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ENG 105

### The Originality of Harry Potter Does Not Define its Merit

Stories reflect the world around us as well as the history that came before us. It is often the stories which hold depth and meaning that stay with us, both in our minds and over time. A story riddled with between-the-lines innuendos that can only be understood with knowledge of current and past events makes for a more interesting and thought-provoking read. If a story were completely original – a feat in and of itself – it would lack that second meaning which resonates with and impacts its readers.

Harry Potter, specifically, has become a symbol of our generation. Growing up reading and watching the series has facilitated an understanding of the world. It touches upon topics ranging from discrimination to Arthurian legend. The Harry Potter series is not original, as it follows an Arthurian approach to characterization and setting while drawing influences from ancient mythology, J.R.R. Tolkien, and modern day issues, all the while making them relatable to readers of varying ages.

The very appearance of J.K. Rowling's wizarding world calls to mind the stories of King Arthur and Camelot. From the use of parchment and quills to the very castle that is Hogwarts, a glimpse into Rowling's world is a glimpse into the medieval era. Rowling first describes Hogwarts as she writes, "Perched atop a high mountain . . . its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers" (Sorcerer 111). In that moment, the reader begins to feel as if they have entered another era, or perhaps another world.

Rowling weaves Arthurian legend into the series by directly referencing the great wizard Merlin. During Harry's first ride to Hogwarts on the Hogwarts Express, he begins collecting "Famous Witches and Wizards" cards, and finds one of Merlin. Rowling writes, "Soon he had not only Dumbledore and Morgana, but Hengist of Woodcroft, Alberic Grunnion, Circe, Paracletus, and Merlin" (Sorcerer 103). Even including the witch Morgana references the well-known tales.

While it is not directly stated in the books, it can be inferred that muggles are familiar with Arthurian legend. The key difference is that the witches and wizards know Merlin to be a historical figure. His influence on the wizarding world can be seen through "The Order of Merlin," which Dumbledore is a member of. On the other hand, the muggles believe Merlin to be a fictitious and mythical character stemming from legends of questionable origin. By creating this difference in perspective, and keeping one of the perspectives to be what we outside of the series believe, Rowling is keeping her world somewhat realistic. Despite the magic, the realism in her story helps intended messages carry over to the reader extremely effectively.

When it comes to characterization and plot similarities between Harry Potter and Arthurian legend, the most obvious similarity is Albus Dumbledore and Merlin. After all, both are extremely powerful wizards known for their long robes and even longer white beards. Dumbledore's membership in the Order of Merlin cements this parallel even more. A look at Dumbledore's actions also highlights similarities to Merlin. Dumbledore takes Harry under his wing, just as Merlin took young Arthur under his. According to Heather Arden and Kathryn Lorenz, Dumbledore can also be seen as an Arthur figure if one takes into account the set-up of the entire story. Hogwarts itself is a parallel to Camelot – a safe

haven “ruled” by a just and fair “king”: Dumbledore. It has “knights,” namely Harry, Ron, and Hermione, who learn from their leader, go out on “quests,” and always come back when they are completed (Arden and Lorenz 59). Arden and Lorenz summarize this by writing, “In effect [Dumbledore] is a combination of the characteristics both of Arthur, because of his position and authority . . . and of Merlin, because of his powers of sorcery and his special relationship with his protégé, Harry, whom he took under his wing when he was a child, as Merlin did for the infant Arthur” (Arden and Lorenz 61).

Another more modern influence on Harry Potter is J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. The majority of similarities between these two stories come into play in characterization. As with many fantasy heroes, including Arthur, Harry and Frodo both grew up without their parents. While Bilbo technically cared for Frodo in the same way Dumbledore cared for Harry, a better comparison would be Gandalf and Dumbledore. Both Gandalf and Dumbledore are wizards, once again with long beards – even Tolkien references Merlin. Gandalf cares for Frodo throughout the majority of the journey portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings* (Monroe).

These two stories do have one major similarity in their plots. In both stories, an event occurred before the beginning of the first books which plays a major role in the events during each series. Caroline Monroe writes, “The evil sorcerers (Voldemort/Sauron) are weak in the beginning of the stories and must be prevented from regaining the power they had lost” (Monroe). In *The Lord of the Rings*, an army of elves and men defeated Sauron, who used to hold power over the majority of Middle Earth, in a battle of epic proportions. During the plot of the books, Sauron finds his way back to a threatening position after the One Ring is found. In his rise to power, he plays the major antagonistic

role throughout the entire story, and it is up to Frodo and The Fellowship of the Ring to keep him from fully recovering what he once had – domain over Middle Earth. In the Harry Potter Series, Voldemort had once held sway over the wizarding world as Sauron did Middle Earth. When Harry was young, Voldemort tried to kill him but his spell backfired. Due to black magic, Voldemort lived on but was in a weakened state. As Harry is reintroduced to the wizarding world, Voldemort begins his struggle to regain his power. This leaves Harry and his friends, specifically Ron and Hermione, to stop his rise to power, as Frodo did to Sauron.

Even as J.K. Rowling referenced stories old and new, she also includes issues in her books that resonate with today's readers, as they find the very same issues in their world. Rowling once said, "I wanted Harry to leave our world and find exactly the same problems in the wizarding world" (quot'd in Pye). Of the many important issues addressed, one of them is discrimination. While the wizarding world may discriminate against race and gender, the spotlight of discrimination in the books is on the purity of bloodlines. Gayatri Sekar explains, "The pure-bloods represent the wizarding aristocracy; the half-bloods are next in the pecking order . . . and at the bottom of the social hierarchy are the Muggle-born witches and wizards" (Sekar). "Purebloods" are witches and wizards who have two magical parents. The farther back they can trace their family tree without coming across a muggle-born witch or wizard, the more "pure" a family is thought to be. One of the main characters in the books, Hermione, is in fact a muggle-born witch. Both of her parents are non-magical. The readers are shown that it has no effect on her magic. In fact, she is known as "the cleverest witch of her age" (Prisoner 253). Despite this, she is negatively affected by the attitudes of those who think she is lesser than them. This parallel to

discrimination in the real world can teach readers, especially impressionable children, to be open-minded about anyone different than them. The issue of discrimination is a hot topic today, and has been for a very long time. Hermione's presence in the Harry Potter series reflects the turmoil that exists outside of the books.

The Harry Potter books are some of the best-selling books in history. They have become a staple in the lives of the millions of children who grew up reading the series. Yet it is by no means original. The characters, plot, and setting are just some parts of the series that are heavily influenced by previous stories and relevant issues. Because of this, the Harry Potter books begin to parallel the real world. As issues and history are related into the story, the very soul of society follows. The first of the Harry Potter books, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, is a small, easy to read book. It's obviously a children's story. As the books progress, they get longer, darker, and become more relevant in today's society. By borrowing from our culture and saturating her books in it, Rowling slowly introduced an entire generation to the real world. If, 500 years from now, someone from a completely different society were to pick up a copy of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, they would get a glimpse into our world. Sure, we don't have magic, but the underlying messages, the important parts, will always be there. So long as such a story lives, our society can never end. In that way, J.K. Rowling did create her horcruxes; 7 of them.

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