

Abstract

This essay explores the differences between various female characters presented in the Harry Potter novels by J.K. Rowling. I demonstrate how they vary by using three situations that each applies to several notable female characters. Firstly I look at how four women of various ages: Hermione Granger, Minerva McGonagall, Ginny Weasley and Fleur Delacour, deal with being in love, the relationships they do or could have and how relations with the opposite sex affect them. I discuss their own behaviour, whether their character is consistent or surprising, and to a lesser extent the behaviour of those around them. Secondly I explore the women that qualify as mother figures to Harry: Professor McGonagall, Mrs. Weasley and Petunia Dursley. I look at whether they are strong or weak and how being in the stereotypical female role of housewife can vary drastically from character to character. Lastly I discuss house-elves, focusing on Winky and Dobby. I explore the role these two have as well as the part house-elves as a whole play and also how house-elves, male or female, represent oppressed and abused women. Scholarly discussion on the female characters, human and non-human, and how well Rowling has written them is not abundant, but it does exist. Of course there is no unanimous view on this topic but in this essay I take the side of those who believe that women are well represented by Rowling. I fully acknowledge that the female characters are by no means perfect, but as a whole they are realistic, which in my opinion is better than them being perfect. By going through the three aforementioned topics I conclude that while Rowling may not have set out to write feminist novels, which she did not, the female characters are not only well written, but positive and important, despite having flaws.

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1. Introduction

Throughout all the Harry Potter novels we can see subtle feminism. The reader does not see women fighting for their right to be equal to men, there are no rallies for women's rights or anything of that kind. This can make some readers pause and think that the novels are perhaps anti-feminist. The reason, however, why the reader does not see women fighting for their rights, is that the women do not have to fight. The wizarding community J.K. Rowling has created views men and women as equals. No character comments on the fact that women are on the same sports team as men playing Quidditch; nobody mentions that it is a great victory to feminism that a woman has become Headmistress of Hogwarts or Minister of Magic, etc. Nobody mentions any such things specially, like we, modern muggles, would do, because to the people of Rowling's wizarding world, women and men playing on equal ground is normal. There is no need for people to celebrate these things as special achievements because they are not special and that is exactly what feminists in our modern society are fighting for: women and men being equal and as a result the fact that we do not have to celebrate women getting top jobs or setting records any more than men. "The end purpose of understanding and applying the feminists' point of view is to eliminate inequality for women and improve the lot of everyone" (Dresang 216). In this sense the world of Harry Potter is far more advanced than our own.

With that being said it does not mean that there are not characters in the Harry Potter novels that fall into stereotypical female roles. This is because J.K. Rowling is not herself a part of the wizarding world: she is a part of our modern world where there are still stereotypical female roles and men rule the universe. Not all female characters are strong, powerful, feminist women and there is no need for every single one of them to be like that; no two women are the same and no woman can be perfect in every way. It is not realistic to portray every woman as a hard-core feminist and indeed most of the female characters of the novels are not portrayed as feminists. Ginny Weasley for example is on the feminist side of the spectrum while her own mother is on the opposite end. What the female characters and representations of women in the Harry Potter novels that the reader gets to really know have in common is that they are realistic; they

are not the same, they handle different situations and feelings in different ways, they live their lives differently and they make different choices.

In this essay I will use examples from all seven Harry Potter novels, originally published 1997-2007: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (PS)*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (CoS)*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (PoA)*, *Harry Potter and Goblet of Fire (GoF)*, *Harry Potter and Order of the Phoenix (OotP)*, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince (HBP)* and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (DH)*, as well as information from pottermore.com (a website created by J.K. Rowling for her fans to experience the novels in a new way and to learn more about the characters and events of the novels) and scholarly articles. My essay is split into three chapters, exploring three different situations or feelings that multiple female characters of the novels experience. The first chapter is about love and the characters' various behaviours in regards to love. The second chapter deals with the housewives and mother figures of the novels and the way this stereotypical female role can vary. The final chapter is about house-elves, what they represent and the different ways they handle the difficulties of their lives.

2. The Effects of Love

Several of the female characters are shown falling in love or being in love throughout the Harry Potter novels. How they handle this part of their lives and also how it affects them to be in a relationship is quite different from character to character, much like in real life. For example, Hermione bottles things up, Ginny is outspoken and confident about her relationships and Fleur Delacour becomes a better person through love.

The Harry Potter novels are, understandably, told from Harry's point of view and therefore the reader does not see what the other characters are thinking or feeling at any given moment unless the characters say it aloud, or it can be read in their behaviour. Because of this we do not know when Hermione falls in love with Ron, but it is not unreasonable to assume that she realises what she is feeling much sooner than Ron does as she is a smart woman whereas Ron is notoriously slow and, frankly, dumb when it comes to girls and feelings. Hermione may start out in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* as a rather weak little girl, reliant on the boys to save her, annoying and a know-it-all, but she matures extremely well and as Krunoslav Mikulan points out, her "character grows beyond the stereotype of the weak woman/geek and gradually attains abilities usually attributed to male heroes" (290): wisdom, strength, power, etc.

When Ron starts to date Lavender Brown in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the reader starts to notice Hermione's feelings. While Hermione is very confident about her studies, her knowledge and things of that nature it seems that she is not as confident about acting on her feelings. She is more analytical and she likes to know all the facts and because of this it is quite difficult for her to go out on a limb or take a chance like that of dating her best friend without being able to conclusively know what the consequences could be. Hermione is smart enough to know that if she and Ron become a couple and then break up, they will probably not be able to keep their friendship, but not only would she lose Ron as a friend, she might even lose Harry too, as she would never want to make him choose between his friends. Hermione makes decisions with her head and not her heart. It is probably because of this quality of her personality that Hermione does not try to further her relationship with Ron and she therefore suffers in silence when Ron flaunts his relationship with Lavender. As Eliza Dresang states, "she has logic, the logic missing sometimes from her friends, Harry and

Ron” (227). It is not until late in the seventh and last book that Hermione “snaps” and kisses Ron when he shows surprising care about the welfare of house-elves: a topic that Hermione is extremely passionate about and one that Ron has previously shown very little interest in. Hermione is the first to act in their romantic relationship and her first act comes about due to a topic that is dear to her heart. She is usually shown as very level-headed, but on this occasion she is anything but.

Before they act on their feelings Hermione goes through something that is extremely difficult for anyone to go through: the man she is in love with leaves her. Ron expects her to follow him but she cannot. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* Ron storms out on Hermione and Harry, and because the three of them magically guard their location quite well that means that Ron has no way of getting back to Harry and Hermione. Ron’s reason for leaving is that they are not getting anywhere with their search for horcruxes and how to destroy them, coupled with the effect of the horcrux he wears around his neck. Those things make him so frustrated that they have a big row which ends with Ron storming out and leaving them. Hermione is devastated. But she does not go with him because she knows that despite their search being difficult and so far not very successful, it is necessary and something that she would not make Harry do alone. She keeps a cool head in a passionate situation. She chooses saving the world over a boy. That scene alone shows the strength of Hermione’s character. The fact that she is in love does not mean that her whole life will now revolve around that boy and that whatever that boy does or how he behaves will define her. She is the opposite of Bella Swan from Stephenie Meyer’s popular teenage romance novel *Twilight* (2005) who is completely ruled by her boyfriend. As Krunoslav Mikulan puts it: “Rowling has succeeded in developing the character of a child who transforms herself into a young woman and who is able to resist the traps connected with her sex: she does not retreat into passivity and silence, she is not scared of the world dominated by men, she does not “lose her voice”” (292). According to Dresang “one of the most dreadful and long-lasting things to happen to young women as they as they reach adolescence is for them to “lose their voices,” symbolic of their losing their self-confidence and their agency” (229).

Professor McGonagall has a similar experience as Hermione when it comes to her lover. This is not anything shown in the books because the Harry Potter novels do

not focus in any way on the love life of the adults. Due to the existence of pottermore.com, the users of that website now know a lot more about certain characters' background and history. For example, before Professor McGonagall becomes a professor at Hogwarts she works at the Ministry of Magic for a while. While in that job as a young woman she falls in love with a muggle, Dougal McGregor, and almost marries him without telling him what and who she really is. Before she can go through with this she realises that this is exactly what her mother did and she saw how unhappy her mother had been that way and so she calls the wedding off. Because of her job and the International Statute of Secrecy she cannot give her lover any reason for her change of heart since it would break the law and she would lose her job at the Ministry. McGonagall knows that she will never be happy with McGregor, or any man for that matter, if it means she has to hide who she is her whole life. So she chooses herself, her job and her ambitions over a miserable marriage (Rowling "Professor McGonagall").

This must have been exceedingly difficult for McGonagall to do because she loved that muggle but it was the right thing to do none the less, not only for her own happiness but for McGregor as well, because she would never have been able to share her whole self with him. She would have been tied down and unhappy because of this and she would not be negatively tied with any man nor would she sacrifice her independence for one either. She is an exceptionally strong woman and a female character that any reader, male or female, could and should look up to.

Of all the female characters Ginny Weasley handles her love life the best. She is a great feminist and nothing and no one will define her other than herself. She never lets a boy change who she is. At Hogwarts Ginny is very popular with the boys; she is the only character shown to have multiple partners. This does not make her brother Ron happy. Ginny and Ron have a very vicious screaming argument when Ron and Harry walk in on Ginny kissing her boyfriend Dean. Ginny tells Ron in no uncertain terms: "[i]t is none of your business who I go out with or what I do with them" (*HBP* 268). To which Ron retorts that it is and he adds: "D'you think I want people saying my sister's a-" (*HBP* 268). It is quite obvious that Ron is about to call Ginny a slut. Understandably she becomes even angrier at that and even draws her wand. "Ginny is quick to refuse this subject position [of slut]. She stands her ground, points to the unfairness of a sexual double standard, and declares herself free to act as she pleases" (Cherland 278). Ron's

only reason for almost calling his sister a slut is that he does not understand female sexuality and has archaic notions as to how women should behave. It is shown in several places throughout the novels that Ron does not have great emotional maturity and he is certainly not as mature as Ginny is, even though she is younger. Ginny knows her sexuality and she knows how to handle it so much better than Ron knows his own. “Girls like Ginny Weasley may be positioned as immoral or impure, but they can speak themselves into another existence by taking up different subject positions” (Cherland 278).

When Harry starts seeing Ginny as more than just Ron’s little sister he initially tries his best to do nothing about it and stop feeling that way because of loyalty to Ron. To young men it seems like dating their friends’ little sisters is something they absolutely cannot do for some reason, even though their intentions are for a genuine relationship as opposed to just using them for sex. It has been established since the first time Harry and Ginny meet that Ginny has a crush on Harry; the otherwise talkative and confident girl is reduced to blushing, clumsiness and absolute silence whenever Harry is around. But after some good advice from Hermione she tries to get over Harry because she recognises the way he thinks; she knows that there is little chance that Harry will ever think of her as something other than Ron’s little sister. So she loosens up and relaxes around Harry prompting him to take more notice of her. Once their relationship has escalated to that of boyfriend and girlfriend Ginny does not change or become more passive than she was. She stays true to herself even when Harry breaks up with her, for her own good which, of course, Ginny takes some offence to. She does not break down or stop functioning. She knows that her boyfriend has a tough job ahead of him and she accepts that sometimes life just happens. Harry says to her that: “It’s been like ... like something out of someone else’s life, these last few weeks with you” (*HBP* 602). To Harry, Ginny is normality: she is a happy and carefree, confident and unburdened person, all of which Harry so desperately craves.

There is one aspect of Ginny’s relationship with Harry that is very strange. This strangeness occurs when the reader sees that little glimpse into the future in the chapter titled “19 Years Later” as an epilogue in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Ginny and Harry’s three children are named James Sirius, Albus Severus and Lily Luna. James is Harry’s father, Sirius is Harry’s godfather, Albus is Harry’s headmaster, Severus is

also Harry's headmaster, Lily is Harry's mother and Luna is Harry's friend. Not one name of these six has any great emotional connection to Ginny. Of course both Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape were Ginny's headmasters too and Luna is Ginny's friend as well as Harry's, but Harry had a much greater connection with all of them, except for maybe Luna. The name Luna can very well be the only name Ginny decides, but it is not a name exclusively connected to her. Harry could have come up with it as well. None of Ginny's children are named for anyone in her family; there is no Molly, no Arthur, no Fred. It looks like Harry has complete control over the naming of their children which is very strange because we know Ginny to be a strong and confident woman who probably has ideas of her own as to what her children will be called but the fact is that she becomes completely submissive in this which is very inconsistent with her character, to say the least.

Fleur Delacour is first presented in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as a student of Beauxbatons who becomes a Triwizard Champion. Being chosen as a Triwizard Champion is a sign of great strength of character and wizarding ability as there is only one Champion from each school, or so it should be. Being a Champion would make the reader think that Fleur is another one of those strong female characters that Rowling has created. But throughout *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* she is represented as a very weak one. She is for example patronising and looks down her nose at Harry when she discovers that he has been chosen as the fourth Champion, she laughs at Dumbledore's speech at the Welcome Feast, she is overly critical of the Christmas decorations at Hogwarts along with the food and the temperature and she is the least successful of the four Champions in the Triwizard Tournament. During the second task she fails to retrieve her hostage from the bottom of The Lake and when Harry does it for her she is extremely, over-the-top, grateful. Her sister, who is her hostage, is never in any danger, a fact that everybody knows the whole time aside from Fleur and Harry. Harry only realises it as he finishes the task, but it appears that Fleur never realises this as she is continually grateful for Harry's apparent heroism throughout the later novels when the Triwizard Tournament has been over for years.

Fleur's only positive, if it can be called that, quality in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* has nothing to do with her personality but is the fact that she is extremely pretty: "[a] long sheet of silvery blonde hair fell almost to her waist. She had large deep

blue eyes, and very white, even teeth” (*GoF* 222). She is in fact so pretty that Ron can barely talk when he is around her and many boys cannot help but stare at her as she walks by. Her beauty and her mysterious power over boys stem from the fact that she is part Veela. Veela are Rowling’s representation of the ancient Greek sirens: beautiful part-women, part-birds who have mysterious powers over men and lure them to their deaths. They represent “the understanding that female people are different from normal people. Girls and women are sexual beings with dangerous power over men” (Cherland 275). Men are so affected by the Veela that they desperately want to do or be something impressive and so lie to make themselves seem more important or attempt foolishly dangerous things to impress them. Meredith Cherland point out: “Even the reasonable boy with the ordinary name, Harry Potter, loses himself and his reason when the Veela dance” (275). When the Veela become angry they transform: “their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders” (*GoF* 101). This does not seem to happen to Fleur, nor does she lure men to her to kill them, probably because she is only one-quarter Veela. Like Cherland notes in her article, “Fleur does not do well in the events of the Triwizard Tournament, but she does frequently demonstrate her power over Ron Weasley and other boys, who lose their ability to speak in her presence” (276). The most notable occasion when Fleur uses her power over men is when she tries to get Cedric Diggory to ask her to the Yule Ball, accidentally hitting Ron with her charm as well.

Because of this aspect of Fleur’s personality and being, it is understandable that the Weasley family has some reservations about her marrying Bill. It is quite possible that they think that she somehow enchanted Bill to want to be with her as they do not see them as being compatible at all. And it is true that up until a moment in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* when Bill has been attacked by a werewolf, what the reader sees of Fleur is just her annoying and patronising personality. But when Mrs. Weasley assumes that Fleur might not want to marry Bill anymore after his face has been disfigured, Fleur is extremely insulted and shows a surprising strength of character for what has until now been a weak one: “You thought I would not weesh to marry him? Or per’aps you ‘oped? [...] What do I care how ‘e looks? I am good-looking enough for both of us, I theenk! All these scars show is zat my husband is brave!” (*HBP* 581). All of a sudden Fleur has redeemed herself in some way and the reader realises that there

must be more to her than just her Veela heritage. Being in love with Bill seems to have strengthened her and made her a better person. It is one of the ways that being in love can actually better a person.

None of the noted female characters react to falling in love or being in a relationship the same way. Their reactions are varied but all are real and believable. Almost all reactions are true to their personality; it is only Fleur that really surprises the reader by showing that there is more to her than vapid beauty, thereby strengthening her as a character. Hermione is smart and safe when it comes to her relationship, McGonagall is strong and independent with hers and Ginny stands up for herself. Ginny's attitude towards relationships is something that modern girls and women should emulate. Having more than one sexual partner in a lifetime is in today's society generally viewed as being very negative for women, but it should not be. It is fine for a man to have multiple partners and so it should be for women, but this double standard is in place and does not appear to be changing. It is women like Ginny that are the ones that will make it change.

Romantic love is not the only type of love represented in the Harry Potter novels. The female characters of the books also experience platonic love in different ways but the most notable of this type of love is the love of the mother.

3. Mother Figures: Weak Stereotypes or Strong Women?

Harry never knew his mother, Lily Potter, because she dies when Harry is still only a toddler. Because of this Lily has become almost like Petrarch's Laura to Harry. Of course Harry is not in love with his own mother like Petrarch was in love with Laura, but the platonic love is there nevertheless and everything else fits: Lily is unattainable, she is dead and so Harry can never really be around her or get to know the real her; she is perfect. Harry can only watch from afar or listen to others tell him about her and of course out of respect for the dead, people tend to gloss over the negative aspects of someone's character and therefore Harry can never know any negative sides to her. She is always described as beautiful, never does anyone make any notes about her appearance that could be considered negative, etc. Everything Petrarch thought of his Laura, Harry knows about his mother. Aside from the fact that Lily is not blonde, everything fits together. But because Harry cannot know his actual mother, Rowling gives us mother-figures for him instead. Most notable of those are of course his aunt Petunia and Ron's mother, Molly Weasley. But there is a sliding scale of mother-figures or housewives that goes from a strong, independent woman, to an overbearing one, to a cruel one and finally to abused ones.

Professor Minerva McGonagall is the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts and also head of Gryffindor House, both of which are positions of authority. However, "[t]he structure of authority, the patriarchal society, places some constraints on her, but she is an empowered female within this structure" (Dresang 235). She is not the first person the reader thinks of as a mother figure to anyone as she is not in a typical mothering role, but she is one none the less. As a teacher she is responsible for guiding and educating youngsters and helping them to grow the ability to cope with real life once school is over, which is a profession you need a certain mothering quality if you want to do it well. She is in a position of power and she handles that position exceptionally well. She is smart and she does not take any nonsense from anyone. She is a very capable teacher and manages the art of being strict while still making the students like her as a teacher and therefore be more likely to enjoy her classes and learn. Upon first meeting her in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry's first, and correct, impression is that this is not a woman one should cross. McGonagall teaches Transfiguration, a

subject that is not in any way feminised but is actually one of the most difficult and dangerous subjects taught at Hogwarts that, before her time, was taught by Dumbledore himself. She is not only an extremely accomplished witch and an Animagus, she is in fact very skilled in all regards, can duel people younger and more agile than her and live to tell the tale. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* she is hit in the chest with four Stunning Spells at once and it still does not kill her, even though she is in her sixties at the time. She is a very strong woman and a great person for girls, as well as boys, to look up to and want to emulate. Compared to Mrs. Weasley, McGonagall does not come off as particularly nurturing; she often seems a bit gruff and hardened but she is nurturing and loving in her own way, she wants Harry to do well and achieve his goals. She cares about Harry and his wellbeing just as much as Mrs. Weasley, Harry's primary mother-figure.

Professor McGonagall does not give unnecessary punishment while not being soft on the students; the punishment she gives is always appropriate to the "crime." She is, according to Eliza Dresang "the epitome of fairness" (235), unlike Professor Snape who can be petty and vindictive when doling out punishments. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* for example, Snape punishes Harry by having him copy out misdeeds done by his father and godfather and therefore making the punishment not about school but a personal pain to Harry. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* when Snape wants Harry taken off the Gryffindor Quidditch team because he is found where a cat has been petrified, an incident which has absolutely no connection to Quidditch whatsoever. Professor Snape's suggested punishment is a personal one again because Harry happens to be very good at Quidditch and Professor Snape wants to make Gryffindor less likely to beat Slytherin. Professor McGonagall never makes the punishment personal like that, she is anything but cruel, she gives the students the punishment they deserve and once it is done it is done. She does not hesitate to take house points away from her own house if she feels the student deserves it but she is fair and does not give out unnecessary punishments either. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* she shows this as well by planning on giving Harry and George Weasley a week's worth of detention for attacking Draco Malfoy on the Quidditch pitch, a fair but still rather severe punishment since it has the added negative aspect of making them have no time to do their homework for a week. Professor Umbridge then cuts in and

gives them both, and Fred Weasley as well, a lifelong ban from Quidditch. This is a punishment which is not only ridiculously harsh but something that is not within her power to give, as Professor Umbridge has no authority over the students of Hogwarts once they leave school. Professor McGonagall herself even displays great shock at Professor Umbridge's announcement because she knows that what she herself was going to give out as punishment was severe enough and that this extreme punishment is beyond anything she would ever have thought of. All in all, Professor McGonagall is a good influence on Harry and he is lucky to have her in his life. She "is neither a caricature nor a stereotype but a strong, independent female" (Dresang 234).

Molly Weasley is the most motherly of all the characters in the Harry Potter novels, but she is in a rather stereotypical female role and there is not particularly much that makes her break the mould when it comes to this stereotype. She is overbearing, nagging, constantly feeding people, she knits, cooks and cleans. Mrs. Weasley does not have a career outside the home; her job is that of a housewife despite the fact that the family has very little money and is always having trouble getting by on just Mr. Weasley's salary. From what the reader sees of Mrs. Weasley and her husband, the idea of her working outside the home does not even occur to her or anyone else, despite all her children being away at school for most of the year, during which time Mrs. Weasley does not have anyone but her husband to fuss over. It would seem logical that she would get a job during winter but no such thing is ever mentioned and there is nothing else that the reader can do but assume that she never does any work that brings money into the home. With small children it is very reasonable for a parent to stay at home with them, whether it is the mother or the father, but starting from the second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, all seven of the Weasley children are either away at school or grown up with their own careers and lives outside of the Burrow. Mrs. Weasley is anything but submissive to her husband though, if anything the reverse is true. She is forceful, she knows what she wants and she makes sure that everybody, not just her children, are held accountable for the things they do wrong. She is much more likely to dole out punishment for any wrongdoing than her husband is, meek as he is. In this sense it is almost as if the stereotypical parent figures are reversed, but it is only in this one aspect of their personalities.

As Harry's best friend's mother, Mrs. Weasley is the most prominent mother-figure for Harry and she considers him as good as a son. Like what most mothers probably feel, Mrs. Weasley's greatest fear is losing her children, including Harry. Due to the fact that the novels are all about magic, this is not just something the reader has to deduce from her behaviour or what she says, it is actually physically shown when Mrs. Weasley tries to handle a Boggart in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The Boggart takes the form of your worst fear and when Mrs. Weasley tries to deal with it it changes in turn from dead Ron, to dead Bill, to dead Mr. Weasley to "[d]ead twins. Crack. Dead Percy. Crack. Dead Harry..." (*OoP*, 160). From this scene it is easy to see just how much she cares about her family and not just her family by blood but about Harry too.

What the scene with the Boggart also shows is a shortcoming of Mrs. Weasley's. Every other time a Boggart has shown up the people dealing with it have managed to handle it. They may be frightened, obviously, but this is the only scene where a character is shown to have failed to get rid of a Boggart. Mrs. Weasley is not strong enough to do so, even when in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* a group of thirteen year olds can do it and Harry can do it alone in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* when he is fourteen. You have to be a strong person to be able to handle seeing your worst fear laid out in front of you and it is something all the characters that have faced a Boggart have managed to do, some with more difficulty than others, but Mrs. Weasley is the only one who cannot do it.

In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Mrs. Weasley has an especially fierce moment where she shows that there is more strength to her than that of "just" a housewife. It is during the Battle of Hogwarts and she sees Bellatrix Lestrange try to kill Ginny. Seeing as her worst fear is about to happen right in front of her own eyes, Mrs. Weasley does not break down like with the Boggart but instead attacks, yelling: "NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!" (*DH* 589). This is the only curse word in the whole series. There are some instances of "bloody hell" and a few where it is obvious that a curse word was going to follow but either the character gets cut off by somebody else or the line is stopped before the curse word and somebody else is shown reacting to the swear. It is interesting to think about the fact that the swearword is given to Mrs. Weasley, the doting mother and probably the character who is least likely to curse.

What it does though, is make the line more powerful than if any other character had said it because the extreme circumstances require an extreme response, even from someone like Mrs. Weasley.

Growing up, before he knew he was a wizard, the only mother-figure in Harry's life was his aunt Petunia. Aunt Petunia is like Mrs. Weasley in only two ways; firstly that she does not work outside the home and secondly in the sense that they are both cast in very stereotypical female moulds, even though those moulds are very different. Petunia never breaks her mould, unlike Mrs. Weasley who has a moment of strength and mould-breaking which will be discussed in the following chapter. She never changes her negative behaviour towards Harry, she only cares about what others think of her and her home and her family and she is completely obsessed with what her neighbours are up to. She is the frivolous female stereotype who does not care about anything substantial, which is a bit of a paradox since she is married and a mother who cares deeply about her own child. She in no way cares about Harry and is extremely hateful towards him, like she resents his very existence, while being very overprotective of her son Dudley to the point where it hurts him more than it helps him; always glossing over bad grades, ignoring comments about him being a bully, giving him anything he has ever asked for, etc.

Aunt Petunia's relationship with Harry is the opposite of his relationship with Mrs. Weasley who takes Harry in because of love and an innate caring nature, while Petunia takes him in only because she is told to do so. She shows him just enough care as an infant to not let him die. Having Harry in her house is a constant reminder of her sister Lily and how much she hates her. So she takes those feelings out on Harry; she is unable to separate her feelings for her sister from her sister's son who has never done her any harm, much like Professor Snape cannot separate his feelings for Harry's father from Harry himself. As a young girl Petunia was extremely jealous of Lily and her magic and the fact that their parents loved her for it. Petunia felt pushed aside for what she felt was her freak of a sister. Seeing Harry every day is like seeing her sister every day and she hates that and so she takes her frustrations out on him (Rowling "Vernon & Petunia Dursley").

Despite knowing quite a bit about the magical world due to her sister and James Potter, Petunia is rather clueless sometimes. She and Vernon decide to try and squash

the magic out of Harry, something that is just as impossible as it is to turn into a wizard once you have been born a muggle. Petunia should have known this, given that in a memory shown in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the reader sees that she wanted to become a witch, going as far as writing to Professor Dumbledore and asking to be accepted into Hogwarts. It is probably after this denial that Petunia starts to insist that Lily is a freak and that magic is the worst thing that can happen to someone. Petunia does not accept Harry at all, she only accepts the son that is her own blood and forgives or ignores any flaw he has, to the point of where it is actually hurting Dudley, while she mercilessly sees every flaw in Harry whether it is real or not.

The role of a mother-figure is one that is very easily stereotypically female and two of Harry's mother-figures indeed fall into that mould. Even so, the two stereotypical females are different; just because they both have some characteristics that put them into that mould, it does not mean that these are the same characteristics. The fact that Mrs. Weasley and Petunia are so vastly different and yet fall into the same stereotype shows the range of what one commonly thinks about women who have the same job to do. The range of what Harry's mother figures think of him spans from Mrs. Weasley's unconditional love and all the way to Petunia's house-elf-like treatment of Harry.

4. The Troubled Lives of House-Elves

Dobby the house-elf is a very important character in the Harry Potter novels and house-elves in general are not only important to the plot but also interesting to observe and analyse. Rivka Kellner suggests that what is possible to see from the behaviour of the house-elves and how people treat them is the fact that house-elves “should be seen as indirect and perhaps unintentional representations of unemancipated and unempowered women of the past, and those in oppressive societies today” (367). It is, in fact, quite easy to see this as the similarities are numerous. They are bound to a family, or a master, whose bidding they must always do. They can never get away from this master even if he or she mistreats them terribly, unless said master decides he does not want them anymore and throws them away. All they do is cook, clean, babysit and keep their masters’ secrets. They do not get wages for their work, nor holidays, nor pension plans. They are not allowed to have opinions or do things just because they want to. House-elves are completely dependent on their masters despite having powerful magic of their own. Their magic is arguably even more powerful than that of their masters who have to use wands to channel their magic while house-elves do not need any aids for their magic. They, however, never use this magic to help themselves, they could as they have the ability but they never do because they lack the strength and confidence. House-elves “do not have history of their own (so far as Rowling has told us) beyond that of their owners. Just as in *our* world, history is his-story and not her-story, house elves have no elve-story” (Kellner 383).

All these things can easily be paralleled to oppressed women; they are bound to their husbands, unable to get a divorce even though they are being abused, they do not work outside the home, they only do housework and rear children. They have the capability to stand up to their husbands but they do not do it, possibly because, just like with the house-elves, it just does not occur to them that getting away from this is an option and so they have rationalised it in their minds and believe that this is just the way life is and they should be happy with their lot. The only way to free a house-elf is to present him or her with clothes because they are not allowed to own any for themselves, wearing instead tea towels or pillow cases. Historically women have not been allowed to own property and this connection with house-elves not owning clothes is a further

one between house-elves and oppressed women. Kellner also points out that women are stereotypically obsessed with clothes and it is also because of that, that using clothes to free house-elves is significant (368).

Winky, a female house-elf, is the Crouches' house-elf. After Mr. Crouch's wife dies Winky takes care of him as he ages and also the Crouch's son, who everybody believes to be dead, but as Winky herself says: "Winky keeps her master's secrets" (*GoF* 333). While working for the Crouches, Winky does not seem to have been outright abused, however, Mr. Crouch is indeed a very strict man who believes in following rules above all else so it is entirely plausible that if Winky does something wrong or something she is not allowed to do she will have been punished. But from what we know, Mr. Crouch does not physically harm Winky while she is with him. Her behaviour is not that of an abuse victim, she just does what she is told. It is when Winky is freed that Mr. Crouch's obsessive adherence to rules really hurts her. Despite the fact that Winky does not really do anything wrong, Mr. Crouch frees her and talks to her in a way that is utterly demeaning and humiliating (an attitude which seems to be shared by most wizards) while Winky sobs and begs him not to. The combination of Mr. Crouch's former strict but most likely non-abusive behaviour when Winky worked for him and his dramatically cruel way of dismissing her, can probably explain Winky's behaviour after she's been dismissed. After being freed Winky becomes depressed, she does not do the work she has been hired to do and becomes an alcoholic. She has absolutely no idea how to handle herself or life without her master. Being freed is the most shameful thing that has ever happened to her because that is what she was taught to believe, both by the wizarding society around her and by her own kin who had been servicing the Crouches for generations before Winky.

Winky gets a position at Hogwarts with Dobby after Crouch dismisses her and while she is ashamed she still wears clothes, something no other house-elf does, except for Dobby. Professor Dumbledore is now Winky's master but she does not wear the tea-towel with the Hogwarts crest like the other house-elves. This is strange as one would assume that Winky would not want any extra reminders that she was dismissed, such as clothes. One would think that she would be more comfortable conforming in that sense with the other house-elves instead of being associated with Dobby who is the only other house-elf who wears clothes. Winky takes no care at all in her appearance and her

clothes are stained and burned because she does not care about anything at all after being dismissed. She just sinks into depression and alcoholism even though she is now living and working in a place and for a master that the reader, at least, views as a much better master than Mr. Crouch.

Dobby is the first house-elf the readers meet and the first impression they get of what house-elves are like. While Dobby may be male, the fact that he is a representation of a type of a woman means that he needs to be included in a discussion about women. Dobby is extremely abused by his masters, the Malfoys. He is made to punish himself for every little thing that he does wrong and he is never given any leeway or the benefit of doubt. Any real or perceived wrongdoing on his part ends in a cruel punishment; he is made to burn his hands, clamp his ears in the oven door, etc, a behaviour that persists even after he is freed from the Malfoys.

The medical information website webmd.com has a list of 14 signs of domestic violence concerning the behaviour of the typical abuser. The abuser in domestic violence cases is the victim's partner, but when viewing this from the point of view of house-elves we can substitute the partner for the master. Of the 14 signs listed, three are not applicable to house-elves since they concern owning property, working outside the home or going to school and the victim's children. One sign is about the abuser threatening to kill themselves and that does in no way apply to the Malfoys because they would never threaten such a thing over someone they view as far beneath them as Dobby. They do not even think that he is capable of using his own free will to undermine them and try to thwart their plans and like Kellner says, "they cannot conceive that he has the will-power to obstruct them" (375). The 10 signs that are left accurately describe Dobby's relationship with the Malfoys: they put him down and embarrass him, they act in ways that scare Dobby, they control what he does and who he sees, they stop him from talking to people aside from themselves, they do not give him money, they make all the decisions, they act like the abuse is no big deal, they intimidate him with magic (in muggle circumstances this is intimidation with weapons), they shove him, slap him, choke him and hit him and finally they threaten to kill him ("Domestic Violence – Signs of Domestic Violence").

Dobby's entire existence has been about pleasing his masters in any way that he can, and probably in ways that he cannot, and all he knows in this world is that if you

fail you get punished and if you succeed you probably get punished, too. Despite how dreadful his life has been, Dobby risks extreme punishment to warn Harry that bad things are about to happen at Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Dobby is a very strong character who does what he believes to be right, in his own way, despite knowing what could happen to him if anyone finds out. Kellner agrees with this estimate saying that “[i]n the books Dobby is the only house elf to undermine his owners, to think for himself” (373).

When Harry helps release Dobby from his service, Dobby is understandable grateful. He never has an attachment to the Malfoys that makes him dependent on them, he is not like Winky. He does his work and withstands the abuse but the Malfoys never give him anything back that would make him want to be loyal to them; he is only loyal because he is bound to the family, not by choice or will. When Dobby is all of a sudden free to be what he wants to be and do what he wants to do he is tremendously happy. He is getting away from years of abuse and he handles it extremely well. When most abuse victims are “freed” from their abusers they often feel lost and not knowing what to do but that is because of how dependent they have become on their abusers. Since Dobby never feels this dependence on the Malfoys he can walk away from that part of his life with his psyche relatively intact. Due to the magic that bound Dobby to the Malfoys he cannot easily speak badly of them even after he has been released but instinctively he knows that he should be able to now that they are no longer his masters and he therefore tries when speaking to Harry when Harry has discovered that Dobby is now working at Hogwarts. This attempt does not go very well for Dobby, though, because as soon as he has spoken ill of the Malfoys he is “horror-struck by his own daring – then he rushed over to the nearest table, and began banging his head on it, very hard, squealing, ‘*Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!*’” (*GoF* 332). The abuse is still ingrained enough in him so that he cannot help but punish himself when he does something that the Malfoys would deem as wrong. Just because Dobby is handling his freedom much better than Winky it does not mean that he does not have issues.

Dobby’s new master is Dumbledore who is an infinitely better master than the Malfoys and unlike with Winky and her feelings on the matter, Dobby is exceptionally happy in his new post. Dumbledore does not even mind if Dobby or the other house-elves want to call him “a barmy old codger” (*GoF* 332) if they like. Dobby has some

difficulty just getting the words out even if he is only saying them as explanation, not as a genuine insult, which shows the reader that just because Dumbledore is a good master and Dobby is a happily freed house-elf the magic that binds a house-elf to his master is still in effect. Dumbledore may be a good master but he is still a master: he “does offer Dobby a salary [...] but, as far as the reader knows, makes no further efforts to ameliorate the plight of the house elves at Hogwarts” (Kellner 372). The difference between Dobby’s enslavement to the Malfoys and his working for Dumbledore is that the second one is by his choice and also the fact that Dobby does get paid for his work at Hogwarts along with one day off a month and he has the possibility of leaving if he so chooses. The line between employment and enslavement is somewhat blurred in Dobby’s case since he seems to have some rights but still retains some of what the bond between a house-elf and his master enforces.

The rest of the house-elves that work at Hogwarts are all firmly set in their ways; they do their work, cook and clean, and look at Dobby like there is something severely wrong with him for wanting more out of his life than just work. Dobby got out of a horribly abusive household and yet the other house-elves look at him with something bordering on contempt when he expresses joy at being freed. To them, like to Winky, being freed is a shameful thing, to them being freed means you are not good enough and you did not do your job well enough to stay with your master. “Asking for pay and decent working conditions, according to these house elves, is an immoral act” (Kellner 379). It is so stuck in their heads that they do not realise that they have the option of something more. Much like what human brains can do, the house-elves’ brains just know one thing and one thing only and therefore they do not even think of the fact that they might have other options. They are just so stuck in their rut that they have stopped realising what they could be missing, because surely there was a time before house-elves were enslaved, however long ago that might be, and the house-elves of that time probably did not appreciate being enslaved and having their magic bound to a human master. Now, generations later, they have come to accept that this is their life and that is all there is to it, much like oppressed women accept their fate in situations like that. Even some regular women of today in our modern society think that patriarchy and misogyny is the way of the world and that feminists are fighting a losing battle. Just like

the house-elves who think that Hermione's S.P.E.W. is total nonsense and not something they would ever want to align themselves with.

S.P.E.W. or Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare is a society that Hermione founds upon realising how house-elves are treated by wizards and feeling compelled to do something about it. She, "so far as can be made out from reading the Harry Potter books, is the first person in the history of the wizarding world to be upset about this situation" (Kellner 369). Nobody receives her with enthusiasm, in fact the only members aside from herself are Harry and Ron, neither of whom cares about elfish welfare but only joins because Hermione is their friend. In fact Ron "claims to know that house elves don't mind working hard and being exploited. He asks her how the world could get by without their services, as if the needs of those with power naturally take precedence over the needs of those who serve them" (Cherland 279). Eliza Dresang states that this opposition from people is comparable to the opposition that those who wanted to abolish slavery faced: "those who opposed slavery were not enthusiastically welcomed or even understood by their contemporaries" (228). She thinks that Hermione's personality is "an indication that she may continue her advocacy for the house-elves despite her own misgivings or those of others" (Dresang 228).

While S.P.E.W. is a noble idea of Hermione's it has some flaws. Most important is the fact that when Hermione realises that she cannot easily talk the house-elves into wanting something more than being slaves she starts knitting clothes for them, covering them in trash and thereby tricking the house-elves into picking the items up and therefore being freed. None of the house-elves ever picks up the clothes aside from Dobby who is already free and so his status does not change when he does so. Had any of the enslaved house-elves picked up the clothes and been freed they would have been devastated and even though they are not abused at Hogwarts they are still very dependent on their work and so their behaviour when faced with sudden freedom would most likely have been more like Winky's than Dobby's.

When speaking in terms of house-elves being an allegory for women it is definitely worth noting that the Society for Promoting the Training of Women, or S.P.T.W., a British society that helps "women of all ages seeking to improve their career prospects through training and further education" (*Society for the Training of Women*) was originally, from 1859 to 1926, called The Society for Promoting the

Employment of Women, or S.P.E.W. (Bridger), which happen to be the same initials that Hermione uses for her society. The difference between Hermione's S.P.E.W. and the S.P.T.W. is that Hermione is going to help the house-elves in any way she can think of, whether they want help or not, while the S.P.T.W. helps women if they want help. This is a significant difference in policy and is probably why the S.P.T.W. is more successful than Hermione's S.P.E.W. The original name of the S.P.T.W. is a random little fact that is not common knowledge, so for the average reader the abbreviation of Hermione's society does not mean much but by delving in a little deeper one can see that Rowling did not only think of the big picture but also the small details that make the big picture even better.

Dobby is quite possibly unique, not only as a house-elf but also as a person. He is certainly a "relatively revolutionary house elf, but he is still held captive by the state of mind that created his slavery in the first place" (Kellner 375). Somebody who has been abused as much as he has needs so much strength of character to come out on the other side whole and happy. It is a strength that not many possess. Winky certainly does not; she and Dobby are on the opposite ends of the scale of how abused people, not just women, might behave after getting out of their abusive relationship. There is a reason why Dobby is much loved by Harry Potter fans and it is not just because he is cute and weird but also the underlying fact that Dobby is a person that the reader subconsciously would love to emulate. His strength is inspiring.

5. Conclusion

I believe the Harry Potter novels represent women rather well and quite accurately. There is a wide range of personalities when it comes to the female characters, most of whom are strong and even the weak ones seem to show the reader at least a glimpse of some form of strength that they possess. It is also important to remember that often “[w]omen have wrongly been perceived as weak when in fact their strength is simply not defined in masculine terms” (Dresang 230).

Of course the novels are not flawless when it comes to feminism even though the wizarding community itself is much further along on the way to gender equality than we are. There are many examples of flaws, including the fact that seeing how important Sirius, Harry’s godfather, is to Harry and how he gets an entire book introducing him, one would assume that Harry’s godmother would be just as important to Harry. Yet she is never even mentioned. There is also the fact that Ginny is represented as a strong, powerful witch and a feminist, yet she suffers the stereotypical injury of a useless girl who cannot fight, a broken ankle, at the fight in the Ministry of Magic (*OoP*). The one main character, Harry, is male, as is his mentor and the main bad guy. During the years the novels span there is no woman in a place of highest authority, the two Ministers of Magic during those seven years are both male, although Cornelius Fudge’s second in command is female. The lead evil, Voldemort, is male while his most devoted servant is female, the two Headmasters of Hogwarts are male while Dumbledore’s Deputy Headmistress is female, the Head of the Auror Office that is mentioned is male, and so on. There is only a brief interruption of male hierarchy at Hogwarts when Professor Umbridge manages to take control but even so, the Headmaster’s study seals itself to her and thereby does not acknowledge her as a real Headmistress. On the formerly mentioned pottermore.com, J.K. Rowling states that female Ministers of Magic are in fact not uncommon, it only so happens that during the seven year glimpse of the wizarding world that the readers of Harry Potter get, the Ministers of Magic were male. Whether or not this information is genuine or if Rowling added it as a reaction to feminist criticism concerning the Ministers’ gender is something everyone has to decide for themselves.

There are many details of the Harry Potter novels that do not look great to some feminist critics but flaws are what makes life interesting. No novel is perfect and it should not be. None of the characters are flawless either, neither the female nor the male ones, but that is what makes them good and believable because no human being, or magical one, is perfect. Everybody has flaws; that is what makes us real.

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