

Harry Potter and the Enslaved Kitchen

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“It’s all in *Hogwarts, A History*. Though, of course, that book’s not entirely reliable. *A Revised History of Hogwarts* would be a more accurate title. Or, *A Highly Biased and Selective History of Hogwarts, Which Glosses Over the Nastier Aspects of the School.*”

“What are you on about?” said Ron, though Harry thought he knew what was coming. “House-elves!” said Hermione, her eyes flashing. “Not once, in over a thousand pages, does *Hogwarts, A History* mention that we are all colluding in the oppression of a hundred slaves!”

- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*

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Since its inception in 1997, the *Harry Potter* series has bestowed its universal readers with crucial life models some may employ throughout their existence; demonstrating the series is more than just a handful of books, it’s a way of life. J. K. Rowling’s unparalleled literary and multi-media hit chronicles a young boy’s new and unique life in the wizarding world, all while supplying fans with an abundance of moral and ethical implications that may be extracted from these mediums and employed in everyday affairs. However, there’s one timeworn and highly debated social dilemma inside the secretive wizarding realm displayed throughout *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*: wizarding supremacy against house-elves, spawning radicalized subjugation against their race and duties within magicked households and kitchens. This deep-rooted battle encompassing the bondage of house-elves and their use within the *Harry Potter* series has sparked innumerable debates throughout the chapters and the fans who consume these contentious concepts. J. K. Rowling applies such circumstances surrounding the historical enslavement of bodies and food to educate her global audience on the unfair pressures and cultural norms through the topic of slavery; thus creating a gateway by virtue of the *Harry Potter* series as a way for readers of all ages to understand the political and societal outcomes of the

enslaved. What do the lives and legacies of the multi-racial characters within the *Harry Potter* series, and their perception toward the principles of slavery within the Hogwarts kitchens, ethically teach *Harry Potter* enthusiasts on the overwhelming topic of consumption by servitude? Although J. K. Rowling molded these wizarding complications around real-world matters, she displays them in a manner that ultimately enlightens the audience on such chronicled concerns and strives to promote a political outlook on human rights by showcasing the immense struggles surrounding such elitist traditions. By doing so, the *Harry Potter* series becomes a moral vessel for readers of all backgrounds to extract such biases from the series and understand them more fluently within their own cultures by presenting such issues of food-based slavery spewed (or S.P.E.W.'d) throughout the series.

The impression of slavery and class hierarchy is exceedingly distinguished throughout the *Harry Potter* series, as the novels slowly wend their way toward this oppressive theme. Set in the early 1990s, a newborn Harry Potter is left on the doorstep of his aunt and uncle's home in the suburbs of London, orphaned by his parents who were murdered by the most dangerous wizard of their time, Lord Voldemort. Throughout the series, *Harry Potter* audiences follow Potter as he attempts to find his way through the wizarding world, which includes being introduced to the many forms of enslavement displayed throughout wizarding society. Primarily, house-elves are showcased as the subjugated, however, other characters or worldly beings within the pages also suffer great forms of oppression.

Readers are first introduced to Dobby the house-elf in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, whose attentiveness was always in Harry's favor, despite such courageous acts deemed antagonistic toward his Master, Lucius Malfoy. House-elves are bound to their wealthy

wizarding owners for life and rarely freed, as Dobby squeaked to Harry during their first encounter shown in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1999), “Dobby is a house-elf — bound to serve one house and one family forever. A house-elf must be set free, sir. And the family will never set Dobby free...” (p. 14). Indeed, the only way a house-elf can be freed is by the master presenting the elf with a piece of clothing; their daily garb being scraps of cloth they’ve managed to scavenge throughout their tenure. By the end of the book, Harry artfully frees Dobby by tricking Lucius Malfoy into handing Dobby the sock off Harry’s foot, presenting readers with one of the greatest quotes series wide, “Dobby is *free*,” (p. 531). From this moment onward, the *Harry Potter* series was privy to such issues encompassing bondage, revealing how the characters within the novels enact and react to this age-old theme, along with allowing readers the opportunity to engage their own ethics and morals through this concept. Dobby’s beloved character continues to be a focal point throughout the series, yet, it isn’t until the fourth installment, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* when readers see Hermione Granger (Harry’s best friend) create an anti-house-elf slavery movement that dominated a large portion of the book’s pages.

Hermione became acutely aware of the subjugation of house-elves primarily through the Hogwarts kitchens, where she learned countless house-elves lived and worked full-time at Hogwarts without pay. As displayed within *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), Hermione immediately embarked on a hunger strike to prove to the greater Hogwarts community that the food they were consuming was made and served through wizarding hierarchy tradition, and such values, in her opinion, were villainous. Notably, hunger strikes have been utilized for centuries (large or small scale) as a way for people to revolt against the controversial traditional

systems chronicled around our globe. Throughout the novel, Hermione continuously questioned why her fellow peers would consume the nourishment provided to them, regardless of how weak she was beginning to feel after days without eating. Her stance was simple: pay the elves for their time in the kitchens and I will eat. Writers Margaret S. Hero and John M. Parrish (2010) discuss the interworking of the enslaved shown throughout *Harry Potter* within their book, *Damned If You Do: Dilemmas of Action in Literature and Popular Culture*. The authors' contest, "Rowling makes clear that Hermione's willingness to confront house-elf slavery as a moral problem gives her multiple kinds of wisdom that other characters in the books lack," (p. 149).

In fact, Hermione's anti-house-elf slavery act became a full-fledged organization at Hogwarts called the "Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare," comically dubbed "S.P.E.W." With this morally conscious intention in mind, Hermione's group (composed of three members: Hermione, Harry, and Ronald Weasley — chiefly against the boys' will) began their rallying through the use of pamphlets, an intricate organization manifesto, and S.P.E.W. badges in support of the cause. The trio would frequently find themselves in the Hogwarts kitchens as Hermione made her plea to the house-elves to revolt against their circumstances and stop cooking at once. The notion that Hogwarts and their plentiful feasts were plated by bounded and unpaid house-elves further fueled Hermione's efforts to raise awareness against the Hogwarts kitchens and oppression of wizarding house-elves. J. K. Rowling's ability to display this pivotal social issue allows the reader to comprehend the situation at Hogwarts (and the greater magical world) and internally visualize which side of the token they would support; Hermione's cause against the enslaved, or the deeply rooted wizarding traditions of which most characters concur. Hero and Parrish affirm this is the sole way, "Rowling makes her readers inhabit," these critical themes

within the overall tale, and go on to state those throughout the magical community who refuse to fight for equality, “neglect to, or choose not to,” (p. 138).

Providing that, one cannot neglect the obvious factor enclosing this issue, house-elves are undeniably the spine of the wizarding world. They are essential workers crafted in such a manner exclusively for the master’s egocentric benefit. At Hogwarts, there would be no food or beverage without the tireless labor of the house-elves. Breakfast, luncheon, and dinner are always promptly made and displayed for the students and staff, and equally cleared as if each individual meal had not happened. The large population house-elves must cater toward is not numerically described in the *Harry Potter* novels, however, readers can avail themselves to comprehend the house-elves are supplying these forms of nourishment for substantial congregations three times per day, every day.

Comprehensive moral matters on the topic of nourishment versus authority are discussed in Sidney W. Mintz’s book, *Sweetness and Power*, which, in part, provides a fascinating anthropological view of large-scale cultures and how such social practices create an assemblage of societal meaning. Mintz (1986) affirms, “Complex societies, composed of many overlapping subgroups, differ widely in the way they can live, and in their historically influenced access to the acts, objects, and persons through which they validate their knowledge of life’s meaning,” (p. 154). House-elves hold a staunch mentality of their way of life within wizarding society; as they do not believe their enslaved subgroup within the community is detrimental to their race. On the contrary, house-elves have a timeworn appreciation for their position within the complex magicked realm. Yet, as Hermione argues within *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, house-elves were born without a choice and were immediately classified under human domination.

Aside from Dobby (*Harry Potter's* only documented freed house-elf), the others seek no recourse to validate themselves or their life's meaning aside from the work they are meant to achieve for their master. Indeed, this is the crux of J. K. Rowling's overarching motivation to place such race relations within her fourth novel. All of Rowling's worldwide readers can relate to food in one way or another, and by placing these racially skewed fragments throughout *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and connecting them to nutriment, readers are able to resonate on deeper cultural levels regardless of the fictional scenario at hand. By doing so, Rowling cleverly allows the reader to be dually suspended from their reality and continue their lived fantasy via the novel; all while bestowing readers with seminal ethical relationships they may digest at their leisure.

In view of these moral implications scattered throughout the *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* continues to be the only novel that discusses these large-scale enslaved manners in great detail. Rowling's six other novels merely dismiss these disenfranchised concerns and Warner Bros. Pictures decided against inserting S.P.E.W. and Hermione's efforts to free the enslaved from the *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* film (2005). Alas, Hermione's attempt to end servitude within the wizarding world became a moot point after the fourth book, as Harry's journey to defeat Lord Voldemort influenced the series onward.

Nevertheless, it's difficult for critics and academics alike to discharge the enslaved kitchens after densely reading about such concerns in book four. Interestingly, J. K. Rowling's website, *Wizarding World* (2021), discusses the innumerable feasts at Hogwarts, as they go on to describe them in "mouthwatering detail," (para. 12). While there's no mention of the thralldom in the Hogwarts kitchens, the website does boast that readers should be, "Surprised the last book

wasn't *Harry Potter and the Elasticated Waistband*," and goes on to say that, "Harry, who'd spent his life being starved for more than attention, [had] so many wonderful dishes put in front of him," (para. 12). Sensationally illustrated in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) is an example of the umpteen food options Harry and his peers had plated for them by the Hogwarts kitchen house-elves. Rowling goes on to write:

"[Harry] had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops and lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup, and, for some strange reason, mint humbugs," (p. 89).

Under those circumstances, yes, Harry did have bountiful amounts of nourishment placed in front of him diurnally. However, such edibles were prepared under the human expediency of peculiar institution.

Moreover, the *sole* mention of Hermione's anti-slavish efforts is described on *Wizarding World* and proclaims, "Countless house-elves served in the halls of Hogwarts, cleaning, cooking, and delivering trunks, among other tasks. Hermione disputed the regularity with her S.P.E.W. activism but, like those she was trying to help, she certainly meant well," (para 10). To grasp this notion, one must read that pronouncement multiple times to understand that the overarching wizarding consensus was the house-elves' only position at Hogwarts was to "help." Alas, the *Wizarding World* website continues to invalidate the real concerns encompassing the enslaved (and how they could be freed), as such ideals are written in a blog post entitled, *Why house-elves are totally better than wizards* (2021):

“They always went above and beyond. The house-elves’ failing came from the fact that they were expected to serve. Happily spending their days cooking up feasts, they never turned their minds to the potential for rebellion, because it was simply not how they operated. They worked in teams and they lived to serve. And without someone to teach them that there might be a better way, that was how it would remain. Why would wizards ever seek to re-educate, when their instincts towards servitude were so beneficial toward them?” (para. 4).

Although this sentiment may be akin to Hagrid’s infamous rock cakes (hard for some readers to swallow), *Wizarding World* has firmly positioned its sentiments on this leitmotif; leaving the fandom to choose their own side in accordance with their virtuous beliefs. Moreover, this author argues it’s difficult to announce the house-elves of Hogwarts meant well in their aiding efforts when historically, they were offered no other alternative. The magicked realm has repeatedly pigeonholed house-elves to cook, clean, and serve their masters without question as to whether or not a different or better position would suit their race. As Mintz (1986) described in *Sweetness and Power*; how can individuals, or in this case, house-elves, understand their life’s meaning when they’ve never known another form of being? Furthermore, it’s extremely disputable for *Wizarding World* to say the house-elves went “without someone to teach them that there might be a better way,” when Hermione’s S.P.E.W. efforts in the fourth book were blatantly apparent to the house-elves and her fellow peers. Hermione’s struggle to educate the greater wizarding world was rooted in fighting for the free-will of all house-elves, and it’s shocking Rowling’s website would exclaim that not a single character tried to educate the house-elves on a broader version of life. Nevertheless, the enslaved kitchens scattered throughout wizarding life is

a tradition that continues to be hotly debated and questioned within the fandom, with little answers to aid the greater *Harry Potter* community toward a consensus in regard to house-elf servitude and their hopeful freedom.

To conclude, although the bulk of *Harry Potter* fans do not position the series in a servitude-by-consumption manner, the essence of the enslaved and their position within the wizarding realm affects each character, storyline, and cultural development throughout the series. Withal, the broader picture demonstrates to *Harry Potter* enthusiasts that one's attitude toward another person or race is just as significant for the whole of the series as it is in our Muggle world. Regardless of which character or activist cause one may closest associate themselves to, the extensive bondage struggles encircling such elitist traditions and forms of injustice within the wizarding world can be used as an ethical vessel for one to illuminate themselves on broader issues and go forth with their own social reconstruction to better the world around them. While the wizarding community may consistently elucidate these unfortunate affairs within their broader society, they perfectly mimic our not-so-distant past across the globe; educating readers solely through this seven-book arrangement. By extracting such morals and placing them in everyday scenarios, *Harry Potter* readers have the potential to adapt these core values and utilize them in their own cultures by means of promoting equality for all, with the added benefit of a contemporary way of considering social hierarchy within society. Although J. K. Rowling chose to present these real-life biases in the form of the wizarding world, her motives behind enlightening the readership on such relevant matters have resonated with audiences for over twenty years; gifting readers the opportunity to know that while we all have both good and bad within us, it's how we act upon such virtues that truly show others who we truly are.

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