

Sorting hat or psychologist? harry potter and the theories of psychology

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Analysis through the application of psychological concepts to characters in fiction has a long history, most notably starting with the psychoanalytic literary theory based off of Freud's theory of diagnoses through psychoanalysis. Such analysis can help understand what the author was thinking when they wrote their stories; what they were trying to teach us, what certain events or symbols the characters experience represent for real life, and often what an author believes about topics relevant to the their writing.

An informative example of this type of analysis would be to use various psychological concepts to examine and then compare the characters Tom Riddle and Harry Potter from JK Rowling's Harry Potter series. These characters, despite having very similar childhood environments which affected their personalities in psychologically predictable ways and caused some similarities between them throughout their lives, can be seen as nearly polar opposites in most of their behavior during the series due to a combination of the many differences in the factors which make up their nature and the few key differences in their nurture. To be able to make that kind of analytic comparison, however, a person needs to have at least some background knowledge in the subject being analyzed, in this case the Harry Potter series and the relevant characters. First of all, it is important to remember that the universe in which all of these events take place is one where magic exists and its users live in hidden communities throughout the world. The series starts eleven years after the end of the first war against the magical terrorist Voldemort (also known as the Dark Lord), then builds up with various conflicts between the previously thought to be dead Voldemort

and Harry Potter, until Voldemort returns in the middle of the series, which then spends the last few books describing the second war against Voldemort. Harry Potter, the main protagonist of the series, is essentially the mascot of the Light side, due to his being credited with the defeat of Voldemort as an infant.

Tom Marvolo Riddle is the real name of Voldemort, and therefore this paper will refer to him as Tom when describing his earlier years of life and Voldemort when describing his life once he adopted the moniker and became a terrorist. During the first war, one of Voldemort's servants overheard a prophecy which set the plot of the entire series into motion; the prophecy described a child soon to be born who would be able to defeat Voldemort because he "will have power the Dark Lord knows not," (Rowling, 2003). According to Dumbledore, the archetypal mentor figure to Harry and the professor who first introduced Tom to the wizarding world, that power was the ability to love. The prophecy also stated that "The Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal," (Rowling, 2003), which, because it helped to give them equal status, was part of how the books set them up as the representations of their opposing ideologies by making them as similar as possible so that they could more easily be contrasted. The most important background details necessary for the analytic comparison are facts about their early lives. They were both in effect orphans, though Harry was not orphaned until three months after his first birthday and Tom was effectively orphaned a few hours after he was born.

Tom was not truly an orphan until his teens because his father was still alive, but he did not know anything about his father until he was already at Hogwarts, and did not meet him until he arrived at his house to murder him. Both were subjected to neglect as children, although it was neglect of different kinds; Harry's guardians purposefully neglected him as a way to hurt him, but the workers at the orphanage where Tom was raised did not intentionally neglect him; they were simply not equipped to give a newborn the emotional support that it needs to have healthy psychological development. Neither of them had any friends while they lived in the muggle world, although Harry was able to make friends once he arrived at Hogwarts while Tom never had any friends, the closest being the inner circle of Death Eaters, his most loyal followers. Another important set of details is about their genetic predisposition. All children inherit traits from their parents; one of those heritable traits is a higher risk to develop mental disorders, especially ones that the child's ancestors suffered from. Because "the environment in which we grow and develop influences the expression of those genes.

.. Some genes are never expressed, the other expressions may be limited or enhanced by the environment (nurture)," (Caldwell 2017), environments that increase the probability of children developing mental disorders, such as those that Tom and Harry grew up in, can make a child that is genetically predisposed to a mental disorder even more likely to develop it. Tom, unlike Harry who's family shows no evidence of having any mental disorders, definitely does have a predisposition that would have been affected by his childhood; all of his mother's family were portrayed as having various

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disorders due to a history of inbreeding. The theory from developmental psychology known as attachment theory can explain a lot of their behavioral differences.

Attachment theory states that very young children use their relationships with their guardians to develop a model for how relationships should work throughout their lives, so if a child's attachment to their parents is not the secure attachment that it should be, it can negatively impact them for the rest of their life. Disorganized attachment, the attachment style in which a child is unable to form any attachment model due to an inconsistency in caregivers, causes the child to have trouble forming connections to others as an adult do to their lack of understanding of how relationships are meant to work. Also, like all styles of insecure attachment, it can be another risk factor for developing various psychological disorders. Due to the environment of his orphanage home, Tom best fits into the category of disorganized attachment, which is supported by his lifelong lack of friendships and general antisocial behavior. During the first year of his life, Harry lived with his parents, and was able to experience secure attachment to them during that time. After they died, however, he lived with the abusive Dursleys, where he had a type of anxious attachment due to their failure to meet his needs.

Anxious attachment includes both the avoidant and resistant attachment styles, in which the guardians of a child either consistently or occasionally fail to meet a child's needs, causing them to have various relationship troubles later in life. As Dumbledore stated, the ability to love was the power that allowed Harry to defeat Voldemort. His ability to retain that power and

not lose it to the effects of his childhood with the Dursleys was largely caused by the early differences between Harry and Tom, and it was also the cause of their seemingly opposite characterization later in life. Tom succumbed to the various risk factors he was exposed to and developed the traits necessary to diagnose him with psychopathy according to the American Psychological Association's DSM-5; this includes the inability to empathize with and care about others. A lot of his lack of positive emotion can be contributed to his disorganized attachment, since he had no model of how to care for people or what it felt like to be attached to someone. Harry, however, retained the subconscious memory of his parent's love and secure attachment throughout his childhood, and therefore, he knew that it was possible to have healthy relationships that were different from his with the Dursleys, so when he entered a situation in which he had the opportunity to form attachments at Hogwarts, he was able to.

Like his mother's sacrifice providing a magical shield made from her love that protected Harry from Voldemort for the first few books, the memory of both of his parents' love for him provided an emotional shield that protected Harry from the harmful effects of the Dursley's psychological and physical abuse. JK Rowling strongly believed in the power of happiness and love, and she infused those ideas into her novels in many ways. One of those ways can be seen in the context of comparing Harry, the protagonist of the series, and Tom, the main villain. The main difference between them that made them into the polar opposites that they are described as is their (in)ability to love; essentially, this is her way of saying that love is the difference between a hero and a villain. She even stated in an interview that " everything would

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have changed if Merope had survived and raised him herself and loved him,” (Rowling 2007); if Tom’s mother had raised him and he’d had the opportunity to form a secure attachment with her, thus teaching him how to love, he’d have been different enough that he likely would never come a villain, and it is possible he might even have become a hero like Harry was.

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