

# THE DICHOTOMY OF GOOD AND EVIL IN THE NOVELS OF J.K. ROWLING

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the recurrence of good and evil elements in the novels of J.K. Rowling. It looks at the various characters and incidents that align themselves with these anti-thetical elements. Harry Potter novels are narratives that run parallel to real life and simulate the real world and its problems. This paper shall evaluate as to how a prudent reader can glean from these novels a ready wisdom to distinguish between good and bad choices. In keeping with the popular literary formats of the picaresque the Harry Potter series also trace the adventures of a young orphaned boy. This paper also goes on to explore the Harry Potter novels as an example of 'bildungsroman' – a story of growth, self discovery and maturity.*

## Introduction

Man has always segregated the living world into anti-thetical elements and dichotomies. Literature, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology and other faculties have constantly delineated theories that compare and contrast good and evil, light and darkness, happiness and grief and other such bipolarities. Literature, from its very origin unravels the victory of good over evil. Both the oral tradition and the written narratives introduce the hero and the anti-hero. The stories are descriptions of the exploits of the hero and the onslaught of the villain and in the modern context the anti hero. Even if, the Bible was to be read on these lines it would unfold the story of God and Satan, the falling of man, virtues and vices and the eventual penance for falling into disgrace by the precept of Christ's sacrifice.

This paper in the light of the above context intends to explore some of the anti-thetical elements of good and evil in J.K. Rowling's popular Harry Potter series.

## Analysis of the novels/themes

Let us begin this dialectic by analysing what makes Harry a universal hero and Lord Voldemort, his villainous adversary, an anti-hero.

Harry's fortunes are contradictory. On the one hand, he is the boy who lived after the death curse, the lightening scar on his forehead is the testimony of his trials. On the other hand, the same colossal event that spared his life usurped that of his parents. He is orphaned in his infancy. The mighty wizard Albus Dumbledore entrusts him in to the care of his uncle and aunt, who ill-treat Harry. Harry leads a charmed yet miserable life till the age of eleven. His coming of age and the magical entry into the world of Hogwarts is the happiest event in the dulcet tones of his life. This new life opens a plethora of new sensations. He makes friends for the first time, experiences unconditional love and kindness, wears new clothes and eats to his fill. These fortunate adventures also bring in their wake the knowledge of the murder of his parents, by the 'One who Must Not Be Named' i.e. Lord Voldemort. Every wizard and witch lives in mortal fear of this Dark Lord, the epitome of evil, who shall return one day and wreak havoc.

There are striking similarities between Harry and Lord Voldemort which are confusing and frightening for Harry from the very beginning of this picaresque tale. Harry is an orphan and so is Lord Voldemort,

his nemesis. They are both born with mixed blood. Their lives are marred by penury until they are rescued by Albus Dumbledore. Both of them are destined to be powerful wizards and share similarities in their wands. These similarities provide justification for Lord Voldemort being called the anti-hero. On juxtaposition, Harry represents good and Lord Voldemort is evil incarnate. This marking of one as good and other as evil is in accordance with what Professor Albus Dumbledore, delineates, that Harry makes a choice and so does Lord Voldemort. Harry chooses good over evil and Voldemort vice-versa. They are distinct as chalk and cheese for the categorical choices they make.

Harry is an amateur wizard, an average student and has been marked as an opponent by the invincible Lord Voldemort. In all the novels, he embarks upon an adventure which is not of his choosing and comes out a winner only as a result of his fortitude. Lord Voldemort in sharp contrast is a veteran wizard, practised in the art of evil witchcraft. He reduces other people to the status of worms, frightens them, tortures them, kills them and takes any other recourse that befits his will. He is wily and power hungry. He is devious and seeks to immortalise himself by trying to acquire the philosopher's stone. Just like the saying goes a cat has nine lives he creates 'Horcruxes' and seven of them at that, each time putting out the remnants of humanity in him.

In the end, Harry has to die himself first, in order to kill Lord Voldemort. On a symbolic level, slivers of Lord Voldemort's persona that had become a part of Harry as the result of the death curse that was hurled upon by Lord Voldemort needed to be divested. The little evil that lurked in Harry had to be smothered so that he could resurrect phoenix-like. Thus poetic justice is arrived at with the victory of good over evil.

The Harry Potter novels are replete with illustrations of good and evil. The representations of '*The Order of the Phoenix*' and '*Death Eaters*' are also in keeping with this theory of good and evil.

'*The Order of the Phoenix*' as described in the novels is a congregation of the good wizards, those who crusade against the satanic Lord Voldemort. They are supporters of Albus Dumbledore who have put their lives on stake for the good cause. Some of the members are as named in the novel, Remus Lupin - the professor who is also a werewolf, Sirius Black - the animagus and Harry's Godfather who is an alleged mass murderer, the eccentric Alastor Moody with a magical eye, Nymphadora Tonks - a metamorphmagus, an expert in concealment and disguise. They are all a motley lot but what is significant in the context is they are all dedicated to the right cause. Werewolves and mass murderers and thieves (as in Mundungus Fletcher) are generally considered anti-social elements but in the Harry Potter novels, these are the people who ultimately help Harry hoist the flag of goodness. On the other hand, an esteemed member of society such as Lucius Malfoy, an eminent official in the Ministry of Magic, fraternises with the devil, Lord Voldemort. He is a death eater and has the death mark on his forearm. Barty Crouch Junior, is the son of a ministry official, who in the disguise of Mad eyed Moody brings about the resurrection of Lord Voldemort and fulfills the duties of a faithful death eater. Bellatrix LeStrange, from the erstwhile family of Blacks and Sirius Black's cousin has affiliated her loyalties to Lord Voldemort and kills and tortures many of her own brethren.

For other manifestations of good and evil, let us explore the elements in the chronology of the books. The first book of the series is *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. The novel begins with a description of house number four, Privet Drive. This house belongs to Harry's uncle. Mr. Vernon Dursley, his wife Petunia Dursley and his son Dudley are Harry's only living family. The filial affection that Harry ought to have derived from them is altogether absent. Instead he gets from them scorn, jealousy and insult. However, their house where Harry lives in shambles, provides Harry with a magical protection that Lord Voldemort cannot penetrate. Next, in the course of the novel, we meet Hagrid, the gamekeeper of Hogwarts School of witchcraft

and wizardry, an honest man who aligns himself with Professor Albus Dumbledore. This novel brings forth a veritable gallery of characters. The good being, Professor Albus Dumbledore, Professor Minerva McGonagall, Rubeus Hagrid, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger - Harry's friends and fellow students, Nicolas Flamel - the alchemist who made the Philosopher's stone and many more. In sharp relief, evil is represented by Draco, son of both a ministry official and a death eater. The most malicious characterisation is that of Professor Quirell - the teacher of Defence against the Dark Arts. His character is a carefully crafted simulation of the Mephistophelian image. His master Lord Voldemort needs to inhabit his body and Quirell's other face is a wicked one. Mephistopheles - the messenger of Satan or Lucifer ensnares gullible mortals and so does Professor Quirell who entraps Harry to acquire the philosopher's stone, to resurrect his master. Harry is protected by ancient magic. His mother's love insulates him from the defiling touch of Professor Quirell and the evil soul of Voldemort has to flee.

In the second novel *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets* the evil designs of Lucius Malfoy, a death eater, are again directed at bringing Lord Voldemort back to power. He plants Tom Riddle's diary in Ginny Weasley's bag. Tom Riddle is an alias of Lord Voldemort. Through this diary, the Chamber of Secrets is opened again and the monster or the Basilisk unleashed upon Hogwarts. Harry's bravery and loyalty to Dumbledore bring to him the sword of Gryffindor and Fawkes - the phoenix. Harry as an ultimate act of bravery and chivalry kills the basilisk, destroys the diary and rescues Ginny from the Chamber of Secrets.

In the third novel *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban* the author begins her tale with a mass murderer on the loose by the name of Sirius Black. Sirius Black has gone absconding from Azkaban - the prison for wizards gone wrong. It was considered an impossible task and Harry is told that Sirius Black was out to kill him. Also, another character introduced to us is that of Remus Lupin - a professor

and a werewolf. Harry seeks him out to learn how to conjure a Patronus - a charm that keeps Dementors at bay. Dementors are creatures of the dark, keepers of Azkaban. They are faceless and infamous for their 'Death kiss' that they perform indiscriminately. Their fetid breath laden mouth, sucks out all the happiness from a person and draws out their soul, thus rendering a person soul less and the punishment is worse than death - a living death. As the novel progresses, the truth that is unravelled is most shocking. Remus Lupin the werewolf finds Harry fencing wands with Sirius Black. Sirius however is intent at killing Scabbers, the pet rat of Ron Weasley who is actually an animagus. Scabbers, was Peter Pettigrew who betrayed Harry's parents and his treacherous act not only got them murdered but also got Sirius implicated for this act of treason. The end of the novel brings forth an ambiguous resolution. Sirius becomes Harry's Godfather but is on the run. Peter Pettigrew escapes and Remus Lupin resigns from his post.

The fourth novel *Harry Potter and The Goblet of Fire* begins on a very ominous note with the conjuring of the death mark. The novel acts out the Triwizard tournament which was indeed a ploy of Barty Crouch Junior to bring back Lord Voldemort to life. The evil elements are intense in this novel and the end is frightening with Cedric Diggory - a triwizard champion's untimely death. Harry comes out unscathed from the terrible rendezvous but the reader's sensibilities are assaulted with Lord Voldemort's rebirth.

The fifth novel *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix* etches out an impending battle, that between the good forces and the evil. The Order is pitted against the death eaters for the obtaining of a prophecy which is a replica of the original clairvoyance made by Sybill Trelawney - a professor of divination. This prophecy is a weapon that Lord Voldemort intended to gain in order to kill Harry. In the battle, which ensues in the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry, Sirius Black is killed by Bellatrix Lestrange. Harry is able to destroy the prophecy but he is rendered alone in the vile world.

In the sixth novel, *Harry Potter and The Half Blood Prince*, Harry is mentored by Professor Albus Dumbledore into the art of defence against the dark magic, of Lord Voldemort. In one escapade after another they destroy Horcruxes - a magical object in which Voldemort has saved a sliver of his living self. The act tremendously weakens Dumbledore and he is killed by his faithful servant Severus Snape. It is a typical Julius Caesar like tragedy where the benefactor is betrayed and stabbed by his protege. Severus Snape, is the half blood prince, who always was of dubious repute. He was a member of the Order of the Phoenix but he gives the unbreakable vow to Narcissa Malfoy. In order to fulfill his oath he kills Albus Dumbledore.

The seventh novel *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hollows* is the darkest novel of the series which begins with the holocaust of doom. Harry is terribly alone without his Godfather and mentor. His friends Ron and Hermione are bickering amongst themselves. Lord Voldemort's reign has clouded all minds and disharmony is rampant. No one can be trusted upon. Evil looms large, threatening to snuff out goodness. Harry knows that in his final confrontation with Lord Voldemort he would have

to meet his own death, in order to fortify the invincible Dark Lord. In the end, despite the prophecy coming true, Harry lives and Lord Voldemort dies. The novel ends on a very optimistic note of good conquering evil, virtue overpowering vice, happiness over grief, hope fortifying disillusionment.

### Conclusion

Harry Potter novels are fantastical, away from the realms of reality but its concerns are for the real world. The real world is infested with evil elements that plague and disease man's existence. Man's nature gives in easily to the pressures of such evil. Such novels, enlighten mankind and resurrect faith and optimism. Literature, aids the cause of trust in truth and goodness. Modern life is harsh and stark. Harry Potter and other such fantastical novels are a noble effort that by means of precept, help right from children to grown up readers to invest their trust in God's mysterious ways. Life is all about the choices that a person makes. The path of good is not easy and it is easier to deflect on to the evil. Yet, it is important to adhere to goodness and tread upon the right path and that is the message disseminated by J.K. Rowling's novels.

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