

# *A Defense of Potter, or When Religion is Not Religion: An Analysis of the Censoring of the Harry Potter Books*

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**Résumé:** L'article propose une analyse de la récente controverse suscitée à Toronto par les romans de J.K. Rowling. Cédant aux accusations de parents selon lesquelles la série Harry Potter faisait la promotion de la sorcellerie, la commission scolaire du comté de Durham a retiré des salles de classe les ouvrages incriminés. Julia Šarić replace les faits dans une perspective plus générale, celle de la censure des récits merveilleux et fantastiques pour la jeunesse. Les oeuvres en cause ne contiennent pas de références à la secte dite de Wicca mais elles appartiennent à un genre qui, selon Northrop Frye, ne doit pas être jugé en fonction des critères moraux imposés aux récits réalistes. Enfin, l'analyse fait valoir qu'il faut faire confiance à l'imagination des jeunes lecteurs, car les Harry Potter ne sont pas des romans initiant à la «vraie vie». Ils peuvent, toutefois, se révéler des outils pédagogiques susceptibles d'éveiller la sensibilité littéraire des jeunes.

**Summary:** This paper is an analysis of the recent controversy surrounding objections to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. The author examines in detail how Toronto's Durham County School Board responded to parental complaints regarding alleged occult themes in the books by temporarily restricting classroom reading of the materials. The issues that arose in this particular case are then examined for their larger significance within censorship debates concerning children's books and the genre of fantasy in particular. Arguing that Rowling's books do not in fact contain references to the actual religion Wicca, the author then moves on to discuss how various authors and theorists have defended fantasy as a genre that must be seen as what Frye would call a "stubborn structure" — a fictional creation that resists being interpreted according to real-world morals and standards. Finally, the author argues that imaginative engagement with a text provides the best opportunity for students to contemplate literature as a "total form" whose value lies in its ability to simultaneously engage readers and draw attention to the artfulness of its construction. The author concludes by stating that the Harry Potter books should not be

judged as any kind of "guide to life," and that parents and educators would do well to utilize, within the context of literacy education, the readers' genuine interest in and enjoyment of the books.

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books are among the most widely read in the world today, impressively achieving blockbuster status among an audience for whom video games long ago began to outsell books. The stories revolve around an eleven-year-old orphan whose parents were killed at his birth by an evil wizard, leaving Harry to be raised by his "muggle" (or non-magic using) aunt and uncle, who fear and distrust magic. On his eleventh birthday he is invited to come to Hogwarts School for Witches and Wizards, where he goes to school with other children who take classes in such subjects as potion-making and the care of magical beasts. The series has managed to do the seemingly impossible — it has "persuaded a TV generation that there is life beyond the remote control" ("Harmless Harry" A17). Rowling's plan is eventually to publish three more books in the series (which already contains four titles), and if her success to date continues, she may likely become the most widely-read children's writer ever.

But not everyone is *Wild about Harry*, to quote one of the titles of the books written about the phenomenon. Across North America, some Christian groups have voiced objections to the book on religious grounds, saying that it promotes witchcraft and occult themes. The books' notoriety has increased to such an extent that the series appeared in the forty-eighth position on the American Library Association's list of the top one hundred books that parents wanted removed from schools in the 1990s. The number of complaints that the series is receiving appears to be on the rise in this new century, as the ALA now reports that the Harry Potter books have topped its list of most challenged books for the years 2000 and 2001 as well ("Harry Potter Tops" 67). The main objection to the book is that it "promotes the occult or Satanism," which, along with being labelled "sexually explicit" and "unsuited to age group," is one of the top complaints made about the books on the list ("In Good Company" B8). Those who challenge the books object to its use of magic and witchcraft, which many have equated to the real-world religion Wicca (also called Witchcraft).<sup>1</sup> One American Christian group, Freedom Village USA, goes as far as to state on its website that "the Harry Potter books are in fact designed to be recruiting tools for Wicca/Witchcraft and the occult" ("The Truth About Harry Potter" 4).

The controversy has by no means been confined to fundamentalists in the United States; Canada has experienced its own episode. In a highly publicized case in April 2000, the Durham school board (located just east of Toronto) restricted classroom reading of the books, which had become popular read-aloud material in primary school classes. Responding to the "twenty

telephone complaints and ten letters from parents objecting to the use of the books at various schools," the board decided to allow classroom study and use of the books only when all parents gave written consent (Josey, "Durham Limits" B3). Although the board eventually removed the restriction, some see this as "a narrow and partial victory for enlightenment" ("Harry Potter and the Book-Banners" C4).<sup>2</sup> The Durham board's response to the complaints of parents objecting to the Harry Potter books has created a debate about censorship in schools that in Ontario has not been equalled since Peterborough County's removal of Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

Many questions arise from the nature of this case and the arguments surrounding it, questions that have been addressed in passing by people on all sides of the debate but which have yet to be dealt with extensively. Whose beliefs should form the moral standard against which literature is evaluated? What is the place of the beliefs of a specific group within a classroom context? Whose response matters: the response of parents or that of child readers? What is the relationship between Harry Potter and real life? When is religion not religion, and what else could it be?

In this discussion, I will focus on these questions in relation to the Harry Potter controversy mainly as it took place in the Durham board. I will attempt to explore the issue from all sides, including those who support, are against, or are ambivalent about the books, and from this analysis try to address the greater issues concerning censorship and the status of fantasy itself. My goal is to provide a thoughtful and balanced response to this issue, but I fully acknowledge that this paper is meant to be a defense of the books and of the genre of fantasy. I will argue that fantasy is an example of Northrop Frye's "stubborn structure" that resists being interpreted by outside moral standards and which must be judged as a category separate from tangible experience. For this reason I will move from my discussion of this specific case to a more theoretical examination of fantasy itself, drawing on the philosophical, psychological, and critical writings surrounding the genre. I hope to show that instead of interpreting works of fantasy as a kind of "guide to life," the audience can benefit from reading the Harry Potter series and other fantasy books by learning to contemplate the stories they enjoy as "total forms" — aesthetic creations that invite the reader to engage in them while being engaged by them.

Public response to the complaints launched against the books has been as strong as the complaints themselves. Many parents support the books because, as one parent states, "any book that gets kids to read, which Harry Potter does, can't be all that bad" ("Debate over Harry Potter books"). Happy that their children are reading, many do not understand the objections raised by other parents and ask, like one editorial writer, "Where is the sense in not making use of such a valuable learning tool?" ("Harry the Hero" A10). Famous local children's author Robert Munsch has said that "not to use [the

Harry Potter books] as an educational tool is mind-bendingly stupid" (Dabrowski A22). Despite the fact that the books had been restricted — and not banned — in the Durham board, terms like "book-banners" and even "room full of wackos" have been used to describe the parents who met with the school board to discuss their complaints ("Harry Potter and the Book-Banners" C4; Warrington A2). One writer goes as far as to say that this case "suggest[s] that our cultural evolution stalled out somewhere around the time of the Salem witch trials" (Coyle A6). Even one of the Durham trustees, Kathleen Hopper, says that rather than being sensitive to parents' concerns (as the official memo states), "this is basically censoring popular children's fiction. It's very different" (Dabrowski A22). The issue has been turned into a debate where apparently censorship and fundamentalism are being pitted against humanism and freedom of speech. Those who are asking for the restriction are seen as "hayseeds" (Burnett 63) by those who support the books and who, in contrast, see themselves as democratic and open-minded. Bogdan (summarizing the rationales for specific works drafted by many school boards, English departments, and professional organizations) states that those who object to the restriction of books could be described as believing that "removing a book on the basis of parental objections is a moral and intellectual cop-out" (77).

Yet the opposing points of view regarding Harry Potter are not simply divided into religious and secular camps. The strong objections of some Christians have already been expressed, but it is interesting to note that while still acknowledging the presence of magic in the series, not all Christian groups object to children reading them. Differing points of view on the importance of the alleged occult content of the books has divided Christians to the point where the debate is to a large extent being carried out among themselves. One article, entitled "Harry Potter Lures Kids to Witchcraft with Praise from Christian Leaders" (Kjos), even lists the responses of different Christian magazines to Harry Potter, and then analyzes and argues against those who approve of the books. While some of the more extreme respondents to the books believe, as one Oshawa mother claimed, that "witchcraft, sorcery, wizardry — any of that is the devil, it's from Satan," other Christians have a more benign view of the books, even calling them "a blessing" (Scrivener). Some Christian educators who approve of the books worry that "when Christians talk about banning or restricting books, anti-Christian bigotry is fueled" (a concern that was also shared by Muslims who voiced protest against Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*). Their support of the series reflects what their secular counterparts have argued: they downplay the relationship between literature and life, valuing the books for their appeal to a young audience. A principal of one community Christian school claims that "good literature is good literature ... just because the lifestyle doesn't match mine, doesn't mean you throw the book out," while another main-

tains that “it’s not so much what you eat or drink or what you read. It’s how you live your life that’s important” (Scrivener).

These comments are evidence of what Frye would call the logical priority of the “centripetal” meaning of literature.<sup>4</sup> The centripetal meaning of a text applies to the “self-contained verbal pattern” of a work, whose main value lies in its intertextual relationship to other works (*Anatomy* 73). Saying that “good literature is good literature” also echoes Sidney’s and Shelley’s arguments that literature should only be judged according to other works of literature, not by any outside system of morals. The centripetal view, which leads to what I would then call the centripetal response, argues for the kind of aesthetic and critical distance that most defenders of the series would ascribe to its young audience, like the parent who does not “see anything wrong with these books” and argues that “we need to give our kids some credit” (“Debate over Harry Potter”). Readers (here adults and children) who demonstrate a centripetal response to the literature resist making outside, or real-world, values and morals the criteria by which to judge the quality of a text.

Those Christians who wish to see the books removed are not satisfied, however, as their colleagues are, to simply say that “good literature is good literature.” While those who support the books have given priority to the centripetal view, parents calling for restrictions have by contrast given priority to the “centrifugal” view. As Frye explains, the centrifugal view involves audiences continually “going outside [their] reading, from the individual words to the things they mean” (*Anatomy* 73). In *Re-Educating the Imagination*, Bogdan applies Frye’s model to the censorship debate directly, describing the centrifugal view as “that meaning which has to do with what the work seems to be saying in terms of its correspondence with ‘truth’ or its proximity to actual existence” (87). This type of response gives priority to the supposed relationship of the events in the text to real life, and to the possible transference of the “values” espoused in a book to the life of the reader. The priority of the centrifugal response is what leads some, like one youth culture analyst for *Focus on the Family* magazine, to be concerned that “children who become fascinated by [Rowling’s] charms and spells could eventually stumble into the very real world of witchcraft and the occult” (White C7).

Although those who would argue for the priority of the centripetal response are content that a work of literature does not have to have direct bearing upon a reader’s life, they have not truly answered the concerns voiced by the parents who would still like to see the books removed from classrooms. According to Bogdan’s model of inquiry, theoretical questions about justification, censorship, and response are complicated by what she calls the “meta-problem,” or “feeling, power, and location” problems (xxxiii). The concern of objecting parents is genuine and often intense. Several newspapers reported that one woman was “seemingly on the edge of tears” when

she told the school board that “We want [the books] removed immediately” (“School Board Rebuffs” D1). As mentioned above, many of these parents feel that their own beliefs are being misrepresented in the classroom at the expense of another set of beliefs that are offensive to their own. Several parents addressing the Durham board argued that “if books concerning witchcraft are available in school, then the Bible and other religious texts should be used extensively in classes, as well” (“School Board Rebuffs,” D1). One mother made this anxiety over representation clear when she announced that “I’m not backing down one step. Because you’re the minority doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be heard” (Scrivener). Clearly, these parents not only feel offended by the content of the series itself, they also are expressing frustration at the marginalized position they believe that they occupy as a result of their unpopular beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, although supporters of the Harry Potter books have made many arguments prioritizing the centripetal meaning of literature, they participate in the debate about the centrifugal meaning of the books just as often as the opponents do. *The New Yorker* book critic Joan Acocella praised the books “because they [teach] excellent morals” and “[ask] young readers ... ‘to face the hardest questions of life’” (Coyle A6). Others defend the books’ values, arguing, like University of Alberta children’s literature professor Raymond Jones, that “These are profoundly moral books. They do not deny that existence of evil, but show that good can overcome it” (Warawuk). All of these comments imply that readers are being influenced in a way that carries into their day-to-day lives.

Comments such as these move away from the centripetal view of literature that attempts to prevent the books from being subjected to a moral evaluation, and instead engage directly in the centrifugal, or “truth-of-correspondence,” argument that the opponents have put forth. “Truth-of-correspondence,” Bogdan writes, “is essentially a belief in the transparency of words and their power to reflect or reproduce ‘life as it really is’” (82). Concerning the Peterborough County case mentioned above, Bogdan makes the important observation that when dealing with a “truth-of-correspondence” argument, one has to be careful when “meeting the censor on his own terms” (83). The truth-of-correspondence argument is what censors in Peterborough County used in the 1970s when calling for the removal of Margaret Laurence’s books; it also seems to characterize the complaints of the parents and educators objecting to the magic in the Harry Potter books. But, as mentioned above, by making claims that the Harry Potter series teaches good morals as opposed to bad ones, those who are supporting the book have also been led “straight into the censors’ ballpark” where the victory will go to whoever can “pla[y] the truth-of-correspondence game with greater acumen” (Bogdan 82). What is worse for the supporters is that for the most part they have not responded to the Christian parents’ concern about witchcraft, and have in-

stead chosen to focus on other issues that they feel are the books' saving graces. If the books do, in fact, "teach" the reader something, then school trustee Janet Weis can indeed argue that "as far as I am concerned the books teach witchcraft and putting it in such a nice little story about a little boy simply puts a sugar coating on it" (Josey, "Harry Potter's Magic" A1). As Bogdan argues, "we cannot be satisfied with blanket assumptions about the power of literature to instruct with delight by reason of its appeal to the non- or suprarational, and then be indignant when censors claim that the very efficacy of that kind of elemental appeal can be influential in ways that they do not approve" (98).

If the truth-of-correspondence, or centrifugal, approach is given priority here, then the censors may indeed have a stronger argument than the supporters with relation to the books being used in the classroom. It is the school board's policy to be "sensitive to parents who [do] not want their kids reading the books or hearing them" (Kuitenbrouwer A3), which would seem to be a responsible attitude. If it is assumed that the books really do deal with witchcraft and the occult, there are more than enough biblical quotes offered in Christian magazines to show that the books would indeed be offensive to Judeo-Christian values. The very association of the terms "Wicca/Witchcraft" and "magic/witchcraft," where the magic portrayed in the books is explicitly connected to the religion that is being objected to, indicates that the opponents to the books are concerned that the books reflect an actual facet of real life that they do not wish to see promoted. One of the books' defenders unwittingly reinforces the protesters' concerns that the books represent and "glorify" the Wiccan religion when she asks, "don't public schools teach children about other religions and cultures?" (Shimkofsky A19). With even the books' defenders passively acknowledging the validity of the censors' truth-of-correspondence argument, it would seem reasonable for Durham board trustee Janet Weis to argue that "we don't allow books that promote Christianity in our public schools because they might offend someone, so we should not have books glorify witchcraft either" (Josey, "Durham Limits" B3).

Engaging in a debate over the concerns of parents who are responding on behalf of their children is not an easy matter. Writing from the perspective of an academic who is specializing in literature education, I realize that I am working in a position where educators have often tended to evade the true concerns of parents rather than address them. When dealing with the concerns of an "interpretive literalist" (Bogdan 84), a defender of literature is tempted to simply fall back on Sidney's assertion that since literature never affirms, it consequently never lies (132). Similarly, one could also refer to Frye (as I have above), who argues that literature is a stubborn structure that resists "the horizontal [perspective] that looks out to life" and which therefore has "no consistent connexion [sic] with ordinary life, positive or negative" (*The Educated Imagination* 39-40). While both of these theoretical argu-

ments are important for establishing literature as something that should not be read as a simple guide to life, in the matter of addressing the concerns of an interpretive literalist these arguments reject the relevance of the content that is being objected to. That the reader being discussed is a child further complicates the issue, since the imagination of a child, it can be argued, does not necessarily have the same critical capacity or aesthetic distance as an adult (I will return to this issue of the reading imagination later in the discussion).

Salman Rushdie, in his defense of his own work *The Satanic Verses*, was caught in a similar conundrum, where he primarily sought to defend the creative autonomy of literature but still felt the need to address what he felt was a misreading by his opponents. In his essay *In Good Faith*, Rushdie insists that "*The Satanic Verses* is not 'only a novel'" and that "novels are not trivial matters" (3). He in fact encourages the discussion of the book, since "human beings understand themselves and shape their futures by arguing and challenging and questioning and saying the unsayable; not by bowing the knee, whether to gods or to men" (4). He does, however, move out of this meta-commentary into an actual interpretation of his own work, since "that book containing 'nothing but filth and insults and abuse' that has brought people out on to the streets across the world ... simply does not exist" (4). It is for a similar reason that I here wish to engage directly in the truth-of-correspondence debate given by those who object to the Harry Potter books on religious grounds. I feel this is necessary because like "that book containing 'nothing but filth and insults and abuse,'" the books that are "recruiting tools for Wicca/Witchcraft" do not exist.

It is unfortunate that in this debate the presence of "witchcraft" or the "occult" has partly been taken for granted by many of those responding to the books, whether they support or object to the series. What has been almost absent in the newspaper coverage of the Durham controversy is the voice of an actual Wiccan (or Witch, which is the older name that some Wiccans have decided to reclaim). Right-wing Christian writer Berit Kjos assures readers that "anyone who has researched witchcraft and talked with contemporary pagans will see the alarming parallels between contemporary occultism and Rowling's seductive message to children" (4). Kjos is obviously implying that non-Wiccans, most likely other Christians, who conduct such "research" would come to this conclusion, but actual Wiccans say something very different on their own behalf. As one Wiccan explains: "Harry doesn't have anything to do with real witchcraft or magic at all" (Higgins A9). This statement comes from an article written for the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* in October 2000; it is the only extensive interview that I came across where a Wiccan was asked to comment on the truth-of-correspondence argument made by parents in the Durham board. The Wiccan interviewed here (who remains anonymous) also points out that Harry and his friends are in fact depicted

as Christians, at least to the extent that they have godparents and celebrate Christmas (rather than Solstice, as Wiccans celebrate).

Contrary to what Kjos states, anyone who is truly familiar with the religion Witchcraft, or who practices it, would point out that the actions of Harry and his companions at Hogwarts School for Wizards and Witches bear no resemblance to the “real” Craft. I myself have studied Wicca for five years, and while I am not a member of any particular church or coven (a group of followers who practice together), I feel that I have learned enough about the religion both from followers and from literature on the faith to be able to describe some of its general practices and beliefs. Wicca is a nature-based religion in which the followers observe the seasons through rituals and worship a benign creator, often simply known as “the One.” The One is represented as a male and a female (the Lord and Lady) and as other Gods who are linked to different traditions and to whom different aspects of nature are associated. The practice of “Witchcraft,” which I will distinguish from the fictionalized lowercase “witchcraft,” is a combination of herbal lore and energy work (group meditation rituals), most often focusing on healing or providing material sustenance, and usually done in the service of others. The “magic” that Wiccans do involves directing the focused energy and intentions of one person or a group of people towards the “work” that needs to be done. Wiccans resist being labelled as followers of the “occult,” and it is also worth noting that the Satan of Christianity does not exist in Wicca, which is not a dualistic religion. Anyone who compares these beliefs to the Harry Potter books would see that Wicca has nothing to do with flying on broomsticks, summoning objects to fly across the room, concocting potions out of reptile parts, or pronouncing curses on other people. As with most major religions, there is definitely a moral code in Wicca, which involves utilizing magical energy for the good and never to the detriment or injury of the practitioners and other people. While the various traditions of this religion (such as Celtic, Norse, or Egyptian) vary on their exact practices and rituals, one rule that all Wiccans observe is “Do what you will, an’ it harm none.”<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the fact that Durham school board chairman Doug Ross said that “everybody’s values have to be respected, regardless of religion” (Gray 20), the only religious values considered were the values of Christian parents. Although I have argued that the Harry Potter books have nothing to do with real Witchcraft, there seems to be another issue here that has arisen because of the debate, one that I feel needs to be addressed as well. Earlier I attempted to present the objections of the Christian parents asking for the removal of the books in terms of Bogdan’s “feeling, power, and location problems,” but it seems that Wiccans in this case are at a greater disadvantage than even those Christian parents who feel that they are “the minority.” As the woman from Kitchener states, Wiccans “tend to be pretty quiet. After

being burned and tortured by these ‘religious’ people for so long, we’d rather be circumspect” (Higgins A9). Christianity is the founding faith of this country, and it might be said that Witchcraft has been one of the most universally persecuted religions in history, which problematizes the claim that Christians are the oppressed minority here. Wiccans still feel the anxiety that comes from a history of persecution, persecution that, as evidenced by this case, continues into the twenty-first century. “They [opponents of the books] are just so full of fear and hatred,” the Kitchener woman continues. The opinions widely expressed in this case regarding Witchcraft make this statement easy to understand, where some parents can boldly express that “witchcraft, sorcery, wizardry — any of that is of the devil, it’s from Satan” (Scrivener). It is a difficult position from which to speak, especially when school board trustees like Janet Weis can make damaging, misinformed statements and the Durham board can simply ignore the slandering of a religion that is recognized and protected by the Charter. It is not likely that the public would tolerate and support such slander if it had been a “major” religion that was being attacked, such as Judaism or Christianity.

But to return to the Harry Potter books, what is important is that the truth-of-correspondence argument regarding the presence of real Witchcraft in the books is problematized by the fact that Wiccans neither acknowledge nor accept the validity of this comparison, and that “research” actually reveals the dissimilarities between the two.

Who, then, are the wizards and witches that attend Hogwarts? They are not to be confused with or objected to as Wiccans. Bob Walderp, a “cult-watcher” with the Alabama-based Watchman Fellowship, told readers of *Christianity Today* that “the books’ mysticism does not reflect actual occult practice,” and points out that J.R.R. Tolkien, the King Arthur tales, and even C.S. Lewis attracted children with fantasy (Keim 23). The magazine itself, in an article called “Why We Like Harry Potter,” assures its readers that “the literary witchcraft of Harry Potter has almost no resemblance to the ‘I-am-God’ mumbo jumbo of Wiccan circles” (37). Aside from the obvious derogatory overtones of this comment, the magazine is making an important distinction that Wiccans, when asked, are also quick to make. As Kelly Gillette, a Wiccan priestess and mother of two children who attend Durham schools, states: “This book [the first Potter book] is no more about [Wiccans] than Snow White or Cinderella” (Gray 20).

The magic in the Harry Potter series functions very differently than the “Craft” mentioned above. Firstly, and most importantly, the “wizardry” and “witchcraft” of Rowling’s imaginative world is not put forth as a religion. As mentioned above, the characters most closely resemble Christians, if anything, since they celebrate Christian holidays (Christmas) and have godparents (e.g. Harry’s godfather is Sirius Black). More important than these minor details, however, is the fact that Wicca and the magical world of

the Harry Potter series espouse very different worldviews and cosmologies, with magic itself occupying a different role in each context. In Wicca, as with many pantheistic faiths, human beings are seen as existing firmly in the natural world, co-dependent on other living beings and natural phenomena for both material and spiritual sustenance. As part of this co-existence, all living things possess life energy that is granted by the divine One, energy that can be shared between beings and directed towards a specific purpose. This sharing of energy is what appears to be the spells that witches cast — the energy from plants and natural phenomena (like weather) is directed by way of a ritual to a specific end. The use of magic in Harry Potter does not share the same spiritual, communal, and largely natural characteristics as the magical work of Wiccans. Unlike writers such as Ursula K. LeGuin and even Madeleine L'Engle, Rowling does not in her books offer any apparent over-arching philosophy, much less spiritual cosmology, that governs or even involves magic. Contrary to what many objectors to the series would have to say, here religion is not religion.

With no spiritual or cosmological (this is not to say moral) significance being attached to magic in these books, we are left with what I would call “domesticated magic.” Domesticated magic is a type of magic realism, where magic is employed in a story to add a fantastic quality to what would otherwise be common or familiar experiences to readers. Rowling’s books in one sense belong to what many view as the largely British genre of “school stories,” where the narrative revolves around the experiences of a group of characters at a school, often a boarding school like Hogwarts. While indeed dealing with fantastic topics such as “Potions,” “Care of Magical Beasts,” and even “Fortune-Telling,” the classes that the characters attend are nevertheless treated like regular school subjects, with teachers, lessons, homework, exams, and, of course, grades. Although it is played on flying broomsticks, Quidditch is still treated like a regular sport, complete with team rivalries, star athletes, tournaments, and both professional and collegiate leagues. Even Harry’s special broom, the “Nimbus 2000,” is looked upon with awe and mild envy by the other children in much the same way that children value new bicycles or skateboards. And while he is indeed a “wizard,” Professor Dumbledore still functions in much the same capacity as a regular headmaster, enigmatic and even elusive at times, but always arriving to provide guidance and leadership when major events transpire. The series is full of other such examples of domesticated magic. While it is true that the series’ grand narrative of the battle between good and evil wizards somewhat exceeds in scale the frame of the traditional school story, the epic nature of Harry’s ongoing battle with Voldemort is nonetheless ubiquitous in literature ranging from ancient myths to Tolkien’s epic, *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien often being cited as an acceptable Christian writer). Rowling chooses to employ in her narrative the fantastic devices that she understands

her readers will enjoy, but many of the same “supernatural” effects could also have been achieved if she had, for example, chosen to set her story in a futuristic world where technology, instead of magic, could make human beings capable of performing feats that we could only imagine now. The domesticated magic in the Harry Potter series is a device, not a philosophical or spiritual system of beliefs.

These distinctions between Wicca and literary depictions of “witches” or “literary witchcraft” should be the beginning of an analysis, and defense, of fantasy. The witchcraft and magic traditionally portrayed in popular literature, from fairy tales to fantasy novels, must be understood as something separate from the contemporary religion that calls itself Witchcraft.<sup>7</sup> This distinction is not only necessary for alleviating some of the ignorance surrounding negative public attitudes towards Wicca; the development of fantasy in children’s literature can only be understood when the “magical” elements that characterize the genre are studied intertextually. The very “supernatural” conventions that distinguish fantasy make this genre, even more than fiction in general, the “stubborn structure” that resists the kind of horizontal reading applied by the opponents of the Harry Potter books.

In order to establish fantasy as perhaps the most stubborn of structures, it is necessary to examine the origins of our literary and philosophical understanding of fantasy as it relates to the imagination and fiction in general. This discussion, I believe, must therefore begin with Plato, and the origins of *phantasia*.

When Plato banished the poets from his republic, he declared that dramatic poetry “has a most formidable power of corrupting even men of high character” as it “stimulates an element which threatens to undermine the reason” (337). While Sidney and eventually Shelley go on to write defenses of fiction in general in light of Plato’s accusations, all three are, for the most part, dealing with fictional representations of events that resemble real life. Because poetry attempts to be a “mirror which purports to reflect the ... total form of the world” (Bogdan 12), Plato feared that an audience could conceivably identify with the play’s (or poem’s) situation and characters to the extent where they would lose their aesthetic distance and begin to emulate what they saw (or read). Poetry to Plato was inferior to philosophy because the philosopher sought to uncover the truth rather than disguise it in fiction. Yet the poet was merely an “image-maker” whose “images [were] phantoms far removed from reality” (337). Although Plato was referring to the idea that poets only imitated real life, which itself was only an imitation of the true Forms, his concerns about poetry nevertheless arose from its mimetic function. With relation to fantasy, however, one question still needs to be asked: how could “images [that] are phantoms far removed from reality” still provide a negative example which could possibly be imitated in “real life”?

It is here that we must consider Plato's phantoms as they are related to the Greek word *phantasia*, which is itself the etymological root of our own word *fantasy*. Brann defines *phantasia* as a "verbal noun ... which means 'to bring to light' ... 'to make appear'" (21). In this sense, we can understand Plato's phantoms as being products of what Brann calls "phantasia-imagination," or the "capacity for inner appearances, that is to say, for internal sense presentations, *which resemble external perceptions*" (21; emphasis added). Brann makes a distinction between the terms "imaginal" and "imaginary," a distinction that is becoming increasingly necessary when evaluating the role of the imagination in the act of reading. She defines "imaginal" as "having the features of or pertaining to an image," whether mimetic or not, while the term "imaginary ... characterize[s] imagery of *unreal or inactual originals*" (18-20; emphasis added). The status of the phantom as a mimetic imaginal (as opposed to imaginary) mental projection is essential to understanding Plato's anxiety. Poetry, and especially drama, produced morally questionable fictions that were nonetheless plausible enough to blur the distinction in the imagination between the fiction and the audience's real life. But again, as mentioned above, this idea of phantoms seems to relate mainly to the audience's tendency to reproduce mentally something that has a "real-life" equivalent. What about a truly fictional image, such as a unicorn or a centaur, which phenomenological philosophers like Husserl would term a "non-existent object" (Brann 128)? Do these "nonexistent objects" pose the same threat as Plato's phantoms? What is the status of the "phantom" that does not pretend to be real?

It is with this consideration of non-existent objects that we see how our popular definition of fantasy has changed from its root in *phantasia*. Brann defines fantasy as "the illusionistic mode of the imagination and the literary genre that is its product" and goes on to suggest that "'phantasy' should perhaps be the spelling used when a somewhat more elevated or visionary power is intended" (21). The "illusionistic mode" and "literary genre that is its product" seems to encompass the whimsical, nonexistent, magical characters, situations, and worlds that most of us would associate with the literary genre "fantasy." The magical elements of fantasy can truly be characterized as *imaginary* (as defined above) as opposed to *imaginal*, since, as already indicated by the instability of a truth-of-correspondence argument regarding magic and witchcraft in the books, fantastic images truly have "unreal or inactual originals." Although it can be argued that all fictional works are imaginary, fantasy is even more removed from "reality" since the magic that characterizes the genre has no original in real life, nor can it possibly be enacted in real life. No reader will be able to fly on a broom, no matter how much he or she may want to play "Quidditch" (a game somewhat like soccer, but played on flying brooms, that Harry plays on a team in the series). Despite the fears of one *Christianity Today* reviewer that Rowling

has taken “something deadly from our world and turn[ed] it into what some are calling ‘merely a literary device,’” there is nothing in the ‘magic’ of the Harry Potter series that could “spill over into the real world” (Komschlies 113). The magical elements of fantasy have no origins in real life, cannot possibly be turned into actual practice, and need to be considered as being indeed “merely a literary device.”

Although we are often tempted to see ourselves as a progressivist society where our ideas evolve rather than regress over time, in this matter of evaluating the role of fantasy in children’s literature there seems to be more evidence of the truth-of-correspondence argument today than ever before. This is not to say that this is the first time that the genre has come under attack. Fantasy has never inhabited a secure position in literary and educational history. While most adults look back with a kind of vague nostalgia upon fairy tales and “classics” such as *Alice in Wonderland* that were told to them in youth, the support of fantasy among parents and educators has hardly been unanimous. Earlier writers and educators acknowledged the appeal of fantasy to children, but as late eighteenth-century educational philosopher and writer Maria Edgeworth argued, “much valuable time” would be lost by writers who chose to “indulge” this taste (xi). Indeed, many of the widely-read authors of moral children’s literature believed, like Evangelical writer Mary Martha Sherwood, that fairy tales could “never be rendered generally useful” and that more realistic books “seemed more likely to conduce to juvenile edification” (iv). What is important to note, however, is that objections to fantasy like these had less to do with the truth-of-correspondence argument that characterizes the Harry Potter debate, and instead focused more on questioning the justification of the use of the mode itself.

It was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that fantasy began to gain popularity again, a trend that continued well into the twentieth century. Ironically, in the light of the present debate, it was religious authors who began to make use of the mode extensively, and it is in their writings that we find some of the best defenses of fantasy as a stubborn structure. Charles Kingsley’s *The Waterbabies* and George MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* became classics that are still published widely today. Both men were Christian clergymen and used magic in depicting their Christian themes. MacDonald, along with J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, are often cited by opponents of the Harry Potter series as examples of “good” moral fantasy writers (Kjos 5). Along with being English professors at Oxford and Cambridge, Tolkien was an openly faithful Roman Catholic, while Lewis’s works on Christianity have earned him a reputation as a theological writer and intellectual champion of the faith. And along with being prolific writers of fiction, all three authors also wrote essays that helped define the literary genre of fantasy, with Tolkien and MacDonald especially defending it as a structure that is meant to be independent of the “real world.”

In his essay "The Fantastic Imagination" (1867), MacDonald attempts to justify fantasy writing "were justification or excuse necessary" (313). MacDonald's aims in the essay are both to encourage the use of the form and to establish it as a stubborn structure that must be evaluated on literary terms according to the reading experience. MacDonald supports the belief that writers of fairy tales do, in fact, create material that is comprised of nonexistent images. He states that "some thinkers would feel sorely hampered if at liberty to use no forms but such as existed in nature, or to invent nothing save in accordance with the laws of the world of the senses" (315). He makes an important differentiation between the "imagination" and "fancy" that reinforces the distinction between the *imaginal* and the *imaginary* mentioned earlier:

there is that in [the writer] which delights in calling up new forms — which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation. When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy; in either case, Law has been diligently at work. (314)

A world that exists outside of the "laws of the world of senses" must nonetheless still exist according to rules that apply to this "little world of [the writer's] own, with *its own laws*" (314; emphasis added). The invention and especially the consistent application of the laws created for this new world are essential for maintaining the reader's sustained belief in fantasy, or centripetal response, and for hampering a centrifugal response that would gravitate toward applying the laws of the "moral world" to the invented world (315).

Tolkien was familiar with MacDonald's work, and so it is not surprising that his own ideas about fantasy as a stubborn structure seem to almost echo the earlier writer. In his famous essay "On Fairy Stories," Tolkien defines the characteristics of the genre and, in a sense, justifies the development of our modern adult fantasy by attacking the notion that fairy stories are meant to be read by children alone. Like MacDonald, Tolkien offers a set of criteria by which an intertextual, centripetal, literary evaluation of fantasy works can be made. Some of the elements that he identifies as being ubiquitous in the genre are wish fulfilment, the "Great Escape" from death, and the eucatastrophe, or happy ending (59). Yet just as MacDonald insists that a writer must create and then maintain the laws of his or her own invented world, Tolkien's main requirement for good fantasy is the establishment of Secondary Belief, or the creation and sustenance of a credible Secondary World. According to Tolkien, true fantasy requires that the reader, whether an adult or child, be convinced of the credibility of the events and characters which appear within the context of this new world, or Secondary World (45). The successful portrayal of the Secondary World serves a dual purpose: first,

the reader will respond to the artfulness of the piece with a relative degree of the Secondary Belief needed to *temporarily* suspend the disbelief invoked by fantasy; by the same token, the maintenance of the laws of the new world will establish the Secondary World of the literary work as something that exists independently outside the reader's experience. In either case, Tolkien's criteria emphasize the distance needed between the readers' actual lives and the material they are reading (the centrifugal response) so that they can experience literary and imaginative engagement.

While writers like MacDonald and Tolkien argue for the literary autonomy of fantasy, little has yet been said that privileges this genre above others. In other words, more needs to be said about why people should write, or more importantly *read*, fantasy. Since the issue of justifying the study of literature requires a much more lengthy treatment than I am able to offer here, I will instead attempt to offer a summary of what Bogdan calls a "poetics of total form" (53) and show how fantasy functions within this view.

Summarizing Frye's anagogic view of literature (which was developed over the course of his career), Bogdan argues for how Frye's belief in the value of contemplating the "total form" of literature can be applied to literary study as a discipline. She explains that, "within this philosophical perspective, each reading experience becomes an occasion for enlightenment, in which the individual reader enjoys increased awareness and psychic growth, participating in the fulfillment of human desire simply by attending to the story" (54). Frye's view (like that of Shelley and, as I will show, of MacDonald) describes literature as "a kind of Platonic Form" where the contemplation of beauty (or good literature) leads to an understanding of a truth that does not necessarily have to do with moral truths of the tangible world (53). This contemplative process emphasizes the value of the act of reading itself, rather than what may be simply gleaned from the content of the text.

MacDonald also provides a justification (and, for this study, a defense) of fantasy, which is similar to Frye's anagogic view. It is the transformative power of the process of contemplating a "fairytale" that gives it its "meaning":

[A fairy tale] cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has a vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight. Everyone, however, who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development; one man will read one meaning in it, another will read another. (316)

Like Shelley and Frye, MacDonald believes that a kind of transformation through the imagination occurs when a person contemplates poetry, or in MacDonald's case, "fairytales" (316). Shelley's belief in the transformative

impact of poetry rests mainly in the power of metaphor, while MacDonald's ideas could be described as a neo-Platonic contemplative process.

Although Bogdan says that "[t]he limitation of the stubborn structure as a metaphor for literature is its denial that texts can in any way influence for ill" (94), I believe that MacDonald acknowledges the capacity for literature to influence for good as well as ill. By simply stating that "everyone ... who feels the story, will read its meaning after his own nature and development," he leaves the actual impact on the reader ambiguous, implying only that readers will learn more of themselves through their own responses (316). Truly, MacDonald insists that "a genuine work of art must mean many things; the truer its art, the more things it will mean" (317). The capacity for literature to promote self-discovery is to MacDonald the greatest justification of literature:

The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is — not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, *to make him think things for himself.* (319; emphasis added)

Again, my intent in citing the views of these various writers is to emphasize that the main benefit of literary study must go beyond the supposed transference value of specific morals or lessons from the text to the reader. Contrary to the "truth-of-correspondence" view presented before, as these authors have shown, it is the very artfulness and artificiality of literature that allows readers to engage in this contemplation of literature's total form. It is the process of contemplation itself that allows readers to engage in the narrative while still staying aware of the artful order of words, the "verbal pattern," that the author has employed in the creation of the text. By maintaining a measure of aesthetic distance between themselves and the text, readers can truly engage in the possibilities of imaginative experience while still being aware of the real-world verbal pattern that the author has employed in presenting such an imaginative universe.

I would argue that fantasy, possibly above all other genres, lends itself best to this contemplation of the total form of literature. Unlike the more "realistic" genres, the characters and places described in fantasy works exist more firmly in imaginative experience than realistic figures do. It is true that all fictional creations belong to the realms of the imagination, but fantastic, or nonexistent, figures through their artificiality draw attention to their status as constructions that exist outside everyday experience. With regard to its possible uses in literary education, fantasy provides more ready opportunities to discuss both the construction and the impact of works of literature that have already succeeded in engaging readers through delight. In other words, sharing fantasy books with students provides an excellent opportu-

nity to discuss their aesthetic enjoyment of the literature. Beginning with the reader's personal response to the work, educators can then move into discussing how the actual effects (e.g., fear, rapture, suspense, elation) are variably achieved by the author throughout the text. Works of fantasy lend themselves to the enjoyment as well as the scrutiny of readers, fulfilling the double goal common to literature education.

Perhaps, then, this is how we must end a defense of Harry Potter — on the same point with which the discussion began. Children love to read Harry Potter. Once the truth-of-correspondence argument regarding allegations of witchcraft has been disproved, we are left with books that have managed to attract the attention and loyalty of millions of young readers who come from a generation where reading is losing the battle for children's time to many other forms of entertainment. Regardless of what we see as being the purpose or the rewards of reading, everyone who has taken sides in this debate can agree on one thing — reading itself is good. The minds that George MacDonald spoke of, the minds that needed to have things woken up in them so that they might learn something of themselves, were not only the minds of adults. When left alone as examples of the nonexistent Secondary World that they inhabit, the Harry Potter books may be interpreted by children as what MacDonald calls "a firefly that now flashes, now is dark, but may flash again" (321). Yet MacDonald warns against imposing an interpretation on the reading experience of others, since no one comes to a text the same way. Continuing with the firefly metaphor, he cautions that, "caught in a hand which does not love its kind, [the reading experience] will turn to an insignificant, ugly thing, that can neither flash nor fly" (321).

For those who would still choose to read "witchcraft" and "the occult" in Harry Potter, the series becomes an "ugly thing" that cannot be absorbed, evaluated, and incorporated by those who read and love these books. I must once again quote MacDonald with reference to the unique response of readers and why one response (or one set of responses) to literature must not represent all possible responses to a text. In answering the supposed problem that people will take too much freedom of response and simply find any meaning in literature that they wish, he says that the reader will find

Not what he pleases, but what he *can*. If he be not a true man, he will draw evil out of the best; we need not mind how he treats any work of art! If he be a true man, he will imagine true things: what matter whether I meant them or not! (320; emphasis added)

The purpose of this essay has been to describe and analyze the different voices of those who have been affected by this controversy — the Christian parents, the secular supporters, the misunderstood Wiccans, and the

readers themselves — and to provide a defense of the act of writing and reading fantasy. When parents or educators themselves misunderstand or are ignorant of what they are apparently objecting to, this ignorance will certainly be reflected in their reading of a text. Only when works of fantasy like the Harry Potter series are read as the stubborn structures they are can we even begin to address the more important and more fruitful questions that will arise from children's experiences of reading the books they have chosen. Salman Rushdie, when addressing those offended by his book, better describes the purpose of this defense, and what might come from it: "Perhaps a way forward might be found through the mutual recognition of that mutual pain. Let us attempt to believe in each other's good faith" (5).

## Notes

- 1 For the purposes of this essay, I will capitalize "Witchcraft" when dealing with the religion Wicca, and use the lower-case "witchcraft" when referring to the fictional practice portrayed in works of literature.
- 2 I would also like to mention that recently a group of parents in Saskatoon put pressure on the Roman Catholic School Board to remove the Harry Potter books from optional classroom reading lists. One parent, calling the series "ungodly" and "evil," claimed that the books carry an underlying theme of witchcraft, "which is linked to satanic doctrines" ("Saskatoon Parents"). The parent claimed that this apparent "glorification of witchcraft" runs contrary to the board's mission statement to "strengthen faith in Jesus" and should therefore be removed ("Saskatoon School Board"). At the time of the writing of this article the matter remained unresolved, and consequently I have decided not to include it in the main body of my discussion.
- 3 See chapter four of Bogdan's *Re-Educating the Imagination* for a more in-depth discussion of the case of Peterborough County.
- 4 For a more complete discussion, see chapter four of *Re-Educating the Imagination*, where Bogdan applies Frye's model for deriving meaning from literature directly to the issue of censorship in schools.
- 5 It seems ironic that what many consider to be the dominant religious and cultural influence in this country seems to have been put into a position of powerlessness here, yet the statements like this one suggest that Christians are, in fact, the minority. I would suggest here that the parents who are asking for the removal of the Harry Potter books because of their Christian beliefs are positioning themselves by adopting the discourse of powerlessness, or what Burlein would call "countervoice." Burlein has observed that recently in the United States, right-wing, Christian fundamentalist groups have begun to adopt the discourse of oppression in order to shift their position of power from that of the dominant group to the minority who must struggle to have its rights acknowledged in a pluralistic society. The use of a discourse of oppression is meant to elicit a certain response, one that automatically calls for sympathy and recognition. This discourse is meant to counter the anticipated "anti-Christian bigotry" which is apparently fueled "when Christians talk about banning or restricting books." The effect of a dominant group adopting the discourse of a

minority is not the main concern of this discussion, but it is important to understand how the Christian parents position themselves in this matter.

- 6 In fact, in terms of books resembling actual Wicca, there are far more closely-related works, such as Diana Wynne Jones's *Chrestomanci* series, which features characters who call themselves witches and enchanterers. Although Wiccans do not refer to themselves as enchanterers, sorcererers, or wizards (despite what certain Christians have been quoted as saying in this paper), the characters in Jones's books practice forms of knot-magic and energy work, which more closely resembles the Craft than the Harry Potter books do.
- 7 Unfortunately, there have not been many detailed studies that deal with the simultaneous diachronic development of the popular mythology surrounding witchcraft and the actual religion. Candace Savage's *Witch: The Wild Ride from Wicked to Wicca*, while not written to be a strictly academic analysis, offers an informative and entertaining overview on the different depictions of witchcraft in history.

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