

ENG 260

Spring 2021

Dr. Angela Fulk

Class notes—Week of Apr. 19, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Chapters 1-6

This week, I asked the question on the Discussion board about how much familiarity you all had with Harry Potter prior to this course. Both of the people who have responded so far have at least some prior knowledge of this series, from movies if not from books. For many of you, this may be the first time actually reading the first novel in the series. If you have seen the movie, you will probably decide that it follows the book very closely.

The first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* always seems less appealing to me than the chapters that follow. I think it is because of the point of view. Starting in Chapter Two and for the rest of the novel, we see events in a third-person, limited omniscient point of view, essentially through Harry's eyes. That isn't possible in the first chapter, of course, since he is a baby, is not present for the entire chapter, and sleeps through the portion where he does appear. Rowling doesn't have much of a choice here, but does the shift in POV bother any of you as it does me?

The first part of Harry's story marks him as the standard "hero" character in a quest-based narrative. Often, the hero in this type of story is orphaned or has otherwise mysterious origins, and rises from a mundane, seemingly unimportant position. We learn early on that Harry, though he does not know this himself, is destined for greatness.

Much of the early part of the book stresses the contrast between the "Muggle" world of the Dursleys—essentially, middle-class suburban life—and the magic world that Harry discovers he belongs to. By condemning the Dursleys and others like them, Rowling seems to be recommending the positive qualities of imagination, creativity, and departure from expected norms. Her books suggest that magic lies all around us, if we could only see it.

In the "Diagon Alley" chapter, Harry acquires his magic wand. We are told that this is not a simple purchase, unlike the other items on his school list. Harry must be matched with the perfect wand, which the wandmaker says will choose him, rather than the other way around. When the right wand is revealed, it turns out to be the "evil twin" of Lord Voldemort's wand; both wands share cores made from the feathers of the same phoenix. Rowling is very consciously using symbolism in her wand-lore. The phoenix is a mythical bird that is reborn from its own ashes, and the phoenix feathers in these wands thus suggest some power over life and death. The types of wood are equally significant. Both yew (Voldemort's wand) and holly (Harry's) are evergreen trees that have poisonous red berries. As evergreens, both are associated with everlasting life, though holly has cheerful Christmas associations, and yew is associated with death and was once often planted in cemeteries.