

Harry Potter and the Dangerous Damsels

Women have been, and always will be, a pivotal part of our history.

Unfortunately, sexism has overshadowed their importance, heavily altering society's perception of what a woman is and can be. In literature, authors rarely depict women as characters that can stand-alone. Instead, literature depicts women as characters that cannot function without the assistance or presence of a man. When these novels become popular and are read by the masses, they spread the notions that all women are "damsels in distress," waiting around to be rescued by a man. It can perpetuate the stereotype that men are the true heroes while women are simply along for the ride. True interest develops when a female character is crucial to the journey on which the hero must embark. Not as a romantic figure that drives the protagonist towards a sense of fulfillment, but as a character without which the story would be incomplete.

J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is one of the most popular literary series of our time and has garnered remarkable large youth audience. The novel features various female characters that are not only crucial to the plot, but characters that spark debate as to whether or not their portrayal perpetuates or defies stereotypical gender roles. Different factors come into play when determining whether the portrayal of female characters was helpful or detrimental, and the analyzation of these factors shows that while the portrayal of women in *Harry Potter* is not perfect, it is more positive than negative.

Women are not objects, nor have they ever been. But unfortunately our culture continuously hyper-sexualizes women, painting a picture not of what they are, but of what men *want* them to be. The entertainment industry presents women as sexual objects, introducing them into the story solely for the fulfillment and pleasure of men. One would assume that in a tale of warlocks, witchcraft, and wizardry, there would be no place for characters of a sexualized nature. However those characters do exist within the Harry Potter universe. They are Veelas, semi-magical humanoids who are distinguished by their unparalleled beauty and charm. The downside to their presence is their purpose, which is to use their beauty to supernaturally entrance men. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry was not impervious to their charm, for as “the Veela started to dance...Harry’s mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the Veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen.” (Rowling 67)

Rowling described Veelas as fierce warriors, becoming quite formidable when provoked. Soon after Harry was introduced to them, they danced during the Quidditch World Cup. Eventually the audience stopped paying attention to them and “at this, the Veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns.” (Rowling 72) The Veela became fierce *only* when they did not have the attention of the men in attendance. In addition, their physical appearance overshadows their ferocity, as their ability to charm and seduce took precedence over their ability to attack and defend. This is key in analyzing Rowling’s portrayal of women. The warrior aspect of the Veela’s identity

being swept under the rug furthers the misconception that an appealing physical appearance is the most crucial aspect of a female.

As much as an appealing appearance is unnecessary for a woman to succeed, a man is just as unnecessary. The only thing a woman needs to succeed is *herself*. Too often the media displays stories in which a female protagonist goes on a journey only to be distracted from her path by male love interests. Think Stephanie Meyers' *Twilight*, a novel with an audience mainly comprised of preteen girls. The novel is peculiar, as the protagonist's heart is torn between a super sparkly vampire and a positively pec-tacular werewolf. The story focuses on how torn she is between the two creatures, going back and forth repeatedly throughout the series. Think Suzanne Collin's *The Hunger Games*. As the protagonist is on a quest to dismantle an entire empire, she is constantly distracted by the love she has for two boys. It's a very common and upsetting archetype. Critics praise J.K. Rowling's characterization of Hermione Granger for avoiding this archetype. Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, we see that Hermione is not one to be bothered with love interests. Her primary focus is her studies and becoming a bigger and brighter student with each lesson, as we often find her immersed in books. Writer Chloe Angyal noted that Hermione "was a student and friend first, and a love interest second. She was at school to learn, not to flirt with boys. She was a friend to Harry and Ron because she liked them, not because she secretly wanted to date them."

However, there is a character in the *Harry Potter* series that briefly loses her way due to a man, and her name is Tonks. *Harry Potter* aficionados know Tonks as the bubbly, friendly, and vibrant witch of the series. She is quite the colorful character, having the ability to change her hair from neon pink to platinum blonde at will. At one

point in the story, like any human, she falls in love. She falls for Remus Lupin, a fellow member of the Order of the Phoenix. While he harbors the same affection for Tonks, he refuses to become romantically involved with her, believing he is “too old...too poor...[and] too dangerous...” (Rowling 624) and therefore unworthy of her love. His stance regarding their relationship subsequently depresses Tonks. Her magic suffers, and her vibrant pink hair retreats to a demure brown. When Tonks and Lupin eventually elope, her radiance returns and she regains the control of her witchcraft. Tonks is an incredibly skilled witch, and it is saddening to note how the aspects that make her character so appealing disappear when the man she loves does.

Tonks stands among other female characters in the Harry Potter universe that aren't afraid to put their wand to work. One of the most important facets of Tonks' character is her ability and readiness to defend herself. She is skilled in combat and never shies away from a fight. She, among other characters, does not fit the 'damsel in distress' archetype. Hermione, in addition to having immense knowledge of witchcraft, is a skilled combatant. Her knowledge of witchcraft is what heightens her skills. Throughout the series, she duels alongside Harry and Ron and even defends *them* when they are attacked. Ginny Weasley, another central female character, functions as the protagonist's primary love interest throughout the series. The lovely thing about her character is that a love interest *is not her only role*. While her character spends most of her time in the background in the earlier novels, as the series grew, she became feisty and fiercely independent. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Harry sees her “red hair flying like flames” as she engages in combat with a Death Eater that attacked Hogwarts (Rowling 598). Characters such as Ginny and Hermione show women that intelligence is

not the extent of their attributes. They can be fighters, leaders, or warriors that receive pleasure from the blood-curdling screams of their enemies, ie. Bellatrix Lestrange.

Bellatrix, a loyal and nearly obsessive follower of Voldemort is notorious for her lack of concern for human life other than her own. She had no remorse for increasing the death toll of the series, doing as far as to murder her own niece, Nymphadora Tonks. She is also an incredibly fierce combatant, and is feared on the battlefield. Although Bellatrix is quite the evil character, she adds diversity, and the diversity of female characters *also* lets female readers know that there are multiple roles that women can play in any given situation.

Time and time again, cultural misconceptions overshadow the importance that women have in our society. Many believe they exist solely for the pleasure of a man. Many believe that they need a man to function, and all too often, they are seen as helpless and weak. The Veelas in Harry Potter lived off the attention of men, and Nymphadora Tonks lost her color when she lost her love. However characters like Hermione Granger and Ginny Weasley showed that they are anything but helpless. In conclusion, the portrayal of women in this novel was more positive than negative. While there are the negative aspects of the Veelas and Tonks, there is a diversity in female roles in *Harry Potter* that makes a statement. There were female characters that were dancers, musicians, scholars, witches, and warriors. It speaks volumes on established gender roles as well as the potential roles. The diverse portrayal of female characters in this novel is very important because it *reminds* its female readers that they can be anything they choose to be.

Works Cited

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