

Harry's World: An Exploration of J.K. Rowling's Social and Political Agenda in the *Harry Potter* Series

Erin Vollmer

Faculty Sponsor: Richard Gappa, Department of English

ABSTRACT

Over the years, the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling has grown in popularity, becoming one of the most read and most criticized pieces of children's literature to date. Interestingly, the series has not only gained popularity with children, but also their adult counterparts. As a result of its adult success, Harry Potter has attracted more and more scholars to pursue serious literary analysis, most frequently exploring themes such as death and religion. However, the focus of this research is on the intertextual parallels of the numerous hierarchical structures found in the Harry Potter series, examining how these hierarchies develop the social and racial themes in the story and vice versa. A further purpose is to determine if there is a correlation between the power structures found in the series and our own, drawing on secondary criticisms and theory for support. Above all, although the series should not be reduced to "this versus that," there is sufficient evidence to argue that a conflict of materialistic versus altruistic values is at work in the *Harry Potter* series. Therefore, the examination of race, hierarchy, and power assists in the recognition of the social and political systems at work in the series.

Keywords: J.K. Rowling, Hierarchy, Materialism

INTRODUCTION

When a skinny boy with black hair, green eyes, and a telltale scar appeared on the scene in 1997, nobody could have predicted the significant impact this seemingly insignificant boy would have on the world. Now, a decade later, the names of J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter are household names, creating a cultural phenomenon that extends not only to children, but also to their adult counterparts. Rowling's unique mixture of legend, myth, theory, and fantasy is refreshing, opening up endless opportunities for analysis and contemplation. Indeed, Rowling, like her most popular character's namesake, is a master "potter," crafting her novels in a seemingly more complex manner as her series progresses. However, there have been sophisticated structures of social and political themes embedded in the story since the first novel in the series. Only now, on the verge of the series' completion, can these themes be seen at work in their continuity. Although there is enough text available for debate and critical analysis to ensue, it is important to note that only with the installment of the seventh and final book can the series be examined justly as a totality.

POWER AND PREJUDICE

To date, the central conflict in the *Harry Potter* series stems from the ever-present juxtaposition of the Muggles, or non-magic people, and the Wizarding community. From the beginning, Muggles have been portrayed in unfavorable light; the likes of the Dursleys, Harry Potter's disagreeable guardians, are the first examples we are given of Muggles. In addition, it is clear that the majority of the Wizarding community holds itself above Muggles. There are some wizards who do not necessarily hate or despise Muggles, but rather are fascinated by the Muggle's lack of intelligence; that is, their lack of *wizarding* intelligence. Indeed, some wizards prefer to study Muggles—similar to how gorillas are studied by primatologists—and examine their inferior intelligence and ability to cope within their environment. The most notable example of this attitude is reflected in Mr. Weasley. One of the first characteristics we learn about Mr. Weasley is that he is "crazy about everything to do with Muggles"ⁱ. Even though Mr. Weasley does not exhibit an extreme form of prejudice, he still expresses a condescending attitude, noting "how many ways Muggles have found of getting along without magic"ⁱⁱ. Certainly this statement emphasizes an appreciation of the Muggle's ingenuity, but the fact remains that Mr. Weasley seems far more prone to study Muggles as opposed to considering them his equals. It is important to note, however, that Mr. Weasley would never intentionally cause harm to a Muggle. Indeed, Mr. Weasley's job at the Ministry of Magic is in The Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, *protecting* Muggles from artifacts that have been bewitched by wizards to cause harm or mischief, also known as "Muggle-baiting"ⁱⁱⁱ. The concept of Muggle-baiting is seen very clearly at the Quidditch

World Cup in Book IV, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. For the first time in the series, we see Death Eaters, followers of Lord Voldemort, publicly using magic to harass a family of Muggles, suspending them in the air and throwing them around like rag dolls. Whereas Ron Weasley insists “that’s sick”^{iv}, the Death Eaters take no greater pleasure than in the torture of Muggles. This is a pivotal point in the exploration of race and hierarchy in the series. Cynics would say it is human nature to place those who harbor prejudices into positions of power; in fact, from this point of view, it is not unfair to say that prejudice is a requirement of power. In other words, the structure of power demands that someone or some group be considered less superior than another. Therefore, the Death Eaters, who take a sadistic approach in their treatment of Muggles, are discernible as figures of power. The danger of this combination—power and violence—is reminiscent of past dictatorial regimes, such as that of Adolf Hitler. Another instance of Hitler *déjà vu* arises with the increasing emphasis on blood purity in the later books of the *Harry Potter* series.

THE WIZARD’S CASTE SYSTEM

Elaine Ostry, in her critical article “Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision in J.K. Rowling’s Fairy Tales,” maintains that Rowling teaches a lesson that people should be judged “by their merits, actions, and morals rather than their race”^v. Although Rowling may demonstrate this ideal in her characterization of Harry and his friends, it is nonetheless an *idealistic* perception; thus, Rowling also includes familiar controversial issues such as racism and violence. Indeed, the *Harry Potter* books would not generate so much criticism if it were not for the realism that Rowling embeds within a fantastical and entertaining plot. In other words, *Harry Potter* can be read not only as a captivating journey into a magical world, but also as a realistic commentary on human experience. As such, the ideal of judging a person based on “merits, actions, and morals”—as presented by *Harry Potter*—is juxtaposed with the oppositional view that only if one is pure-blood can he or she be granted any sort of high-level status in the Wizarding world. This is the view implied by the actions of the Death Eaters, and very blatantly stated by characters such as the Malfoys—who represent a corrupt, albeit privileged upper-class mentality. From this perspective, there is a clear caste system at work in the Wizarding world of *Harry Potter*. At the top of this distorted system are the purebloods, families who descend from long lines of witches and wizards. Next are the half-bloods and mixed breeds. These are wizards and witches who have one parent that is a witch or wizard, and one parent that is either Muggle-born or another species, such as a giant (Hagrid) or a Veela (Fleur Delacour). Just below (or far below the half-bloods, according to purebloods such as the Malfoys) are two rare circumstances: the completely Muggle-born witch or wizard and the Squib. Hermione Granger is the most well-known example of a witch who was born to two parents of Muggle origin, and she is arguably the most intelligent witch in her class. On the other hand, there is Argus Filch, caretaker at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who was born to a wizard family, but who possesses no magical ability. In addition to Muggle-born wizards and Squibs, there are “blood traitors,” pure-blood wizards, such as the Weasleys, who support Muggle-born witches and wizards like Hermione. The “traitors” are regarded by wizard “purists” to be at the same level as or below Muggles.

RACISM AND THE CREATION OF THE ULTIMATE VILLAIN

With so much emphasis on these “blood battles” in the stories, the hypocrisy of the Death Eater’s system of beliefs becomes very evident. After all, their leader is not pure-blood. Lord Voldemort, formerly Tom Marvolo Riddle, is the offspring of a witch mother and a Muggle father. However, while still living under the name Tom Riddle, Voldemort brutally murdered his living Muggle relatives, shielding the fact that he is a half-blood. Perhaps, then, Voldemort’s followers are not aware of his questionable background. On the other hand, they may choose only to see the fact that he is a descendant of the great Salazar Slytherin, co-founder of Hogwarts and supporter of a pure-blood society. It is also possible that Voldemort uses the murder of his Muggle family as his way of “buying” status in a pure-blood society, viewing blood sacrifices as his payment—a parallel to materialism that will be explored later. Voldemort further acknowledges the necessity of his father’s death, saying “...and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death...”^{vi}. That is, Voldemort murdered his father and grandparents; therefore, he has relinquished his Muggle blood through their deaths. As proof of his new status, Tom Riddle sheds his name and utilizes the pseudonym Lord Voldemort, solidifying his status among pure-blood wizards.

J.K. Rowling acknowledges that Voldemort is “someone who is incredibly power hungry. Racist, really”^{vii}. Thus, Voldemort’s racism is relative to his desire for power. Voldemort knows that, although he is incredibly skilled at magic, he must have followers with status in the Wizarding world to successfully implement his reign of terror. Not surprisingly, those wizards with status are also the most wealthy and most racist wizards—notably the Malfoys. Again, the power/prejudice structure is seen here. In addition to racist attitudes, Voldemort further

parallels his followers in both his and their concerns with personal gain. For instance, in Book VI, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Dumbledore describes Voldemort's followers as "a mixture of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty"^{viii}. In all cases, Voldemort's followers are only interested in their *individual* needs, and what they can get if they aid Voldemort in what he wants. The question, however, is what does Voldemort want? Ostry argues that "the heroes fight against those wizards who possess a vision of racial purity"^{ix}. Therefore, it is implied that Voldemort and his Death Eater's are only in pursuit of "racial purity." This certainly seems likely when, in Book V, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Sirius Black, Harry's godfather and a pure-blood wizard, explains to Harry the reason why most of the Black family supported Voldemort. Sirius says, "they thought Voldemort had the right idea...getting rid of Muggle-borns and having purebloods in charge"^x. While Voldemort's policies may clearly parallel Hitler's in terms of racism, violence, and power, the termination of the Muggle race, by a Holocaust, is not Voldemort's ultimate goal. Voldemort realizes, like many other wizards, that there are not enough purebloods in existence to purify the Wizarding race. As Hermione points out in Book VI, "[t]he Death Eaters can't all be pure-blood, there aren't enough pure-blood wizards left"^{xi}. Sirius echoes this point in Book V, saying "[t]he pure-blood families are all interrelated...there are hardly any of us left"^{xii}. Voldemort, as a power-hungry individual, would not be satisfied with the annihilation of Muggle-borns; no, as Dumbledore points out in Book VI, Voldemort is interested in his power "to frighten, to punish, to control"^{xiii}. Therefore, it would do Voldemort no good to kill off Muggle-borns because he would be left with a very small group of people to control. Thus, Voldemort is not meant to be portrayed exclusively as a Hitler figure, but as the ultimate villain, a combination of multiple past and present political and social evils.

HARRY'S PARADOXICAL EXISTENCE

Voldemort and his Death Eaters' ascension toward ultimate power, although terrible, is also profoundly characteristic of a bourgeois society, exercising power and wealth over the proletariat. Voldemort clearly places individual desires ahead of the community's, therefore, distinct class divisions are inevitable based on his ideology. In contrast, Harry and his friends compose a communal society, working together for the common good. In her essay, "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority," Rebecca Stephens points out that Voldemort as "the singular power of the evildoer"^{xiv} has thus far been defeated by Harry because "[Harry's] is always a group effort"^{xv}. Although Harry's actions can be categorized as a "group effort," his existence is paradox. He represents both community and individuality. He is the focal point of his altruistic community; yet, he has been "marked" as an individual since infancy. Despite these apparent binaries, Harry reconciles his dual nature by uniting with his friends against Voldemort. Therefore, although he is an individual by default, Harry's true mentality rests more heavily on community values. He makes this explicitly clear in Book VI when he realizes he could be the next to die and responds, "[b]ut if it is...I'll make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it"^{xvi}. Harry will always act for the good of others, sacrificing himself if necessary.

A MATERIALISTIC CONFLICT

Harry's allies in his fight against evil are the members of the Order of the Phoenix, a secret organization revealed in Book V. There is no individual leader in the Order; everyone cooperates to achieve a common goal: to prevent Voldemort from becoming too powerful and once again controlling the Wizarding world. In short, the Order represents an ideal altruistic society. There is a spirituality that connects Harry, a savior-like figure, and the members of the Order; they are intuitively united to prevent the unjust hegemony that is inevitable if Voldemort assumes complete control of the Wizarding world. As such, the conflict becomes one of materialistic values, represented by Voldemort, versus spirituality and morality, represented by Harry and the Order. However, just because Harry represents the spiritual, the good in society, does not mean that Voldemort becomes materialistic by default. The proof of Voldemort's materialistic nature—his predisposition for collecting capital goods—is displayed quite blatantly in the text. In Book VI, Dumbledore informs Harry that "the young Tom Riddle liked to collect trophies. You saw the box of stolen articles...taken from victims of his bullying behaviors"^{xvii}. Not only is Voldemort guilty of amassing goods, but also of stealing and bullying—acts lacking in virtue.

Harry's recognition of Voldemort's materialism is a crucial moment in Harry's development. He is now able to see the negative connotations attached to an emphasis on material wealth. That is, Voldemort both steals these goods *and* uses them as Horcruxes, retaining pieces of his corrupt soul so he will be immortal until the Horcruxes have been destroyed. The message being portrayed is certainly provocative: Horcruxes, or material goods, are

“[d]ark stuff, very dark indeed”^{xviii}. The juxtaposition of evil and material wealth reveals the flaws of a materialistic ideology; thus, Harry rebels directly against this concept.

POWER AND ETHICS

Harry’s rebellion, however, is not only an act against Voldemort and his cohorts, but also an act in response to a corrupt government—a government that should help to suppress a dictator on the rise. The government in question is, of course, the Ministry of Magic, the Wizarding world’s existing governmental body. Although Draco Malfoy’s father, who works for the Ministry of Magic, is undeniably corrupt, we do not really see this corruption reflected in the Ministry’s proceedings until the end of Book IV and most of Book V. In order to serve its best interests, the Ministry chooses to deny the return of Voldemort after Harry witnesses his “rebirth” in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Indeed, the Ministry is willing to go to extreme lengths to portray an appearance of control, utilizing both its power over the most popular media outlet, *The Daily Prophet*, as well as placing a particularly crooked Ministry official in Hogwarts. The Ministry, through its recruitment of an interim professor, Dolores Umbridge, is able to enact unfair ordinances within Hogwarts, challenging, for example, the students’ right to free speech. Only at the end of Book V, after the return of Voldemort is inevitable, will the Ministry acknowledge his existence. Never, however, does the Ministry take responsibility for its severe breakdown of ethics—its withholding of critical knowledge from the people. As a result, Harry loses faith in the existing government, the Ministry of Magic, and opts to fight for a new system. Therefore, when Rufus Scrimgeour, newly elected Minister of Magic in Book VI, tells Harry it is Harry’s “duty to be used by the Ministry”^{xix}, Harry refuses to become the Ministry’s new poster boy. He will not stand behind a government that is possibly as corrupt and materialistic as the evil regime of Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

CONCLUSION

Although Harry embodies the ideals of a classless, virtuous society, his utopian society will never exist. Human nature has always, and will always, deny the emergence of a perfect society. Therefore, it would be uncharacteristic of Rowling’s style, as a magical *realist*, to end her controversial series with the onset of a utopian society. As such, one might infer that Rowling intentionally leaves certain issues unresolved to safeguard against a “fairy tale” ending. For instance, Hermione’s S.P.E.W (Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare) movement, started in Book IV, was ridiculed or ignored by most everyone, including the elves. Ron sums up the general consensus held by the wizards when he tries to enlighten Hermione, saying “Hermione—open your ears...They. Like. It. They *like* being enslaved!”^{xx}. Aside from Dobby the house-elf, the lone voice of freedom in the group, the other house-elves respond to talk of freedom and working for pay as something that is “rude and embarrassing”^{xxi}. Although Hermione abandons her organization and views it as an unsuccessful endeavor, Rowling *is* successful at demonstrating the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of changing an entire system of beliefs. Indeed, literature often critiques society, receiving harsh criticism along the way. As a result, what we are left with at the end of Harry Potter, although portrayed in a magical and fantastical world, must be true to realism. Therefore, prejudice will still exist, some will still place the individual ahead of the community, and hierarchy will not be wiped out. Perhaps, then, it is best to conclude that Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series will ultimately demonstrate what society should strive for: harmony that can only exist with diversity.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (New York: Scholastic, 1999), 31. Hereafter cited as “Chamber,” including the page number(s) referenced.

ⁱⁱ Chamber, 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chamber, 38.

^{iv} J.K. Rowling *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Scholastic, 2000), 120. Hereafter cited as “Goblet,” including the page number(s) referenced.

- ^v Elaine Ostry, "Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision in J.K. Rowling's Fairy Tales," in *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays*, ed. Giselle Liza Anatol (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), 93. Hereafter cited as "Reading HP," including essay name, author, and page number(s) referenced.
- ^{vi} Goblet, 646.
- ^{vii} Reading HP: J.K. Rowling qtd. in Elaine Ostry's "Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision in J.K. Rowling's Fairy Tales," 93.
- ^{viii} J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Scholastic, 2005), 361-2. Hereafter cited as "HBP," including page number(s) referenced.
- ^{ix} Reading HP: Ostry, Elaine. "Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision in J.K. Rowling's Fairy Tales," 89.
- ^x J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003), 112. Hereafter cited as "Order," including page number(s) referenced.
- ^{xi} HBP, 242.
- ^{xii} Order, 113.
- ^{xiii} HBP, 276.
- ^{xiv} Reading HP: Rebecca Stephens, "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority," 58.
- ^{xv} Reading HP: Rebecca Stephens, "Harry and Hierarchy: Book Banning as a Reaction to the Subversion of Authority," 58.
- ^{xvi} HBP, 77.
- ^{xvii} HBP, 277.
- ^{xviii} HBP, 496.
- ^{xix} HBP, 346.
- ^{xx} Goblet, 224.
- ^{xxi} Goblet, 378.