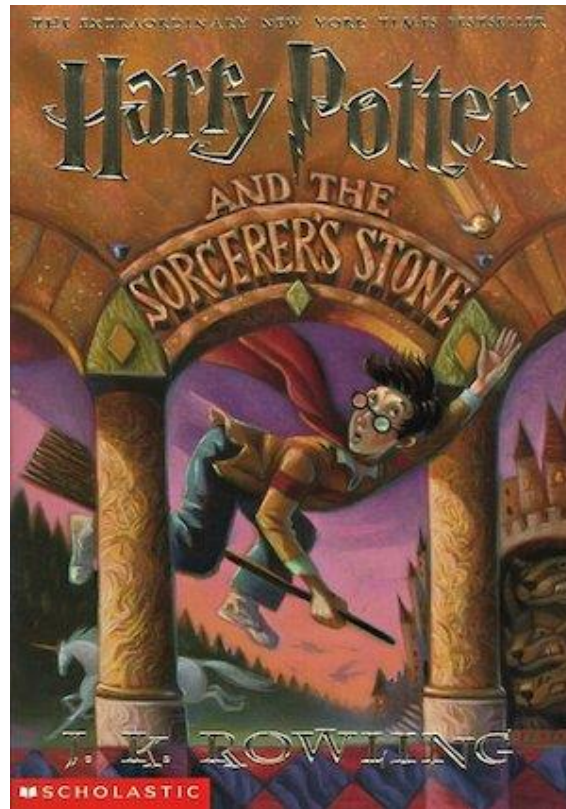


**Casting the Spell of Friendship:  
Bacon's Tenets in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter***

**Meenakshi Srihari, M.A. English**

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**Abstract**

*Harry Potter*'s claim to fame is multifaceted. At the root of these claims is that the series appeals to children and adults alike because of the basic universal values it reflects. One of these is friendship. The paper evaluates the portrayal of friendship in the series through the lens of the aphoristic tenets of friendship presented in Bacon's essay "Of Friendship". Bacon's objective appraisal of friendship deems it sentimental, practical and at times Machiavellian. The paper surmises that the series perfectly defines and unravels notions about the abstract concept of friendship, much like Bacon's essay does.

**Keywords:** Rowling, Bacon, Friendship, Philosophy

### ***Harry Potter* – Focus of the Series**

The *Harry Potter* series was never merely a set of children’s books; it was and remains one author’s determined effort to show that the extraordinary stems but from the ordinary, and that intrinsic human values form magical relationships. To put it simply, the books are an earthly journey on a magic carpet. At the end of every book, one might as well exclaim that Harry is like a normal boy, except that he is a wizard. The plethora of characters in the series makes it a study of relationships, and friendship is one theme that is explored exhaustively.

The universality of friendship is undisputable, and its nature has been meticulously studied by philosophers and writers. Of these studies, Francis Bacon’s essay “Of Friendship” stands apart because of his unique aphoristic style- the simplicity of friendship shines through even as he explains its intricacies. The maxims that he puts forth serve as markers to what friendship should or should not be like, and this paper serves to vouch for these guidelines in exploring the theme of friendship by applying them to J.K.Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series.

### **Bacon on Friendship**



**Francis Bacon (1561- 1626)**

Courtesy: <https://www.biography.com/people/francis-bacon-9194632>

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Bacon begins his essay by citing the philosopher Aristotle- “Whosoever is delighted in solitude, is either a wild beast or a God” (280). It is not very difficult to identify the loner in Harry Potter. The Dark Lord, The One Who Must Not Be Named and You-Know-Who- the villainous dark wizard of the series, Voldemort is known by many names in the books. The group of wizards that always follow him, better known as the Death Eaters, can hardly be deemed his friends, and he has been described in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* as being “alone and friendless” (238). Not only does Voldemort fall into step with Aristotle’s views on friendship but also Nietzsche’s philosophic ruminations when he says that there is no good, but only power and those that are weak enough not to use it. There is no disputing that Voldemort is indeed the wild beast of the series.

But Bacon’s dark and foreboding opening paves way to a delightful discourse about the fruits of friendship. Though there are papers that call Bacon’s attitude typically Machiavellian, alluding to an assumption that his treatise is about the advantages of friendship rather than about how a friend feels ennobled by the deed of friendship (Kabir 127), a closer look at his essay shows us that the fruits aren’t materialistic - rather they are Bacon’s way of convincing the reader that friendship is much more than the simple feeling of satisfaction.

### **First Fruit of Friendship**

The first fruit of friendship that Bacon mentions- that it helps in the “ease and discharge of the fullness and swellings of the heart” can find no better representation than the friendship between Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Harry is burdened by the responsibility of saving the wizarding world (and himself) from Voldemort’s incessant threats. This is no mean feat, and as an adolescent, Harry’s coping mechanism would nearly have failed had he not had Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley to unburden his troubles to and seek advice from. This is particularly seen in *The Goblet of Fire* where Harry has to take part in the dangerous Triwizard Games. It is an amalgamation of Hermione’s wit and Ron’s solidarity that get Harry through the tasks successfully. In fact, it is in the same book that the three have an altercation of sorts- a misunderstanding that makes Ron pick a fight with Harry, and a spat of jealousy between Hermione and Ron. The trio discovers that it cannot exist as a duo, a fact beautifully explained in C. S. Lewis’ “*The Four Loves*” where he quotes Charles Lamb – “Lamb

says somewhere that if, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but “A’s part in C,” while C loses not only A but “A’s part in B.” In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out” (95). Thus theirs is a bond complemented by each other, and defective when either one is missing.

### **Futility of the Bond**

Bacon talks of the futility of the bond formed when men choose their favourites, or *privadoes*, and call them their friends, a term that should be reserved only for the most intimate of relationships. Something of this manner can be seen in Horace Slughorn’s *Slug Club*, an informal name for his favourite students, almost always famous, in Hogwarts. However, his intentions have little to do with forming real bonds, as Albus Dumbledore tells Harry in *Half Blood Prince* -

He used to handpick favourites at Hogwarts, sometimes for their ambition or their brains, sometimes for their charm or their talent, and he had an uncanny knack for choosing those who would go on to become outstanding in their various fields. Horace formed a kind of club of his favourites with himself at the centre, making introductions, forging useful contacts between members, and always reaping some kind of benefit in return [...] (75)

It is to be remembered that so blinded was Slughorn to be in the midst of students who were illustrious or from illustrious families, that he unwittingly gave Voldemort, then a student, the secret to keeping his soul from dying- a folly he would bitterly repent in the years to come.

### **An Acquaintance Not Necessarily a Friend**

Bacon’s staunch refusal to call an acquaintance a friend is a wakeup call to modern day relationships that are arbitrarily called friendships. An article that appeared in the newspaper *The Hindu* terms this phenomenon “Calling the Spade a Clover” (April 28, 2015). The modern age of the social media pays little heed to real relationships. People are made friends and “unfriended” in the gap of a few hours. The true friendships that Emerson talks about which “when they are

real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know” (180) are sorely missing. The reason is of course, that few value it because few experience it.

### **True Friendship**

“Friendship [...] maketh daylight in the understanding, out of darkness, and confusion of thoughts” (284), says Bacon, and this vital understanding of oneself is the second fruit of friendship. Emerson, in the same vein as Bacon, has spoken about the two pillars of friendship- truth and tenderness (181), and these two qualities blend together beautifully as the friend holds up a mirror to us, helping us recognize ourselves. There can be no better illustration of this from the series than the unique bond between Dumbledore and Harry. The impressive old headmaster of Hogwarts takes Harry under his wing and helps him understand what the fragments of his past mean, and gives him the courage to face his future. In *The Chamber of Secrets*, Dumbledore tells Harry, “It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities”(18), helping the young Harry reflect on what is truly important to life, thereby stirring up the real Gryffondorian values of courage and sound judgement in him.

### **Reflecting one’s Blemishes**

The mirror of understanding is never complete without reflecting one’s blemishes- what Bacon seems to term “dry ice”. One of the touching moments in the series is when Neville Longbottom, a fast friend of the trio, refuses to let them get into any more trouble. The meek Neville shows considerable spunk by exerting his sense righteousness here, and Dumbledore aptly describes what he did in the end-of-year feast in *Philosopher’s Stone* – ““There are all kinds of courage,’ said Dumbledore, smiling. ‘It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Neville Longbottom’” (245).

### **A Fair Share of Treacherous and Meaningless Friendships**

While there are the trio, Dumbledore, Dobby and Hagrid on one hand embodying true friendship, a fair share of treacherous and meaningless friendships also abounds in the series. Harald Thorsrud titles his chapter in a book “Voldemort’s Agents, Malfoy’s Cronies and Hagrid’s Chums” and that is, in a nutshell, the three kinds of bonds that are formed throughout

the series. Stripped to the bare essentials, Voldemort's followers are nothing but his agents-though the wicked Bellatrix Lestrange does die fighting for Voldemort's cause, she does not incite in him any more feeling than his victims dying painful deaths in his hands do. In the same category fall Quirrel and Wormtail, the latter having betrayed his real friends out of loyalty to Voldemort. Their friendship though can only be termed corrupt, and by that virtue, not be termed friendship at all. On the other hand, Malfoy's cronies Crabbe and Goyle are in the relationship out of the true pleasure of being with their sharp tongued friend. Theirs is a pathetic plight, for the trueness of their friendship is not reciprocated, and Malfoy's treachery towards their friendship is only seen when he abandons them to flee during the FiendFyre (*Deathly Hallows*, Ch 31).

### To Conclude

All the illustrations given so far will suffice in showing that the third fruit - "bearing a part in all actions and occasions" (286) is fully justified by the friendship of Harry, Ron and Hermione, who stick together through prosperity and adversity alike. Friendship in the *Harry Potter* series is thus a reflection of the myriad shades that the bond can take. It is not looking for a companion, no, but the unfolding of destiny, for true friends never have to seek out each other, they're always there. Perhaps Bacon's tree grows at the moment somewhere near us, its fruits readily at our disposal. As C. S. Lewis says, "*Friendship is born at that moment when one man says to another: 'What! You too? I thought that no one but myself. . .'*". The spell has been cast, and the world waits for its magic to unfold.

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