadwinner'" (quot'd in Brown). The young wizards of Rowling's series adopt this policy and accept this as their future. The audience sees this marital system again with Harry's Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, as Mrs. Dursley stays home with Dudley and Mr. Dursley works as the director of the Grunnings drill manufacturing company. Although these women display strength in their ability to manage an entire household while keeping their husbands happy, Rowling presents no career options for these women forcing them to rely on their husband as the source of income. In this way, they present themselves as helpless damsels needing a male hero to rescue them from distress. The women of Rowling's world adopt the subservient role of the wife instead of the independent heroine because of the established patriarchal "norms" of her world.

Despite the wizarding world's harsh patriarchal society, Rowling creates numerous powerful females who are able to overcome society's expectations throughout the *Harry Potter* series. Rowling provides her audience with the power-hungry and ambitious Professor Dolores Umbridge who, although not morally sound, is able to exploit her authority to achieve her own ends. She manages to advance from a position as the Hogwarts Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, refusing to allow any of her students to actually practice defensive magic, to the Hogwarts High Inquisitor throwing Sibyll Trelawney out. Finally, by rooting out Dumbledore's

Army, a coalition of students intent on teaching themselves the dark arts, she becomes Headmaster of Hogwarts. She quickly moves up through the rankings by eliminating all opposition to her rule. The audience clearly sees the extent of Professor Umbridge's hunger for power when she casts a Cruciatus Curse on Harry to find out his plans. Harry notices "a nasty, eager, excited look on her face that Harry had never seen before" (*Order of the Phoenix* 199). She loves to exercise control over people who are weaker than her, and she enjoys causing emotional and physical pain. Rowling reminds her audience that despite her authority and power of intimidation, Professor Umbridge is one of the few female characters who overcame the patriarchal plague by describing her as a frilly, pink, cat-lover. Rowling seems to be showing her audience that it is fine to enjoy items deemed 'girly' by society, but this should not stop females from achieving career goals in fear of being named 'manly'. The lack of female coworkers in her position does not discourage Professor Umbridge who quickly rose to achieve her career goals. However, she does not last long in her position as Headmaster as she is mortifyingly chased off the grounds of Hogwarts upon Dumbledore's return. Although Professor Umbridge demands authority and power, she is a female caught in the patriarchal wizarding world and must overcome greater obstacles than her male coworkers. Professor Umbridge may not be a role model for young female readers, but through her character, Rowling presents her audience with a character of feminist strength that can overcome the obstacles of living in a male dominated world.

Despite these constraints of the patriarchal society that impede a woman's maturation into adulthood, Ginny Weasley *does* transform from a "damsel in distress" into a strong woman. Rowling first introduces Ginny to her audience as Ron's stammering little sister with a silly little crush on Harry Potter in the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Although Ginny

has a greater role in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Rowling's characterization of Ginny remains stagnant. Tom Riddle tells us that "the foolish little brat" confides "all her pitiful worries and woes-how her brothers tease her... how she didn't think famous good great Harry Potter would ever like her..." to the pages of the diary. Riddle continues, "it's very boring, having to listen to the silly little troubles of an eleven-year old girl" (*Chamber of Secrets* 309-311).

Ginny requires rescuing from the male hero, Harry Potter, as she is completely helpless in this novel. Despite this vulnerable, powerless beginning, Ginny matures into a strong independent young adult by Rowling's fifth novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. After being captured by Professor Umbridge's followers, Neville, Ron and Ginny were able to escape with a "Couple of Stunners, a Disarming Charm, Neville brought off a really nice Impediment Jinx, [...] but Ginny was best, she got Malfoy -- Bat Bogey Hex -- it was superb, his whole face was covered in the great flapping things" (*Order of the Phoenix* 760). In this novel, Ginny begins to defend for herself instead of relying on someone else to come and rescue her. Rowling shows that, like Ginny who goes through a great transformation in spite of the patriarchal wizarding world, girls can overcome the prejudice and become their own heroine.

Hermione is also able to overcome patriarchal "norms" throughout the *Harry Potter* series and defies the "damsel in distress" stereotype. Unlike Ginny's upbringing in the wizarding world by a ministry worker, Mr. Weasley, and a homemaker, Mrs. Weasley, Hermione was raised in the muggle world by two full-time working dentists. Hermione refuses to be subdued by Rowling's patriarchal system from the beginning and fights to show her capabilities as a wizard. She defies the 'damsel in distress' stereotype as she slaps Draco across the face in defense of her friend. Hermione screams, "Don't you dare call Hagrid pathetic you foul—you evil—" abruptly cut off by Harry in attempt to restrain her anger (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 293). Hermione fights for

what is right despite society telling her to let her male counterparts do the fighting. Countless examples of Hermione's intelligence and bravery saturate the entire series. Promoting equality through her creation of The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, defending Luna Lovegood even though everyone thinks she's a bit crazy, and going on a near impossible quest to find the horcruxes because she trusts her friends so much are all examples of Hermione speaking her voice and fighting for what she believes in. Hermione is "physically beautiful, but it is her personal agency... [of] challenging the stereotype that pretty girls cannot be intelligent and strong" that dominates the story (Wolfgram). Hermione is unlike any other female in the wizarding world. Rowling provides her audience with the perfect role model for young female readers with the intelligent and strong from beginning to end—Hermione Granger.

The women of the *Harry Potter* series are able to overcome the expectations and obstacles they suffer through and transform because of them despite the patriarchal society Rowling sets her story in. While many characters display powerful characteristics, Ginny and Hermione stand as the paramount visual representation of feminine strength in the male dominated wizarding world. These characters serve as role models for young female readers who should no longer have to relate to the male hero. Through the development and self-discovery of young female readers enjoying stories like the *Harry Potter* series, feminist ideas will permeate through all of society, eliminating the feminine stereotype.

Works Cited

Brown, Angela. "Harry Potter and the Gender Structure: Exploring Gender in "the Goblet of Fire"." Order No. MR44215 University of Calgary (Canada), 2008. Ann Arbor: ProQuest. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

Emma Watson Gives Feminism New Life. Perf. Emma Watson. United Nations, 2014. *CNN*. Cable News Network, 24 Sept. 2014. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine, 1998.

Print.

—. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine, 2003. Print.

—. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine, 1999. Print.

—. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York, NY: Arthur A. Levine, 1997. Print.

Schoefer, Christine. "Harry Potter and the Magical World of Patriarchy". Duluth: New Moon Girl Media, 2000. ProQuest. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

Wolfgram, Susan M. "GENDER-INFORMED PARENTING: A REVIEW OF THE FILM HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE: WHY NOT HERMIONE GRANGER?" *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 14.3 (2002): 130. ProQuest. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.