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Cambria Findley-Grubb

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Harry Potter as a Piece of Apocalyptic Fiction

Cambria Findley-Grubb

Key Words, Concepts, and Names: Harry Potter, Order of the Phoenix, Apocalyptic Literature, Apocalypse, Armageddon, J.K. Rowling, Christianity, Revelation, Symbolism, Righteous Remnant, Dualism, Prophecy, Bible

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series remains one of the most popular series ever created, loved by adults and children alike. The *Harry Potter* series has been translated into over thirty languages in more than one hundred and thirty countries (Killing 2). This series has spawned a billion dollar industry eight movies, merchandise including shirts, cloaks, wands, and bobble heads, an intercollegiate muggle quidditch league, and a multimillion-dollar amusement park attraction. However, despite its increasing popularity and fandom, *Harry Potter* remains a highly controversial book among fundamentalist religious groups because of its involvement in the world of witches, wizards, and magic. Groups such as these often quote the biblical book of Revelation to condemn the *Harry Potter* books, particularly Revelation 21:8 which states "[...] those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death." Despite the use of the book of Revelation to rebuke the *Harry Potter* series, few have actually analyzed the parallels between the two books. In fact, *Harry Potter* itself holds many of the characteristics prevalent in intertestamental apocalyptic literature. These characteristics include but are not limited to symbolism, pessimism, the world shaking at the foundations, dualism, the presence of a righteous remnant, prophecy and determinism, and triumph of God. This essay will analyze the presence of these characteristics, as well as sacrificial love in the *Harry Potter* novels, specifically focusing on the fifth book, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. This essay is a preliminary study and will later be expanded regarding all seven *Harry Potter* novels.

Symbolism

In keeping with apocalyptic characteristics, J.K. Rowling employs various symbols in *Harry Potter*. Many of the creatures created in the fantastic world of *Harry Potter* act as symbols of good and evil. The Phoenix, Fawkes, is a symbol of good, which represents resurrection, loyalty and courage. These attributes are seen in the second novel when Fawkes rescues Harry from a Basilisk (a giant snake) by risking his own life blinding the serpent. The job of Auror, is another good representation of positive symbolism as it arises from the word "dawn" and represents those who fight off the darkness (Spencer). The Aurors in the novel are those who fight off Voldemort and the forces of darkness throughout the series. Rowling also uses many samples of negative symbolism in her novel, such

C. Findley-Grubb

as giants. In the Bible, giants are commonly associated with evil and destruction. This idea is reiterated in *Harry Potter* when many of the giants slaughter their own kind and join the Dark Lord. Another instance of negative symbolism is seen in the Dementors. These creatures feed off human fear and cause despair to everyone around them. However, Rowling's use of mixed illustrations of symbolism to demonstrate the lines between good and evil are not always sharply drawn and first impressions cannot always be relied upon. For instance, Thestrals are creatures who can only be seen by people who have seen death. Upon first consideration, this may be seen as a bad omen because of its connection with death. However, throughout the novel Thestrals demonstrate themselves to be fiercely loyal and brilliant.

J.K. Rowling further uses symbolism in naming her characters in order to demonstrate personality traits. Albus [Dumbledore] comes from the Spanish word "alba" meaning white or dawn. This meaning is important because it places Dumbledore in direct opposition to darkness or evil. Voldemort's name is also very telling. In French "Vole de mort" means "flight from death," which coincides with Voldemort's quest for immortality during the first four books of the series. Bellatrix, Voldemort's right hand, means female warrior. However, in direct opposition to this is Minerva McGonagall, who serves as Bellatrix's foil. Unlike Bellatrix, who prides herself on her fighting ability, Minerva prides herself on her wisdom and teaching the future generations. This is perhaps why Rowling named her after the Roman goddess of wisdom. Another example of name symbolism is Dolores Umbridge, whose first name derives from the Spanish word pain. Her last name is a homophone of "umbrage" which means a feeling of pique or resentment at some often fancied slight or insult (Spencer). These two names accurately portray the student's feelings regarding Professor Umbridge. Throughout *The Order of the Phoenix*, Cornelius Fudge convinces the Ministry of Magic to ignore the obvious signs that Voldemort has returned to power. His name, meaning "evade or dodge," accurately represents his treatment of this crucial information throughout the fifth book. The last two important pieces of name symbolism in the book are Petunia Dursely, Harry's aunt, and Lily Potter, Harry's mother. While both are named after flowers, the petunia symbolizes anger and resentment, while the lily symbolizes innocence and purity. The lily is also a flower associated with Easter, apropos because of Lily's sacrificial love to save her son (Spencer).

Numerology is another critical instance of symbolism used in the *Harry Potter* novels. For example, the *Harry Potter* series contains seven novels. In numerology, seven is the divine number. Further, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Tom Riddle states, "Isn't seven the most powerfully magic number?" Harry escapes death from Lord Voldemort seven times during the *Harry Potter* series. Another instance of seven occurs in the prophecy which states, "The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies." This equating of Harry with the divine number seven may demonstrate he is more than an average teenage boy. Further references to seven in the *Harry Potter* series include the seven Weasley children, seven secret passages at Hogwarts, seven horcruxes, and attending school at Hogwarts for seven years.

In *Harry Potter*, the numbers four and twelve also play a representative role. Hogwarts is represented by four houses: Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin. As Ronald Farmer documents in his commentary, in

numerology four is the cosmic number (4 seasons, 4 directions), so the number of houses at Hogwarts being represented by the number four is of obvious significance. In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, twelve plays a particularly important role because of twelve Grimmauld Place, which is the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. It is at this location that the resistance gathers, and represents the will of all people coming together against Voldemort. Numerology plays a role in this case because twelve represents all people together.

Parallel Symbolism to Revelation

Perhaps the most important characteristic of symbolism are seen in the parallels between Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix and the biblical book of Revelation. In his book God, the Devil, and Harry Potter, John Killinger describes the importance of symbolism both in the *Harry Potter* novels and the book of Revelation. He states that while Harry Potter may have many highly fanciful images, it has no more than the great drama in the book of Revelation, and cites many examples of popular symbols between the two books (Killinger 49). When one reads *Harry Potter*, one of the most important themes is the power of love, and that love will conquer all in the end. In this case love is a symbol for God in the novel. Those who follow the power of love, in order to protect others and stand up to evil, such as Sirius does in the fifth novel, or Dumbledore in the sixth, act as martyrs, just as the people of John's day were martyred. Furthermore, in the book of Revelation, these martyrs are connected to the world of the living, ever waiting. In Rev 6:9 John states "I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained." By analogy, in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, this connection at the altar is symbolized by the Veil in the Department of Mysteries, which connects the realms of the living and the dead.

Another parallel between the two books, is the presence of "the believers" versus the "committees of injustice." In the Book of Revelation, the believers are those who are spared by God and taken through the tribulation. In *Harry Potter*, the idea of the believers is manifested in Dumbledore's Army and The Order of the Phoenix, which takes a stand against evil and fights for what is right. A parallel to the believers is also found in Revelation 9, which states evil could only harm those that did not have the sign of God on their forehead. As previously noted, in the *Harry Potter* series, God is love, and Harry's lightening bolt scar symbolizes his mother's sacrificial love for him, rendering Voldemort unable to harm him. The antithesis of the mark of God in the Book of Revelation is the mark of the Beast, which is worn by those that are loyal to him. In the *Harry Potter* series this is manifested through the Dark Mark, a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth, that is placed on one's arm by Voldemort to summon his most loyal followers. The committees of injustice in the *Harry Potter* series are manifested in Voldemort's Death Eaters, as well as the Ministry of Magic, which slanders the believers.

The characters in the *Harry Potter* Series, as well as the book of Revelation, further mirror one another. As the manifestation of ultimate evil in *Harry Potter*, Voldemort plays the role of Satan, and the dragon. This role is demonstrated in Revelation 12: 4-5 which states, "The Dragon stood in front of the woman as she was about to give birth, ready to devour her baby as soon as it was born. She gave birth to a son who was to shepherd all

C. Findley-Grubb

nations with an iron rod. And her child was snatched away from the dragon and was caught up to God and to his throne." In this verse, the dragon does kill the child, but it is through this act and being brought to God that the child is able to secure the dragon's destruction. This act, too, parallels the *Harry Potter* tale, in which Voldemort attacks Harry while he is an infant in order to secure his power. However, it is through this act that Voldemort sets into motion a chain of events that leads to his ultimate downfall. In both these tales, evil carries within itself the germ of its own destruction (Farmer).

Perhaps one of the most revealing parallels between the books is in Revelation, the Lion of Judah and the Lamb still bearing the marks of being slaughtered, is who is worthy and will rule in the end. Compared to the Beast, a lamb seems to be the least likely creature to defeat it, such as the teenager Harry defeating the Dark Lord in *Harry Potter*. However, it is not only a lamb, but a slaughtered lamb, who is worthy in Revelation. This suggests that Harry must be slaughtered by Voldemort in order to come back and defeat him, which occurs in the seventh novel. This lion imagery in conjunction with the lamb also fits *Harry Potter* as Harry is a member of the Gryffindor house, whose symbol is the lion. The fact that the lamb is in the lion's house may also be seen as a radical rebirth of images where Rowling blends two opposing forces together in a single character. Throughout the series, Harry is cast as the lamb who fights against the Beast. There are two examples of the Beast in the *Harry Potter* series. In Order of the Phoenix, Voldemort is represented by the Sea Beast. This parallel is seen in Revelation 13:3, which states "And one of his [the beast's] heads seemed to have a deadly wound. But his death stroke was healed; and the whole earth went after the beast in amazement and admiration." In the fourth *Harry Potter* novel, --Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, Voldemort returns to power after a certain death, much the same as the Beast does in the book of Revelation. Further, Professor Umbridge personifies the earth Beast in the book of Revelation. The earth Beast has "two horns like a lamb, but he speaks like the dragon" and "He exerts all the power and right of control of the former beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell upon it to exalt and deify the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed, and to worship him" (Rev. 11-12). Though Umbridge's physical description is quite disarming, it is clear to the students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry it is clear that she is there is support of Voldemort, much like the earth Beast in the Book of Revelation.

Pessimism and Shaking at the Foundations

Another characteristic of apocalyptic literature that manifests itself in the *Harry Potter* series is an emerging attitude of pessimism evolving as the world shakes at its foundations. In the end of the fourth book, the dark wizard Voldemort is returned to full power, and yet few are willing to acknowledge his return. Throughout the fifth book, circumstances keep worsening until there remains little doubt that the Dark Lord has returned. As the "sorting hat" says in the beginning of the book,

*"Oh know the perils, read the signs,
The warning history shows,
For our Hogwarts is in danger,*

*From external deadly foes,
And we must unite inside her,
Or we will crumble from within,
I have told you, I have warned you,
Let the sorting now begin."*

This song resonates with the idea that things are bad, and they are only going to get worse, a common theme in apocalyptic literature.

The mood is only further darkened throughout the novel as they explore the idea that Voldemort has a new weapon, something he did not possess in the earlier books. While few know what the weapon is, ignorance fuels the increasing anxiety over the Dark Lord's return. Half way through the Order of the Phoenix, circumstances decay further as a mass breakout from Azkaban occurs. Azkaban is a wizarding prison, similar to Alcatraz, where those who have committed horrendous crimes are incarcerated. Often times these crimes included the murder of muggles (non-wizards) or demonstrating loyalty to Voldemort. The mood of the novel further deteriorates as Dumbledore, the only wizard Voldemort ever feared and a strong protector of the school, is replaced by Dolores Umbridge as the head of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. When this change occurs, the students are forced to endure a plethora of hardships, including canceled clubs, whipping, and detentions which include physical abuses that are cruel by any standard.

This mood of pessimism continues throughout the novel as people refuse to believe that Voldemort has returned. However, when the evidence becomes irrefutable, the ministry puts out the following press release;

"It is with great regret that I must confirm the wizard styling himself Lord, well you know who I mean, is alive and among us. It is with almost equal regret that we report the mass revolt of the Dementors of Azkaban who have shown themselves averse to continuing in the ministry's employ."

While the ministry has finally admitted their previous failure to acknowledge Voldemort's return, the novel ends on a note of ultimately dire pessimism. If Voldemort is on the loose, and the Death Eaters are under his command, there exists no limit to the terror that may happen in the coming years.

Righteous Remnant and Dualism

Through this mood of pessimism emerges a concept of duality. The *Harry Potter* series demonstrates this duality as a constant struggle between good and evil, and like apocalyptic literature, it is not a true duality because good always triumphs in the end. Instances of this duality can be seen in multiple scenarios in the book, including the struggle between the Death Eaters and Order of the Phoenix at the ministry and the battle between Dumbledore and Voldemort. Likewise, foils in the novel provide multiple examples of dualism in Dumbledore and Voldemort, Harry and Draco Malfoy, and Minerva and Bellatrix.

C. Findley-Grubb

When the concept of duality emerges, it is common for a "righteous remnant" to emerge as well. A righteous remnant is a minority group, which, under the present circumstances, has little chance of convincing the majority of their opinion, and is often persecuted for this reason. This idea is perfectly demonstrated by the line, "they'll know we're right in the end" thought Harry...but he wondered how many attacks like Seamus' he would have to endure before that time came." Throughout the fifth *Harry Potter* novel, the Order of the Phoenix acts as the righteous remnant. Even though the reader is aware that Voldemort has returned at the end of the previous novel, most wizards are not and naively refuse to believe so. When people such as Dumbledore and Harry proclaim this truth, both find themselves persecuted and slandered against by the majority of their peers. At the end of the novel, Harry is described as "a lone voice of truth. Perceived as unbalanced yet never wavering in his story. Forced to bear ridicule and slander." This description perfectly demonstrates Harry as being a member of the righteous remnant in the novel.

Another example of the righteous remnant emerges as Harry and other Hogwarts students band together to form a defense against the dark arts group to prepare for a battle against Voldemort. However, when this battle finally arrives, "Harry's insides plummeted sickeningly. They were trapped and outnumbered two to one." Fortunately, in accordance with good triumphing in this dualism, the teenagers are able to battle and hold the Death Eaters at bay until the Order arrives and triumphs.

Prophecy and Determinism

A further example of apocalyptic characteristics in the *Harry Potter* novels is that of prophecy and determinism. At the climax of the fifth novel, the righteous remnant enters the Department of Mysteries and discovers a prophecy that is inscribed with Harry's name. The prophecy states,

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord shall mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not. And either must die at the hands of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

Through this prophecy, the reader is reminded that Harry's future is set and there is no way he can change it. One day Harry will have to face the Dark Lord, regardless of his own wishes. Likewise, determinism is demonstrated in this concept because despite Harry's own wishes, his predetermined and unalterable destiny was sealed long before he was even born.

Sacrificial Love and the Triumph of God

"There is a room in the Department of Mysteries, that is kept locked at all times. It contains a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than the forces of nature." In this quote, Dumbledore is describing the force of love. It is love, not evil, which triumphs in every *Harry Potter* novel. When

Lily out of love sacrificed her life to save her infant, she gave a protection to Harry that greatly hinders Voldemort throughout the novels. In fact, it is the reason that Voldemort falls from power in the first place. Dumbledore states,

"I knew too where Voldemort was weak. And so I made my decision. You would be protected by an ancient magic of which he knows but despises, and which he has always, therefore, underestimated to his cost. I am speaking, of course, of the fact that your mother died to save you. She gave you a lingering protection he never expected, a protection that flows in your veins to this day."

This parallels a basic belief among Christians; the significance of the crucifixion. Lily, like Jesus, gave her life through love so others may be saved and given protection. Since in the *Harry Potter* novels God is represented by love, this ultimate act of sacrificial love, as well as others appearing throughout the novel, are useful in demonstrating the apocalyptic tenet of the triumph of God.

Conclusion

While true apocalyptic literature may have died out in the first century, the characteristics continue to resonate in literature to this day. The Harry Potter series is the epitome of such a piece of literature. This series demonstrates ideas critical to the apocalyptic mindset including symbolism, dualism, pessimism, righteous remnant, triumph of God and more. When one reads the series for fun, these ideas may not immediately leap from the page, but given critical study and time, it is clear to see that Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, as well as the whole series, is a masterpiece of apocalyptic literature.

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C. Findley-Grubb

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