

Morally ambiguous themes of the harry potter book series

Literature



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J. K. Rowling's, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, was published in 1998. While the popular series has a sort of cult-following, with seven books, eight movies, tons of merchandise, and even a theme park, there are many people that disagree with key elements of the series. Many believe that this story should be banned, especially in schools where impressionable children will be reading them. Conservative Christians, for example, would say that Harry Potter is morally ambiguous or, having unclear morals and a lack of clarity in ethical decision-making. That is, when an issue, situation, or question has moral dimensions or implications, but the decidedly "moral" action to take is unclear, either due to conflicting principles, ethical systems, or situational perspectives. Something that I found that Rowling suggests through her story is that the problem is that the battle between good and evil cannot be fought when the lines between the two are blurred.

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone seems to begin with clear distinctions between good and evil. The eleven year old main character, Harry Potter, and the wise Professor Dumbledore are seen as wholly good, doing the right thing throughout the beginning of this story. The main source of conflict and the antagonist in the book is Lord Voldemort. Voldemort epitomizes evil and villainy, as he is the murderer of Harry's parents and a creature destined to kill Harry and destroy Hogwarts. His short description in the beginning of the novel alludes to his evil presence throughout. Dumbledore, the epitome of goodness and benevolence, is the man describing Voldemort, illustrating a subtle battle between good and evil at the onset of the series. This is where the issue of moral ambiguity comes in. While we see these characters as

completely and wholly good or evil, Rowling complicates things over the course of the narrative by creating a few morally ambiguous characters.

From the start of *Sorcerer's Stone*, Professor Snape is presented to be a malignant follower of Lord Voldemort, and Harry and friends are only too ready to believe that their Potions teacher is completely evil. For example, in chapter eleven, during a quidditch match, Harry's broom flies out of control, it seems to be controlled by an evil force, outside his control. Hermione spies Snape from across the stands staring at Harry, as if he were placing an evil spell on the broom. She sets his robes on fire, destroying any possible spell that may have come from him. It is later discovered that Snape was actually trying to protect Harry. (Rowling 189-91) Also, when Harry sees Snape seemingly threaten Quirrell, he believes Quirrell to be good and Snape to be evil. He informs his friends that they must safeguard the good Quirrell from the evil Snape, in order to save the Sorcerer's Stone.

In actuality, though, it is the seemingly benevolent Professor Quirrell who is doing the bidding of Lord Voldemort. Professor Quirrell illustrates the results of an overweening greed and desire for power, a willingness to pay any price to acquire it even a willingness to align himself with and surrender his soul to the "Dark Side," a diabolically evil force (Schakel 185). When Harry sees Quirrell inside the final chamber, he comes face to face with evil's helper. Quirrell is hosting Voldemort in his turban and plans to destroy Harry. Harry must do whatever necessary to prevent the evil Voldemort from stealing the Sorcerer's Stone, for he will use it for evil instead of for good. As Harry is physically fighting with the two-faced monster of Quirrell and Voldemort, he

is literally fighting the strong evil spirit that killed his parents and is trying to kill him. When he places his hand on Quirrell's face, it burns, illustrating that good will overturn evil in the end. (Rowling 288-295) Later on, Harry asks Dumbledore why Quirrell failed to kill him. In response, Dumbledore tells the story of Harry's mother's death, which had saved Harry's life: "If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love...Quirrell, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good" (Rowling 299). Basically, love is a pure, good thing that serves as protection and strength to defeat evil throughout the Harry Potter series.

I believe that through *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Rowling argues that the concepts of good and evil are too complex to be expressed in black-and-white terms, and each character has some element of good and evil in their nature. The problem is, Rowling suggests, how can a battle be fought between good and evil when the lines between the two are so blurry? An important distinction to make is that "good" characters sometimes do "evil" things. This, of course, doesn't make these actions right. These characters still get punished for their actions, often by losing house points. Harry and his friends argue, break rules and don't listen to professors throughout the entire book. Throughout *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, there are many instances where characters face their fears and stand up for what they believe in. These scenes encourage bravery, love, and courage to do what one thinks is right. One such example would be the scene that takes place on Halloween night. There was a troll loose in the school, so the students were instructed to remain in their dorms. Ron and Harry did not go back to

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their dorm as they were told. Instead, they chose to disobey authority and face the troll in order to save Hermione (Rowling 172-177). Harry and friends also directly go against authority figures while confronting Voldemort. Although they save the school, they still did an “evil” thing by disobeying. While the characters could be seen as “evil” for disobey authority, I see “good” characters that chose to stand up for their beliefs of what was right. While it is good to endorse themes of friendship and bravery, I believe that it was a good thing that Rowling still showed the characters getting punished for their disobedience. Could it be possible that Rowling wanted to show the reader that breaking the rules isn’t always wrong, but there will still be consequences for our actions?

In his article, *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis*, Peter Schakel discusses how the *Chronicles of Narnia* series is more morally acceptable to the conservative christian audience because it presents good and evil as stark opposites, which children have no difficulty in differentiating. There is no moral ambiguity in this story. The *Narnia* books also present witches of any kind as consistently on the evil side (Schakel 178). Different from *Narnia*, the *Harry Potter* books show both good and evil witches and wizards. However, the *Potter* books, like the *Chronicles of Narnia*, include dark magic, the “Dark Arts,” the “Dark Side” (Rowling, chap. 16), and always treat it, like the *Chronicles*, as a representation of evil, of “going bad,” of making self and power the center of one’s life. At several points in this *Harry Potter* book, the students of *Hogwarts* are constantly warned away from experimenting with, or even showing interest in, dark magic (Schakel 185).

While Narnia may offer a more morally clear story, that doesn't mean that Harry Potter is without morals. The characters and story of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone demonstrate that good and evil exist, though the lines between them, in the books and in real life, are not as clear as the conservative Christians I reference would like for them to be. As the characters in Harry Potter show, one must choose to side with good or evil. As quoted in the second Harry Potter book, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (Chamber chap. 18).