

## House-Elves, Hogwarts, and Friendship: Casting Away the Institutions which Made Voldemort's Rise Possible

Susan Peppers-Bates  
Stetson University

Joshua Rust  
Stetson University

### 1. Introduction

While plantation slavery was introduced to the United States under British rule, it was not until the early nineteenth century that the southern states transformed from a society with slaves to a genuine slaveholding society.<sup>1</sup> Unlike a society with slaves, a genuine slaveholding society regards slavery and the attendant hierarchies as economically and culturally essential. Not only did slavery come to be highly profitable, but it also came to imply a vertical set of social and power relations within which every man, woman, and child was to be understood—where “white” or “black” marked the difference between those who could engage in trade and those who were a commodity to be traded.

A genuine slaveholding society did not—and could not—arise in a vacuum, but took root in a society which happened to have slaves. In the 1700s, while the plantation economy did not require slavery, it did depend on nearly free labor made possible by a system of indentured servitude. And various factors, from the scarcity of land and the increasing price of tobacco to pre-existing pockets of slavery and racial animus, transformed the South from a system of servitude to a totalizing system of race-based slavery.

We argue that an analogous transformation takes place over the seven books of the *Harry Potter* series. Prior to his final confrontation with

---

<sup>1</sup> For an example of this traditional distinction, see Mark Weiner, *Black Trials: Citizenship from the Beginnings of Slavery to the End of Caste* (New York: Vintage, 2004), pp. 29-31.

Harry, Voldemort hardens a relatively fluid order of magical and non-magical creatures into the false universalism of a hierarchical society which privileges one group (European/white/magical/etc.) by rendering others deviant and invisible. But just as the slaveholding society of the antebellum South was built from a society with slaves, pre-existing institutions *within* Hogwarts and the Wizarding World set the stage for Voldemort's totalizing pure-blood utopia. Just as slavery would not have been possible without, for example, the institution of indentured servitude, we contend that the pre-existing subjugation of the house-elves and, less obviously, Hogwarts' house system prefigures and makes possible Voldemort's coup. While it is not clear that the defeat of Voldemort entails the elimination of either of these institutions, we suggest that Rowling nevertheless sees friendship as the ultimate means by which the Wizarding World avoids becoming a genuine slaveholding society. And perhaps, more radically, friendship could also eliminate the institutional soil in which Voldemort took root. True friendship that sees difference as a cause for celebration, as opposed to domination, would be a means toward a more truly egalitarian vision—where not only house-elf slavery is abolished, but also where the rigid house system is replaced with a more socially fluid network of learners. Moreover, friendship could be the vehicle by which the boundary between the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds is eliminated.

## 2. Voldemort's Pure-Blood Ideology

After Voldemort's followers infiltrate the Ministry of Magic, one of their first acts is to change the fountain in the main lobby. Whereas before witches and wizards were portrayed with house-elves and other magical creatures (admittedly, staring up at them with adoration), now they stand on top of cringing, inferior muggles and the other magical creatures are nowhere in sight:

Now a gigantic statue of black stone dominated the scene. It was rather frightening, this vast sculpture of a witch and a wizard sitting on ornately carved thrones . . . . Engraved in foot-high letters at the base of the statue were the words MAGIC IS MIGHT. . . . Harry looked more closely and realized that what he had thought were decoratively carved thrones were actually mounds of carved humans: hundreds and hundreds of naked bodies, men, women, and children, all with rather stupid, ugly faces, twisted and pressed together to support the weight of the handsomely robed wizards. (*DH* pp. 241-42)

The wizards' privileged standing has been extended with more explicit domination and persecution.

Harry Potter, himself of both muggle and wizard ancestry, was raised by a hateful aunt and uncle (Vernon and Petunia Dursley) who despise him for his difference, a difference so distasteful to them that they never even bother to explain it to him. Harry does not learn that he is a wizard until Rubeus

Hagrid shows up personally to deliver his invitation to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Uncle Vernon had tried, in vain, to destroy all of the magically delivered letters for Harry, so that Harry would never learn the truth of his ancestry. Only under duress does Aunt Petunia acknowledge the truth that Harry's parents were "freaks" killed not in a car crash, but "blown up" by another wizard (*SS* p. 53). Their shame is reminiscent of Americans of mixed ancestry hiding their African heritage, in the face of a discriminatory "one-drop" rule whereby even one drop of "tainted" blood nullified your whiteness.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the Durselys' prejudice is mirrored in the Malfoy family, which regards any mingling of wizard and muggle blood as dirty; thus Draco Malfoy insults Hermione Granger by calling her a "Mudblood" for having non-magical parents (*CoS* p. 112). The biologically false imagery of blood as possessing degrees of purity captures the imagination of prejudiced wizards as surely as similar imagery captivated Southerners who invented terms such as "octoroon" and "quadroon" to rank the degree of black blood in racially mixed people. Surely, J. K. Rowling, a British citizen, meant to draw the reader's mind to parallels with Hitler's racialized obsession with Jewish blood as a pollutant that came in degrees.<sup>3</sup> The Nazi regime shipped people off to concentration camps for even distant Jewish ancestry. And the irony behind Hitler's rumored Jewish ancestry is echoed in Voldemort's own mixed muggle-witch parentage; Voldemort's hatred of the muggle father who abandoned his mother, a father whom he physically resembled, drives his hatred of muggles as such.

### 3. Institutional Entrenchment: House-Elves and Hogwarts' Houses

Institutional or structural discrimination occurs when a society's rules and conventions unjustly favor certain subgroups. Intergroup oppression

---

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the one-drop rule in American racial discourse, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formations," in *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity*, ed. Charles Gallagher (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), pp. 17-22.

<sup>3</sup> No doubt Rowling also intended the series as a commentary on the British aristocracy's preoccupation with family lineage and "blue blood." Hence the recent controversy over Prince William's marriage to Kate Middleton, a middle-class "commoner." For example, note James Whitaker's emphasis on heredity when he asserts, "I'm not against the middle class as such, but I do query whether she has the background and breeding to be queen one day"; see Anthony Faiola, "Kate Middleton's 'Commoner' Status Stirs up Britons' Old Class Divide," *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2010, accessed online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/12/18/AR2010121803829.html>. The article goes on to suggest that Rowling herself has been subject to this kind of discrimination: "that despite the rise of mega-rich commoners such as Richard Branson and J. K. Rowling, this is still very much a society where status is measured in birthright and breeding."

results from a variety of mechanisms, including what Charles Tilly calls “opportunity hoarding.”<sup>4</sup> Long-standing societal patterns in funding for America’s public schools, which channel resources to middle-class, white students and away from poor and minority students, are a clear example of institutional discrimination. Indeed, the latest data from the U.S. Department of Education tracks clear institutional bias in distribution of punishments by race and gender, with black males receiving the harshest and most frequent punishments.<sup>5</sup> Similar unfair outcomes for African-Americans in measures of health-care access, financial resources, and judicial punishment work together to create institutional barriers to their fair treatment and to re-entrench white racial privilege.<sup>6</sup> Racism in the U.S. has moved from *de jure* to *de facto*, but it endures and was nurtured in the ground of racial hatred and domination.<sup>7</sup>

Institutional barriers to equality flourish in similar soil in Harry Potter’s world. The pure-blood ideology of Voldemort and the Death Eaters did not arise in a vacuum. Both the barriers and the ideology simply pushed to an extreme the prejudice already represented in the original Ministry of Magic “Fountain of the Magical Brethren” statue—a smiling house-elf, centaur, and goblin “were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard” (*OotP* p. 127). While it—unlike the new statue—doesn’t imply the elimination or outright domination of non-pure-blood witches and wizards, the original statue was hardly a vision of equality.

Prior to Voldemort’s uprising, the Wizarding World was already organized in a relatively neat social hierarchy, represented in Figure 1:

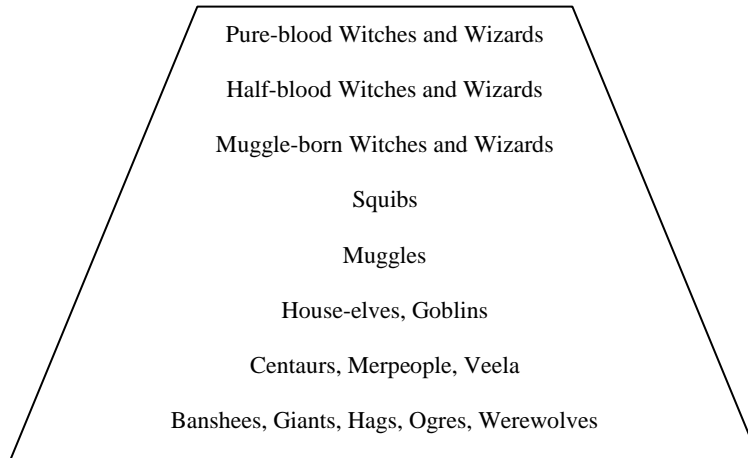
---

<sup>4</sup> Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2005), chap. 10. See also Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), chap. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Tamar Lewin, “Black Students Punished More, Data Suggests,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2012, pp. A11 and 18.

<sup>6</sup> For an extensive catalogue of opportunity hoarding, see Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, chap. 1.3.

<sup>7</sup> Readers desiring data documenting the many racial disparities in outcome in the U.S. can turn to the articles and appendices in Gallagher, *Rethinking the Color Line*.



**Figure 1**<sup>8</sup>

This hierarchy implies institutions which Voldemort was able to exploit in order to consolidate his power. In this section we'll look at two special cases: the institution of house-elf slavery and the house system of Hogwarts.

Let us first consider the case of house-elves. House-elves are still slaves, freed only at the whim of their masters (or by Hermione's hidden knitted creations), some with minds so thoroughly colonized like Kreacher's that they look forward to their heads being mounted on plaques at death (*OotP* p. 76). This house-elf identification with "their" family at the expense of their own identity and interests recalls Malcolm X's description of a "house Negro [who] would say, 'What's the matter boss, *we* sick?' *We* sick! He identified himself with his master, more than his master identified with himself."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the house-elves refuse to pick up the clothes that Hermione leaves out for them to "free" themselves, considering it insulting.<sup>10</sup> They identify more as slave-servants of Hogwarts than as their own free persons. Only Dobby seems to take pride and pleasure in his freedom and expresses gratitude to

---

<sup>8</sup> This graphic is adapted from a figure in Karen Brown, *Prejudice in Harry Potter's World* (College Station, TX: VBW Publishing, 2008), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots," in *Reflections: An Anthology of African-American Philosophy*, ed. James Montmarquet and William Hardy (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), pp. 203-10, quotation at p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *GoF* pp. 98-99, 138, and 374-82. For an in-depth discussion of house-elf slavery, see Brown, "Extreme Measures: Examining the Mindset of the House-elf," in Brown, *Prejudice in Harry Potter's World*, pp. 86-119.

Harry for freeing him (*CoS* p. 338). This different response to the offer of freedom fits with Malcolm X's analysis that the better treated house slaves identified with their masters, whereas the more abused field slaves hated them and wanted to escape. Recall that Dobby's masters, the Malfoys, treated him "like vermin" with death threats "five times a day" (*CoS* pp. 177-78).

Once wizards and witches accepted the idea that some fully non-human magical creatures—such as house-elves—were subordinate, the stage was set to question the moral worth of part-human magical creatures such as werewolves and centaurs. Next, the idea of degrees of worth helped to create the myth of degrees of "purity" of wizarding blood, whereby those of mixed parentage fall below those with two magical parents, and "mud-bloods" no longer count as full members of the magical community. Voldemort's uprising would not have been possible had this great chain of magical being not already entrenched itself in the hearts of ordinary witches and wizards.

Other institutional structures, besides the enslavement of house-elves, prefigure the pure-blood ideology of Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Superficially, it might seem as though Hogwarts' egalitarian system of houses remains an attractive alternative to the doctrine of pure-blood supremacy. The houses are organized horizontally, not vertically. And until the Ministry's Muggle-Born Registration Commission, instituted under Voldemort, accuses muggles of stealing magic, Hogwarts remains open to muggle-born magic users. However, even here, all is not well.

In general, the Sorting Hat selects students according to his or her natural talents or virtues, rather than according to family lineage. These are the characteristics heralded in the yearly song of the Sorting Hat:

You might belong in Gryffindor,  
Where dwell the brave at heart,  
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry  
Set Gryffindors apart;  
You might belong in Hufflepuff,  
Where they are just and loyal,  
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true  
And unafraid of toil;  
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,  
If you've a ready mind,  
Where those of wit and learning,  
Will always find their kind;  
Or perhaps in Slytherin  
You'll make your real friends,  
Those cunning folk use any means  
To achieve their ends. (*SS* p. 118)

Gryffindors are brave, Ravenclaws are intelligent, Hufflepuffs are self-disciplined, and Slytherins are ambitious.

One indication that something is amiss with the house system is that it might readily be compared to the autocratic utopia envisioned by Plato in the *Republic*.<sup>11</sup> The *Republic* consists of three classes—the Guardians or Philosopher-Kings and -Queens, the Auxiliaries, and the Workers. Not only are Plato’s classes and Hogwarts’ houses both individuated according to virtue or excellence, but there is great similarity in which virtues distinguish the various classes or houses. For Plato, all workers must have the basic virtue of moderation or self-discipline, defined both in terms of obedience to authority and self-mastery.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, the working class is self-disciplined when “the desires of the common majority are controlled by the desires and the intelligence of the minority of better men [and women].”<sup>13</sup> Correspondingly, Hufflepuffs are “loyal” and “unafraid of toil.” Both Gryffindors and the auxiliary soldier class must have the virtue of bravery or courage. Finally, both Ravenclaws and Philosopher-Kings and -Queens have wisdom or “a ready mind” as a principal virtue.

Against this background of similarity a few differences between Plato’s class system and Hogwarts’ house system readily assert themselves. First, the classes of Plato’s *Republic* are decidedly hierarchical, with Philosopher-Kings and -Queens commanding the Auxiliaries who exert authority over the Workers. And while most members of each house believe that their house is superior to the others, these houses are arranged in a more or less egalitarian fashion. In this regard it is important to note that the hierarchy of classes, for Plato, implies a hierarchy of virtues, so that the upper classes have all of the virtues that the lower classes have, plus their unique virtue. Thus Guardians are wise, brave, and self-disciplined, whereas the Auxiliaries are only brave and self-disciplined. Self-discipline, then, is regarded as a kind of basic virtue upon which the others are founded: “self-discipline literally spans the whole octaval spread of the community, and makes the weakest, the strongest, and the ones in between all sing in unison.”<sup>14</sup> Hogwarts’ egalitarian house system eliminates this Platonic picture of nested virtues so that Ravenclaws need only be wise, Hufflepuffs need only be hard-working, and Gryffindors need only be brave.

*Prima facie*, this egalitarian component is one of the more attractive aspects of Hogwarts, construed here as a kind of political utopia. However, as the exclusionary attitude of Salazar Slytherin suggests, the house system is embedded within and so not immune to a social hierarchy, beginning with pure-blood witches and wizards and ending with despised outsiders.

---

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 330e-431d.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 431d.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 432a.

Following the founding of Hogwarts over 1,000 years ago, Professor Cuthbert Binns explains:

For a few years, the founders worked in harmony together, seeking out youngsters who showed signs of magic and bringing them to the castle to be educated. But then disagreements sprang up between them. A rift began to grow between Slytherin and the others. Slytherin wished to be more *selective* about the students admitted to Hogwarts. He believed that magical learning should be kept within all-magic families. He disliked taking students of Muggle parentage, believing them to be untrustworthy. After a while, there was a serious argument on the subject between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and Slytherin left the school. (*CoS* p. 150)

The rift between Slytherin and the other founders suggest that the various houses are only superficially “separate but equal.”

Second, Plato’s political utopia has no place for the Slytherin temperament. Indeed, the Platonic interlocutor most akin to a Slytherin is Thrasymachus, the sophist who argues that morality is nothing but a means by which the stronger maintain rule over the weaker.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Draco Malfoy’s name evokes the specter of tyranny, bringing to mind both the notorious, draconian dictator and the French phrase meaning unfaithful (*mal foi*). To be unfaithful is a way of lacking self-discipline, even the basic means for obedience to “the intelligence of the minority of better men”; Malfoy’s name suggests he lacks loyalty. Yet without self-discipline, which spans the octaval spread of the Platonic community, Slytherin cannot be a part of that community.<sup>16</sup> While Plato would find it perplexing that Slytherin is a part of the Hogwarts community, perhaps this also explains why Slytherin must be the source of discord within it.

There’s a third difference between the *Republic* and Hogwarts. While at least three of the four founders of Hogwarts strove for harmony within the wizarding community, the house-based solution was itself exclusionary in that it could not include non-magic-using muggles. Hogwarts is a utopia within the world, but could not include the world. This stands in marked contrast to

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 338c.

<sup>16</sup> For a more sanguine take on Slytherin, see Steven Patterson, “Is Ambition a Virtue? Why Slytherin Belongs at Hogwarts,” in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2004), pp. 121-31. Patterson argues that because, for Aristotle, virtue is a midpoint between an excess and a deficiency, then appropriate, moderated ambition can be a virtue. While there is virtuous ambition, it isn’t clear that Slytherin exhibits this. Recall that the Sorting Hat says of Slytherin, “Those cunning folk use *any means*/To achieve their ends” (*italics ours*). Indeed, even Patterson cites Hermione Granger, a Gryffindor, as the epitome of virtuous ambition; *ibid.*, p. 131.



Plato's utopia, which strives to include nearly everyone within its fold (but still excludes the disabled and moral reprobates such as Thrasymachus).

Ironically, where Slytherin sought to exclude only those who did not come from established wizard families, a Hogwartian utopia still excludes those without magical skills. Even the most sympathetic wizards readily deceive, censor, and manipulate muggles in order to enforce the separation between the Wizarding World and the Muggle World. These thought-control practices are reminiscent of Plato's noble lie.<sup>17</sup> What can be said on behalf of the wizarding community in this regard? First, a defender of Hogwarts might simply note that it is, after all, a school for wizardry and witchcraft. As such, it cannot be any more culpable for excluding muggles than a pilot school is for excluding the blind. Second, these exclusionary practices are understandable: "They built this castle together, far from prying Muggle eyes, for it was an age when magic was feared by common people, and witches and wizards suffered much persecution" (*CoS* p. 150). The potential for continued persecution is reinforced in the Dursleys' treatment of young Harry Potter.

While the fact that Hogwarts is a wizarding school explains why muggles are not admitted, this cannot explain the full-scale manipulation and isolationist practices enacted by even the best members of the wizarding community. Pilot schools might justly refuse to train the blind, but they would not thereby be justified in deceiving the blind as to the existence of pilots, aircraft, etc. Moreover, Hogwarts isn't open to magic users of any variety. House-elves, and perhaps other magical creatures such as goblins and merpeople, are powerful magicians and yet refused admission.<sup>18</sup>

So it is only the threat of persecution by muggles that might explain the Wizarding World's deceptive practices. However, the witches and wizards obviously wield tremendous power. As demonstrated by Voldemort's uprising, it seems that muggles have more to fear from wizards than the other way around. More importantly, to explain these practices is not the same as justifying them; even if we grant that a separation between the two worlds is necessary, we should not thereby think that such a separation is ideal.

The house system of Hogwarts, while not nearly as pernicious as the pure-blood ideology of Voldemort and the Death Eaters, nevertheless buttresses the larger social order which sets the stage for a genuine

---

<sup>17</sup> *Republic*, 382c.

<sup>18</sup> House-elves, however wandless, can perform spells—such as apparating—under conditions that witches and wizards cannot. Note also that although part-veelas, such as Fleur Delacour (*GoF* p. 256), appear to be candidates for admission to Schools of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Harry discovers in *Prisoner of Azkaban* that the werewolf Remus Lupin entered Hogwarts in secrecy only thanks to the sympathy of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore (*PoA* p. 353). In addition, as discussed in *Goblet of Fire*, Hagrid hid his half-giant parentage until he was "outed" by journalist Rita Skeeter (*GoF* p. 439).

slaveholding society. The house system inflames differences through isolation and competition. Moreover, following Tilly's pattern of "opportunity hoarding" (see note 4 above), the school artificially monopolizes magical power. Hogwarts is not open to magic users of all varieties (including house-elves), and goblins bitterly resent the fact that only wizards and witches are permitted to carry wands (which are needed for the vast majority of spells) (*DH* p. 488). Finally, the secrecy surrounding the school requires mass manipulation of non-magical muggles. These are the kinds of institutional structures which give rise to class resentment, thus leaving the Wizarding World vulnerable to the rise of a charismatic dictator.

#### **4. Harry's Hope: Friendship as an Antidote to Hate**

We've argued that Voldemort and the Death Eaters exploit pre-existing institutionalized divisions in proffering their pure-blood ideology. So what's to be done? This question actually flags two questions. Given that the Ministry of Magic had been taken over by Voldemort's puppets, we might first inquire into the conditions by which Voldemort is defeated. Voldemort's ultimate defeat is possible, though, without re-examining the institutionalized hierarchy which gave rise to the coup in the first place. So we must also inquire into the kinds of institutional changes which might prevent this kind of uprising from ever happening again.

How was Voldemort defeated the first time? In spite of his espoused pure-blood ideology, his own grudging respect for "mixed bloods" comes out when he selects Harry (rather than Neville Longbottom, a pure-blood whose birth also satisfied the terms of the prophecy) as the target of the prophecy about the one with the power to defeat him. As Dumbledore points out to Harry, Voldemort perceived the mixed-blood baby as a greater threat:

"He chose the boy he thought most likely to be a danger to him," said Dumbledore. "And notice this, Harry. He chose, not the pureblood (which, according to his creed, is the only kind of wizard worth being or knowing), but the half-blood, like himself." (*OotP* p. 842)

Prejudiced wizards such as Voldemort and the Lestranges continue to underestimate to their own peril the powers of those they view as weaker. The hiding place of Voldemort's locket-Horcrux is twice breached because he considers only a full-grown wizard to be a threat. The underage Harry and the house-elf Kreacher both foil magical defenses that simply fail to register their presence because of who they are. Kreacher escapes with the locket-Horcrux and Harry escapes with Dumbledore because of this oversight (*DH* pp. 176-200; *HBP* pp. 555-78). Furthermore, Dobby rescues Luna Lovegood, Garrick Ollivander, Dean Thomas, Ron Weasley, Hermione, and Harry from Death Eater clutches, because the Malfoy mansion's magical defenses do not protect against house-elf magic (*DH* pp. 446-76). Oppressed peoples have similarly won battles and freedom by exploiting their oppressors' hubris and myopia.

However, merely taking advantage of Voldemort's ignorance of difference will not be enough to rebuild either the Wizarding World, or our own. After all, Voldemort's power consists, in large measure, in his ability to exploit pre-existing institutionalized hierarchies of difference. Without addressing institutionalized prejudice, the killing of Voldemort is merely a stop-gap. Indeed, the Sorting Hat itself grasps the danger of institutional divisions' turning difference into deviance, when it laments at the start of Harry's fifth year:

Though condemned I am to split you  
Still I worry that it's wrong,  
Though I must fulfill my duty  
And must quarter every year  
Still I wonder whether sorting  
May not bring the end I fear.  
Oh, know the perils, read the signs,  
The warning history shows,  
For our Hogwarts is in danger  
From external, deadly foes  
And we must unite inside her  
Or we'll crumble from within. (*OotP* pp. 206-7)

As Andrew Mills re-phrases the Sorting Hat's worry, "[b]eing in a House at Hogwarts affects the way you treat people": good and loyal Gryffindors put their house-mates above students from other houses.<sup>19</sup> Sadly, such loyalty can morph into vice when inter-house division leads to feelings of superiority and division.

Thus the magical world needs a full-scale reimagining of the social hierarchy which conditions how witches, wizards, squibs, muggles, service creatures, and various outsiders might relate to one another. Audre Lorde argues:

The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women [and men] to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference . . . . [W]e have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Mills, "Patriotism, House Loyalty, and the Obligations of Belonging," in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy: Hogwarts for Muggles*, ed. Gregory Bassham (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 97.

<sup>20</sup> Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Theorizing Feminisms*, ed. Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger (New York: Oxford,

What would it take to dismantle the house system? Lorde is addressing the need for an intersectional approach to feminism that does not focus on a monolithic “woman” that really represents only white, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual women’s interests.<sup>21</sup> Defining “woman” in terms of the experience of the norm within society’s power structure simply replicates the ways in which men have historically defined “human” only in terms of their own experience. We cannot root out sexism while leaving other forms of discrimination in place; as long as we turn any difference from the normative “status quo” into deviances to be controlled and feared, dominance and inequality will remain. Extrapolating these remarks to the social hierarchy which frames the Wizarding World, in order to prevent a pure-blood ideology from ever taking root again, we have to, if Lorde is correct, alter the “old structures of oppression,” which see house-elves as staring adoringly at their masters, and the house system, which exacerbates differences through competition and segregation. Instead, following Lorde, we must “identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.”

Rowling, we contend, suggests that friendship constitutes one such alternative pattern of relating across difference. Friendship across diversity is the key to *seeing* one another. Nasri Abdel-Aziz and Laurence M. Thomas assert:

Friendship at its best, we believe, requires a certain kind of moral disposition, namely that of being naturally responsive to the moral goodness of others. We think of this as a kind of innocence, responsive innocence is perhaps the best term for it; and we believe that responsive innocence is exhibited most fully by infants. Infants are quite uninterested in skin color, and other physical features, of the persons who love them. Instead, infants simply delight in being the object of love. . . . [T]here is no greater impediment to the development of such friendships [across ethnic differences], than that the two parties allow their thinking about the other to be so informed by prevailing social images regarding the group to which the other is a member that the other’s actual behavior is distorted by these images.<sup>22</sup>

---

2006), pp. 292-97.

<sup>21</sup> On this point, see also Angela P. Harris, “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory,” *Stanford Law Review* 42 (1990), pp. 581-616; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1993), pp. 1241-99.

<sup>22</sup> Nasri Abdel-Aziz and Laurence M. Thomas, “Friendship,” in *Reflections*, ed. Montmarquet and Hardy, pp. 279-80.

Similarly, Alexander Nehamas suggests that friendship, which he calls “dangerous,” is a vehicle for change:

The sense that our knowledge of our friends, and everyone we love, is always provisional and incomplete is a constant incitement to come to know them better. Knowledge, in this context, is not passive: it changes both the knower and the known, and the further we look into and reinterpret our friends, and so ourselves, the more extensively we are likely to change.<sup>23</sup>

Albus Dumbledore himself suggests bases for non-hierarchical social relations when he speaks with Harry at King’s Cross:

“That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children’s tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. *Nothing*. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.” (*DH* pp. 709-10)

Love, loyalty, and innocence are characteristics of friendship, and Harry consistently exemplifies the way that friendship cuts against the grain of the social hierarchy which made Voldemort’s rise to power possible.

Harry, raised by muggles, does not know the Wizarding World’s stereotypes about house-elves, giants, mud-bloods, and pure-bloods. He also still possesses, at age eleven, some of the child’s responsive innocence (especially given his own lack of experiences of love). He sees Dobby, Hagrid, Hermione, and Ron as individuals, not through the lens of prejudiced stereotypes. His seeing them this way, especially in the case of Dobby, but also with respect to Hermione and Hagrid, enables them to see themselves as something more than the stereotypes that the pure-blood obsessed throw their way. Recall Draco’s remark, “You’ll soon find out some wizarding families are much better than others, Potter. You don’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort” (*SS* p. 108). For Draco, friendship is a relation that must exist within the wizard hierarchy, but for Harry it’s a means of transcending it. Even in his friendship with Ron, Harry defies what we could label class-based-wizarding differences (*SS* p. 108). He goes even further when he rescues and befriends magical outsiders: having saved the goblin Griphook and buried Dobby the house-elf, the former remarks, “You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter” (*DH* p. 486). Having himself experienced neglect and a refusal of others to see him in his own uniqueness and valued difference, Harry is careful not to discriminate against others in this fashion.

---

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Nehamas, “The Good of Friendship,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 110, no. 3 (2010), pp. 270 and 289-90.

Rowling offers Harry to us as a model of the power of friendship to turn differences into a source of delight and not deviance. As such, the *Harry Potter* books offer a possible vision of an inclusive world. Friendship and love are, for Rowling, defined in terms of openness to the other.<sup>24</sup> Harry does not invite us to reject differences or different identities and to take on what Mari Matsuda calls “the cloak of the detached universal.”<sup>25</sup> Progressive identity politics longs neither for an inversion of the status quo—say, where house-elves rule—nor for Harry’s Invisibility Cloak to hide all of the things that make people even within the same groups diverse.

As discussed above, the “responsive innocence” of friendship sees with the expansive eyes of love instead of the myopic vision of stereotype, and thus sees each person in her or his individuality. Muggle, house-elf, goblin, centaur, werewolf, veela—you name it—can and should forge a world together, taking on the difficult but rewarding work of understanding one another in their diversity.

### **5. Does the Death of the Master Imply the Dismantling of His House?**

Through the power of friendship and sacrifice, Harry Potter succeeds in killing Voldemort. But, in the years that follow the Battle of Hogwarts, is he as successful in dismantling what Lorde calls “the master’s house”—the entrenched institutions which made Voldemort’s rise to power possible in the first place? Again, we’ll look at the particular cases of house-elf enslavement and Hogwarts’ exclusionary house system.

We’ve discussed the revolutionary role friendship can play in Hermione’s and Harry’s treatment of the house-elves. Dobby’s last words in the film *Deathly Hallows: Part I* clearly identify friendship as the means by which his emancipation is possible: “Such a beautiful place it is, to be with friends. Dobby is happy to be with his friend, Harry Potter.”<sup>26</sup> But as Dobby and Kreacher learn of the possibility of different wizard-elf relations through their interactions with Harry, they are able to resist externally imposed definitions, enabling them to fight for their own and other elves’ freedom. Indeed, in the Battle of Hogwarts, Kreacher leads the other house-elves against the Death Eaters (*DH* pp. 734-35).

In the case of the house-elves, Rowling tells us—though, curiously, not in the books—that “Hermione greatly improved life for house-elves after

---

<sup>24</sup> When a character loves another, as in the case of Severus Snape’s love for Lily Potter, his or her Patronus changes to reflect the object of love. See Catherine Deavel and David Deavel, “Choosing Love: The Redemption of Severus Snape,” in *The Ultimate Harry Potter and Philosophy*, ed. Bassham, pp. 53-65.

<sup>25</sup> Mari Matsuda, *Where Is Your Body?* (New York: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 419.

<sup>26</sup> Even in the book series, Dobby’s last words are the name of his friend, “Harry . . . Potter” (*DH* p. 476).

her graduation.”<sup>27</sup> While this suggests the possibility of the kind of institutional change necessary to prevent the future restocking of Death-Eater ideology, this description is sadly compatible with continued enslavement of the house-elves.

What about the difference-making implicit in Hogwarts’ house system? Do we see, as Lorde puts it, an attempt to “identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference”?

In the epilogue to the series, nineteen years after Voldemort falls, Harry, Ginny Weasley (now Potter), Hermione, and Ron are putting their children on the Hogwarts Express. Despite the sentimentality of the final scene, the sparring of the siblings and cousins over who will be in Slytherin and beat Draco’s son Scorpius on exams shows that the unstable house structure remains. Signs that the racial hierarchy has been weakened come in Ron’s teasing his daughter Rose that “Granddad Weasley would never forgive you if you married a pureblood” (*DH* p. 756). We also see Teddy Lupin, the half-werewolf, kissing Victoire Weasley, herself a part-veela French witch. We might extrapolate that the relations between the Wizarding and Muggle Worlds are no longer based on paternalistic lies (though we do not know for sure). We can also take comfort in the fact that Harry reassures his son Albus Severus that the Sorting Hat takes one’s free choice into account when selecting one’s house (*DH* p. 758),<sup>28</sup> signaling that the house structure need not be rigid or biologically determined.

Yet why insist on the house structure at all? We have attempted to argue that at least one snake lurks in Hogwarts’ rose garden. Not only are muggles excluded and house-elves enslaved, but the house system artificially exacerbates competition and reifies difference. Why not exchange the neat system of houses with a messy, multivariate and inclusive concatenation of overlapping skills and values? Why artificially introduce divisiveness at all?

Recall that prejudice against centaurs (Firenze) and werewolves (Remus Lupin) and giants (Hagrid) led parents of some students at Hogwarts to protest and seek any chance to get non-fully-human staff discharged from their posts. The purge that Dolores Umbridge and her ilk brought to bear against all non-pure-blood families had its seeds in these accepted hierarchies of power. Failure to recognize differences among magical folk and across sentient beings as valuable lay the groundwork for Voldemort’s vicious persecutions and purges of non-pure-bloods.<sup>29</sup> If the world post-Voldemort is

---

<sup>27</sup> “Highlights of J. K. Rowling’s US Book Tour,” accessed online at: <http://bibliophilists.wordpress.com/2007/10/22/highlights-of-jk-rowlings-us-book-tour/>.

<sup>28</sup> See also Dumbledore and Harry’s discussion of the role of choice in house selection (*CoS* p. 333).

<sup>29</sup> For a similar analysis see Brown, “On Squibs and Werewolves: A Closer Look at the Disability Issue,” in Brown, *Prejudice in Harry Potter’s World*, pp. 120-48.

to be rebuilt in a way that prevents the return of another like him, equality and celebration of difference must be its new groundwork. A new fountain in the Ministry of Magic must show muggles, witches, wizards, giants, goblins, house-elves, centaurs, and all living beings as dignified each in her or his own right.

Instead, the *Harry Potter* series ends on an ambivalent note: while progress has been made, it's not clear that either the institution of house-elf slavery or Hogwarts' exclusionary house system has been fully dismantled. And so remains the possibility that a future tyrant will return to exploit those differences. Perhaps this is why, in the limbo of Harry's King's Cross experience, Voldemort continues to exist in the form of a small, flayed-looking child. Until the institutions which give rise to racism are abolished, Voldemort can never die.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> We wish to thank those who have provided helpful feedback, including participants of the "The Power to Imagine Better": The Philosophy of *Harry Potter*" Conference, held in the Fall of 2011 at Marymount Manhattan College, NY; Kaleigh Pappas; Tara Hunter; Jordan Nein; Maya Carter; Miranda Ghali; Alannah Creswell; Madeline Briggs; and the other participants in Stetson University's Honors 4 tutorial on the Philosophy of Harry Potter. We would especially like to thank Carrie-Ann Biondi for her dedication and insightful comments.



