A Power the Dark Lord Knows Not:

Ethical Love as a Critique of Western Individualism in *Harry Potter*

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Upon its publication in 1997, J.K. Rowling's series about a young wizard named Harry Potter quickly became "the biggest children's book series ever," staking its claim in 21st-century culture as it shattered book-sale records, inspired an international movie franchise, and swamped the children's and adult's best-seller lists alike (Hoffman and Fineman). The *Harry Potter* books' widespread appeal is perhaps partially due to Harry's archetypal journey, which tells of his progression from a powerless child to an able adult who finds a niche within his community—one that, while magical, closely parallels and intersects with the reader's own. However, although Rowling's series draws on archetypes that suggest a universal appeal, they are far from apolitical: indeed, they grapple with the socio-ethical and ideological conflicts that were prevalent at the time of their publication. Written during the 1990s and 2000s when "the notion of community had been systematically eroded […] in the need to strive for materialism and self-promotion," Rowling's magical world closely reflects the cultures she is most familiar with: British culture, specifically, and Western culture, more generally (Eccleshare 106). In fact, the *Harry Potter* series is a trenchant socio-political critique of Western culture's notions of rugged individualism, which suggest that the individual is all-important, self-sufficient, and invulnerable. Rather than reaffirm such a narrative, Rowling instead warns against it through her depiction of Harry's arch-nemesis, Lord Voldemort, who represents the ultimate dark vision of rugged individualism: violent, unregulated power. If Voldemort is an expression of the dangers of extreme individualism, however, Harry represents an alternative path: ethical love. In fact, it is Harry's ability to "love"—to accept his relation with and vulnerability to the other—that sets him apart from Voldemort, and ultimately enables Harry to understand him, defeat him, and help rebuild the Wizarding community. Harry's journey is therefore a vision of ethical goodness

rooted in a recognition of one's relation to the other that demands ethical action and condones community over isolation, as well as love and trust over power and fear.

For the purpose of my analysis, it is crucial to understand my definition of the term "love" and how it relates to socio-ethical theory. Here, I define love not as the sentimental phenomenon, but rather as an ethical way of understanding the self. As the socio-ethical theorist Judith Butler states, humans are "beings who are formed in relations of dependency" (Butler 20). From early infancy on, one forms a sense of identity in relation to the "other," who is often defined as all people that the self perceives "as different and not the same as 'me' or 'we'" (Dunham et al 375). This "mode of relationality, definitionally blind, makes us vulnerable to betrayal and error" in regards to the other, even as the other's "exposure and vulnerability […] makes a primary ethical claim on [us]" (Butler 102, 31). In other words, because our sense of self is defined through a relation to the other, the other's potential actions pose a threat to our sense of self. Just as we are vulnerable to the other, however, the other is also vulnerable to us; such mutual vulnerability thus calls on both parties to respond ethically and affirm ties rather than destroy them through violence. In fact, according to Butler, to deny one's relation to the other—and the responsibility that comes with this dependency and vulnerability—is to deny one's humanity. The denial of one's relation to the other takes rugged individualism to the extreme by setting oneself up as a "wholly perspicacious [being]," who "by definition, could not be in love, blind and blinded, vulnerable to devastation" (102). In essence, to "preserve oneself against the injuriousness of the other" as Voldemort attempts to do is to "become inhuman" (103). To understand one's relation to the other, however—to accept one's vulnerability, dependency, and responsibility to the other—is a form of ethical love that ultimately affirms humanity, life, and community.

The significance of ethical love is established early on in the *Harry Potter* series with Lily Potter's sacrifice for her son, Harry. Faced with the choice of saving herself or her infant, Lily refuses to stand aside when Voldemort orders her to so he can kill her son. Instead, she shields Harry and begs Voldemort to kill her instead. Her resulting death—which reaffirms her strong maternal connection with her son—draws on an "ancient magic" that Voldemort "despises" and has "always, therefore, underestimated," having never known it in his life: love (*Order of the Phoenix [OP]* 835-6). Indeed, Lily's ultimate affirmation of her connection with an other is an example of the sociality of both humanity and magic, for human relations and magic are not about domination and the power to make one's ideals reality, but rather connection. One's relation to the other is "magic at its deepest, its most impenetrable," and Voldemort, who does not understand love, cannot overcome the ancient magical shield that it creates (*Prisoner of Azkaban [PoA] 427).* As Harry's headmaster and mentor, Dumbledore, tells him in *Sorcerer's Stone (SS)*, "to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever" (299). This magical and emotional protection for Harry resides in his blood and his very skin. He has been so indelibly marked by Lily's ethical love that Voldemort, who rejects his human connection and vulnerability to others, cannot possess him or even touch him "without enduring mortal agony," for, despite Voldemort's great magical abilities, he cannot bear to touch "a person marked by something so good" (*Half-Blood Prince [HBP]* 511, *SS* 299).

While Lily's foundational love shields Harry from physical death, it also saves him from ethical and emotional death. Since Harry is raised in his aunt and uncle's household where he is hated and neglected—his "bedroom" is a cupboard under the stairs—it would have been unsurprising if Harry's emotional and psychological development had been severely damaged.

As Dumbledore notes, however, this does not happen. Although Harry has suffered for "ten dark and difficult years," he arrives at Hogwarts to begin school at age eleven mostly "safe and whole" (*OP* 835). Rowling stated in an interview that this is largely due to the love Harry receives from his parents in his earliest days, which enables his brain to develop "in a way that Voldemort's brain didn't" (*Women).* Unlike Voldemort's childhood, which knew neither a caretaker's or a parent's love, Harry's harmful childhood with the Dursleys is mitigated by his parents' early love, which primes him to seek community and provides him with a "protection that no one can undo" (*Women).* Indeed, Harry's ability to affirm his human connection to the other despite his neglect becomes his greatest strength, for it is "the only protection that can possibly work against the lure of power like Voldemort's" (*HBP* 511).

In fact, throughout the series Harry remains "pure of heart," never once being "seduced by the Dark Arts" or showing "even for a second […] the slightest desire to become one of Voldemort's followers" (*HBP* 511). Unlike Voldemort, Harry rejects the path to extreme individualism and its illusions of power and invulnerability. Rather than try to hide or destroy his vulnerabilities, he accepts them and realizes that his connection with others makes him stronger. He is willing to ask others for help—be they wizard, house-elf, or other magical creature—and is thereby able to create a diverse network that can subvert Voldemort's reign of terror. To create such a network, Harry refuses to promote himself as a lone Western hero. Instead, when talking with others he always emphasizes his "normalness"—his human fear and vulnerability in the face of obstacles—and his connection with others, remarking that all of his successes against Voldemort were "luck—[he] didn't know what [he] was doing half the time […] and [he] nearly always had help" (*OP* 343). By fashioning himself in opposition to traditional notions of Western individualism, Harry emphasizes collective action over individual

narrative, creating a community that is bound not by fear of his special powers, but by a bond of common goals that outlasts one member's betrayal and unites the group throughout the war against Voldemort. Harry thus proves that he does not want to be special and invulnerable, as Voldemort does; rather, he wants to be part of a community. He is not outside the community as a vague figure of hope—the Boy Who Lived, the Chosen One—as much as he is a human boy who is just as dependent on and vulnerable to the other as anyone else. Harry's rejection of fame and his ability to embrace his relation to the other—to ethically love—therefore pushes back against rugged individualism's depiction of love as a weakness. In *Harry Potter,* love is a strength, and it is the key to creating a community that can defeat Voldemort where an individual cannot.

Indeed, much of Harry's journey is about finding a family and niche within the Wizarding community. He does not take this journey alone. Although he comes from a neglectful home, Harry chooses to reach out to others and create his own family, one which expands to include his school friends, the Weasley family, Dumbledore's Army, and members of the Order of the Phoenix—especially his godfather Sirius Black, who becomes a "mixture of father and brother" before his death (*OP* 831). Readers first see Harry's ability to connect with the other when the Hogwarts gamekeeper, Hagrid, reveals his magical heritage to him on his eleventh birthday. Rather than revel in his powers and reject Hagrid's help, Harry immediately befriends the gamekeeper, asks him questions that reveal his ignorance and vulnerability, and allows him to guide his first steps into the Wizarding world. Even when Harry crosses the threshold into the magical world and adolescence, symbolized by Platform 9¾, he does not go alone. Instead, he reaches out to the Weasley family for help when he is vulnerable and confused about how to get onto the platform. The Weasley family then continues to play a major role in

Harry's life: he stays with them during the summer, receives hand-knit Weasley sweaters, and even gives the twins his Triwizard Cup winnings to start up their joke shop. Harry effectively becomes a part of the family, and is considered by Mrs. Weasley to be "as good as" her son (*OP* 90). The Weasleys' influence is crucial, for they continue to provide Harry with an "emotional power base" throughout his turbulent adolescence, as his father-figures in the forms of Sirius Black, Albus Dumbledore, and Remus Lupin pass into and out of his life (Eccleshare 95). Without a doubt, the Weasley family's ethical love—their ability to genuinely accept those who are different from them, whether they are Muggle, werewolf, or lonely boy—remains a major influence on Harry's development into an ethical man who tries to understand the other.

While Harry is primed by his parents and the Weasley family to forge relations to the other despite his vulnerabilities, Voldemort, who was "from the moment of his birth, institutionalized," reveals just how damaging lack of love can be on ethical development (*Women*). Unlike Harry, Voldemort was born out of a loveless union—the product of a love potion—and grew up in an orphanage without any of the foundational ethical love that shielded Harry. After Voldemort's Muggle father, Tom Riddle Sr., was released from the love potion, he rejected and abandoned Voldemort's mother, Merope, while she was pregnant. Merope's resulting "unrequited love and attendant despair" led to her refusal "to raise her wand even to save her own life" (*HBP* 262). The effect of Merope's choice to die "in spite of a son who needed her" is just as powerful as Lily's choice to die for her son (262). Leaving no message for baby Tom Riddle Jr. beyond the name of the Muggle who had rejected her, Merope allows herself to die and abandon her son without any shield against the damaging effects of growing up in an institution.

Drawing on her work with Lumos, her charity which helps institutionalized children in Eastern Europe, Rowling stated that Voldemort's inability to love is an extreme result of the "measurable brain damage [that] is done when a child is taken away from his mother and placed in an institution" (*Women).* Brain scans reveal that once "pathways haven't been made, […] you can never get [those connections] back" (*Women).* In other words, without any positive fundamental connection with the other as an infant, Voldemort is hence unable to form connections himself. His "damage" is his inability to feel empathy with others and make human connections, for as Dumbledore remarks to Harry, "if there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love" (*SS* 299). Thus, whereas Harry seeks out community, Voldemort craves to be special and apart, separate from the feeble witch mother who "succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death" and the "foul, common Muggle, who abandoned [him] even before [he] was born" (*HBP* 363, *Chamber of Secrets [CoS]* 314). Rejected by both parents, Voldemort becomes obsessed with power and its illusion of invulnerability; he craves to shed his relations with others, to work alone and become "the greatest sorcerer in the world" (*CoS* 314). In isolating himself in such a way, however, Voldemort never develops an ethical compass; he focuses solely on erasing his human vulnerabilities and annihilating the threatening other. By attempting to make himself self-sufficient and all-powerful, he slowly destroys his soul. As Butler warns, this is dangerous, as we "are constituted in relationality: implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us" (Butler 64). We cannot escape our connection with others, for they are a fundamental part of ourselves; we define ourselves against them, with them, in relation to them. While "one seeks to preserve oneself against the injuriousness of the other, […] if one were successful at walling oneself off from injury, one would be inhuman" (103). Voldemort essentially tries to do just this: he wants to be

the isolated, all-knowing individual, beyond vulnerability and death. To be this is to be inhuman, however, and this is Voldemort's fate at the end of *Deathly Hollows (DH)* without ethical love: inhumanity. He becomes a shadow of humanity: a small, repulsive child left "shuddering […] where it had been left, unwanted, […] fragile and wounded" (*DH* 706-7).

Voldemort's descent into the inhuman occurs slowly over his life. Upon meeting him as a child, Dumbledore noted that young Tom Riddle had "obvious instincts for cruelty, secrecy, and domination" and was "already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish, to control" (*HBP* 276). Even then, he showed "contempt for anything that tied him to other people, anything that made him ordinary" (277); he preferred to act alone. Unlike Harry, who first enters the magical world with Hagrid, Voldemort refuses Dumbledore's offer to accompany him to Diagon Alley to get school supplies, telling him, "I don't need you. […] I'm used to doing things for myself" (274). As Dumbledore points out to Harry during their private lessons in *Half-Blood Prince*, this desire to operate alone follows Voldemort into his school years, when he collects a group of "dedicated friends"—for whom he "undoubtedly felt no affection"—that are a mix "of the weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty" (361-2). Indeed, even as an adult surrounded by his Death Eaters, Voldemort has "never had a friend, nor […] has [he] ever wanted one" (277). Voldemort's desire to be set apart from others is particularly symbolized in the shedding of his name, Tom, which marked both his human relations with others—particularly the Muggle father who abandoned him—and his human vulnerability. The common name Tom "made him ordinary" when he "wished to be different, separate, notorious" (*HBP* 277). He thus became Lord Voldemort, a name that almost everyone in the Wizarding world would fear to speak.

In denying his relation to the other, Voldemort becomes an extreme example of Western individualism; he works alone and craves power above all else. Time and again Voldemort seeks power that will set him apart and transform himself into something beyond human and, ultimately, beyond death, his greatest fear. He follows this pursuit no matter the cost, with no remorse for those he kills to create the magical Horcruxes that will "mutilate his own soul," encapsulate part of it, and tether his spirit to the earth in a twisted immortality (*HBP* 511). Indeed, Voldemort is the representation of humanity's darkness; he is what a person can become when ethical love is absent and power becomes an obsession. Having never truly fostered a human relationship, he is not part of the Wizarding community; rather, he is a constant threat on its outskirts, tempting those who are power-hungry from within. He is manipulative, cruel, and evil, the ultimate other that one wants to condemn rather than understand, for to understand Voldemort—to name him—would be to admit a relation to him.

But this is what Harry must do in order to defeat him. He must first understand Voldemort—his human beginnings, his ways of thinking, his descent into the inhuman—if he is to find the Horcruxes that encapsulate the pieces of Voldemort's soul, destroy them, and finally defeat the "mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul" left behind (*HBP* 508). By shaping Harry's journey this way, Rowling indicates that we must recognize and understand our relation to the other, even if it makes us vulnerable, even if we fear what we find. To do otherwise would be to repeat Voldemort's mistakes. It would also be a lie, to pretend that Voldemort's evil is not a human possibility. Indeed, as Ursula Le Guin argues, it is a form of "escapism" to pose "evil as a 'problem,' instead of what it is: all the pain and suffering and waste and loss and injustice we will meet all our lives long, and must face and cope with over and over and over, and admit, and live with, in order to live human lives at all" (Le Guin 69). In other words, we are

implicated in evil; it is not an outside problem that bears no responsibility, but rather a result of the many injustices and suffering for which humanity as a whole is accountable. Voldemort was not *born* evil; he is a product of both his natural tendencies and his upbringing. Humanity is therefore implicated in his actions, but fearing to speak his name—to acknowledge his humanity—will not change that. Thus, in order to take ethical action, we must remember that we are "related to those we condemn," for to forget means we "lose the chance to be ethically educated or 'addressed' by a consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities" (Butler 45). We must remember that the other's actions, though we label them as "evil," are very much human, and we must further understand why and how these situations come about in order to address them ethically and ensure that we do not create those preconditions again.

To arrest this cycle of condemnation and violence is the reason why Harry must learn about Voldemort's human beginnings through Dumbledore's lessons, and why his readers must learn as well: to understand how such an evil can come about, and how to ensure it does not happen again. Primed by his parents' foundational love, Harry is able to do just that by using his ability to connect with and understand the other's mind without being tempted by power. He can "[flit] into Lord Voldemort's mind without damage" because he is "protected, in short, by [his] ability to love" (*HBP* 511). His ability to love is also what spurs him to pursue Voldemort in the first place. Remembering "his mother, his father, and Sirius," he is determined to finish Voldemort, even when bringing about his end means realizing the ultimate relation between them: Harry's status as a living Horcrux (512). In other words, Harry has a shred of Voldemort's soul inside of him, courtesy of the curse that failed to kill him as a child. Faced with the horror

of such evil inside him—and by extent, his own possibility of following such a path—Harry faces this relation with the other and sacrifices himself to end the cycle of isolation and power, thereby protecting his loved ones and solidifying his transformation from a lonely orphan boy to an ethical man whose actions can protect his community and ensure life, just as Lily's love did for him.

Helped by his friends, Harry's triumph over Voldemort is a critique of the idolized Western individual. By attributing the rugged individual's qualities to the villain and creating a hero who upholds an ethical system that recognizes one's relation to the other, Rowling effectively warns against the lure of power and extreme individualism and instead offers up a new ideal that fits with a 21st-century globalizing world, where we must constantly confront the other who highlights our vulnerabilities and challenges our definition of what it is to be human. Indeed, Rowling encourages communication over isolation, understanding over condemnation, collective action over individual power. Perhaps most importantly of all, she reminds her readers, young and old, of the importance of ethical love, which alone can combat the destructive desire for power and ensure life in the face of death.

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