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Harry Potter and the Black-and-White Thinking

Some Christians believe that the works of Joanne K. ROWLING are anti-Christian because they deal with magic and magic is somehow alternative or dangerous for Christian faith. These censors forget that children's books have certain characteristics and, as the Italian philosopher and writer, Umberto Eco said, maybe they are afraid of magic because they are the only ones to believe magic is real.

CHILDREN BOOKS DESCRIBE REALITY

Unlike these extremists, children unconsciously perceive the difference between fiction and reality surprisingly well and they know that magic does not exist. Fairy tales and children's books explain the real world to the little ones who need to understand it in their own language. Thus, many unpleasant realities are told to children in a metaphoric way.

For example, no child would ever think to find a wolf disguised as her or his grandmother: the wolf in *Little Red Hiding Hood* is a clear metaphor of violence and murder of children, as the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. On the other hand, ways of escaping the "villains" are told in children's books: Cinderella teaches humbleness and telling the truth means the end of Pinocchio's problems.

Jesus followed the same narrative pattern when teaching by parables. What is the Kingdom of God like? We could not understand a "scientific" description of it. Jesus answers in a way that we may understand: the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, a shepherd searching for the lost sheep, a master inviting to a banquet, and so on. The mustard seed, the shepherd, and the master are fictional characters. This does not mean that the parables are false, because they truly talk of the Kingdom, which is real.

The Harry Potter story is very complete. One can find in it most of the patterns of children's literature, as it is the magic story of a noble orphan at college. It is a universal story, where everyone can find something for oneself, like in a rainbow. Can we decipher a specific relationship between ROWLING's works and black-and-white thinking? Let us examine how the author presents a few pairs of opposites in the story of Harry Potter.

WITCHES AND WIZARDS VS. MUGGLES

This is a crucial pair of opposites. Muggle is one of the many words invented by ROWLING to describe something related to the parallel magic world. Muggle means non-magician. Harry lives with a terrible Muggle family, the Dursleys: Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and cousin Dudley. Petunia is the sister of Harry's mother, Lily, who did not belong to a magicians' family, but had the skills to become a witch. This is a breach in the dualistic organisation of two parallel societies: it is impossible to divide humans in two pure categories.

Yet, many people on both sides like this dualism. In fact, the Dursleys affirm it by spoiling Dudley and bullying Harry, who does not have a

bedroom, but lives worse than an animal in a storeroom under the stairs. They are ashamed of their forced relationship with the weird son of the disgraceful Lily. On the other side, there are "pure-blood" witches and wizards who dislike non-magicians (the word "Muggle" reminds of "muggins", a synonymous for stupid) and hate the so-called "Mudbloods", ie. non-pure-blood magicians.

As a consequence of this dualism, at the time of Harry's birth, the Death Eaters, a secret fellowship of hooded magicians (remember the Ku Klux Klan?), starts to kill as many Muggles and Mudbloods as possible, together with the magicians who tried to stop them. Their leader, the Dark Lord Voldemort, killed Harry's parents, James and Lily; Lily died protecting baby Harry with her body. Then, he tried to kill Harry, but his death curse turned against himself. As a result, Voldemort lost all his powers and the Death Eaters disappeared, while little Harry only got a thunderbolt-shape scar on his forehead and became famous all over the magicians' world.

Eleven years later, Harry starts to go to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. There, he meets the children of the Death Eaters, who insult his friend Hermione and his mother's memory, because they are Mudblood.

RICH VS. POOR

Another classical dualism is based on wealth. Harry's rival at school is Draco Malfoy, a spoiled son of a rich pure-blood (and former Death Eater) family. Malfoy continuously bullies Harry's friend, Ron Weasley, not because of his blood (the Weasleys are an old family of magicians), but for their poor economic condition. The insults the Weasleys (red-haired and six-children-family) receive from the Malfoys (blond and one child) particularly



remind of the racist remarks of some English people towards the Irish, and generally other similar racist dualistic behaviour.

Harry Potter overcomes this pattern, because, even if he has inherited a fortune from his parents, he respects the Weasleys and is very careful not to offend Ron's pride by offering him money as to a beggar.

Harry's wealth brings us to a possible Biblical parallel. He is extremely rich in the magicians' society, while when he is home at the Dursleys, he does not even have a decent dress and he is underfed. In fact, Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon are eager to demonstrate how little value Harry has. It reminds us of Jesus' words "you will have a treasure in heaven" (Mark 10:21).

In fact, Harry's situation is apparently dualistic in itself. The Dursleys dress him as a slave and treat him worse than a pet. On the other hand, when Harry is at school, he is the school champion, the hero who saved the world from Voldemort: he is socially, spiritually and economically rich. His relationship with the magicians' society is eschatological: it is the place where he gets his reward. This reminds us of a Christian who hungers and thirsts for righteousness.

Still, Harry's behaviour overcomes dualism, since he does not use his new wealth in order to get to the "other side". He does not accept this unjust order and rebels: he does not take revenge on the Dursleys and he refuses the Malfoys' behaviour towards the Weasleys. This sounds as a very Christian behaviour towards eschatology.

GOOD VS. EVIL

In such a plot, the relationship between good and evil is crucial. From Harry's point of view, the bad guys killed his parents, who were the good guys. This is a typical "involuntary" black-and-white thinking: it is a quite understandable and reasonable reaction. This mental pattern is then projected to the rest of Harry's relationships. His friends are the good guys and his enemies are the bad guys. This is the dualistic pattern that Harry has more difficulty to overcome, due to the dramatic way he became an orphan.

The inadequacy of such a "good guys vs. bad guys" scheme is evident for a very interesting character: Professor Severus Snape. He is slippery, he finds joy in punishing Harry and his friends and in awarding his enemies, he is the head of the students' house rival of Harry's, he is frustrated because he teaches "Potions" instead of his favourite subject "Defence from the Dark Arts"; if it was not enough, he is dressed in black and his name reminds of a severe snake. Well, every time the school is in danger or Voldemort tries to come back and to kill Harry, the boy accuses Snape.

Still, the headmaster, professor Albus Dumbledore (*albus* in Latin means "white"!), who protected Harry since his birth and who is considered the greatest wizard of all times, says that Snape is trustful. Even so, the boy points his finger at Snape. Surely Snape is an obscure character. Once he was among Voldemort's followers; yet, he betrayed the Dark Lord and his fellow Death Eaters. All the same, in every book (till now, at least), Snape is not only innocent, but he also saves Harry from any efforts to kill him.

It is difficult for Harry to admit that people who do not like him are not automatically bad. When shadows on the myth of James Potter arise little by little, it is even more difficult for Harry to overcome his black-and-white thinking. Still, ROWLING wants the reader to make this distinction.

It is easier to live in a world divided between good guys and bad guys. Moreover, it is easier to reach power and consensus by pointing one's finger on the bad guys, who are not automatically bad people: they are just the "others". For example, Adolf HITLER indicated the "Jews" and Josif STALIN the "Enemies of the People". Black-and-white thinking is often "successful" in human history. Let us just remember that Dietrich BONHOEFFER in his *Ethics* warned that success it is not automatically a characteristic of good.

SERIOUSLY OVERCOMING DUALISM

Even if Muggles have the same rights as witches and wizards, even if rich people should respectfully relate to poor people, even if nasty people cannot automatically be considered bad people and nice people cannot automatically be considered good people, there must be a way to distinguish people. Overcoming dualism does not mean erasing differences. Overcoming dualism is not a trivial task. In fact, the story of Harry Potter does not consider all the characters at the same level.

In the fourth book, in his end-of-the-year speech, professor Dumbledore explains the violent death of a student: "He was a person who exemplified many of the qualities which distinguish his student's house: he was a good and loyal friend, a hard worker, he valued fair play. I think that you have the right to know exactly how it came about. He was murdered by Lord Voldemort. The Ministry of Magic does not wish me to tell you this. It is my belief, however, that the truth is preferable to lies and that any attempt to pretend that he died as the result of an accident, or some sort of blunder of his own, is an insult to his memory. Remember him. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right, and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember his name."

So, there are no rigid criteria but a clear methodology. As the first point, one should remember; memory without revenge, keeping history in mind can help overcoming dualistic patterns. The second point is justice: if a good, kind and brave boy is intentionally killed, the murderer is not to be followed, because there are evident limits that should not be crossed. As a third point, it is better and more respectful to be sincere. Quoting a book on the history of WSCF, it seems to me that the way suggested by ROWLING to overcome black-and-white thinking is by "seeking and serving the truth", remembering that the seeking moment is no less important than the serving moment. Finally a question to Christian censors, who are afraid of Harry Potter: is this not a Christian message?

Suggested Reading

- ROWLING Joanne K., *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London, 1997.
 ROWLING Joanne K., *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. London, 1998.
 ROWLING Joanne K., *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. London, 1999.
 ROWLING Joanne K., *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London, 2000.
 ROWLING Joanne K., *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London, 2005.

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