

Major Paper 1.5: Critical Approaches to Harry Potter

engl 131 / sec. 0 / autumn quarter 2010-11 / chang



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...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...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?

At the start of our first sequence, you were asked 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 sequence then dove into the “cultural assumptions and ideological tensions” (Anatol xv) of the novels. Over the breadth and depth of your first sequence of assignments and readings, 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” (xv). Now, the culmination of the 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 **5- to 8-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 and why is Harry Potter important to read, analyze, and teach? 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).

You might address questions about literacy, genre, censorship, education, or pedagogy:

–In what rhetorical or reading context is *Harry Potter* best suited? Primary school? Secondary school? University?

–Why teach *Harry Potter* in the writing classroom? What might *Harry Potter* offer to other disciplines? Contexts other than just in English or in the writing classroom?

–What does *Harry Potter* and other children’s literature reveal about our culture, our world? Is that important? What might be problematic, risky, or dangerous about *Harry Potter*?

–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?

You might address questions about social and cultural formations, power, politics:

–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?

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 **6 to 8 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 of them 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

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):

formal title page, appropriate title for your paper

58-92 inches, typed, double-spaced, with MLA citations, proper format, stapled

works consulted page, at least 6-8 authoritative sources, correct MLA format

Targeted outcomes: 1, 2, 3, 4

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.

Draft Due: Monday, November 1

Final Due: Make revisions based on comments and responses from me and your peers and hand in the revised final version on WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3.