

How characterisation
creates the theme of
good vs. evil in the
harry potter serie...



Topic: The use of themes, stereotypes, mirror effects and totalitarianism as shown through the protagonist and antagonist in ' Harry Potter'. Research

Question: How does characterisation creates the theme of good versus evil in the ' Harry Potter' series. abstract Out of curiosity of how the ' Harry Potter' series, authored by J.

K. Rowling, has achieved its immense level of success and why this may be, I decided to investigate how characterisation of the protagonist and antagonist created the theme of good versus evil in the novels. As main components, the use of stereotypes, mirror effects, thematic developments and extended allusions are analysed.

The primary sources that were used were all seven ' Harry Potter' novels, as it was determined that using the entire series rather than just one book would provide a greater scope and more resources to create a more in depth analysis. The conclusion of the essay was that Rowling's characterisation of the hero and the villain was executed to steer in a way that enables the reader to identify with Harry, the hero, and to a much lesser extent with Voldemort, the villain. Creating the Theme of Good Versus Evil in the ' Harry Potter' Series Through Characterisation " Harry Potter will indeed stand time's test and wind up on a shelf where only the best are kept; I think Harry will take his place with Alice, Huck, Frodo, and Dorothy, and this is one series not just for the decade, but for the ages" - Stephen King¹ introduction The fantasy novel series ' Harry Potter', authored by J. K. Rowling, depicts the tale of an unlikely hero and his journey to defeat the paramount evil, aided by his friends and the ability to love. Harry Potter' has become a cultural phenomenon across the globe, replacing the traditional fairy tales on <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

children's bookshelves and having sold more copies than the Bible over the past 10 years. The story of the scrawny bespectacled boy, prophesised to lead the ultimate battle of good vs. evil has further been transformed into an immensely successful film franchise, grossing more than \$5.

4 billion and becoming the highest grossing film series. Along with rave reviews, it is needless to say that ' Harry Potter' is doing quite well, and has captivated millions upon millions. The prosperity of the ' Harry Potter' series cannot alone be attributed to simply being a ' good story', and a relevant question to inquire is whether Rowling's implementation of literary techniques through characterisation has a significant contribution to the above. With one of the topics with the most significance being the battle between good and evil, characterisation through thematic development, use of stereotypes, extended allusions and comparisons may be of importance. The above can be restated as the research question of this essay; how does characterisation create the theme of good versus evil in the ' Harry Potter' series? Rowlings' use of stereotypes to distinguish between good and evil Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort are the antithesis of each other, an idea conveyed through their respective character descriptions. Rowling characterises her protagonist as a somewhat normal teenage boy having " a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, bright green eyes ... and wearing round glasses held together with a lot of Sellotape" 2, raised by his Muggle, or non-magical, aunt and uncle following the murder of his parents by Voldemort. Here he remained oblivious to being a wizard for 11 years before enrolling into Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and exposed to the magical community. Parallels can be drawn from Harry's experiences to those of the

reader, as there is a sense of familiarity with being the 'new kid', but lacking a sense of superiority and importance.

Rather he is a sponge ready to soak up, and establish a place in the world, with these traits contributing to evoking empathy for Harry in the reader. In deep contrast to Harry, Voldemort is described through negative connotation, although an accurate description of him is not available until his resurrection during the fourth book. This in itself is a type of characterisation, as he is in absentia, and is consequently described through character reactions, which offers suspense and stimulates the imagination of the reader.

Even after his presumed death, the magical community fears to say his name, and refer to him as 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named' and by his followers as the Dark Lord. This is shown early on by Rubeus Hagrid, one of Harry's loyal friends, when Harry asks him about who Voldemort is and to say his name: "I don't like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does." "Why not?" "Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went ... bad. As bad as you could go.

Worse. Worse than worse. His name was ..." Hagrid gulped, but no words came out. "Could you write it down?" Harry suggested. "Nah - can't spell it. All right - Voldemort.

"Hagrid shuddered." Despite Hagrid being a half-giant, even he fears the very thought of Voldemort due to the fact that the magical community was terrified of him for his wrath of evil. Upon his rebirth, he is physically described as having "hands like large, pale spiders; long white fingers ... the <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

red eyes. Whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness" 4. Voldemort is addressed with apprehension; he is described to evoke contempt within the reader and it becomes obvious very early in the first book that this 'human' is to be greatly feared.

These vast differences between how the main protagonist and antagonist are illustrated is not a coincidence but rather a literary technique employed by Rowling. Rather than leaving it up to the reader to decide if Voldemort is evil or Harry is good, she created two prime examples for the classic stereotypes of good and evil, similar to what can be seen in 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', where differentiation between good and evil through Alice and the Queen of Hearts is immensely conspicuous. Therefore from the very onset of the books, the reader is completely convinced of who is the hero, and who is the villain, no questions asked. In addition to Rowling's use of stereotypes, she also ensured that the reader, as the 'Harry Potter' series was primarily targeted towards adolescents, was able to relate to not Voldemort, but to Harry. This was made evident through retaining some aspects of being a typical teenager in that Harry still undergoes the various stages of puberty, such as love, friendship and school. As previously mentioned, the reader is able to connect to Harry, while very few can say that their life long ambition is to become a universal dictator and father a mass genocide. Harry between good and evil Although Rowling stereotypically depicts Harry as good, throughout the series he begins to doubt himself and his 'goodness' due to the increasing abundance of similar character traits he shares with Voldemort.

The second novel, ' Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets' in particular emphasises these strange likenesses, as Voldemort himself addresses them: "[We are] both half-bloods, orphans, raised by Muggles. Probably the only two Parselmouths⁵ to come to Hogwarts since the great Slytherin himself. We even look something alike. " ⁶ From the above quote it can be seen that the two share both physical and emotional similarities, and it is therefore curious that they are polar opposites of each other, with Harry and Voldemort being the epitome of good and evil respectively. Harry continues to question himself as to why this persists, eager to know why he was not fighting for the same thing as Voldemort and vice versa, and eventually confronts his headmaster and mentor. Dumbledore functions as all knowing in the ' Harry Potter' series and as a source of theoretical knowledge through his ability to ' fill in the blanks' by metaphorically showing Harry vital puzzle pieces in his Pensieve⁷.

He reassures Harry and introduces the vital statement that " it is our choices ... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" ⁸ This idea, that our choices defines us as people is a recurring element in the ' Harry Potter' series and is portrayed through different characters. It is comprehensible that Harry simply chose to be good while Voldemort simply chose to be evil, although these parallels were developed through many small choices. An example of how our choices influence who we are can be seen through Dumbledore's statement that " Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, nor do I believe that he has ever wanted one. " ⁹, and thus it can be seen that Voldemort chose to exclude himself, to isolate himself from others and to live in solidarity.

It was through his selfalienation that Voldemort was capable of rising to power, without remorse or concern for others, and it was through his lack of trust in anyone that he was able to avoid being betrayed. In contrast to Voldemort's choices, Harry chose a distinctly different path. Alike Voldemort, Harry entered the magical community knowing no one and belonging nowhere, however unlike Voldemort, he veered towards companionship, trust and allowed others to help him. An example of this is in the first book when he for the first of many times stands up for his friends, in this situation Ron Weasley, Parselmouth: the ability to communicate with snakes, described as the trait of a dark wizard.

6 Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, page 233 7 Pensieve: a stone basin used to store and review memories 8 Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, page 245 9 Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, page 260 7 when his soon to be rival, Draco Malfoy, gives him the option of ditching Ron for a more affluent crowd: "'You'll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there. He held out his hand to shake Harry's, but Harry didn't take it. ' I think I can tell who the wrong sort are for myself, thanks,' he said coolly.

" 10 This passage shows that Harry did indeed have the opportunity to choose ambition, power and success if only he disregards any human emotional contact, which was the path that Voldemort chose, however Harry doesn't and already here he distinguishes himself from Voldemort. Therefore it can be seen that although there are irrefutable similarities between Harry and Voldemort, Harry would never have become evil merely due to the fact <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

that he never chose to. ub-themes of good versus evil Although the main theme that is under discussion is good versus evil, there also exist several sub, or secondary, themes that are of vital importance including friendship, love and sacrifice. These dovetail into one unity, functioning as the foundation for the primary theme. A significant aspect of these secondary themes is that while good is capable of all three, evil is only capable of one, namely sacrifice, and this idea shall be further developed.

The ability to love and maintain true friends is repeatedly emphasised as an indicator of good or evil, and furthermore the dependence upon these friends to succeed. During the very first DA11 meeting, one of his best friends, Hermione Granger, attempts to advertise Harry as the perfect teacher for the defence against the dark arts by detailing the various dangerous encounters that he has had with Voldemort and how he ' skillfully' survived each one of these. However Harry immediately revokes this claim, stating that "[he doesn't] want to sound modest of anything, but [he] had a lot of help with all that stuff. 12 Harry is here referring back to the assistance, perseverance and adherence of his friends, Harry Potter and the Philosophers Stone, page 81 Dumbledore's Army: a student led group dedicated towards the defence against the dark arts 12 Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, page 306 8 mainly Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger; through the various obstacles they have faced, such as the life-sized set of Wizards Chess¹³, killing the basilisk¹⁴ and one of Voldemort's Horcuxes¹⁵, and fighting off numerous Dementors¹⁶ at once. Despite the stereotypical prerequisite of a hero living in emotional isolation and seclusion, without the collective, and the loyalty and support of friends, good

could not have conquered evil due to the fact that friendship is a fundamental element of being good.

In contrast to the before mentioned, Voldemort requires neither friendship nor does he feel the need to express loyalty to those serving him; he would without a second thought sentence one of his most loyal servants, or Death Eaters, to death for his own benefit. To Voldemort, friendship and trust are not only signs of weakness and humanity, but also a representative of normality and being 'regular', an idea of which he condemned early in his childhood. Upon discovering his supernatural abilities whilst living in a Muggle¹⁷ orphanage, Voldemort began to think of himself as superior and of other people to be inferior to him, resulting in him giving off an aura of grandeur and often referring to himself in third person. There are however a few instances in the series where Voldemort attempts to express a more 'human' side, though always with an alternative motive and as a mean of manipulation. This is first seen upon his resurrection in 'Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, where he ironically exclaims, " But look Harry! My true family returns..."¹⁸ This passage functions as an oxymoron as it contradicts the previously mentioned statement by Dumbledore that Voldemort never had a friend, or a family for that matter since he was an orphan, nor did he ever want one, and those of his servants that consider themselves his 'loyal friends' are deluded. A further example of Voldemort using human sentiments for his own benefit is when he applies for a job at Hogwarts: Wizards Chess: similar to chess however the pieces resort to smashing each other to pieces rather than being taken off the board¹⁴ Basilisk: an enormous snake with the ability to kill a person by staring into its eyes and

possesses lethally venomous fangs 15 Horcrux: a fragment of a person's soul that has been split through murder, isolated within an object and can ensure immortality as long as the soul fragment remains intact 16 Dementors: guards of the wizarding prison, Azkaban, that feed on happiness and can suck a person's soul through a 'kiss' 17 Muggle: non-magical people 18 Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, page 561 9 "'And what will become of those whom you command? What will happen to those who call themselves - or so rumour has it - Death Eaters? ... ' My friends,' he said, after a moment's pause, ' will carry on without me, I am sure. ' ' I am glad to hear that you consider them friends,' said Dumbledore. ' I was under the impression that they are more in the order of servants.

" 19 Voldemort applies for the job at Hogwarts with no intention of becoming a teacher, but rather for an excuse to visit the school for own personal benefit; to create another Horcrux, and attempts to lessen Dumbledore's suspicions of him through the false pretences of not being a deranged psychopath. It can therefore be deduced that in good, you are capable of love and loving your friends, while in evil you are not because a person having succumbed to evil will always have his or her best interest ahead of others, regardless of the situation. As was briefly mentioned before, sacrifice also plays a distinctive role in differentiating between good and evil through their respective interpretations of the act.

Good veers towards self-sacrifice and favours inflicting pain upon itself rather than upon others, innocents in particular, and this is heavily portrayed through Harry in the ' Harry Potter' series. A specific example of this is seen in ' Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince' where Harry, acting upon his gut <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

intuition of evil being omnipresent beyond the usual, decides to give his only supply of lucky potion, Felix Felicis, to his closest friends to ensure that their lives will be saved through liquid luck: "Why do I need socks? asked Ron. ' You need what's wrapped in them; it's the Felix Felicis.

Share it between yourself and Ginny too. Say goodbye to her from me. I'd better go, Dumbledore's waiting -' ' No! ' said Hermione, as Ron unwrapped the tiny little bottle of golden potion, looking awestruck. ' We don't want it, you take it, who knows what you're going to be facing? ' Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, page 416 10 ' I'll be fine, I'll be with Dumbledore,' said Harry. ' I want to know you lot are OK. " 20 Harry does this despite of the tremendous risk that he himself is under, as he is the main target of Lord Voldemort, not his friends, however he couldn't bear the idea of his friends being sacrificed for their involvement with him and as a result of the danger that he had inflicted upon them. Harry's selflessness is further developed in ' Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' during the final battle between good and evil, in which good is fighting in the name of Harry Potter and evil is fighting in the name of Lord Voldemort.

As Voldemort's forces start to break those fighting against him, he gives Harry an ultimatum; either he is to surrender himself to Voldemort or Voldemort gives the orders to eradicate all those challenging and opposing him. Once again Harry's benevolence is displayed through his inability to sacrifice others for his own benefit, his recognition that his life is not worth more than those of others, and that he does not have the right to ' play god'.

Although first ensuring that a friend is supplied with sufficient knowledge regarding how to finally kill Voldemort, Harry goes to Voldemort with <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

complete awareness that he will be murdered mercilessly, and by doing so he would be saving hundreds of innocent people in return. As a strict contradiction to Harry's selflessness, with his moral compass consistently directing him down paths where others will not be affected by his actions, Voldemort overall lacks these morals and is basically emotionally handicapped. He is incapable of prioritising the lives of others above his own and this is one of the key elements that distinguish evil from good. the roles of good and evil in totalitarianism At the first glance Voldemort's regime seems entirely fiction and completely unrealistic, however this claim can be questioned following a further analysis.

With the creation of a supreme ruler with servants to do his every bidding, and an ideology based on the "purity" of blood, certain parallels can indeed be drawn to our own history, and events that occurred a mere 70 years ago. He can both psychologically and through his practices be compared to Adolf Hitler, one of the most controversial and undoubtedly sadistic dictators of the 20th century. Rowling essentially uses an extended allusion to characterise Voldemort as a totalitarian, seen through the abundance of similarities between him and Hitler, and this especially makes Voldemort seem all the more cruel and malicious as the reader is able to identify with those affected by his wrath. It can be seen that Voldemort and Hitler shared similar skewed views of the 'perfect' society, favouring a racial cleansing as the only solution to creating such a population. Voldemort specifically targeted Muggles and Mudbloods²¹, while Hitler targeted mainly Jews, disabled, homosexuals and political opponents, and they executed their respective ideas of social filtration through perverse propaganda,

discrimination and murder. Particularly in 'Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows' it can be seen how Voldemort uses fear and brainwashing as a mean to control and conform the magical community, with an example of this being what Harry, Ron and Hermione witness upon breaking into the Ministry of Magic in disguise following Voldemort's reform: " Harry looked more closely and realised that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards.

Muggles,' whispered Hermione. ' In their rightful place. " 22 The above passage shows the bias that is experienced by those who are not viewed as privileged or desired, and the public humiliation and mutilation that they subsequently must undergo, along with portraying a hierarchy through symbolism as the privileged are physically sitting and oppressing the underprivileged. Also introduced in the same chapter as the above passage is the slogan ' Magic is Might'23, propaganda authored by Voldemort to emphasise his personal views that pure bloods and those with magical abilities are superior to other racial groups.

This slogan can be compared to a popular Nazi German motto " Die Juden sind unser 21 Mudblood: an offensive term used to refer to a witch or wizard with Muggle (nonmagical) parentage. 22 Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, page 199 23 Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, page 198 12 Unglück! " 24, which was coined by the nationalist German historian Heinrich von Treitschke in the 1880s and further publicised by the Nazi newspaper ' <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

Der Sturmer', and is simply translated to "The Jews are our Misfortune!

These are two examples of government propaganda used to present and promote racism and discrimination in a politically correct manner, in addition to portraying the parallels that can be seen between the two regimes. Even Voldemort and Hitler's childhoods share common likenesses, with both of them having grown up neglected children, as Voldemort was an orphan who was never loved or shown empathy, and as Hitler was physically and emotionally abused by his father.

Therefore as a consequence of their tragic adolescences, their respective futures and roles in society can be seen as perhaps having been foreshadowed. In addition, neither Voldemort nor Hitler actually did any hard labour themselves; instead they appointed servants and created an army to serve them, the Death Eaters, and the SS and Gestapo respectively. Furthermore, they both also showed an emotional affinity towards non-humans; Dumbledore expressed that possibly the only real relationship Voldemort ever had to anything was to his snake, Nagini, with whom he communicated to in Parseltongue. It is later revealed that the snake in fact contains a Horcrux, a fragment of Voldemort's own soul, and therefore in actuality he merely had a relationship with himself. In comparison, Hitler was known for his love of the dog breed German Shepherd, and cared deeply towards his last dog, Blondi, whom he kept by his side even when he was in hiding and allowed her to sleep in his bed. He gave orders that the dog be given the same pills that were to end his own life, and committed suicide shortly after the death of Blondi.

It was not a simple coincidence that Rowling's Lord Voldemort almost perfectly mirrored Adolf Hitler, but rather a way of enabling the reader to identify with the atrocities that were witnessed under Voldemort's rule. The horrors, the genocide and the fear created by Voldemort do not seem nearly as unrealistic, despite 'Harry Potter' being a fantasy series, because we've seen it happen before, and as it can be universally agreed that Hitler was evil, the similarities between Voldemort and the latter shown through the characterisation of Voldemort concludes that he too must be evil. 4 " Der Sturmer. " Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. 5 Sept. 2010. Web. 03 Oct.

2010. . 13 conclusion The 'Harry Potter' series poses a challenge in analysing, as there are extensive layers and depth to the characters that must be peeled off one by one. The protagonist and antagonist, being Harry Potter and Lord Voldemort respectively, are complex characters intentionally created by Rowling to function as a mean of differentiating between good and evil. Through a character analysis of the before mentioned main characters, it is possible to display how characterisation creates the theme of good vs. evil, and this is specifically shown through Rowling's use of literary techniques.

These include creating stereotypes of good and evil, where the reader is easily capable of distinguishing between the two, and developing a mirror effect between Harry and Voldemort, where it is emphasised that although many superficial similarities may occur, our choices remain as what defines us. Employing several sub-themes, created an opportunity for the reader to build a wall between good and evil based on how they each interpreted and enacted friendship, loyalty and sacrifice. Lastly, Rowling's use of an <https://assignbuster.com/how-characterisation-creates-the-theme-of-good-vs-evil-in-the-harry-potter-series-essay/>

extended allusion, through the abundance of likenesses between Voldemort and Hitler, further develops the barrier between good and evil and eliminates any possibility of the reader empathising with Voldemort rather than the intended target, Harry. Hence it can be seen that developing a theme such as good vs. evil doesn't just simply require the author stating who is good and who is evil, but rather it requires extensive character development to create authenticity.

Finally, it can be concluded that the use characterisation has indeed aided the prosperity of the series, and as Stephen King commented about Rowling's creation, " this is one series not for the decade, but for the ages"