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Unmarginalising the Child in *Harry Potter* – with Reference to the Mythology of Innocent Childhood

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The mythology of innocent childhood has created a cultural image of children that denies them their individual agency and often leads to their marginalisation. In recent decades, academic research has been working extensively on addressing and critiquing such myths. Although Rowling's widely popular Harry Potter *series noticeably aims to undermine assumptions of mythic childhood innocence in the literary sphere, there has been no comprehensive discussion that would connect* Harry Potter *with ideas that seek to challenge assumptions about "the innocent child". Providing such analysis – and advocating the emancipation of children in the process – is the aim of this contribution.*

Keywords
Harry Potter; J. K. Rowling; children; mythology of childhood innocence; Hogwarts; children's literature

Oh, the torment bred in the race,
the grinding scream of death
and the stroke that hits the vein,
the haemorrhage none can staunch, the grief,
the curse no man can bear.

But there is a cure in the house
and not outside it, no,
not from others but from *them*,
their bloody strife. We sing to you,
dark gods beneath the earth.

Now hear, you blissful powers underground –
answer the call, send help.
Bless the children, give them triumph now.[1]
– Aeschylus

Be of stout heart, the worst is yet to come![2]

The cultural myth of childhood innocence is discussed extensively and comprehensively in Henry Jenkins's introduction to *The Children's Culture Reader* (2000)[3] – published at a time when the Harry Potter series (1997–2007) were achieving their extraordinary impact and popularity. The book was intended to question "some key assumptions behind … reform movements [that seek to attack the corrupting force of mass culture on children's lives], rejecting the myth of childhood innocence in order to map the power relations between children and adults" (Jenkins 3), and it aimed to "avoid texts that see children primarily as victims in favour of works that recognize and respect their social and political agency" (3). Critics have analysed *Harry Potter* a great deal, often recognising its obvious portrayals of "misbehaving" or "rule-breaking" children (Damour, Smith, and others) or even assuming that the series depicts an "evil child" (Blackford) – and indeed, much can be said about such portrayals, from comic (and often satisfying) retaliatory comebacks to outbursts of anger, to various unresolved crimes or morally questionable acts such as stealing, cheating, lying, illegal visits, and so on, especially in terms of how they tear down the assumptions of adults who "wish the children ideally to be … innocent (and possibly ignorant), charming, playful, harmless, unfrightening, sexless, nonviolent, and religiously correct" (2011: 43), as Peter Hunt puts it, expressing his hope that "it is obvious that a children's book can no more be these things than children can, except in certain minds" (2011: 43). Alongside such portrayals, many other issues are involved in the discussion on the myth of innocent childhood,[4] however, it is beyond the scope of one paper to provide a detailed account of each issue in relation to Rowling's series. Instead, in the following discussion I want to focus primarily on a single aspect of the myth of childhood innocence, namely its resulting marginalisation of the child, and how the Harry Potter series confronts the issue and, ultimately, the mythology, its source, itself. In other words, my aim is to look at how *Harry Potter* deliberates marginalisation of the child, portraying adult failure together with the consequently required supplementation exercised by a child, and how

engagement with these depictions results in empowerment of the child and, eventually, the endorsement of emancipation of a child, the "Other".

The mythology of innocent childhood assumes that a child exists "in a space beyond, above, outside the political" (Jenkins 2): we imagine children to be "noncombatants whom we protect from the harsh realities of the adult world" (2) and overlook that children "also have suffered the material consequences of our decisions" (2). Children are often understood as "inadequate", "immature", and "irrational" and, therefore, in need of adult protection and nurturing – an understanding echoed in Dolores Umbridge's treatment of Hermione who, not being "a Ministry-trained educational expert" (*Phoenix* 218), is not, Umbridge thinks, "qualified to decide what the 'whole point' of any class is" (218). As Umbridge argues that "[w]izards much older and cleverer than [Hermione] have devised our new programme of study" (*Phoenix* 218) and that students "will be learning about defensive spells in a secure, risk-free way" (218), she expresses assumptions about both the fatal inadequacy of a child and the need for security and adult direction. As mentioned before, such thinking results in marginalisation of children and thus provides the basis for endorsing social hierarchisation based on age (and perhaps on qualification, expertise, or "maturity"). This marginalisation

> affects not only how we understand the child, its social agency, its cultural contexts, and its relations to powerful institutions but also how we understand adult politics, adult culture, and adult society, which often circle around the specter of the innocent child (Jenkins 2).

Turning to how *Harry Potter* responds to marginalisation of the child, an inevitable component of childhood innocence mythology, Hunt notes that, in children's literature, children positioned as "perceptive and reflexive subjects, more knowing than the adults around them" (2009: 51), sometimes represent the "last refuge of a collapsing society" (2009: 51), and Karen Sand-O'Connor argues that children in children's books after 1970 are often required to "take responsibility for educating and protecting their parents, who are flawed caretakers of both past and present generations" (225). The adult world "is unstable, both morally and foundationally" (Sand-O'Connor 227), and its authority "is questioned and questionable" (227). Consequently, "children are often required to assume the decision-making power that their parents have abandoned" (Sand-O'Connor 227). Adela L. Catand further observes

that "these characteristics are strikingly displayed in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*" (22–23) and in other similar literature of the 2000s and 2010s. These proposals can be examined in *Harry Potter* through various instances of adult failure – especially those of the characters of Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape. Such failures often leave children and the young to face overwhelming situations or require them to make excessively hard decisions – as Sand-O'Connor writes, "Child characters in [children's literature after 1970] must not only parent themselves but also often manage the past for their parents, who seem poised to break under the weight of history" (231). Such analysis tangibly undermines the assumption that places a "competent" adult in a position necessarily superior to a child, considering the child inadequate, in need of learning from the adult and of being protected and directed by the adult.

The first instances of serious adult failure can be found towards the end of *Azkaban*. Sirius Black and Remus Lupin both assume, expressing no hesitation or possible dispute, that they are entitled to execute Peter Pettigrew and thus bring about long-delayed and previously misdirected justice: "There'll be only one murder here tonight" (*Azkaban* 249), says Sirius referring to Pettigrew and after Lupin demands that explanations to Harry, Ron, and Hermione precede the killing of Peter, Sirius makes his intentions even clearer: "Tell them whatever you like. But make it quick, Remus. I want to commit the murder I was imprisoned for…" (256–57). Lupin stops Sirius from executing Pettigrew only to make sure that the truth is explained in advance but does not question the intention to violate proper justice. Once everything is explained, Lupin agrees to kill Peter and, addressing Pettigrew directly, adds: "You should have realized … if Voldemort didn't kill you, we would" (*Azkaban* 275). It is a child character – Harry – who prevents the execution and proposes the rightful judicial process: "'NO! … 'You can't kill him … You can't … We'll take him up to the castle. We'll hand him over to the dementors… He can go to Azkaban… but don't kill him'" (*Azkaban* 275). Harry explains he is not doing it for Pettigrew who, according to him, "deserves" (*Azkaban* 275) Azkaban, but he does not "reckon [his] dad would've wanted [his friends] to become killers" (275) – a simple argument, actually, for supporting the existence of a modern justice system. Lupin and Sirius do not protest, but the fact is, nevertheless, that a child proposed a democratic (and humane) solution while adults failed to do so.

The failure of Snape is obvious in the same passage. In a blind pursuit of his "[v]engeance" (*Azkaban* 264), he disregards and cancels every request

to hear the account of real events concerning Sirius, the account that may replace the previous false narrative that Snape yet believes. Even though Lupin warns Snape that he is "making a mistake" (*Azkaban* 263), not having "heard everything" (263), and that the situation can be explained, Snape interjects and continues with his accusations based on erroneous assumptions, binding and gagging Lupin in turn. When Hermione approaches Snape, suggesting that "it wouldn't hurt to hear what they've got to say" (*Azkaban* 264), Snape silences her, and as she continues, nonetheless, to argue that refuting the wrong assumption would change the entire situation dramatically, Snape becomes "suddenly quite deranged" (*Azkaban* 264), silencing and insulting the child: "KEEP QUIET, YOU STUPID GIRL! … DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND!" (264). Snape makes it clear that he intends to give Sirius to the dementors as soon as possible for them to perform a dementor's kiss, sucking out his soul and making it lost – a punishment legal in the wizarding world, which is considered worse than death and which, together with its legitimacy in wizarding law, requires critical analysis. Snape ignores Sirius's plea ("You – you've got to hear me out … The rat – look at the rat –" (*Azkaban* 264)), having a "mad glint" (264) in his eyes and seeming "beyond reason" (264). It is children (again) who must stop, though violently, an adult (and an authority), who through his rashness, preconception, and vengefulness becomes dangerous and a threat to a human life, as Harry, Ron, and Hermione knock him out together using magic.

Continuing with Snape, in his position as a teacher, he fails to recognise and sanction, if not disqualify, bullies among Slytherins (students of his house for whom he bears heightened responsibility) long term, throughout the series. Here is his treatment of Draco Malfoy, the bully of the series, who is late for the Potions class: "'Settle down, settle down,' said Professor Snape idly" (*Azkaban* 94) – as the narrator explains,

> Snape wouldn't have said 'settle down' if [Harry and Ron'd] walked in late, he'd have given them detention. But Malfoy had always been able to get away with anything in Snape's classes; Snape was head of Slytherin House, and generally favoured his own students above all others (94).

He even gets angered when Professor McGonagall reproaches Malfoy justifiably: "Snape … looked annoyed, though Harry strongly suspected that this was less because of Malfoy's rudeness than the fact that McGonagall had reprimanded one of his house" (*Prince* 358). This emasculation, caused

through the failure to confront oppressors and advocate for the weak, is often confirmed in Snape's outbursts in situations when others question the appropriateness of his decisions or do not express a measure of respect that he considers adequate (but is unable to earn it naturally). As many examples in the series show (and I list some later), Snape regularly sanctions students for their protests against his injustice. Furthermore, he evaluates criticism aimed at him as unacceptable – even though his approach requires a serious reproval: "Detention, Weasley ... And if I ever hear you criticise the way I teach a class again, you will be very sorry indeed" (*Azkaban* 129). Or, addressing Harry, "'SILENCE! I WILL NOT BE SPOKEN TO LIKE THAT!' Snape shrieked, looking madder than ever. '... I have just saved your neck; you should be thanking me on bended knee!'" (*Azkaban* 265). Particularly painful appears to be the criticism from a *girl* (and a much younger one) – Hermione – as throughout the confrontation in the Shrieking Shack discussed above, Snape does not hesitate to insult and silence her in response.

The Harry Potter series is known to put particular emphasis on questioning and resisting hierarchisation in society – Karin E. Westman explains:

> Through a parallel world suggestive of contemporary British society in which magical and nonmagical people negotiate survival, Rowling's series critiques a politics of absolute power based on self-interest, secrecy, and difference and values instead a democratic power structure based on trust, altruism, and shared knowledge (2011: 102).

This perspective enables us to recognise the failure of numerous adult characters to join the emancipative endeavours of other characters. Fascist supporters of the Dark Lord, of course, fail by default, and Westman has already criticised the Ministries of both Cornelius Fudge and Rufus Scrimgeour because they, like Voldemort, "attain their authority by privileging the rights of wizards over the rights of other magical species (house elves, goblins, giants) and over the rights of Muggles, non-magical people; ..." (2011: 102). However, the character of Horace Slughorn requires further critical analysis.

The former (and re-employed in *Prince*) Potions master at Hogwarts systematically seeks the company of students who either are famous or talented themselves or have such parents, establishing his selective Slug Club – everything in the hope of gaining advantages through having contacts with these students in case they succeed in their careers later in life. Slughorn's behaviour towards those he evaluates as not suited to joining the Slug Club,

considering them untalented or having no potential for a successful career, is repulsive. For example, from the moment Marcus Belby, selectively invited for Slughorn's private lunch on the Hogwarts Express, reveals that his family does not get on with his famous uncle who had invented the Wolfsbane Potion, Slughorn becomes uninterested, gives Belby "a cold smile" (*Prince* 138) and turns to someone else; when Slughorn later offers around a tray of pies, Belby is "somehow ... missed out" (138). Like "the pursuit of power at the expense of individual rights [places] the Ministry on a continuum with the fascist zeal of Voldemort" (Westman 2011: 103), the favouring of some over others, together with granting the privileges to the select few, places Slughorn on the continuum with anyone who endorses, supports, or is uncritical towards stratification in society (including Lord Voldemort and the mentioned Ministries). Slughorn's duel with the Dark Lord (alongside the future headmistress of Hogwarts, McGonagall, and the future minister, Kingsley Shacklebolt) during the Battle of Hogwarts puts him in the position of a proper resistance against fascist tyranny, and the risking of his life in such dangerous situation is perhaps expiatory for his past failure to recognise authoritarian inclinations in Voldemort and for his ultimate cherishing of the future tyrant – but whether Slughorn forwent his own hierarchising strategies remains unclear and a case for critical inquiry.

In relation to this, Holly Blackford, it seems, attempts to accuse Dumbledore of hypocrisy throughout her discussion on the assumed "evil child", Tom Riddle:

> Dumbledore points out Tom's obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination' (*Half-Blood Prince* 276) and distaste for commonness without recognizing how the school inculcates competition and the drive for dominance in the students through houses, sports, point systems, hierarchies, and favoritism of particular students .... The school places special value on students who possess important lineage and who achieve high status such as Prefect, Head Boy, Outstanding O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. status, and Quidditch player. Yet the internalization of the desire for prestige is viewed, in Tom, as evil (156).

However, Blackford fails to recognise an important distinction between, on the one hand, encouraging a productive competitive spirit and appointing students into various positions (such as Prefect or Quidditch captain) as a recognition of talent or sense of responsibility and, on the other, seeking

superior status through humiliating and disadvantaging others, and sometimes indeed even harming or murdering them in the process. Furthermore, the school as such does not place special value on students with important lineage, although some teachers (such as Horace Slughorn) do, as shown above – such practice (or approach), however, always requires critical analysis. Nonetheless, I will return to discussing the character of Dumbledore shortly.

Each portrayal of adult failure and consequently required child supplementation functions against the myth of childhood innocence, particularly against the assumption that children are "noncombatants whom we protect from the harsh realities of the adult world" (Jenkins 2). But Rowling also managed to demonstrate the other side of the coin: that "child characters left with these responsibilities often end up fearful or damaged by lack of guidance" (Sand-O'Connor 227), as Harry, Ron, and Hermione end up, at times, inadequately exhausted, damaged, or desperate. Eva-Maria Metcalf observes that "[a]uthors, like teachers, have resigned their authority as preachers and educators" (52), and recognises it as a positive opportunity: children acquire freedom "to make more or less informed choices" (53) themselves. However, Metcalf also sees and acknowledges that "empowerment of the child has its price" (53). This is demonstrated most obviously in Dumbledore's failure to share information about Horcruxes more widely so that more people – both children and adults – were employed in searching for and destroying them. Entrusting such important mission to Harry, Ron, and Hermione and withholding information about the quest from adults is valid to be read as a powerful instance of child empowerment. However, the narrative in *Hallows* makes it clear, through various situations of the protagonists' exhaustion and desperation, that such a task is indeed inadequately burdensome. Like the Harris children in Anne Fine's *The Granny Project* (1983), Harry, Ron, and Hermione "may save the world, but learning to do it comes at the price of emotional well-being" (Sand-O'Connor, 232), together with other forms of well-being. Furthermore, the fact that the eventual destruction of the Dark Lord and his followers happens during the Battle of Hogwarts, when far more people from the opposition are engaged – in both fighting as well as searching and destroying Horcruxes – confirms that cooperation and collaborative endeavour, not secretive strategies and solitariness, are required for missions intended to defeat authoritarian leaders and regimes.

Together with portraying adult failures, and interestingly for those tracing the development of children's literature in recent history, Rowling's series complicates the division between adults who are either resigned or in error

and children who must compensate for these failures, the division that is characteristic of the development of children's books after 1970, as discussed by Sand-O'Connor. This problematisation happens in two ways: through portraying competent adults and responsible adult intervention, on the one hand, and through portraying child failure, on the other. The ending of *Phoenix* is a demonstration of a rather huge triumph secured through the intervention of a resourceful adult: Dumbledore arrives at the Ministry and manages to capture several Death Eaters, many of whom had recently escaped from Azkaban, and confidently duels the Dark Lord himself. The decision of Lupin, Sirius, Moody, Tonks, and Kingsley to go to the Department of Mysteries and aid the children in fighting the Death Eaters included a high personal risk and is, therefore, rather admirable. Similarly in *Hallows*, when Harry explains to McGonagall that he needs to search for an item that, if found, may bring about the destruction of Lord Voldemort and the end of his regime, the response of the leader of the Order of Phoenix is remarkable – and far from inventing childish excuses or seeking one's own safety:

> 'We shall secure the school against He Who Must Not Be Named while you search for this – this object.'
> 'Is that possible?'
> 'I think so … we teachers are rather good at magic, you know. I am sure we will be able to hold him off for a while if we all put our best efforts into it' (479).

Later, McGonagall does not even leave space for Harry (or Luna) to fight rather capable and resourceful Snape, dealing with him – aided by Professors Flitwick and Sprout – herself (*Hallows* 481–82). Further, Harry being charged for underage magic at trial, facing the entire high court of law Wizengamot alone, calls to mind Maria Tatar's assertion that "children depend on adults to advocate their needs in the social sphere" (275) because they are "even more bereft of the power to represent themselves than Marx's peasants" (275) – fortunately, Dumbledore manages to arrive at the court on time and successfully advocates Harry's case. These reactions are in sharp contrast to, for example, Carrie of Nina Bawden's 1973 children's book *Carrie's War*: "Carrie's children … are fearful when their mother comes upon the place where she and her brother had been evacuated during the war: 'Their mother was frightened and this frightened *them*'" (Sand-O'Connor 231; emphasis in original). Unlike the unnamed oldest son in Bawden's novel, who must take

his mother's hand and guide her to tea, Harry does not face a need to provide similar comforts for Dumbledore or McGonagall (nor other mentioned adults). In these examples, adults themselves are capable of appropriate responses that given situations demand.

This discussion is related to a failure of a child to ask adults for help even if such help is available – and the possibility is that it would bring about an effective solution for the problem. Harry never complains about Umbridge's barbaric punishment – writing lines with the magical torturing quill – to adults in authority. He does not share this with Ron and Hermione either at first, explaining to himself that "this was between himself and Umbridge, a private battle of wills, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of hearing that he had complained about it" (*Phoenix* 243). Once Ron finds out, he advises him to tell McGonagall or Dumbledore, but Harry refuses to give Umbridge "the satisfaction of knowing she's got to [him]" (*Phoenix* 246) and admits that he is also angry at Dumbledore. However, it becomes clear that if Dumbledore had known about Umbridge's methods, he would not have tolerated them: when Umbridge aggressively shakes a student, Marietta Edgecomb, during the investigation of the activities of the student organisation Dumbledore's Army, Dumbledore repels her, using a sort of violent charm as Umbridge is consequently "waving her hands in the air as though they had been burned" (*Phoenix* 544) – and he explicitly warns her that he will not let her "manhandle [his] students" (544). Dumbledore has a share in this child's failure to seek adult help because of his general air of being inaccessible and for his failure to share and explain important information, which makes Harry uncertain and tense throughout *Phoenix*. But Harry also seems to be unnecessarily obstinate, refusing to complain as if it meant losing to Umbridge. Nonetheless, the story makes it clear that seeking adult help would have caused Umbridge problems, gaining the advantage for everyone who regarded her presence at Hogwarts troublesome and debilitating.

Tying back to Dumbledore's failure to share information about the task of destroying Horcruxes, one of Harry's – and Hermione's and Ron's – most serious mistakes is the failure to recognise Dumbledore's lack of democratic leadership and the problem of his secretive strategies (sooner). In consequence, after Dumbledore's death, Harry continues to believe sternly that he must not share the secret about Horcruxes with anyone except Hermione and Ron – like Dumbledore said. McGonagall gets the closest to resolving this issue in the immediate aftermath of Dumbledore's death:

> 'Harry, it might be important,' ….
> 'It is … very, but he didn't want me to tell anyone.' …
> 'Potter … in the light of Professor Dumbledore's death, I think you must see that the situation has changed somewhat –'
> 'I don't think so … Professor Dumbledore never told me to stop following his orders if he died' (*Prince* 584).

Seeing a refusal to share essential information, McGonagall, in accordance with her general democratic ethics, stops insisting, not daring to violate the independent agency of a child. At the start of *Hallows*, Mr Weasley, Lupin, and Mrs Weasley make a similar attempt, but they seem to consider a reference to Dumbledore undisputable – Lupin and Mr Weasley drop the questioning in response, and although Mrs Weasley tries once again, she does not dispute Dumbledore's orders but Harry's comprehension instead:

> It's utter nonsense, if Dumbledore needed work doing, he had the whole Order at his command! Harry, you must have misunderstood him. Probably he was telling you something he *wanted* done, and you took it to mean that he wanted *you* – (77–78; emphasis in original).

These examples show that the failure to question the old man includes not only children but adults also. Even towards the end of the series, Harry is confused and disconcerted when several members of Dumbledore's Army want to help with the mission (even ready to fight) and still ponders the old headmaster's orders: "Dumbledore had warned him against telling anyone but Ron and Hermione about the Horcruxes" (*Hallows* 469). However, throughout these interactions with his peers and friends, Harry realises that "he should not be 'keeping his secrets clutched tightly to his chest, afraid to trust' (Hallows 469)" (Westman 2011: 103), and "agrees with Ron and Hermione that they must forego those [secretive] strategies of the past … in favor of a public, shared knowledge, trusting to empathetic and sympathetic responses rather than retreating into isolation and fear" (2011: 103-4).

The mentioned examples of adult failure and subsequently required competence of a child create a space for discussing the emancipation of children, an issue recognisable throughout the series and, naturally, a solution for the marginalisation of children. The main stage of the series, Hogwarts, is known for creating "a fluid educational dynamic that resists traditional

hierarchies of age and experience but values situational knowledge and talent" (Westman 2011: 98), as "mutual respect for knowledge" (2011: 98), "collaborative pedagogy [which] allows students and teachers to share ideas and even exchange roles" (2011: 98), and the emphasis on "the possibility that someone with knowledge – whether young or old – can instruct another" (2011: 98) are central to the studying experience there.[5] Further, a highly reputed teacher, Professor McGonagall, is ready to consider seventeen-year-old Harry's suggestion even outside the classroom, in a serious warfare situation: " 'There's something in that,' she agreed" (*Hallows* 479). Snape (nicknamed the Half-Blood Prince), too, as a talented Potions student, scribbled instructions into his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* that "deviate[]" (*Prince* 184) from the original instructions but ensured better results in concocting potions thus surpassing the professional directions of an adult author. Harry's ability to conjure a Patronus at the age of fifteen – extraordinarily advanced magic, which poses difficulties for fully educated adult wizards and which, if mastered, is used for driving away Dementors, monsters that cause despair and anxiety in people – is admired by the Wizengamot members during the court hearing, and later in *Phoenix* we witness how it makes Harry completely qualified for teaching the spell to others, members of the secret student organisation named Dumbledore's Army.

Surely, there are cases that problematise these inclusive, equalising instances. In relation to the described educational dynamics at Hogwarts, one of them is, again, the character of Snape. The atmosphere of Hogwarts does not encourage excessive pleasantness and niceness – and it is clear already before the narrative moves to Hogwarts that the portrayed children are not apt for such demands, would Hogwarts standards require it – as is established through the behaviour of the teachers themselves, who are, on the one hand, appropriate and reasonably polite (and professional) but not necessarily nice and pleasant. To give one example (out of many), Professor McGonagall is a witch with "a very stern face" (*Stone* 85) whom Harry, in his first encounter with her, evaluates as someone "not … to cross" (85) and who begins her first class with the first-years with "a talking-to" (100), doing it in a strict and direct fashion indeed: "Transfiguration is some of the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts … Anyone messing around in my class will leave and not come back. You have been warned" (100). However, tolerating Snape's classroom behaviour becomes problematic in multiple cases. His acknowledgement of Harry at the first Potions class in *Stone* is (infamously) memorable: taking the register, he pauses at Harry's name to

note sardonically that Harry is the school's new "*celebrity*" (101; emphasis in original), and proceeds to ask Harry questions related to potion-making that no one was yet required to learn so that he may conclude, humiliating Harry: "Tut, tut – fame clearly isn't everything" (102). All of that despite Harry never displaying arrogance about his fame nor taking delight in it. Throughout the series, Snape continues to treat Harry (and other students, especially those from the Gryffindor house) unjustly – at times his actions are of serious injustice. During the first class, he calls Neville "Idiot boy!" (*Stone* 103) because Neville has made an unintentional mistake in concocting a potion and has even hurt himself in the process (Snape had never warned the class about the specific mistake that might create a dangerous situation (!)). In *Phoenix*, Snape uses the opportunity that Harry has made an unintentional mistake in concocting too and makes his potion vanish completely, leaving Harry with an empty cauldron and therefore zero marks – as Harry observes, "His potion had been no worse than Ron's … or Neville's …; yet it was he, Harry, who would be receiving zero marks for the day's work" (211-12). Snape often employs wit and sarcasm, making these situations appear entertaining, however, it is necessary to recognise that his conduct is not simply a matter of benign "nastiness" (Schanoes 132) or "unpleasantness" (132) but of serious injustice, which, having debilitating consequences and the potential to cause psychological harm, requires constant critical evaluation (and opposition).

Snape does not only mistreat students but even uses his position as a teacher (and his authority) to inflict sanctions on students who recognise his injustice and resist, though not always in the neatest fashion (it is understandable, however, that a child is not necessarily able to respond to an injustice, especially to the sophisticated and subtle one Snape inflicts). During the mentioned first lesson in *Stone*, Harry points out that Hermione might be able to answer the questions that Snape is asking, for which Snape subtracts one point from Gryffindor for "cheek" (103). In *Azkaban*, Ron confronts Snape for silencing Hermione because she answered his question about werewolves: "Why ask if you don't want to be told?" (142) and is given detention for it. In *Prince*, again, while the class is practising non-verbal magic for the first time (and no one except for Hermione is successful yet), Snape tries to jinx Harry, expecting he will not be able to defend himself as he has not yet learned to use non-verbal spells. Harry knocks Snape off his feet using a verbal Shield Charm, and when Snape consequently tries to humiliate him, Harry responds ironically: "'Do you remember me telling you we are practising *nonverbal* spells, Potter?' 'Yes,' … 'Yes, *sir*.' 'There's no need to call me 'sir', Professor'" (*Prince* 171; emphasis

in original) – a response for which Snape can give him detention and does not hesitate to do so.

If the children are not able to confront Snape effectively, and without him being able to sanction them afterwards, the question is what the response of other adults (especially other teachers), in particular the headmaster, an adult with authority over Snape, is. One of the few criticisms we witness comes from Lupin who teaches Defence Against the Dark Arts in *Azkaban*. In continuation of his harassment of Neville, Snape does not hesitate to inform Lupin, in front of the class, that the group "contains Neville Longbottom. I would advise you not to entrust him with anything difficult" (*Azkaban* 100). Lupin, however, reacts with intentional empowerment of the abused: "I was hoping that Neville would assist me with the first stage of the operation … and I am sure he will perform it admirably" (*Azkaban* 100). Dumbledore – the headmaster – provides a perspective to Snape's blinkered perspective on Harry at the time of Harry's first year at Hogwarts:

> '– mediocre, arrogant as his father, a determined rule-breaker, delighted to find himself famous, attention-seeking and impertinent –'
> 'You see what you expect to see, Severus,' said Dumbledore, without raising his eyes from a copy of *Transfiguration Today*. 'Other teachers report that the boy is modest, likeable, and reasonably talented. Personally, I find him an engaging child' (*Hallows* 545).

This response has no impact whatsoever, as Snape retains his erroneous assumptions about Harry for several years onwards. Furthermore, the stoic attitude that Dumbledore displays face to face with seriously mistaken perceptions (which consequently lead to various injustices against Harry), and denigration, requires critical evaluation too. Next, Dumbledore finds out about the aforementioned detention in *Prince* and arranges with Snape to move it to another time because it collides with his private lesson with Harry, but he does not investigate the circumstances that have led to the detention and would put Snape's conduct into question. Dumbledore does not "look too stern" (*Prince* 186) and acts teasingly about the situation as if Harry were a misbehaving boy who needs to be punished, but he has failed to discover (or has refused to see) that the problem has a source in his teacher. Of course, except for delusional Umbridge, Harry does not get into so much trouble with any other teacher, which is another case against Snape rather than vice versa. Snape being incorrectly assumed the master of the Elder Wand and his

subsequent (completely useless) death might be seen as a just punishment for his continual erroneous assumptions about Harry and other students and for his exaggerated negative interpretations of their motives and behaviour, but it would be much smoother if the existence of a requisitory egalitarian system at Hogwarts had secured mutual respect between students and teachers, or if the proper and more resolute intervention of the headmaster had helped to resolve the issue of such an unprofessional, and debilitating, teacher. In the context that tolerates Snape, students are sanctioned for any indication of insubordination while a teacher remains unpunished despite his continual long-term demeaning treatment of students.

Another character that complicates the emancipative atmosphere of Hogwarts is the Ministry official and new teacher in *Phoenix*, Dolores Umbridge – with the middle name "Jane", which, significantly, "simply felt rather smug and neat between her other two names" (*Harry Potter*), as Rowling noted. Her opposition is quite overt and made clear in her classroom interaction with Hermione who disagrees with the opinion of the author of the textbook:

> 'But I disagree,' Hermione continued. ...
> 'You disagree?'
> 'Yes, I do,' said Hermione ... . 'Mr Slinkhard doesn't like jinxes, does he? But I think they can be very useful when they're used defensively.'
> 'Oh, you do, do you? ... Well, I'm afraid it is Mr Slinkhard's opinion, and not yours, that matters within this classroom, Miss Granger' (*Phoenix* 283–84).

Umbridge explains that she is at Hogwarts to "teach [students] using a Ministry-approved method that does not include inviting students to give their opinions on matters about which they understand very little" (*Phoenix*, 284). Oppositely to both Snape and the general setup at Hogwarts, and paradoxically enough, Umbridge introduces and enforces an excess of politeness and correctness:

> 'Well, good afternoon!' she said .... A few people mumbled 'good afternoon' in reply.
> 'Tut, tut ... That won't do, now, will it? I should like you, please, to reply 'Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge.' One more time, please. Good afternoon, class!'

> 'Good afternoon, Professor Umbridge,' they chanted back at her.
> 'There, now … That wasn't too difficult, was it? …' (*Phoenix* 215).

However, the fact that, in trying to achieve her goals, Umbridge does not hesitate to use means such as the torturing quill, the Torture Curse itself, or even to order the monstrous Dementors to attack a teenager puts her quest for correctness and pleasantness into question, as such practices are not only far from creating a respectful environment but obviously place her on a continuum with the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters in terms of criminal actions. Furthermore, as later in the series, during Voldemort's fascist regime in *Hallows*, Umbridge is found leading a persecutive Ministry commission that, in fabricated trials, accuses and punishes Muggle-born witches and wizards for having stolen their magical abilities, it can hardly be concluded that this character is provided with an expiatory circumstance as the narrative moves towards its end.

On the other hand, Dumbledore, in his position of an influential headmaster, appears to be a pioneer for the discussed emancipation. He is behind the mentioned cooperative educational dynamics at Hogwarts and often treats children with more benevolence and invests more trust in them than other adults, such as various Ministers or previous headmasters in the portraits in his office, would. For example, Dumbledore asks Harry to persuade Slughorn to share the real memory of his conversation with Tom Riddle, and when the previous headmaster Phineas Nigellus notes that he "can't see why the boy should be able to do it better than [Dumbledore]" (*Prince* 349), Dumbledore replies that he "wouldn't expect [Phineas] to …" (349), expressing his disagreement with traditional views about adults being superior to the young, invested in the quest to subordinate them. However, Dumbledore's general hypocrisy and solitariness in his endeavours need to be considered as well. For example, the idea that Harry should accompany him on his journey to the cave in search of a Horcrux does not come as naturally as one would expect from someone who wishes the emancipation of a child – Harry had to "earn(ed) the right" to join Dumbledore: when Harry asks if he may join him on the quest, Dumbledore "looked at [him] for a moment before saying, 'Yes, I think so … I think you have earned that right'" (*Prince* 474). Dumbledore's approach should also be scrutinised in terms of romanticising children through empowering them, which is not ultimately a way to confront the mythology of innocent childhood but rather to endorse it. Jenkins explains:

> Embracing a politics of appropriation and resistance runs the risk of romanticizing child's play as the seeds of cultural revolution. I use the word *romanticizing* with precision here. In many ways, [such] celebration of children … can be traced back to Rousseau's celebration of the 'natural' and 'spontaneous' child …. While this myth of the child certainly has advantages over the more repressive image of the child as a blank slate or the multivalent image of the innocent child at risk, it is nevertheless a myth (30; emphasis in original).

Oppositely, we never witness McGonagall entrusting complicated tasks solely to children, yet her approach does bring fresh air into the position of headmistress at the end of *Prince* nevertheless: after presenting her opinion she listens to the opinions of others and even encourages Hagrid to share his view, as the half-giant remained silent: "Very well … then I must agree with Filius that the right thing to do is to consult the governors, who will take the final decision" (585–86). In this vein, the Ministry of Magic is confronted as well when Harry defies Minister Scrimgeour, who refuses to release innocent Stan Shunpike from Azkaban so that he may pretend that the Ministry is successful in resisting Voldemort – Scrimgeour has, in his position of authority, failed to secure basic justice but is arrogant enough to demand deference from the young nevertheless:

> 'Remembered that I am not Dumbledore, who forgave your insolence and insubordination? You may wear that scar like a crown, Potter, but it is not up to a seventeen-year-old boy to tell me how to do my job! It's time you learned some respect!'
> 'It's time you earned it,' said Harry (*Hallows* 110).

If Dumbledore's emancipating endeavours can be questioned, Hermione is a character who surpasses him in these terms. As touched upon above, she is conscious of her right to disagree with an adult (and a teacher) when she confronts Umbridge. Her continual endeavours to advocate for the rights of house elves (and goblins) – for example, to secure fair wages and time for rest in the context of their working lives – are not a direct part of the argument for emancipation of children, but such magical creatures, together with children and Muggles, can be categorised as "Other" in the society of adult witches and wizards that often perceives itself superior to those whom

it categorises as "Other", this being true even apart from Voldemort's fascist insurgency: as goblin Griphook summarises, "[w]izards refuse to share the secrets of wandlore with other magical beings, they deny us the possibility of extending our powers!" (*Hallows* 395).[6] Hermione, after her endeavours, especially in *Goblet* and *Phoenix*, can be most truthful in arguing that the trio "wanted elves to be freed for years" (*Hallows* 395), and her reassuring of the goblin about wizards protesting against the Dark Lord's regime is somewhat the most authentic too:

> We protest! And I'm hunted quite as much as any goblin or elf .... I'm a Mudblood! ... I've got no higher position under this new order than you have, Griphook! It was me they chose to torture, back at the Malfoys'! (395).

Further, Hermione's egalitarian morals manifest in admirable humaneness and are confirmed in a rather absurd scene during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries in *Phoenix*. One of the Death Eaters accidentally hits a mysterious bell jar, which causes his head to turn into one of a baby and then back in turns. Hermione explains that "It's Time" (*Phoenix* 697), and when Harry tries to attack the Death Eater, "his tiny baby's head bawling loudly while his thick arms flailed dangerously in all directions" (697), Hermione stops him: "You can't hurt a baby!" (697).

One of the serious threats to emancipation of children is (together with his classroom behaviour as discussed before) Snape's treatment of Harry's memories – his privacy – during their Occlumency lessons in *Phoenix*. The entire (often institutional) practice of magical memory manipulation and unauthorised mind penetration through the means of Legilimency is problematic.[7] Yet, Snape secures himself a privilege that Harry is not granted during their lessons. With Harry being an absolute beginner in Occlumency, Snape gains access to memories like "Cho Chang ... drawing nearer to [Harry] under the mistletoe" (*Phoenix* 472) or "Cedric Diggory ... lying on the ground with blank eyes staring at him" (473). However, Snape uses the Pensieve to set aside his traumatic memory to make sure that Harry does not see it by accident throughout the training. After Harry watches it in the Pensieve nevertheless while Snape is away, Snape, who had been showing no respect (or at least tactfulness) whatsoever for Harry's private (even intimate) memories, reacts with fury: he pushes Harry to the floor "with all his might" (*Phoenix*

572) and throws glass jars after him, causing potential, if not actual, physical harm to the child.

Emancipation of the "Other" is problematised and destabilised in the epilogue in *Hallows* too – nineteen years after the Battle of Hogwarts. During the meeting at Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, Ron unscrupulously confides to Harry that he "did Confund [the examiner]" (*Hallows* 604), a Muggle, during his driving test, Harry expressing no disapproval whatsoever. Hermione contradicts Ron's claim that she thought in advance that magical confounding of a Muggle would be inevitable, but she is also not portrayed as expressly disapproving of such practice. Ron remarks, referring to Draco Malfoy's son and addressing his and Hermione's daughter Rosie, that "Granddad Weasley would never forgive [her] if [she] married a pure-blood" (*Hallows* 605), ridiculing the stratification of society based on blood status, but his use of magical privilege for convenience, together with the lack of disapproval from other (now adult) characters, remains problematic and requires critical evaluation. In other words, as Westman writes,

> [a] wizard's own integrity of self, it seems, is more valuable than that of a Muggle or another magical creature, an exercise in institutional privilege that Rowling's series demonstrates but does not fully explore alongside Harry's sacrifice of self – a limitation, perhaps, born of Rowling's intergeneric fusion of fantasy with the bildungsroman and the school story, among other genres, which consequently restricts readers to the growth of Harry's character rather than the growth of a society (2011: 103).

In this sense, the final lines of the epilogue must be read with irony: "The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well" (*Hallows* 607).

In addition to, for example, questioning the absence of moral guilt in children, Rowling's series explores how children participate in (adult) culture and exercise their individual agencies, confronting marginalisation of the child and thus, ultimately, resisting the myth of childhood innocence on a particular level. The series depicts adults who, at times, fail tremendously, even when occupying influential positions or possessing significant measures of power or authority – like in other children's literature after 1970, children are "not allowed to avoid the realization of the failures of previous generations" (Sand-O'Connor 236). Also, if these same adults are, in some way, perpetrators of the marginalisation of children (or any other group categorised as "Other"), this

politics of theirs immediately comes under serious scrutiny, even becoming ridiculous. In addition to portraying adult failure, Rowling in her series directly engages with the emancipation of children, and through such endeavours she joins critics, artists, and educators who "offer us models of a children's culture that is progressive in both its form and its content" (Jenkins 32) and "move[s] beyond mythic innocence and toward a recognition and advocacy of children's cultural, social, and political agency" (32). Furthermore, *Harry Potter* recognises that children encounter and must negotiate harsh realities of the world just as adults do, including poverty, abuse, and neglect – the books invite us to understand that children

> need us to be more than guardians of the fort or protectors of the village, and we will not rise to those challenges as long as our actions are governed by familiar myths of the innocent child. The goal is not to erase the line between child and adult, which we must observe if we are both to protect and empower the young. The goal is to offer a fuller, more complex picture of children's culture that can enable more meaningful, realistic, and effective political change (Jenkins 32).

If we recognise that seventeen-year-old Harry's final line at the end of *Hallows* – "I've had enough trouble for a lifetime" (600) – needs to be treated with a measure of scepticism, *Harry Potter* becomes a flash point for future engagements that seek to shed critical light on the cultural myth of innocent childhood in children's literature and Children and Youth Studies. (Harry's concluding desire to eat a sandwich and have a good sleep is absolutely fine, though.)

Endnotes

1. Quoted in the preface of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).
2. The line belongs to Sir Cadogan of the Harry Potter series – a knight painted in one of the portraits at Hogwarts.
3. The article includes both the account of the historical development of the cultural idea of childhood, including a reference to, in this respect, Philippe Aričs's important and influential work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1960), and the outline of the Puritan as well as the Romantic discourses, including ideas of thinkers such as William Blake and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, both of which are most relevant for the discussion on the myth of childhood innocence as we know it today. Moreover, Jenkins provides several links to various recent political issues and to contemporary culture, with its use of technologies, making the discussion on the myth of innocent childhood tangibly up-to-date and,

therefore, particularly suitable as the main theoretical framework for the examination of contemporary literature such as mine.

4. For example, in my Master's thesis (2023), building upon Reinhard Kuhn's discussion on "the intrusion of evil into the seemingly innocent universe of children" (132) – or the "destruction of childhood" – in Western literature, I discuss encounters of children in *Harry Potter* with sex and death, together with their ensuing responses, arguing that Rowling's portrayals of such encounters and subsequent reactions oppose the Rousseauian pattern, for which the fatalistic vision of childhood destruction is characteristic, and thus contribute to challenging the mythology of innocent childhood.
5. Although many examples in my discussion come from Hogwarts, which is an educational space, my intention here is not to discuss exclusively pedagogy in *Harry Potter* or Hogwarts as an educational institution, like several other critics do (in *Lessons from Hogwarts* [2020], or Thomas, Gruner, Birch, and others), but rather to continue the examination of child-adult interactions in general, the student-teacher one, however, being the most prominent, given the main boarding-school setting of the novels.
6. For further discussion on ethnic otherness, race, and multiculturalism in *Harry Potter* see Horne, "Harry and the Other: Answering the Race Question in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter" (2010), Anatol, "The Replication of Victorian Racial Ideology in Harry Potter" (2009), or Anatol, "The Fallen Empire: Exploring Ethnic Otherness in the World of Harry Potter" (2003).
7. For further discussion on the use of memory modification spells, the complementary skills of Legilimency and Occlumency, and the Pensieve in the series see Westman, "Perspective, Memory, and Moral Authority: The Legacy of Jane Austen in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*" (2007).

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