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HARRY POTTER VERSUS CHILDREN’S LITERATURE: CAN THE  
SERIES OF BOOKS *HARRY POTTER* REALLY BE CLASSIFIED AS  
CHILDREN’S LITERATURE?

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso

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**Harry Potter versus Children's Literature: Can the Series of Books Harry Potter Really Be Classified As Children's Literature?**

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (TCC) para a disciplina LLE5090 do Departamento de Língua e Literatura Estrangeira do Centro de Comunicação e Expressão da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina - Curso de Letras – Língua Inglesa e Literaturas, como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Bacharel em Letras – Língua Inglesa e Literaturas.

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**Abstract**

**Harry Potter versus Children's Literature: Can the Series of Books Harry Potter Really Be Classified As Children's Literature?**

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**Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina  
2009**

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The classification of books in categories such as Children Literature, Young Adult Literature, and Adult Literature is one that is commonly used and certainly expected when the reader is looking for a book. There is not such a thing as a unique guide used for everyone to reach these classifications and it is not difficult to find books that are put in a category and, after one reads it, the book lets the reader wondering if that was the right classification for that volume. The present study deals with one of these moments of wonder. Its main goal is to show why the series of books Harry Potter would be better classified as Young Adult Literature, rather than Children's Literature. Throughout the work, characteristics of both categories will be presented and compared with excerpts and situations contained in the books; a parallel with real life situations will also be provided, along with the results of these contents and the conclusion reached through the study.

**Keywords:** children's literature; young adult literature; Harry Potter; Rowling; classification of books.

**Number of pages:** 37

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## **Resumo**

### **Harry Potter Versus Literatura Infantil: A Série De Livro Harry Potter Pode Ser Classificada Como Literatura Infantil?**

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#### **Orientadora**

A classificação de livros em categorias como Literatura Infantil, Literatura Infanto-Juvenil, e Literatura Adulta é comumente usada e certamente esperada quando o leitor vai à procura de um livro. Não existe um guia único usado para alcançar essas classificações e não é difícil encontrar livros que são colocados em uma categoria e, depois de lidos, deixam o leitor imaginando se aquela foi a classificação mais apropriada para aquele volume. O presente estudo lida com essa dúvida. O principal objetivo é mostrar que a série de livros Harry Potter seria melhor classificada como Literatura Infanto-Juvenil ou mesmo Literatura Adulta, ao invés de ter como alvo as crianças, como leva a crer a classificação da série como Literatura Infantil. No decorrer deste estudo, características de ambas as categorias serão mostradas e comparadas com excertos e situações encontradas nos livros da série; será traçado um paralelo de momentos do livro com situações da vida real e por fim, será apresentado o resultado das análises realizadas neste estudo, assim como a conclusão a que essas análises levaram.

**Palavras-Chave:** Literatura Infantil; Literatura Infanto-Juvenil; Literatura Adulta; Harry Potter, Rowling; classificação de livros.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Harry Potter series, composed of seven books, has been a worldwide phenomenon since the release of the first volume, in 1997. The life, problems, joys, victories and defeats of the little wizard have been followed enthusiastically by millions of people around the world. The “worshiping” of Harry does not seem to be restricted by age barriers: children, young adults and adults were equally seduced by the adventures told by Rowling.

However, in spite of the stupendous success, the series is also the cause of frequent discussions and worries concerning some of its aspects, such as the depth of the recurring themes of the books, its language, frequently too complex for the age group to which it is targeted; parents worrying about the books being stimulating violence in children; churches and religious cults criticizing the books for talking about magic, wizards, witchcraft, etc. Some evidence of those worries can be found in a Washington Post article written by Holland: “Parents worried about the influence of the wildly popular Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling have persuaded the state's Board of Education to review whether the books should be allowed in the classroom.” Or in this article from Associated Content where it is stated:

However, not every parent was thrilled with their child's Harry Potter enthusiasm. Almost immediately there were calls for boycotts of the boy wizard from Christians who felt that any book dealing with the dark arts should not be part of a child's reading. There have been book burnings and the book was banned for a short time in some school districts.

In this same article, from Associated Content, even the Pope gave his opinion about Rowling’s books: “[...] the Pope said the books were not appropriate ‘because these are

subtle seductions which act unnoticed and by this deeply distort Christianity in the soul, before it can grow properly” and, also, other concerns were shown:

These who are opposed to Harry Potter look not only at the occult depictions in the books and movies, but the general dark tone of the books. There is a great deal of destruction and violence. There is the death of many people and animals. In addition, Rowling made references to real people who were either associated with the occult or purported to be associated with the occult.

In spite of the radicalism of some of those quotes, they show how much the stories of the young wizard have affected people all over the world. Religious people, parents, children...everyone seems to have an opinion about the books of the series.

Taking into consideration all of the above, the research question that guides this paper is: to which extent can the Harry Potter series of books be considered children’s literature? Therefore, the main objective of this piece of study is to identify and analyze important aspects for the classification of a book as children’s literature, to contrast them with aspects found in the books of the Harry Potter series as well as trying to provide an alternative classification for the books.

One of the reasons for the importance of an alternative classification lies, as an example, in the fact that it is an ingrained habit for a great number of readers to go to a bookstore and look directly for the section in which they think a certain kind of book may be stored. Parents looking for children’s books go straight to the children’s section, believing that what may be found there are books whose contents are “safe” for kids. While the Harry Potter series may and in fact is enjoyed by many children, the contents of its books may not be exactly what the parent was seeking in a children’s book. That happens mainly because the series is not easy to classify. The themes of the books reach readers of all ages in such

different levels that it is a hard task to decide where to “file” them. Children like the books because they present a magical world, a fantasy where the “good guy” goes against everything and defeats evil. A young adult or an adult may see it completely differently.

The challenge that Rowling’s books pose to those trying to fit them into a single category may be one of the reasons for such intense confusion and discussion regarding the target audience of the series. Harry Potter not only defies evil in his adventures, he also defies the frontiers between categories of literary works. So, what to do when a book has characteristics that can belong to all the categories? I believe that it would be a good solution to try to discover which characteristics are more predominant in the work, which in my opinion, in Rowling’s books, are those of young adult literature or even adult literature. Thus, providing this alternative classification of the series may benefit the public in the sense that it gives them the choice of reading or not themes that could be more thoroughly enjoyed by a more mature audience.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In order to fulfill the main objectives of the present research, in this section some information concerning literature, children’s literature, young adult literature and Harry Potter will be provided. Each of these items will be presented in following sub-sections.

### **2.1. LITERATURE AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE**

Literature can be any written and published production that has the intent of being made permanent, challenging the meaning of words and even the passage of the time. As stated by Nicola:

Literature is an artistic manifestation. The word is the tool of literature, which means that the literary artist explores the word in its totality (meaning, sound, design). In every literary work is perceived an ideology, a posture of the artist regarding reality and human aspirations.<sup>1</sup> (25)

This idea is complemented by the definition of literature given by Cereja and Magalhães:

... it can be said that *literature is the art of the word*. As in any kind of art, literature demands, from the writer, techniques, knowledge, sensibility and patience. ... Literature, as the language it utilizes, is an *instrument for communication* and, because of that it also fulfills the social role of *transmitting the knowledge and the culture of a community*.<sup>2</sup> (10)

Literature, therefore, comprehends all textual styles; it is the collection of textual production written around the world. However, in spite of the fact that “literature, strictly speaking, is that which is written down” (Godard, “Oral Literature”), there is also a branch of literature that is oral. Oral literature “shares with written literature the use of heightened language in various genres (narrative, lyric, epic, etc), but it is set apart by being actualized only in performance and by the fact that the performer can (and sometimes is obliged to) improvise so that oral text constitutes an event” (Godard, “Oral Literature”). According to

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<sup>1</sup> “A literatura é uma manifestação artística. A palavra é o material da literatura, isto é, o artista literário explora a palavra em sua totalidade (significado, som, desenho). Em toda obra literária percebe-se uma ideologia, uma postura do artista diante da realidade e das aspirações humanas.” (This and the subsequent translations are mine.)

<sup>2</sup> “[...] pode-se dizer que *literatura é a arte da palavra*. Como qualquer arte, a literatura exige, da parte do escritor, técnicas, conhecimentos, sensibilidade e paciência. [...] A literatura, assim como a língua que utiliza, é um *instrumento de comunicação* e, por isso, cumpre também o papel social de *transmitir os conhecimentos e a cultura de uma comunidade*.”

Rego, “it is through literature that the speaker of a language shows all his/her creative potential”<sup>3</sup> (10).

Children’s literature can be defined as a literary genre that has, usually, children as its target audience. In the *Education Encyclopedia*, children’s literature is defined by Root Jr. as:

[...] any literature that is enjoyed by children. More specifically, children's literature comprises those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature or who may not possess the reading skills or developmental understandings necessary for its perusal.

When delimiting the range of what is covered by children’s literature, it is important to take into consideration that children’s literature has been “since its beginning, a minor literary genre, connected to an utilitarian-pedagogic role that makes it more pedagogy rather than literature”<sup>4</sup> (Palo & Oliveira 09).

Concerning the function of a children’s book, Góis says that “the ideal of literature is to please, entertain, instruct and educate children [however,] ... the first function of a children's book is the aesthetic construction, the education of the sensibility, because it puts together the beauty of words and the beauty of images.”<sup>5</sup> From this, it could be said that at least two basic characteristics were usually expected from a book classified as children’s book: it should contain images (illustrations, pictures that stimulate the imaginary of children) and it should bring some kind of moral knowledge to children, with the purpose of education. Hence Maria Antonieta Antunes Cunha’s argument:

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<sup>3</sup> “é através da literatura que se manifesta todo o potencial criativo de que pode ser portador o falante de uma língua.”

<sup>4</sup> “desde os primórdios, a literatura infantil surge como uma forma literária menor, atrelada à função utilitário-pedagógica que a faz ser mais pedagogia do que literatura.”

<sup>5</sup> “o ideal da literatura é deleitar, entreter, instruir e educar as crianças, e melhor ainda se as quatro coisas de uma vez, [contudo] [...] a função primeira do livro infantil é a estético-formativa, a educação da sensibilidade, pois reúne a beleza da palavra e a beleza das imagens.”

Children's literature influences and wants to influence in all aspects of a student's education. Therefore, children's literature has the means to act in the three vital areas of men (activity, intelligence and affectivity), areas in which education should provide changes in behavior.<sup>6</sup> (qtd. in Góis 22)

All the authors quoted above seem to have one thing in common: they see children's books as a tool to help the development of the young ones, while at the same time, giving them pleasure and entertainment. The books of my childhood could all fit into their descriptions. I used to read books full of beautiful illustrations and stories that, while soft and simple, were also clever and thoroughly enjoyed by me. They were my initiation, my first steps towards more mature and complex stories.

## **2.2. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN LITERATURE – NODELMAN'S THEORY**

Perry Nodelman is one of the most known and respected authorities in children's literature nowadays. The author has written several articles and books on the subject and his works are vastly used as resources for information about books written for children. Besides being a writer, Nodelman has also worked as a professor for almost forty years.

To make a straight comparison between Harry Potter and children's literature possible, in this research, besides the definitions already given above, characteristics of children's books defined by Nodelman, particularly from the book *The pleasures of children's literature* (20-22), will be considered and compared with parts of Rowling's books.

To Nodelman, children's literature:

(a) is simple and straightforward;

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<sup>6</sup> "A literatura infantil influi e quer influir em todos os aspectos da educação do aluno. Assim, nas três áreas vitais do homem (atividade, inteligência e afetividade) em que a educação deve promover mudanças de comportamento, a literatura infantil tem meios de atuar."

- (b) focuses on action. Subtle psychological events are often implied through narration and comment on actions;
- (c) is about childhood and/or expresses a child's point of view;
- (d) is optimistic and tends toward fantasy;
- (e) views an un-idyllic world from the viewpoint of innocence;
- (f) tends to balance the idyllic and the didactic.

Besides having those aspects, Nodelman does not consider Children's books to be shallow in meaning or impact, as he says

Their apparent simplicity contains depths, often surprisingly pessimistic qualifications of the apparent optimism, dangerously and delightfully counterproductive possibilities that oppose and undermine the apparent messages. These texts can be easily and effortlessly heard or read, but once read, they continue to develop significance, importance, complexity, to echo ever outward and inward. These are texts that resonate. (Nodelman, "Pleasure and Genre" 1-2)

This affirmation, coming from the author, may lead the reader of this paper to insert Harry Potter in those 'deepest' aspects in children's literature. Therefore, it is important to say that, while talking about those meanings, Nodelman was referring to books such as Curious George, Anne of Green Gables, Charlotte's Web, The Tale of Peter Rabbit and so on. All of those books bring insightful meanings, beautiful stories and images, while at the same time, maintaining the subtlety of books written for children. So, it may be wise to say that, while books for children are often light, it does not mean that they cannot delve in serious subjects. The difference with Harry Potter lies in the fact that stronger subjects are

dealt with graphically, and are full of descriptions and details that *may* teach children, but may also become too complex, too deep for the younger ones.

### **2.3. YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

This section will provide a definition for young adult literature and its characteristics, so that this can be seen as a possible alternative to the classification of Harry Potter.

Young adult literature is the literary genre destined to readers between the ages of 12 (end of childhood) to 20 (beginning of adulthood). According to Almario, this age group can be defined as “a period of uncertainty when kids are no-longer-kids-but-not-quite-adults” (1).

The main reason for a separation between children’s literature and young adult literature lies in that “gap”, where teenagers started to be recognized as having a level of maturity that was not that of a child nor that of an adult.

This literary genre has characteristics more similar to the ones of adult literature rather than children’s literature. Vandergrift says that “with greater freedom in both content and form, young adult literature is moving into a closer connection with adult literature, and fluent readers in this age group may read primarily adult books” (par. 1). This can be attributed to the fact that, today, young people mature earlier, having, therefore, a greater capacity to deal with themes that were usually considered too complex for children to understand.

The genre is vastly recognized and utilized through the world. In a search on Google, as an example, people get more results when searching for young adult literature definitions than they get if searching for adult literature and, as it happens with children literature and young adult literature there is also a blurred line dividing what is young adult and what is adult literature. Some say that young adult’s books are those written for teenagers, while

others, such as Herz and Gallo, say that “YAL covers a broad spectrum of books, including books written for adults that are read by both, adults and teenagers” (11).

#### **2.4. HARRY POTTER**

Harry Potter is the name of the main character of the fantasy books created by the author J. K. Rowling. The Harry Potter series encompasses seven books that tell the life story of the young wizard from his first until his last year of study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. The central story arc concerns Harry's struggle against the evil wizard Lord Voldemort, who killed Harry's parents in his quest to conquer the magical world to subjugate non-magical people to his rules. After the books were published, several successful derivative films, video games and other themed merchandise have been based upon the series.

In order to make this work understandable not only to those who have read the books, it is necessary to provide a small description of what is told in each of the books of the series:

**Book 1 – Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone:** In the first novel of the series the reader gets to know a black haired, green eyed boy, with a scar in his forehead and broken glasses – Harry Potter. Harry, after living eleven years under the care of his aunt and his uncle, finally discovers that he is a wizard. During his first year at Hogwarts, the school destined to train young wizards and witches, Harry makes new friends (such as Hermione, Ron, Hagrid and Dumbledore, school principal and future mentor of Harry), new enemies and starts to learn about the Wizard World and its differences. At first, he faces some difficulties, but with the help of his friends he surpasses them. It is also in his first year that Harry knows and fights against the wizard that killed his parents and is back now trying to retrieve the Philosophical Stone, who is believed to give immortality to those who drink an elixir made from it. In his duel with Voldemort, Harry defeats him, concluding this way, his first year at school.

Book 2 – **Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets:** In his second year, Harry discovers that he speaks parseltongue (the tongue used by snakes), and this helps him to open a chamber that is said to encase a terrible monster. Harry is after the monster because Ginny, one of his friends, had been taken by it. The young wizard once more faces his mortal enemy. Yet, this time, he is only a memory kept magically in a diary that was protected by one Basilisk. Harry defeats the creature, saves Ginny and destroys the memory of the Dark Lord that was kept in the Chamber.

Book 3 – **Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Askaban:** In his third year, Harry faces the Dementors (creatures that are personifications of evil and that guard the prison of Askaban). He also faces a fugitive of Askaban believed to have killed Harry's parents and several other people following the orders of the Dark Lord. Through the story, Harry finds out that not only the story told of Sirius (the escaped prisoner) was not true, but the man was also his godfather and his father's best friend. The discovery of the truth about Sirius gives Harry not only a link to his past, but also a father figure that will come to be very important in his life. This was the only book in the series where Voldemort did not have an active role.

Book 4 – **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire:** In the fourth book of the series, Harry participates in a tournament between several schools of wizards. Even though Harry is under aged and the rules only allow one champion per school, somehow the rules end up broken and Harry gets to represent the school along with Cedric Diggory, the chosen champion of the school. Almost at the end of the book, Harry finds himself face-to-face with Voldemort, who planned to kill Harry in order to bring back to life his physical body, that was destroyed when Voldemort tried to kill Harry as a baby. Harry manages to escape, but not before being a witness to Cedric being murdered by the Dark Lord. Harry tries to warn the wizard community about the return of Voldemort, but no one believes him.

Book 5 – **Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix**: This year, Harry discovers the existence of a group of wizards formed to combat Voldemort, called The Order of the Phoenix. Back at school, Harry faces accusations that say he lies about the return of Voldemort, and has to deal with the constant intrusion of the Ministry of Magic in the school. Harry and his friends try to fight against the orders of the Minister and Dolores Umbridge, so they practice a forbidden subject in secret, fight all the gossip surrounding Harry and the boy also discovers an intense connection, presented in form of visions and nightmares, between his mind and Voldemort's. At the end of the book, while fighting one more time against evil, Harry witness the death of his beloved godfather by the hands of Voldemort's allies. It is in this book that Harry discovers, through a prophecy, that he is the one destined to kill Voldemort.

Book 6 – **Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince**: This book marks the official return of the Dark Lord to the world of wizards and non-wizards. The story revolves around Harry's suspicion that something wrong is coming. It is also this year that he finds a potions' book that belonged to a self entitled "Half-blood Prince". The book helps Harry immensely with his classes in Potions. Besides that, Harry also has encounters with Dumbledore, where the headmaster teaches everything about Voldemort to Harry in order to prepare the boy if he comes to face the villain again. Furthermore, Harry helps to destroy relics believed to carry parts of Voldemort's soul, those relics are called Horcruxes. At the end of the book, a battle between good and bad wizards ensues in Hogwarts soil. Once more, Harry watched while his friend and mentor, Dumbledore, is killed by Snape, who later escapes. It is after the funeral that Harry decides not to come back to his last year at Hogwarts – his mission in life now would be to find and destroy all the Horcruxes and defeat the Dark Lord.

Book 7 – **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows**: In the last book of the series, Harry engages in his journey to find the Horcruxes. He has the help of his loyal friends, Ron and Hermione, as well as the protection of the members of The Order of the Phoenix and the professors and students of Hogwarts. The boy and his friends, through several fights against Death Eaters and quarrels between themselves, destroy all but one of the Horcruxes. Then, in the final battle, that happens again in Hogwarts soil, Snape (along with several other known characters) is killed and Harry discovers he was not a traitor and that Snape had killed Dumbledore at the headmaster's request. Harry and his friends destroy the last Horcrux and, in a final duel, Voldemort is finally defeated by the boy. The book ends with a fast-forward in the lives of Harry, Ron and Hermione, where they appear at the train station sending Harry's and Ginny's and Hermione and Ron's kids to Hogwarts.

Those small summaries may help the reader of this paper to read it, even without the previous knowledge of the books of the series.

### **3. HARRY POTTER AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

Harry Potter's world is made of magical and mythological beings, fantasies and spells and also of an intense focus in the growth, not only physical but also emotional, of the leading character of the series. Classified by many editors as children's literature, the volumes of the series certainly have an immense appeal to children, especially due to the universe in which the stories are told. However, some of the characteristics of the books tend to stray from what may be expected from books for children, making it difficult to insert the series in a category: subjects as death, fight for power, victories, defeats, loss of loving ones, angst, battles and scary creatures are found in the stories and, although also subjects that may appear, in a softer way, in children's books, in Harry's world they are usually depicted graphically, having great depth and details.

In the following sub-sections, the contrast between what is found in Rowling's books and some characteristics of children's literature will be shown and discussed, focusing mostly on Noldeman's definitions.

### **3.1. DEATH, PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND OPTIMISM**

My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry's parents. There is Voldemort's obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price . . . I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We're all frightened of it. (Rowling qtd. in Greig, par. 13)

J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, as stated by the author herself, are mainly focused on death. The subject is largely present in Potter's life: from the death of his parents to the death of Sirius Black—his godfather, the death of his mentor and friend, Dumbledore until the death of several of his friends, especially in the last book (book which beholds an enormous massacre, with 13 characters, both good and evil, dying).

With the development of Potter's story, the readers are able to see him not only being a witness to death but also reacting to the death of several of his loved ones. As an example, there is the scene when his godfather, Sirius, is hit by a spell and is thrown into a portal from where he could never return. Harry's first reaction is of intense despair, trying to save Sirius. After that, Harry could be said to follow the Five Stages of Grief (as originally described by Kübler-Ross in 1969), which are: denial, rage, bargain, depression, and acceptance.

When he is in denial, he does not want to believe in what had happened:

“He hasn't gone!” Harry yelled. He did not believe it, he would not believe it; still he fought Lupin with every bit of strength he had: Lupin did not understand, people hid behind that curtain, he had heard them whispering the

first time he had entered the room – Sirius was hiding, simply lurking out of sight – “SIRIUS!” he bellowed, “SIRIUS!” (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix” 807)

Not only the scene that led to Sirius death, but also Harry’s fierce reaction are incredibly touchy subjects that were presented rather bluntly and shockingly, especially when it concerns children. Death is something that is usually dealt with extreme delicacy in children’s books, mostly, due to the difficulty that kids may have to grasp death’s real meaning. It is hard to explain that when someone dies, they do not come back from it. Hence the subtlety and grace found in stories for the young ones. In Harry’s life, there is no such thing as easing him into the subject.

In the sixth book occurs one of the most poignant scenes of the entire series: the death of Hogwart’s headmaster and Harry’s friend, Dumbledore; Harry saw his death without being able to do anything, since the boy was paralyzed due to a spell casted by the headmaster himself.

“Avada Kedavra!” A jet of Green light shot from the end of Snape’s wand and hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. Harry’s scream of horror never left him; silent and unmoving, he was forced to watch as Dumbledore was blasted into the air: for a split second he seemed to hang suspended beneath the shining skull, and then he fell slowly backwards, like a great rag doll, over the battlements and out of sight. (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince” 556)

Further in the book, the funeral of the headmaster is described. It is when the readers are able to see all the angst and intense psychological development to which Harry is forced

into for feeling alone in the world, especially because he had been losing, since he was a baby, everyone he has ever loved.

And Harry saw very clearly as he sat there under the hot sun people who cared about him had stood in front of him one by one, his mother, his father, his godfather and finally Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and Voldemort; he must abandon forever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one: that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking from his nightmare, no comforting whisper in the dark that he was safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his protectors had died and he was more alone than he had ever been before. (Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince" 601)

Taking into consideration only the main theme of the books, several of the characteristics that could be expected of a children's book, as defined by Nodelman, are missing or taken into a degree of description that surpasses softness or innocence: there is nothing optimistic in Harry's reaction to Dumbledore's death, psychological events as well as Harry's psychological development are not subtle - what he experiences, his actions and his emotions are fierce, graphic and clear; the language used in the books, in spite of being direct, presents a great degree of details, as well as references to several names inspired by characters of literary works and world history--which would imply a previous knowledge of the reader in order to actually understand and further enjoy them.

### 3.2. LANGUAGE AND ILLUSTRATIONS

“NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!” (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows” 736)

In children's books people usually expect simple language, images (illustrations), children as protagonists, etc; however, in Harry's universe one can hardly say that those characteristics are predominant, or even present. In spite of the fact that the series is initiated with Harry as an 11-year-old boy, throughout the development of the story we see the characters maturing, growing up. The presence of illustrations is almost nonexistent; they appear mostly on the book covers and beginning of chapters--which is an uncommon feature in children's books.

The way the books are written is relatively simple, direct, and easy to follow, if the reader is not a child and is able to follow the long sentences, to understand all the words created by the author, the complicated names of characters and places, etc. Even some adults find the language of the Harry Potter books complex, as can be seen through the words of judge Robert Patterson: "I found it extremely complex," he said of the language used in the books - even more complex than the Dickens novels his father read to him as a child (qtd. in Fresolone, par. 3).

The following excerpt helps to illustrate the long sentences and unknown/complicated words used by Rowling:

"Silence," said *Voldemort* [italics added], with another twitch of *Malfoy's* [italics added] wand, and Charity fell silent as if gagged. "Not content with corrupting and polluting the minds of Wizarding children, last week Professor Burbage wrote an impassioned defense of *Mudbloods* [italics added] in the *Daily Prophet* [italics added]. [...] The dwindling of the *purebloods* [italics

added] is, says Professor Burbage, a most desirable circumstance... She would have us all mate with *Muggles* [italics added]... or, no doubt, werewolves..." (Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" 12)

Rowling combines here references created by herself, such as *Daily Prophet*--the newspaper of the wizard world, the words *muggles* and *mudblood*, which refer, respectively, to non-magical people and half-wizard/half-muggle descendents, and some uncommon names, such as *Voldemort* and *Malfoy*. To name her characters, Rowling makes use of her knowledge of French, Latin, history and mythology. This more "scientific" background may provide a more pleasurable reading to those with a reasonable knowledge of the mentioned areas--which does not necessarily mean that a child could not be pleased while reading the books, however, since the level of understanding of adults and children is different, the meaning of certain words and references may be completely lost by the child.

### **3.3. IS HARRY POTTER A CLASSIC HERO OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE BOOKS?**

In spite of the fact that he is the "hero" of the books, Harry is far from fitting the stereotype of the perfect man full of scruples that usually characterizes a protagonist of children's stories. Harry's attitude in the war between good and evil does not put him in the category of an ordinary hero, but in one of a hero with substance, with personality traits and depth that go beyond that of a typical adolescent. Harry Potter is a hero who makes sacrifices, who is willing to put his life on the line to save that of his friends, even if it means breaking the laws or the rules by which his life is to be guided.

Harry's character is often tempted by evil's powers, defies and frequently disobeys rules, risks his life following the path that he thinks is the right one, in spite of advices on the contrary. The young magician is full of imperfections and seems to be subject of failing as

every human being. He does not try to hide his imperfections and often gets carried away by emotions, including those not very “accepted” in typical representations of classical heroes, such as: fear, selfishness, jealousy, fury, intolerance, etc.

Breathing hard as though he were fighting, Harry turned away from Dumbledore, who still had not moved a muscle, and paced up and down the study, rubbing his knuckles in his hand and exercising every last bit of restraint to prevent himself knocking things over. He wanted to rage and storm at Dumbledore, but he also wanted to go with him to try and destroy the Horcrux; he wanted to tell him that he was a foolish old man for trusting Snape, but he was terrified that Dumbledore would not take him along unless he mastered his anger ... (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince” 512)

The fact that Harry is not a classic hero is not necessarily a reason for not looking at the series as children’s literature. Yet, again, this particular characteristic complicates once more such definition, as his faults and flaws serve to make him more “regular”, more “normal”, which makes it easier for readers of any age to identify with the young wizard.

Furthermore, it can be said that Harry’s characteristics as a hero agree better with Joseph Campbell’s classification of heroes of myths. He says: “typically, the hero of fairy tales achieves a domestic, microcosmic triumph, and the hero of myth a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph. [The hero of myth] brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole” (30).

Campbell also describes, throughout his book, what he considers to be common characteristics of a hero journey. In a study guide, using Campbell’s theories, Andersen (1) condensed some of these characteristics, giving six steps to this journey: 1) The Unusual

Beginning - the hero has a start that sets him apart from other children; 2) Separation - the hero is separated or alienated from his peers; 3) Initiation - the hero discovers his origins and his uniqueness; 4) Trial and Quest – trial or trials that help the hero prepare to face his/her opponent and the quest to become a hero; 5) Transformation – the epic confront between hero and opponent, where the opponent is defeated and the hero deeply changed; 6) Return – the hero returns home a changed person.

Harry can be “seen” in those situations. He starts his life surviving, with only a lightning bolt scar on his forehead, the battle that killed his parents; because of his beginning, he is separated from his magical peers; he learns about being a wizard and that he belongs in a world that is not the one where he lives; he learns magic and prepares to fight Voldemort; he defeats Voldemort in an epic final battle, therefore saving the Wizardly World of the evil represented by the Dark Lord; and, finally, he returns to live with the ones he loves.

The journey of the wizard is detailed and profound, and while enjoyed by all audiences, an older public may just understand better the depth of what Harry went through in his life – all his struggles, his doubts, his feelings, the perils he faced could be more relatable to a public more familiar with the struggles and difficulties of real life.

### **3.4. VIOLENCE IN HARRY POTTER’S UNIVERSE**

The books from the Harry Potter series also approach violent themes. Throughout the seven volumes the reader can see physical aggression, torture, fights, murder attempt, murders. To provide the reader with a list of every time violence was used in the young wizard world would be an impossible task; however, it is possible to present at least one example of each of the cases quoted above.

To illustrate a clear point of physical aggression, both self-inflicted and not (not to mention the emotional aggression as well, but this subject was already touched when explaining Harry's psychological development), in *The Goblet of Fire* we can see Wormtail, who was one of Voldemort's minions, executing a ritual to bring his master back to life. For that, it was necessary that Wormtail cut his own hand as well as forcibly take a sample of Harry's blood.

[Wormtail] stretched his right hand out in front of him - the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward. [...] Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. [...] [Harry] saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtails remaining hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm and blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting with pain, rummled in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it. ...  
(Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" 641-642)

This example alone serves to illustrate some of the points already touched in the paper, particularly the extreme violence to which Harry is exposed. In the scene just described he faces quite a lot of violence: right before what happened in the quote above he sees, first hand, his friend Cedric being killed, and during the scene itself Harry watches Wormtail cut his own hand and is helpless as he realizes that he will be the next to be physically hurt. Scenes such as this are quite strong compared to those expected from a children's book.

This sort of emotional and physical torture continues in a more explicit way when Harry is purposely tortured in his fifth year as a student in Hogwarts. At this time, the Minister of Magic was trying at all cost, to control Hogwarts and prevent the spreading of the

story that Voldemort was alive. The Minister then put one of his employees, Dolores Umbridge, to keep a watchful eye at the school while inserted as Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. At one time, this professor applies a cruel punishment on Harry:

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: I must not tell lies. He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel - yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth. Harry looked round at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile. (Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" 266-267)

What can be seen in this excerpt is a professor, someone who should pose as example in behavior to students, purposely torturing Harry and watching, with a smile, while he suffered.

The examples of fights are so many during Harry's seven years at the school that it is hard to pick only one. The boy is not only always fighting for what he believes, but he fights for his life as well. And as the menace of Voldemort increases, the number of times that Harry, as well as his friends, have to engage in battles that often end with little and major injuries to the participants, also increases. Here is one little example of a friend of Harry fighting, along with the boy, against Death Eaters: "Neville screamed, his legs drawn up to his chest so that the Death Eater holding him was momentarily holding him off the ground. ... He fell to the floor, twitching and screaming in agony" (Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" 801).

Harry also faces many attempts against his life. The first one happened when he was only a baby and Voldemort killed his parents and tried to kill him, and in every other book of the series, someone always tried to end his life. On his first year at Hogwarts, Harry escaped death several times. At the end of the book, Professor Quirrell confesses to the boy: “*I tried to kill you. ... I’d have managed it before then if Snape hadn’t been muttering a countercurse, trying to save you*” (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone” 288-289).

At last, several murders occurred through all seven books of the series. Harry watched quite a few of those, including, as previously said in this paper, the death of his godfather Sirius Black.

As it can be noticed by the excerpts randomly taken from the books, violence is constantly present, and Rowling does not spare the readers with light descriptions. On the contraire, most of the scenes have a heavy charge of aggressions that can hardly be found on books destined for children. In the books, Harry and his friends went through countless fights where someone almost always got seriously injured, he witnessed deaths, he fought against dark creatures, he was abused mentally and tortured physically by a professor and all that was experienced by the readers with a great amount of details.

#### **4. HARRY POTTER IN THE CONTEXT OF REAL LIFE THEMES**

As commented and explained before in this work, the characteristics present in the books may not fit the children’s literature category. To further prove this point, some aspects more fitted to mature readers that can be found in Rowling’s series will be discussed. Among these themes are:

#### **4.1. BALANCE OF POWER**

Whereas the definition of Balance of Power is more often used in politics, it can be applied into the daily lives of people. Balance of power is, according to Henry Kissinger,

When a group of states so constituted are obliged to deal with one another, there are only two possible outcomes: either one state becomes so strong that it dominates all the others and creates an empire, or no state is ever quite powerful enough to achieve that goal. ... [The Balance of Power] was meant to limit both the ability of states to dominate others and the scope of conflicts. Its goal was not peace so much as stability and moderation. (Kissinger, 20-21).

So, where does that definition fit in the Harry Potter world? The entire wizard world is ruled by a Balance of Power situation, not only in the balance between good and evil, but in the day to day lives of students of Hogwarts as well.

There are four “houses” in which the school is divided. Those houses (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin) are separated and defined such as clans where the students live and learn. While the students may have it in their hearts to go to a house (and this may influence their final outcome), it is not ultimately in their hands to pick in which house they will stay. This is the job of the Sorting Hat that, by judging each student's qualities, places them in the most appropriate house. And there is where the Balance of Power is stated.

Each of the houses has their own importance and qualities; however, they live in eternal competition. This competition is, at times, explicitly noted: the houses participate in official competitions throughout the year in order to win the House Cup. Although it may

seem as an obvious incentive to unbalance the power between the houses, those competitions in any way have to do with the degree of influence, power or relevance of the houses in Hogwarts. None of the houses is *considered* better or more powerful than the other, but the rivalry and dispute to see which one is better is always there, and it surpasses the not so friendly official competitions between them.

The students of each house could be compared to citizens of a country: they are loyal to their houses, they fight for it, and they defend each aspect of their beliefs. The power that each house has is always balanced in a fine line, the line that does not allow a house to overpower the other.

As for the balance between good and evil, throughout Harry's entire journey, there are political moves and real fights to try to keep it even. The Minister of Magic, as well as the director of Hogwarts, Dumbledore, are constantly dealing with the forces trying to overpower others in order to impose their own ways. When this attempt to keep the powers balanced fails to occur, what happens is what people see today when the Balance of Power in our society fails: wars are ensued until the problems are dealt with or negotiated. And, in the books, since a pacific existence between those who believed in Voldemort and those who did not was not possible, a constant state of war is seen. This happens until the very end of the series, when the menace is finally gone and the balance between good and evil is restored to an equal level.

#### **4.2. DISCRIMINATION / PREJUDICE**

Discrimination and prejudice are other themes that could be more relatable to adults, rather than children, since adults may have had a greater amount of experiences in life, as well as knowledge of human kind history, which enables them to identify and grasp more accurately the impact that those themes have on people's lives. While some children may in

fact know or have lived through these situations, they may not know how to name them or be aware of the weight discrimination/prejudice have in our history and society.

In the books, the theme is always present. It starts already with the relationship between wizards and muggles (by itself a pejorative term used by wizards to define those who do not have magical powers). In chapter four of the first book of the series, Harry finally discovers he is a wizard and that his uncle and aunt had hid it from him his entire life. When Harry questions his aunt, she gives him a little speech showing her prejudiced feeling towards wizards:

[About Harry's mother] I was the only one who saw her for what she was – a freak! ... Then she met that Potter and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as – as – abnormal ... . (Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone" 53)

However, it is not only through Petunia (Harry's aunt) that the prejudice is shown. The wizards, even the ones that are not 'bad guys' in the books, often show that they consider themselves better than the muggles just because muggles do not have magical powers.

Even in the wizard's own world it is easy to spot prejudice. There is a division that classifies the 'importance' of a wizard and that is more often explored through the actions and mouths of the villains in the books. The social system that the "bad guys" seem to follow (and that some "non-bad guys" also respect, although not publicly) ranks as such:

**Purebloods:** families who descend from long lines of wizards.

**Half-Bloods /Mixed Breeds:** those who have one parent wizard and one parent who is either a muggle or other species such as giants.

**Muggle-born** (or the extremely pejorative term: **mudblood**): wizards whose two parents are muggles.

**Squib:** the person who has both parents wizards but possesses no magical ability.

Although there is no such thing as a difference in magical power among wizards, some purebloods present behaviors that could be compared to Nazis' behavior, considering themselves superior to those who do not have 'pure blood'. A clear example of this is how Hermione (a muggle-born) is treated by Draco (a pureblood) in the school. He often picks on her, insults her, such as in this situation when Hermione says something and he replies: "No one asked your opinion, you filthy little mudblood" (Rowling, "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets" 112).

The scenes are described throughout the books, such as when Voldemort and the Death Eaters (his followers) defend the purity of the blood, which allows people who know the history of Nazism and Hitler to make a connection between what happens in the books and what happened in real life. Most children may not know or know without depth about the impact of Hitler's and the Nazis' actions had in our history, which would prevent them from making such connections.

#### **4.3. SLAVERY**

Slavery, by definition, is the practice of owning someone, of forcing someone to work without due payment. One called a slave is robbed of its freedom; it is, by all means, treated as an object that is made to be used. In a more formal definition, Nieboer says that "a slave is one who is not free ... [someone who] is the property of another, politically and socially [a slave is] at a lower level than the mass of people, and [performs] compulsory labor" (4).

In the magical world, the concept of slavery is not yet banned from society. Similarly to what happened with our society, some wizards do not see any problem in using 'inferior' beings as slaves. The most blatant example of that is the relationship between wizards and the

Elves in the books. The Elves are considered as possessions of the wizards, and are treated as such. They work for free, they do not have rights, and they are often treated as less than living creatures. Hermione seems to be the only one defending the rights of the Elves, because, as she says: “Elf enslavement goes back centuries. I can’t believe no one’s done anything about it before” (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire” 224).

She is much as an abolitionist, fighting for their right to do as they please with their lives. Although the Elves themselves have already ingrained in their minds that they are indeed possessions, and the majority of them are quite happy being as they are, in the fourth book we can witness Hermione creating a group to fight for their rights: the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (S.P.E.W.). While most of the wizardly world and great part of the Elves object to her fight, some are happy with it. Dobby, a house-elf, is set free because his owner threw a sock and he grabbed it (in order to be set free, a elf has to gain a piece of cloth from its master), and he enjoys his freedom very much, even thanking Harry profusely for having made the master throw the sock: ““Harry Potter freed Dobby!” ... Dobby threw his arms around Harry’s middle and hugged him. “Harry Potter is greater by far than Dobby knew!”” (Rowling, “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets” 338-339).

Themes such as the ones presented above show that, in order to understand, to sympathize with or condemn the behaviors of characters through the development of Harry’s story, the reader must have knowledge of the world and its history, the reader must have developed the ability to judge right from wrong in intricate situations.

It is quite hard to expect children to recognize that Draco’s behavior is condemned not only for insulting Hermione. In the books, it is said that Draco used a bad word, but not much more is explained about that. For the insult and the following reaction to it (Draco being attacked by the Quidditch team for using such a strong word against a colleague) to reach a

greater effect, it may be necessary from the reader to know the deep meaning of prejudice. Although not required, the knowledge of real world situations such as the Apartheid (more in the sense of social Apartheid, rather than the real situation that had this name), the long lived and still present discrimination against those who are different from the majority, and so on, expand the reaction to all the times that we see Hermione, or Hagrid (a half-blooded son of a wizard and a giant) or even Harry suffering through situations where they are singled out.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Harry Potter's world is a rich one, full of details, incredible creatures and situations, full of magic and wonders. It is easy to understand how a world so literally magical could attract and entertain readers with ages that range from little children to older people.

While magic and wonder, the fantastical aspects of the books, and the appeal of easy-to-like characters may be the major attraction to children, the more fierce points of the series are what keep adults engaged. I, myself, was already an adult when I started reading the series. I have to admit that I resisted for a long time to the idea, because, as I had listened, this was a series that had children as its main target. It took me some days of boredom to finally give in and read the first book. And, as soon as I finished it, one of the first ideas that crossed my mind was "how this kind of story could be classified as children's literature?"

It always intrigued me to see the kinds of stories being categorized as children's literature and how they were so far away from the tales and little books that I used to read as a kid. This was what motivated me to write this essay; and, while researching to write it, I saw that this concern was not one that was exclusively mine. There are several books, articles and discussions that somehow touch this subject, or analyze aspects of the books in contrast to very mature themes, or show how adults see the world of Harry Potter.

I also found out that the classifications of books is a loose field, which does not possess actual rules or guides that could be used to categorize volumes. This fact makes it a difficult task for publishers and workers of bookstores and libraries to know exactly under which category to categorize the Harry Potter series, as an example.

In this paper, I presented arguments, using Nodelman's ideas of what children's books are like, to suggest that, while the Harry Potter series does have some aspects that appeal to the young minds of millions of kids, and that could lead people to call it children's literature, because of some strong and mature themes (such as death, violence, prejudice, etc) and the way they were presented, a classification as young adult or even adult literature could be justified as being more appropriate.

As stated through the paper, young adult (or adult) literature is more prone to approach, with such intensity, most of the themes present in Harry's story. Given that in the books the actions and situations are not always (if ever) simple, that Harry had to grow up quite forcefully and quickly due to his role in the wizardly world, that most of the story is not actually innocent and so on, we could say that, instead of having children as its targeted audience, the books would better "serve" a public whose level of maturity is developed enough to grasp the meanings and tones of what happens in Harry's journey.

That being said, it is necessary to say that, while I believe that an alternative classification would be better for the books, I do not engage in the defense that children are badly influenced or should not be allowed to submerge themselves in Harry's stories. Most of the themes may be better understood by a more mature audience; however, nothing prevents children from enjoying the adventures of the young wizard. If anything else, Harry Potter could serve as a bonding tool between parents and their kids, since adults could offer some

input to younger ones with some difficulty that might arise while they are reading Rowling's books.

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