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“A Power Beyond the Reach of Any Magic”: Mythology in Harry Potter

Cover Page Footnote

Daniella Rizza, FCRH 2011, is from Long Island, New York. She is an English major and an Italian minor. She researched Harry Potter and mythology last semester for her honors senior thesis under the guidance of Rev. Martin Chase, S.J. This fall, she plans on pursuing a master’s degree in childhood education.

“A Power Beyond the Reach of Any Magic”: Mythology in *Harry Potter*

Daniella Rizza, FCRH '11

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels have over the last decade become a worldwide phenomenon, but why? It is perhaps because of the mythical elements that underlie Harry's story, particularly the myths of the child and the hero. Comparing the Potter novels to works by mythological theorists Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, it is clear how Rowling both uses and updates traditional mythological structures and elements in the novels. The *Harry Potter* novels both incorporate the standard myths of the child and the hero, which accounts for the series' immense ability to grab the reader, and update these myths, making Harry's quest even more accessible to the modern audience in its rejection of a high-born, kingly hero. Instead, the series exalts a hero that destiny does not create whose quest is more democratic, necessarily involving collaboration with many others.

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a number of trials along the way. In order to defeat Voldemort, Harry must first destroy six Horcruxes, external items into which Voldemort places pieces of his soul, before he can finally battle Voldemort. Harry's heroic mission, contained mostly in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the final novel in the series, has parallels with the hero quest theories of Jung and Joseph Campbell.

In his discussion of the myth of the child, Jung claims “the child in mythology represents ... the archetypal child, who symbolizes life's possibilities.”¹ Jung argues that the goal of childhood is individuation, which is completed “from the synthesis of conscious and unconscious elements in the personality.”² The end result of individuation is what Jung calls the Self, “this wholeness that transcends consciousness.”³ Along the way, Jung's child hero confronts both “miraculous birth and the adversities of early childhood—abandonment and danger through persecution.”⁴ The element of abandonment is particularly important, for “‘Child’ means something evolving toward independence. This it cannot do without detaching itself from its origins: abandonment is therefore a necessary condition, not just a concomitant symptom.”⁵ Jung also notes a common paradox present in myths of the child, who “is on the one hand delivered helpless into the power of terrible

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enemies and in continual danger of extinction, while on the other he possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity.”⁶ Jung heavily influences Campbell, but Campbell at times diverges from Jungian concepts in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell does not elaborate upon or care much about the hero’s childhood—one such way in which he wanders from Jung—but he too prescribes that the hero has some sort of miraculous birth, arguing that “the makers of legend have seldom rested content to regard the world’s great heroes as mere human beings who broke past the horizons that limited their fellows and returned with such boons as any man with equal faith and courage might have found.”⁷

At the surface level, Harry seems to match up to the implications that Jung and Campbell make about a special child of some sort of high birth or prodigious inborn skill. The series begins with an infant Harry, who has just inexplicably survived a Killing Curse cast by Lord Voldemort directly after Voldemort kills Harry’s parents, Lily and James Potter, with the same curse. For “eleven years,” Voldemort and the Death Eaters, his followers, tortured and killed many people in order to establish a world order where wizards would dominate Muggles, the non-magic people from whom the wizards hide their powers in a secret Wizarding world.⁸ Harry’s feat is remarkable, for not only has he survived an attack from the darkest wizard of all time, but he also has become the only known survivor of Avada Kedavra, the Killing Curse, which “has no countercurse.”⁹ The Killing Curse bounced back upon Voldemort and seemingly killed him. Harry’s ability to survive this attack from the wizard so feared that wizards cannot even utter his name certainly reflects the supreme powers associated with Jung’s “child” and Campbell’s “hero’s childhood.”

Though Harry appears to have been provided with superior powers at birth, he in fact does not have the inborn skill or royal title which Jung and Campbell attribute to a child hero. As a wizard living in the Wizarding world, Harry is the equivalent of a “mere human being” who is not endowed with any spectacular powers.¹⁰ Compared to the world’s Muggle population, Harry is more than a mere human being, but as Harry’s challenge is to defeat a fellow wizard in the Wizarding world, he is on equal footing with the rest of his society. Also, Harry’s parents are not gods or royalty. James is a wizard and Lily is a witch, but since they live in the Wizarding world, they do not own any superior powers or position of nobility relative to their neigh-

bors. Lily, in fact, is Muggle-born witch, meaning she has no blood relatives who are in any way members of the Wizarding society. Before he was born, a special prophecy that applied to Harry, describing how he will defeat the Dark Lord, also applied to another wizard boy, Neville Longbottom. Since this other boy also fits the prophecy, it diminishes the significance of Harry’s birth. Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, also explains that the prophecy did not come to fruition because of destiny when he says, “If Voldemort had never heard the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled? Would it have meant anything? Of course not!”¹¹ In addition, Lily’s choice to die attempting to protect Harry, not Harry’s inborn skill, provides him with the power to survive Voldemort’s attack, for “to have been loved so deeply ... will give us some protection forever,” which is in Harry’s case a magical shield preventing Voldemort’s spells from harming him.¹² Unlike a king or god, Harry is not born into a position of power, but obtains what little power he has through the choices of others.

The adulthood of the hero’s life is of much greater significance for Campbell and Jung. Jung’s child must fight to establish consciousness, but his hero must then return to his unconscious in order to fulfill his quest. In his outline of “the typical struggle of the hero with the monster (the unconscious content),” Jung says that the hero “cuts off a portion of the viscera, the heart for instance, or some essential organ by virtue of which the monster lives.... Thus he kills the monster, which then drifts to land, where the hero, new-born through the transcendent function ... steps forth.”¹³ Jung likens the hero’s quest to the human’s struggle to reclaim connection with the unconscious that has been lost.

Campbell, who dismisses the idea of childhood heroism, provides a much more detailed account of exactly how the hero completes his mission. He breaks the hero’s quest into departure, initiation, and return. The hero, responding to a call to adventure which “signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from the pale of his society to a zone unknown,” sets forth from his home to enter a world apart from his own in which the quest takes place, performing some task to cross the threshold of adventure.¹⁴ This ends the first stage, separation. While in this new place, the hero undergoes a series of trials with the aid of magical helpers, and after “a decisive victory is won,” he “gains his reward,” usually sacred marriage, atonement with the father, or apotheosis.^{15, 16} This ends the second phase, initiation. The hero must

then successfully return to whence he came to deliver the reward he has earned to the rest of his nation.

Harry's adult hero quest officially begins when he is sixteen years old and in his sixth year at Hogwarts. At the close of his fifth year, Dumbledore tells Harry about the prophecy, which must be fulfilled since Voldemort acted upon it when Harry was a baby, marking Harry as his equal. Harry is now the only one who can defeat Voldemort, and he comes to accept that the prophecy will be fulfilled. Harry learns that Voldemort has likely created six Horcruxes. His quest is to locate and destroy all of Voldemort's Horcruxes before he can fulfill his final task of killing Voldemort; Dumbledore has begun the quest for him by destroying one, a ring which Voldemort's grandfather, Marvolo Gaunt, owned, and has already begun searching for the next Horcrux. Harry decides to accompany Dumbledore for this trial, but when Dumbledore and Harry return from their mission, Professor Severus Snape kills Dumbledore, leaving Harry alone as the leader of this quest.

Harry's call is a decision of whether or not to complete the task that Dumbledore began for him. After Dumbledore's funeral, Harry decides to answer that call, to remove himself from the expectation of protection, and to actively fight Voldemort, unlike their previous encounters in which Harry had merely escaped. Following Dumbledore's example, Harry chooses "to fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated."¹⁷ Instead of completing his seventh and final year at Hogwarts, the place "where he had been happiest; the first and only place he had felt at home," Harry leaves this home and crosses the threshold of adventure when he enters the uncharted territory of finding the Horcruxes.¹⁸

Harry's initiation trials and the destruction of the viscera are the elimination of the Horcruxes, which are well-hidden and difficult to destroy. Harry learns that Dolores Umbridge, a Ministry of Magic official, has Slytherin's locket, which is, unbeknownst to her, a Horcrux. Harry, Ron, and Hermione sneak into the Ministry disguised as employees and successfully steal it from her, but they have no weapon with which to destroy it. There is "something beating inside the locket, like a tiny metal heart," which is again the exact vital organ Jung names in his description of the hero.¹⁹ For weeks, they are stuck with an indestructible Horcrux and no ideas as to where the rest of them are or what they even are, until Harry encounters "a silver-white

doe, moon-bright and dazzling," which he follows to a frozen pool in which lies Gryffindor's Sword.²⁰ The magical aid from this doe provides Harry with one of the only methods that can conceivably destroy a Horcrux, for the sword is goblin-made and thus capable of "imbibing only that which strengthens it," including the basilisk venom which it absorbed when Harry had stabbed the basilisk through the mouth.²¹ When Harry tries to retrieve the sword, however, the Horcrux chokes him upon hitting the freezing water. It is Ron, not Harry, who is able to pull the sword from the pool, using it to cut the locket off of Harry's neck. Though Harry opens the locket when he speaks to the snakes on it in Parseltongue, a rare wizard gift of speaking to snakes which Voldemort inadvertently transferred to baby Harry, Ron is the one who destroys it. Ron is Harry's savior and performs Harry's task when he eliminates the Horcrux, although Harry is the hero of this quest. Ron's heroism here also runs counter to the theorists' ideas that a hero has some sort of destiny or inborn power because Ron is just as able to complete this essential step to Voldemort's demise. The goblins are also essential to Harry's quest, as they are the only beings capable of creating such a sword, without which Harry could not destroy the Horcruxes. The importance of this race—which under current Wizarding law does not share equal rights with humans—in this quest shows a clear rejection of an aristocratic, monarchical society.

Ron later proves this again when the trio is at Hogwarts in search of Ravenclaw's diadem Horcrux. While Harry searches for the diadem, Ron and Hermione go to the Chamber of Secrets, a hidden room which is the final resting place of a gigantic snake called a basilisk, whose fang they wish to obtain to destroy the cup Horcrux. Although Ron does not speak Parseltongue like Harry does, he imitates the noise Harry made to open the locket before he stabbed it. It takes him "a few goes to get it right," but he successfully opens the entrance to the Chamber and retrieves the basilisk's fang, with which Hermione stabs the cup Horcrux.²² Even Parseltongue, Harry's one tangible power that he has which the average wizard does not, is not necessary for destroying the Horcruxes, as Ron proves.

The rest of Harry's trials are similar to the locket episode. With each Horcrux, he receives help from many varied beings, and someone other than himself ultimately eliminates it. Hufflepuff's cup Horcrux is locked away in a vault which belongs to Death Eater Bellatrix Lestrange at Gringotts, the wizards' bank run

by goblins. With the help of Griphook, a goblin on the run from the Death Eaters, they break into Bellatrix's vault, but an enchantment preventing robberies makes it so that anything they touch which does not belong to them burns their skin. Harry finally locates the cup, "and although he could feel it scalding his flesh he did not relinquish it," and the trio escapes on the back of the blind dragon which was guarding the vault.²³ With the help of Dumbledore's brother, Aberforth, they enter Hogwarts through a secret passage in the Hog's Head bar. As mentioned above, Hermione and Ron enter the Chamber of Secrets and destroy the cup, then reunite with Harry when the three of them search for Ravenclaw's diadem Horcrux. When they finally find it, Death Eater Vincent Crabbe accidentally melts the Horcrux and kills himself when he tries to attack them with Fiendfyre, a dangerous cursed fire. Since Dumbledore destroys the ring, and Neville later kills Nagini, Voldemort's pet snake and final Horcrux, the only Horcrux which Harry physically eliminates himself is the diary Horcrux, which he does back in his second year at Hogwarts when he rescues Ron's sister, Ginny, from the basilisk in the Chamber. At the time, Harry did not even know what a Horcrux was yet he destroys it to rescue Ginny, a different hero quest. Harry passes these trials, eliminating all the Horcruxes, but it is in large part through the efforts and aid of many others. The power to defeat Voldemort is not concentrated in Harry, but is available to anyone with the skill and bravery to help him.

Before Harry can face a final decisive victory and provide the boon for his nation, Harry quite literally lives out the task that Jung assigns his hero, the return to the unconscious. Harry learns that when Voldemort's Killing Curse failed to kill him as an infant, a piece of Voldemort's soul accidentally was transferred into Harry, making Harry himself a Horcrux. Even though it means sacrificing himself, Harry bravely continues his mission to destroy all the Horcruxes to bring an end to Voldemort, the boon he has hoped to bring to the Wizarding world all along. He meets Voldemort in the woods and lets Killing Curse hit him, but to Harry's surprise, his thoughts continue after the spell hits:

He lay facedown, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. [...] Nobody else was there. He was not perfectly sure that he was there himself.

A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he was lying, definitely lying, on some surface. Therefore he had a sense of touch, and the thing

against which he lay existed too.

Almost as soon as he had reached this conclusion, Harry became conscious that he was naked.²⁴

At this point, it is still unclear where Harry is. He has a body, as he feels himself lying down, but it is not the body that Voldemort killed, for he is now naked, "unscathed ... [and] not wearing glasses anymore."²⁵ Wherever he is, there is no concept of time, for he cannot determine the relative length of the period between recognizing that he exists and recognizing that he is naked. Harry also determines that he exercises some control over the place, for when he hears "a pitiful noise" and wishes he were clothed, "Barely had the wish formed in his head than [sic] robes appeared a short distance away."²⁶ The source of this noise has "the form of a small, naked child, curled on the ground, its skin raw and rough, flayed-looking, and it lay shuddering under a seat where it had been left, unwanted, stuffed out of sight, struggling for breath."²⁷ The curse separates the piece of Voldemort's soul from Harry's, leaving Harry "new-born" while the part of Voldemort's soul remains gruesome, maimed, and dying.²⁸

As Harry examines the grotesque being, Dumbledore appears. Not knowing what to make of this, Harry asks, "But you're dead. ... Then ... I'm dead too?"²⁹ Dumbledore replies, "That is the question, isn't it? On the whole, dear boy, I think not."³⁰ Harry demands an explanation, but Dumbledore merely states, "you already know."³¹ Since Harry is not dead, he is in some sort of unconscious state in which he reasons through all that has happened to him, things he already knows but could not piece together properly in his consciousness. Harry has now done precisely what Jung says the adult hero must do: reconnect with the unconscious. While he is here, Harry works out the answers to the questions he had while he was in his consciousness, like why he again survives the Killing Curse and how he can defeat Voldemort. Dumbledore affirms Harry's control over this place when he says, "This is, as they say, your party."³² Dumbledore's closing line—"Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"—indicates that Harry is indeed in his unconscious, reflecting on the things going on inside his own mind, rather than in some sort of afterlife.³³ Rowling herself explains on her official website that the curse "disables Harry severely enough that he could have succumbed to death if he had chosen that path [...] But Harry does decide to struggle back to consciousness."³⁴ Finally hav-

ing achieved separation from the piece of Voldemort's soul, Harry defeats the evil that dwells in him when he chooses to go back to his conscious self without taking the piece of Voldemort with him. In this sense, Harry is literally conquering an archetype that was present in his own mind, coming to recognize that it has always been there and leaving it to die when he proceeds back to his consciousness. This is really the moment of Harry crossing back over the threshold, for he survives the ultimate trial, the invincible Killing Curse, and with his transcendence of this challenge, eliminates another piece of Voldemort's soul.

On top of all this, Harry's connection with the unconscious material of his mind allows him to proceed confidently into his final battle with Voldemort when he comes back to consciousness, now having a fully established Self. While talking to Dumbledore in his unconscious, the two discuss the Elder Wand, a legendary unbeatable wand whose possessor "must capture it from its previous owner, if he is to be truly master of it."³⁵ When Harry returns to consciousness, he is finally able to understand that he is indeed the master of this wand, for Draco Malfoy, a young Death Eater from Harry's class at Hogwarts, took the Elder Wand from Dumbledore before Snape killed him, and later Harry took Draco's wand during a scuffle with Death Eaters. Thus, when Voldemort celebrates his apparent victory by humiliating Harry's body with the Cruciatu Curse, a spell that physically tortures its recipient, "the pain [Harry] expected did not come."³⁶ Uniting his unconscious and his conscious, Harry synthesizes that the Elder Wand will not work against him.

When he and Voldemort face each other in their final battle, Harry reveals the boon which he delivers to his people, a love shield like the one his mother gave to him. Harry explains, "I was ready to die to stop you from hurting those people [...] I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you."³⁷ This battle also further emphasizes that Harry's becoming a hero is Voldemort's choice. Though he knows that the Elder Wand will not work properly against himself, its master, instead of tricking Voldemort into attempting another Killing Curse, Harry explains the situation to him and invites him to "try for some remorse."³⁸ Harry's final, decisive victory over Voldemort, toward which he has been actively working for two years, is not a showcase of Harry's superior magical strength. In fact, Harry does not even cast a spell meant to harm Voldemort, opting for Expelliarmus, a defensive spell which merely removes the opponent's wand from his

or her hand. The quest, according to Campbell, has already been completed because Harry's decision to die and his status as master of the Elder Wand make it so that Voldemort is no longer a threat to Harry or to his friends. It is Voldemort's own hubris that causes his final death, as he persists to attack Harry with the Killing Curse despite Harry's evidence that it would not work correctly. Voldemort is "killed by his own rebounding curse," refusing to accept Harry's offer of atonement.³⁹

According to Campbell, "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward."⁴⁰ The readers of the Harry Potter novels experience this carrying-forward of the human spirit as they identify with Harry and his struggles, an identification that Rowling makes simpler with her updates to the child and hero myths. Harry is not a king or a deity; he is an average boy from his society who needs to handle problems which are thrust upon him. In its rejection of this high-born hero, the updates which Rowling makes to the mythological structures establish the Potter series as myth for the democratic era. Voldemort and his Death Eaters represent a monarchical and hierarchal society, where Voldemort is the despot and where birth determines one's placement in society. Pureblood wizards—those descended from two magical families—reign supreme, followed by halfbloods, while Muggle-born wizards, Muggles, and creatures of "near-human intelligence," including centaurs, goblins, and house elves, are all doomed to marginalization and limited rights.⁴¹ Harry and his friends stand in direct opposition to Voldemort's system. It takes the work of many for Harry to complete his quest, and many types of beings are instrumental in his quest. Each Horcrux is destroyed by a different witch or wizard of varying blood statuses, while nonhumans are also helpful. Gryffindor's sword only has the power to destroy Horcruxes because it is goblin-made, and house elf Dobby nobly dies to save Harry's life in their escape from Malfoy Manor.⁴² In the final battle at Hogwarts, Harry sees the Death Eaters "folding under sheer weight of numbers" when the house elves emerge from the kitchen, attacking with their knives.⁴³ Harry's victory is a victory for democracy, where abilities are worth more than birth and where a majority can enact a change.

Harry Potter's quest to defeat Voldemort generally follows the mythological structures of the child and the hero, according to the theories Jung and Campbell compiled after studying myths from many locations and time periods. Harry's quest includes important

elements of both theories, including the departure-initiation-return structure Campbell proposes, and the all-important return to the psychological unconscious which Jung claims is a task with which all humans must struggle. Myths like the ones Jung and Campbell describe have always had the “magical” ability to grab the reader, for they express the archetypes which reside in the collective unconscious, archetypes that in turn characterize the real life experiences of all people. The immense worldwide popularity that this little series of children’s books about an adolescent British wizard has enjoyed, however, goes even beyond the normal grasp of a myth in the updates which Rowling makes. Gone is the high-born, demigod hero, and in its place, the novels revolve around Harry, a reluctant hero who gets his powers from others’ choices and who collaborates with other wizards and beings to complete his hero quest. The series’ adherence to myth structures gives it the same psychological allure, but its deviances from typical myths make it a modern myth and thus even more relevant to—and reflective of—readers today.

Notes

¹ Carl G. Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, Comp. Robert A. Segal (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 123.

² Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 129.

³ Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 130.

⁴ Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 131.

⁵ Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 133.

⁶ Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 135.

⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 319.

⁸ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 10.

⁹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (New York: Scholastic, 2000), 216.

¹⁰ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 319.

¹¹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Scholastic, 2005), 510.

¹² Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone*, 299.

¹³ Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 164.

¹⁴ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 58.

¹⁵ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 30.

¹⁶ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 246.

¹⁷ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 645.

¹⁸ Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*, 431.

¹⁹ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, 2007), 276.

²⁰ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 366.

²¹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 303.

²² Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 623.

²³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 540.

²⁴ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 705.

²⁵ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 706.

²⁶ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 706.

²⁷ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 706-7.

²⁸ Jung, *Encountering Jung on Mythology*, 164.

²⁹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 707.

³⁰ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 707.

³¹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 708.

³² Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 712.

³³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 723.

³⁴ J. K. Rowling, *J.K Rowling Official Site*, 18 Nov 2010 <http://www.jkrowling.com/textonly/en/faq_view.cfm?id=122>.

³⁵ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 412.

³⁶ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 727.

³⁷ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 738.

³⁸ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 741.

³⁹ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 744.

⁴⁰ Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 11.

⁴¹ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (New York: Scholastic, 2003), 754.

⁴² Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 475.

⁴³ Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 735.