

# 'The Boy who Lived' in the Cupboard: 'Queer Readings' and Rowling's *Harry Potter* Series

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## Abstract

The paper argues that the articulation of non-normative identities, desires and meanings are possible even within literary representations that are also forms of deliberations to conform to (hetero)normalcy. A queer reading of the popular *Harry Potter* series created by J. K. Rowling is attempted to identify the understated proclivities of subversion in texts that have a non-esoteric readership. Certain ideations that have emerged from queer theoretical discourses are applied in the process of interpreting textual aspects, especially pertaining to the two important characters of Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter. The aim is not to add to the significantly large amount of slash fiction that the series has generated and instead use the grounds provided by the author herself, purposively and otherwise, that bear affinities or may be read in terms of certain theoretical exercises in the field of queer studies.

**Keywords:** *Harry Potter*, queer reading, homosexuality and literary representations, non-conformity, heteronormativity.

## 1. Introduction: Why Queer Reading?

The research analysis, intended in the paper, discovers connections between the 'low brow' genre of popular fiction and the 'high brow' genre of theoretical discourses. This very distinction between respectable and non-respectable writings has also been challenged from within the academia pertaining to literary studies. Hence, the scope of this paper comprises references to the seven fantastic novels of J.K. Rowling, popularly known as the 'Harry Potter series' published in the years 1997-2007. The texts have an overwhelmingly wide readership and it is necessary to study the nature of this wide acceptance of this fiction. A queer reading of this series, or rather the two characters in the series— Harry Potter, the protagonist and Albus Dumbledore, a pivotal character in the series — helps in reflecting upon whether (and how) the popularity or acceptability can only be attained by succumbing to norms or, alternatively, there are certain (understated) possibilities of subversion. Hence, the focus is on situations and relationships that Rowling herself created of and around these two characters and the argument is that these examples from the novel lend themselves to analysis through the queer theoretical lens.

The impetus for such a research may be substantiated by observations made by Donald Hall, in *Queer Theories* (2003) about exploration of literary texts based on concepts that emerge from theoretical discussions on queer. In the chapter "The Queerness of 'The Yellow Wall-Paper'", Hall proceeds to argue that some texts may be deemed 'appropriate' for queer analysis due to the

latent or ‘normalized’ references to homosexuality (as in *Giovanni’s Room* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) unlike others where there no or only vague references to sexual desire. Hall (2003) suggests that when a text “contains few sexual implications or references to differing social valuations of desire”, it is still possible to undertake a queer reading, with “some textual detail with which to work” (p. 116). The seven novels of/ about Harry Potter are such texts where desire is presented as rather domesticated and only in form of heterosexual relationships. The study seeks to problematize this representation of desire and undertake an inquiry into the changeable connotations of a few situations that develop within the narratives.

It may be of note that most of the instances that shall be analyzed pertain to ideations about male homosexuality. This is because the female characters in the series are mostly of secondary importance. The essay “From Sexist to (sort-of) Feminist Representations of Gender in the Harry Potter Series” notes that quite few female characters like that of Hermione, Prof McGonagall, Bellatrix LeStrange, Mrs. Weasley and even Ginny, all of whom become increasingly important in the last three books of the series, do not salvage the “overall message related to power and gender still conforms to the stereotypical, hackneyed, and sexist patterns of the first four books, which reflect rather than challenge the worst elements of patriarchy” (Heilman, Donaldson, 2009, p.140). The authors provide a detailed analysis of several instances from the series arguing that most of the minor female characters “are depicted as anti-intellectual and most keenly interested in the low-status magic of the Divination class” and even the major characters like Hermione are at “the height of action. . . not typically very involved, and they are always fearful and emotional”(p. 146).

The current study recognizes the prevalence of these patriarchal (and heterosexist norms) in the series but chooses to argue that there are also possible interpretations of textual instances that may be instrumental in subverting norms of gender and sexuality. This argument is thus substantiated through the proposed ‘queer reading’ of the articulations about Harry and Dumbledore.

## 2. The ‘Secret and Lies’ of Albus Dumbledore

In fact, it is possible to argue that Rowling, herself, has invited an exploration of how much of her work may be critically examined through queer discourses when she recognized the homosexuality of a very important and well loved character in the series, Albus Dumbledore. A brief character introduction to Dumbledore would include his being the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, depicted as “*the greatest wizard of modern times*” (*Philosopher’s Stone* p. 77) for his intellect and valor, who is of crucial importance in all of Harry’s conquests. *The Guardian* reports in an article from October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007, that Rowling, at a Q&A session at New York’s Carnegie Hall, made the “revelation” about how she “always thought of Dumbledore as gay”. The report quotes Rowling elaborating on this back story: “Dumbledore fell in love with Grindelwald [a bad wizard he defeated long ago], and that added to his horror when Grindelwald showed himself to be what he was. To an extent, do we say it excused Dumbledore a little more because falling in love can blind us to an extent, but he met someone as brilliant as he was and . . . he was very drawn to this brilliant person and horribly, terribly let down by him”. Rowling’s declaration acquire significance, especially in the context of the first novel of the series which has the first appearance of the character as a wizard with an illustrious career that includes being “particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945” (*Philosopher’s Stone* p.77). The seventh novel depicts a letter by Dumbledore to this alleged lover where he expresses favorable sentiments about having “met” the latter (*Deathly Hallows* p.291). The report

proceeds to add that Rowling was amazed by the warm reaction of the audience and joked about “the fan fiction” this revelation would generate.

A relevant question in the context of this declaration is about its occurrence outside the textual boundaries. While it is noteworthy that the highly favorable audience reaction paints a hopeful picture against the stigma associated with homosexuality, the fact that author chose to make this ‘revelation’ outside the textual boundaries needs to be critically engaged with. The extract from the newspaper emphasizes that Rowling had always imagined Dumbledore as gay but decided not to make much of it. On one hand, it seems that the author refuses to recognize sexual preferences as parameters to make identity-markers for her characters. On the other hand, the preponderance of heteronormative love or familial love (conventional forms of affective ties) makes one think otherwise. Based on the article by BBC News from October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007 on the same ‘revelation’, Rowling reportedly said that she would have told her readers earlier if she had known that it would make them “happy”. Whatever may have been the reasons to keep Dumbledore in the ‘closet’ (the fear of popular disfavor or aesthetic necessities), such a decision does point towards the general invisibility (or ignorance) about non-normative sexualities in the hetero-social matrix that also includes the magical world of Harry Potter.

This lack of a textual engagement with Dumbledore’s homosexuality is a concern for queer studies because it repeats the pattern where literature is unable to reflect upon or articulate the consequences of self-comprehension beyond the social norms. As Michael Warner (1993) writes:

Every person who comes to a queer self understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. It means being able, more or less articulately, to challenge the common understanding of what gender difference means, or what the state is for, or what "health" entails, or what would define fairness, or what a good relation to the planet's environment would be. Queers do a kind of practical social reflection just in finding ways of being queer. (Alternatively many people invest the better parts of their lives to avoid such a self-understanding and the social reflection it would imply). (p. xii).

Quite evidently, Warner observes that there are different kinds of positions that one may take with regard to living outside the socially sanctioned sexual order. The novels’ lack of reflection on Dumbledore’s non-heteronormative sense of being eliminates the afore-mentioned “self-understanding” and “social reflection” on the part of the character. This can be argued as underutilized potential of the character who is lauded throughout the seven novels for his bravery and intellect.

More importantly, Dumbledore is shown as having great faith in the power of love. In the first novel, he emphasizes for Harry the power of love, “to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever” (*Philosopher’s Stone* p.216). Seven years later, in the seventh novel, he again advises the protagonist: “Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all, those who live without love” (*Deathly Hallows* p.578). Such statements about ‘love’, one of the most contentious issues in the context of the stigma that is associated with non-normative desires and affective ties, could have become more poignant in the context of Dumbledore’s sexuality. The poignancy is, however, not enabled as the textual

materials do not make non-heteronormativity or the stigma associated with, quite visible. Hence, the articulation is very important. The taboo is the worst crime of all”, writes Karla Jay ([1972] 1992) and invisibility is an aspect of this taboo. Jay further writes:

When I was growing up, I thought that I and perhaps one or two other people were the only homosexuals who had ever existed. I felt very alone and yes very ‘queer’. I read everything I could find hoping that there were other people, even the fictional ones, like me, that there were people with whom I could identify. But I read works from Socrates to Oscar Wilde, without discovering that I was not alone, because the critics, instead of pointing out my tribes-people, denied her existence and because the scholars would rather cut off their hands than put the work of a homosexual or a homosexual work in a school library. And yet, if they took the works of homosexuals and lesbians out of the libraries the bookshelves would be a lot emptier. (p.68)

The selected visibility of Dumbledore’s homosexuality is also another example of a literary work frustrating the hope of a person who “felt very alone” and “queer”, who turned to fiction for finding company and failed to identify with the character whose homosexuality was kept hidden. Even this incomplete self-comprehension of Dumbledore is also not acknowledged. Ironically, it is a notorious journalist, who seeks to avenge herself on Harry and Dumbledore, who ‘digs up evidences’ about Dumbledore’s purportedly one same-sex relationship in the novel and records it in a maliciously written biography “The Secret and Lies of Albus Dumbledore”. That happens to be the only fictional depiction of the character’s homosexual identity, reflecting the taboos around homosexuality without any direct attempt to subvert these taboos.

### **3. A ‘Cupboard’/ ‘Closet’ and Same Sex Desire for Harry, the Hero**

However, the textual materials in the series lend itself to not only this constructed absence of homosexual desire but its inadvertent articulation. In fact, it may be argued that the discussion of underutilized potential of articulating male homosexuality in the Dumbledore-Grindelwald story opens up discussions about other affections and relationships in the novels that may have been regularized to fit in the hetero-social matrix but actually have underpinnings that challenge this very matrix. Such a direction of reading is considerably substantiated by the concept of “reparative reading” (p. 150) by Sedgwick (2003), proposed as a more effective alternative to practices of “paranoid reading” as a form of queer reading. While “paranoid reading” focuses solely on “certain disarticulation, disavowal, and misrecognition of other ways of knowing” (Sedgwick p.144), the “reparative reading” also pertains to non-normative experiences but by following a different trajectory. Sedgwick begins the exploration of “reparative motives” as allowing for possibilities of being about “pleasure” which has been criticized as being “merely aesthetic” and “frankly ameliorative” labeled as “merely reformist” (p.144). The re-envisioning of the textual and non-textual instances in the context of queer theory above helps in reflecting upon the limited sustainability of normalcy. As Sedgwick writes further:

No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fanatamastic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects and ambitions and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are perhaps, the many ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (p. 150-151)

Based on such observations it becomes possible to read the subversive possibilities in at least one of these relationships, portrayals of which seemingly collude with hetero-social norms. This is to say that even if the existing literary culture has the "avowed desire" of "not to sustain" existences that do not pertain to heteronormativity, there are slippages from the benchmarks of normalcy in the processes of reading literature and these slippages lead to avenues of subversion. This means that reparative reading, while questioning the normative and dominant and disarticulating the same, looks into means of non-normative articulations, unlike paranoid reading, which is mostly about disarticulations. When non-normative existences needs to be articulated, there is a necessity to take recourse to "reparative motives" which pleases (a positive affect) and reclaims or ameliorates. In this regard, we can look into the trajectory of (emotional and ethical) growth in the protagonist, Harry Potter and discover 'new' or non-normative patterns of thought that are substantiated when studied through the queer theoretical lens.

Notably, Harry's story begins to gain momentum in the second chapter of the first novel (*Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* (1997)) with him living as a ten year old orphan with the Dursleys' who have been previously introduced in this fashion: "Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, of number four, Privet Drive, were proud to say that they were perfectly normal, thank you very much" (p.7). The 'normal' Dursleys ill-treated Harry, born of 'abnormal' parents to the extent that they made him do all household chores, clothed him only in their son's discarded clothes and fed him quite grudgingly. Also, Harry was kept unaware of his parentage. The marginalization of the protagonist continues further within the social matrix: "At school, Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang"(p.27). They also discourage him from thinking in an 'abnormal' fashion: "If there was one thing the Dursleys hated even more than his asking questions, it was his talking about anything acting in a way it shouldn't, no matter if it was in a dream or even a cartoon -- they seemed to think he might get dangerous ideas" (p.24). Later, they go to great lengths to prevent Harry from attending his school where he would be amidst other non-normal people and will be taught magic. Aunt Petunia's outburst of hatred towards this 'abnormal way of life' when asked whether she knew about Harry's being a wizard may be considered as an example:

"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that-that school-and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family! ... Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as - - as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!" (p. 14,15)

Petunia's reaction to Harry being a wizard echoes the hateful excommunication of the LGBTQ community from the various institutions in various cultures. Moreover, the genetic intent in Aunt Petunia's frequent mention of her ostracized and dead sister, Lily as being the original reason for the 'sin' in the family echoes of the genetic and the diseased qualifier associated with homosexuality. The words 'freak' or 'strange' or 'abnormal' used by Petunia for her witch-sister Lily bears resemblances with several terms of homophobic origin along with the word 'queer' which was later reclaimed. The patterns of discrimination and persecution of the 'abnormal' by the 'normal' occurs in the subsequent novels as well. For example, in the second and third novel

of the series, Dursleys try locking up the hero in his room, prevent him from doing his homework (which is practicing magic), encourage others to think that the 'Potter-boy' was of nasty character and attended the St. Brutus' Secure Center for Incurably Criminal Boys. Moreover, Harry is forced to "act normal" or remain hidden when Dursleys' would have guests (p.21). All such actions can be attributed to forms of stigmatizing or taboos Harry's existence for being different.

Significantly, Harry is made to stay in a cupboard as a bedroom within the Dursley house. The first letter from Hogwarts (the school of magic, which is the primary site of all Harry's adventures), as recorded in *Philosopher's Stone*, is addressed to "Mr. H. Potter/The Cupboard under the Stairs/ 4 Privet Drive/ Little Whinging/Surrey" (p.30). In the film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerers' Stones*, Dudley Dursley, the 'normal' child is seen stamping upon the stairs to disturb Harry sleeping in the cupboard beneath it. So the 'cupboard' is very similar to a 'closet' in being the symbol of the suppression of the normative over the oddity. Harry's initiation into adolescence coincides with his discovery of being a wizard, hence, his leaving the cupboard to find the wizarding world where he tastes acceptance, even affection and popularity for the first time in his life. His consequent owning of a wand becomes the material evidence of his emancipated self. So his 'coming out of the cupboard' can be read in terms of 'coming out of the closet'. There are also minor but significant references in the novels to the character of Dudley Dursley, the protagonist's cousin, with his streak of violence and practices of intimidating people, as signifying the hyper masculine identity that the 'odd' Harry does not possess and is, therefore, victimized for a while, till his self-recognition of being different and subverting the norms of the Muggle world imposed on him.

This is clearly not a direct recognition of taboos pertaining to marginalized sexualities. Yet, an attempt to read beyond the restrictions of normalcy highlights the possibility of creating newer meanings or multiplicity of meanings, destabilizing monolithic formations. Sedgwick, in her afore-mentioned work, questions the devaluation of pleasure and amelioration as motives of cultural and critical practices, which includes literary or fictional practices and takes recourse to a new queer reading as from a "reparative position" which is to "surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader *as new*"(p.146). Such a perspective of reading takes into account that there are fresher, newer and astonishing possibilities of knowing and expressing, even while challenging or rather repairing the existing knowledge. So, for a "reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise" (p.146). However, it is more than the matter of the 'cupboard' and the 'closet' that directs the queer reading of the Harry Potter series. It is possible to pursue a queer reading if we compare the depictions of relationships that Harry has with Sirius (his father's friend and his Godfather ) and Severus Snape (a teacher at Hogwarts who is revealed, in the seventh novel of the series, to have been in love with Harry's mother when they were at school together). With James' and Lily's untimely death their affection is realized in Harry but through 'queer reading' of "reparative motives", the depiction of both the relationships may be studied in relation to each other.

Notably, it is suggested by Mrs. Weasley in *Order of Pheonix* (p.84) that Sirius treats him not as his ward but as the replica of his dead friend Harry's being extremely similar in physical features to his father is also suggested as a factor that intensifies this emotion. Rowling avoids a direct confirmation of this suggestion as Sirius defies such a connection. However, it is certain textual instances about Snape and Harry that is relevant to the current research. From the very first book of the series, Snape is depicted as harboring a strong dislike for Harry. Dumbledore, the primary source of Harry's knowledge about the history of his parentage, explains as a reflection of

the hostility between Snape and James, further substantiating the quite evident similarity of physical features between Harry and his father. It is after Snape's death that the reader along with the protagonist, Harry, is made aware about the former's unrequited love for Lily through a magical envisioning of the deceased's memories. In the seventh book of the series, *Deathly Hallows*, it is revealed that Snape and Lily were childhood friends, a friendship that developed into romantic love for Snape. Lily and Snape fell out over the latter's inclinations towards dark magic. While Lily marries James, Snape became a Death Eater in the army of the dark wizard Lord Voldemort. Snape, during his services to Voldemort, unknowingly contributed to Lily's murder and being extremely repentant, swore to protect her son, Harry. When this romantic back-story is revealed, Snape's actions throughout the series gets reinterpreted as that of a positive character who looked after the hero, all the while seeming to hate him. It is in this context that two minute instances in the text become largely significant. In the first book of the series, Rowling writes about Harry's first evening at Hogwarts where Snape is the Potions master: "It happened very suddenly. The hook-nosed teacher looked past Quirell's turban straight into Harry's eyes" (p. 100). Snape's dying moment in the seventh book is also significant: "... Snape looked as though there was no blood left in him, his grip on Harry's robes slackened. 'Look ... at.... me ...' he whispered. The green eyes found the black, but after a second something in the depths of the dark pair seem to vanish, living them, fixed, blank and empty. ... and Snape moved no more." (p.528). Clearly, there is the recurrence of the manner in which Snape and Harry's eyes are connected. There are repeated references throughout the series to the 'green almond eyes' shared by Harry and Lily. It is in this context that it is possible to read into Snape's love for Lily being transferred to Harry, who has his 'mother's eyes'.

The above instances can be read in terms of Butler's reflections on invisibility of homosexual desire and Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" in *Gender Trouble* (1990). The essay points out that "Freud interprets the self-critical attitudes of the melancholic to be the result of the internalization of a lost object of love" (p.78) and in "melancholia, the loved object is lost through a variety of means: separation, death, or the breaking of an emotional tie" (p. 81). Both Snape and Sirius are represented as undergoing these processes and their emotional upheavals for the parents, Lily and James, acquire relevance in relation to the child, Harry. Based on the Freudian expressions of melancholia and mourning as interrelated processes of grieving, Butler hence argues in this manner:

In the case of a prohibited heterosexual union, it is the object which is denied, but not the modality of desire, so that the desire is deflected from that object onto other objects of the opposite sex. But in the case of a prohibited homosexual union, it is clear that both the desire and the object require renunciation and so become subject to the internalizing strategies of melancholia. (p. 75)

Based on Butler's observations, it is possible to argue that Snape's emotions towards Harry remain unexplained or understated in the series and even misrepresented for almost the entire series because, unlike Sirius's affection for James, it is Snape's romantic love for Harry's mother that is now reminisced in Harry's eyes. Both the desire and the objects of affection are changeable in Snape's relationship with Harry.

With trauma and idealization of loss as the tropes of reading homosexual underpinnings in the Harry Potter series, the relationship of Dobby and Colin Creevey with the hero must also be looked into. Initially perceived as silly hero worship, Creevey's (a Muggle born wizard) and Dobby's (a house-elf) loyalty for Harry unto death create a normative space of passion that seeks to conceal any indication of same sex desire. Colin Creevey, in spite of being an underaged wizard

who had been restricted from participation, joins the famous battle of Hogwarts, in the seventh book of the series and sacrifices his life, fighting for Harry. Such pathos also materialize in the death scene of Dobby with Harry crying out for help while Dobby who had been stabbed “had stretched out his thin arms to Harry with a look of supplication”. Rowling proceeds to write that “Harry caught him and laid him sideways ... ‘Dobby, no, don’t die, don’t die’. The elf’s eyes found him, and his lip trembled with the effort to form words. “Harry . . . Potter . . .” (p.385) In Harry’s relationship with Colin Creevey and Dobby where sacrifice as a masculine ideal becomes the guise for same sex passion. The problematization of desire as is apparent in the characters of Colin Creevey and especially Dobby who endangered his life more than once to save his Harry Potter is masked and to an extent resolved by the principle of masculinity or heroism where they sacrifice their life for the object of desire; in this sense, the culmination of this same sex desire can be avoided since it falls outside the normative space of heterosexuality.

Moreover, Butler describes the hegemonic account of gender formation as a narrative, while the alternative, buried “traces of a history of enforced sexual prohibitions” that actually produce the dispositions, is “untold,” a story that “the prohibitions seek to render untellable” (p. 82). It is therefore significant that most of the men who are important to Harry (except Ron) are characters who perish by the end of the novel. These men are often paternal figures but not always. They are instead bound a sense of devotion to Harry. As Butler notes, “the loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self” which is evident in Harry’s act of naming his progeny or taking Remus’ son into the family. Butler notes that “the loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self” (p. 57) Where Freud ostensibly implies a lost object of the opposite sex, however, Butler believes in the original existence of a ‘homosexual cathexis’, that leads to a subsequent and more acceptable heterosexual relationship, as is in Harry’s marriage with Ginny which is actualized only after the ‘men’ in his life are gone forever.

## **Conclusion**

The above study, therefore, substantiates the possibilities of alternative readings or newer meanings that help in countering the conformity to norms that is deemed characteristic for popular fiction. Given that the connotations of non-normative sexualities are understated or even concealed, these may seem to have little to do with the overwhelming popularity of the series. Yet, the manner in which the homoerotic discourse can be very well placed within the original texts indicates that the reader’s reaction to this fantasy fiction may not be merely within the dominant narrative of heteronormativity. Moreover, the texts have generated a surprisingly large amount of slash fiction, weaving stories of same sex love between the characters from the series. This is rather ironic, given Rowling’s restraint which is tandem with the official motto of Hogwarts: “Never Poke a Sleeping Dragon in the Eye”. Yet, the very fact that her narrative offers a scope for queer reading and also celebrates love as the most important kind of magic without attempting to define parameters of loving also proved relevant to the study. As the two major characters of the series rouse ‘suspicions’ of disavowing the hegemonic pressures of normalization, Rowling’s fiction anticipates in some sense the author’s current, more visible, support for LGBT rights.



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