

ENG 260

Spring 2021

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Class notes—Week of May 3, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Chapters 13-17

As we saw in *Hatchet*, the narrative point of view in *Harry Potter* is limited omniscient, which has the effect of letting us witness events through Harry's eyes while not being completely first-person. In *Hatchet*, this p.o.v. was necessary because Brian was the only character in view for most of the book—we had to be told what he was thinking. In *Harry Potter*, using this p.o.v. helps Rowling build suspense because the reader knows only what Harry knows. If Harry misinterprets events, the reader is likely to be led into the same misinterpretation. This allows Rowling to hint that Snape is the villain for most of the novel, producing a dramatic surprise when it is revealed that instead, it is Professor Quirrell.

Fantasy as a genre has long been read as a means for the reader to learn psychological lessons vicariously, through the experiences of the characters. Several such lessons have emerged by the end of the novel. One is the importance of facing one's fears. As we saw last week, the "Mirror of Erised" section is a warning against becoming so obsessed with one's desires (which may or may not be attainable) that one forgets to live in the present. The most distinctive lesson of the book, I think, is learned offstage, by Nicholas Flamel, a wizard who dedicated his life to cheating death but who learns to accept it in the end. Death is not the worst of possible evils. Harry declares that he would rather die than give in to Voldemort. We are told that using unicorn blood to prolong life, as Voldemort does, will work, but will result in "a half-life, a cursed life" (258). Life cannot be purchased at the expense of other innocent life.

One of the unusual features of the series of seven *Harry Potter* novels is that they grow up along with Harry. Each one is set during a new year of Harry's life, from the ages of 11 to 17. The first three novels, I believe, can be classified as children's literature, but the tones and themes of the books grow darker as they go along. The final three books in the series are much more geared toward young adults than children (Book Four is on the boundary and could go either way). If you are planning to use these books in the classroom, you will want to take this into consideration.

Questions to Answer 2-3 Sentences each:

1. How does Rowling contrast the magical and non-magical worlds she creates in her novel? How are we, the readers, being led to feel about magic?
2. How does the novel reinforce the connection between Harry and his deceased parents?
3. Where do you see elements of good-vs.-evil conflict in this book?
4. What is the role of Professor Snape in this novel?
5. How would you describe the tone of this book?
6. Does the Sorting Hat ever make mistakes? Hermione's love of books and dedication to homework seem to suggest she should have been placed in Ravenclaw, and on page 218 we see Neville worrying that he's not brave enough to be in Gryffindor. Do you see reasons why the Hat has placed them both in Gryffindor House, or not?