

Introduction

Learning the Passwords for the Magical Paintings on Display

Thank you for choosing to read this book on *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the capstone and most intriguingly complex book of author J.K. Rowling's seven-book series. As this book itself is unusual, in light of most books on Harry Potter, I'll preface it with an explanation of its more peculiar features and vocabulary, and list several operating assumptions which might strike the reader as foreign, even bizarre.

In exploring Ms. Rowling's artistry and meaning, the first "given" is that her writing deserves to be taken seriously. This is a credible assumption, because the author has said many times that she planned the whole series and each book for the "obsessive" or serious reader.¹ The books themselves – which include paintings opened by a secret word or knowing touch to a greater, concealed world within, offer repeated examples of an "inside being greater than its outside,"² and eyes with more and less penetrating insight or vision³--indicate that they work on levels beneath the surface narrative.

The tradition in which Ms. Rowling writes, too, requires attentive reading. It is the Romantic, subversive tradition of symbolist literature beginning with Chaucer, Dante, and Shakespeare, which is to say, the Medieval imagination as understood by Blake, Coleridge, and Ruskin and furthered by 19th and 20th Century satirists and fantasy writers, to include MacDonald, Orwell, Chesterton, Sayers, Goudge, Lewis, and Tolkien. In reading Ms. Rowling as a writer of this tradition, I have tried to follow the examples of D.W. Robertson's work on Chaucer, Northrop Frye reading Spencer, John Ruskin on landscape painting, Coleridge's "transforming vision" and natural theology, and Dante in his instruction about unveiling his own work.

This path is a departure from the dismissive analysis of critics as notable as Harold Bloom and A.S. Byatt who think Ms. Rowling's books "puerile" and "slop" and even from admirers who write patronizing reviews of the Potter books as edifying books for children. Harry Potter, as James Thomas of Pepperdine has noted, seems "too juvenile, too popular, and too current" to deserve the kind of serious reading we feel obliged to give acknowledged classics or literary canon.⁴ I therefore feel obliged to explain in this book why I believe (beyond the author's suggestion and telling signs in her books) Harry Potter merits canonical status and respect.

First, Rowling novels hold up to close reading. My first two books—*How Harry Cast His Spell* and *Unlocking Harry Potter*—examine in depth the series' alchemical artistry, narrative misdirection, postmodern themes, Christian content, hero's journey structure, and the meaning of various recurrent symbols and images in the series. This study was anything but wasted time. These books are now used in classrooms from Princeton to Pepperdine, because exploring the books as vessels of meaning (rather than cultural artifacts or sociological curiosities) is as rewarding as reading Shakespeare, Dickens, and Swift.

More important, the specific school of criticism from which I interpret the books, what Frye calls the "iconological tradition" of Dante, Spencer, and Ruskin,⁵ is especially illuminating when its tools are applied to Rowling's work. The two parts of the word "iconological" — *icon* and *logos* — the utility of this neglected method in understanding both Ms. Rowling's artistry and the profound resonance of her meaning in the hearts of her international reading audience.

An "icon" is a painting, usually religious, that, as an image portraying something or someone else (its "referent"), is less about exactitude in representative detail than it is about likeness in meaning and substance. "Symbol" is closer to the meaning of icon than "picture," because an icon is less like a photograph or exact likenesses than a defining image or transparency to the referent. As C.S. Lewis said about Spencer⁶ and his own work,⁷ their starting point and strength is not in their faithful representation but in the power and translucency, to use a Coleridgean phrase, of their key images.

Iconological criticism, then, is the work of penetrating the surface of these images and symbols to discover the "greater substance inside," which is to say, their several levels of meaning. Dante urged his readers

to look under the veils of his poetry, and, specifically, to understand them as working on four levels – the surface, moral, allegorical, and anagogical meanings that exist simultaneously in his work.⁸

As D.W. Robertson explains, this was not a superhuman expectation on Dante’s part, but just the Medieval baseline understanding of how to understand reality, man, Scripture, and any work of art, especially literature.⁹ Most of a poem’s or painting’s meaning was assumed to require penetrating vision or puzzle solving and readers of Shakespeare and Chaucer, as well as Dante devotees, are obliged to look beneath the surface, moral, and allegorical levels – political and theological – to get at their most important meaning, the anagogical.

“Anagogical” is not a word we use very often but it is important to know and understand it to grasp the purpose of traditional iconological criticism. “Anagogical” literally means “leading upwards” and “leading back.” When applied to story or symbol, it refers to the transcendent meaning or metaphysical referent of the icon or parable. Living as we do in an ontologically flat world, in which the “Great Chain of Being,” instead of reaching from lifeless matter to the Supreme Reality, is stretched instead horizontally across the gateway to meaning, even the best books of the Western Canon are rarely “mined slowly” and meditatively as Ruskin said they must be¹⁰ to be understood at the anagogical level.

“Slow mining” in a rich text, contrary to the mental picture I have of working in a mine, is delightful work with remarkable rewards. It does require, however, a transformed and transforming vision, another Coleridgean notion. Which brings us to the “logical” part of “iconological” criticism. To get to the anagogical or spiritual realities at the heart of profound writing means understanding, as C. S. Lewis put it, that “the world is mental.”¹¹ Ron Weasley asks Harry rhetorically if he is “mental” at two critical points in *Deathly Hallows*,¹² meaning, “You’re crazy!” But Harry is indeed “mental,” even a symbol of the Intellect.

As explained in Chapter 5, what Lewis meant in saying the world is mental is that the principle and unity of existence is the divine *Logos*, which our Intellect or noetic faculty (not to be confused with discursive reasoning or academic intelligence) is “continuous with,” if not identical to. This inner *logos*—what Lewis calls conscience and others the Eye of the Heart—recognizes the divine *Logos* in created things (their “inner principles,” the *logoi* of St. Maximos), as well as in truth, beauty and

goodness. The *logos* within sees the *Logos* without in the way a knowing subject recognizes itself in a mirror's reflection.

Iconological criticism is the exercise of this "seeing eye" and "sacred I" within us in the penetration of surface meanings to recognition of itself in the analogical or transcendent level of nature, art, and literature. Time spent in reflection on a landscape painting by Turner, a lyrical ballad of Coleridge or Wordsworth, an Inklings novel, a Harry Potter adventure, or the ocean at sunset fosters our sense of the sublime and of the metaphysical beneath the physical, so that, as Sir Philip Sidney put it, the focus of our reflection is "instructing while delighting" us.

I have argued since 2002 that the symbols or images central to Harry Potter are the trio of Harry, Hermione and Ron as, first, a soul triptych of Spirit, Mind, and Body, and, second, as an alchemical work in progress, with Ron and Hermione acting as alchemical mercury and sulfur and Harry as leaden Philosophical Orphan becoming the Philosopher's Stone. The publication of *Deathly Hallows* only confirmed the validity of that argument. I will explain *Deathly Hallows* as the series' alchemical finale in Chapter 3, but Harry as an icon of Intellect or the Spirit within us is probably the more important image of the two.

Harry beneath the Invisibility Cloak, alone or with his two friends, is a story-symbol of the invisible, "seeing eye" or *logos*-Intellect within. His seven staged story, then, is the adventure of his noetic purification or "corrected vision," an alchemical allegory of human apotheosis. Ms. Rowling's books, as has frequently been noted, are about life and death. The reason they resonate with a worldwide audience, though, is because Harry's journey to and from King's Cross is the story of our hoped for spiritual perfection and immortality in the Eye of the Heart – the "sacred I" and "seeing eye."

The *Deathly Hallows Lectures* in this book are organized into two parts and seven chapters to mine that meaning. The first three-chapter part is an examination of *Deathly Hallows* in light of my previous books' ideas: the 5 keys that unlock the series, literary alchemy, and Christian content. Ms. Rowlings' books are not evangelical or an invitation to devotional Christianity, per se; Harry's transformation however, is an engaging and edifying story-symbol or parable of Everyman's life in Christ – the Word or *Logos* living in us and behind the veil of all surfaces.

The second part, the four last chapters, are the “slow mining” for the anagogical aspect of the eye symbolism that is the larger part of *Deathly Hallows*’ meaning. I explore the eyes as the avenue of ego-transcendence in detailing the connections between Lily’s green eyes and the eyes of Dante’s Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*; in unveiling the eye in the mirror shard contrasted with the two eyes of the Locket Horcrux; and, finally, in explaining the “triangular eye” Hallows symbol and its three dimensional story echo in the burial of Moody’s Mad Eye. I end the book with a collection of thirty-one frequently-asked questions.

This book has been a lot of fun for me to write and is my personal thank you to Ms. Rowling for years of reading pleasure. I need and want to thank, as well, the many friends at HogwartsProfessor.com who have joined me in conversation about books in general and Harry Potter specifically for the last four years. Robert Trexler of Zossima Press midwived this book through its long delivery, Deborah Chan (aka “Arabella Figg” at [HogPro](http://HogPro.com)) edited it with invaluable and patient attention so it is as intelligible as it is, and Joyce Odell gave it the “eye-catching” cover it enjoys. I owe at least a tip of the hat here, too, to Travis Prinzi of TheHogsHead.org, whose book *Harry Potter & Imagination: The Way Between Two Worlds* is the most cogent exploration of the allegorical and political level of meaning in the Potter series I have read, for his many kindnesses to me. Conversations with and the efforts of Deborah, Travis, Robert, Joyce and the [HogPro](http://HogPro.com) All Pros about all things Potter have made this a better book; the failings and mistakes that remain are all mine.

Summing up, the *Harry Potter* series, full of edifying symbols, is an evocative parable of human perfection and ego transcendence. As you’ll discover in the coming pages, *Deathly Hallows* is all that *and* a book about how to read books like *Deathly Hallows*. I understand these ideas are difficult for most readers to grasp or accept, being contrary to prevailing opinions about *Harry Potter* and conventional thinking about what it is that books do, even about what reality is. As Coleridge, Lewis and others insist, however, matter’s and energy’s measurable and sense-perceptible surfaces are *not* the greater reality of our lives and world; they are visible obstacles or veils which must be penetrated to know the Absolute beneath their surface. Because *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is a book illustrating this fact and because its symbols are largely about interpreting the world as symbol, and demonstrating

the value of stories, it deserves a symbolic and subversive reading (“subversive” understood literally as “turning the underside or inside up”).

The Deathly Hallows Lectures is your password to enter the much larger world of fun and meaning behind the gargyle guardians and Pink Lady artistry of Ms.Rowling’s novels and especially *Deathly Hallows*, the series finale. Thank you for joining me on this adventure of meaning-mining and, in advance, for writing me with your comments and corrections when you’re done.

Gratefully,

John Granger

John Granger

www.HogwartsProfessor.com

Feast of the Dormition, 2008

Post:

All book page and chapter references are to Scholastic hard cover editions

Endnotes

- 1 For Ms. Rowling's interview comments that suggest a serious reading of her work is in order, see Chapter 6, pp. 192-195
- 2 For a listing of several "Inside greater than outside" references, see Chapter 5, pp. 184-185 (note 8).
- 3 For discussion of Ms. Rowling's eye symbolism in *Deathly Hallows*, see Chapters 4-7.
- 4 For Bloom and Byatt criticism of the Potter books, see <http://hogwartsprofessor.com/?p=34>, <http://hogwartsprofessor.com/?p=391>; for patronizing reviews see <http://hogwartsprofessor.com/?p=166> or <http://www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2007/07/24/potter-narnia-and-spiderman-matter-in-a-serious-world/>; James Thomas was quoted in *Time* magazine's 2007 Person of the Year Runner-Up profile of Ms. Rowling that can be read at http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/personoftheyear/article/0,28804,1690753_1695388_1695436,00.html
- 5 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, page 10; see discussion here in Chapter 6, pp. 204-208.
- 6 C. S. Lewis, *Oxford History of the English Language, 16th Century (Excluding Drama)*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 387-388; see discussion here in Chapter 6, pages 211-212.
- 7 "All my seven Narnian books, and my three science-fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The *Lion* began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: 'Let's try to make a story about it.'" C. S. Lewis, *It All Began With a Picture*, cited in *C. S. Lewis: Companion and Guide*, Walter Hooper (ed.), New York: HarperCollins, 1996, page 401.
- 8 Dante Alighieri, *Convivio*, 2.1; see discussion in Chapter 4, page 138, and Chapter 6, page 205.
- 9 "[T]he underlying logic of the four senses of Scripture became a habit of mind." D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962, page 355 (cf. *Preface*, Chapter 4, "Allegory, Humanism, and Literary Theory"). See pages 15 and 32 for his discussion of how "a work of art was frequently a puzzle to be solved" in the Medieval "habit of mind."
- 10 John Ruskin's "slow mining" quotation can be found in full with citation in Chapter 6, pp. 212-214.

11 For discussion of “the world is mental,” see Chapter 5, pp. 188-189

12 “Are – you – *mental?*” (*Hallows*, Chapter 19, page 371; Ron has just rescued Harry from pool in Forest of Dean); “What?’ said Ron loudly. “Are you mental?” (*Hallows*, Chapter 36, page 748; Harry has just said he doesn’t want the Elder Wand)