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The Harry Potter series has brought up many controversies and questions about whether or not they are sexist or feminist writings. Harry Potter is an extremely popular, widespread series that has been prevalent within society for the past ten years, creating a following and making fans crazed every time a new book or movie was launched. Because of its sweeping success, many critics have studied and analyzed who reads these books and watches these movies, finding that both genders read it equally as much. This brings many debates about how the women in the novels are portrayed, and how that portrayal will affect readers. One specific point that is discussed is the fact that the lead is a male, and some of the other significant powerful characters are also males, creating the thought that Harry Potter is sexist. The purpose of this paper is to confront the depictions of women in Harry Potter through an analysis of certain female characters in the series. The characters I plan to analyze are Hermione Granger, and Professor Minerva McGonagall because I think I can prove my argument by looking at both. In this essay, I will look at these depictions of the women, how they are described throughout the novels, and show how J.K. Rowling has created a feminist work of literature when she wrote Harry Potter, and disprove the fact that Harry Potter is sexist.

Feminism is a hard concept to define. Author of *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey gives an in depth meaning when he states “feminism…is always more than a body of academic texts and practices. It is also, and perhaps more fundamentally so, a political movement concerned with women’s oppression and the ways and means to empower women” (135). He continues on saying that there are many different types of feminism; each type defines a different reason for women’s oppression, and has possible causes and solutions to the problems. Reading and analyzing the Harry Potter series while having the definition of feminism in mind is important due to the prevalent influence the series has on society. Since many children and young adults have access to the series, it is important for us to understand if the characters in the series are sending a positive message to the audience, and what point Rowling established when she wrote the books. In online article, “Harry Potter’s girl trouble,” writer Christine Schoefer reports that the series is sexist because “Harry, of course, plays the lead. Harry is supported by…a colorful cast of male characters.” Schoefer, along with many other critics, when they say they believe Harry Potter is a sexist novel; they use their reason as the fact that the main character is a male. However, just because the main character is a male does not make the novels sexist. Potter and all of his friends are dedicated to fighting for fairness for everyone, no matter what sex, origin, or species. Women have significant impacts on everything, and are never seen as inferior within the series. Some of the most powerful characters in the series are women, and they are not depicted using any gender stereotypes. According to professor Eliza Dresang, gender stereotypes are “something conforming to a fixed or general pattern, a mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion or an uncritical judgment…based on a group, not an individual” (Dresang 221). Rowling doesn’t use gender stereotypes when she writes about her characters, as author and editor Janet Croft states in her article talking about the series “there seems to be no difference in which subjects boys and girls are expected to excel, no difference in teaching methods, no difference in expectations of students’ academic or athletic achievement. All paths are equally available to boys and girls” (137). By saying this, she is showing that Rowling breaks the stereotype barriers in her stories, and creates a world where everything is equal for both genders, they are treated the same, and what is expected of both genders is the same as well.

The independent researcher Michele Fry states that “readers can see Hermione not only as a strong female character, an essential part of Harry's life, but also as a feminist protagonist in her own right” (165). Fry argues that Hermione can be seen as another main character in the series, and this is an interesting point that she brings up. Many strong female characters appear throughout the series, and they play many differing parts, including a friend, mother, sister, student, etc. Hermione Granger is a good example of the many parts a character might represent because she is a friend and a student, and she is portrayed in many different lights throughout the novels. As author Meredith Cherland points out, throughout Harry Potter “we see Hermione the giggler, Hermione the helpful and capable, Hermione the emotionally expressive, and Hermione the clever” (278). She states that Hermione is depicted in many different ways, and this shows that all of these distinctive attributes put together make her a strong female, because she can be all of these things without losing herself. In some pieces of pop culture, males are represented as braver, wiser and more powerful than the women. Among many movies and books, this can primarily be seen in the Spiderman trilogy, where Spiderman’s enemies capture his girlfriends to force Spiderman to fight, and in every movie the male is always the one who has to defeat evil to save the female. However, Harry Potter is different in the sense that you can find a ton of important women in the series, as well as men, and there is no difference in the genders. The women often have to fight their own battles with evil in order to overcome things, and they don’t rely on the male characters to save them. Hermione fights battles differently than do the boys in the novels, she uses her reason and logic in order to solve problems and mysteries, and her strength can be seen from this. Cherland would agree with Fry that the female characters have crucial, non-stereotypical roles within Harry Potter, and we can see this clearly by examining the character of Hermione Granger.

In the beginning of the first novel of the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone,* Hermione is constantly teased by her classmates for being too smart. One day after class when Hermione did really well on a specific levitation spell, Ron said to Harry “its no wonder no one can stand her…she’s a nightmare…she must’ve noticed she’s got no friends” (Rowling 137). She overheard Ron talking, and she ran to the bathroom and cried and was upset. Someone could claim this is Rowling’s way of showing that females are inferior to men and get hurt easier and are vulnerable. However, in the fact that Hermione ran away crying does not stereotype her as being girly, but it shows that she is a typical child responding to a situation just like how a normal eleven-year-old child would respond in this situation where she was being bullied. We can prove this by looking at an example of how Hermione responds to ridicule when she is older, she does not behave similarly. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Askaban*, the trio, Harry, Ron and Hermione’s friend Hagrid’s hippogriff is killed. The school bully, Draco, makes fun of Hagrid for being upset about his pet’s death in front of Harry, Ron and Hermione, and they all get upset at Draco and they all make moves towards him but Hermione was the fastest one to get to him and “SMACK! She had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster” (Rowling 138). Now that she is older, Hermione figured it’s her turn to fight for herself and she stands up to the school’s bully. When she goes to slap Draco, both her male friends are right next to her, and she could easily have stepped back from the situation and Harry or Ron would have confronted Draco, but she did not rely on them to fight for her, she takes it upon herself to get done what she felt was necessary at the time. When she was younger, she ran away from confrontation and just cried instead, but now that she grew up, she can stand up for herself and her friends, which shows that she has grown tremendously.

Hermione is the perfect example when examining the feminist principles in the novels. Throughout the series she has many strengths and weaknesses, but she is mostly criticized about her weaknesses as a character. She is attacked at school a lot for being too bossy, whiny, or studious, but these all ignore the fact that she has many strengths as well. The psychologist Gail Grynbaum states “Hermione is repeatedly the truth-sleuth, comfortable in the library, who finds the clue that makes sense of the mystery at hand. She is always the one standing at a crossroads pointing the way.” The fact that Hermione is there at the fork in the road showing the right way to go breaks the gender stereotype of women. Grynbaum points out the fact that Hermione is that character that is smart, and she is able to figure out most of the secrets that no one else can. Her knowledge and brains save her and her friends throughout the series multiple times, showing her strength every time she uses her intellect to defeat a problem. For example, at the end of the first novel when Harry, Ron and Hermione are looking for the missing sorcerer’s stone, going through many underground chambers solving different obstacles. After the brutal game of chess, Harry and Hermione had to leave Ron, and they come across a sequence of potions and a logic puzzle that must be solved in order to pass and continue onto the next chamber. When Harry is skeptical, and doesn’t think he can solve the riddle, he asks if they will be stuck down there forever. Hermione replies, “of course not…give me a minute” (Rowling 230). She is able to solve the puzzle and they can move forward, and without her, Harry would never have been able to get the Sorcerers Stone to be destroyed so Voldemort could not have gotten it.

In the fourth novel, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,* Hermione shows her true feminist beliefs when she starts “The Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare” in order to showcase her ideals that house elves shouldn’t be treated poorly, and to help them get equal treatment. The majority of Hermione’s friends grew up with house elves as servants, so they do not see anything wrong with the poor treatment of them, but since Hermione grew up in the real world, she is aware that it is not right to enslave anyone. Even though her friends were not fully on board with her cause, Hermione did not give up, and she kept on fighting for the rights of elves, proving to be a feminist because she is fighting for equal treatment of another species who cant fight for themselves. She is a feminist because she works really hard to demonstrate that even though she is a girl, she is just as good as the boys. She proves to everyone that she is intelligent, faithful, and courageous.

Another great example of a feminist character in the Harry Potter series is Professor Minerva McGonagall. Similarly to Hermione, critics also frequently attack McGonagall for being uninteresting, and because she is second in control to the male headmaster, Dumbledore. Many critics have differing opinions on McGonagall. For example, Heilman depicts the professor as clever, however, not wise. And Mendlesohn describes her as “unfair and hasty,” but Dresang claims that she is “a strong, ethical woman…seems to embody ‘wisdom’” (235).

However, what some of the critics don’t realize is that she holds an important position as the head of Gryffindor. Just as author Mimi Gladstein points out, “McGonagall is a responsible and positive figure. And, it is *she*, not a male professor, who is the faculty sponsor of Gryffindor, the house all the main characters inhabit” (78). It is in the professor that the students at Hogwarts have a powerful adult model to look up to, that they can depend on and have respect for. Gladstein also points out that “Each character is judged individually by what kind of person he or she is, and each character is given the opportunity to be either good or evil.  It is the individual characters' choices that make them what they are--not their gender." (82). She identifies that throughout the series not once is it a huge deal that women are involved on the Quidditch team, in the Triwizard Tournament, or that they are some of the teachers. One’s gender is irrelevant in the world that Rowling has created. This proves the fact that gender stereotypes are not seen, because throughout the series women are equal to the men, the genders can be seen as either good or evil characters, professors, students, athletes, etc. In any of the novels, it never appears to be a big deal that a female or a male is a certain thing, they are evaluated based on who they are as a person, and that gets rid of any stereotyping that may occur in society.

In the first book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone,* we are introduced to Professor McGonagall, who is described as a tall woman with dark hair dressed in dark robes and a stern look on her face, one that follows the rules precisely; however, she breaks a rule early on for a student. When McGonagall first notices Harry Potter flying his first time on his broom, she takes him and introduces him to the captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, with the intention of Harry being a possible seeker. However, students are not allowed to become a seeker during their first-year, but McGonagall thinks that this rule doesn’t have to be enforced in this case. The fact that McGonagall is willing to break this rule for a first-year student is important because it shows that she is willing to stand up for what she believes in, and because she thinks Harry will make a good contribution to the team, she is willing to bend the rules for him and bear the consequences herself in order for him to be on the team.

Another example that shows why McGonagall is a strong female character in the series is in the Order of the Phoenix, when she shows that she won’t back down to anyone, no matter who they are or what they demand. When Dolores Umbridge assumed control of Hogwarts, it is Professor McGonagall that is the only one who took a stand against her. When Umbridge made the remark that Harry hadn’t been doing well in school, McGonagall responds “I should have made my meaning plainer . . . He has achieved high marks in all Defense Against the Dark Arts tests set by a competent teacher” (Rowling 664). She continues to weaken Umbridge’s authority when the argument about Harry becoming an Auror is brought up. McGonagall insists that Harry has a chance of becoming an Auror, a very influential wizard job, but Umbridge asserted that Harry had no chance of ever being one. Even though Umbridge was McGonagall’s boss at the time, she didn’t have a problem standing up to her, and she fought her on this issue and McGonagall states “Potter, I will assist you to become an Auror if it’s the last thing I do!” (Rowling 665) She decided that she would coach Harry, and help him with whatever he needed to learn in order to become an Auror. The fact that Professor McGonagall successfully defends her beliefs that Harry can be an Auror and that she stands up to Umbridge, even though no other professor will, demonstrates what an important character McGonagall is in the series. The fact that Professor McGonagall always sticks up for Harry, no matter what the circumstances are and how much trouble she could get in for doing so, she still does it, and that demonstrates such strength in a person, and shows that McGonagall is a true leader. McGonagall is a feminist because her every actions and every decision she makes don’t depend on a man in her life. Her reality does not center on behavior of any man, or anyone that she loves. Also, the other thing that contributes her attributes to feminism is the fact that all of the fighting that she does in her life is to protect the students and Hogwarts, instead of fighting to defend or shield a man she is in love with. This fact that a woman is not blinded by love, and can fight and make her own decisions in life, makes her a feminist because, just like Storey’s definition, she is a women who has her own power, and does not need a man in her life to tell her what to do, or to fight for, or to do anything for at all.

Ever since Harry Potter has become popular culture within society, people have began to dug deeper into researching it and developing theories on whether or not J.K. Rowling meant for them to be sexist or feminist pieces of literature. Because the books are so popular, especially among younger children and teenagers, it is important for people to criticize and review them because the generations of kids growing up reading these books shape everything that they do around these stories. Therefore, as adults, researchers, psychologists, professors, etc, feel the responsibility to make sure that the novels are appropriate and set a good enough example for kids to be reading on a daily basis. Many professionals have analyzed the series and looked at different characters, and proved whether or not they believed that it is gender stereotypical or if it is suitable for young adults and growing kids to be reading. Using many different expert opinions and scholarly articles, this paper has examined Hermione Granger, and Professor Minerva McGonagall, two of the major powerful female characters, and has proved that the Harry Potter novels are in fact, a feminist series.

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