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Stereotypes in the Houses of *Harry Potter*

Stereotypes surround us and engulf our thoughts. People say that stereotypes do not exist and that all of the categories are in our heads, or that we are being judgmental, but that is definitely not the case. Sadly stereotypes only exist because as a society we make them exist. Meaning, if we did not fuel this cycle, there would not be a cycle. We are extremely capable of breaking out of this cycle and we would be able to see that the only reason these groups have significance is because we give them significance. Many adults like to believe that the categorizing that happens in high school, such as cliques, will end once they “grow up.” However, even as we grow older I am finding that we still cling to the stereotypes and classify people into groups around the work place or just in general. It is engraved in our heads and we cannot escape it unless we make an extreme effort to stop this cycle. In “Stereotypes: Conceptual and Normative Considerations” Judith Andre explicitly states that “stereotypes are unavoidable” because “there’s a great difference between a true generalization and a stereotype” (80-81). Meaning there is a difference between categorizing them and noting the difference in a person. In *Harry Potter* there are stereotypes that haunt each house at Hogwarts: School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We are introduced to them at the very beginning of Harry’s experience at Diagon Alley and they are made clearer to the reader as the series progresses. In my essay, I argue that stereotypes plague the houses within *Harry Potter* and that they are accepted as truth. We are brought up in a society that literally clings to the categories that we put people into. Without stereotypes we would be able to broaden our minds and branch off with people we deem different than ourselves and rid ourselves of the hierarchy we create with these stereotypes. The hierarchy that stereotypes present creates a significant problem because it is no longer groupings to be afraid of, it is groups that believe that they are higher than others and will use violence and force to rise above.

Through my research I have found evidence that stereotypes are planted in our heads from the moment we learn there are differences in other people. When referring to the word stereotypes, I mean “a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group” (Definition of Stereotypes). We, as a society, are taught that there are differences between one person and another and that is why there are stereotypes and different groups throughout the world. I have found in numerous books, websites and journal articles that stereotypes could be said to be a perpetuated cycle and without the help of bystanders, there will always be differences. In “Believing What You Hear: The Impact of Aging upon the Old”, Teri Bennett and Jean Gaines say that the stereotypes about old people may or may not be true, but older people incorporate these “standards” so that these stereotypes become true (435). If we hear the description of a group, we automatically sort people into that group according to what we know about them. We do this to ourselves in the same way, once we figure ourselves out we put ourselves into a group and then we act accordingly (435). In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Storey talks about the fact that “human biology does not divide people into different races, it is racism that insists on this division” (167). Although in my argument I am not discussing the differences between races in *Harry Potter*, the same principles apply. Just as Storey says, “it is racism that insists on this division”, the theory of structuralism also discussed by Storey says “meaning is produced, not through a one-to-one relation to things in the world, but by establishing difference” (111). The stereotypes are in place because the differences between the students in the different Houses have been culturally established, not naturally. The word different makes the labels and groupings true. Through this culturally accepted term we give meaning to the function of stereotypes and differences between people creating more conflict between groups. In *Harry Potter* we see the hierarchy of the Houses create conflict using force and violence as a tool to be at the top of the “system.” This hierarchy generates an “us versus them” attitude, which increases the conflict and the divisions between the already divided Houses.

All of the stereotypes that are in place at Hogwarts could be traced back to the fact that the founders were all very different too and decided to make four different houses. Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff decided when they started the school, Hogwarts, they would separate children under their watch. Eventually when they died the new students would be placed under the Sorting Hat to find out which house they would be in: Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw. “While still alive they did divide their favorites from the throng, yet how to pick the worthy ones when they were dead and gone” (Goblet of Fire 129 ebook). The head of the houses were all very different making the houses themselves all very different. If there are no houses within Hogwarts there probably would not be half of the drama and tension within the school, but because there are divisions within the school, the children who were raised by wizards and witches already know which house they want to be in because they know of the stereotypes.

According to the Sorting Hat the Gryffindors are, “where dwell the brave at heart, their daring, nerve and chivalry set Gryffindors apart” (Sorcerer’s Stone 86 ebook). Harry symbolizes a true Gryffindor during The Triwizard Tournament when he flies away from the dragon after he steals one of her eggs (Goblet of Fire 248 ebook). “You might belong in Hufflepuff, where they are just and loyal, those patient Hufflepuffs are true and unafraid of toil” (Sorcerer’s Stone 86 ebook). Before the first task in The Triwizard Tournament, Harry tells Cedric Diggory who belongs to Hufflepuff that they will be fighting dragons. Cedric returns the favor, showing true Hufflepuff loyalty by telling Harry that the second task would involve him taking a bath with his egg (Goblet of Fire 300 ebook). The Sorting Hat describes Ravenclaw as, “or yet in wise old Ravenclaw, if you've a steady mind, where those of wit and learning, will always find their kind” (Sorcerer’s Stone 86 ebook). In the *Deathly Hallows* Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood, who is a member of the Ravenclaw house, are looking for Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem. In order for them to get into the Ravenclaw common room, instead of a password, they had to answer the riddle: “which came first, the phoenix or the flame?” (407 ebook) Luna Lovegood answers: “I think the answer is that a circle has no beginning” (408 ebook). “Or perhaps in Slytherin you'll make your real friends, those cunning folk use any means to achieve their ends.” Draco Malfoy joined the Quidditch team during his second year at Hogwarts, which surprises everyone. When Hermione brought up the fact that “At least no one on the Gryffindor team had to buy their way in”, which shows how Draco used any means to get to play on the Slytherin Quidditch team (Chamber of Secrets 82 ebook). The founders decided from very early on that the school must be separated into four houses, which led to a competitive environment, but they did not realize how competitive the environment would be.

From the moment the reader is introduced to a fellow Hogwarts student we are told that according to Draco Malfoy, “…I know I’ll be in Slytherin, all our family have been—imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?” (Sorcerer’s Stone 60 ebook). When we follow Harry to Hogwarts we see that he already does not want to be in Slytherin because Hagrid told him that, “There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one” (61 ebook). During the Sorting ceremony, Harry is very adamant that he must not be in Slytherin even though he has qualities that would fit the Slytherin stereotype. This shows the readers that stereotype are learned and that the thoughts that involve stereotypes are intertwined with things we are taught and are influenced by the things that we hear and see. Once Harry finds out that Slytherin is supposedly a bad house to be in he immediately decides that the stereotype is true and he accepts it as truth. It is important to note this fact because Hagrid and Draco have been brought up believing that different houses were different things, but Harry was introduced to this at an older age and he still accepted that as a truth. It shows that stereotypes are extremely controlling and that without realizing it we accept what has always been accepted.

In the *Goblet of Fire* the Sorting Hat says, “By Gryffindor, the bravest were prized far beyond the rest” (129 ebook). Throughout the *Harry Potter* series the reader sees how Harry truly is the typical Gryffindor. From the very first book Harry shows how brave he is when he come face to face with Voldemort without his parents there to protect him. Ron and Hermione, who are also Gryffindors, display bravery as they solve puzzles and fight through various challenges in order to help him. Also, Neville Longbottom who is a part of Gryffindor stands up to his fellow Gryffindors when they are trying to leave the corridors at an unprecedented hour. He stutteringly tells them “I wont let you do it. I’ll—I’ll fight you” (Sorcerer’s Stone 191 ebook). In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* various Gryffindors show their nerve. Harry Potter and Ron Weasley decide that since they cannot get onto Platform 9 ¾ they are going to take Mr. Weasley’s flying car even though they both know it probably is not the best idea. They take the car anyways risking the car being seen by Muggles, but manage to get to Hogwarts without too many people noticing. At the end of the book when Harry Potter is talking to Albus Dumbledore, he still believes that he should be a part of the Slytherin House because the Sorting Hat contemplating putting him there. However, the sword of Gryffindor presented itself to Harry Potter during his time of need proving to him that he belonged into the house the Sorting Hat put him in. Throughout the course of *The Deathly Hollows* Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley continue Dumbledore’s Army even though Harry is not there to lead them in the right direction. They show that they are true Gryffindors because they were so brave, daring, and they showed their nerve by going against what they were told and doing the right thing. Neville and Ginny decided that they needed to continue to teach their friends how to defend themselves even though they could have gotten in trouble in the process.

Throughout the course of the series there are several instances where the reader can clearly see that they motives within the Slytherin house are definitely not the best. “And power-hungry Slytherin loved those of great ambition” (Goblet of Fire 129 ebook). In the very first book, we are introduced to a very rude boy who seems to not care about anyone other than himself. Draco Malfoy is presented when Harry first visits Diagon Alley, but their first real interaction happens when Draco is introducing himself to the famous Harry Potter for the first time. Harry’s new friend, Ron Weasley, snickers to himself when Draco proudly tells Harry his name. Draco goes on to say, “Think my name’s funny, do you? No need to ask who you are. My father told me all the Weasleys have red hair, freckles, and more children than they can afford” (Sorcerer’s Stone 80 ebook). From the very beginning the readers get a very bitter taste in their mouth from the “Slytherin type”. The most obvious stereotype that the Sytherin’s represent is the fact that Voldemort himself was a Slytherin and that alone categorizes the Sytherins in a not so good position with the rest of the world. The catch is that one would think that it would be a good idea to turn away from the horrible person that their house produced, but they follow him like he is their Lord and want to be more like him. They cherish his name and promote everything Voldemort stands for, which make them seem even worse. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,* Bellatrix Lestrange kills her own cousin Sirius Black. Bellatrix clearly symbolizes the Slytherin stereotype told to the reader by the Sorting Hat, “those cunning folk use any means to achieve their ends” (Sorcerer’s Stone 86 ebook). It is clear to the reader that this particular Slytherin will do anything to achieve what they want, which is the gratification of Lord Voldemort. She goes on to taunt Harry about the loss of his godfather by telling him he must mean the Unforgiveable Curse and asking him if he truly loved Sirius (Order of the Pheonix 610 ebook).

In the *Harry Potter* series there are outliers that do not line up with these stereotypical groups because they do what they want and do not let the world classify them. In Harry Potter there are definitely outliers in every house. Outliers prove that stereotypes have power, but only to a certain extent. There are people that do not conform to the stereotypes and there are people who do not learn how they should act in a given category.

In the beginning of the book when Harry and his new friends are being sorted into their new houses, we are introduced to a very strange boy who keeps losing his toad. On Neville’s way up to the stool where he would be sorted into his house, he tripped, which does not sound very brave or noble. Once he was sitting down, the Sorting Hat was placed on his head and it is said that it took a very long time for the hat to choose which house Neville Longbottom would be in (Sorcerer’s Stone 87 ebook). The Sorting Hat eventually shouted “GRYFFINDOR”, probably much to people’s surprise, and he stumbled to the Gryffindor table with the sorting hat still on only to run back to Professor McGonagall. As time went on Neville truly did show that he had qualities of a true Gryffindor. The fact that Neville could learn the characteristics that Gryffindor has makes the categories less of a threat. Neville learned how to be a Gryffindor by watching his fellows classmates and following their examples; the reader can see his growth as a character from the moment he stammers that his friends should not leave the Gryffindor tower to the moment he kills Nagini, Lord Voldemort’s last Horcrux, in the last book.

Another outlier presented to the reader throughout the series is Professor Severus Snape. He is the head of the Slytherin House at Hogwarts and from the very beginning Harry Potter feels very bad vibes from him. In fact, throughout the whole series the reader gets very mixed signals from Professor Snape because we see him acting a certain way, but at the same time Dumbledore is telling the reader something completely different. Various times Snape takes away points from Harry and his fellow Gryffindor friends, starting in the very first book. “And a point will be taken from Gryffindor House for your cheek, Potter” (Sorcerer’s Stone 100 ebook). He constantly picks on Harry and the reader can assume it is only because he was jealous of James Potter and his friends. The fact that Professor Snape was in Slytherin makes the reader turned off from him at the very beginning, taking Harry’s side whenever Snape picks on him. Snape was a Death Eater and we see how loyal he is to Lord Voldemort and to Professor Dumbledore, which makes the reader even more hesitant when it comes to trusting Snape. In *Deathly Hallows,* Lord Voldemort kills Snape and there is some degree of pity for such an interesting character, but before he dies Snape gives Harry his memory in the form of a teardrop. All of Snape’s secrets are revealed when we see his life through the Pensieve. Harry Potter then watches Professor Snape’s life and sees that Snape was always looking out for his best interest because he was in love with Lily Potter. In one conversation the reader can finally see Professor Snape’s true colors: “[Dumbledore] I prefer not to put all of my secrets in one basket, particularly not a basket that spends so much time dangling on the arm of Lord Voldemort.” “Which I [Snape] do on your orders!” (Deathly Hallows 472 ebook). Incredibly the reader finds out that Snape was a very strong, good man all along and that he did not fit the stereotype of Slytherins at all.

Stereotypes define our world, but there is a way we can escape their hold. Breaking stereotypes is not impossible because as a society, we create them ourselves. In *Harry Potter,* the head of the houses were all very different, but just because they were different, it did not give them the right to separate and divide the entire school. Stereotypes are culturally adopted, as seen in *Harry Potter*; they are not genetically or naturally made. The children who were raised by Muggles did not understand the way the Houses were viewed because they had no one influencing their thoughts. Stereotypes are learned and adopted at a very young age and can be very persuading when coming into an unknown situation. An increase in grouping people only increases groups to feel like they are above the rest creating a hierarchy, which in turn creates conflict as we see from the Slytherin House. If we can recognize the stereotypes that we surround ourselves with, we can start with trying to break down the things we think we know about certain groups and make our own opinions about people. As I quoted above from *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Storey explicitly states, “meaning is produced, not through a one-to-one relation to things in the world, but by establishing difference” (111). I cannot reiterate enough how vital structuralism is to understanding stereotypes because we are establishing differences between people and categorizing them accordingly creating “a meaning” for that group.

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