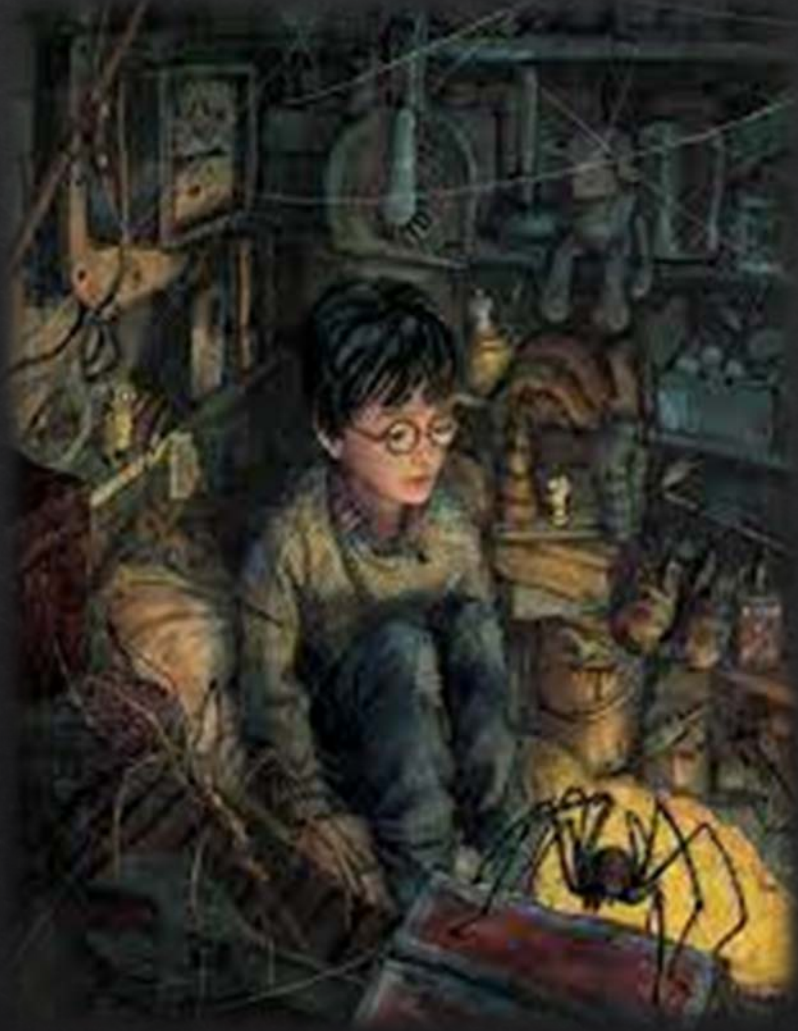
A young boy with glasses is sitting in a red hammock, looking upwards with a thoughtful expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a fence.

Magical currency: representations of labour, wealth and class in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

April 25th 2023 – Dr. Charles A. Sankey Chamber
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Textual Overview



Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone operates as a portal fantasy in which Harry, a boy who “had to wear [the] old clothes of Dudley and ... round glasses held together with a lot of sellotape” (Rowling 21) turns into a boy who has a vault with “mounds of gold coins. Columns of silver. Heaps of little bronze knutz” (Rowling 80). This shift in class is not due to a universally improved lifestyle for all wizard-kind but a sort of **aristocratic inheritance** for Harry himself. It very quickly becomes clear that in the wizarding world the cultural presumptions are that “some wizarding families are much better than others” (Rowling 116). This ultimately prompts questions not just about **the extent to which class is foregrounded** in the text, **but why** any sort of class disparity needs to exist at all?

Textual Overview Continued

While it may appear as though the wizarding world is challenging capitalistic systems, **the function of capital** is still present through **alternative forms of currency**. It is true that physical coins exist, but it is also true that both **purity of blood and magical ability** act as their own forms of currency. Much like the role of money in the muggle world, blood lines and magical prowess have the power to **purchase their wielder's higher social status**. The existence of these non-traditional currencies in conjunction with magic's inherent elimination of large portions of the workforce relegates the **poorest people** without magical, relational, or financial privilege, **into a position of assumed inferiority**. Two such characters are Argus Filch and Rubeus Hagrid whom having neither traditional or non-traditional wealth must fill the role of a labourer and are subsequently depicted as physical and social outsiders.



Literature Review

Genre Studies



Many authors have engaged with the Harry Potter series by invoking the conventions it borrows from other genres. **Elizabeth Galway** positions Harry Potter in the British boarding school genre. She asserts that “the inherently gendered and elitist traditions of that genre are perpetuated through a phenomenally popular series that on its surface appears to champion equality and diversity.” (Galway 67). The discussion around class is furthered by **Emily Strand** as she explores the role of labour and house elves through a science fiction lens, equating the replacement of labour with magic or house elves as on par with replacing labour with robots.

Literature Review Continued

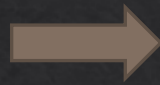
Critiques of the Wizarding World

A second area of study around the Harry Potter universe is scholarly critiques of the wizarding world itself. **Maureen Saraco** uses disability studies to highlight the problematic role that squibs (non-magic people that exist within the wizarding world) play. Similarly, to this, **Victoria Scholz** discusses how the terms squib and muggle “have a certain negativity to them... purebred wizards with magic abilities are, of course, viewed as higher class, but purebred wizards without these abilities are nearly as bad as regular humans, but a human with no magical lineage yet still has magical abilities is deemed unworthy of anything” (Scholz). These ideas of class are even more prevalent in **Megan Farnel’s** discussion on the way in which finances and labour seem to be implemented abstractly throughout the series.

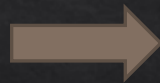


Theoretical Framework

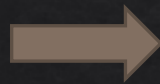
As a way to make sense of the role of wealth, labour and class within the text, I employ various elements of Marxist theory. In particular, some of the key concepts that I build my research on are Currency, Historical Materialism, and the Rhetoric's of Fantasy



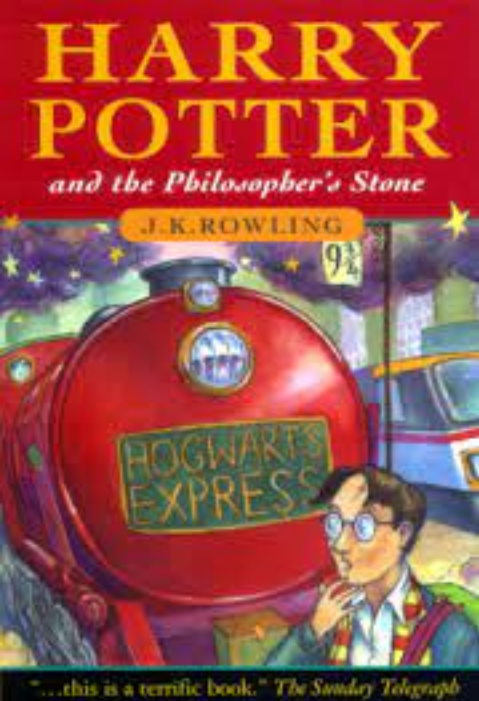
Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Mendlesohn explains that in the Harry Potter series "there is no system of magic, no sense of what each kind of magic can achieve, the choice of potions versus wand spells versus magical objects is frequently arbitrary and prevents planning" (Mendlesohn 63-64).



Angela Hubler notes in her introduction that "A great deal of literary analysis of children's literature ignores the insights of historical materialism and fails to analyze the relationship between art and social and economic reality" (Hubler XII).

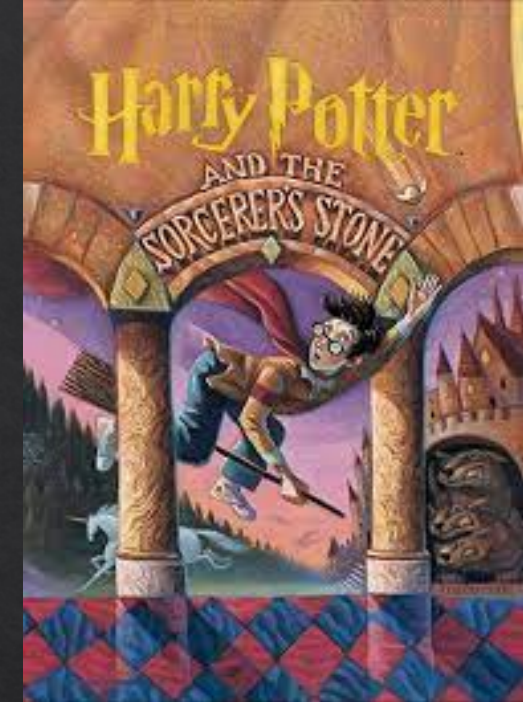


Joan Ramona Resina highlights in *Cultures of Currency* that there is a "shift in the meaning of concepts like "market," "currency," "exchange," and "money"" (Resina i).



Methodology

Studying only *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* is a way to explore the book without having to discuss the cultural phenomenon that occurred. Furthermore, my focus is on critiquing the structure of the wizarding world and the world building accomplished within this text operates as the initial point of entry into this space.



I mobilize the multiple theoretical approaches of young people's literature and Marxist literature to perform close readings of the text. I simultaneously bolster my understanding and analysis by engaging with the scholarly conversation around the Harry Potter franchise that currently exists.



Research Questions

In what ways is the text upholding traditional class hierarchies and to what degree are they normalized in the wizarding world?

What structures and objects have magic not changed (whether intentionally or unintentionally)?
Where are the cracks that exist between magical ability and human labour?

To what extent do characters become lower class in the wizarding world and what role do they then play within the text?

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