

Harry Potter and Existential Universe

An Inquiry into Harry's Journey through the tenets of purpose and meaning

Padmini A.

¹Student, Maniben Nanavati Women's College, Mumbai.

The viewing of Harry Potter series of books from the prism of the existentialism throws up interesting insights into the unmistakable philosophical undertones of the narrative. J.K.Rowling, the author of this fascinating book series, constantly weaves the themes of mortality, free choice, alienation, angst, and meaning into the plot. She also questions the strictly material, scientific and reductionist viewpoint of life and existence. The world of Harry Potter, the protagonist, constantly alternates between the real and the magical (the 'muggle' and the magic). He is persistently fighting the forces of nihilism and constructing meaning in his search for justice. The purpose of living, as with Harry's, is to confront the inherent absurdity of existence and to overcome it; to create meaning where none otherwise exists. This is an act of supreme courage and determination, as also it is to face the frightening prospects of annihilation inherent in the act.

'Harry Potter', one of the highest sold books of all times, is a fantasy series set in the UK, written by author J K Rowling. It follows the story of Harry Potter and his friends as they attempt to conquer the force of evil, set against a backdrop of magic and wizardry. Harry's rather grim story begins with the murder of his parents, Lily and James Potter at the hands of the antagonist and the manifestation of evil, Lord Voldemort. Harry escapes the attack with a mere scratch on his forehead - in the shape of a lightning-bolt - a scar that forever marks him as special and unique although unknown to him.

The central themes of this book are existential in nature – that of purpose and meaning woven around the distinctly fatalistic surface level twists and turns of the story. The events that unfold revolve around the prophecy: "One with the power to vanquish Voldemort. ... Born to those who have thrice defied him.....and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives...". The author seems to imply that at some point in the future will come, in which one (Harry or Voldemort) of them must be dead in order for the other one to survive. Neither Harry nor Voldemort can live while they are both surviving. It means that both Harry and Voldemort must "die" before either can truly live and when one of them is truly living then the other is dead. Rowling uses the theme of 'duality' as a tool to further separate the notions of good and evil and the choices that the main characters, indeed Harry, needs to persistently make to redeem himself to a higher purpose.

Harry's character is wholly 'good' - he is the voice of bravery, loyalty and unwavering virtue. Early on in the series, while Harry is young, the theme of evil is represented proportionately. However, as Harry begins to confront more realities tied to his fate, evil begins to manifest itself as an insurmountable force -- in the face of which Harry is steadfast, brave and ever-moral. As a mere boy, Harry enters the world of witchcraft and wizardry and is at once thrust into problems that he must overcome. His purpose is almost always that of the savior and the conqueror of evil. In 'The Chamber of Secrets' Harry Potter burdens himself with the task of finding the Chamber and defeating the snake that plagues the school. He has no obligation to throw himself in the path of danger- yet it is his character's moral obligation to safeguard the school and serve his friends.

His two closest friends, central character to the book, Hermione Granger and Ronald (Ron) Weasley, act as Harry's conscience and his voice of reason. Hermione represents intelligence, wit, logic and an adherence to rules, whereas Ron represents capriciousness, mischief, simplicity, loyalty and bravery. Through Harry's journey, Hermione and Ron demonstrate themselves as dedicated to his fight - they inherit his fate as their own by choice. They will never be required by fate to face Lord Voldemort, and they are, hence, shielded from the terrible and awesome future that awaits Harry. This is again an existential theme contending that there is no given destiny by god or a higher power, one has to make choices and take full responsibility of the consequences thereof.

Another strong existential theme is that of isolation. Harry is, in that sense, isolated and alone as he faces the world. He is the only person to have survived Lord Voldemort's wrath. He is the 'chosen one' who will ultimately defeat Voldemort. In his desire to be virtuous he is often at the receiving end of ridicule and mockery. He is, in some cases, painted as a liar, and his truth is rejected. None of these events sway Harry from his path - yet he is always aware of his aloneness.

In the fourth book, the physical form of Lord Voldemort is revealed, and his forces of evil manifest themselves in the magical world as incubi of wickedness - The Death Eaters. Diametrically opposite are the Order of Phoenix and the ancillary characters that support Harry's quest. Hermione and Ron stand as representations of intelligence and loyalty. Professor Dumbledore, his mentor and guide, represents wisdom, whereas Mrs. Weasley represents love, family and belonging. Rowling uses these implicit virtues to demonstrate and define the qualities of 'good' and further remove them from the dark side. They act as reflections of good and voices of reason for Harry as he continues on his quest. The binary of evil and good or of nihilism and purpose are constantly interwoven into the story via the characters and the challenges they face.

The themes of 'duality and 'fate' are most obviously represented through the character of Severus Snape, the Potions professor who draws Harry's ire and rouses the reader's suspicion. Snape is a convert, he has shifted sides from evil to good through the persuasion of Professor Dumbledore. As a character, he is struggling with the guilt of having been responsible for the deaths of James and Lily Potter, Harry's parents, and he seeks to absolve himself. Snape is delivered from his own past and his own evil by the great sacrifice he makes - fulfilling his ultimate purpose as a 'good' character. Does Snape ultimately demonstrate himself to be the 'best' of them all by sacrificing not only his life, but his character, his persona to the greater purpose of good? Or is his reason wholly selfish - so as to absolve himself of guilt and wickedness. To what standards does the virtue of 'goodness' lend itself? This is a deeper, uncomfortable question raised by Rowling that almost seems to suggest that the elaborate edifices that the world creates are wholly absurd and useless and that the true deliverance is in confronting one's own mortality and true meaning in life.

Snape's character opposes Harry in a fundamental way - by depicting the illusion of choice. Harry can never choose the dark side - while Snape actively succumbs to it. Harry can never demonstrate duality, or appear wicked - while Snape's entire intention is to remain concealed until he can be of great use to the forces of good. Ultimately however, both Harry and Snape are agents of good operating in contrasting ways. Once again, through the lens of existentialism J.K. Rowling rotates the narrative around the recurring theme of self-deception as a means to escape one's final end. Her character have to choose between temptations and distractions of the material life and an authentic one; between the apparent drudgery and redundancy of life and finding a higher goal on one's own chosen path.

Harry also must face suffering, grief and loss on his journey. Several ancillary characters in the story sacrifice their lives for the virtuous good, and Harry must question the meaning of such a sacrifice. Not only is he confronted with the terrible twist of fate that would separate him from his parent and thus orphan him, but also with his mortality and the fragility of life - that forces of good can too be vanquished,

and that his fate may ultimately lead him to the same end. Among those lost are Professor Dumbledore - Harry's mentor, who leaves Harry alone on his journey to conquer evil. Dobby - his loyal friend lays down his life so that Harry can live his, acting as a shield as he dies of a mortal wound protecting Harry. Several characters are extinguished without so much of a struggle - representing how absolute death can be, eliminating all that the person stood for in the blink of an eye. His godfather, Sirius, dies without a struggle as he disappears into a magical curtain - never to return again, and Harry, and indeed the reader, is left to ponder the nature of his death. Rowling thus uses 'death' to demonstrate the grand prowess of evil. Thus, the possibility of one's own finite end, one's impermanence, has a strong presence throughout the Harry Potter series.

While Harry remains unyielding to the forces of good, and champions the fight against evil time after time, the reader is left questioning the ultimate outcome of the prophecy. As he faces Lord Voldemort, the reader becomes aware of just how special Harry's character is. Determinism is truly in the details in the case of this series, as Harry acts in a way that finally seals him to what he must do to find his purpose. Throughout the book, Harry's spell of choice is 'Expelliarmus' - a lesser spell that disarms the wielder. As Harry faces his opponent, he casts this lesser spell, while the Lord casts the ultimate killing spell. Even at this moment, Harry does not choose evil to give himself a fighting chance - he merely presents himself as he is - thus completing the prophecy. In doing so, the last vestige of evil - the shard of Voldemort that lives inside Harry is exhumed - thus conquering evil in the true sense. This is the theme of 'meaning' and purpose that foretells that there are choices to be made at every stage in life to ultimately buffer oneself from its farcicality.

The Harry Potter series thus demonstrates itself as the archetypal story of good vs. evil, where the forces of morality must fight against a growing wickedness that threatens to envelop the world. Rowling is thus swaying between nihilism and hope; between randomness and determinism; between destiny and choice - indeed the foundations of existential philosophy.

In the fascinating journey of Harry, the reader accompanies the protagonist as he searches inwardly and outwardly for his purpose, as he fulfills his destiny and ultimately conquers evil. It brings into question the aspirational qualities of a hero and it prompts the reader to dissect and analyze what virtues lend themselves to a purposeful, well lived and meaningful life. Although life may present itself with no inherent meaning, it promises true freedom and choice. Ultimately, it is through our own actions, and creativity that we infuse it with meaning.

Conclusion

Harry Potter's journey begins as an orphan, as a person of no importance literally caught up in the absurdity of his situation living in the cupboard under the stairs, wearing the used clothes of his spoilt cousin and never finding any love. In the normal 'muggle' world he lives a life of hardship, angst and mistreatment. He is constantly forced into situations not of his making that test him again and again. In his heroic struggles to overcome the gigantic threats that life throws at him he is truly alone. However, instead of these experiences shaping him into a nihilistic and defeated human being, he is constantly drawn towards a higher purpose for which he is born.

Harry's is the voice of bravery, loyalty and unwavering virtue. He achieves heroism and grandeur towards the end as he understands the true meaning of the Sorcerer's Stone - not to be possessed to gain immortality or wealth; but only to seek and find it for its own sake - much like the central theme of existentialism - living life to rid oneself of illusions and seek to undertake a meaningful journey *by and for* itself!

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