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Adult Women in the Wizarding World : Rowling's Ideal Female in the Harry Potter Novels

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Abstract

This study focuses on the perceptions of gender and its expressions in the *Harry Potter* series, primarily regarding the adult female characters in the novels. Through the *Harry Potter* novels, J. K. Rowling asserts her belief that women must fit into a traditional role that a heteronormative society dictates or else they are not a “true” woman. Rowling’s recent public transphobic statements also lend credence to this heteronormative perspective. This phenomenon is seen through the analysis of the “good” adult female characters—Lily Potter, Molly Weasley, and Minerva McGonagall. Their treatment in the text differs from the “bad” adult female characters—Dolores Umbridge, Rita Skeeter, and Olympe Maxime. Literary scholars Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace’s “Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series” provides a framework for this thesis in that they outline the traditional structures within Rowling’s world—home, school, and government. The structures are utilized to examine the female character’s roles, and how they obey or defy the men within these systems. I conclude that the *Harry Potter* novels and their portrayal and treatment of “good” and “bad” women can influence how young readers view other female characters in the series and in other texts, as well as women and womanhood in their real lives.

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Adult Women in the Wizarding World:

Rowling's Ideal Female in the *Harry Potter* Novels

by

Grace Ann McCarthy

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

June 2023

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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2023

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Background and Introduction

With the publication of the first *Harry Potter* novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, in 1997 the world of young adult and children's fiction was irreversibly changed.¹ Along with subsequent releases in the series, the popularity surrounding the boy wizard, Harry Potter, only grew. It was not only Harry himself who skyrocketed into stardom; it was also his creator, author J. K. Rowling. With her humble origins and miraculous success story, the world wanted to know all about her and her secrets to this success. Readers responded to the media's portrayal of Rowling's modest image, which resonated with the novels' themes.

The near-universal love for Rowling has slowly shifted after the publication of the last novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, in 2007. The transphobic rhetoric Rowling shares on social media caused the main shift in how she is perceived. As recently as June of 2020, Rowling published a blog post titled, "J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender," documenting the recent backlash against her for seemingly transphobic public tweets. On June 6, 2020, she tweeted:

If sex isn't real, there's no same-sex attraction. If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn't hate to speak the truth. / The idea that women like me, who've been empathetic to trans people for decades, feeling kinship because they're vulnerable in the same way as women - ie, to male violence - 'hate' trans people because they think sex is real and has lived consequences - is a nonsense. / I respect every trans person's right to live any way that feels authentic and

¹ The individual *Harry Potter* novels are as follows and will be referred to as: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone-SS*; *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets-CS*; *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban-Pos*; *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire-GoF*; *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix-OotP*; *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince-HBP*; *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows-DH*

comfortable to them. I'd march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it's hateful to say so. (@jk_rowling)

In her blog statement, Rowling states her main concern regarding transsexual issues was her concern for other women. Rowling believes that saying trans women are real women undermines the experiences that cisgender women have existing as women. She argues that because trans women did not necessarily grow up presenting as female, they cannot fully understand the female experience of male harassment and female shame. The "lived reality of women globally" that Rowling describes in her tweets she feels is being undermined by trans individuals (@jk_rowling). Rowling asserts that she understands and loves trans individuals; she worries only for the specific experiences and safety of cisgender women.

If transitioning becomes more accessible, it can lead to more men claiming to identify as transgender to access women's spaces, Rowling believes. She states in her 2020 blog post:

So I want trans women to be safe. At the same time, I do not want to make natal girls and women less safe. When you throw open the doors of bathrooms and changing rooms to any man who believes or feels he's a woman . . . then you open the door to any and all men who wish to come inside. That is the simple truth. ("Speaking out on Sex and Gender")

This statement has an underlying sentiment that because men, using whatever means available, may do something underhanded and sinister, all trans women should not be trusted. According to Rowling, they cannot be trusted in female spaces, and they cannot be trusted as women. She concludes her blog statement with, "'woman' is not a costume" ("Speaking out on Sex and Gender"). These posts send the message that, according to Rowling, one can dress like a woman,

act like a woman, but can never truly be a woman. They also imply that there is a right and wrong way to *be* a woman.

Despite its popularity among all age groups, the *Harry Potter* series primarily speaks to children. What children read matters, for the beliefs presented in the books they read have an impact on them. As professors Bojana S. Vujin and Viktorija E. Krombholz explain, “[S]ince children lack the necessary reading experience and practice, they are by default what narratology calls ‘unsophisticated readers,’ and therefore rely less on subtlety and more on tropes to tell the difference between the white and black hats” (26). Learning how to identify “good” versus “bad” people in fiction based on an author’s use of stereotypes regarding appearance and behavior could lead to children applying those identifiers to people in real life as well. If conservative views regarding gender are present in Rowling’s series, flying under the radar of whimsy and mild progressivism, no one would have known to mention other perspectives when discussing the novels with children. It is thus more urgent than ever to reexamine the *Harry Potter* series now, especially since Rowling herself stated in the 2011 “The Women of Harry Potter” interview that, “I do strongly express my world view in my books.” With all of this information in mind, it begs the question: Does, and should, Rowling’s conservative political beliefs affect the *readings* of her text?

In 1988, feminist theorist Judith Butler published an essay titled “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” This essay describes the expressions of gender as a performance, with the gender roles acted out as generally ones prescribed by a heteronormative society. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2021, Butler explains this theory further:

I suggested more than 30 years ago that people are, consciously or not, citing conventions of gender when they claim to be expressing their own interior reality or even when they say they are creating themselves anew. It seemed to me that none of us totally escape cultural norms. At the same time, none of us are totally determined by cultural norms. Gender then becomes a negotiation, a struggle, a way of dealing with historical constraints and making new realities. When we are “girled,” we are entered into a realm of girlhood that has been built up over a long time—a series of conventions, sometimes conflicting, that establish girlness within society. We don’t *just* choose it. And it is not *just* imposed on us. But that social reality can, and does, change. (Gleeson)

Rowling fits what Butler describes since she strives to depict strong, feminist characters, but in actuality, Rowling rehashes traditional gender roles in her female characters. These female gender standards dictated by a heteronormative society show the supposed “right” and “wrong” ways to behave as a woman. Butler continues to explain that though these gender roles are a mixture of compulsions and expectations, these standards can change. However, Rowling’s views on gender have evidently not changed since the publication of her books, as her recent transphobic tweets have shown. Conversely, the social reality since the release of the *Harry Potter* novels has largely shifted into a more inclusive definition of what it means to be a woman. It is with this altered perspective in mind that this examination of the *Harry Potter* series will be conducted.

This study focuses on the perceptions of gender and the descriptions of masculinity, femininity and nontraditional appearances and actions in the *Harry Potter* series, primarily regarding the adult female characters in the novels. Rowling herself claimed herself to be a feminist and stated, “I’ve written a lot of well-rounded female characters in these books” (“The

Women of Harry Potter”). But with her trans-exclusionary rhetoric, it now seems that Rowling has an exclusionary perception on what constitutes a woman. The pinnacle of femininity for Rowling revolves around being a mother or maternal. Professors Marcelina Fransisca and Jenny Mochtar believe:

Rowling sees that girls and women are the strongest and the most admirable when they become mothers. For her, being a mother is the strongest and the most powerful position a girl or a woman can take. Many of the female characters in the story are mothers, and they are always portrayed as the symbol of safety and life. Positioning her young female characters as mothers can be seen as her attempt to give them a very strong power.

Therefore, it is in this context that Rowling has created strong and independent female characters. (7)

While Fransisca and Mochtar’s interpretation of Rowling and her female characters sheds a positive light on this habit of Rowling’s, further analysis may say otherwise.

The power of love, especially the kind between a mother and their child, is unquestionable throughout the series. However, it seems this is the ideal kind of relationship that Rowling prescribes to many of her female characters. When being a mother and caretaker becomes the only option, or at least the only “correct” option, it only damages or warps the perception of womanhood for the series’ young (girl) readers. Many women cannot, or choose not to have children, and it is unfair for women to be subjected to this normative idea of inherent maternalism when men do not have these same expectations. Especially since, when a character lacks these motherly attributes, in the series, they are mocked for having traditionally masculine attributes. Nontraditional females are villainized by the narrative, and therefore indirectly by Rowling herself.

This examination consists of two parts. The first part examines adult women characters in the *Harry Potters* series as the pinnacle of motherhood. These characters—Lily Potter, Molly Weasley, and Minerva McGonagall—perform as the ideal female role throughout the series through their motherly or maternal characteristics. The second part analyzes adult female characters who act outside of the expected norm and how the text treats them. These women—Dolores Umbridge, Rita Skeeter, and Olympe Maxime—are seen as “different,” thus being mocked (or marked) with masculine attributes. Additionally, taking Rowling’s beliefs into consideration, along with the depictions of villainous females that are often masculine-coded, it could be concluded that Rowling does not see these characters as “true” women. By portraying a “correct” way to look and act as a woman also leads to a very narrow heteronormative perspective in the novels, which again reflects Rowling’s conservative views regarding gender.

Lily Potter as Mother

Lily Potter, the protagonist’s (Harry Potter) mother, serves as the catalyst for the events of the entire *Harry Potter* series. The sacrifice of Lily’s life for her son’s starts the first chapter of the first book. The magnitude of Lily’s love for her child and the importance of it is impressed upon Harry himself, as well as the reader. Hogwarts Headmaster Dumbledore tells Harry: “[T]o have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever” (SS 335). Lily’s love towards her child manifests as physical protection for her son, making her someone for the reader to admire. As Rowling herself describes, “At these times of real stress, it’s [Harry’s] mother that is a place of refuge. . . . Lily was a representative of safety in a way that a father couldn’t be. . . . mother love is hugely important in the books” (“Women of Harry Potter”). The basis of Rowling’s core beliefs, what a mother should be, and her idea of a perfect female is embodied in Lily. Lily herself never physically appears in the

novels—she appears only in memories and photographs, as well as a ghost—but her presence is undoubtedly important and palpable. Through her death, Lily fits as the maternal figurehead even better, for nothing can change or contradict this perception. As scholar Melanie J. Cordova describes:

[Lily] is reinterpreted after death by various characters to Harry: a brilliant student, popular in school, kind, beautiful, and a mother willing to die to defend her child. The Lily mythos is strong and unbreakable. . . . As the furthest away from Harry—literally deceased—his want to interpret and present his mother coalesces with the mythos he has built around her, which results in her emerging from the series entirely unscathed by his critical point-of-view. (23)

Cordova's argument for the positive and negative portrayals of female characters in the series is sound; however, she places the blame for these portrayals on Harry the character, rather than on Rowling as author.

This thesis asserts that Rowling's own beliefs shape how she writes her female characters, rather than the fault of a fictional character that Rowling created. Harry can only perceive his mother through other people's memories and words—which Rowling creates—all telling Harry how his mother died for him, and how they see her *in* him: "You have your mother's eyes" (SS 91). Harry cannot see his mother for himself to make his own judgment. Rowling's writing froze Lily in time not as an individual, but as a *memory* of a mother, giving up her life for the sake of another—sacrificing herself for the sake of her son, thereby living on as an ideal for women.

Molly Weasley as Mother

Molly Weasley's presence throughout the series performs as a second mother not only to

Harry, but to all the children in the series. The Weasley clan serves as Harry's first introduction to the wizarding world, largely dictating how to view that realm. The first friend Harry meets on the Hogwarts express, Ron Weasley, expresses his family's views of Hogwarts houses, "Gryffindor . . . Mom and Dad were in it, too. I don't know what they'll say if I'm not. I don't suppose Ravenclaw would be too bad, but imagine if they put me in Slytherin" (*SS* 118). This introduction to a loving Gryffindor family and warning about the series' villain and Harry's arch nemesis Voldemort's affiliation with Slytherin house largely influences Harry's decision to be sorted into Gryffindor. This choice, Gryffindor over Slytherin, dictates how the rest of the *Harry Potter* series and Harry as a character develops. Through this, "Rowling centres the Harry Potter stories around the emotional power base of the Weasley family. Not only the seven Weasley children but Harry and Hermione, too, are sustained by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. The security of the Weasley family home appears to act as a traditional yardstick of how families should be" (Eccleshare 95). Through the Weasley family, Harry, as well as the reader, learns what a family should be and how it should behave.

Molly Weasley fits the traditional role of motherhood perfectly. She cares for all children, not just her own, as well as acting fiercely protective and nurturing. As a homemaker, she cooks elaborate meals, knits Christmas sweaters, and cleans houses. Mrs. Weasley largely performs as a caring but passive character during the wizarding war, yet her story culminates in the defeat of the evil witch, Bellatrix Lestrange. During their duel, Mrs. Weasley shouts, "You — will — never — touch — our — children — again" (*DH* 833). At that moment she fights not only for her own children, but for all children in the world. Molly serves as a peak representation of what a mother should be—a protector of children. The only flaw she shows throughout the series involves caring too much for the children, to the point of overbearingness. Where other adults

want to provide Harry information regarding the fight against Voldemort, Mrs. Weasley staunchly disagrees (and sides with Dumbledore):

“[W]ell . . . I can see I’m going to be overruled. I’ll just say this: Dumbledore must have had his reasons for not wanting Harry to know too much, and speaking as someone who has got Harry’s best interests at heart —”

“He’s not your son,” said Sirius quietly.

“He’s as good as,” said Mrs. Weasley fiercely. “Who else has he got?” (*OotP* 116)

Mrs. Weasley wants Harry to remain a child for a bit longer. She claims Harry as one of her own, and believes she knows the best for him as a mother. Mrs. Weasley not only follows her maternal instincts, she also follows Dumbledore’s orders. Where Lily Potter serves as the idealization that probably few could achieve, Molly Weasley portrays reality. Lily and Molly show different sides of motherhood—one self-sacrificing and all loving, the other hard working and caring.

Both women illustrate what Rowling believes a mother should be, and both are portrayed as positive representations throughout the series and exhibit ideal family dynamics. Through Molly Weasley and the Weasley family, “[Rowling] has a clearly defined moral code which in the domestic context upholds family values—the large, loving Weasley family is well brought up, with children obeying parents on matters of importance, though sufficiently full of spirit and prankish to be fun” (Eccleshare 73). Eccleshare also notes that Rowling’s families are traditional families—no stepparents or siblings, and certainly no LGBT parents. The lack of deviation from heteronormative structures shows how Rowling’s worldview may not be as accepting as previously thought, or even as she believes it to be. For Rowling, families are not complicated. A family is a father and the leader of the family, the mother and the caretaker, and the children. All of the families shown in the novels, like the Potters and the Weasleys, and even the villains such

as the Dursleys and the Malfoys, follow conventional structures and dynamics.

These traditional family patterns are shown repeatedly: “the two families with whom Harry spends his time, as both of the husbands/fathers are the breadwinners (Vernon Dursley and Arthur Weasley) and both of the mothers (Petunia Dursley and Molly Weasley) are the primary caretakers” (Pugh and Wallace 269). Though the Dursleys are heavily criticized and not meant to be liked or admired, they still share the same family dynamic as the wholesome Weasleys. It could be concluded that Rowling considers the traditional family dynamic to be inherent, or normal and correct. Rowling's portrayal of her female characters shows this inherent heteronormativity. While both Lily Potter and Molly Weasley are certainly admirable, their main purpose throughout the stories is to perform as mothers and role models for girls to become mothers and fulfill their maternal destinies.

Minerva McGonagall as Mother

Even characters who are not mothers, such as Professor Minerva McGonagall, perform a maternal role in the text. McGonagall teaches at Hogwarts, and acts as Head of Gryffindor house, where Harry resides. McGonagall introduces herself to the first-year students prior to their Sorting Ceremony, serving as a sort of maternal figure to the students through this transitional period. Though not as overt as Molly Weasley, McGonagall still possesses a caring and protective nature over Harry and his classmates.

When students act out of turn, her first concern is always for the students' safety: “What on earth were you thinking? You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?” (SS 198); and “*Nothing* gives you the right to walk around school at night, especially these days, it's very dangerous” (SS 272-273). While McGonagall's protectiveness could be attributed to her position as Head of House, it should be noted that other Heads of

Houses, namely the male professors, are not seen acting with as much of a parental nature over their students as McGonagall does. After Harry and Ron sneak out with a troll loose in the castle, “Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper, and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart. Snape bent over the troll. Professor McGonagall was looking at Ron and Harry” (SS 197-198). Compared to the male professors in this scene, McGonagall's first concerns lie with the children. Though this could also be attributed to McGonagall having more prevalence in the text because of her closer proximity to the main character's House, it was still Rowling's decision to portray the female professor closest to Harry at school as a motherly, protective woman. It can then be concluded that McGonagall possesses the maternal nature inherent to women, aligning herself with the idealized mothers.

Harry often benefits from McGonagall's maternal nature. She confronts Harry after seeing him flying unsupervised on a broomstick in his first year (which she scolds him for first), “how *dare* you—might have broken your neck” (SS 166). But rather than punish Harry, McGonagall bends the rules so that Harry can have a position on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, developing his superb flying skills. In addition to this leniency, McGonagall also assists in buying Harry his first broomstick, akin to a parent buying their child their first baseball glove. McGonagall is key in providing opportunities and support in Harry's life.

It should be noted that male characters who demonstrate paternal instincts—such as Albus Dumbledore, Rubeus Hagrid, and Arthur Weasley—do not have their primary purposes in the narrative revolve around caregiving. These men have jobs and goals beyond their students and children. In addition to being headmaster of Hogwarts, Dumbledore also spearheads the operation against Voldemort and is said to be the only person the dark wizard fears; Hagrid serves as a friend to Harry as well as a keeper of all sorts of critters; and Mr. Weasley has a

position at the Ministry that feeds his fascination for non-wizard objects.

‘Good’ Females in the Patriarchal System

Rowling has a particular habit when depicting her female characters—both the sympathetic (“good”) females and the unsympathetic (“bad”) females. As Pugh and Wallace describe, “Women’s roles are subjugated to masculinity in the Potter books in that the gender roles in the three main social institutions—government (the Ministry of Magic), school (Hogwarts), and family (the Dursleys and the Weasleys)—are blatantly traditional” (269). The reader encounters women only within these patriarchal confines and in their relation to the men of these systems. Lily Potter, Molly Weasley, and Mrs. Dursley are all defined by their roles as mothers and in relation to their husbands and children. At Hogwarts school, McGonagall, despite her wisdom and strong-willed attitude, consistently defers to Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts. Though her academic position entails obedience to a superior, even in situations of crisis or in Dumbledore’s absences, she always defers to him.

Even outside of school situations, deference to Dumbledore continues. In the very first chapter of the book, McGonagall protests Dumbledore’s decision to have Harry live with the Dursleys after the death of his parents: “You don’t mean — you can’t mean the people who live here? Dumbledore — you can’t. I’ve been watching them all day. You couldn’t find two people who are less like us” (SS 13-14). Even after witnessing the horrors of the Dursleys with her own eyes, with a short reasoning from Dumbledore, McGonagall quickly relents, “Yes — yes, you’re right, of course” (SS 14). Though McGonagall serves as a good, motherly character for her concerns over Harry, her repeated deference to Dumbledore is also portrayed as correct and appropriate behavior. Throughout the series, whenever others question Dumbledore, he always comes out the other side in the right, wholly good and correct. Dumbledore’s moral and

intellectual superiority shows that, in the end, the man will always be right. So, while a woman's role is to care for children, it is also her role to submit to male authority.

The 'Good' Females in the 'Bad' Characters

Even in her villainous females, Rowling observes a heteronormative dynamic. Bellatrix Lestrange acts as the primary female villain in the series, being a Death Eater and right-hand woman to Voldemort. She is evil in her own right, having been sent to wizarding prison for torturing Harry's classmates' parents. Rowling describes the relationship between Bellatrix and Voldemort as, "There's an interesting thing about female psychopaths isn't there? They often need to meet a male counterpart to release that part of themselves and that's how I see Bellatrix. . . [Voldemort] is the only person [to] whom she feels subservience. She has that curious personality disorder or quirk that is particularly female" ("The Women of Harry Potter"). Even Bellatrix's villainy cannot truly be her own—instead, beholden to a man. And how Rowling describes it, there is a particularly female characteristic that is innate to show subservience to men. Though Rowling describes Bellatrix as a villain and "bad" character, she does not characterize her as an "bad" female, for she defers and follows a man.

Narcissa Malfoy serves as another female who could be seen as villainous throughout the series. She is wife to Lucius Malfoy, a known Voldemort supporter and adult antagonist to Harry, as well as mother to Draco Malfoy, Harry's main school antagonist. Just from her name itself, Narcissa, so similar to "narcissism," suggests that she cares more for herself, which includes the Malfoy family reputation, over everything else. This implies the opposite of caring and motherly, which seems to be the nature of her in the text as well. She only appears briefly for most of the series, her first appearance being described in this way: "[Draco's] mother was blonde too; tall and slim, she would have been nice-looking if she hadn't been wearing a look that suggested

there was a nasty smell under her nose” (*GoF* 110). Her description presents her with beauty or dignity, until it gives the impression that she thinks herself above everything else.

However, her next appearance in the series is vastly different. Voldemort has tasked her son Draco with the fruitless task of killing Dumbledore. Narcissa sobs and begs Severus Snape to make a magical Unbreakable Vow to protect her son, “There is nothing I wouldn’t do anymore!” (*HBP* 23). If an Unbreakable Vow were broken by either party, both would die. Narcissa, similar to Lily, risks her life for the safety of her son. At this point in the series, none of the characters involved in this oath are characters the readers root for, except Dumbledore. The text makes a clear nod to a mother’s willingness to sacrifice everything for her child. The readers may still not like Narcissa, as she makes a vow that would doom Dumbledore, but they understand her love for her child. By Narcissa reclaiming her maternal values, and becoming a redeemed woman for doing so, Rowling reminds readers to value motherhood and see it as a positive female trait. Narcissa may not be a good character, but she performs as a good mother, aligning herself with natural, maternal impulses, and thus becoming a “good” female.

However, Narcissa’s character changes entirely in the final novel of the series. Harry sacrifices himself to Voldemort for the sake of the wizarding world. Once again, Harry’s death does not go as planned. As Harry lies alive but pretending to be dead, Voldemort sends someone to check his status:

Hands, softer than he had been expecting, touched Harry’s face, pulled back an eyelid, crept beneath his shirt, down to his chest, and felt his heart. He could hear the woman’s fast breathing, her long hair tickled his face. He knew that she could feel the steady pounding of life against his ribs.

“Is Draco alive? Is he in the castle?”

The whisper was barely audible; her lips were an inch from his ear, her head bent so low that her long hair shielded his face from the onlookers.

“Yes, ” he breathed back.

He felt the hand on his chest contract; her nails pierced him. Then it was withdrawn. She had sat up.

“He is dead!” Narcissa Malfoy called to the watchers. (*DH* 821)

Narcissa betrays her dark responsibilities for the safety of her son. It is emphasized to the reader that nothing is more important to her than her son. Additionally, to ensure the safety of her son, Narcissa also saves the life of someone else’s son, Harry. Rowling describes this moment:

There’s an echo of what Lily did—a quite conscious echo of what Lily did at the start of the story at the very end of the story. At the start of the story, Lily dies to keep her son alive. At the end of the story, Harry lies, pretending to be dead on the ground, and it’s a mother who saves him again because she is trying to get to her own son. . . . That was closing the circle. He was saved there by Lily, and he’s saved there by Narcissa. (“The Women of Harry Potter”)

Rowling designs it so that it is commendable that Narcissa would do anything to protect her own son, but it is seen as even more admirable that she would protect Harry, betraying her own beliefs and alliances. Narcissa becomes not just a mother protecting her own son, but a protector “mother” of another child as well. By consciously paralleling Narcissa to Lily, having the two women serve as anchor points at the beginning and end of the series, it impresses the importance of mothers and motherly love in the series. But this likeness also stresses that Narcissa becomes good by acting as a mother, protecting both her own son and protecting Harry. Despite the questionable actions she had taken throughout the series, these no longer matter. Narcissa's main

goal becomes protecting her son, which saves Harry in the process, and thus becomes a “good” female by the end of the series.

What Makes a ‘Bad’ Female

Before discussing the “bad” females in the *Harry Potter* series, the difference between a “bad” character and a “bad” woman must be noted. Rowling’s heteronormative perspective not only dictates what makes a “good” or “bad” character, but also specifically a “good” or “bad” woman. There can be villainous characters, such as Bellatrix and Narcissa, but their conformity to the role of a traditional woman saves them from being “bad” females, and from Rowling’s expressed disdain. In contrast, Rowling negatively calls attention to the looks and behavior of the female characters that do not fit in the traditional mold in the text. As Vujin and Krombholz explain:

Representations of villains in fiction tend to make them conspicuous and easily recognisable, and this is even more frequent in children’s literature, which speaks to an inexperienced reading audience and is more likely to follow established narrative patterns or rely on less-than-subtle means of characterisation. An important element in the portrayal of villains, in children’s and adult literature alike, is their physical appearance, as is the extent to which they (do not) conform to socially accepted ideas about gender and sexuality. (23)

This quote highlights Rowling’s tendencies to feminize her villainous male characters. I assert the inverse, however, and examine how Rowling *masculinizes* her *nontraditional female* characters. In both instances, the othering of “bad” characters showcases Rowling’s heteronormative worldview regarding gender and its expressions. It serves to villainize both women who do not follow conventional norms, as well as women who do not look like a

stereotypical female. And through the descriptions of both the “good” and the “bad” females, the reader can learn how Rowling’s ideal female should look and behave. Rowling’s ideal female was previously discussed in regard to the motherly attributes and deferential nature found in Lily Potter, Molly Weasley, and Professor McGonagall. The depiction of nontraditional or “bad” females happens most blatantly in the characters of Dolores Umbridge (introduced in the fifth novel, *Order of the Phoenix*), the reporter Rita Skeeter, and Beuxbaton’s headmistress Olympe Maxime (the latter two first appearing in the fourth novel, *Goblet of Fire*).

Dolores Umbridge as ‘Bad’ Female

The final social institution that Pugh and Wallace mention is the government, which in the Harry Potter universe, is the Ministry of Magic, and no character serves as a better representation of the Ministry’s opposition to Dumbledore than Dolores Umbridge. Umbridge seemingly fits the role of a Ministry underling wholly devoted to the Minister of Magic, Minister Fudge. But as the fifth novel progresses, Umbridge’s actions seem to be for her own desires, rather than those of her superior or the Ministry. Rowling herself states, “One of the things I find most revolting is self-righteousness which converts self-interest. And that was Umbridge from beginning to end . . . a horrible woman” (“The Women of Harry Potter”). Although Umbridge performs unsavory actions, Bellatrix, the torturer and murderer, does not receive the same kind of distaste that Umbridge does by Rowling.

Other female characters who act as mothers and obey their male superiors are presented as “proper” women. Umbridge does neither of these things, and spites the role of a traditional woman further by treating children poorly and ignoring her male counterparts. In her classes, Umbridge refuses to teach students thoroughly and punishes anyone who dares question her or the Ministry. Her punishments consist of:

Harry placed the point of the quill on the paper and wrote: *I must not tell lies*. He let out a gasp of pain. The words had appeared on the parchment in what appeared to be shining red ink. At the same time, the words had appeared on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel — yet even as he stared at the shining cut, the skin healed over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth. Harry looked around at Umbridge. She was watching him, her wide, toadlike mouth stretched in a smile. (Rowling, *OotP* 339)

Multiple students suffer under this punishment if they speak out against Umbridge or the Ministry; this is a practice for her *own* pleasure, rather than any orders from the Ministry. Torturing students will likely only look bad for the Ministry, and actions Umbridge later takes in torturing Harry are explicitly illegal by the Ministry. Umbridge not only does not follow the Ministry and Minister Fudge's orders and regulations, but even worse, purposely works against Dumbledore. Umbridge serves as a “bad” character for her torture of children and denying of truths, and by not displaying any maternal instincts and following her own interests rather than bowing to the men around her, Umbridge becomes a “bad” female—which continues in her physical description as well:

She looked just like a large, pale toad. She was rather squat with a broad, flabby face, as little neck as Uncle Vernon, and a very wide, slack mouth. Her eyes were large, round, and slightly bulging. Even the little black velvet bow perched on top of her short curly hair put him in mind of a large fly she was about to catch on a long sticky tongue. (*OotP* 187)

It seems that Rowling does everything in her power to describe Umbridge as unattractively as possible. The word choice—squat rather than short for example—conveys a picture that

accentuates her grotesque, almost nonhuman, qualities. This description occurs as soon as Umbridge appears, before the reader knows anything about her personality or actions, giving the readers an immediate indication that she is not meant to be nice or liked. By likening Umbridge to a toad, as well as Vernon Dursley, who the audience has already built a dislike for, it asks the audience to laugh at her ugliness. This association could also lead readers to the conclusion that ugliness should thus be associated with negative character traits. This intention is further cemented when coupled with the “little black velvet bow” Umbridge wears. The text gives the impression that she is laughable for having the gall to adorn herself in feminine accessories when she is so hideous and unfeminine.

The contrast of Umbridge’s feminine adornments being at odds with her unfeminine appearance appears again, when Harry expresses, “The witch spoke in a fluttery, girlish, high-pitched voice that took Harry aback; he had been expecting a croak” (*OotP* 187). This vocalization occurs along with another physical descriptor: “squat, with short, curly, mouse-brown hair in which she had placed a horrible pink Alice band that matched the fluffy pink cardigan she wore over her robes A pallid, toadlike face and a pair of prominent, pouchy eyes” (Rowling, *OotP* 258-259). Despite the pink garments, bows and ribbons that Umbridge adorns herself with, it is still presented as a surprise when she sounds like a woman. Umbridge’s nontraditional femininity, her failure to look and behave according to traditional female standards in her physical appearance and attire reduces her in Harry and the reader’s eyes to an inhuman status. The text deliberately demeans her, acting as if she should know her place as an unattractive woman. The book asks its readers to look at and point out the absurdity of Umbridge’s looks and demeanor, and gives permission and encouragement to laugh at her.

Umbridge is also described as looking like “somebody’s maiden aunt” (*OotP* 258).

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, a “maiden aunt” is akin to an “old maid,” or someone no longer young and unmarried, if not unmarriageable. Umbridge is judged both for her marital status and her age. Marriage typically correlates with motherhood and children, viewed as a desirable outcome for women in heteronormative structures. So again this word choice shows how Rowling’s standards paint with broad strokes for the reader a nontraditional “bad” woman in Umbridge. The “maiden aunt” phrase also indicates that Umbridge is no longer young, but still behaves as such in her wardrobe and mannerisms.

As such, the audience is supposed to laugh at her, in her pretending to be something that they know she is not. She does not have the traditional youth and beauty a female is expected to possess, nor does she have the classy maternal qualities of Professor McGonagall. Later in the novel, “Professor Umbridge opened her handbag, extracted her own wand, which was an unusually short one” (*OotP* 303). Wands are, of course, linked to magic. Umbridge functions as a woman who prioritizes herself and her own selfish desires, unlike a traditional woman, and her magic serves as an important tool to do so. By having her wand be “unusually short,” the text and Rowling herself do not only describe her wand to make fun of Umbridge. They also imply that she is not a very good witch either, undermining both her and her femininity, beauty, age, power, goals, and abilities.

It appears that Umbridge should be judged not only for her ugliness being at odds with her feminine accessories, but also because of the feminine things themselves, according to Rowling. The description of Umbridge’s office includes:

The surfaces had all been draped in lacy covers and cloths. There were several vases full of dried flowers, each residing on its own doily, and on one of the walls was a collection of ornamental plates, each decorated with a large technicolor kitten wearing a different

bow around its neck. These were so foul that Harry stared at them, transfixed, until Professor Umbridge spoke again. (*OotP* 336-337)

The excessiveness of it all, the attention given to appearances and decorations serve as a source of ire towards Umbridge. Her very voice, her titters and giggles, her repeated *hem hems*, are enough to have characters spiral into annoyance, “Her voice was high-pitched, breathy, and little-girlish and again, Harry felt a powerful rush of dislike that he could not explain himself; all he knew was that he loathed everything about her, from her stupid voice to her fluffy pink cardigan (*OotP* 268). Umbridge lies on the complete opposite end of the spectrum from the “good” females and is portrayed negatively for her indulgences. The ideal female that Rowling cultivates does not indulge themselves in “stereotypical” female behavior, such as overtly caring about clothing and appearances. Umbridge does not possess any qualities that society values in females, such as a traditional look or disposition, and that juxtaposition between what she tries to look like and what she actually is only serves to make her more unlikable, more grotesque, and more laughable.

Umbridge faces constant mockery throughout the novels, both by other characters and by the text itself, for her girlish, pink attire contrasted with her ugly appearance. The contrast of adorning herself in femininity when her very self looks so unfeminine allows Umbridge to be seen as a joke in that regard—that she cannot cover up what we know her to be. There exists a similar sentiment in transphobic rhetoric—that other people would always be able to tell if a person is transgender, no matter what they wore or how they changed their appearance. This dichotomy in appearance also becomes a source of shaming for the individual, that they were foolish enough to think that they could ever try to hide what they truly were. And with Umbridge, she is not only ugly for having masculine attributes, her physical features were akin

to monstrous, with a toad-like face and pointed teeth. She is not only trying to cover up her masculinity, but also that she is a monster, inside and outside.

As noted previously, Umbridge's wand was described as, "unusually short" (*OotP* 303). While the wand symbolizes her power, a wand may also be a phallic symbol. So, while a short wand shows her lack of power, it could also show a sort of lack of manliness. So Umbridge becomes not only a poor wizard, but a poor "man" as well. Throughout the series, wands are shown to be reflections of their wielder. This repeated mockery of Umbridge relays the feeling that everyone else can see that her exterior is a façade, so rather than attempting to cover it up, she should instead feel shame for her appearance.

Rita Skeeter as 'Bad' Female

Similar sentiments are also seen in the character Rita Skeeter. Skeeter first appears in the fourth novel of the series and at first present only in name. She works as a reporter for *The Daily Prophet*, the most popular wizarding newspaper, and does not mince words in her reporting. Her first mention occurs after the publication of an article discussing Death Eater attacks at the Quidditch World Cup. What Skeeter writes is objectively accurate—the responsibility should undoubtedly fall on the Ministry to manage, yet they had not done so. The Ministry had not even made a statement to the public, it was only through Skeeter's article that this event became known.

However, as Ron Weasley's brother, Percy, quickly announces, "That woman's got it in for the Ministry of Magic!" (*GoF* 161). Skeeter's outspoken journalism receives no accolades, but instead reproach. Readers are meant to sympathize with this statement, for it would be more beneficial for the "good" characters if the events Skeeter writes about remained undocumented. Skeeter publishes various articles throughout the novel, questioning both the Ministry and

Dumbledore. She now not only works against the Ministry, but against “good” characters as well. As a journalist, Skeeter does not have to adhere to Ministry protocols, the Minister himself, or the direction of Dumbledore. She does not have to report to anyone other than herself. Before she has even physically appeared in the novel, because she publishes uncomfortable truths, no matter what side the people involved fall on, her status as a “bad” character becomes cemented.

Skeeter’s physical descriptions occur with contrasting qualities similar to Umbridge’s: “Her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face. She wore jeweled spectacles. The thick fingers clutching her crocodile-skin handbag ended in two-inch nails, painted crimson” (*GoF* 335). While not described as outright ugly as Umbridge had been, something distinctly off-putting lies in the description Rowling uses for Skeeter. Her physical features are particularly masculine—her heavy jaw, large hands, and unusual strength often mentioned. It is specified that Skeeter had, in fact, “large, mannish hands” (*GoF* 339). But the contrast in Skeeter’s appearance occurs between her masculine physical descriptors and the feminine ways in which she adorns herself.

Skeeter always dresses indulgently, with bright, colorful robes and nails, as well as hair always styled, and her makeup done up. While these illustrations certainly give a more vivid idea on what kind of person she is, Skeeter’s descriptions provide basis so that the reader may judge her as frivolous and vain. Her nails are “talons” and her makeup includes “heavily penciled eyebrows” (*GoF* 337). The word choice and behavior of the other characters makes it seem unnatural and superficial to dress up in such a way. The reader is made to feel suspicious of Skeeter’s appearance, both in how she dresses herself up and how that contrasts with her masculine attributes. Because of this, as well as her unwillingness to bend to male authority, Rita Skeeter becomes deemed a “bad” female.

Skeeter’s descriptions in the text portrays a sense of disdain for her extraneous adornments in contrast with her masculine features. But Skeeter’s secret throughout the book doesn’t lie in how she covers up her appearance, but in how she covers up her actions. She can obtain exclusive news and gossip, and the characters do not know how she gets around the school undetected. The reveal at the end of the novel shows that Skeeter can transform into a beetle, thus able to spy on unsuspecting students as they have private conversations:

“Rita Skeeter”—Hermione’s voice trembled with quiet triumph—“is an unregistered Animagus. She can turn —”

Hermione pulled a small sealed jar out of her bag.

“— into a beetle.” . . .

Inside were a few twigs and leaves and one large, fat beetle.

“Look very closely, and you’ll notice the markings around her antennae are exactly like those foul glasses she wears.” (*GoF* 801-802)

Skeeter uses her ability to transform herself to obtain access to places and conversations that ordinary people could not. This ability becomes an advantage, one unfairly taken. This reveals another anti-trans parallel, in that transphobic sentiments portray a trans person’s transness giving them an unearned, unfair advantage in life, sports, etc. There is also an underlying predation in Skeeter’s circumstances, similar to another anti-trans rhetoric—one Rowling herself has expressed. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) believe that if trans women were given access to women’s bathrooms and other private areas, this freedom would be abused by men to prey on vulnerable women and children. Rowling has even taken advantage of this fear and written a novel in which this exact situation happens, titled *True Blood*, released in 2020. While Skeeter’s circumstances are not explicitly anti-transsexual, these parallels still show that

Rowling aligns herself with the belief that frowns on those who try to alter themselves in any substantial way. It does not matter if they are changing the body they reside in—such as trans or crossdressing individuals—or how one adorns their body to express or perform themselves. If a woman chooses to express herself in a way that does not align with Rowling’s heteronormative perspective, she is a problem.

Olympe Maxime as ‘Bad’ Female

The third character who does not fit into the traditional, “good” female role is Olympe Maxime, or Madame Maxime. Madame Maxime works as headmistress of Beauxbatons, a wizarding school in France. Madame Maxime’s position is unique; as the headmistress of an entire school, she has her own authority, not having to report to any male—that is, until her school joins with Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament. And as seen previously, when at Hogwarts, as well as the overall British wizarding community, Dumbledore holds the power. Madame Maxime quickly questions the authority Dumbledore has, souring her to the other characters and the reader. Her first introduction in the novel comes when she and her students arrive at Hogwarts, accompanied by their flying carriage pulled by giant, winged horses.

When Dumbledore suggests that Hagrid, Hogwarts’s gamekeeper and staunch Dumbledore man, take care of the creatures, Madame Maxime responds, ““My steeds require — er — forceful ’andling,’ said Madame Maxime, looking as though she doubted whether any Care of Magical Creatures teacher at Hogwarts could be up to the job. ‘Zey are very strong’” (*GoF* 270). Though her words seem innocuous, they hold a presumptuous tone that carries with Madame Maxime through the rest of the book. She not only questions Dumbledore’s authority by not blindly following his orders, she also questions his staff. With the reader intimately familiar with both Dumbledore and Hagrid as well as their abilities, it can be taken as a slight

against their characters, especially with how the text frames the statement.

Maxime's presumptuousness ties in with her overall demeanor and appearance. Her descriptions include speaking and behaving "imperiously," with an unruffled attitude. She commands her students with a wave of her hand, and they stand in lines to follow her. At their arrival feast, Maxime's students stand at her entrance and do not sit until she herself has been seated. These behaviors could simply be seen as a sign of respect for their headmaster, but are often met with slights and giggles by Hogwarts students. Thus, readers are supposed to think this conduct by the students and their headmaster is silly—silly for the students to be so formal, and silly because of the woman they defer to. This behavior is caused by Madame Maxime's highly unusual appearance:

Harry had only ever seen one person as large as this woman in his life, and that was Hagrid; he doubted whether there was an inch difference in their heights. Yet somehow — maybe simply because he was used to Hagrid — this woman (now at the foot of the steps, and looking around at the waiting, wide-eyed crowd) seemed even more unnaturally large. As she stepped into the light flooding from the entrance hall, she was revealed to have a handsome, olive-skinned face; large, black, liquid-looking eyes; and a rather beaky nose. Her hair was drawn back in a shining knob at the base of her neck. She was dressed from head to foot in black satin, and many magnificent opals gleamed at her throat and on her thick fingers. (*GoF* 268-269)

Though this description is more favorable compared to Umbridge and Skeeter, Maxime's appearance still contains the quirky descriptions that Rowling associates with nontraditional women. Her unnaturally large height and build, as well as a handsome face, and later mentioned "deep voice" (*GoF* 269), are qualities more of a traditionally male description. But like Skeeter,

Maxime description also always occurs with the items in which she adorns herself. The clothing, along with the rings and necklaces, as seen in the passage above follow her with each appearance. By calling attention to her accessories, the text also conjures the dichotomy of such luxurious pieces, as similarly donned by Dolores Umbridge and Rita Skeeter, on such a nontraditional woman.

Madame Maxime's luxurious wardrobe, coupled with her imperious attitude, give an overall unlikable feeling to her character: "Madame Maxime had drawn herself up to her full, and considerable, height. The top of her handsome head brushed the candle-filled chandelier, and her gigantic black-satin bosom swelled" (*GoF* 303). Maxime awareness of her appearance and demeanor and what perception they create are used as an advantage. But because she uses her features to fight for what she believes in—in this case a fair chance in the Triwizard Tournament—she is seen as wrong to do so.

Maxime advocating for herself and her students acts directly against Dumbledore's authority. Though Maxime's dedication to her students could be seen as a maternal attribute, her behavior puts the main cast at a disadvantage, and therefore deemed improper. Madame Maxime cares for her students based on respect and authority, rather than more traditional ways of mothering. In addition to her attitude, Maxime does not have a traditional or "good" female attitude or appearance, so she could never truly be a mother figure, according to Rowling's standard. Madame Maxime cares too much for her own appearance and wants, and cares too little for the authority of men, and thus becomes a "bad" female.

Maxime withholds a secret throughout the novel as well. Along with her more masculine features, her height defines her as well. In forming a budding romance with half-giant Hagrid, he confesses to her, "Momen' I saw yeh, I knew . . . Another half-giant, o' course!" (*GoF* 472).

Maxime responds, “Ow dare you I ’ave nevair been more insulted in my life! ’Alf-giant? Moi? I ’ave — I ’ave big bones!” (*GoF* 472). Though never explicitly revealed if Madame Maxime is indeed half-giant, the text heavily implies it as the truth. Maxime instead contributes her height to “big bones.” Maxime’s situation coincides with Rowling’s heteronormative view that there are certain experiences that make someone a “true” woman. In her 2020 blog statement where she outlines her concerns regarding transsexual activism, Rowling mentions that there are female experiences that a trans woman cannot experience if they did not grow up presenting as a woman. She explains:

I’ve read all the arguments about femaleness not residing in the sexed body, and the assertions that biological women don’t have common experiences, and I find them, too, deeply misogynistic and regressive. It’s also clear that one of the objectives of denying the importance of sex is to erode what some seem to see as the cruelly segregationist idea of women having their own biological realities or—just as threatening—unifying realities that make them a cohesive political class. . . It isn’t enough for women to be trans allies. Women must accept and admit that there is no material difference between trans women and themselves. (“Speaking out on Sex and Gender”)

One of these “biological realities” involves female shame. To have an innate sense of shame of oneself, regarding anything from their appearance to behaviors to hobbies, that has been conditioned into girls since birth, is what Rowling refers to. While female shame remains a complex issue still being perpetuated by society, to define females by this experience that only serves to harm them is a disservice. A woman should not have to feel ashamed of themselves at any point in their life, to be a “true” woman. With regard to Maxime, throughout the text she never out rightly expresses any shame in her status. Rather, the text assigns a sense of pity to her,

feeling that she should be both ashamed of her status, and ashamed of hiding it. But because Madame Maxime does not express any female shame, she can not be a “true” female, according to Rowling.

Conclusion

By examining the perceptions of gender and the descriptions of masculinity, femininity and nontraditional appearances and actions in the *Harry Potter* series, primarily regarding the adult female characters in the novel, it reveals that the novels reflect author J. K. Rowling’s narrow view of womanhood, and those women who do not fit into this scope are not a “true” woman. Mothers, or maternal women, are praised and shown as the pinnacle of womanhood—like Lily Potter, Molly Weasley, and Minerva McGonagall. Nontraditional women—those who do not follow the maternal archetype—are villainized and mocked by the text—like Dolores Umbridge, Rita Skeeter, and Olympe Maxime. However, it is not only their ability to care for children that became a deciding factor in this, but also in how they interact with the men around them. The “good” females are subservient to the men in their lives, the “bad” women are not. The women must fit into the traditional role that a heteronormative society dictates, or else they are not a “true” woman. While there is nothing inherently wrong with being a mother or a homemaker, in the *Harry Potter* novels, these gender roles are “problematic when women are presented as only taking action within the purview of men, and their actions are depicted as largely irrelevant or unreasonable when they step outside that authority” (Pugh and Wallace 271). Again, there is nothing inherently wrong with a traditional family structure, but when this dynamic is presented as the *only* way for love and happiness to flourish in a woman, the only way to be a “good” woman, it becomes problematic.

Rowling’s heavy-handed portrayals of nontraditional female characters as monstrous

quasi-animal, pseudo-masculine hybrids do not allow for the readers to come to their own conclusions about the characters through their eventual actions, but rather exhibits a distrust for the reader to do so. She makes it clear that any female character that does not immediately conform to conventional stereotypes may be accurately judged as mutant, untrustworthy, laughable, and even dangerous. In contrast, the half-giant Hagrid, equally monstrous in appearance, is defined as gentle and lovable from the beginning, an opinion which never changes, a quality few nontraditional females are afforded in the novels.

The *Harry Potter* novels become a tool for Rowling to further her heteronormative agenda. The series prescribes upon the world that *this* is the ideal—from opening the series with a mother dying for the sake of her son, to closing the series with each and every character paired off in a heterosexual marriage with biological children. As Vujin and Krombholz describe it, “[T]he narrative ends in a triumph of heteronormativity. . . . In other words, by the end of the series, the queer threat is dispelled, the hero has secured an heir (two, in fact), and heteronormativity can once again breathe a sigh of relief” (38). In Rowling’s world, both the real and imagined, the ideal is one of heteronormativity. Her ideals are presented to child readers through exaggerated personifications of good and bad women. And if Rowling were to have her way, children would be able use the skills picked up in the *Harry Potter* series to identify and ostracize the “bad” women in real life. To recall, Rowling states that, “I do strongly express my world view in my books” (“The Women of Harry Potter”). This heteronormative worldview is one that not only praises mothers and traditional structures, but also ridicules and villainizes any woman who dares to follow her own desires or break traditional molds.

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@jk_rowling. “I respect every trans person’s right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them. I’d march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it’s hateful to say so.” *Twitter*, 6 June 2020, 7:16 p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269407862234775552?s=20

@jk_rowling. “The idea that women like me, who’ve been empathetic to trans people for decades, feeling kinship because they’re vulnerable in the same way as women - ie, to male violence - ‘hate’ trans people because they think sex is real and has lived consequences - is a nonsense.” *Twitter*, 6 June 2020, 7:09 p.m.,

https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269406094595588096?s=20

@jk_rowling. “If sex isn’t real, there’s no same-sex attraction. If sex isn’t real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn’t hate to speak the truth.” *Twitter*, 6 June 2020, 6:02 p.m.,

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