

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HARRY POTTER

An Unauthorized Examination
of the Boy Who Lived



EDITED BY
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Lyubansky examines the question of racial prejudice in the world of Harry Potter. Rowling portrays a race-blind society at Hogwarts but pursues the issue of race through proxy: the hatred of the pure-bloods for the “Mudbloods” and the slavery of the house-elves. But, Lyubansky argues, the issues of race and prejudice are not so easily categorized.

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Harry Potter and the Word That Shall Not Be Named



“RACE” IN THE twenty-first century is ubiquitous. It influences our understanding of history and current events, school achievement and athletic success, and both interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. Yet, in many contexts and social circles, race is so emotionally threatening that for many White people it has simply become “the word that shall not be named.” Moreover, even those willing to name it struggle to find shared meaning in a word that means many different things to different people. But what if there were a magical parallel universe where these racial themes could be safely explored under the guise of wizards and Muggles and elves? At its best, by taking advantage of our suspension of disbelief, fiction can penetrate our psychological defenses and reach our core beliefs. J. K. Rowling understands this. She uses the Harry Potter series not only to entertain, but to provide readers with a real world moral framework that explicitly encompasses race-related issues. This essay will examine contemporary assumptions about race in



the Harry Potter universe using two different levels of analysis. The first part will examine the series' underlying racial ideology of color-blindness, while the second will examine the nature of racism and the psychological impact of enslavement, as portrayed by the characters.

THE RACIAL UTOPIA

At first glance, the Harry Potter universe seems to have little racial tension. There are a handful of non-White characters, including fellow Gryffindors Lee Jordan, Dean Thomas, Angelina Johnson, and Parvati Patil, as well as Harry's first romantic interest, Cho Chang. Yet Rowling treats race with far less attention than she does the Weasleys' hair color. Even though she provides the non-White characters with racial identifiers (e.g., Angelina Johnson is described as "a tall black girl with long, braided hair" [*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* 224] and Dean Thomas as "a Black boy even taller than Ron" [*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* 122]),¹ neither race nor racial status are ever mentioned by any of the characters.

Indeed, the racial identifiers seem to exist only as a vehicle for Rowling to show how race has no real meaning in her magical universe. Perhaps she wants to show the reader a racial utopia, even as she is depicting parallel forms of racism directed against Muggles, half-bloods, and elves. If so, it is worth pointing out that in the real world, there is little agreement about what a racial utopia would look like, with multiculturalists and social conservatives (who are predominantly White) usually having contrasting visions. The racial utopia of the Harry Potter series falls squarely within the neo-conser-

¹ In contrast to the non-White characters, none of the White characters are racially identified. Part of the reason lies in the privilege of Whiteness: "As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (Lipsitz 1). But like Lord Voldemort's name, the omission of "The Race That Shall Not Be Named" (Woods 2) signifies more than merely the absence of necessity. Naming "Whiteness" brings to mind various racial discrepancies that affect every aspect of our lives and brings awareness to racial privilege, a process that tends to make White people feel uncomfortable (Kivel), even though there is no similar discomfort in using racial identifiers to refer to people of color. To experience this discomfort, I invite you to try Thandeka's "Race Game," in which the African-American theologian and journalist challenges White people, for one week, to racially identify other Whites whenever making reference to them (e.g., "my White friend Ron").

vative racial ideology (Omi & Winant). According to this ideology, race is assumed to be socially constructed and racial justice is pursued via a color-blind society in which everyone pursues the American/British dream by “lifting themselves up by the bootstraps” (i.e., a “just world” that rewards good choices and a strong work ethic). “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our [biological or God-given] abilities,” says Dumbledore (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* 333), who later reminds Fudge, the Minister of Magic, that what people grow to be is much more important than what they were when they were born (*Goblet of Fire* 708). Accordingly, for neo-conservatives, the belief that race (a biological or God-given characteristic) does not matter is typically grounded in one or both of two seemingly contradictory but actually compatible beliefs—that “we” are all the same (i.e., “humans” or “Americans” or “Muggles”) or that each one of us is a unique person.

The color-blind ideal is so eminently reasonable that it can seem almost objectionable even to question it. After all, who wouldn’t want to be perceived as a unique being, while at the same time have his/her humanity recognized? Yet, critics of a color-blind ideology (and there are many) reject it for several reasons. To begin with, they point out that a color-blind ideal, at best, does nothing to curtail the institutional and interpersonal racism that are still experienced by people of color on a daily basis and, at worst, actually works to maintain the racial hierarchy by pretending and acting as though it doesn’t exist (think the Ministry of Magic during its denial of Voldemort’s return).² In addition, critics of racial color-blindness argue that racial status is associated with cultural experiences (e.g., music preferences, experiences of discrimination) that shape a person’s identity or sense of self. This perspective is well-captured by Dr. Lisa Delpit, executive director of the Center for Urban Education & Innovation:

² This is the stance taken by most social scientists interested in race, as well as the official position of the American Sociological Association, whose 2002 statement on race posits that “Refusing to acknowledge the fact of racial classification, feelings, and actions, and refusing to measure their consequences will not eliminate racial inequalities. At best, it will preserve the status quo.”



“I don’t see color, I only see children.” What message does this statement send? That there is something wrong with black or brown, that it should not be noticed? I would like to suggest that if one does not see color, then one does not really see children. Children made “invisible” in this manner become hard-pressed to see themselves worthy of notice.

To be sure, there is no evidence in the books that any of the non-White characters suffer from poor self-esteem or any other negative state, but there is no evidence to the contrary, either. One of the privileges of Whiteness is to deny the impact of race on people’s lives, and this privilege is readily apparent in the Harry Potter series. The truth is that, because the stories are almost exclusively told through the eyes of White characters who don’t notice race, we really don’t (can’t!) know anything about the reality of the non-White characters. To see racism, critics of color-blindness argue, it is first necessary to see race.³

Yet, even within the neo-conservative ideology, Rowling’s portrayal of race is problematic in that non-White characters barely seem to exist and none occupy positions of authority. This is evidenced by the fact that Cho Chang is the only non-White character who is developed to any degree, as well as by the fact that not a single adult character in any of the books is a person of color—not even in the otherwise progressive Hogwarts. Their absence is conspicuous, especially given that Rowling has worked for Amnesty International and clearly intended to create a multicultural society in which cultural differences, while generally unnoticed, are celebrated when the occasion permits (e.g., Seamus Finnigan’s shamrock-covered tent and other decorations at the Quidditch World Cup). No doubt, Rowling intended to comment on race by focusing on blood status and elf rights. Her treatment of these topics provides ample opportunity to examine both contemporary and historical race relations, and it is to these racial metaphors that I now turn.

³ This statement is a reasonable summary of the multicultural racial ideology—that race, although socially constructed, should be recognized (seen) in order to validate the experiences (both positive and negative) and cultural differences (e.g., food, music, dialect) that members of racial minority groups may share.



THE COLOR OF BLOOD

The tendency of some wizards to place a premium on pure blood (that is, on pure breeding) and treating half-bloods and Muggles as second-class citizens is an obvious parallel to our own society's history of oppression of Blacks and obsession about interracial sex and marriage. A number of characters, including Draco and Lucius Malfoy, explicitly espouse the superiority of pure blood, but this racist⁴ attitude may be best personified by the portrait of Sirius's mother:

"Filth! Scum! By-products of dirt and vileness! Half-breeds, mutants, freaks, begone from this place! How dare you befoul the house of my fathers.... Yooooou!" she howled, her eyes popping at the sight of the man [Sirius]. *"Blood traitor, abomination, shame of my flesh!"* (*Order of the Phoenix* 78).

Contained in this epithet are a number of important ideas: (1) that half-bloods (i.e., those of both Muggle and wizard parentage) are subhuman and undesirable, and that (2) their very presence threatens the purity and cleanliness of both their surroundings and their selves.⁵ Thus, her disgust extends to her son, who befriends and invites the half-blood members of the Order into his house, and by so doing contaminates not only the house but himself. This view is remarkably similar to the beliefs held by supporters of anti-miscegenation laws in the United States, who thought that interracial unions would contaminate and dilute the pure White blood and lead to moral degeneracy and ultimately the country's downfall. While the last U.S. anti-miscegenation law was finally struck down in 1967 (*Loving v. Virginia*), interracial marriage continues to be controversial for many people.⁶ It is certainly a sign of progress that the contemporary argument against such unions is more likely to be framed as

⁴ Racism refers to the belief that race accounts for differences in human character or ability and that a particular race is superior to others. The emphasis on lineage and blood status suggests that Muggles and wizards can be treated as racial groups.

⁵ University of Pennsylvania psychologist Paul Rozin likes to illustrate the permanence of the idea of contamination by asking people first to imagine a fly landing in their drink and then consider the possibility of finishing the drink after the fly is removed.

⁶ A 2001 study carried out by the *New York Times* and published in the book *How Race Is Lived in America* found that 29 percent of Whites and 15 percent of Blacks disapproved of Black-White marriages.



an issue of compatibility than as blood contamination, but no doubt there are still more than a few people who, when it comes to Black-White marriage, have the same reaction as Sirius's mother.⁷

Rowling makes a strong link between the evil of Voldemort and the Death Eaters and the belief in pure-blood superiority. Throughout her books, all examples of prejudice and discrimination against half-bloods or Muggles are perpetrated by either the Slytherins or Voldemort's supporters, while each "good" character, without exception, not only explicitly denounces prejudice against half-bloods but behaves accordingly. Thus, Dumbledore hires Hagrid to teach at Hogwarts, despite the fact that he is a half-giant, and when Rita Skeeter reveals his half-blood status, Dumbledore, along with Harry, Ron, and Hermione, convinces him that blood status is irrelevant. Similarly, the Weasleys, Sirius, and all members of the Order clearly reject the notion of half-blood inferiority—despite the scorn and disgust such a stance engenders from the pure-blood racists among them.

Not only is there a clean division between the evil racists and the good egalitarians in the first six Harry Potter books, but the tendency to be racist or non-racist seems impervious to change. For all the emphasis on choices, we have yet to see any racist character choose to denounce racism—though Draco seems at least to have the potential to do so. To this point, however, he has proven to be closed to any information that contradicts his deeply held conviction of pure-blood superiority. This is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory, which holds that people experience emotional discomfort when their attitudes are challenged and tend to try to eliminate this discomfort by discounting the challenging information, rather than engaging in the more difficult task of changing their belief system to accommodate it. Thus, when Draco's belief in pure-blood superiority is challenged by Hermione's obvious intelligence, he finds reasons to invalidate her accomplishments (e.g., she sucks up to the teachers or she studies so much because she is too ugly to have friends).

This is not to say that there would be no hope for Draco in the real

⁷ One of the practical problems of racial purity that Rowling does not take up is the issue of deciding who qualifies as a "pure-blood." The term "half-blood" suggests that one parent is a Muggle, but it's not clear how a person with three "pure-blood" grandparents would be classified. The United States historically solved this problem (and simultaneously discouraged miscegenation) by adopting the "one-drop rule," which held that a person with even one drop of Black blood would be considered Black.

world. Racial identity models (e.g., Cross, Helms) suggest that emotional, personal experiences regarding race may create enough cognitive dissonance to inspire real attitude change. Perhaps Dumbledore's unflinching faith in him in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* may inspire Draco to re-examine his beliefs.

In addition, psychologists have identified a number of factors associated with creating group-level attitude change (including racial attitudes). If the teachers at Hogwarts want to facilitate more open-mindedness and less prejudice in their students, they could draw on contact theory, but they'd have to proceed carefully. According to contact theory⁸ ethnic and racial group prejudice can be reduced or even eliminated by bringing group members (in this case, half-bloods and pure-bloods) into cross-group contact with each other, but only as long as the nature of the contact meets a prescribed set of conditions. These conditions include ensuring that status is not dependent on blood lineage, having ample opportunity to get to know members of the other group, not behaving according to the other group's stereotypes, requiring cooperation, and having support from the relevant authority.

It is not coincidental that the problem of intolerance of half-bloods seems limited to the Slytherin House, despite the likely presence of both pure-bloods and half-bloods in all four Houses.⁹ In Gryffindor, for example, the students seem completely disinterested in blood lineage, perhaps because all of the above conditions are met. In contrast, none of the necessary conditions are met in the Slytherin House, where the hostile environment toward half-bloods makes them reluctant even to disclose their status. It is noteworthy that even Snape, the head of Slytherin, does not readily disclose his half-blood status, much less do anything to promote tolerance or open-mindedness in his students.

The research on contact theory suggests that prejudice against half-bloods in Slytherin would be most easily eliminated if House membership were re-sorted each year, as this would facilitate equal status and acquaintanceship and require cross-group cooperation. Of course, given Hogwarts's history and tradition, this intervention is

⁸ The original foundation for contact theory is Sherif's classic 1954 study on intergroup conflict and cooperation (i.e., the Robber's Cave experiment). The study is available online (<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Sherif/index.htm>).

⁹ At the very least, we can be reasonably sure that half-bloods are well represented in each House, as we are told by Hagrid that "Most wizards these days are half-blood anyway. If we hadn't married Muggles we'd've died out" (*Chamber of Secrets* 116).



not likely to be adopted. Even so, prejudice against half-bloods could be considerably lessened through the creation of a safe, equal-status environment in the Slytherin House. This would require Snape to model tolerance and acceptance and take an assertive stance against intolerance of any kind, including inappropriate jokes and teasing. While this is not likely to dissuade the hard-core racists, it will effectively move their belief system outside the mainstream and, consequently, outside of most people's comfort zones.

It is worth noting that the obsession with blood and lineage is not limited to wizards. Even in the Harry Potter universe, select Muggles are shown to be as racist as any Death Eater. Consider the not-so-subtle undertone of eugenics¹⁰ espoused by Vernon Dursley's sister, Marge, who, in reference to Harry, comments:

"This one's got a mean, runty look about him. You get that with dogs. I had Colonel Fubster drown one last year. Ratty little thing it was. Weak. Underbred" (*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* 27).

Much like the Malfoys, Marge Dursley seems invested in "pure-blood," and like them, she seems to endorse the protection of racial purity via both selective breeding and targeted killing. Such attitudes are so abhorrent that it is tempting to dismiss them as fictional evil that could not exist in our world. But they are, in fact, an allegory for the anti-Semitism and racial ideology of Hitler and the Nazis.^{11, 12}

The racism of the Nazis and the Death Eaters is easy to identify and poses few moral questions. Contemporary racism, however, is more complicated. To be sure, some racism is still perpetrated by

¹⁰ Eugenics is the study of hereditary improvement of the human race by controlled selective breeding.

¹¹ In a July 2000 interview with the CBC, Rowling said, "In the second book, *Chamber of Secrets*, in fact he [Voldemort] is exactly what I've said before. He takes what he perceives to be a defect in himself, in other words the non-purity of his blood, and he projects it onto others. It's like Hitler and the Aryan ideal, to which he [Hitler] did not conform at all, himself. And so Voldemort is doing this also. He takes his own inferiority, and turns it back on other people and attempts to exterminate in them what he hates in himself."

¹² Describing even a few of the parallels between WWII and Harry Potter is beyond the scope of this essay, but I draw on these parallels to make the following fearless prediction (warning: possible spoiler): The Death Eaters (i.e., the Nazis) will be defeated in Book Seven when Voldemort (i.e., Hitler) decides to betray the Giants (i.e., the Soviet Union), who despite Hagrid's efforts are still aligned with Voldemort at the conclusion of *Half-Blood Prince*. Forced to defend themselves against Voldemort, the Giants join forces with Dumbledore's supporters and the Ministry of Magic (i.e., the Allies) and manage to pull out a hard-fought victory, despite significant losses.



avowed racists (e.g., White supremacists) who strive to promote a racist agenda by intentionally hurting, humiliating, or intimidating non-Whites.¹³ But today's racism is often much more subtle, and, unfortunately, it is not only perpetrated by those who are evil or who want to hurt others. Good people, even those with the best egalitarian intentions, can and do perpetuate acts of racism, sometimes without even being aware of having done so (Gaertner & Dovidio).¹⁴ Harry's and Ron's indifference to elf rights and S.P.E.W.¹⁵ is a good example. Although Harry frees Dobby and neither of them engages in explicitly racist behavior, their lack of support for S.P.E.W. can be interpreted as an implicit endorsement of elf inferiority, especially given their propensity for actively confronting perceived injustice.

Unintentional and aversive racism¹⁶ may seem hard to study, but

¹³ Many race scholars and anti-racism activists argue that racism (as opposed to prejudice), by definition, can only be perpetrated in the context of considerable institutional power. According to this definition, people of color in both the United States and Europe can be prejudiced and can commit hate crimes, but they cannot be racist.

¹⁴ Fyodor Dostoyevsky captured this tendency in his 1864 *Notes from the Underground*, observing that "Every man has reminiscences which he would not tell to everyone but only his friends. He has other matters in his mind which he would not reveal even to his friends, but only to himself, and that in secret. But there are other things which a man is afraid to tell even to himself, and every decent man has a number of such things stored away in his mind. The more decent he is, the greater the number of such things in his mind."

¹⁵ This issue is examined in more depth in the next section.

¹⁶ In my five years of teaching an upper-level undergraduate course on race, this notion of unintentional racism is the one that White students consistently find to be the most challenging to acknowledge—even in others. This is most likely because, like Harry and Ron, these students tend to associate racism exclusively with evil and sadism, rather than with ignorance and conditioning. As a result, they consider racism to be something that they, as well-meaning individuals, would never (could never!) perpetrate, which makes the idea of unintentional racism extremely threatening to their self-concept. This was evident, for example, when we watched and discussed the 2006 Academy Award-winning film *Crash*. In the film, Officer Tom Hansen (played by Ryan Phillippe), a junior member of the police department, seems to have made a conscious choice not to be a racist. He is shown standing up against racial injustice in multiple scenes, even with more senior members of the department, and he goes out of his way to make sure that he treats African-Americans with compassion, even under very stressful conditions. Tragically, in a later scene in his squad car, he misinterprets the intention of his passenger (a Black hitchhiker he picked up on a deserted road) and shoots him dead when he reaches into his pocket. When I discuss this scene in class, White students (even those who identify with a progressive, multicultural racial ideology) tend to believe that race was not a relevant factor. They acknowledge that Officer Hansen acted out of fear and argue that it was the situation that scared Hansen, not the passenger sitting beside him. "If it were a White man sitting next to him," they say, "he would have shot him, too, because his reaction was rational under the circumstances, even if it turned out to be misguided." I suggest that Officer Hansen's reaction is not at all rational. He didn't point his gun and say, "Okay, let's see your hands nice and slow;" he didn't shoot at the hand that was reaching for the pocket. He shot to kill. "A reflexive act," the students say. "He didn't mean to do it." I agree. He didn't. He acted out of a deep, primal fear, a racial fear that would not have been present with a White passenger. This makes it a racist act, albeit one that most White students and adults are not willing (able?) to acknowledge.



psychologists interested in social cognition and group relations have designed a variety of methods to do just that. Perhaps the best known of these is the Implicit Association Test (IAT)¹⁷ an online test measuring implicit attitudes and stereotypes that was developed by Brian Nosek, Mahzarin Banaji, and Anthony Greenwald in 1998. An implicit stereotype, according to the IAT FAQ, is “a stereotype that is powerful enough to operate without conscious control.” For example, if you think that John Walters is more likely to be the name of a famous person than Jane Walters, you might be indirectly expressing a stereotype that associates the category of male (rather than female) with fame-deserving achievement—despite the fact that there is a famous female with this last name (Barbara Walters). This was the finding of one of the first experimental studies of implicit stereotypes, and this tendency was found to be uncorrelated with explicit expressions of sexism or stereotypes (Banaji & Greenwald).

In the race IAT, users are first asked to put positive and negative words, such as “failure,” “glorious,” “terrific,” and “nasty” into categories of “good” and “bad” by clicking the appropriate key on the keyboard as the words flash on the screen. Then, they are asked to do the same with images of Black and White faces. By having users respond to the prompts as quickly as possible, the test aims to side-step both lack of awareness and cognitive control—the brief, but significant, time lapse we need to give an “acceptable” answer rather than a truly honest one. Consistent with previous studies of implicit attitudes, studies using the race IAT reveal that White respondents tend to show implicit bias against Blacks.

So, what would happen if there was a blood-status IAT and all the Hogwarts students were required to take it? Consistent with their explicit attitudes, Draco and many other Slytherins would show anti-half-blood bias, but what about Harry, Ron, and Hermione? Research with the IAT reveals that implicit racial bias among White respondents is present as early as age six, with ten year olds showing the same magnitude of pro-White bias as adults (Baron & Banaji). These findings suggest that Ron, having been socialized in a wizard society in which there is open racism against half-bloods, probably holds some

¹⁷ The race IAT (as well as age, sex, and other versions) and associated data can be found at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/>.

implicit negative stereotypes of half-bloods, although his friendship with Hermione probably mitigates the bias (remember that implicit stereotypes are not correlated with explicit attitudes). The results are harder to predict for Harry and Hermione, both of whom are raised by Muggles and have Muggles in their lineage. However, some IAT studies (e.g., Margie, Killen, Sinno, & McGlothlin) suggest that although they would show no bias regarding potential friendships, they would be more likely to associate transgressors with pure-bloods. There is little doubt, of course, that everyone at Hogwarts would show an implicit anti-elf bias, but this topic requires considerable elaboration.

THE TROUBLE WITH ELVES

Poor Hermione. Unlike practically everyone else, she considers the treatment of elves to be morally problematic. “You know house-elves get a very raw deal!” said Hermione indignantly. “It’s slavery, that’s what it is! . . . Why doesn’t anyone *do* something about it?” (*Goblet of Fire* 125). Ron’s response seems representative of almost everyone in the book: “Well, the elves are happy, aren’t they? You heard old Winky back at the [Quidditch] match . . . “House elves is not supposed to have fun” . . . That’s what she likes, being bossed around . . .” (*Goblet of Fire* 125).

Hermione protests, but Ron seems right. When Barty Crouch threatens Winky with clothes (the only path to freedom), she prostrates herself at his feet, shrieking, “No, master! Not clothes, not clothes!” (*Goblet of Fire* 138)—hardly the reaction we would expect from someone unhappy with his/her circumstances.

Hermione, of course, is undeterred. After researching the history of elf enslavement (it goes back centuries), she decides to form S.P.E.W. (Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare), with the initial intention of obtaining fair wages and working conditions and the long-term goal of getting elf representation in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures (*Goblet of Fire*). Both Harry and Ron join, but they do so reluctantly and clearly only as a favor to Hermione. Neither they, nor any of their classmates, are actually interested in acting on behalf of elf rights. Ron again seems to speak for everyone when he says, “Hermione—open your ears . . . They. Like. It. They *like* being enslaved!” (*Goblet of Fire* 224).



In the real world, there has never, to my knowledge, been a group of people who liked being enslaved, although slaveholders in the United States certainly made that argument.¹⁸ It is therefore somewhat troubling that Rowling creates a race of sentient beings that does, in fact, seem to enjoy enslavement and prefer it to freedom. That said, the attitude of the elves creates an interesting moral dilemma. Should we respect and honor the wishes/desires of the “oppressed” group (Ron’s position)—even if our own moral sensibilities are offended by their “enslavement”—or should the value of universal freedom (Hermione’s argument) trump the value of free will?

It is tempting to dismiss Hermione’s argument, especially considering that neither Harry nor Ron nor any of the adults at Hogwarts or in the Order of the Phoenix seem interested in taking up the cause. Harry and the Order, after all, are supposed to represent what is good and just. Surely, we are intended to let them guide our moral judgments, especially since Rowling had previously trained us that there is little moral ambiguity in her characters (i.e., all the good characters are open-minded toward half-bloods, while all the evil characters are prejudiced). Taken together, it is not unreasonable to conclude that Hermione’s campaign for elf rights is misguided idealism, a not uncommon adolescent malady.

Moreover, there is something to be said for free will. Most of us have had the experience of doing something nice for someone else and enjoying both the process of this selfless act and its consequence. It’s not so hard to imagine a group of beings whose meaning in life was based on just this kind of selfless helping. If they really like it (and there is no evidence that anyone but Dobby is unhappy in their “servitude”), then it would not only be unwarranted to set them free, but immoral and unkind, as well.

And yet, I believe that it is Hermione’s position that is more morally acceptable. For one, it is Albus Dumbledore, not Harry, who serves as the moral compass of the wizarding world. Harry wants to do the right thing, and he never lacks the courage to follow through, but

¹⁸ The absurdity of this belief is evident in Louisiana physician Dr. Samuel Cartwright’s 1851 proposal of a psychiatric diagnosis (*drapetomania*) to explain the *pathological* tendency of Black slaves to flee captivity. In a paper published in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal*, Cartwright argued that *drapetomania* was both treatable and preventable and prescribed whipping and amputation of the toes as the most effective treatments.

he sometimes lacks the experience and wisdom to know what the right thing is—as when he tries to rescue Sirius. Here, too, he lacks the requisite wisdom. Dumbledore’s explanation to Harry concerning Kreacher’s complicity in Sirius’s death is instructive:

“Kreacher is what he has been made by wizards, Harry . . . Sirius did not hate Kreacher. . . . He regarded him as a servant unworthy of much interest or notice. Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike. . . . We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward” (*Order of the Phoenix* 832–834).

To be sure, Dumbledore seems to be arguing more for treating the elves compassionately than for setting them free, but he is also drawing a parallel between indifference and neglect and mistreatment and abuse, which certainly suggests that he would be much more sympathetic to the goals of S.P.E.W. than to Harry’s and Ron’s professed indifference.

Psychological and historical research also supports the goals of S.P.E.W., as there is evidence that prolonged enslavement (and even second-class status) can lead to the victimized group’s internalization of the oppressors’ belief system. This is evident in the writings of Black civil-rights leaders such as Malcolm X¹⁹ as well as in the numerous studies that have documented the tendency of members of oppressed groups to endorse negative stereotypes of their own group. If contemporary experiments demonstrate the presence of internalized racism under relatively egalitarian (and legally equal) conditions, it is possible to imagine that the much more severe oppression of enslavement could, after several centuries, produce the type of reliance on the masters and the unwillingness to make free choices that the house-elves espouse. If true, and Dumbledore’s commentary on Kreacher seems to imply as much, then the house-elves’ preference for enslavement is a product of oppression rather than an exercise of free will. Hermione may indeed be idealistic, and she underestimates how challenging the transition to freedom would be for both elves and wizards, but her position on elf rights (and even her methods of achieving change) is morally just and scientifically valid.

¹⁹ I am referring to the part of his autobiography in which he comments on his life prior to his imprisonment and subsequent conversion to Islam.



Notably, a lack of prejudice against Muggles or half-bloods does not seem associated with a greater likelihood of supporting elf rights. This is evident in *Order of the Phoenix*, in which even Sirius Black, whose rejection of his family's obsession with pure blood caused him to run away at age sixteen and his family to disown him and burn his name off the family tapestry, was unable to see the elves as anything other than servants. Ditto the Weasleys, despite Sirius's observation that they are the prototypical blood traitors. In fact, of all the positive characters, Ron seems to be the least interested in elf rights and the least sensitive to their plight. For example, when Hermione accuses him of making up his Divination homework, Ron (who is guilty as charged) pretends to be outraged. "How dare you!" said Ron. . . . "We've been working like house-elves here!" (*Goblet of Fire* 223). Although it may be tempting to dismiss the comment as a meaningless joke, humor can often provide important insight into people's belief systems. Hermione rightfully raises her eyebrow at the comment, as it suggests that Ron is unaware that comparing an evening of schoolwork to a lifetime of slavery could be considered offensive.

Unfortunately, this happens in our world, too. Although many individuals do see human rights as important across a variety of different identity groups, it is also true that advocates for racial equality do not always act as allies for the LGBT and disability communities, and vice versa. The bottom line is that Harry and Ron mean well and clearly have the courage to act consistently in accordance with their convictions, but their views about certain types of oppression are nonetheless narrow-minded. Like most of us, young and old, they still have some learning and growing to do.

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