
**J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*
and *the Order of the Phoenix*:
A Political Reading**

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Abstract :

Like J. J. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and many other fantasies, Rowling's *Harry Potter* is rich with allegorical implications that reflect the political anxiety of the era in which it was written. The critics and readers found connections between the events of the early parts of the novel and the historical havoc in world politics, like Hitler and World War II, a thing which Rowling attested in many of her interviews. Still, the texts are still open for other readings. It is possible to draw political parallels with contemporary issues. For instance, the American and British readers have been unable to resist identification with the events which mirror the international campaign on terrorism. This study is a political reading of Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. It sheds light on the role of the Ministry of Magic in the novel and its relation to the governments' policies to misguide the public about the terrorist threats to world powers, prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Keywords: political, terrorism, September 11, Machiavellianism, government

Introduction: Literature Review

Since the publication of British author's, J. K. Rowling's, first installment *Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone* in 1997, criticism on the Harry Potter series mainly focuses on the controversy the installments aroused among the public. Harold Bloom, in an article published in 2000 in *The Wall Street Journal*, questions the literary merits of the series and the literary genre it belongs to, noting that Rowling's work is aesthetically weak and "not well-written" (Bloom, 2000. See also Safire, 2000 and Hensher, 2003). Critics have been generally divided into

supporters and detractors of *Harry Potter*. Novelist and professor A. S. Byatt, for instance, follows in the footsteps of Bloom and criticises Rowling's work, in an article, *Harry Potter and the childish adult*, published in *New York Times* (2003), as a commercially successful, but literarily worthless fictional work.

Page Byam, on the other hand, praises the series not only as juvenile fiction, but as a work of literary merit for adults. Byam compares the work to major literary works written in English:

I side with those who believe that the Harry Potter series not only deserves the attention it is getting because of its imaginative qualities and compelling storyline, but also because of its 'adult' literary merits...the Harry Potter series fits well into 'the great tradition' of British novels that is still taught in college classrooms, beginning with Samuel Richardson, continued by Jane Austen, and culminating in the efforts of Charlotte Bronte" and Charles Dickens. (Byam, 2004)

Byam adds that the argument that the Harry Potter series aroused was mainly triggered by jealousy because of the work's commercial success and the author's subsequent popularity (Ibid.).

Similarly, in a review published in *Topic: The Washington and Jefferson College Review* in 2003, Kathleen McEvoy does justice to Rowling's work by applauding its aesthetic organisation and structural beauty.

Lee Ann Diffendal (2004) questions the Harry Potter series from the perspective of the moralist and religious controversy it aroused among the public, who objected to Rowling's treatment of magic as a fundamental factor in defeating evil. Other critics, like C. W. Neal (2002), answer those critics who believed that the work has a subversive influence on young readers. Neal maintains that the text is rich with spiritual messages, apparent in its apocalyptic end as the good prevails and the evil powers perish. Miranda Maney Yaggi also defends Rowling's work in the face of the stormy critical reaction by trying to prove that J. J. Tolkien's *The lord of rings* was one of the critically acclaimed works that influenced Rowling in writing *Harry Potter*.

In the light of the aforementioned, divided critical views, an attempt to read behind the lines is necessary to give the work its deserved critical merit, apart from its popularity and commercial achievement. Some scholars attempted to read some of Rowling's installments from political

viewpoints. Benjamin Barton, for instance, in *Harry Potter and the half-crazed bureaucracy* (2006), finds in *Harry Potter* a critique of governmental bureaucracy. He observes:

Rowling's scathing portrait of government is surprisingly strident and effective. This is partly because her critique works on so many levels: the functions of government, the structure of government, and the bureaucrats who run the show. All three elements work together to depict a Ministry of Magic run by self-interested bureaucrats bent on increasing and protecting their power, often to the detriment of the public at large. In other words, Rowling creates a public-interest scholar's dream—or nightmare—government. (Ibid.)

Likewise, Nancy R. Reagin (2011) reads Rowling's work as an allegory of Nazi Germany and World War II. She draws some parallels between Adolf Hitler and Lord Voldemort.

This research aims at reading Rowling's fifth installment in the series, *Harry Potter and the order of the phoenix* (2003) (henceforth, *Harry Potter*), from a political standpoint to prove that it is an allegory of pre-war-on-Iraq atmosphere and the policies of the British and American governments to mislead the public through wrong and exaggerated intelligence information concerning Saddam Hussein's possession of mass-destructive weapons.

Harry Potter and the International Campaign on Terrorism

Rowling's fifth installment of Harry Potter's adventures chronicles fifteen-year-old Harry and the challenges that he encounters in his fifth year at Hogwarts, the wizardry school. In this part, Harry endeavours to uncover the mystery of Lord Voldemort, or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and the nightmare of his return. The novel follows the same Bildungsroman style of the previous installments, though it is with more clear coming-of-age overtones in this part. It shows the development of Harry from a timid, young person into a strong character, whose initiative and clever leadership of his group in the wizardry world make him powerful enough to face the evil Lord Voldemort.

Harry has to discover all the secrets that those close to him try to keep intact, hoping to protect him from Voldemort. His journey towards knowledge is not only an external one in which he discovers many things about his past and the dangers he will face in the future. It also provides

him the confidence and maturity that are fundamental in helping him to confront evil. In order to better understand the political message of the text, it is necessary to sum up the main storyline of the events of this installment.

The novel opens with Harry waiting for the beginning of the new year in the wizardry school in the Dursley's, his guardian's, home. He is anxious over the return of Voldemort, after he sees him in his dreams, now incarnated in a human body. His anxiety increases after realising that he is being watched by wizards and witches all his summer holiday. While arguing with his cousin, they are attacked by two Dementors, prison guards from the wizardry realm. Though he is not allowed to use magical powers in the real world, he is forced to use them to defend himself against the horrible guards. This puts him in a difficult situation because he is threatened to be expelled from Hogwarts for violating the rules.

Even Harry's best friends and classmates at Hogwarts, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, are prevented to update Harry of any new news in the wizardry world by the head of the Order of the Phoenix (a group of wizards and witches, who join force to fight Lord Voldemort) Albus Dumbledore. Harry is later surprised when Ron and Hermione inform him that the wizardry world does not believe Harry and Dumbledore, concerning Lord Voldemort's return.

The events escalate as Harry is taken to a secret meeting of the Order of the Phoenix, where he uncovers the secret surrounding Voldemort's evil plans and his search for means to restore his power. He realises that the wizards do not trust Sirius Black, Harry's godfather, because he is the descendent of dark wizards known for their support of Voldemort.

Harry is not allowed to join his classes in Hogwarts when the magic court refuses to accept his justification for his use of magic in the non-magical world, only after Dumbledore provides enough witness in his defense of Harry. But while his close friends are given some appointments, Harry remains on the margin and is no longer trusted as before. He and Sirius Black are ostracised and the latter has to stay home as no one trusts him. This intensifies Harry's disappointment and resentment. But Sirius refuses to obey the orders and follows Harry to Hogwarts Express, disguised as a black dog.

Harry notices some weird things in Hogwarts, including black horses that he alone, together with a girl named Luna, are able to see. Besides, a change in the faculty members is obvious as Albus Dumbledore is replaced by Delores Umbridge as the new Headmaster of Hogwarts because, as it is revealed later on, Minister Cornelius Fudge views him as a rival, trying to take his position. This is the main reason that Fudge denies all the news of Voldemort's return as being false, just to weaken Dumbledore's authority. A stiff professor specialised in Defense Against Dark Arts, Delores is later revealed to be assigned by the Ministry of Magic. Her stifling policies differ drastically from the practical ways of Dembledore because she prevents the students from practicing magic and teaches them only theoretically.

Harry is forced by the new rules at Hogwarts to form a club, which they call Dumbledore's Army (D.A.), to learn how to practice dark arts, which is suggested by Hermione. Though they agree to meet in a secret place, they learn from Sirius, who keeps sending messages from his image in the fireplace, that they are being monitored by Umbridge. But the group break up when one of the D.A. reveals the secret of this organisation to Umbridge, which leads the latter to send Harry, his fellow members, and some officials out of Hogwarts. Dumbledore finds himself obliged to force Umbridge to free Harry from any charge of organising the group, but he has to escape capture by the ministry.

Harry is worried when he hears the members of the Order of the Phoenix discussing Voldemort and the possibility of his haunting influence on Harry. They believe that Harry is possessed by Voldemort after Harry has a dream of a serpent attacking Ron's father, Mr. Weasley. He is believed to be responsible for the attack as he can see behind the snake's eyes, which he later realised that it indeed happens. He contemplates running away to protect his friends from Voldemort, only to be discouraged by Dumbledore.

Harry is alarmed by a dream he has while in his history exam in which he sees Sirius being tortured by Voldemort, which he takes as real. While trying to urge his friends to save Sirius, Harry is captured by Umbridge and her supporters at Hogwarts. Umbridge uses all the magical means she can to force Harry confess his plans to her. Hermione and Harry claim to show Umbridge the plan, taking her to the forest, where she is attacked by centaurs because she is an arrogant human. Harry and

his group, now free from censorship and tyranny, are able to act on their own to save Sirius and to restore order at Hogwarts.

The dream of Sirius's torture is later revealed to be a trap set by Voldemort to snare Harry to come to the Ministry of Magic and Harry and his friends are involved in a battle with the Death Eaters. They fight until they are rescued by the members of the Order of the Phoenix. Sirius dies in the fight and Harry confronts Voldemort, only to be saved by Dumbledore. The novel ends with Harry's discovery of his past when Dumbledore speaks of his connection with the dark Lord Voldemort and the prophecy that says that either Voldemort or Harry has to die at the end.

Readers during the time of the novel's publication identified with the events and the Ministry of Magic's attempt to conceal serious information from the public, which echoes the US government's impractical handling of similar information concerning Al-Qa'ada's threats to attack the states (See Shortland and Dunne, 2019). Some references have been made by critics, like Steven Fielding (2014), that the Ministry of Magic in *Harry Potter* and its irresponsible and totalitarian policies represent the author's commentary on the international War on Terror.

In an interview, Rowling affirms that the events in the novel are similar to the political situation of the time and the War on Terror: "... what Voldemort does, in many senses, is terrorism, and that was quite clear in my mind before 9/11 happened....but there are parallels, obviously....These things just happen, it's human nature. There were some very startling parallels at the time I was writing it" (*TheLeakyCauldron.org*, 2005).

Alfonso Cuarón, the director of the third part of the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the prisoner of Azkaban*, observes that the evil Voldemort has many things in common with both George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein as: "They both have selfish interests and are very much in love with power. Also, a disregard for the environment. A love for manipulating people" (Power and Gordon, 2003). Meanwhile, he identifies Minister Fudge as being similar to the British Prime minister Tony Blair. This is because, as Cuarón opines Blair is "the ultimate politician. He's in denial about many things. And everything is for the sake of his own persona, his own power. The way the Iraq thing was

handled was not unlike the way Fudge handled affairs” in the novel (Ibid.)

In an interview, Rowling comments on the political message in *Harry Potter*, saying: “You should question authority and you should not assume that the establishment or the press tells you all of the truth” (TheLeakyCauldron.org, 2007). Like the Ministry of Magic, which censors the information and controls the media, represented by the Daily Prophet, the wizarding newspaper, the US and UK governments manipulate the public opinion to misguide the people and the international community about the mass destructive weapons the Iraqi government was supposed to have. The Ministry tries to maintain the secrecy of the news of Voldemort’s return. Unlike the authorities in the Ministry of Magic who do not exaggerate the threat represented by Voldemort’s resurrection, the UK and the US officials made use of the impending terrorist threats in the aftermath of the September attacks on the US as the main pretext of their international campaign on Iraq to overthrow the Ba’ath regime.

In the novel, Minister Fudge tries to maintain his authority by discrediting Dumbledore’s urges to take precautions to be able to face Voldemort and his expected return into power. All his endeavours to disempower Dumbledore are only because he views him as a challenge to his political position. Dumbledore is aware of Fudge’s intentions to overthrow his political rivals and his policies of denial. This is obvious when he says: “We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward” (Rowling, 2003).

Similarly, Umbridge, the new Defense Against Dark Arts professor at Hogwarts, is depicted as a Machiavellian character, trying to maintain her position as the head of the school of magic. She works as an informant to the Ministry and inspects all the faculty members and the students for any sign of disconformity or conspiracy. She also intrudes in the professors’ classes and bullies them while attending the lessons herself. The students at Hogwarts start to suspect Umbridge and the Ministry of Magic of concealing the reality of the Death Eaters’ break-out of prison.

Harry is detained for a week for disseminating the news of Voldemort’s return, which Umbridge claims to be a lie. As a punishment Umbridge orders Harry to carve something on the back of his hand. Both Harry and Dumbledore are treated as a threat to the Ministry of Magic

and its policies. Harry learns from Sirius that both are watched by the ministry through Umbridge because they suspect them of being conspirators.

No one in the story behaves foresightedly, except for Hermione whose advice to Harry is fundamental in helping him to act properly in critical times, especially when his mentor, Dumbledore is absent. Dumbledore tries to keep all the information from Harry, because he believes that he is too young to know these dangerous details, as he justifies to Harry at the end of this installment: “I cared more for your happiness than your knowing the truth” (Rowling, 2003). But Harry is too curious to discover the truth. Dumbledore later regrets keeping the information from Harry after he realises Harry’s strong will and potentials. This makes him responsible and worthy of the trust, as Dumbledore confesses to him: “I know you have long been ready for the knowledge I have kept from you for so long, because you have proved that I should have placed the burden upon you before this” (Ibid.). He ultimately confesses his mistake of hiding the necessary information from Harry, until this leads to the death of Sirius Black: “For I see now that what I have done, and not done, with regard to you, bears all the hallmarks of the failings of age....An old man’s mistake” (Rowling, 2003).

Rowling’s reading public, thus, identified with the events of her fifth installment of the Harry Potter series because they were able to see the implied message in the text. The US and the British governments similarly practiced Machiavellian policies to deceive the public. Whether Lord Voldemort stands for Bush, Blair, or Saddam Hussein, those who have been most harmed by their practices have been the subjects under their rule.

Conclusion

Harry Potter is, no doubt, not merely a book written to entertain young readers as many critics believe it to be. It also contains an underlying political critique. In order to better understand the text, one should read behind the lines to be able to see that it is not only a story that explores the struggle between good and evil. The implied political message and the reaction of the adult reading public answer all critics who claim that the novel is merely children’s literature.

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قراءة سياسية في رواية هاري بوتر وجماعة العنقاء

ل جي كي رولنج

الملخص :

كما هو الحال في رواية سيد الخواتم ل جي كي تولكيان وكثير من اعمال الفنتازيا الاخرى تعج سلسلة هاري بوتر القصصية للكاتبة جي كي رولنج بالمضامين المجازية والتي تعكس المخاوف السياسية التي زامنت الفترة التي كتبت فيها هذه الاعمال. ولقد وجد النقاد والقراء على حد سواء صلة وثيقة ما بين احداث الاجزاء الاولى لهذه السلسلة القصصية والدمار التاريخي التي تسببت به السياسة الدولية لهتلر والتي ادت الى اندلاع الحرب العالمية الثانية الامر الذي اكدته رولنج في كثير من مقابلاتها الصحفية. ولا تزال هذه النصوص قابلة لدراسات سياسية اخرى حيث بالإمكان مقارنة الاحداث بقضايا العصر الراهن. فعلى سبيل المثال وجد القراء الامريكان والانكليز ترابط واضح بين احداث هذه السلسلة والحملة العالمية لمحاربة الارهاب. تركز هذه الدراسة على الرؤيا السياسية لرواية هاري بوتر وجماعة العنقاء ل رولنج. وتسلط الضوء على دور وزارة السحر في الرواية وعلاقتها بالسياسات الحكومية للقوى العظمى والتي تهدف الى تضليل الرأي العام حول التهديدات الارهابية التي كانت تقض مضاجع هذه الدول قبيل اجتياح العراق في عام ٢٠٠٣.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سياسي، الارهاب، هجمات سبتمبر، الميكافيلية، الحكومة.