

An exploration in  
equality: racism and  
slavery in the magical  
world of Harry Potter...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Slavery and Racism, as contributing factors to human history, are frequent themes in literature across the globe. JK Rowling's Harry Potter series is littered with references to slavery and racism, as well as related topics. The story is told as a seven-part saga, focusing on Harry's life in the wizarding school Hogwarts. Harry is a boy, orphaned by the evil Lord Voldemort, who learns of his parents' lives as witch and wizard and thus of his own status as a young wizard. Throughout the series Harry develops as a wizard, fighting for the ultimate destruction of the man who murdered his parents.

The books explore many complex ideas prominent in society using the wizarding world, which is displayed as a microcosm of the real world. The series discusses these ideas using the fictional story as commentary which is both easily comprehensible and entertaining for all audiences. JK Rowling uses her Harry Potter novels as a means to criticize human society by creating parallels between the real and magical worlds. The series documents the negative effects of slavery, using House-elves as the enslaved of the magical world.

The elves, who are required by ancient magic to serve their masters dutifully and unrepentantly until they are freed (Chamber 14), perform chores around the house as well as run errands at their masters' bidding. The expectations that their masters have of them are high, and any failure to complete a task requires the elves to punish themselves, generally with physical pain (Chamber 14). Their working conditions are rough, and relations between elves and their masters are not often amiable.

Rowling clearly depicts the elves as a suffering species, indicating that their enslaved status is leading to their unhappiness. The sorry fate of the elves very closely resembles that of many enslaved people throughout history, especially that of African Americans in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Described by Carey as “bondage,” the elves have practically no control of their lives; they are forced to act on their masters’ whims, no matter how menial the task (Revisited 160). Instead of living as free agents, they are simply puppets for the desires of their masters.

The enslaved people of the world lived (and live) as such, unable to act in response to their own wants and needs. Rowling, in expanding on the wretched lives of the House-elves, is criticizing the morals of societies who use slavery. The elves are treated unfairly, and since they are both cute and pitiful, with big eyes and a small body, they are easy to empathize with. She clearly wants the reader to sympathize with the elves and view their slavery as evil and cruel. She feels slavery as a whole is a foul part of society, and her depiction of it convinces readers of the same.

The elves are forced into submission without any sort of payment or even time off. They are not allowed “sick leave and pensions” (Goblet 182). They work tirelessly in “abject servitude” (Dendle 165). They do not even have the right to their own emotions. According to Winky, an elf employed by Hogwarts, “house-elves has no right to be unhappy when there is work to be done and masters to be served” (Goblet 538). Thoughts and feelings, which ought to be inalienable rights to any being capable of them, have been totally replaced in importance by the desires of their masters.

Unfair as it was, this was the reality for many slaves in America as well, living only to do their master's bidding, forbidden to allow their emotions to alter their performance. The social commentary Rowling provides opens her readers' eyes to the harshness of slavery, and convinces them of its cruelty. Not only are the tasks that they are forced to do reminiscent of the African Americans forced into slavery, the status that House-elves are given is also comparable. The elves are not educated, giving the appearance of being dim-witted and stupid.

As described by Rangwala, "the elves use childish language with poor grammar, often referring to themselves in the third person" (137). The depiction of elves as creatures without so much as a firm grasp on proper speech marks them as inferior to almost any other intelligent species. African Americans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often portrayed this way as well, using poor grammar and slowed speech. Although Rowling does not actually feel that House-elves deserve this lowered status, she gives it to them in order to indicate the wrongness it portrays.

The elves are further dehumanized by their attire. Kreacher, the house-elf belonging to Harry's godfather Sirius Black, is described as such: "except for the filthy rag tied like a loincloth around its middle, it was completely naked" (Order 100). While members of a normal society wear clothes that cover the majority of their bodies, House-elves are not allowed this privilege. That they are not even allowed clothes - with clothes they acquire freedom, and so are limited to rags - subordinates them once again to all normal members of society.

<https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-in-equality-racism-an-slavery-in-the-magical-world-of-harry-potter/>

Slaves of real-world history were treated similarly, often provided only with minimal cheap clothing. Both groups, the elves and the enslaved of the real world, are treated as a lower class by society. The desire for superiority over intelligent non-humans is not just constrained to the case with House-elves. It is rampant in the wizarding world. "The emotional need to express dominations symbolically runs deep in both worlds" (Dendle 171). For example, the wizarding government dictates much about the lives of part-humans and other magical creatures, demoting them to lower status.

The wizard community has centrally organized species management" (Dendle 167) which includes a Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures within the Ministry of Magic (Order 665). Wizards have established a sense of superiority over magical creatures and enforce this ranking through control of their lifestyles. Anatol comments that the magical world functions under "a human-centered perspective that relegates nonhumans lower down a hierarchical chain of living things" (118). Humans have an innate desire for superiority in both the real and magical worlds, using countless methods to establish their own heightened status.

The wizarding government, for example, strictly regulates the livelihoods of magical creatures, ensuring human superiority. They restrict wand use to humans (Goblet 132), permit Centaurs only certain areas of land (Order 665), force Giants to live in remote, mountainous areas (Order 378), and control magical non-humans with species-specific Codes of Conduct (Stone 263). Almost every aspect of the lives of part-human or nonhuman creatures is dictated and controlled by the Ministry, and none of these creatures are considered equal to humans.

<https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-in-equality-racism-an-slavery-in-the-magical-world-of-harry-potter/>

Wizards enforce their self-appointed superiority without real consideration of the species their rulings affect. In fact, as described by Law 15 ' B,' it is inconceivable that any nonhuman could be equal or superior to humans, especially in respect to intelligence. The law describes them as “ magical creature[s] who [are] deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore [are] considered responsible for [their] actions” (Order 665). By labeling them with “ near-human intelligence,” wizards are cementing into the law, the government, and thus all of the magical world, their own heightened status over magical creatures.

Anatol argues that the Fountain of Magical Brethren (located in the Ministry of Magic) which depicts a wizard, witch, centaur, goblin, and house elf living in harmony together (Order 117), “ suggests equality between magical beings” (Anatol 112). However, even though the name and outward appearance would indicate that all five beings are equal, the three magical nonhumans are still viewed as inferior. They all stare “ adoringly” up at the witch and wizard, with poses that do not indicate equality (Order 117).

Even when wizards attempt the facade of equality between all magical beings, their own sense of superiority is still apparent. Half-Giants especially are treated as subordinate to wizarding humans. Hagrid, the most prominent half-Giant in the series and a close friend of Harry's, is treated as part of a lesser species by many. Although Hagrid is not unintelligent, he is part of an allegedly subordinate species of part-human, and as such is viewed negatively. In what Hermione, one of Harry's two closest friends, calls “ bigotry” (Goblet 434), he is described as a “ great oaf” (Chamber 311) and as seeming “ very slow” (Order 395).

<https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-in-equality-racism-an-slavery-in-the-magical-world-of-harry-potter/>

Being part Giant is in fact one of the most difficult positions to be in in the wizarding world, as Giants are very unfriendly, “ bloodthirsty and brutal” (Goblet 439), and the prejudices that are held against them are carried over to people like Hagrid who have Giant ancestry. In a sense, Rowling is comparing the biases that wizards had against Part-Giants to those common among many other groups, including those that whites held against African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both were considered dim and unworthy of civilized society, and both were undeserving of this prejudice.

By making Hagrid one of the nicest and gentlest characters in the series, Rowling is countering these popular opinions, indicating her belief that targets of discrimination (like African Americans) are not in fact dim or brutal. This “ animalization of giants,” Anatol states, “ correspond[s] in many ways to the racist bestialization of non-European people” (115). This racism is apparent in the ways in which he and other Part-Giants are treated by witches and wizards. There is significant prejudice against Giants, and those with Giant relatives suffer from the stigma of giant culture.

To be Part-Giant is considered bad, and just as Africans during Apartheid would sometimes deny their true heritage in order to be accepted in society and avoid harassment and cruel treatment, Part-Giants sometimes do the same in the wizarding world. Madame Maxime, the headmistress of Beauxbatons (a competing magic school) and a Part-Giant, is affronted when Hagrid asks her to elaborate on her Giant ancestry. “ I ‘ ave nevair been more insulted in my life! ” she responds with her French accent, “ ‘ alf giant? Moi? I ‘ ave - I ‘ ave big bones! ” (Goblet 429).

<https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-in-equality-racism-an-slavery-in-the-magical-world-of-harry-potter/>

Maxime feels it is easier to deny her Giant roots than to live with the stigma of being Part-Giant, and thus responds in anger when she is approached on the matter. She does not want to live with people judging her in a way comparable to the ways Africans were judged, so instead lives life in denial. According to Anatol, any Part-Giant is “ a physical other in wizarding society, an apt metaphor for being a racial other in the muggle world” (114). Rowling’s portrayal of racism against Giants indicates her animosity for racism in general, especially that which has occurred so frequently in human society.

Racism against other humans in addition to giants and other nonhumans is apparent and an important theme throughout the story. Carey argues that Rowling feels strongly that “ discrimination based on race is evil” and “ that even superficially egalitarian societies conceal deep inequalities and injustices” (House-elves 107). In the novels, race itself is not a basis for discrimination – that is, the color of one’s skin is not an issue in the series. However, blood status is used as a parallel for race, and is certainly a cause for much discrimination.

Blood status, referring to the amount of magical blood someone has, is commonly divided into the following categories: Pureblood, a term for a wizard with only magical heritage, Half-blood, a term for a wizard with one magical parent and one nonmagical parent, Mudblood, a derogatory term for a wizard with nonmagical parents, and Muggle, the phrase used to describe a nonmagical person. The most common forms of prejudice which parallel racism are the mindset many Purebloods hold that they are superior to



anyone with nonmagical blood, and the opinion that any wizard is better than a Muggle.

Within the magical community, Mudbloods are treated the most unfairly, comparable to how many minorities have traditionally been treated. Social commentary relating to racism is overwhelming in the series, offering the perspective that all human beings are equal, no matter their ancestry, whether it should pertain to race, as in the real world, or magic, as in the magical world. The feelings towards Mudbloods that purebloods and wizards of magical heritage hold are synonymous to the negative feelings that different racial groups have historically felt for each other.

The name itself, “Mudblood,” indicates a hierarchical system in which those of nonmagical parentage are at the bottom of the social structure. Ron elaborates on this, after an event in which Draco Malfoy, Harry’s arch-nemesis at school and a Pureblood, has called Hermione a Mudblood: “It’s a disgusting thing to call someone. Dirty blood, see. Common blood.” (Chamber 116). Although there is no difference between a Pureblood and a Mudblood in either appearance or magical skill, prejudices are held nonetheless.

Throughout history, different racial groups have taken this position, feeling superior to others based on their blood or heritage. Paralleling a ‘Hitler-esque’ view on how inferior peoples (especially Jews) ought to be handled, Voldemort says that “we shall cut away the canker that infects us until only those of the true blood remain” (Hallows 11). Just as Hitler and the Nazis felt that Aryans were racially superior, and that Jews and other ‘lesser’ people

should be condemned, Voldemort insisted upon Pureblood superiority and fought for the destruction of all other people.

In describing those of non-‘ pure’ blood as a “ canker,” Rowling very clearly indicates that the relationship between those with a Pureblood mindset and others is historically comparable to other racial cleansing in which one ‘ superior’ group tried to eradicate the other. When the Ministry of Magic is taken over by Voldemort’s followers, propaganda emerges that warns of the alleged harm that non-Purebloods cause to the rest of the wizarding world.

One brochure printed at this time is headed “ Mudbloods and the Danger they Pose to a Peaceful Pureblood Society” (Hallows 249). This again, is an example of an unfair mindset in which one group of people is considered inferior, causing them to be discriminated against. In this case, the Mudbloods are described as a “ danger to... society,” hinting that they are savage, fierce, or otherwise undeserving of relations with civilized people. In a similar vein, the stereotypical Native American is wild, savage, dressed strangely and wearing war paint, and speaks simplistically.

However, the Native American people were no less intelligent nor less civilized than the Europeans who settled in their territory, they were simply misunderstood and unfairly judged. The Mudbloods, too, are just as civilized and worthy of society, even though they have a different ancestry. The Pureblood versus Mudblood racism that is omnipresent throughout the story indicates Rowling’s condemnation of racial discrimination as a whole. Racism in the novels is extended from hostilities between Purebloods and Mudbloods to those between wizards and non-magic humans.

Many wizards feel that they are superior to Muggles, and for this reason they believe they have the right to dominate them. The Ministry of Magic, when under the control of Voldemort, illustrates this point of view with an enormous statue depicting a wizard atop a throne made up of the bodies of Muggles, captioned by the phrase “ Magic is Might” (Hallows 242). This mindset in which one group of people believes they are superior in some way and thus have the right to control another group, is similar to the theory of Divine Right, and frequently appears worldwide.

Dumbledore, the Hogwarts headmaster and Harry’s mentor, in his misguided youth, wrote in a letter regarding his plan to force Muggles into subservience: “ Wizard dominance being FOR THE MUGGLES’ OWN GOOD” (Hallows 357). The opinion that Dumbledore held, that dominating and controlling Muggles would in fact help them, is ridiculous. Molly Ivins comments on this in her well-known quotation, “ It’s hard to convince people you’re killing them for their own good” (Bumper sticker).

Of course this is true, and Ivins is making an attempt to convince the world that the destruction of a group of people will not benefit anyone. According to Oakes, self-proclaimed superiority, and the mindset that it gives a right to rule, will lead to “ exploitation,... abuse, and... excessive violence” (Secret 154). Violence as a result of a superiority mindset is definitely prominent in the wizarding world. This aggression has significant ties to racial issues prominent in real-world society, most significantly to violence towards African Americans.

In Goblet of Fire, Muggles are tortured simply because of their lack of magic, closely resembling Ku Klux Klan rituals. The wizards performing the acts against the Muggles wear hooded robes and masks to hide their faces, just as Klan members wore their infamous white robes when performing Klan rituals. The Klan members and robed wizards alike had no reason beyond a strong dislike for the other group (African Americans or Muggles) to their torture, and yet still harbor an unrepentant racist attitude, leading to an extreme amount of uncalled-for violence.

Racist violence, Rowling feels, is cruel and unnecessary in civilized society. Societal ties can also be drawn in the way Muggles are depicted in the series. As described by Oakes, Muggles are frequently considered to be “slow,” pathetic, and inept in comparison to wizards (Flying 119). Mr. Dursley, Harry’s Muggle uncle, demonstrates this excellently, often sputtering at a loss for words when angry, described as “stupid” (Chamber 1), and making unintelligent decisions (Stone 38-44).

In a similar fashion, African Americans and Native Americans, when depicted in the media of the 1800s and 1900s, are often depicted as dumb and uneducated. They frequently use poor speech and are unable to perform simple tasks. Rowling uses an unattractive description of Muggles as a way of commenting on the marginalized groups they represent. The purpose of Rowling’s depiction of racism is to convey a message of equality, and is epitomized by the character Remus Lupin who states that “Every human life is worth the same” (Hallows 440).

Rowling truly believes that all people, regardless of race, religion, or blood status, is equal in all respects, and that no person should be segregated against for any reason. The social commentary which is abundant (although seamlessly incorporated) in JK Rowling's Harry Potter series is used as a device for Rowling to criticize certain aspects of humanity. She takes very specific stands on issues which are comparable to issues in the real world, issues such as slavery, unfair superiority mindsets, and racism.

The magical world, which mirrors the real world, must deal with all of these issues, although in audience appropriate ways using magical creatures rather than real minorities. Just as many marginalized have struggled with slavery and racism to an extreme degree in the nonmagical real world, various magical creatures and wizards have had to fight the same issues in the fictional magical world. Using her novels, Rowling is calling for the equality of all peoples, magical or not, the world over.