Harry Potter through the Focus of Feminist Literary Theory:
Examples of (Un)Founded Criticism

Krunoslav MIKULAN[•]

Abstract

Joanne Kathleen Rowling's series of novels about Harry Potter has attracted the attention of numerous literary critics. This paper questions the problems of multiple readings from the viewpoint of feminist literary theory. We can observe considerable differences in the approach of various literary critics to Rowling's series and the opinions of these critics are equally varied. They claim that these are sexist novels, feminist novels, novels for boys, novels in which girls can find role-models and novels in which the author seeks to assert herself through the discourse of fictional text. It is concluded that the novels analyzed can be read from multiple perspectives and that Rowling succeeds in making the reader aware of the problems of male-female relations by positioning the characters on opposite sides with regard to emotional relations, relations towards different people and the family and towards society in general, as well as through convincing and impressionable characterization.

Key Words: Harry Potter, feminist literary theory and criticism, multiple readings, relationships between sexes

1. Introduction

In 1997 the first edition of Joanne Kathleen Rowling's first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, was printed in a limited edition of only 500 copies (Blake 2002: 3). The novel gradually attracted the attention of readers and critics, initially without any influence from the advertising industry or for other non-literary reasons. Very soon the novel reached the top of the bestsellers' lists. Six sequels were published, the seventh appearing in bookshops in July 2007.[1]

The first novel received mainly positive criticisms, but since the third volume the amount of negative criticism and the number of the books' opponents have grown steadily and Rowling's work has been increasingly disputed.

Rowling's novels also attracted the attention of the feminist literary criticism. Children's and juvenile literature in general is approached in a variety of ways - the feminist reading of a children's book can direct its attention to the examination of the ways women are portrayed, search for archetypes from a feminist perspective, examine female values and the sense of community, or focus its attention to the patriarchal way of subject construction and possible points of resistance, etc (Dresang 2002: 217). In its extreme form feminist literary theory regards literature solely as a political expression of the relationship between sexes. The author's context and intentions are completely irrelevant and are considered only to the extent to which they confirm the negative position of women within the patriarchal structure of power. Instead of the author's context it is the reader's context that is examined from the feminist perspective (Paul 1999).

In accordance with the vast differences between different feminist theories, various literary critics apply differing sets of criteria to J. K. Rowling's novels. While some critics, for example, try to prove the explicit sexist base of the *Harry Potter* series, others attempt to investigate how the female characters cope with the dangers of marginalization and find the strength to resist them.

It would appear that at least four different theses can be discerned when examining the *Harry Potter* novels:

1. They are sexist novels.

2. They are feminist novels.

[•] Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Croatia
[1] The series consists of the following titles: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998.), *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2005) and *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007).

3. They are boys' novels.

4. They are novels in which girls can find their ideals.

While reviewing the most prominent critical observations this paper will attempt to show that much of the negative criticism aimed at Rowling's novels from the feminist point of view is unfounded and that the author's sometimes clumsy handling of some of the contemporary topics and intersexual relationships is unintentional.

2. (Un)Founded Criticism

Elizabeth E. Heilman expresses her disappointment with the main female character, Hermione Granger, and lists many examples of negative ways women are portrayed in the novels (Heilman 2003: 222). Contrary to male characters, Hermione often shows fear - in the first novel, for example, she cowers with fear when she sees a troll, so that the boys (Harry and Ron) had to rescue her: "[Hermione] was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror" (*Philosopher's Stone*: 130). Heilman furthermore claims that girls are represented as anti-intellectual, interested mostly in magic of the lower order as taught in Divination classes (Heilman 2003: 223);[2] that Hermione's knowledge is important, but only contributes to Harry's adventures and not hers; Heilman also points out that the French girl Fleur who takes part in the Tri-Wizard Tournament in the fourth novel is the only girl in the tournament,[3] she performs the worst of all, and in the second part of the tournament gets entangled in seaweed and is unable to save her sister (Harry does that instead); women are usually described as possessing motherly characteristics - e.g. Professor McGonagall is smart, but not wise, powerful or brave, she takes care that students go to bed on time, she is relatively easy to trick and Harry and his friends do that quite often (which is impossible with Principal Dumbledore); unicorns prefer female touch, etc. (Ibid.: 225).

Although it would appear that the girls' membership of the Quidditch teams together with boys speaks of equality of the sexes, Heilman regards this as an example of inequality. According to her, girls scoring points does not mean a lot because the game is over when the small flying ball (the snitch) is caught by the seeker, and that is usually a boy. The only female seeker is Cho Chang, who chases Harry instead of the snitch (Ibid.: 226).

However, it seems that Heilman sometimes extracts individual events in order to support her theses without taking into account the development of the characters. For example, although in the first novel the boys really save Hermione from a troll, in all further adventures and clashes with evil Hermione plays a crucial role and becomes indispensable in the fight against evil on the side of good. This is particularly the case in the seventh novel of the series when Hermione saves the lives of her friends at least three times (*Deathly Hallows*: 138, 344, 362).

Returning to the problem of girls in Quidditch teams, we can see in the novel *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (85) that in the Gryffindor team there are four boys (Harry, Oliver, Fred and George) and three girls (Angelina, Katie and Alicia). The Slytherin team has no girls at all. Due to this fact we might offer a different reading - that Rowling attempts to accentuate the amorality of the Slytherin house which, contrary to the democratic house of Gryffindor, stands for racism, and social and sexual inequality.

Heilman (223) admits that both feminist and poststructural theory accept that a text can be read from various, contradictory and even transgressive positions, but that it is still important for literary criticism to reveal the dominant and hegemonistic convention.

Eliza T. Dresang starts from a different position and argues that the Harry Potter novels are, in fact, feminist in nature (Dresang 2002: 218). She bases her analysis on what Rowling has actually written, and not on what Rowling could or should have written; moreover, Dresang refuses to view Rowling's writing as female subjectivity seeking to confirm itself through

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[2] However, in the fifth novel Hermione points out that Trelawney is "an absolutely appalling teacher … and a real old fraud" (*Order of the Phoenix*: 324), which disputes Heilman's generalized statement, i. e. it is not true that all girls adore Divination.
[3] Even in the process of choosing the candidates for the tournament the girls' crying was unecessarily pointed out. When the Goblet of Fire decides who will be the Beauxbatons representative (Fleur Delacour), the other students of that school are deeply disappointed and two girls start crying: "Two of the girls … had dissolved into tears, and were sobbing with their head on their arms." (*Goblet of Fire*: 237)

discoursive strategies of the fictional text. On the other hand, numerous comments and interviews given by Rowling confirm Dresang's opinion that the author did not write her novels as consciously feminist, i. e. with the express intention of promoting the equality of women (Ibid.: 220).

Dresang distinguishes between caricature and stereotype characters. Literary caricature is a representation which includes comic exaggeration in the description of the internal or external characteristics of a character and always refers to the individual. Stereotype refers to a group and represents a mental picture that a society has created about that group, as well as simplified opinions, prejudice etc. (Dresang 2002: 221). Rowling created Hermione in her own image: intelligent, somewhat confused, a bit tiresome. In the first novel Hermione is unable to suppress her boastful nature whilst on the train to Hogwarts and tells everyone that she has already read numerous books, that she knows everything about a variety of magical beings and that she is intimately acquainted with Harry Potter's history. Hermione has not yet learned how to share her knowledge with others without alienating them in the process. Another aspect of the author that is apparent through Hermione is her dedication to the rights of other beings, minorities, the poor - Rowling used to work for Amnesty International in London and was involved with the problem of human rights in Africa. In the novels Hermione fiercely fights for the rights of the House-Elves, which does not reverberate well with her colleagues.

According to Dresang, the stereotypes in Hermione's characterization are reflected in her hysterical, timid and fearful behaviour, as well as the language Rowling uses to describe her behaviour. These are typical terms connected with the "weaker" sex (crying, sobbing) and in the novels they are never used to describe male characters. This leads to the false interpretation of female characters as weak or comical, which is unacceptable for feminist criticism (Ibid.: 223). In spite of this, Dresang views Hermione as a positive character because she is a perfect example that possessing information and knowledge leads to power. Thanks to the many books she has read Hermione often saves the other heroes, and her incredible industry, which sometimes borders with stubbornness, contributes to the (wrong) readers' view of her as invulnerable and indestructible (Ibid.). Regarding crying and sobbing, Dresang points out that Rowling stated several times that she had never cried herself, so that Hermione's hysterical outbursts and weeping occur too often for us to view them as a credible development of her character, which is completely inconsistent with her key role in the novels. Dresang sees in this a deliberate exaggeration of characterization concealing some kind of special agenda by Rowling (Ibid.). However, Hermione's character develops from novel to novel and the above-mentioned vocabulary is gradually replaced by stronger adjectives and verbs as she becomes more powerful and focused to world problems. Roberta Seelinger Trites (according to Dresang 2002: 224) calls such an approach *subverting stereotypes* which can appear in the course of a novel, although the hero does not possess any particular abilities or powers at the beginning. Hermione's character grows beyond the stereotype of the weak woman / geek and gradually attains abilities usually attributed to male heroes, a process that could be termed androgynisation. It should be pointed out that not all feminists agree with such an androgynous approach to feminism and Dresang concludes the following (2002: 224):

> While radical-libertarian feminists believe both men and women should be androgynous, that is, have access to the full range of so-called male and female characteristics, radical-cultural feminists look more to the enhancement of the so-called female qualities. Although the series is not finished, by book four Hermione seems to be in the process of combining both masculine and feminine traits and thereby subverting the stereotypes imposed on her in earlier books.

Indeed, while in the seventh volume Hermione courageously saves her friends several times, she continues to express traits usually attributed to women, such as caring for others, and, quite unexpectedly, continues with her outbursts of weeping until the very end.

One of the ways in which the authors attempt to represent strong and independent female characters is through the change of roles i.e. through incorporating female characters in adventurous plots usually reserved for men. The change of roles is one of the demands of existential feminism. In her work *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most prominent advocates of this theory describes women as the "others", as "the other or weaker" sex and points

out that the best way for women to become equal to men is by accepting roles otherwise reserved for men, and not by accepting roles of a lower order created by men (Dresang 2002: 225). In accordance with this opinion female characters are given male roles in many adventure or fantasy literary works. However, it cannot be said that Rowling employs this technique to represent Hermione, because Hermione's power is not realized through typically male roles; also, she does not attain androgynous characteristics conforming to the theories of radical feminists.

Many feminist theories view hierarchical structures as part of the male dominated world (Parsons 2004: 136), and only a few accept the opinion that hierarchy is not necessarily connected to patriarchal structures (Dresang 2002: 225). Elizabeth E. Heilman suggests that Rowling's novels "feature females in secondary positions of power and authority and replicate some of the most demeaning, yet familiar, cultural stereotypes for both males and females" (Heilman 2003: 222). Farah Mendelsohn, for example, points out that "the feminist notion of a social order [is one] free from hierarchy and exclusion, [thus] the hierarchical nature of the fantasy world and its exclusiveness [are] inherently anti-feminist ideals." (Mendelsohn 2002: 181). The Hogwarts management is indeed hierarchically organized and female characters do not play a decisive role within the structure of power.[4] However, Dresang claims that women are not completely subjected to the patriarchal power structure but rather have space for their own development (Dresang 2002: 226). While Mendelsohn, just like Heilman, believes that Hermione is represented as silly and even hypocritical with regard to the position of House-Elves (Mendelsohn 2002: 180), Dresang claims that Rowling, by giving Hermione her name[5] and through personal identification with this character, intended a much more important role for her and that her character will continue to gain power from novel to novel, becoming ever more independent and self-confident (Dresang 2002: 226). This notion is confirmed by Hermione's decisive role in many of Harry's adventures, during which the importance of knowledge is continually accentuated. The initial teasing to which Hermione was subjected gradually disappears, along with the realisation on the part of her friends that she is becoming an indispensable factor of their group that they can always rely upon.

Heilman observes that the majority of main characters are men. One of the problems she lists is that scary, evil or supposedly evil characters are predominantly male (e.g. Voldemort, Peter Pettigrew, Severus Snape) (Heilman 2003: 223). Christine Schoefer shares her opinion and says (Gupta 2003: 127):

> No girl is brilliantly heroic the way Harry is, no woman is experienced and wise like Professor Dumbledore. In fact, the range of female personalities is so limited that neither women nor girls play on the side of evil.

It is hard to accept this criticism as valid, because if the situation were reversed, i.e. if the main evil characters were women, it could be understood as the opinion of the author that women possess evil traits by nature, that they are morally weak, or that they revel in scheming and machinations. On the other hand, a completely different reading is possible as well - could it not be Rowling's intent to show that it is men who are particularly prone to evil, just as in the real world the majority of criminals are none other but men?

In the novel *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (293) half-giant Hagrid receives the news that the hippogrif Buckbeak will be executed and hides his face with a handkerchief. This is not the only instance of Hagrid crying,[6] but if we attempt to denote Hagrid as a caricature character who needs to follow conventions, what of the situation in the fifth novel when Principal Dumbledore sheds a tear or two (*Order of the Phoenix*: 744)? In her criticism Heilman avoids all

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[4] That is, until Dolores Umbridge temporarily takes over as school head in the fifth novel (*Order of the Phoenix*).

[5] In the Greek mythology and literature Hermione appears on the one hand as a daughter of Helen of Troy and Menelay, King of Sparta, and on the other as a goddess introduced into literature by Euripidus in his tragedy *Andromach*. Euripides' Hermione is represented as a woman with a strong intellect, great determination and ability to reach her goals. In the Bible we can find St. Hermione, the martyr of Ephesus, canonized in the year 117. In Shakespeare's The Winter Tale Hermione is wife to Leontes, King of Sicily. In 1927, Hilda Doolitle, poet and writer, wrote an autobiographical novel HERmione that was published fifty-four years later by her daughter Perdita (who in turn received her name from Hermione's daughter from the above mentioned Shakespeare's play). It is interesting to note that Hilda Doolittle was in close relationship with D. H. Lawrence 1914-1918. A year later he published his famous novel *Women in Love* in which one of the main characters was named Hermione. Lawrence's Hermione is a woman seeking intellectual understanding and control over her environment, also characteristics of Rowling's Hermione (Dresang 2002: 213-215).

[6] Hagrid cried in the novel *Goblet of Fire* (395) as well, in the scene when Dumbledore, Harry, Ron and Hermione try to convince him to break his self-imposed isolation, after a newspaper had revealed that he was a half-giant.

scenes in which men cry. On the other hand, the fact that Hermione, even in the latter novels, sometimes has eyes full of tears means only that it is a typically female emotional reaction, which was determined by scientists to be more healthy and better for the psychological and physical development of a person, so that the call for the androgynisation of female characters is unnecessary as long as the members of both sexes are accepted as they are, with all their specific traits.

When Malfoy, seeing Hagrid crying, remarks with a sarcastic voice "Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?" (*Prisoner of Azkaban*: 216), the first person who comes to his defence is none other but Hermione; she slaps Malfoy, pulls out her magic wand and is ready to fight him on an equal footing. She is capable of subduing childish hysteria and transforms it into determination based on knowledge and skill. According to Dresang (2002: 229), Rowling has succeeded in developing the character of a child who transforms herself into a young woman and who is able to resist the traps connected with her sex: she does not retreat into passivity and silence, she is not scared of the world dominated by men, she does not "lose her voice".[7]

One of the characteristics of a feminist text is the creation of a community - the stress is not on the dependence on someone, but on interdependence (Dresang 2002: 230). Therefore, the question is whether Hermione, in her interaction with other characters (mostly Harry and Ron), gains something that might help her in her own development, or whether she is dependent on other heroes. There are numerous examples in which we see that she is not only completely dependent on her friends, but that they are more dependent on her than vice-versa. On the other hand we see that Hermione has only male friends and that she barely socializes with other girls. This is in contrast with theories of multicultural, global and eco-feminists who point out that one of the key feminist characteristics is the creation of a single-sex community that offers support to its members.[8] Rowling has created a community that is not based on sex, but on the affiliation with the school (in a narrower sense) and with the fight of the good against evil (in a broader sense). At the end of the fourth novel Professor Dumbledore gives an important speech to his students (*Goblet of Fire*: 627):

"Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here, at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.

"Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

This short excerpt sums up Rowling's philosophy; community, friendship, trust, without sexual, racial, national or religious differences.

The moral development of women, particularly in regard with the ethics of caring is another characteristic of a feminist text (Dresang 2002: 231). While radical feminists persist with the notion of biological determinism, radical-libertarian feminists believe that it should be overcome through androgynisation (and accepting both male and female traits towards the betterment of both sexes), whilst radical-cultural or gender feminists claim that women should use it and protect it (Ibid.: 232). Carol Gilligan's research shows that Hermione accepts the androgynous model of moral-ethical development that has clear features of the "male" component (Ibid.). When she speaks of women, Gilligan claims that the moral development is focused on the understanding of responsibility and relationship, while men understand the morality of justice and connect the moral development with the understanding of rules and rights (Ibid.). In simplified terms, we can speak of caring on one hand and justice on the other, i.e. directing attention to the others (people) on one hand and the structures of power on the other. Hermione's attitude towards racism and exploitation forms part of the domain of male views of morality, because it addresses the problems

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[7] Several psychologists, among others Lynn Mikle Brown, Carol Gilligan, Mary Pipher and Joan Jacobs, wrote about the so called "loss of voice" in the moment when girls become young women, and about various consequences of such retreat into anonymity. More on this in Dresang (2002: 229).

[8] Female community is the basis of most (but not all) feminist theories.

of injustice (everyone should be treated equally), and it speaks of the notion of caring (no one should be hurt) to a much lesser degree.

According to Dresang, although Hermione's sense for justice is obviously based on rules, interpersonal relations are more important: after the above-mentioned combat with the troll Hermione openly lies to Professor McGonagall in order to save Harry and Ron from punishment. She apparently did not do this in order to respect rules but to care for friends (232). In another case she saves the hippogrif Buckbeak from execution, again out a wish to care for him and Hagrid. In the series there are more similar cases but it is not easy to determine whether we are dealing with the female ethics of caring, the male ethics of justice, or the attainment of an androgynous equilibrium.

Furthermore feminist literary criticism cannot agree on the other female characters. The most important of these characters is certainly Professor McGonagall, but while Heilman (2003: 223) describes her as clever, but not wise, Mendelsohn (2002: 175) claims that she is unfair and dismissive, whilst Dresang (2002: 235) says she is a strong and ethical person that embodies wisdom.

As if aware of the completely opposing interpretations Rowling in her sixth novel pits two similar and yet different women against each other. Narcissa Malfoy, escorted by her sister Bellatrix, begs Professor Snape for help, because evil Voldemort has chosen her son Draco to perform some sinister task. Narcissa is wife to Lucius Malfoy, one of Voldemort's most faithful followers, but she is also a mother and implores (*Half-Blood Prince*: 38):

> "Severus ... please ... you are, you have always been, Draco's favourite teacher ... you are Lucius's old friend ... I beg you ...
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> ...
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> When Snape said nothing, Narcissa seemed to lose what little self-restraint she still possessed. Standing up, she staggered to Snape and seized the front of his robes. Her face close to his, her tears falling on to his chest, she gasped, "You could do it".

Her sister Bellatrix does not share her opinion:

> "You should be proud!" said Bellatrix ruthlessly. "If I had sons, I would be glad to give them up to the service of the Dark Lord!"

The argument between sisters continues throughout the chapter. Both characters are intentionally represented as caricatures, their behaviour is impulsive, and they embody two opposing currents of the female psyche as seen from the male perspective - the caring mother willing to do anything for her children (but also willing to inflict pain and destruction in order to protect their offspring); and the evil and unscrupulous follower of evil. Rowling appears to be using exaggeration to keep her distance, but this scene might be read from at least several more standpoints. Is Narcissa the embodiment of a weeping scared woman, or is she truthfully worried for the well-being of her son? Has she perhaps been seduced to the path of evil, or has she broken down only when confronted by the mortal danger her child might be facing? Or, taking into consideration the family she comes from, is she in reality rotten to the core and her interests are aimed solely towards the members of her family? Is Narcissa strong or weak, evil or victim? Her sister Bellatrix is not an unambiguous character either, although this may not seem so on the first sight. She might be evil by nature, but she might also be mentally ill. Does she care for her sister (she does go with her to visit Snape and witnesses the "unbreakable vow") or is she more interested in the success of Voldemort's evil plans? Many characters in Rowling's novels are not what they seem at first; some start as negative characters, only to suddenly become positive and vice versa. For example, Professor Snape is described as an extremely negative person, but four years later we learn that he was on the side of good all along, and yet at the end of the sixth novel he murders Professor Dumbledore; in the seventh novel it is, however, explained that he killed Dumbledore in order to save Draco Malfoy and because the principal was terminally ill and would have died in a couple of months anyway. The French half-veela Fleur Delacourt is unbearable and conceited, but at the end of the sixth novel she shows her unconditional love to one of Ron's brothers, in spite of the terrible wounds that marked him forever; Professor Lockhart is extremely popular with students (except Harry), but at the end he turns against Harry and his friends.

Another important characteristic of a feminist literary text is that it envisages a world to which the readers can aspire, and not a world that reflects our reality (Dresang 2002: 238). If we follow this train of thought we can conclude that Rowling does not write feminist novels because her story does not lead to any change based on gender issues. However, her insistence on other ethical questions, as well as the attempts of several characters to fight inequality and racism, seem to be in conformity with the positions of modern feminist theories, which emphasise the inclusiveness of, and worry about, all forms of repression and marginalization, not only the repression and marginalization of women. Moreover eco-feminism, as well as multicultural and global feminism, fight against repressive structures in general and bind the position of women with others who find themselves marginalized.

There are critics who believe that the *Harry Potter* series is undoubtedly feminist in nature. Ximena Gallardo-C. and C. Jason Smith (2003: 191) believe that Harry Potter is an exceptionally feminized character, a trait which allows female readers to identify with him. They also suggest that the novels are full of oppositions between phallic symbols (e. g. towers) and feminine symbols (e. g. caves, dungeons), and that Harry's actions show a clear preponderance of feminized thought on the symbolic level. These critics believe that the series increasingly deals with the relationship towards "the others" (e. g. elves, giants...) and that this trend enables a critical reassessment of values from the position of women. If we accept this opinion we might conclude that Harry is in fact a girl in disguise. Gallardo-C and Smith compare Harry to Cinderella - they both live in similar conditions, they are poorly treated, they fear failure, and they never manage to shed the negative consequences of their upbringing (Ibid.: 195). The motifs that appear in both literary works are similar as well: desertion, loss of parental protection, female (witch) magical powers. The scar on Harry's forehead is the consequence of the conflict between the male force of evil Voldemort and the passive female motherly protection, and symbolizes the vulnerability of the allegedly firm and strong male body. Thus, both masculine and feminine traits are combined in Harry's body, both the weapon and the wound, the open and the closed body (Ibid.: 197). The authors come to the conclusion that although Harry is a boy "he is passing through a world where many females have walked before him and triumphed." (Ibid.: 196).

It would, however, appear that at least some of the reasons for the attractiveness of the *Harry Potter* series are of an altogether different nature. By positioning Hermione against Harry and Ron, Rowling plays on the still existing differences between the upbringing of boys and girls, so that their often contradictory reactions can be accepted as their own by the male and female readers, thus identifying themselves with the main characters.

For example, in a scene of the fourth novel Ron invites Harry for a game of Quidditch in order to cheer him up after a dramatic event. Hermione, as the embodiment of the ethics of caring, warns Ron that Harry most certainly does not feel like playing sports, but Harry jumps at the invitation and accepts without thinking. Hermione's only comment was a bitter "Boys!" (*Goblet of Fire*: 134). This is one of many scenes in which girls immediately identify themselves with Hermione and boys with Harry. An excellent example of this "split identification" can be found in the fifth novel of the series. A group of boys fiercely argue about Quidditch, but Hermione's opinion is different (*Order of the Phoenix*: 507):

"That's the trouble with Quidditch," said Hermione absentmindedly, once again bent over her Runes translation, "it creates all this bad feeling and tension between the houses."

She looked up to find her copy of Spellman's Syllabary, and caught Fred, George and Harry all staring at her with expression of mingled disgust and incredulity on their faces.

"Well, it does!" she said impatiently. "It's only a game, isn't it?"

"Hermione", said Harry, shaking his head, "you're good on feelings and stuff, but you just don't understand about Quidditch."

"Maybe not." she said darkly, returning to her translation, "but at least my happiness doesn't depend on Ron's goalkeeping ability."

It might be interesting to note that some critics believe that Harry Potter novels are typical books for boys (Doughty 2002: 243). Harry is obsessed with sports (i.e. Quidditch), he yearns to become a hero (not a patient or knowledgeable person), gets into typically male types of trouble etc. Terri Doughty claims that Rowling celebrates male heroism at the point of development of our society when popular culture abhors male violence, when boys become murderers in an ever increasing number of cases, and that Rowling actually succeeded in reaching the subliminal wish in the minds of her readers to remind themselves that boys have their own path to maturity, the path they are able to walk, be it alone, or with the help of others (Ibid.: 257).

On the other hand there are examples in the series which we might claim are used by Rowling to show female psychological or emotional superiority, and not submissiveness. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* Harry and Ron have problems in finding a partner for the ball, so that Harry is forced to "defend" himself from invitations he receives from numerous girls (339):

> A curly-haired third-year Hufflepuff girl to whom Harry had never spoken in his life asked him to go to the ball with her the very next day. Harry was so taken aback he said "no" before he'd even stopped to consider the matter. The girl walked off looking rather hurt, and Harry had to endure Dean's, Seamus's and Ron's taunts about her all through History of Magic. The following day, two more girls asked him, a second-year and (to his horror) a fifth-year who looked as though she might knock him out if he refused.

> "She was quite good-looking," said Ron fairly, after he'd stopped laughing.

> "She was a foot taller than me," said Harry, still unnerved. "Imagine what I'd look like trying to dance with her."

Thus female, but not male, emancipation seems to have been attained. Harry is seriously worried because his female colleagues want to invite him to the ball, particularly those older than he.

In the same scene we can sometimes find examples of women represented as both strong and weak. For example, in the fifth novel Harry repeats to Ron and Hermione that Cho Chang started crying when he kissed her. Ron's comment was typically male: "You'd think a bit of kissing would cheer her up" (*Order of the Phoenix*: 405), while Hermione attempts to explain some things to Harry (Ibid.):

> "Well, obviously, she's feeling very sad, because of Cedric dying. Then I expect she's feeling confused because she liked Cedric and now she likes Harry, and she can't work out who she likes best. Then she'll be feeling guilty, thinking it's an insult to Cedric's memory to be kissing Harry at all, and she'll be worrying about what everyone else might say about her if she starts going out with Harry. And she probably can't work out what her feelings towards Harry are, anyway, because he was the one who was with Cedric when Cedric died, so that's all very mixed up and painful. Oh, and she's afraid she's going to be thrown off the Ravenclaw Quidditch team because she's been flying so badly."

The scene continues with Ron's comment: "One person can't feel all that at once, they'd explode", and with Hermione's angry reaction: "Just because you've got the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn't mean we all have." (Ibid.: 406).

Although the scene is somewhat comical, it clearly suggests that girls are emotionally more mature than boys. Indeed this is valid for the relationship between men and women in general, at least on a symbolic level. The fact that Cho Chang cries might prompt some critics to claim that Rowling portrays women in a negative light, but on the other hand it appears that this very scene proves that girls (women) are more ready to accept the responsibility for interpersonal relationships, that they care about this problem and that they do not behave irresponsibly and rudely like many boys (men), who usually face such problems by neglecting them and leaving them unsolved.

Suman Gupta criticized the way the desires and relationships between men and women were represented in the series. He cites the example in the fourth novel of the Bulgarian "veela" (female magical beings), who are considered by all men to be irresistibly attractive. Gupta's

opinion is that the problem lies in the fact that Rowling does not represent the relationships of her characters according to the individual characteristics of the others, but focuses her attention on the general desire for external appearance. They succumb to this desire without regard for the actual internal characteristics of the desired person (Gupta 2003: 128). However, is this really valid? When Harry Potter spots the "veela" for the first time at the world Quiddich tournament, his reaction is as follows (*Goblet of Fire*: 94):

> The veela had started to dance, and Harry's mind had gone completely and blissfully blank. All that mattered in the world was that he kept watching the veela, because if they stopped dancing, terrible things would happen. … And as the veela danced faster and faster, wild, half-formed thoughts started chasing through Harry's dazed mind. He wanted to do something very impressive, right now. Jumping from the box into the stadium seemed a good idea. . . but would it be good enough?

This and the following paragraphs tell us that the "veela" are magical beings who have the power to enchant men. Therefore, the male characters did not lose their heads because of their external appearance but because of their magical powers. Only a few pages later the reader receives a moral teaching that completely negates Gupta's criticism, because Rowling's intention is to show that outer appearance is misleading (*Goblet of Fire*: 101):

> …the veela lost control. Instead of dancing, they launched themselves across the field and began throwing what seemed to be handfuls of fire at the leprechauns. Watching through his Omnioculars, Harry saw that they didn't look remotely beautiful now. On the contrary, their faces were elongating into sharp, cruel-beaked bird heads, and long, scaly wings were bursting from their shoulders -

> "And that, boys," yelled Mr. Weasley over the tumult of the crowd below, "is why you should never go for looks alone!"

Rowling uses the "veela" to show the naïvety of men. In the forest Harry, Ron and Hermione encounter three "veela", around whom many men have congregated, boasting loudly of their true or imagined feats and accomplishments (*Goblet of Fire*: 113):

> "I pull down about a hundred sacks of Galleons a year," one of them shouted. "I'm a dragon-killer for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures."

> "No, you're not," yelled his friend, "you're a dish-washer at the Leaky Cauldron … but I'm a Vampire Hunter, I've killed about ninety so far -"

> A third young wizard, whose pimples were visible even by the dim, silvery light of the veela, now cut in, "I'm about to become the youngest ever Minister for Magic, I am."

> Harry snorted with laughter. He recognised the pimply wizard; his name was Stan Shunpike, and he was in fact a conductor on the triple-decker Knight Bus.

> He turned to tell Ron this, but Ron's face had gone oddly slack, and next second Ron was yelling, "Did I tell you I've invented a broomstick that'll reach Jupiter?"

On the one hand this paragraph contains criticism of the male obsession with the outer beauty of women, and on the other the obsession of the magical world with money, power, maleness and unimportant accomplishments of life. Of course, the criticism is at the same time aimed at our own world.

The obsession of men with outer appearance is also shown in the chapter where Ron and Harry discuss who to invite for the ball (*Goblet of Fire*: 344):

> "We should get a move on, you know… ask someone. … We don't want to end up with a pair of trolls"

> Hermione let out a splutter of indignation. "A pair of what, excuse me?"

> "Well - you know," said Ron, shrugging, "I'd rather go alone than with - with Eloise Midgeon, say."

"Her acne's loads better lately - and she's really nice!"

"Her nose is off-centre," said Ron.

"Oh, I see," Hermione said, bristling. "So basically, you're going to take the best-looking girl who'll have you, even if she's completely horrible?"

"Er - yeah, that sounds about right," said Ron.

However, Rowling's intention is not to criticise only men when boys are captivated by the Bulgarian *veela* and the French girl Fleur Delacourt, because the girls are equally infatuated with the self-obsessed Professor Lockhart in the second volume of the series.

3. Conclusion

As shown in the above examples, it is not true that Rowling portrays only women in a negative light, and if there are some discrepancies in her approach to describing boys and girls (which could be demonstrated only by a complicated statistical analysis), it could hardly be proved that she has done this on purpose. If Rowling attempted to divide her attention between men and women mathematically this would reflect on the general construction of the novels and would lead to a considerable sense of artificiality.

Therefore we are unable to reach an irrefutable conclusion on gender equality in Rowling's novels. It would appear that the author does not intend to promote sexual equality, nor does she attempt to perpetuate permanently established norms and customs. Through constant ironical provocation of each sex she seems to be attempting to highlight the apparent differences without openly pleading either cause. However, the lack of such direct intervention does not at the same time mean that the author does not get deeply involved in the ethical questions of modern society, because she constantly positions the characters at opposite poles with regard to emotional relationships, the relationships towards other people or those who are different, towards family and the society as a whole. At the same time Rowling uses exaggeration and caricaturisation to make the reader aware of the problems of male-female relationships.

If we attempted to show these relationships in a table form (Fig. 1) we might conclude that the relationships of male and female characters, as well as their attitudes towards society largely correspond to opinions prevalent today on what equality actually means, and we can observe in which segments of male-female relationships these differences are still present. However Rowling's intentions are not to erase the differences. Rather she places them at the opposite ends of an imagined circle, on an equidistant trajectory, so that they never nullify each other. In this system, neither the androgynisation of female characters, nor the feminization of male characters seem to be necessary in order to achieve mutual respect and equality in the social texture of the modern (wizarding) world, but there is space for improvement in several fields, that can be achieved by joint action of all human beings towards the common cause.

Fig. 1: Intergender relationships in the novels by Joanne Kathleen Rowling

	Boys	Girls
General equality	●	●
Equality in school achievements	●	●
Equality in sports	●	●
Equality in politics	●	○
Importance of outer appearance	●	●
Importance of community	◘	●
Devotion to family	◘	●
Devotion to friends	●	●
Understanding of relationships among people	◘	●
Understanding of relationships between sexes	○	●
Emotional maturity	○	●
Ethics of caring	◘	◘
Promotion of ethical values in general (with positive characters)	●	●

● - Yes
○ - No
◘ - Conditionally (to a limited measure or inconsistently)

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