

COPING WITH HARRY POTTER:
HOW LITERATURE FRAMES OUR ENCOUNTERS WITH GOOD AND EVIL
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A Thesis Submitted to the English Departmental Honors Program

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Preface

When the idea came to me in the summer of 2007 to write a scholarly paper on the Harry Potter series, I did not immediately embrace it. I labored under the presumption that Harry Potter was not the stuff of serious academic pursuit, and tried to force the notion from my mind. But as I tore through the final installment of the series with a frightening ferocity, the urge to write this paper outgrew my ability to suppress it. Everywhere I turned people were talking about the Harry Potter phenomenon—understandable in the wake of the long awaited final book in a series seventeen years in the making¹. My mind was ultimately made up for me by an Associated Press article I stumbled upon in the evening hours of July 24th, entitled “A Generation Says Goodbye to Harry Potter.” This article focused on a narrow demographic of Harry Potter readers, aged 19-21, who shared the experience of growing up in a whirlwind of learner’s permits, Starbucks coffee, and social networking websites with a boy wizard whose experience was nothing like theirs. And yet, this generation, *my* generation, had been inexplicably joined with the boy wizard, and simultaneously shared the experience of coming of age with him and with each other. It was after reading this article that I abandoned all misgivings about being laughed out of my English program, and accepted that my destiny was to see this wild idea to its logical conclusion, and to publicly bid my own farewell to Harry Potter. I drew courage from my discovery of Lana A. Whited’s *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*, a collection of sixteen scholarly essays published when the series was still unfinished. With the completion of the series, a complete analysis was now possible, and even welcome.

¹ As the story goes, Rowling first began work on the series in 1990. I was four years old.

It should go without saying that anyone wishing to remain blissfully ignorant of any plot details should not read any further. This paper will contain many plot spoilers for those who have not yet completed the series², and if there is anything to glean from growing up in the Harry Potter generation, it is that spoiling the story for others is ranked right alongside several other, (just as well known) unforgivable curses.

Introduction

Ten years ago, no one (not even J.K. Rowling herself) could have imagined the worldwide controversy that Harry Potter would spawn. What began as the fanciful story of a modest, single British mother has exploded into countless debates. Few fictions have been controversial enough to cause fighting in school boardrooms across the globe and to force teachers to obtain signed permission slips before reading out loud from them in class. And yet, in just a few short years, the whole Harry Potter series has attained banned book status in many places around the world, joining such classics as the *Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. The American Library Association has declared the Harry Potter series as *the* most challenged book of the 21st century (Dresang 231). Even when the series was still far from complete in 2000, *Newsweek* reported that “reading of the books has been challenged in 25 school districts in at least 17 states, and the books have been banned in schools in Kansas and Colorado.” The infamy the books have gained has put them on equal footing with many we now know as classics, but even this label has been hotly contested. There are those detractors who violently reject Harry Potter as literary classic, and scoff at those beyond the

² What are you waiting for?

young adult age range who venture into Harry's world. In some ways, Harry's fame is to blame for the incredulity of such commentators—the rule of thumb for classic literature is that it must first suffer a long period of under-appreciation. The Harry Potter series defies conventional beliefs of what makes for classic literature by simply enjoying off the charts success (and commercialization) while its author is still alive. But this cannot be the only, or even a very important, criterion in determining whether Harry Potter can be deemed “classic.” Indeed, the usual definition of a “classic” is that the work must function on multiple levels and continue to appeal to readers over time (Whited 8). While the series has not yet been tested over time, it has certainly been tested across age groups, and has consistently demonstrated its value to readers from all demographics. The very existence of Rowling scholarship is testament to Harry's ability to give more and more on each successive reading, especially for those of us who grew up alongside the boy wizard. As each installment has grown more mature and complex, valid concerns have been raised over children too young to handle the material—namely those under age eight (Whited & Grimes 208). Even children readers have conceded that the books (especially past the second installment) may not be appropriate for those under 10 to experience unsupervised (Borah 358). Of course, there is no denying that a large part of Harry's readership are children. And outside the debate over whether Harry Potter has the staying power of a classic, the majority of arguments have centered on concern for this readership.

Most Harry Potter objectors take issue with the books on moral and religious grounds. The most common argument is that the series has a satanic agenda, though this has lost some

of its momentum in light of the series' completion³. Some parents have refused to allow their children to read Harry Potter, and some school libraries have been forced to remove Harry Potter from their shelves. Harry Potter cannot be assigned as required reading, and if a student uses the books for a project or a teacher wishes to read from the books (after obtaining signed permission slips, of course) other students are permitted to leave the room. The basis for such drastic measures has often been the simple fact that Harry Potter is a wizard and he goes to a magical academy. This alone was reason enough for one school in Chatham, Kent to banish the series. The school's head teacher stated that "devils, demons, and witches are real and pose the same threat as, say, a child molester" (qtd. in Whited 3). But Harry Potter is not a child molester, nor is the series a how-to manual for magic. In fact, Rowling herself has repeatedly said that "these books are fundamentally moral (that is how I see them, in any case)" (qtd. in Doughty 250). The magical world Harry occupies is almost incidental to the story—the larger narrative deals with many of the same things muggles (that is, non-magical people) deal with in our daily lives. Demonizing Harry disregards the many lessons the series has to teach us about good and evil of all kinds— lessons which are far more valuable than those sourced in religious paranoia about the paranormal. Harry's world is fantastic, but it is also very real. As Amanda Cockrell observes, "good does not always win in Harry Potter's world" (16). Rather, good and evil are locked in combat and often the good suffer defeat; key players die and do not come back; not all disasters and evil plots are avoided or prevented: in short, life is decidedly imperfect. Furthermore, Rowling's tales are littered with more than "a few characters who are neither wholly bad nor wholly good and don't seem to know which

³ Now, those same detractors who saw the hand of Satan in the works see Jesus in Harry's sacrifice.

side they are on” (Cockrell 17). Readers of all ages stand to gain something from the many layered nature of the series, whether it is a reinforcement of important values and lessons for adults, or first encounters with the grey shades of reality for children.

Harry Potter and the Young

A good deal of Harry Potter scholarship has been concerned with the reading experience of children. Scholars such as Eliza T. Dresang have tackled the question of sexism in Harry Potter and how this affects the reading experience of young girls, while others like Terri Doughty have sought to answer why Harry Potter has been so successful among young boys, who usually lag behind their female counterparts in reading enthusiasm. Despite disagreements over gendered experience, most scholars agree that “Rowling provides young readers with models of moral decision-making via the characters who inhabit her magical and Muggle worlds” (Whited & Grimes 207). In their essay analyzing Harry Potter through the framework of Lawrence Kohlberg’s theories of moral development, Whited & Grimes make the case that children between the ages of 10 and 18 are widely believed (by Kohlberg and other psychologists) to be in the stage of greatest moral development, and if this is true then “what they read during those stages is vital, not only for them, but for the rest of us, who will eventually live in the world they run” (Whited & Grimes 205). It is for this reason that we turn now to a few of the series’ lessons readily accessible to children.

One of the most striking things about Harry’s world is its sheer diversity. Rowling’s creations run the gamut from muggle to wizard, white to black, poor to rich, young to old, human to centaur to goblin and back again. Rather than an artificial setting of mild mannered human wizards, Rowling has mimicked the real world and recognized through her characters

that diversity does (and should) prevail. This is valuable, especially, to a young reader, because it underscores the fact that the world is not homogeneous and good can be found in unexpected places. By observing Harry's interactions with people (and creatures) from all walks of life, children learn by example to be tolerant of differences and at the same time wary of stereotypes. One of Harry's best friends is the muggle-born Hermione Granger. "Muggle-born" is a category which stands in opposition to "pure blood"—a descriptor of familial status and prestige equivalent to our "aristocratic". However, Hermione's intellect does not suffer one iota from her common origins, and she proves to be not only the brightest pupil in the school, but also one of the most loyal and pure hearted friends in Harry's entourage. In fact, there are a number of characters in Rowling's cast who have less than reputable births, including the "half-breed," uneducated Rubeus Hagrid. Hagrid is the product of a human male and a giantess, a fact he carefully conceals from the general public. It is not until the fourth book in the series that Harry and his friends learn the truth about Hagrid, and for good reason. The reaction that Hagrid's honesty earns him from Madame Maxime (another half-giant living in denial) in book four is reason enough to keep any secret. And yet, despite the overwhelmingly negative view of giants held by the magical world, Hagrid is a kind hearted and devoted friend to Harry. In fact, it is often the case that the muggle-born and the half-breed characters outshine the pure blooded in integrity and compassion. Jann Lacoss calls these situations "reversals" (78) and Farah Mendlesohn observes that "the visibly articulated structure of the Potter novels is that birth into a magical family is no guarantee either of magical ability or of quality of character" (170). Many of the nastiest characters come from old and respected blood lines, emphasizing Mendlesohn's point that a good birth is

no indicator of moral fiber. Of course, lest we err in the other direction and believe all mixed-bloods good and all pure-bloods evil, Rowling offers up plenty of contradictory examples, like the brave but misunderstood Sirius Black (an ancient blood line) or the villain of villains himself, Lord Voldemort (a half-blood). As Sirius tells Harry in *The Order of the Phoenix*, “the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters” (302). Rowling muddies the waters well enough so that it is impossible to make a clear case for either parentage—readers are shown that there is no easy way to tell what a person is like on the inside from their position in society alone. This is also the case, of course, in the real world, and young readers benefit from an early exposure to this lesson. Even Harry’s wonderful world suffers from “racism” and ethnocentrism. Because it is much easier to fear the unknown, Rowling gives us characters that defy preconceptions so that we are forced to reconsider. The Harry Potter books are full of human ugliness, but rather than keeping this from children, we must allow the process of consciousness raising to begin early.

Rowling offers a number of other cases for tolerance and understanding. Luna Lovegood is a good example, and one of the strangest girls at Hogwarts. She wears radishes for earrings, reads magazines upside down, and believes whole heartedly in the unbelievable (no small task in a magical world inhabited by the fantastic). She is the girl at school who must put up wanted flyers for her belongings at the end of the term, and who everyone calls “Loony” Lovegood behind her back. And yet, despite her oddity and her loner lifestyle, Luna is a great friend. Harry and company can rely on her to listen to even the most unlikely of stories without judgment, and to think up fantastic strategies for dealing with problems (how to get to the ministry in the dead of night? On the backs of thestrals of course!). Though she

never quite reaches the prestige level of Harry's inner circle (a position reserved for Hermione and Ron and few others), she becomes indispensable in the fight against Voldemort when the time comes. Though it is unlikely that anyone perceives Luna as evil, her queer comportment can easily lead others to miss the value of her character. As a minor character Luna does not single handedly teach tolerance, but rather serves to support a theme of acceptance.

A similar but more serious case occurs in the form of Remus Lupin, Hogwart's defense against the dark arts teacher in Harry's third year. Once again, Harry finds a good friend in an "odd" character, though in this case, the stigma is greater. Lupin has a secret even worse than Hagrid's. He too is not quite human, but rather than half-giant Lupin is a werewolf. The magical world is highly prejudiced against Lupin's kind, even though he is not responsible for his condition. Even "Hermione at first takes it for granted that a werewolf must be on the Dark side" (Langford 56). This situation can be extrapolated to any number of scenarios in the real world, from the physically and mentally disabled, to those suffering from communicable disease (i.e. AIDS). As with these real world parallels, Lupin is a valuable person suffering from a controllable condition who is nevertheless deemed untouchable by most of society. Jann Lacoss suggests that children's literature "must depict life as it should not be, in order to reinforce socially acceptable behaviors" (67). Thankfully Dumbledore is unconcerned with Lupin's affliction and hires him anyway. In part, Harry's ability to look past people's "defects" is due to the modeling of Albus Dumbledore, who frequently demonstrates that people can, and will often, surprise you. In most cases, Harry carries this lesson forward well, with a few exceptions (especially in the case of Snape—but more on that later). Lupin is often pigeonholed as unquestionably evil, but fortunately there are others who

value him. He not only teaches Harry important lessons in the classroom (where would Harry be without his patronus?) but helps Harry get to know his father, if only in memory. Lupin is also a valuable member of the Order of the Phoenix. Young readers may grasp only pieces of this puzzle, but the underlying message is clear—stereotypes and discrimination get in the way of friendships with good people. Rowling underscores this lesson through the ridiculous character of Dolores Umbridge, whose “pointless hatred of half-breeds” gets her chased out of Hogwarts bounds by a herd of raging centaurs in book five (Langford 85). Her ignorance and prejudice put her in mortal danger, neatly illustrating the idea that it is better to make friends than enemies.

One of the most frequently cited situations in Harry Potter moral scholarship is the case of Peter “Wormtail” Pettigrew. Harry has good reason to hate Wormtail—his deficiency of character led him to betray Harry’s parents, resulting in their deaths. It is all too easy to see Wormtail as unquestionably criminal and possessing no redeeming virtue, and yet Harry shows him mercy. When given the choice to exact revenge on Wormtail in his third year, Harry instead chooses to trust the system to bring him to justice. Harry does a very difficult thing in being kind to an enemy, and unfortunately it backfires when Wormtail escapes. However, Dumbledore assures Harry that his kindness will someday be repaid. Until recently, it was impossible to tell exactly how this would come to pass, but with the final installment, readers finally learn that Wormtail repays Harry twofold—he not only saves his life, but loses his own in the process. Of course, it is highly unlikely that any of Rowling’s readers will have identical experiences in life. What is to be learned here is that a lesser person (say, Voldemort) would have killed Wormtail without hesitation while Harry chooses not to. He

reacts rationally rather than vengefully, but not without feeling just a pang of vengeance. This is one of the earliest examples in the series of the importance of choice, and we will return to this theme later.

What is most significant about the Harry Potter series is that it does not present itself as moralistic. It is on the surface pure unadulterated (and addictive) fun. The value the series holds for children lies in the fact that it is both escapist fantasy *and* realistic— that it allows them to see their own schoolyard experiences played out within Harry’s world while keeping the material at a distance. Rowling “presents readers with concrete examples of evil, allowing them to confront it safely, in a controlled environment” (Lacoss 83). This reading experience is what Jann Lacoss refers to as informal learning, and it can be more important than what children are taught didactically: “informal lessons thus help them learn about getting along with others, living in a more adult environment away from parents, and, probably most important, learning to deal with good and evil (that is, moral lessons)” (74). Children take these lessons to heart because they identify with the characters. They are inclined to listen when Dumbledore implores “Remember Cedric.⁴ Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory” (*Goblet of Fire* 724). Harry Potter will continue to offer this same informal learning opportunity to each new crop of children who pick up the books, which is strong evidence of a classic.

⁴ The first Hogwarts student to die in the series, and the turning point in the series toward darker themes

Harry Potter and the Young at Heart

Of course, I did not set out to make the case for Harry Potter as classic children's literature, but as classic literature proper. While no one knows exactly what proportion of Rowling's readers are adults, it is known that her books can be found even on the bookshelves of childless "grown-ups." M. Katherine Grimes said it best when she commented "The Potter series did not catapult to the top [of the New York Times bestseller list] just because children read the books. In fact, many of the biggest Pottermaniacs I know are adults" (106). It is also true that Rowling offers an informal learning experience to her older readers as well. While the lessons discussed above are important for children and even a valuable reminder for adults, Rowling does not draw the line with these simple moral lessons. As the series progresses and Harry grows more mature, so too do the themes of the novels. "Rowling is still dealing with the same theme of good versus evil, and the inevitable intertwining and mirroring of the two, but in an increasingly more adult fashion" (Cockrell 26). While literature typically provides a world to escape to when our own becomes too much to handle, the careful reader will notice that Rowling does not let us off so easily with pure escapism.

The series confronts a number of more mature themes, not least among them political ineptitude. In Harry's world, the Ministry of Magic houses the magical bureaucracy, and it often falls short of expectations—much like our own governments. During Lord Voldemort's first reign of terror, the ministry proved ineffectual at combating him, and even then a private resistance was necessary.⁵ Only after Voldemort's fall from grace did the Ministry attempt to

⁵ Harry's own parents were members of the original Order of the Phoenix, which is revived in Harry's fifth year.

prosecute his followers, but the trials they held (and which Harry observes with the help of the Pensieve) yielded dubious results with their McCarthyism methods.

The Ministry commits all manner of crimes from bumbling ignorance to willful deceit throughout the series. After Voldemort's shocking disappearance, the magical media (with Ministry oversight) was quick to trumpet the news, but not nearly as quick to announce his return. That they are understandably shocked and slow to act after Voldemort's return is made clear through Cedric Diggory's death, but after the initial shock has worn off they adopt a policy of stubborn denial. Those who know the truth can't help but be frustrated with the organization most able to spread the warning and raise awareness when it chooses to at first ignore and then deny the truth. In desperation, the Ministry has been known to suspend due process and imprison the innocent in an effort to appear to be doing something, as was the case in *Chamber of Secrets* with Hagrid's arrest, and the reason for Sirius Black's long incarceration which prevented him from becoming Harry's rightful caretaker. This smacks all too painfully of our own government's anti-terrorism strategies (Langford 83-85). Even worse, the ministry is often responsible for libelous publications in *The Daily Prophet* (the magical newspaper) which undermine not only the story of Harry and those around him but call their motives into question, causing untold numbers of the magical community to fail to heed sound warnings. Ultimately the irresponsible behavior of the government enables Voldemort to commit horrific deeds unchecked, and makes itself vulnerable to a putsch. Our own, frequently justified mistrust of government is mirrored in Rowling's portrait of this magical bureaucracy.

The politics of Harry Potter also recall some of our darker periods of history, as pointed out by Lana A. Whited in the epilogue to *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*. The issue of blood heritage and social class was addressed briefly earlier in this essay in the context of lessons for children to learn, but the lesson is no less important for adults. Indeed, given the capacity for adults to inflict greater damage with racist and classist attitudes, it is an invaluable lesson. Raising consciousness on these issues is important at any age, and never loses its potency. Rowling alludes to more than meets the eye in the first chapter of the series when she writes “*Don’t ask questions*—that was the first rule for a quiet life with the Dursleys” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 20).⁶ This line grows more eerie as the series develops, finally culminating in the “central theme that Rowling has been developing throughout the Harry Potter series: the goal of racial purity and the horrors perpetuated by those who pursue it” (Whited 368). As Whited points out in the epilogue to *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter*, there are striking connections between the dates given in Harry Potter and those of significance in our own world. Especially relevant to this discussion is the year 1942— for Harry Potter, this means the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, but in modern history marks the heyday of Adolf Hitler (Whited 369). It is not possible to read the Harry Potter series and miss the parallels between Voldemort and Hitler. Both were obsessed with racial purity and were successful in amassing followers willing to commit horrible acts for this end. Rowling’s inclusion of such a figure reminds readers how ludicrous such purity vendettas are—both Voldemort and Hitler would have been excluded from the pure world they sought to create. As our own world grows seemingly darker, it becomes possible to draw more and more

⁶ Surprisingly Orwellian for a “children’s” book

connections between this fictional evil and real evil. Terri Doughty wrote “in the light of the nationalistic and ethnic battles in the former Yugoslavia, or the tribal wars in Rwanda, it is hard not to read Voldemort and his Death Eaters as ethnic cleansers. Supporters of Voldemort wish to promote purity of blood” (Doughty 249). In my own reading I have associated the tactics of the Death Eaters with modern day al Qaeda, even as I remind myself that Rowling conceived the series long before 9/11, or the Madrid bombings, or even the London underground. With so many possible mirrors, the evil Rowling writes about must be kept in our conscious minds so that we might guard against it. She reminds us to never grow completely comfortable with the status quo, as it may be flawed. This sentiment is captured neatly toward the end of *Goblet of Fire*, as things begin to heat up for the series:

“You are blinded,” said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, “by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be!” (708)

Beyond the political themes (and lessons) of the series, Rowling also offers up several multi-faceted character studies. Besides making for an interesting read, these characters appeal to those of us among Harry’s readership with a rudimentary understanding of human psychology. Among Rowling’s more mature character creations is Severus Snape. Arguably the most complex and interesting of all her characters, Snape is also the most hated. He may even surpass Voldemort himself in both regards. Throughout the series the portrayal of Snape develops from a comically intimidating Hogwarts teacher to mysterious double agent,

reminiscent of figures from our own Cold War era. The reader puzzles alongside Harry and his friends as bits and pieces about their least favorite teacher are revealed. Rather than clarifying matters, the more we learn about Snape the muddier the overall picture becomes. For Harry, Snape is inaccessible. While most in the wizarding world are intrigued by Harry, Snape is revolted. It is not immediately clear that Snape's hatred is carried over from his hatred of Harry's father, James. Harry has an incomplete picture of Snape until the very end, and is thus left believing that Snape is the mastermind behind any number of evil plots, and is in cahoots with Voldemort. This is not entirely untrue, but for the most part Harry's accusations against Snape are misguided and misinformed. In many early incidents, such as the Quidditch match where Harry is nearly killed (*Sorcerer's Stone*), it often turns out that Snape was working to save Harry. But why? The hatred Harry perceives from Snape is real, as are Harry's later suspicions of Snape's involvement with the death eaters. And yet Snape is often (and reluctantly) working behind the scenes to help not only Harry, but other characters such as Remus Lupin. At times the reader is forced to side with Harry against Dumbledore's judgment—how could he possibly have such unwavering trust in Snape when Snape is so *obviously* evil? As David Langford puts it in *The End of Harry Potter?*, “Snape is a known double-crosser, a Death Eater who supposedly reformed to become Dumbledore's agent in Voldemort's inner circle, but who could just as easily be using his position for the triple-cross of working for the Dark Lord against Dumbledore” (129). It becomes even more difficult to trust Dumbledore's judgment in the sixth book, where Snape is no longer vaguely associated with the death eaters, but instead regularly among their ranks. It is not until the final book that the picture becomes clear and Snape's complexity is finally made tangible.

We go into the seventh book knowing that Snape hated Harry's father (not without reason), that Snape has the dark mark burned into his arm, and that he killed Dumbledore, but we do not fully understand Snape's motivations until we learn of his love for Harry's mother. Indeed, "he's been built up over many books into too *complicatedly* unpleasant a personality to be reduced at this stage to a simple Bad Guy" (Langford 131). Rowling has made Snape so deliciously complex that even those who wish to dismiss him cannot entirely ignore the mitigating circumstances—Snape has good reason (many, in fact) to behave the way he does, and the fact that this is not always understood by those around him serves to illustrate the shortcomings of perception. What is perceived as evil can instead be any number of things, including mercy (as in the case of Dumbledore's "murder"). It should not be overlooked by the adult reader that Snape's actions seem rather Kevorkian. There is an ethical dilemma in play here because Rowling forces us to ask "when is a murder not a murder?" or more specifically, "when is evil not evil?" As Terri Doughty put it, "this is not an absolute world, and some of Harry's most interesting dilemmas address the difficulty of distinguishing at times between good and evil. It can be hard to know who is friend and who is foe" (Doughty 247). Making Snape so difficult to pin down has the end result of compelling readers to admit that there is no causal link between someone's likability and their intrinsic worth.

As Harry regularly demonstrates, our choices are more significant than to be inherently good or inherently bad. It is easy for the reader to think well of Harry because Rowling spends so much time illustrating that he is innocent at heart and well intentioned. It is harder to see the merit of other character's choices, like Snape. Snape is not magnanimous or emotionally available, but he too is redeemed by his choices. These choices are most

redeeming when they require that the chosen action be the *less* desirable. Snape would prefer to spurn Harry for his likeness to James, but instead chooses to pay tribute (and perhaps restitution) to his unspoken love of Lily by looking out for Harry's wellbeing. Snape's assisted suicide of Dumbledore is most unsavory, but he chooses to honor a promise to a respected friend while at the same time giving Draco Malfoy a second chance (even when he may not have deserved it). Snape is not likeable, but he is self-sacrificing, and that is where the value lies in this character study.

Of course, what would a discussion of good and evil in Harry Potter's world be without the Dark Lord himself? Voldemort is the pinnacle of evil, and his function in the novel (aside from driving the plot, of course) is to serve as Harry's foil. It is not that Voldemort is inherently bad and Harry is inherently good. If this were true, it would not make for a very interesting series. In fact, it is their similarities which are most compelling, and which illustrate Rowling's most powerful lesson for young and old alike. It is also these similarities which are most disturbing for Harry. When Harry meets the memory of Tom Riddle (the young Lord Voldemort) in the Chamber of Secrets, Tom taunts him, "there are strange likenesses between us, after all. Even you must have noticed. Both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even *look* something alike..." (*Chamber of Secrets* 317). From this point on, Harry worries he has inherited more than just the ability to talk to snakes (a decidedly dark art)—he wonders if he too will turn out to be evil. Harry's anxiety reaches new heights in the *Order of the Phoenix*, when he begins feeling Voldemort's emotions and seeing through his eyes when in his dreams. But although Voldemort is quick to point out

their similarities to Harry, he “will likely never acknowledge their primary difference: the strength Harry receives from his conscious decision *not* to become another Heir of Slytherin” (Pharr 64). Indeed, Voldemort never does—and his hubris makes him vulnerable in the end. This is the pinnacle of Rowling’s lesson—it is how Harry chooses to act that sets him apart. It is here that it is useful to return to the scene of mercy between Harry and Wormtail. While it is true that Harry makes the choice to be kind to an enemy, he also makes the choice not to kill another being for his personal satisfaction. In contrast, Voldemort would have killed Wormtail without batting an eye (and would likely have enjoyed it) as he does to anyone who is in his way or no longer of use to him. In contrast, Harry refuses to blast people out of his way, even if it puts him in mortal danger—opting to disarm, rather than stun, Stan Shunpike as he pursues Harry through the air at the start of final book (*Deathly Hallows*). The world, it turns out, is not divided between good and evil, but those who stop to remember Cedric Diggory whenever they “have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy,” like Harry, and those who act only out of a desire to satisfy a personal agenda, like Voldemort (*Goblet of Fire* 724). Both Harry and Voldemort shared bitter childhoods absent of loving parents only to come into their own at Hogwarts, but they reach very different conclusions about how to cope with their bitterness. As one scholar puts it in an analysis of an early scene in the series, “Gradually, Harry comes to know what he has earlier only sensed and what Quirrell will never understand: that good and evil do exist, with choice the thin but crucial wall between them, and power the charm that can make that fragile barrier disappear. This is his school’s greatest lesson” (Pharr 63). Though she had Quirrell in mind, the same applies for

Voldemort.⁷ Voldemort chooses the ‘easy’ route of vengeance on the world he feels has wronged him, while Harry takes care in every choice to do whatever seems right—not just for himself, but for others as well. Readers of all ages can easily surmise which of these characters is more admirable, but it takes a certain amount of maturity to understand how very difficult it can be to be the better man.

Conclusion

Rowling’s genius lies in her ability to raise serious issues against a casual backdrop. She gets the reader to ask, are good and evil necessarily mutually exclusive categories or are they shades, and can one be both at the same time? She does not try to answer these questions, but supplies the raw materials necessary to work the problem out. She colors Harry’s world with diverse and unpredictable characters, plays with our expectations, and throws a few curve balls. She gives us Snape, the double/triple agent, and Voldemort, whose behavior is explained (though not justified) by his history. Even good may not be entirely good, as with Harry who is not always heroic because he chooses to be but who is often heroic because he is “the chosen.” What makes Harry Potter so rich a reading experience is what it has to teach us about the world around us—an imperfect, political, real world. It speaks to Rowling’s craft that she has been able to do this for children and adults simultaneously in a single, monumental effort.

I would be lying if I said that reading Harry Potter was not fun, or exhilarating, or deeply enjoyable. The series ultimately owes its success to these very attributes. What I hope I have shown through my analysis is that a book (or series of them) can be simultaneously

⁷ Quirrell was, after all, being controlled by Voldemort

enthraling and instructive. The books function on many levels and at the most meaningful level force us to question our motivations and acknowledge the power of choice. I am confident that Harry Potter will one day rest comfortably amongst other classic literature of our day. My experience of growing up with Harry—of learning, and changing, and morally evolving—is not unique. Many “Pottermaniacs” (as we have been called) who were once thirteen and awkwardly awaiting the next installment of Rowling’s creation are now adults pursuing higher education degrees in every field and entering the professional world in droves. Though our talents and our paths vary greatly, what we have in common is our love for the boy wizard with the lightning scar. As voraciously as we read each book when they were released, we reread the well worn pages now, with very different eyes, and discover more and more each time. We have connected with other readers, of all ages, and now share at least this one unifying experience. When I began this project, I set out with the task of saying my own goodbye to Harry Potter. Over the last year, I have come to realize that while there will be no more Harry Potter book releases and sleepless summer nights spent devouring them, this is not really goodbye the way I thought it would be. There is a timeless quality to Harry Potter which ensures he is not soon to fade. To borrow the sentiments of a fellow Harry Potter scholar,

Harry Potter is Everyboy and Everyman, the Everyman or Everywoman we all know is inside us, whether we are six, sixteen, or sixty, the Everyman who knows he is special, that great things lie in store for him which others do not yet recognize. We are that boy in the cupboard under the stairs just waiting for our letter from Hogwarts, just waiting for Hagrid to come and take us from the humdrum and unjust Dursleys to an

exciting, magical world in which our unique heroism allows us to catch the Golden Snitch, look evil full in the face, and win. (Grimes 122)

I am proud to count myself among the many adults not afraid to embrace an elaborate fantasy and recognize it for what it really is—a reflection of our own very real world, which we must navigate equipped only with the power of choice.

- *July 31, 2008*

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