

Teaching Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone

Margaret Hubbard suggests lessons to teach the film Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone suitable for the media element of 5-14 English

This outline is intended as lessons on the film Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone suitable for the media element of 5-14 English. It can be taught didactically or through group discussion (i.e. showing a clip and putting the class into groups to find and discuss the narrative strands, the languages, the representation and the genres). At the end a teacher may wish to set an essay similar to a Standard Grade Media essay, or may wish to use it for discussion grades only. By definition, knowledge of the media would emerge in the discussions.

The film is a useful tool to teach Language, Narrative, Representation and Genre. It is necessary that students have been introduced to the language of film by using excerpts from other texts, or a film language teaching video. They need to be aware of camera angles and their usage, sound and lighting. Clip 1

Begin by showing the opening up to 'There's no such thing as magic' (at approximately 12 minutes). A discussion would then elicit the following points: • Languages and narrative construct the genres of fantasy, and of the unwanted child in a comfortably-off household.

• After the establishing shot, the music changes in tone from eerie to comforting, which sets up Dumbledore's character.

• The lighting also creates the positive side of the world of magic.

• The characters are set up as 'goodies' through the music, the lighting, their voices and the dialogue.

• Magic is introduced through the clothes, the light extinguisher, the cat and the motorbike.

• The concern for the baby is evident by the close-ups on Dumbledore and the silver lighting.

• Leaving the baby on the doorstep has echoes of Moses, Arthur, and the words 'Until he's ready', echoes of Jesus.

• Opening title. The time span from babyhood to ten years old is bridged by the close-up of the scar. The use of blue, and the lighting links Harry with elemental power.

• The Dursleys' house is set up as complete contrast. Dumbledore and McGonagall cared for Harry, whereas the Dursleys don't. Vernon is cruel, Petunia indifferent, Dudley bullying. The significance of the names also begins here. Dudley (like Malfoy later) calls him 'Potter', not 'Harry'.

• In the snake scene, Harry's power is apparent. The music is unlike most scenes involving snakes. It is pleasant, non-threatening. This little section continues the narrative enigma. Who is this child? Why was he left on the doorstep? Who are the wizards? How can the child talk to snakes, and make the glass disappear? Harry's power is more evident to the audience than it is to him.

• When the birds gather, there are echoes of The Birds and of Danny Champion of the World, a text familiar to many children. There too, the birds are pitched against the 'baddies'. At the end of this section, once the class has talked about all the points above, it is useful to make a chart:

Representations Genres

- Who is Harry?
- Who are the wizards?
- Why does he have a scar?
- How can he talk to snakes?
- What are the owls all about? etc.
- Music – makes Dumbledore eerie comforting.
- No music for the Dursleys.
- 'Big sound' for titles – Harry's power.
- Silvery lighting on Dumbledore and McGonagall: magic.
- No lighting effects for Dursleys – they are ordinary.
- Close-ups to emphasise Dumbledore's care. Close-up on scar – its significance.
- Bridging shots of the scar.
- Computer-generated images of the cat.
- Establishment shots of the same street, yet the mood is very different because of the narratives and genres.

- Magic world is good.
- Human world is cruel.
- Family – his human family is less safe than his magical family.
- Snake – familiar reactions but the snake is indifferent to people.
- Fantasy
- Oliver Twist – unwanted child.

Narratives	Genres	Harry and Malfoy
Harry and family		
Harry and Hermione and Ron		
Harry's past/Voldemort		
Harry and Snape		
Harry and the Stone		

Harry and Quidditch

Harry and Gryffindor (his “family”).

- Merlin/Arthur. (Dumbledore/Harry)
- “Oliver Twist’ – child rescued from despair.
- Child overcoming evil without adult help. (ET/Free Willy/Famous Five)
- Fairy Tale.
- Horror – Harry v Quirrell/ Voldemort in the chamber.
- Sport.
- Epic/heroes.

Narrative and Genre chart

It is important at this point to determine that students understand the four key aspects. A film language tape may only have covered film languages. Narrative, as story, needs to be clarified as does Representation and Genre. Representation is simply how something is repeatedly presented: at this point in the film, magic is good. It is presented thus through the positive aspects of the narrative and the languages. Equally the narrative and the languages work together to construct the Dursleys in a negative light. Genre is best tackled by establishing a list of genres not in the film e.g. the western, the gangster, the quiz show. At this point it is advisable to show the whole film, after which the students can develop their narrative and genre charts in groups. Clip 2 Diagon Alley (at approximately 23.00 minutes) The Dickensian genre is explicit in Diagon Alley, but here also the magic world and the human world meet, in ways familiar to the audience. The children are recognisable as normal children excited about the brand name Numbus 2000. The Quidditch team strips look readily identifiable as the contents of any high street sports store. Yet the characters and the shops are dressed in a Dickensian style, and there are no cars. The Leaky Cauldron is very Fagin-like. The magic element is evident in the bank run by wizards, and the trip to the vaults has James Bond overtones in its technology. Students can add to their charts how genres are constructed through the *mise en scéne* (as well as the narratives) from a close analysis of this scene. This scene also contributes to one of the narratives: the wand and the scar begin to reveal the past. Clip 3 The boat scene (at approx. 36 mins) Again students should do an image analysis. The overhead shot, into which the little flotilla sails, sets up something very special. The lighting of gold and silver emphasises this. The castle is every child’s dream, and this is reinforced by the reaction shot of the children looking up at it. The representation of Hogwarts is magical, good and glorious. This is continued by the castle interior, but here it is more readily identifiable to its viewers as boarding school (gowns, houses, cup, rules). Malfoy is the first character we meet, who is set up as a baddie. This is done through the languages of *mise en scéne* and sound – his looks and the close-up on his extended hand, which Harry refuses.

In this scene also. Snape first appears, instantly recognisable as an adversary. Clip 4 Interior of school as students go upstairs (at approx. 46 mins). The representation of a boarding school is very clear in the cloaks, the building, prefects etc. Clip 5 The Quidditch Match (at approximately 1.12 – 1.20 minutes) It begins with dramatic music and visuals, which remind the audience of gladiators. The language of the film points to the dramatic. Unusual shots contribute to this: the quaffle being released; the cuts and the tracking shots reinforced by the music. At the end the steadicam round Harry sets him up as a hero. The representation of class is worth commenting on here. “Take that side!” is not spoken in the same accent as that of the other students. The coarser accent of the Quidditch dirty player carries and ideology of lower class accents = not playing fairly. Gender representation is also worth exploring here. Girls play Quidditch – but not Hermione. Girls in this film are good at sport, or in Hermione’s case, clever. However, either attribute is shown to bring popularity. The boys only become friendly with her after she has lied to keep them out of trouble and, it must be remembered, they had only gone to rescue her earlier in the text because they were sorry for her. Previously Ron’s view was, “She’s a nightmare”. Again all this can be added to their Representation chart. Clip 6 The forest scene (at approx. 1.40 mins.) A cursory analysis here – really only the use of the blue filter and the sound to suggest horror/danger. Clip 7 The chess game and the vault (at approx. 1.56 – 2.03 mins) This scene should be analysed in detail as it is the climax of the film and so contains all the ideological messages. Narrative: The children have been failed by the adult world and have set out to combat evil alone. To do so they require skill, magic and brains. Each of the three main characters contributes to these three essential elements.

Hermione is not a passenger on the way to the chess game (her knowledge is necessary en route), and Ron comes into his own there (“I’ll be a Knight!”). But Harry is the hero, and as Ron instructs him he has to go on alone. (“Not me, not Hermione, you Harry!”). Hermione also contributes to the hero ideology when she denigrates herself, giving up her earlier values (“Books and cleverness. There are more important things – friendship”). Thus the ideology of the film is made explicit. Languages of the chess game.

1. *mise en scéne*. The children don’t wear school uniform when they break the rules;
2. the camera angles and the cuts build the excitement;
3. the fires add to the tension;
4. the sound builds also. Thus the *mise en scéne*, the camera angles and the sound all make the chess scene very dramatic. Genre: Ron’s sacrifice is in the genre of the epic. The secondary figure sacrifices himself to allow the hero to go on. Both Hermione and Ron, despite their strong roles in the scene, display fear: Harry not so. Once in the vault the music builds, and the way down into it is shot from Harry’s point of view. The lighting and the fire add a metaphorical heat to the action. Harry, like an epic hero, or like Harrison Ford in pursuit of the grail, is on a quest. The final battle has to be between good and evil. Harry triumphs but at a cost – the loss of his innocence. All the aspects of film language combine to make the tension of this scene. The computer generated image of Voldemort, along

with the earlier examples of technical wizardry (the cat, Platform 9&3/4, Quidditch) are all worthy of note as they contribute to the construction of the magic. Clip 8 The final feast (at approx. 2.13 mins.)

This scene is the denouement. It carries Dumbledore's very human message, and takes the film back to a place experienced by its audience – the headteacher addressing the school while, at the same time, it maintains the boarding school icons. The cutaways to Malfoy set up an expectation of a further struggle between himself and Harry in the next film. At the end, when Harry says he will threaten magic on the Dursleys, we are pulled into the magic world and approve. Thus the magic is seen by the audience as a valid weapon on the unpleasant humans, its final representation.

Extension Work

It is also possible to compare sections of the film with the book. I would suggest chapters 1, 2 and 3, the Quidditch match, and the ending. This could lead to a discussion of how to move from text to film, and students could then take a section of the text which is not in the film, or an obvious other follow-on – what happens when Harry goes back to the Dursleys, and storyboard the scene, i.e. work out the overall plan and then produce a shot-by-shot breakdown. Such an exercise really displays media knowledge, as it requires an understanding of shots, sound, lighting and mise en scène. Another possible piece of work is on the book covers in different languages, available on the Internet. It is interesting to compare how different countries chose to present the text, and this can lead to discussion about which covers the students like and why. All of this has been taught to a first year class over a period of four weeks. The students both enjoyed the work, and emerged from it with a fair understanding of how the meaning of a film is made. © 2004 film Margaret Hubbard