



# *English Studies in Latin America*

## **Hermione Granger through the Focus of Feminist Theory**

**Author:** Valentina Rivera

**Source:** *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 9 (July 2015)

**ISSN:** 0719-0921

**Published by:** Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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## Hermione Granger through the Focus of Feminist Theory

Valentina Rivera<sup>1</sup>

The present article analyzes the character of Hermione Granger from The Harry Potter Series, taking a feminist stance and considering feminist, queer and non-essentialist theories. In this essay, the feminist nature of Hermione's character is explored, discussing the nature and portrayal of female characters in children's literature.

KEYWORDS: J.K. Rowling, children's literature, feminism, gender, performativity, gender roles

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<sup>1</sup> Valentina is a Bachelor in English Literature and Linguistics from Pontificia Universidad de Chile. She is currently getting a teaching degree from the same university. Her main interests lie within children's literature, cultural studies and gender studies. She is also very interested in reading promotion and hopes to get involved in projects alike in the future.

*“Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined” – Toni Morrison, *Beloved**

Female characters in children’s literature are often given passive roles, lacking sense of agency or power within the story. They have been commonly represented as ‘damsels in distress’; figures that seldom take part in adventure and are only validated by the appearance of a man that rescues them or saves them from danger. Thus, female roles are often reduced to that depiction without considering all of the dimensions in which women can participate in, creating a wrong definition that limits their agency. In children’s literature this portrayal becomes conflictive, as the world being shown to them through fiction comprises a duality of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, dictating the things that are allowed and forbidden, hence telling them what they can and cannot do. What is harmful about this construction of the world is that young readers, whether consciously or not, may perceive the real world on those terms. Therefore, exposing them to strong commentaries on the female world in their forming years could make a long lasting impact, only contributing to the replication of stereotypes and to an incomplete perception of the world, which can be inadvertently carried until adulthood.

Within all the dual representations of the world that have been expressed through children’s literature, an important and especially conflictive one is that of gender. The female and male worlds are seen in opposition, both consisting of specific traits, values, behaviors, attitudes, skills and possibilities attributed to each. Thus, anything that comprises femininity or masculinity can only be present in a girl or a boy respectively, meaning that gender values are sex-based and not interchangeable.

Nevertheless, new discussions regarding gender have been set since the feminist movement appeared, specifically its third approach (what has been called the “third wave”), in which the concepts of female and male have been challenged. As it is a social movement, it has made its way to literature, including characters that reject the idea of a female and a male world in opposition. Such is the case of *The Harry Potter Series*, where the character of Hermione Granger not only embodies the coexistence

of masculinity and femininity, but also defies all conventions and stereotypes regarding women, constituting a feminist figure in children's literature

Hermione Jean Granger, the clever friend of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley in the saga, is a strong female character given her ability to reconcile the duality previously mentioned. *The Harry Potter Series* comprises a worldwide phenomenon that has been read by thousands of people, who are not all children, and continue to be read in different cultures and languages. Hence the importance of a character like Hermione, who embodies faithful representations of gender and transmits gender-friendly values. Through her character, Rowling does not dictate what a girl must be or become, but rather emphasizes the choices girls have and how a duality between male and female behavior is not needed.

That duality, however, is commonly thought necessary within our societal structures and has become a barrier for boys and girls to freely shape their identities. The way in which our world is currently constructed in terms of gender roles and gender categories, is the result of a re-signification process in which several discussions have been established. Though the struggle for the equality of the sexes has made progress during the last decades, there are still categories that need further development so as to achieve a fair representation of social and cultural constructions regarding gender. Gender Studies, as an interdisciplinary field, has sought for the accurate understanding of gender, refreshing the meaning of masculinity and femininity. Within Gender Studies, Feminism stands out as a sub-field given the status of women being a minority in a 'male' world. As a result of the patriarchy and its dominance upon our society, women have been entitled to fit fixed gender patterns that have been set by patriarchal society, restricting the freedom and the possibility of identity for women as social and sexual beings.

As a consequence, feminist scholars and academics have accentuated that the concept of "woman" itself must be re-defined by and for women, dismissing all the previous conceptions that

have been settled by their male counterparts. Moreover, the very own concept of gender as an inherent condition has been challenged by the assumption that it is a performative act rather than a condition given by nature. It is this notion that Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* offers, establishing that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (179, emphasis in original). In other words, gender is constructed through the series of actions and behaviors which, ultimately, constitute the repetitive performance of gender. Butler also rejects the collective consciousness regarding gender since she believes it only permits "men" and "women" (under its own terms) to co-exist, resenting the notion of gender as a performance, which constitutes the very core of Butler's foundational theory: "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already established" (178). Thus, Butler offers performativity as a means to tackle the fixed identity that men and women are required to fulfill, paving the way for new discussions on the formation of gendered and sexed individuals, while contrasting it with the view of biology as an element that absolutely determines our identity.

Consequently, as a movement and as a scholarly field, Feminism has developed given the new theories and discussions that have appeared throughout time. Feminism today is in a stage in which many women acknowledge that what it means to be a "woman" is not a predetermined set of traits and behaviors they must fulfill. On the contrary, every single woman has her right of identity which is formed as a result of her unique experiences, performance and choices: "[g]enders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (Butler 180). Therefore, genders cannot be grouped as homogeneous masses that represent certain performativities because each individual's gender behaves differently and uniquely. This notion makes direct reference to a concept that conforms the third wave of Feminism, that of non-essentialism.

If we take all of this into account when analyzing children's literature, it is perceived how women and men are represented as two distinctive and contrasting worlds. It is perhaps even more accentuated since it is through these forming years that the conceptions of gender, sex and sexuality are construed. In "Gender roles in children's fiction", Judy Simmons establishes that for a long period of time "the separate fictional worlds of boys and girls were being demarcated with great clarity, each with its own internal laws and its own territory, from which the other sex was outlawed" (144).

Consequently, boys have been associated with action, adventure and authority, whereas girls have been identified with sensitivity, emotions and home-like activities. In said stories, the binary opposition in gender is sharp and unquestionable, leading to a universal conception of what boys and girls are and must grow to be. It is easy to prove this when reading, for example, "Winnie-the-Pooh" by A.A. Milne where female characters are hardly, if ever, present or "The Tale of Peter Rabbit" by Beatrix Potter, where the only female character present is Peter's mother, who only fulfills that role and hence, reinforces gender expectations. While it is true that there are also other children's books that do have strong female characters (as Jo from Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women", Matilda from Roald Dahl's "Matilda", or Pippi from Astrid Lidgren's "Pippi Longstocking"), the presence of females that are protagonists or take part in adventures is not evident. Rather, when this does happen it may create a feeling of novelty, just as the examples mentioned above, where those girls are given agency and power but they are different than others girls. It is in that difference that their impact relies, because them being strong characters is not as common even in the stories they belong to.

Thus, and following today's state of feminist discussions, it has become essential to have female voices constructing their own identities through different types of writings, as well as showing what experiencing their own womanhood is like. In children's literature, again, this becomes a challenge for readers are oftentimes encountered with the same opposing patterns between the boy and the girl world. It is in this sense that J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter Series* refreshes said opposition

through Hermione Granger, for she offers a real portrayal of women that, although in the magic world, does resemble its current state in society, dismissing myths and stopping the perpetuation of wrong and stereotypes.

Undoubtedly, the most powerful and present female character throughout the seven books is that of Hermione Granger, a muggle-born witch who is accepted at Hogwarts, school of Witchcraft and Wizardry when she is 11 years old. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone*, she meets Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley on their way to their first year of school, and in this encounter she is described as having “a bossy sort of voice, lots of bushy brown hair, and rather large front teeth” (105). Though this is the only proper description of her offered in the books, her actions and overall portrayal depict her as an overconfident know-it-all. At the beginning of the saga, this is presented as her most remarkable asset, which oftentimes is seen as a negative quality by her peers and costs her the stereotype of “nerdy”. Granger is commonly involved in Harry’s quest to defeat Lord Voldemort and to discover his past, which leads her to experience several adventures and dangerous situations. Nonetheless, Hermione Granger faces these situations with full determination and is not given a passive role, constituting the strongest feminist character within the saga.

It is important to note that *The Harry Potter Series* in its entirety does not qualify as feminist novels; however, this does not exclude the possibility of having a feminist character in it. This statement would not be considered a fact by the academics that have analyzed Granger through a feminist focus, since she has been often referred to as a passive and submissive character. To begin to explain her feminist nature, however, it is important to understand what a feminist character should comprise. In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Roberta Seelinger explains that feminist characters “are often more articulate by the end of the novel than they were at its inception” and “almost always understand the primacy of voice” (7). Essentially, to be a feminist character means to experience an awakening from the socially inscribed gender roles, understanding how women are perceived and choosing to reject

any stereotypes they entail. Thus, this understanding may not be present at the beginning, but a feminist character will go through a progression of awareness of her agency in the course of the story.

Nonetheless, in “From Sexist to (sort-of) Feminist”, Elizabeth Heilman believes that Hermione would not fit into this category as she argues that “he [Harry] is the hero, she is but an assistant”, establishing that Hermione “seems perfectly content with her subordinate partnership with Ron and Harry” (145). Heilman fails to realize that there is a strong interdependency between the trio, that what really matters “is the way these novels demonstrate people interacting, gaining strength from each other and being strong in their relationship” (Seelinger 99). The interrelationship between the three of them has been built on strong foundations of loyalty and friendship, being equal for all the three of them.

Moreover, Heilman’s remarks completely misunderstand the focus of the story as she forgets that the central figure of the saga is indeed Harry, not Hermione or Ron. Though it is true that throughout the seven books both are given the roles of companions, the story itself follows the quest of “the boy who lived”, which entails that each of the story lines will be revolved around Potter. Therefore, what Rowling is doing is being consistent with her narrative line and not intentionally sexist: Hermione becoming the center of each adventure would simply make no sense.

Similarly, it has often been discussed the protagonist of the saga being male, to which Rowling has replied:

I was writing the books for six months, before I stopped and thought: well, he’s a boy. How did that happen? Why is he a boy? Why isn’t it Harriet? And number one, it was too late, Harry was too real then for me to try to put him in a dress... And then there was Hermione — and Hermione is an indispensable part of the books and how the adventures happen... It wasn’t conscious. That’s how he happened.



This proves then that Rowling has developed the story just as she first envisioned it, resulting in unconsciously having a male central figure. She acknowledges that she is by no means making a commentary on male supremacy or legitimizing it.

Nonetheless, to prove the feminist nature of Hermione Granger and understand it in its entire spectrum, it is imperative to consider her character development. Heilman has only taken into consideration particular events and has not studied Hermione's personality and identity in its entire spectrum. When Hermione first arrives at Hogwarts, she is an 11-year-old girl with an incipient understanding of the world and, specifically, the magic world. Naturally, it is within time that she develops her sense of identity and self-discovery, hence why she does not represent a full grown feminist character in the first book.

In the very first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the most discussed event is when Hermione encounters a troll while hiding in the girls' bathroom from her classmates who had been making fun of her bossy attitude. There, she avoids having dinner in the dining hall and misses the announcement of a big troll lurking in the castle, who later enters the bathroom and finds a crying Hermione hiding under the sinks. What seems to bother critics the most about this particular scene is the language used to describe Hermione's attitude, as Rowling presents her behavior with phrases such as "she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror" (175). Certainly, when Harry and Ron find her she is "shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she was about to faint" (175), making her appear completely vulnerable and submissive to the boys' rescue. However, critics as Heilman seem to focus on one particular event to claim that Hermione is "emotional and cr[ies] readily throughout all seven books" (Sexist 148), when in fact her emotional maturity is still in its early stages. Nevertheless, to label this attitude as weak would be to perpetuate a false representation of women just because they openly express their feelings. Ron and Harry are both scared as well, only they do not show it in the way Hermione does. As Dresang expresses, "women

have wrongly been perceived as weak when in fact their strength is simply not defined in masculine terms” (*Heritage* 230).

In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, in turn, Ron’s weak personality is more accentuated than in the first book, when this position could have been easily attributed to Hermione since she is the only girl of the trio. When Hermione first proposes the idea of a polyjuice potion, she very firmly acknowledges that “[t]his is the most complicated potion “[she’s] ever seen” (185), while still willing to proceed with her idea, at the expense of breaking school rules which is something she hates. Nevertheless, the boys are the ones who hesitate and they are concerned they will get caught, to which Hermione responds with “shut[ing] the book with a snap” and adding: “[w]ell if you are going to chicken out, fine”, while having “bright pink patches on her cheeks” and eyes “brighter than usual” (185). Hermione plays a decisive role acting as the problem solver, acknowledging that her knowledge gives her power. The fact that the boys trust her judgement and follow her instructions also proves the interdependency among them, meaning that they are equally important in their bonding regardless of their gender.

In the same school year, readers learn that Hermione is muggle-born when Draco Malfoy calls her “you filthy little Mudblood”. Malfoy reacts after Granger sharply says that on the Gryffindor Quidditch they “got in on pure talent” (124), without needing to buy new broomsticks for the players to be accepted, as Malfoy did. After this strong confrontational statement, Malfoy reminds her of her muggle-born nature and Hermione is silenced. Nevertheless, and as her development continues in *The Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* her feminist character begins to take a stronger shape. As established in “Hermione Granger and the Heritage of Gender” by Eliza Dresang, there are different feminist perspectives to consider when analyzing a feminist character. Among them, she considers role construction (subversion of stereotypes and gender reversal) and self-determination (agency) (220). She refers to stereotypes proposing that it is possible for that character to be “empowered if

she consciously subverts the stereotype” and thus declining that “oversimplified version” of herself and “uncritical judgment” surrounding her (221). If a character succeeds at embodying these characteristics, then it is certain that we are dealing with a feminist figure and such is the case of Hermione Granger. Following this progression, Rowling provides more explicit examples of Granger’s feminist awakening in the third book.

As previously explained, though aware of her non-magical heritage Hermione does not interpret this as an impediment to freely develop her sense of selfhood and build her identity accordingly. However, she did silence herself when Malfoy first referred to her as a Mudblood. This event is not repeated again when, in an even nobler act than standing up for herself, Hermione confronts her antagonist when he is making fun of her friend Hagrid, who had been crying for Buckbeak: “Have you ever seen anything quite as pathetic?... And he’s supposed to be our teacher!” (293). Even though the trio was entirely present, “Hermione got there first — SMACK!”, and at the surprise of everybody Hermione “had slapped Malfoy across the face with all the strength she could muster” (293). Everyone is shocked and stands there “flabbergasted”, except for Hermione who having hit Malfoy already, continues to defend her friend: “[d]on’t you *dare* call Hagrid pathetic, you foul — you evil —” (293). Following this statement, there is an obvious role reversal in which Hermione acquires an attitude commonly attributed to males, as when Ron “weakly” says her name and “trie[s] to grab her hand as she swung it back”, adding with full determination: “[g]et *off*, Ron!” (293).

In this scene, Ron is acting scared and wants to avoid any further confrontation, whereas Hermione continues as she “[pulls] out her wand” and “Malfoy [steps] backward” (293). This scene is not only powerful because Hermione embodies a male behavior, but also because her agency is strong, explicit and unapologetic. Nevertheless, it is important to note that adopting a male behavior is not necessary in order to be a feminist figure, but it is always powerful when it happens because it explicitly

reverts traditional female roles and the ‘ladylike’ behavior female characters often adopt in children’s books. Being the only girl in the place, she is the only one ready to put up a fight, as the rest of the boys remain silent and scared. Harry, who is the central figure of the saga, does not intervene and Ron does so but only in order to stop the conflict, grabbing her arm and wanting to control her actions. Hermione nevertheless shows full confidence as she ignores Ron’s attempt to silence her and proves that she can be as physically challenging as any boy, and in this case, magically challenging as well.

Furthermore, another important point to tackle is the thought of Hermione’s knowledge only being at the service of her friends. If this was true, Hermione would not be able to subvert her stereotype, find self-determination or define her identity on her own terms. As mentioned above, her cleverness has always been an intrinsic asset of hers but it has been argued that it is never used for her own purposes. This assumption, once again, is incomplete because it does not consider character development. While it is true that in the first two books readers know little of Hermione’s personal interests, this changes in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, where Hermione advocates for house-elves, despite having no support from her friends. When she is not helping Harry to solve problems or absorbed in books, she spends her time participating in the “Society for the Promotion of English Welfare” or “S.P.E.W” (224), which she created herself. Though it is not a major topic within the saga, it is always present and it is a clear demonstration that Granger possesses enough determination and independency as to carry out her own projects, which have nothing to do with Harry’s personal journey.

She also does not hesitate to point out to her friends when they are lacking of a sense of community and/or ethics of caring, as when Ron shows no interest whatsoever in house-elf enslavement: “[i]t’s people like you, Ron... who prop up rotten and unjust systems, just because they’re too lazy” (125). Repeatedly, then, Hermione proves that gender is never a barrier for her to

be passionate about something and strongly defend it, even if that means to openly confront her male friend.

In the same book, her sexual development is also further explored and new issues arise: appearance and body image. For Hermione it had never appeared to be an issue until she is invited by Viktor Krum to the Yule Ball, when she modifies a few of her physical traits for the occasion. When Hermione arrives at the ball, everyone notices that she “had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head” (414), and as if no one had noticed, Hermione goes and greets Harry, shrugging aside the changes in her looks. While it is true that Hermione altered her physical appearance and even shrank her teeth for the ball, it is not possible to argue that she is a body-obsessed female. What is interesting is that her “transformation” seems to mean more to her classmates and friends than to herself. Furthermore, this is the only occasion in the book where Hermione is seen working on her appearance and, in this case, she does so out of personal enjoyment and not out of feeling inadequate. It could also not be argued that she decided to look different for her date, since Krum had been “coming up to the library every day to try and talk to [her] (422), even before Hermione looked different. Heilman refers to this event and claims that girls “value their looks more than their intelligence and schoolwork” (Sexist 229), without realizing that it never costs Hermione her dedication to learning. Moreover, what Heilman is doing with that statement is replicating the same sexist, incorrect perception of women she is supposedly trying to tackle. It only contributes to the collective consciousness that establishes that women are either pretty or smart, but never both.

Finally, it is never stated that feminist characters must not undergo any changes, whether psychological or physical. On the contrary, it is imperative for them to suffer different experiences that allow them to grow and learn. It would be indeed deplorable to have a character that goes through different physical transformations to fix beauty patterns or to be accepted. However, if she has the

need to dress up or modify something of herself out of choice, it is important that she is respected in her decision. As Seelinger explains, “[a] major goal of feminism is to support women’s choices, but another that is equally important is to foster societal respect for those choices” (*Sleeping 2*). Hermione Granger alters a few characteristics to go to the ball, but it is never her interest to look like the other girls or to adapt to beauty standards, meaning that despite criticism, she can still feel comfortable with her own looks, without making body appearance her one and only priority. This shows that she understands where her true value is, which again does not dismiss the possibility of dressing up for an occasion: embellishment really does not mean you do not possess critical thinking and these two concepts should no longer be seen as mutually exclusive.

In the three following books, much more attention is given to the battle against the dark forces and the defense of the magic world. Hermione’s agency is nonetheless never diminished and continues to play a decisive role in the plot. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, for example, Granger proposes to create a Defense Against the Dark Arts club (later called “Dumbledore’s Army”), rebelling against Professor Umbridge and her attempts to keep students unarmed in case of an attack of any sort. Hermione speaks up and tells her classmates: “I had the idea – that it might be good if people who wanted to study Defense Against the Dark Arts – and I mean really study it, you know, not that rubbish Umbridge is doing with us... I thought it would be good if we, well, took matters into our own hands” (339). Not only is she given enough agency and voice, she is also given critical thinking as she does not passively consume all the information professors give to students. Additionally, she is heard and trusted by her peers, hence why she is also given the power to organize the club and become a leader.

Lastly, an important event in the sixth book *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* is when the trio must face the darkest journey while looking for Voldemort’s horcruxes, in which they will constantly put their lives at risk. However, their lives are not only what is at stake: the future of

Hogwarts and the magic world depends on their success in said journey. Harry tells them both, Hermione and Ron, not to join him given the threatening circumstances, to which Granger replies: “[y]ou said to us once before...that there was time to turn back if we wanted to. We’ve had time, haven’t we?” (651). Granger thus solidifies her strong feminist character by being consistent until the very end. Even in the most precarious and risky situation of the saga, and with full understanding of what that implies, she chooses to cooperate and participates in the journey. Hermione acknowledges that her participation is important, and bravely takes part in the journey, which validates her self-confidence and determination.

From what has been exposed thus far, it is possible to establish that Hermione’s feminist character is developed through a progression of attitudes, behaviors and choices. In this analysis I have only taken into account crucial events that have defined Hermione as a strong feminist figure; however, there are other events in the books that can be used to argue that she is not. It is essential to understand that Hermione presents flaws and errors in her personal quest, but this is the only way for her to be an authentic character. The moments in which she fails at proving to be a feminist figure do not comprise inconsistency; they only mean that she is organically learning to construct her identity despite her gender. In fact, they only contribute to the faithful representation of females, since no one is born with a full comprehension of the world and the social conceptions that must be declined.

It is through this same process that Hermione succeeds at rejecting the typical role constructions, subverting stereotypes, gaining agency and self-determination. In *The Harry Potter Series* Hermione is able to build her own identity on her own terms, without anyone else’s input, without being defined by her gender. Ultimately, what defines her as a feminist character is how she acts with self-determination, how she chooses to behave and react according to her circumstances, without depending on the feminine qualities she is supposed to fulfill. Moreover, all the characteristics attributed to Hermione are important and decisive in the saga, which makes her essential and also

differentiate her from the other girls in the story. Rowling does not articulate Hermione as to represent girls as a homogeneous group; she articulates Hermione only to represent herself, substantiating the notion that it is not possible to talk about *women* as indistinctive subjects. In fact, Hermione Granger proves that each individual embodies an infinite number of qualities, none of them excluding another, proving that women have choices and must be respected in their decisions.

Thus, it cannot be established that Granger is a 'gender-based' character, since she succeeds at subverting stereotypes, breaks sexist patterns by adopting the so-called 'male' attitudes and, though a girl, manages to become a significant and powerful figure within the story. This is never seen problematically as Granger embodies 'male' and 'female' traits without treating them as intrinsic contradictions, and it is through these reconciliations of opposites that she comes to represent the most complete feminist woman within the saga. It is through this character that Rowling transcends the 'male' and 'female' duality: Hermione takes a long existent dichotomy and makes co-existence possible.

As it was previously mentioned, to have a consistent and already feminist character from beginning to end would be not only unrealistic but also unauthentic, and it would certainly not contribute to the gender discussion. Consequently, another line of investigation could comprise the moments in which Hermione failed at being a feminist character and how these scenes contribute to the development of her identity on all different levels: sexual, social, cultural, magical.



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