

The magical allegory of Harry Potter: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2

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Directed by David Yates, screenplay by Steve Kloves, based on the novel by J. K. Rowling

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2 is the eighth and final installment of the long-running film series adapted from the children's fantasy novels by British author J. K. Rowling, centering on the titular half-human boy wizard and his adventures at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Worldwide box office figures for the film now exceed 1 billion dollars, but that in itself says little about the qualities of *Harry Potter*, book or film.

The first Harry Potter film in 2001 was of a generally family-friendly nature, featuring the naive though charming performances of then-child actors Daniel Radcliffe, Emma Watson and Rupert Grint as protagonists Harry, Hermione and Ron. The original actors were retained for the series, literally growing with the characters, as each new film, except the last one, represented another academic year at the Hogwarts School.

With each sequel, the films became grimmer and more violent, even visually darker. Daylight scenes in the final installment, for example, account for a relatively small percent of the 130-minute running time, and the mood is foreboding. Story-wise, all of this connects to the power rivalry of contending factions of wizards and witches and to Harry's deepening personal struggle with the nefarious "dark lord" Voldemort.

As the struggle with Voldemort suggests, the premise of the story is allegorical—good/light against evil/dark—with obvious revivals of the genre traditions of British heroic legend and medieval romance, even though the films have modern elements. Harry, for instance, is an orphan; magical implements choose him; and his mentor is a wizard. This recalls the medieval legend of Arthur, Merlin and the sword in the stone.

Corresponding to the simplification of reality to good and evil, allegory in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* is manifested in the bright/dark clothing, normal/extreme gestures and handsome/haggard physiognomies of the protagonists and antagonists. Character names are also allegorical, some villainous examples being Bellatrix (war

woman), Malfoy (bad faith) and Voldemort (flight of death).

Unsurprisingly, allegory places significant constraints on the film actors, who are forced to put life into characters that are moral abstractions, not people, restricted in manner of behavior, expression and thought. The problem goes not only for the main character roles, but also for secondary and minor character roles, which are even more one-sided and undeveloped in the demographic structure of the magical epic fantasy.

Poor characterization in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* is compounded with pacing problems, flat and slow sequences, sudden bursts of action and a lack of emotional texture. The film apparently tries to make up for these shortcomings with a spectacle of special effects, such as Voldemort's spell bombardment on a magically shielded Hogwarts and the assault of "death eaters," giants, and spiders on the school.

As to the plot of the film, it completes Harry, Hermione and Ron's hunt to destroy Voldemort's six hidden Horcruxes, mysterious magical objects that contain the soul of the "dark lord" and ensure his power of immortality. In the course of the adventure, Harry learns that he is actually a seventh Horcrux, inadvertently made as such when Voldemort cast a spell that killed Harry's parents when the boy wizard was an infant.

The mystery begins to unravel when Harry looks into the teardrop of the dying Severus Snape, a cold teacher at Hogwarts, suspected follower of Voldemort and murderer of Harry's wizard mentor, Professor Dumbledore. As it turns out, however, Snape feigned allegiance to Voldemort and killed Dumbledore at his own request so that Voldemort would have the opportunity to kill Harry and thereby destroy himself.

Prompted by Voldemort's assault on Hogwarts, Harry confronts the "dark lord," is struck down and enters a deathlike dream state in which he reunites with Dumbledore. Afterwards, Harry awakens to deal a fatal spell on his enemy, who turns into ashes. The film ends nineteen years later, as Harry, Hermione and Ron in their thirties (the make-up is weak) send off their children on a magical train to the Hogwarts School.

One should note that there are differences between *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* and the work it takes after. Several story and plot details are either modified or

omitted, though one should not overestimate the literary qualities of the source text. J. K. Rowling has an ability to craft a generally entertaining adventure-fantasy story, but she cannot be described as a profound, original or discerning writer.

Rowling's prose style, for one, suffers from several basic problems, such as comma splices, mixed metaphors, pleonasms, repetition and stock phrases. The vocabulary in her novels is also limited, though this is rather understandable for children's literature and eventually advances as the volumes progress. Besides that, conversation between Rowling's literary characters is often contrived, lacking the effect of spontaneity.

Consider the following passage from the last novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, when Harry, in his dream state, reunites with his deceased mentor:

Harry glanced over his shoulder to where the small, maimed creature trembled under the chair.

"What is that, Professor?"

"Something that is beyond either of our help," said Dumbledore.

"But if Voldemort used the Killing Curse," Harry started again, "and nobody died for me this time—how can I be alive?"

"I think you know," said Dumbledore. "Think back. Remember what he did, in his ignorance, in his greed and his cruelty."

Harry thought. He let his gaze drift over his surroundings. It was indeed a palace in which they sat, it was an odd one, with chairs set in little rows and bits of railing here and there, and still, he and Dumbledore and the stunted creature under the chair were the only beings there. Then the answer rose to his lips easily, without effort.

"He took my blood," said Harry.

"Precisely!" said Dumbledore. "He took your blood and rebuilt his living body with it! Your blood in his veins, Harry, Lily's protection inside both of you! He tethered you to life while he lives!"

"I live . . . while he lives? But I thought . . . I thought it was the other way around! I thought we both had to die? Or is it the same thing?" [1]

It is not a criticism of those who like Harry Potter to say that the writing here is of the formulaic and melodramatic sort, with artificial language and an abstract moralistic view of social life. Understandably, many young people read Rowling to go beyond the limits of their lives and the literary material they are expected or required to read, but her own approach is quite limited. What have other commentators said about Rowling as a writer?

Yale professor and well-known literary critic Harold Bloom wrote in 2000 that the first Harry Potter novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997), was clichéd and "not well written" and that Rowling reconceived Thomas Hughes' Victorian novel *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857) through the

"magical mirror of Tolkien." Bloom added that Rowling had also incarnated a middle-class world "divided not by social classes." [2]

Less astutely, Bloom opined that Rowling "feeds a vast hunger for unreality" and that the mass appeal of Harry Potter is a "mania." On the contrary, the seven popular novels and eight films have more likely resonated with millions of adults and children around the world for the reason that people have realized, intuitively, that something is wrong with the present state of things—that social and artistic life, as they are, are unsatisfactory.

But while the fantasy of Harry Potter tries to resolve certain problems, its allegorical symbolic mode is a distortion of the world. Not history, but *teleology* (Harry the "chosen one"); not economics, but *morality* (good and evil); and not class, but *race* (wizards and humans) are the primary and overarching thematic elements integral to the novels and films. This, indeed, is middle-class fantasy.

Harry Potter, moreover, represents the mythology of the great hero—a special variety of the human race on whom everything depends—who is placed before the crowd and whom the crowd must admire and follow. This is a fundamentally condescending and demeaning idea, translating socially as political and psychological dependence on a small group of elites, not the democratic initiative of the masses of people themselves.

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2 brings to a close a series of films that grew out of juvenile fiction. This was a derivative fantasy story based on allegorical and heroic formulas that conveniently foreordained a person to be a "legend" and "destined" things for him.[3] The character's first name even means "Lord, ruler of the House." It is probably better that the allegory of Harry Potter ends now rather than later.



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