“The foulest creatures that walk this earth.”

J.K. Rowling’s Magical Creatures as Metaphors for Difficulties for Teenagers
Abstract
In this essay I discuss the magical creatures in the Harry Potter series; not the complete series but *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Many scholars say that the Harry Potter novels are didactic, moralist books in different ways. What I investigate is if the magical creatures in the novels can be read as metaphors for issues that the teenage reader finds difficult to deal with and if they could also offer ways to help. More specifically I look at the giant and the werewolf as metaphors for separate types of outsiders who have to try to handle the prejudice of others; one being strange because of genes and one because of an illness. I also look at the house-elf as a metaphor for various oppressive situations one can encounter as a child and also for how to cope with change. In connection to the house-elves I also discuss racism and social class. The last two creatures I investigate are the Dementor as a metaphor for depression and the Boggart as a symbol for fear. My conclusion is that one can read these creatures as symbols or metaphors for difficulties for teenagers in various ways and that these interpretations almost always also offer a way to handle said difficulty.
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Introduction

It might at first seem as though Rowling’s magical creatures in the Harry Potter novels are only tools to help or hinder the wizards and witches on their adventures, or merely a sign that the books belong in the fantasy genre. However, my claim is that they also can be seen as metaphors for issues that teenagers find hard to handle at some point during puberty and, at least in some of the cases, ways to actually handle them. Consequently, what I will be doing here is a study of Rowling’s magical creatures, more specifically the giant, the werewolf, the house-elf, the Dementor and the Boggart and what they symbolise in the Harry Potter series. I will not be focusing on all seven books, instead I have chosen three of them; *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. My reason for limiting my study to these books is that all the five creatures first appear or have their first vital roles in these books. The titles of the books are long so to simplify I will use abbreviations when quoting or referring instead of using the full titles. I will call *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* COS, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* POA, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* GOF and as for the other two titles that I also refer to, I will call *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* OOTP and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* DH.

I will give some examples of what I mean by comparing the magical creatures to issues teenagers might find difficult to handle. Hagrid, being a half-giant, is a metaphor for people who are different in various ways. Some treat him as a stupid and clumsy animal and others, such as Harry and his friends, treat him like a friend and an equal. Remus Lupin, being a werewolf, can also be analysed as a metaphor for being different and having to deal with people’s prejudices because of it. Both Hagrid and Lupin want to be accepted and live like other wizards do, even though they are only half-human, like Hagrid, or ill, like Lupin. The house-elf is a metaphor for being oppressed in different ways and a metaphor for what change could do to you and how you can manage it. Dobby works as an inspiration for seeing that there will be freedom at some point; by this I mean when a person is old enough to move out and take care of him- or herself. The Dementor is a metaphor for depression and also other types of anxiety such as sadness and fear. Accordingly, the Patronus charm is a symbol for the positive thoughts that you are required to think to be able to face your fears and make the Dementors disperse. The Boggart is a very specific symbol of fears and phobias, and magic also offers a practical solution of how to handle this problem; that is, the Riddikulus charm that changes the Boggart into something funny and kills it with laughter. This would be very
similar to the visualisation technique that is all about trying to think of something not threatening when faced with the thing or concept that you are afraid of (Johnson 7).

I am discussing the creatures and what themes or issues they might work as metaphors for. Some of the creatures symbolise a number of different themes. Firstly, I give a theoretical background for what my thesis is about. Then I divide the analysis into sections according to the themes I am discussing. My themes are as follows: being different and accepting the ones who are different, oppression, social class and embarrassment, coping with change and also depression, fear and phobia.

**Theory**

The theories I will be using for this analysis are from research about children’s literature. I have been reading about a number of varieties of reader oriented theories. There are scholars, such as Stanley Fish, who claim that neither the personal experiences of the reader nor what actually exists within the text control how we interpret it. The control comes from the social conventions for literary interpretation which affect the social contexts that the reader and the novel are a part of (Tenngart 60). Social conventions are important for literary interpretation, I do agree with that, but for my analysis I will put more emphasis on personal experiences. With that in mind, I have read about how to define the reader and came across scholars like Wolfgang Iser (Tenngart 58) and Umberto Eco (Tenngart 59) who are among those who, with their own variations of the same main idea, claim that a rewarding way to work with a reader oriented theory is to focus on the “informed reader”, the reader who has the right previous knowledge of a specific genre of books.

The “informed reader” that Iser and Eco discuss could be considered a kind of average reader of the type of novel studied or almost an implied reader, i.e. the reader that the text creates for itself (Tenngart 58). I will be using the term ‘implied reader’ in my analysis. The implied reader is, according to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, a term used by scholars, such as the already mentioned Wolfgang Iser, of reader-response criticism to describe the hypothetical or ideal reader who has the correct set of attitudes and values with him or her while reading a text, “in order for [the text] to achieve its full effect” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*). The implied reader should not be confused with a real and alive reader; it is more a term to describe an ideal situation.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* it is very much open to interpretation which literature could be considered didactic: “In the broadest sense, most allegories and satires implying a moral or political view may be regarded as didactic, […]. A
stricter definition would confine the term to those works that explicitly tell readers what they should do” (The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms). Encyclopædia Britannica briefly mentions a perhaps more modern definition that more closely resembles the one of the Harry Potter series, that one “would note the striking creative swing between didacticism and delight” (Encyclopædia Britannica). The scholar A.S. Abraham states in his article “The New Didacticism” that “[c]hildren’s books have always alternated between periods when art for art’s sake prevailed and times when using books to impart values prevailed” (Abraham 5) and his general idea, as I understand it, is that he is grateful that the modern books for children contain less obvious didactic lessons than before. The veiled didacticism is something that I feel applies very much to the Harry Potter series because in all the adventures and the creative use of language to describe the characters and the surroundings, there are many moral messages to be deciphered.

One of the best possible arguments for why my analysis is useful and rewarding is what scholar David Bleich claims in his subjectivist psychological theory about reading. He begins with the persuasion that the most important thing for every human being is to understand him-or herself (Tenngart 69). This would mean that we read fiction with the main objective to get new perspectives on our own identity and the life that we lead (Tenngart 69). Bleich claims that as soon as a reader is moved by something in a narrative, the emotion concerns his or her own personal experiences more than the actual events in the narrative (Tenngart 69) and again according to Bleich, the real function and effects of reading are found in those subjective impressions (Tenngart 70).

Bringing in the subjectivist theory of Bleich might indicate that I am writing about my own personal experiences of reading the Harry Potter series as an adolescent, but my first experience of this series did not occur until I was 20 years of age. I do, however, find this psychological view very interesting and think about how useful the books would be if one would read them while being a teenager and what they might help a teenager to cope with and this is one of my main reasons for writing this thesis.

**Being different and accepting the ones who are**

Both the giant and the werewolf can be seen as metaphors for being different. Hagrid being half-giant is treated as though he is stupid by some people, for example the children of the Slytherin house: “‘God, this place is going to the dogs,’ said Malfoy loudly. ‘That oaf teaching classes, my father’ll have a fit when I tell him’” (Rowling POA 125). By other people, for example Harry, Hagrid is treated with respect (Rowling GOF 469) because they
see him as a friend and an equal. In my analysis the “implied reader” is a teenager. That Hagrid is treated as an animal by some wizards and as an equal by others can be seen as a metaphor for growing up as a teenager and being different and therefore being worried about fitting in. Some people are better at tolerating differences than others. Hagrid works as an inspiration for people who feel different and he might offer a good model for how to accept it and try to make the best of the situation.

Maria Nikolajeva discusses good and evil father figures for Harry and she mentions Hagrid as one of them, together with Dumbledore, Sirius, uncle Vernon, Snape and also Voldemort (Nikolajeva 7). Hagrid can be seen as a father figure for Harry because he is the one who lets him know that he is a wizard, takes him to Diagon Alley to buy his school supplies and tries to answer Harry’s questions as best he can. This friendly first encounter with Hagrid instantly puts him among the ‘good guys’ and tells the reader that he should be admired.

Ron does try to explain to Harry why people are prejudiced about giants: “[b]ut… Harry, they’re just vicious, giants. It’s like Hagrid said, it’s in their natures, they’re like trolls… they just like killing. Everyone knows that” (Rowling GOF 470). Harry, being raised by Muggles, does not share this view of how “everyone” would know it (Rowling GOF 469). Lisa Hopkins mentions this prejudice in her essay in Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays: “When it is revealed that Hagrid was born to a giantess, numerous members of the magical community allege that the brutal nature of giants will automatically be inherited and dominate his personality” (Hopkins 30), even though his mother left when he was still young and his “upbringing by his gentle, diminutive father has given him an apparently inexhaustible supply of tolerance and patience” (Hopkins 30).

Nikolajeva mentions the magical hierarchy in her article and lists the relationships which are, among others, that humans are superior to nonhuman beings such as giants (Nikolajeva 14). As Ron tells Harry, this is something that everyone knows and something that is widely accepted. This hierarchy is never questioned in the books; it is simply a fact that if you are not fully human you are not worth as much because being not fully human means that you are part animal.

Hagrid, being half-giant, is an example of somebody who is part animal and therefore belongs in the lower part of this hierarchy. When Hagrid first meets and talks to Madame Maxime in Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (Rowling GOF 466) it becomes even clearer that he has come much further in accepting himself for what he is, than other giants have:
’No, don’ go! I’ve – I’ve never met another one before!’

’Anuzzer what, precisely?’ said Madame Maxime, her tone icy. […]

’Another half-giant, o’ course!’ said Hagrid.

’Ow dare you!’ shrieked Madame Maxime. Her voice exploded through the peaceful night air […]. (Rowling GOF 468)

When Hagrid is honest and asks Madame Maxime about her past (Rowling GOF 467) because he knows that she is a half-giantess, she is deeply insulted and storms off (Rowling GOF 468), even though she is of an enormous size and it is quite obvious what she is. The reader is left on his or her own to think about why she rushes away from Hagrid, but the most obvious conclusion would be because she is afraid of what people will think if she admits to her heritage. She is basically embarrassed about being different. Here we have two ways of handling the same situation: Somebody who tries to accept his being different and make the best of it and somebody who desperately tries to hide her being different because she is ashamed. If you are different and do not like the way in which you are different, you will have an easier time accepting it and making the best of the situation with help. A good help is the support of people who like you for you because this support system gives you positive feelings and energy to handle the people who would be prejudiced against you. Hagrid has this support system with Harry and his friends and also with Dumbledore (Rowling GOF 467). The reader does not find out enough about Madame Maxime’s background to know whether or not she has this support system but because she is obviously ashamed to admit to Hagrid that she is a half-giantess, it is likely that she does not feel like anyone would like her for who she is.

A related question that teenagers struggle with would be to strive for or not to strive for normalcy and what this normalcy is according to the values in our society, for example when it comes to growing up, succeeding in school, exercising during your free time, finding a boy- or girlfriend, graduating from school, finding a job, moving in with your girl- or boyfriend, having children etcetera. Tison Pugh and David L Wallace discuss normalcy, what is considered normal and what values Rowling projects about this in their article about heteronormativity and what is queer in the Harry Potter series. Their conclusion is that normalcy is in a sense ridiculed through the image of the horrible Dursley family who are obsessed with being what they consider normal (Pugh and Wallace 265). I am only using this article to a limited extent because it contains a few factual inaccuracies. However, the sections on werewolves and normalcy have been useful.
As Rowling ridicules normalcy, she also encourages being different or ‘strange’. The two half-giants could be seen by the implied reader as examples of either accepting yourself or being embarrassed about being different. It is very clear which way the author thinks is the best to go about it. Hagrid is never clearly ashamed even though he never talks about being half-giant; not even to Harry and his friends. He, as most, has probably also struggled with finding himself but with the support of Dumbledore (Rowling *GOF* 467) he is, at least most of the time, proud of who he has become. With this pride, he is a role model for the students at Hogwarts and consequently also for the reader. This is not explicit in the novel but through Harry and his friends and their positive view of Hagrid and also through Dumbledore’s affection for him, the reader is encouraged to view him as a good and brave character that is a role-model. Madame Maxime, however, is ashamed of being different to the wizards because she wants to fit in. In other words, the two half-giants Hagrid and Madame Maxime represent two different ways of managing being different and the feelings associated with this.

Werewolves work in a very similar metaphorical way to the giants. Remus Lupin arrives as a new professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts class in the third book about Harry Potter. Towards the end of the book, it is revealed that Lupin is a werewolf. Rowling herself has said when interviewed that Lupin’s “being a werewolf is a metaphor for people’s reactions to illness and disability” (Naficy 207) and it has been said by a number of scholars, for example Siamak Tundra Naficy in *The Psychology of Harry Potter*, that he is a metaphor for the “stigmatized outsider” (Naficy 216). Most of the werewolves are uncivilised and do nothing to try to hide it, for example the vicious and purely evil Fenrir Greyback, who takes special pleasure in biting children, especially adorable little girls (Rowling *DH* 383), and this causes people like the children in Slytherin to treat them like second class citizens. They look at werewolves like this because they are ignorant of any exceptions to the generalisation of the ‘savage werewolf’.

However, one example of such an exception is Remus Lupin. Not only is he a civilised werewolf but he also plays a significant role in Harry’s life. When Nikolajeva discusses father figures in her article she does not include Remus Lupin and this made me wonder. I cannot be sure if she merely forgot about Lupin or if she does not consider him to be a father figure in Harry’s life. However, I certainly think he is a father figure to Harry and there are many arguments as to why one would consider him to be one; the fact that he helps Harry handle the Dementors, the fact that he knew Harry’s father James, that he can tell Harry a lot about James and that he more generally has deep affection for him and wants the best for him.
Maybe Nikolajeva does not think that a dangerous werewolf should be seen as a father figure for Harry, but of that I cannot be sure.

Severus Snape, however, hates Lupin. He exposes Lupin as a werewolf at breakfast in front of the whole school (Rowling *POA* 456), all because of a “schoolboy grudge” (Rowling *POA* 387) from when Lupin and Snape attended Hogwarts when they were children. This leads to Professor Lupin’s decision to leave Hogwarts. His reason for leaving is that the parents “will not want a werewolf teaching their children” (Rowling *POA* 456). His words “highlight his inability to control his desires” (Pugh and Wallace 268) however much he wants to be able to do so. His desire to take and keep the job is based on his gratitude to Dumbledore both for allowing him to attend Hogwarts as a child and for hiring him “when [he has] been shunned all [his] adult life, unable to find [any other] paid work because of what [he is]” (Pugh and Wallace 267). Lupin is prejudiced against by many characters in the books for being an uncontrolled and crazy animal that would bite anyone; even some of his colleagues share these views. To summarize, both being different but still good and being different and evil are represented by the werewolves: “Lupin is presented as a good werewolf who strives to control his dark urges to harm others; in contrast, Fenrir Greyback delights in the pederastic pleasures of preying on children” (Pugh and Wallace 268).

I have read numerous articles that all discuss Harry Potter and make the comparison between werewolves and homosexual men. When discussing the werewolves, Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace make this comparison and, among other things, compare lycanthropy to the HIV virus and they conclude that lycanthropy is infectious, just like HIV (Pugh and Wallace 268). This interpretation creates another prejudice that one can add to the list of what kind of difference and preconceived notions for which the werewolf and the giant are metaphors. The only real difference between their “abnormalities” is that being a giant is hereditary and being a werewolf is an illness that is both “transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids” (Pugh and Wallace 268) and hereditary. The implied reader who suffers from diabetes or another illness might identify with this situation and be able to look at Lupin as a good example of living with an illness because he has friends who accept him for who he is.

Giants are seen as stupid, werewolves as violent and they are both seen as animals. They are both prime examples of wizard racism and prejudice and these two issues are very much present in the world for teenagers to handle in any way they know. Looking at the Harry Potter series from a didactic, moralist perspective, reading about how wizards who are acting very much like humans would handle these and similar issues in a fictitious story might help someone to do it in their own lives. Sometimes things become easier to handle when you read
about how somebody else handles a similar situation with experience and bravery, even if you do not have any experience at all. Also, one might learn that it is acceptable not to be brave and to occasionally fail. It is important to learn how to be brave yet it is not necessary to be so in every situation.

It takes a certain degree of bravery to defy a set of social rules that have been constructed by a more socially powerful class. Yet Hagrid, being part animal as I mentioned above, does this by trying to fit in with the wizards because he loves working at Hogwarts. The other giants are also proud of what they are but this is because they do not want anything to do with the wizards due to a previous oppression they have suffered. They can make it on their own and even make a good resource for both sides in the war, when both Lord Voldemort and the Order of the Phoenix send people to try and persuade the giants to join their ranks. But the giants are very unwilling to join any side because they have been treated badly by both good and evil wizards before. So the previous racist behaviour from the wizards turns into an obstacle because the giants are unwilling to support the wizards. This can certainly be interpreted as morality when it comes to racism and other types of prejudice. One of the lessons for the implied reader to learn is that one should never treat anyone as if they are worth less than anyone else because one may eventually need help from those people. The over all moral is that prejudice is bad and one should never be a part of it.

Tolerance and acceptance of people’s differences are moral lessons for the reader to learn from the Harry Potter series. Lisa Hopkins also discusses tolerance in her essay in Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays. Her conclusion is that “[t]olerance for the difference of characters like […] the half-giant Hagrid [and] the werewolf Professor Lupin […] is clearly and warmly advocated by [Rowling’s] books” (Hopkins 32) because this is a knowledge that Harry and his friends has to acquire to complete their challenges (Hopkins 32).

Another aspect that has much to do with prejudice and preconceived notions is covered below in the section about oppression and social class, because to tolerate people’s differences is an intrinsic part of being anti-racist; accepting people for their personalities and not what race or family they belong to.

**Oppression, social class and embarrassment**

Oppression, racism and social class are not new subjects to children’s literature, as Brycchan Carey brings up in the introduction to an article about house-elves in Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays: “Unfree […] labor has always been central to children’s literature, and slaves, whether as bonded humans or magical ‘helpers,’ appear regularly in both British and
American writing for children” (Carey 103). Like the “unfree labor” that Carey mentions (Carey 103), Nikolajeva states that children in our society are oppressed and powerless and this makes it quite a paradox that children get to read books written by adults about independent and powerful children. These independent fictional children do, however, only get to be that way under certain conditions and under a limited amount of time (Nikolajeva 6). Thus, Nikolajeva touches on the same oppression that I claim is one of the issues symbolised by the house-elves, the general oppressive situation that is being a child.

Dobby and Winky can be seen as metaphors for ways of coping with or escaping from oppression, for example the oppression of being a child. Literary critic Bruno Bettelheim would, according to Daniela Caselli, “have praised the Potter series for demonstrating how children can deal with oppressive situations” (Caselli 177). The house-elves are treated as slaves (Rowling COS 133) and housekeepers by the wizards. They live with wizard families and work for them but they do not get paid (Rowling GOF 111). They wear rags to show that they are worth less than the wizards (Rowling COS 133) and they do this willingly because this is how it has always been done. Dobby wants to be free, he wants to control his own life and be paid for the work that he does (Rowling GOF 111). Winky, however, is a very typical house elf who is satisfied with being oppressed by the family she works for (Rowling GOF 112) and wearing the rags that all the house-elves have to wear. She does, however, get fired for being disobedient (Rowling GOF 154) and she becomes an alcoholic (Rowling GOF 583) because she cannot handle her new situation. She even attacks Hermione for speaking ill of the master who fired her (Rowling GOF 416). This might be due to her being brainwashed or too bound to tradition. Rowling does make it very clear that Winky’s way of handling the oppressive situation that she is in is not effective and should not be emulated. If it was not obvious enough before, it certainly becomes clear when she turns to alcoholism and sits around the Hogwarts kitchen crying. Even if Rowling makes it very clear that Winky is not handling her situation well, the implied reader might sometimes recognise him- or herself in Winky, who lives a hard life, but still does what she is told (Rowling GOF 112) and still is content with her situation because that is the way it has always been and is supposed to be. Traditions and how the family looks to the outside world are immensely important in some families. Winky does get out of her oppression but not out of her own will. Hence she is so lost that she has to put herself in a position of being oppressed again in order to avoid losing her mind (Rowling GOF 416).

Deborah L Thompson is one of those who address the subject of the house-elves. She briefly discusses them in one paragraph of her article “Deconstructing Harry” and she uses
words such as “annoying” and “bothersome” (Thompson 44) to describe them. Thompson, unlike Carey, never gets to any insights about the destiny of these oppressed creatures, instead she merely calls them annoying and also states that there is a gender difference between them (Thompson 44). “Dobby is an obstructionist and a pain, but we learn why and can forgive him by novel’s end” (Thompson 44) and Winky “obstructs the forces of good by providing aid and comfort to a Death Eater” and she “weeps and wails […] about not wanting to be free” (Thompson 44).

Hermione, however, does not want to support the continued oppression of the house-elves so she establishes S.P.E.W., the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, as an attempt to change things for the house-elves (Rowling GOF 246). This is the only case of political activism before the last of the seven books and it is not taken very seriously by anyone but Hermione herself (Rowling GOF 263). Not even the reader is encouraged to take S.P.E.W. seriously because of how Ron and Harry find Hermione annoying and how the other Gryffindors mostly feel the same, also the fact that an acronym for the name of her society spells a slang word for vomit does not help. Brycchan Carey’s article “Hermione and the House-Elves: The Literary and Historical Contexts of J.K. Rowling’s Antislavery Campaign” discusses S.P.E.W and the general history of slavery at length but in a way that is too politically focused to fit my thesis. It is, however, brought up that Hermione’s campaign “provides a clear model for political action with which young people in the real world can identify and emulate” (Carey 107) but I do not agree. None of the characters take her campaign seriously and this would make the reader predisposed to also think of it as a joke. There is, however, no protesting that Hermione’s methods can be emulated, yet the likelihood of the implied reader taking it seriously enough to think of doing something similar him- or herself is small because of the taunts she has to endure from for example Harry and Ron.

Most scholars who discuss the house-elves in any way say that the books make it obvious to analyse them as a symbol for being oppressed and that they are a comment about social class. However, Suman Gupta concludes in *Re-reading Harry Potter* that this is wrong and the argument for that is that “the house-elves are not servile because of the way that society is organized, they are born servile” (Gupta 123). I disagree because I think that the situation of the house-elves alone make them a symbol for oppression and social class divisions. One can use any of the numerous examples of how Mr Malfoy verbally and physically abuses Dobby in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* to support this claim.

A number of ways of being different are reflected on in the Harry Potter series, mainly when it comes to the giants and the werewolves but also in the racism against Muggle-borns
and half-blood wizards. The question of class is certainly present in the difference between the rich Malfoy family and the poor Weasely family. The question of race is also present in the prejudice against Hagrid, Madame Maxime and Professor Lupin. The question of ethnicity is also certainly present in the racism from some of the pure-blood wizards against the Muggle-borns and the half-blood wizards, the ones who have one wizard parent and one Muggle parent. Class, race and ethnicity are all difficult questions that the implied reader definitely or maybe will be forced to deal with.

Slytherins, which the Malfoys have been for generations and whose premier goal is to only surround themselves with pure-blood wizards (Rowling COS 51), make a perfect metaphor for people in society today who oppress others mostly because they are in a position to do so. For them, as with some people teenagers would meet in this world, the only important things are to have the right relatives and to be in possession of money. The Malfoys look down on the Weasleys both for being poor and for surrounding themselves with half-bloods and Muggles (Rowling COS 51):

‘Dear me, what’s the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don’t even pay you well for it?’ […]
‘We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy,’ [Mr Weasley] said.
‘Clearly,’ said Mr Malfoy, his pale eyes straying to Mr and Mrs Granger, who were watching apprehensively. ‘The company you keep, Weasley… and I thought your family could sink no lower –’ (Rowling COS 51)

As Mr Malfoy clearly states in the quotation, he and Arthur Weasley absolutely do not share the same priorities when it comes to social life, career and money. Mr Malfoy is racist towards Hermione’s parents Mr and Mrs Granger because they are Muggles. Ron is embarrassed about the Weasley family being poor and this is most evident when Draco Malfoy taunts him about it, an example of this being his second hand dress-robes (Rowling GOF 187). Other than being embarrassed about being poor himself, he is also sometimes jealous of Harry having inherited money from his parents (Rowling GOF 185) and thus being able to buy things that Ron cannot afford.

I also claim that the frequent presence of racism and other types of prejudice in the Harry Potter series is a way to make the wizarding world more similar to the real world to make it easier for the reader to identify with not only the characters but also the more general
aspects and moods of the setting where these characters exist. If the implied reader identifies with the characters and the more general aspect of the story, it makes it easier to get emotionally involved with the characters and look at their problems as something that the reader him- or herself could and probably will encounter at some point, even if the specific issue at hand does not have anything to do with racism. I claim that the possibility to identify with the characters and the world in a novel is very important if the book is to be considered something that could help the reader to handle issues in his or her own life and this is why I briefly mention this point.

**Coping with change**

Change is another aspect which can be difficult for the implied reader to deal with in his or her life; such as when one is faced with the move to a new place of residence, when new things happen in your life and when new people come into it and also changes in your own body. All these things can and some definitely will happen during one’s teens. Dobby and Winky both have trouble handling their newfound freedom even though they become free in very different ways. Their difficulty is based on “a psychological enslavement deeper then mere fetters[, because] […] the house-elves have been enslaved for so long that they have lost the ability to conceive of themselves as free” (Carey 104). Dobby is rescued from the Malfoys by Harry (Rowling *COS* 248) and Winky is fired by Bartemis Crouch (Rowling *GOF* 154). When Dobby first meets Harry he has to injure himself as soon as he speaks or is about to speak ill about his wizard family (Rowling *COS* 16), which, as stated earlier in this paragraph, turns out to be the Malfoys, to show that he is ruled by them. When he is rescued, however, he is completely and utterly loyal to Harry (Rowling *COS* 249) because he was the one who helped him. Dobby dies a heroic death after having saved Harry and his friends’ lives (Rowling *DH* 384-385), so even if he begins with being an oppressed house-elf he ends up as a free elf that saves the lives of the wizards that he loves. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for how the implied teenage reader grows up and doubts him- or herself but matures to achieve bigger things, just as Dobby evolves from the oppressed house-elf to the free elf that saves lives.

Dobby can be seen as an inspiration for children who feel like they are only allowed to do what their parents tell them and that they will be punished if they do something wrong. These children can see Dobby as ‘a light at the end of the tunnel’ that is the years of being a teenager because he is rescued by Harry from the evil Malfoy family (Rowling *COS* 248) and as a free elf he thrives (Rowling *GOF* 414). There will be freedom at some point, when the
implied reader comes of age and is able to move out and live on his or her own. It is not until
one starts asking oneself exactly why it has to be this certain way that one questions reality
and might even want to change the situation. Winky does not actually have a breakdown until
she is fired and has to deal with her new situation (Rowling *GOF* 414). She does not know
what to expect with this change and the pressure becomes too much for her to be able to
handle. This is very similar to how difficult it would be to move to another city, attend a new
school and meet new people. As stated above, Rowling makes it very clear which one of the
two elves the reader should sympathize with by describing Winky as tragic and Dobby as
brave even though his methods to save Harry sometimes risk killing him instead:

’[…] Dobby thought his Bludger would be enough to make –’

‘Your Bludger?’ said Harry, anger rising once more. ‘What d’you mean, your
Bludger? You made that Bludger try and kill me?’

‘Not kill you, sir, never kill you!’ said Dobby, shocked. ‘Dobby wants to save
Harry Potter’s life! Better sent home, grievously injured, than remain here, sir!
Dobby only wanted Harry Potter hurt enough to be sent home!’ (Rowling *COS*
133)

The quotation about Dobby’s Bludger is one of the many examples of how Dobby sabotages
things for Harry with the intention of saving his life; there are stolen letters, ruined puddings,
closed barriers which result in missed train departures, fixed Bludgers and more. Dobby tries
hard and Harry gets aggravated with him for making his life harder than it has to be but still
he is rewarded by being rescued from the Malfoy family. Dobby feels such gratitude towards
Harry for changing his situation that Dobby’s main goal continues to be to help Harry and
save him and his friends when they end up in dangerous situations. This, I claim, is one of the
many cases of morality in this whole series. The lesson to be learned here is that if you do
everything you possibly can to help your friends, it is alright to break some of the rules and
traditions to achieve what you want because in the end you will, at least most of the time, be
rewarded for being good.

In the case above and in many other places in the series, it becomes evident that “[t]here
is a strong sense of morality running through these books” (Rudd 48). Brycchan Carey sees it
differently in the essay in *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*. According to Carey, Harry
rescues Dobby from the Malfoy family because he has a personal connection to Dobby that
derives from “himself [having] suffered false imprisonment” for his whole life living with the
Dursley family (Carey 104). This interpretation makes Harry’s rescue of Dobby an action that is at least part selfish in the way that he probably sometimes wished that somebody would rescue him from the Dursley family, or Harry rescues Dobby more because he can identify with his situation and just wants to help him. However one interprets it, it is very much a case of morality, whatever his reasons are for rescuing Dobby.

The general idea that the Harry Potter series are moral and didactic novels has been brought up by many scholars. One example of this is Daniela Caselli who, in her article “Reading Intertextuality. The Natural and the Legitimate: Intertextuality in 'Harry Potter’”, says that “[i]f children read more thanks to Harry Potter, then the book is seen as necessarily being a moral one insofar as it helps children to become better citizens” (Caselli 172). I would not call it “better citizens” but I do very much agree that the series present some practical ways to handle various difficulties and that it therefore becomes a moral and didactic reading experience.

**Depression**

Mental illness, such as depression, has become less of a taboo in our society. It has also become more common and thus more covered by the media. In 2004 “BBC ran a feature […] focusing on depression in teenagers. They estimated that one in eight teenagers will experience depression before reaching the age of twenty” (Barton 29). This is also something that is evident in children’s literature where the subject of depression has become more frequent (Barton 27) both through symbolism and metaphors and also more clearly described: “As medical and cultural recognition grows, it is therefore only logical that children’s literature begins to show signs of this new awareness” (Barton 29). This notion is becoming more and more widely spread among scholars and other authors. Rowling’s Dementor is a case where this applies. Rowling herself has revealed to interviewers that her plan and meaning for the Dementor was to have them symbolise the horrible effects of depression. Professor Lupin, as teacher of Defence against the Dark Arts, knows much of these horrifying creatures:

‘Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them. Even Muggles feel their presence, though they can’t see them. Get too near a Dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory, will be sucked out of you. If it can, the Dementor will feed
on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself – soulless and evil. You’ll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life. And the worst that has happened to you, Harry, is enough to make anyone fall off their broom. You have nothing to feel ashamed of.’ (Rowling POA 203-204)

After reading this description of what the Dementors are, it becomes clear that they can very easily be interpreted as symbols for depression and such feelings. The Dementors have for example been called “an awesomely disturbing creation, with their ability to drain the life-force of humans” (Rudd 50), this being curiously similar to how Julie Barton describes depression in her article: “Depression is not a normal feeling of sadness that is part of human experience – it is a deeper and more persistent lack of any feeling at all” (Barton 28). There is a way to fight off the Dementors, as Harry learns from Professor Lupin in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (Rowling POA 146-147) and this is the Patronus charm. This, I claim, is a metaphor for a way to handle anxieties and fears by controlling your mind and concentrating on thinking happy thoughts. It might seem like escapism but life would be rather empty and meaningless without positive thoughts and happy memories to think of when things are less good; this is astonishingly similar to how horrible the description is of when a wizard has to face a Dementor because he or she is drained of exactly those happy thoughts. In other words, the novel might help younger readers to find good things in their lives to focus on when their current situations are less happy, just like Harry does when he has to battle the Dementors.

The Dementors guard Azkaban prison (Rowling POA 48) and keep the prisoners caught in their own heads (Rowling POA 204). By draining them of their good feelings and happy memories, the Dementors make the prisoners go mad (Rowling POA 400) just like people who suffer from a depression that gets so far out of control that it starts to ruin their whole lives. After the first time Harry and his friends encounter a Dementor, Ron says “I felt weird though, […] [I]like I’d never be cheerful again…” (Rowling POA 96). Ron’s comment creates another possibility to compare facing a Dementor to being depressed, which, as stated above, happens to one in eight teenagers at some point.

In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban the Dementors are still obeying the Ministry and chasing after Sirius Black but they do not distinguish between who they hunt and anyone else who might get in their way. Just like depression, the Dementors are wholly without mercy. And also very much like depression, they sometimes strike in an instant and attack people for no apparent reason just like when the Dementor enters the cabin on the
Hogwarts Express where Harry and his friends sit (Rowling *POA* 93). At other times they are more subtle, or search for the person before they find her or him, and attack someone who has done something bad enough to deserve anxiety. This would be very similar to when they at long last find Sirius Black and the Ministry prepare to let him face the Dementors because they think he is a murderer (Rowling *POA* 419), the latter example working very similar to the concept of guilt. Just as guilt does, the Dementors plague you with horrible memories. In the case of Sirius Black they do haunt an innocent man, but nobody knows this until Harry sees the name Peter Pettigrew on the Marauder’s Map. The Dementors are truly and purely vicious creatures and they do join Lord Voldemort when he returns (Rowling *OOTP* 133-134). Two of them attack Harry and Dudley (Rowling *OOTP* 21) for no apparent reason, other than Harry being Harry, and this almost causes Harry to get expelled from Hogwarts (Rowling *OOTP* 34-35).

**Fear and phobia**

“About 40% to 60% of children have a fear of something. Five percent to 10% of children have fears that become severe enough to develop into phobias” (Johnson 7). According to Tom Ollendick, professor of psychology at Virginia Tech University who has studied fears and phobias in children for more than 30 years, it is fear of heights, different types of animals, the dark, blood or enclosed spaces that are among the most frequent (Johnson 7). Even if one cannot be sure if these numbers are an indication of the situation in the United States or in the world, 40 to 60 percent still is a large number of people. Hence, one can safely deduce that fears and phobias are common among children. Journalist Rebecca F. Johnson has insightful comments about themes in the Harry Potter series even if she only discusses the third film in her article: “Some experts say the film’s overarching theme of confronting and overcoming fears[,] a common thread through much of the series about the young wizard[,] sends a positive message to young viewers” (Johnson 7). She is also one of those who say that the movies and books about Harry Potter “might help them learn to face [their fears]” (Johnson 7) by reading about, for example, the Boggart:

[A Boggart]’s a shape-shifter […]. It can take the shape of whatever it thinks will frighten us most. […] So the Boggart sitting in the darkness […] has not yet assumed a form. He does not yet know what will frighten the person on the other side of the door. Nobody knows what a Boggart looks like when he is alone, but
Boggarts are, as described in the quote above, creatures that live off people’s phobias and can therefore be seen as a metaphor for the psychological phenomenon that is a phobia. Phobias are what the Boggarts use as a tool for hurting people, so they are connected to phobias both literally and metaphorically. Harry and his friends first face a Boggart in one of the first Defence against the Dark Arts classes for Lupin in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling *POA* 146). Thus, he “helps the young witches and wizards visualize their worst fears and then turn them into ridiculous portrayals” (Johnson 7). This way of facing ones fears is supported by psychologists such as Lawrence Shapiro who says that “[v]isualization and humor are great ways to get kids to overcome fears” (Johnson 7). However, Lupin stops Harry from facing the Boggart at that time, thinking that it will turn into Lord Voldemort and “[he] didn’t think it a good idea for Lord Voldemort to materialise in the staff room. [He] imagined that people would panic.” (Rowling *POA* 169).

After having fainted on the train from facing the Dementor it turns out that the thing Harry fears more than Lord Voldemort is a Dementor, which means fear itself (Rowling *POA* 169-170). This is a remarkably clever position for a thirteen year old to take. Lupin even says “that suggests that what you fear most of all is – fear […] [, which is v]ery wise […]” (Rowling *POA* 169-170). To be most afraid of fear itself is wise because it is the actual feeling of fear that paralyses you, not the heights, or the spiders, or anything else one might be afraid of. Most people can identify with suffering from phobias because there are such varieties of them. Some phobias are irrational and some less so. Some phobias we can get over in our teens by confronting them, such as speaking in public. Others, of course, need more work than that, maybe even therapy. Lupin even uses a Boggart for Harry to practice on when trying to teach him the Patronus charm because he knows that it’ll turn into a Dementor (Rowling *POA* 257). Here the Boggart turns into what Harry fears the most, which is a Dementor and the Dementor is a metaphor for fear. In other words, readers might here learn that it is the fear that paralyses you and not the actual thing that you are afraid of, just as Harry learns after talking to Lupin about the Dementors.

Even in the case of the Boggarts, meaning the phobia, magic provides a good and practical solution to the problem, the Riddikulus spell: “The charm that repels a Boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a Boggart is laughter. What you need to do is force it to assume a shape that you find amusing.” (Rowling
This is very logical and would very likely work on at least some phobias that the reader might suffer from, especially if teenagers are considered as the implied reader for the books. However, “research […] has suggested that the visualization technique[,] think the cliche of imagining the audience in their underwear when giving a speech[,] is successful only some of the time. Repeated interaction with the object that scares children is more effective, says Tom Ollendick” (Johnson 7). Laughter can be used as a cure and solution for many problems; phobias, other kinds of fear and also anxiety, self-doubt and stress. You will probably feel better when you do or see something you think is fun or funny and something that you can draw energy from, just like psychologist Shapiro’s claim about visualization and humour quoted above (Johnson 7).

Thus, in the case of the Boggarts, magic defeats them with laughter (Rowling POA 146-147) and in the case of the Dementors, magic conquers them with really strong and happy memories (Rowling POA 258). Rowling makes the ways to overpower most of the magical creatures that pose any danger to the wizards very logical and very much applicable to real life situations for children and teenagers. So as well as being entertaining, exciting and something to identify with, the Harry Potter series can, from the didactic, moralist perspective already mentioned, be seen as something of a therapeutic read that can give people possible solutions for problems and ways to manage any difficult situations that might arise.

Conclusion

As one can see, the Harry Potter series offers a space for adolescent readers to confront common problems, such as fears and phobias, racism and oppressive situations, depression, how to cope with various types of change and also how to accept being different or accept other people who are different. There are many issues which I have touched on in my analysis and I have come to find that there are metaphors or symbols for them in the books and also practical suggestions on how to deal with these issues.

The giant is a metaphor for being different and accepting people for who they are. Hagrid and Madame Maxime symbolise different ways to handle being different; either managing to accept being different with the support of the people who love you or being embarrassed about it and always trying to hide it. It is very clear to the reader which way is advocated when the giant who is embarrassed has a much smaller and much less significant role than the one who has support and is able to accept what he is. Thus the implied reader would get encouraged to accept the fact that he or she might be slightly different and learn
that with a good support system one will get far and achieve big things. Tolerance and acceptance of other people are moral lessons frequently referred to in the series.

The werewolf is another metaphor for being different and also for how people are afraid of you because ‘your kind’ is generally seen as violent and dangerous. The aspect of illness, through Lupin and his lycanthropy, and being contagious is symbolised here, which could be emotionally helpful to read for a teenager who has an illness like cancer or diabetes and feels like the people around him or her treat him or her in a way that he or she does not like. It might be with caution, pity or fear but it is a way different than before the illness and, much like Lupin, he or she probably just wants to be treated like everyone else.

Prejudice comes in here too, in this case that the illness makes its victim violent and dangerous. This is a more obvious reference to racism than that of the giants, even if Ron does say that wizards are afraid of giants because they are considered violent (Rowling GOF 470). A number of comments and events concerning the werewolves are obviously references to prejudice and racism, for example when Lupin comments on that he has had and will have problems finding a job because nobody wants to hire an uncontrolled and violent animal. Thus, the werewolf is one of many references to racism; others include the Malfoy family’s disdain for the Weasley family because they are friends with both Muggle-borns and Half-bloods.

The house-elf is a symbol of having to do what somebody else tells you, and either being happy with that because you do not know any alternatives or wanting to rebel against the authority and be free to make your own decisions. This can be applied to when children grow up to become teenagers and start to think for themselves. They might, as Dobby, realise that they want something else than what their parents or wizard family say they should aim for, or they might be proud of their situation and satisfied with being where they are because they are afraid to try something new, as when Winky is fired by her wizard family and is devastated by her new situation. The house-elf is also the most political reference that I am discussing in this thesis, a reference to the people who are lowest in the hierarchical food-chain that is the wizarding society and are thus oppressed by the more powerful people such as the Malfoy family and some of the more powerful wizards at the Ministry of Magic. This, I claim, can be interpreted as a metaphor for being a child and thus “the lowest in the hierarchical food-chain” when it comes to power. Thus, the child can read about the houseelves and learn how to, and how not to, handle their own oppressive situations.

The Dementor is a symbol for the worst, saddest and most horrible experiences and feelings that a person is faced with in life. In other words it is a symbol for depression and
other types of anxiety. It is a logical progression that authors of children’s literature should also cover the subject more and more today, because the number of teenagers who experience depression increases. In reading about how the wizards battle the Dementors, the reader might learn that by keeping his or her most wonderful and positive experiences close it gets a little bit easier to endure worse experiences and survive more difficult times.

The Boggart is most likely the most obvious symbol of those that I discuss and it is the symbol of fear, so much so that it even takes the shape of what the nearest wizard fears the most. This becomes a tool for Lupin to help Harry learn to battle the Dementors. Fears and phobias are something that most people suffer from during a long time or at least at some point. The way Rowling has the wizards handle a Boggart is to defeat it with laughter. By reading about this, the reader might feel that his or her phobia also becomes a bit less tough to handle if they think of a way to make it possible to laugh at instead, again referring back to psychologist Shapiro and his comment that humour is a good tool for children to use to be able to manage what it is that they are afraid of (Johnson 7).

There are of course many more possible ways to analyse the creatures I have chosen. One might do a more political analysis of the werewolves and the giants, about their choice of sides when the war begins. One might also consider the aspect of power in the Dementors and the Boggarts and how they can destroy wizards. One might do a deeper analysis of the theme of sexuality that can be found in the werewolf and another alternative would be to investigate family figures such as the many possible father figures in Harry’s life.

Lastly, my conclusion is that these magical creatures that I have discussed can indeed all be seen as symbols or metaphors for difficulties teenagers will or might encounter during their teenage years. However, my conclusion is not only that, but also that these metaphors and symbols make the Harry Potter series a didactic read in the way that they might support the implied reader, which in my analysis is a teenager, in his or her endeavour when it comes to handling these difficulties, such as fears, depression and oppression. The Dementor and the Boggart might help children face their fears while still being horrifying and thrilling parts of the wizarding world. Winky can be seen as an example of how even when one is in a truly horrible situation, there is help somewhere and in her case that help is in Dumbledore, who gives her work. Dobby, Hagrid and Lupin provide useful guidance and make for positive role models as well as interesting characters in an exciting fictional world filled with adventures.
Bibliography


