

Harry Potter and the Ancient Wisdom

The Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling are a fantastically magical phenomenon. Coming out of nowhere in the publishing world, they rapidly became the best-selling young people's books of our time, and the movies based upon them have been equally popular.

The books are examples of three literary genres. One is the bildungsroman, or novel of the moral and psychological education of the protagonist; Harry Potter is a student at a boarding school, but is also in the great school of Life. Another genre is the quest story, in which the protagonist faces a series of trials, the passing of which results in the discovery of a great treasure--in Harry's case, self-knowledge. And the third is the fairy tale, whose central character is often an orphan; Harry is an orphan and thus a fitting representative of every human being, for we are all, in the words of one of the great Theosophical teachers, members of "poor orphan humanity."

Harry comes from a family of Wizards but has been reared by Muggles, or non-Wizards, and so is ignorant of his background and latent powers. He is called, however, to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he will spend seven years being educated in magic but also in moral and psychological maturity. At or from Hogwarts, Harry will engage in a series of quests that are all part of an encompassing great quest to discover who and what he is.

The four books in print, with three more projected for the series, appeal to the young--both in years and in heart. That appeal is founded on the author's skill as a storyteller, but also on the worldview of the stories, which--it may be suggested--is compatible with the Ancient Wisdom.

Rowling's wide-ranging familiarity with myth, legend, magic, and odd bits of recondite and esoteric information is the web-stuff from which she spins her magical tale. The books create their own world, whose integrity is an essential for good fantasy. Yet they are also interpretable in or, to use J. R. R. Tolkien's term, "applicable" to other contexts, such as Theosophy, with which Rowling has some familiarity, as is clear from

her reference in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* to the fictitious author "Cassandra Vablatsky" and her equally fictitious book *Unfogging the Future*. "Vablatsky" is a metathesis of "Blavatsky," and "Cassandra" is an appropriate substitute for "Helena," because Cassandra was the daughter of Priam, King of Troy, a prophetess who always spoke the truth but was never believed and because Cassandra's story is part of the great war of the *Iliad*, fought over Helen. Moreover, the fictitious book title *Unfogging the Future* suggests *Isis Unveiled*, Helena Blavatsky's first major work.

Although "Cassandra Vablatsky" shows that Rowling has some knowledge of the Theosophical tradition, one cannot assume that knowledge to be either deep or extensive. And yet, interestingly, much in the *Harry Potter* books is parallel to Theosophical ideas. Such parallelism need not imply a detailed knowledge of those ideas by the author, but may arise quite independently out of her familiarity with the myths, legends, and symbols in which the Theosophical Ancient Wisdom is embodied or even from deep unconscious levels of the psyche, where the Wisdom is enshrined in the heart-mind of every human being.

Polarities

One of the Theosophical themes of *Harry Potter* is that of polarity: spirit/matter, life/form, energy/mass, yin/yang, esoteric/exoteric, inner/outer, and so on. Several notable such polarities appear in the books. One is that of Wizards versus Muggles, two kinds of people who inhabit *Harry Potter*'s world. Wizards are wise in the ways of magic; Muggles are muddle-headed, unmagical, although clever technologically to compensate for their lack of magic powers, but also often unimaginative and philistine. Wizards and Muggles are in practice different castes, who seldom mingle and sometimes misunderstand each other:

"Are all your family wizards?" asked Harry

"Er—yes, I think so," said Ron. "I think Mum's got a second cousin who's an accountant, but we never talk about him." (*Harry Potter and the*

Philosopher's Stone 74 –5; all unidentified quotations are from this first book)

These contrasting castes of the wise and the muddle-headed are parallel to the two kinds of people identified in *At the Feet of the Master* (one of the spiritual classics of Theosophy): In all the world there are only two kinds of people—those who know, and those who do not know; and this knowledge is the thing which matters.

The knowledge in question is that of the reality of an orderly plan in the universe and of the place of human beings in that plan. Wizards, by etymology, are wise ones who know. Muggles are the other sort.

Another sort of polarity is that of good versus evil. And this polarity is quite distinct from that of Wizards versus Muggles. There are good Muggles and evil Muggles, as well as good Wizards and evil Wizards. Indeed, the two archetypal figures of good and evil in the stories are both Wizards. Albus Dumbledore is the headmaster at Hogwarts and the greatest living Wizard. His first name, Albus, is the Latin word for "white," he being a "white" or good magician. The first part of his surname, Dumb, is the English word for "silent, unspeaking," reminding us that true wisdom cannot be told but only experienced; the later meaning of dumb as "stupid" is ironically appropriate, as wisdom is often mistaken for stupidity by those who do not know, for example, in the literary figure of the Wise Fool. In addition, Dumble rimes with humble ; and the truly wise are always humble people, for they know how much is still unknown. The last part of the headmaster's name, dore, is a homophone of door, and this wise headmaster is the door through which Harry will enter onto the Path of learning and serving.

On the other hand, the archetype of evil is Voldemort, Harry's shadow and nemesis. Once a student at Hogwarts, as Harry is now, Voldemort adopted that nom de mal when he launched upon his evil path. Vol suggests the German verb *wollen* "want, wish, desire," and mort is the Latin root for "death." So Voldemort is he who has a wish (Vol) of (de) death (mort), the opposite of wisdom.

At Hogwarts, Harry's two best friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, are another polarity. Ron is from an old Wizard family; Hermione is from a Muggle family. And they balance each other in many characteristics: Ron is quiet and introverted; Hermione is talkative and outgoing. Ron is shy, with a feeling of inferiority as he is the youngest of six talented brothers; Hermione is confident and assertive, a distinguished achiever. Ron takes risks; Hermione is law-abiding. Ron is full of masculine energy; Hermione, of feminine energy. With Harry, they form a triangle of energies and personality types.

The Quest

The ultimate quest in the Harry Potter books is that of self-discovery. In that respect, these books share a common theme with the great spiritual guidebooks of humanity. Enlightenment is the ability to answer correctly the question "Who am I?" A Zen student once came to the Zen master and asked what he must do to achieve enlightenment. The Zen master replied, "Who's asking?" The student who can answer that question is enlightened. The same question is the principal subject of all the Upanishads and, indeed, of spiritual treatises in all the great traditions.

Harry is on a great quest to discover who he is--in the simplest, most literal sense of learning about his parents--but also in the deeper sense of discovering his own nature and his mission in life. That great quest is mirrored in a different quest theme in each book of the series. In the first book, it is to find the Philosopher's Stone. "Philosopher" is a traditional term for an alchemist, and the Philosopher's Stone is a magical product of the alchemist's art that turns base metals into gold and produces a drink, the Elixir of Life, that gives immortality.

(Apparently the American publishers thought "philosopher" sounded too dry and dusty, so adopted instead the term "Sorcerer's Stone.")

Harry's quest for the Philosopher's Stone takes him and his two friends into the underground cellars of Hogwarts school, where the Stone has been hidden. Their journey into those depths mirrors the ancient theme of a descent into the underworld, which is the unconscious part of our psyche, where we discover hidden truths about ourselves. Harry's

underground exploration has seven stages (reduced to five in the movie):

1. He and his friends must pass a three-headed dog guarding a trapdoor entrance to the cellars. The dog, though called "Fluffy" in the story, is Cerberus, the watchdog of the underworld or Hades in Greek mythology. The dog can be put to sleep with music played by Harry and Hermione on a flute that Harry was given as a present. Similarly, Orpheus gained entry to Hades to rescue his dead wife by playing on a lyre. The flute that Harry and Hermione play is an analog of the instrument in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, which Tamino and Pamina play during their co-initiation at the end of the opera.

2. When the companions have tumbled through the trapdoor (like Alice down the rabbit hole), their fall is cushioned by their landing on a lushly growing plant, called the Devil's Snare. The tendrils of this plant entrap anything that touches it and grow tighter as its victim struggles to escape. Hermione, however, remembers from her ceaseless study that the plant retreats from light, so she uses a magic spell to produce a bright illumination from her wand. The Devil's Snare suggests that what is soft and easy is sometimes a trap and that evil and oppression can be overcome by the Light of Knowledge.

3. Next the companions come to a chamber at whose far end is a door that can be unlocked only by one particular key out of a flock of winged keys flying wildly around the room. Harry, who is an expert at catching things while flying on a broom, finds it. The symbolism is obvious: we need the key of knowledge to open the door to inner reality, but that key is illusive and can be captured only by one who has trained to accomplish the task.

4. In the chamber beyond the door, the companions find a giant chessboard on which they must become pieces in a game of Wizard Chess, in which captured pieces are smashed to bits by the capturing piece. Ron, who is the chess master of the group, directs their moves and finally sacrifices himself so that Harry can checkmate the opposing king. The chess game echoes that in *Alice through the Looking Glass*

and is a common metaphor for the game of life. Ron's heroic self-sacrifice for the welfare of others puts him in the class of future bodhisattvas, who sacrifice their own welfare for the good of all.

5. Leaving the unconscious Ron behind, in the next chamber Harry and Hermione find a huge and hideous troll that must be overcome. However, the troll has already been vanquished--in fact by the three companions, who had knocked it unconscious in an earlier encounter above ground when it had invaded the school halls. Overcoming the monster is gaining control of our own shadow or Dweller on the Threshold, the embodiment of our faults, sins, and bestial nature. Once that control has been established, however, the shadowy troll is no longer a challenge, but can be dealt with as necessary.

6. In the penultimate chamber, Harry and Hermione are trapped between walls of fire that can be passed only by solving a riddle. Hermione, the brainy one of the threesome, solves it. Harry sends her back to tend to Ron as he goes on alone. The fires of passion can be quenched only by knowing the answer to the riddle of life. That knowledge is gained by the truly intelligent and is, in fact, what intelligence means. We must use our intelligence to pass to the inmost chamber of our quest, and that final passage must be made by each person alone, for the final initiation in the quest is a solitary one, experienced without any aid except that which each of us has within ourselves.

7. In the final chamber, Harry finds both Voldemort, who has corrupted one of the teachers at Hogwarts and occupied his body, and also the Mirror of Erised, which must be used to find the Stone. The Mirror of Erised shows those who look into it, not a reflection of reality, but rather an image of what they most desire. It is the great illusion, and one must know its secret not to be trapped by it. To find the Philosopher's Stone in the Mirror, one must want to find it, but not to use it for oneself. Harry finds the Stone, not to use it for himself, but to save it from evil use by Voldemort. Through Harry's act of selfless courage, the Philosopher's Stone, like Tolkien's One Ring, is destroyed so that it can never fall into Voldemort's hands. True wealth and true immortality are

achieved only by those who are motivated by selfless desire. And that is the great secret of the quest.

Hogwarts Lessons of Life

In the course of discovering the great secret, Harry learns a good many lessons, as do the readers with him. Although this is fantastic fiction, its messages are realistic fact. We can identify seven lessons, three of which are preliminary:

1. There is another level of truth than everyday Muggle reality. We are all orphans in this world and Harry Potters in the School of Wisdom, learning the truths of that level.

2. Master teachers, like Dumbledore, are available in the school of life to guide us in our learning.

3. From those teachers, we learn to face Truth, but not foolishly:

[Harry:] "Sir, there are some other things I'd like to know, if you can tell me . . . things I want to know the truth about"

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution." (216)

When he starts to ask about Voldemort, Harry calls him by the euphemism "You-Know-Who," which most people use for him, because they are afraid even to name the great evil Wizard, but Dumbledore corrects him:

Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself. (216)

Following those three preliminary lessons are four principal lessons:

1. Discrimination. We must choose our own way on the Path of life: Dumbledore tells Harry: "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets 245). The Mahatma Letters tell us: "We have one word for all aspirants: TRY." And in the spiritual guidebook, At the Feet of the Master, the first of four qualifications for entering on the Path is

"Discrimination." Moreover, the third Truth of the White Lotus (from another spiritual guidebook, *Light on the Path*) tells us: "We are each our own absolute lawgiver, the dispenser of glory or gloom to ourselves; the decreer of our life, our reward, our punishment." This lesson is therefore that of making an effort--of trying--to distinguish between the real and the unreal, between the less good and the better, between the transitory and the eternal.

2. Desirelessness. The second principal lesson is that the world is mayavic or illusory, and therefore we must pass through it free from selfish desire. The Mirror of Erised is a symbol of mayavic desire. The word "Erised" is "Desire" spelled backwards, hence wrong desire. The Mirror has an inscription carved around its top: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi," which is a backward spelling for "I show not your face but your heart's desire." Those who look into this Mirror do not see themselves as they are, but rather the illusion of what they want to be and do and have. Dumbledore explains the Mirror:

The happiest man on earth would be able to use the mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. . . . It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. . . . However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge nor truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible. (157)

The Mirror is a symbol of Maya, the Great Illusion, this desire-governed and motivated world. In *At the Feet of the Master*, the second qualification for entering the Path is "Desirelessness," that is, freedom from personal desire or, as the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it, acting without desire for the fruit of the action.

3. Points of Conduct. The third lesson is that we must live our lives according to Right Principles, rather than arbitrary rules. Harry often violates school rules, but never moral principles. The third qualification in *At the Feet of the Master* is "Six Points of Conduct": Self-control as to the mind, Self-control in action, Tolerance, Cheerfulness, One-

pointedness, and Confidence--especially confidence in the Plan, which is what those who know, know. And those who know, know that death is part of the Plan. When Harry worries about the effect of the loss of the Philosopher's Stone on the good philosopher-chemist who achieved it and who must die without it, Dumbledore explains:

After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was not really such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all--the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things which are worst for them. (215)

4. Love. Harry was saved from the assaults of Evil, both in his infancy and on his quest, by the great love his mother had for him. Dumbledore tells Harry:

Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection for ever. . . . Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good. (216)

The fourth qualification in *At the Feet of the Master* for entering the Path is Love.

These are the lessons that Harry Potter learns in his first year at Hogwarts, and in the first stage of his education in life: to discriminate in making his choices; to do the right thing without personal desire; to be guided by intelligent principles in life, rather than arbitrary rules; and to have confidence in what Dante in *The Divine Comedy* called "The Love that moves the sun and the other stars." They are Discrimination, Desirelessness, Good Conduct, and Love.

Those are not bad lessons for any of us to learn at the beginning, or at any time, of life.

Author's note

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