

University of Groningen

## Cultural Anxieties in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince. Evil and the magic of human abilities

Zock, T.H.

*Published in:*

At the Crossroads of Art and Religion. Imagination, Commitment, Transcendence

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2008

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Zock, T. H. (2008). Cultural Anxieties in Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince. Evil and the magic of human abilities. In H. Zock (Ed.), *At the Crossroads of Art and Religion. Imagination, Commitment, Transcendence* (pp. 101-116). (Groningen Studies in Cultural Change; No. 34). Peeters.

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

CULTURAL ANXIETIES IN  
*HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE*

EVIL AND THE MAGIC OF HUMAN ABILITIES

Hetty Zock

It is mid-July and a chilly mist hangs over the Muggle world. This is how *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* opens.<sup>1</sup> Generally, Muggles – people without magical abilities – are blessedly unaware of what happens in the magical world, but the odd mist is a foreboding that this will change. A war is underway: Voldemort, Lord of Evil, is attempting to seize power, resulting in many deaths and terrifying attacks in both the magical and the Muggle worlds. Harry Potter – for those who only know him from the bestseller lists – is an orphan whose parents were killed by Voldemort when he was a year old. It was in fact Harry whom Voldemort tried to kill because of a prophecy predicting that one of them would kill the other, but Harry miraculously survived the attack. When Harry turned eleven, it became clear that he was a wizard, and hence belonged to the magical world. He began attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, returning during the holidays to his horrible uncle and aunt who raise him along with their own spoiled, overweight son.

The structure of most of the Harry Potter sequels is simple. The setting is Hogwarts boarding school, the protagonist Harry is a lonely orphan who turns out to be a wizard with magical abilities and, like a mythological questing hero, he is destined to fight Voldemort. Each book covers a year at the school, starting at the beginning of the term and ending with the summer holiday, when Harry, to his great regret, has to return to his Muggle family. The seventh and last book of the series,<sup>2</sup> which appeared after I had completed this article, does not describe school life but is completely devoted to Harry's mission of tracing and fighting Voldemort. In each book Harry is one year older and issues concomitant with his age group are addressed. In *The Half-Blood Prince*, the sixth volume of the series, and the subject of this article, Harry is 16 years old.

---

<sup>1</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince* (London, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows* (London, 2007).

The structure of the sequel may be simple, but the elaboration is much more complex. J.K. Rowling is a master of the ‘magic art of bricolage’,<sup>3</sup> in the imaginative and humorous postmodern mixing of diverse genres: children’s literature, fantasy, mystery, fairy tale, mythology, epic fantasy, boarding school novel and *Bildungsroman*.<sup>4</sup> She attracts an incredible number of readers – both children and adults. Since the first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, appeared in 1997, more than 350 million copies have been sold worldwide in 65 different languages.<sup>5</sup> The books have not only been translated into almost all Western languages, from Dutch to Estonian, but also into Hindi, Arabic, Chinese, Urdu and Singali, to mention just a few.<sup>6</sup> The immense popularity of Harry Potter across cultures and countries requires a serious cultural analysis. Why are the novels so appealing? What is their impact? What does that tell us about our time? These are the central questions of this contribution.

The Harry Potter phenomenon has led to a flourishing of Harry Potter scholarship, mainly in the domains of ‘children’s literature’<sup>7</sup> and ‘cultural studies’.<sup>8</sup> The books are fervently debated and – interestingly – evaluated in quite different ways, in terms of their literary and aesthetic value, their function in children’s development, or their ideological message – whether it be sociopolitical, moral or religious. The literary quality of the books is highly disputed. On the one hand, educators are happy that children are reading books again, but on the other hand they hope that the experience will seduce them into reading ‘good books’ as well. Apparently, the distinction between so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture – which is becoming increasingly blurred<sup>9</sup> – has not yet vanished. Fascinating in this regard is that respected ‘high culture’ journals do not know what to do with Harry Potter. The *New York Times Review of Books*, for instance, was embarrassed when the books kept appearing in the top five of their bestsellers list. As a solu-

<sup>3</sup> W. Doniger, ‘Can You Spot the Source? Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban’, *London Review of Books*, 17 February (2000), pp. 26–27.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The protagonist comes of age, in separate instalments, one for each year of Harry’s life’, P. Nel, *J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Novels: A Reader’s Guide* (New York, 2001), p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> See <[www.bloomsbury.com/](http://www.bloomsbury.com/)>.

<sup>6</sup> If we can trust *Wikipedia*.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, G.L. Anatol, ed., *Reading Harry Potter: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT etc., 2003) and Nel, *J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Novels*.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, A. Blake, *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter* (London etc., 2002) and S. Gupta, *Re-Reading Harry Potter* (Basingstoke etc., 2003).

<sup>9</sup> See the contribution by Gordon Lynch elsewhere in this volume and L. Schofield Clark, ‘Why Study Popular Culture? Or How To Build a Case for Your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department’, in: G. Lynch, ed., *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture* (London, 2007), pp. 5–20.

tion, they added a children's bestsellers list,<sup>10</sup> which they later divided into subcategories to prevent the Harry Potter books staying on top there as well. The prestigious French literary journal *Lire* had a cover portrait of Harry for the issue released immediately after the publication of *The Half-Blood Prince* in July 2005, with the title 'Why he is good for literature' and calling him the hero of multicultural globalisation.<sup>11</sup>

When I tell academic colleagues that, as a religious scholar and psychologist of religion, I am doing research on Harry Potter, I often receive slightly contemptuous responses – suggesting that it might be fun, but not 'serious' research. Others start gushing about their children, who simply adore the books. In my view, however, it is of extreme importance to do 'serious' research on the Harry Potter phenomenon. Irrespective of the aesthetic judgements, the books and films deserve attention because of their global influence. Like all cultural artefacts, they can only be understood as located in a specific socially and politically determined cultural context, and hence as having a social and political impact.<sup>12</sup> Texts have everything to do with our daily world and reflect cultural values. Sociopolitical readings of the Harry Potter books lay bare issues of class, racism, consumer capitalism and elitism, and the judgements vary from 'conservative' and 'nostalgic' to 'subversive', heralding Harry as a hero of world peace. The books are multilayered and, of course, not all of the cultural values and ideological subtexts will be grasped consciously – but at least such interpretations show 'what children *might* pick up, topics *some* children might question'.<sup>13</sup>

For religious scholars, the books are especially interesting because religion is omnipresent in the novels: we find elements of magic, mythology and the Bible, while the background theme is the struggle between good and evil.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the books are hotly debated in Christian, Muslim and Hindu circles is striking in this respect. For example, there is a conservative

---

<sup>10</sup> Nel, *J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Novels*, p. 65.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in the Dutch newspaper, *De Volkskrant*, 8 October 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann show how the Harry Potter novels, as popular cultural artefacts, may be used in the study of international relations and politics as pedagogical or analogical mirrors, or as a source of data (evidence about dominant ideas, norms, and beliefs). They also consider that the books can be studied as being constitutive of beliefs about politics, D.H. Nexon and I.B. Neumann, eds., *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham etc., 2006), pp. 11-20. See also Gupta, *Re-Reading Harry Potter*, p. 25f.

<sup>13</sup> Anatol, *Reading Harry Potter*, p. XVI.

<sup>14</sup> See for example, D. Colbert, *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter: A Treasury of Myths, Legends, and Fascinating Facts* (Wrightsville Beach, N.C., 2001) and A.Z. Kronzek and E. Kronzek, *The Sorcerer's Companion: A Guide to the Magical World of Harry Potter* (New York, 2001).

Christian crusade against the books which considers that they bring children into contact with the occult,<sup>15</sup> while the more liberal Christian enthusiasts see in Harry Potter a Christian saviour and use the books to illustrate the biblical message.<sup>16</sup> Religious scholars argue that 'Harry Potter is a part of an ongoing countermove against the decentring of religion from our life worlds'.<sup>17</sup> The Harry Potter phenomenon throws light not only on what attracts preteens and teenagers throughout our globalised world, but also on the role of religion and the search for meaning in this context. In saying this, I realise that my liberal-Protestant background has provided me with an important incentive to study Harry Potter from this perspective, as liberal Protestantism has always emphasised the interrelatedness of the Christian tradition and contemporary cultural events, and also highly values spiritual sources originating from other religions and cultures.

*Detecting cultural anxieties in The Half-Blood Prince*

My basic assumption is that the Harry Potter novels address developmental issues and anxieties that reflect basic cultural anxieties of our time.<sup>18</sup> The books belong to what Reynolds, Brennan and McCarron<sup>19</sup> have characterised as 'frightening fiction'. 'Frightening fiction' is generally labelled as 'horror', but it also has 'characteristics of what literary critics have traditionally termed the fantastic, the marvellous, the grotesque, the Gothic, the

---

<sup>15</sup> See R. Abanes, *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the Magic* (Camp Hill, Penn., 2001) and the American Christian website: [alopogeticsindex.org](http://alopogeticsindex.org).

<sup>16</sup> See for example, C. Neal, *The Gospel According to Harry Potter: Spirituality in the Stories of the World's Most Famous Seeker* (Louisville/London, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> I.B. Neumann, 'Pop Goes Religion: Harry Potter Meets Clifford Geertz', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9/1 (2006), pp. 81-100, p. 92. The American sociologist Lynn Schofield Clark, writing from the perspective of mass communication, sees the Harry Potter hype, together with popular television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Left Behind*, as characteristic of the contemporary interest in the supernatural and paranormal and as indicative of the religious situation today. L. Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Blake states that the books address 'many of the anxieties in our changing political and cultural world' (*The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter*, p. 4). Joan Acocella has pointed out that 'Rowling (...) asks her pre-teen readers to face the hardest questions of life, and does not shy away from the possibility that the answers may be sad: that loss may be permanent, evil ever-present, good exhaustible', J. Acocella, 'The Harry Potter Series', *The New Yorker* 31 July (2000), pp. 74-78, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> K. Reynolds, G. Brennan and K. McCarron, *Frightening Fiction* (London/New York, 2001).

uncanny, literature of terror, and literature of the occult'.<sup>20</sup> The fears raised by this popular genre and the ways readers cope with them tell us a lot about how existential issues are dealt with in our culture.

Erik H. Erikson's existential-psychological theory may serve to further underpin this assumption. Erikson argues that existential anxiety is linked with human psychosocial development. Existential anxiety – the fear that non-existence is possible, fear of nothingness, the awareness that human existence is finite<sup>21</sup> – lurks behind the negative poles of the psychosocial tasks that are central to life: mistrust, shame, guilt, feelings of inferiority, identity confusion, and feelings of isolation, self-absorption and hopelessness. Erikson stresses that the cultural and historical context of a specific time and place determines which anxieties come to the fore and how they are dealt with.

In *The Half-Blood Prince* the main existential issue is the fear of evil forces that seem to be everywhere and cannot be controlled. The fear of evil is closely associated with the fear of death and meaninglessness, which is already indicated by the chilly mist described at the beginning of the book. In the Harry Potter novels, this mist is caused by the so-called Dementors, terrifying, dark, wraithlike figures cloaked in large hoods, who suck the soul from their victims. The kiss of a Dementor leaves you depressed, empty, drained and unable to find meaning in life. The Dementors, monsters of depression, are on the loose because the Lord of Evil – whom time will show to be petrified of death – is becoming increasingly powerful. The nature of this encroaching evil is disclosed using both narrative and metaphor.

Before embarking on a cultural-psychological reading of *The Half-Blood Prince*, I will first briefly outline the content of the book, showing that the two main narrative lines reflect the psychosocial tasks linked with adolescence: the hero-quest line, which is linked with establishing a sense of identity, and the relational line, which is linked with the task of intimacy, that is, being able to fuse one's identity with those of others.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Reynolds et al., *Frightening Fiction*, p. 4, referring to T. Todorov et al., *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, transl. R. Howard (Ithaca, NY, 1975).

<sup>21</sup> T.H. Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern. Erik H. Erikson's Contribution to the Psychology of Religion* (Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA, 1999, <sup>2</sup>2004), p. 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-46.

*Narrative lines: the hero's quest and the search for intimacy*

In *The Half-Blood Prince*, the central mythological theme is that of the *hero's quest*. Voldemort and his accomplices, the Death Eaters, are becoming increasingly powerful, and even penetrate the safe haven of Hogwarts. The final battle between Harry and Voldemort – announced in the first novel but not taking place until the final one – is being prepared. At the end of *The Half-Blood Prince*, Harry takes the task of the hero upon himself, which is to find and fight Voldemort, Lord of Evil.

According to Erikson, the central question of adolescence is that of identity:<sup>23</sup> Who is 'the real me'? Where do I belong? What can I hope for? What do I really want? Which goals do I want to strive for? What are my purposes and competencies? The basic concern behind these questions is finding a balance between the capacity for *fidelity* (being able to stand for something) and its negative counterpart *repudiation* (being able to reject what you do not stand for). One might say that in this book Harry Potter comes of age: in finding his life vocation he establishes his identity. At the end of the book he will lose his last supportive and trustworthy parental figure, the headmaster Dumbledore; as does Frodo, who loses the wise wizard Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, and King Arthur, who loses Merlin in the quest for the Holy Grail. However, like these mythical heroes, he also now embarks on his mission with support from his peers: his best friends Ron and Hermione.

The form of the narrative, however, is not that of a mythical tale but of a mystery novel with Harry investigating the activities of Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape. Malfoy is a student who has been Harry's rival since they both arrived at Hogwarts, and Snape is a vicious professor who has hated Harry from the beginning. Harry suspects both of them of having connections with Voldemort. To his frustration, neither Dumbledore nor Ron and Hermione will take his suspicions seriously. However, together with Dumbledore, he delves into Voldemort's past by way of the 'pensieve', a magical instrument which makes it possible to share memories of others. The knowledge thus acquired will serve Harry well in overcoming Voldemort. It is definitely possible to enjoy the books simply as mysteries. Many of the narrative cues incite a desire to read on, for example, the reader is curious to find out about the 'half-blood prince', the owner of Harry's second-hand potions book who has scribbled some very useful tips in the margins. At the same time, the serious theme of establishing an identity and finding a life vocation are addressed by presenting a mythical hero who can be idealised

---

<sup>23</sup> See E.H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968), pp. 128-135 and Zock, *A Psychology of Ultimate Concern*, pp. 43-35 and pp. 131-135.

and serve as a figure with which readers can identify as they follow Harry's quest to find his identity. This is true of both teenagers and anxious adults who are not sure where they stand in the complex contemporary world.

One can also enjoy the books by focusing on the second narrative line – the *relational*. The protagonists in *The Half-Blood Prince* are basically obsessed by intimate relationships: friendship and being in love. Ron and Hermione are attracted to each other although they are not completely aware of this. Ron is involved with another girl and Hermione hates the fact. Meanwhile Harry gradually realises that he is in love with Ginny, Ron's sister, who breaks up with her boyfriend Dean and becomes Harry's girlfriend – though only for a short time, because at the end of the book Harry decides that they must stop seeing each other as the relationship will be too dangerous while he is hunting Voldemort.

The narrative of both lines is characterised – just as in the other books – by *humour*: a sense of mockery and irony, gimmicks and humorous interactions, which make the teenagers laugh at the difficulties with which they are confronted. Humour thus has an empowering function. For instance, there is the question of the effectiveness of love potions: 'Ginny raised an eyebrow skeptically. "Do they work?" "Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question and the attractiveness of the girl"'.<sup>24</sup> Later it becomes clear that the love potion does not bring *real* love, only obsessive love.<sup>25</sup> Humour is an important feature of the book, something often neglected by critics. As I will point out later, the humour in the books provides a clue as to how to interpret the nature of Harry's magical world.

In the following, I will focus on the central issue of the hero-quest plot line – the fear of evil and concomitant anxieties – showing that the way that evil is presented reflects the contemporary cultural context.

#### *Cultural anxieties: evil, death and meaninglessness*

One can easily recognise the contemporary 'struggle against terrorism' in *The Half-Blood Prince*. Lord Voldemort and his accomplices wreak havoc, killing people and destroying infrastructure. The population is warned that attacks must be expected anytime and anywhere – even Hogwarts is no longer safe as was the case in earlier books. Voldemort turns out to be as difficult to catch as Osama Bin Laden.<sup>26</sup> An important theme is the unreliability and incompetence of the authorities in dealing with the threat. The

<sup>24</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*, p. 117.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245f.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.



Minister of Magic – let us say, the Prime Minister of the magical world – Cornelius Fudge, who has made a mess of the ‘battle against terrorism’, is replaced by the more energetic Rufus Scrimgeour. The Ministry of Magic does not really know how to fight evil. The security measures introduced by the Ministry are rejected as being quite useless by Dumbledore, Harry and his friends.<sup>27</sup> The leaflets circulated by the Ministry with tips on how to behave in dangerous situations are a parody of the leaflets and television advertisements used by Western governments.<sup>28</sup> The Ministry of Magic tries to raise morale through symbolic arrests, despite them targeting innocent people. The new minister, Scrimgeour, wants Harry – because of his reputation as ‘the boy who lived’ and who is rumoured to be the ‘chosen one’, the saviour – to support the Ministry by becoming, as Harry cynically remarks, ‘the ministry’s new poster boy’.<sup>29</sup>

Different layers of anxiety are addressed in the story. Firstly, there is the children’s feelings of powerlessness with regard to adults and the unfairness of the world.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, we find the adolescent’s critical mistrust of leaders and their dominant ideologies. In Erikson’s terms, adolescents have an ‘ideological sensitivity’: they are looking for a reliable ideology that can bring order and meaning to life. Thirdly, the powerlessness felt by people with regard to terrorism, and their decreasing faith in the competence of governments to manage the global threats.<sup>31</sup> It is no coincidence that within this cultural climate the ‘search for meaning’ has become a vital issue in the Western world – in whatever area one may be looking for meaning.

Another contemporary existential anxiety touched upon in *The Half-Blood Prince* is the fear of aging, illness and death. It is striking that ‘evil’ in the book is associated with the fear of death, and ‘good’ with the power of love. Love is presented as the antidote to fear of death. Voldemort, the personification of evil, is petrified of death and, as his name indicates (‘Volde-Mort’ is a play on the French words), his one and only preoccupation is to live forever. To attain this goal he attempts to find the philosopher’s stone (see volume 1 of the series) and, as becomes clear in this volume, he also splits his soul into seven parts, one part remaining within him as a living human being, and the other six parts hidden in ‘Horcruxes’, which are magical objects. This protects him from death as he can obtain a new living

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 63, p. 228.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-46.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 605.

<sup>30</sup> See Nel, J.K. *Rowling’s Harry Potter Novels* and B. Virole, *L’enchantement Harry Potter. La Psychologie de l’enfant* (Paris, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> See also G.M. O’Har, ‘Magic in the Machine Age’, *Technology and Culture* 41/4 (2000), pp. 862-864 and Gupta, *Re-Reading Harry Potter*.

body with the help of a Horcrux. One is reminded of vampire tales, but is this not also a dark version of Jesus' resurrection? Yet, neither rising from death nor eternal life are described as being realistic or even desirable possibilities in *The Half-Blood Prince*. Death is nothing to be afraid of, Dumbledore tells Harry during their dangerous underground mission to destroy a Horcrux located in the middle of a Styx-like, dark, cold lake with dead bodies drifting as ghostly guardians: 'It is the unknown we fear when we look upon death and darkness, nothing more'.<sup>32</sup> An existentialist message indeed.

*The magical world – literal interpretation or evocative fiction?*

Having addressed the developmental and cultural anxieties found in *The Half-Blood Prince*, I will now address a fiercely debated issue among cultural critics.<sup>33</sup> What is the nature of the magical world in the Harry Potter books, and in what sense is it indicative of the return of religion in the post-Christian, globalised world?<sup>34</sup> Some have argued that the ideological subtext of the Harry Potter books implies a regression to a pre-modern view of life, and must be considered as a reaction to the failure of the rationalistic modern world-view to cope with the important social, political and existential questions of our time. I will argue that this is not the case. In my view, the 'magic' in *Harry Potter* is a metaphorical way of celebrating human abilities and not a nostalgic return to a pre-modern, anti-rationalistic way of life.

Several different definitions of 'magic' and 'religion' figure in Harry Potter research. I take the position of Clifford Geertz,<sup>35</sup> who defines religion as transcending the realm of mundane, everyday life and subsumes magic under religion – unlike several other religious scholars, who make a strict

---

<sup>32</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*, p. 529. We find here the existential anxieties that Irvin D. Yalom has sketched in his *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York, 1980): the fear of death, of freedom (i.e. willing things, taking responsibility), of isolation, and of meaninglessness.

<sup>33</sup> I will not go into the equally interesting debate about the supposedly Christian or non-Christian character of the books. See for example, L. Caldecott, 'A Wizard's Mission. Christian Themes in Harry Potter', *The Christian Century* 125/1 (2008), pp. 24-27 and T.H. Zock, 'Harry Potter en de transitionele ruimte. Verbeelding en zingeving vanuit psychologisch perspectief', in: B. Verstappen et al., *Vreemde verhalen, goed nieuws?* (Nijmegen, 2003), pp. 36-53.

<sup>34</sup> See Blake, *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter*; Neumann, 'Pop Goes Religion'; and R. Natov, 'Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25 (2001), pp. 310-327.

<sup>35</sup> C. Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in: C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1966, 1973), pp. 87-126.

distinction between the two.<sup>36</sup> A cultural critic who also subscribes to Geertz's definition of religion and whose work has influenced my own interpretation is Iver B. Neumann. In his article 'Pop Goes Religion' he argues that the magic presented in Harry Potter is a form of individualised magic that can be compared with the contemporary need to look for meaning in an 'other' realm.<sup>37</sup> This is necessary because the scientific rationality that reigns over the mundane realm does not answer 'last questions'. Neumann uses a Geertzian view of religion understood as 'slippage', that is, 'moving beyond the realities of everyday life'<sup>38</sup> and returning from the 'sacred' realm to the commonsense world with new meaning. In this way, the commonsense world becomes part of a wider reality.<sup>39</sup> In Neumann's view, religious practices are about meaning rather than belief. Therefore, he argues, whether the magical world 'exists' or not is irrelevant, what is important is whether the books fulfil the religious function. 'Belief' in the contemporary individualised setting is not necessary for the fulfilment of the religious function of transcending the ordinary.<sup>40</sup> The important thing is that it is possible that slippage into a different, meaning-giving realm occurs. Hence it is not surprising that Neumann directly links religion and art. Referring to the programme of the English Romantic poets Coleridge and Wordsworth, he states that 'fictional evocation is akin to religious evocation'.<sup>41</sup>

Neumann argues that the global fascination with Harry Potter suggests that children and adults from very different cultural and religious backgrounds, engaged in different practices, can somehow recognise themselves, their own anxieties and the cultural anxieties of their time in the books and give these meaning. Neumann concludes that: 'Harry is a reading event, a multimedia event, a text and a hypertext. As such, it invites the consumption of a traditional magical life world in an individualized setting while at

---

<sup>36</sup> According to Geertz, magic consists of manipulating impersonal forces and the religious reverence of gods, Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System'.

<sup>37</sup> Neumann points out that the magical tradition has always been an undercurrent in Christianity.

<sup>38</sup> Neumann, 'Pop Goes Religion', p. 83f.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>40</sup> This explains why 'fundamentalists' (either Christian, Muslim, or Wicca), who take a literal view on Harry Potter's magical world, feel the need to criticise the books.

<sup>41</sup> Neumann, 'Pop Goes Religion', p. 85. Neumann, referring to the anthropologist B. Malinowski, further discusses the relationship between magic and science in the Harry Potter books. Malinowski holds that both have to do with manipulating materiality, that is, the world around us. Magic starts where profane knowledge, i.e. science, ends. In this sense, magic may be considered pseudo-science. In the Harry Potter novels, however, it is the other way around: science starts where magic ends.

the same time providing social arenas for the processing of this slippage outside the churches'.<sup>42</sup> The books present an individualised way of producing meaning through religious 'slippage', meaning that religious experience occurs less and less frequently in the setting of a church or another religious institution. As a result, reading the Harry Potter novels or watching the movies entails slipping from 'real life' into another, sacred realm and returning with new meaning. Neumann does not consider the question of what new meaning people actually find in the Harry Potter realm.

Other critics give a more literal interpretation of Harry's magical world, although they also stress that the books address the fundamental questions of postmodern culture. Andrew Blake states that the Harry Potter books are about collective powerlessness, bureaucracy, and the crisis of faith in both Christianity and scientific rationality.<sup>43</sup> In his view the books are definitely reminiscent of the Christian message despite the absence of a supernatural being, whether God or the Devil. The proposed solution to these postmodern problems is what Blake calls 'magic realism':<sup>44</sup> establishing control through the spiritual, magical realm. Thus, Blake interprets Harry's magical world in a literal way. He characterises the books as 'retrolutionary', a neologism he borrows from designers of a new model for Jaguar, which has a traditional look but is equipped with all the latest technical gadgets.<sup>45</sup> In a similar way, Blake states, the Harry Potter books try 'to reinvent the past [for example, the glorious British Empire] for present-day consumer culture'.<sup>46</sup>

Sumar Gupta, in his sophisticated postmodern literary and social critique of the books, argues that the spirit of Harry Potter is definitely anti-rational. In a sense, he takes the use of magic in the books as literally as orthodox Christians. He considers that Harry Potter is presented as a supernatural saviour. He is 'the Chosen One', who, according to the already quoted prophecy,<sup>47</sup> is destined to fight and kill Voldemort. The books attempt to show that neither rational thinking and science nor education are of any help in fighting Voldemort. In the following close reading of *The Half-Blood Prince* I will show that both Blake's and Gupta's interpretations of Harry's magical world as anti-rational and pre-modern are incorrect, and will present an alternative metaphorical and humanistic interpretation.

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> Blake, *The Irresistible Rise of Harry Potter*.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-102.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 15f.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 9. A similar interpretation is given by O'Har, 'Magic in the Machine Age'.

<sup>47</sup> 'Neither can live while the other survives', Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*, p. 76.

*Evil and the magical world in The Half-Blood Prince*<sup>48</sup>

The status of the magical world in *The Half-Blood Prince* may be a bit ambiguous, but time and again it becomes evident that the power of magic is limited and no substitute for human abilities and a rational, scientific way of thinking: while the evil forces are not demonised, nor are the good powers divinised.

In *The Half-Blood Prince*, it turns out that Voldemort – although portrayed in the previous books as a vague, mysterious, otherworldly figure – is not superhuman nor a supernatural evil force. As his past is gradually uncovered by Harry and Dumbledore, we find the lonely, talented, resentful, sadistic, mistrusting orphan Tom Riddle, who grows up to become a talented but vicious wizard with an extreme fear of death. Taking on the name ‘Lord Voldemort’, he looks for eternal life by dividing his soul, as mentioned, into the Horcruxes. This can only be done by killing, which the book argues dehumanises by mutilating the soul.<sup>49</sup> Harry’s vocation, as a kind of mythical hero, is to destroy the Horcruxes and thus defeat Voldemort. Harry asks Dumbledore: ‘So if all of his Horcruxes are destroyed, Voldemort *could* be killed?’ and Dumbledore replies, ‘Without his Horcruxes Voldemort will be a mortal man with a maimed and diminished soul’.<sup>50</sup> The mythical, ostracised Voldemort, who is referred to as ‘You-Know-Who’ and ‘He Who Must Not Be Named’,<sup>51</sup> becomes increasingly humanised in this book and there is no absolute, supernatural ‘evil’, nor absolute, supernatural ‘good’. Contrary to what Gupta argues, Harry must not be considered as the supernaturally destined saviour (although without a divine call). It is true that he is called ‘the Chosen One’, as was Jesus, or Neo in the movie *The Matrix*. However, several times it is made clear that the prophecy has no magical power in itself. Dumbledore explains to Harry that it was the prophecy itself that made Voldemort chose him as his archenemy rather than this event being predestined in itself.

If Voldemort had never heard of the prophecy, would it have been fulfilled? (...) If Voldemort had never murdered your father, would he have imparted in you a furious desire for revenge? Of course not! If he had not forced your mother to die for you, would he have given you a magical protection he could

---

<sup>48</sup> It must be kept in mind that the work of most of the authors discussed here was published before the publication of *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*.

<sup>49</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*, p. 469.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 475.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

not penetrate? Of course not! Don't you see? Voldemort himself created his worst enemy, just as tyrants everywhere do!<sup>52</sup>

In other words the prophecy was self-fulfilling and Harry's 'magical protection' derived from the love of a mother who sacrificed herself to protect him and his own 'ability to love'.<sup>53</sup> As Erikson suggests, being loved in childhood strengthens the individual's sense of basic trust and overcomes the fear of death, making it possible to love and sacrifice oneself for others. Here we have the only power that can defeat Voldemort: the human power of love. Rather than being supernaturally chosen, it is Harry's ability to love that makes him the one chosen to defeat Voldemort.<sup>54</sup>

One might argue that there is a certain amount of 'splitting' between good and bad in *The Half-Blood Prince*. Nonetheless, it is repeatedly made clear that people have both good and bad aspects, Harry included. His life story and abilities are strikingly similar to those of Voldemort. Even the unpleasant and nasty Draco Malfoy is not completely inhuman or bad. Just like Harry, he wants to take revenge for the injustice done to his father, who was taken to the magical prison of Azkaban after being exposed as one of Voldemort's followers. Malfoy wants to kill Dumbledore but finds that he cannot. Dumbledore states: 'Draco, you are not a killer'.<sup>55</sup> When Draco has disarmed Dumbledore, he stammers:

'You're in my power ... I am the one with the wand ... you're at my mercy ...'. 'No Draco', said Dumbledore quietly. 'It's my mercy, and not yours that matters now.'<sup>56</sup>

Once again, it is the power of love that triumphs. Further, the 'bad guy' Severus Snape also has an ambiguous nature. He is definitely 'bad' because he kills Dumbledore at the end of *The Half-Blood Prince*, but nonetheless there remains some doubt about whose side he will finally join. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* will reveal it to be the side of good.

At the end of *The Half-Blood Prince*, after Dumbledore's death and as Harry is about to undertake the last part of his heroic journey together with Ron and Hermione, he remembers Dumbledore telling him long ago 'to

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 476f.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 477.

<sup>54</sup> It is important to note that, in the end, Voldemort will die in a fight with Harry, but that Harry does not actually kill him. Voldemort points his wand at Harry and utters the killing curse, but the curse backfires and he kills himself. Voldemort dies because of his inability to love.

<sup>55</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*, p. 553.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 553.

fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay, though never quite eradicated'.<sup>57</sup> Harry realises that 'he must abandon for ever the illusion he ought to have lost at the age of one: that the shelter of a parent's arms meant that nothing could hurt him'.<sup>58</sup> This is a rather realistic view, implying neither the splitting between good and evil nor the taking of refuge in a magical world. Harry is a saviour figure, but not an omnipotent one. He is an existential hero and the fight against evil is presented as a choice:

'You see, the prophecy does not mean you *have* to do anything! But the prophecy caused Lord Voldemort to *mark you as his equal*... in other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the prophecy!'<sup>59</sup>

We can conclude that evil cannot and must not be fought against by magical means and devices but rather with human qualities such as love, courage, friendship and self-sacrifice. There are countless examples of the limits of magical power in this volume. Take, for instance, 'Felix Felicis', the good-luck potion which enables the recipient to succeed at everything. Harry gives it to Ron, who is the keeper for the Hogwarts Quidditch (a kind of football or rugby on broomsticks) team, to overcome his nerves for an important match. However, Harry only pretends to pour it into Ron's glass and it works as a placebo. Nevertheless, during the 'shoot-out' at the end of the book, when Harry and his friends actually take some of the potion, it does seem to work in a magical way. So there remains some ambiguity concerning the workings of magic in *The Half-Blood Prince*. But ultimately, it will not be magic but the power of love, human solidarity and the willingness to risk one's life for a good cause that destroys Voldemort. This is reminiscent of the biblical saying, which also appears in other forms in other religious and philosophical traditions: 'Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it',<sup>60</sup> although here it is not 'for Jesus' sake'.

Given this existential-religious message, what actually is the function of magic in the books? I agree with Roni Natov, a professor of English who teaches in the field of Children's Studies, that it stands for the evocative power of the imagination. She has pointed out that: 'In the Harry Potter books, magic calls attention to the awe and wonder of ordinary life',<sup>61</sup> and

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 478f.

<sup>60</sup> Luke 16: 33, *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Edition.

<sup>61</sup> Natov, 'Harry Potter and the Extraordinariness of the Ordinary', p. 315.

argues further that the magical world of Harry Potter is not a realm distinct from everyday life, as in the work of C.S. Lewis and Tolkien. Rather, there is an 'interpenetration of two worlds':

In Rowling's stories, the interpretation of the two worlds [the Muggle world and the world of Hogwarts] suggests the way in which we live, not only in childhood, though especially so – on more than one plane, with the life of the imagination and daily life moving in and out of our consciousness.<sup>62</sup>

As does Neumann, Natov refers to the English Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge to make her point:

Magic embodies the imagination, stands in for what is beyond the power of children, perhaps anyone, to actualize (...) Harry's supernatural powers invite children to imagine beyond the boundaries of their limitation.<sup>63</sup>

The magic in the Harry Potter books stands for a celebration of human abilities. This view of magic as imaginative play and a celebration of human abilities may be substantiated by looking at the role of humour in the Harry Potter novels. The relativising and subversive power of humour keeps reminding readers that this is fiction – although evocative fiction that may empower and provide meaning. Harry's magical world also offers the opportunity to relax, to temporarily retreat into an 'other' world and just enjoy the mystery and the imaginative playing with cultural traditions. It offers the opportunity for what psychoanalysts call 'regression in the service of the ego', which supports emotional growth. This retreat into the magical world created by Rowling may also serve as a flight from reality, but the humour, which represents the reality principle, makes it difficult to take the magical world too literally.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 314. Cf. A. Lurie, 'Review of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*', *New York Review of Books* 20 (1999), pp. 6-8 and Zock, 'Harry Potter en de transitionele ruimte'.

<sup>63</sup> Lurie, *Review*, p. 316.

<sup>64</sup> This metaphorical view of the magical world is corroborated by the last book of the series. Close to the end Harry is unconscious after having been wounded by Voldemort. He wakes up in a vague, white, heavenly place, where he meets the dead Dumbledore. They talk about what to do next, and Dumbledore gives him some advice. Finally, Harry asks him: 'Tell me one last thing (...) Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?' Dumbledore answers: 'Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?', Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p. 723.



*Conclusion: the ideological subtext of The Half-Blood Prince*

Our analysis ends with an existentialist-humanist message concerning how to cope with evil forces in the world and in ourselves. Death is a fact of life, evil must be fought, but it can never be conquered definitively. We have to accept the human condition. Voldemort is what psychologists call a 'shadow figure', representing the anxieties of our postmodern culture: fear of death, of dependence, and of meaninglessness.<sup>65</sup> The only way to fight evil is through human qualities such as love and solidarity, and Harry's role as an existential hero with whom it is possible to identify explores this theme. While there are definitely Christian overtones, which may be the reason why the novels are applauded by liberal Christians,<sup>66</sup> neither God nor the Devil, nor other supernatural beings which are wholly good or bad, appear in the novels. There are only human beings with human abilities which can be used for the good of humanity, a good that must be achieved by humanity alone. *The Half-Blood Prince* does not stimulate a nostalgic, anti-rational and unrealistic return to a world of absolute magic. It is the magic of human abilities and human life that is celebrated. The humorous, evocative play stimulates the human imagination so that we can hear the existential message.

Does everyone grasp this existentialist-humanistic ideological subtext? Not necessarily. There is much more to find and enjoy in the adventures of Harry Potter. Yet, the subtext is there, and perhaps it might seep into the minds of the readers – both children and adults – just as the chilly mist seeped into the world at the beginning of the novel. The fact that so many people in so many different cultural contexts enjoy the books suggests that they somehow touch on the issues and anxieties of our time.

---

<sup>65</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince*, p. 475 ff.

<sup>66</sup> After the appearance of the last book of the series in July 2007, J.K. Rowling herself confessed that there are evident parallels with the Christian tradition and that she is a Christian herself – although a liberal and sometimes doubting one. See the Dutch newspaper, *Trouw* 25 October 2007, pp. 6-7 and N. Gibbs, 'Harry Potter Creator Finally Telling Secrets', *Time* 170/27 (2008), pp. 100-107.