

“It Is Our Choices That Show What We Truly Are”:
Moral Choice in the Harry Potter Novels

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The Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling have become an unprecedented literary phenomenon since the publication of the first novel in the United States eight years ago. Even the most casual consumers of popular culture know Harry's story; the more avid stand in line at bookstores until midnight, see the movies in I-Max theaters, and purchase the tie-in Lego sets. The books have also gotten caught up in the fervor and fundamentalism of the current American "Great Awakening." Declining to join in the books' celebration of reading or celebrate their triumph over the lure of electronic entertainment, religious conservatives have asserted that the books malign, disparage, and denigrate religion in general and Christianity in particular.¹

It is easy to ridicule the reaction of the religious right to the Harry Potter novels. They have made themselves easy targets, drawing such characterizations as "Leviticus-quoting fruitcakes who accuse Harry [Potter] of Satanism."² Their frequent demands that the books be pulled from school libraries have proven futile; most school boards have rejected the view that fiction featuring fantasy and magic will harm the religious development of impressionable children.³ Still, the objections continue. "Where will the fascination and emulation end?" the Christian author Richard Abanes asks, apparently not rhetorically. "As Harry Potter fans mature, will they desire to delve deeper into occultism?"⁴ That's giving the books a power in the Muggle world that they neither possess nor aspire to wield. Rowling deals in metaphor, allegory, and fantasy, and most of her readers understand the books to be imaginative works of fiction.

Religious conservatives should take heart: the mainstream media has paid increasing attention to the religious themes of the Potter novels since the appearance of

the third book in 1999 and particularly the fourth book in 2000. As the series has materialized, reviewers have extensively deliberated the possibility that the Potter books furnish a convivial update—or a pale imitation—of one or the other of two mainstays of British children’s fantasy fiction: J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or C.S. Lewis’s nine-part *Chronicles of Narnia*.⁵ Both these beloved series package religious allegory in highly structured, deeply contrived fantasy worlds, just as the Potter books do. The parallels have been explored at length elsewhere.⁶ My concerns here lie in a more particular exploration of the novels’ religious possibilities, a less conventional reading of the main characters, and a rank speculation into the resolution awaiting us in the seventh and final novel in the series.

As the series ages, mainstream media reviewers come closer to identifying the religious meaning Rowling has embedded in her vibrant and engaging fantasy. A writer for *Slate.com*, Steven Waldman, compares the Rowling books to the “Left Behind” series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The “Left Behind” books, belittled by “secular critics . . . as of the wackos, by the wackos, and for the wackos,” imagine a world after the Rapture has lifted the saved to heaven, and it’s pretty bleak: seven years of mayhem and murder at the direction of the Antichrist before the Second Coming finally puts an end to the misery of the condemned. In contrast to those who dismiss the religious themes in the Potter novels as superficial, Waldman argues that both the “Left Behind” books and the Potter novels are about the same thing: “a Manichean struggle between good and evil.” Such a struggle, he points out, is essentially religious in nature and gives both books a theological substructure.⁷ He then identifies each book with a distinct Christian faith tradition: “It’s not, as one might expect, that Left Behind is Christian and Harry

Potter pagan,” he says, “but rather that Left Behind is Protestant and Harry Potter is Catholic.”⁸ In *Left Behind*, people are saved only by faith; salvation cannot be earned by anything they do. In *Harry Potter*, as in Catholic moral teaching, faith alone doesn’t guarantee salvation; Catholics are taught to do good works, to act on the free will that comes as a gift from God. According to Waldman, this particular message begins to take shape towards the end of the second Potter book: “It is our choices, Harry,” Hogwarts Headmaster and Harry’s spiritual advisor Albus Dumbledore says in *Chamber of Secrets*, “that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”⁹

I find Waldman’s analysis particularly apt. For one thing, he recognizes the essentially religious character of the conflict in the novels; for another, his focus on the idea that salvation comes through good works rescues the Potter novels from a cultural debate that is mired in a set of intellectual and theological categories that I find inflexible. Moreover, his analysis echoes Rowling’s own repeated emphasis, through her characters, on the neoliberal idea that free choice enables individuals to transcend fate and create their own destinies. But I differ with Waldman in one respect: I do not see Harry Potter as the exemplar of free choice that both he and Rowling imagine him to be. Harry’s life is too overdetermined by his identity to permit him a meaningful degree of human freedom. It’s a different character in the Potter series who does exemplify the Catholic struggle with free will, sin, and redemption: Severus Snape. I will explain this theory at greater length once I have explored the limits that have been placed on Harry’s freedom to act.

At the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, as we know, the fate of the entire Wizarding World rests on Harry’s decision to take down the evil, amoral Voldemort once and for

all. The books' central moral conviction resides in the idea that Harry can freely choose to accept the mission that Dumbledore has outlined for him. Though Voldemort has identified Harry "as the person who would be most dangerous to him," Harry is a moral free agent; he can choose to pursue Voldemort or not.¹⁰ If that is true, then the moral calculus of the books is clear and completely laid out, and we can speculate with little fear of gross error about the eventual resolution of the long plot in the already eagerly awaited (and as yet untitled) Book 7. But what if that assumption of free will and free choice turns out to be flawed?

Asking that question does not mean that we must necessarily see the books as rejecting religious morality. The anti-Christian rap that's been put on the book is, as I have already implied, both wrong and silly. Rowling, who is famously reluctant to be introspective in public, has not only disclosed her own religious affiliation (Episcopalian) but also confessed to feeling the very sense of doubt that Catholics and high-church Anglicans associate with the essence of faith: "[L]ike Graham Greene," she told a British magazine, "my faith is sometimes about if my faith will return."¹¹ It thus comes as no surprise to non-fundamentalists that Rowling has written a classic Christian morality play, with its moral center fixed on the twists and turns of belief and unbelief.

Expressing the books' moral nadir, Professor Quirrell tells Harry in *Sorcerer's Stone*, "There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seek it."¹² The debate about the Potter books should thus be reframed. They are not about whether they embody any religious sensibility but about how an evident religiosity is being expressed through the trials of the major characters.

Religious literalists may find it difficult to engage in such a discussion. Rowling offers few if any of the familiar markers of religious practice in Harry's adventures. The books decline to mention God explicitly. No one ever goes to church, or prays, or does missionary work. Not every work of fiction can revolve around these activities, but not every work of fiction that aspires to moral teaching needs to. Anytime the basic moral quandary of a story revolves around a struggle between good and evil, it is bound to be informed by the familiar elements of world religion: scriptural imagery, theology, ritual, tradition, Messiah figures, devil figures, and the like. All are present in the Potter novels. The presence of evil does not imply an endorsement of the motives of evil; indeed, most Christian traditions, particularly Catholicism, teach that there can be no redemption or salvation in the absence of evil.¹³ Rowling does not have to tell an explicitly religious story in order to convey her convictions. That the *Left Behind* authors—and other believing writers—feel so constrained is a result of theirs.

The moral conflict at the heart of the Potter novels is this: can Harry, the “Chosen One,” freely choose to confront Voldemort? If not, what factors constrain and limit the choices he is obliged to make? Harry faces the classic problem of ascriptive characteristics: he cannot choose *not* to have the very things that constrain and define the “choices” that he is unable to avoid. The parents to whom he was born, the month in which he was born, the fact he was born a boy—all of these set him up as the likely object of the first prophecy Sybill Trelawny ever makes. Harry has no control over any of them; he cannot alter, decline, or escape them. In fact, it is Voldemort whose apparently free choice—based on tragically incomplete information—made Harry the

unambiguous object of the prophecy and thus “singled out the remarkable person” uniquely qualified for the task of eliminating Voldemort.¹⁴

Further, our understanding of Harry’s free choice is necessarily filtered through the one character who has done the most to direct and guide Harry’s life (not to mention limit the information Harry has had about the formative events of his life). Dumbledore contends that Harry can freely choose to fulfill his destiny as the “Chosen One.” “[T]he prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything,” Dumbledore explains in *Half Blood Prince*. “But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to *mark you as his equal*. . . . In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy.”¹⁵ Dumbledore is braced by the belief that Harry has not been corrupted by the horrible things that have happened to him and to the people around him: “In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart’s desire, and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches.”¹⁶ Dumbledore insists that it is Voldemort who has made the prophecy come true by acting upon it in trying to kill Harry as a baby. Harry, who has lived his life marked by the relic of the curse that failed to kill him, chooses to pursue Voldemort not to seek power himself but to deny Voldemort the power to hurt others.¹⁷

This is all well and good, especially if you are inclined to accept Harry at face value, as a good-hearted boy, incapable of evil himself, remarkable and unique as the result of his parentage, despite his parents’ murder and the assault on him as a baby. Harry is portrayed not just as special and gifted but also as immune from accountability for his mistakes and transgressions. Harry is the blank screen onto which we as readers

and viewers project ourselves. We want to be Harry, to be special like him, to experience his frustrations and triumphs, and, like him, to get away with breaking the rules. As Stephen King put it in reviewing *Goblet of Fire*, “Harry is the kid most children feel themselves to be, adrift in a world of unimaginative and often unpleasant adults . . . who neither understand them nor care to.”¹⁸ For adults, Harry’s celebrity taps into our own suffusing culture of instant fame and vicarious thrill-seeking; in this respect, the limited range of the actor playing Harry in the films becomes for some a literary asset: “Too much acting might interfere with our ability to project ourselves into his head and vicariously experience the fruits of his celebrity.”¹⁹ As the Divination professor Sybil Trelawney notes, Harry makes a wonderful Object; his ability to be the object of our projections is precisely his appeal.²⁰ The books put us inside his head and keep us there.²¹ Our projection of ourselves onto Harry and of him onto ourselves is essential to our accepting the assumptions and constraints of the moral universe Rowling has created. Over time, Harry’s habitual rule-breaking becomes a convenient mechanism (sometimes annoyingly so) for him to fulfill our expectations for him as protagonist and hero; indeed, his ability to bend and break rules reinforces the moral order of the Wizarding World. Harry’s own specialness makes him a law unto himself.²²

We are meant to find this endearing, and for the most part, we do. Our sympathies are engaged at the outset, when we meet Harry even before he discovers his true identity (an experience not entirely dissimilar to the self-discovery process of another fabled superhero, Clark Kent).²³ As the maltreated orphan, he doesn’t know who he is or what his strange abilities mean. The first thing that marked him as distinct was his mother’s willingness to sacrifice her life to save her son. But how special is it to have a

mother who is willing to die for you? Wouldn't most parents make that deal without hesitation? Not until *Half-Blood Prince* does Harry consider whether the mother of his classmate, Neville Longbottom, the other boy who might have been the Boy Who Lived, would have died for him, too.²⁴ We learned the answer to that question two novels earlier in the series. In *Goblet of Fire*, Harry learns that the Longbottoms endured torture to the state of insanity to protect their loved ones. In *Order of the Phoenix*, Neville's mother rouses herself from her *Cruciatius*-induced stupor just long enough to present her son with a bubble gum wrapper—an offering he accepts gratefully, knowing his mother can express her love for him in no other way.²⁵ In *Half-Blood Prince*, we learn that even Draco Malfoy's mother, a Dark witch and Voldemort supporter who espouses the racial hatreds of pureblood wizards, is willing to endanger herself to save her son: "There is nothing I wouldn't do anymore," she tells her sister.²⁶

So Lily Potter's great sacrifice doesn't make her or Harry uniquely virtuous; however, it does enable him to escape the supposedly certain death of the *Avada Kedavra* curse. Contrary to what they teach at Hogwarts, Harry manages to escape that curse more than once. Three times, to be exact. He escapes it as a baby—the act of invulnerability that makes him famous and marks him, as we learn in *Order of the Phoenix*, the only person capable of defeating Voldemort. He escapes it in the graveyard in *Goblet of Fire*, through the reverse-spell effect (a rare phenomenon made possible by the coincidence that Harry's wand and Voldemort's share the same magical core). Finally, he avoids death in *Order of the Phoenix*, when Dumbledore magically animates the statue of a wizard to intercept the curse Voldemort once more directs at Harry.²⁷ Harry's multiple narrow escapes from this supposedly unblockable curse reinforce his

status as “exceptional” and convince us that the celebrity status that he experienced the first time he walked into the Leaky Cauldron was somehow both natural and deserved.²⁸

But Dumbledore misunderstands the nature of the freedom Harry can experience. Harry is not free to “turn [his] back on the prophecy,” as Dumbledore asserts, because Voldemort’s own refusal to do so traps Harry in a kill-or-be-killed imperative that he can escape only by committing murder himself.²⁹ As he acknowledges to Ron and Hermionie, “[I]t seems as though I always knew I’d have to face him in the end.”³⁰ Harry, like Dumbledore, believes his choice to pursue Voldemort is freely made, because he recognizes “the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high.”³¹ What he doesn’t yet appreciate is that, like the early Christians in the Roman Coliseum, head held high or not, he goes in regardless.³² Harry has not yet shown that he understands the difference between a choice that is freely made and one that is constrained by elements inherent in one’s identity. From a Catholic theological perspective, he has to know he is a sinner, acknowledge his sins, and repent. A good first step would be to recognize that his well-intentioned recklessness led to the death of another person. Such a development would cement Waldman’s thesis that the books stand on a Catholic understanding of free will.

So far, Rowling has steered clear of a experience of sin and redemption for Harry that can be understood as unambiguously Catholic. Instead, the six books revolve around the destiny conferred on Harry by relationships that were developed long before he was born. There is a lot of biological determination here, despite Rowling’s attempts to soften it; we see it in how students are Sorted into their Hogwarts houses (family members usually go into the same houses, though the Patil twins and the Black brothers

furnish two notable exceptions).³³ We're told repeatedly that "there's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin."³⁴ A fixation with blood purity abounds in Wizarding world, even for those who profess not to care about it, because it shapes their social relations and gives them a familiar—and hierarchical—social structure. The male Weasley children, for example, buy into the enslavement of house elves and the racial assumptions on which it rests.³⁵ Harry's lineage as the wizard son of a pureblood father and a Muggle mother, both of whom were Gryffindors and Head boy and girl, almost certainly means that he can no more take sides with Voldemort in *Sorcerer's Stone* than he can accept Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia as real parents to him. Most important of all, his relationships with his parents' friends have a great deal to do with the circumstances in which he finds himself.

Harry may have an unusual backstory, but his sense of moral agency is not particularly sophisticated. He knows the feelings with which his parents' murder have left him, and that is all the incentive he requires to develop and maintain unconditional loyalty to Dumbledore. But his freedom to act is entirely shaped by that crime. Dumbledore's infatuation with Harry's purity of heart is part admiration and part psychological projection; he needs for Harry to fulfill his hopes and dreams for the wizard who might someday vanquish the physical embodiment of evil in the wizarding world. And he is training Harry to accept that this should be Harry's idea of what he ought to do as well. By the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, there is no doubt that Harry fully embraces this mission. But he has never really questioned it, never seriously considered what the other side is about, never truly been subject to temptation. Harry cannot become the Christ figure of the wizarding world, notwithstanding the crucifixion image in the

fourth film's climactic graveyard scene. He is something less exalted, less perfect. While we find it a thrilling prospect to imagine the destiny that awaits him in the final installment of the series, by the time of the sad denouement of *Half-Blood Prince*, that destiny flattens him, renders him two-dimensional, and makes him rather uninteresting as a moral actor.

The contrast to Severus Snape, the most morally interesting character in the novels, could not be more plain. His motives and actions speak to a more complex process of moral decision making: a Slytherin and a Death Eater, he changed sides after overhearing the prophesy that inspired Voldemort to kill the Potters. Harry thinks he understands Snape well enough to know that Snape's conversion to the "right side" cannot have been sincere, and he spends little time reflecting on what insight this information might supply into Snape's character and motives.³⁶ Speculating on the nature of Snape's change of heart will enable us to identify Snape with the moral problem that gives the series its Catholic flavor.

That moral problem is what it means to be free to choose what to do. Philosophers and theologians have been writing about this problem for centuries; the Kantian formulation is probably briefest and adds a further imperative: knowing what is right and choosing freely to do right. To choose to act freely is not merely to choose to do what one desires. St. Augustine knew this intimately, though he could not at first "explain so easily" why it was that "in practice, the human will did not enjoy complete freedom."³⁷ Freedom was not implicit in human action, he preached, in opposition to then-prevailing Christian notions of free will; freedom did not result from the exercise of something so mundane as common sense. Rather, it resulted from the integration of free

will, sin, and human love over the course of a life spent trying to know God's will and to follow it.³⁸ Thus, meaningful freedom for Augustine is not merely the freedom to act autonomously; in fact, Augustine suggests that autonomy is itself an illusion unless it is seen as the result of a "vital interdependence" between grace and free will, as an expression of God's love for God's people.³⁹

A nice example of the exercise of freedom in the Augustinian sense comes at the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, when Ron and Hermione tell Harry that they intend to accompany him on the search for Horcruxes in Book 7.⁴⁰ That choice surely was constrained, in an Augustinian sense, by the history they have shared with Harry and their own independent commitments to justice, but it also originates in their love for him. This choice seems the freest of any made by children in the series. In contrast, for the most part, the choices Harry makes to do the right thing are determined as much, and sometimes more, by the circumstances of his birth and life, than by his possession in abundance of the "'power the Dark Lord knows not.'"⁴¹

Let me be clear: though I think Harry's life is predetermined, vastly more than Rowling has Dumbledore acknowledge, I recognize that the books wouldn't work if it weren't, at least to some degree. After all, if the hero can take a hike instead of seeing the challenge all the way through to the end, the dramatic tension would leave the books in a rapid exhalation of disappointment. I wouldn't mind seeing Harry undergo more of a test of his own beliefs, but perhaps Rowling, who is wise and knows what she is doing, is saving this for Book 7. It could be that such a rite of passage will make more sense after Harry has come of age, signifying Harry's coming into his own as a moral agent, his attaining a more mature, dare I say adult, sense of judgment. My point is simply this:

much as I enjoy following Harry and his friends through their school years, for me they are not the most compelling characters from the point of view of moral freedom, free will, and the complex psychology of human love.⁴²

The moral fulcrum of the books, I am convinced, is Snape, the greasy-haired, hook-nosed, nasty Potions master who is hateful, unsympathetic, and a “little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts.”⁴³ He’s mean to Harry at every turn, even when saving his life, and Harry’s animus towards him becomes so ingrained over time—another example of an inherited prejudice—that Harry prefers to blame Snape for the death of his godfather, Sirius Black.⁴⁴ Even before the horrific end of *Half Blood Prince*, Snape furnishes the series with its most realistic example of an internal conflict between good and evil. It’s a measure of Rowling’s success and skill in crafting this character’s morally ambiguous position that no one at Hogwarts really knows what side Snape is really on or whether his renunciation of the Dark Lord was sincere. Rowling exploits this uncertainty throughout *Half-Blood Prince*; readers know that Snape took the Unbreakable Vow to help Draco Malfoy, on the one hand, and that he argued with Dumbledore about a task he did not want to perform, on the other.⁴⁵ Snape seems to like and to be liked by no one (excepting perhaps the brown-nosing Slytherin students under his supervision), and he does not permit himself the luxury of emotional proximity to anyone. Snape’s prowess at Occlumency—the ability to close the mind and shield one’s feelings—is also a perfect device for maintaining emotional distance and avoiding the intimacy mature people seek.⁴⁶ After Snape’s apparent treachery at the end of *Half-Blood Prince*, the surviving members of the Order of the Phoenix are entirely convinced that Snape

succeeded in fooling them utterly, but they do not stop to consider whether the other side believed him as well.⁴⁷

Even more to his credit, Snape is the only character who explicitly rejects Harry's celebrity, who considers Harry ordinary and lacking in talent.⁴⁸ Snape alone is unimpressed by Harry's adventures and accomplishments: "[H]e ha[s] no extraordinary talent at all. He has fought his way out of a number of tight corners by a simple combination of sheer luck and more talented friends. He is mediocre to the last degree."⁴⁹ Snape doesn't sentimentalize Harry; instead, he seeks to toughen him up, to show him what he will be up against (something the ersatz Moody merely pretends to do in *Goblet of Fire*). Unable to see past his own prejudices, Harry perceives his interactions with Snape not as instructive but as retaliatory bullying.⁵⁰ He thus misses their significance: each contains nuggets of vital information and advice. Snape's unique experience as a former Death Eater gives him a privileged insight into what Harry will eventually have to face.⁵¹ Snape's parting words to Harry at the end of *Half-Blood Prince* mix instruction with ridicule and insult in a way Rowling characteristically employs to keep Snape's moral status uncertain: "'No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!' [Snape] shouted 'You haven't got the nerve or the ability.'"⁵² "'Blocked again and again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter,' sneered Snape."⁵³

As important as these exchanges are to understanding Snape's character and motivation, there are still more revealing clues. The most important is the memory Harry sees in the Pensive in *Order of the Phoenix*, a pivotal revelation into Snape's childhood.⁵⁴ In this scene, James Potter and Sirius Black bully and humiliate the adolescent Snape in front of his peers, while Remus Lupin does nothing to stop it. It might seem that

Rowling put this memory in front of Harry in order to dispel some of the hero-worship Harry has cultivated for his father, end the tiresome filio piety, make James a little more human in Harry's eyes, and push Harry a little further along the road to adulthood. A deeper speculation, I think, propelled inferentially by the series' seemingly inexhaustible rendering of Harry's own missteps, is that the scene has greater meaning for Snape than it does for Harry. It displays Rowling's fine appreciation of the delicate psychology of teenage boys, and it reveals something of lasting importance about Snape and his relationships with the classmates he detested.

What is most humiliating for the teenage Snape—and continues to rankle the adult Snape as well—is not the bullying by itself. It is the loss of face that comes with Lily's intercession on his behalf. What fifteen-year-old boy can stand to be saved by a girl? Snape reacts to his embarrassment just as any typical boy his age would do: by covering up his own feelings and striking out against both the bullies and those who try to intervene on his behalf. In this memory, Snape treats Lily with contempt; he calls her a "Mudblood" to distance himself from her emotionally and to regain his dignity and masculinity. But though he is ashamed to be caught in the position of a victim in Lily's presence, he does not hate her. I believe that he uses the racially charged insult because he loves her; further intensifying the drama, he cannot—dares not—acknowledge it, either to her or to himself. His purpose is to prove to her that he owes her nothing, when in fact he hopes eventually to be everything to her, most of all a man not in need of rescuing. By insulting her, he negates the debt he owes her and camouflages his gratitude to her.⁵⁵

Over the course of the six novels, we learn much about James but far less about Lily. We do know, from what Professor Slughorn has to say about her in *Half-Blood Prince*, that Lily was attractive, admirable, brave, and pretty. “I don’t imagine anyone who met her wouldn’t have liked her,” he tells Harry.⁵⁶ When the fifteen-year-old Lily confronts James and orders him to release Snape, it is clear her kindness is both sincere and unconditional. Only a mature, confident, and loving person would come to the aid of the most disliked person at school. “She could see the good in everyone,” Lupin tells Harry in the third film, “even when they could not see it in themselves.”⁵⁷ Lupin was speaking of himself, but Snape, if forced, might say the same.

We can infer something more about Snape’s feelings for Lily by examining how he treats others. In the classroom, Snape is a stern, forbidding, and unsympathetic figure. More revealingly, his silence substitutes for praise; Hermione’s consistently high performance in Potions elicits a typical response from Snape: “[A]s Snape swept by he looked down his hooked nose at [Hermione’s cauldron] without comment, which meant that he could find nothing to criticize.”⁵⁸ Here lies another important clue. Snape never misses a chance to taunt Harry about his father, but whenever he does so, he is entirely silent on the subject of Harry’s mother. In the many exchanges between Snape and Harry, Snape angrily likens son to father, and the comparison is not meant favorably: “‘You’d have died just like your father, too arrogant to believe you might be mistaken . . .’”⁵⁹ As Snape leaves Hogwarts for the last time, he contemptuously undermines Harry’s adoration for his father: “‘Coward, did you call me, Potter,’ shouted Snape. ‘Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?’”⁶⁰ Snape has abundant reason to hate James—Lupin readily acknowledges that the deck was

stacked overwhelmingly in James's favor⁶¹—but we never once hear him extend that animus to Lily. Snape's silence reveals his real feelings about her. She is present in that silence, and that silence tells us everything we need to know about the only major mystery left at the end of *Half-Blood Prince*.

That mystery is the mystery of why Dumbledore trusted Snape when Snape changed sides the year Harry was born. Dumbledore is neither naïve nor a fool; he had to have required serious and significant proof of Snape's change of heart before taking him in, giving him a job, and clearing his name with the Ministry.⁶² He obviously got it, because he insists throughout the first six books that he believes and trusts Snape: "I am sure. I trust Severus Snape completely."⁶³ (The other side distrusts him, too; witness Bellatrix Lestrange's interrogation of him in *Half-Blood Prince*.⁶⁴) What proof would Snape have been able to offer Dumbledore to demonstrate that he had indeed turned his back on his evil master?

Most likely, I have to think, that proof came in the form of a demonstration of Snape's own ability to love and to act selflessly out of love. Snape hated James Potter as a student; we know that never changes.⁶⁵ But, if I am right, Snape loved Lily Evans. He deserted Voldemort and joined Dumbledore not because James Potter died, but because Voldemort killed Lily. This is what Dumbledore knows about Snape that no one else knows, this is why Dumbledore, who believes in the redemptive power of love, believes and trusts Snape, and this is why Snape teaches and schools Harry at every opportunity (though Harry never sees it as anything but retaliatory). Snape can summon no sentimental affection for Harry because he is James's son, but he teaches and protects him because he is Lily's.⁶⁶ We are repeatedly reminded that Harry has his mother's eyes.

What it must mean to Snape to look into those eyes, we never hear. It is left to his replacement as Potions master to warn the students not to “underestimate the power of obsessive love.”⁶⁷ Through his silence, Snape is protecting Lily and his memories of her; but his hatred of James must be amplified by the fact that James got the one girl who treated Snape humanely.⁶⁸ Snape does not regret James Potter’s death, as Harry angrily points out to Dumbledore at the end of *Order of the Phoenix*, but he grieves at Lily Potter’s. As Dumbledore tells Harry, Snape’s discovery that Voldemort had murdered the Potters was ““the greatest regret of his life.””⁶⁹

This is not merely the stuff of teenage soap opera. It matters terribly if we are to believe that what Dumbledore says repeatedly about love holds the key to Harry’s future. According to Dumbledore, love is the most powerful magic of all (even we Muggles believe we can exercise the magic of love, even if we can’t charm open a door or cook meals with the downstroke of a wand). From an Augustinian perspective, we might also observe that love is nothing if not an exercise of free will. For Rowling, this is what it means to be free—to choose, as Lily did, to love and to die for the son whom she loved; contrast Lily, as Harry does, with Merona Gaunt Riddle, Voldemort’s mother, who is too weak to choose to live for the son who needed her.⁷⁰ This is, we’re told, the fatal flaw in Tom Riddle’s character. Riddle is unable to love because his parents failed to love him. Is the inability to love the flaw that has destroyed Snape or will his capacity for selfless love hold the key to his possible redemption?

Here Rowling’s assumptions about love must be examined further. The ability to love, as Dumbledore tells us, is what gives Harry the only advantage over Voldemort that will matter in the end. Harry’s love for Sirius, his godfather, saves him from Voldemort

at the end of *Order of the Phoenix*; appreciating the significance of this latest escape, Dumbledore is gambling everything that Harry's capacity to love will save the world.⁷¹ Rowling's characters who love act selflessly. We've seen the capacity for sacrifice in Ron, more than once; Hermione too has taken risks and ended up literally petrified; and both nearly got killed in *Order of the Phoenix*.⁷² But in the real world, people who think they love can be controlling and manipulative; people can do bad things in the name of love. We will need clarification from Rowling on this matter. Perhaps she will again take inspiration from the Latin. *Caritas*, the Latin word for love, literally means charity; Catholic theologians write of love in the sense of giving without expectation of reciprocation, a complete selflessness, morally freely done.⁷³ Can Harry love in this way? Can he sacrifice himself for those he loves? What about those he doesn't? Will Snape's love for Lily enable him to give of himself selflessly? Is that, perhaps, what he was really doing when he killed Dumbledore, acting on Dumbledore's orders though he hated to do so?⁷⁴

Thus, having turned out to be the title character of *Half-Blood Prince*, Snape is set up perfectly to play the pivotal role again in Book 7. Snape's experiences on both sides of the fence that divides the Wizarding World make him morally ambiguous, complex, and interesting. Indeed, he gave in to his own destiny, but, if my reading is correct, he also knows love, has loved (though unrequitedly), and continues to love. His uncharted depth enables him to convince everyone of the role playing he is obliged to do. Like Harry, he possesses the great power that Voldemort does not, and it is that power that, I dare to predict, will enable him to save Harry in some material way. Whether he can save himself will be, I suspect, the main Catholic theological question of Book 7.

Endnotes

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¹ Rowling's British publisher recently observed that the Potter books "tore an entire generation away from the TV." "Rushdie is only Indian author to hit big time," *Times of India Online*, June 1, 2006, accessed at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/1576774.cms> (June 11, 2006).

² John Leonard, "Nobody Expects the Inquisition," review of *Order of the Phoenix*, *New York Times*, July 13, 2003, accessed online at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res+9C04E1DE113AF930A25654C0A9659C8B63> (November 6, 2003).

³ "Gwinnett Schools to Keep Harry Potter," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 11, 2006, accessed online at www.ajc.com/metro/gwinnett/stories/0512gwxpotter.html (May 22, 2006). This Georgia example is the but most recent, and the demands for censorship of the Potter novels have in fact decreased in number and frequency. As Rowling knows, nothing better guarantees that a text will be read, and read widely, more than banning it (see *Order of the Phoenix*, 581-82). For an example of an attack on Potter from the Christian right, see Richard Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family* (Christian Publications, 2002); works that see an acceptable, explicitly Christian morality in the Potter novels include John Granger, *Looking for God in Harry Potter: Is there Christian Meaning in these Bestselling Books?* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004); and Connie Neal and C.W. Neal, *What's a Christian to Do about Harry Potter?* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: Waterbrook Press, 2001).

⁴ Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family*, quoted in Steven Waldman, “No Wizard Left Behind,” *Slate*, May 18, 2004, accessed online at www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id=2100637 (June 23, 2004).

⁵ For the U.S. publication dates of the first four novels in hardback, see George W. Beahm, *Muggle and Magic: J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter Phenomenon* (Charlottesville, Va.: The Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2004), 4-5.

⁶ See, .e.g., Wendy Doniger, “Never Snitch: The Mythology of Harry Potter,” originally published in the *London Review of Books*, 2001, available online at <http://fathom.lib.uchicago.edu/1/777777121870/> (accessed May 22, 2006); and Janet Maslin, “At Last, The Wizard Gets Back To School,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2000 [url] (accessed May 22, 2006).

⁷ Waldman, “No Wizard Left Behind.” Other similarities in plot lines and character traits include no one believes the good guys when they declare the return of the evil one; the evil ones “occupy a human ‘shell’” and have “wormy sidekicks”; both books feature corrupt or inept public officials, poorly disguised liberal political agendas, heroes with no time for romance or a personal life and distinguishing marks on their foreheads.

⁸ Waldman, “No Wizard Left Behind.”

⁹ *Chamber of Secrets*, 333.

¹⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, 509.

¹¹ “Special JK,” *Tatler*, January 11, 2006, 128-34, accessed online at www.mugglenet.com/jkr/interviews/tatler.shtml (January 17, 2006). See Mark 9:24 (healing of the epileptic child): “I believe; help my unbelief!”

¹² *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 291.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “The Profession of Faith,” Section Two, IV, 412 (1993), accessed online at <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/CDHN/visible4.html> (June 12, 2006): “But why did God not prevent the first man from sinning? St. Leo the Great responds, ‘Christ’s inexpressible grace gave us blessings better than those the demon’s envy had taken away.’ And St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, ‘There is nothing to prevent human nature’s being raised up to something greater, even after sin; God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good. Thus St. Paul says, ‘Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more’; and the Exsultet sings, ‘O happy fault, [o necessary sin of Adam] . . . which gained for us so great a Redeemer!’” (footnotes omitted).

¹⁴ *Half-Blood Prince*, 510.

¹⁵ *Half-Blood Prince*, 512 (emphasis in original).

¹⁶ *Half-Blood Prince*, 512. In his admiration for Harry, Dumbledore has overlooked the fact that few children worry about mortality (the ability of teenagers to believe themselves immortal is legendary) and that Harry, having been left a small fortune by his parents, has no anxieties about poverty.

¹⁷ *Goblet of Fire*, 600-01; *Half-Blood Prince*, 509-12.

¹⁸ Stephen King, “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,” book review, *New York Times*, July 22, 2000, accessed online at www.nytimes.com/2000/07/23/books/rowling-goblet.html (November 6, 2003).

¹⁹ David Edelstein, “Scary Harry: A More Sinister *Potter*,” film review, “Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire,” *Slate.com*, <http://www.slate.com/toolbar.aspx?action=print&id-2130629> (accessed November 21, 2005); see also A.O. Scott, “An Adolescent Wizard Meets A Grown-Up Moviemaker,” film review, “Harry Potter and the Prisoner of

Azkaban,” *New York Times*, June 3, 2004, accessed online at

http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=1&res=980DE2D81431F930A

[35755C0A9629C8B63&oref=slogin](http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?_r=1&res=980DE2D81431F930A35755C0A9629C8B63&oref=slogin) (July 5, 2005): “Harry is an especially treacherous role [Daniel Radcliffe] has to be heroically distinguished from his peers without having too distinct a personality of his own, a paradoxical demand very few young actors could satisfy.” The side-kick role invariably is the meatier one; Rupert Grint’s Ron Weasley may be likened to Sean Astin’s Samwise Gamgee in Peter Jackson’s “Lord of the Rings” film trilogy; both are rewarded for their more subordinate parts with greater emotional ranges.

²⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, 544.

²¹ A problem with the films is their inherent inability to reproduce the third-person omniscient perspective of the books; we always know what Harry is thinking in the books, but in the films, Radcliffe must transmit, often wordlessly, what we know Harry to be thinking and feeling.

²² Rich Burlew, “The Order of the Stick, #253,” accessed online at <http://www.giantitp.com/cgi-bin/GiantITP/ootscript?SK=253> (Dec. 6, 2005). This cartoon satirizes the impunity with which Harry violates school rules and Ministry law; the Harry cartoon character declares, “I have only token respect for the rules, which is OK because all of my so-called authority figures regularly bend, break, or simply forget about the laws in order to accommodate my latest adventure.”

²³ One might observe that Rowling has created a Rawlsian pretext for her protagonist; when we meet Harry, he exists under a veil of ignorance about himself, the Wizarding world, and the laws that govern it. But Rowling’s twist on Rawls’ now-classic

formulation is that Harry is the only one so burdened. Even his Muggle relatives know he is a wizard. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

²⁴ *Half-Blood Prince*, 139-40.

²⁵ *Order of the Phoenix*, 514-15.

²⁶ *Half-Blood Prince*, 21. Narcissa Malfoy models racial hatred for her son when they encounter Hermione in Diagon Alley; *Half-Blood Prince*, 114.

²⁷ *Goblet of Fire*, 696-98; *Order of the Phoenix*, 815-16.

²⁸ *Order of the Phoenix*, 839; *Sorcerer's Stone*, 69-70; but see 76 (Harry worries about the Wizarding World's expectations of him).

²⁹ *Half-Blood Prince*, 512.

³⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, 98.

³¹ *Half-Blood Prince*, 512.

³² Walter A. Murphy, *Upon This Rock: The Life of St. Peter* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 505-37, imagines a St. Peter who, given the opportunity to learn the difference, is able to choose freely to enter the arena where his life will end with his dignity intact.

³³ *Goblet of Fire* (Patils); *Half-Blood Prince*, 70.

³⁴ *Sorcerer's Stone*, 80. Malfoy tells Harry, "I know I'll be in Slytherin, all our family have been." *Sorcerer's Stone*, 77.

³⁵ Wendy Doniger notes, "class, rather than race or religion, is the central issue" at Hogwarts. "Never Snitch," 2. Others see race implicated in ways that potentially undermine the assumptions of Rowling's neoliberal myth; see, e.g., William P. MacNeil,

“Kidlit as Law and Lit: Harry Potter and the Scales of Justice,” *Law and Literature*, 14:3 (Autumn, 2002), 545-64, 552-53.

³⁶ *Half Blood Prince*, 591-92.

³⁷ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 142.

³⁸ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 375. According to Brown, Augustine’s preeminent biographer, this process involves the “reintegration” of love and knowledge through “an inseparable connection between growing self-determination and dependence on a source of life that always escapes self-determination.” Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 376.

³⁹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 376. The late John Paul II once restated this Augustinian idea as the freedom not to do as we like, but the right to do as we ought. *USA Today*, March 29, 2005.

⁴⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, 651.

⁴¹ *Order of the Phoenix*, 841.

⁴² Rowling may not intend for us to see them as such; she said early on that her intention was to appeal to everyone, not just young readers.

⁴³ *Order of the Phoenix*, 670.

⁴⁴ If anyone is responsible for Sirius’s death, aside from Dumbledore who justifiably assigns blame to himself for permitting Harry to act on the basis of incomplete information, it is Harry and his “saving-people-thing”—his instinct for playing the hero that he refuses to examine until after it leads to tragedy. *Order of the Phoenix*, 733, 825-26.

⁴⁵ *Half-Blood Prince*, 35-37, 405.

⁴⁶ *Order of the Phoenix*, 519, 530-33.

⁴⁷ *Order of the Phoenix*, 527; *Half-Blood Prince*, 615-17. Is it GOF or OOTP where Snape talks about blocking Voldemort? In *Half-Blood Prince*, Snape calls Voldemort “the most accomplished Legilimens the world has ever seen” and declares himself incapable of fooling Voldemort (26).

⁴⁸ *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 136-39; *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 387; *Order of the Phoenix*, 519; *Half-Blood Prince*, 31, 179.

⁴⁹ *Half-Blood Prince*, 31.

⁵⁰ Harry repeatedly demonstrates an unwillingness to learn from Snape; for one example, see *Half-Blood Prince*, 180: “Why doesn’t he use another guinea pig for a change?” Naturally, it is Hermione who points out to Harry that he and Snape think about the Dark Arts and how to fight them in eerily similar ways (*Half-Blood Prince*, 180-81).

⁵¹ Harry’s disastrous Occlumency lessons in *Order of the Phoenix* give Snape the chance to tell Harry about the psychology of the Death Eaters and Voldemort’s unique and formidable weapons. *Half-Blood Prince*, 79; *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 374.

⁵² *Half-Blood Prince*, 602.

⁵³ *Half-Blood Prince*, 603.

⁵⁴ *Order of the Phoenix*, 640-50.

⁵⁵ Examples of literature where hatred or intense dislike masks romantic feelings: Shakespeare (used as diversionary device in many comedic plays), “Beloved Immortal” (film); Jane Austin, *Pride and Prejudice*.

⁵⁶ *Half-Blood Prince*, 489.

⁵⁷ *Prisoner of Azkaban* (film).

⁵⁸ *Order of the Phoenix*, 233.

⁵⁹ *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 361.

⁶⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, 603.

⁶¹ *Order of the Phoenix*, 670.

⁶² *Goblet of Fire*, 590-91.

⁶³ *Half-Blood Prince*, 549; see also *Order of the Phoenix*, 833: “I trust Severus Snape,” said Dumbledore simply.”

⁶⁴ *Half-Blood Prince*, 25-36.

⁶⁵ Dumbledore says to Harry in *Sorcerer’s Stone*: “I do believe he worked so hard to protect you this year because he felt that would make him and your father even. Then he could go back to hating your father’s memory in peace” (300).

⁶⁶ Examples of Snape’s intercessions on Harry’s behalf include *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 290; *Prisoner of Azkaban*, 386-88; *Order of the Phoenix*, 745-46, 832-33; *Half-Blood Prince*, 160 (Snape: “Potter is quite—ah—safe in my hands”).

⁶⁷ *Half-Blood Prince*, 186.

⁶⁸ None of the teachers at Hogwarts are married; they seem to live a monastic existence but for the infrequent occasions when public displays of adult intimacy are acceptable; see *Goblet of Fire*, 420 (the Yule Ball); *Half-Blood Prince*, 640 (Dumbledore’s funeral).

⁶⁹ *Order of the Phoenix*, 833; *Half-Blood Prince*, 549. Apparently none of Snape’s cohort knew of his feelings for Lily, either. Lupin expresses surprise that Snape abandoned Voldemort after learning of the Potters’ deaths; *Half-Blood Prince*, 616. It seems apparent that Dumbledore confided in no one on this matter; neither Professor

McGonigall nor Professor Lupin was privy to Dumbledore's reasons for trusting Snape.

Half-Blood Prince, 616.

⁷⁰ *Half-Blood Prince*, 262.

⁷¹ *Order of the Phoenix*, 815, 843-44.

⁷² *Sorcerer's Stone*, 283; *Chamber of Secrets*, 257; *Order of the Phoenix*, 792, 795-98.

⁷³ Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, II (Minneapolis, Minn.: Winston Press, 1980), defines Catholic love in relation to principles of justice and charity: "[W]e must overcome our own narcissism. We must strive for objectivity in every situation and become sensitive to the situations where objectivity eludes us. . . . Christian loving also means readiness to take risks, to accept pain and disappointment. It means using one's human powers productively. Loving demands a state of intensity and commitment. Christian love cannot coexist with indifference. Indeed, the opposite of love is not hate but *apathy*, a lack of concern, a suspension of commitment (literally, *apathy means to be 'without pain'*") (977) (emphasis in original).

⁷⁴ This theory has provoked extensive debate on the fan websites; see, e.g., various podcasts and message boards at www.mugglenet.com. One clue in support of the theory is that Harry, too, knows what it feels like to follow Dumbledore's orders and hate what he is being forced to do. In fact, both he and Snape were forced to do things that caused harm to Dumbledore, who had protected and cared for them both. *Half-Blood Prince*, 569-74.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Back to all quotes. Courage Harry Potter Series Change J.K. Rowling Power Experience Strength Literature. Context. This quote is spoken by Dumbledore in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets (2002). This quote pops up at the end of Harry Potter's second year at Hogwarts. He's just defeated Tom Riddle (a.k.a. Lord Voldemort) in the Chamber of Secrets, saved the school, and rescued his Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling. Relationships: No Romantic Relationship(s). Regulus Black & James Potter. It was simply impossible to judge such things. Just one offhand comment might destroy someone's life. A single choice can bring wars and suffering to an entire generation or even more. Five seconds of consideration could change a person for the better. Newly second-year James Potter was wandering through the dungeons of Hogwarts, trying to remember as much as possible of the layout and taking notes whenever necessary. He and his friends were trying to make a map of the castle for all of the first years that got lost on their way around. They had split up to get as much of the school covered in record time before the map became unnecessary for the new students. J.K. Rowling > Quotes > Quotable Quote. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities. J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. tags: abilities, choices. Read more quotes from J.K. Rowling.