

Slavery in the Harry Potter Series

IKER ARANGAY JASO

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

2017/2018



TUTOR: RAÚL MONTERO GILETE

DEPARTAMENTO: DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA Y ALEMANA Y
DE TRADUCCIÓN E INTERPRETACIÓN

Abstract

J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels are amongst the most famous literary sagas in the world, and studies about the author and her novels are fairly common. The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the way in which slavery is represented in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels. For this purpose, this paper will first introduce some basic facts about fantasy literature and a general overview of the slave process in Great Britain, and then continue with a section that deals with how Rowling may have been influenced by both issues. Secondly, I will analyse in depth the way in which slavery is portrayed through house-elves in the Harry Potter series. In order to do that, a thorough analysis of the seven Harry Potter novels will be made, in order to find as many quotes and evidence as possible that will help understand the way in which the author wanted to depict such a controversial issue. Finally, a conclusion will summarize the whole paper and will underline the most relevant ideas.

Key words: fantasy, Harry Potter, slavery, house-elves, J. K. Rowling

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1. Introduction

When describing J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books, Julia Eccleshare accurately described the reason for their success.

Successful storytelling in terms of plot is not just about exciting readers and making sure there is an interesting and absorbing storyline which can be followed. It also needs the integrity to make sure readers experience substantial emotional shifts while they read. The role of good plotting, beyond the superficial one of holding attention, is to allow readers to dream and imagine, to grow and travel. (16)

The novels of Harry Potter are known worldwide, seven bestseller novels being published between 1997 and 2007. Immediately successful, they turned J. K. Rowling into one of the richest, most powerful and famous writers in the world. The novels were adapted into eight box-office films and Rowling has also written several other short novels and a play, all within the universe of Harry Potter. The franchise is still expanding with a new set of films. J. K. Rowling is one of the most influential writers of fantasy of the 21st century: "Many of Rowling's sales were to adult readers, of course, and she thus set the stage for other crossover success such as Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* books, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series" (Levy and Mendlesohn 165).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the way in which J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels portray the issue of slavery through magical creatures known as house-elves. In order to achieve that, this is the outline that this paper will follow: Firstly, I will analyse the main characteristics of fantasy literature, which is the genre that the Harry Potter series belong too. Secondly, I will provide some general information about slavery throughout Britain's history, as I believe that it is fundamental to understanding the way in which Rowling depicts slavery in her novels. Then, I will thoroughly analyse

the way in which slavery is represented in the novels, including the differences between various types of slave representations. And finally, the conclusions will be outlined and further research will be suggested. The style guide that I will follow in this paper will be the 8th edition of MLA.

2. Modern Fantasy Literature

2.1. Characteristics of the genre

Fantasy is a literary genre that deals with speculative fiction. With fantasy, we find fantastic worlds ruled by magic and filled with talking animals and amazing creatures like unicorns and dragons. In fantasy, beliefs, imagination and wishes are above science and knowledge; strange phenomena are accepted without evidence or explanation (Manlove 8). In fact, unlike in science fiction, usually in fantasy there is no reason for circumstances to happen (Martin 318).

The word *phantasia* has a Greek origin, meaning “power of imagination; appearance, image, perception” (Etymonline, par. 1). Therefore, “fantasy” could be defined as something that looks real but in reality, is not. Many early fantasy novels were written in Ancient Greek Times, probably the most known being Homer’s epic *Odyssey*, a classic story in which Odysseus (also known as Ulysses) tries to return home whilst facing sirens, cyclops and sorcerers. In fact, fantasy is originated in ancient myths that mixed human heroes with anthropomorphic deities (Montero 130).

According to Philip Martin, there are three core elements that are indispensable for the genre of modern fantasy: the first one is the whimsy element, in which we find wondrous elements, irony and nonsense (139). Some examples of whimsy adventures would be Carroll’s *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). The second element would be the romantic medieval mysticism. In this case, we find princes and knights involved in quests. William Morris is a great example of employing medieval sensibility. The third and final element is adventure. These adventures are set in realistic and contemporary environments, but allow space for fantastic occurrences. Examples of writers who use adventure elements

are Arthur Conan Doyle and Charles Dickens. Thanks to the combination of those three elements, fantasy emerged as a literary stylistic genre (183).

The genre of fantasy is quite wide. In fact, according to Martin¹ fantasy could be divided into five different categories. However, we have to bear in mind that often these categories are not fixed, as they may intermingle together.

Firstly, we have high fantasy, in which the main characters are somehow forced to face evil. This evil is usually a personified force, which fights against good. So ultimately, it is a battle between two sides. “*The Lord of the Rings* set the standard for modern high fantasy” (657), but we also have C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950) books and J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series as recognizable examples of this category. Secondly, we find adventure fantasy which is akin to high fantasy. However, in the case of adventure fantasy the characters themselves are the ones who embrace the adventures. In this case, there is no evil but chaos which unlike evil, cannot be completely defeated and is constant. A great example of this category is George R. R. Martin’s series, *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1991). Thirdly, we have fairy-tale fiction. These are the traditional bedtime tales that we are all familiar with, like Cinderella or Hansel and Gretel. They have domestic settings, but there might be miraculous events. They explore the closest malice: an evil family member, for example. Fourthly, we have magical realism, in which abstract but fantastical events occur independently, “in the midst of realistic everyday settings and events” (914). Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) would fit into this category. Last but not least, there is dark fantasy, which is related to horror and Gothic fiction. In this category, true evil surrounds the characters who must face it in its most terrifying form. Examples from this category range from the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* to the more modern novels of Stephen King.

2.2. Modern fantasy in the Second half of the 20th century: Lewis and Tolkien

In this section, I am going to focus on the characteristics of fantasy during the second

1 I will follow Philip Martin’s classification of fantasy throughout this section.

half of the 20th century. However, in order to understand them, it is important to mention that between the wars, very few works regarding fantasy and children literature were published. Nevertheless, according to Levy and Mendlesohn, 30 years after the war a golden age of fantasy emerged, in which the genre became innovative by having its dominant forms changed and fixed (101). Responsible for this change were mainly J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, considered the fathers of modern fantasy, who “stand together at the origins of modern fantasy, meditating the fantasies of earlier generations and both, in their own very different ways, helping to give modern fantasy its medievalist cast” (James 62-63).

In the decades after the war, children’s literature underwent a drastic change. “In the years between 1950 and 1990, the landscape of children’s fantasy in the UK and the Commonwealth changed in both literal and metaphorical ways” (Levy and Mendlesohn 101). In fact, this era was extremely prolific. After the war, children gained far more access to the outside world. In children’s fantasy, we move from confined battles at home to battles in which entire kingdoms and worlds are involved and greater feats are at stake. Therefore, the increased responsibilities that children had in the outside world also increased within the fantasy world. They were children, but they had adult like responsibilities. This way, writers were able to make their stories more realistic, as there was a need to emphasize the freedom that children and teenagers had. Another major change was the interest in folklore and English traditions (Butler 226). This change also led to a change in the landscapes found in fantasy, as they were moved to Britain: for example, the Harry Potter series are wholly set in Britain, and mainly at Hogwarts, a wizarding castle located somewhere in Scotland.

Regarding C. S. Lewis, Levy and Mendlesohn point out that “[t]he change that took place in [fantasy] books was epitomized and encoded in 1950, by C. S. Lewis, in a set of books that came to define what children’s fantasy *was* even while many other forms continued to exist alongside” (106). This set of books are the Narnia books, led by the publication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in 1950. Unlike with Tolkien’s book, here we find child protagonists, who face crucial escapades in order to save the world of Narnia. In this case, we can see the involvement that children had in

the outside world. Therefore, Lewis was hugely influential by giving children adult-like responsibilities.

J. R. R. Tolkien published *The Hobbit* in 1937, and the sequel, *The Lord of the Rings* was published in Great Britain between 1954 and 1955, which is nowadays considered a masterpiece. Back then, it set the bar for what the core of fantasy and children's literature was. His master publication was, and still is, very influential for many other writers: "Most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating him or else desperately trying to escape his influence" (James 62). *The Lord of the Rings* included several themes, prototypes and key tropes that would be included in later fiction, like "medievalist world[s] of varying periods, prophecies [...] and the lost heir" (Levy and Mendlesohn 135). One of the most important characteristics that Tolkien introduced in *The Lord of the Rings* was the quest: the heroes of the story embark on a quest, from a familiar place to an unknown one, where the majority of the narrative sets place. The heroes are often guided by a mentor or guide through this unknown place: in the case of *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf will guide the hobbits out of the Shire. According to Martin Simonson, Tolkien needed to move the characters out of the Shire because otherwise he could not integrate the quest, the monsters and the "epic scenarios of the greater world beyond its limits" with the fairy-tale-like setting presented in *The Hobbit* (122).

But Tolkien's most important achievement was normalizing the secondary worlds found in fantasy novels. Prior to him, writers needed to emphasize that secondary worlds were linked to the real world or point out that they were seen in dreams and tales (James 65). Tolkien did not only manage to move the setting of fantastic events from our world to secondary worlds, but he also created a whole new world with a complex history, myths, languages, and maps in *The Lord of the Rings* (Martin 207). He also created several different creatures that roamed in this world, such as dragons. Furthermore, among humans he included different races with distinct backgrounds and traditions, including wizards, hobbits or dwarves (Levy and Mendlesohn 135). Similarly, Lewis presented the world of Narnia, a new secondary world accessible within our world through the use of a portal.

Thanks to Lewis and Tolkien we had a revival of destinarianism², also known as prophecy driven narratives. This is related to destiny and how it affects the characters: someone has been chosen to perform a heroic action (like defeating evil) and they cannot escape that fate. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* the children have a destiny (marked by a prophecy) which is relevant for the whole plot of the novel (Butler 227). This destinarianism is also related to the fact that children could have more experiences outside their houses: they had the opportunity of picking their own destiny, something that was nearly impossible before. Another recurrent theme highlighted with Lewis and Tolkien, and related to destinarianism is choice. Over and over again they try to emphasize how important choices are. For example, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* Lewis wants to emphasize how the children were independent and could make their own choices by having Edmund side with the White Witch.

2.3. Fantasy as inspiration for J. K. Rowling

J. K. Rowling has always been an avid reader, and is therefore, familiar with many famous fantasy novels. Hence, it is not surprising that she got some inspiration from other writers' fantastic novels, such as *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), by Kenneth Grahame (Larson, par. 8) or *The Magic Faraway Tree* (1943) by Enid Blyton (Levy and Mendlesohn 166). Despite claiming that she never finished reading *The Lord of the Rings* nor read all the Narnia books (Grossman, par. 5), there is no denying that she was inspired by them. For example, according to Rowling herself, she enjoyed C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*: "[...] the Narnia books, [...] I adored them when I was a child" (Renton, par. 12).

One could say that Rowling was inspired by the wardrobe that holds a portal to Narnia to create the portal that young witches and wizards have to cross in her Harry Potter books in order to get to the Hogwarts Express: the barrier at platform nine and three quarters at King's Cross Station. According to Martin, C. S. Lewis is able to

2 The term "destinarianism" is the way in which Farah Mendlesohn describes "how destiny affects specific individuals to bring about historically significant events within the universe of the text" (Webb 120).

captivate his audience by including familiar and recognizable details when the children enter Narnia (1726). The first thing that they see when climbing through the wardrobe is a lamp post. That way, C. S. Lewis is capable of convincing readers that they are in a “real” place. This is the description that Rowling makes of platform nine and three quarters when Harry first enters it in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* (1997): “A scarlet steam engine was waiting next to a platform packed with people” (71). There is nothing out of the ordinary in this description, but the details of the locomotive persuade us of the reality of the landscape. At the same time, Rowling portrayed the freedom that children had in a highly complex way: in the first books, Harry and his friends are confined in Hogwarts, but as the books progress they have to face the magical world while fighting on the outside, in places like London (Levy and Mendlesohn 162). By doing that, Rowling is able to emphasize the importance that her teenage characters have within the wizarding war.

Rowling might have also been inspired by Tolkien’s quest, where the heroes embark on an adventure quest, from a familiar place to an unknown one and are guided by a wiser mentor. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, Hagrid is Harry’s guide: he is the one revealing to him that he is a wizard and he is also the first one who guides him in this new magical world by taking him to Diagon Alley, a magical shopping area where Harry has his first contact with the magical world. Unlike Tolkien, Rowling did not create a new world, but a magical world within our world. But she did include a menagerie of magical creatures like dragons, unicorns, centaurs and merpeople.

Lewis’ and Tolkien’s destinarianism is also present in the Harry Potter series. In fact, according to Levy and Mendlesohn, the idea of destiny reached its zenith in the 1990s with Harry Potter (114). The prophecy of the “Chosen One” is crucial for the plot of the story, as Harry’s destiny was decided before he was even born. Furthermore, the idea of choice is also highly significant and strongly associated with destiny in the Harry Potter series: for example, the sorting hat marks the paths that students will have in the following seven years, but Harry is able to choose to be sorted into Gryffindor instead of Slytherin.

3. Slavery in Britain

3.1. A Historical Overview

Slavery dates back to ancient times. Many of the most well-known civilizations throughout history have had slaves one way or another: Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece or The Roman Empire, all these civilizations were supported by slavery and even religious books like the Bible refer to the consent of slavery. But if we look back even closer in time, we find that the golden age of slavery was barely two centuries ago. In fact, slavery was a major business between the 17th and 19th centuries. Colonisation was the major force behind the success of the slave trade back then: Europeans needed massive human labour in the New World. (Hochschild 2).

The British empire was the main pioneer of the slave trade, and dominated the Atlantic triangle: slave traders travelled by ships to Africa, where they sold goods in exchange for black slaves, who were taken to the New World. There, they were sold in exchange for goods (such as sugar or tobacco), which were then taken back to Europe. In Africa, the people who captured slaves were themselves African. In fact, many African tribes had their own systems of slavery, but when the Europeans arrived, African chiefs commenced selling those slaves in exchange for goods (Equiano 6). The reality inside the trade ships was inhuman: thousands of slaves were packed into limited spaces and travelled in suffocating and terrible conditions for months. Besides that, the high rate of disease and death that slaves endured was highly significant (Anstey 30-31). Most of the slaves that the British bought were sold around the British empire, but the vast majority of them ended up working in the sugar plantations of the British colonies in the Caribbean (Bonilla 337). The conditions of slaves in the Caribbean were even more inhuman, if that were possible. They harvested the crops for the majority of the world while working between 12 and 14 hours every day, and they earned no money for their labour. Many died at a very young age. In fact, according to Hochschild, “one third of Africans died within three years of disembarking in the West Indies” (63). Slaves were whipped and punished for not working hard enough, and many of them were executed. Apparently, it was cheaper to buy a slave than to keep them alive for breeding (Hochschild 67). Many of the slaves did not know any other way of life: they lacked

freedom and were submissive to the white supremacy. However, it is worth mentioning that there were domestic slaves too, who had better life conditions than those slaves working on the plantations (Bonilla 360).

Black slaves were rarely seen inside Britain. Rich entrepreneurs were the ones most likely to own one for their personal service, and in those cases, it was a matter of bestowing prestige on oneself. According to Hochschild, in London “slaves sometimes had to wear brass or silver collars engraved with a master’s name and coat of arms” (51), and a goldsmith in Duke Lane could advertise “silver padlocks for Blacks or dogs” (51).

The slave trade was abolished in the UK in 1807. However, despite the abolition, slavery continued until its true abolition some years later (1834). The reason for this abolishment was mainly the massive social clamour against slavery. Another reason may be the fact that human labour was not necessary any more. However, there were many who insisted that abolishing slavery would lead to the downfall of the British Empire, as it was an important factor that contributed to the economy of the country (Anstey 41).

3.2. Slavery in Modern Britain

Unfortunately, slavery did not end with the abolition of slavery in 1834; modern slavery is still an existing and everlasting problem that affects over 40 million people in the world (“What is Modern”, par. 3). According to Mark Burns-Williamson “general indicators of human trafficking or modern slavery can include signs of physical or psychological abuse, [...] poor living conditions and working long hours for little or no pay” (as cited in Grierson, par. 16). Modern slavery is not only part of undeveloped countries, as it affects every single country of the world. Even in Britain, “the Government estimates that there are tens of thousands people in modern slavery in the UK” (“Slavery”, par. 1). The most vulnerable groups of people are women and children, who commonly fall victims of modern slavery. It is worth noting that there are different types of slavery in Britain, but in the majority of these types the slaves are immigrants

brought from other countries, especially Vietnam and Nigeria (Grierson, par. 5). In fact, human trafficking is one of the most common types of slavery found in Britain. Traffickers recruit victims who are in a situation of poverty and force them to work, beg, serve, prostitute and more. However, trafficking does not only involve bringing people from overseas, as “43% of victims are trafficked domestically within national borders” (“What is Human”, par. 11).

Another common type of modern slavery is domestic slavery. Domestic workers often work in a private household (in which they usually live) where they clean, cook, take care of the children, and so on (Mantouvalou, par. 4). This kind of domestic worker (generally young women) usually work a 24 hour schedule and earn little money, but other times, they are paid with food and accommodation. “Domestic work is a sector which is particularly vulnerable to exploitation and domestic slavery because of the unique circumstances of working inside a private household combined with a lack of legal protection” (“Domestic”, par. 1). We talk about slavery when these workers are forced to work extra hours, receive threats or are not allowed to leave the households where they work. According to Mantouvalou, domestic workers normally have their passports taken off them by their employers and as a result, they are afraid of taking any action against them or even reporting to the authorities, as they remain undocumented (par. 10.)

The U.K. has taken several measures against modern slavery, like the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in 2009, or the Modern Slavery Act in 2015. Although the response of the government has been slow, the situation of slavery has improved in the last years. However, these measures do not seem to help enough, as in many cases victims are treated inappropriately and culprits get away with their crimes (“Slavery”, par. 10).

3.3. J. K. Rowling's relationship with slavery

It is extremely difficult to uncover J. K. Rowling's relationship with slavery and her choice of including this topic on her Harry Potter novels, but the truth is that she

decided to bring such a controversial problem to the forefront, along many other problematic topics such as race. According to Rowling herself, “the house elves is really for slavery, isn't it, the house elves are slaves, so that is an issue that I think we probably all feel strongly about enough in this room already.” (as cited in “Edinburgh”, par. 163). Therefore, Rowling might had decided to introduce the topic of slavery because it is strongly associated with the history of the United Kingdom. According to Brycchan Carey, Rowling tries to help young readers “understand the stereotypes about slaves when (or if) they learn about them in school” (96). He also states that Rowling might have introduced this significant topic in order for the characters to distract themselves from the imminent fight against Lord Voldemort.

4. Analysis of slavery in the Harry Potter series

Written by J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter is one of the most famous sagas in the world, which presents an amazing world filled with witches and wizards, spells, enchantments, and magical creatures. Nevertheless, despite the high quantity of magical abilities found in the novels, the wizarding world seems to be old-fashioned in many ways. For instance, “the Hogwarts train runs on steam; the children write with quills; the Minister of Magic wears a bowler hat” (Butler 234). So, we find important elements of normal everyday life, familiar to every reader, combined with something exotic and new: magic. The same happens with the case of slavery and house-elves: In Harry Potter, slavery (which is strongly related to the British history) is presented in the form of house-elves, a magical creature original to the Harry Potter series.

Despite relying on magic, the magical world is still full of prejudices against *muggles* (non-magical people), non pure-blood wizards and magical creatures. In her analysis, Butler suggests that, “even the sympathetic characters are characterized by attitudes ranging from casual prejudice [...]” (233). In fact, according to Petra Kohlová, non-human creatures are judged because they are not perceived as individuals (25). The truth is that the world of Harry Potter includes a wide variety of different creatures like

goblins, elves, mermaids and centaurs. The problem is that all these creatures are considered inferior to wizards precisely because they are not human. And because they are not human, it is easier to dehumanize them. However, wizards acknowledge that these creatures are semi-human and responsible for their actions. In the following example of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), we can see how centaurs are dehumanized: “Law Fifteen B states clearly that ‘Any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions —’” (754). In fact, despite having human like attributes, creatures are not only rejected, but they are also treated with inferiority. “The way they were treating her! [...] calling her ‘elf ’ all the time [...] it was like she wasn’t even human!” “Well, she’s not,” said Ron. Hermione rounded on him. “That doesn’t mean she hasn’t got feelings, Ron” (Rowling, *GF*, 139). Dobby, a house-elf, confirms that he has never been treated equally: “Dobby has *never* been asked to sit down by a wizard – like an *equal* –” (Rowling, *CS*, 13). According to Luis Gómez, none of the creatures presented in the series can enjoy human-like freedom, as giants have been mostly exterminated and confined out of the U.K., the lands of the centaurs are controlled by the Ministry of Magic and goblins are above all rejected (300). Therefore all these creatures have been alienated by the magical world despite being magical creatures belonging to said world.

As previously stated, I will now look specifically at the way in which slavery is represented in the Harry Potter novels. For that end, I will examine the way in which house-elves are portrayed in the books and how the magical world has accepted and normalized the slavery-like treatment of house-elves.

4.1. Situation of house-elves in the Harry Potter series

According to the Collins dictionary, slavery can be defined as “the state or condition of being a slave; a civil relationship whereby one person has absolute power over another and controls his life, liberty, and fortune” or as “the subjection of a person to another person, especially in being forced into work” (Collins, par. 6). From what we know in

the Harry Potter novels, house-elves always work with a specific family, and they tend to do it for generations: “Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever...” (Rowling, *CS*, 14), “I is looking after the Crouches all my life, and my mother is doing it before me, and my grandmother is doing it before her [...]” (Rowling, *GF*, 381). The first time Harry meets Dobby, he learns that house-elves cannot escape, as they can only be set free by their families (Rowling, *CS*, 14-15). Later in the book, Dobby explains that the only way in which house-elves can be freed is when their masters give them clothes (Rowling, *CS*, 187). In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), we learn that elves cannot speak ill of their masters, and that they must keep their secrets “Tis part of the house-elf’s enslavement, sir” (380). Apparently, house-elves are attached to the family house, and a house-elf is inherited together with the house like a mere object, as seen in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005), when Harry inherits his godfather’s house together with his house-elf (51). So, unlike for example African slaves, house-elves cannot be sold (Gómez 386). However, both instances present slaves as objects under the control of the system, and they cannot change that situation. In the same way as with real slavery, house-elves’ lives are not worth anything, as seen in the following quote: “I have had it all tested for poison [...] Had a house-elf taste every bottle” (Rowling, *HBP*, 485). Therefore, there is no denying that house-elves live in a situation of slavery, because they are controlled by their masters in all aspects of their lives and because they are considered as mere objects. The house elf could remind us of the domestic workers who live in a situation of slavery, as in both cases they work confined, taking care of the household and in both cases their freedom is rejected.

In the Harry Potter series, identifying a house-elf is quite an easy task, and not only because of their physical appearance, but because they wear distinctive clothing that marks them as house-elves. When Harry first meets Dobby in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), the clothes that Dobby wears astound him: “Harry noticed that it was wearing what looked like an old pillowcase, with rips for arm and leg holes” (12). Later in the book, Harry satisfies his curiosity by asking Dobby about his clothes: ““Why d’you wear that thing, Dobby?” he asked curiously. ‘This, sir?’ said Dobby,

plucking at the pillowcase. ‘Tis a mark of the house-elf’s enslavement, sir.’” (Rowling, *CS*, 187). These distinctive clothing may remind us of real slavery. As previously mentioned, a goldsmith in London sold distinctive padlocks for slaves (Hochschild 51). The fact that they have to wear unique clothing marks their submission towards the magical society. It is worth noting that this emphasizes how the humans undermine and dehumanize them even more, as clearly seen in the following quote: “‘Look at the state of his robes,’ Malfoy would say in a loud whisper as Professor Lupin passed. ‘He dresses like our old house-elf’” (Rowling, *PA*, 148), which mentions house-elves in a derogatory way.

It is also interesting to note that house-elves speak in a strange way, as they make several mistakes in regard to word order and the use of pronouns: “We is already making Christmas dinner in the kitchens!” (Rowling, *GF*, 410). According to Carin Möller, the way they speak is a reminiscent of the way in which African-Americans were inaccurately characterized in Hollywood in the 30s and 40s (11). Carey also believes that by giving elves that speech, Rowling’s purpose was to “make connections between the house-elves and historical slaves” (104).

4.2. Representation of different types of house-elves in the Harry Potter series

4.2.1. Gender

It is very difficult to compare the situation between male and female house-elves, because there are only few elves present in the novels and the main representation of a house-elf is a male one, Dobby. However, we can compare his situation with Winky, a female house-elf that appears in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Regarding their physical appearance, house-elves seem to be very similar in both genders, as Harry confuses Winky for Dobby the first time they meet (Rowling, *GF*, 97). However, consider the following passage: “Its voice was higher even than Dobby’s had been, a teeny, quivering squeak of a voice, and Harry suspected — though it was very hard to

tell with a house-elf — that this one might just be female.” (Rowling, *GF*, 97). By intuition, Harry is able to identify her as a female because of her voice.

Interestingly enough, Dobby and Winky are both the only house-elves that become free during the course of the novels. However, their reaction to being freed could not be more different. On the one hand, Dobby accepts his freedom with excitement, as he realizes that he was living in a submissive situation: “We house-elves were treated like vermin, sir! Of course, Dobby is still treated like that, sir” (Rowling, *CS*, 188). He is the only house-elf throughout the novel to acknowledge the bad situation in which they live. However, we have to keep in mind that he is one of the two examples of elves in the novel (that readers know about) who receives punishments and threats from his family (Rowling, *CS*, 186-187). The fact that Dobby seeks work at Hogwarts, which has “the largest number [of house-elves] in any dwelling in Britain, I believe. Over a hundred” (Rowling, *GF*, 181-182) seems curious. However it reminds us of Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave who ended up working on a slave-ship in the Atlantic triangle: “Despite his fierce and successful drive for his own freedom and compassion for those still in the bondage, slavery is still such an omnipresent fact of life that he takes it for granted” (Hochschild 39-40). This shows that Dobby, despite being successful in getting his freedom, is unable to do anything against a lifestyle that is already accepted by the system in which he lives and furthermore, being a slave is the only life that he knows. In fact, he never shows any interest in freeing other house-elves: “[...] please keep Dobby out of this” (Rowling, *GF*, 539).

On the other hand, freedom makes Winky miserable: she is depressed and turns to alcoholism. Winky was proud of serving a family: “Winky is properly ashamed of being freed!” (Rowling, *GF*, 379). At the same time, she believes that Dobby is a bad elf because he enjoys his freedom and she seems to be scandalised by the fact that Dobby demands a salary for working (Rowling, *GF*, 98). Despite the difference in their attitudes seemingly not having anything to do with the gender, Kathryn McDaniel proposes that female house-elves have double-submission because they are slaves and female. In fact, according to her, the situation of a freed house-slave could be

comparable to that of a housewife, because the perspective of being employed outside the protection of their homes after centuries of being confined terrifies them (McDaniel, as cited in Gómez 427). However, since Winky is the only female house-elf that Rowling developed, it cannot be concluded if her intention was that of showing Winky as a victim or to simply have her react the way she did in order to contrast her with Dobby.

4.2.2. Age

After analysing the aspect of gender, I will now move on to analyse the way in which age is seen through house-elves. Kreacher (a male elf) and Hokey (female) are the representation of older house-elves to appear in the Harry Potter series, and they will be subject to my analysis.

The character of Kreacher is presented as an old and grumpy elf, the opposite of Dobby in terms of accepting the system. In fact, Kreacher, just like Winky, wants to be a good elf and would not be able to bear being freed: “We can’t set him free [...] the shock would kill him. You suggest to him that he leaves this house, see how he takes it.” (Rowling, *OP*, 110). Besides that, Kreacher also wants to maintain the old traditions of his family, including “to have his head cut off and stuck up on a plaque just like his mother” (Rowling, *OP*, 76), which apparently is his aspiration in life.

Because of his age, Kreacher is not only often mistreated worse than a regular house-elf, but he is also believed to be weaker and madder: “He’s not right in the head, [...] I don’t think he realizes we can hear him” (Rowling, *OP*, 110) or “that lunatic elf” (Rowling, *OP*, 333). Harry even thinks of him as “a distinctly unlovable object” in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), further dehumanizing him (191).

We know that Kreacher is treated extremely bad by Sirius, his master. Sirius threatens him “Sirius went as far as to threaten him with clothes” (Rowling, *OP*, 117-118),

punishes him “Sirius, [...] seized Kreacher by the back of his loincloth and threw him bodily from the room” (Rowling, *OP*, 118) and even wishes his death: “He might have crawled into the airing cupboard and died. . . . But I mustn’t get my hopes up. . . .” (Rowling, *OP*, 505). Like Dobby, Kreacher does not like his master at all. In fact, Kreacher loathes Sirius. He is unable to ignore his orders, but he can criticise him while whispering (Rowling, *OP*, 110), something that he always does whenever he can. Therefore we can guess that house-elves can speak-ill of their masters when they are with them, but not when directly speaking with another person. Kreacher’s hatred of Sirius is so strong that he ends up betraying him: despite not being able to lie to him due to his commitment, he is able to lie to others without having to punish himself (Rowling, *OF*, 829), knowing that his actions will lead to Sirius’ demise.

However, in Rowling’s last novel, we learn that Kreacher can be remarkably attentive when he is well treated by a master (Rowling, *DH*, 225). Therefore, his actions against Sirius could not be considered as anti-slavery, as his actions are moved by the hatred that he has accumulated against Sirius. Furthermore, we know that his actions are not moved by disconformity of his situation, because he would be willing to serve other family members, as he confirms in the following quote: “Kreacher would much rather be the servant of the Malfoy boy” (Rowling, *HBP*, 422). Therefore, we know that Kreacher is only loyal to those who behave benevolently with him: “He’s loyal to people who are kind to him, [...] so he serve[s] them willingly and parrot[s] their beliefs” (Rowling, *DH*, 198). In the same way, his actions are reminiscent of Dobby, who helped Harry (who was not his master but was nice to him) over his own master (who punished and threatened him).

Hokey is a female house-elf that briefly appears in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and she is described as “the tiniest and oldest house-elf Harry had ever seen” (433). During her brief appearance, we discover that Hokey’s master has been murdered and that she was blamed of the assassination. However, we do learn that she was not guilty, but that she was quickly judged as the killer because she was a house-elf “the Ministry was predisposed to suspect Hokey [...] because she was a house-elf,”

(Rowling, *HBP*, 439) and because she was old “[i]t was concluded that she had not meant to do it, but being old and confused —” (Rowling, *HBP*, 438). As we can see, the magical society was inclined to believe that Hokey was the murderer simply because she was a house-elf, and the fact that she was old was only an excuse to further turn her into a scapegoat: “She was old, she admitted to having tampered with the drink, and nobody at the Ministry bothered to inquire further” (Rowling, *HBP*, 439). Therefore, we can see how the issue of age also affects magical creatures, as age further worsens house-elves’ situations. We also have double submission, because these elves are old and in a situation of slavery.

4.3. Normalization of slavery

4.3.1. House-elves

Despite being slaves, the majority of house-elves themselves do not care about their situation, and refuse to take any action that would lead to the improvement of their lives. They perceive their subordination as a moral requirement bound to the norms of the society (Kohlová 31) and they seem to have “lost the ability to conceive of themselves as free” (Carey 104): “They’re not like house-elves, who never stick up for themselves” (Rowling, *GF*, 449). In fact, Dobby seems so be an exception among elves: “Yeah, well, yeh get weirdos in every breed. I’m not sayin’ there isn’t the odd elf who’d take freedom, but yeh’ll never persuade most of ’em ter do it [to ask for wages]” (Rowling, *GF*, 265). House-elves have no rights, and they consider them as something trivial, not comparable to work: “House-elves have no right to be unhappy when there is work to be done and masters to be served” (Rowling, *GF*, 538). This is a contrast with other creatures who, despite being undermined by the magical society, are willing to fight for their situation: “Goblins don’t need protection [...] they’re quite capable of dealing with wizards” (Rowling, *GF*, 449) or “we [centaurs] are an ancient people who will not stand wizard invasions and insults! We do not recognize your laws, we do not acknowledge your superiority” (Rowling, *OP*, 757).

So, why do house elves accept their situation without any resistance? We know from the books that despite dating back many centuries ago, no one has ever taken any measures to avoid the situation of enslavement that elves suffer (Rowling, *GF*, 224). According to Hermione, house-elves might not fight back because they are “uneducated and brainwashed!” (Rowling, *GF*, 239). Gómez suggests that the house-elves’ problem is that in order to wish for their freedom, they must first perceive themselves as slaves of the social context of the system that justifies their situation as subjects. (Gómez 389).

4.3.2. The Wizarding world

The wizards’ perception of house-elves is that of accepting unquestioningly their condition of slaves. They believe that the point of a house-elf is to work with a family without getting paid while being almost invisible to them: “I mean, you’re not supposed to see them, are you? That’s the mark of a good house-elf, isn’t it, that you don’t know it’s there?” (Rowling, *GF*, 182). Besides that, one of the most common arguments used in favour of enslavement is the fact that house-elves themselves are content with their situation: “They. Like. It. They like being enslaved!” (Rowling, *GF*, 224). This way, their inequality is not blamed on society, but on the elves themselves: they are the ones pointed as responsible for their situation. For that reason, the majority of the characters that are presented with the idea of finding a solution to the situation of slavery, instantly shut it down, as they believe that house-elves are comfortable with their situation: “Well, the elves are happy, aren’t they?” Ron said. “You heard old Winky back at the match . . . ‘House-elves is not supposed to have fun’ . . . that’s what she likes, being bossed around. . . .” (Rowling, *GF*, 125).

The situation of house-slaves is so normalized that the following expressions are common within the wizarding world: “I feel like a house-elf” (Rowling, *OP*, 159) or “We’ve been working like house-elves here!” (Rowling, *GF*, 223). According to Elaine Ostry, the previous quote parallels the English expression “to work like a black” (96),

which has its origins in slavery and shows that slaves are “implicitly the paradigm of sweat-of-the-brow diligence, concentration and efficacy” (Matory 413). Once again, we see how real slavery is portrayed through house-elves in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels.

4.4. Opposition

Hermione is the only character throughout the series that seems to be concerned about house-elves, the first one to acknowledge the issue as slavery and to point how unjust the system is: “You know, house-elves get a very raw deal!” said Hermione indignantly. “It’s slavery, that’s what it is! [...] Why doesn’t anyone do something about it?” (Rowling, *GF*, 125). It is worth remarking that Hermione herself is a victim of the said unjust system she criticises, as being the daughter of *muggles*, she is discriminated by many wizards. In Noah Berlatsky’s words, “her knowledge of her own marginalised status, and of her own people’s history” is the reason for Hermione’s sympathy towards elves (par. 3). Hermione is also the first one to realize that house slavery is a problem that must be solved by wizards and witches, as they are the ones responsible for sustaining their situation (Gómez 387): “It’s people like you, [...] who prop up rotten and unjust systems” (Rowling, *GF*, 125). Therefore, she recognizes that the slavery of house-elves is a social issue that concerns all the magical society and not just elves themselves. Hermione also realizes how the issue of house-elves is ignored and excluded: “Not once, in over a thousand pages, does Hogwarts, A History mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!” (Rowling, *GF*, 238). For those reasons, Hermione decides to give visibility to the issue.

Some of the measures that Hermione would like to accomplish to end the house-elves’ subjection include trying to free them and making sure that they have salaries, pensions and proper clothes. For this reason, she founded the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare (Rowling, *GF*, 224).

It seems that J. K. Rowling introduces the topic of slavery in her series with humour, as there are some instances in which the issue is presented in a comical way, especially the way in which the opposition to slavery is presented. The most prominent comical example around the issue of slavery is the acronym of the society that Hermione founds to help the issue: S.P.E.W.³ According to Gómez, this satirical acronym reflects Hermione's inaccurate campaign for the fight, and how it is bound to fail (390).

We should take a look at her approach to the cause: she fiercely tries to get fellow students to pay for the cause and she goes as far as hiding clothes so that elves can take them by mistake and force them to be free. Ironically, she does not ask any elf to join the cause: according to Gómez, she is ready to do anything that she can to help elves; anything but involve elves themselves in a fight that represents them (390). As we can see, Hermione's intentions are noble, but she takes an incorrect approach by doing exactly the same as the rest of society: pushing aside house-elves, and being too extreme while doing it. Hermione never reaches her goals, as not even her best friends support her. According to Philip Nel "Rowling seems both to admire Hermione and her convictions and to mock her zeal as naïve or overdone" (46).

One could suppose that Harry Potter himself could also be considered as a fighter in favour of house-elves' rights, especially if we acknowledge that he was the one who managed to get Dobby free. According to Nel, Harry and Hermione are able to easily identify the discrimination found within the magical society because they both have lived in the non-magical world for years (45). However, Harry only seems to be interested in Dobby and not in other elves. Why is this?

The relationship between slavery and the protagonist of the series is an interesting one. Harry sets Dobby free in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and seems to be concerned about him throughout the book. However, his interest towards the situation of the other house-elves seems to be unenthusiastic. In fact, he believes

3 "To spew", verb: "If someone spews or spews up, they vomit" ("Spew", par. 5).

Hermione's behaviour towards the issue to be over the top: "Hermione, when are you going to give up on this spew stuff?" (Rowling, *GF*, 320) So, he joins Ron and ridicules the name of the society that she created, therefore turning a serious problem into a comical one. This situation is extremely confusing, as he even acknowledges that house-elves' situation is inhuman when he first meets Dobby: "'And I thought I had it bad staying here for another four weeks," he said. "This makes the Dursleys sound almost human.'" (Rowling, *CS*, 15). As we can see, Harry realizes that Dobby's situation is inhuman. Therefore, the reader could deduce that he freed Dobby as a way of defying the established system. However, for Carey, Harry feels sympathy for Dobby because they have both lived under the reign of cruel families. He also states that Harry's motivation for freeing Dobby is strictly "that of personally rewarding [him] for his individual good behaviour" (104). However, Harry does not feel sympathy for Kreacher, who is also mistreated by his master. We could consider that since Sirius is Harry's godfather and feels a high esteem for him, he unintentionally sides with him without taking into account Kreacher's feelings (not because he is an elf, but because he is unfamiliar with him). In a similar way, Gómez argues that Harry only helps Dobby because he is owned by the Malfoy family, who are Harry's antagonists (386). Therefore, we could also argue that Harry's actions regarding house-elves' slavery are always related to the benefit or loss of the elves' respective masters.

Even when he is the main representation of repression against slavery, Dobby himself helps with the comical conception of the issue by bargaining for his salary, as he finds too much freedom to be "frightening" (Rowling, *GF* 415). Furthermore, despite frequently proclaiming his freedom, Dobby always "seems voluntarily to submit to a kind of servitude to Harry" (Carey "Literary", 165), as the elf himself confirms in the following quote: "Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes [...]" (Rowling, *HBP*, 421). Winky is also presented in a comical way, because when she is freed she becomes addicted to the popular beverage of the wizarding world, *butterbeer*, and she speaks like a drunk person, hiccuping.

J. K. Rowling probably decided to introduce the matter of slavery together with

humour because she wanted to downplay the issue. Compared to the dangers awaiting in the magical world, the house-elves' issues seem trivial to most of the characters. Further evidence that shows the triviality of the issue, is the fact that slavery and the house-elves were mostly removed from the film adaptations of the novels. Therefore, humour helps her convey the idea that house-elves' slavery is comparable to mere school problems.

Before, we presented the idea of destiny and choice, and their importance to the overall plot of novels. In Harry Potter, all the characters who have excessively mistreated or underestimated house-elves have ended up paying for it. A lesson that Harry is repeatedly taught is that "We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward" (Rowling, *OP*, 832), that brutally treating house-elves will only lead to one's demise. We have previously said that the house-elf situation is presented in a trivial way; however, there is no denying that the issue of slavery is necessary for the overall plot, because Harry needs to understand that other magical creatures have feelings and are as complex as humans, which will be necessary in his fight against evil. For example, Harry saves Griphook's life (a goblin) in the last novel, and in return he helps him find a Horcrux that will help Harry defeat Voldemort. Harry shows respect towards Kreacher and he leads the house-elves of Hogwarts to battle against Lord Voldemort in the final battle. So, the moral of the story may be that helping those who need it (creatures who are unfairly treated by society) will help him defeat evil, which is the main goal of high fantasy.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation has aimed to demonstrate that the house-elves presented in the Harry Potter series live in a situation of slavery, and that there is little hope for their freedom. In fact, Dobby (who is the only elf who wanted to be free) is still a slave of the magical system despite getting his freedom, because he is unable to help his peers and because he does not want too much freedom. Nevertheless, there is still hope for their future, as Dobby has already lit the fuse of freedom. The fact that he was able to

understand his situation and fight to change it probably means that other elves could be ready to do the same in the future, and it shows that even if their situation is not going to change in the near future, there is still a chance for change. Not all the doors are closed, and it is possible that they do realize that their situation in the magical world is unethical. In fact, we already know that house-elves have the ability to think and behave autonomously while using reason, therefore it is not too far-fetched to believe that they might want to fight for their freedom in the future.

Rowling leaves an open-ending novel, because we do not know what will happen with the house-elves. This is probably because she wanted to point out that “This is a wizards’ war” (*DH*, 296), in which the house-elves matter is pushed into the background. At the same time, she presents the house-slaves’ situation as a comical one, that sometimes makes us laugh during the reading process, but it is still a serious issue.

In conclusion, the aim of this dissertation was to analyse the way in which slavery was represented in the Harry Potter novels through the use of house-elves, and this has been demonstrated throughout the paper. It would be interesting to continue with this topic and analyse the prejudices found in the wizarding world, like blood related issues or hybridism. Such a fascinating world, which captivates children and adults alike is made even greater by J. K. Rowling through her portrayal of real life problems, which not only create such a brilliant read, but also give her readers innumerable ideas to think about.

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