

Gender roles in harry potter

Literature, British Literature



Girls in young adult fantasy novels tend to fare rather poorly, especially in the light of Susan from the Chronicles of Narnia. When Aslan admits the Pevensies into paradise, Susan is barred because she has forgotten Narnia and is more interested in stockings and the real adult world, because she has dared to want to grow up. Jill Pole comments: “She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations” (1). C. S. Lewis presents a conservative view of girls in the fantasy genre, that they will be drawn into their own adolescent fantasies and will abandon the secondary world. Philip Pullman compounds this with his treatment of Lyra in the His Dark Materials trilogy where she is the protagonist in the first novel but cedes decision making and power to Will through the remaining narrative. Hermione Granger starts out challenging this conservative view but ultimately she is turned into a mother and sidelined from the world of action. Her role changes through the novel and this is not due merely to the maturation of the character as she ages but also the needs of the male dominated groups around her, from the school group with Harry and Ron to the Order of the Phoenix. A quick glance offers the view that between 11 and 15 she is more rebellious whilst between the ages of 16 and 17 she takes on a sisterly role before her final appearance as a mother. In the Harry Potter novels Hermione is variously a bookish individual who supports and guides Harry through her research and work. She is the dominant force in Harry’s success until the sixth novel, *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince*, where her role as Harry’s educator is taken by Dumbledore. Eliza Dresang sees Hermione as being far more successful than she is made out to be by Farah Mendlesohn. Hermione gains agency and is able to take

more control of her situation than Mendlesohn gives her credit for through her own actions, finding “evidence in the text to be considerably more optimistic about Hermione’s self-determination than does Mendlesohn” through her determination about being sorted by the Hat and “refuses to be deterred from her purposes, whether it be learning, admonishing about rules or ... championing the underdog”.

Mendlesohn comments that “Hermione is accepted in the social structure of the school only because she is Harry’s friend” and that “[r]adicalism, as embodied by Hermione, is irrational, ignorant, and essentially transient”. Though her attempts at freeing the house-elves are doomed, she is more successful at galvanising her peers and enabling Harry’s success through her contributions. There is another issue to consider though and that is one of genre. The first five Harry Potter books are clearly school stories. Motifs, such as the annual arrival via the steam train and the term times with the enforced stay over Christmas, come from this genre. Instead of only competing in sports for honour such as Quidditch, house points are awarded or taken away for behaviour or acts of bravery. In the final two novels, the structure of the novels change to being a more conventional fantasy series wherein Harry must defeat Voldemort in a final conflict. This switch to the fantastic, in particular a male dominated fantastic world, means that Hermione must change roles to remain in the world since we rarely see any lone witches who have not turned to Voldemort such as Bellatrix Lestrange. This change of genre changes the expectations placed on the characters by readers and the roles which they play. School stories, in the mould of Enid Blyton’s *Malory Towers* or *St Clare’s*, offer the reader a

tale of a group of children who go on adventures limited in scale by location, an isolated school, and time, terms end and the year is punctuated by holidays. They offer a degree of carnivalesque expressed in the capers of the students which are tamed by the teachers but also a continuing discourse of maturation and acculturation to the wider adult world which must be entered. Parents exist at the edge of the story, referred to in letters or bringing their children to school. Once the anarchic time at school comes to an end, the parents represent the roles that the children will adopt. The fantastic world that Rowling constructs is one which begins as potentially subversive with Hermione challenging perceived wrongs and gaining a more powerful agency in the world through her knowledge. As she matures, the world is fully extended past Hogwarts and becomes deeply conservative and male dominated and Hermione has to re-ascertain her social standing on the edge of the group, her enabling agency now of no direct use to Harry.

Hermione matures in the series changing from the shy, bookish outsider to being, in effect, a big sister character to Harry and Ron but at the cost of her own agency and talents. As she matures into this role, she changes from being an inquisitive person, pushing her own bounds of knowledge and even her sanity, to being slightly calmer but clearly not of equal standing with Ron and Harry who are allowed to take active roles into world. When we first meet Hermione on the train going to Hogwarts, Rowling presents her as unkempt, exploring child unafraid to make new friends or to go up and visit the train driver. She is described as having “a bossy voice, lots of bushy brown hair and rather large front teeth” (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, p 79) and already wearing the school colours. She

interrupts Ron and Harry who are tucking into a carriage way feast of sweets. Curious, she challenges Ron to show him the magic trick which he is attempting. As the train approaches the station, she encourages the two boys to don their robes and questions whether they have been fighting already. Her drive towards perfection is shown in her encyclopaedic knowledge of the school drawn from reading the history. Already knowing the reason for the enchanted ceiling, she attains a position in the newly formed social triumvirate as the knowledge repository. Hermione comes back from the school holidays a day early whilst the friends are trying to find out who Nicholas Flamel is and is “torn between the horror at the idea of Harry being out of bed... and disappointment that he hadn’t at least found out who Nicholas Flamel was” (Philosopher’s Stone, p158). Her curiosity and good behaviour are at odds since she is aware that the answer may well lie in the forbidden section of the library but that entry transgresses the school rules. Although it is Harry who discovers Flamel by accident on the back of the collector’s card he got on the train, it is Hermione who links him to the Philosopher’s Stone through a book she got “out of the library weeks ago for a bit light reading” (Philosopher’s Stone, p. 161). Ron’s only comment, “Light?” (Philosopher’s Stone, p. 161), a suggestion that knowledge is not highly prized in Hogwarts as opposed to Quidditch. It was Hermione who noticed that Fluffy was standing on the trapdoor (Philosopher’s Stone, p120), a fact that both Ron and Harry missed. Yet her achievements come at a social price. Hermione’s adherence to the school rules is shown in Philosopher’s Stone after the finding of the trapdoor at night. When Harry receives a new

broom after the destruction of his old one, her comments “So I suppose you think that’s a reward for breaking rules?” (Philosopher’s Stone p. 123). Her forthrightness about the midnight incident is tempered by the argument with Ron and Harry. She is clearly upset by their reaction which is made worse by Ron’s careless comment about her not having any friends. Rushing past Harry, he notices that she is crying (Philosopher’s Stone p. 127). When the troll is announced, both boys realise that it has gone to the girls’ toilets where Hermione is trapped. When Professor McGonagall enters, Hermione lies to protect them all and claims that she wanted to tackle the troll herself. Although this means that “from that moment on, Hermione Granger became their friend” (Philosopher’s Stone, p. 132), she can only do so by lying to a teacher and so overturns her previous rigid adherence to rules. She has to adopt the boys’ own world view. In Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Hermione offers to make the Polyjuice Potion to see what Malfoy knows about the chamber’s opening. She tricks Lockhart into signing a slip for ‘Most Potente Potions’ to fool the Librarian (Chamber of Secrets, p. 124). When Ron says that they will need to steal from Professor Snape’s private stores, she retorts: “Well, if you two are going to chicken out, fine... I don’t want to break the rules you know.” (Chamber of Secrets, p. 125). Hermione is aware that they have already obtained a permission slip that Lockhart has signed without realising what it is (using his own arrogance), that the recipe relies upon illicit goods and that the boys cannot discover Malfoy’s perceived role without trickery. Despite her protestations about the rules, she is aware that these will need to be broken to be successful. When they come to making the potion, the

group need parts of their victims and Hermione is too hasty in taking some hair from Millicent Bulstrode in Wrestling and accidentally turns herself into a cat much to Myrtle's delight, "Wait till everyone finds out you've got a tail!" (Chamber of Secrets, p. 169). Whilst Ron and Harry have used her Sleeping Potion to knock out Crabbe and Goyle, Malfoy's henchmen, Hermione's own attempt has backfired and so she is unable to help get information from Malfoy. Her overachievement turns her into a figure of fun. Although she is able to assimilate Harry and Ron's worldview into her own perceptions, she is unable to fully join their world although she is the enabler for their plans through the potion and the linking together of the clues in Philosopher's Stone. Her overachievement comes to a head in the Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban when she is given the use of the Time-Turner. In Snape's Potions class, Neville is aided by Hermione to perfect the Shrinking Solution but when Ron and Harry turn to challenge her after the deduction of points, she disappears only to reappear a few minutes later with her bag falling apart through weight of books. When she brushes off Ron's challenge about the contents, he muses "Do you get the feeling Hermione's not telling us something?" (Prisoner of Azkaban, p. 99). Clearly Hermione is unable to tell the boys about Professor McGonagall's gift of the Time Turner. In the Defence against the Dark Arts exam, Hermione comes into contact with the Boggart and after "a minute inside it [the Boggart's trunk], she burst out again, screaming" (Prisoner of Azkaban, p. 234). The Boggart, which presents worst fears, has suggested to her that Professor McGonagall will fail her in an exam, so her fears of academic and also personal failure come to the fore. Ron is still inclined to

laugh at Hermione's fear since he will not excel academically. Despite their close bond, Hermione's academic achievements have always separated her from the boys. It is only when the situation demands that time is altered that she is able to tell Harry. When they fail to save Buckbeak the first time, Dumbledore suggests to Hermione that the situation can be saved by going backwards and Hermione confesses to Harry, "I've been using it all year to get to all my lessons" (Prisoner of Azkaban, p. 289) but she still cannot work out why Dumbledore has suggested going back three hours. It is up to Harry to formulate the plan to save the Hippogriff and Sirius. Once again, Hermione's mental achievements enable Harry but she is unable to complete the reasoning for the shift in time. Hermione proves herself via her academic prowess and enables Harry and Ron to complete various challenges. She is the person to whom the boys go when they have difficulties with the homework. Lupin praises her as the "finest witch of her age" (Prisoner of Azkaban, p. 253) in the Shrieking Shack as she becomes hysterical at his perceived betrayal of her loyalty, "I didn't tell anyone... I've been covering up for you" (Prisoner of Azkaban, p. 253). Her need to prove herself academically is challenged and Ron's reaction is to want to laugh. Despite her achievement and regular help for Harry and Ron, it is only the teachers who really prize her accomplishments. She is the character most likely to fail through overachievement. Her role is clearly defined in the school story as the swot. The school story genre allows her this room as a defined role but it she must adapt when the genre changes to a conservative high fantasy wherein gender roles are somewhat different. During the Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, she reverts to the quiet

studious Hermione of the first novel when Harry gets the magicked version of the potions book. As Harry falls under its spell and useful marginalia, she becomes increasingly exasperated at his lack of work or effort in the class commenting “Well, it wasn’t exactly your own work, was it?” (Half-Blood Prince, p 182). She and Ginny are protective of Harry and test the spell book which he has picked up, though they do not see the inscription claiming it is the property of the Half-Blood prince. With the aid of Ginny Weasley, she also defends him during the setting up of the self-help Dark Arts group, the acronymed DA, in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. Gathering the curious students together in the Hog’s Head, she comments “well I thought it would be good if we, well, took matters into our own hands... And by that I mean learning how to defend ourselves properly, not just in theory but doing the real spell” (Half-Blood Prince, p 303). Though she is instrumental in gathering the class, she immediately reverts to her supporting role and allows Harry to discuss the events at the end of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire where he met the revived Voldemort. Her tenure as Prefect in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix shows her stopping the Weasley twins from recruiting junior members of the school to test their joke wares, saying “I told you this morning, you can’t test your rubbish on students!” (Order of the Phoenix, p 229) whilst Ron, her fellow Prefect, looks on from the side. Although she is active in keeping the more extreme elements of the carnivalesque from taking over the school in the form of the Weasley brother’s joke wares, it does mark the apogee of the progression from swot to Prefect in the school novel. Though these roles are usually played by various characters in the school story genre, Rowling

has rolled them into one person who exemplifies the qualities of Hogwarts and, in particular, Gryffindor. Though Hermione is keen on the maintenance of the status quo, she becomes increasingly vocal against the abuse of power in two areas. She has mixed success but it allows her to retain her role in the social cohesion of the friendship group and to begin organising others in the school. Firstly she challenges a perceived abuse of the house elves by the wizarding classes and sets up the Society for the Protection of Elvish Welfare, SPEW. This act comes after Dobby is freed by Harry in Harry Potter and Chamber of Secrets. Hermione starts knitting hats to free the elves from their slave positions at Hogwarts in Order of the Phoenix and when challenged about this by Ron, exclaims “Of course they want to be free!” (Order of the Phoenix, p 230). Whilst it may mirror Rowling’s own time working for Amnesty International, she undermines Hermione by having Dobby pick up all the hats as the elves are offended by them. Though she gains the partial support of Dumbledore as he explains to Harry that he had encouraged Sirius to treat Kreacher with kindness (Order of the Phoenix, p 733), Ron and Harry dismiss her efforts. To an extent, she loves hopeless causes and sets out to free the elves despite their reluctance to change their positions. Secondly, she attacks the misuses of authority by teachers, such as Severus Snape and Dolores Umbridge. In Prisoner of Azkaban, Snape takes over Lupin’s classes while he recovers from his change. Ignoring the class protests he begins to set them work which will provide clues to Lupin’s condition and Hermione protests (Prisoner of Azkaban, p128) which encourages Ron to defend her and receive detention. She becomes increasingly agitated

by Snape's manner and challenges him through questions. Though she has been able to answer the questions that he puts to the class since the first book, earning his contempt, she now uses these as a challenge to his authority through passive disruption. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Dolores Umbridge attempts to run a school based on the traditional school model of learning the theory of Defence against the Dark Arts rather than practical lessons. Hermione listens to Umbridge's long speech which sets out the rationale for the coming changes. During the first Defence against the Dark Arts lesson she immediately questions Umbridge's passive stance through using Umbridge's insistence on pupils raising their hands to ask questions (*Order of the Phoenix*, p 217-218). Asking the question, she repeats herself when the answer is not forthcoming. Hermione continues this with the creation of the Dark Arts or Dumbledore's Army group. As Umbridge tries to crack down on any nascent dissent against the Ministry of Magic's policy, Hermione comes up with the plan of setting a group to rectify the lack of practical training. Facing the belief that Harry killed Cedric, fuelled by the Daily Prophet, she motivates the students to come together and to learn practical defence. As she does this she comments "d'you know ... I think I'm feeling a bit ... rebellious" (*Order of the Phoenix*, p 559). Rather than continuing her challenge to misplaced authority, once the school story ends, she moves towards the role of the sister. Whilst on the run from the Ministry of Magic in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Harry confesses to Ron that Hermione is "like a sister," "he went on "I love her like a sister and I reckon she feels the same about me" (Deathly Hallows, p308). To some degree she follows the path of Lyra

Pullman's 'His Dark Materials' trilogy where she develops her challenges early on but ends up giving up independence. Before she meets Will, Lyra is free to challenge the authority figures around her but after the meeting, when Will is cooking an omelette, he commands "Find a couple of plates" he said, and Lyra obediently did so (The Subtle Knife p 25). After the defeat of Voldemort, we see her and Ron on Platform 9 ¾, waving their children off on the Hogwarts express. The action occurs around Harry and Ron with Hermione chiding them when they see Scorpius, Draco's son, with "Don't try to turn them against each other before they've even started school" (Deathly Hallows, p605). She is keen to maintain stability in the world for the children. As she develops into adolescence, she moves away from her rebellious side straight into motherhood, so avoiding Susan's fate in the 'Chronicles of Narnia'. Though she moves into adolescence, she is faithful to Ron, declaring her love for him in the Deathly Hallows. Despite Lupin's proclamation of her talent, we finally see Hermione taking her children to platform 9 ¾. She avoids Susan's banishment from the magical world because she cares for her friends and, ultimately, children and is not selfish as Susan is implied to be by Aslan in the quotation at the beginning of this essay. Yet it seems a poor fate for all her achievements. The boarding school genre allows Hermione to excel academically and be an equal to Harry and Ron. She develops and is capable of taking on teaching duties and, it would appear, likely to follow Minerva McGonagall as the archetypal spinster teacher. She is the archetypal swot who becomes Prefect as she gets to the end of her school years. Her insistence upon hardwork and her dislike of cheats, even if they are her friends, show Hermione's

dedication to maintaining order, though not at any price. She also takes on what appear to be hopeless causes, the release of the elves and then challenges against misused authority, despite the ridicule of her peers. Hermione stands against inequality and tries to effect change. Dumbledore is the only person who backs her stance, and this is only very partially, as he explains to Harry. Dealing with her own social group, she is more effective in galvanising her peers into forming the Dark Arts group. Yet she is on the edge of the social group. On the train to Hogwarts, it is Harry who accepts her into the nascent group and then more firmly once the troll is defeated in the bathrooms. Once the OWLs have been taken, Hermione moves away from being the bright academic, her role in helping with Ron and Harry finishing their homework redundant, to being involved in maintaining the group with Ron and Harry through her caring for both boys. It is only Hermione who can cope with the real world of Oxford Street before they manage to get into more magical territory. The school narrative allows Hermione to blossom as an individual as the closed world of Hogwarts bars the real world and gives her space as a person. Once the real world begins to encroach, she begins to move away from her academic achievements and into the big sister role. At one level Rowling sees Hermione as a caricature of her school memories but at another, the Harry Potter series fails to address the idea that girls can do more than become mothers or spinster teachers. In Narnia the Pevensie children are either kept in childlike paradise away from ever growing up or they are ejected from paradise for thinking of the adult world. In 'His Dark Materials', Lyra moves from challenging the misplaced authority of Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel to leaving Will to make all the

decisions. Hermione's own contributions to the group come through enabling Harry to complete tasks with the requisite knowledge that she can find or discern. Once the fight against Voldemort moves into Harry's own history, only Dumbledore can help Harry. Whilst on the run in *Deathly Hallows*, it is Hermione who tries to keep the group together and to work out Dumbledore's final clue in the book of fairy tales. She is a catalyst for those around her and remains sidelined. Whilst she shows that she can develop herself against Mendlesohn's analysis through her own talent, Dresang's assertion that Hermione gains strength through empowering others is shown to only be partial; she sacrifices her individual power and role to help recreate a safe world. Once she has enabled Harry, Rowling moves her into a maternal role, her highest honour. It short changes the Witch that Lupin described as the brightest of her age. Bibliography Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Routledge, London, 1981) Lewis, C. S., *The Last Battle* (Harper Collins, London, 2005) Moorcock, Michael, *Wizardry and Wild Romance: A Study of Epic Romance* (Gollancz, London, 1987) Pullman, Philip, *The Subtle Knife* (Scholastic, London, 1997, 2001 reprint) Rotruck, Amie Rose, 'Where Have All the Tomboys Gone?: Female Figures in British Children's Fantasy Series' in *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* Volume 32, Number 88, Summer 2003 Rowling, J. K., *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Bloomsbury, London, 1997) Rowling, J. K., *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Bloomsbury, London, 1998) Rowling, J. K., *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Bloomsbury, London, 1999) Rowling, J. K., *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Bloomsbury, London, 2000) J. K. Rowling, *Harry*

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