



A Postmodern Apocalyptic Reading Of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series.

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ABSTRACT: *The popularity of the Harry Potter series has set fire to a debate within the Christian community dividing them into two – those who believe that the story is dangerously subversive to Christianity, and those who highlight the biblical symbolism in the Potter books and the triumph of Christian values like faith, love and the victory of good over evil. Christian morality, as set forth in the Book of Revelation, encourages hierarchical dualism. Binary classifications and accompanying value judgements have evolved to dominate modern-day perceptions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other social issues. The Harry Potter series borrows heavily from the traditional apocalyptic story but Rowling adapts the narrative using a distinctly postmodern style. Doing so challenges Revelation's vision of apocalyptic, binary morality, transcends the apocalyptic dualism and promotes conflict between good and evil. As Elizabeth Rosen's work on postmodern apocalyptic fiction shows, several postmodern authors have challenged the legitimacy of moral systems based on apocalyptic absolutism. This paper argues that Rowling's metanarrative about prejudice in the wizarding world delivers a similar challenge. Rowling presents a blend of the five traditional crucial constituents of the apocalypse and also rejects metanarratives of prejudice to create a postmodern alternative moral system that is not based on binary divisions, but, rather, transcendence of apocalyptic morality.*

KEY WORDS: *apocalypse, dualisms, metanarrative, prejudice, transcendence*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The final book of the New Testament, The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic prophecy that predicts the intersection between heaven, earth, and hell in a final confrontation between the forces of good and evil. Read literally, Revelation is an epistle, or letter, from the prophet John of Patmos to seven churches in Asia, each of which is given a specific message from the Spirit (2:1-3:22). The basic prophecy comes from God and Christ via angelic messenger to John, who writes down predictions about a period of chaos on earth, Christ's second coming and thousand-year reign of peace, Satan's imprisonment and ultimate destruction, and the Last Judgment, when the wicked are cast into a lake of fire (6:1-20:15). According to John, a new heaven and a new earth will replace the old, and the faithful will live with God and Christ for eternity in a heavenly city called New Jerusalem (21:1-22:5).

The apocalyptic prophecy of the Book of Revelation has a history of encouraging powerless groups to seek deliverance in the promise of ultimate divine judgement against their perceived oppressors. It has traditionally been understood as a reassurance that God has a master plan and will eventually deliver the chosen believers from their current experience of suffering and chaos. Elizabeth Rosen calls this apocalypse story "an organizing principle" which offers "a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it" from "a mythology about endings that hovers in the cultural background and is just as real and influential as our myths of origin" (xi). Central to the message of the Book of Revelation is a hierarchical, dualistic vision of moral and immoral absolutes like good and evil. The binary nature of the myth establishes order in part by mandating the superiority of some people, the saved, over others, the doomed. According to Rosen the apocalyptic myth "encompasses a moral dimension" and "is naturally a vehicle for the analysis and criticism of behavior, whether of the individual, nation, or cosmos" (xiii).

In her work, Rosen is careful to define the difference between the apocalyptic myth and the apocalyptic narrative (xxi). The apocalyptic myth of the Book of Revelation assures the faithful they will be rewarded, but it also condemns "the other," sinners, to eternal damnation and rejects any notion of a middle ground between these two extremes. This rigid, binary morality creates a hierarchical value system and limits identity to a

dualistic classification that establishes one as the ideal and the other as inferior. The apocalyptic narrative, however, merely refers to the use of five essential plot elements that define the traditional apocalypse of the Book of Revelation. These five elements are divine authority, receiver of a prophesy, the end of the world, judgement day, and transcendence; together they create a “general plot [that] is discernible whether we examine the Christian apocalypse of John or more ancient, cyclical versions of cosmic destruction and renewal” (Rosen xxi-xxii).

Divinity scholar Adela Yarbro Collins explains, “The Apocalypse handles skillfully the hearer’s thoughts, attitudes, and feelings by the use of effective symbols and a narrative plot that invites imaginative participation. This combination of effective symbols and artful plot is key to the power of apocalyptic rhetoric” (145). What Collins calls “effective symbols and artful plot,” Rosen calls the apocalyptic narrative. This narrative, according to Rosen, can be separated from the Book of Revelation’s myth and “the power of apocalyptic rhetoric” can be appropriated by postmodern authors to promote alternative, non-dualistic moral paradigms. To support her argument, she examines several examples of late twentieth century apocalyptic fiction, including *The Matrix* trilogy, *Watchmen* and other graphic novels by Alan Moore, Terry Gilliam’s films, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Galápagos*, Robert Coover’s metafiction and several of Don DeLillo’s novels. All of these artists implement the plot structure of the five apocalyptic narrative elements of the Book of Revelation but rework the myth “to use it as the most effective vehicle for their social critique” (Rosen xx).

Like the authors of apocalyptic literature mentioned above, J.K. Rowling recognized that the apocalyptic narrative of the Book of Revelation has been a successful tool for social critique and moral education for the past 2,000 years. Rowling’s use of the five basic narrative elements of the Book of Revelation throughout the *Harry Potter* series offers a subversive critique of the traditional myth from within the structure of the apocalyptic narrative itself. This is the defining characteristic of a sub-genre of apocalyptic literature Rosen calls “postmodern apocalyptic fiction.” According to Rosen:

Postmodernism challenges traditional sense-making structures, which it calls grand or metanarratives, refusing to impose one point of view or privilege one kind of “culture” over another... Yet postmodernists have remained interested in the apocalyptic myth, even as they reject the myth’s absolutism or challenge the received systems of morality that underlie it. (xx)

The novels and films Rosen analyzes “possess narrative traits that we recognize as ‘postmodern’—indeterminacy, irony, unstable identity, the mixing of high and low culture, pluralism and multiplicity, skepticism of authority, and skepticism about grand narratives” (Rosen xxvi).

An analysis of how J.K. Rowling meticulously retells and revises the apocalyptic myth of the Book of Revelation to convey a distinctly non-dualistic moral message shows that *Harry Potter* provides a postmodern critique of, and an alternative to, the binary apocalyptic moral system ingrained in modern-day society. The widespread popularity of the series sets fire to a debate within the Christian community dividing them into two, those who believe that the story is dangerously subversive to Christianity, and those who point out the biblical symbolism in the *Potter* books and the triumph of Christian values like faith, love and the victory of good over evil. According to Richard Abanes the novel series is replete with “spiritually dangerous material that could ultimately lead youth down the road to occultism” and endorses “unbiblical values and unethical behavior” (6) whereas critics like John Killinger draw attention to the similarity between the New Testament and *Harry Potter* in an attempt to prove that, ultimately, “the master plot, the one underlying the entire novel, is the critical struggle between good and evil” with *Harry* as a substitute for Christ and *Voldemort*, *Harry*’s arch enemy, corresponding Satan (38).

Abanes once expressed the opinion that “Rowling’s moral universe is a topsy-turvy world with no firm rules of right and wrong or any godly principles by which to determine the truly good from the truly evil” (245). This haziness threatens Abanes’ fundamentalist view of Christian morality, which depends on the western traditional dichotomy of good and evil. The more moderate critic Killinger too attempts to depict each character as eventually ordained to be either good or evil, even though he admits that throughout the narrative, “good sometimes looks like evil...and evil often masquerades as good” (40). Towards the close of his book, nevertheless, he admits that the message of the *Harry Potter* series is to “accept life on its own terms – the evil with the good” and he quickly adds that, “this is the one point at which the Christian vision sticks and can go no further, but must finally remain dualistic; it recognizes that evil cannot entirely be absorbed by good. The devil and his angels must be cast into the lake of everlasting fire, for they will never repent” (Killinger 185-186).

J.K. Rowling has not simply portrayed the unambiguous victory of good over evil; instead, she has presented a struggle to go beyond the apocalyptic dualism that promotes conflict between good and evil. Moreover, she has upheld a substitute for traditional apocalyptic morality by creating characters who do not fit neatly into the good/evil dichotomy. Analysing the *Harry Potter* series as an exemplar of postmodern apocalyptic fiction has significant implications.

Harry Potter, with its heavy Christian symbolism and obvious connections to the New Testament, can hardly be called a secular story; at the same time, without explicitly mentioning God or other theological

elements, can it really be considered a religious story? Certainly, it's far from a fundamentalist retelling of Revelation like that of the *Left Behind* series. By virtue of the major plot elements Harry Potter shares with the Book of Revelation and the alternative moral lesson Rowling uses that plot to teach, one can conclude that the series not only fulfills the criteria Rosen sets for the postmodern apocalyptic fiction genre, but extends them beyond the religious/secular literature binary.

One can say that Rowling's fantastic story about dualism and bigotry in the wizarding world has its foundation in the apocalyptic myth of the Book of Revelation. Rowling's use of a third-person limited narrative voice produces an effect similar to the experience of reading the Book of Revelation. Restricting the audience's knowledge to Harry's experiences conveys the same feeling of tunnel vision evoked by John of Patmos's first-person account in the Book of Revelation. In the traditional story, the prophet never questions the authenticity of his vision, because he receives it from God, the omnipotent divine authority. Furthermore, since the story is told in first person, readers have no reason to doubt John of Patmos when he insists he "received and passed on the Truth as total, complete and forever the same" (Quinby, *Millennial Seduction* 28). Yet Harry is an often-clueless teenage boy. Rowling limits her narration to Harry's point of view, but also intentionally and repeatedly demonstrates to the reader that Harry is an unreliable narrator. Using an unreliable narrator undermines the traditional biblical dualism between the prophet of Christ and the false witness of the Anti-Christ.

Postmodern apocalyptic writers challenge two factors of the traditional apocalyptic story – divine authority and receiver of the revelation – besides preventing the audience from trusting the narrator or the prophet. Rowling allows the readers to question the father figure and the head master of Harry's school, Albus Dumbledore, because, as the novel progresses one gets to understand that he is not as omniscient as he seems at the onset of the novel series. At the end of every book, a conversation takes place between Harry and Dumbledore, the headmaster of Harry's school. Without fail, Dumbledore discloses vital information that finally throws light on Harry's personal experiences throughout the school year. After the first few books, the annual repetition of this scene is laughably predictable. The reasonable assumption, therefore, that Harry never knows all of the facts requires readers to doubt the validity, or at least the scope, of any 'truth' Harry presents as certain and complete. That Rowling effectively demands this scepticism from the reader stands in stark contrast to the apocalyptic ideal of a single Truth revealed to John at Patmos and set down in the Book of Revelation.

According to Quinby, "Apocalypse presents itself as the revelation of absolute Truth" (*Anti-Apocalypse* 66). By asserting that there is only one Truth and only one legitimate moral hierarchy, the Book of Revelation established "the paradigm of so much aesthetic theory that privileges monological originality over dialogical richness" (Quinby, *Millennial Seduction* 26). Bauckham reinforces this "Revelation is overwhelmingly concerned with the truth of God [emphasis Bauckham]. So we should not construe the notion of different imaginative ways of perceiving the world in the vulgar postmodern way that reduces all significant truth to matters of personal preference and ends in nihilism" (160).

Between absolute Truth and vulgar nihilism are Harry's annual conversations with Dumbledore, which demonstrate the anti-apocalyptic argument that "truth itself is dialogical...attained and revealed through communication with the thoughts of others" (Quinby, *Millennial Seduction* 26). Such an understanding of truth is antithetical to "apocalyptic knowledge claims privileging certainty, abstraction, and reductive generalization" (Quinby, *Anti-Apocalypse* 67).

In order to challenge this apocalyptic view of absolute Truth and omniscient holy being, writers of postmodern apocalyptic fiction translate the traditional God figure into secular terms by humanising the deity (Rosen xxiii). Some writers create more than one deity, splitting the traits of the traditional Judeo-Christian God among different characters (Rosen xxiii). On the contrary, Rowling, "conflates the God/Devil binary structure of the traditional apocalyptic paradigm in order to represent a far more shaded morality than Revelation allows" (Rosen 8). In the first four books of the series, Dumbledore is portrayed as powerful, infallible, and all-knowing. Harry (and therefore the audience) knows Dumbledore as the greatest sorcerer in the world, whose awesome "powers rival those of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named at the height of his strength" (*Chamber of Secrets* 17). When Voldemort returns at the end of the fourth book, Harry fully expects Dumbledore to be the saviour of the wizarding world, the only one who possesses the incredible strength and skill necessary to defeat Voldemort.

Throughout the fifth, sixth, and seventh books, this vision of Dumbledore is systematically destroyed. Harry gradually loses faith in Dumbledore as he learns about the more unsavory details of his past. In their annual chat at the end of the fifth book, Harry blames Dumbledore for Sirius's death, and Dumbledore admits to making "an old man's mistakes...I had fallen into the trap I had foreseen, that I had told myself I could avoid, that I must avoid" (*Order of Phoenix* 838). In this scene, not only must Harry accept the fact that the great Dumbledore's plans were deeply flawed, but he also realizes that it is his task to defeat Voldemort. For the first time, Dumbledore is neither all-knowing nor all-powerful. In the sixth book, Harry watches Dumbledore die, leaving no doubt about his mentor's mortality (*Half-Blood Prince* 595-596). The illusion of Dumbledore's god-like invincibility is shattered.

In the seventh book, Dumbledore takes on the qualities of a Devil or Antichrist figure. It is revealed that in his youth, Dumbledore was ambitious, power hungry, single-minded, and above all, committed to 'cleansing' the world of Muggles and Muggle-borns – the very traits Voldemort is famous for. At first, Harry refuses to believe Dumbledore could ever be anything but "the embodiment of goodness and wisdom," he had known, but eventually the evidence against Dumbledore is overwhelming (Deathly Hallows 360). Harry, seeing the world in terms of moral absolutes, reacts by starting to hate Dumbledore. Dumbledore's fall from grace, his transformation from God to Devil, is complete; Harry's feelings about him could not be more different than the respect and adoration he felt in the first four books.

Harry confesses that, "He had thought he knew Dumbledore quite well, but ever since reading [Dumbledore's] obituary he had been forced to recognise that he had barely known him at all" (21). As the God figure, Dumbledore's resistance to classification within a binary moral paradigm is an example of "instability in the religious roles in general [that] suggests the kind of uncertainty about identity which is part of the postmodern variation of the apocalyptic myth" (Rosen 129). When an author creates characters who are not easily divided by "the partition between the chosen and the doomed" he or she takes an important step towards undermining the totalistic "binary structure" and "normative morality" contained in the traditional myth of the saved vs. the damned (Quinby, *Millennial Seduction* 3, 37).

In the Book of Revelation, there's nothing ambiguous about the end of the world, which is the third narrative element of apocalypse. No detail, from the grotesque punishments that will befall the damned, to the heavenly reward waiting for those who are saved, is spared. The water turns to blood, most of humanity perishes, and there's an epic battle at Armageddon. In postmodern apocalyptic fiction, in contrast, "the apocalyptic 'world' which is destroyed can also be flexibly interpreted" (Rosen xxii). Figurative worlds include specific communities, individuals, or even an individual mind (Rosen xxii). Again, Rowling's apocalypse is somewhat of a combination of the two; there are elements of both individual and communal destruction in the last book of the Harry Potter series.

Hogwarts, Harry's school and the centre of the wizarding community, is attacked, and just before Harry learns that he will have to sacrifice himself, he sees that "the situation within the castle had deteriorated severely: The walls and ceiling were shaking worse than ever; dust filled the air, and through the nearest window Harry saw bursts of red and green light so close to the foot of the castle that he knew the Death Eaters must be very near to entering the place" (Deathly Hallows 626). The battle starts to become more personal when Harry witnesses Ron's brother being killed. He reflects, "The world had ended, so why had the battle not ceased, the castle fallen silent in horror, and every combatant laid down their arms?" (638). The Death Eaters do breach the walls of the castle, the death toll mounts, and it becomes clear the students and teachers defending the school have no hope of victory.

Finally, in the midst of this communal destruction is one of the most moving passages of the series, when Harry realizes he must sacrifice himself to save the rest of the wizarding world. "Terror washed over him as he lay on the floor, with that funeral drum pounding inside him... It was over, he knew it, and all that was left was the thing itself: dying" (DH 692). Following the apocalyptic narrative, the end of the world is necessary before Harry and the rest of the wizarding world can achieve transcendence and reach New Jerusalem. The combination of Harry's personal demise and the communal destruction of Hogwarts foreshadows Harry's personal evolution beyond a binary worldview and the wizarding world's transcendence beyond the Gryffindor-Slytherin dichotomy.

The fourth element of the apocalypse is judgement, a particularly difficult element for postmodern writers to adapt, due to "postmodernism's refusal to privilege one culture or point of view over another" (Rosen xxiv). Rosen emphasises that "what we lose when the apocalyptic paradigm is removed as a sense-making structure is a clear sense of good and evil, as well as the corresponding sense of ourselves as a member of one of those groups. In such a universe, the fundamental apocalyptic notion of judgment cannot exist" (163). In Harry Potter, like the Book of Revelation, one side wins, and one side loses. One is left to think whether Rowling is merely perpetuating traditional apocalypticism by celebrating the superiority of good, tolerant people, and condemning bad, prejudiced people.

Finally New Jerusalem is reached. "Tell me one last thing," said Harry. "Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" Dumbledore beamed at him, ... "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?" (DH 723). This exchange takes place at the end of the final book, when Harry meets his (dead) mentor in a dream-like state following Voldemort's second-to-last attempt to kill him. Harry presents Dumbledore with a binary choice, as if "real" and "happening inside my head" are mutually exclusive. As John Granger writes, "Dumbledore's response reveals that he thinks Harry has created a false dichotomy. There is another option to account for his experience than just either/or...there is a nonmaterial (albeit, anything but immaterial) unity between what is real and what is happening in our heads" (Granger, *Lectures* 178-179). Dumbledore casting aside Harry's dichotomy and replacing it with an option that

blurs the distinction between the two extremes is the most literal example of Rowling presenting an alternative to the dualism of the apocalyptic myth.

This exchange with Dumbledore enables Harry transcend the binary morality which engulfed him. This transcendence functions as the New Jerusalem of the story. New Jerusalem, as canonically described in the Book of Revelation, is literally a "great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God" (21:10). Built on "the cosmic mountain where heaven and earth meet," it is a gift from God to the faithful followers that finalizes the division between the saved and the damned (Bauckham 132).

In postmodern apocalyptic stories on the contrary, "New Jerusalem is less a place than a new way of seeing: a new vision. Characters do not inherit a new world. Often, they inherit a new way of understanding the old word. And this new way of understanding allows them to see the old world anew" (Rosen xxiii).

Finally Harry is able to accept this 'New Jerusalem understanding' of transcending into a non-dualistic moral system. In the epilogue, nineteen years after the events in the last chapter, Harry names his middle child Albus Severus, giving him both Dumbledore's and Snape's first names. This is clearly an indication of Harry's personal acceptance of each of these characters' ambiguous moral qualities, further more Albus Severus symbolises the possibility of ending the wizarding world's metanarrative of prejudice.

J.K. Rowling admits that in her story, "undeniably, morals are drawn" (Grossman 2). But she avoids the dualism of the original myth by creating morally ambiguous characters on both sides of the war between Harry and Voldemort. She creates a spectrum of good and evil, instead of two separate and opposing groups, and does not claim to offer any kind of permanent truth about the nature of good and evil. Her judgments are not cross-cultural or universal, unlike in the Book of Revelation, where there is no escape from a final judgement by an all-knowing God. To conclude, Rowling presents a blend of the five traditional crucial constituents of the apocalypse and also rejects metanarratives of prejudice to create a postmodern alternative moral system that is not based on binary divisions, but, rather, transcendence of apocalyptic morality.

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