Major Paper: Critical Approaches to Harry Potter

Famed Judy Blume, no stranger to the controversy over "children's literature," says in her essay "Is Harry Potter Evil?" for the National Coalition Against Censorship website: "It's a good thing when children enjoy books, isn't it? Most of us think so. But like many children's books these days, the Harry Potter series has recently come under fire. In Minnesota, Michigan, New York, California and South Carolina, parents who feel the books promote interest in the occult have called for their removal from classrooms and school libraries." She continues, "I knew this was coming. The only surprise is that it took so long -- as long as it took for the zealots who claim they're protecting children from evil (and evil can be found lurking everywhere these days) to discover that children actually like these books. If children are excited about a book, it must be suspect." Clearly, Blume believes in the value of and the potential power of *Harry Potter*, of books in general. So, what is the value of and the power of *Harry Potter*? Are these books or other "children's literature" worth reading, critiquing, and teaching?

The first sequence asked you to interrogate the place, value, and critical potential of *Harry Potter* in the classroom and in scholarship. Does *Harry Potter* belong in the classroom? A university classroom? And what is at stake in their study or in their dismissal? The second sequence dove into the "cultural assumptions and ideological tensions" (Anatol xv) of the novels. Over the breadth and depth of your first and second sequence of assignments, we have considered, discussed, read, and written about more than just *Harry Potter*, about more than just children's literature. Underpinning all of our discussions, provocations, and explorations are arguments about representation, about the construction of categories, identities, and meanings, and about the intersections of cultural and social locations such as race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality. In fact, you have been participating in the very work of cultural studies.

The importance of engaging these stories is clear: as Giselle Liza Anatol argues in her "Introduction" to *Reading Harry Potter*, these books can serve as a "powerful tool for inculcating social roles and behaviors, moral guides, desires, and fears. Whether these books serve as 'time-passers', literacy training, exercise for the imagination or the logical-thinking process, teachers of social norms, models for dealing with problems, and/or a means for improving a cantankerous or melancholy mood, they can affect and sway their readers" (xv). Now, the culmination of the second sequence asks you to take that exigence one step further, to critique and analyze the kinds and means and forms, obvious and inobvious, of training, exercise, norms, models, and affects *Harry Potter* materializes and argues within its many-thousand pages. In other words, you are going to "read too much into it" in order to excavate, explicate, and analyze *Harry Potter* as literature, as rhetoric, as cultural production. Like the spell *priori incantatem* in the *Goblet of Fire* that reveals all of the spells a wand has ever cast, this assignment asks you to unpack and unwind *Harry Potter* to show and to analyze the various cultural, political, and ideological "spells" it has cast, through its language, its characters, its plots, its constructions, its voices, and even its silences.

Goals and Outcomes

For this **8- to 10-page** formal, researched paper, you will identify **one** central critical question, lens, or theory to use to close-read, analyze, and explicate *Harry Potter*. You may choose to work with one or more of the books we have read for class, but realize that your paper must be focused, specific, and deploy evidence carefully and strategically. Armed with the theoretical and cultural studies concepts from the readings, previous assignments, and class discussions **generate your own claim, your own argument** about *Harry Potter*. For example, how does your *Harry Potter* "make visible" race or gender or class or sexuality? How does *Harry Potter* work in and work against the boarding school genre? Is *Harry Potter* an allegory for the US's "War on Terror" or Britain's immigration politics? How does technology function in the novels? Be selective and specific in your claim.

Think about the following questions when you sit down to make your claim (pick and choose the best and most relevant questions to use as a way to generate ideas and subclaims). Your researched paper might be broken down into the following sections (fully framed by a critical claim and exigence):

I. Encomium (1-2 pages): an introduction in praise of *Harry Potter* drawing on your own personal investment.

—Why do you/did you read *Harry Potter*?
—What do you get out of *Harry Potter*? Why is it important to you?
—If you have never read *Harry Potter*, why didn't you read it? Why start now?
—Who introduced you to *Harry Potter*? Who have you encouraged to read *Harry Potter*? Why?
—Why take a college class on *Harry Potter*?

II. Why Harry Potter (2-3 pages): argue for the value of reading, studying, teaching, and critiquing of *Harry Potter*.

—In what rhetorical or reading context is *Harry Potter* best suited? Primary school? Secondary school? University?
—Why teach *Harry Potter* in the writing classroom?
—Is there something subversive about *Harry Potter*? What might be problematic, risky, or dangerous about *Harry Potter*?
—What does *Harry Potter* and other children's literature reveal about our culture, our world? Is that important?
—Who is the intended audience of *Harry Potter*? Is *Harry Potter* children's literature? Is it for adults?
—Is there a relationship between *Harry Potter* the novels, the story and *Harry Potter* the brand, the product line, the business? What does this relationship reveal?
—What might *Harry Potter* offer to other disciplines? Contexts other than just in English or in the writing classroom?

III. Analyzing Harry Potter (4-6 pages): identify a critical approach or question to analyze *Harry Potter*

—What are the central arguments (these can be more than just themes) of *Harry Potter*? Does it comment on identity, culture, or power? Are these arguments overt or covert?
—What stereotype or cultural assumption (about race, gender, sexuality, class, or nation) does *Harry Potter* make? How is this stereotype or assumption construction and deployed?
—What is the importance of *Harry Potter*? What does it tell its audience? How is its production, circulation, and consumption important to its meaning or meanings?
—What are you trying to prove to your readers about *Harry Potter*? Why is your claim important?
—How would you convince your audience of your stance? What evidence and reasoning is required?
—How might this paper be in conversation with your first sequence? In conversation with the class's readings?

IV. Conclusion (1 page): bring all of the sections together to make one final argument.

—How do the above sections connect? What is the central claim that runs through each?
—What is **at stake** in your claim, argument, and evidence? What is **at stake** in your analysis and reading of Harry Potter?

Remember that the above questions **should not be a laundry list** for you to simply run down the answers. Be selective and focused about what you wish to write about and then generate your own claim about your artifact. You are required to include at least **ten outside sources** including the secondary texts read for this class, scholarly journals, and credible newspapers and magazines and websites; the sources must be relevant and useful to your claim but all ten need not be cited in your paper. The novels themselves do not count toward the five required outside sources.

Assume your audience is familiar with or has read the Harry Potter books. You need not spend a great deal of time summarizing plot or character. Your paper must demonstrate your ability to **close read** both text and research. Like your previous papers, you will be expected to **critically argue and persuasively articulate** your argument with **direct quotes** from your research as support. Also, keep in mind the **course outcomes** as you work and write.

Guidelines and Due Dates

Audience: Because this paper requires a strong understanding of cultural studies concepts, you will write for an audience that is more of an academic community, which can include your instructor, your classmates, and the authors of the essays we have read. Keep in mind that your audience is varied in many ways, including academic experience and familiarity with the texts, so you'll need to consider of what information each type of reader will need to make sense of your essay. Another good way to think about your audience is to imagine the publication in which your essay could appear such as the *Reading Contexts* anthology or the *Reading Harry Potter* collection or a scholarly journal. Your audience analysis will further define and reveal who you are writing to and writing for.

Format: This assignment is a formal, academic paper and should follow the manuscript guidelines outlined in the course policies (see the course website for an example of a major paper's formatting):

appropriate title for your paper, proper heading
92-150 inches, typed, double-spaced, with MLA citations, stapled
works consulted page, at least 10 authoritative sources, correct MLA format

Targeted outcomes: _____

Paper Proposal/Conference Memo #1: Bring to your conference on _____ your Conference Memo (to be assigned), which identifies key concepts, your working claim, and a rough outline of your main ideas.

Paper Proposal/Conference Memo #2: Bring to your conference on _____ your Conference Memo (to be assigned), which further specifies key concepts, your revised claim, and a fuller outline of your whole paper.

Draft Due: Wednesday, February 22, at the start of class

Final Due: Monday, March 12, make revisions based on comments and responses from me and your peers and hand in the revised final version with your Final Portfolio