Education at Hogwarts: Colonizing the Muggle

Christian Sorensen

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol21/iss2/5

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inscape by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
Children's books are usually read for pleasure or for improving reading skills. This is not inherently bad; after all, “reading literature for pleasure offers several benefits. First, readers pay attention to those aesthetic qualities of texts that entertain or please the ears. We can also identify with familiar experiences captured in stories” (Yenika-Agbaw 446). There is no dictum stating that books must be anything other than entertaining; “a book is something that exists primarily to provide the reader with a literary experience, something he cannot get elsewhere from other means” (Tucker 17).

But must children’s books be simply pleasant bedtime stories? Yenika-Agbaw states that “children’s literature as a discipline maintains an ambiguous status” (446). On the surface, children’s literature entertains children, but it often has another, more subtle objective. “Conventionally, English children’s literature in the eighteenth century was not imaginative, but useful, exemplary, and moralistic” (Gaul! 51), fulfilling John Locke’s “object of juvenile reading: to accommodate to the world of experience, to learn to deal with the concrete problems that it presented” (50). Even today, children’s literature serves to train children, to induct them into society, making “it a fascinating but necessarily complex field for study” (Tucker 17).

As we move beyond the pleasurable reading of children’s literature, we see social themes and issues play out their course in the text. In fact, themes and issues may be more revealing in children’s literature than they are in adult literature. After all, children’s books almost always depend on “characters who are easily identifiable and have clear roles to play” (Tucker 27). These stereotypical characters are essential in training children how to behave in and conform to society. In addition, “children when young tend to see the universe as an essentially moral construction, imbued with a sense of ‘inherent justice,’ so that somehow, in the long
run, good will always be rewarded and evil eventually punished” (Tucker 20). Children want to see the world as black and white, right and wrong. And within this binary, right must prevail. Consequently, children’s literature enforces these binaries and trains children to function in and conform to society. In this way, children’s literature “establishes both a measure of mimesis and a mode of civil authority and order” (Bhabha 32).

Going beyond “efferent and aesthetic readings,” we can begin to read with a sensitivity “that propagate[s] social change” (Yenika-Agbaw 447). Colonial and postcolonial attitudes are prevalent in children’s literature. “[I]t is, after all, both the literature of enfranchisement and literature for the disenfranchised” (Harper 40), as children’s literature enculturates children but is not written by them. Fictional literature creates parallel worlds that children can understand and relate to. These worlds are based on ideals; they are “the result of incorporating the modernist ethos of progressivism, the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality, and the celebration of new or alternative histories” (Harper 42). As a result, children’s books contain “many examples of cultural syncreticism, hybridization, ethnicity, and resistance” (42). Authors attempt to paint the world they live in, or the world they view children as living in, and demonstrate the social underpinnings that create society. A postcolonial reading then steps in and “challenges social injustices incurred during the evolution of human civilization” (Yenika-Agbaw 448).

THE SOCIETY OF HARRY POTTER

This is the world, the society, that makes the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling so intriguing. Rowling has created a world parallel to contemporary Britain in which she can discuss issues of colonialism and class. Within this framework, she introduces characters, objects, and events that represent the colonial domination and the postcolonial forces that resist it. The barrier between the wizard world and the Muggle (or human) world, the ritual of the Sorting Hat, the educational practices of Professor Dumbledore, and Hermione’s efforts to liberate the house-elves are important postcolonial symbols that shape the way children view their world.

Harry Potter is no ordinary boy. Born to James and Lily Potter, a wizard and a witch, he is orphaned as a baby when the evil Lord Voldemort kills both his parents. When he tries to kill Harry as well, Voldemort is almost entirely destroyed. But the attempt to kill him leaves Harry with a scar on his forehead in the shape of a lightning bolt. Raised by his
non-magical, very Muggle aunt and uncle Dursley, Harry has no idea of his special origins until he turns eleven and receives a letter inviting him to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

He leaves the Dursley's and begins his education at Hogwarts, learning about the wizard society of which he is a fundamental part. The seven-book *Harry Potter* series follows Harry through his education and experiences at Hogwarts, a school with “a seven-year curriculum of classes to prepare wizards to practice magic responsibly, . . . [being] a community unto itself, operating on basic rules understood by students and faculty” (Schafer 74).

One of the things that readers soon discover is that the wizardry world is based on a distinct class system, mimicking that of Britain. Each individual has his or her own place in the system based largely upon heritage—pure-bloods, mudbloods (wizards with Muggle heritage), squibs (non-magical wizards), or Muggles. Furthermore, this class system marginalizes or denies a position to other creatures and societies, including elves, giants, centaurs, werewolves, etc. Though difficult to draw an exact comparison with Britain's class system and social structure, the class system in *Harry Potter*, and the characters outside the class system provide the tension of the series; “a hierarchy of cultural importance and value is imposed by the colonizing power, both on the conquered indigenous societies, and on the [wizard] agents of colonial oppression themselves” (Docker 443). Wizards fight either to preserve or to destroy this class system. And Harry Potter, a boy of eleven, is pivotal in this clash; he is introduced to it on the Hogwarts Express before he even arrives at Hogwarts.

**HARRY POTTER AND PLATFORM NINE AND THREE-QUARTERS**

“All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier. . . . Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it” (Molly Weasley in *Sorcerer's Stone* 93).

There is a strong separation between the society of the wizards and the society of the Muggles. As initiates into the wizard world, students catch the Hogwarts Express at the King's Cross nine and three-quarters platform. For the uninformed native and non-wizard, though, platform nine and three-quarters does not appear to exist. There is clearly a “dividing barrier” (*Sorcerer's Stone* 92). This physical barrier represents the cultural barrier that exists between the two worlds. Fortunately for Harry, he encounters a wizard family, the Howards, who help him through it.
Once through the border, Harry becomes part of the wizardry world. He meets pure-blood wizards who discriminate against mudbloods, claiming “they’re just not the same, they’ve never been brought up to know our ways” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 78). He meets other wizards who argue “that talent supersedes money and ancestry” (Schafer 63). As readers, we are able to see how the colonizing wizard society identifies “with power, formal education, [and] dominant . . . cultural practices” of postcolonial theory (Yenika-Agbaw 450). Within that context, we can see how these same issues play out in contemporary society.

**THE SORTING HAT AND THE HOUSES OF HOGWARTS**

There’s nothing hidden in your head  
The Sorting Hat can’t see,  
So try me on and I will tell you  
Where you ought to be.  

*(Sorcerer’s Stone 117)*

Each school year begins with the ritual of the Sorting. A talking hat, once belonging to the wizard Gryffindor, is placed on the head of the first-year students and announces to which house they belong. This is the first step in the Hogwarts educational colonization process. In explaining the significance of the event, Professor McGonagall says:

Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory, and spend free time in your house common room.

The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 114)

The house becomes the defining community for each student. In this community, young wizards will make friends and establish associations that will define who they will become. So the Sorting Ceremony does more than merely place each student in a house; it indicates what kind of wizard the student is and will be. Each student has a place, and the Sorting Hat knows where each student belongs. According to its song, “I’ve never yet been wrong” (*Goblet of Fire* 177).
Although it has never been wrong, its task has not always been easy. “Sometimes, Harry noticed, the hat shouted out the house at once, but at others it took a little while to decide” (120). The house must first know its natives before it can properly place them, as each of the four founders “value[d] different virtues / in the ones they had to teach” (Sorcerer’s Stone 177).

The Sorting Hat must determine what type of individual each young wizard is. Although probably unintentional on the Hat’s part, much of the sorting takes place by heritage. The Hogwarts Houses seem to ratify the social class structure. The Slytherins generally support the distinction of class, separating the pure-blood wizard families from mudbloods and poor wizard families. Gryffindors, on the other hand, fight for equality and removal of the oppressive class system.

As an example, Draco Malfoy is assigned to Slytherin when “the hat had barely touched his head” (Sorcerer’s Stone 120). Draco comes from an extremely wealthy family. He, like his father (a Slytherin alumnus), turns his nose up at those “below” him and those who fight for them. On the Express to Hogwarts their fourth year, Malfoy says: “Father actually considered sending me to Durmstrang rather than Hogwarts, you know. . . . Well, you know his opinion of Dumbledore—the man’s such a Mudblood-lover—and Durmstrang doesn’t admit that sort of riffraff” (Goblet of Fire 165).

The Slytherin House attracts many longstanding wizard families, class-conscious families that espouse colonial virtues. This is perhaps not without design on the part of the author. Some readers speculate that Salazar Slytherin was named for Antonio Salazar, “the fascist dictator of Portugal for 36 years. . . . Though never officially an ethnic cleanser, he was a colonialist, who ruthlessly put down ethnic uprisings in his country’s colonies in Africa” (Rosenthal). Rowling would have been familiar with Salazar, since she was living in Portugal in 1991–93 (Schafer 28), just after her inspiration to write the series, and just as Portugal was preparing to celebrate its upcoming twentieth anniversary as a democratic state in April 1994. This was also a significant date in that Portugal’s former colonies of Angola and Mozambique were also celebrating twenty years of independence. It is quite natural then that Salazar would show up in her novel to represent the colonizing faction of the wizard world.

Gryffindor house seems to collect a wider range of wizards than Slytherin House. In Harry’s own age group, there is a representative of each of the wizardry classes. Harry comes from a long line of wizards,
and a wealthy family. Ron Weasley comes from a pure-blood but poor family. Seamus Finnigan is “half-and-half. [His] dad’s a Muggle” (Sorcerer’s Stone 125). Hermione Granger is also a mudblood, coming from two Muggle dentists. Neville Longbottom’s wizard family “thought [he] was all-Muggle for ages” (125). Neville’s family was excited when he was accepted to Hogwarts, although they worried that he was a squib and “might not be magic enough to come” (125).

Gryffindor houses the only known black wizards in the school—Dean Thomas, “a black boy even taller than Ron” (122), and Angelina Johnson, “a tall black girl who played Chaser on the Gryffindor Quidditch team” (Goblet of Fire 261).

It is this great diversity within the Gryffindor House that will eventually break down the stratification of the wizard class structure. It is also because of this diversity that Harry must be placed in this house. The Sorting Hat finds it difficult initially to sort Harry into a house. When Harry places the Hat on his head, it carries on a dialogue:

Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There’s talent, oh my goodness, yes—and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that’s interesting. . . . So where shall I put you? (Sorcerer’s Stone 121)

Harry seems to possess traits common to all four houses. The Hat can place him anywhere. But Harry knows where he wants to be placed, or more aptly put, where he doesn’t want to be placed.

Not Slytherin, eh? . . . Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that—no? Well, if you’re sure—better be Gryffindor! (121)

In Gryffindor Harry interacts with students of various social classes, and he will ultimately be shaped into the wizard he was meant to be—the wizard who will ultimately overcome the evil Lord Voldemort and the discriminating colonial values he represents. As the opposite of Lord Voldemort, Harry is a pivotal figure at the transition of colonial attitudes. Because of his understanding and sympathy toward oppressed classes, Harry will become a liberator, defeating those who refuse to acknowledge the value of the “other.”
PROFESSOR DUMBLEDORE AND THE HOGWARTS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

The truth . . . is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. (Albus Dumbledore in *Sorcerer's Stone* 298)

All young wizards must attend wizard school to learn how to function in wizard society. It is through analysis of the community at Hogwarts, the educational community, that postcolonial ideas are most clearly expressed. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note concerning colonial practice,

Education becomes a technology of colonialist subjectification in two . . . important and intrinsically interwoven ways. It establishes the locally English or British as normative through critical claims to "universality" of the values embodied in English literary texts, and it represents the colonized to themselves as inherently inferior beings—"wild," "barbarous," "uncivilized." (426)

But a Hogwarts education under Professor Dumbledore is different from the expected colonial education. To some extent, young wizards are schooled in all the knowledge essential to understanding who they are and how they are to behave in society. Professors Snape and McGonagall are clearly the educational enforcers; they distribute house points, but most often they withhold house points for actions that violate school or community rules. They indoctrinate young wizards in the proper behavior and protocol of society.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, allows room for young wizards to grow and learn for themselves. When the rest of the wizardry society shudders at the name of Voldemort, referring to him only as "You-Know-Who" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 5) or "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named" (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 368), Dumbledore tells Harry to "call him Voldemort. . . . Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 298). Dumbledore allows Harry to get into situations where he must confront his fears and the attitudes of society. To some extent, Harry recognizes this.

He's a funny man, Dumbledore. I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything
that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try [to stop Voldemort], and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help... It's almost like he thought I had the right to face Voldemort if I could. (Sorcerer's Stone 302)

Dumbledore is subtly indoctrinating this generation of students in the evils of colonialism. He recognizes the diversity in Gryffindor Hall and creates in the students an awareness of different evils—fear, ignorance, power, oppression, and injustice.

As a part of the colonizing machine, how does Dumbledore get away with undermining the colonial powers he ought to be supporting? First, it should be noted that he is not trying to undermine the community; he is merely setting out to change the colonizing framework that the community operates under. He is greatly respected by the wizardry community, “considered by many to be the greatest wizard of modern times” (Sorcerer's Stone 102). Though offered the post of Minister of Magic, he turns it down to remain headmaster at Hogwarts. He realizes that change will not happen through governmental bureaucracy, but through education. Because of the great respect he commands, he is given “free rein, always” by the Ministry of Magic (Goblet of Fire 709).

With such trust, Dumbledore teaches his students and allows them to learn about right and wrong. He teaches them that “there are all kinds of courage. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends” (Sorcerer's Stone 306). He goes beyond the mere vocalization of this lesson as he demonstrates it to his students. After Voldemort's reappearance in Book Four, Dumbledore confronts the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, about his responsibilities and attitudes. It is not until this time that we really see what side of the colonial coin Dumbledore supports.

You are blinded by the love of office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, as you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be! (Goblet of Fire 708)

To this point, Dumbledore subtly supports any efforts that have moved toward greater equality. He hires the giant Hagrid and the werewolf Lupin as instructors; he offers to pay Dobby and Winky ten
Galleons for their service; he allows Hermione to persist in her campaign to liberate the house-elves; he even offers Professor Snape, a former supporter of Lord Voldemort, a chance to redeem himself. Dumbledore's educational quest is to teach students to seek equality and to abandon the prejudices of wealth over poverty and pure-blood over mudblood.

HERMIONE GRANGER AND THE SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF ELFISH WELFARE (S.P.E.W.)

Our short-term aims are to secure house-elves fair wages and working conditions.

Our long-term aims include changing the law about non-wand use and trying to get an elf into the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, because they're shockingly underrepresented. (Hermione Granger in *Goblet of Fire* 224–25)

One of the friendships essential to Harry's development as a liberator is Hermione. She actively explores postcolonial issues. Of all the students at Hogwarts, Hermione is most sensitive to the plight of other creatures, most likely due to her own Muggle background. This, combined with her studies, makes her a diligent postcolonial voice. Under the tutelage of Professor Dumbledore, Hermione manipulates the wizard education system to “[pave] the way for subversive and eventually revolutionary processes” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 427).

Hermione has a developing social conscience and will work tirelessly for those she sees as oppressed or an underdog. She is quick to take Neville under her wing and help him along, especially in Potions class. She bought Crookshanks from a magical creatures store because no one had wanted him. She spent hours preparing a defense for Buckbeak, a falsely-accused hippogriff, and later began to take an interest in the plight of house-elves. (Ark)

Hermione first takes interest in the plight of house-elves at the Quidditch World Cup in Book Four when Barty Crouch forces his house-elf, Winky, to sit in the Top Box despite her fear of heights. Winky explains to Harry, “House-elves does what they is told. I is not liking heights at
all, Harry Potter . . . but my master sends me to the Top Box and I comes, sir” (Goblet of Fire 99).

Hermione becomes upset at the opening banquet that year when she learns that there are house-elves, “the largest number in any dwelling in Britain . . . over a hundred” (182), who work in the kitchen at Hogwarts. Surprised that she did not know they were there, Nearly Headless Nick, the Gryffindor Hall ghost, explains:

Well, they hardly ever leave the kitchen by day, do they?

. . . They come out at night to do a bit of cleaning . . . see to

the fires and so on. . . . I mean, you’re not supposed to see

them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house-elf, isn’t it,

that you don’t know it’s there? (182)

She is further infuriated when she discovers that they work without pay, holidays, sick leave, or pensions (182). House-elves are servants, or more appropriately slaves, to wizards. And most wizards in the society accept this as life. Nearly Headless Nick laughs, “House-elves don’t want sick leave and pensions!” (182).

Hermione sees this oppression and seeks to do something to draw attention to it and change it. She spends her free time in the library researching the history of elf enslavement, and becomes disappointed to find that it “goes back centuries . . . [and] no one’s done anything about it before now” (224). She forms S.P.E.W., the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, heading the manifesto with “Stop the Outrageous Abuse of Our Fellow Magical Creatures and Campaign for a Change in Their Legal Status” (224).

But S.P.E.W. is destined to die out. Its failure is evidence of the post-colonial attitudes of the society. On all sides Hermione faces opposition. Wizards don’t see a need to help. As Ron states: “They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!” (224). Few students are willing to buy a badge. Harry and Ron buy them only “to keep her quiet,” and Neville “paid up just to stop Hermione from glowering at [him]” (239). In fact, most students are unwilling to seriously consider the possibility of making such radical social change. “Some [students] seemed mildly interested in what she had to say, but were reluctant to take a more active role in campaigning. Many regarded the whole thing as a joke.” Fred and George Weasley, Ron’s older twin brothers, have often been to the kitchens to see the elves. They tell Hermione that the elves are “happy. They think they’ve got the best job in the world.”
Hermione does not meet this resistance to change solely from the wizards, but from the house-elves themselves. Hermione rejects their claim, arguing "that's because they're uneducated and brainwashed!" (239) When Harry meets Dobby, the house-elf he tricked Lucius Malfoy into freeing, Dobby tells of his struggles in finding work. "Most wizards doesn't want a house-elf who wants paying. . . . 'That's not the point of a house-elf,' they says, and they slammed the door in Dobby's face! Dobby likes work, but he wants to wear clothes and he wants to be paid, . . . Dobby likes being free!" (378). However, it is not Dobby's experience that is significant here. What is more significant is the response of the other house-elves. They "all looked away at [his] words, as though Dobby had said something rude and embarrassing. . . . The Hogwarts house­elves had now started edging away from Dobby, as though he were carrying something contagious" (378). The house-elves attempt to dissociate themselves from Dobby and his radical ideas.

Winky's response is even more intriguing. Winky has been freed, but she finds no pleasure in this. She refuses to allow Dumbledore to pay her to work—"Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid! Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!" (379). She still defends her old master, Mr. Crouch, ashamed that she has let him down. Furthermore, she is ashamed that she may have disgraced her family line—"I is looking after the Crouchers all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her . . . oh what is they saying if they knew Winky was freed? Oh the shame, the shame!" (381). Just as with slavery in the United States, enslaved elf families continue to serve individual wizard families through generations.

Such a lack of interest and effort to fully liberate the house-elves is similar to the initial postcolonial response when a colony undergoes the process of liberation. The colonizers continue to disregard the necessity of such freedoms, arguing that the colonized like their situation. Likewise, the colonized resist this change in condition, uncertain of what to do with their new freedoms. Though Hermione cannot immediately liberate the house-elves, she can continue to educate her classmates. As Macaulay states, "it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern" (430). As a student, Hermione is not capable of affecting the total change she wishes to make; she simply does not have the power. However, she can begin to make an impact by using her influence with her
friends to create an intermediary group. This group, sensitive to the hidden colonial battle for power and domination, can recognize the injustice of society and work toward that change.

At this point, only half-way through the series, it is impossible to know where Harry Potter and his friends will end up or how they will affect the underlying structure of the wizard society. While speaking of children’s literature in general, Yenika-Agbaw argues that “confirmation of injustice does not guarantee liberation from colonial legacies” (450). While this is true, Harry is destined to be the greatest wizard of all time; as such, he may be able to lead the revolution that will bring about change. And perhaps this is one of the objectives of the *Harry Potter* series—to demonstrate that individuals can make a difference. Even when reading children’s literature, “children should know that unless readers are able to read for social change and justice, they will find themselves confirming existing meanings determined by others’ ideologies” (Yenika-Agbaw 452).
Bibliography