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Harry Potter: A World of Fear

Jennifer Sattaur
Department of English, University of Wales, Aberystwyth

'Terrorism is an evil that threatens all the countries in Europe. Vigorous cooperation in the European Union and worldwide is crucial in order to meet this evil head on.' (Balkenende, 2005) This quote, from the Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende after the 2005 terrorist attacks on London, immediately strikes a note with those familiar with the Harry Potter novels. Likewise, the following quote from the French Prime Minister, Dominique de Villepin: 'More than ever, our democracies must rally together and show unity in the face of the terrorist threat. More than ever, we must all show vigilance and determination.' (2005) There is another leader whose words are nearly identical:

...we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. -
Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open... we are all facing dark and difficult times. (Rowling, 2000: 627)

As irreverent as it seems to compare the words of world leaders following the crisis of terrorist attacks with those of a main character from a children's book, but because of the similarity of views expressed, the parallels hold a deep and unmistakable significance.

The Harry Potter novels portray a world based firmly on Western society, with all the implications of capitalist and consumerist culture; furthermore, the too-familiar world of J K Rowling is paralysed by the fear of a pervasive and elusive Evil. The parallels between the Dark Forces of Lord Voldemort and the oppressive fears our western civilisations are labouring under, with the Dark Forces of Terrorism at their root, are both striking and obvious. The novels show a clear-cut and indisputable division between a 'good' side - based upon western culture - and an opposing 'evil side' which corresponds closely to the terrorist threat. The novels have frequently been the target of criticism accusing them of sexism, racism, xenophobia, conservatism, and conventionalism, and if these charges are accurate then they place the novels in the precarious position of being defenders of and apologists for the Western way of life, complete with all its familiar evils - evils that Rowling consciously draws attention to. If this role of apologist is unconscious, it has even more devastating implications for the novels. By creating a mirror with

Jennifer Sattaur

Important areas of parallelism, Rowling invites the reader to subconsciously assume further areas of parallelism, and a direct correlation between the values and truths of the novels and those of real life. This gives the work a responsibility over the subconscious messages it transmits.

Are the Harry Potter novels a product of a flawed and dangerous Anglo-centric mode of thinking? Worse, are the novels a tool used to defend that mode of thinking? Or, are the novels more complex than that? The question is the effect the novels have on readers - the ways they condition their readers to think about fear and its roots in our own world. Carl Jung wrote of the power of archetypal images to influence the subconscious, especially in literature, and the archetypal images of 'good', 'evil', 'saviour', 'villain', and so on are unmistakable in the novels, to the extent that they are frequently criticised for their unoriginality of plot and composition. Rowling has created a fantasy world which very closely mirrors our own and which, by doing so, creates an opportunity to evaluate and potentially resolve the causes of terror in our own world as well as her fantasy one. Because of their power and unquestioned popularity, the novels have a responsibility to not only bring into focus the flaws of our society, but also to offer the possibility of resolution rather than escapism. This paper therefore is separated into two sections. The first addresses the serious and complex charges of racism and classism, xenophobia and conservatism, the construction, as it were, of Rowling's fantasy mirror in which she brings the flaws of our society into focus. The second addresses the issue of fear within that society, and deals with conventionalism and the popularity of the novels, and the cause and effect of such popularity for both children and adults; the question of whether Rowling's novels live up to their responsibility.

Rotten at the Core

The charges of racism and classism have been levelled frequently and viciously at the Harry Potter novels, particularly at the first three novels in the series. For example, Richard Adams says:

A careful racial inclusiveness includes obviously Asian and black characters as students. But cultural identities are heavily connected to social background, and these have been scrubbed out by Rowling... this is not so much multiculturalism as naïve monoculturalism. (Adams, 2003)

John Houghton, in a Christian critique of the early books, explains how Harry Potter's world is clearly divided into a socially superior and elite



Harry Potter: A World of Fear

caste of wizards and witches, against the socially inferior and less important muggles (2001). Academics, journalists, and fans alike have been struck by the insidious ways that these traits run through the threads of the narratives, and are concerned at the implications. I would argue, however, that as the novels progress, it becomes harder to level charges of racism and classism, as the position of the novels in relation to these becomes more ambiguous as the writing becomes more complex.

The progression of the novels is in fact crucial in determining whether the books can be condemned on these grounds. There is a distinction to be made between subtle and unconscious messages which are transmitted to an uncritical reader, and the conscious and deliberate messages of the author transmitted to uncritical readers, and also the messages picked up by critical readers. A number of critics are concerned that unconscious messages in Rowling's writing cancel out the deliberate stance she takes up against issues such as racism and classism; however, I would argue that Rowling is consciously manipulating the effects of unconscious messages in her earlier, simpler writing to later highlight those same issues, in the darker and more ambiguous later books.

With the publication of the later books, then, the charges of racism and classism must be re-examined. Classism becomes a serious issue for Rowling and Harry Potter, beginning with *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, and the revelation of the pure-blood elitism that exists in the wizarding world - an elitism which grows in importance throughout the later novels. The hatred of 'mudbloods' and muggles, and the elitism of 'purebloods' eclipses the need to focus on the classism of upper versus lower class, or even wizard versus muggle. Rowling, it becomes clear, is not ignoring the issue, nor is she unconsciously supporting a classist position. Rather, she transposes the issue to a fantasy setting - an age-old trick which allows the writer to present the topic in a fresh light, highlighting it and making its ramifications clearer. By putting that fantasy portrayal of the issues side-by-side with the realistic portrayal of the muggle world, Rowling succeeds in focusing the spotlight on it. The effect is amplified as the antagonism becomes more pronounced in the later, darker books. As Julia Eccleshare says in *A Guide to the Harry Potter Novels*:

There is a clear link, which develops through the series, between those who are racially prejudiced and those who are followers of Voldemort, the 'Dark Lord', part of whose darkness is a hatred of muggles and those who, like himself, are of mixed blood... (2002: 78)

Jennifer Sattaur

Rowling's involvement of the issue of blood in the muggle-wizard divide points to a concern with racism as much as with classism, and this fantasy re-telling makes both issues ambiguous, and forces her readers to actively consider it.

Instead of realistic racist and classist antagonism, which could be dismissed by readers as a side issue to the story, Rowling addresses the issues, for example, through her portrayal of non-human characters. The later books, from *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* onwards, explore wizarding rules and prejudices against non-human creatures such as centaurs, goblins, and mer-people, and part-human creatures such as giants, were-wolves and vampires, in the same ambiguous manner. From the first appearance in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* of the house-elves, through to Hermione's elf-rights campaign and the introduction of the mad elf Kreacher, Rowling uses the servile little creatures to demonstrate the nasty workings of racism, and her portrayal is far from clear-cut. Set against the obvious sympathy of the reader for the overworked and abused house-elves is the attitude even 'good' wizards like Ron Weasley have towards them, and the resistance of the house-elves themselves to freedom. Rowling shows the issues of racism and classism as they really are: not a black and white case of prejudicial behaviour against tolerance, but a slippery and treacherous ground where even those with good intentions must tread very carefully indeed.

Furthermore, as the novels progress Rowling's depiction of her world becomes more ambiguous, and her characters increasingly complex. The situations she creates force the characters within the novels to re-examine their own ideas about racism and classism, and this in turn leads her readers to re-examine these issues. Rowling's re-writing of her own characters is a clever manipulation of complex versus simple reading. To a child, even real people can seem two-dimensional, but as that child gets older he or she comes to know himself and those around him as more complex, and issues such as classism and racism begin to matter. As people develop, relationships become slippery and difficult to interpret, and as Rowling's characters develop the effect is the same. It is, therefore, simplifying the matter too much to call the series 'racist' or 'classist'. Racism and classism are not ignored, but rather dealt with on a more complex plane; this is not the product of an unconsciously prejudiced mentality, but rather a subtle shifting of the battle-ground in order to fight more effectively. Rowling has deliberately constructed a world which, by mirroring our own, brings into focus the issues of racism and classism which are very much a contemporary concern.

Harry Potter: A World of Fear

This brings us, then to the charges of xenophobia and conservatism. There are many who have been quick to claim that the books embody a nostalgia for and worship of conservative British culture and, on a larger scale, of western culture in general. Critics are concerned that the books instill and reinforce a dependence on conventional stereotypes and conservative values in readers. Christine Schoefer asks, '...are the stereotypes in the story integral to our fascination- do we feel comforted by a world in which conventional roles are firmly in place?' (Schoefer, 2000) Richard Adams says:

Despite all the books' gestures to multiculturalism and gender equality, Harry Potter is a conservative. A paternalistic, One-Nation Tory, perhaps, but a Tory nonetheless... what the series portrays is a nostalgic and 'small-c' conservative view of Britain. (Adams, 2003)

Although *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* remedies this with the introduction of both the Quidditch World-Cup and the Tri-Wizard Tournament, nevertheless there is a strong distrust of what is foreign in the books, which sits uneasily with the earlier discussion of racism (although it is a separate and distinct issue), and the magic of the novels cannot be separated from the type of culture in which it manifests itself. Julia Eccleshare says:

The inclusion of an international element reflects a far more ambitious scope for Rowling. The addition of an enormous new cast drawn from all over the world enables her to bring in a new and particularly sinister version of the kind of arguments Ron and Harry have been having with Malfoy. The hooded gang which first persecutes muggles by humiliating and teasing them and is then closely associated with the raising of the Dark Mark is closely modelled on the Ku Klux Klan... (2002: 80)

The later novels elevate the seemingly innocent bickering of children into issues of much greater social importance, empowering and lending credence to childish arguments. Eccleshare also points out:

The Durmstrang students are immediately more sinister and the subsequent discovery that Karkaroff was once a Death Eater endorses the idea that these people, who have only thinly disguised Germanic characteristics, are both nationally and individually untrustworthy. (p81)

There is likewise a feeling of tension in the campsite, with so many nationalities and conflicting cultures packed into a tight space, which is reminiscent of the fraught atmosphere many people would claim to feel

Jennifer Sattaur

In, for example, an international airport such as JFK, or a football stadium patrolled by armed security guards.

A death-eater could be anyone; a terrorist could be your own next-door neighbour. An attack can come from anywhere, and from anyone - who can be trusted? In both worlds, the answer is that no one can be trusted; any one could be bribed, blackmailed or brainwashed - or enchanted into joining the 'other' side. In *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* Arthur Weasley refuses to enter the house until his wife has negotiated a complex system of pass-codes with him - a process which she sees as pointless, and which we know to be futile. The scene is distressingly close to home, and it is possible that we know Arthur Weasley's fears intimately. Speaking of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Julia Eccleshare says, 'The petrification of the Muddbloods has sinister overtones. The idea that some individuals are being picked off in what initially seem like unrelated attacks is very scary to an enclosed community.' (2002: 79) Again, the threat is coming from within. Is it any wonder, then, that what is foreign and unknown is to be distrusted, while what is familiar is to be clung to as much as is possible? Is it any wonder that this policy will prove popular despite its consistent failure to be effective? Again, Rowling's mirror brings into focus this very serious contemporary issue, through a fantasy retelling which encourages her readers to see the situation in a fresh light. Where the issues of racism, classism, xenophobia, and conservatism are concerned, Rowling's mirroring has been accurate and responsible, inviting the reader to unquestioningly accept that the works as a whole will continue to be so. But do they?

A Society In Fear

Harry Potter's world is clearly a reflection of our own; and Harry Potter's world is under attack from within. In a review of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, Michiko Kakutani says:

...the terrible things that Ms. Rowling describes as being abroad in the green and pleasant land of England read like a grim echo of events in our own post-9/11, post-7/7 world and an uncanny reminder that the Hogwarts Express... leaves from Kings Cross Station - the very station where the suspected London bombers gathered minutes before the explosions that rocked the city nine days ago. (2005: 1)

Rowling is aware of the terror that is abroad in our own western civilisation, and what may have started out as an innocent portrayal of that world is now inevitably a social commentary which must take



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Harry Potter: A World of Fear

responsibility for the subconscious messages it conveys. The last three novels have indeed been progressively darker, and it is no coincidence that this overlaps with the growing menace of the terrorist threat. As Marina Warner says:

...the historian Jackson Lears points out that 'luck in America' has always thrived in spite of Puritan insistence on hard work and meritocracy. But today's lottery culture makes prophylactics a matter of even greater urgency; the random deaths that terrorists inflict uncouple personal responsibility from penalties... J K Rowling used to be reassuring... but... Rowling is now piling on the terror. (2003)

Consciously or unconsciously, Rowling's world started off mirroring our own, and now it must continue to do so. The question is whether Rowling's mirror is a dark glass - in their portrayal of our world and our fear, what subconscious messages do the novels transmit to readers? The xenophobia and conservatism of Rowling's world is an accurate mirror of the Western culture we live in today, and the increasing fears of our society. The connections and implications are clear; it only remains to examine how effectively Rowling maintains control over the messages she subliminally sends to her readers. There have been many critics who have pointed out that the story Rowling has created is nothing new, nothing special. Why then has it so completely captured the imagination of so many?

The charge of unoriginality against Harry Potter is one of some validity. Harry Potter is not new or innovative, but rather it uses all the familiar components in all the familiar ways. There is a boy hero, who starts life off as deprived and orphaned, and who is marked as chosen and special; there is the struggle between 'good' and 'evil' forces; there is the wise teacher; there are loyal side-kicks; there are tests of strength, and quests, and prophecies. The plots could have been lifted from any one of a number of fairy tales from a number of cultures throughout history. So, why do they appeal to so many people? Surely, they should be dull and unexciting? The answer, I feel, is that some of the popularity of the Harry Potter novels lies precisely in their familiarity rather than in any innovation; the conventionalism of the novels comes from the fact that Rowling is employing the sorts of ageless archetypes that Jung wrote of as the tools of the subconscious for teaching the conscious mind. The archetypes of hero/saviour and evil/villain in particular have been popular throughout history in times of trouble, and appear in sources as diverse as Robin Hood, the Bible, and the Legends of King Arthur. Jung believed that the appearance of archetypal images in dreams would either inspire the subject to positively critique and work through problems, or else they

Jennifer Sattaur

would push the subject to seek vicarious relief: repression and ultimately neurosis. In literature, such archetypes will capture the imagination as strongly as any dream, and they have the power to heavily influence the beliefs and inclinations of the reader. The question is which option does Harry Potter inspire his readers towards? Elizabeth Schafer says:

The phenomenal success of Harry Potter suggests that he and his world are reinterpreting ancient archetypes for a generation of young readers who may have been jaded by reality television but eagerly embrace their connection to their collective unconscious. (2000: 161)

Rowling's application of archetypal images to her mirror of our society in these troubled times gives her both power and responsibility. John Houghton says, 'Harry Potter's world is a moral one where lines are drawn between good and evil, and where good wins through in the end because of an underlying system of values that says it should.' (2001:16) This is a particularly religious point of view, and one which feeds the craving of a secular society in a time of crisis. Vulnerable as we are in our fear, the story of good versus evil is familiar, and the concept of a chosen one, a saviour, is reassuring. As Elizabeth Schafer says:

Harry's birth represents the possibility of a peaceful saviour emerging during a time of crisis to restore order. Harry becomes an icon for wizards who invest their hopes in him for salvation from Voldemort.' (2000: 45)

This is particularly true in that we have no such saviour in our world of increasing secularity and mistrust in politicians. Harry is neither politician nor religious leader, but he nevertheless champions the hope that Evil can be defeated.

Harry, then, is a symbol for hope, and following his story allows the reader something else - an escape into a world where there is more hope than in our own. Both for children and adults, the Harry Potter novels offer vicarious relief. Richard Bernstein, in a review in the *New York Times*, says:

...Bettelheim's main idea was that children live with greater terrors than most adults can understand, and fairy tales both give uncanny expression to that terror and show a way to a better future. The same can be said of the Harry Potter books... (1999:1)

AS Byatt indicates that, '...the attraction for children can be explained by the powerful working of the fantasy of escape and empowerment.' (2003:

Harry Potter: A World of Fear

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2) Elizabeth Schafer agrees, 'most readers feel empowered by vicariously experiencing Harry's adventures in which he gains control over himself and his surroundings.' (2000:13) If this is the case, it would further explain the popularity of the novels with readers of all ages. If they do indeed allow readers to work through their fears, however, then the question becomes one of effect again: In what way will readers be inclined to deal with the problem? What is the solution that J K Rowling is offering? Which of Jung's two paths will her readers be led to take?

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A matter of great importance is whether or not the books question the division between good and evil, and the labelling that is a result of such a division. On the surface, the books must present that division as clear because our own society does so. To kill, hurt, injure, and destroy is wrong, and there must be no doubt on that score. What should be questioned is the causes and motivations, and the portrayal of black and white alignments. Two reactions to the 9/11 attacks on New York can help to illustrate this point. President George Bush, in the State of the Union Address, said:

...we can now move forward, with confidence and faith. Our nation is strong and steadfast. The cause we serve is right, because it is the cause of all mankind. The momentum of freedom in our world is unmistakable and it is not carried forward by our power alone. We can trust in that guiding power who guides the unfolding of the years.

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In a contrasting statement Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said: 'On that day you wonderful people of this great country awoke to find you were fragile, you were vulnerable - for so long bad things had happened to other people a long way away...' Against the unfounded optimism of President Bush, and the self-righteous rhetoric, is the stark truth that emerges from the Archbishop's words. *Why was America vulnerable?* This is the question academics of international politics are asking the world over. Do underlying causes blur the definitions of 'good' and 'evil'? In order to live up to their responsibilities as a mirror to our society and a safe-ground for vicarious empowerment, the Harry Potter novels need to address such questions. But do they?

Unfortunately, I feel that the Harry Potter novels fail in this respect, particularly in the ways they outline the power struggle. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Voldemort speaking through Quirrell heard to remark that 'There is no good and evil, there is only power, those too weak to seek it...' (Rowling, 1997: 211) This is more or less an unconscious theme for the novels, as they fail to provide an under

Jennifer Sattaur

justification for the alignments of 'good' and 'evil' which are presented. Marina Warner says:

As magic is a bid for power, it's often a symptom of powerlessness; it expresses a longing to control the future. We are all blind before the unknown ahead, so the condition is somewhat existential, but it has been sharpened by recent conflicts and the apocalyptic language of the 'war on terror' and the 'axis of evil'... Harry and his mates sound like Bush on the phone to Blair stirring it. (2003)

The Harry Potter novels mirror our own uses of rhetoric on the subject of 'good' versus 'evil', and 'us' versus 'them', and the message they transmit is one of re-enforcement rather than critical examination. The Harry Potter novels do not in reality champion the under-dog so much as they are about a vicious struggle for power between two opposing forces. The battle between Good and Evil will not end in Evil being reformed, but in Evil being destroyed altogether. One side will be 'right', and the other 'wrong'. One side will gain power and triumph, and the other will be vanquished. The message transmitted to readers, therefore, is unyielding. It is a message of no mercy. Although Rowling does go to pains, especially in the later books, to blur the lines between 'good' and 'bad', to make characters and actions ambiguous, and finds areas of gray between the black and white; nevertheless, there is no question in the end about which side is 'good' and which is 'evil'. Rebecca Skulnick and Jesse Goodman write:

Harry does not question the validity of his heavens, the Hogwarts institution, and the power of Albus Dumbledore... Harry pronounces both what is evil and what is good based on the institution in which he is lent the power of hero. Additionally, Harry does not question whether he acts on behalf of good or evil. (2003: 272)

There can be no mitigating circumstances for Lord Voldemort, and there can be no blame placed on the rest of the wizarding community. This may be a message of hope for those living in fear, but it is not a solution to the problem which has spawned the fear in the first place. Against the charge of conventionalism, after a promising start Harry Potter has, as yet, failed to clear the hurdle. Rather than leading readers to question the causes of terror and find solutions not rooted in counter-violence, the novels only invite the reader to experience vicarious relief in the hope provided by Harry the Saviour's anticipated triumph. Unless the final novel finds a way of altering its subconscious messages, the series as a whole will have failed to bear its responsibilities as a mirror and as therapy, and its success will be based on empty promises.

Harry Potter: A World of Fear

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Jennifer Sattaur

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Jennifer Sattaur

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