



## THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A Peer-Reviewed And Indexed Bi-Annual Online Literary Journal

<http://worldlitonline.net/>

ISSN: 0974-097X • Vol 15. No. II • July-December 2019



### **The Moral Vision of A Fantasy Writer: J.K.Rowling's *Idea of Good and Evil in Harry Potter***

Dr. Navi  
Asstt Teacher,  
Govt. High School,  
Saharanpur,  
Uttar Pradesh, INDIA.

---

Art and life cannot, after all, be kept in wholly autonomous compartments, and likewise aesthetic and moral values cannot be treated as utterly independent of one another. As Mr. Morgan aptly puts it, “Man cannot begin to think less of art without, at the same time, beginning to think more or less, of religion, of love, of equality, of possessions, of power, of all else by which his mind and spirit are engaged. The values are independent.

K.R.S. Iyengar Art cannot detach itself completely from morality and ethics. Life has no meaning without ethical values as these values raise man to the heights of humanity. Art reflects life and it can never be tempted to eulogize the amoral pleasures and present a fake picture of man’s predicament. To this J.K.Rowling can be no exception. Even if she deals with the concept of witchcraft, she herself refutes the charges of promoting occultism:

They (people) have missed the point so spectacularly. I think the Harry books are very moral but some people just object to witchcraft being mentioned in a children’s book unfortunately, that means we’ll have to lose a lot of classic children’s fiction.

It is worth noticing that the entire Series *Harry Potter*, at best, never seems to promote evil and amoral ideas. It offers plenty of high philosophy and moral values to the readers. Ann Swinfen makes clear the nature of morality in a fantasy:

It has been the concern of many modern writers of fantasy to use the form in order to present moral, religious or philosophical ideas. This conscious moral basis of much serious fantasy may be revealed in a number of ways. It may be implicit in the numinous quality of the marvelous experience. It may be present in the structural patterns of the work, in the use of the mythic elements or in quest tale form.

However, without indulging into propagandist flair Rowling has a good deal to tell us about her ‘moral, religious or philosophical’ ideas. The moral and philosophical ideas are more overtly visible than religious ones. The moral vision of Rowling is that of an observer of life, often in secular respect. But to hold that her books are completely devoid of God would be a sheer misunderstanding of her vision. Her own designation as a member of a church is evidence that she is not an atheist. The big hope of life that we find in her books, in spite of all the dark events in the story, is another example of her sense of the divine and the spiritual. Moreover, the qualities she renders to her characters are in a manner a representation of her faith in the Almighty. Her belief in the goodness of heart and the ethical values of humanity define her sense of righteousness. Though she does not talk explicitly about God in her books yet the great virtues and

Dr. Navi

sacrifices of people in *Harry Potter* signify the divine power. These novels seem more like an allegory wherein we can find tenets of moral and spiritual wisdom from various cultures that strike a common ground among all of them in a more comprehensive way. Moreover, her characters' repeated use of the word 'God' during their conversations implies that they are aware of a supreme power. They celebrate Christmas and Easter and sing carols; they remember God even their most fanciful tunes —'God Rest Ye, Merry Hippogriffs'—which shows that being a wizard does not disconnect them from the Almighty.

Rowling's concern for humanity speaks volumes of her moral strength as there is a depiction of real life in her fantasy; it does not give an escape from reality at the cost of it, rather makes it lifelike. She tries to explore answers and solutions to the effects of a harder reality as her hero follows her own ideas of courage:

I see Harry as someone who is struggling to do the right thing, who is not without faults, who acts impetuously as you would expect someone of his age to act, but who is ultimately a loyal person, and a very very courageous person. So in as much as he had qualities that I admire most I would say he is a good role model. That doesn't mean that he is saintly, but then frankly, who is? But I think you do see enough of Harry's inner life, the workings of his mind in the books to know that he is ultimately human, struggling to do the right thing which I think is admirable.<sup>5</sup>

Rowling maintains that Harry is a boy of great merits but makes it clear —'that doesn't mean that he is saintly, but then frankly, who is?' which proves that her morality is tinged with a deep sense of reality as there seems no intention to create an unrealistic picture of man by making him absolutely flawless.

Throughout the Series Harry betrays the restlessness of a person in search for his true self. As a learned scholar, Deborah de Rosa says, 'The core questions Harry faces as adolescent and as a Hogwarts student is, 'Who am I'? The revelation of his wizard status is in fact, a stimulant to his thoughts which revives in him the dormant desire to relate with his lost family and the world outside. The freedom given by the magical world provides him complete opportunity to search for his roots. But Harry's search for identity is not only a search for his recognition as a person but also as a social being as well as human being. The fact that his parents died fighting for the right cause contributes greatly to his search for identity as it plays a vital role in forming his choices which alone decide the true self of a man as Dumbledore opines — 'It is our choices, Harry that shows what we truly are far more than our abilities'.

With man as a complex being, life is sure to have conflicts. Altercations arise when two convictions collide. In *Harry Potter* the conflicts highlight the significance of good over evil. The entire Series *Harry Potter* reflects the black and the white as well as the grey shades of human personality as good grapples with evil throughout the Series. Our choices, whether right or wrong, result from our long internal battles and it is the inner conflicts that lie at the roots of all our external actions. In this regard, Deborah De Rosa holds, 'Although attention to external behavior serve as a valid way to shape one's identity, Harry must discern whether he is fundamentally courageous and good or manipulative and evil.'

In *The Philosopher's Stone* Quirrell's revelation of his connection with the Dark Lord ironically reveals how even a once straight-forward person like Quirrell could be easily lured by the forces of evil and sacrificed his conscience at the altar of avarice:

He is with me wherever I go...I met him when I travelled around the world. A foolish young man I was then, full of ridiculous ideas about good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power and those too weak to seek it...

On the other hand, Harry's resolution never to give up to Voldemort's will confirms his strong will power and untarnished soul; he asserts his avengence to the evil plans of the Dark Lord:

...Haven't you heard what it was like when he was trying to take over? There won't be any Hogwarts to get expelled from! He'll flatten it, or turn it into a school for the Dark Arts! ... If I get caught before I can get to

the Stone, well I'll have to go back to the Dursleys and wait for Voldemort to find me there. It's only dying a bit later than I would have done, because I' am never going over to the Dark Side!...

J.K.Rowling takes us to those delicate recesses of humanity that are most palpable to human heart— love, compassion, friendship, fraternity, forgiveness and what not. Her indicative language brings back to the reader the simple but most powerful truths of life that stand to protect good from the bad eye of evil. The selfless love of a mother saves baby Harry from the callous Dark Lord — something that evil creatures like Voldemort and Quirrell cannot comprehend:

If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realise that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign...to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection for ever. It is in your very skin. Quirrell, full of hatred, greed and ambition, sharing his soul with Voldemort, could not touch you for this reason. It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the series Dumbledore's tremendous belief in the essential goodness of human heart is remarkable as he says, "It matters not what someone is born but what they grow to be." Moreover, *Harry Potter* gives us a new definition of courage—'There are all kinds of courage... It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.'

Not only the conflicts but also the mysterious questions that still puzzle human mind find a close analysis in Rowling's fantasy. Death and Immortality are such issues of human existence which she tries to explore through a new medium— fantasy. She herself accepts:

My books are largely about death. They open with the death of Harry's parents. There is Voldemort's obsession with conquering death and his quest for immortality at any price, the goal for anyone with magic, I so understand why Voldemort wants to conquer death. We're all frightened of it.

Voldemort tries to defeat death up to the end of the Series but death remains what it is — an inevitable truth which impartially treats all muggles or wizards alike. Sean Harris points out in his biography of Rowling, 'One of the most interesting features of Harry Potter saga is that characters can die. Magic cannot cheat death' Even Rowling has Dumbledore to speak the truth curtly —'No spell can reawaken the dead.'

None of Rowling's books remains free from death. But death is not all murder and killing; here in these novels death appears to have a deeper plan. There are such children as Harry, Neville, Luna and Hagrid who are deprived of parental love and care due to the untimely blow of death. In Rowling's scheme of actions such children grow at an early age; they learn before time to act for their present and prepare for their future. But the childhood carelessly left to grow on its own accord can sometimes be harmful to the personality as shows Rowling in the character of Tom Riddle whom the stiff air of the orphanage so disgusts as turns him into the Dark Lord— Voldemort.

There is another dimension of Rowling's exploration of life and death. The presence of ghosts in the books reveals more of this aspect of the story. The ghosts of Hogwarts specifically, Nearly Headless Nick, the Bloody Baron, the Friar and the Gray Lady are there not just to create supernatural effect or for comic relief they often provide; behind their very presence is the deep concern of the writer for the unresolved mysteries of life, death and immortality. In *The Order of the Phoenix* when Harry loses his god-father Sirius Black, in desperation he is suddenly struck with the idea that Sirius might return to him as a ghost almost like Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost of his house, Gryffindor. Here Nick emerges as Rowling's mouthpiece. Nick understands Harry's depressed feelings, 'Oh, very well...I can't pretend I haven't been expecting it' and explains —'It happens, sometimes...when somebody has suffered a...loss.' Nick tells Harry that 'wizards can leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth, to walk palely where their living selves once trod'. He asserts 'But very few wizards choose that path.' He tells Harry that Sirius will not return that 'he will

have... gone on' But Nick's further remark sheds light on the complexity of the matter when perplexed Harry expects a more reasonable reply from him. As Harry asks, 'What d'you mean, "gone on"?...Gone on where? Listen—what happens when you die, anyway? Where do you go? Why doesn't everyone come back? Why isn't this place full of ghosts? Why--?' But Nick has no answer:

I was afraid of death...I chose to remain behind. I sometimes wonder whether I oughtn't to have...well, that is neither here nor there...in fact, I am neither here nor there...I know nothing of the secrets of death, Harry, for I chose my feeble imitation of life instead. I believe learned wizards study the matter in the Department of Mysteries—

Rowling's misty ideas in the matter finds some clarity in a very illuminating book *Life Beyond Death* by a great philosopher, Swami Abhedanand, whose revealing lectures on the matter take ample scientific assumptions in the light of some of the most ancient scriptures, including 'the most universal and the most unsectarian'<sup>23</sup> Vedanta. There is no direct acceptance of it in *Harry Potter* yet when Rowling calls the floating figures of Nearly Headless Nick or the Bloody Baron 'ghosts' and Nick calls himself 'a feeble imitation of life', it indicates the presence of soul even as mere 'imprint' left of the people on the earth 'where their living selves once trod'. These talking ghosts of Hogwarts possess 'mind and intellect'<sup>24</sup> and 'the impressions' of their 'physical and mental activities'<sup>26</sup>. For instance the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw i.e. the Grey Lady who remembers how she betrayed her mother and was killed by the Baron (known as the Bloody Baron).

Often Nearly Headless Nick shows his pining for the pleasure of having food like the students at Hogwarts as he is not able to get being a ghost: 'That does look good...I haven't eaten for nearly four hundred years... I don't need to, of course, but one does miss it...' This condition of the souls of the dead is more logically defined by Swamijias :

The realm beyond death is the realm of the realized ideals, or of the realized thoughts. If we think of a piece of bread, the bread is there and we will eat. If we feel hungry we are eating. If we think of coffee, we are drinking coffee. ...we carry that attachment with us, and with our desire we manufacture those things out of the finer material in the spirit world.

These revelations fit to the ghosts in Hogwarts as all the ghosts carry in their hearts their cherished desires or some 'attachment' of their past life when they were alive. For instance, Prof. Binns, the only ghost who teaches at Hogwarts, must have been deeply devoted to his profession at the time when 'he had fallen asleep in front of the staff-room fire and got up next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him'

The best of Rowling's ideas and opinions about life and death seem to sum up in the seventh and final novel when Dumbledore shares with Harry his philosophy of life and death in the chapter *King's Cross*. With a tinge of morality Rowling imagines a peaceful and holy departure to the good and selfless people as we find in almost near-death experience of Harry when he finds himself with Dumbledore at a strange place full of peace. On the other hand in the form of 'a naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath'<sup>30</sup> she hints at the worst condition people like Voldemort suffer after death and in Dumbledore's words — 'there is no help possible'.

Rowling shows her sensibility to the contemporary notions too as her books somewhere touch such findings of modern researches as that of Kenneth Ring's who has been researching for more than twenty years on Near Death Experiences (NDEs). Harry's NDE is not like the ultimate NDE experiences that Kenneth asserts but it certainly includes many elements, like the 'encounter with a dazzling light' as the place where Harry finds himself is full of sunlight irrespective of the fact that it was night time when Voldemort nearly killed him. Further the people who profess to have NDE believe that it changed their views about death into positive ones as tells Kenneth, 'The persons who have returned from these ultimate NDE,s further assure us

that this is a journey that all of us, not just a few privileged souls, will one day take.’ When Rowling has Harry feel — ‘Leaving this place would not be nearly as hard as walking into the Forest had been, but it was warm and light and peaceful here, and he knew that he was heading back to pain and the fear of more loss.’— she makes the reader aware of the urgency to live in the present and care for those around us than indulge out of fear into the miserable chaotic search for eternal life like Voldemort. Finally, Rowling comes up with a brilliant definition of real immortality when Dumbledore declares:

You are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying.

The dark hues of death are overcome by the lighter and brighter hues of hope in *Harry Potter*. Optimism is engraved in the texture of these novels like a strong Patronus— ‘a kind of positive force, a projection of the very things that the Dementor feeds upon – hope, happiness, the desire to survive...’ The positive force of optimism lies at the root as Rowling writes ‘largely about death’ and still there is sunshine after each dark moment. Against the pessimism owing to the growing series of loss, hope makes for equilibrium.

The characters, howsoever afraid of Voldemort, might collapse before a Dementor or be an easy prey to the Boggart, are yet full of fighting spirit; they show equal strength to stand up with courage and fight for the noble cause i.e., war against Voldemort irrespective of their differences or the so called ‘purity of blood.’ Eventually Rowling aims at bringing forth the eminent quality and capability in man to move ahead in most fractious situations and testing times affirming that ‘hope springs eternal in human breast’.

The good will of Dumbledore, McGonagall, Weasleys, Harry, Hermione, Hagrid and others and their potent faith in love, trust, friendship, bravery, loyalty and justice keep the spirit of the novels positive. Human values make them resilient and guard against despair and disappointment. The Weasleys set a superb example of optimism. ‘Very nice and extremely poor’ the family of Arthur and Molly Weasley bubbles with mirth and laughter. Despite their already big family Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and their children treat him like their family member whenever Harry joins them. Even the Lovegoods provide ample reason to believe that despite the tragedies of life man can find a way out of despair. Indeed it is the Browning like faith that saves her from the dejection of losing her mother when Luna was only nine and finds solace in the fact that at least she has her father at her side. This is why the series never sinks into irreconcilable depression and in the aftermath of war Harry hopes -- ‘Happiness would come...’

### References

1. Iyengar, K.R.S., *The Adventure of Criticism*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers (P)Ltd., 1985, p.660.  
Comic Relief, Live Web chat March 21, 2001,  
[http:// www.comicrelief.com/harrybooks/pages/transcript.sctm/](http://www.comicrelief.com/harrybooks/pages/transcript.sctm/).
2. Swinfen, Ann, *In Defence of Fantasy, A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945*, Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.147.
3. Rowling, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2004, p.443.
4. J.K.Rowling at a press conference after the release of *The Half-Blood Prince*, July 18, 2005.
6. Rosa, Deborah De, “Wizardly Challenges to and Affirmations of the Initiation Paradigm”, *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed., Elizabeth E. Heilman, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2003, p.173.
7. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, Secrets*, London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2001(1997), p.245.

8. Rosa, Deborah De, “Wizardly Challenges to and Affirmations of the Initiation Paradigm”, *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed., Elizabeth E. Heilman, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2003, p.174.
9. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, London: Bloomsbury Pub.,2001(1997),p.211.
10. *Ibid*, pp.196-197.
11. *Ibid*,p. 216.
12. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, London: Bloomsbury Pub.,2000, pp.614-615.
13. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, p.221.
14. “Coping with Fame and Death”, *The Hindu*, Jan. 11, 2006.
15. Smith, Sean, *J.K. Rowling: A Biography*, London: Michael O’Mara Books Ltd., 2001, p.215.
16. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, p.605.
17. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, pp.757-758.
18. *Ibid*, p.758.
19. *Ibid*, p.759,
20. *Ibid*.
21. *Ibid*.
22. Abhedanand, Swami, *Life Beyond Death*, Calcutta: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 2000, p.92.
23. *Ibid*.
24. *Ibid*.
25. *Ibid*.
26. *Ibid*.
27. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, p.
28. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, p.102.
29. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, p.99
30. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2008, p. 566.
31. *Ibid*, p.568.
32. Ring, Kenneth, “Ultimate Near Death Experiences”, *Theosophical Digest*, Ist Quarter 2006, p.11.
33. *Ibid*, p.16.
34. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p.579.
35. *Ibid*, p.577.
36. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, London: Bloomsbury Pub., 2004 (1999), p.176.
37. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p.598.