THE ALAN REVIEW

Spiritual Quest in the Realm of Harry Potter

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First, the disclaimer: although I read voraciously as a child and write for children as an adult, I have never been particularly drawn to fantasy, to science fiction, fairy tales, or anything along those lines. I sampled the genres and have nothing against such alternate realities, but am simply drawn more toward what we call realistic fiction.

On the other hand, every work of fiction, whether fantastic or realistic, offers an alternate reality, a way of stepping into someone else's circumstances and psyche and shedding our own momentarily. That fact is intrinsic to why we read fiction—when we return to our own realities (providing the alternates had substance) we are changed, expanded by experiencing the feelings of another, and better-fitted to meet our own challenges.

That said, I want to look at the alternate and fantastic world of Harry Potter because it has so captured the imaginations of children and adults alike, garnering unprecedented weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. The *Journal of Marketing* reported that in 2002, the first four Potter books have sold some 70 million copies and been translated into 30 languages ("There's Something..." 126). Because it has been such a phenomenal success, it behooves us to consider the world and characters J.K. Rowling offers children.

While such a shifting, unreliable physical world seems fantastic, it is not hard to find parallels with the psychological realms we inhabit; how much more true this is for children for whom the world is mysterious, new, and filled with incomprehensible rules and ways of handling different personalities.

Hers is a world that has attracted not just a little protest. Some conservative Christian groups balk at what they feel is the glorification of witchcraft and wizardry. Some went so far as to identify the lightning scar on Harry's forehead as either a swastika or "the mark of the beast" and his broomstick as a phallic symbol ("Some Church..." 1). Others worry about the violence and disturbing imagery in the stories. The Potter books have been challenged in schools and have been burned in at least one public rally ("Harry Potter might"...2A).

But as more circumspect adults dig into the works, they are finding much of worth. The first volume, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,* is a moral tale in which good (personified by witches and wizards) overcomes evil (also personified by witches and wizards). Thus, the parallelism demonstrates that this society is quite like our own in that it contains both negative and positive elements. The positive must struggle to prevail.

Joseph Campbell, in his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* examines the mythological hero's journey and its attending archetypes. He points out that heroic myths deal with humanity's deepest issues, their plot lines representing psychological, rather than purely physical, triumphs, a hero who dies to the material world and conquers death of one sort or another through rebirth (Campbell 16-7, 35). Hollywood story analyst Christopher Vogler extended Campbell's observations to modern films, demonstrating that these archetypes and plotlines continue to appear, from *American Graffiti* to *Wizard of Oz.* Their persistence testifies to their psychological and spiritual importance. Harry Potter exemplifies Campbell's hero archetype and, in *Sorcerer's Stone* at least, follows the typical hero's journey described by Campbell:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

Along the way, Harry encounters many of the archetypes that Campbell and Vogler note are intrinsic to such a journey, among them the Herald, Mentor, Threshold Guardian, and Shapeshifter.

The first stage in the hero's journey is the "Call to Adventure." The opening of the story finds the hero placed in the Ordinary World—in the language of the Potter books, the Muggle world, the world of non-wizards. The kindly, fatherly wizard, Professor Dumbledore leaves orphaned Harry with Muggle relatives, the Dursleys, believing he will be cared for there until he comes of age. Harry's Ordinary World is set apart from what most readers will find familiar by the cruelty of his caregivers, his aunt and uncle Dursley and his cousin. Unlike Harry, the aunt and uncle are aware of Harry's real identity as a wizard and are determined to drive any such tendencies from him, in the process, depriving him of every comfort and sign of affection. Just before Harry's eleventh birthday, Mr. Dursley observes a series of unusual events that signal Harry's approaching Call to Adventure: a cat reading a map, strangers in cloaks whispering about Harry, owls swooping about, shooting stars. Finally, Harry receives his first letter—and Dursley grabs it from him before Harry can read it. Letters continue to come—eventually by the dozens—no matter where Dursley hides Harry.

Finally, on Harry's eleventh birthday, Dursley hides his family in a tumbledown shack on a small rock island. A violent storm ensues, bringing with it Hagrid, in the archetypical role of Herald. The Herald, Campbell notes, summons the Hero toward the Special World where dangers as well as bounties await. "The herald or announcer of the adventure," Campbell tells us, "is often dark, loathly, or ter-

rifying, judged evil by the world" (53). Hagrid fits the bill well:

> A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by the long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair. (Rowling 46)

But just as highly spiritual people are not *of* the material world, Harry is not *of* the world—he is not a Muggle, and Hagrid does not stand in the way of Harry's claiming his destiny, and so Harry readily sees the man as the gentle giant he truly is. Hagrid reveals to Harry his true identity as a wizard and delivers Harry's letter of acceptance to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (51). The Call to Adventure has been sounded.

A Hero needn't readily accept or believe the call, and while Harry is properly intrigued, he greets the news that he is a wizard with an exclamation of disbelief (51). But his disbelief is momentary, and, considering the Dursleys' cruelty, he is quite ready to leave the Ordinary World behind in favor of the intriguing world of witches and wizards. Hagrid goes on to tell Harry his true story—that his wizard parents were killed by the evil wizard Voldemort, who also attempted to kill Harry as a baby—that, in addition, Harry somehow had seemed to have caused Voldemort to disappear. Among the wizards, young Harry is already a well-known hero. Harry's flickerings of memory support Hagrid's version of events, proving this Herald trustworthy.

In informing Harry about himself, Hagrid is also acting as Harry's first Mentor. A failed wizard himself with only a small store of magic at his disposal, Hagrid overrules Dursley's objections and prepares Harry for entry into the Special World. Such preparation, Campbell points out, involves giving the hero "amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass" (69). For Harry, these are the first tools necessary to his new world—his list of school supplies, among them course books, robe, wand, and owl.

Such items cannot be gotten anywhere in the Ordinary World:

> "Can we buy all this in London?" Harry wondered aloud.
>
> "If yeh know where to go," said Hagrid. (Rowling 67)

Hagrid, of course, knows where to go—through the Leaky Cauldron, a "tiny, grubby-looking pub" that none of the Muggles seem to see, into the courtyard and, with three taps of Hagrid's pink umbrella, right into Diagon Alley, the marketplace of wizards. While shopping, Harry meets two of his future opponents, Malfoy and turbanned, stuttering Professor Quirrell; they might be seen as Threshold Guardians, beings who attempt to prevent the hero's entry into the Special World. But Harry does not perceive them as obstacles; for readers, they simply foreshadow trouble. Thus, with Hagrid's knowledge and reassuring guidance, Harry has crossed the First Threshold into the Special World, a "zone" Campbell explains, "of magnified power" (77).

Harry makes a number of Threshold crossings in *Sorcerer's Stone*. Diagon Alley is a simple appetite-whetter and another opportunity for Harry to doubt himself, to possibly refuse the call.

> "Everyone thinks I'm special," [Harry] said at last. "...but I don't know anything about magic at all."
>
> "Don't worry, Harry. You'll learn fast enough," [Mentor Hagrid reassures him.] (86).

But Harry shows no hesitation about crossing the next Threshold—catching the train at Platform nine and three-quarters. There, the Threshold Guardian he must overcome is the difficulty of finding an apparently non-existent platform to board his train to Hogwarts. He is assisted by a temporary Mentor—a wizard mother seeing her children off to school. "All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten," she tells Harry (93).

Vogler notes that at the Threshold, the Hero "must be able to take a leap of faith into the unknown or else the adventure will never really begin" (152). He goes on the state that "Heroes don't always land gently. They may crash into the other world, literally or figuratively" (153). The wizard mum, seeing Harry's confusion, advises, "Don't stop and don't be scared or you'll crash into it; that's very important. Best do it at a bit of a run if you're nervous" (Rowling 93). Thus, Harry takes a leap of faith, landing himself right in front of the Hogwarts Express. This train ride with his new classmates marks Harry's passage into the Special World.

Campbell refers to the next stage as entering the "Belly of the Whale" (90); the Hero seems to have died to one world and to be reborn an innocent in the next. One of the first faces Harry sees when the train comes to a stop is hisMentor, Hagrid, there to guide the "first years" to the school. The students walk a "steep, narrow path" through what seems to be a thick forest, catching a glimpse of a magnificent castle just as they board their boats (111). Harry is moving into the "dream landscape of continuously fluid, ambiguous forms," that Campbell describes (97). Rowling writes

> Harry had never imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands of candles that were floating in midair...dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. (116)

Later, when Harry makes his way through the castle, he discovers that

> [t]here were a hundred and forty-two staircases at Hogwarts: wide, sweeping ones; narrow, rickety ones; some that led somewhere different on a Friday; some with a vanishing step halfway up that you had to remember to jump. Then there were doors that wouldn't open unless you asked politely, or tickled them in exactly the right place, and doors that weren't really doors at all, but solid walls just pretending. It was also very hard to remember where anything was, because it all seemed to move around a lot. The people in the portraits kept going to visit each other . . . (131-2)

While such a shifting, unreliable physical world seems fantastic, it is not hard to find parallels with the psychological realms we inhabit; how much more true this is for children for whom the world is mysterious, new, and filled with incomprehensible rules and ways of handling different personalities.

The Belly of the Whale is a place where the hero "must survive a succession of trials" (Campbell 97). Harry's first Hogwarts test is an initiation rite intended to reveal Harry's primary characteristics and place him with others of his ilk. Each student takes a turn wearing the "Sorting Hat" to determine to which of Hogwarts' four houses he or she will be assigned. Harry is assigned to "Gryffindor where dwell the brave at heart" and whose "daring, nerve, and chivalry/Set Gryffindors apart" (Rowling 118). Rowling gives a clear indication of the enemy status of Malfoy (the student Harry encountered in Diagon Alley and again on the train) when he is assigned to Slytherin, whose "cunning" residents "use any means to achieve their ends" (118).

Harry shows his chivalry—and his worthiness to walk the Hero's path—when he engages in a high-speed broomstick chase after Malfoy, trying to retrieve a friend's possession.

Both boys are breaking the rules; it is the day of their first flying lesson and their teacher has forbidden them to fly in her absence, so Harry risks expulsion to help his friend. But Harry's remarkable, natural broomstick skills identify him as a potential star player in the school sport, Quidditch, and punishment is quickly forgotten.

Harry is chosen to play the difficult position of "seeker." The seeker's job is to catch the Golden Snitch, a small, winged ball, thereby ending the game. A seeker is more likely than other players to be seriously injured. This critical and dangerous role certainly befits a hero. In Harry's first game, his house, Gryffindor, is pitted against the wiley Slytherins. Gryffindor seems headed for victory until Harry's broomstick turns into a bucking bronco. It has been bewitched—apparently by Professor Snape , the Potions professor, who has made no secret of his dislike of Harry. One of Harry's classmates manages to break the spell and Harry wins the game to become a beloved school hero.

"The original departure into the land of trials," Campbell tells us, "represented only the beginning of the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination" (109). For Harry, the temptation might be to rest in the glory of this worldly (or "other-worldly"), victory. A second distraction from his quest come in the form of the Mirror of Erised (or Desire), a mirror that presents the viewer's greatest desire—in Harry's case, union with his parents. The benevolent, wise Professor Dumbledore cautions Harry away from this appealing entrapment. "[T]his mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it," Dumbledore tells Harry (Rowling 213). "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (214).

True to the Hero that he is, Harry turns away from the dream-state offered by the mirror and prepares to, as Vogler terms it, "Approach the Inmost Cave" (167). Vogler goes on to explain,

> Heroes, having made the adjustment to the Special World, now go on to seek its heart . . . the very center of the Hero's Journey. On the way, they may find another mysterious zone with its own Threshold Guardians. (167)

On a midnight excursion with two friends, Harry had discovered a fierce, three-headed dog guarding a trapdoor in an off-limits area of the castle. This monstrous Threshold Guardian is a clear reference to Cerberus, the three-headed dog of Greek mythology which blocks the path to the underworld. The "underworld" beneath the trapdoor is Harry's Inmost Cave. There, the friends realize, must be hid the Sorcerer's Stone, a substance that "will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal" (220)—wealth and immortality await in the underworld! Word comes to Harry that his archenemy Voldemort is still alive, though weakened, and Harry realizes that Voldemort is after the Stone. When his friends point out the danger of trying to thwart Voldemort, Harry sees the central issue: Voldemort's plan is to take over the world. Though it might mean his death, Harry is determined that he will never go over to the "Dark Side"—nor will he stand by and allow it to take over (270).

While Cerberus was tamed with a penny, Fluffy, the three-headed dog of Hogwarts is soothed by music. So flute-playing Harry and his allies slip past the Threshold Guardian The underworld presents a series of high-stakes tests and trials: strangling vines; a violent, human chess game; puzzles to solve. Finally, Harry must literally walk through fire to face Professor Quirrell. Quirrell turns out to be the ultimate shapeshifter. It was Quirrell, not Snape, who had bewitched Harry's broomstick in the Quidditch game. Further, Quirrell, it turns out, is literally two-faced, for on the back of his head, beneath his turban, he carries the nearly destroyed Voldemort: Quirrell has been trying to help Voldemort regain his strength. Now Harry must face his greatest fear, his Supreme Ordeal. Here, Campbell says, the hero must face the central question, "Can the ego put itself to death?" (109). Quirrell unwraps his turban and brings Harry face-to-face with the evil wizard who attempted to kill him and succeeded in killing his parents. Harry gains a clearer understanding of the nature of evil when Voldemort says, "I have form only when I can share another's body...but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds..." (293). Evil is a moral and spiritual choice, a willingness to allow oneself to be used, rather than a will to conquer self.

Harry is now in possession of the Sorcerer's Stone (his Reward), gained by looking into the Mirror of Desire, now housed in this underworld beneath the trapdoor. It is significant that while Harry's greatest desire earlier had been reunion with his parents, his ultimate desire now has become to benefit the world by keeping the Stone from Voldemort. When Harry refuses to hand it over, he finds himself in a fight with the two-faced man. Harry feels the fire in his scar again, but it subsides when Quirrell's own skin blisters at the touch of Harry's skin. Then, amid "Quirrell's terrible shrieks and Voldemort's yells of "KILL HIM! KILL HIM!" everything goes black for Harry (295).

Harry has engaged in the Supreme Ordeal, forgoing concerns for himself to align himself unwaveringly on the side of good. As Vogler states,

> The Supreme Ordeal . . . signifies the death of the ego. The hero is now fully part of the cosmos, dead to the old, limited vision of things and reborn into a new consciousness . . . In some sense the hero has become a god with the divine ability to soar above the normal limits of death and see the broader view of the connectedness of all things. (199)

Now we learn whether or not Harry will "take The Road Back, returning to the starting point or continuing on the journey to a totally new locale or ultimate destination" (217). In *Sorcerer's Stone,* the decision point of The Road Back Phase occurs with the Resurrection phase, the main purpose of which "is to give an outward sign that the hero has really changed" (241).

After his ultimate struggle with death, Harry awakens in the Hogwarts hospital wing. This brief recovery phase places Harry "quarantined safely away" from others, as Vogler points out is typical of this stage (228). "One function of Resurrection," Vogler explains, "is to cleanse heroes of the smell of death, yet help them retain the lessons of the ordeal" (228). The first face Harry sees is "the smiling face of Albus Dumbledore" (Rowling 295). Harry shows that he has truly changed (placed his own interests after the well-being of others) by showing alarm that Quirrell/Voldemort possesses the Stone. Dumbledore assures Harry that this did not happen, that Dumbledore had arrived in time to rescue Harry (though he points out that Harry "was doing very well"[296]) on his own and that the Stone will be destroyed. Dumbledore also explains that while Voldemort lost that battle, he is not destroyed forever. "He is still out there somewhere, perhaps looking for another body to share," Dumbledore tells him. "[N]ot being truly alive, he cannot be killed." Harry "has delayed his return to power" and, if others take up the battle, he may be delayed forever (298). Thus, we see that Harry, too, may be called upon to battle evil again. Dumbledore's explanations of events help Harry—and readers—to clarify

and solidify what they have learned through the Ordeal.

Self-realization is another frequent hero's reward. Dumbledore explains to Harry that when his mother died protecting him from Voldemort, her love left an indelible mark on her son that neither a world full of Dursleys nor of evil wizards could erase. Love protects—conquers all; for this reason, Quirrell and Voldemort were literally unable to touch Harry (299). Love is the ultimate amulet of protection.

To cast the story for a moment in Christian terms, Dumbledore might be seen as the Divine Father of the universe. He looks to Harry's well-being, even as he sends the beloved boy into the world. Dumbledore is also the only one Voldemort truly fears, who has powers equal to Voldemort, though Dumbledore refrains from exercising all of them (11). Voldemort is the personification of evil, the devil, while Harry plays the role of the savior who is returned to his Divine Father when his work is done. It is a pattern that has been repeated in religious histories and mythological heroes' journeys throughout time.

A return to the Ordinary World is also a part of the Hero's Journey, and it involves bringing something of value back to that world, a boon to be shared. The delaying of Voldemort's evil designs and the understanding of the need for a continual struggle against evil are the Ultimate Boons of Harry's Ordeal. When the school term ends, Harry boards the train to a London full of Muggles. But he returns with knowledge of his true worth and with the realization that he has, for a time, benefited all by staving off evil. In a promise of justice that every tormented child will appreciate, Harry notes that some of his new magical abilities will allow him to "have a lot of fun with" his bullying cousin (Rowling 309). Harry is, as Campbell phrases it, the "Master of the Two Worlds" (229).

Almost thirty years after Campbell's study was published in 1949, child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim presented his book, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.* Bettelheim's work came in response to concerns in the '60s and '70s that fairy tales (which need not involve fairies) presented violence and other negative imagery damaging to young readers and listeners. (This is not unlike the criticism Harry receives, although religiously-motivated concerns seem to predominate.) Many parents either steered their children away from such reading material or presented sanitized, Disney makeovers. Bettelheim points out that

> . . . a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious.
>
> Modern stories written for young children mainly avoid these existential problems . . . The child needs to be given suggestions in symbolic form about how he may deal with these issues and grow safely into maturity. (8)

Both myths and fairy tales have their roots in the lore and religious traditions of more basic times in humanity's development. The Harry Potter stories, by contrast, are neither myth nor fairy tale, but modern tales recently conceived of by Scottish writer J.K. Rowling. Fairy tales and myth are usually short while the Potter stories are famed for their length (the last volume being 734 pages). Fairy tales generally have simply-drawn characters and plots, while characterization and plot in Potter is more complex. But Harry, like the heroes of myth and fairy tale, faces no shortage of evil.

Bettelheim points out that the power of the fairy tale to teach is most of all in the child's identification with the hero, rather than the defeat of the villains (9). Harry is a particularly appealing character to children. Good-hearted but not perfect, picked upon, an average student with childlike concerns and ordinary looks, Harry stands as a sort of Everyboy. He is, proclaims one reviewer, "the epitome of the downtrodden orphan who conquers all adversity" ("Sheer..." 2).

Of course, ordinary children do not have the powers of wizards to assist them, any more than they encounter fairy godmothers, magic amulets, or wish-granting genies. How, then, can such stories assist children in navigating a world fraught with real danger and difficulty? Bettelheim explains,

> The unrealistic nature of these tales...is an important device, because it makes obvious the fairy tale's concern is not useful information about the external world, but the inner processes taking place in an individual. (25)

Though the Potter stories present a fantastic world, children nonetheless gain from them psychological and spiritual understandings that will serve them better than amulet or genie.

Like Bettelheim, Campbell laments the loss of such guidance:

> ...the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religious inheritance, we...must face alone, or, at best, with only tentative, impromptu , and not often very effective guidance. This is our problem as modern, "enlightened" individuals, for whom all gods and devils have been rationalized out of existence. (104)

Apparently, though, children have been quicker than many adults to recognize what speaks to their inner needs, for *Harry Potter* seems to be a new story that, in calling on the imperishable hero's journey, offers much of substance to nourish a child's soul.

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