

Harry Potter and Redefining Normal: Disability in the Magical World

When a hero is thought of, certain characteristics come to mind: bravery, ambition, charisma, strength, and perhaps physical beauty. A heroic character is held up as an ideal standard of human qualities, especially when illustrated in media or literature; creative license allows a writer to invent a hero and what a hero can accomplish, built from those common features. Recently, however, the stereotypes of a hero have started to be questioned, where it is wondered why certain individuals are not included. For example, why is a hero with a disability rarely seen? According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, an individual with a disability is "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (United States). Although there are many different disabilities, when a disabled individual is thought of, certain characteristics still come to mind, commonly involving the image of a person in a wheelchair; while there are some exceptions, an individual with a disability, physical or internal, is hardly considered to be a hero. Thus, J.K. Rowling's series, Harry Potter, stands out—not because the main character is disabled but because, through his perspective, the reader learns about individuals with disabilities when filtered through a magical world. By illustrating impairments, Rowling exemplifies disabled characters as a way to redefine the idea of normal; through analyzing Harry as an imperfect hero in comparison to the roles of Squibs in the Wizarding world, an individual with a disability is shown to be complex and well-rounded, demanding further research as they represent more than what their disability entails.

As an imperfect hero, the titular Harry Potter represents the idea that characters can be flawed but still successful as a protagonist—even before magic enters his life. In the article

"Harry Potter and the World of Difference," Penelope Friday "looks at attitudes towards difference and those who do not fit in this most different of worlds" as seen in the series; she too points out that "it is hard to name even one book in which a main character is disabled," where "there has been little movement in . . . literature to show disabled characters in a positive form" (Friday). However, Harry is unique in his introduction, where he is not only an orphan and overseen by cruel relatives, but he distinctly stands out against the Dursley family, their normality emphasized in the first scene of *The Sorcerer's Stone*: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much" (Rowling 1.1). Meanwhile, Harry is a stark contrast against the ordinariness of the Dursleys: "Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot of Scotch tape . . . The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning" (Rowling 1.20). However, rather than having his unique appearance marginalize his character, he is punctuated by his flaws; for example, as Friday points out, the reader is "immediately . . . struck by one thing: Harry Potter wears glasses. It is one of his defining characteristics" (Friday). While this is arguably minute, Harry's impaired vision – no less his lightning bolt-shaped scar – are never altered or corrected, even once introduced to magic: "In a world where bones can be re-grown in a night . . . one of the abiding fascinations in J.K. Rowling's world is the apparently inexplicable rules surrounding disability and healing" (Friday).

Furthermore, when Harry does enter the Wizarding world, he continues to exist as an imperfect hero, even though he is in a magical environment. In the essay "Harry Potter and the Disability Lens," Crystal Ortiz notes that "throughout the seven books, the question of 'what is

normal' is constantly being challenged," where both Harry and the reader have to adjust to a new normal (Ortiz). As Ortiz points out, in *The Goblet of Fire*, Harry is invited by the Weasley family to attend the Quidditch World Cup, where Mrs. Weasley tells the Dursleys, "It would be best for Harry to send us your answer as quickly as possible the normal way," which is by Owl post, as opposed to what Muggles would construe as sending mail by a postman (Rowling 4.30). This idea continues to be played out humorously by characters like Mr. Weasley, attentive of Muggles and their ordinary objects that, to him, are fascinating; in comparison, when the Dursleys are faced with what they consider to be Harry's deviations, their reaction is a mix of paranoia and fear, as seen when Mr. Dursley is appalled by Mrs. Weasley's unorthodox letter: "Other people might not understand why Uncle Vernon was making a fuss . . . but Harry had lived with the Dursleys too long not to know how touchy they were about anything . . . out of the ordinary. Their worst fear was that someone would find out that they were connected . . . with people like Mrs. Weasley" (Rowling 4.31). It is with these examples, however small, that "Rowling uses the constant reversal of normality to question much more sensitive 'norms'. While encouraging the child to question . . . 'what if people could fly?', she is also encouraging them to question other 'given' states" (Ortiz). In this context, magic is arguably a generalized disability, viewed by Muggles, like the Dursleys, as an embarrassing impairment, while magical folk, like the Weasleys and Harry, struggle to understand the standards of normalcy that have been set for them by someone else. Although not strictly seen as an individual with a disability, Harry is still presented as a concept unfamiliar to most readers: that the main character can be abnormal in comparison to others, can have faults that stand him apart from the crowd, but that "does not stop

him from being the hero and protagonist of the books. Disability is no barrier to heroism" (Friday).

However, if magic acts as a form of generalized disability to Muggles, the lack of magic in the Wizarding world equally speaks of a type of handicap. While Harry is successfully the hero of the adventure, there are several characters that Rowling writes that cannot seem to overcome the disability of otherness, or the idea that there are still acceptable and unacceptable standards within the magical world, opening the door for discrimination. Thus, though Harry remains relatable as an imperfect hero, others introduced in his tale represent when difference is not applauded, especially when more clearly marked as an individual with a disability. For example, as Harry transitions into the Wizarding world, he learns about the different blood statuses of magical humans, known as Muggle-borns, Half-bloods, and Pure-bloods. The conflict of traditional Pure-bloods not wishing to be tainted by Muggle-born unions is a significant part of the plot; however, blurred and forgotten about between those defining lines is a group known as Squibs, first mentioned with the character Argus Filch. As the caretaker for Hogwarts, Filch is known for being unpleasant toward students, to the point that "it was common knowledge that [Filch] was always begging Dumbledore to let him suspend students by their ankles from the ceiling" (Rowling 2.125). From the moment Filch is introduced in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, he is characterized as a bully; he appears to be nothing more than a ill-tempered individual who is intent on accusing students of bad behavior, even if they are innocent, as seen when Harry first encounters him: "Harry and Ron managed to get on the wrong side of [Filch] on their very first morning. Filch found them trying to force their way through a door . . . He wouldn't believe they were lost, was sure they were trying to break into it on purpose, and was threatening to lock them

in the dungeons. . ." (Rowling 1.132). For the rest of the series, Filch remains a minor presence who only wishes to catch Harry doing something wrong and threaten him with consequences, from detention to expulsion.

Yet, a reason behind Filch's behavior and cruelty toward students is never really explored until *The Chamber of Secrets*, when an explanation of who Squibs are is given and it becomes clear that Filch has faced persecution for his status as a Squib, acting out of anger against his lack of magic in a magical world. When Harry discovers that Filch is a Squib, he is confused, unaware of what he has learned when snooping through Filch's office: "There was only one thing on [Filch's desk] . . . a large, glossy, purple envelope with silver letting on the front. . . . Harry picked up the envelope and read: *KWIKSPELL: A Correspondence Course in Beginners' Magic*. . . . Why on earth did Filch want a Kwikspell course? Did this mean he wasn't a proper wizard?" (Rowling 2.126-8). However, despite the fact that Harry is ignorant, Filch is defensive and almost scared when he realizes that Harry has read his letter: "Filch's pasty face went brick red. . . . 'Have you—did you read—?' he sputtered. 'No,' Harry lied quickly. . . . 'If I thought you'd read my private—not that it's mine—for a friend—be that as it may—however—' Harry was staring at him, alarmed; Filch had never looked madder" (Rowling 2.128). Harry's accidental discovery comes to a head when Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat and companion in catching troublemakers, is paralyzed, marked by a message from the Heir of Slytherin. Immediately, Filch accuses Harry of attacking Mrs. Norris—not because rumors are circulating that Harry is the Heir of Slytherin and not because Harry was the one that found Mrs. Norris, but because Harry knows that Filch is a Squib and Filch believes Harry has attacked his cat out of spite: "'[Harry] did it, he did it!' Filch spat, his pouchy face purpling. . . . 'He found—in my office—he knows I'm a—I'm a—' Filch's

face worked horribly. 'He knows I'm a Squib!'" (Rowling 2.142). Although Filch being a Squib does not justify his unpleasant behavior toward students, it does offer insight behind why he acts the way he does; not only does he believe that Harry has harmed Mrs. Norris, his closest companion, because he is a Squib, but this anticipation of persecution is indicative of other experiences where Filch has been bullied or discriminated against for being a Squib. Overall, Filch is arguably the cranky caretaker who harasses students because he is defensive toward those who may punish him for what could be considered a disability in the magical world.

Unfortunately, the idea of Squibs like Filch being persecuted for who they are is perpetuated when Ron later explains to Harry the definition of a Squib: ". . . Ron stifled a snigger. 'Well—it's not funny really—but as it's Filch,' he said. 'A Squib is someone who was born into a Wizarding family but hasn't got any magic powers. Kind of the opposite of a Muggle-born wizard, but Squibs are quite unusual'" (Rowling 2.145). Ron then adds, "'I reckon [Filch] must be a Squib. It would explain a lot. Like why he hates students so much.' Ron gave a satisfied smile. 'He's bitter'" (Rowling 2.145). While Ron's attitude toward Filch can be somewhat forgiven, due to his youth and bad experiences with Filch's temper, his explanation of Squibs speaks volumes about their presence in the magical world. Additionally, Ron explaining who Squibs are, as opposed to the all-knowing Hermione, indicates an underlying societal influence; the Weasley family is Pure-blood and, while more open-minded than old-fashioned Pure-bloods, still show signs of being mired in Wizarding world traditions, upholding the acceptable norms of their society. In Therí Pickens' review of *Prejudice in Harry Potter's World* by Karen Brown, she explains that "the Weasley family's relationships to social others highlights several factors . . . the functioning, maintenance and possible destruction of the Wizarding world's social hierarchy"

(Pickens). Thus, Ron's attitude, like toward Filch and Filch being a Squib, come from a "manifest a lifetime of obeying and living by Wizarding social customs. Ron's overt distaste . . . and his reaction to myriad other social situations" proves that the magical world is susceptible to discriminating against others within their own realm (Pickens). It is Ron's perception of Squibs that is indicative of his parents' own perception, reflecting the limits set by the Wizarding world upon individuals considered different: ". . .these limits, upheld by Ron and Mrs. Weasley, bring to the fore the underlying biases taught by years of adherence to rigid social mores" (Pickens).

While Filch is the most recognized one in the series, Squibs continue to be expanded on with other characters and dialogue, punctuated by the treatment of Squibs by other magical humans. For example, Harry meets another Squib in *The Order of the Phoenix* named Arabella Figg; although he knew Mrs. Figg previously, known as the Dursley's "batty old neighbor," it is when Harry is attacked by dementors that Mrs. Figg reveals she is a Squib, instructed by Dumbledore to keep an eye on him (Rowling 5.19). When Harry is consequently brought before Wizengamot, Mrs. Figg testifies in his defense: "'I'm a Squib,' said Mrs. Figg. 'So you wouldn't have me registered, would you?' 'A Squib, eh?' said Fudge, eyeing her suspiciously. 'We'll be checking that. . . . Incidentally, can Squibs see dementors?' . . . 'Yes, we can!' said Mrs. Figg indignantly. Fudge looked back down at her, his eyebrows raised. 'Very well,' he said coolly" (Rowling 5.143-4). It is important to note that Fudge, the Minister of Magic, is the one primarily treating Mrs. Figg with disdain; although Fudge's main intent is to get rid of Harry, he still takes the opportunity to humiliate Mrs. Figg, based purely on the fact that she is a Squib. Small comments like Fudge's exist throughout the series, even as no other Squibs are actively introduced. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, Marvolo Gaunt insults his daughter, Merope, by shouting,

"You disgusting little Squib, you filthy little blood traitor!" (Rowling 6.210); when teasing Ron, one of the Weasley twins, Fred, makes the offhanded remark, "It's very character-building stuff, learning to peel sprouts without magic, makes you appreciate how difficult it is for Muggles and Squibs," equating Squibs to the same level as Muggles, who are not even included as citizens in the Wizarding world (Rowling 6.328). Significantly, after discovering the Half-Blood Prince's copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, Harry uses one of the Prince's spells on Filch: ". . . a jinx that glued the tongue to the roof of the mouth (which he had twice used, to general applause, on an unsuspecting Argus Filch)" (Rowling 6.238). Even though, four years ago, Harry learned that Filch is a Squib and who Squibs are, nothing changes; he casts a spell on Filch that effectively silences him and renders him helpless, all for the sake of entertainment. This episode, as well as other examples seen throughout, represents the marginalization of Squibs in the magical world, ultimately symbolizing the real world treatment of disabled individuals as each group of people struggle to have a voice in society.

In conclusion, disability in the Wizarding world needs further research. While Squibs are representative of disability, there are other characters who deserve attention; Remus Lupin's lycanthropy resembles a physical disability that is discriminated against as he is unable to hold a job, while Neville Longbottom's apprehension in social situations is similar to generalized anxiety, an emotional disability that should require accommodations in the classroom. Although Harry will continue to stand out as an imperfect hero, J.K. Rowling's series works to redefine the idea of normal in both the magical and real world, where ableism is an unavoidable factor; as Friday states of Rowling's inclusion of Squibs, "Words have power—but sometimes . . . it is the words left unwritten . . . that say more about the values and opinions of a society. In our world,

as well as in . . . [the] Wizarding world, there are perhaps things—people—that the majority would rather not think about" (Friday). As readers come to identify the "people not only marginalized but silenced," the steps toward change can be taken, as the standards of society that permit discrimination against others—from Squibs in the magical world to individuals with disability in the real world—can finally be put to an end (Friday).

Works Cited

Friday, Penelope. "Harry Potter and the World of Difference." *Disability Now*. Disability Now, 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2014.

Ortiz, Crystal L. "Harry Potter and the Disability Lens." CUNY School of Professional Studies, 2012. *EPortfolio: Final Paper: Disability in Literature*. Digication Inc, 2 Dec. 2012. Web. Apr. 2014.

Pickens, Therí A. "Prejudice in Harry Potter's World Review." Rev. of *Prejudice in Harry Potter's World*, by Karen A. Brown. *Disability Studies Quarterly: The First Journal in the Field of Disability Studies* 29.1 (2009): n. pag. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. The Society for Disability Studies, 2009. Web. Apr. 2014.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. New York: Scholastic, 1997. Print.

---. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: Scholastic, 1998. Print.

---. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. New York: Scholastic, 2000. Print.

---. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York: Scholastic, 2003. Print.

---. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. New York: Scholastic, 2005. Print.

United States. U.S. Department of Justice. Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section. *A*

Guide to Disability Rights Laws. Americans with Disabilities Act, 9 Apr. 2012. Web. Apr.

2014.