New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory
Online ISSN 2347-2073 **Vol. III Issue III, July 2014**

INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE AND REDEFINING MEANING IN *HARRY POTTER*

Jessica Seymour
Southern Cross University, Australia
j.seymour.21@student.scu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper explores and analyses the phenomenon in which readers interpret words by privileging their previous experience of them; even when that experience directly contradicts the word's use in a narrative. The imposition of alternative meanings onto words which are used within a specific narrative discourse often leads to fallacious conclusions about the ideological and spiritual themes in the text. This paper offers an exploratory, evidence-based critique of the interpretive practices of Harry Potter critics who base their examinations of the narratives on contexts outside of the narratives themselves. After briefly outlining the critical conclusions which focus on spiritual and mythological signifiers in Harry Potter, this paper offers an alternative analysis of those signifiers; with specific reference to the usage of these words in the narratives. When a word's usage in a narrative is privileged over its accepted meaning in real-world discourses, critics gain a clearer understanding of the narrative as a whole.

Who do we trust to make meaning; the text, the reader or the author? The question of authority over texts has been debated among academics since Roland Barthes' pivotal work on the 'death' of the author (Barthes); which explores how power over the words and meanings in written texts ought to fall in favour of the texts' readers, due to the author's physical absence from the text once it is published and publically available. Some popular and academic critics take the reader's ownership of the text to mean that they can argue against the use of certain words, symbols and expressions within a narrative when their usage does not comply with the critics' understanding of them. While there can be no question that each individual comes to a text with preconceived understandings of word meanings and experience in interpretation, the intention of the author in setting out to communicate a certain idea cannot be ignored, nor can the way words or symbols are expressed within the narrative context. How much of the critics' understanding of the text comes from the text itself, and how much is projected onto the text by critics who refuse to engage with the narrative's meaning-making paradigm? What happens when the meaning garnered by critics directly contradicts the internal logical consistency of the text itself?

This paper argues that when a narrative expressly assigns meaning to a word or signifier, either through usage or through explanation, that meaning should be recognised and privileged even when it contradicts the reader's experience of the word in everyday use. Readers who take complete ownership of the text can occasionally disregard the meanings of certain words and phrases as they are used by imposing their own meanings, and ignoring any

elements of the text which contradict their personal response to it. While this may or may not be the reader's right, it can be awkward when the reader's personal imposition of meaning works in direct opposition to the meanings established within the narrative context. Narratives, particularly fantasy narratives which is constructed to divert from the established cultural norm, rely on a certain level of suspension of disbelief and willingness on the part of the reader to accept the internal logic of the story.

The focus of this paper is the problematic way that some critics both in the academic and popular discourses approach meaning-making and interpretation of non-realistic fantasy texts, which rely on re-imagined words and concepts to create the textual world. Popular criticism, including magazine articles, blogs, and analytic books, is widely consumed by the contemporary Western public. First, this paper will examine how popular critics engage with signifiers in the popular *Harry Potter* series, the different theoretical frameworks which they implement to justify their analyses, and why their approach is problematic. This essay will then examine the signifiers which critics take issue with as they are used within the narrative context of *Harry Potter* – including their redefined meanings and their implications for the overall narrative progression and character development.

The fictional meaning of a word, or signifier, and the everyday meaning interact with at the site of the reader – and the reader can choose which meaning to privilege in their own interpretation of the text. Derrida's work on the centre of cultural meaning-making (1993) explains that while the relationship between a signifier and its meaning is arbitrary, using the signifier in context centres its meaning by providing a discourse through which it can be judged. Unlike spoken conversations which engage two active participants in negotiating meaning-making, the text must make its re-imagined signifiers clear by establishing their meaning through their use. The reader comes to the text after this centring of meaning has taken place. This re-imagination often has specific ramifications on the narrative and plot, and so the meaning of the signifier within this new context should be privileged in interpretive practice when it diverts from its everyday use.

The *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling is a fantasy series which follows the title character through his experience at a magical boarding school. It is a seven book series which has inspired eight films, three companion novels, dozens of academic books and articles, hundreds of merchandise items and a theme park (Anelli). It is one of the highest selling book series of all time. It is also one of the most controversial; the series has been banned in a number of schools and libraries, and has become one of the most challenged book series in history, most often because readers have interpreted the use of magic in the series as indicative of Satan worship and a direct attack on Christianity (Abanes). In keeping with the traditions of the fantasy genre, Rowling uses recognisable signifiers and redefines them to be used as narrative devices; either to reinforce characterisation or to further various plot points. These terms are often borrowed from mythology, the occult and Pagan theology, as a way of enhancing the overall non-realistic atmosphere of the story. Rowling alters the meaning of words to better suit the purposes of her narrative and, in doing this, re-imagines the signifiers within the discourse she has created.

Religious critics invested in the moral education of young people became particularly interested in the *Harry Potter* series because it grew to popularity so rapidly. Many religious commentators first became aware of Harry Potter when a satirical email began circling claiming that the series mentions Satanism by name and that Rowling herself was a practicing Satanist (Anelli). In fact, many of the organisations and groups which argue for *Harry Potter's* removal from bookstores and libraries openly admit to never having read the books; they have only read what commentators say about them (Anelli). This disturbing fact renders popular culture criticism, and the accepted practice of using outside sources to further interpretive discussions, worthy of scholarly examination. Even when the 'critic' is not being academically rigorous, their studies have a lasting effect on the way that people engage with narratives.

The fantasy genre frequently uses realist principles and redefines them to suit the purpose of a particular narrative. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien's elves are physically beautiful, wise and attuned to the natural world, while Gregory Maguire's *Wicked* elves are green-skinned, stupid and shallow. The Brothers Grimm imagined elves as little naked men who occasionally kidnap children and make very expensive shoes in their spare time, and Rowling imagines elves as tiny, subservient creatures who work as slaves in wizarding households. The use of a word or signifier within a specific discourse changes its meaning, particularly when that discourse exists outside of reality. The problem with fantasy texts, or any written narrative, is that readers are culturally biased towards interpreting signifiers in a certain way. This can lead to the imposition of meanings onto a word even when a narrative explicitly redefines it. The *Harry Potter* series removes several signifiers from their Western cultural context and their previous usage in other fantasy texts, and then redefines them within the narrative world. Critics of the series often impose their personal understanding of these terms onto the narrative and justify these responses with reference to context and discourses outside of the series. This is especially true in cases where signifiers have spiritual connotations in a different context, such as a religious or spiritual discourse.

Readers may decide that they prefer the elves as Tolkien describes them, and refuse to accept the definition offered by Rowling despite the necessity of her elfish characterisation to the overall plot of the narrative. In contemporary literary criticism, the emphasis on reader-oriented theories has led to the logocentric ideal of the reader's context as being more important than the written context. If the narrative relies on this new definition for the development of plot and characters then the reader can become alienated from the text by virtue of their refusal to engage with the fictional reality. Many critics approach fantasy texts with these spiritual concepts and ideas in mind because they expect the narrative to have a pedagogical application. They expect that any religious themes which are depicted in a children's text will have a direct effect on the spiritual well-being of the young reader.

The popular assumption among critics is that children require protection and censure due to their relative inexperience, and that if children have too much freedom in the texts they engage with, then their morals will be compromised (Nikolajeva; Zipes 2002; 2009; Nodelman). This expectation relies on the assumption that the child is a blank receptacle for adult agendas, and novels targeted towards young readers have attracted much scholarly

criticism due to the perception of the child reader as being particularly vulnerable to ideologies in texts. Children's and YA literature are notable genres of fiction because, unlike women's fiction and post-colonial literature, the demographic which primarily consumes the media does not create it. Children's literature academics have been divided on the subject of the readers' passivity within the discourse; with many arguing that the adult author has colonized the child by using children's and YA literature to perpetuate adult values (Nikolajeva; Zipes 2002; 2009; Nodelman).

Zipes is a particularly noteworthy scholar in this instance. His conclusion that children have been turned into "investments" (2002 xi) whose only purpose is to consume the media created for them by adults is discussed at length in his *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. He explores how the conservative ideals in *Harry Potter* are used to indoctrinate the child into the capitalist ideas of modern Western culture. Zipes' conclusions are never referenced in popular culture criticism which argues that the *Harry Potter* narratives glorify witchcraft (Abanes; Roper). Despite the considerable ideological differences between critics' conclusions about the *Harry Potter* series, their motivation remains constant: to determine the 'intended' subtext of Rowling's work. While Zipes assumes that any conservative themes he identified are deliberate manipulations on Rowling's part, other critics like Jack Roper and Richard Abanes argue that the use of occult signifiers demonstrates a desire to indoctrinate the child reader into anti-Christian ideologies.

Whichever approach is taken by critics, there is an assumption that the author is being deliberately manipulative; and that the conclusions drawn by critics are an accurate reflection of the narrative's subtext. Perry Nodelman writes:

> If colonialist thinking tends to conceive of people as colonisable in part by perceiving them as childlike, it seems logical to suggest that adult thinking about childhood is inherently colonialist already. The metaphor of childlikeness applies most immediately to children themselves – and children's literature might be best characterized as that literature that works to colonize children by persuading them that they are as innocent and in need of adult control as adults would like to believe (163)

While these studies address the potential for 'colonized' readers to internalise the normative ideals of the author, what remains to be investigated is whether the fiction itself constructs young people as submissive and dependant on adults for guidance. That is, whether contemporary fiction colonises the young reader by portraying them as submitting to the 'intentional manipulations in the fictional narrative. These questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but they do explain why popular critics like Abanes and Roper pay such close attention to the signifiers used in *Harry Potter* and their ideological connotations. The assumption that critics make of the young reader's pliability is what prompts their religious readings of *Harry Potter*, and their interpretations of the series are frequently characterised by the use of occult dictionaries and the *Bible* to centre the signifiers within religious discourses and interpret their meaning accordingly.

When a signifier is used in a commonly-accepted manner, then the author cannot logically expect to exercise power over its interpretation; but when the signifier is used in an unusual context and the discourse re-imagines its signified meaning, then the author is creating an expected alternative meaning to the commonly-accepted one. Fantasy texts use suspension of disbelief to allow the reader to explore the more non-realistic elements of the plot and narrative devices. It is a convention of the genre, and most readers who approach a fantasy text do so with an expectation that they will be engaging with a narrative world which is both familiar and unfamiliar. The text uses the genre convention of suspension of disbelief in order to accommodate the redefined meanings of signifiers. The author, as creator of the alternative context in which the signifier is read, would logically be the meaning-maker in that context. Occasionally, particularly in non-realistic genres such as fantasy and speculative fiction where re-defining signifiers is accepted practice, the use of a signifier in a particular context can denote a new meaning specific to the text.

'Elf' is a signifier which, as stated above, is a frequently re-imagined concept in fantasy, requiring a narrative context in order to be fully understood as well as a willingness on the part of the reader to engage with the discourse as it stands. In *Chamber of Secrets*, the second book in the series, Harry meets a house-elf named Dobby who serves the Malfoy family. House-elves, in *Harry Potter*, are described as small creatures with "bat-like ears" and unusually large eyes (Rowling 1998 15), and are considered a symbol of wealth because only the richest pure-blood families own one. Jack Roper uses the *Bible* and *The Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult* by Neville Drury to redefine Rowling's use of the term 'elf'. When applying meaning to the signifier, Roper comes to the following conclusion:

> The Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult by Drury has this to say: Elves were spirit-creatures that were hidden from God's sight because they were unclean. The Bible calls them demons in Mark chap. 1:26-27. Can we call these elves "dinky demons"? (n.d.)

Roper's approach to the narrative is to take a term, pull it out of the discourse in which its meaning is centred, and redefine it from the perspective of a specialist dictionary. He supports his interpretation using an alternative context – one created by a textual discourse established outside of *Harry Potter*, which is never referenced by *Harry Potter*, and which exists in a radically different genre. The occult dictionary is non-fiction. *Harry Potter* is fantasy. Readers approach these genres with different expectations about how signifiers will be used: for example, occult dictionaries define the previous uses of terms such as 'elf' as they have been used within the spiritual discourse. If a reader is familiar with that discourse, or has had occasion to engage with 'elf' in that context, then they can reasonably expect a certain meaning. The expectation is that the signifier's use in this context will be familiar. However, in the fantasy discourse, the reader approaches the genre with the genre expectation that real-world uses of signifiers which denote invented creatures will be open to continued re-invention. By using the occult dictionary to centre his interpretation of the signifier 'elf', Roper creates a connotation and expectation of the word's meaning by referencing discourses with no relationship to Rowling's text.

I find it very difficult to imagine that JK Rowling would intentionally provoke the wrath of conservative Christian readers by redefining signifiers in *Harry Potter*. Not only is she a practicing Christian herself, but it is very unlikely that she was considering the potential backlash while she was writing these signifiers within the context of the *Harry Potter* series. Speculating about her intensions would lead this paper's argument down the same problematic critical trajectory of the critics it is arguing against. I would cautiously concede that Rowling's redefinition is a deliberate manipulation of the purposes of these terms, but the redefinition of words is considered common practice in fantasy writing. Rowling is not being deliberately provocative; she is following accepted genre conventions.

It is very easy to argue that the reader has a right to this interpretive freedom. After all, one of the key beliefs of reader-oriented theory is that the reader ultimately has the most interpretive power over a text. Roland Barthes's essay 'The Death of the Author' heralds the death of the author, or the death of the assumption of the author as being the most powerful figure in the text, and the birth of the reader as an active, engaged consumer. His analysis attacks the assumption that the author is the ultimate source of knowledge, since the author is themselves a product of a language and social culture which predetermines meanings which can be gained from signifiers. He concludes that the desire to impose limitations on the reader's ability to take meaning from a text is a form of institutional control. For Barthes, reading is a productive practice in which the reader is liberated from the process of discovering, or pretending to discover, what the author intended – and is instead focused on gaining their own unique knowledge from the text. Michel Foucault's essay 'What is an author' argues that the author as a source of meaning had been so ingrained in critical theory up until that point that other concepts and ideas have sprung up around the author in order to support this claim. In order to widen the potential for the text, the author's own power over interpretation and meaning-making must be done away with.

This paper argues that the reader's interpretive power, when exercised without restraint or due reference to the text, creates a situation where interpretive practice becomes less about the text itself and more about whichever theoretical framework the critic has chosen to implement. Attempting to supersede the meanings of words used in a textual discourse can be harmful to analysis, and it appears to be accepted practice in some areas of popular criticism which are regularly consumed by the public. This literary criticism therefore has more power over the interpretive practices of readers than the closed-world of academia. Academia, unfortunately, also frequently engages with interpretive practices which hold texts accountable to outside discourses for meaning-making. This is often the case in philosophical criticism. Some children's literature academics have been known to apply outside philosophies onto literature, and then criticise the texts for not adhering to those philosophies. At the *Brand of Fictional Magic* conference at the University of St Andrews, the first academic conference dedicated to *Harry Potter* scholarship, Clementine Beauvais gave a keynote address examining the Platonic themes in the series. Beauvais connected Harry Potter's education under Albus Dumbledore thematically to the paideia of the Philosopher King in Plato's *Republic*. She argued that his education should have enabled Harry to become a great leader in the Wizarding world. Instead, she went on, Harry's decision to remain out of

the public eye and devote himself to family is a waste of his potential and an ultimate betrayal of Dumbledore's plans for him. But this argument assumes that a) Rowling meant for Harry to embody the Cave allegory, and b) that because Harry bears a striking resemblance to Plato's Philosopher King, he is bound to the Philosopher King's fate in the *Harry Potter* series. By imposing the Philosopher King onto *Harry Potter,* Beauvais was arguing about what was 'meant' to happen to Harry, instead of what actually happens.

I would argue that Harry's decision to remain family-oriented instead of seeking a power position in the Wizarding world represents autonomy from the expectations of Albus Dumbledore. Drawing on Beauvais's use of the Cave allegory, I would conclude that Harry's decision to educate Voldemort (explaining Voldemort's mistake in trusting Snape and how he can go about rebuilding his soul to avoid a fate worse than death) indicates his resolution to liberate his fellow prisoners by sharing the knowledge kept from them. In short, he fulfils the Cave allegory, just not in the manner which Beauvais anticipated.

Elizabeth Galway's 'Reminders of Rugby in the Halls of Hogwarts: The Insidious Influence of the School Story Genre on the Works of J.K. Rowling' condemns critics who "resist the attempt to position Rowling's books within a broader historical context and to explore her work in relation to that of earlier writers" (66), and while contextualising literary works can provide insight, it can become problematic when these readings attribute philosophies which are not present in the work. For example, Galway makes the case that "[u]nderneath its magical facade, Hogwarts, like Rugby, ultimately serves to mold the hero into a member of the ruling elite and an ideal masculine citizen, ready to defend and uphold the values of his school and the community to which it belongs" (82). This argument does not account for the text's active resistance of several values propagated by Hogwarts school; such as the tendency towards practice-based pedagogy over theory (Bassham), which is portrayed as useful but ultimately destructive to the student body, and the institutionalised racism present when teachers refuse to punish bullies who attack Muggle-borns. My own work on depictions of Elf slavery in Harry Potter (Seymour) demonstrates Harry's initial complicity, but eventual rejection of the ideologies which celebrate wizard supremacy and elitism.

As I explain earlier in this paper, critics and academics often approach children's literature expecting a pedagogical application to the text. Religious criticism has become particularly relevant to children's books because their expected pedagogical utility can extend to indoctrinating young readers into the moral beliefs of the culture. When texts are perceived as not adhering to the expected moral practices of the majority (in this case, the Christian ethos) then the texts are censored, banned and, in *Harry Potter*'s case, burned, out of fear that the child will be indoctrinated into alternative beliefs. This is, of course, ludicrous because the assumption that the child will blindly submit to whichever ethos is advocated in a text assumes that they have no willpower or moral and ethical context from which to view alternative beliefs (Melrose). *Harry Potter* is not alone in this treatment; many texts including *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis) and *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien) have also attracted similarly destructive criticism (Abanes).

Richard Abanes is another critic of *Harry Potter* who decontextualises the signifiers in the series and then recontextualises them in an alternative context before attempting to interpret

them. Abanes is a self-described religious scholar who writes popular books denouncing various aspects of popular culture which does not adhere strictly to the Christian faith. While his work may not demonstrate scholarly rigor, in styling himself as a religious scholar, Abanes he is holding himself accountable to the same academic expectations as other critics. That includes the expectation that his conclusions are justified by the texts he is analysing. His critical works include *Harry Potter, Narnia, and The Lord of the Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies* (2005), *What Every Parent Needs to Know About Video Games: A Gamer Explores the Good, Bad, and Ugly of the Virtual World* (2006), and *New Earth, An Old Deception: Awakening to the Dangers of Eckhart Tolle's #1 Bestseller* (2008). He has also published extensively on Christian and Mormon practices.

Abanes approaches the use of words and signifiers generally attributed to mythology in *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick* (2001). The title itself demonstrates Abanes's approach to the *Harry Potter* series, because he has deliberately chosen to use the occult spelling of 'magick', instead of the spelling 'magic' which is used in the narrative. This indicates Abanes's desire to remove signifiers from their context in *Harry Potter* and establish their meaning in a separate discourse before attempting to engage with them. Abanes brings many of the signifiers used in the *Harry Potter* series to task in order to demonstrate the inherent evil in the narratives. These include the use of ghouls and anthropomorphised animals. Abanes argues that there is "a great deal of symbolism, language and activities honouring witchcraft" (2001 4), and writes that the use of supernatural signifiers indicates the dependence of the narratives on the occult and Rowling's desire to lead children down a path towards witchcraft.

Abanes reads the words and phrases in the series and draws conclusions about the surrounding characters and narrative themes, which is a common tool of textual analysis. He approaches the use of ghouls and anthropomorphised animals in the series as an indication of the evil of characters who engage with them. He writes that the Weasleys allow a ghoul to live with them, even though "[a] ghoul, according to occult legend, is "[a]n evil spirit supposed to feed upon human corpses…"" (63, change in original). Abanes argues that the Weasleys are "perfectly content having this entity dwell with them as a long-term guest", and se they must be evil by association (63). Since Abanes has defined ghouls as "evil spirits", a character who has one as a guest in their house could be 'evil' if he is assuming that all spirits in occult tradition were once mortal humans. It is written in Deuteronomy 18:11–12 that a person who consults with the dead is detestable to the Lord, and Abanes's critical approach to *Harry Potter* relies heavily on biblical uses of signifiers, and so it would be logical to assume that Abanes is approaching the word 'spirit' with this in mind. Abanes also notes the use of animal 'familiars' throughout the series – particularly the cats owned by Hermione Granger and Argus Filch – as being textbook examples of the occult and demonstrative of Rowling's wicked intentions because witchcraft is outlawed in Deuteronomy 18:10: "There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer".

This paper's argument owes much to the traditions to New Criticism, which developed out of the debate as to whether or not authors or readers had the most power over a text. As

discussed above, Abanes approaches the *Harry Potter* series under the assumption that any occult themes he recognises are intentional. Indeed, many critics, including those more sympathetic to Rowling such as Connie Neal (2001; 2008), and John Granger (2010; Granger & Bassham) approach the narratives assuming that their interpretations align with Rowling's intentions for the work. The concept of 'intentional fallacy' was first used by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley (1946), who argue that the meaning of a narrative or text does not originate with the author's intentions. At the time of publication, literary criticism was broadly focused on author-oriented theories and finding meaning in the biographical context of the producer of the work, and Wimsatt and Beardsley's radical counterargument posited that finding meaning in a narrative could not be settled by privileging the author's stated or supposed intentions. It is not, they write, what the author *means* by the work, but the work itself which is most important in meaning-making. The 'affective fallacy' (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949) works in a similar line; arguing that the subjective effect a narrative or text has on a reader is likewise unimportant in literary study. The text itself embodies the meaning, and its objective structure is therefore the best reference to use when divining meaning.

The concepts of intentional and affective fallacy became an integral part of New Criticism, which holds that the object of literary study should be texts and how they are structured to disclose meaning, rather than what meaning can be divined from a text through familiarity with the author's background. But there is a relationship of causality between the author and the text which is difficult to ignore in critical discourse. ED Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* rejects the approach of New Criticism, and Wimsatt and Beardsley's works, arguing that the author's intention cannot be completely removed from a text because the text itself was intentionally produced. That is, the author's desire to produce a narrative is intentional, and the proof of that intention is in the product itself. This response came during the rise of Freudian criticism (Harland), which privileged the conscious and subconscious decisions of the textual producer in interpretation. Hirsch's intentionalist view argues that words cannot exist without a context, and thus their meaning can only be determined by a mind through a discourse. Thus the power of interpretation lies with the author, who creates the discourse in which a word is used.

Rosemary Maier's analysis of Wimsatt and Beardsley's 'intentional fallacy' calls into question the lack of contextualisation given to words like 'fallacy' and 'intention'. Without an explanation of what Wimsatt and Beardsley mean, she writes, it remains unclear whether their argument "is merely a timely pejorative, or whether it denotes a real perversion of critical logic" (137). Maier, like Hirsch, takes issue with the apparent desire of Wimsatt and Beardsley to cut the author entirely out of the critical process, arguing that there is a significant difference between the intentions which the author has upon beginning a text and what intentions they have for its meaning once it is complete:

> The literary intention – the intention which is at issue in Wimsatt's and Beardsley's article – is the author's knowledge of his potential literary work. What has contributed to much of the controversy about "intention" is the lack of clarity regarding the kind of potential being discussed. What *might-*

> *be* is sufficiently inchoate as knowledge for it to be disregarded in this discussion; the distinction between the poem (or novel, or what-ever) as the author thought it *ought-to-be* and it *would-be* is one of the crucial distinctions implied by Wimsatt's and Beardsley's argument. At the risk of oversimplification, the *will-be* kind of intention must be seen as closer to the poem itself (*as-things-are*) than the *ought-to-be* intention (138)

Essentially, Maier argues that the author's plans for the work ought to be considered in the critical process, but that the author should not attempt to control the process of meaning-making or analysis once the work is complete and in the hands of the public. The author's unrealised intentions for a work, Maier writes, have no relevance to criticism because these unrealised intentions are divorced from the actual text being analysed.

The reader may not always have access to the author's thoughts on the text, so arguably the best way to discern any intended meaning would logically be through the author's use of language in the narrative. These meanings, intended or not, are steeped in a rich tradition of socially constructed language use. Signifiers (or words and signs) exist in a context or discourse which gives them meaning; in this case, the discourse is the text produced by an author for a reader. The reader may not be the intended audience of the text, so they may not approach the discourse in the way that the author is expecting. In this situation, the reader may interpret different meanings from the signifiers used. Emile Benveniste's work on the nature of the linguistic sign argues that words require context in order to be readily understood, and this context takes the form of discourse. Benveniste takes a somewhat alternative route to New Critics, who argue for the structuralist perspective to literary inquiry, by arguing that there is no 'universal truth' to be garnered by signifiers. Instead, the 'truth' is relative to the discourse which constructs it. Benveniste argues that just because critics have accepted the bipartite nature of the sign, it does not logically follow that the sign can be considered arbitrary or readily transferable. It can only be so if a discourse re-imagines it, or uses it in an alternative context which redefines its meaning.

V. N. Vološinov's Marxist philosophy of language argues that the meaning of signifiers is produced socially; not only linked to the sound of the word itself, but with the "extraverbal factors of the situation" (79). The key word here is 'situation'. Meaning-making is situational and context-dependant. There are many critics who disregard the context of the narrative and the signifier's application within it in order to infer meanings which go against the meaning implied by the text. Derrida's concept of logocentrism is the view that speech, and not writing, is central to language. The emphasis on reader-oriented theories has led to the logocentric ideal that the reader's context, external to the text, is more important in meaning-making and interpretive practice than the written context. This creates conflict and contradiction because the meaning imposed on signifiers by readers may be contradictory to the meaning as defined within the internal logic of the text; which is the case in Roper and Abanes's approach to textual analysis. No author can expect to wholly remove their work from cultural context, or the expectations of the reader, but the development of the new meanings is made easier by their treatment in the narrative context.

The *Harry Potter* series redefines the meanings of signifiers by using them within the narrative context and demonstrating their meanings through usage. Works of fiction have the power to re-define words and signifiers because they are creating a discourse which is both reminiscent of but separate to the reader's personal context. The ability for words to be redefined through usage is demonstrated in how language has developed over the centuries to accommodate accepted contemporary practice. In 2012, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave a speech in Parliament which accused the Opposition Leader of being a misogynist. At the time, the Australian Macquarie dictionary defined 'misogyny' as the hatred of women; but after Ms Gillard's provocative speech, which demonstrated that the term 'misogyny' was now being used in contemporary society to mean a deep prejudice against women as well as outright hatred, dictionary was updated to include this new definition (Daley). Words are frequently added to, removed from, and edited within dictionaries to ensure that their signified meanings represent their contemporary uses. As discussed above, the accepted practice of fantasy towards redefining words and signifiers for use in narrative contexts demonstrates the fictional work's capacity for redefining words through usage.

These new meanings are often required by the narrative to further the plot or ensure a particularly nuanced approach to character. For example, the redefinition of 'elf' in Harry Potter is crucial to the development of the narrative, and the 'ghoul' which Rowling creates provides an example of how the Weasley family is comparatively more appealing to Harry than the Dursley family. This is an explicit method used by the author to create meaning in the text and guide the reader's interpretation. When Rowling re-imagines the meaning of signifier, this allows the signifier to be more useful to the narrative, while separating it from the 'real' world. The reader cannot negotiate meaning with a text because the text is a physical artefact and not a sentient creature capable of elaborating on how signifiers are defined within the narrative context. As such, the narrative context for interpretation is established ahead of time by the author.

Elves, as redefined by Rowling, are magical creatures who live to serve wizards. They are extremely loyal, and are magically conditioned to punish themselves if they even think of disobeying a direct order or failing to complete a task given to them by their master. This is particularly relevant to the overall plot because it foreshadows their inability to refuse an order; in *Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007), Kreacher the elf is ordered to let his master, Regulus Black, die so that he can retrieve a piece of the evil Lord Voldemort's soul and destroy it. Kreacher loves Regulus, but he is not allowed to save him or even tell Regulus's family what happened to him because Regulus had given Kreacher a specific order not to:

> '… And his mistress was mad with grief, because Master Regulus had disappeared, and Kreacher could not tell her what had happened, no, because Master Regulus had f-f-forbidden him to tell any of the f-f-family what happened in the c-cave…' (163)

Rowling's redefinition of 'elf' serves the narrative because Kreacher has to keep the secret and, when Harry Potter eventually becomes Kreacher's master, Kreacher is able to confess his part in Regulus's death and tell Harry where the piece of Voldemort's soul is. Here we see

how context-specific narrative meaning-making has a direct effect on the overall plot. By imposing the occult definition of 'elf' onto the *Harry Potter* narrative, Roper is deliberately disregarding the signifier's usage within the context of Rowling's narrative and well as the characterisation of the creatures Rowling uses the signifier for. If the reader refuses to acknowledge the internal logical consistency of the story, or the accepted practice of fantasy authors to redefine words and phrases, then the plot of the narrative may not make sense.

When Abanes interprets the signifier 'ghoul' to draw conclusions about the relative 'goodness' or morality of the characters who interact with these creatures, he does so without reference to how the ghouls are represented in the text. By analysing how the ghoul is represented in the text the critical understanding of the characters' relationship with it becomes clearer. The word 'ghoul', in *Harry Potter*, signifies the creature who lives above Harry's best friend Ron's bedroom; a creature who is not physically described when Harry first learns of him, but is described through his actions in and around the Weasley family home. He is described in *Chamber of Secrets* as essentially harmless, "howl[ing] and dropp[ing] pipes whenever he felt things were getting too quiet" (37). The ghoul acts as a metaphorical personification of the Weasley family, and by extension the comparisons between the Weasleys and the Dursleys, Harry's biological family. The Weasleys are characterised as being loud, rambunctious, and prone to the unexpected – which is a sharp contrast to the quiet, restrained household of the Dursleys. The use of contrast within the narrative establishes the Weasleys as preferable alternatives to the Dursleys in Harry's perspective. Rowling's redefined signifier 'ghoul' reinforces the lively, never-sit-still attitude which characterises the Weasley family.

The ghoul becomes useful from a plot perspective during *Deathly Hallows*, when Harry, Ron and Hermione begin their quest to destroy the evil Lord Voldemort. Ron, fearing that his family could be targeted when Lord Voldemort's followers discover that he is helping Harry, decides to use the ghoul as a decoy.

> 'We can't hide my whole family, it'll look too fishy and they can't all leave their jobs,' said Ron. 'So we're going to put out the story that I'm seriously ill with spattergroit, which is why I can't go back to school. If anyone comes calling to investigate, Mum or Dad can show them the ghoul in my bed, covered in pustules. Spattergroit's really contagious, so they're not going to want to go near him.' (86)

The ghoul is dressed in Ron's pyjamas, his hair is dyed, and he is moved into Ron's bedroom. Here, the ghoul's benevolence, which was established during *Chamber of Secrets*, is used to drive the narrative by allowing Ron to accompany Harry on his quest. Without that decoy in place, Ron would not feel comfortable leaving his family to join Harry because he is portrayed as an extremely loyal, family-oriented character. The redefined signifier becomes crucial to the internal logical consistency of the narrative and the development of the main plot.

When Abanes argues that the use of "familiars" in *Harry Potter* indicates that the narratives are based heavily in witchcraft (63), he notes several examples of these 'familiars' being used in the text: including Crookshanks and Mrs Norris. Abanes goes on to argue that familiars are

either a gift from Satan or an inheritance from another witch, and that their presence in the series is a clear indication of its Satanic subtext. The imposition of the signifier "familiar" on Crookshanks and Mrs Norris (cats owned by Harry's friend Hermione Granger and Argus Filch, Hogwarts's cantankerous caretaker, respectively) is fallacious because no reference is ever made to the animals being anything other than companions and pets. The term 'familiar' is, in fact, never used in the entire series. Here, a signifier has been arbitrarily inserted into the narratives and then interpreted from a separate discourse in order to create a connotation which does not exist.

In *Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling 1999), the third book in the series, Hermione buys Crookshanks from a magical menagerie after he tries to kill Ron's rat, Scabbers. Crookshanks is more intelligent than average cats, as demonstrated by his ability to recognise Peter Pettigrew and Sirius Black as humans, even though they only appear in the early narratives as shape-shifters taking the form of animals. Crookshanks's ability to see the truth of things is used to foreshadow the plot twist at the end of *Prisoner of Azkaban*, and creates a personality link between the cat and his owner Hermione, who frequently described as the brightest witch of her age. The other major cat character in the series, Mrs Norris, is portrayed as a devoted pet who accompanies Filch wherever he goes. This reflects Filch's own devotion to Mrs Norris; when Mrs Norris is petrified in *Chamber of Secrets*, Filch is visibly distressed: "He was slumped in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs Norris, his face in his hands" (108). Later he is seen walking the corridors "red-eyed… lunging at unsuspecting students and trying to put them in detention for things like 'breathing loudly' and 'looking happy'" (111). Mrs Norris also stalks rule-breaking students, reporting them to Filch who is depicted as taking perverse pleasure in punishing them.

Using animals to judge characters and situations is a device implemented by many authors as a literary shorthand; Heathcliffe has a bitch that bites in *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë), which can be read as a manifestation of his behaviour towards women, and Sherlock Holmes, in the short story 'Silver Blaze' (Doyle), points out that if a dog doesn't bark at a thief then it is likely that the dog is familiar with him. By creating anthropomorphised animal characters Rowling uses the cultural and literary expectation of animal insight to draw comparisons between the animals and their owners. The cats in *Harry Potter* allow the reader to examine the human characters from different perspectives. It is ironic that Mrs Norris, whose behaviour is most typical of a "familiar" as Abanes defines the term, has attached herself to Argus Filch – a non-magical janitor, and the least wizard-like character in the series outside of the Dursley family.

Readers, when encountering a text, can exercise extraordinary power of interpretation. Books by and large should belong to their readers (Sheko), but the act of interpretation and understanding should not extend to giving the reader the power to ignore or actively argue against the internal logical consistency of the narrative, particularly in those instances where redefined signifiers have a significant effect on the overall narrative drive. Themes, symbols, metaphors, and the motivations of characters are open to the interpretation of the reader – as they should be – but if a text, particularly a fantasy or speculative text, establishes new definitions within in the context of the narrative, then these meanings should be privileged in

interpretive practice, even in cases where the reader's experience contradicts it. Narratives create worlds and meanings outside of the reader's experience, which rely on a certain level of suspension of disbelief in order to communicate their meaning.

While readers can and should use their personal perspective and context in interpretive practice, the readers who choose to re-interpret words and signifiers which are specifically defined within the text risk interpreting the narratives with little reference to the narrative itself. This dangerous method constructs the narrative as ultimately secondary to the theories and philosophies applied to it, creating an expectation that the text itself need not be rigorously examined because the critic's word will be taken at face value. The tendency among religious advocates to censoring children's fiction with symbolic links to spiritual discourses frequently relies on the analysis of critics like Abanes and Roper without engaging with the text itself; devoting hours of their time to banning and burning these books on the word of critics who fail to engage with the text with the same intensity which they use to engage with their theoretical frameworks.

These readings have become accepted practice among popular culture critics. It is therefore necessary to devote scholarly attention to them and reflect on why this practice is so problematic. Critics who allow the narrative context to establish alternative meanings against their general accepted usage will develop a more nuanced and relevant interpretation of the text. This does not mean that the reader should be passive to the text and the supposed intentions of the author, but that they are willing to negotiate and suspend their own expectations of signified meaning in order to engage more fully with a narrative. Critics like Abanes and Roper create and impose alternative meanings onto the signifiers in *Harry Potter* in order to ensure a negative connotation in their usage and interpretation. Since the signifiers have been redefined to be used as plot devices and characters in *Harry Potter*, the outside meanings imposed on them often directly contradict their usage within the narrative.

Works Cited:

Abanes, Richard. *New Earth, An Old Deception: Awakening to the Dangers of Eckhart Tolle's #1 Bestseller*. Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers, 2008. Print.

Abanes, Richard. *What Every Parent Needs to Know About Video Games: A Gamer Explores the Good, Bad, and Ugly of the Virtual World*. North Eugene, Harvest House Publishers. 2006. Print

Abanes, Richard. *Harry Potter, Narnia, and The Lord of the Rings: What You Need to Know About Fantasy Books and Movies.* North Eugene, Harvest House Publishers, 2005. Print.

Abanes, Richard. *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magick*. Camp Hill, Horizon Books, 2001. Print.

Anelli, Melissa. *Harry, A History: the true story of a boy wizard, his fans, and life inside the Harry Potter phenomenon*. Camberwell, Puffin Books, 2008. Print.

Barthes, Roland. "Death of the Author." *Image Music Text*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1968: 142–148. Print.

Bassham, Gregory. "A Hogwarts Education: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." in Bassham, G (ed) *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*. New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, 2010: 212-228. Print.

Benveniste, Émile. "The Nature of the Linguistic Sign." in Cobley, P (ed) *The Communication Theory Reader*. New York, Routledge, 1996: 63-69. Print

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights.* London, Collins Clear-Type Press, 1847. Print

Daley, Gemma. "Macquarie Dictionary has last word on misogyny." *The Financial Review*. (2012, October 17). Online. Available from: http://www.afr.com/p/national/macquarie_dictionary_has_last_word_NzrQFdWcPJG6G8qLRRiZtK (accessed March 18, 2014)

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences." *Writing and Difference*. London, Routledge, 1993. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1976. Print.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. "Silver Blaze." *Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Naples, Trident Press International, 1892:1-36. Print.

Drury, Neville. *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Occult*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1985. Print.

Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" in Harari, J. V (ed) *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1969. Print.

Galway, Elizabeth A. "Reminders of Rugby in the Halls of Hogwarts: The Insidious Influence of the School Story Genre on the Works of J.K. Rowling." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 37.1 (2012): 66-85. Print.

Granger, John. *The Hogwarts Saga as Ring Composition and Ring Cycle*. Pennsylvania, Unlocking Press, 2010. Print

Granger, John & Bassham, Gregory. "Just in Your Head? J.K. Rowling on Separating Reality from Illusion" in Bassham, G (ed) *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*. New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, 2010:185-197. Print.

Harland, Richard. *Literary Theory from Plato to Barthes: An Introductory History.* London, Macmillan Press, 1999. Print.

Hirsch, E. D. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967. Print.

Lewis, C. S. *The Chronicles of Narnia*. London, Harper Collins Publishers, 1950. Print.

Maguire, Gregory. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. Sydney, Harper Collins, 1995. Print.

Maier, Rosemarie. ""The Intentional Fallacy" and the Logic of Literary Criticism." *College English* 32.2 (1970):135-145. Online. Available from: http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/374640?uid=3737536&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21104350861683 (accessed March 18, 2014)

Melrose, Andrew. "The Hidden Adult and the Hiding Child in Writing for Children?" *TEXT*

16.1 (2012): 1-18. Online. Available from: http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/melrose.htm (accessed March 18, 2014)

Montgomery, Marion. "On Reading "The Intentional Fallacy": The Problem of "Internal Evidence"." *College English* 26.7 (1965):540-542. Online. Available from: http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/373521?uid=3737536&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21104350861683 (accessed March 18, 2014)

Neal, Connie. *The Gospel According to Harry Potter*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Print.

Neal, Connie. *What's a Christian to do with Harry Potter?* Colorado, Waterbrook Press, 2001. Print.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Theory, post-theory, and aetonormative theory." *Neohelicon* 36.1 (2009):13-24. Print.

Nodelman, Perry. *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*. Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2008. Print.

Roper, Jack M. "Harry Potter: The Hero for Modern Witchcraft." *Christian Broadcasting Network*. Online. Available from: http://www.cbn.com/spirituallife/onlinediscipleship/harrypottercontroversy/harrypotterheromodernwitchcraft.aspx (accessed 24 February 2011)

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London, Bloomsbury, 1998. Print.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. London, Bloomsbury, 1999. Print.

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.* London, Bloomsbury, 2007. Print.

Seymour, Jessica. "Harry Potter and the House-Elf Rebellion." *Write4Children: The International Journal for the Practice and Theories of Writing for Children and Children's Literature* 3.ii (2012): 28-39. Print.

Sheko, Tania. "John Green at the State Library of Victoria." *Brave New World*. 2009. Online. Available from: http://tsheko.wordpress.com/2009/05/31/john-green-at-the-state-library-of-victoria/ (accessed 1 September 2012)

Tolkein, J. R. R. *The Lord of the Rings*. London, Harper Collins Publishers, 1954. Print.

Vološinov, V. N. "Toward a Marxist philosophy of language." in Cobley, P (ed) *The Communication Theory Reader*. New York, Routledge, 1996:70-87. Print.

Wimsatt, W. K & Beardsley, M. C. "The Affective Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 57.1 (1949):31-55. Print.

Wimsatt, W. K & Beardsley, M. C. "The Intentional Fallacy." *The Sewanee Review* 54.3 (1946):468-488. Print.

Zipes, Jack. *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* New York, Routledge, 2009.

Zipes, Jack. *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*. New York, Routledge, 2002.