



Discussion Questions: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling

From: Scholastic.com

1. The title of each of the chapters provides some clues as to what will occur in each. Do the titles tell the whole truth? How do they reveal some of the more symbolic meaning of the story?
2. The author has more than a little bit of fun with names in this story. For example, the Professor of Herbology is Professor Sprout, and even the authors of the textbooks Harry must study are puns and riddles. Can you find other examples of this wordplay and show how the names reflect the characteristics of their owners? What about names that are the opposite of what you'd expect? — for example, the huge, terrifying three-headed dog named Fluffy? What effect do you think the author achieves with this name?
3. Many novels of high fantasy borrow from the traditional stories of fairy tales, myths, and legends. The dog Fluffy which guards the trapdoor at Hogwarts School resembles Cerberus, the three-headed dog which guards the underworld of Greek mythology. What other creatures from traditional tales are paralleled in the story? How does each of these creatures play a pivotal role in advancing the plot?
4. In Chapter Nine, Harry disobeys a direct order from one of the teachers at the Hogwarts School and takes off on a broom. This infraction is normally cause for expulsion from the school. However, in Harry's case, it brings him the honor of being chosen as the "Seeker" for his Quidditch team. Can you find other instances in the story where Harry's actions lead to quite opposite results from what is expected? To what extent is the book's plot advanced by such surprise turns of events? How much unpredictability would be too much?
5. Quirrell tells Harry that "There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it" (p. 291). Do you agree with this? Is this the reality of the world? Or if good and evil do exist, what makes them so? Which is more important in the world, power, or good and evil?

About the Book

Harry Potter has lived a miserable life since his parents' death. Left to survive with his horrible aunt and uncle, the Dursleys, and their spoiled son Dudley, Harry has been forced to live in a spider-ridden closet under the stairs. But as his eleventh birthday approaches, all this is about to change. A mysterious letter arrives by owl messenger, inviting him to attend Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry is astonished to learn the truth about his parents — that they were wizards of the highest renown — and that he is destined to become one too. At Hogwarts, Harry finds friends and becomes an expert in Quidditch, an aerial sport played on broomsticks. But soon he becomes involved in a life-threatening struggle against the forces of darkness, and finds himself fighting for survival against those who would rather see him dead before he can come into his full powers.

Themes

Much of what is classified as high fantasy has as its central theme the classic struggle of good over evil. In this book, the suspense is also built by the fact that the evil of Voldemort and his followers is a tricky enemy to defeat, because much is hidden from plain sight. Harry and his friends, then, are left with a mystery to puzzle out before they can begin to understand and confront, let alone defeat, the enemy. Their task is made even more difficult as they cannot convince their superiors of the impending danger. The young heroes have to face their greatest challenges without any support from adults until the last few pages. Discuss how Rowling uses these elements to build excitement and make this book a compelling page-turner.

Conflict

The Mirror of Erised (Desire) plays an important role in the Harry's growing understanding of his internal conflict. The inscription around the top of the mirror (page 207) translates: "I show not your face but your heart's desire." When Harry gazes into the mirror he sees his parents and other members of his family. Dumbledore, the headmaster of the school, cautions Harry, saying that the mirror "will give neither knowledge nor truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible" (p. 213), and he concludes by saying, "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (p. 214). Harry longs for the connection to his family, something missing from his miserable childhood. How does he eventually make that connection to the past without losing sight of what is important in the present and essential to the future?

Setting

The setting of a fantasy must be made clear if the reader is to more fully enter into the story. As Harry arrives at Hogwarts School, readers see it through his rather astonished eyes. What are some of the tricks and traps of the school? What are the rules for living at Hogwarts? Which rules are made explicit, and which ones does Harry have to figure out for himself? Can you think of situations where you've had to figure out unwritten rules? Would you say that life as a whole is like that? Many great fantasies begin with a very realistic, sometimes mundane, setting before transporting the reader to the more fantastic setting and then returning to the more realistic setting at later points in the story. Sometimes the contrast between the two settings underscores the changes experienced by the main character. Can you think of other books written in this way? How do they compare to Harry Potter in their use of setting?

Characterization

Besides Harry Potter himself, who was your favorite character in the book? Or which character did you find most interesting? Why? What details did Rowling provide that made that character come alive in your mind in all his or her complexity? Did you learn more about the character from their words, their appearance, or their actions? Did your first impressions of the character remain unaltered, or did you change your opinion of the character as the story went on? Do any of the characters remind you of someone you know?

Sometimes, the very qualities that seem to make a person disagreeable to you, as Hermione was to Harry and his friends at first, become assets to you once that person becomes your friend. What qualities did Hermione bring to the group? What does her integration into the group tell you about the nature of friendship?

*Discussion Questions excerpted from Scholastic.com.
Provided by the Mahopac Library.*