

A Historical Analysis of the Portrayal of Teens in Popular Literature:

The Chronicles of Narnia and Harry Potter

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Throughout the history of literature and writing about the lives of individuals, adolescents have been the subject of countless novels and book series. And with each generation, new books with teens as their main characters have been published that grab the attention and capture the hearts of adolescents and adults alike. Although they often focus on out-of-this-world adventures and events that could never occur in real life, the main characters are still teenagers with everyday problems and struggles. And in this way, the relateability of adolescent characters plays a big role in their huge popularity. *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Harry Potter* series represent two such sets of books. Although they depict different generations of teens and were initially published in quite different time periods, some similarities and reoccurring themes can still be seen in the ways the characters are portrayed.

Subsequently, the purpose of this project is to analyze historical trends in the ways in which teens are portrayed in popular literature of the time. The two book series were chosen for several reasons, including their popularity at the time they were published as well as over time, similarities in the country in which they were written and published, and their focus on characters that would be classified as adolescents throughout the majority of the series.

*The Chronicles of Narnia* series consists of seven books written by C.S. Lewis and published between 1950 and 1959. Although all seven books are considered part of the same series and share some characters and settings, only the first four books will be analyzed in this project due to their consistent portrayal of several characters. In the first four novels, four main characters are portrayed: Peter Pevensie, Susan Pevensie, Edmund Pevensie, and Lucy Pevensie. These four siblings live in England and have a unique connection due to their familial relationship that is not necessarily seen in other novels about adolescents. At the time of their

publishing in the 1950's these books were hugely popular and were marketed as Christian based stories for children and young adults.

The *Harry Potter* series consists of seven books as well and was written between 1997 and 2007 by J.K. Rowling. It focuses on the lives of teenagers as they are invited to and then attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in Great Britain. Although there are numerous adolescent characters portrayed and introduced throughout the series, the focus is on a group of three friends who meet during their first year of school: Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and Hermione Granger. This series was written and published in England and became hugely popular there and abroad just a few years after the first three became available in the States.

Although these two series were written in two very distinctive time periods and do have some differences in their plot and the writer's intention when writing them, similarities and differences do exist in the ways in which the teenagers are portrayed. Although numerous aspects of their character and development are portrayed throughout the two series, several areas in their lives will be specifically analyzed and discussed. In addition to a comparison of the two series, gender and specific age comparisons between the characters will also be included in situations in which these two factors also play a part.

One very important aspect in the lives of the adolescents in both of these series is the roles they play within the context of their group. In both series, the characters tend to play a role that is specific to how they interact with other members of their particular friend or character group. Although this could be chalked up to personality differences between characters, gender and age also seem to play an important part in the determination of these roles.

In *the Chronicles of Narnia*, the group that is focused upon consists of four siblings, two girls and two boys. Peter is the oldest boy, and as such, the clear leader when it comes to making decisions about what is best for the group. The people of Narnia call him the “High King,” while the other siblings are merely kings and queens, which indicates they consider him the rightful leader of the group as well. Susan is the next oldest and the oldest girl. She considers herself to be in charge of Lucy, but may be less willing to tell Edmund what to do, despite him also being younger than her. However, as the oldest girl, the other three do seem to turn to Susan when it comes to advice and words of wisdom. In a way, it seems as though Peter and Susan have adopted the role of parents when it comes to their two younger siblings, and much of their behavior and actions toward Edmund and Lucy reflect this. Edmund is the next oldest and the youngest boy. He struggles with the idea that Peter is the “boss of him” and can tell him what to do as his older brother. This leads to some conflict between Edmund and his siblings in Book 1 when he runs away and betrays them to the White Witch. Lucy is the youngest and sometimes struggles to be heard. In Book 1, no one believes her when she first visits Narnia and she feels belittled by her siblings. Similarly, in Book 2, Aslan appears to her and tells her what path to take but her siblings do not believe that she saw Aslan, so she again feels as though her opinion is discounted as the youngest of four siblings.

In the *Harry Potter* series, the main group consists of three school friends who are not related to one another, two boys and one girl. Harry Potter is “the boy who lived” to the wizarding world and is unaware of his magical background until his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday when he is invited to attend Hogwarts. He tends to be the ring leader of the group of friends and heads up many of the adventures the three of them end up on. However, sometimes the other two think he is being unreasonable in his quest to figure things out and are less supportive of his desire to

immediately “get in on the action.” Ron Weasley comes from a large wizarding family and is the youngest boy in a family of six boys and one girl. He is often jealous of Harry and sometimes believes that Harry seeks out the attention that he so often receives. As a younger sibling in a large family, Ron craves the type of attention that Harry receives all the time and often envies him this. For example, in Book 4, Ron believes that Harry somehow tricked the system and put his own name in the Goblet of Fire without letting Ron in on the secret. As a result, Ron becomes very jealous and refuses to speak to Harry for a few months. Hermione Granger does not come from a wizarding family but quickly catches on to the wizarding world and earns a reputation as the brightest witch of her age. She is initially outcast from Ron and Harry’s group for being the “know-it-all” girl who cannot stand to break the rules. However, after the three end up warding off a troll during Book 1 of the series, they become immediate friends who do everything together from that point forward. So she eventually succeeds in winning the respect of the two boys, but they still give her a hard time throughout the series for being so concerned with her schoolwork.

One theme that seemed to reoccur throughout the two series is the idea that girls have the “smarts” and boys have the “muscle” in a group situation, so the gender roles in each series were discussed and further analyzed through the use of specific examples. In *the Chronicles of Narnia* Book 1, the gifts given to Lucy, Susan, and Peter by Father Christmas reflect a difference in their roles as girls and boys. Peter is given a sword and shield to be used in battle. Lucy is given a healing potion, and Susan is given a bow and arrow along with a magic horn that helps her to call for help. Both Lucy and Susan’s gifts reflect roles that involve standing at a distance from the fighting and “helping” roles, while Peter is given tools to be used in direct hand-to-hand combat. However, age may also play a role here. Peter and Susan are the oldest of the four siblings, and

as such, were both given weapons to be used in battle. Lucy on the other hand, is the youngest of four siblings and is given something that will allow her to help the injured and heal wounds after the battle, when the danger of her being hurt is greatly reduced. While this still gives her an important role in a situation involving battle, it represents a safer, more protected position for her to be in.

In the *Harry Potter* series, this sort of theme is seen throughout the series in which Hermione is the book smart “clever” one while Ron and Harry are the more athletic and “physical” ones when it comes to adventures. And for the most part, these roles remain the same throughout the series, but the characters do sometimes stray from them and demonstrate skills in other areas. For example, in Book 1, Harry, Ron, and Hermione must make their way through the obstacles set up by other wizards in order to get to the Sorcerer’s Stone. Each character has a specific task in which they excel and effectively utilize their individual skill. Hermione uses her book smarts and memory of class work to get the three of them through an obstacle involving a magical plant called Devil’s Snare. Then she also uses her powers of reasoning to solve a riddle involving potions which allows Harry to reach the final chamber in the group of obstacles. Both of these instances remain pretty true to her role as the smart, logical one of the group, but in this particular situation, she is not the only one who reasons her way through an obstacle. Ron has to manipulate life sized chess pieces in order to get the three of them to the next room. This actually demonstrates his spatial and critical thinking abilities more than his ability to be physical or strong. Harry however, does use his athletic ability during the obstacle he completes when he must ride a broomstick to catch a flying key. Although this may not seem particularly athletic, in the wizarding world, flying on a broomstick is equivalent to being a world class soccer player in terms of the athleticism involved. So although specific gender roles are evident throughout most

of the series, this particular example involving Ron demonstrates a contradiction to traditional roles, in which Ron proves to be more adept at playing chess than Hermione, a game that is generally thought of as requiring considerable intellectual ability.

Another theme that was present in both series was the idea of one character being jealous or envious of another character. In both series, one member of the group often felt inferior to another, making them upset and sometimes resulting in that character feeling like they had been outcast from the rest of the group.

In Book 3 of *the Chronicles of Narnia*, Lucy envies Susan's beauty and spends a great deal of time wishing she was more like her. She allows this envy of Susan to distract her from helping out her friends in a time of need at one point, and she realizes how silly it was to have done so after the fact. Also, in Book 1, Edmund gets frustrated because he wishes people would listen to him like they listen to Peter. So Edmund lashes out and betrays his siblings by joining forces with the White Witch, whose goal it is to destroy all four siblings. In both of these situations, Lucy and Edmund are feeling inferior to their sibling of the same sex who are older than they are and the struggles associated with being a younger sibling are made evident.

In the *Harry Potter* series, Ron experiences a similar situation in which he is frequently jealous of Harry and the reputation he has as "the boy who lived." As a younger sibling in his own family, Ron feels as though Harry is just another older brother who has outshone him with all of his glamorous accomplishments and notoriety in the wizarding world. In addition to the previously mentioned example involving the Triwizard Tournament, this also occurs in Book 7 when Ron gets into a huge fight with Harry while they are searching for the Voldemort's Horcruxes. Although this fight was not specifically begun over Ron feeling inferior to Harry, his

feelings of frustration and anger toward Harry regarding this come out during the course of their argument and Ron decides to return home, leaving Harry and Hermione to continue the search on their own.

Another noticeable aspect in the way in which the adolescents in each of these series was portrayed involved how they expressed emotion in times of frustration and anger. Although different characters were upset by different things and reacted in a wide variety of manners, it seems as though gender and age played a distinct role in the acceptability of their reactions.

In *the Chronicles of Narnia*, both Lucy and Edmund become upset in Book 1, but the way they express it is very different. Lucy cries at not being believed by her older siblings when she first tells them that she traveled to Narnia and met a faun named Mr. Tumnus. Her siblings attribute it to her age and being the youngest of the group, but her gender may also play a role in the acceptability of her response. Edmund on the other hand, becomes sullen and angry when he is caught in a lie by his siblings. Here, he seems to internalize much of the emotion that he is experiencing rather than being openly upset or crying like Lucy did. This could also be related to their gender difference and the way that boys are taught to express emotion when upset.

In the *Harry Potter* Series, Hermione, Harry and Ron all have very distinct ways of expressing their emotion. In Book 1, Hermione cries when Ron and Harry get mad at her and she becomes easily flustered in scary situations and circumstances where she feels as though they could get in trouble with authority figures. Part of this is due to her personality and her desire to be perfect in everything she does, especially when it comes to school, but the way that she takes it so personally when Ron and Harry get mad at her and essentially call her a “goody two shoes” could also be due to her gender and the way she was taught to express emotion as a girl. Ron,

however seems to demonstrate both extremes of emotion, sometimes showing visible signs of fear, frustration, etc., and sometimes acting sullen and withdrawn rather than making an effort to express his emotions. For example, in Book 4, Ron believes for a large portion of the book that Harry put his name in the Goblet of Fire without telling Ron how he had done it. As a result, Ron becomes sullen and angry, refusing to talk to Harry until after the first task of the Triwizard Tournament. Here, he is behaving in a manner similar to Edmund in *the Chronicles of Narnia* where he represses much of the emotion he is experiencing. On the other hand, Ron becomes noticeable panicked throughout the series whenever he encounters spiders. He trembles, cries and whines until he is able to remove himself from the situation. This seems to go against his earlier desire to contain his emotion and not show his distress in emotional situations, but since his emotion here is associated with a specific phobia, it is probably much harder for him to control. Similarly, Harry cries openly in Book 4 when he realizes that Cedric has been killed by Lord Voldemort. This was obviously a shock to him and not something that could be easily internalized, as would typically be his reaction when fighting with Ron, dealing with bullies, etc.

So in this way, it seems as though the way emotions are expressed varies between gender and depending upon the situation. There is also a considerable difference between the two series where gender roles regarding the expression of emotion are pretty strictly followed in *the Chronicles of Narnia* series and they are not always in the *Harry Potter* series. This could reflect a change in the acceptability of male characters expressing visible emotion or a difference in the situations and seriousness of circumstances that the characters find themselves in.

In conclusion, similarities and differences were evident in the ways in which teens were portrayed between the two series (*The Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Harry Potter* series). In terms of the group dynamic and roles of individual characters within their particular group, some

change was evident. A distinct leader was seen in both groups of adolescents that made up the main characters in each series, although this did not mean that the other members followed blindly in either case. So although Peter and Harry served as the group leaders in each series, they were still usually willing to listen to the input of other members of the group. However, in the *Harry Potter* series, Harry is the same age as Ron and Hermione, which seemed to give him less power than Peter had in *the Chronicles of Narnia* as the oldest sibling of four. So perhaps this variation could be due to age differences between characters, or it could demonstrate a historical shift from having a clear-cut leader in a group of adolescents to having a group where each adolescent has an equal say in what goes on and decisions are more democratic in nature.

Another component of the adolescents' group dynamic that was present in both book series was the idea of one member of the group feeling inferior to another member due to envy, jealousy, etc. Although the reasons that any particular member felt inferior or jealous were different depending on the situation, this aspect in the portrayal of teens actually remained fairly consistent between the two series, which seems to suggest that this is a common element of the teenage years, even when comparing teenagers as they are described in the 1950's and in the 1990's.

Regarding gender roles and how they were illustrated in the two series, there were quite a few differences in how boys and girls were portrayed. Generally speaking, it seemed as though strict gender roles as they were portrayed in *the Chronicles of Narnia* series became more relaxed between the time that the two series were written. Although some components of traditional roles for boys and girls were still present by the time the *Harry Potter* series was written, there also seemed to be more fluidity in the roles that the different sexes could play. Also, in terms of the way emotion was expressed by boys and girls, it seemed like boys' and

girls' reactions became much more homogenous and the situation seemed to dictate the difference between the way they expressed emotion in the *Harry Potter* series rather than that character's gender.

As a result of this analysis, it would appear as though some aspects in the lives of teens have changed over time and some have seen relatively little change. Regardless, similar themes involving the lives and everyday struggles of teen are evident throughout the two series and seem to be indicative of what it is truly like to be a teenage of that time period. And although the assumption has been made that similarities and differences between the two series are due largely to historical trends and changes, several other factors may play a role. For example, the religious background of *the Chronicles of Narnia* when compared to the *Harry Potter* series, which was not marketed as being specifically religious, may influence how the characters were portrayed. Since the main goal of writing the *Harry Potter* series involved the telling of a story rather than the introduction of a religious lesson, more emphasis could have been placed on the realistic portrayal of teenagers while writing it. Also, regarding similarities found between the two series, the country in which both of them take place and were written could contribute. Since both *the Chronicles of Narnia* and the *Harry Potter* series were written and took place in England, the inclusion of cultural components may have contributed to similarities in the way teens were portrayed. So although historical influences have some bearing in this analysis, other factors must be taken into account and recognized as contributing to the similarities and differences observed.

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