

HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE

By J.K Rowling (Born in England, July 31st, 1965)

Themes

The Value of Humility

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone emphasizes the virtue of humility by showcasing the extraordinary modesty of its hero and by making this modesty an important part of Harry's success in obtaining the Sorcerer's Stone. Harry's humility is no doubt ingrained in him during his ten miserable years of neglect and cruelty with the Dursleys. But Harry does not stop being humble when he gains fame, wealth, and popularity at Hogwarts. His reaction to the discovery that everyone seems to know his name on the train to Hogwarts does not make him primp and pose, but rather only makes him hope that he can manage to live up to his reputation. In this respect, he contrasts sharply with Draco Malfoy, who prides himself on his family reputation and downplays achievement.

Similarly, when it becomes apparent that Harry has an astounding gift for Quidditch, his reaction is not to glory in his superstar abilities, but rather to practice more industriously than before. When Harry breaks Quidditch records by catching the Golden Snitch in the first five minutes of the game, he does not even pause to appreciate the applause of the crowd, but rushes off. Harry's refusal to glorify himself is instrumental in getting the stone because he differs from wicked wizards like Quirrell in that he desires only to find the Stone for the common good, not to use it to acquire personal fame or fortune. If Harry were less humble, he would be unable to seize the stone. He is the extreme opposite of Voldemort, who strives only to achieve his own selfish goals.

The Occasional Necessity of Rebellion

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Hogwarts is a well-run institution, with clearly spelled out rules that are strictly enforced. Midlevel teachers and school administrators like Professor McGonagall constantly police students for violations, and the rules are taken seriously. Even at the highest level of the Hogwarts administration, there is a clear respect for the rules. Dumbledore is a stern taskmaster. He makes a very gentle and warm welcome speech to the first-year students, but he throws in a few menacing reminders about the prohibition of visits to the Forbidden Forest and the third-floor corridor. None of these Hogwarts rules ever seems arbitrary or unfair. On the contrary, we generally approve of them, feeling that in a world imperiled by misused magic, strict control over student behavior is necessary.

Even so, it soon becomes clear that Harry is unable to abide perfectly by the rules. He enters the third-floor corridor in the full knowledge that it is forbidden territory, and he dons the invisibility cloak to inspect the restricted-books section of the library. After the flying instructor has clearly prohibited broomstick flying until she returns, Harry does not hesitate to take off after Malfoy to retrieve Neville's stolen toy. And Harry

approves of infractions of the rules by others as well. When Hagrid reveals that he is engaged in an illegal dragon-rearing endeavor, Harry not only fails to report Hagrid to the authorities, but actually helps Hagrid with the dragon.

Harry's occasional rebellions against the rules are not vices or failings. Rather, they enhance his heroism because they show that he is able to think for himself and make his own judgments. The contrast to Harry in this respect is the perfectionist Hermione, who never breaks a rule at the beginning and who is thus annoying to both Harry and us. When she eventually lies to a teacher, showing that she too can transcend the rules, Hermione becomes Harry's friend. One of the main lessons of the story is that while rules are good and necessary, sometimes it is necessary to question and even break them for the right reasons.

The Dangers of Desire

As the pivotal importance of the desire-reflecting Mirror of Erised reveals, learning what to want is an important part of one's development. Excessive desire is condemned from the story's beginning, as the spoiled Dudley's outrageous demands for multiple television sets appear foolish and obnoxious. The same type of greed appears later in a much more evil form in the power-hungry desires of Voldemort, who pursues the Sorcerer's Stone's promise of unlimited wealth and life. While Voldemort and Dudley are obviously different in other respects, they share an uncontrollable desire that repels Harry and makes him the enemy of both of them. Desire is not necessarily wrong or bad, as Dumbledore explains to Harry before the Mirror of Erised—Harry's desire to see his parents alive is touching and noble. But overblown desire is dangerous in that it can make people lose perspective on life, which is why Dumbledore advises Harry not to seek out the mirror again. Dumbledore himself illustrates the power and grandeur of one who has renounced desires almost completely when he says that all he wants is a pair of warm socks. This restraint is the model for Harry's own development in the story.

Power and Morality

Power is the ability to control the behavior of others or to get things in a desired way. Power itself is not either good or bad. It is the intent behind the desire to acquire power and its right use that makes it either moral or immoral. Power and morality is the dominant theme in 'The Harry Potter and The Sorcerer's Stone.' Allied to this theme is the theme of conflict between good and evil with the forces of evil striving to acquire power to dominate and destroy others and the forces of good trying to stop them as we see in the characters of Droco Malfoy, Quirrell, Voldemort and Harry, Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore respectively.

In the concluding chapter of Book 1, Quirrell's comment about the Sorcerer's Stone and his affections for Voldemort that “[t]here is no good and evil, there is only power and those too weak to see it” evoke important philosophical ideas. The sentiments Quirrell expresses underlie one of the classic works of political theory, Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. In this sixteenth-century work Machiavelli wrote about how rulers should expand their power with no regard for morality or justice. The distinction Quirrell makes here between “power” and “those too weak to see it” follows the principles that Machiavelli laid out. Quirrell's statement also echoes the thought of nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued that individual human will and striving are more important and relevant than morality and more impressive than flimsy notions of right and wrong. The ideas of these two philosophers emphasize the individual at the expense of the common good, and Voldemort embodies their values.

By placing these sentiments in the mouth of Quirrell, who is as pathetic and squirrelly as his name suggests, Rowling rejects the idea that the world should be based on power and domination of others. It is fine to cultivate power; Dumbledore's power, after all, is exceptional and praiseworthy. But the story suggests that with power comes responsibility toward others and that responsibility includes a sense of what is right and wrong. Dumbledore shows the students that Slytherin House may have acquired a lot of points but that victory should go to the house that has been engaged in a just and righteous struggle. This is surely also the reason that Flamel is induced to destroy the Sorcerer's Stone; it is a source of incredible power, but there is no guarantee that its power will be used properly, and so it must be destroyed. Power is important, but morality is more so.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts

Harry's Scar

The lightning-shaped scar that Harry receives from Voldemort symbolizes everything unique and astounding about Harry, though he never thinks twice about the scar until its history is finally told to him. Like the famous scar of Odysseus in Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*, Harry's forehead lightning bolt is a badge of honor, an emblem of having survived a great battle and of being destined to wage still more battles in the future. It constantly connects Harry to the past, not just to the trauma of the struggle against the evil Voldemort, but also to the loving parents who tried to protect him. The scar is also a symbol of Harry's emotional sensitivity, because it hurts him whenever hatred is directed at him, as when Snape first sees him at Hogwarts or when Quirrell tries to grab him.

Quidditch

As the preferred sport and pastime of the wizard world, Quidditch is entertainment, but the game is also a symbol of the deeper virtues taught at Hogwarts. The all-consuming importance of Quidditch at the school shows that magic is not just a bookish pursuit, but has a physical and practical application as well. Hermione may learn all of her textbooks perfectly, but she is not a hero for doing so; heroism is won on the Quidditch fields. Quidditch also shows that wizardry is intended for much more than the self-centered use of magic powers for personal glory. Any wizard who uses it for such ends alone is, like Voldemort, no longer a part of the team-spirit philosophy of Hogwarts. A person should use magic with an awareness of others' needs and values, just as winning at Quidditch depends on the successful interaction of several players acting cooperatively. No matter how talented a single Quidditch player like Harry might be, he or she cannot play the game alone.

The Mirror of Erised

Harry's encounter with the Mirror of Erised symbolizes his growing self-awareness, as the magic mirror forces him to look within himself and face the question of what he really wants. Harry has never had to inquire into his own desires before, because the Dursleys never cared about his desires and, upon arriving at Hogwarts, he seems to have everything he needs in his daily schedule of classes and meals. But the Hogwarts experience is meant to be more than a routine of memorizing formulas and learning to transform matches into pins. It is meant to bring personal growth and character development, for which it is necessary to examine one's soul. Harry's desires, as reflected in the mirror, are noble ones; he wants to see his family alive and then wants to find the Sorcerer's Stone for the common good. Voldemort, on the other hand, is driven by nothing but his ego, and his desires are wholly selfish. The Mirror of Erised shows us that who we are (literally, the reflection of ourselves that we see in the mirror) is defined by what we want—our desires shape our identities. That Harry is the one who ends up with the Stone teaches us that we must temper our desires.

Character of Harry Potter

Harry Potter is the hero of the story. Orphaned as a baby, he is brought up by his aunt and uncle, the Dursleys, maltreated by them, and tormented by their obnoxious son, Dudley. Neglected and disdained, Harry grows up to be a timid boy unsure of his abilities. His sudden fame as a wizard at Hogwarts comes not just as a total contrast to his earlier forgotten misery, but as a fate that we feel is very much deserved after his youthful suffering. Yet even after he becomes famous, Harry never loses his modesty and humility. Even by the end of the story, when he has obtained the Sorcerer's Stone and saved Hogwarts (and perhaps the whole world) from Voldemort, Harry does not revel in his success. He simply asks Dumbledore a few factual questions and is satisfied with the answers, never expecting any praise. Moreover, he does not wish to use his powers to fulfill grandiose wishes. Dumbledore wisely knows that, unlike Voldemort, Harry will desire only to get the magic stone, not to use it. He does not covet riches or power, or harbor any secret wild ambition; he just wants to make sure that the stone and its power do not fall into the wrong hands. The simplicity of his desire is part of what makes him a hero. Harry's capacity for loyal friendship is another of his attractive features. It is also one of the surest proofs that Harry is developing at Hogwarts, where he is a lonely individual at the story's beginning but has a circle of loyal friends and admirers by the end. His faithful membership in Gryffindor is a symbol of his newly developing team spirit. He prefers maintaining good relations with his schoolmates to basking in individual glory. Similarly, rather than boast of his immense talent at Quidditch, he rejoices in the communal victory for his house and does not stop for applause even when he breaks Quidditch records. He is willing to put himself at risk for the sake of a friend, sometimes foolishly, as when he battles a troll to save Hermione and when he gets himself severely punished for helping Hagrid with his dragon. Harry's success at forging true friendships and overcoming his early loneliness is almost as inspiring as his defeat of the evil and powerful Voldemort.

The Theme of power of choice and its impact

A huge theme within *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is that of the power of choice and its impact on our wellbeing, on our lives, and on the lives of others. We are repeatedly given examples of difficult choices and their consequences or positive outcomes.

For example, the book begins with an examination of how choice impacts Harry's early life with the Dursleys. As a ten-year-old orphan living with his terrible Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, and Cousin Dudley, Harry has very little agency; he is forced to live in a tiny cupboard beneath their stairs and is largely neglected. Even after the flood of letters addressed to Harry begin to arrive, Harry is not allowed to open them, and is, in fact, swept off to a small island to sequester him from the truth of his heritage and being: Harry is a wizard. Once imbued with this truth and provided with agency—the ability to choose—Harry's life is radically and irrevocably changed.

More and more instances of the consequences of choice arrive as the book unfurls: We learn that Harry's mother chose to sacrifice herself out of immense love when Voldemort hunted the Potters down, an act that resulted in her own death... but also in Harry being able to survive Voldemort's attack while being rendered mysteriously protected from his touch. We discover that Professor Quirrell chose to serve as a vessel for what is left of Voldemort's decrepit being, an act that results in Quirrell's slow unraveling and eventual death. We discover that Nicolas Flamel, the creator of the sorcerer's stone, makes the difficult decision to destroy it... an act that will eradicate the powers of immortality that the stone imbues and result in Flamel's death, but will otherwise serve the greater good of wizarding-kind.

We see less outwardly dramatic choices as well: When offered friendship by arrogant Draco Malfoy, Harry chooses to reject this relationship—despite its offer of instant power and social climbing in his new school environment—in favor of friendships with the far less popular Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. Ron and Hermione end up becoming some of the most critical people in Harry's life and a source of continued support for him.

Harry chooses to break the rules during a broom-flying lesson in order to act honorably and rescue the Remembrall of his awkward peer, Neville Longbottom. While this is a risky choice, Harry winds up as the Seeker of the Quidditch team because of the boldness and skill he displays on the broom.

Ultimately, choice becomes an incessant presence within this book, as well as within the rest of the *Harry Potter* series. Perhaps what J.K. Rowling is getting at here is an important life lesson for us readers as well: We can either let life happen to us, or stand up and choose courageously... even if the choice is one that might result in pain or difficulties for ourselves. There is always power in seizing one's agency, in learning to deal with unfortunate circumstances, and in fighting on the behalf of the forces of good.

What is a major conflict and resolution in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone?

One of the major conflicts in this first book of the series is a character vs. character conflict between Harry and Quirrell. A character vs. character conflict is one in which a character has a struggle between an opposing force represented as another character. The resolution of the conflict was that Harry defeated Quirrell when Quirrell could not find the Sorcerer's Stone.

Harry Potter is a wizard who attends a special school for wizards. He is convinced that one of his teachers is trying to kill him. He is correct about that, partially. Unfortunately, for most of his first year he is focused on the wrong one and the wrong reason.

Harry discovers that the school is hiding a special jewel called the Sorcerer's Stone, made by an alchemist named Nicholas Flamel, which "will make the drinker immortal" (Ch. 13). It is being guarded in a secret part of the castle.

Harry heard two of his teachers, Snape and Quirrel, discussing the Stone. Since Quirrell was a sniveling wimp and Snape was overbearing and seemed to not like Harry, Harry assumed that Snape was the enemy. He had also seen Snape with scratches on his leg, and assumed that he had tangled with the Three-headed dog guarding the Stone ("Fluffy").

It does look suspicious. Snape is also plenty mad when he sees Harry. Harry and Hermione also think that Snape is trying to curse Harry during a Quidditch match, but Snape is trying to perform a counter-curse (Ch. 17).

Harry and his two friends, Ron and Hermione, had to undergo a series of tests to get to the stone. These included a killer plant, a chess match, a Quidditch test with flying keys, and a potion riddle, before Harry finally got to the end.

Once reaching the end, he found himself faced with Professor Quirrell and the Mirror of Erised. This mirror was something that Harry was familiar with. He knew that it showed a person what he desired most. Quirrell had passed all of the other tests, but was flummoxed by this one. It turned out that the evil Dark Wizard Lord Voldemort was using him for a host.

Quirrell came back out from behind the mirror and stared hungrily into it.

"I see the Stone... I'm presenting it to my master... but where is it?" (Ch. 17)

Since Quirrell does not have an innocent motive, he will never get the Stone. This was Dumbledore, the Headmaster's plan. The mirror is the final test. Harry has it and is able to keep it safe. Voldemort and Quirrell can't get him, or the Stone. Dumbledore and the others are able to come and rescue Harry after he passes out. Dumbledore explains to him when he wakes up that only someone who wanted to find the Stone and protect it, but not use it, would be able to get it. He tells him the stone has been destroyed.

This is a conflict that did not get entirely resolved. It was not really Quirrell that Harry was battling, it was Voldemort. Harry will have to face him again and again, because he is determined to rule the world, and Harry is determined to stop him.

What literary techniques does J.K. Rowling use in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*?

Three literary techniques that Rowling uses very successfully to pull us into her imaginative world are **humor, contrast, and imagery**.

The novel's opening, which highlights the exaggerated stupidity, meanness, and conventionality of the Muggle Dursleys, as well as their abuse of Harry Potter, brings us into the story, makes us laugh, and builds sympathy for Harry. We are soon rooting for him to succeed against the hot-tempered Vernon, petty-minded Petunia, and bullying, spoiled brat Dudley. This humor continues, if in a more deadpan way, as Harry attends Hogwarts. For example:

What happened down in the dungeons between you and Professor Quirrell is a complete secret, so, naturally the whole school knows.

This light-hearted approach to a serious theme keeps the book from becoming preachy and unbearable.

Rowling also contrasts the dull, pedestrian, unimaginative Muggle world with the magic and enchantment of the wizarding world. She contrasts Harry's low status in the Muggle world, where he is treated with contempt by his adoptive family, with his high status in the wizard world. The two worlds are opposites of each other, and with such a stark contrast, who wouldn't want to leave the Muggles behind?

Most of all, Rowling is superb at using imagery—which is description using the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—to paint a convincing and compelling picture of her fantasy world. You really feel that you are there: that this is a real place coexisting with our more mundane world.

What are great examples of irony in the J.K. Rowling used in her first book?

There are three types of irony: dramatic, situational and verbal. Situational irony is when something happens that is not what you expect.

One of the biggest examples of irony does not become entirely clear until later. This is that Severus Snape is charged with protecting Harry even though Harry was the son of his enemy in school. Harry and his friends assume that Snape is out to get Harry. For example, when they see Snape keeping eye contact and mouthing a spell at the Quidditch match, they assume that he and not Quirrel is trying to hurt Harry. Snape is actually trying to protect Harry.

Dramatic irony is when the reader knows something that the characters do not. In this case, the reader realizes that there must be some kind of history between Snape and Harry, or Snape would not be acting like this. Harry, on the other hand, just assumes that Snape is mean to him and does not really know why.

A final example of irony is Hagrid and Fluffy. Hagrid tells a stranger that the way to tame Fluffy is to use music. He tells this story to the children when they visit him. Quirrel uses what he learns to get past the dog, so the children do not have to use this skill. The potion test, the flying keys, and the chess game are all designed so that one of the children can use his or her ability when the others could not.