



Emerging Voices

David Beagley, editor

Equalizing Time: *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* as a Retrospective and Prospective Adaptation

Karyn Keane

Karyn Keane is a senior at Longwood University with a major in English, a concentration in Rhetoric and Professional Writing, and a minor in Children's Literature. In addition to Harry Potter and adaptation theory, her interests include cultural rhetoric, rhetoric of social change, and feminist literature.

J. K. Rowling's beloved Harry Potter series spurs academic discussions about multiple aspects of the wizarding world. Topics range from basic discussions of character development, narrative technique, and the role of symbols to more avant-garde subjects like the role of fanfiction in shaping readers' perceptions of the books. With regard to the study of adaptations of the series, fanfiction and film editions are well-documented; however, little discussion occurs surrounding *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, the recent stage adaptation by Jack Thorne, John Tiffany, and J. K. Rowling.

Beginning during the last chapter of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, *Cursed Child* details the trials faced by Potter's teenage sons as they navigate the magical world in his wake. Although the main cast of characters in the play consists of the offspring of familiar characters (Scorpius Malfoy, Albus Potter, James Potter II, Rose Weasley, etc.), Harry and other characters make important reappearances, sometimes even adopting significant roles in the play. Perhaps due to its recency of publication, the work has received little focus in academia. Despite its absence, this new stage adaptation merits critical examination. Its contents pose interesting questions for fans and scholars about the effects of adaptations on re-reads as well as the ability of works to stand alone. *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* possesses a unique status as both a Retrospective Adaptation, which rewards readers for their prior knowledge about the series, and as a Prospective Adaptation, which leads audiences to the source series. Thus, *Cursed Child* can be read as a stand-alone text since it requires no prior knowledge to navigate.

Rewarding Prior Knowledge: Retrospective Adaptations

In this context, the term "Retrospective Adaptation" refers to those adaptations which reward audiences for their prior knowledge of the origin story. Rewards may include enhanced or enriched knowledge of plot or greater understanding of significance.

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child is a Retrospective Adaptation because it alters readers' perceptions of characters and concepts from the original series. Literature scholar Linda Hutcheon writes, "There is a whole other, extra dimension that comes with knowing the adapted work, a dimension that makes the experience of reading a richly 'palimpsestuous' one, as we oscillate between the version of a story we already know and the one we are reading now" ("Harry Potter...," 173). In other words, prior knowledge of the original work enhances audiences' experiences with adaptations by allowing them to shift between familiar and unfamiliar. Throughout *Cursed Child*, plot elements and symbols draw from wizarding history and add meaning to the adaptation for those familiar with the source text. In this way, the stage adaptation "rewards" readers of the original series for their use of prior knowledge.

Cursed Child first achieves this by "repurposing" the original series in a new light. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon explains this phenomenon in other forms of adaptation:



The recent phenomenon of being “musicalized” for the stage is obviously economically driven. The movies of *The Lion King* or *The Producers* offer ready-made name recognition for audiences, thereby relieving some of the anxiety for Broadway producers of expensive musicals. Like sequels and prequels, “director’s cut” DVDs and spin-offs, videogame adaptations based on films are yet another way of taking one “property” in a “franchise” and reusing it in another medium. Not only will audiences already familiar with the “franchise” be attracted to the new “repurposing” (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 45), but new consumers will also be created. (*A Theory...*, 5)

Here, Hutcheon contends that audiences regard new adaptations of already well-known works as low-stress, enjoyable experiences. Her observation applies to *Cursed Child* as the Retrospective work effectively repurposes items from the original Harry Potter series. By merging new characters with familiar ones from the books, audiences reap the benefits of their contextual knowledge about the wizarding world and can deeply understand and appreciate certain aspects of the play. For example, Severus Snape’s character in *Cursed Child* returns in his familiar double agent role when Scorpius Malfoy travels back in time to repair mistakes. While begging Snape for assistance, Scorpius pleads, “Please—for Lily, for the world, help me” (Rowling, Tiffany, & Thorne 180). Audiences likely admire *Cursed Child* Snape’s role in isolation and know some of his story from dialogue-based explanations within the play; however, his wartime contributions become increasingly meaningful when readers of the original series recall his bravery and his unwavering love for Lily Evans-Potter. This “repurposing” of characters rewards loyal readers because it allows them to use their prior knowledge in interpreting *Cursed Child* and gain added meaning.

Additionally, *Cursed Child* is Retrospective because it creates opportunities for fans to interpret the wizarding world in reinvented ways. In her examination of adaptation theory, Hutcheon writes, “Telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create manifestly different interpretations” (*A Theory...*, 8). Hutcheon later adds, “Sometimes, as we have seen, in adapting, Galloway changes the point of view of a familiar story, telling us the tale of ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ from the perspective of the giant’s devoted wife in order to show us something the ‘old story’ might not have considered” (“Harry Potter...,” 173). This concept that changes in perspective influence analyses of adaptations applies to *Cursed Child*. By providing audiences with the opportunity to view the wizarding world through a new generation’s point of view, fresh thoughts about characters, situations, and themes arise. As Albus Potter and Scorpius Malfoy navigate conflicts surrounding adolescence and ethical dilemmas, audiences receive new information that shapes their views of familiar events and characters. In one instance, Albus and Harry engage in a disheartening yet thought-provoking conflict:

HARRY (*finally losing his temper*): You know what? I’m done with being made responsible for your unhappiness. At least you’ve got a dad. Because I didn’t, okay?

ALBUS: And you think that was unlucky? I don’t.

HARRY: You wish me dead?

ALBUS: No! I just wish you weren’t my dad.

HARRY (*seeing red*): Well, there are times I wish you weren’t my son.

(Rowling, Thorne, & Tiffany 41)

In this interaction, audiences familiar with the original series see the hardened side of the now-adult Harry. This perspective allows for new interpretations of his character, especially with regard to his emotions and approach to familial issues. By altering interpretations through expanding upon prior knowledge, *Cursed Child* acts as a typical Retrospective Adaptation.

The ability of *Cursed Child* to help audiences learn valuable life lessons is Retrospective because it uses contextual knowledge for education. In an essay about how the original series teaches readers about coping with terror, literature scholar Courtney B. Strimel argues that the books’ “emphasis on magic, the violence, and the character ambiguity” allows readers to “confront terror issues” and “learn



that fear is an inevitable byproduct of terrorism, but that reason, teamwork, and calmness must override chaos in order to deal with terror" (36, 46). While *Cursed Child* teaches similarly meaningful concepts in isolation, the context derived from reading the original series enriches these lessons. One example includes the following exchange between Albus and Harry after defeating Delphi Diggory:

ALBUS (stomach sinking further, he knows this is not what his dad would do): And then—when we caught her—I wanted to kill her.

HARRY: You'd watched her murder Craig, you were angry, Albus, and that's okay. And you wouldn't have done it.

ALBUS: How do you know that? Maybe that's my Slytherin side. Maybe that's what the Sorting Hat saw in me.

HARRY: I don't understand your head, Albus—actually, you know what, you're a teenager, I shouldn't be able to understand your head, but I do understand your heart. I didn't—for a long time—but thanks to this—"escapade"—I know what you've got in there. Slytherin, Gryffindor, whatever label you've been given—I know—know—that your heart is a good one—yeah, whether you like it or not, you're on your way to being some wizard. (307)

By itself, this kindhearted discussion between father and son already teaches lessons about character; however, with prior knowledge from the original books about Harry's own concerns regarding his house placement, the conversation becomes more layered and effective. The multi-generational concerns expressed in *Cursed Child* show audiences that comforting advice helps when facing reoccurring conflicts, including those about personal character.

An additional example of Retrospective adaptive qualities in *Cursed Child* is its use of the recurring theme of negotiating character ambiguity. Scholar Drew Chappell writes of the original series, "On the surface, Harry's world seems to be filled with binaries, most importantly the 'two sides' in the civil war against Voldemort. But as Harry and his friends age, they discover that where they had expected clear divisions and certain answers, they instead find subtleties and uncertainties" (283). This important theme reappears in the play as characters cope with uncertainties about others' morality. For example, Albus voices his confusion in the following quotation:

ALBUS: When Amos Diggory asked for the Time Turner my father denied they even existed. He lied to an old man who just wanted his son back—who just loved his son. And he did it because he didn't care—because he doesn't care. Everyone talks about all the brave things Dad did. But he made some mistakes too. Some big mistakes, in fact. I want to set one of those mistakes right. I want us to save Cedric. (52)

Albus' expression functions Retrospectively in *Cursed Child* by illustrating recurring ideas and plot points from the original series. If readers already have some understanding of these ideas, then their experience in character interpretation and analyses (and, by proxy, their holistic experience as audience members) improves.

Cursed Child is further Retrospective because it rewards readers of the original series for their prior knowledge about Harry's coping skills. In a discussion about the presence of death in children's and young adult literature, scholar Marian S. Pyles writes, "Books for children in the middle grades are less didactic, showing the grieving child not only coping with his loss but also dealing with other problems as well, thus giving additional insights into life" (75). Audiences of *Cursed Child* witness this firsthand as Harry continually mourns Cedric and others; however, their contextual knowledge of how Harry has performed this arduous task for his entire life presents him as emotionally resilient. In the following exchange, Harry hints at his ongoing coping efforts:

HARRY: The boy who was killed—Craig Bowker—how well did you know him?

ALBUS: Not well enough.



HARRY: I didn't know Cedric well enough either. He could have played Quidditch for England. Or been a brilliant Auror. He could have been anything. And Amos is right—he was stolen. So I come here. Just to say sorry. When I can.

ALBUS: That's a—good thing to do. (308)

Harry's above confession shapes audience perceptions of his character through the use of sympathetic language. In an adaptation which depicts Harry somewhat negatively, this contextual knowledge allows audiences to draw deeper conclusions about characters. In this way, *Cursed Child* acts as a Retrospective Adaptation.

Additionally, the thoroughness of *Cursed Child* as an adaptation gives it Retrospective appeal. Hutcheon notes, "Stories and worlds get adapted, but so, in a sense, do entire works of literature: their stories, worlds, characters, themes—the whole thing" ("Harry Potter..." 174). Adaptations of this nature are immersive and require extensive knowledge of small details within the world at hand. For example, audiences of *Cursed Child* benefit from contextual knowledge about the oft-jovial Trolley Witch during her spectacle on the Hogwarts Express:

TROLLEY WITCH: These hands have made over six million Pumpkin Pasties. I've got quite good at them. But what people haven't noticed about my Pumpkin Pasties is how easily they transform into something else...

She picks up a Pumpkin Pasty. She throws it like a grenade. It explodes.

And you won't believe what I can do with my Chocolate Frogs. Never—never—have I let anyone off this train before they reached their destination. Some have tried—Sirius Black and his cronies, Fred and George Weasley. ALL HAVE FAILED. BECAUSE THIS TRAIN—IT DOESN'T LIKE PEOPLE GETTING OFF IT...

The TROLLEY WITCH's hands transfigure into very sharp spikes. She smiles.

So please retake your seats for the remainder of the journey. (54)

The above quotation portrays the Trolley Witch quite differently than her depiction throughout the books. If audiences are familiar with the Trolley Witch's ordinarily lacklustre presence within the source text, then this scene conveys deeper feelings of shock, fear, and dark humour. This enhances audience members' understanding of her character and the tradition of the Hogwarts Express. Therefore, *Cursed Child* works Retrospectively through its coverage of details from throughout the wizarding world.

Similarly, the nature of *Cursed Child* as a stage adaptation of a beloved children's text is Retrospective. Quoting a children's film critic, Hutcheon writes, "To watch again children's films in adulthood lets us travel self-consciously to somewhere now closed off from us, because the audience is changed, because we have changed" (*A Theory...*, 174). The quotation refers to the comforting feel of familiar adapted works, in which audiences may relax with characters they already know. In the case of *Cursed Child*, audiences familiar with the original Harry Potter series may be transported back to the magical world they know and love. For example, Harry and Albus' below conversation adopts a sentimental tone reminiscent of the books:

HARRY: Those names you have—they shouldn't be a burden. Albus Dumbledore had his trials too, you know—and Severus Snape, well you know all about him—

ALBUS: They were good men.

HARRY: They were great men, with huge flaws, and you know what—those flaws almost made them greater. (307)

Here, Harry's words of wisdom evoke memories of Dumbledore and Snape's trials and prompt readers to reflect on personal changes within themselves since they last read the original series. This tendency to prompt flashbacks makes *Cursed Child* a Retrospective Adaptation.



Similarly, *Cursed Child's* perpetual inexplicability requests a prior understanding found in numerous Retrospective Adaptations. Literature professor Suman Gupta examines the irrationality of the original Harry Potter series, writing that "the magical beings and happenings [of the books] are mysterious to readers of our world because we are accustomed to trying to explain things, to understanding principles, to trying to rationalize, and the magical is definitively inexplicable" (298). In an overview of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Gupta contends:

...the rational aspects of the game are seldom those that Harry deals with himself, and rationality is always secondary to the final stage where Harry's natural abilities—his chosen-ness (in terms of gifts unknown to himself, and courage which he seems to be born with)—shine through. (300)

Themes of irrationality remain present in *Cursed Child*, as demonstrated in the following conversation:

ALBUS: Slytherin is the House of the snake, of Dark Magic...It's not a House of brave wizards.

HARRY: Albus Severus, you were named after two headmasters of Hogwarts. One of them was a Slytherin and he was probably the bravest man I ever knew.

ALBUS: But just say...

HARRY: If it really matters to you, the Sorting Hat will take your feelings into account.

ALBUS: Really?

HARRY: It did for me. (11)

Much like the original series, the play offers no explanation for the Sorting Hat's decision to consider Harry's feelings. This ambiguity leaves audiences to conclude that Harry's inherently special nature led to the flippant treatment of this life-changing event. Audiences watching *Cursed Child* who are familiar with this irrationality are able to enjoy the play without asking frustratingly unanswerable questions. Their use of contextual knowledge to become immersed in the eccentric world places *Cursed Child* in the Retrospective category of adaptations.

Standing Alone: Prospective Adaptations

In this context, the term "Prospective" refers to the ability of adaptations to stand alone. When read exclusively from their source texts, Prospective Adaptations spark conversation about contemporary and anticipated issues, earning them perpetual relevance that does not hinge upon prior knowledge. Prospective Adaptations also frequently nudge readers in the direction of the original series by depicting the world of the source in comprehensive and engaging ways for newcomers to the fandom. If audiences have no previous exposure to the source, then a true Prospective Adaptation offers them a glimpse at the realm that encourages them to discover more by examining the originals.

Cursed Child is Prospective through its use of perpetually relevant themes that require no prior knowledge to understand and appreciate. Fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes examines the cultural phenomenon surrounding the Harry Potter series through a critical lens, writing that readers "know from beginning to end that Harry will triumph over evil, and this again may be one of the reasons that her [J. K. Rowling's] novels have achieved so much popularity" (296). While Zipes criticizes this aspect of the series, its presence in *Cursed Child* holds adaptive value. Although the play's resolution is predictable, it acknowledges the inevitable and eternal presence of evil by relating the past to the present using situational dialogue. One example of this concept in the play appears in the following quotation:

HERMIONE: Go on. Go home to your family, Harry, the Hogwarts Express is about to depart for another year—enjoy the time you've got left—and then come back here with a fresh head and get these files read.

HARRY: You really think this could all mean something?



HERMIONE (*with a smile*): It could do. But if it does, we'll find a way to fight it, Harry. We always have. (32)

This exchange between Harry and Hermione connects former and contemporary evils, subtly implying that tragedy and crisis are unceasing; however, the perseverance and intelligence of certain individuals persists to keep negative forces at bay. This element shapes *Cursed Child* into a Prospective adaptation because it illustrates that the future will contain similar conflicts, but that solutions exist. Understanding this requires no prior knowledge from the audience, and may lead to their discovery of the original series where they can learn about similar stories and events.

Another case of *Cursed Child* as a Prospective text lies in its relevance to modern cultural issues. Even as an adaptive work, the play presents numerous opportunities for analysis and contemporary connections that are separate from the source text but equally thought-provoking. Regarding the importance of character analyses to modern problems throughout the original Harry Potter series, authors Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella contend:

Given its widespread appeal, the series and readers' response to it provides useful signposts to the state of various cultural concerns. For example, readers have debated the series' representation of girls and girlhood as embodied by Hermione. Hermione appears more knowledgeable about magic than Harry or Ron, and yet her frequent emotional displays and need for rescuing create a complex picture of modern girlhood. (9)

Cursed Child offers similar societal commentary through its depiction of Hermione Granger across alternate universes. When Albus and Scorpius use the Time Turner to alter the past, Hermione's life changes drastically. At the book's beginning, Hermione is the Minister of Magic and married to Ron; however, her life in the alternate universe alters with the absence of their marriage:

SCORPIUS: Only he didn't. I found Rita Skeeter's book about them. And it's very different. Ron took Hermione to the ball.

ALBUS: What?

POLLY CHAPMAN: Sshhhh!

SCORPIUS looks at POLLY and drops his volume.

SCORPIUS: As friends. And they danced in a friendly way, and it was nice, and then he danced with Padma Patil and that was nicer, and then they started dating and he changed a bit and then they got married and meanwhile Hermione became a—

ALBUS: —psychopath. (138)

This implication that unmarried women are angry and bitter serves as an interesting critical point and ensures *Cursed Child* relevance throughout modern cultural discussions. Since the play thoroughly explains this point and does not require prior knowledge from the original books for understanding, *Cursed Child* acts as a Prospective Adaptation.

Additionally, *Cursed Child* is Prospective in its ability to become an origin story to those with limited prior knowledge of the Harry Potter series. In an explanation of the memorability and value of adaptations, Hutcheon writes, "For at least one generation of children, *The Jungle Book* is the 1967 Disney cartoon, not a collection of stories by Rudyard Kipling, even if the film opens with an image of the book (Newton 17-38). These children experience the book, if read after the film, as the second text, as (in a sense) the adaptation" ("Harry Potter..." 172). The same sentiments apply to *Cursed Child* as young generations of theatregoers witness the family-inclusive play performed live. The play thoroughly constructs an immersive world for newcomers, as seen in the following exchange which introduces Platform 9 ¾:

JAMES (*with a grin*): Can we go now, please?



Albus looks at his dad, and then his mum.

GINNY: All you have to do is walk straight at the wall between platforms nine and ten.

LILY: I'm so excited.

HARRY: Don't stop and don't be scared you'll crash into it, that's very important. Best to do it at a run if you're nervous.

ALBUS: I'm ready. (8)

In this conversation, the play updates audience members who are unfamiliar with the concept of Platform 9 ¾ from the original books. Thus, since enjoying *Cursed Child* requires no contextual knowledge, the play can introduce them to the wizarding world and then guide them to the source texts. This unique ability makes *Cursed Child* a Prospective Adaptation.

Cursed Child also acts as a Prospective Adaptation through its subtle reminders of the constant threat of indifference. In a discussion about ethical presentations found in children's literature, researcher Lisa Sainsbury contends that Melvin Burgess' *The Baby and Fly Pie* rejects "the ultimate evil of indifference in its depiction of a courageous and faithful young girl" (40). She further argues, "If novels for young people are able to demonstrate the moral imperative in exposing the suffering of others, then they are engaging young readers in one of the most crucial areas of ethical concern" (40). *Cursed Child* achieves this by highlighting the importance of mercy in the face of tempting evil:

DELPHI (truly pitiful): Then kill me.

HARRY thinks a moment.

HARRY: I can't do that either.

ALBUS: What? Dad? She's dangerous.

HARRY: No, Albus...

ALBUS: But she's a murderer—I've seen her murder—

HARRY turns and looks at his son and then at GINNY.

HARRY: Yes. Albus, she's a murderer, and we're not.

HERMIONE: We have to be better than them. (292)

In this interaction, the characters' struggle not to become their enemies reminds audiences that they must be courageous and fight indifference to others' suffering. Rather than relying on prior knowledge for efficacy, this idea depends solely upon the audiences' understanding of *Cursed Child*. By teaching audiences this cross-generational lesson without invoking other works, *Cursed Child* serves as a Prospective Adaptation.

Conclusion

Harry Potter and the Cursed Child's status as a simultaneously Prospective and Retrospective Adaptation makes for interesting critical discussion regarding its effects on audiences. Retrospectively, the adaptation rewards audience members who possess prior knowledge through enriching their experience; however, it also acts Prospectively by making statements isolated from the main series and guiding newcomers to the original works. While many likely assume that *Cursed Child* must be enjoyed after the original series to yield maximum benefits, its simultaneously Retrospective and Prospective qualities invite readers of varying backgrounds to partake. Quoting fanfiction scholar Sheenagh Pugh, Lesley Goodman writes that studying new genres "from a literary point of view" investigates "what *kind* of writing this is, how its particular conventions and history have shaped it, what needs it tries to satisfy, how it has developed and is developing" (663). These questions'



application to *Cursed Child* make it worthy of further study. The open nature of the adaptation promotes inclusive attitudes about who can enjoy literature and advocates for widespread accessibility, shaping a holistically brighter future for the field.

Karyn Keane

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