NATASHA STERLIN

The Iconography of Harry Potter

Prepared For: Professor Reeves Medaglia-Miller

“Do not pity the dead, Harry. Pity the living, and above all those who live without love.”

This quote was not taken from an ancient proverb proclaiming the importance of love, nor is it from an historical civil rights leader. This quote in fact is from a children’s book. A book, however that has singlehandedly changed the world of literature around the globe.

Harry Potter has become a cultural phenomenon that has either touched or offended millions. Its immense popularity has broken many records, the fifth installment HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX was the fastest selling book of all time, selling a record breaking one million copies on the first day of release.

From the imagination of a British French teacher, J.K Rowling, the series has been the topic of great analysis by scholarly professors, religious leaders, and equality right groups. Although many perceive Harry Potter as the anti-Christ, and mirroring a fascist society, to millions of children, young adults, and adults alike, Harry Potter has taught the importance of the triumph of good over evil in life and within us, which makes him and his world an icon.

Semiotics and Harry Potter

The world of Harry Potter consists of many individuals who practice magic in school, work, and the government. The individual this book is based on is a Caucasian individual, with black hair, glasses, and a lightning shaped scar on his forehead. As we delve deeper into this world, we can note that this is Harry Potter, “the boy who lived”, the symbol of good, and the necessary journey toward morality in the fight against evil. Another significant character out of the Harry Potter stories is characterized as a tall, skeletal individual, with a flat face, and red slit eyes. Lord Voldemort represents Harry’s enemy; evil, in this epic war, who also fears death. Throughout the series, Harry and his friends Ron, and Hermione, have been in a constant battle against Voldemort and the demons within themselves. Particularly in book five, HARRY POTTER AND THE ORDER OF THE PHOENIX, Voldemort, who allows Harry to see glimpses of what Voldemort himself, is thinking and doing, possesses Harry from time to time.

1 (Rowling J. K., 2007)

2 (Wikipedia, Harry Potter, 2007)

3 (Wikipedia, Harry Potter, 2007)

4 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, 1997)

5 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 2000)
“At once, Harry’s scar burned white-hot, as though the old wound had burst open again-and unbiden, unwanted, but terrifyingly strong, there rose within Harry a hatred so powerful he felt, for that instant, he would like nothing better than to strike-to bite- to sink his fangs into the man before him.”  

Harry first believe he was only seeing into Voldemort’s mind, he later realized that Voldemort was also seeing into Harry’s as well, playing on his fears, insecurities, and wishes, eventually using this power to lure to him by showing his godfather being tortured. In the quote above, Harry was angry with Dumbledore, his head master and mentor, for not paying enough attention to him as he was going through this overt problem, and of course, the woes of puberty. He envisioned himself as a snake (Voldemort’s beloved pet) attacking Dumbledore.

During Voldemort and Harry’s encounter, Voldemort possesses Harry, urging Dumbledore to kill them both.

“Kill me now, Dumbledore...if death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy...’

Let the pain stop, thought Harry...let him kill us and I’ll see Sirius again.

And as Harry’s heart filled with emotion, the creatures’ coil loosened...”

As Harry began to think of sacrificing himself in turn to kill Voldemort, realizing that death is not something to fear as Voldemort does, the creature let him loose. As Harry began to think of his late godfather whom he would meet on the other side, and the love he would feel again, something that Voldemort never experienced, he released him, and Harry has won one of the many battles he eventually has to face.

To many people, Harry Potter symbolizes a racist, anti-religious, fascist society.

The Guardian alleged that Potter was also racist - a patrician swine to the poor house elves...

The enslavement of the house elves has caused many readers to raise an eyebrow as to what message this may be sending younger audiences. In the fourth book, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Winky, a house elf who was recently fired from her ‘master’ becomes frighteningly depressed, as she had to learn to live a life without serving him. In the story, the house elves sole purpose is to please the people they are working for, once they feel that they are not useful, or betrayed their master in some way, the begin to hurt themselves.

6 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, 2003)

7 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, 2003)

8 (Liddle, 2007)

9 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 2000)
“‘You can’t have met many decent wizards,’” Said Harry, trying to cheer him up.

Dobby shook his head. Then without warning, he leapt up and started banging his head furiously on the window, shouting ‘Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!’

‘Dobby had to punish himself sir... Dobby almost spoke ill of his family, sir...’\textsuperscript{10}

Such as the use of ‘pure-blood,’ or ‘Half-blood’, Harry Potter’s world mirrors our world, where there is imbedded systematic racism. The use of ‘mud blood’ for example, is an offensive term and is what Hermione; Harry’s best friend is called, because she was born to parents who do not practice magic.

“The expressions “pure-blood,” “half-blood,” and “Muggle-born” have been coined by people to whom these distinctions matter, and express their originators’ prejudices. ... If you think this is far-fetched, look at some of the real charts the Nazis used to show what constituted "Aryan" or "Jewish" blood...”\textsuperscript{11}

Although Harry Potter does have numerous references to racism, he and his friends do fight to change it. For example, Hermione becomes an activist for the house elves. \textsuperscript{12}

Harry Potter has been referenced to anti-Christian or Muslim because they conflict with their teachings. The practice of Witchcraft, and magic, is believed to be a disgrace to God. \textsuperscript{13,14}

“There shall not be found among you anyone who ...practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD, and because of these abominations the LORD your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not appointed such for you.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Deut. 18:10-14}

However, numerous religious studies have however admitted that the overriding theme of the triumph of good over evil, has taught their children a valuable lesson, and compared Harry Potter’s self-sacrificial ways to a religious savior such as Jesus.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{10} (Rowling J., \textit{Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets}, 1998)
  \item \textsuperscript{11} (Goldstein, 2007)
  \item \textsuperscript{12} (Rowling J., \textit{Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince}, 2005)
  \item \textsuperscript{13} (Wikipedia, Religious debates over the Harry Potter series, 2007)
  \item \textsuperscript{14} (Page 10 of essay, taken from Wikipedia, Religious debates over the Harry Potter series, 2007)
  \item \textsuperscript{15} (Translation, 1983)
\end{itemize}
“It is beyond doubt that Harry was made to resemble a young savior. Upon his birth, people try to kill him, he is forever subjected to injustice but always supernaturally manages to prevail and save others.”

The lightening shape scar on Harry’s forehead has been linked to the Flag of Britain Union of Fascists, as their magical society has been compared to a patriarchal, fascist one where one prevailing government or Voldemort, forcibly rules the land without consent from the public.

“Harry Potter is, as the French newspaper Libération puts it, a “sexist neoconservative autocrat... inherently capitalist”, who exists in an environment where “social sciences are as useless and obsolete as state regulation.”

The book seems to have a largely political undertone. The seventh book, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, society is a clear mirror of Nazi-Germany where ethnic cleansing runs rampant. The witches and wizards, who were not born of magical parents, are banned, punished or killed, as Voldemort sees ‘pure blood’ wizards as superior. Many parents begin to wonder, ‘is this really want we want our children to read?’

However, the theme of triumph over evil again comes to play, and Harry with the help from his best friends does destroy Voldemort and his totalitarianism society; it once again becomes a world of acceptance.

J.K. Rowling states that the core message she is trying to instill in her story is “…a prolong argument for tolerance, a prolong plea for an end of bigotry…”

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16 (Wikipedia, Religious debates over the Harry Potter series, 2007)
17 (Wikipedia, Politics of Harry Potter, 2007)
18 (Page 10 of essay, taken from Wikipedia, Politics of Harry Potter, 2007)
19 (Page 10 of essay, taken from Bryon, 2007)
20 (Liddle, 2007)
21 (Rowling J. K., 2007)
22 (Wikipedia, Politics of Harry Potter, 2007)
Maslow’s Hierarchy and Harry Potter

The Harry Potter series have touched upon many levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, such as ‘safety and security’, as the wizard world is in peril when Voldemort comes into power, and ‘social belonging’ as Harry’s best friends Ron and Hermione stick with him until the end. However, the level that stood out predominately to me was the last level, ‘self-actualization’, and Harry Potter’s overriding theme of the importance of love in the battle against evil. When Harry was a year old, Voldemort killed his parents by using a very powerful killing curse, a curse that failed to kill Harry himself. This was because of his mother. She had used an ancient spell that protected Harry with the power of her love. This guarded Harry in his first year at school, Hogwarts, from a teacher who, with Voldemort’s soul, tried to kill him.

“Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark...to be loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever...”23

Harry, at eleven years old, did not realize how important love was to his survival; he eventually learned that with his mother’s sacrifice, and his friends support, he could accomplish anything.

Self-actualization also incorporates acceptance, which is another large theme of the Harry Potter books.

“You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow up to be.”24

Harry learns that acceptance needs to take place before he can have a chance to vanquish his enemy. Dumbledore teaches Harry that Voldemort has never learned to accept his parents, or those who were different from him, he has therefore never learned to love, which resulted in his demise. This was something that Dumbledore said was Voldemort’s greatest weakness. 25

23 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, 1997)

24 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, 2000)

25 (Rowling J., Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, 2003)
Marshall McLuhan and Harry Potter

In many cases, Harry Potter is seen as an extension of the mind or of the conscience. In his constant battle of what is good, and what is not, Harry leans that he must not become entrapped in his own self-pity, loathing, or obsession, as Voldemort had several times. In HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, however, Harry does become immensely obsessed with finding a wand that Voldemort has been looking for as well instead of the task Dumbledore had left him (to find object that Voldemort placed pieces of his soul into, and destroy them). Harry began slowly sinking into mania, obsessing over where the wand may be.

“As the weeks crept on, Harry could not help but notice, even through his new self-absorption that Ron seemed to be taking charge...” 26

By fixating on this specific task, Harry was unable to help Ron and Hermione in finding the objects, putting his battle on hiatus. Harry becomes isolated, snappy, and even argumentative and it seems for a brief moment that he has allowed himself to become trapped by his obsession. His friends are finally able to pull him out of this deep self-involvement, eventually finish the task at hand, destroying Voldemort, and Harry was able to function properly again.

Harry Potter uses the misery of adolescence, a bit of violence and humour to capture the attention of children and young adults. However, the imbedded message of love or the importance of choosing the right path and many others may have become lost on some people because of the overall excitement and adventure Harry Potter brings. For example, I did not realize that there were actual messages and themes in Harry Potter when I first began the series. I was much too excited at the prospect of an actual Hogwarts in England. As I mentioned above, many people perceive Harry Potter in different ways, the message that it may give is different in the eye of the reader. For instance, many may see the series as morally unjust, or promoting love, and acceptance in readers.

Marshall McLuhan may say that Harry Potter has been used to promote J. K Rowling’s political view in readers.

"You should question authority and you should not assume that the establishment or the press tells you all of the truth." 27

Although it may be seen as a good political message, it can also be seen as a negative thrust toward patriotic or government mutiny. Since the series is so wildly popular among youth, some children may understand the underlying message and feel that J.K Rowling has a point; people should not believe everything that they may hear from the mouths of authority.

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26 (Rowling J. K., 2007)

27 (Wikipedia, Politics of Harry Potter, 2007)
Consumerism and Harry Potter

The Harry Potter franchise has become more famous than the books itself. The movies have become an enormous cultural success, the first movie, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* raked in a staggering $976,475,550 worldwide, making it the fourth highest grossing films of all time, the others in the top twenty.  

Harry, Ron, and Hermione have been made into dolls, figurines and collectables, while the stories have inspired other fan memorabilia and trends such as clothing, food, fan fictions, and music groups or ‘wizard rock’, such as *Harry and the Potters and the Cruciatus Curse*. There are also plans of opening a theme park in 2009 in Orlando, Florida.

The Harry Potter brand itself is estimated around $15 Billion, making J.K Rowling an enormously wealthy woman. Some religious activists believe that Rowling sold her soul for riches.

"Rowling -- or, as she shall henceforth be referred to and credited as, Mrs. J. K. Satan -- said that as she sat in a coffee shop one grey day, wondering what to do with her empty, aimless life, it hit her: "I'll give myself, body and soul, to the Dark Master. And in return, he will give me absurd wealth and power over the weak and pitiful of the world. And he did!"  

There have been many legal arguments surrounding Harry Potter especially after it became so popular. Numerous people have claimed that J.K Rowling have plagiarized their work, and reaped the rewards. The most famous of these disputes was Nancy Stouffers’ alleged 1984 story *The Legend of Rah and the Muggles* and *Larry Potter and His Best Friend Lilly*. 

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28 (Wikipedia, Harry Potter, 2007)  
29 (Wikipedia, Harry Potter, 2007)  
30 (Wikipedia, Religious debates over the Harry Potter series, 2007)  
31 (Wikipedia, Legal disputes over the Harry Potter series, 2007)
What Harry Potter Means to Me

When I first heard of Harry Potter, it did not intrigue me at all. The thought of a kid going to school for magic, I believed, was not worthy of my time. However, my aunt sent me the third installment of the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, and decided to give it a whirl. I began the series at the age of thirteen, with much anticipated disappointment, I found however, that I soon became practically (and healthily) obsessed with Harry Potter’s world, and was almost convinced that it was real. I remember telling my mother that I was going to England to look for my favourite character, Ron. Now, six years later, I am still fascinated with J.K Rowling’s brilliant technique of attracting children, and young adults to reading again, and teaching us such valuable lessons. I was nearly in tears when the series ended, but remember that I still had the movies to look forward too. When the movies are over, however, I know that these books are going to remain on my bookshelves for my children, and my children’s children.

Harry Potter - vanquisher of evil, or fascist? The books have become a literary trend that has moved many generations of people worldwide. Magic and whimsy follow it; controversy and disputes plague it. However, one of the essential themes, the importance of the victory over evil, has manifested itself many times, even though it may be lost on some of the younger readers, or ignored by some of the more disgusted ones. This is a vital lesson to teach children whether universally accepted or not. He is a hero too many, he is hated by several, He may be a savior, he may be racist, but no one can deny that Harry Potter is an icon.
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