

The Harlequins in the Weasley Twins: jesters in the court  
of Prince Harry (and J.K. Rowling)

*The king he sits upon his throne/the world's weight on his chest/  
When your mind begins to race you've got no time to rest/  
Where is my clown?! I need him now, to take my troubles away/  
The harlequin rushes in as his work begins for the day.  
--"Fool's Gold," Blackmore's Night*

I'd marry Fred and George Weasley if I could, if I were younger and unattached, if they were older and, well, real. The fact that polyandry is unconventional (not to mention illegal) probably wouldn't bother them at all.

Of all the characters in J.K. Rowling's books, most people are drawn (as they're intended to be) to Harry Potter—the young male Cinderella, consigned to the cupboard under the stairs instead of the kitchen hearth, with spiders to contend with rather than cinders. Harry is a wonderfully sympathetic protagonist, and his Aunt Petunia, Uncle Vernon, and Cousin Dudley make marvelous incarnations of the wicked stepmother and the ugly step—well, it would have to be “-brothers” in this case, wouldn't it. Even more fun, to we who are addicted to the fairytale, is the fact that the story doesn't end with “Cinderella” being whisked away to live happily ever after in the magical castle where he rightfully belongs; it only just begins there. (Those who aren't as enamored of fairytales, unfortunately, often don't make it that far, having gotten bogged down in the essential but sometimes tedious background Rowling must lay before we get to the “good part.” My advice is: read the second one first; the stories get better as you go along, and you'll find them well worth the time invested.)

Harry is certainly an appealing character, and his life at Hogwarts with Ron and Hermione, Hagrid, Professor Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and all the denizens of Gryffindor House, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and even Slytherin is, for the most part, an enviable one. However, taking his rightful place in the wizarding world, where he is revered almost as royalty, also has its risks--dangers that are unique to Harry because of who he is—the boy who lived—and in so doing nearly destroyed the evil Lord Voldemort.

Lord Voldemort, or what's left of him ten years after the curse with which he tried to kill the infant Harry rebounded upon him, breaking his power and nearly killing him, knows that at age eleven Harry will go to Hogwarts and thus re-enter the wizarding world, Voldemort's own realm. So, by parasitically attaching himself, his essence, to a young wizard, Voldemort manages to go to Hogwarts as well and begins his campaign to kill Harry, regain his physical body, and return to power as the most evil dark wizard ever known. In Book I, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Voldemort's power is weak, watered down. In Book II, *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, through the vehicle of his own schoolboy diary and the recreation of his youthful self, he is stronger but still not strong enough to kill Harry. Book III, *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*, unravels more of the mystery surrounding Lord Voldemort's followers and the

murder of James and Lily Potter, but reveals little more about Voldemort himself. But in Book IV, *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire*, with the aid of his servant, Wormtail, the wizard who had betrayed the Potters and Sirius Black all those years ago, Voldemort begins his onslaught in earnest. Though he is once more thwarted in his efforts to kill Harry, he does manage to return to physical form, killing and discarding Cedric Diggory like a crumpled up wad of used paper in the process, and begins to gather the death eaters about him once again. Book V, *The Order of the Phoenix*, promises to be at least the beginning of a monumental struggle for supremacy in the wizarding world—the evil wizards will join forces with the dark lord while the forces of good will undoubtedly coalesce around Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts and the only person Voldemort has ever feared, and of course, around Harry.

As the stories become more serious with each book, maturing as it were as Harry, Ron, and Hermione mature, the resident practical jokers—Fred and George Weasley—begin to function more and more as harlequins, jesters in the court of the young prince, Harry Potter, whose very name is a blending of the royal with the common place, and in the service of his creator, J. K. Rowling.

One of the reasons Rowling's books are so popular is the richness of detail with which they're endowed. (She's particularly good with names—Sirius Black, for instance.) Another is the fact that all of those details can trace their ancestry to literary conventions that reach all the way back into antiquity: the convention of “the fair unknown,” raised in obscurity and adversity only to find that he or she was born to the purple, from Luke Skywalker back to King Arthur; the convention of the unseen world existing side by side with the one we accept as normal and peopled with beings exotic in appearance but unsettlingly familiar in action and motivation, from Tolkien's Frodo Baggins to Shakespeare's Puck; and of course the eternally popular convention of the elemental struggle between good and evil, told and retold to every generation from Stephen King's *The Stand* clear back to The Bible itself. Rowling's success and that of her novels rests largely upon her ability to translate these ancient conventions into contemporary characters, settings, and events. Many writers have also employed the convention, in one guise or another, of the harlequin or jester, and here again, Rowling is no exception.

The court jester or fool as he was sometimes called, has played an essential part in literature at least as far back as King Lear. Traditionally, the jester's main functions are to aid the royal or noble lords and ladies, to provide amusement or diversion from the worries of the day, often to act as a conduit by which intelligence is gathered or purposefully dispersed, and occasionally to provide misdirection, diverting attention from the activities of the noble for one reason or another. It is within this tradition that we locate Fred and George Weasley in the ongoing Harry Potter tale. As the subject matter of the stories becomes more serious, the need for the talents of the harlequin grows, and the characters of Fred and George become more prominent, from the two of them getting bare mention now and then in Book I to the twins enacting a parallel story line or subplot throughout Book IV.

It's obvious from the outset that Fred and George are adept at providing laughter, which often offsets the tension and stress the other characters are under. What may be less than obvious is that these twin jesters function not merely as comic relief, but also—like the traditional court jester—as aids to the prince and as masters of misdirection. Just