

## **A Comparison of Opinions on the Most Famous Wizard in the World: The double face of Harry Potter**

### **Not the Power of Success but the Humbleness of Giving Himself By Paolo Gulisano**

The Harry Potter story has come to its conclusion: in Italy the translation of what has been announced as the last episode of the series has been published; seven books that narrate the adventures and the growing up (from 11 to 18 years old) of the main character, Harry, during his scholarly period in the school of witchcraft and wizardry 'Hogwarts'. Each volume of the book tells the story of one year at the school. These fantasy tales, written for both children and adolescents, for a generation that read little more than text messages have achieved extraordinary success and have captivated millions of adult readers as well.

"There is more truth and wisdom in the world of fairy tales than there is in the world of alleged rationalism" wrote G.K. Chesterton, the great English compatriot of J.K. Rowling; and in the tale of the young wizard of Hogwarts, wisdom is not lacking. Behind the astonishing adventures of the various characters one can see the anthropological vision of the author that describes the context of the postmodern world; leading the reader from a vision of an individualist selfish man, towards a vision of a man lead by moral values, such as the giving of himself, the choice of good, self-sacrifice, friendship and love. The author writes a tale for children, trying to transfer to them her concept of good not by using moral discourse, but by trying to lead the reader to understand that "to do good" is the right thing to do. Therefore it becomes clear that success without effort, wealth and eternal life on this earth are nothing but illusions, and that the only things that really count are friendship, love and commitment.

The story is set in contemporary England and the hero is a teenager; an orphan since the age of one whose parents have been killed by the evil Voldemort, a powerful wizard, whose ambition is to rule the world, but who finds an obstacle in the Potter family, in particular due to the love of Harry's mother who had given her life for his sake.

In her saga the author points out her vision of post-modern man, who looks for safety in material goods, who uses others as objects at his disposal, who boasts of superiority in order to affirm himself, finds in the end that he fears everything that goes beyond his little knowledge. He is afraid because much of the reason of the previous centuries has deluded him: from great ideologies have come Nazi concentration camps and Russian Gulags, leading to present times when the president of a leading country can push a button to trigger a nuclear war and thus the end of life on the earth. This is the man that has lost God and therefore doesn't know himself either. He wants to own himself, but in truth he is owned by the material things that belong to him. This is the man that has no hope since he has no more sky to look at. This is the man that doesn't know any longer how to be a creature of his Creator, because he has renounced Him. This is the man of indifference that doesn't ask himself questions on his origins, or on his future; he lives every day building up new needs because consumerism has turned him into a consumer of things.

Voldemort is the symbol of the man who puts himself at the centre of the universe, and from being a creature of God he tries to turn into the creator himself; with the illusion that with power everything is possible to him. However Voldemort has a weak side that will appear throughout the other volumes of the story: he has a great fear of death, since after death all he can see is nothing. This is typical of a man that has lost sight of the horizon that transcends him.

From here comes the distressing search for the myth of pleasure, of a long life on this earth and a fear of death. The desire for an immortal life that Voldemort wishes for is the same as that of many scientists and modern researchers: we think for a moment about the utopian promises of biology, biotechnology, computers and robotics.

Rowling puts aside this tragic evidence of post-modernity by moving away and trying to illustrate her vision of man and life, by using a particularly apt and intelligible style for children, at whom the book is aimed.

Harry, the main protagonist of the book, after having lived a childhood without any real meaningful relationships, always subject to harassment, is unaware of his true identity until something special happens (the arrival of the letter which asks him to Hogwarts), which gives start to a period of formation. Fundamental for the development of Harry is the opportunity for relationships that the new life presents him with: From those with persons that love him; his friends, the game warden Hagrid and the Silent headmaster; to those with persons that despise him; Professor Snape and the Malfoy family. Harry learns from these relationships how to know himself, to appreciate himself, even to fight to defend his self and others. He discovers a part of himself that he did not know; a world of feelings that enriches his journey and helps him to grow in awareness of others and of whom he is facing himself.

In this journey of perfecting his nature, these values are far more decisive than that of the magic, which represents the most striking element of the stories (and that has raised concerns in many educators), which plays a spectacular and enchanting function in the eyes of the little readers, but that's not all. Harry, entering into the world of the magicians, discovers that magic is not a game for boys; that it is not enough to have a magical wand to resolve problems, but that it takes a lot study and toil to learn the art of magic. The same author gives good evidence in the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, where Hagrid explains to Harry that there exists a Ministry of Magic, and Harry questions: "But what does a Ministry of Magic do?" "Well, their main job is to keep it from the Muggles (non-magical people) that there are still witches and wizards up and down the country." "Why?" "Why? Harry, because everyone would want magic solutions to their problems" (pp. 51). Or further more, when it is said: "There is a lot more to magic, Harry quickly found out, than waving your wand and saying a few funny words." (pp. 99).

As the great Irish writer C.S. Lewis, author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, wrote; there exists "a bigger magic" than that of sorcerers and necromancers. In a world such as the contemporary one, where there does not seem to exist an objective truth to adhere to, but only the subjective truth that each person has created, Rowling also presents her concept of truth. The truth is presented as something wonderful and terrible to be handled with caution, as something precious that can not be manipulated at will, according to one's own interests.

There is another aspect that the author wants to communicate: that it is not the great heroic deeds that count, although they are worthy, but that it is the small altruistic gestures made by less-gifted people that are much more precious. The emphasis is not on the power of success, but on the humility of self-giving. Weakness is the final winner, not the strength of the muscles. Evident is the call to another great Christian author of England of the twentieth century, J.R.R. Tolkien, whose heroes are the small, humble Hobbits; the exact opposite of the arrogant superheroes, who have the pretension that they are totally self-sufficient, and wish to dominate the world. And as in Tolkien, Rowling is also

strong on the theme of death. This theme is at first sight surprising in a book for children, and also because in today's world the theme of death is often largely hidden from children. In this story, instead it is well-defined and "central". There is talk of the reality of death, immortality, and the suggestion that something may exist beyond.

With the expression "central theme of death" one understands that this carries the story, and that the sub-plot is the gift of her life by his mother to save her son Harry. Several times this episode is revisited to highlight the power of love in such a gesture. In the myth of Harry Potter then it is possible to find an intelligent reading of the age in which we are living. With this background of symbols, metaphors, direct and indirect references, and the use of mythology, a wise reading of the current times is present. It is not the power, it is not the success, it is not the easy life that leads to the truest and most profound joys, but it is friendship, selflessness, sacrifice, and the adherence to a truth not built on an image of man himself.

Man has great desires (as in the mirror of desire), but he cannot change to satisfy these needs right away: if he tries to do so he will lose his own human identity; instead he is called to comply with a purpose that is bigger than himself. Where does this purpose come from? Rowling does not state this clearly, but she leaves the question open; the question that arises whenever man tries to understand the meaning of his own existence.

## **A Wrong Image of the Hero**

**By Edoardo Rialti**

In the success of Harry Potter by J.K. Rowling, many people have seen a parallel with the great fantasy works by J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis; Christian authors of the most-loved fairy tales of the twentieth century. Two men that with the pure beauty of their works have done for an endless number of people what many others have not been able to do or did not want to do: they have exposed them to transcendence, to the infinite beauty of the great providential story in which "we live, we move and we exist".

However, although on the surface there may apparently be many points in common, the imaginative source and the educational proposal at the base of Rowling's novels is very different from that of Tolkien and Lewis, and communicates a vision of the world and of man that is full of errors and deeply dangerous suggestions; and these are all the more seductive because they are interposed with half-truths and enthralling writing. But as Lewis warned "poisons, as they become sweeter, do not stop killing." The truly great fantasies in healthy western tradition have always been of a window opened on the profound order of the created universe and on mankind. Tolkien in his major essay on fairy tales, recalls that the narrator of fairy tales can move away from the physically-created universe, but not its moral order: we can imagine a universe illuminated by a green sun, but we must not succumb to the temptation to present as a positive reality the situation where spiritual and moral structures are reversed or confused: a world where evil is good.

This is exactly what happens in Harry Potter. Although single positive values can be found in the story, at the heart of this tale witchcraft is proposed as a positive ideal; violent manipulation of things and persons thanks to occult knowledge and the prerogative of the few: the ends justifies the means, since the wise, the chosen, the intellectual know how to control the dark powers and turn them into good, isn't it so? This is the "civilisation of the machines" against which Lewis warned us. Bernanos and John Paul II have covered this as well.

This is a deep and serious lie, the ancient Gnostic temptation of joining salvation and the truth with a secret knowledge; that is why Harry Potter is nevertheless rich in Christian values, but they are detached from the real source that makes them be, the true order of things. The protagonists of fairy tales have always been normal boys involved in an extraordinary adventure: magic has always been used as a visual representation of the forces of evil that threaten the way, or, on the positive side, as a visual image of grace: the wise magicians and good fairies represent providence that does not leave us alone on our journey. But these are precisely the powers that can accompany or impede man, and not powers that man his self should obtain to dominate and win. These powers are vested only to God and his messengers, as we are warned in Holy Scripture.

Tolkien himself took to clarify this when he wrote that the world of fairy tales "could possibly be translated into a more appropriate manner with magic - but this is a magic with particular means and power, the antithesis compared with the vulgar tricks of the industrious and scientific magician" And then added that "I used magic previously, but I should not have done so: magic should be left to the operations of the magician (...), magic produces, or claims to produce, an alteration in the primary world (...). It is not an art, but a technique; what it wants is power in this world, the domination of things and will."

He is always wise to distinguish between "art, or magic"; the wonderful good that exposes us to the beauty of creation, and the great tragedy that takes its place

from the "treacherous fraud of magicians." Harry Potter is precisely this industrious and scientific magician. As a teacher I can well verify the harmful influence of such a proposal on my students. The protagonists of the great fairy tales do not ever become magicians, and the seduction of magic has always had extremely serious and highly destructive consequences: the stories of Tolkien and Lewis tell about the rejection of magic and power, not of a certain power or a certain magic, but of power and magic per-se. There is no hero more antithetical to Harry Potter than Tolkien's young man Frodo, or Lewis's Pevensie brothers. Their paths are paths of hard work, offerings and dispossession.

It is this extraordinary discovery of authentic Christianity, in which the protagonist of the story is not exceptional man, as in ancient paganism and its fresh outbreaks in today's ideologies, but the man who says yes, so it is, to the initiatives of the mystery of God. It is this that extols and enhances beyond the imaginable the human experience of each one of us, whereas books like Harry Potter show a blatant disregard for "muggles"; common men who do not have magic. It is no longer taught that there are bad things and to reject evil in itself, but only that there are forces to be subdued. This is truly "diabolical", as opposed to "symbolic". Therefore fundamentally we are told that certain things are not evil in themselves, so long as they are used for a good purpose: violence becomes good, if in the right hands and with the right people, perhaps even in the right doses. Harry Potter proposes a wrong and morally harmful image of a hero, an areligious image that is even worse than an explicitly antireligious proposal: the devil in Holy Scripture does not ever say "There is no God", but offers the much more subtle seduction of "You shall be like God", whether he is there or not you will not have any more need of his love, because you will have the same power.

Harry Potter apparently refers to the same narrative form used by Tolkien and Lewis, but empties the meaning of its significance. It is no coincidence that Rowling's books do not teach true transcendence, but vague new-age spirituality. This is true escapism; of escape from reality, since they let you think that we would be happy "if": if we had certain powers, if we had some technique unknown to others, instead of finding out that we are loved and respected for what we are by someone who is better, wiser and greater than we are, and who guides our lives and our journey.

Here we have the "morbid illusion" that Tolkien warned us against: the illusion of a power that appeals to the desire for hidden and magic formulas that Lewis sharply defined as "spiritual lust". The significant increase in interest in black magic and Satanism among young Harry Potter readers should make us think and worry as Fr. Gabriele Amorth reminded us. Therefore the judgement the then Cardinal Ratzinger expressed on the serious criticism of Harry Potter by the German journalist, Gabriele Kuby, sounds evermore profound: "It is a good thing that you clarify the case of Harry Potter, since it contains some subtle seductions that work in depth and with great effect, and that corrupt young Christians in their souls even before they are fully formed".

**END.**

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