Reimagining the Journey of Self-Discovery and Transformation: *Harry Potter* and the Shifting Role of the Authority Figure in the *Bildungsroman*

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Abstract

For this paper I will examine the *Harry Potter* series as contemporary children’s literature which challenges the ideas of formation and the necessity of a moral guide from Victorian *Bildungsroman* and reimagines those ideas to suit the needs of the contemporary child. I contrast the *Harry Potter* series with George MacDonald’s *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) to trace the evolution of the authority figure from one who uses question and answer dialogues in order to encourage the protagonist to reach moral and physical maturation to one who relies on experience to enrich the life of the protagonist with little or no influence from the authority figure. The *Harry Potter* series frames the journey of discovery the self as one fraught with fear, uncertainty, a lack of wonder, and a loss of moral certainty.
Introduction

Of all literary genres, children’s literature, which includes picture books to Young Adult fiction, is the only one that encompasses a specific age-group demographic and is meant to foster moral growth in the children who read it. By its very nature, it is meant to be instructive and transformative. For both American and British children’s literature, this instruction appears in the story of the development of the hero—both morally and physically—on his or her journey to adulthood, moral agency or maturation. This journey is a character’s Bildungsroman. Because of its emphasis on maturation and growth over time, the Bildungsroman functions as a culturally constructed version of the childhood experience in stories for children, giving them characters to emulate and moral guides to obey without question. Like other literary genres, the meanings and nuances of the contemporary Bildungsroman cannot be contained in a single definition. Rather, its meaning has changed over time, evolving into a complex genre through scholarship and the literary works which both maintain and extend its boundaries. The Bildungsroman has shifted from its Victorian focus of a journey of formation, where guides along the way assist the protagonists to become moral agents capable of making their own decisions, to a type of journey where the protagonist, with or without a guide, embarks on a quest to discover the “true” self or identity—whether or not the truth will prove to be certain or stable. In short, the genre of the Bildungsroman covers all of the variant forms of the “coming of age” theme which is popular in children’s literature, since it mirrors the childhood experience of maturation and physical transformation.

It is not surprising then that children’s literature from the nineteenth century until the present has eagerly adopted the genre and themes of the Bildungsroman—the formation of the main character on his or her journey of instructive experiences with the end goal of moral and
physical maturity. Part of why children’s literature remains didactic even today is due to the strong influences of the Bildungsroman and writers and parents' desire to educate and transform children into moral or ethical adults. By its very structure and content, the *Bildungsroman* has found appeal among young audiences who can identify with young persons on a journey to make their way in the world. This reader identification with the text allows the *Bildungsroman* to influence the lives of its readers in more complex ways than other genres in the complete transformation of the self and molding of a culturally constructed moral awareness.

The Victorian concept of forming children through the books they read is still prevalent in our postmodern literary world, only this time the books focus more on teaching children to cope independently with problems such as trauma, death, and difficult choices. While the Victorians strongly believed in forming children for the trials of adulthood, they were more focused on preserving an idealized notion of the child rather than presenting the child-reader with the problems and trauma of childhood. In order to preserve this idealized child figure, the Victorians turned to combine the *Bildungsroman* with the fantasy genre. For the Victorians, fantasy was central to their ideas about the education of children. Some of the earliest didactic texts were written as fantasies, creating a children’s book world where “delight and instruction” coexisted with one another. The Victorian child could be entertained with simple, pastoral settings while at the same time instructed in morality by, for example, fairies. The Victorians held that once the child’s imagination was given “free reign” to be entertained and revel in this kind of innocent wonderment, it could then be instructed (Grenby 144, 160-161). For Grenby, Manlove, and other scholars, fantasy may be explained as “fiction involving the supernatural or impossible” (Manlove qtd. in Grenby 145), meaning that stories involving talking animals,
fairies, people no bigger than a thumb, magic, and alternate worlds are all part of the fantastical genre.

Children’s fantasy has shifted from a genre that emphasized wonder and fancy to one that included more and more realistic elements. 1940s and 1950s children’s fantasy focused more attention on children as the protagonists and morphed into a newer, more “realistic” fantasy genre which fascinates children’s book authors up until our own century (Manlove 80). This realistic fantasy includes writers as diverse as C.S. Lewis to Roald Dahl to J.K. Rowling. In these stories, the characters start their adventures as ordinary children from “our world” who journey to an alternate world—a journey not unlike the journey of education towards moral maturity in the Bildungsroman. While this newer fantasy contained elements from early Victorian fantasies, it was radically different in that it chose to explain the real world to children using that actual world as a starting point. Modern fantasy, then, grounds itself in realism.

Fantasy remains popular today in part because it provides the perfect ground in which to cultivate the education of children. Like the Bildungsroman, children’s fantasy also encourages its readers to go on adventures outside their familiar world and find their identity. M.O. Grenby argues that removing protagonists from their familiar surroundings makes them question and eventually find their identity—a quest that encourages readers to do the same.

The journey to another world, or another time, decontextualises the protagonists…They then have to discover afresh who they are, and, usually, can return to their reality at the end of the novel with a stronger sense of themselves. (Grenby 164)

Thus, fantasy is fertile ground for the seed of the Bildungsroman, as it reinforces the idea that protagonists must travel to a place outside of normality such as Narnia, Hogwarts, or beyond the
Shire in order to discover their identity. Removed from a familiar setting, they are more likely to
“cultivate” themselves by the experiences they encounter. Fantasy, therefore, encourages
education based on experiences and lessons in identity—both of which lead the child to his or
her own moral maturity.

Of this new wave of contemporary literature, the *Harry Potter* series is no exception.
J.K. Rowling’s series frames the journey of the self as one fraught with fear, moral uncertainty,
and a striking lack of wonder. Rowling’s characters no longer romp in a pastoral setting or
portray the Victorian ideal of the innocence of childhood. Harry and his friends are beyond the
wonderment of nature and fairies—they must save their world from a terrifyingly real
destruction. Harry’s own *Bildungsroman* journey, as I will demonstrate, is not one of formation,
but self-discovery. First, Harry must learn that he is a wizard, and the moral implications of
being a wizard. Hogwarts does not form his identity; it helps him to become aware of it.
Through the careful blurring of strict lines among genres such as fantasy and the school story
that complicate the *Bildungsroman* journey, Rowling resurrects the authority figures from the
Victorian period and uses them to aid her hero in a postmodern quest of identity. Although these
figures at first resemble the strict moral authority of the Victorian age, they have evolved into the
morally ambiguous character who allows the hero to “experience” in order to learn, rather than
instructing him or her on how to act or think. With her groundbreaking series, Rowling
reimagines the genre of the *Bildungsroman* into a new form that blends the separate, historical
changes of previous genres and leaves readers to sort out for themselves the moral consequences
and how the story will form them without an authority figure.

However, Harry’s journey toward maturity is set apart from earlier works because he
does not travel to the outside to find his identity, but rather goes to a place where he is known
and accepted. At Hogwarts, he lives among fellow students and teachers who support his journey with much more kindness than the Dursleys, to whom he was nothing but a burden. While Dumbledore still conducts instructive dialogues with Harry reminiscent of Victorian conduct books, he and the other moral guides in Harry’s life disappear toward the end of Harry’s journey so that Harry must find his way alone.

This study examines the shift in the Bildungsroman genre in children’s literature by comparing and contrasting the attitudes, characteristics, and formal methods of moral instruction that authority figures from the Victorian Age deployed, to the innovative ways in which the characters from the popular Harry Potter series are constructed and taught. This study will also examine the role of the authority figure in the hero’s journey of self-discovery and transformation from a child into an independent moral agent.

**The Bildungsroman**

Of all the genres that comprise the Harry Potter series—such as the coming of age story, the school story, and the fantasy adventure—the Bildungsroman is perhaps the most important as it deals with the hero’s coming of age and rite of passage into adulthood. One of the earliest critical sources in English on the Bildungsroman, Susanne Howe’s book, Wilhelm Meister and his English Kinsmen: Apprentices to Life (1930), focuses on the concept of the Bildungsroman in its simplest, most direct definition. She introduces the Latin phrase “Mundus et infas” which means “man and his meeting with the world” to describe the ideas behind the earliest German Bildungsroman novels. The Bildungsroman, then, is the story of a hero traveling to the outside world to learn from his experiences. One of the earliest examples of the Bildungsroman is Goethe’s Wilhelm Meisters Lehjahre, published between 1794 and 1796. While Goethe was not
the first writer to confront this subject of learning through experience in the outside world, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehjahre* became the prototype of the *Bildungsroman* genre, because it was one of the first German *Bildungsroman* that directly influenced the works of British authors. This subject appealed to the British literary world “…perhaps because it implied the gaining of experience—usually the author’s own—at the hands of the world and therefore it involved action, travel” (Howe 1). While the *Bildungsroman* is certainly biographical in nature, Howe openly excludes autobiographical novels such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* because the main characters of both novels do not change or develop throughout their adventures, or experience a sudden realization at the end of the novel of who they are and how they can use their experience to inform their future actions (Howe 14). To be a proper *Bildungsroman*, the characters within the text must change and that change is generally brought about by the use of external forces and especially the act of the journey into the harsh outside world. A *Bildungsroman* must encompass all of these factors—namely, change and development in a character, a realization of self, and a sense that the character has grown up, which is proved through his future actions—in order to be a true *Bildungsroman*.

Although Howe gives a good explanation of the genre as a whole, she shies away from stepping outside her strict definition of the *Bildungsroman* and does not delve into a deeper interpretation of the peculiarities of the English *Bildungsroman*. Using and extending Howe’s definition in his book, *The Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974), Jerome Buckley interprets the *Bildungsroman* as the “‘novel of all-around development or self-culture’ with ‘a more or less conscious attempt on the part of the hero to integrate his powers, to cultivate himself by his experience’”(13). Building on Howe’s work, Buckley looks at different examples of the English *Bildungsroman* genre which tend to straddle the middle
ground between *Bildungsroman*, the journey of self-cultivation through experience, and *Entwicklungsroman*, translated as the novel of a character’s development (Buckley 13).

Subgenres of the *Bildungsroman* that developed after Goethe include the *Entwicklungsroman*, which chronicles “a young man’s general growth rather than his specific quest for self-culture,” the *Erziehungsroman*, which emphasizes “the youth’s training and formal education,” and the *Kunstlerroman*, which is a tale of the growth and development of an artist in his or her profession as a writer, painter, or poet (Buckley 13). Through all of these subgenres, however, there is still the common theme of growth and change. The word *Bildungsroman* itself has at its root the German word “*Bildung*” meaning “shaping” or “formation.” Buckley takes this interpretation further by suggesting that “*Bildung*” is related to “*Bild*” and “*Bildnis*” which have the meaning of “picture” or “portrait” (Buckley 13-14). *Bildung* can also mean “cultivation” or *culturation*; one acquires culture as one acquires character. Thus, to Buckley, a *Bildungsroman* is the fictional representation of the story of formation, but also a portrait of an artist—a theme present in all the subgenres of the *Bildungsroman*.

In their book *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman*, Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward attempt to answer the question of where the *Bildungsroman* genre is heading in contemporary literature. Again, they reaffirm the preceding literature on the *Bildungsroman*, citing the nineteenth century critic Karl Morgenstern, who stated that the purpose of the *Bildungsroman* was not only to show the “formation” of the hero, but also to “foster the Bildung of the readers” (Morgenstern qtd in Summerfield and Downward 1). They also bring up the issue of gender in the contemporary *Bildungsroman* and how the female is represented as “an inadequate counterpart” to her male version (Summerfield and Downward 5).
Thus, in contemporary literature, the *Bildungsroman* has become more of a spectrum of experiences and mix of other genres in order for the reader to relate more with the characters.

In contemporary literature, the *Bildungsroman* has a much looser definition than it did in Goethe’s time. Its primary purpose is still to show the growth and formation of its main character—male or female. However, this loosening of its definition over time has allowed for the *Bildungsroman* to evolve into a complex genre. This “loosening” has helped the *Bildungsroman* integrate more easily with other genres—as in *Harry Potter*. Today’s *Bildungsroman* is more about the quest to find the self and an identity than it is about “growing up” or that classic story of formation.

**The Authority Figure**

In both contemporary and Victorian children’s literature, an archetypal mentor character represents authority in some way and must interpret the world to the protagonist. In a *Bildungsroman*, this character is a guide in the form of an older, wiser mentor who often takes the place of the parental figure or guardian and helps develop the protagonist’s moral maturation. Often, the protagonist serves as an apprentice to this mentor in the hopes that the mentor will impart to him his knowledge. The Victorians took this *Bildungsroman* moral guide and implemented it in their stories to help teach moral lessons to children. Early Victorian fiction was written in the form of dialogues, known as conduct books, in which the moral guide poses questions to the protagonist. In Victorian children’s books, the authority figure or moral guide plays the role of the parent, instructing the child through the use of dialogues resembling the questions in early Victorian catechisms and conduct books. With the exception of works by Lewis Carroll, nearly all Victorian books for children contain a positive moral guide who helps
the protagonist to achieve moral and physical maturation (Lurie 99). Children’s books from the Victorian period also placed an emphasis on helping children to grow up physically by assuring their moral growth—thus creating the need for a character who can fill the shoes of the parental figure. As Elaine Ostry asserts in her article “Magical Growth and Moral Lessons,” the Victorians saw moral maturity as “the invisible side of growing up” (Ostry 27). The physical growth of children was also linked to a sense of wonder, hence, the Victorian emphasis on wonderment.

Through the use of dialogues and more open parent-child relationships, the Victorians granted the child “responsibility for his or her own moral development.” This allowed parents to let children correct their faults through their experiences, but only in a parentally controlled environment (Ostry 30). But they also believed that experience alone was not enough to aid the child’s moral growth into spiritual maturity. Experience might help physical growth, but moral maturity was only to be achieved with the aid of a moral guide.

One of the most influential writers of didactic fantasy of the Victorian Period, Scottish author George Macdonald (1824-1905), created his children’s books with a mindset to portray the transformation of the child in a land of wonder. His books are not written “to children” but “for children of any age” which gives his works a unique, child-like innocence that appeals to both children and adults who have a nostalgic respect for his imagery of childhood. He also wrote for adults, became a poet after the success of his novels, and devoted his life to the Congregational Church as a member of the clergy. He is perhaps best remembered for his fairy stories and fantasies written for children. After leaving the clergy due to his unorthodox and non-doctrinal views in his sermons, he became a professional writer and later converted to the Church of England. During that period, he made friends with Charles Dodson (Lewis Carroll)
and Alexander Strahan, the London publisher and editor of a children’s periodical called *Good Words for the Young* (Carpenter and Pritchard 329). The first installment of MacDonald’s *At the Back of the North Wind* appeared in the first issue of this periodical and was later published in book form in 1871 with *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Princess and Curdie* following suit in 1872 and in 1877. Admired by both C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, MacDonald “…was one of the first writers to give children an opportunity to rejoice over the wonders of their own world” (Higgins 9). MacDonald’s use of strong didactic language and fantasy in his writing helped to establish a precedent for combining fantasy with children’s books in order to teach morals to children. However, MacDonald never wrote for children, “…but for the childlike, whether five, or fifty, or seventy-five” (MacDonald qtd. in Carpenter and Pritchard 329). MacDonald never simplified his writing for children, but rather explored complex concepts through a lens of wonder which children and the childlike found enticing.

In MacDonald’s works, the conception of the child shifts from helpless beings that need a moral guide to attain moral maturity to independent agents who are learning to “teach themselves” morality (Ostry 50-51). MacDonald’s characters are removed from adult supervision for part of their *Bildung*, but still not without adult influence. This removal of direct authority shifts only slightly from some of the earlier Victorian novels for children, but it shows that the Victorians were perhaps becoming unsure of how to present the child in literature—whether the child should be allowed to be shown as innocent but carefully controlled by a very adult environment or culture, or whether children should appear as if free from adult influences on their journeys, yet still choose to conform to the advice of their moral guardians (Gubar 4-6). MacDonald’s moral guides become more mysterious and indirect with their children and appear to play much less of a role in the lives and moral journeys of their charges. In *The Princess and*
the Goblin (1872), MacDonald portrays a young Princess Irene who must learn how to be a princess from her ghost-like great-great-grandmother in the cozy setting of a fairy tale complete with goblins who can be frightened away by singing. Princess Irene’s great-great-grandmother conducts question and answer sessions with the young princess to help her in her journey towards maturity, but her questions are so obscure that even she admits that Irene will not understand them until she is grown up. Like a parent reading from a conduct book, the grandmother drills instruction in their conversations. When Irene gives the “wrong” answer to a question, the grandmother supplies the right answer.

For example, when the grandmother asks why Irene has been crying, Irene responds that she was lost in the tower and couldn’t find the staircase leading down. But this is evidently the wrong answer, or there may be at least one other way of perceiving the situation. The grandmother then points out, “But you could find your way up?” implying that Irene has come to her grandmother to have her tears wiped dry (MacDonald 12). The grandmother is older and wiser than Irene, so her answers must be correct and unquestioned. In the scene where the grandmother gives Irene the ring, Irene cannot understand why her grandmother has to keep part of her present, the ball of thread, from her. The answer is just as puzzling and counterintuitive: “But you must understand that no one ever gives anything to another properly and really without keeping it” (115). What the grandmother is really giving her is advice, which, if she did not keep herself, would be of no use to Irene. Since the grandmother cannot leave her tower and accompany Irene on her adventures, she gives her a ring attached to the ball of thread to help Irene find her way back to her grandmother if she gets lost (MacDonald 116). Irene goes on adventures completely independent of her grandmother, but she is still invisibly connected with her mentor in case anything goes wrong on her adventure. The grandmother, like early Victorian
moral guides, still maneuvers Irene toward moral growth, but leaves her to “learn the lessons for [herself]” (Ostry 46). In other words, the grandmother is sending an object to take her place as Irene’s moral guide, therefore indirectly assisting Irene, but letting Irene use her own judgment.

The works of George MacDonald are not without strong didactic language or moral guides that are so characteristic of classic children’s literature, but they open the door for a new wave of children’s literature that removes the moral guide from the adventure altogether and one that sees the child itself as both teacher and learner—allowing the child to experience adventures alone and somewhat unguided by strong authority figures, but still achieve moral maturity.

**The Postmodern Authority Figure**

Following the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, the use of the authority figure or moral guide shows itself to be an integral part of children’s fantasy. However, in contemporary children’s fantasy since 1950, books typically remove most of the positive authority figures from the life of the protagonist. The way that the protagonist achieves moral maturity has shifted back to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, where the protagonist learns by experience, and where the mistakes are more valuable than the successes. In order to complete the quest, the protagonist must often be placed in a world alone and unaided by authority. Generally, if an authority figure is present, he or she remains in the background, or is treated as odious and controlling.

With the start of the postmodern movement, readers and texts and the ideas surrounding them change. The reader comes to be understood as “…a co-producer, a co-collaborator of the Text. The reader takes on shared responsibility for the text’s ‘meaning’. As a result the Text always remains in motion; it is process, not product” (Marshall 135). In the last thirty years or
so, the authority figure plays a much smaller role and more of an emphasis is placed on
experience. Through this postmodern idea, children put themselves in the shoes of the
protagonist and experience the adventure or the story with that character even more so than
earlier texts, since their experiences are generally more realistic than those portrayed in the
Victorian Period. They then learn from their experiences instead of being told what to think or
believe by a moral guide who gives them the answers to their question. Thus through co-
collaborating, the reader “experiences” the text with the characters, learning the same lessons as
the protagonist.

Naturally, with the shifting of the *Bildungsroman* genre, the iconic role of the mentor
who helps mold the protagonist also changed. Eventually, in post-1950s fantasy, the authority
figure was elided altogether. Through a shift to a postmodern worldview filled with instability
and the constant quest for the self, the emphasis in the *Bildungsroman* shifted to focus more on
the internal, rather than the external, forces that shape children’s lives—a shift which was
anticipated by the rise of the Modernist novel in the early part of the twentieth century. Thus, the
authority figure is left out of the picture or rebelled against because of the emergence of the idea
that maturity occurs through knowledge of the self—an internal exploration rather than an
external one. The self becomes an “…inwardly generated phenomenon, a notion of personhood
based on the particular (yet strangely abstract) qualities that make us who we are” (Nealon and
Giroux 37). As a child grows, this notion becomes more and more concrete to the point where
the child can define exactly who they are based on cultural determiners such as race, economic
status, and gender. In these books, the only role that the authority figure can play is that of
recognizing the protagonist’s identity, which then solidifies that identity for the protagonist.
Identity in these books came to be viewed as something that was determined by outside cultural
influences that somehow left the self “untouched” (43, 36). In other words, it became no longer necessary for an authority figure to play a role in the actual formation of the protagonist since the protagonist had to discover his or her identity through experience and simply have that identity acknowledged by the authority figure or other supporting characters. The need for a guide is nonexistent in this period because children are now seen as more independent and are expected to learn from their experiences rather than from the words and advice of their mentors.

Fantasy in the postmodern era also shifted from a focus on moral growth to a focus on uncertain identity. Fantasy based on moral growth “…presupposes responsibility for one’s actions” meaning that the children in the stories learn the consequences behind their actions as they progress towards moral maturity (Manlove 107). However, postmodern authors focus instead on “a change or a loss of self, in part reflective of children’s uncertain grasp on their lives” (Manlove 107). Instead of depicting children as safe within the bounds of adult supervision and guidance, children are placed in “an annihilating gale of fears” and threatened by “figures of menace.” These books focus on darkness, horror, and the “sense of things being out of control” —a general feeling of insecurity and instability where reality is being shaken and tossed away (Manlove 199-200). Starting in the 1960s with the works by Roald Dahl and others, the stable, strong, authority figure of the Victorian period was replaced by a figure that lets children behave as they like and suffer the consequences—a learning by experience method of instruction.

Not only does this shift the type of instruction that children receive through stories, but also the role of the authority figure and how much direct influence the authority figure actually has on the protagonist. “…[F]or the first time in such domestic fantasy the children’s self-discovery is conducted without reference to parents, or to any ethic of fitting in with the family
or society. This leaves the self more open to instability” (Manlove 107). There is very much the feeling that children are on their own in the world when it comes to discovering their identity. It is not so much a rebellion against authority as a sudden removal of authority, which leaves children to cope without adult influence. Writer Alison Lurie attributes this in part to the construction of a subversive message in children’s books that deals with the private sphere instead of the public sphere (Lurie 9). In these books, the author takes the side of the child protagonist against the seemingly antagonistic parents or guardians. By portraying the guardians as foolish, nasty, or unfeeling, the author creates a subversive message against that authority. Previous works such as *Alice in Wonderland* blatantly oppose public authority through parody. To illustrate, the Caterpillar takes the place of a school teacher who teaches Alice absolutely nothing at all and the Red Queen plays the role of a very bad governess (Lurie 6-7). In Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach*, James’s aunts are terrifying and exert their authority over James in an abusive way. In the end, they pay for their misdeeds and selfishness by getting squashed by the peach (Dahl, *Giant Peach* 40). Dahl’s image of authority shows children that even adults can be selfish and not as morally mature as the earlier Victorian books had painted them to be. As I will show, J.K. Rowling herself joins this postmodern shift, poking fun at the Ministry of Magic, the authority that the Wizarding government represents, and how the real authority in the Wizarding World is incapable of stopping Voldemort. Arguably, there are no real strong or positive moral guides in the tale and the author chooses to side with the children against all adult authority.

Roald Dahl’s works are notably devoid of positive, strong adult figures. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), Charlie’s parents stay behind at home when Charlie and his child-like Grandpa Joe visit the factory. Outside of Charlie’s parents and grandparents, the most
influential person in his life is Willy Wonka, the owner of the largest chocolate factory in the world. Before he meets Wonka, Charlie is told that he is “the most amazing, the most fantastic, the most extraordinary chocolate maker the world has ever seen!” (Dahl, Chocolate Factory 11). Charlie and the reader already have a pretty good idea of who Wonka is by the time he enters the story. By feeding the reader this sort of anticipation of what comes next, Dahl effectively creates a character that his audience will respect—no matter how silly or quirky that character may be—and an authority figure that his audience will listen to.

Willy Wonka is an old man, yet he does not appear to be one. Wonka acts and thinks like a pouting child who refuses to grow up. His main purpose in life is to create a candy paradise for children—or at least, a place for Oompa-Loompas to live in peace with access to cacao beans (157). And who does he choose to run his factory when he is gone? A child. On whose shoulders does he place the responsibility of the largest chocolate factory in the world? A poor child named Charlie Bucket, whose experience with chocolate is probably the most limited of any child in the world. Wonka has no family, and he does not expect to treat Charlie as a son. “I don’t want a grown-up person at all. A grown-up won’t listen to me; he won’t learn…I want a good sensible loving child, one to whom I can tell all my most precious candy-making secrets—while I am still alive” (157). Wonka sees a friend in Charlie—someone he can trust. All the adults he ever trusted betrayed him and all he has left are children. Wonka represents authority, yet he himself is opposed to authority. He pokes fun at the adults on the tour of the factory and refuses to listen to any criticisms of himself or his factory. To him, the adults will control him and his factory in a way which would destroy his candy just as Slugworth and Prodnose destroyed his business by stealing his candy-making secrets. After his business became able to compete with other candy-makers, Wonka began to run his factory like a child and made it as
unconnected with the adult world as possible. His attitude toward adults seems to reflect Dahl’s own.

Part of Dahl’s portrait of dysfunctional child-authority figure relationships comes from his own childhood. His father and older sister both died of pneumonia when he was a small boy. The death of his father left him with the idea that his father had rejected him in order to be with his favorite child, Dahl’s older sister, who had died a month earlier (Donaldson). His experience at public school with cruel adults also helped to shape the image of authority figures in his writings (Rutledge). As Kristine Howard notes, each of Dahl’s stories contains at least one authority figure who is cruel and subsequently punished in some disastrous way—a reflection of Dahl’s own childhood memories (qtd. in Donaldson). All of Dahl’s characters are distinctly good or bad. The good are always rewarded and the bad are always punished for their misdeeds; there is no ambiguity between good and evil, but there is also less instruction from an authority figure on either. Dahl subverts the traditional Bildungsroman authority figure by giving the reader a character like Willy Wonka, who does not support the authority of the children’s parents, but upholds a child-like authority instead.

Like the Victorian dialogues, Willy Wonka does engage in question and answer sessions with the five children, but only gives them nonsensical answers. When the children misbehave, Wonka warns them not to, but does not prevent them from learning their lessons. Once each offending child has been carried off to be repaired, the Oompa-Loompas sing a song that reflects the moral lesson of that child’s bad habit which got him or her into trouble. It is not Wonka who does the explaining and teaching; it is the Oompa-Loompas. In the character of Willy Wonka, Dahl subversively sides with the children against their parents. In a way, Dahl satirizes traditional authority figures by making Mr. Wonka the wackiest—and yet the wisest—character
in the book. He seems so like a child, but yet seems more clever and authoritative than all of the children’s parents.

Charlie’s adventure in the Wonka Chocolate factory becomes a journey where Charlie sees what happens to naughty boys and girls. By the end, he learns from the mistakes of the other boys and girls and grows morally mature enough to take over the factory from Wonka. It is the story of a journey into another world that is so wonderful the protagonist chooses never to leave—a place that is the culmination of Charlie’s greatest desire, which is to have enough to eat in the form of chocolate.

Charlie’s adventure is in a world from which he had “previously been secluded…” and one which is “riddled with insecurity concerning the self…but founded on reality” (Manlove 116). The story itself takes place in our world, but inside the magical world of the chocolate factory, thus cleverly mixing fantasy with reality—two genres which had formerly been completely separate (Manlove 99, 106). Dahl’s fantasy is ordinary in that is takes place in our world without fairies or magic. By making his story ordinary, Dahl better relates to his child audience—a trend that continues in Rowling’s *Harry Potter*. In a way, Dahl sets the stage for coming works which focus more and more on the interior quest for the self—which is found, not in an outside, secluded world, but in a world of inclusion and belonging.

By the late 1990s, the world was stunned by a small British boy in spectacles training to become a wizard in the magical school of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Without a doubt, J.K. Rowling's seven-book series *Harry Potter* series has changed the way children’s books are written and published.
Despite her humble beginnings as a newly divorced woman and single mother, J.K. Rowling managed to write one of the most successful children’s book series of our times.

Rowling was born on July 31, 1965 in England—sharing the same birthday as her well-beloved Harry Potter. While at the University of Exeter, she studied French and Classics, and it was shortly thereafter that she came up with the idea of a young boy who goes to a school for wizards which would turn into the basis for her *Harry Potter* series. After a short marriage with Portuguese journalist Jorges Arantes, Rowling divorced and moved to Edinburgh with her daughter. It was during her time as an unemployed, single mother that she was finally able to write the story about the young wizard and send the manuscript off to many publishers before it was accepted by Bloomsbury and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* was finally published (“J.K. Rowling”). Since then, Rowling has published seven *Harry Potter* novels for children.

Although some scholars deride the *Harry Potter* series because of its immense popularity world-wide, it cannot be denied that Rowling’s approached to writing for children is not so different from Victorian authors. In an interview in the year 2000 with Brad Crawford, Rowling indicated that she, like other authors of children’s literature, does not simplify her writing for children or write with children in mind: “I never consider the audience for whom I'm writing. I just write what I want to write.” Like George MacDonald, Rowling believes that the message of her novels can be relevant to anyone of any age. Rowling has won many awards for her popular series and her books have been translated into seventy-three languages, making her the most popular—and wealthiest—writer of the contemporary period.

**Harry Potter and Genre Blurring**

Like other fantastical works from the epoch it represents, the *Harry Potter* series presents a careful blend of genres. *Harry Potter* does not fit nicely into a genre mold, which many critics
find problematic (Barfield 182). Not only does the series not fit a distinct genre category, but it deploys seemingly opposing genres and makes them work together in perfect harmony (182).

Rowling takes fantasy, the *Bildungsroman*, and the school story—the first an imaginative and creative genre, the second, a journey, and the last hard and cold realism—and melds them to create a complex retelling of a classic hero’s journey of formation and quest for knowledge (Steveker 80). Steveker makes a valid argument that can be extended further to include how the *Harry Potter* series does not only use the character archetypes from classic literature, but shifts the entire genre of the *Bildungsroman* itself to become a quest for not only knowledge, but self-discovery through the experiences of the protagonist without the need for a moral guide.

Rowling’s world is different from earlier fantasies in that her world is not imagined by the protagonist of the story and its readers, but simply exists alongside our own (Manlove 180). Colin Manlove calls *Harry Potter* “a celebration of reality” (178). Some scholars find Rowling’s emphasis on reality disturbing and problematic for the series to be labeled as a contemporary fantasy. John Pennington argues that Rowling’s Wizarding World is not consistent—meaning that Rowling’s rules for magic are not clearly defined according to notions of magic in fairy tales—and thereby fails to produce a sense of childlike wonderment in the reader like the early Victorian fantasies (92). Harry’s world is not a safe cozy one like that of *The Princess and the Goblin*. Harry and his friends live in constant fear of the return of the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters who can suck the very life out of a person with a single kiss. The scenes at Hogwarts are bright and cheerful, but there is always a dark threat hanging over the students. Unlike children’s books of the Victorian period, the *Harry Potter* series is meant to connect with contemporary children living in a postmodern age fraught with fear, uncertainty, and a lack of wonder; *Harry Potter* meets those needs by blending genres—the fantasy is more realistic, the school story is
relatable, and the *Bildungsroman* mirrors the everyday experience of the twenty-first century child on his or her journey of self-discovery and identity formation, though this journey will be marked by different expectations and a less than firm understanding that the self will be either constant or fully knowable to oneself.

The contemporary *Bildungsroman* reflects the historic struggle of previous iterations around the search for identity, but the newer form seems less indebted to the quest for moral maturity as in early children’s books. In *Harry Potter* the journey of the protagonist is no longer just about a kid growing up, but about a child finding, or at least seeking the self and an identity that seems elusive and threatening. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* we learn that Harry’s parents have been killed by Voldemort when he is still just a baby. In essence, Harry is born without someone to explain his identity or heritage to him. In the very first chapter, Harry enters the world of his aunt and uncle, never suspecting who he really is, “…not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous…” (SS 17). And his relatives, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, agree to raise him, but only so that they can erase the fact that Harry’s parents were a wizard and a witch. They want to blot out Harry’s ancestry and hide him from society every time some part of his true identity shows itself—as when he speaks with the snake at the zoo or magically escapes from Dudley and his cronies (SS 25, 27). As Leigh Neithardt observes in her article “The Problem of Identity in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone,*” Harry must struggle to create his own identity, even though it is being squelched by his muggle relatives (162). Harry’s relatives continually deny Harry’s identity and act as though it does not exist rather than re-affirm it like positive guides. Despite their attempts to silence his past, Harry is able to discover his identity with only a slight amount of help from Hagrid—who merely affirms and solves the final piece of the puzzle of Harry’s identity.
Harry’s journey, then, is a journey into inclusion and out of exclusion. Harry lives hidden away in a cupboard under their stairs, excluded even from the society of the Dursley family. When Harry starts receiving letters from Hogwarts, the Durselys remove him even further onto an island off the coast where the water literally creates a barrier between him and his discovery of his self. The house where his aunt and uncle take him is moldy, filthy, and in terrible disrepair. Just before Hagrid arrives, and just before he turns eleven, Harry hears a noise outside in the storm. His first reaction is that the rocks are crumbling into the sea—signifying the crumbling of the Dursleys’ lie, the barrier between him and his true identity that has kept him prisoner all these years (SS 45). His acceptance to Hogwarts is the first time Harry is “…embraced by a community instead of regarded as an outcast” (Neithardt 162). The magical Wizarding World, through the character Hagrid, breaks into the hut with brute force, bringing a partial end to Harry’s exclusion. At this point in the narrative, Harry becomes aware of his identity as a wizard, but it will take him until the end of the seventh book to discover what this really means.

Eventually, when Hagrid asks Harry about his family and heritage and Harry is clueless, Hagrid exclaims in disbelief: “Yeh don’ know what yeh are?” (SS 50). Hagrid does not ask ‘who’ but ‘what,’ implying that Harry does not understand his own identity. Harry knows who he is—he is Harry Potter, a small boy of eleven—but he has no idea that he is a wizard—the “what.” This is a question which Harry will pursue until the end of the series when he discovers he is another horcrux, inadvertently designed to keep Voldemort alive. Hagrid and the other moral guides in Harry’s life know the answer to Hagrid’s question but “It is Harry who must find out that he is a wizard—in his own way—and adopt that as part of his journey of self-discovery and knowledge” (Neithardt 167). But Harry needs to know what it means to be a
wizard and the extent of his magical powers so he is better able to complete his final task as hero of destroying Voldemort. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Harry encounters the Mirror of Erised—thinly disguised as desire spelled backwards—a mirror which shows the viewer exactly what he or she desires most. For Harry, he sees his family, indicating he desire for an identity (SS 208). In this instance, Harry does not seek out Dumbledore; Dumbledore finds him and gives him an explanation of the mirror—which plays a part in the discovery of the sorcerer’s stone later in the book. Harry begins to realize who he is the minute he looks into the mirror of Erised. He now knows the answer to Hagrid’s question: he is a wizard from a strong wizard family and nothing else matters, not even his quest to find the sorcerer’s stone (SS 209). The mirror shows him his true identity, which he finds fascinating and comforting. This is where Harry finally recognizes himself as a wizard; it is the first inkling of his true identity. What he does not know is his destiny, which is revealed as he ages and undergoes more training.

As the series progresses, Harry learns that he is not only a wizard, but he is also the only one who can successfully defeat Voldemort in the end. Harry’s identity is inextricably bound to Voldemort’s perverse being—neither of them can live without the other. Here, Harry must answer the question of who he really is in relation to the most evil man in the world. In reality, Harry’s ability to defeat Voldemort comes from his identity being connected with Voldemort. He is able to see into Voldemort’s eyes from time to time and feel some of his feelings.

In *Order of the Phoenix*, Harry starts having strange dreams about Voldemort—dreams where Harry becomes Voldemort and causes the death of innocent people. These dreams, as the reader discovers later in *Deathly Hallows*, are a result of Harry’s mental connection with Voldemort. “Left alone in the dark room, Harry turned toward the wall. A cracked, age-spotted mirror hung on the wall in the shadows. Harry moved toward it. His reflection grew larger and
clearer in the darkness….A face whiter than a skull…red eyes with slits for pupils…” (OP 586).

Again, the image of the mirror resurfaces in connection with Harry’s questions about his identity.

Harry is seeing a vision of Voldemort in the mirror, a signal to him of what he could become if he so chooses. But an evil like Voldemort is exactly what Harry has worked his whole life not to become. Harry sees his reflection in the mirror and instantly rejects it. He refuses his identity as being like Voldemort, just as he rejects the Sorting Hat’s suggestion to place him in Slytherin during his first year at Hogwarts (SS 121). This shows the readers that identity must be discovered by each individual person, and is not given arbitrarily. The Sorting Hat does not “grant” special abilities to the kids, it merely helps them to identify them within themselves (Neithardt 167). The series shows that Harry can be whoever he chooses to be—good or evil. As Leigh Neithardt argues “…identity is neither one-dimensional, nor it is fixed. It is never a simple “answer.” It shifts and alters as one changes and assimilates new knowledge and experiences into one’s own sense of self, wizard or Muggle” (172). The quest for identity spans the whole series—taking Harry from mentor to mentor until he realizes his final destiny to offer his life up to Voldemort so that his friends will live. Harry finally reaches his moral maturity and crosses the border between childhood and adulthood when he sacrifices everything and decides to fight Voldemort alone for the sake of his friends.

Harry leaves the confines of the Dursleys with Hagrid on his adventure to discover more about himself and the Wizarding World which he was born to inhabit. This is one of the strongest aspects of the books with which many children can identify. By using fantasy, the *Harry Potter* series allows children to escape to another world, but it also allows them to feel suddenly accepted alongside Harry. Children who may feel that they are different than their peers find an explanation for their loneliness in Harry’s experiences and learn to accept
themselves as unique. What makes this so interesting is that in previous children’s books, the protagonist journeys out to the Other—a place or person that exists outside the normal community and is foreign to the protagonist—in order to finish his or her formation. The children visiting the foreign land feel at home and accepted, but the fact remains that they are only in that world for a short period of time and must return home when their formation is complete. In *Harry Potter*, Harry must stay. He has to return every summer to the Dursleys, but that is only a temporary reprieve for his own protection, and hardly a place of refuge or support (HBP 55). In the *Harry Potter* series, Harry finds that he has been living with the Other and now has the opportunity to return and find his truest identity.

**Harry Potter and the Authority Figure**

When constructing her narrative, J.K. Rowling actually makes a move backwards towards the Victorian period by giving her hero guides to help him on his quest. She recreates and reinstates the archetypal character of the mentor and positive figure of authority which had been rejected by other postmodern authors leading up to this point. Harry has several guides to help him in his quest for identity, but unlike even the authority figures in Dahl’s books, Harry's guides disappear when he needs them most, which forces him to learn from his experiences alone. As in Victorian children’s literature, these guides are present, but instead of instructing Harry before all of his adventures and learning experiences, Dumbledore, Snape, Hagrid, and the other teachers use experience as a tool for identity formation, allowing him to discover his identity for himself on his own—who he is relative to the people around him. The quest for identity is a very lonely journey. In *Harry Potter*, Harry is surrounded by new friends at first, but they disappear one by one until Harry alone faces Voldemort. This pattern is present in
every installment of the series—it is essential that Harry is alone with Voldemort so that he can discover the next step of knowledge of his identity.

Of all the authority figures he encounters throughout the series, Harry’s most influential guide is the headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore is also the only wizard who fully understands who Harry is and what he will become. He “wants the young wizard to realize them [Harry’s abilities] in full as part of his quest to define his own identity” (Neithardt 162). Dumbledore guides Harry to help him find his identity on his own and not instruct him in morality like the Victorian guides.

We first meet Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* when he deposits baby Harry on the doorstep of Number Four Privet Drive. He resembles an old man with a pointy hat and seems a bit senile with his odd enjoyment of Muggle candy and all things charming and good, but this is apparently just the surface (SS 9-10). From the very start we learn that even Voldemort—the most evil and terrible person in the Wizarding World—fears Dumbledore (SS 11). Dumbledore gives the reader a sense of security. Nothing will go wrong while Dumbledore is around. Once we discover that Harry’s task is to defeat Voldemort, we realize that Dumbledore outshines Voldemort in magical powers and therefore he will make sure Harry succeeds. Dumbledore is wise, but not all-knowing. In a way, he learns alongside Harry and comes to realize more about the death eaters and how to destroy Voldemort as the series progress.

While Dumbledore exists to ensure Harry’s success in every adventure, he usually disappears when Harry and his friends need him the most. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Dumbledore remains a mysterious authority to Harry, but when Harry needs him most, he
disappears (SS 267). Dumbledore returns just in time to save Harry from death, although he hints that Harry and his friends were managing just fine on their own (SS 296-297). In order for Dumbledore to be a faithful and helpful postmodern guide to Harry in his adventures, Harry must fight his battles and learn his lessons alone. However, at the end of every book in the series, Dumbledore has a small chat with Harry, helping him to understand everything that has happened to him over the course of the school year. While they resemble the question and answer sections of the Victorian conduct books, these chats are merely to help Harry understand what he has experienced, instead of telling him what he will experience and how to deal with it. It is instruction after the experience instead of before, as in Victorian children’s literature.

By reinstating the mentor figure, J.K. Rowling composes a new direction for the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and Harry’s quest for the self. In order for a child to understand the self, he or she must have an outside force that acknowledges that identity. “Children are often defined by the adults who are prominent in their lives” (Neithardt 159). Children need role models in their lives in order to shape their own distinctive behaviors and traits and distinguish themselves from the people around them. Philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas explains that identity formation includes “external others” who must acknowledge one’s identity in order for that identity to become secure and real (Habernas qtd. in Steveker 72). Guides and mentors in Victorian children’s literature were meant to take the place of the parent in the instruction of morality, but in contemporary, postmodern children’s literature, this archetypal figure drops the habit of a moral guide and assumes the role of a barely present mentor in an identity quest. Rowling’s Dumbledore assumes this new role, but in the way in which Rowling has recreated it. Dumbledore and the other authority figures in Harry’s quest are there to acknowledge and cement Harry’s new-found identity of being a wizard when Harry first arrives at Hogwarts, but
that type of acknowledgment occurs only in the first installment of the series. The rest of the series focuses on Harry’s gradual discovery of his destiny to fight Voldemort. For the *Bildungsroman*, this means that the guide has once again become an integral part of the quest narrative, only this time the mentor prods the hero to search for something deeper and more complex than simply his physical maturation.

Dumbledore acts more as a guide to help Harry discover his true “self” rather than an authority figure to help form him or help him to “grow up” as in the early Victorian novels for children. In *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince*, Dumbledore finally tutors Harry one on one in preparation for Harry’s final climatic encounter with Voldemort. Harry’s education with Dumbledore consists almost entirely in experiencing other people’s memories through the Pensieve. In those memories, Dumbledore acts as Harry’s guide, pointing out things that Harry should anticipate during the memory and interpreting things for Harry. But Dumbledore himself does not instruct him—Harry’s own experience of the memories informs and teaches him. There are details about Voldemort’s history which Harry cannot understand without experiencing the memories (HBP 363). However, since Harry’s and Voldemort’s destinies are connected through the fact the Harry contains a portion of Voldemort’s soul in his body since the day he received his scar, the knowledge that Dumbledore gives Harry is not only relevant for him to discover more about his enemy, but also more for him to learn about himself, his identity, and how his enemy can affect him from within. When Harry finally learns that he is a horcrux, inadvertently created when Voldemort killed his parents, he learns the truth and his true identity as the one who will destroy Voldemort (DH 691). He already has heard the prophecy from *Order of the Phoenix* that “…neither can live while the other survives…” but now, through experiencing Severus Snape's memory he finally understands his destiny—the end of his journey—and has
reached the end of his quest (OoP 841). The next phase of his hero adventure is to find his way completely on his own, and to make his decision to die for his friends—the point of complete moral maturity.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the authority figures in Harry’s life prove themselves to be much less than the idealized shadows in Harry’s mind. Dumbledore is a more realistic person. Unlike earlier guides, Dumbledore has glaring faults that impact the future of his charge. He “admits to frailty and mistakes in his decision-making, showing himself much less than the idealized parental role model Harry would prefer…” (Barfield 187, OoP 826). Harry discovers that his father and godfather bullied the weaker kids at school, which disrupts Harry’s perfect vision of them as role models. Harry’s relatively safe world suddenly breaks when his godfather Sirius dies, leaving him with all sorts of questions about mortality and safety, an experience that mirrors the confusion and rebellion of adolescence.

In her article, “Harry Potter’s Archetypal Journey” Julia Boll argues that Harry’s journey fits into the typical hero’s rite of passage story. Harry embodies the archetypal hero, going through the cycle of the hero, “…from Innocent to Magician…” each year, with each year becoming more complex than the last (Hunter qtd. in Boll). Dumbledore, Sirius, and even Snape embody the role of the mentor, with Snape becoming more of the dark, mysterious mentor who “brings out the hero’s weaker sides and encourages him to face them” (Boll 90). Harry also has a number of “false” authorities or guides in his life—Professor Quirrell, Riddle’s diary, Gilderoy Lockhart, the Half-Blood Prince’s Potions textbook—things or people that Harry trusts completely at their first encounter, but who betray him in the end or prove to be less authoritative than they first appeared. Only Dumbledore remains Harry’s stalwart if imperfect guide, in whom
he seeks guidance throughout the entire series. Boll also briefly mentions Voldemort as a possible mentor for Harry, “teaching him where the darkness lies within his soul” (95).

Where the Victorian authority figures watched over their wards, Harry’s guides desert him because he no longer needs them.

And Harry saw very clearly as he sat there under the hot sun how people who cared about him had stood in front of him one by one, his mother, his father, his godfather, and finally Dumbledore, all determined to protect him; but now that was over. He could not let anybody else stand between him and Voldemort; he must abandon forever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one, that the shelter of a parent’s arms meant that nothing could hurt him. There was no waking from his nightmare, no comforting whisper in the dark that he was safe really, that it was all in his imagination; the last and greatest of his protectors had died, and he was more alone than he had ever been before. (645)

In this scene at Dumbledore’s funeral, Harry finally realizes that the strong, parental figures in his life are gone, a moment when he recognizes his identity, however unsure it may be, and the fact that he has grown up. They are gone because he does not need them. The battle is something he must finish alone without the aid of an adult. The only characters that Harry needs at this point are his friends who can continually re-affirm Harry’s role as hero. He no longer needs an authority figure, either to interpret the world for him or confirm his identity as hero and wizard. Thus, while earlier postmodern children’s books such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* demonstrated that a guide was no longer necessary in the formation of the child protagonist, Rowling has found a new way to re-incorporate this archetypal figure into her story, changing the role from the Victorian teacher and parent figure to that of a morally ambiguous
character who lets the protagonist roam in an unsheltered, frightening landscape alone, only so that he or she can become a moral agent through un-guided experience. Rowling’s guide is only necessary to answer questions of the protagonist, but not to instruct.

The *Harry Potter* series has issued in a new type of literature that focuses on the search for identity and acceptance. In the world of children’s book publishing, the series has spawned others like it that draw attention to the protagonist who discovers that he or she is actually out of place in our normal, modern world, and really belongs to a magical world within our own. In all these books, the characters have the ground pulled from beneath them as they discover that all they thought was true really is not. The child protagonists of these books discover their new identities all on their own without the help of a mentor. It is only after they find themselves in this new world that a mentor steps in to help them make sense of it. Thus, the mentor’s role is only to provide stability for a short time and point the children in the direction where they will gain the most from their experiences. Children in this age do not noticeably mature physically as in the Victorian books—or at least, there is less focus placed on physical growth and more of an emphasis placed on the discovery of one’s true identity. Thus, even in a literary world of instability and fear where nothing is certain, children discover the one thing they can take control of is their identity.


