

Harry Potter: Political Allegory in the Harry Potter Series

GOALS

- Students will identify archetypes and symbols (supernatural helpers, the hero, death, a curse)
- Students will understand the concept of a socio-political allegory
- Students will apply the concept to the Harry Potter series
- Students will consider how stereotypes, group dynamics, and social power relations in the Harry Potter series might reflect real life

RATIONALE

Literature often provides us with a socio-political allegory, a fictional world in which the social dynamics and political systems that govern everyday life take on new shapes. The Wizard of Oz offers us one classic example of how a motley cast of characters, all subject to some kind of challenge or lost opportunity, negotiates a fictional world and strives to overcome what each sees as the limits of his or her personal identity within a larger context.

In narrative form, symbolic characters and their actions resemble the social and political realities that individuals face in real-life situations. The Tin Man, for example, represents the isolated and detached existence individuals face in an increasingly technological industrialized world. Dorothy, an orphan like Harry Potter, must come of age and define her sense of home as she faces contending forces of good and evil—the witches of the East and West.

Indeed, since each of the characters in The Wizard of Oz desires a new trait to make him or her “whole,” the “gifts” supplied by the Wizard create another allegory entirely. In an increasingly consumer culture, these objects represent the conditions through which one might live more fully—how interesting that Dorothy finds her sense of home and belonging in a fancy pair of shoes!

PROCESS

- Ask students to define socio-political allegory. (See glossary.)
- Give examples from The Wizard of Oz or another text the students know
- Ask students to apply those ideas to Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince using the handout

Harry Potter: Political Allegory in the Harry Potter Series

- Choose a symbolic quality from this list of characters in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince.
- Think about what that quality means to the individual character and to people around him or her, then consider whether this reflects people and their qualities in real life.
- Write down your ideas about one or two characters using the chart and examples below

Character	Symbolic Quality	What does it symbolize for this character?	What does it symbolize for other characters?	Allegorical “Real-life” Significance
Malfoy	Pure-blood	Aristocracy, entitlement	Nothing	Preoccupation with heritage, like in Nazi Germany
Lupin	Werewolf	Lupin sees this as a disability, making him different from other Wizards	Harry tells him he’s “normal” but Harry sees it as a “furry little problem”	Acceptance of difference can diminish struggles for people with disabilities
Ron	Blood-traitor			
Hermione	Muggle-born			
Kreacher	House-elf			
Hagrid	Half-giant			

When you’ve completed your examples, join with three or four classmates to exchange ideas. Feel free to add more characters or qualities to the list. Your group should try to answer the following questions:

1. Think about how different groups in the series represent groups that we see in today’s society. For example, what do you think the death-eaters and their regime symbolize?
2. The series makes a big deal of heritage and “blood status.” Do you think different characters interpret the significance of being half-blood, pure-blood or muggle-born differently? Does contemporary society have similar ideas about lineage or social status?
3. The series includes “minority groups” such as goblins, house-elves and giants. Clearly, it’s better to be a witch or wizard. Can you rank the status and desirability of each identity, from top to bottom?
4. Does a “minority identity” define what kind of jobs goblins, giants or house-elves have? Do these “minority groups” have different rights than the wizards and witches?
5. If you see a social hierarchy in your school or community, who would be at the top? Who would you put in the middle, and at the bottom? Who has the most power? How do they wield that power?

Blood-traitor — a witch or wizard who loves muggles.

Giants — a species that human wizards and witches consider dangerous, rude, and violent. Hagrid's mother was a giant.

Goblins — a race of very intelligent magical creatures, some of them run the bank. Historically, they organized numerous rebellions against wizard society.

Half-blood — a witch or wizard with one magic and one muggle parent.

House-elves — magical creatures who, after living for hundreds of years in servitude, are generally afraid to leave their masters. They are not permitted to use wands when performing magic.

Minority — in the Harry Potter series, communities of characters who almost all witches and wizards consider non-human; they usually look different and have different ways of using magic.

Mud-blood — a derogatory term for someone with muggle parents.

Muggle — a non-magical person.

Muggle-born — a wizard or witch with muggle parents.

Social hierarchies — ways of categorizing people from top to bottom, often unfairly. People at the top of a hierarchy often control those below them.

Socio-political allegory — a story that often has magic or surreal elements and represents the politics and social issues of the author's real-world experience. This gives the author a fictional way of talking about society and politics in a kind of code that has an entertaining surface story; if you read critically, you find that the author comments on important issues like the government, human rights, and the economy.

Squib — a non-magical person born to a witch and wizard.

Stereotypes — immediate reactions to a person or group of people, usually based on limited knowledge. Someone who looks at a person in a wheelchair and assumes that the person in the wheelchair is weak or not athletic might be reacting to a stereotype. Many people in wheelchairs play basketball, run marathons and can do as much as an athlete on two legs.

Werewolves — people who, after being bitten by another werewolf, are permanently afflicted by a disease that causes them to change form at the full moon.