

Morals and Messages from Harry Potter: Lesson Learned

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When I was in college, I took an English course titled “Harry Potter and Global Society” that opened my eyes to the power of literature. I had taken previous English courses and read great works of many authors such as Hemingway, Steinbeck, Dickens, Shakespeare, and Joyce. But these famous pieces of literature were placed on an ivory pedestal. Although I knew books could impact culture, I never figured that literature itself could shape my culture or the modern world I lived in.



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The fact that we studied such a generationally relevant book that was not only a part of my world and everyday life but also of every other student in that class, made the overarching lessons of literature and its power hit home.

The Harry Potter books are the number one selling book series ever published. The Harry Potter movies are the highest grossing film series of all time. As of last November, total Harry Potter book and movie sales topped \$24 billion. Harry Potter creator J.K. Rowling is the first author ever to become a billionaire.

I believe her use of myth and folklore is the underlying reason why her Harry Potter series is so wildly successful. Rowling touched a need within the audience for guidance and care and provided it by creating a fantastical world that intersected and interacted with our own.

Myths and folklore are figurative stories about how people within different cultures deal with universal life issues. Every culture possesses them, and they profoundly influence how societies see the world and understand themselves.

Joseph Campbell, a scholar of mythology and specifically of the “hero-quest,” argues that “myths are [the] clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life. [They show] what we’re capable of knowing and experiencing within.” He says myths “have to do with the themes that have supported human life, built civilizations, and informed religions over a millennia, [they] have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage.”

Rowling uses the language of myth and folklore rather than history to communicate her message. In doing so, she is indicating that moral messages gained through folklore impact people at a deeper level and are more important than the actual history of a society.

In 2008 there was a survey done by a local British newspaper asking which English figures, such as Winston Churchill and Sherlock Holmes, were real and which were fictitious. Surprisingly, the survey revealed that over 50% of the people believed that Sherlock Holmes was real and almost 25% believed that Churchill was mythical. There was also an equal amount of confusion between the real kings of British history, like Richard the Lionheart, and fictitious kings, like King Arthur. This raises the interesting question of how the English, or any other people for that matter, view their own past.

England, of course, is the backdrop for the Harry Potter series. British history, like that of almost every nation, is a mixture of good governance and tyrannical rulers, of national progression and the brutal conquest of foreign lands, and of national identity mixed in with the repression of other cultures. Although there are of course noteworthy characters in

England's past, like Sir Isaac Newton, William Wilberforce (English politician who led the abolition of the slave trade) and William Shakespeare, there are also countless examples of immoral leaders who used their power to a negative effect.

If, for example, a parent was faced with having to use a British historical figure as a role model for their child, how many of them would ever tell their child to be like King Henry VIII? If they did, they would be encouraging violence as a means of control, the misuse of women, and the execution of whoever you don't like. In many ways, it is much easier to glean life lessons from British legends than to try to find the heroic deeds of past British rulers.

In trying to guide the future generations to make honorable and selfless choices, it would be easier to point youth to myths like the legend of King Arthur and his adventures to create the British Empire than any one historical ruler. One source of Harry Potter's appeal is that he can be seen as a modernized King Arthur. The Arthurian Legend with a young protagonist assisted by siblings or friends, a quest to acquire magical artifacts, a supernatural guide, a confrontation between good and evil in which the child plays a crucial role, sounds almost exactly like the story line of the Harry Potter series.



I believe that Rowling's Harry Potter series in some ways is filling the need for moral education of today's youth. The series' run-away success cannot simply be attributed to her use of magical wands and interesting characters. Rowling created a fantastical world in her Harry Potter series, complete with locations, history, and cultural nuances. She gave depth to that world by having her characters face issues that people today struggle with. How to co-exist with the "other" (in this case, the non-magical "Muggle" world) and how to purge evils within form the backdrop for the entire Harry Potter series.

People overlook the power of literature, especially children's literature, and its messages for society. They assume if a book was written for children it must not have much depth or content. This type of thinking has led to oversights not only about the content that the parents are letting their children read, but also about the impact Harry Potter and other youth literature has had on the current generation. J.K. Rowling has deeply influenced the shapers of tomorrow's culture; yet her series has not received the accolades other influences have had.

Unificationists need to recognize that myths and folklore, expressive of universal truths, are more culture-forming than social inputs. They speak the language of the heart and address the original mind. Applied Unificationism should take into account not just data and the world of the intellect. Transformative social and political policy needs to be infused with an intuitive dimension that informs public thinking.

Sammi Vanderstok currently works for the investment bank, Barclays, and plans to use her skills to help non-profit organizations and youth programs. She has presented her work on literature and Harry Potter at several conferences and taught a class on the subject during the recent 3-Day University at Barrytown.

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