Anna Mik, "Entry on: Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Harry Potter, 1) by J. K. Rowling", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/641. Entry version as of November 04, 2026.

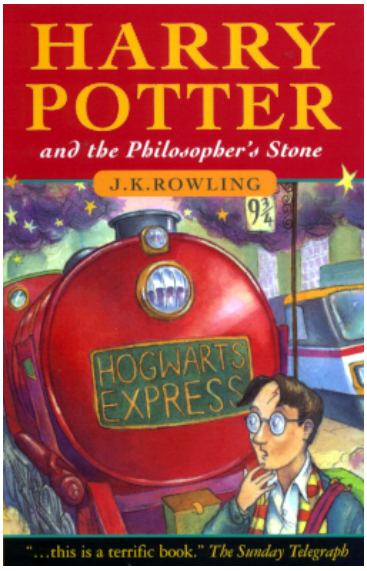
J. K. Rowling

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Harry Potter, 1)

(1997)

TAGS: Centaur(s) Cerberus Giants





Cover of the first edition. Courtesy of Bloomsbury Publishing.

General information	
Title of the work	Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Harry Potter, 1)
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1997
First Edition Details	J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury, 1997, pp. 223
ISBN	9780747532699
Official Website	pottermore.com (accessed: February 4, 2019).

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Awards	1997 – Nestlé Smarties Book Prize 1997 Gold Medal 9–11 years; 1997 – FCBG Children's Book Award 1997 Overall winner in Longer Novel Category; 1997 – Birmingham Cable Children's Book Award; 1997 – British Book Awards 1997 Children's Book of the Year; 1998 – Young Telegraph Paperback of the Year; 1998 – Carnegie Medal: Shortlist; 1998 – Sheffield Children's Book Award; 2001 – Whitaker's Platinum Book Award; 2013 – Voted nation's favourite children's book in Reading charity Booktrust's '100 best books for children' vote.
Genre	Fantasy fiction, School story*
Target Audience	Children (also now: crossover)
Author of the Entry	Anna Mik, University of Warsaw, anna.m.mik@gmail.com
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Creators



Portrait of J. K. Rowling, photographed by Daniel Ogren on April 5, 2010. The file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike (accessed: May 25, 2018).

J. K. Rowling , b. 1965
(Author, Illustrator)

Joanne Kathleen Rowling, was born July 31, 1965 in Yate, Gloucestershire, England. She graduated from the University of Exeter with a degree in French and Classics, she is considered a writer with classical background. After publishing the first Harry Potter book in 1997, she gradually became the best known author of all time.

The Harry Potter septology (1997–2007), is one of the most successful and popular series in the history of children's literature (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* sold in 107 million copies). It may be argued that, from the very beginning, the author herself had to expand this world, fill the gaps, and explain all the rules– not only by discussing some issues (later on – mainly on Twitter) or giving guidelines in the interviews but by creating her website Pottermore. Once it was an online platform, where fans could read the series simultaneously with Rowling's commentary and additions. Now it serves more as commercial space, although Rowling still adds some new elements (e. g. the short history of magical schools in USA).

To give to the devoted fans of Harry something that would allow them to feel the magical bond with the world they want to be a part of she created three books that now exist in both the secondary world of Hogwarts and the primary world where the reader can have a copy in their own hands.

HP Series Spin-offs:

Quidditch Through the Ages by Kennilworthy Whisp (2001), *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* by Newton Scamander (2001) and *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (2007)* are allegedly copies of books from the world of Harry Potter which include different literary genres and publication formats: history of sport, bestiaries, and collections of fairy tales. These books are not part of the septology, but they provide complementary information about sports, animals and animal-like creatures, and fairy-tales of the Wizarding World. Additionally, they can be interpreted as a device to help convince readers of the reality

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of the magical world. In these three books, as in the series sensu stricto, J. K. Rowling plays on various levels with great literary traditions, using one of the many features of postmodern literature.

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* Hand-written copies were released in 2007, printed ones in 2008.

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Additional information

Adaptations	Movie: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, dir. Chris Colombus, Warner Bros. Picture, 2001.
Translation	Multiple languages
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	The following book: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

Summary

Harry Potter, the main character of the series, is an orphan living with his uncle and aunt, who treat him like, to put it delicately, a spare wheel. One day, on his 11th birthday, he gets an extraordinary letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (delivered by Hagrid, half-giant, later, one of his best friends), with an invitation to start his year as a student wizard. He also learns (mainly from Hagrid) about his past and his greatest enemy – Lord Voldemort, dark and evil wizard (the main antagonist in the story), who killed his parents and also tried to kill him. Harry was the only wizard who survived the killing curse cast by Voldemort and at the same time he defeated Dark Lord, which made him famous among wizards and witches who since then call him the Boy Who Lived.

In Hogwarts Harry Potter not only learns magic, but also makes new friends who eventually become his family. He attends classes, where he learns Defence Against the Dark Arts, Potions, Charms, and maybe most importantly – Quidditch, the most popular sport in the wizarding world, in which he instantly becomes a champion.

The main plot however of the first book is centred around a mysterious little package, that Hagrid picks up from Gringotts – the wizarding bank. As Harry and his friends later find out, in it was the philosopher's stone, a magical object created by Nicolas Flamel in the 14th century. The stone had the ability to produce Elixir of Life and

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transform any metal into gold.

The Elixir of Life is the possible solution for Lord Voldemort to regain his powers in order to rule the wizarding world. The stone was hidden in the school's underground, protected by magical spells and riddles prepared by teachers. Harry, Ron and Hermione suspected one of them, Severus Snape, of wanting to steal the stone for the Dark Lord. As no one believes them, the young students decide to find the stone themselves before Voldemort does. In the underground chamber, Harry and Voldemort meet again to fight over the stone and once again – the young boy defeats the powerful wizard, however (as we find out in the next volume) – not permanently.

Analysis

The Harry Potter books, as has been pointed out many times now (Richard A. Spencer, Christine Walde, Elżbieta Olechowska, see: Further Reading), are very much based on antiquity. Not only do spells (a*ccio*, *crucio*) and various names (Minerva, Hermione, Dedalus) come from Latin, but motifs, narrative strategies and characters are deeply rooted in classical texts and aesthetics. Here I will mention a few among many (also see: Further Reading).

The main motif of this book – the search for the philosopher's stone – might already point out to the classical inspiration. Not only does the word 'philosopher' allude to the ancient tradition, but also the stone's function – conquering death – also could be related to the classical concept of staying young thanks to various potions (inter alia, 'ambrosia' – in Greek meaning 'immortality'). Also, seven wizards that prepared tasks protecting the stone in Hogwarts might be related to the Seven Wise Men of the classical world (Cavarnos, 1996).

Harry Potter meanwhile could be interpreted as a mythical hero. His fate has been intertwined with the fate of his worst enemy and he cannot do anything to change it. What is more, he is in a way marked by fate as the scar on his forehead in the shape of a lightning bolt – left by Voldemort – which lets everyone identify him as the greatest hero of their time.

Also, the Underworld of the classical mythology might be the Forbidden Forrest (located next to the castle) of the Harry Potter world. Both spaces are associated with death and danger, although they are not necessarily evil or cursed. They are just not homes for the

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living. Both places are also inhabited and guarded by mythical creatures, which do not belong to the so-called civilized world. The connection between these two locations is highlighted by the presence of dark figures: Hades in the Underworld, and Voldemort in the Forbidden Forest, when the latter is on the verge of death. The former is in the Underworld because it is his realm, whereas the latter is an intruder in the Forbidden Forest. Both figures inspire awe in anyone who encounters them. The ancients also feared to say the name of Hades aloud, just like "Voldemort" is called You-Know-Who.

There are many ways to interpret *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, however, I would like to focus on the topic of fantastic beasts inspired by antiquity, as they are also representatives of the magical world.

One of characters inspired by the classical mythology that we encounter in the series is Rubeus Hagrid, half-giant, half-human (he is also a wizard, however, he did not graduate from Hogwarts). In the very beginning of the first book Rowling gives his description that suits both: his look and his behaviour, which will not change throughout the series (Rowling, 1997: 16–17). What is worth underlining right away is the comparison to an animal – a dog, culturally recognized as a symbol of faithfulness and devotion. Later on, when he picks up Harry from the house in the middle of the sea, we encounter another, close-up description of Hagrid. Here his monstrosity is built upon the principle of contradiction: a giant man with "warm" traits: dolphin boots, dog howl, beetles eyes… (Rowling, 1997: 39) His enormous size is most likely associated with warmth and strength rather than with danger. Hagrid is an embodiment of faithfulness and kindness, qualities strange to the 'real' giants – those that we know from antiquity (e.g., Thracian Gigantes, Orion, Talos, etc.)

Another creature that Harry and his friends meet – also, inspired by classical antiquity – is the three-headed dog Fluffy, based on Cerberus. When the children escape Filch and his cat Mrs. Norris, they end up in the forbidden corridor, where a dog guards the entrance to Hogwarts' undergrounds. There they meet the dog for the first time. Since then Harry, Ron and Hermione have not dared to go back and investigate what Fluffy actually guards. The topic of the mythical monster comes back when Harry spots Snape's wounded leg and discovers that the potion master did go to the third floor. When they confess their discovery to Hagrid:

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'How do you know about Fluffy?' he said.

'*Fluffy?*'

'Yeah – he's mine – bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. I lent him to Dumbledore do guard the––' (Rowling, 1997: 141)

... Philosopher's Stone, as we later find out. A three-headed dog bought from a Greek, man that protects the entrance to the underground is a clear association with the classical mythology and Cerberus. Although treated by students as a monster, for Hagrid he is a pet that does not differ much from his 'normal' dog Fang.

In the Forbidden Forest, we also meet a herd of Centaurs. They were probably inspired by 'good' mythical Centaurs, Chiron and Pholus, as for example Ronan, a friend of Hagrid, who was kind and not aggressive at all from the very beginning. His knowledge of the world seemed to be much deeper than that of the wizards themselves. He says: "Mars is bright tonight [...] Unusually bright," (Rowling, 1997: 185) as if he knows of a threat to Harry's and his friends' future.* Also, the way Hagrid and Ronan communicate appears to be rather odd. When the half-giant tried to get an answer from the centaur, he:

[...] didn't answer immediately. He started unblinkingly upwards, then sighed again. 'Always the innocent are the first victims,' he said. 'So it has been for ages past, so it is now.'

'Yeah,' said Hagrid, 'but have yeh seen anythin', Ronan? Anythin' unusual?'

'Mars is bright tonight,' Ronan repeated while Hagrid watched him impatiently. 'Unusually bright.' (Rowling, 1997: 185)

While Ronan is making this remark, another centaur, Bane, joins the company. He is described as looking wilder than Ronan, however he says exactly the same phrase: "Mars is bright tonight." (Rowling, 1997: 185). Hagrid's comment on this sentence is quite appropriate:

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"Never […] try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy star-gazers. Not interested in anythin' closer'n the moon." (Rowling, 1997: 185) As he continues with "They're deep, mind, centaurs... they know things... jus' don' let on much" (Rowling, 1997: 185), we might be sure enough of their knowledge and customs, which are far from aggressive or savage. When they read the stars, one of them warns his companion: "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens," (Rowling, 1997: 187–188) and to the heavens they are faithful the whole time. Firenze, to save Harry, allows him to ride on his back, which they are not allowed to. When Bane sees them, he expresses his feelings very clearly, as he does not want to share the centaurs' secrets with the wizards.

There are certain strategies that the centaurs apply in relationships with humans. Some, as Bane, are conservative and distrustful towards wizards, who harmed their kind in the past. Firenze however represents more a liberal approach and perceives the cooperation with humans as the only way to defeat their common enemy.

Those presented above are just a few examples of how Rowling appropriated classical antiquity in her first book about Harry Potter. They can be interpreted in other ways and it is fair to claim that this novel provides classicists with many opportunities for analysing reception.

The scope and nature of Harry Potter novels' influence on children across the world, in the original and in the various translations, merit a separate interdisciplinary study.

* Centaurs can read the future from the stars. One of the centaurs teaches astronomy at Hogwarts.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Centaur(s) Cerberus Giants

Animals Childhood Harry Potter Supernatural creatures (non-

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	classical)

Further Reading

Cavarnos, Constantine, *The Seven Sages of Ancient Greece: The Lives and Teachings of the Earliest Greek Philosophers, Thales, Pittacos, Bias, Solon, Cleobulos, Myson, Chilon*, Belmont, MA: Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1996.

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Addenda

Publ. by Scholastic in the US in 1998 under the title: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.*

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