

## On Using Harry Potter as an English Composition Text

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### Abstract

This paper will basically describe my experiences over the last three years using the first three of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels as English Composition course texts with third and fourth year university students. The students in question are mostly English Department majors as the course is required as part of the program for certification as junior high school and senior high school English teachers. The paper will describe the basic reasons for choosing Rowling's novels as texts, general class procedure, and course requirements, setting it all very briefly in the context of Japanese education and society.

The basic finding is that although Japanese university students have little experience in extensive reading, especially in English, they are willing and able to read a full length book as well as read and write weekly page-long comments on the various chapters of the book. They are also able to write page-long weekly diaries on matters of personal interest as well as two-page movie reviews on an average of four movies per school year (the movies in question deal with themes related to the Harry Potter novels). In general, however, the students seem to have little knowledge of what one would call the basic classics of Western civilization and literature as well as topic-related books such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

Another finding over the past several years has been that Japanese university students have very little knowledge of any works in the field of children's or juvenile or young adult literature. Most university English Departments likewise do not have courses or specialists in this area, whereas they are commonly included in English Departments in universities in at least the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

### Discussion

Several years ago I read the first of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, out of sheer curiosity. There was currently a Harry Potter boom and I was intrigued by it. In previous years I had read the Narnia novels of C. S. Lewis, a variety of J. R. R. Tolkien novels,

stories by George MacDonald, novels by S. E. Hinton, and a large portion of the novels of Madeleine L'Engle. I had also written research papers on Hinton and MacDonald as well as several on the works of L'Engle<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, I was completely unprepared for the novels.

Soon after I had finished reading *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* I met an American friend, a Catholic priest, who was visiting in Japan at the time. In the course of our meeting, I mentioned reading the Rowling book and commented that it seemed to be basically theology in story form and was so popular because it appealed to a hunger for religion. He agreed. That agreement was both comforting and confusing. It was comforting to know that my opinion was not idiosyncratic, but it was confusing because unlike Madeleine L'Engle, there was no obvious source for Rowling's theology.

Madeleine L'Engle has written extensively of her spiritual reading and insights. They are regularly incorporated into her novels.<sup>2</sup> But where was Rowling's theological framework coming from? It is very clearly there.<sup>3</sup> The basic notion seems to be much like that of St. Augustine's *City of God*, with the residents of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry resembling members of the City of God on earth. However, since the City of God on earth (also known as the kingdom of God or the Church) has both worthy and unworthy members, the Hogwarts community has examples of both types. As in the Gospel parables of the fish in the net (Matthew 13:24–3) or the tares and the wheat (Matthew 13:47–48), all are allowed to grow without interruption until the harvest.

Again in a Gospel fashion, in the parable of the sower and the seed (Matthew 13:3–8), we see that although Harry has the gift of magic, he must choose to exercise it. Like the gift of faith, he must choose to accept it. Likewise, he must use that gift of faith to get through the invisible barrier to Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross Station that somehow separates the ordinary Muggle world from that of magic in order to board the Hogwarts Express. He must consciously choose his friends and show what he values most. On Harry's first train trip to Hogwarts, he meets Draco Malfoy and his cohorts Crabbe and Goyle. Draco Malfoy invites him to choose his friends politically, that is, to choose Malfoy over Ron Weasley, but Harry refuses. Malfoy is from an old and rich wizard family and his father has many political connections and a lot of influence in the magical world. Harry nevertheless refuses his offer of expediency-based friendship. Harry chooses his friends not by what advantages they can gain for him, but because of love. Once again, this is a clear echo of the Gospel words (Matthew 6:24): "No one can serve two masters; for he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other."

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1 The papers may be found in various volumes of the *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities)*.

2 This aspect of L'Engle is discussed in my essay "On Time with Madeleine L'Engle", *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities)*, No. 44 (1994).

3 This aspect of Rowling is discussed in my essays "Harry Potter in Perspective" and "Harry Potter in Perspective II" appearing in No. 51 and No. 52 respectively of *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities)*.

The Weasley family is well-known in the magical world for being very very poor and for producing large numbers of children, as often as not with red hair. Malfoy repeatedly mocks Ron Weasley and his family for their poverty (Ron is forced to wear secondhand clothes, buy used textbooks, and must even use a secondhand wand). But the Weasley family is filled with love (as Harry finds out when he visits them in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*). This very markedly contrasts with the home environment Harry has experienced with his only living relatives, the Dursleys, where Harry is treated rather like Cinderella was treated by her stepmother and sisters. Again and again, the primacy of love is emphasized. This too is central to the Gospels and the message of Jesus. Over and over again, the whole set of Harry Potter novels emphasizes this question of choice: who do you love? which side do you choose? This is not a simple question for it includes the problem of the nature of love. Is love an emotion? Is love an act of the will? As Frederick Buechner says, "In the Christian sense, love is not primarily an emotion but an act of the will."<sup>4</sup> The movie "La Bamba" deals with this question of choice also. The Mexican-American teenager Ricardo Valenzuela becomes the rock singer Ritchie Valens and in the process of becoming a rock star he must decide whether his family or his music is more important to him. He must choose spending time with his girlfriend Donna or singing in concerts and going on tours.

There is also the question of vocation. Commonly this means one's calling in life. As was mentioned above, Harry was born into a magical family and blessed with magical ability himself, but he has to choose to use it. Although his name was registered among the Hogwarts students as soon as he was born, he had to accept the invitation and buy all the textbooks and magical equipment he needed. He had to appear at King's Cross Station on September 1 in order to take the Hogwarts Express with the rest of the students. This theme of vocation was discussed and then emphasized in class by showing the movie "Men in Black." In that movie, a New York City Police Department detective is recruited to work for a secret group which monitors the presence of aliens on earth and protects the people of earth from any dangers their presence might cause. The group also completely hides the presence of the aliens from ordinary people with a device that modifies or erases memories of aliens. This is very reminiscent of Ivan's story of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In that story Jesus reappears on earth and is taken before the Grand Inquisitor. Jesus is told that people don't really want to hear his message and that they don't really want the freedom to choose: all they desire is a peaceful life.

The students were shown the similarity of theme in the movie and in the Dostoevsky book. This was then compared with the Harry Potter book, where like in "Men in Black", a division of the Ministry of Magic is charged with erasing or modifying the memory of magical events that happen to Muggles. The only problem in class was that the students had no knowledge of who Fyodor Dostoevsky was and none of

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4 "Love" in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* by Frederick Buechner (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pg. 54.

them had ever heard of or read *The Brothers Karamazov* or any other of his books. A similar situation occurred later in the book when Harry discovers the Mirror of Erised, which shows the person standing in front of the mirror his heart's deepest desires. Dumbledore reminds Harry that the mirror will give "neither knowledge nor truth" nor will it tell whether what the viewer sees is "real or even possible."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the mirror has a Siren-like quality. But no one in the class knew what the Sirens were, knew who Homer was, or had ever read *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*.

Again in connection with the theme of vocation and choice, the students were told about and discussed the question of free will. Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* was mentioned as collateral reading. In that novel too, the problem of free will appears as a central theme. One of the main characters in the novel, Charles Wallace, is enslaved because he becomes involved in a contest of wills with a more powerful creature and in the course of the struggle his concentration lapses for an instant and he is lost.<sup>6</sup> The students were told that this theme is mentioned in St. Augustine, but no one had any idea who St. Augustine was and no one had ever heard of his *Confessions* or *The City of God*. Likewise, the students were told that "if the will won't will, nothing can make it will" appears in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But again, no one had ever heard of either Dante or his *Divine Comedy*.

Discussion of the whole framework of the magical world was also necessary, as Rowling provides no direct answer to how such things as crossing from the ordinary world at King's Cross station to the other-dimensional Platform 9 3/4 is possible. This theme of other worlds or other dimensions also appears in such movies as "Golden Child" and "Vampire in Brooklyn" (both of which the students have watched in class and written reviews about). The whole framework of it was discussed a long time ago by Evelyn Underhill.<sup>7</sup> The philosophy of Magic that underlies the Rowling books and various movies has been in existence several thousand years. According to Underhill, it involves three basic assumptions. The first is that there is an intangible but real medium that supports and influences what we call the real world. The second assumption is that our world exists in balance with the unseen world. And the third assumption is that this balance may be used or controlled by a disciplined and trained man's will.

A final point is the use of picture descriptions of the action in the various chapters of the book. In a word, the students use sketch books and make *manga* style chapter by chapter summaries. With this technique it is possible to judge the individual student's degree of understanding because each student must somehow visualize the various characters and their actions. Misunderstandings of the text become

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<sup>5</sup> *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> This is discussed in my essay "On Reading L'Engle and Dante" , *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Humanities) No. 45, 1995.*

<sup>7</sup> This was done in her 1907 essay "Defence of Magic". It was reprinted in *Evelyn Underhill: Modern Guide to the Ancient Quest for the Holy* edited by Dana Greene (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), pp. 33-46.

easily recognizable when put in picture form. Likewise, mistakes due to language transfer (from English to Japanese) become clear.<sup>8</sup> This technique will accurately portray actions and situations independent of drawing ability.

This is the third year a Harry Potter novel has been used as an English Composition test. Two years ago the students in the class read the first novel (a little over 300 pages in the American edition). A year ago they read the second one (which is about 340 pages long). This year's class is reading the third volume in the series (about 430 pages long). As the reading level for the Harry Potter books has been listed at third to fifth grade elementary school level, the books are much easier to read than the material on which the students are tested in the nationwide uniform tests. It is likewise much easier than the bulk of the material they are given in the classes taught by Japanese professors. But since they are not used to reading extensively, they need to develop the habit. Since the Harry Potter novels are available in Japanese translation, their content is readily accessible outside of class. Several of the students have mentioned reading one or more of the volumes in Japanese. Motivation has been high also since "Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone" was made into a movie. In fact, the students are currently watching it in class and eagerly awaiting the movie edition of the second novel.

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8 This was first discussed in my essay "Picture Analysis and Reading Comprehension", *Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Wakayama University (Education) No. 40*, 1991.

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