

LESSON 15

From **Harry Potter's Cauldron** (critical essay)
by Benoit Virole

Let me try to identify some of the ingredients in this mysterious recipe. Harry Potter is a young hero whose tragic past (the dramatic death of his parents) and singular destiny (Harry is unique: on his forehead he bears a mark of predestination) will allow young readers to identify with him since the readers are themselves locked in their own unconscious novels of origin. To live an exceptional life and to be the child of an extraordinary, but vanished, couple is a universal fantasy. . . . This is certainly a . . . **theme** common to many other literary works for young people, but J.K. Rowling **embellishes** it in an interesting way by writing Harry as a wizard who can conjure up miracles and who therefore enjoys a form of omnipotence that he has yet to learn to master. Harry's **initiation**, his apprenticeship in what is allowed and what is forbidden, is a second ingredient that reinforces the young . . . reader's link to the hero, and all the more so because the initiation carries with it opportunities for transgression. This initiation into magic and the world of wizardry is thus a **metaphor** for initiation into the adult world. It is all the more interesting for being developed in the **confines** of an imaginary society, constructed by the author, with its own rules, an original and specific vocabulary, and set

rituals that the reader—sometimes especially the adult reader—sees as a pastiche of actual social **convention**. The building of a society with its own rules and structures, essentially the construction of a **virtual** universe, is one of the major reasons for the fascination with J.K. Rowling's imaginative work.

But these few ingredients blended in our literary cauldron couldn't **justify** the success of *Harry Potter* if it weren't for a remarkable binding agent. Rowling's narrative **style** is the special catalyst that has turned the ingredients into a dish that is now almost universally consumed. Her style is direct, stringing together short narrative sequences . . . but stripped of any really detailed description. It's a stylistic method that can disconcert lovers of written language. Indeed many educators don't consider *Harry Potter* a genuine work of literature. And yet, there is something in this way of writing that's especially effective and perfectly **adapted** to the cognitive style of today's children, who have been raised on a constant flux of images and for whom quickness of mental picture-painting and focus on action are preferable to literal description and the complications of inner states.

Exercise I: Context Clues

Read the passage above, paying special attention to the words in dark type. These are the Master Words you will study in this lesson. As you read, look for context clues in the sentences and paragraphs around each Master Word. Circle any words and phrases that give clues to the meaning of the Master Words.

Master Words

Place a check by words you feel you know; underline words you don't know.

adapt	convention	initiation	metaphor	theme
confines	embellish	justify	style	virtual

Exercise 2: Using Context Clues

Fill in the form for each of the Master Words listed below with context clues (if any), your definition, and the dictionary definition. If you have difficulty writing a definition, try using the word in a sentence instead.

1. **adapt** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
2. **confines** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
3. **convention** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
4. **embellish** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
5. **initiation** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
6. **justify** Part of Speech: *v.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
7. **metaphor** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
8. **style** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
9. **theme** Part of Speech: *n.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____
10. **virtual** Part of Speech: *adj.* Context Clues: _____
Your Definition: _____
Dictionary Definition: _____

• • • Exercise 3: Using Synonyms

Each italic word or phrase in the sentences below are synonyms of one of the Master Words in the list. On the line following the sentence, write the Master Word that best replaces the synonym.

convention

confines

justify

theme

style

1. Manny tried to *defend* the purchase of the tablet computer by saying he will use it to do homework. _____
2. Our teacher's *approach* is to ask a question and then to wait in silence until someone is brave enough to answer. _____
3. It is the *custom* in our family to share one thing about our day at the dinner table. _____
4. Coach told us to focus on the action within the *limits* of the court. _____
5. The *message* of the principal's talk was school pride. _____

• • • Exercise 4: Sentence Completion

From the Master Words, choose the appropriate word for the blank in each of the following sentences. Write the word in the space provided at the right.

1. As (a, an) ...?... into the club, Roberto had to take a laptop apart and put it back together again—blindfolded. _____
2. You have been working too hard to find a personal ...?... Perhaps if you relaxed, it would just come naturally. _____
3. The match was at a ...?... stalemate. No one could get an advantage. _____
4. The gray weather became a ...?... for my state of mind: dull and bored. _____
5. Transformation is a common ...?... in Greek mythology. _____
6. Sammy couldn't ...?... the expense for a cab so he walked home in the rain. _____
7. "Please stay within the ...?... of the park," our guide called after us. _____
8. Most young people can quickly ...?... to new technology. _____
9. It is (a, an) ...?... in our school to give a gift to the principal at the end of the year. _____
10. My brother has been known to ...?... his accomplishments when he first gets to know someone. _____

Exercise 5: Formal and Informal Usage

A word has both a denotation and a connotation. The *denotation* is the dictionary meaning of the word; the *connotation* is the emotional content the word may carry. For example, the words *news* and *buzz* have similar denotations, but their connotations are quite different. *News* is a more formal word that refers to the happenings of the day. *Buzz* is an informal word that refers to excitement generated around an event.

Each sentence below contains a pair of synonyms in parentheses. Write the word that best fits the context. Then indicate if the usage is formal or informal. The first one has been done as an example.

Marisa's father insisted that they listen to the (news, buzz) on the radio.

news (formal)

1. Like clockwork, about every three months a new (style, rage) sweeps through the middle school.
2. You're missing the point. The (theme, meat) of the play is in the last act.
3. My sister cannot wait to get out of the (confines, shoebox) of her cubicle.
4. Marie's (initiation, coming up) into adulthood was abrupt and surprising.
5. Samuel likes to (embellish, riff on) the details of stories he tells.
6. The bass player thought they should (tweak, adapt) the middle section of the song a little bit.

Exercise 6: Metaphor

In his analysis of the *Harry Potter* series, the author of the essay says that Harry's initiation into the world of wizardry is a metaphor for initiation into the adult world. A metaphor is a comparison in which something known stands for something more abstract or unknowable. For example, a rose is sometimes used as a metaphor for the abstract concept of love or an eagle is used as a metaphor for the abstract concept of freedom.

Can you come up with another metaphor for the step one takes from adolescence to adulthood? Fill in the blanks below to create another metaphor. Then explain your metaphor on the lines that follow.

The step from adolescence to adulthood is a _____

Write About It: A Claim

The author of the critical essay makes a claim that today's young people prefer action over lengthy descriptive passages in the literature they read. Do you agree with his claim? **Write a claim** of your own in which you state your agreement or disagreement with the above statement. Then come up with three details (from your own experience or from research) that support your claim.