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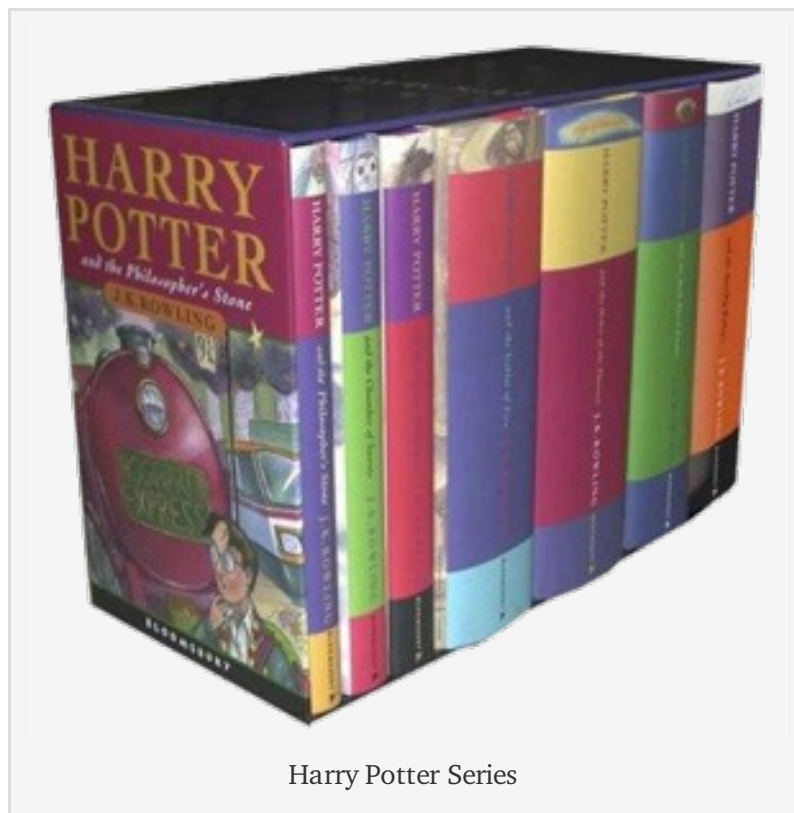
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Discuss the importance of paganism and death in the Harry Potter series.

The *Harry Potter* series of novels has become one of the biggest selling series of books of all time. The series follows the title character Harry Potter learning how to become a wizard, and on his adventures and quests to defeat Harry's nemesis, Lord Voldemort. Throughout the series, several themes are explored such as love, good vs. evil and the importance of friendship. However, one theme that features predominantly is the theme of death. I will explore the importance of this theme; how the deaths of those closest to Harry affect him and how death will ultimately end the long battle between Harry and Voldemort. The series obviously follows Harry and his friends learning the arts of witchcraft and wizardry at their school, Hogwarts. Whilst the series is clearly fictional, there have been several complaints about J.K. Rowling's novels, arguing that the books glamorise pagan beliefs and the occult. These views come mainly from Christian groups who feel that the all magic is the work of the devil and that by having Harry and his friends use magic, the young readers of the novels will want to explore the use of magic themselves. I will look at the content that many feel is inappropriate for young audiences and examine the arguments of those who deem *Harry Potter* inappropriate for their children.



Harry Potter Series

At the beginning of the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, we become aware that a wizard named Voldemort, whom several other wizards and witches were afraid of, has mysteriously vanished after killing a couple, Lily and James Potter, but leaving their son, Harry alive. Harry is then left to be brought up as a Muggle (a non-wizard) with his Aunt, Uncle and cousin, unaware that he is one of the most famous wizards in the world. The fact that Harry's parents died before the start of the novel is a hugely important factor to the rest of the series. As Harry has been brought up in the Muggle world as an orphan, he has come to know very little about his past and the world in which he lives. By attending Hogwarts, Harry soon learns more about his past and what happened the night that his parents were killed. In their first battle against one another, Lord Voldemort tells Harry that his parents died "begging for mercy" (Rowling, *The Philosopher's Stone*; page 213) and that his mother, especially, died trying to save Harry. The fact that Harry has to deal with the loss of his parents from an early age, and then to later learn that they died in order to protect him, is an important sense of characterisation from Rowling. The early death of his parents has meant that Harry has learned that death is an inevitable part of life and not necessarily something to be afraid of. "To the well organised mind, death is but the next great adventure." (Rowling, *The Philosopher's Stone*; page 215) Here, Dumbledore is emphasising to Harry that whilst people may be afraid of death, it is something that is unavoidable and that must be treated in a realistic manner. By addressing death in such a casual, yet adult manner, Rowling is almost preparing her readers for their future, where dealing with death and loss is such an inevitable part of

life.

On the night that Lily and James Potter died, Voldemort was unable to kill Harry, for reasons unknown to the wizarding community and to Voldemort himself. Whilst Harry survived, he was left with a lightning bolt shaped scar on his forehead. This scar is a symbol of Voldemort's attack on Harry and a constant reminder that, while he defeated one of the darkest wizards in history, it symbolises the night that Harry should have died. The fact that Harry's scar is a bolt of lightning could perhaps be a literal picture symbolising the flash of green light associated with the '*Avada Kedavra*' curse that was intended to kill Harry. "There was a flash of blinding green light and rushing sound," (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*: page 191) Similarly, Harry's scar could be symbolic of the emotional scars that people face when dealing with death and loss. As Harry has to see his scar every day, he is constantly reminded of the night that he should have died, and the night that his parents died trying to protect him.



Harry's scar - a constant reminder of the night he should have died.

One of the main elements to the plot in *Harry Potter* is the prophecy involving Harry and Voldemort. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, we come to learn about said prophecy, which ultimately changes the course in which Harry is leading his life. The prophecy reads, "Either must die at the hands of the other for neither can live while the other survives" (*Order of the Phoenix*, Rowling; page 741). The use of this prophecy as the main story behind the epic battle between Harry and Voldemort emphasises the importance of death in the *Harry Potter*

novels. The prophecy tells us that either Harry or Voldemort must die in order for the other to live, in this sense it tells us that death is inevitable for one, or potentially both of the duo. From then on, Harry's life changes yet again as he realises that it is he who needs to kill Voldemort in order to stop him from taking over both the Wizard and Muggle worlds.

Throughout the *Harry Potter* series, several of the important characters around Harry die. The father figure of Sirius Black, Harry's Godfather and strong link to Harry's parents, is killed by Bellatrix Lastrange in *Order of the Phoenix*. After his untimely death, Harry becomes extremely angry and volatile around his friends and mentors. Harry feels that Sirius's death was his fault and that it could have been prevented had he not fallen for Voldemort's trick. When talking to Dumbledore after the events at the Ministry for Magic, Harry becomes irrational and aggressive when Dumbledore offers his condolences and advice for Harry. "Harry felt the white-hot anger lick his insides, blazing in the terrible emptiness, filling him with the desire to hurt Dumbledore for his calmness and empty words." (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*; page 726) Here, Rowling uses Harry's feelings towards Sirius's death to allow the reader to acknowledge the varying emotions that people go through when they are dealing with the death of a loved one. Rowling is allowing Harry to let his emotions go so that the reader can fully empathise with him and to allow Harry to go through dealing with Sirius's death in the same way. In terms of writing for her audience and for her fans, it could be suggested that Rowling portrayed Harry at being angry with those around him following Sirius's death because the readers may have been angry at Rowling to killing off a character that played such a vital role in Harry's life.

Another of Harry's closest friends and mentors is killed later on in the series. When Dumbledore is murdered by Professor Snape in *The Half-Blood Prince*, Harry immediately seeks for revenge against Snape, wanting to punish him for murdering his mentor and friend. Harry even attempts to use the Unforgivable Curses, which deliver torture or even death, on Snape in order to seek revenge. "'Cruc-' yelled Harry for the second time, aiming for the figure ahead illuminated in the dancing firelight, but Snape blocked the spell again; Harry could see him sneering. 'No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!' he shouted over the rushing of flames... 'You haven't got the nerve or the ability-'" (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*; page 562) By having Harry react in this uncharacteristic manner, though notably fighting against his long-term rival, Snape, is also another way in which Rowling explores the emotions in Harry faces each time a person close to him

dies. This once again echoes the real-life issues that people face when coping with a sudden death. Harry is acting largely out of character at this point, although Harry can often be hot-tempered and angry, he is not one to use the Dark Magic. By making Harry react in this way, Rowling is telling her readers that when events happen unexpectedly, a change in character is a likely occurrence.



Michael Gambon and Daniel Radcliffe as Professor Dumbledore and Harry Potter

One notable death is the death of Harry's schoolmate Cedric Diggory during *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Whilst taking part in the schools Triwizard Tournament, Harry and Cedric are completing the final task when they reach the Triwizard Cup; signalling the end and the winner of the competition. Deciding that they shall both come out as winners, they reach for the Cup simultaneously, which transports them to a small graveyard. Upon getting there, Harry's scar burns with pain and with a flash of green light, Cedric is killed. "Before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing, before he could feel anything but numb disbelief" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*; page 554). Although not one of Harry's closest friends, the death of Cedric is extremely important and significant to Harry as it is in his hands that Cedric is killed. Not only does Harry feel responsible for Cedric's death, as it is Voldemort who wanted only Harry to enter the graveyard, so dismissively ordered for Cedric to be killed, but he feels that it is his responsibility to take Cedric's body back to his parents. Harry has to then return to Hogwarts with

Cedric's body and tell everyone how and why he died. This death stays with Harry, and it is in *Order of the Phoenix* that Harry first sees the Thestrals; strange, horse-like creatures with wings and "dragonish" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*; page 178) heads. Harry can only see the Thestrals in *Order of the Phoenix* following Cedric's death as "the only people who can see Thestrals are people who have seen death." (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*; page 394)

During the time at the graveyard, Voldemort is brought back to human life, using Harry's blood as a way to regain a body. It is during this chapter that Harry sees "a thick grey ghost of Cedric Diggory" (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*; page 577) appear from the end of Lord Voldemort's wand. This leads us to question whether Cedric has really died and whether the characters in the *Harry Potter* series ever truly die; Hogwarts itself is laden with Hogwarts ghosts that regularly interact with the students. This is not the only incident where Harry encounters those close to him who have previously died. When Cedric appears in the graveyard having just been murdered by Voldemort's servant Wormtail, Harry's parents, Lily and James, also appear. Whilst Harry and Voldemort are duelling and their wands connected; Lily, James and Cedric all offer Harry words of encouragement and advice on how to battle Voldemort, "we will give you time... you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts..." (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*; page 579). The same happens once again in *The Deathly Hallows*, however this time Harry's mother and father, Godfather Sirius Black and friend, Professor Lupin appear, yet again to offer Harry guidance through a battle with Voldemort. Whilst the images of the deceased are merely ghost-like, Harry to an extent believes that they are real and communicates with them as if they are truly there in human form, once again forcing us to question whether the characters in *Harry Potter* truly die. Despite this, Dumbledore tells us that, "No spell can reawaken the dead," (Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*; page 605)

Perhaps the most notable, and most prominent, feature of death is in the final *Harry Potter* novel, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. The name itself almost warns us that the book will feature a profound tone of death and darkness throughout. The book features a heavy bloodbath; seeing yet more of Harry's friends and loved ones die at the hands of Lord Voldemort. The deaths encountered at the end of the novel, once again, force Harry to feel guilty for the deaths of those close to him. Harry knows that it is he that needs to kill Voldemort and feels that the more people close to him who die, to the more responsibility he has to succeed in his mission. "Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort

knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it. The images of Fred, Lupin and Tonks lying dead in the Great Hall forced their way back into his mind's eye, and for a moment he could hardly breathe: Death was impatient..." (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*; page 555)

During the novel; Harry, Ron and Hermione come across the Wizarding fairy tale, *The Tale of the Three Brothers*. The tale tells the story of three brothers who, by using their magic, attempt to cheat Death. The story mentions a Cloak of Invisibility, an item which Harry owns. There are several elements to the fairy tale that are important factors to the events of the final novel, but to an extent, the story resembles Harry's life up until now. With his previous six years at Hogwarts, Harry has managed to escape death on numerous occasions. On five occasions, Harry has managed to defeat, or escape, from Voldemort who has always had the intention to kill him. The fairy tale outlines a simple viewpoint on death, "he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, equals they departed this life." (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*; page 332) It is as though this is foreshadowing what Harry later faces in the chapter; *The Forest Again* where Harry goes to Voldemort in order to die. "I must die. It must end." (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*; page 556) Harry is acting like a martyr in order to protect those around him, to face the inevitable and to fulfil the prophecy.



Once Voldemort has regained power, his band of followers, the Death Eaters help him on his quest to kill Harry Potter and take over both the Wizard and Muggle worlds. Once again, the term 'Death Eater' simply reinforces the theme of death

found throughout the *Harry Potter* novels. The Death Eaters are perhaps so called as death is the one thing that Voldemort fears the most, the one thing that he will do anything to avoid. Voldemort is obsessed with becoming immortal that he has split his soul in to eight pieces, placing six of the pieces in to magical objects, known as Horcruxes. It is these six Horcruxes that Harry must destroy in order to be able to kill Voldemort, therefore fulfilling the prophecy. Voldemort is so intent with being immortal, even whilst he is a teenager that he will do anything. “But how do you do it?’ ‘By an act of evil – the supreme act of evil. By committing murder. Killing rips the soul apart. The wizard intent upon creating a Horcrux would use the damage to his advantage...” (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince*; page 465)

Although Harry Potter has become a hugely successful phenomenon all over the world, there have been several groups who feel that the content of *Harry Potter* is extremely unsuitable for the children it is aimed towards. These attitudes have come mainly from religious groups, particularly those of Christian faith. Michael O'Brien states in *Harry Potter and the Paganization of Children's Culture* that the *Harry Potter* series has the potential to “lower the natural and spiritual guard in a child's mind” (O'Brien; page 8) and that this will inevitably lead to the said child joining the occult. He questions that if this is to happen, then “what other kinds of disordered interests and activities will follow as he makes his choices in later life?” (O'Brien; page 8) O'Brien is not the only one to feel this way about the novels. In *Why Heather Can Write*, Henry Jenkins speaks of the evangelist, Berit Kjos who feels that the merchandise surrounding the series is just as damaging at the content in the novels. “In God's eyes, such paraphernalia become little more than lures and doorways to deeper involvement with the occult.” (Jenkins; page 194) Many Christian groups feel that all forms of witchcraft are pagan and are associated with the devil, therefore they feel that by writing a novel about a group of children at a school for witches and wizards, J.K. Rowling is “glamorizing witchcraft” (Deavel and Deavel; page 1) and leading children in to wanting to explore the world of magic further.

The *Harry Potter* novels are not the first series of books to feature a heavy use of magic, but previous series have not been criticised in the same way. O'Brien discusses that many novels feature characters using witchcraft, but that these characters are usually the villains of the series, not the heroes as seen in *Harry Potter*. He suggests that “for many Christian parents, the problem is not the presence of magic in a book, but how magic is represented.” (O'Brien; page 9) and

compares *Harry Potter* to the *Narnia* series by C.S. Lewis. He argues that the characters found in *Narnia*, particularly the White Witch, who use magic are portrayed in “classic terms”, meaning that they are “manipulative” and “deceiving” (O’Brien; page 9). O’Brien continues to say that “Supernatural powers, Lewis repeatedly underlines, belong in God alone, and in human hands they are highly deceptive and can lead to destruction.” (O’Brien; page 9) During this article, O’Brien stresses that the use of magic portrayed in the world of *Harry Potter* is corrupt and that it “will darken the mind” (O’Brien; page 10) and criticises the fact that Rowling’s characters explore the world but do not suffer any consequences or side effects for their actions. It is interesting that O’Brien draws this comparison as it is clear that Rowling has been heavily influenced by the work of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien as well. All three of the authors have created fantasy worlds in which their child (or child-like) characters explore their surroundings and have to battle evil. However, as previously suggested, the evil characters portrayed in these series are the only characters to use magic; whereas in *Harry Potter* there are forms of both good and bad magic, which is what leads many to feel that the series is inappropriate for the target audience.



Harry Potter series - Glamorizing witchcraft?

One Christian website (Christian Answers for the New Age) features an article outlining the themes and events which feature in the final novel of *Harry Potter*;

The Deathly Hallows. The article discusses the events that occur in *Harry Potter* from a Christian perspective. They suggest that the series may not be suitable enough for Christian readers, leading on to suggest that although the hero of the books, Harry Potter is not a good role model. They suggest that Harry “has no remorse and few consequences from lying and cheating; he seeks revenge in many cases; he hates; and he can be cruel” (Page 3/3) The article argues that Harry is consistently lying and breaking rules, but suffers no consequences, the ends justify the means and therefore Harry does not show suitable behaviour to the children reading. However, we could argue that while Harry may not be perfect, he has suffered from a poor childhood and that, perhaps, Rowling wanted to portray a more realistic, modern day role model. By creating such a character, Rowling is reaching out to those readers who feel they are different from the others around them- something that Harry feels on numerous occasions, both before and after joining Hogwarts. She is also creating a more realistic character for the audience to get behind and follow on his journey.

Whilst the views portrayed by these religious groups are understandable, we must remember that the *Harry Potter* novels are a fictional series, simply exploring the world of magic. The books are purely there for children to explore their imagination and, perhaps, to get them more excited about reading in a world that has so quickly become obsessed with computer gaming. Jenkins relays the story of Heather Lawver in his article; a girl who claims that she “read a book that changed her life”. *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* gave her the inspiration to set up a website where fans could join together to write “a school newspaper for a school that existed only in their imaginations.” (page 172) The children participating are using the things that they have learned from Rowling’s stories and have combined them with their own imaginations to create something new, something that many teachers and parents are constantly trying to teach children to do.

It is clear that the theme of death is heavily prominent throughout the series and plays a vital role in Harry’s life and journey through his seven years at Hogwarts. By experience death on so many occasions and in so many different ways, the loss he has suffered has shaped him in many ways. Without the theme of death running throughout *Harry Potter*, the reader may not have grasped the important notion that death will end the battle between Harry and Voldemort. The entire story is based upon the magic arts contained within the fantasy world and it is understandable that protective parents and group leaders may feel that the content is inappropriate for young audiences; but we must argue whether the

Harry Potter series remained a children's book throughout its run. The series is fictional and that must be understood when reading the novels. Whilst some may deem it unsuitable, it cannot be argued that the *Harry Potter* phenomenon hasn't encouraged children to read and expand their imaginations when entering such an exciting fantasy world.



The final battle between Harry and Voldemort

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