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Literal and Metaphorical: Racial Themes in *Harry Potter*

Ostensibly, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series creates a world oblivious to race, one in which those of any background can rise according to their abilities alone. However, beneath the surface, *Harry Potter* encompasses deep-seated racial themes and constructs a complex and highly stratified racial hierarchy. Although the novels depict certain antiquated racial logics, they also ask "questions about cultural, national, and ethnic bias" as well as highlight the "horrors perpetuated by those who pursue [racial purity]," offering a multilayered criticism of the very racial stratification that the series upholds (Whited 8,1). *Harry Potter* preserves traditional racial attitudes through its narrow emphasis on the White and the Anglo-Saxon, but turns around to challenge these same themes through its depiction of an entirely new, metaphorical racial hierarchy of magical creatures.

In appearance, the world of *Harry Potter* is "color-blind," and race is neither acknowledged nor relevant. The result is a supposed "racial Utopia," one free from constrictive ethnic identity (Lyubansky 2). The magical school of Hogwarts, to some extent, fits this description; the school includes multiple minorities, and race appears to play no role in determining student relationships or abilities. But the color-blind construct, which seems to liberate minorities from the bounds of their racial categorizations, actually limits them further by ignoring a key part of their identity. Rooted in traditional Anglo-American elitism, the color-blind mentality "works to maintain the racial hierarchy by pretending and acting as though it [doesn't] exist" and is used by Neo-Conservative thinkers to justify the current societal system of White dominance (Lyubansky 1-3). Thus, at heart, color-blind ideology can be interpreted as

racially elitist, and organizing the novels around this construct suggests that *Harry Potter* ties in to these discriminatory beliefs.

Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon bias behind the color-blind construct is reflected in the racial identities of all major characters found in the *Harry Potter* series. Whether good or evil, every one of these characters is White and English, and the conflict engulfing the wizarding world is narrated entirely "through the eyes of White characters" and decided exclusively through the actions of those characters (Lyubansky 2). All other races are merely spectators, their futures in the hands of this select group of White wizards. Minorities, if present at all, play nearly no role in the major happenings of the novels. Cho Chang, an East Asian classmate of Harry's, serves as a love interest to multiple characters in the series but is not developed any further. Angelina Johnson and Dean Thomas, both members of Harry's Gryffindor house, are of African descent but play little role in the central plot of the works. Despite their presence, these "non-White characters barely seem to exist" and serve only minor, replaceable roles (Lyubansky 7). The inclusion of these minority characters actually further marginalizes them, as they can be read as simply accessories, irrelevant to the larger happenings of the books. Instead of distracting from the White dominance of the wizarding world, the inclusion of unimportant minority characters only highlights it further (Lyubansky 7).

Besides the overwhelming Whiteness of its major characters, *Harry Potter* upholds traditional stereotypes through other forms of character description. Notably, the novels recreate the practice of classifying moral character through traditional color stereotypes. In typical Eurocentric fashion, these assignments range from white (good) to black (evil). Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful "good" wizard, has a surname literally meaning "white" (Ostry 95). His evil counterpart, Lord Voldemort, is colloquially referred to as the "Dark Lord," and his

followers conjure the "Dark Mark" to alert others to the presence of evil. First seen at the start of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* during the Quidditch World Cup, the Dark Mark evokes great terror, igniting panic and hysteria among the fans in attendance (129). This fear of the Dark Mark can be read as a metaphor for the European fear of "dark" peoples and the mysterious cultures that they embrace. By connecting darkness with evil, *Harry Potter* connects "dark" peoples to the same sentiment. Predictably, lightness (and European ancestry) represents the antithesis to this evil, linking *Harry Potter* to a long-standing tradition of Eurocentrism and xenophobia.

All of this evidence may lead to the conclusion that *Harry Potter* is, at heart, simply a continuation of the stereotypical and elitist racial attitudes found for so long in European literature. The works contain antiquated racial constructs and do not seem to offer any criticism of those constructs, at least on the literal level. Furthermore, the works normalize Eurocentrism, presenting White dominance as the normal, expected state of affairs; White characters determine the fate of the world, and worldwide conflict is decided by an all-White cast in an all-White atmosphere. But to judge *Harry Potter* based entirely on literal racial themes would be premature. Beneath those literal themes are a much larger and much more complex set of metaphorical racial themes. The two, although often in conflict, actually complement each other, offering a deeper layer of insight into the Eurocentric world suggested by a surface interpretation of the novels.

Through magical and metaphorical racial themes, *Harry Potter* offers detailed evaluations of historical racial tensions in the non-magical world. This commentary is most apparent through the novels' depiction of various groups of magical creatures. These groups, in line with their high level of racialization, often match closely with stereotypes of historically

marginalized peoples. The goblins of the wizarding world are slimy, mistrustful, and greedy, "a modern-day embodiment of the stereotype of a Jewish moneylender" (Horne 91). Denied full rights, they turn to the trades with which they are historically associated, "forging metal and protecting valuables" (Goldstein 98). The character and plight of the house-elves closely matches that of African-American slaves of Antebellum America. The house-elves provide unpaid labor and need the consent of their wizard masters to earn their freedom. In addition, the wizarding world depends on their labor in much the same way as Southern plantations depended on the labor of their own slaves (Whited 9). Goblins and house-elves not only match the stereotypes assigned to their non-magical counterparts, but also suffer from the same oppression and scorn that these groups endured. The Centaurs, another oppressed magical group, expose the root cause of this oppression when confronted in the Forbidden Forest toward the end of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Highly intelligent creatures, they correctly attribute wizarding oppression to "the arrogance of their kind" (755). Just as the mistreatment of Jews and African Americans proved rooted in unjustified attitudes of superiority, so does the mistreatment of marginalized groups in the magical world.

Although not as obvious as the racialization of magical creatures, the bloodline status of wizards themselves can be interpreted as offering racial commentary. Voldemort's obsession with blood purification closely parallels similar racial logics employed in 20th century Europe and America, logics that championed the supposed superiority of White peoples (Whited 7). In addition, his war to cleanse the wizarding world of mixed-bloods holds unnerving parallels to many historical ethnic-cleansing campaigns, including those conducted by Nazi Germany. In much the same fashion as the Nazis, Voldemort wishes to "impose a version of the Nuremberg Laws on England," delineating wizards by their bloodlines and using those delineations to

determine their rights (Hitchens 9). Both Voldemort's desire to "purify" bloodlines and the war he instigates to do so are primarily related to racial issues. These issues are the chief cause of conflict in the wizarding world and play an even larger role there than in the non-magical world from which Harry comes.

Racial issues figure prominently in both literal and metaphorical readings of the *Harry Potter* series. However, *Harry Potter* regards the metaphorical racial logics of the series very differently than it does their literal counterparts. The series presents metaphorical racial constructs almost exclusively to criticize them. Judgments and actions based on magical racial categorizations are painted as growing primarily from ignorance and arrogance. Wizards regard house-elves in much the same way as Southerners viewed their slaves before the American Civil War, connecting treatment of the group to an inherently undesirable and universally reviled set of ideals (Whited 9). In addition, goblins are denied full rights for no apparent reason, and their plight seems inherently unjust. Of all of Harry's classmates, only Hermione, possessed of the "keenest sense of justice of all the Hogwarts students," is aware of the baselessness surrounding wizarding treatment of other magical groups (Whited 9). At the conclusion of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Professor Dumbledore, who shares much of Hermione's insight into the problems caused by wizarding oppression, acknowledges the failures of wizards to construct a free and fair magical society, conceding that "wizards have abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward" (834). Through this statement, Dumbledore highlights the unfairness of wizard-led oppression as well as the consequences that could come of such treatment. It is also important to note that Voldemort, the central villain of the novels, holds racial logics at the center of his elitist ideology, an ideology demonized throughout the entire *Harry Potter* series. By connecting racial elitism to the wizarding world's most evil character, the

novels offers criticism of such elitism and the flawed beliefs behind it. Thus, on a metaphorical level, *Harry Potter* acknowledges the injustices of racism and proves highly critical of those injustices.

Given its marked criticism of metaphorical racial logics, *Harry Potter* seems to adopt a contradictory attitude toward racial themes in general. On the literal level, the series recreates the same antiquated and elitist racial model that has traditionally dominated European literature, one that paints Whites as superior and "others" as marginal. Yet, on the metaphorical level, the novels criticize this very same attitude. The series seems to suggest that just as the elitist attitudes employed by wizards toward other groups are unjustified and arrogant, so could the attitudes traditionally employed by European chauvinists in their degradation of other races. This transposing of magical racial beliefs to non-magical racial beliefs is also reflected in the pure-blood mania driving Voldemort and his followers. Voldemort's followers fully believe that being of pure-blooded ancestry brings with it extra talent, abilities, or worth, even in the face of "consistent evidence against pure-blood superiority" throughout the novels (Whited 12). The ignorance exhibited by Voldemort's followers could extend to traditional attitudes of White dominance as well; painting White elitism as unjustified is inherently critical of the attitude. Thus, in a sense, *Harry Potter* is highly critical of the very same Eurocentric attitude it upholds through its creation of an all-White character cast.

Harry Potter, then, adopts an attitude toward race that can be described as, at the very least, multifaceted. The series is not shy in its depiction of race; the novels are highly racially charged, and the central conflict of the series grows from the incompatibility of conflicting racial ideologies. Although the works initially seem to uphold antiquated racial logics, deeper analysis reveals a much more critical and substantive evaluation of these themes, one that ultimately casts

them as highly problematic. From wizards to werewolves, *Harry Potter* communicates important racial commentaries, and those commentaries extend far beyond the confines of Hogwarts.

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