

HARRY POTTER vs. GANDALF

A comparative analysis of the Literary Use of Magic

In the works of J. K. Rowling, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis

In the last **two months of year 2001**, two of the most eagerly anticipated movies of all times hit theaters : *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Both were the first in a projected series of films, and adapted from the first volumes of two popular series of books written by British authors who go by their initials : J. K. and J. R. R. Both series, and both films, deal with magic and wizardry.

Among many Christians, the simultaneous coming out of these two films became a herald of renewed debate till today :

- **On the one hand, the works of Tolkien have been almost universally embraced by literate Christians**, who have long recognized the richness and beauty of Tolkien's Middle-earth as well as the profound influence of Tolkien's traditional Catholic faith upon the shape of his imaginary world. Christian fans of Tolkien also tend to be fans of C. S. Lewis, whose seven-volume series *The Chronicles of Narnia* is also a work of Christian imagination that involves magic and wizardry.
- **The Harry Potter books, on the other hand, have met with decidedly mixed reactions among Christian readers.** In both Catholic and Protestant circles, some have enthusiastically embraced Rowling's popular series, at times even explicitly making comparisons to Tolkien and Lewis as regards the use of magic and wizardry. Others, however, have attacked the young hero of Rowling's series as a veritable poster child for the occult.

The quality of the discussion hit its lowest point with the advent of an ever-spreading email campaign based on facetious statements in a satirical essay in the [Onion.com](#), a humour website. [That essay](#) — complete with **made-up** 'quotes' from Rowling and her young readers advocating the Church of Satan and mocking the death of Christ, has been **mistakenly distributed as genuine reportage** by innumerable Christians, achieving [urban legend status](#). But even relatively sober arguments on the subject have **too often been superficial**, relying on guilt — or innocence — by association.

INTRODUCTION : There's something about Harry

Before plunging into the moral debate over the magic of Harry Potter, it's worth noting that, in general terms, the Harry Potter stories have **real merit as literature and entertainment**, and perhaps **social and moral merits** as well — along with moral drawbacks. They are mostly **well-written, lively, exciting, and quite funny, with vividly imagined creations** and engaging characterizations.

Moreover, although highly fantastical and imaginative, Rowling's narratives are packed with **knowledgeable allusions and references to historical myths, legends, superstitions**, and so forth, so seamlessly woven into the fabric of the narratives that even literate adults may not catch them all. Books like *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter* offer readers insight into the cultural backgrounds of many elements in Rowling's stories, potentially turning an exercise in entertainment and diversion into a genuine learning experience.

On a moral level, the *Harry Potter* books offer villains who are utterly odious and despicable, and protagonists who are, if not quite charitable or forbearing, at least brave and loyal. **Courage and loyalty** are, in fact, significant themes in the books, along with the evils of **prejudice and oppression**.

There are also **wise, competent adult authority-figures** such as brilliant and commanding Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, who inspires boundless confidence as being always in control of the situation, who virtually never makes a mistake, and whom no one can for long have at a disadvantage.

And what of Harry himself ? He's a **decent enough and likable fellow**, with nothing of the bully or troublemaker in him. He's not one to make an enemy — though, should someone make an enemy of *him*, Harry will make war on that person with every weapon at his disposal. The notion of *turning the other cheek* or using a soft answer to turn away wrath is completely foreign here ; and even the more sober voices, such as that of his friend Hermione, whom Rowling has said of all her characters most resembles herself, generally caution Harry on purely **prudential, not moral** grounds.

One aspect of the *Harry Potter* books that has raised some moral concern is the recurring theme of **RULE-BREAKING**. Like many young children, Harry and his friends break a lot of rules — ‘*about fifty*’, Hermione figures at one point, and Dumbledore elsewhere reckons their transgressions at twice that number. Sometimes Harry is legitimately driven by necessity to break a rule ; other times it’s only because he feels like it. Sometimes he is caught, sometimes not ; sometimes he is punished, sometimes not.

At first glance, this may seem like mere honest storytelling, depicting a **typically imperfect young boy whose behaviour sometimes leaves a bit to be desired**. Yet closer examination reveals that Harry and his friends are only ever really punished for breaking rules when they’re *caught by one of the nasty authority figures*, particularly spiteful Professor Snape. When it’s one of the benevolent authority figures, such as genial Dumbledore, or even stern Pr. McGonagall, there are no real consequences for breaking any number of rules, because Harry’s heart is in the right place, or because he is a boy of destiny, or something like that.

Another area of concern for some are the **dark, scary, or grotesque elements in these stories** : the *Dementors*, dreadful creatures almost as horrifying as Tolkien’s *Nazgûl* ; a spell gone awry that leaves one of Harry’s friends coughing and choking on slugs issuing from his throat ; a school washroom toilet apparently haunted by the ghost of a dead student ; disembodied voices breathing murderous threats ; anthropomorphic mandrake roots that look and scream like living human babies but may be transplanted or destroyed at will by teachers and students ; and many others...

Taken altogether, it seems fair to say the *Harry Potter* stories are something of a mixed bag, with some **genuinely worthwhile elements** and **some legitimate points of concern**. For many parents who have children that love the books or who want to read them, the question may be not so much ‘*Is this the best possible book my child could ever read ?*’ as ‘*Is this all right for my child to read ? Or must I forbid it ?*’

MAGIC in Fact and Fiction

In principle, Christians on both sides of the *Harry Potter* debate ought to be able to agree on this much : According to Christian teaching, in the real world, it is **wrong, potentially dangerous, and contrary to true religion** to engage in any form of attempted magic : for

example, *the use of spells and charms, attempted astral projection, or the superstitious use of crystals, or to attempt to engage, summon, control, or otherwise interact with occult powers as by consulting with mediums, astrologers, psychics, card readers, witch doctors, or any other kind of divination or fortunetelling.*

Historic Christian opposition to practices such as these is categorical and decisive. This opposition has been most recently authoritatively restated by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ([2115-2117](#)), and is found in the sources of Christian faith, sacred scripture (e.g. [Deut 18:9-14](#)) and sacred tradition (cf. *Summa Theologica* [II-II, 96,2](#)).

Christians have long recognized that these practices are not only based on **mistaken concepts of reality**, they also render the practitioner vulnerable to **deception and harm by evil spirits**. Furthermore, they **nurture an unhealthy attraction to the gnostic lure of hidden, esoteric knowledge and power accessible only to special elites or adepts**.

At the same time, many Christians on both sides of the Harry Potter debate will also be willing to acknowledge that Christians may accept and enjoy at least some **fictional works** that involve the depiction of magic, and even of ‘good’ magic — magic *imagined to be* both real and lawful, performed by good characters specializing in good magic : good wizards, sorcerers, and the like. As noted above, many of Rowling’s sternest critics are also passionate devotees of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Nor are many Christians today likely to mount campaigns against Glinda the Good Witch of Oz or Cinderella’s fairy godmother. Christian defenders of Harry Potter thus point to all these cases as evidence that **magic in fiction, as opposed to magic in fact**, can legitimately be treated **as good and innocent**.

Possible and Impossible worlds

Once one admits the validity of writing any sort of fiction at all —and Jesus himself created fictional scenarios in the parables —, it’s hard to see **on what grounds one might consistently object** to the literary depiction of magic as a safe and lawful pursuit. For to write fiction is to imagine at least events, usually persons, and often places that have **no real being in the world as God has actually created it**.

But if it's valid to imagine the world to be other than how God has actually created it, it seems **arbitrary to restrict** this imaginative revision of God's world to the invention of fictional events, persons, and places, while excluding, for example, **the invention of fictional physical laws** (e.g. *Laws allowing travel through time or faster than light*) or even **fictional moral laws** (as, e.g. *Lewis's **Perelandra** depicts a world whose inhabitants are morally bound not to dwell on a particular island*).

Of course, our freedom to re-imagine the world, or to imagine other worlds, is **not without limits** : we cannot, for example, imagine a world in which love should be evil and hatred good for the supremacy of love is not a mere contingent fact about the created world, but is an eternal and immutable fact about God himself. It's one thing to rewrite the **order of creation** in fiction (since God *could* have chosen to create the world other than how it is), but quite another to rewrite the **nature** of the Creator himself (since God *cannot* be other than who and what he is).

In Narnia, Middle-earth and the worlds of Harry Potter, Oz and Cinderella, the order of creation includes **powerful forces, good or neutral in themselves**, that some inhabitants of that world are able to engage or control by means of such *paraphernalia* as incantations or wands — some using this power for good, lawfully, while others for ill, unlawfully.

In fact, some Christian readers have even argued for a slippery slope from Tolkien and Lewis to Rowling, suggesting that **Christians who accept Tolkien and Lewis but object to Rowling are being inconsistent or hypocritical** :

cf. Wheaton College English professor Alan Jacobs's audio-taped interview in the [September edition](#) of Ken Myers's [*Mars Hill Journal*](#)

FICTIONAL MAGIC : WHOLESOME AND UNWHOLESOME

Yet probably few of Rowling's Christian fans would wish to maintain that the **fictional depiction of magic as good or acceptable is never cause for moral concern**. While they may feel it's unfair to label Harry Potter in particular a '*poster child for the occult*', they would probably be willing to acknowledge that there are fictional characters who could fit such a description : Willow the Witch on TV's [*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*](#) for example, or the four young protagonists of the 1996 film [*The Craft*](#).

The magical exploits of these characters — which include invoking and summoning ambiguously defined spirits in order to achieve magical effects — **correspond too closely for comfort to real-world occult practices**. In particular there's an appreciable danger here of **direct imitative behaviour** : that young girls, for example, will wish first of all to dress and act like the attractive young women in these entertainments, and that some of them may want to play at witchcraft, emulating the ritual spookiness they have seen. The taste for such things, once awakened, may find titillation in play with *Ouija boards*, Tarot cards, or similar *paraphernalia*. In time some may wish to go further, turning to the Internet or their local library for readily available information on Wiccan rituals or other forms of contemporary magical practice. Not that young girls are likely to become practicing Wiccans simply by watching films. But such viewing habits could be one factor among many that might further incline otherwise vulnerable children in that direction.

Moreover, even for less susceptible viewers — stable, mature viewers who could never *'believe in'* that sort of magic, who wouldn't even bother with reading their horoscope, let alone dabbling in magic — exposure to the likes of *Harry Potter* could still **reinforce the idea of magic and the occult as harmless entertainment**, frivolous to be sure, but not an activity that could **warrant serious moral objections**.

On *Buffy*, for example, while there's a kind of **vestigial Christian influence on the show's mythology** in the crosses and holy water that remain potent weapons against vampires and certain demons, **witchcraft is practiced as openly and amorally as fornication** — not to mention, for the last season or so, homosexuality. The show doesn't so much reject or deny Christian morality on these matters as **ignore it to the point of annihilation**.

Mature viewers, even if immune to the show's explicit fantasy premise that magic is *'real'*, that it *'works'*, could still be influenced by the *implicit moral premise* that magic and witchcraft are **not morally significant realities**. To someone disposed to looking at things this way, a fully Christian response will inevitably strike a note of irrelevance and incomprehensibility, **making the fullness of the Christian message harder to accept**.

Yet none of these concerns seems to apply to Tolkien or Lewis, nor does it *Cinderella*. No one has ever worried that exposure to Gandalf might leave children vulnerable to harmful spiritual influences, or foster an unhealthy attraction to the idea of elite magic.

What, then, defines morally acceptable use of good magic in fiction ? Where, and how, do we draw the line ? How do we distinguish the truly worthwhile (Tolkien and Lewis), the basically harmless (*Oz*, *Cinderella*), and the objectionable (*Buffy*, *The Craft*, *The Vampire Diaries*) ? And where on this continuum does *Harry Potter* really fall ?

SEANCES VS. HARMLESS FLYING BROOMSTICKS

For my part, I don't see any hard and fast answer : no one line in the sand, no one litmus test capable of distinguishing all acceptable uses of good magic in fiction from all unacceptable ones. Fortunately, there are some objective criteria that can be helpful.

For example, one obvious and crucial difference between the magic of Tolkien and Lewis and that of *Buffy* and *The Craft* is that the magic of Tolkien and Lewis in its particulars bears **little or no outward resemblance to actual occult practices** in the real world, instead consisting of obviously imaginary and fantastic phenomena that offer no appreciable risk of direct imitative behaviour.

For example, whereas in *Buffy* and *The Craft* one finds quasi-realistic séance-type rituals and summonings of spirits and demons, nothing of the sort happens in Tolkien and Lewis. Instead, there are such things as storybook wizards who can start a fire with a word or cast a spell of invisibility on a mythical race of creatures ; enchanted pools capable of revealing distant realities or of turning submerged objects into gold ; rings capable of transporting the wearer between worlds or of rendering the wearer invisible ; and the like.

Thus, while the young *Buffy* fan can potentially make a go at emulating the **quasi-realistic occult rituals** she has seen, a young Tolkien fan who might be taken with the idea of creating fire with a word quite simply has **no viable course of action** — no program to follow, no books or websites to research, no late-night TV tele-psychics who can even pretend to offer help — in short, not the potential occult entanglement that could result from experimenting with séances and the like. Because of this, the danger of any slipping from a fascination with this kind of **fantasy magic** to an interest in the world of the occult, to charms and astral projection and horoscopes and the like, is **quite limited**.

And, **on this fundamental point**, Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are unambiguously **on the same side as Tolkien and Lewis, if not even more emphatically imaginary**. For example, the *Harry Potter* books utilize **well-established conventions of fantasy magic**, such as flying on broomsticks and waving magic wands — phenomena instantly recognizable as institutions of the fantasy world— not the real world of **Wicca, Neo-Paganism, and occult practice**.

Even on those occasions when Rowling's magic converges toward real-world practices, it **hardly seems pernicious**. For example, in the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry has a class in Divination that includes lessons in reading tea leaves and astrology. Yet Rowling roundly spoofs the class and the teacher, who is almost infallibly wrong about everything she says. The larger point, is that no child who puts a broom between his legs really hopes to rise up off the ground. And even if he were to do so, he would simply fail. There is no obvious moral danger in this kind of thing.

SEven edges

The **gulf between real-world occult practices and clearly fantasy magic** is an important factor in distinguishing more potentially hazardous fictional uses of magic from more potentially worthwhile ones.

In Tolkien and Lewis, this gulf is by no means the only obstacle in the path of potentially vulnerable readers who might be drawn toward an unhealthy interest in magic. In fact, both authors **took pains to avoid even the appearance of condoning any sort of magical study or practice in the real world**. For instance, Lewis's fictional worlds have been consciously and deliberately shaped in such a way as to make quite clear that the pursuit of magic, while it might be imagined to be a safe and lawful occupation for someone like Coriakin in the fairyland world of Narnia, **is in fact dangerous and wrong for human beings in and of our world** — something attempted by nasty personages like Digory's Uncle Andrew.

In fact, I have below outlined *seven specific literary characteristics* common to Tolkien's and Lewis's fiction — above and beyond the fantasy nature of the magic itself — that have the net effect of **limiting and restricting the role of magic** in their fantasy worlds, essentially acting as **barricades or hedges between magic and the reader**, in effect saying : '*Magic is not for the likes of us.*' Any reader of these books who might be at risk for developing a dangerous attraction to the idea of magic would find in these literary barricades, these hedges, a **strong**

corrective for that temptation. None of these hedges are found in the *Harry Potter* books — which doesn't in itself make the *Harry Potter* books intrinsically evil or objectionable, but **underline a substantial differentiation** between the series. Indeed, there's a **morally significant** difference between a literary approach that imaginatively brings the use of magic as close as possible to the condition and world of experience of the reader or viewer, and one that immediately throws up hedges or barriers that say '*Magic is not for the likes of us.*' This fundamental difference annuls any arguing that **acceptance of Tolkien and Lewis is inconsistent with rejection of *Harry Potter*.**

Here are the seven hedges in Tolkien and Lewis :

1. **Tolkien and Lewis confine the pursuit of magic as a safe and lawful occupation to wholly imaginary realms** like Middle-earth and Narnia — worlds that cannot be located either in time or in space with reference to our own world, and which stand outside Judeo-Christian salvation history and divine revelation. By contrast, Harry Potter lives in *a fictionalized version of our own world* that is recognizable in time and space, in a country called England, a **Christian nation in a timeframe of our own era.**
2. Reinforcing the above point, in Tolkien's and Lewis's fictional worlds where magic is practiced, the existence of magic is an *openly known reality* of which the inhabitants of those worlds are as aware as we are of rocket science — even if most of them might have as little chance of actually encountering magic as most of us would of riding in the space shuttle. By contrast, Harry Potter lives in a world in which magic is a *secret, hidden reality acknowledged openly only among a magical elite*, a world in which (as in our world) most people apparently believe there is no such thing as magic.
3. Tolkien and Lewis confine the pursuit of magic as a safe and lawful occupation to characters who are numbered among the *supporting cast, not the protagonists* with whom the reader is primarily to identify. By contrast, Harry Potter, a student of wizardry, is *the title character and hero* of his novels.
4. Reinforcing the above point, Tolkien and Lewis include cautionary threads in which exposure to magical forces proves to be a *corrupting influence on their protagonists* : Frodo is almost consumed by the great Ring ; Pippin son regrets his curiosity and using of the glass eye of Sauron in *The Return of the Ring* ; Lucy and Digory succumb to temptation and use magic in ways they shouldn't. By contrast, the **practice of magic is Harry Potter's salvation from his horrible relatives and from every adversity** he must overcome throughout the series.

5. Tolkien and Lewis confine the pursuit of magic as a safe and lawful occupation to **characters who are not in fact human beings** — for although Gandalf and Coriakin are human in appearance, we are in fact told that they are, respectively, a semi-incarnate Elvish/angelic being and an earthbound star. In Harry Potter's world, by contrast, while **some human beings** (called 'Muggles') lack the capacity for magic, others (including Harry's true parents and of course Harry himself) do not.
6. Reinforcing the above point, Tolkien and Lewis emphasize the pursuit of magic as the safe and lawful occupation of characters who, in appearance, stature, behaviour, and role, embody a certain *wizard archetype* — white-haired old men with beards and robes and staffs, mysterious, remote, unapproachable, who **serve to guide and mentor the heroes**. Harry Potter, by contrast, is a **wizard-in-training** who is in many crucial respects the *peer* of many of his avid young readers, a boy with the same problems and interests that they have.
7. Finally, Tolkien and Lewis devote **no narrative space to the process by which their magical specialists acquire their magical prowess**. Although study may be assumed as part of the back story, the wizard appears as a **finished product with powers in place**, and the reader is not in the least encouraged to think about or dwell on the process of acquiring prowess in magic. In the *Harry Potter* books, by contrast, Harry's **acquisition of mastery over magical forces at the Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft** is a central organizing principle in the story-arc of the series as a whole.

J. K. Rowling has repeatedly said that, like most people nowadays, she doesn't believe in magic ([CNN interview](#)). Yet also like most people, Rowling doesn't share Tolkien's and Lewis' **moral caution about attempted magic in the real world**. As far as she's concerned, the only caveat about magic in the real world is that it doesn't work. For her, therefore, **wizardry and witchcraft are wholly imaginary constructs offering boundless opportunities for imaginative storytelling** with no more potential risk to the reader than fantasies about travelling at warp speed like in *Star Trek*, or developing arachnoid super-powers like Spider Man from the bite of a radioactive spider. Rowling, therefore, has not seen fit to hedge about her use of magic as Tolkien and Lewis have done. In the forty or so years since the creation of Spider-Man, I haven't heard of a single child deliberately incurring a spider-bite, radioactive or otherwise, in an effort to acquire spider powers ; but I have heard of many children experimenting with the occult especially since *Harry Potter*.

Is there, then, equally no danger of any young Harry Potter fans — particularly vulnerable children whose spiritual development is not being properly cultivated by adequate parental guidance — developing an **unhealthy infatuation** with the idea of magic, and in particular with the idea of **studying and learning magic** and mastering magical forces ?

Might there not be a tendency for some to indulge in fantasies about the idea of **hidden or esoteric knowledge, of belonging to a secret elite**, to some covert world of power beyond their peers ? Might not these stories even be one factor, at some later date, in the absence of adequate parental formation, influencing a child to respond more positively or with **greater tolerance** toward everyday occult phenomena ?

Why are bookstores and libraries putting genuine occult works near the Harry Potter books ?

Not that Rowling herself, or her books, can be blamed for what bookstores or other writers do or say. But the issue here **isn't criticism or blame, but what is prudent**. Christian parents should have a reasonable level of concern about the dangers of magical experimentation and the occult, and they should be aware that Rowling, unlike Tolkien or Lewis, doesn't share their beliefs on this subject. Consequently, greater parental guidance is required to avoid the pitfalls of the use of magic in the *Harry Potter* books than in *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

At the same time, I'm not saying that the absence of these literary safeguards in Rowling automatically makes her work inherently unacceptable, harmful, or even necessarily morally inferior — though I do in fact think on other grounds that it is somewhat literarily and morally inferior.

What I am saying is that Christian readers, and particularly Christian parents, should be aware, first, of the potential pitfalls that may always attend the use of magic in fiction, and second, that Rowling has not given them the safeguards present in Tolkien and Lewis, and that if their children do read the Harry Potter books, parents may want to provide extra guidance in avoiding these pitfalls, which would not be necessary in the case of *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

HEDGES 1 & 2

Consider the first two of Tolkien and Lewis's seven "hedges" against magic: that the pursuit of magic as a safe and lawful occupation is confined to (1) **wholly imaginary worlds** (2) where the **existence of magic is common knowledge**. Rather than **introduce lawful magic into a fictionalized version of our world** — which would in principle entail rewriting Christian tradition in that world to what it has always condemned in fact — they simply imagined the pursuit of magic existing in autonomous realms where no law of Moses had ever been given, and no Christian tradition ever handed down.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in particular, the pursuit of magic is the exclusive domain of evil personages like Uncle Andrew and his fairy godmother, named le Fay after the evil enchantress in the Arthurian tradition.

As for Tolkien, of course, the **distance between our world and his Middle-earth is unbridgeable**. The buffer between Tolkien's Middle-earth and the world of Christian revelation and tradition is no accident : Tolkien felt strongly that explicit entanglement with Christianity was **seriously problematic** for myth and fairy stories ; for example, the Arthurian legends, he felt, were somehow flawed and compromised for being set in Catholic Britain. Tolkien's Gandalf might be very like the Arthurian Merlin ; but to Tolkien it was vital that his wizard at any rate **not coexist with the Christian religion**, Gandalf being fiction, *not* Christ.

Interestingly, Lewis himself took this very bull by the horns in his work *That Hideous Strength*, the third of his Space Trilogy, which features magic not in the distant past nor in some fairyland like Narnia, but in 20th century Christian Britain. In this work more than any other, Lewis goes to great lengths to make clear **just how dangerous and wrong, how incompatible with Christianity**, is any form of attempted magic *in our world*.

Why did Lewis go to such great lengths to hedge the use of magic with all manner of caveats and warnings and condemnations ? Because he wished to avoid any appearance of suggesting that magic, in our world, can ever be regarded as safe or permissible. It's a concern that Christian readers should appreciate... and certainly one not shared by J. K. Rowling.

In the Narnia books, Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew* dabbles in 'utterly unlawful' activities, and **suffers the consequences** : in the end he has lost his very reason. But what about Digory and Polly, who make use of Uncle Andrew's magic rings in our world, first when Digory goes after Polly to bring her back to our world, and secondly when Digory and Polly together go after Jadis in London ? Does this perhaps represent a '*safe and lawful pursuit of magic*' in our world?

No. For one thing, the rings themselves are evil, and it would have been better for them never to have been made. Not only so, but once made, it would have been better had they never been used, for **their use occasions one evil after another** : the stranding of Polly in another world ; the awakening of Jadis ; the loosing of Jadis into our world and the ensuing chaos ; the corruption of Narnia.

The most crucial point is that Digory and Polly's use of the ring doesn't amount, as does Uncle Andrew's creation of them, to '*the pursuit of magic*'. " Digory is not a magician in his own right, even if he used the magic rings, just as Dorothy wasn't a witch, even if she wore and used the ruby slippers. Unlike Harry Potter, neither Digory nor Polly takes up the study of magic or sorcery ; they don't learn to cast spells or work enchantments.

WIZARD SECRET SOCIETY IN ENGLAND

Harry Potter is a wizard-in-training in a fictionalized England. Nor is he an exceptional case. In *Harry Potter's* England there are whole communities and schools devoted to a 'benign' magical lifestyle. Now, Harry's world is certainly not identical to our world. Besides the sheer existence of practical magic — as well as a riot of magical creatures from griffins and unicorns to three-headed dogs and Hippogriffs — there are also **institutional imaginative incursions into reality**, such as the invention of a British Ministry of Magic in Her Majesty's Government.

It's possible to imagine, therefore, that despite the use of real place-names and cultural milieu, Rowling's world differs from ours morally as well as physically : that the use of spells and the like is not morally wrong in her world, *nor condemned by Christian tradition or divine revelation* ; now that's more problematic, **because there are churches and crucifixes** in Harry Potter's world, contrarily to Narnia or Middle-Earth. Unless J. K. considers Christian tradition and divine revelation are fantasies at the same level as her magic...

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, opens with Harry writing a paper for a class at Hogwarts on the ‘pointlessness of witch burning in 14th century.’ Real witches, we learn, could easily deliver themselves from the flames and transport to safety ; in fact, the sensation of attempted burning could actually be enjoyable to a real witch.

Plainly this is intended as a **satirical reinvention of historical events** connected with anti-witchcraft war on the part of Christians. And this implies that in Rowling’s world Christianity and its anti-witchcraft stipulations do exist, but **that they are misguided and unenlightened**. Although in this episode Rowling makes no explicit mention of Christianity or the Church, it would be the height of absurdity to stipulate that in her universe there were non-Christians running around in the 14th century trying to burn witches for reasons that had nothing to do with Christian doctrine.

Admittedly, this is only a throw-away bit and not a dramatically important moment or a recurring theme, but it’s **prominently placed, in the very beginning of chapter 1** of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*.

It’s also worth noting that Rowling’s world, although fictionalized from our own, **in principle might as well be our world**. The fictionalizations are essentially *covert* : general awareness of magic is restricted to a secret elite, mostly wizards and witches.

In fact, in a way Rowling has partially incorporated a Narnian-style ‘*other-world*’ dynamic, in which there are special magical ‘*zones*’ with names like Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft and Diagon Alley, zones that cannot be accessed by conventional means, but must be entered, so to speak, ‘wardrobe-fashion’, through magical pubs and phantom train platforms. And outside these magical zones, in the Muggle world, Harry is not allowed to use his magic, and gets in trouble when he does so.

But that’s **not because it’s wrong** to use magic in the Muggle world, but **merely because Hogwarts policy forbids students to do it**. Grown-up wizards, such as Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, can and do make judicious use of magic in the real world, not just in magical zones. In Rowling there is **no moral barrier to wizardry and witchcraft in the ordinary Muggle world** ; which is to say, Rowling’s moral world breaks with real-world Christian morality, without so much as a nod or word about it.

Beyond this, the Narnian ‘other-world’ dynamic isn’t really at work in Rowling’s stories. Lewis used the idea of another world to create a fictional space of magic which might coexist side by side with the **proscriptions against magic in our own world**.

In Rowling, by contrast, the ‘other-world’ dynamic serves the opposite function — not to *distance* her magic from our own world, but to **bring it as close as possible to the world of our experience**. As in *Buffy*, despite **recurring and blatant incursions of infernal and supernatural powers into the lives of ordinary residents** of the real world, people have a seemingly boundless capacity to **overlook, rationalize, and forget** what they have seen.

In developing this dynamic, Rowling has created a situation entirely unlike anything in the stories of Middle-Earth or Narnia : **a mythology of a secret, mystic elite who possess hidden lore and power unknown to the rest of the world**. This is an idea that the human race has always found strangely compelling and attractive ; it’s the root appeal of every mystery religion, gnostic sect, and secret society that has set itself up against the public teaching of the Christian faith, the gospel proclaimed openly to all. It’s not a taste to be indulged or gratified, even in imagination.

Of course, once you actually get into Rowling’s mystic elite, it turns out to be only a fancifully transformed version of ordinary society. For example, Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, despite the exotic *curriculum* and all manner of magical goings-on, is really just a **traditional British boarding school**. Still, especially in the early chapters of each volume, in which Harry puts in time in the Muggle world before a year of study at Hogwarts, Rowling’s stories do cater to the perennial human attraction to the idea of a secret world of knowledge and power enjoyed by a small elite while forever excluding the unknowing majority.

Again, this doesn’t by itself mean that Christian readers and parents should consign the Harry Potter books to the fireplace. But it does mean that that they should be aware of these **potentially problematic themes** — themes not present in Tolkien or Lewis — and that greater care is required with these books than is necessary in the case of the tales of Middle-earth and Narnia. **Rowling may be unaware** that the imaginary situations she proposes involve a partial suspension of real-world morality, yet at least *some* elements of the potential appeal of her books may tap into an **impulse that ought to be resisted as a temptation, not indulged as a fantasy**.

HEDGES 3 & 4

The third and fourth hedges — that the pursuit of magic is (3) a safe and lawful enterprise **only for certain supporting characters** but (4) a **danger or source of temptation to the protagonists** — are traditional features in many types of fairytales. The wizard or magician tends often to be a supporting character, not a hero. Magic is the proper pursuit of Merlin, not of Arthur or Lancelot ; of Glinda, not of Dorothy ; of the fairy godmother, not of Cinderella ; of Dallben, not of Taran in Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*.

In such stories, it is the 'hero's journey', not the wizard's, with which the narrative is mainly concerned. A hero may have a wizard-mentor, but the wizard's role is usually not to initiate the hero (nor the reader) into the secrets of his power. Rather, it is to **support the hero in his own proper heroic endeavour**, with which the reader is primarily to identify.

A glaring modern example to the contrary is of course the *Star Wars* saga, in which the wizard-mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi does turn the orphan-hero Luke Skywalker toward the study of the Force. I'm a huge fan of the *Star Wars* films, but the fact that that the hero's journey in these films takes the shape of initiation into a sort of mystical elite does seem to me a point worthy of note and concern.

Tolkien, however, follows the traditional pattern : Gandalf appears as a typical wizard-mentor whose role is largely concerned with guiding the heroes and overcoming certain magical obstacles to allow the real protagonist, Frodo (and, in *The Hobbit*, Bilbo) to **do his own proper work in his own proper way**. Frodo and Bilbo work no magic at all, nor do the majority of the supporting cast.

Secondly, and far more crucially, although Bilbo uses the Ring intermittently throughout *The Hobbit*, from the outset of *The Lord of the Rings* we learn that *the Ring is evil and must be destroyed* ; that Frodo must bear it but *must never use it*, for to do so, even once, compromises the user and gives advantage to the enemy.

This brings us to the fourth hedge : already we see that the Ring has begun to **have a deleterious effect on Bilbo** ; we learn with horror that Gollum's wretched condition is the Ring's handiwork ; and even Frodo is almost consumed by its power. This is very far from magic as a safe and lawful occupation as pursued by Harry Potter.

Likewise in Lewis's Narnia, although there is good and neutral magic, none of the protagonists are shown engaging in its study or pursuit, even in Narnian precincts. In fact, good or neutral magic in Narnia generally **subsists more in objects and situations** than in characters. A table, a doorway, or a pool of water might exhibit magical properties ; but good characters, major or minor, do not go about casting spells. Those who pursue magical arts in the Narnia stories, even among the supporting characters, usually turn out to be villains : the White Witch, the Queen of the Underland, Uncle Andrew.

In all seven Narnia books there is one good figure who is a true wizard-type : the magician Coriakin in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, an earthbound star who is being punished for unnamed offenses. There's also Doctor Cornelius from *Prince Caspian*, an ancient, diminutive, corpulent figure who isn't really a wizard, but engages in what he calls 'astronomy' but we would call astrology. Here Lewis's fantasy world converges briefly with a real-world divination practice — yet Lewis is plainly drawing upon the gospel story of the Magi in St. Matthew's infancy narrative.

The chapters in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* give us Narnia's lone good wizard also noteworthy because they contain the **only scene in which any of Lewis' protagonists is seen (rightly) casting a spell** although not in our world : Lucy uses Coriakin's book of spells to make the Dufflepuds visible.

It must be noted that Lewis balances this exceptional scene with a cautionary note, having Lucy **succumb to temptation by using the same book** to eavesdrop on two of her peers from our world. By this Lewis suggests that the sort of power represented by Coriakin's book, while it may be appropriate for him, isn't for weak vessels such as ourselves. The same might be said for Digory's ill-advised ringing of the bell in Charn ; he may have used Uncle Andrew's magic rings rightly, but he too succumbed to temptation and was seduced by magic.

It's also important to note this is an isolated event in the life of Lucy, and so it is for Digory and Polly. While she goes further than they in *actually* casting a spell, her concomitant misstep **suggests what would have happened to her had she gone further in that direction**. Neither Tolkien or Lewis ever gives us, even in their magical realms, a protagonist who engages in the pursuit of magic ; which is of course precisely what J. K. Rowling has given us in *Harry Potter*.

There are many instances in both Tolkien and Lewis in which protagonists **are given or lawfully wield magical artifacts** : Lucy's healing cordial and Frodo's Elven phial, for example. But they do work as external *Sacraments* and have nothing to do with the inner capacity of the character for supernatural power.

Anyway this is still far removed from the *Harry Potter* books, in which all of the important characters are engaged in the **full-blown study** of wizardry and witchcraft, whereas in Tolkien and Lewis, this **level of involvement** is restricted to characters who inhabit the periphery, not the center stage. The drama is not *about* them or their endeavours in the way that it is about those of the main characters.

HEDGES 5 & 6

The next two hedges are closely related the previous two : Not only do Tolkien and Lewis exclude the lawful pursuit of magic from the main characters, they give us Wizards who (5) are **not in fact human** and (6) look and act and relate to other characters in **archetypal fashion** — not like us, or our peers.

On the former point, Tolkien in particular **explicitly affirmed as a matter of principle** that Men, Dwarves, Hobbits, and other mortal races, lack entirely the capacity for magic. Elves have it, as do the *Valar* and *Maiar* (angelic beings) of which the *Istari* (translated 'wizards', including Gandalf) are a special class. Likewise, Lewis's Coriakin, as we have seen, is not a man but a **star in human form**, very much the same sort of thing as Gandalf in fact.

The **apparent exception would be Aragorn**, who seems to possess a **healing power**. But that is merely a reference to the miraculous '*royal or thaumaturgic touch*' that Medievalists attributed to any *true king* appointed by God as His secular representative on earth.

Commenting on this apparent exception in a letter, Tolkien also noted that Aragorn isn't entirely human, having Elvish descent on his mother's side. Anyway, he isn't remotely a wizard like Gandalf.

Yet this brings us to the **specific appearance of these characters**, and **how this affects the way we relate to them**. In particular, Gandalf and Coriakin have the appearance of white-

haired, long-bearded, berobed, staff-wielding, elderly men. They appear as **representatives of a well-established class of characters** with a well-established role associated with certain story functions in literature : an ‘*auxiliary*’ character (as opposed to an ‘*opponent*’) ; and we relate to them as such.

Everyone knows from the outset that these mysterious, formidable figures are **not the reader’s peers or role models**, nor will we ever get to know them the way we know Frodo and Legolas or Lucy and Caspian. The same principle also applies to other characters such as Galadriel : she is no more the reader’s peer than is Gandalf.

This is obviously quite different from Harry Potter, who is **not only human, but is in nearly every important way the peer of his young readers** — readers whose own studies aren’t nearly as interesting as Harry’s but who in many respects can relate to where he is and where he has been. They know what it’s like to face bullying or pestering peers and relatives. They may not be able to do magic ; but then, neither could Harry, exactly, before his adventures began. Their condition is, in fact, very much like Harry’s at the beginning of the first book.

HEDGE 7

Finally, the seventh and last hedge: Tolkien and Lewis devote **no narrative space to the process** by which their wizards acquired their magical prowess. The wizard figure appears as a finished product, with his skills already in place, and there is no literary interest in the means by which one gains mastery over magical forces. Not only do the stories **focus on the heroes’ journeys**, they omit entirely the sorcerers’ apprenticeships.

In Rowling’s works, by contrast, the ‘**hero’s journey**’ *is* the sorcerer’s apprenticeship. The *Harry Potter* books, to summarize the seven hedges, tell the story of a hero who is **a wizard in the making** : a boy of about the same age as many of his fans, inhabiting what is in many ways the same world they inhabit, with many of the same interests and difficulties that they have, who at one time believed himself to be an ordinary boy like themselves, yet has discovered to his joy and theirs that he is much more ; who is now embarked on a secret education in mystic, hidden knowledge and power; whose adventures and apprenticeship in magic are the focus of the story arc of the entire series.

The net effect of all this is that the Harry Potter books *bring the practice of magic imaginatively far closer to the personal condition and experience of the young reader* than other stories of magic and fantasy, including *The Lord of the Rings* and *Narnia*. To a far greater degree, they **encourage and exploit a personal identification between the reader and the wizard**, unlike anything in *Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Moreover, if the reader is at all attuned to the real magic of Tolkien's work, his imagination will be **less preoccupied with such things as the wizardry of Gandalf** than with, for example, the **elusive grace and poetry of the Elves** ; the earthy austerity and hardness of the Dwarves ; the ineffable stateliness, the sheer antiquity of the Ents ; the battle-hardened majesty of Aragorn ; the playful mystery of Tom Bombadil ; and most of all, the Hobbits themselves, with their quiet and humble ways, their unassuming, humorous, gregarious, homebody, meal-loving, comfort-seeking, Shire-dwelling hearts, and, hidden just beneath the surface, their unguessed depths and disreputable capacity for heroism. Here is the true center of gravity in Tolkien's Middle-earth : **not the world of magic, but the magic of the world**.

Even Gandalf himself, for that matter, will probably be remembered by most readers more for his wisdom, insight, and guidance than for any particular spells he devised. In fact, the biggest advantage to having Gandalf about is not so much that he may turn one thing into another or foretell some future event, as that we know **he will guide us well**, that he understands what's going on better than anyone else, that he puts things in proper perspective, **speaks words of wisdom**, and so forth.

Yet Rowling's most vivid creations are firmly entrenched in magic and sorcery. Above all, Quidditch, that astonishing, complicated field game played on flying broomsticks. Invisibility cloaks. The grotesque effects of spells gone bad : the slugs pouring from Ron Weasley's throat ; Hermione's teeth growing past her chin. Hats and books and maps with minds of their own. **Not the magic of the world, but the world of magic**.

Such fantasies *may ultimately prove no more than harmless daydreaming*, but they may also **become overwhelmingly problematic** ; in a context so close to the condition and experience of her young readers, it may for at least *some* children ultimately prove a **temptation and a hazard** — one which has not been hedged off or safeguarded as has the use of magic in Tolkien and Lewis.

Practical conclusions

Let's be straight : I'm not an enthusiastic pro-Harry cheerleader, and yet I do object to prove a *blindly* vehement anti-Harry polemicist. I like to *have reasons* to reject a book as being bad or problematic — in some others cases I wouldn't need to read the book or watch the film to reject it, but Harry Potter is *definitely worth analyzing*. Anyway no one is better equipped to judge which is the case for any particular child than the child's parents. The key, in my judgment, is **balance and context**.

Parents of vulnerable children — children who may not have demonstrated a particularly strong commitment to their faith, or have proven susceptible to peer pressure and tend to hang around with dubious company, who have a **tendency to live in their imaginations or particularly to obsess over favourite books or movies**, and most especially who have already demonstrated an obsessive over-interest in *Harry Potter* — may have to intervene to turn their children's interests in healthier directions.

Yet reading *Harry Potter* by itself — or rather, reading *Harry Potter* as part of a well-rounded reading program including well-chosen books that might include the works of Tolkien and Lewis, the adventure stories of Howard Pyle, the fantasy of Lloyd Alexander, the apocalyptic fiction of Michael O'Brien, the fairytales of George MacDonald, or the detective tales of Sherlock Holmes — a child whose reading has this kind of breadth and depth is unlikely to be negatively influenced by having read the *Harry Potter* books. Indeed, for many readers, the redemptive themes in *Harry Potter* of good vs. evil, of loyalty and courage, of the evils of bigotry and oppression, and of course the wildly imaginative effects of Rowling's magical world may be fondly remembered for years to come...

On the other hand, what I do object to is the claim that it is inconsistent or hypocritical to allow Tolkien and Lewis, but to object to Rowling. **The Rowling books are significantly different from the Tolkien and Lewis books**, and there is good reason to make a distinction between them, perhaps even to draw a line between them, separating the allowed from the disallowed. I therefore made this article to show the **fundamental differences between the *Harry Potter* series and Tolkien or Lewis**. For a detailed article about *Harry Potter*'s in-depth *between the lines* analysis, check my other article :

[Harry Potter and the Powers of Darkness](#)