

IN PAGE AND FILM: VISIONS OF VIRTUE IN HARRY POTTER

Roger Maxson on the Boy Who Lived

Calling *Harry Potter* a cultural phenomenon is scarcely an exaggeration. Few franchises have been as successful, impactful, and well-loved as the one based around J. K. Rowling's story about a boy who lived. But the franchise has not become wildly popular and long-lasting by chance. The computer animated visuals, solid acting, or neatly constructed stories are not what draws so many to watch, read, re-watch, and re-read the story of Harry Potter. It is what is embedded in the stories that endears them to us. *Harry Potter* connects with something deep within hundreds of millions of people across the world.

The Harry Potter story captures our imaginations by telling us of an ordinary, seemingly unremarkable and forgettable boy, who comes to learn that he is destined for great things. It turns out,

the mundane and sometimes cruel world of the Dursleys, the one we are quite familiar with, is not *all* that there is. Our muggle, unmagical world touches a fantastically magic one. When we watch or read his story, we admire Harry for fighting for a worthy cause. We connect with Harry because, deep down, we too long for greater purpose. We too wish to be a part of a larger world. As Harry has a part in a larger story, we too wish to have a role to play; a cause to fight for.

In an era of increasing social disconnectedness, *Harry Potter* tells a story of making genuine and lasting friendships. In a time of eroding cultural identity, Harry comes to find a home. In a time of dismissive irony, evident in *Deadpool*, and popular cynicism and moral nihilism (evident in the radically popular *Rick and Morty*), *Harry Potter* rings of virtue and moral reality. Thomas S. Hibbs explains, “*Harry Potter* does more than simply avoid falling into nihilism . . . It exhibits a vision of what a purposeful life in common with others might look like.”¹ *Potter* stands above the cultural landslide into irony, relativism, and nihilism. And we see something in Harry of what we wish to see in ourselves. Right against wrong. Kindness. Courage.

¹ Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows about Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 185

Wisdom. From page to film, *Harry Potter* rebukes the errors of our age and embodies the classical virtues.

A striking example of the presence of virtue in *Harry Potter* can be found in the fourth entry in the series: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Though each of the classical virtues are certainly present in the wizarding world, perhaps none is displayed so profoundly as courage. Harry, since the very first book, has been aware of the evils of his nemesis, Lord Voldemort. Voldemort murdered many good witches and wizards, including Harry's parents. In his lust for power, Voldemort even turned his wand toward a baby in a crib. But, of course, young Harry survived, much to everyone's surprise, and became known as the "boy who lived."² As Harry comes to learn, the deeds of Voldemort so scarred the memories of nearly every living witch and wizard, that they are still shocked and nervous even to hear his name spoken out loud. Without thinking, Harry says the name Voldemort in casual conversation when he first meets his soon-to-be best friend Ron. Shocked, "Ron gasped . . . 'You said You-Know-Who's name!'"³ Even in the way others respond to his

² J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*: First Illustrated Edition (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2015), 13.

³ *Ibid.* 22

memory, Rowling has shown us the reality of Voldemort's wickedness.

In contrast with many stories of contemporary pop culture, Rowling's story shows us a villain of unglorified, unglamorized, unambiguous evil. And it isn't pretty. No nuance or question in the reader's or viewer's mind exists about the moral status of Voldemort. His lust for power, lies, and murders are simply assumed to be what they really are: cold, naked evil. This very assumption, that *there is such a thing as evil*, and that people can thus do *evil acts*, defies the nihilism that saturates much of pop culture.

In the novel *The Goblet of Fire*, this evil becomes more than a memory for Harry. He had long been told of the wickedness of Voldemort. He knew that this villain had cut short his parents' lives. But now, it was not a story remembered behind safe doors. Having just witnessed the sudden murder of a friend at the command of You-Know-Who, Harry watches as an evil wizard revives the Dark Lord. Now in full physical form, Voldemort stares at Harry, "and Harry stared back into the face that had haunted his nightmares for three years."⁴

⁴ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2000), 612.

Harry looks into the eyes of the one who would kill him. Rowling's prose here shines. The author ensures that the reader knows the gravity of the situation. With the backdrop of a fresh murder, a bloody ceremony of dark magic, and a visual description of Voldemort's visage, "Lord Voldemort had risen again."⁵

It is here we see virtue on full, stunning display in Rowling's written work. None of the feelings of home and friendship, none of the interesting magical school subjects, none of the mystery, are present in the final chapters of *Goblet*. Rowling leaves the reader with the feeling of being exposed to evil. Darkness is in the very air. Harry is alone with dangerous murderers. And yet, like with the Sorting Hat, he has a choice. Harry chooses to have courage.

Certainly, Harry feels fear. Rowling points out that, "there was a split second, perhaps, when Harry might have considered running for it."⁶ But he was unable. "His injured leg shook under him . . . as the Death Eaters [Voldemort's wizard minions] closed, forming a tighter circle around him and

⁵ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 643.

⁶ *Ibid.* 650

Voldemort.”⁷ The situation was beyond Harry’s control. Voldemort mocks him: “You’ve been taught to duel, Harry?”⁸ The Dark Lord means to kill Harry, and Harry knows it. “We must bow to each other, Harry,”⁹ Voldemort continues. “Niceties must be observed . . . Bow to death, Harry . . .”¹⁰ Rowling shows us the depraved confidence of Voldemort in his murderous intent, as his followers laugh in jest. But, in this moment, Harry chooses courage: “Harry did not bow.”¹¹ Defiant, Harry, believing he would die, “was not going to let Voldemort play with him before killing him . . . he was not going to give him the satisfaction.”¹²

After using practiced magical skill to force Harry to bow, and then to torture him, Voldemort sets to work on Harry’s mind. Even with Harry’s physical, emotional, and mental anguish, he makes virtuous choices. Rowling paints the picture of the increasing certainty in Harry’s mind that he will be killed, and of his resolve to have courage rising to meet the

⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 659.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 660.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

occasion. Harry “was going to die like Cedric,”¹³ his murdered friend. “He was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it... but he wasn’t going to play along.”¹⁴ Harry would not break. Rowling continues, “He wasn’t going to obey Voldemort . . . he wasn’t going to beg.”¹⁵

Harry’s defiance draws laughs from the onlooking Death Eaters, and cool anger from Voldemort. As Harry dodged a blast, hiding behind a tombstone, “he knew the end had come. There was no hope . . . no help to be had.”¹⁶ As he heard his would be killer walking towards him, “he knew one thing only . . . he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort’s feet . . . he was going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die trying to defend himself, even if no defense was possible.”¹⁷

Rowling doesn’t state that Harry was courageous. She baptizes every word with that truth. “Harry stood up . . . he gripped his wand tightly in his hand, thrust it out in front of him, and

¹³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 661.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 662.

¹⁷ Ibid.

threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort.”¹⁸

Harry Potter’s enemy was prepared. Both engaged war spells at once. “As Harry shouted, ‘*Expelliarmus!*’ Voldemort cried, ‘*Avada Kedavra!*’” In that moment, “a jet of green light issued from Voldemort’s wand just as a jet of red light blasted from Harry’s--they met in midair--and suddenly Harry’s wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it.”¹⁹

Harry, to his own surprise, had not died instantly. Instead, he was locked into a magical competition with the world’s most feared dark wizard. Their wands both locked by the magical beam between them. Harry’s “hand seized”²⁰ around his wand: he “couldn’t have released it if he’d wanted to.”²¹ The colors jetting from their wands changed colors in the center of the now single beam. The beam became “neither red nor green, but bright, deep gold.”²²

Harry and Voldemort, wands still locked, were lifted without choice off the ground and moved

¹⁸ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 663.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

away from the tombs. As they struggled, “the golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered . . . a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light . . .”²³ As Voldemort’s minions scrambled, “an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air . . . it was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating”²⁴ around the dueling wizards.

Beads of light began sliding between them. Rowling records that Harry found holding on to his wand even more difficult now. But Harry focuses on pushing the light back towards Voldemort’s end of the beam. Now, it was Voldemort who “looked astonished, and almost fearful.”²⁵ From the end of Voldemort’s wand, one by one, emerged the shades of some of his key victims. Cedric Diggory, the recently murdered boy, came and spoke to Harry. Even Harry’s mother, Lilly, and father, James, emerged from the wand. To Voldemort’s great dismay, the ghosts of his victims held him at bay while Harry was able to break the connection, get to a magical transport, and return safely to his school.

²³ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, 663-64.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 664.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

However, before Harry returns, he pauses to ensure he can take Cedric's body with him. Thomas Hibbs notices that, even here, Harry was courageous enough to think of others. "Harry risks his own life," he writes, "to return the murdered body of his friend Cedric to his parents . . ."26

In *The Goblet of Fire*, J.K. Rowling has embedded moral reality into the very framework of her fantasy world. That underlying moral reality and virtue comes rushing to the surface in this moment. Rowling sets a scene in which Harry sees the full reality of evil, and yet, chooses good. The assumption by the author, characters, and readers that Voldemort is evil, *really* evil, is telling. Somewhere within us, we know that men like him are not simply acting against an evolved social ideal. They're wrong. Things should not be the way that Voldemort makes them.

And, author, characters, and readers assume, Harry is in the right. He does not cower, even when we could hardly blame him for doing so. He chooses, when faced with the deepest darkness, to have courage. He even thinks of others in the process. Without propositional definitions and philosophical discussions, we believe that Harry is

26 Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing* 185

on the side of good. He serves a greater purpose. And at the heart of that purpose is what is right and good. The visual imagery, events, descriptions of emotions, and inner struggle in the scene that Rowling paints all reflect this reality in stunning clarity.

So, how was this powerful prose, reflective of deeper moral reality, translated from the page to the movie screen? How was the same reality captured in a different medium? To accomplish this difficult task, Mike Newell, director of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, used every tool in his cinematographic tool box. He used varied lighting, props, music, and various camera angles to capture the feel of Rowling's written scene of Harry's showdown with Lord Voldemort.

Before the first actor says the first line, Newell sets the tone with a dark intro to the film. Even composer John Williams' familiar *Harry Potter* theme is modified in the film's outset to include a subtle, but definite, background wind section keeping time in a way reminiscent of the *Psycho* theme. Tension is thus heightened from the first frame of the film.

The film's first scene includes dark wizards making plans to revive their dark master, who casually murders a muggle non-wizard innkeeper

Though the film quickly moves to more familiar scenes revolving around Harry's beloved Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, even the sky is almost perpetually dark and overcast, signaling to the viewer not to grow too comfortable in the events shaping up. Such visual cues suggest to the viewer that this is not simply another interesting year at Hogwarts.

After a seemingly normal school term, a competition is to be held. Only four young wizards are chosen to participate in the prestigious competition known as the Tri-Wizard's Tournament. As the contest draws to an end, Harry and Cedric (at this point still alive), enter the final challenge as they proceed to victory. The final tournament event takes place in a vast, magical maze. As if to show just how desperately far away from help Harry and Cedric will be when they inevitably face Voldemort, Newell moves the camera's position vertically up and pans the shot out to show how vast the maze actually is. Immediately following, he cuts to the individual competitors inside the maze, whose space is cramped enough to make one claustrophobic. The music of the cheering school band is instantly muted in the maze. The scene quickly grows exceedingly dark and increasingly overcast. The viewer is cued to a danger

the competitors are yet unaware of. At the end of the maze, Harry and Cedric expect to be transported in victory back to their classmates, but are instead transported to their surprise meeting with the Dark Lord.

Under Newell's directorial leadership, the climaxing scene of the film is expertly set up for full dramatic effect. The *mise-en-scene* creates an ominous atmosphere in which the viewer will experience the fateful meeting of Harry and Voldemort. Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White explain that the *mise-en-scene* is "a French term meaning literally 'placement in a scene' or 'onstage.'"²⁷ It refers to "those elements of a movie scene that are put in position before the filming begins and employed in certain ways once it does begin."²⁸ It includes "everything that is visible on-screen... including actors, aspects of lighting, sets and settings, costumes, make-up, and other features of the image that exist independently of the camera and the processes of filming and editing."²⁹ Before our heroes meet the Dark Lord, the movie audience can feel the atmosphere of the scene. Props, music,

²⁷ Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White, *The Film Experience: An Introduction* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 64.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

and lighting are used to convey to our minds the feeling of the situation in which Harry finds himself.

As soon as Harry and Cedric arrive at their fateful destination, the sky is nearly black. They are standing in a cemetery. The source lighting is behind them in the distance, shining past them, so that only their dark forms can be seen. They are surrounded by shadowy, gargoyle-esque grave markers. The only object illuminated is the tomb of Voldemort's father, which reads, "Riddle."³⁰ These visual cues allow the audience to know the scene's location before even Harry does.

Corrigan and White point out that "One of the most subtle and important dimensions of mise-en-scene is lighting, which not only allows an audience to observe a film's action and understand the setting in which the action takes place but also draws attention to the props, costumes, and actors in the mise-en-scene."³¹ They state that "a dark, shadowed" place "may evoke feelings of fear."³² That is precisely the feeling Newell wants to evoke in his

³⁰ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* dir. Mike Newell, (United States: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2004).

³¹ Corrigan and White, *The Film Experience*, 79.

³² *Ibid*

audience. Harry and Cedric feel fear. The scene lighting invites the audience to share it with them.

In a flash of green light, Voldemort's servant quickly murders brave Cedric, and commences with the dark magic ritual to revive the Dark Lord. The lighting is low and ominous, and so is the music. Corrigan and White explain that "Film sound, because it surrounds and permeates the body of the viewer in a way that images cannot, contributes to the authenticity and emotion we experience while viewing a film."³³ The dark musical scoring of these moments "encourages the viewer to experience emotion."³⁴ In this particular case, lighting, props, and music combine to convey to the audience that this moment is gravely serious. Though the images stay on the screen in front of us, the score leaves the screen and washes over us, pulling us into the moment.

The reviving ritual ends in a burst of fire that illuminates the statued graveyard, and Voldemort stands in his full confidence. Newell employs computer animated graphics to portray the transformation. Blackness weaves itself around his

³³ Corrigan and White, *The Film Experience*, 204.

³⁴ *Ibid*

form to indicate that Voldemort is literally clothed in darkness.

As dark musical themes continue to play softly, Voldemort breathes in his new bodily form, pausing as if to grow into himself. But, as his followers appear from the dark clouds to greet their old master, the music stops. All is silent, except for the gentle, ghostly wind, whistling through the cemetery. The only distinct sound to be heard are the soft voices of Voldemort and his Death Eaters. “The film environment attempts to duplicate our acoustic experience of the world,” Corrigan and White remind us, “to orient us in this new space in a way that feels genuine and genuinely gets us to *feel*.”³⁵ We are here meant to feel dark and cold, without even music to warm us. For at least two full minutes, there is no music whatsoever. Only the cold, quiet confidence of the Dark Lord remains as he rebukes his pitiful followers for their lack of devotion. Only once Harry speaks up and objects to Voldemort’s mocking of Cedric’s corpse, the music begins again. Voldemort’s attention is turned towards Harry, and instantly, the sudden music cues us to the danger approaching.

³⁵ Corrigan and White, *The Film Experience*, 205

Voldemort, in his soft but confident voice, mocks as he inflicts pain upon Harry. Releasing Harry from his bonds, he begins mocking him into a duel, following almost word for word Rowling's dialogue in the novel. Within moments, Harry is lying on the dark ground, defenselessly writhing in pain, as Voldemort leans dominantly over him. The shot reinforces the feeling that Voldemort is in charge, and Harry is helpless. With a sadistic smile, Voldemort looks down and coolly states, "I'm going to kill you, Harry Potter. I'm going to destroy you."³⁶

Harry, still lying on the ground, looks into the face of the man who murdered his mother and can say nothing. Gasping for air, his pale face shows desperate fear. Standing up, Harry leaps for cover behind the Riddle tombstone. Voldemort, no longer cool and soft spoken, shouts: "Don't you turn your back on me, Harry Potter! I want you to look at me when I kill you."³⁷ His voice is carried by thunderous music as he shouts deliberately, "I want to see the light leave from your eyes!"³⁸

Behind the tomb, Harry takes a deep breath, as his face grows determined and stern. All of the inner

³⁶ *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, dr. Mike Newell.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

dialogue of Rowling's chapter, all of Harry's inner decision to die like his father and not give in to his murderer, is captured in the seconds the camera is focused on actor Daniel Radcliffe. He knows he will die. But he will die with courage. Standing up and walking to face Voldemort, Harry says unflinchingly, "Have it your way."³⁹

The two wizards simultaneously aim their wands and shout their war spells. There is little or no color in the shot, except Harry's faintly red school sweater. It is overwhelmingly a screen of greys. But computer animated graphics are used to show deep green and bright red beams jolting forth from the wands and meeting in the center. The camera then moves to a central location between the duelers, to fully capture the magical burst. In the center, the beams blend into a single golden burst, resembling molten metal falling to the ground. Each actor's face grows more involved; more determined. Each dueler grips his wand more tightly. The musical score grows less dark but remains just as grave as its volume increases.

As in the novel, the two beams, locked in competition, give rise to an arching web of light. Gusts of wind blow across Voldemort's robes and

³⁹ *Ibid*

Harry's face as they struggle against their respective opponent. Bright and blue, Voldemort's victims appear from the Dark Lord's wand, and aide Harry in his escape. After a few touching words from Harry's parents, Harry makes ready to escape. Within moments, the connection is severed, and Harry is gone. The scene grows near silent as Voldemort scrambles to find his opponent. As he realizes that Harry is gone, Newell takes a close up shot of Voldemort's face to capture his utter frustration as he screams at his second failure to kill the boy who lived.

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, J.K. Rowling gives the world a story that assumes a deep moral dimension. This moral reality is not present only in the magical realm of Hogwarts. It exists in our muggle world as well. Because we, the readers, believe with Rowling a simple truth: Voldemort is wrong. Harry is right. Voldemort is evil, and the world simply ought not to be the way he wills to make it. Harry, in standing against him, fights for what is good and right in the world. His courage is not a preference. It is a virtue. At the heart of this tale is the belief that goodness is a reality. And that we can be on the side of goodness.

Rowling, without textbook definitions, appeals to religious texts and without any moral

philosophical discussion at all, conveys the idea to hundreds of millions of people that evil is real, and it is terrible. She invites us to believe that courage against such evil is virtuous and good. Her written, artistic material served as a springboard into an understanding of our world's moral framework. Her work, though entertainment, provided a source for major Hollywood films to propagate, in stunning high definition, the belief in good and evil, and the belief that we can choose between them.

Thomas Hibbs remarks that some “Christians have voiced reservations about the role of magic in the books.”⁴⁰ Many Christians are concerned that the books and films might serve to desensitize people to real-life witchcraft. But, real witchcraft is not the primary threat to Christianity or Western Civilization in this age. Modernism, moral positivism and relativism, moral cynicism, and nihilism are. Their threats are very real and startlingly widespread. It is these that *Harry Potter* rebukes. “Rowling’s series is not only not part of the problem,” Hibbs continues, “it is part of the solution to what ails our popular culture.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Hibbs, *Shows About Nothing*, 184.

⁴¹ [Hibbs Shows about Nothing 184](#)

Such fantastic stories are not the only way to combat nihilism and relativism. But, it turns out, they are a surprisingly effective way. For those who wish to reintroduce such moral understanding into our cultural framework, one would do well to look again at Rowling's story of a boy who lived. Her work, though not explicitly theistic, is the right kind of story.

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