

## On the Morality of Harry Potter

Read by children and adults everywhere the *Harry Potter* series is truly beloved; beloved on a level that much of today's literature has not reached. While the books were written with a younger audience in mind, it is widely popular among adults, making it a truly unique piece of literature. To the casual reader the books lack a great amount of complexity, only seeing a relatable and charming piece of art. Despite this surface simplicity, the series is actually incredibly intricate. JK Rowling has put an impressive amount of depth in the world she created; a depth that is unseen by most readers. A lot of thought is put into every single part of her books: the characters, the setting, the plot itself, and an enormously vast history or backstory.

Included in this, JK Rowling put in a great deal of religious beliefs – a fact that would probably anger many of the more religious factions. *Harry Potter* has always been under debate in the religious community. The more conservative religious groups accuse the series of promoting witchcraft, satanic beliefs, and pagan actions; while the more liberal groups argue that the series is just fiction and does not have an agenda. *Harry Potter* is actually filled with ideas that would be greatly valued by religious folks, but is mixed in with these pagan ideas, such as witchcraft and magic, keeping these religious factions from seeing the deeper meaning. Through this review, I plan to take a look at these different religious beliefs and ideas that are included in the *Harry Potter* series and analyze how they affect the storyline, the characters, and the readers. In addition to this, I'd like to address how the different beliefs work along with the magic in the story,

debunking the idea that *Harry Potter*, as well as other literary works involving magic, promotes witchcraft, paganism, and evil in today's world.

Since the release of *The Philosopher's Stone* the *Harry Potter* series has received both criticism and praise from all sorts of religious factions. The series is largely praised, yet generally we hear about the criticisms more. The ones heard about the most are the extreme Evangelical, or Fundamentalist, Christian groups criticizing the books for promoting witchcraft. There has been much debate over whether or not the series should be allowed in scholarly settings; many private schools have gone as far as banning it. Some far right Christians like Pastor David J. Myer believe things like "These books were taken into homes everywhere with a real evil spirit following each copy to curse those homes" (Sedlmayr, 119). According to some far right religious sects, *Harry Potter* normalizes the belief in magic and satanic rituals.

There are some who do not necessarily believe that, while the books themselves may not be purely evil, they do act as a "starter drug" for dangerous types of magic and witchcraft (119). Pastor Mike Norris says that *Harry Potter*, a "starting place for evil", is like giving a child a cigarette and the child eventually becoming addicted to things like crack cocaine and heroine. (119) The idea is that a child will tire of pretending to use the spells that exist in the *Harry Potter* series and will go out in search of other spells to use, therefore being caught in the web of the occult. Caryl Matrisciana, producer of *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged*, claims that, despite the *Harry Potter* series' clearly fantastic take on magic, the books actually show very real forms of magic (James). Many true practitioners of magic have dismissed this as false. Yes, there are some forms of

magic used in the books that reflect real life magic, but the average user of magic does not use much of this.

An argument by Christians is that it promotes the religion of Wicca, thus keeping the books in schools violates Separation of Church and State. Actual members of the Wiccan religion have spoken out against this, stating that most of the forms of magic displayed in *Harry Potter* have very little in common with true Wiccan practices (Robinson). According Caryl Matrisciana the broomstick is used by Wiccans to symbolize an erect penis. This is false, for Wiccans only use broomsticks “as an instrument for cleaning and purifying, not [as] a phallic symbol” (Robinson). In addition to this, she also connects pointed hats and the lightning symbol to Wiccan rituals, yet neither is used in any way. J.K. Rowling, herself, has further disproved that any sort of religion, like Wicca, is involved by stating that she purposefully avoided incorporating specific religions in her works. When the series ended, we can see that this was only true within the first several books, and the Christian undertones are apparent in the last book.

There is a belief that *Harry Potter* is putting children in to the world of the Occult and Satanism, focusing on the magic used. In fact, the magic in *Harry Potter* is vastly different than the ritualistic, taboo magic used by the Occult. It has been compared to the fantasy magic used in Tolkien and Lewis’ work. It is highly imaginative and largely removed from the real world. The magic in all three of these worlds obviously was influenced by various real world practices of magic – Wiccan, the Occult, astrology, and clairvoyance – yet none of these references are significant enough to actually turn someone into a Satan-serving, planet-gazing, Wiccan. These references keep a sort of reality and enrich the literature.

There is a clear case of good versus evil in the *Harry Potter* series. There are many critics who will deny this, although if they had read the books their ideas might be different. Those who do agree that this is apparent in the series will argue that it really doesn't matter. Due to the instructions in the Bible, all magic is bad; it does not matter if the magic is used for good or evil, it is inherently abhorrent. The good magic users, to them, are "made to look so innocent" (James). They also claim, that the distinction between Muggles and Wizards is dangerous. The non-magic users are looked down upon while "Good finds itself in the occult" (James). This is not really accurate; the only instances of Muggles being seen as bad revolve around Harry's aunt and uncle. But they are not bad because they are Muggles; they are just mean spirited people.

One of the more extreme beliefs is that the *Harry Potter* series is actual ushering in the Apocalypse. Pastor Joseph Chambers states "the Harry Potter series is a creation of hell helping prepare the younger generation to welcome the Biblical prophesies of demons and devils led by Lucifer himself" (Sedlmayr, 119). According to some, the series is "putting Satan's key in the lock of your children's hearts" (119).

In opposition to many of these statements, *Harry Potter* is actually an incredibly good influence on today's children. Despite much opposition from Evangelical Christians, the series is actually filled with Christian values. Author of *The Gospel According to Harry Potter* Connie Neal believes that "general themes of each book uphold and promote foundational beliefs and Judeo-Christian values emphasized throughout the Bible" (123). Reverend Dr. John Killinger states "The Potter stories, far from being 'wicked' or 'Satanic' ... are in fact narratives of robust faith and morality" (Murphy, 20) He even goes as far as saying that the mythology in *Harry Potter* would be

impossibly without the Christian viewpoint of the world. The idea of good versus evil, in his eyes, did not exist until Jesus came to earth (Murphy, 22). This is not quite accurate, for in Christian theology “there should be no struggle at all between good and evil... [because] there is only one God, and he is omnipotent... [there] can[‘t] be, any real conflict between good and evil” (Murphy, 23).

There are those who believe that simply reading and understanding the *Harry Potter* series will positively affect you in a very Christian way. There is the idea of a “lived religion”: “The practice of everyday life that has religious or moral implications with or without a person being conscious of it” (Apostolides). The Christian ideas that are woven throughout the series are learned by the readers and acted out. The story displays values that are present in the Gospels. There are even people who have gotten religion directly out of the *Harry Potter* series (Alderton). If the idea of “lived religion” is true, then this could affect the way readers act in a positive manner.

Some Christian supporters of the *Harry Potter* series even say it can be a stepping-stone to “more “Christian” books, and from there to a conversation about the Christian faith in general (Murphy, 21). There are many fantasy stories that are similar to *Harry Potter* but have a Christian backbone. Reading these can ready their souls for the actual Christian message.

To combat the Satanic or pagan symbols that are supposedly apparent in *Harry Potter*, there is also a plethora of Christian symbolism in the series. To start, the phoenix, which dies and rises from the ashes, has actually posed as a symbol of Christ and his resurrection. The idea of Gryffindor and Slytherin is also influenced by symbolism in the

Bible. Gryffindor and Christ, both of which are associated with the lion, are good, while Slytherin and Satan, both associated with the snake, are considered evil (Sedlmayr 123).

Harry Potter and Jesus Christ have actually been compared to each other quite a bit. It is clear that Rowling's religious background has seeped into her writing, and this is apparent in her development of the character of Harry Potter. Abigail BeauSeigneur, after reading the final book in the series, states:

What appears to be a book about witchcraft is a story about Jesus Christ . . . The story of Harry Potter is, and always was, a Christian allegory – a fictionalized modern day adaptation of the life of Christ, intended to introduce his character to a new generation. (Murphy, 26)

The similarities between Harry and Jesus start very early in each of their lives: their births. Someone evil tries to kill each of them due to a prophecy that the infant would be their downfall. The next similarity is the supernatural powers they both possessed. It seems hypocritical to condemn Harry for doing feats of magic when Jesus does very similar things.

The focus on love in both the *Harry Potter* series and the Bible is one of the biggest similarities. In the Bible it is stated how love is above all and how God is love. In *Harry Potter* it is driven into the reader time and time again that love is the greatest magic of all; love is the only thing that can defeat evil. If you pair this with the idea that "God is love" then the books actually claim that God is the only thing that can defeat evil. Through his belief in love, Harry is able to defeat Voldemort, the ultimate representation

of evil. “Therefore, it could be argued that Harry Potter is “born of God and knows God” (Murphy, 31).

The sacrificial death of Harry Potter may be the one biggest similarity between *Harry Potter* and Christian tradition. Harry sacrifices himself to save all others. After his death he even goes to a sort of limbo dimension: “King’s Cross.” Now the similarities to the Christian religion here are extremely blatant. “King’s Cross” can be seen as Jesus’ cross, which is the only way to Heaven according to Christian belief; this is a pretty obvious connection.

Harry then is resurrected. This resurrection is not quite done in the same way as Jesus’, but it is clear that this is where Rowling got her inspiration. The resurrection allowed him to finally defeat the ultimate evil and save his comrades. Harry as a savior is doing the saving on a much smaller scale, but there is no doubt that he acts as a sort of Christ figure among the students and professors at Hogwarts.

I think a big problem with much of the criticism directed towards the *Harry Potter* series is the fact that a large majority of these critics have not even read the books. The ones that have read them have only read the first or the first few. I think reading the series would seriously change the way a lot of people look at the *Harry Potter* series. Not only that, it would make the ones who still oppose look as if they actually know what they’re talking about. The fact that many of these outspoken preachers or pastors have not read them really hurts the view people have of their opinions.

Much of the debate around the *Harry Potter* series has become a sort of political issue. Within churches, especially far right Evangelical Christian churches, once a leader

figure states the dangers of *Harry Potter* then the entire church feels like they must oppose the series as well. If anyone reads the books or likes the movies then they are, in many cases, looked down upon and deemed lesser Christians. I have seen the books and movies thrown out because someone was told of the evils of the series.

Despite the clearly Christian basis to some of the plot in the *Harry Potter* series, many people applaud the lack of religion in the series. No character in the book seems to have any sort of belief in a divine being and this is exactly what J.K. Rowling wanted. “There are no churches, no other religious institutions, nobody prays or meditates, and even funerals are non-religious affairs” (LaVaque-Manty). This gets across the point that morality and good works can come from those who are not religious. She really stresses this in some of her interviews as well. The idea that morality and goodness does not always go hand-in-hand with religion is very important to her. This is something that more religious folks would probably use as a reason to hate the *Harry Potter* series, but keeping all religion out of the books keeps Rowling’s hands clean when it comes to religious conversion. If reading the *Harry Potter* series really makes someone change their religion, then it is because they choose to do so, not because of her religious influence.

Far right religious conservatives have their beliefs, and they have a right to that. While that is true, many of their complaints against the *Harry Potter* series are entirely unfounded and do not have much support to back them up. Many critics bluntly claim that they have not read the books, therefore discrediting their opinions in the eyes of anyone who puts much thought into it at all. They claim that it promotes interest in the Occult, Satanism, and Wiccan groups. I am sure there are some cases where people have



turned to real life witchcraft because of the *Harry Potter* series, but these cases are few and far between. These few people must have also had interests and knowledge about these things before they read the series.

Most of the arguments against *Harry Potter* can easily be debunked. The magic is not representative of real world magic, and we hear this from real world magic users. The symbols used in *Harry Potter* are not representative of the occult or Wiccan religions. In fact, there is quite a lot in *Harry Potter* that is similar to Christianity and promotes Christian beliefs, yet this was not Rowling's goal. Her goal was actually to keep all religion out and focus on the good being done by good people.

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