

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Symbolic Settings

How does author J.K. Rowling use setting in the Harry Potter novels symbolically?

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Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Inhabited Settings.....	1-3
III.	Love within Clustered Settings.....	3-4
IV.	The Temperature of a Setting and Love.....	5-6
V.	Stone and Water Settings.....	6-8
VI.	Sentient Settings.....	8-9
VII.	The Forbidden Forest.....	10-12
VIII.	Conclusion.....	12
IX.	Bibliography.....	13

Within the wonderful wizarding world of Harry Potter, it is easy to get lost in the whimsical, mysterious settings that J.K. Rowling builds for her characters to live out their stories in. As a child, I remember getting lost in the settings of the novels as I thumbed through their pages when I was sick, building up both a craving to live in its world full of grand castles and exotic animals and a wish to be a wizard, myself. However, looking back on the series with a more educated eye for literary devices and the complexity of words, I see now that J.K. Rowling's series was much more than a fantastical tale of wizards for grade school children. Her use of symbolism truly gives her novels a greater purpose. Yet, symbolism can happen in many different forms—especially through the span of seven novels—so looking particularly at one form of symbolism in the Harry Potter series can be helpful. I will be specifically answering the question, **“How does author J.K. Rowling use setting in the Harry Potter novels symbolically?”** Her use of dynamic use of settings throughout the novels turn a place into more than a place, adding layers of meaning to the story and creating real-world implications that make it worthwhile to look at how this is accomplished through symbolism.

One way Rowling uses setting as something beyond a place for characters to reside in occurs through homes and offices that are oftentimes used to symbolize characters and their personalities. This is sometimes coupled with irony, creating deeper messages about characters beyond their likes and dislikes in decor. For example, Professor Umbridge's office in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* is a feminine, dainty room described as having “surfaces [that] had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths”¹; “several vases full of dried flowers, each residing on its own doily”², and “a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large

¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York, Scholastic, 2003), 265.

² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 265.

technicolor kitten wearing a different bow around its neck.”³ The outward appearance of the room mirrors Umbridge’s outward appearance as she is often seen in kitschy pink ensembles. Yet, the irony of the room creates a more accurate symbol for her character. Irony is present through Harry’s “transfixed”⁴ reaction to the space because the overload of dainty decorations makes it inherently “foul”⁵, the opposite of the expected reaction to an office decorated like a little girl’s dream. Her obsession with animals, as seen by her collection of kitten plates, is ironic because she loathes beings who are not fully human and describes them as “[f]ilthy half-breeds”, “[b]easts”, and “[u]ncontrolled animals.”⁶ Furthermore, Umbridge’s sins of torturing students within this space continue the irony forward, merging with symbolism. The area has a delicate pink appearance with an unexpected cruel inside, just like the professor herself. This starts to suggest a theme that began with Harry’s mundane world turning upside down with the revelation of magic: Outward appearances do not always reflect the truth.

Rowling continues this concoction of symbolism and irony within settings beyond the wizarding world. Great care is taken by Rowling to describe the setting the Dursleys exist in—number four, Privet Drive—as typical and ordinary. She elaborates on her choices in imagery to make the home seem extremely mundane in her online resource *Pottermore* as she explains, “The name of the street where the Dursleys live is a reference to that most suburban plant, the privet bush, which makes neat hedges around many English gardens.”⁷ Chosen details like this emphasize the dullness of the setting they exist in, becoming a symbol for the Dursleys and the non-magical life which their dwelling represents. Rowling elaborates on the importance of this

³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix*, 265.

⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix*, 265.

⁵ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix*, 265.

⁶ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix*, 755.

⁷ J.K. Rowling, “Number Four, Privet Drive,” *Pottermore*, Pottermore Publishing, Accessed August 27, 2019, <https://www.pottermore.com/writing-by-jk-rowling/number-four-privet-drive>.

symbolic connection stating, “I liked the associations with both suburbia and enclosure, the Dursleys being so smugly middle class, and so determinedly separate from the wizarding world.”⁸ Yet, the Dursley’s smugness in their dull outward lives is ironically overcompensating for the magic going on inside. Rowling includes many scenes of magic invading the house: a symbolic invasion of the Dursleys’ dull way of life. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, magical owls plague the setting⁹ and hundreds of letters inviting Harry to Hogwarts come pouring in through every slot of their home¹⁰. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Mr. Weasley enters the muggle home unexpectedly through the floo network¹¹. The surprising presence of magic in a typical suburban home creates situational irony that adds to the setting itself being used as a symbol for the Dursleys by building on their overcompensation and continuing the theme that the outside of a situation does not always match the truth.

Rowling also creates an exact opposite to the Dursley’s home that opens up to new dynamic uses of setting. The Weasleys’ house is described as looking as if “it had once been a large stone pigpen, but extra rooms had been added here and there until it was several stories high and so crooked it looked as though it were held up by magic.”¹² This setting is not an ordinary home like the one that Harry grew up in, and further imagery continues this stark juxtaposition: “Four or five chimneys were perched on top of the red roof. A lopsided sign stuck in the ground near the entrance read, THE BURROW. Around the front door lay a jumble of rubber boots and a very rusty cauldron. Several fat brown chickens were pecking their way around the yard.”¹³ The clutter and jumble of the Weasleys’ home continue with imagery of the

⁸ Rowling, “Number Four, Privet Drive.”

⁹ J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (New York, Scholastic, 1997), 6.

¹⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 41.

¹¹ J.K. Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York, Scholastic, 2000), 42.

¹² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York, Scholastic, 1998), 32.

¹³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 32.

kitchen being “small and rather cramped”¹⁴ and various books being “stacked three deep on the mantelpiece”¹⁵ giving a feeling of overall messiness. The untidiness of this home juxtaposes the Dursleys’ abode as they keep a “surgically clean kitchen”¹⁶ along with the rest of the property being so spotless that Nymphadora Tonks describes it as being a “[b]it unnatural.”¹⁷ Yet, the reader can assume the Weasleys’ mess was created from years of happy children running around and a passionate father collecting muggle artifacts to examine. Their physical mess is a symbol for the love that it was created out of, while the Dursleys’ home is a mess figuratively as they fight the magic within it.

The use of clutter to create an unconventional representation of love is not just used in the Weasleys’ home. Hagrid, another loving figure in Harry’s life, lives in a hut on the edge of the Hogwarts grounds. The interior of the home is certainly not spotless as “there was only one room inside”¹⁸ suggesting the same cramped feeling as the Weasleys’ kitchen. Within the home, “[h]ams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire, and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.”¹⁹ The combination of a tight space full of belongings still creates an overall warm, comforting feeling coming from the cozy bed and the heat of the kettle. The hut mirrors the love that comes out of the clutter in the Weasleys’ home because of the assumption of how that mess came to be through years of animal caregiving and attempts at baking for beloved students.

So why is Rowling’s connection of clutter symbolizing love important? Significance is drawn out of this connection through the theme Rowling presents on the idea of wealth. When

¹⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 33.

¹⁵ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 34.

¹⁶ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix*, 37.

¹⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Pheonix*, 51.

¹⁸ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 140.

¹⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 140.

investigating clean, wealthy settings, a loving and comforting atmosphere is not manufactured from Rowling's imagery the same way it emanates from the previous two locations. A prime example of a setting that is clean and handsome yet loveless is the Malfoy Manor. Rowling continues her symbolic pattern of forming dwelling places that symbolize the characters residing within them as the opulent manor shows off the wealth and family history that is of utmost important to Draco, Narcissa, and Lucius. To reflect their importance on family connections and pure-bloodedness passed down through generations, "pale-faced portraits"²⁰ line the hallways of the manor. Further imagery describes a peacock seen outside of their house²¹, a bird symbolic of beauty and luxury, yet it is also albino. Their exotic pet having the same color as the family's skin and hair characterizes them as truly set in their blood supremacy beliefs because even their pet must be pure, represented by the color white.

However, a more interesting detail of the house exists in the imagery made regarding lighting. One of their hallways is described as being "large" and "dimly lit"²², yet in their drawing room "illumination came from a roaring fire beneath a handsome marble mantelpiece."²³ A shadowy atmosphere is created by the lack of lighting beyond the flames and this takes the warmth and love symbolically associated with fire away from it. They had enough wealth to purchase a beautiful fireplace, yet it can only emanate physical warmth. Wealth could not buy them the emotional warmth that exists with dwellings of poorer characters like Ron's or Hagrid's. In fact, the descriptions of dim lighting and cold mantle pieces are more representative of the atmosphere rather than the bright fire. Wealth creates a clean but cold room, and love

²⁰ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York, Scholastic, 2007), 2.

²¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 2.

²² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 2.

²³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 2.

creates messy but warm one. From the symbolism of the home representing the Malfoys and the shortcomings of their money, a theme that wealth cannot buy love is created.

While evil resides within Malfoy manor through the family's discriminatory views on blood purity, evil also seems to have an infatuation with stone-filled, wet places. Rowling often places battles in areas of these characteristics suggesting symbolism beneath them. For example, stone can be seen in the final battle in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* as it takes place "in a dark and overgrown graveyard"²⁴ where Harry is forcefully bound to a "headstone."²⁵ The Battle of Hogwarts in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* takes place on the castle grounds where the material that makes up the setting is often repeated through lines of action. For example, "Harry grabbed Hermione's hand as they staggered and stumbled over the stone and wood"²⁶ away from the Room of Requirement and Hagrid, in a fury to protect his loved ones and the place he calls home, throws a death eater "across the room" where he hits "the stone wall opposite" and slides "unconscious to the ground."²⁷ Stone is used by Rowling because it is a material that is known for being tough and stable, symbolically reflecting the strong wills of the fighting individuals.

However, seeing how stone and water combine within Rowling's works creates a more dynamic use of symbolism through the setting's materials. From the "large rock way out at sea"²⁸ where Harry goes with the Dursleys to escape the magical influx of letters, to the Chamber of Secrets where Harry lands "on the damp floor of a dark stone tunnel"²⁹, to the "smooth rock in the center of the lake"³⁰ where Harry and Dumbledore go in his sixth year, it is evident that stone

²⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 636.

²⁵ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 639.

²⁶ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 637.

²⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 735.

²⁸ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 43.

²⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 301.

³⁰ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York, Scholastic, 2005), 567.

and water are often paired together. Investigating how these materials interact physically can bring answers to what this pattern means: Water erodes stone. The erosion of stone creates a revelation of its deeper layers, and symbolically this can be seen as a revelation of the inside of a situation and its truth. In all of these examples, a moment of revelation exists within the settings of stone and water. Harry discovers that he is a wizard on the island with the Dursleys³¹. He discovers the perpetrator of the attacks on Hogwarts in the Chamber of Secrets³². Finally, he discovers a Horcrux in the cave with Dumbledore³³. Although discovery is inherent within the novels' genre of mystery, the materials that make up the settings where discoveries take place create a symbol of the character's revelation of a deeper truth, like water exposing the inside of a stone.

Another important example of the use of stone and water to symbolize a revelation of truth occurs through the Pensieve, an "ornately carved stone"³⁴ bowl full of magical liquid in Dumbledore's office used to transport someone into the past through liquified memories, thus inherently switching to a new setting. Harry uses the Pensieve in his time at Hogwarts to discover the truth about many situations, but he most notably uses it to learn the truth about his professor, Severus Snape. After Snape's death, his memories were collected in a flask that Harry poured "into the wide basin"³⁵ before he "dived"³⁶ in. He first saw Snape's childhood with his mother, Lily Potter, in "a nearly deserted playground"³⁷ where he saw Snape spying on his

³¹ Rowling, , 50.

³² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 310-314.

³³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, 576.

³⁴ J. K. Rowling, "Pensieve," Pottermore, Pottermore Publishing, Accessed August 20, 2019, www.pottermore.com/writing-by-jk-rowling/pensieve.

³⁵ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 663.

³⁶ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 663.

³⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 663.

mother. The scene “re-formed”³⁸ and “shifted”³⁹ multiple times revealing to Harry Snape’s life story. He learned how Snape had fallen in love with his mother, Lily, then destroyed his relationship with her at Hogwarts, how he had sworn to “protect Lily’s son”⁴⁰ to ensure her death “was not in vain”⁴¹ in Dumbledore’s office, and most importantly how he found out Harry has “to die at the right moment”⁴² to kill Voldemort in that same office. The change in setting within the confines of the stone and water bowl help Harry to understand the emotions and relationships between the characters in the memories he sees, thus he can better understand the truth of the circumstances.

Yet, the castle where Harry solves mysteries can be just as helpful to him as the Pensieve in a way that readers would not expect. The castle is used as not just a setting, but also as a character that is symbolic of the students within it, expressing different moods depending on the circumstances occurring within its walls. For example, the castle celebrates with its inhabitant’s victory over Voldemort and his army as the “The sun rose steadily over [it], and the Great Hall blazed with life and light”⁴³. On the other end of the emotional spectrum, the setting’s noises creates the castle’s living sadness. After Dumbledore dies in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, his phoenix Fawkes sings “a stricken lament of terrible beauty”⁴⁴ that matched Harry’s “own grief”⁴⁵ as it was “turned magically to [a] song that echoed across the grounds and through the castle windows.”⁴⁶ This song of grief filling the castle gives an impression of its own

³⁸ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 668.

³⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 688.

⁴⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 679.

⁴¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 679.

⁴² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 687.

⁴³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 744.

⁴⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, 614-615.

⁴⁵ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, 615.

⁴⁶ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, 615.

emotions during the event of its headmaster's death: a method of both expressing the literal mood of Hogwarts as a character and the mood of it as a setting. However, the line within these distinctions is blurred.

Dumbledore also hints at the living value of this setting to young Harry and Ron within *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* saying, “You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it.”⁴⁷ The help not only refers to the fact that the inhabitants of the castle can assist each other, but also to the fact that Hogwarts itself helps students just like a human character would. Most notably, this is done through the Room of Requirement, a setting that, “when it appears”⁴⁸, is “always equipped for the seeker's needs”⁴⁹ in a time of desperation. From acting as a training zone for Harry's formed group, Dumbledore's Army⁵⁰ to even a bathroom with a vast collection of chamber pots⁵¹, the Room of Requirement truly embodies the help being given at Hogwarts from Hogwarts. The room appears to be sentient from its ability to understand the needs dreamt up by the human mind. This sentient nature carries forth throughout the castle making the setting itself feel alive, instead of just a stone shell. Hogwarts can be seen as both a character of the novels—living, emoting, and helping—and as a symbol for the characters inhabiting it, similar to the first explored method of Rowling's use of symbolism within homes, yet done in a more unique way.

Looking beyond the castle lies another setting that is just as dynamic as Hogwarts in the Harry Potter series: the Forbidden Forest. This area is “forbidden to all pupils”⁵² while acting as a protective boundary to the castle like a “woody moat”⁵³ as described by Elizabeth Schafer in

⁴⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 264.

⁴⁸ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 387.

⁴⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 387.

⁵⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 389.

⁵¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 417.

⁵² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 127.

⁵³ Elizabeth D. Schafer, *Exploring Harry Potter* (Florida, Beacham Publishing Corp, 2000), 81.

Exploring Harry Potter. It is forbidden because the setting poses a threat to students because of the “dangerous beasts”⁵⁴ dwelling in it. Schafer asserts in her work that the Forbidden Forest’s ability to put wizards at “close proximity to hazardous beasts symbolizes the wizards’ vulnerability to losing their powers to each other, and to the threat of disbelief in their magical power and Muggle attacks.”⁵⁵ However, this explanation of symbolism falls short because many other issues occur in the forest beside the avoided dangerous magic of its habitants. For example, the issue of the evil that comes with a crave for power exists in the forest with Voldemort killing a unicorn that symbolizes “something pure and defenseless”⁵⁶ and drinking its blood to continue his mission of achieving power. A centaur in the woods explains to Harry further significance to this symbol as he reflects that “[a]lways the innocent are the first victims”⁵⁷ when a struggle for power arises, creating a theme regarding power existing in the confines of the woods.

Moreover, the centaurs living in the Forbidden Forest point to the issue of the existence of an unfair social hierarchy where the fair treatment of non-human creatures is not of importance. The centaurs symbolize those at the bottom of social hierarchies who experience discrimination and violence as evidenced by the fact that despite being an intelligent and “ancient people”⁵⁸, centaurs are insultingly treated by the Ministry of Magic as having “near-human intelligence.”⁵⁹

The creatures living within the shade of the forest symbolize concepts that are real-world issues, and because of the encouraged avoidance of the forest, it is easy to avoid the discomfort

⁵⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 127.

⁵⁵ Schafer, *Exploring Harry Potter*, 81-82.

⁵⁶ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 258.

⁵⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 253.

⁵⁸ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 757.

⁵⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, 754.

of addressing the problems happening within it. This avoidance allows problems to brew into something bigger and bigger like how the weak Voldemort was able to secretly drink unicorn blood resulting in him gaining strength. The avoided troubles of the forest eventually explode in the Battle of Hogwarts like lava flooding down the sides of a volcano as it is the spot where the death eaters “must have penetrated”⁶⁰ to attack the castle. The Forbidden Forest doesn’t just symbolize how close wizards are to their destruction by themselves and by muggles: It symbolizes issues that are ignored in the real world and creates a theme that suggests avoiding those issues can have disastrous effects.

Those who face the Forbidden Forest are also those who face the issues that everyone else avoids. Harry, Hermione, and Neville enter the forest in their first year as “detention”⁶¹ for sneaking out of bed at night. They help in finding the previously mentioned hurt unicorn, assisting the innocent life who was harmed by Voldemort’s clamor for power. Ron does the same with Harry the following year as they enter the forest to gather information from Aragog the spider that would prove Hagrid’s innocence in a murder accusation⁶². Although they do not always make their way through the forest with courage, instead they “moan”⁶³ and are “transfixed”⁶⁴ with fear, they continue in the novels to face the Forbidden Forest as both a setting and a symbol as they do not avoidance its dangerous issues. They do so in the forest and outside of it, even when it is scary or difficult, fighting Voldemort and his ideals of hatred, prejudice, and inequality.

⁶⁰ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 639.

⁶¹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 247.

⁶² Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 278.

⁶³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 249.

⁶⁴ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, 256.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione facing social issues within the Forbidden Forest along with Rowling's other morally good characters fighting the evil ideas symbolically represented by settings prove that Harry Potter is not just a children's story as it is perceived as. A casual reader may not recognize that J.K. Rowling uses her settings not only as a place for her stories to exist within, but also to symbolize characters both emotionally and ironically along with the issues they avoid. Through symbolism, Rowling's settings act as extensions to the characters who exist within them. Her settings also symbolize social issues such as wealth, an evil craving for power, and social inequality, to guide the reader towards themes to be understood in the necessity of dealing with them. Finally, they serve as a mystery for the critical reader to look for what is beyond the surface of a story of a wizard boy and to find the deeper magic beyond what is seen.

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