

Rowling as moralist: Harry Potter and the bullies

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When the Harry Potter movie is released this fall, long lines at theaters are sure to provoke yet more speculation about the popularity of J. K. Rowling's novels (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*). Part of it, I suppose, is the plain dumb luck of setting off a fad: kids are reading her books because other kids are reading her books. Most such fads are shabby stuff, but Rowling's commercial success is honestly earned. She patiently develops all the traditional elements of narrative—setting, character, style, theme, plot—so as to explore the reasons why kids taunt other kids, and the reasons why one might refuse or resist such behavior. There is no denying the comic verve and unpredictable adventure of these four novels, but we need also to recognize that J. K. Rowling is both a master storyteller and a narrative moralist with something important to say.

Most of the action in these novels takes place at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, which Harry Potter attends. In the traditional manner of mythic-heroic narrative, this setting is a lively, well-detailed physical place that nonetheless reverberates repeatedly to the moral and psychological dimensions of the hero's development. For instance, the school grounds include a Forbidden Forest and a deep, mysterious lake across which arriving students must sail in the dead of night. Lake and forest are replete with magical creatures both dangerous and helpful; near them dwells a kindly half-giant wild man named Hagrid, who guides the first-year students in their nocturnal trip. At times Hagrid offers comic relief, but he also serves as the headmaster's right-hand man and as an empathic counterpoint to the more cerebral and emotionally distant characters on the Hogwarts faculty. Hagrid is also something of a drunk, and he keeps adopting dangerous magical creatures as pets. Both habits move the plots forward at key points.

Hagrid is typical of how astutely Rowling fills every available archetypal niche, conjuring up characters, creatures and magical spells with effervescent delight. My favorite minor instance of this comic plenitude is the infamously boring history professor, who died in his armchair in the faculty lounge, failed to notice that he had died and got up as a ghost to continue his lectures “in a flat drone like an old vacuum cleaner” (*The Chamber of Secrets*). And yet, there is ample evidence that history holds the key to many of the mysteries surrounding Harry and his antagonist, the evil Lord Voldemort.

Although Rowling’s characters are convincing and engaging, none of them is fully three-dimensional. These characters are progressively revealed, but they don’t grow or change—not even Harry himself. As each school year passes, Harry becomes more and ever more clearly who he is. But that’s all. His development is essentially linear. Nonetheless, Rowling’s characters are such fully realized types, deployed with such insight, that few readers will be inclined to complain.

Rowling’s control of character is matched by control of style. Hers is transparent, melodic and honest. Word-play abounds, especially in names. Harry’s principal enemy among his classmates is a chronic bully named Draco Malfoy, whose henchmen are named Crabbe and Goyle. Draco’s father, Lucius Malfoy, is one of the principal supporters of Lord Voldemort—whose name, translated and uncurled, means “loved death.”

By far the most intriguing name is that of the headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. In that name I hear albus, stumble, door. I don’t know where Rowling is going with this one, but there is abundant evidence that she would know what a liturgical alb is, just as she would know the etymological links between albus and “white” or “elf.” Dumbledore is certainly a proponent of white magic, but he is also an outspoken advocate of what the Gospel of Luke calls the “narrow door”—an archetypal image for the transforming power of major choices or recognitions (Luke 13:22-30). Finally, despite his powers and his wisdom, Dumbledore’s judgment stumbles now and then. Some such error is apt to prove decisive for Harry.

Despite recent media hype, Rowling first became popular through word-of-mouth among young readers. The key to her appeal, I would argue, is how seriously she engages bullying as a theme, dramatizing an issue that shapes the daily lives of all too many youngsters. Both at home and at school, Harry endures the taunting of bullies. As he moves from the ordinary suburban world of his abusive foster parents

into the enchanted realm of the Hogwarts School, the bullying intensifies from nasty to mortally dangerous (a progression that U.S. schoolchildren have witnessed in real life).

One of Rowling's most adept approaches to the topic is through the figure of Professor Snape, who teaches the making of magic potions. Like several other adults—including Voldemort himself—Snape still carries the wounds and the rage of schoolyard encounters. Like Draco, Snape is inexplicably, relentlessly cruel. He maliciously abuses his authority in his efforts to shame Harry and his friends, to favor his own "house" in the school competition, and to get Harry expelled. Is Snape "just" a grown-up bully, "merely" a meanspirited teacher of the kind that every kid must contend with at some point? Are his threats "just teasing"? Or is he actually in cahoots with Voldemort? Dumbledore trusts that Snape has repented of his former affiliation with Voldemort and reformed his ways, but an attentive reader will notice that the early evidence for that claim is later undermined. As novel follows novel in the series, as Harry and his pals edge ever closer to adulthood, the dangers represented by all this taunting become ever more deadly.

Rowling handles bullying as a theme very delicately, formulating it mostly through plot developments, simply inviting us to notice parallels and draw our own conclusions. Here Rowling's narrative craftsmanship and her psychological insight combine most effectively. Consider, for instance, how she solves the problem that a novel in a series must sustain two different levels of plot. The plot of the series as such is the ongoing efforts of Voldemort to reorganize his scattered followers and return to power as he recovers from near-death. He is in such straits because his magic curse, intended to kill the infant Harry Potter, rebounded off the baby and nearly killed him instead. (That explains the scar on Harry's forehead.)

Each individual novel recounts some specific comeback attempt by Voldemort, an attempt that somehow involves Hogwarts, its leaders or its environs. Harry and his friends thwart Voldemort time and again, but each time more narrowly. Because the tensions in the larger world permeate the school in this way, the malicious taunting by Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy finds parallel in the murderous, inexplicable malice of Lord Voldemort. As one of Voldemort's accomplices explains, "There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it" (*Sorcerer's Stone*).

Albus Dumbledore articulates another perspective on the same question. "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (*Chamber of*

Secrets). When Voldemort kills a student in the school, Dumbledore warns the assembled students to remember the boy's fate whenever they must "make a choice between what is right and what is easy" (*Goblet of Fire*). What we are opposing when we choose wisely is the power of ruthless violence and exploitation; what we are opting for, Dumbledore continues, is the contrary power of friendship and trust. In such ways, Rowling argues that a 14-year-old's choices about bullying form one legitimate aspect of a deeply resonant moral issue.

The moral seriousness of Rowling's stories is most evident in the schemes of the murderous Lord Voldemort and in how these schemes test Harry's character. We are not told why Voldemort wants Harry dead. Harry himself asks Dumbledore, who refuses to tell him. Shadowy hints abound that Voldemort is somehow related to Harry, apparently through Harry's father James. (Voldemort killed both of Harry's parents in his unsuccessful effort to kill Harry himself.)

In the classic manner of the coming-of-age novel, Harry struggles mightily to figure out his own identity and to discover and claim his rightful place in society—a society that more or less resists that claim, both innocently (in the effort to protect him) and maliciously. Usually such novels portray the hero's loss of innocence as he encounters this resistance. But that's not the trajectory of Harry's development. Instead, Rowling's abused young hero must learn how to trust and whom to trust. Although Harry obviously has what moralists call "a fundamental option for the good," he needs to learn that exercising this option fully requires cooperation with others. The virtuous life is necessarily social; evil has only accomplices, not community—which it reliably destroys.

Literally, Harry must survive, discover and then manage his connection to Voldemort. In doing so, he must also determine or discover where he stands in the timeless conflict between good and evil, particularly in light of his precocious ability as a wizard and his enigmatic role in the culturewide conflict into which he was born. When Harry deceives Dumbledore, whom he is reluctant to trust, Rowling plainly and repeatedly says, "he lied." The deception is understood sympathetically but nonetheless depicted as both a moral and a practical mistake. Harry's survival depends upon his developing the courage and the wisdom to trust appropriately and thereby to ally himself with other proponents of the good. Each novel develops this theme by presenting Harry and his two best friends, Ron and Hermione, with a series of challenges to their skills, their honor, their integrity, and their loyalty to one another.

In the most archetypal of these tests, Harry has to use his magic skills to swim all the way across the bottom of the mysterious lake as part of a contest with other schools of wizardry. Once there he has to rescue Ron, who has been enchanted and tied to an underwater statue. Instead of continuing the race, Harry lingers to be certain that none of the hostages awaken and drown because a contestant failed to free them within the allotted time. At the depths of the deep lake, Harry discovers what success means to him in comparison to the lives of innocent victims—in this case, Hermione and the little sister of another contestant. The psychological resonances are dramatic, but Rowling portrays the scene with classical restraint.

Harry remains under water because he does not trust that the school will ensure the safety of these “hostages.” It does not occur to him that the exercise at the lake is merely a game, because at Hogwarts, nothing is “just a game.” The contestants were told that hostages will drown if they fail, and he takes that threat at face value; we are left to wonder how the good Dumbledore came to consent to such an emotionally abusive contest. Rowling’s plots repeatedly acknowledge the importance of what many adults too casually dismiss as “just a game” or passively tolerate because “kids will be kids.” The young bully Draco Malfoy is surely developing into the same sort of murderous conspirator as his father, Lucius Malfoy: at Hogwarts, as in the real world, children powerfully mirror the adults who are their role models.

Older children and younger adolescents—roughly those from eight to 15—are awash in the discovery of their own critical judgment and spectacularly eager to put it to use. Rowling taps into that eagerness and sets her readers loose on questions that are as good as questions get: Who or what is evil? Who or what is good? How can we be sure we have decided correctly? Whom should we trust? Like Harry, every adolescent—and every adult—faces defining choices in responding to good and to evil, choices that count for much more than SAT scores, grade-point averages or adjusted gross income.

Rowling’s moral vision of our common humanity, like her narrative style, is in some distinctive ways premodern: she has an honest, confident optimism that human beings are equipped to recognize, to desire and to choose the good. Although she portrays evil in unflinching detail, she also dramatizes the appeal of the good. Her success in this difficult endeavor reflects the sophistication of her comedy: her sense of humor keeps her from falling into either irony or sentimentality.

In the ordinary mythic-heroic narratives upon which Rowling relies, the hero rescues an innocent victim. But Rowling adeptly combines the two roles of hero and victim: Harry Potter is not only a very talented young wizard but also a scarred orphan with abusive foster-parents, mortal enemies, mean teachers and malicious classmates. He triumphs—he rescues himself from the problems he faces—by developing virtues equal and opposite to the anger, insecurity and pathetic yet ruthless egotism that characterize his enemies. In learning to trust and to cooperate with others, he reestablishes in a mature way the naïve innocence he had as an infant attacked by Voldemort and then handed over to foster-parents who despise him. Harry's triumph is moral, not simply political nor merely physical. Even his nascent skills as a wizard come to fruition at key moments only through some new and immediately prior leap in his moral and emotional development.

Rowling's fine craftsmanship as a narrative moralist comes to a single clear point: the first-fruits of suffering and exclusion can be compassion and resilience, not rage and revenge. In her narrative world, the bullies are chumps. Maybe they are powerful at times, but ultimately they are losers. Maybe they hurt us, but we are not doomed to be their victims, because if we remain loyal, kind and honest we will emerge victorious in the end. Perhaps we will remain scarred; but we can remain morally whole, which is the greatest victory.

That's a wise and consoling lesson for kids who are feeling besieged or tormented by their peers, or uncertain what to do when the bullies descend upon the class scapegoat. No wonder so many kids—and so many adults as well—are reading these novels with such pleasure. Long after the movies close and the media hype dies down, the enduring appeal of these books will rest secure upon the solid foundation of Rowling's skill and her vision: life is hard, but there is hope; above all we must care for one another—and carry a small, flexible wand forged of feistiness and ingenuity.