Using *Harry Potter* to Discuss Moral Values and Equality in the English Language Classroom

My Hildingsson

C-utbildning

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Abstract

Den här uppsatsen tittar på hur Harry Potter-böckerna kan användas för att diskutera moralfrågor i skolan. Syftet är att belysa användbara delar av Harry Potter-böckerna och ge exempel på hur och varför de är användbara för att diskutera rasism och jämlighet mellan kön. Analysmetoden är en tematisk analys, där alla sju Harry Potter-böckerna har lästs noggrant för att plocka ut teman som överensstämmer med sådana teman man bör diskutera i skolan enligt läroplanen.

Det jag kommer fram till är att Harry Potter-böckerna mycket väl skulle kunna användas för att diskutera frågor som rasism och jämlighet mellan kön då detta är centrala teman i böckerna. Baserat på tidigare forskning kring litteratur och klassrmsdiskussioner av moraliska frågor kommer jag fram till att Harry Potter-böckerna skulle fungera väl i undervisningssituationer där man diskuterar moraliska dilemma eller dylikt.

Key Words: equality, Harry Potter, moral values, teaching, racism
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1. Introduction

When I was in eighth grade *Harry Potter* and other fantasy series were a big part of my personal library. Teachers constantly told me to read something else, I was told that I should not read “those” kinds of books. Stubborn as I am I continued to read my *Harry Potter* and to this day I keep seeing teenagers clutching one or the other of the books to their hearts. The ‘Harry Potter generation’ i.e. those of us who were around the age of 12 when the books started to become famous and who could not stop reading them, has now grown up but Harry Potter keeps on fascinating young readers all over the world.

There are, of course, many reasons as to why *Harry Potter* is so popular. In the introduction to *Reading Harry Potter* (2003), a collection of critical essays on the series, Giselle Liza Anatol says “Rowling’s novels allow children to identify with a character who triumphs even though he, like them, appears powerless” (xiii). She argues that “[...] it is exactly because the series has become so widely popular that it is both critically significant and should be taken quite seriously” (xiv). A little later she continues to explain: “[...] children unconsciously absorb not only the plot of the tales, but also the values imbedded within” (xiv). This would mean that reading a book could help the reader’s understanding of a phenomenon and this is something that teachers could take advantage of by letting pupils read literature that transmits values you want them to be exposed to and understand you have a solid ground for later discussions of the subject.

The national objectives for secondary education state that schools shall “transmit the values of life’s inviolability, freedom and integrity for the individual, everybody’s equal worth, equality between men and women, and solidarity with the weak and exposed” (Skolverket 2011). Some of the issues involved here, like race, are not always easy to talk about. In his article “Harry Potter and the Word That Shall Not Be Named” (2010) Mikhail Lyubansky states an interesting question: “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” (233), which is something that I found very interesting and one of the reasons for my choice to analyse the *Harry Potter* series.

The purpose of this essay is to analyse the *Harry Potter* series with regards to the moral values they transmit and reflect on how certain parts can be brought up and used as a springboard to classroom discussion of themes of racism and gender equality. In my essay I will argue that the *Harry Potter* books contain examples of these themes, that teachers are expected to discuss with pupils. I will also show how these themes can be approached in the classroom by using the books.

1.1 Theory and Method
In this section I will give a short theoretical background with regards to the national objectives. I will also give a definition of some of the terms that I will frequently use and refer to. Lastly, I will present my method of analysis, which is a thematic analysis.

1.1.1 Definitions
I will here give definitions of some of the terms that I use frequently throughout the essay and that are of importance for my analysis. I will give the definitions as they are given in the *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary* (2005) since these are complex terms that could be specified in many different ways. However, problematizing these terms is not an objective of this essay and that is why I choose to use these straightforward, simplistic, definitions in order to focus on how they can be applied in a classroom discussion and there be filled with meaning by the teachers and students involved. Therefore, when I talk about morality I mean “[p]rinciples concerning the difference between right and wrong” (‘morality’, *POED*). Empathy is “the ability to understand and share the feelings of other people” (‘empathy’, *POED*). I will often talk about equality, both racial and gender equality. The definition of the
word equal would be “being the same in quantity, size, degree, value or status” (‘equal’ *POED*) and applying this to race or gender that means that everybody should be treated the same way regardless of gender or race.

1.1.2 National Objectives

As I have pointed out above, the national objectives for secondary education state that schools should represent and impart the values of “[t]he inviolability of life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable” (Skolverket 2011:9). The education in Swedish secondary schools should make students aware of human rights and fundamental democratic values (9). This is the main point within the paragraph called “Fundamental Values”. There it also says that schools should “promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise” (9). With regards to racism in particular, it says that “[x]enophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures” (9). Regarding equality between men and women there is a paragraph urging schools to actively promote equal rights and opportunity for women and men; schools have a responsibility to work against traditional gender norms (10).

The goal is that pupils will be able to make ethical standpoints based on knowledge about human rights, democratic values and personal experience. They should be able to respect other people’s human worth and move against oppression and abusive behaviour. They should also be able to understand and empathise with other people’s situations (14). These are goals that every adult who works in a school should help the pupils to reach and understand. This is therefore something teachers should work with regardless of what subject they otherwise teach.
1.1.3 Thematic Analysis

This essay is based on a thematic analysis of the *Harry Potter* series. A thematic analysis is, according to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke in “Using thematic analysis in psychology” (2006), “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (6). A theme is, by this definition, that which “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question” (10). This means that in my case when looking for moral values, my themes are parts of the books that has strong connections to the moral values I am looking for.

In his essay “Theme and Interpretation” (1996), Menachem Brinker describes themes with regards to literature and he says that a theme is something that is “understood as potentially uniting different texts” (33). As an example he mentions Dostoyevsky, and claims that the theme that unites his works is St. Petersburg. This is a theme, he argues, because Dostoyevsky provides a poetical vision of the city. Therefore, it is not “just a city” but a theme to unite his literary works (34-35). Brinker means that when we look for themes in literature it has nothing to do with what the story is about but about finding the precise themes that are of interest to our research. Therefore, different themes may occur with each study of the same text.

The “data”, or literature, that I apply my thematic analysis on is all seven *Harry Potter* books, which I will give a closer presentation of in the next section. I have read them all closely and with the national objectives described above constantly in mind. In doing this I have narrowed my topic of discussion down to two main themes, namely: “good vs. evil” and “equality”.
1.2 Material

Here I will present my primary material, which is the entire *Harry Potter* series. I will also give a short presentation of the author, J.K. Rowling.

1.2.1 Harry Potter – a Presentation

Joanne Kathleen Rowling started writing the books about Harry Potter in 1990 and the first book, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, was published seven years later, in 1997. Ten years later, on the 21st of July 2007, the seventh and last book was published. Being such a success the books were soon adapted into movies\(^1\), beginning with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* in 2001.

The *Harry Potter* series consists of seven books, one for every school year Harry spends at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. To begin with, Harry does not know that he is a wizard. He grows up with his aunt, uncle and bullying cousin Dudley who are as normal as anyone can get and they despise anything unnatural. Harry is not allowed to ask questions and he lives in the cupboard under the stairs. When Harry turns eleven a whole new world is opened up to him. A giant man named Hagrid comes to tell him that he is a wizard and gives him a ticket to the train that will take Harry to Hogwarts School. Entering the wizarding world, Harry finds out his own history. He is a special person. He is the only one who has ever survived the killing curse, the same curse that killed his parents and left him with his muggle (non-magic people) relatives.

The wizarding world is not a peaceful place for Harry Potter. Every year the evil wizard Lord Voldemort grows stronger and Harry has to face him over and over again to prevent him

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\(^1\) Chris Colombus, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s stone*, WarnerBros. Pictures, 2001
from coming to power. The seventh and final book holds the conclusion to the war that has been going on in the wizarding world for generations.

Here is a list of all the books in order of publication:

*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s stone* (1997), hereafter called *The Philosopher’s Stone*
*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), hereafter called *The Chamber of Secrets*
*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), hereafter called *The Prisoner of Azkaban*
*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), hereafter called *The Goblet of Fire*
*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (2003), hereafter called *The Order of the Phoenix*
*Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* (2005), hereafter called *The Half Blood Prince*
*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), hereafter called *The Deathly Hallows*

### 1.3 Previous Research

With the *Harry Potter* series being so widely spread, read by millions of people, a lot has been written about it. In this section I will present a couple of articles that have been of interest to my analysis since they bring up topics of moral values in the *Harry Potter* series. I will also present a few articles on using children’s literature to discuss moral values and difficult topics.

#### 1.3.1 Previous Research on Moral Values and Equality in Harry Potter

One of the topics which critics have discussed in relation to the *Harry Potter* series is race and ethnicity. In her essay “Accepting Mudbloods: The Ambivalent Social Vision of J.K. Rowling’s Fairy Tales” (2003), Elaine Ostry argues that “minorities are mentioned but they are not heroes; all the major players are Anglo-Saxon” (93). She is referring to Rowling’s apparent “colour blindness” with regards to the characters’ skin colour and cultural background. She argues further that Rowling’s use of “the Dark Arts” and “the Dark Lord” to
refer to the evil side shows that she still falls for stereotypical “white” thinking that bad things are dark and good things are white, e.g. the headmaster of Hogwarts, Dumbledore’s, first name Albus, means white (95).

Gizelle Liza Anatol argues the same point in her essay “The Fallen Empire; Exploring Ethnic Otherness in the World of Harry Potter” (2003). After coming to the conclusion that ethnicities are evident only in names such as Cho Chang (presumably Chinese) and Parvati Patil (presumably Indian), she argues that “whiteness becomes the ‘default’ for unmentioned race” and points out that whiteness is “assumed when unstated” (173). She continues by concluding that “Rowling thus finds herself in an ideological bind – while she perhaps attempts to display a ‘colour-blind’ society where everyone is distinguished solely by magical ability, she makes it supremely easy for the reader forget (or ignore) the multi-ethnic surroundings that she initially seeks to establish” (173). Objections to the colour-blind ideal are getting louder and more common and you could argue that by pursuing this ideal Rowling puts forth the wrong idea to the reader. The world is, after all, not empty of colour and every person should be accepted regardless of what colour skin he/she has.

By not noticing colour at all there is a risk of the reader reading all the characters as white and hence a white norm has been reproduced. However, Lyubansky states that “[n]o doubt, Rowling intended to comment on race by focusing on blood status and elf rights” (237) and that makes sense. Blood status (whether your parents are wizards or muggles) is a major theme in the series and Rowling makes clear the connection between the evil Death Eaters (supporters of Lord Voldemort) and their obsession with the purity of blood. Lyubansky says that ”[...] for many white people it [race] has simply become ‘the word that shall not be named’” (233). The point he is making is that it could sometimes be difficult to discuss themes such as race in a school class today but with the use of another “universe”, where the same issues exist, the topic can be introduced in a neutral way before the focus is turned onto
our own society. That way the pupils will have understood the issue before they are asked to apply it on their own reality. This might make it easier for them to see the issues that exist today.

Lyubanski further credits Rowling with the understanding that fiction can “penetrate our psychological defences and reach our core beliefs” (233). By approaching the subjects of race and moral values from a fictional angle the teacher might avoid any preacquired opinions and prejudices and create a classroom environment where students can discuss freely without the fear of saying the “wrong” thing or hurting anyone’s feelings.

On the issue of gender equality, Ximena Gallardo-C and C. Jason Smith comment in their essay “Cinderfella: J.K. Rowling’s Wily Web of Gender” (2003) that “[t]he Harry Potter books does not offer particularly progressive gender roles: while men and boys tend to get into trouble and share knowing winks, women mostly putter around the kitchen, and scold boys for stepping out of line” (192). What they mean is that, regardless of this fact, the Harry Potter books are radical when it comes to gender. They say that “[w]hile the novels do not actively critique gender stereotyping, the narrative does challenge standard constructions of gender […]” (191). Their point is that even though Harry Potter is a boy, he has many female characteristics and is surrounded by plenty of feminine symbols. This makes it easy for the female reader to relate to Harry.

Gallardo-C and Smith continue by pointing out that the choices Harry makes which are rewarded are choices of passivity, which is considered a feminine trait (196-201). They also comment that “[…] no one at Hogwarts says ‘no girls allowed’” (199) and mean that this, along with the sorting hat who sorts pupils into houses based on inner qualities rather than gender, play an important role in displacing the usual gender specific groups that children devise. They conclude that “[t]hough the magical world, like the Muggle world, suffers from gender stereotyping and sexism, it is a world in the process of change: Hogwarts is not only
coeducational, but mixed-sex groups have the advantage over same-sex groups in classes, sports and friendship” (203). They feel that the *Harry Potter* books are a good context for an active discussion of, for example, sex and gender.

This research is of interest to my essay because they discuss the same moral themes that I will discuss. With their different outlooks on the themes of racial and gender equality they help to shed light on different aspects of these themes. Below, I will continue by presenting previous research on the didactic perspective of this essay.

### 1.3.2 Teaching Moral Values Through Literature

In her article “How Can Children be Taught to Read Differently? Bill’s New Frock and the ‘Hidden Curriculum’” (1997), Alexis Wing finds, through observing a class while they read and discuss a book, that children can be made aware of how things work in society by reading books. The book they were reading challenged the stereotypes of girls and boys and Wing found that, by reading this book, the children started to notice stereotypical behaviour in themselves and towards themselves and others (501). By discussing the book in the class the children had the opportunity to voice their newfound experience and discuss it with other children and with the teacher. She concludes that it is through discussion children develop understanding and, also, by confronting them with something strange and norm challenging they open up their eyes to what is happening, not only in the book but in their own world.

Guofang Wan writes in his article “Teaching Diversity and Tolerance in the Classroom: A Thematic Storybook Approach” (2006) about the importance of teaching diversity and tolerance. He means that it is “an imperative for us to live peacefully as global citizens” (140). His main point is that by a thematic approach to literature, teachers can help students develop understanding and tolerance for other cultures. He concludes that children need guidance
while reading or they risk reproducing stereotypical values rather than developing understanding and tolerance towards other people (142).

Fran Levin writes in her article “Encouraging Ethical Respect Through Multicultural Literature” (2007) that literature helps children to understand themselves because children see themselves in the literature they read. She brings up the topic of multicultural literature as a tool for helping children to better understand the world they live in. Levin argues that “[t]raditionally, such literature has focused on superficial aspects of culture like festivals, food, native dress, holidays, and famous people” (101). She admits that these can be “valuable aspects”, but she feels that one should also look at “family stories; coming of age experiences; and topics of social justice, inhumanity, and challenges” (101). She concludes that to learn ethical respect children need to identify with the characters and empathize with their situations.

2. Analysis

I have decided to analyse all seven *Harry Potter* books, focusing on the main moral themes in conjunction with the moral values that teachers are expected to stimulate students into embracing, according to the national objectives. I have chosen to focus on two themes, good vs. evil and equality, both racial and gender equality, because I feel these themes are distinct enough in the books that the pupils will likely be able to interpret and discuss them. In presenting my themes I will analyse them with regards to what the national objectives state as well as what previous researchers have written about the *Harry Potter* series.

My analysis is divided into two parts. The first part is about good and evil, where I show how this is important to the discussion of morals. Even though the world is not as simple as people being either good or evil it could still be a helpful distinction to make. Discussing
stereotypes can help pupils understand their own world, as Wing shows in her study. As an example of that I will discuss the two characters of Severus Snape and Sirius Black. The moral message here is that in fact everything is not what it seems and sometimes you have to give people second chances.

The second part is about different issues of equality, racial equality and gender equality. Issues of equality are very important to discuss, especially in today’s social and political climate where many countries have xenophobic political parties in parliament, with power to make decisions and control people’s lives. It is therefore important to discuss everybody’s equal worth and rights with pupils as early and as often as possible so as to prevent a reproduction of racist opinions and fear of everything different. Gender equality is equally important as boys and girls are still not treated equally with regards to, for example, social expectations, toys and clothes, and women still do not have the same conditions with regards to wages and work opportunities as men do.

2.1 Good vs. Evil

One of the central themes of the Harry Potter books is the fight between good and evil. In the world of Harry Potter the line between good and evil is always obvious, those who are evil are the ones who ally themselves with Lord Voldemort. Lord Voldemort is the antagonist, with his distaste for those who are different and his desire for total power. He wants to purify the wizard race, he is obsessed with pure blood. Those who are good are the ones who fight him, who accept everyone and who realise that it makes no difference to a person’s worth weather he/she has magical parents or non-magical (muggle) parents. This is all very well, however, as I will discuss in section 2.1.2, it is not always clear to the reader which character belongs to which side and here is a good point to discuss with pupils since it sheds light on the fact that you can never judge anyone by appearances only.
2.1.1 The Most Powerful Magic

In *The Philosopher’s Stone* Harry goes from being an unloved, unwanted child in his uncle’s house to a hero at a school of magic. In the wizarding world he learns about Lord Voldemort, a wizard turned evil, and finds out that it was Lord Voldemort who killed his parents. He is also told that Lord Voldemort tried to kill him too, but failed. No one seems to know why Lord Voldemort failed to kill Harry but, whatever the reason, surviving Lord Voldemort’s killing curse has made him a wizarding world celebrity. At the end of his first school year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry he is once again face to face with Lord Voldemort and now he realises that the evil Lord cannot touch him without feeling immense pain. Professor Dumbledore explains to Harry about the most powerful magic in the world.

“Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realise that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign...to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It’s in your very skin.” (*The Philosopher’s Stone*, 216)

What Dumbledore is trying to say is that if Harry just dares to trust the power of love nothing can really harm him and this is the main point of difference between the good and the evil. Voldemort cannot feel love or even sympathise with it and therefore he is utterly evil. Being the moral centre of the series, Dumbledore keeps repeating to Harry what he thinks is most important and as Harry grows older he begins to understand it even though it is not always easy. In the fifth book, *The Order of the Phoenix*, Harry is yet again faced with the possibility that he is going to die. This time Lord Voldemort’s soul is in possession of Harry’s body and there is so much pain that Harry just wants to die. In the same instant that he realises that he is
going to die he thinks with grief and love about his godfather, Sirius, who died just moments before and all of a sudden Lord Voldemort is gone. “It was your heart that saved you” Dumbledore later tells Harry (The order of the Phoenix, 743). This is true, not only in Dumbledore’s words but, to the observant reader, also in Harry’s thoughts when he is possessed by Voldemort. As soon as Harry thinks about Sirius, whom he loves, Voldemort leaves him alone and Harry has his mind to himself again. His heart, the love he feels has saved him from Voldemort, who cannot feel love nor understand it.

This passage from the fifth book, where the good qualities of the ability to feel empathy is stressed, corresponds very well with a paragraph in the national objectives for secondary school which states that schools shall “foster understanding of other human beings and the ability to empathise” (Skolverket 2001). Voldemort cannot empathise and that makes him a bad person. Why this makes him bad is, in the books, quite obvious. It makes him hate and kill those who are different and this is the crucial point where the teacher has a chance to help the students understand that this might also happen in our world. It is crucial, however, to point out that “good” and “bad” are terms to be used carefully. They need to be problematized in class discussions since they are, in fact, problematic. Is there such a thing as “good” and “bad” and who decides which is which? These are questions that make for a good philosophical discussion. To bring the discussion to a more psychological approach, there is the fact that Lord Voldemort is bad, but perhaps he was made bad by circumstances. It is not as easy as a person is just “bad”; there is always more to people’s actions. I will discuss this further in paragraph 2.1.2.

Lyubansky comments that Rowling uses the Harry Potter series to “provide readers with a real world moral framework” and this moral framework is what the young reader might adapt (233). The teacher is crucial here to answer the pupils’ questions and not underestimate the power of this “magical parallel universe” (Lyubansky, 233). It is important that the teacher
helps the pupils to draw parallels between what they have read in the books and the real world. So the question is why it is bad to not be able to feel love and why it sometimes seems to be a struggle for Harry to understand this. These are complicated questions that the students might not be able to sort out by themselves. Since “children see themselves in the literature they read” (Levin, 101), it is important that they are guided so that they do not end up going the wrong way, perhaps sympathizing with Lord Voldemort and feeling that empathy is hurting someone else or that there is no point in feeling empathy if it does not affect people.

There is always a risk in discussing terms like “good” and “evil” because pupils might be led to believe that there is nothing to do about it if someone does something that is considered wrong. It is important to point out that people may change and that circumstances make people do what they do. It can, however, be beneficial to stress the importance of the moral choices we can make. The question of what is good or bad and who decides what is, is again of interest. These are very complex terms and having a philosophical discussion about them may help pupils see different points of view and from there to develop their understanding and empathy for other people.

2.1.2 Severus Snape and Sirius Black

The theme of good and evil is not just about who has the ability to love and who does not. It is also about who is a good person and who is not. At first the pupil might feel that everything in the books is easy, that there are good people and bad people. However, in her essay “Cruel Heroes and Treacherous Texts: Educating the Reader in Moral Complexity and Critical Reading in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Books”, Veronica L. Sanchoes points out that the construction of good and evil in the books is ambiguous (131). The teacher might therefore point out to the pupils that it is not all black and white and the discussion could be turned on to this ambiguity that is characters who are not really either “good” or “bad”. This, what I
choose to call a greyscale, is helpful to the teacher since it sheds light on the issues discussed above: it is important that the pupils see that good and evil are problematic terms that should not be used lightly. One person may do both good and bad things. And good and bad are also relative to which side you are on. What is considered good by one person may be considered bad by another.

The fact that one person can do both good and bad things can be seen for example in Dumbledore himself. Towards the end of the series Harry (and the reader) begins to suspect that not everything is quite right. Dumbledore has dabbled in the dark arts himself when he was younger but has had a change of hearts. This shows that one can always change one’s mind and it is important to point out to the pupils, as Hermione points out to Harry, that he, Dumbledore, did change his mind and that is what matters. Because when somebody changes their mind they need to have a chance to show that they have changed. If you are not allowed to, you might fall back to what you did before. By judging people by past offences you might miss out on many good qualities that person possesses. Dumbledore was always essentially good, he had the ability to love, but he made a wrong step when he was young. This fact is important to note and to discuss with the students because it brings up the subject of duplicity. Everyone has the ability to do good or bad and what choice you make, for it is a choice, is a matter of responsibility.

It says in the national objectives that teachers should help pupils to be able to make ethical standpoints as well as respect other people and act against abusive behaviour. With this in mind, discussing Dumbledore and his choices makes a good base for introducing to the students the subject of empathy. Dumbledore chooses good, his empathy is greater than his need for power. His sister is killed and he decides to drop all contact with his friend Grindelwald, and as we learn already in the first book he later defeats Grindelwald in battle and saves Bulgaria from his oppression. This however is just one of many small indications
that good and evil are not always as easy as that. Where do you draw the line between good and evil and who is really evil? Rowling provides the reader with two perfect characters to base this discussion on.

The first one is Professor Severus Snape. Professor Snape is not exactly good but the important thing is that he is not evil either, like most human beings he has a little of both. He is mean to Hermione and Neville Longbottom, he loathes Harry only because he loathed Harry’s father, his best friends are the Malfoys and he used to be a Death Eater (a follower of Voldemort). However, he has changed sides and Dumbledore trusts him completely. This is what Dumbledore repeatedly tells his friends and followers. Snape is a member the Order of the Phoenix, an anti-Voldemort movement started by Dumbledore, even though almost everyone has their doubts about him. He is not a very pleasant person and at the very sight of him people seem prone to dislike him.

This, of course, is a matter to discuss with the pupils. Why do we judge people by appearance and why should we be careful with it? The pupils will know that Snape is a known associate to Voldemort and might argue that this is cause enough to judge him as a bad person. However, it is pointed out several times that Dumbledore trusts him and here is the key point to discuss: the reader (and Harry) does not know everything about Snape and therefore the basis on which Snape is judged is not complete. There is no preventing judgement altogether, but, based on the national objective’s and the goal that all pupils should be able to make ethical standpoints based on knowledge about human rights, democratic values and personal experience, there is reason to discuss with the pupils the benefits of an open-minded approach to others.

The reader will, throughout the series, learn many things about Severus Snape and most of them are not very appealing but in the end Snape turns out to be good even though his motives might be considered questionable. There is a difference here, as Schanoes says,
between “nastiness and wickedness” which is important to notice, because even though Snape is a nasty person the reader does not know for certain that he is wicked (132). This, I think, is important: Snape does good things such as saving Harry’s life over and over again and yet he is just as nasty and mean as he has always been. Harry (and the reader) is constantly led to doubt Snape and not until the last book, Harr Potter and the Deathly Hallows, do we find out who Snape really is. Snape was an unhappy person who loved Harry’s mother until he drew his last breath. When Harry learns about this he has to change his opinion about Snape. He has to come to terms with the fact that Snape was doing good all along even though he was being nasty to Harry. Pointing this out to the pupils gives them a chance to reflect on the fact that things and people are not always what they seem and that perhaps sometimes one needs to stand back and gather all the facts before judging someone.

Even though Snape’s motive for doing good might be questionable, with him changing sides because of his love for a woman and not because he really had a change of opinion, if we see being good or evil is a matter of choice, then Snape chooses to be good. When Voldemort killed Lilly Potter, Snape changed sides to help revenge her. This might raise questions as to whether Snape deserves Harry’s forgiveness and also how and why Snape turned out the way he did. Harry does forgive Snape and this gives the teacher and the pupils a moral dilemma to discuss. Perhaps one might feel that Harry was in his full right never to forgive Snape for having had his parents killed. On the other hand it is important to point out that by never forgiving the ones who do you wrong you might end up angry and bitter and this may lead to even more hate, which is what we want to prevent.

Teachers can help students to realise that people are not just born a certain way and with some guidance from a teacher this issue might help students develop that empathy the curriculum says the school should promote. It is not enough that they feel what Harry does is right. Harry names his son Severus and tells him he is named after one of the bravest people
he ever knew, but there is a need to explain why Harry does this. And when this is discussed pupils have their own experiences of this kind of empathy, or forgiveness, and it is important that they get their say. Wing finds that pupils are keen to express their own experiences and with the guidance of a teacher they might develop further understanding as to why they are treated certain ways and why they feel the way they do (503).

On the other end of the scale is Sirius Black, Harry’s godfather. If Snape is the bad person who does good things, then Sirius is quite the opposite. He is a good man who sometimes does bad things. He is introduced for the first time in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* and his history is further revealed in *The Order of the Phoenix*. Like Snape, he grew up feeling that he did not fit in. He was born into a pure blood family with strong connections to the dark arts and great contempt for muggles and mudbloods. Meeting James Potter and ending up in Gryffindor house influenced him to the point where he ran away from home to stay with the more liberal Potters. He is, however, falsely accused of treachery and murder and sent to the wizard prison Azkaban. Everyone is in shock at this. He was such a good person, how could he have done such bad things? However, because of his parentage they still believe it of him. He did not actually commit the crime that he was sent to prison for but when he finally escapes he does not act as an innocent person which leads the reader to believe he really is evil. Not until the end of the third book does the reader (and Harry) find out that Sirius Black committed crimes for the sake of the good. All Sirius wants to do is to kill the man who betrayed Lily and James Potter. This naturally brings up the question of the justification of killing. Is it right to kill a man who has committed horrible crimes? Harry does not think so:

“No!” Harry yelled. He ran forwards, placing himself in front of Pettigrew, facing the wands. “You can’t kill him,” he said breathlessly. “You can’t.”

Black and Lupin both looked staggered.

“Harry, this piece of vermin is the reason you have no parents,” Black snarled. [...]
“I know,” Harry panted. “we’ll take him up to the castle. We’ll hand him over to the Dementors. He can go to Azkaban ... just don’t kill him.” (Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, 275)

This is a question that, no doubt, will arise in the classroom. It is ever-present through news reports about death sentences and death row prisoners in e.g USA. In Sweden you can’t be sentenced to death whatever crime you have committed, but some states in USA still sentence criminals to death for certain crimes. Students are aware of this and some may feel that this system should be taken in use in Sweden as well. They may feel that certain things give you the right to kill another. It is, again, an important topic to discuss with student because here the line between good and evil is very thin. Who has the right to claim another person’s life?

Pupils may feel that if someone has murdered a person you loved, you would have the right to kill that murderer. However, empathy and everybody’s equal worth are the values teachers should promote. That means even a murderer has the same human worth as any other person.

In the case of Sirius Black he did not by law have the right to kill all those people, and as it turned out it was not he who killed them. But he still felt he had the right to kill the person who had committed the mass murder. He could not empathise with the murderer and he felt that the murderer was worth less than any other person.

Pupils might feel that one has the right to kill a murderer and if teachers can help pupils to reason about their feelings the pupils might change how they feel about it, or at least understand why they feel a certain way, as Wing finds is the case in her study (503). And that, I think, is the key point. The teacher can ask the pupils if they think it would make Sirius feel any better to have Peter Pettigrew killed because that is what makes the difference. What matters most to Sirius is Harry, and now that he knows Harry is safe he bends to Harry’s will. This shows that Sirius would probably not feel any better by killing Pettigrew since Harry would still not be safe, the threat of Voldemort would still hang over him. And to point out to
the student a good reason why a life should be spared even after the person has done horrible things one can always point out what Dumbledore says to Harry about it all:

“But – I stopped Sirius and Professor Lupin killing Pettigrew! That makes it my fault, if Voldemort comes back!”

“It does not,” said Dumbledore quietly. “ [...] The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed [...] You did a very noble thing, in saving Pettigrew’s life.”

“But if it helps Voldemort back to power -!”

“Pettigrew owes his life to you. You have sent Voldemort a deputy who is in your debt [...]” (The Prisoner of Azkaban, 311)

All of our actions have consequences. This is yet another important thing to discuss with students. To see the cause of an action is not always easy and therefore one needs to choose carefully what way they want to go. Harry is rewarded twice by choosing not to kill. Not killing Sirius gave him the true story of his parents’ death and saving Pettigrew’s life that same day saved his own life four years later. Pettigrew, on the other hand, is at last punished for betraying Harry’s parents and choosing the side of evil. Lord Voldemort does not care about anybody’s life, not even those of his own followers.

2.2 Equality

Another central theme in the series is equality. In the series, “good” is represented by people who want equality for every living creature. They are the wizards who feel that all people are equals regardless of heritage and magical ability. “Evil” is represented by Lord Voldemort and his supporters who want the wizards to come out of hiding and rule over the muggles and they want the wizarding race to be free of muggle blood. They feel that magical human beings
are worth more than everyone else. The opponents of Lord Voldemort are naturally opposing his view of muggles and muggleborns as inferior and they fight for a world where everyone is equal whatever your parentage.

2.2.1 Racial Equality

Everybody’s equal rights and worth is an important theme that is constantly raised through the Harry Potter series. In the wizarding world not everybody’s parents are wizards. Those with mixed blood are looked upon with contempt by some of those whose ancestors are all wizards and witches. In Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone Harry learns early that to some people it is very important where you come from. He is in Diagon Alley, the wizard world shopping street invisible to everyone who does not know it is there, with Hagrid to shop for his year at Hogwarts. In a clothing store he meets an unpleasant boy who sneers at the unnaturally big Hagrid and seems really interested in Harry’s ancestry.

“He really don’t think they should let the other sort in, do you? They’re just not the same, they’ve never been brought up to know our ways.” (The Philosopher’s Stone, 60-61)

This boy turns out to be Draco Malfoy. Malfoy and Harry do not get off to a good start and it will continue that way. In the second book, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, the issue of racism towards the so-called muggleborns is thoroughly dealt with. Malfoy becomes involved in an argument with Harry’s friend Hermione, whose parents are both muggles:

“’No one asked your opinion, you filthy little mudblood’ he spat. Harry knew at once that
Malfoy had said something really bad because there was an instant uproar at his words” (The Chamber of Secrets, 123). This introduces the reader to the worst insult of the wizarding world, “mudblood” or to be a witch or wizard with muggle blood, that is to have a parent (or both parents) who is not a witch or wizard.

There are several examples of racism in the Harry Potter books. In The Chamber of Secrets a monster is set loose in Hogwarts. A monster no one can see and who seems intent on killing those with muggle parentage. Harry, who is able to hear the monster whisper, has to do something or else someone will die. As it turns out, Voldemort is behind it all. Voldemort stands for all that is evil, amongst which racism is the socially most prominent trait. Voldemort wants the wizarding community to stand above the muggles. He wants to purify the wizard race by throwing out everyone who is not a pure blood and snap their wands. If he gains power, wizards and witches won’t be allowed to marry muggles or muggle borns. This discrimination is what Harry, Dumbledore and the others are fighting to prevent.

There is an obvious parallel here to our real world history of racism, with the Nazis wanting to purify the Aryan race. It is made even more obvious by the fact that the reader is told on several occasions that Dumbledore defeated another evil wizard, Grindelwald, in the year of 1945. To understand this underlying parallel it is important that the pupils get to know our own history and are helped to understand how things like this could happen.

However, muggleborns are not the only ones who are the subject of fear and loathing. The wizarding world is full of strange creatures like centaurs, werewolves and giants. In Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix the Ministry of Magic is in denial as to the fact that Lord Voldemort has returned to power. Instead they seem to direct their fears towards other targets. Lyubanski means that even though people see human rights as important “it is also true that advocates for racial equality do not always act as allies for the LGBT and disability
communities, and vice versa” (246). This shows the difficulty of breaking prejudices and bringing tolerance to people, tolerance for everyone.

In the series there are many people who find it hard to tolerate those who are different. Even if they agree to that all wizards are equal, they are still prejudiced towards other beings. This is the case, for example, with the Ministry employee Dolores Umbridge. The Ministry claims that they are for equal rights but they send Umbridge to Hogwarts to keep an eye on Dumbledore and eventually take over as headmistress. Her fear and loathing of those who are not like her is made clear when she is inspecting Hagrid’s lesson. Hagrid is gentle sort of person who is very large due to the fact that his mother was a giantess. Towards giants there is a great fear amongst the wizarding community because of their inclination for violence.

“Are you aware” Umbridge said loudly, interrupting him, “that the Ministry of Magic has classified Thestrals as ‘dangerous’?”

Harry heart sank like a stone, but Hagrid merely chuckled.

“Thestrals aren’t dangerous! All righ’, they might take a bite outta yeh if yeh really annoy them...”

“Shows... signs... of... pleasure... at... idea... of... violence” muttered Umbridge, scribbling on her clipboard again.

“No – come on!” said Hagrid, looking a little anxious now. “I mean, a dog’ll bite if yeh bait, wont it - ... (The Order of the Phoenix, 395-396)

Umbridge’s insults and mean treatment of Hagrid shows that she fears him for being different although the reader knows that he is the same on the inside as everyone else, he is just quite a bit larger than most people. Wing concludes that “[...] awareness can be raised with a book as catalyst [...]” (503). The pupils know that Hagrid is not dangerous even though he is half giant. Umbridge’s unfair treatment of Hagrid would probably raise a discussion, as the
headmasters unfair treatment of a boy did in Wing’s observation of the class reading Bill’s New Frock. Since this incident occurs in the fifth book, pupils who have read the previous books already know what to expect of Hagrid, and Umbridge’s treatment of him goes against what we know about Hagrid. Being a little different is not bad, and Umbridge helps make this point clearer since she treats Hagrid so badly even though the pupils know he is a good person regardless of his size.

Finally, a clear point against racism is made in the novels by Harry in his choice of friends, or rather whom he chooses not to befriend. Harry knows that Malfoy despises people of certain heritage (i.e. muggle borns) and when he chooses not to befriend Malfoy he also chooses not to be part of that fear and contempt towards those who are different.

“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. I can help you there.” He held out his hand to shake Harry’s, but Harry didn’t take it.

“I think I can tell who the wrong sort are myself, thanks” he said coolly. (The Philosopher’s Stone, 81)

Harry’s best friends are, instead, Ron and Hermione. Ron is from a family considered to be “blood traitors” by pure blood fanatics due to their acceptance of everyone’s equal worth even if they are full blood wizards themselves. Hermione is, as stated above, a “ muggleborn” who just happens to be top of the class every year. Harry’s other close friends are Hagrid and Professor Lupin. Harry finds out that Hagrid’s mother was a giantess in the fourth book, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire and Professor Lupin turns out to be a werewolf but also one of Harry’s father’s best friends. Not even Harry himself is “pure blood”. His mother was muggleborn. This shows that Harry does not take into account what people’s heritage is. Harry does not believe that a person’s parentage makes them a better, or worse, person.
There might be pupils who disagree with this, who feel that heritage, culture and/or religion defines a person to the extent that they are so different from what the pupil’s consider normal, that they are not worth as much as them. With The Sweden Democrats, a political party with a racist background, in a position of power, with more support than ever amongst young people it is important to make it clear to pupils, already at a young age, that it does not matter where you come from, every human being is the same. Lyubanski has no doubt that there is more than a few people who would react strongly against interracial mixing (238). This might not be as true in Sweden as in perhaps the USA but again, the climate online and in debates is hardening against those of different heritage and that is why it is important to bring it to discussion and to help the pupils see that race, and parentage, does not matter in itself. Because the *Harry Potter* books bring these subject to the surface they can help teachers with that.

### 2.2.2 Gender Equality

There is no denying that Rowling, however interesting her books are from a moral perspective, is a bit of a traditionalist in some respects. From the very beginning the reader becomes acquainted with mainly male characters. There is Harry and Ron and their classmates. There are the Slytherin boys and the Weasley brothers. The first woman the reader encounters is Mrs Dursley who is a housewife who likes to spy on her neighbours over the hedges. The second is Professor McGonagall about whom nothing is known except that she can turn herself into a cat and that she teaches at Hogwarts. On his way to the Hogwarts Express Harry briefly meets Ron’s mother Mrs Weasley and sister, Ginny. Mrs Weasley is a housewife who cooks a lot of food but tends to forget that Ron doesn’t like corned beef and that Ginny is shy and timid. Not until the second half of the first book do Harry and Ron
befriend Hermione and she holds a traditional role within their trio; she is a helper, she keeps track of them and helps out with their homework.

In the first couple of books women and girls are hardly ever part of the main plot events. In the first book the reader learns different things about Harry’s male classmates, such as Seamus having a muggle father and Neville being raised by his grandmother. About the girls, however, there is not much more said than their names. Perhaps Rowling has been affected by the criticism of the lack of female characters, for in the three last books women and girls hold more prominent roles. Nymphadora Tonks is introduced as a slightly clumsy auror (dark wizard catcher) and Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood join the group of Harry’s close friends.

Although the gender roles tend to be stereotypical, with girls giggling and crying and boys being adventurous but generally composed when confronted with dangers, it is true what Gallardo-C and Smith points out in their essay “Cinderfella: J.K. Rowling’s Wily Web of Gender”(2003): “[...] no one at Hogwarts says ‘No Girls Allowed,’ except perhaps the Slytherins, who do not have girls on their Quidditch team – and they certainly are not role models” (199). Again, what is not equal is represented by persons who are on the evil side. Gender equality in Slytherin is a bigger problem than in the rest of the school houses. Even though the reader does not get to know many girls personally they still exists, except in Slytherin where there is only ever one girl mentioned. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban the Gryffindor team, with their three girl Chasers, defeats Slytherin in the final game and claims the cup and in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince Ginny Weasley plays seeker instead of Harry and she ensures that Gryffindor win the cup by once again defeating Slytherin in the final game. Gallardo-C and Smith concludes that “[t]hough the magical world, like the Muggle world, suffers from gender stereotyping and sexism, it is a world in the process of change: Hogwarts is not only coeducational, but mixed-sex groups have the
advantage over same-sex groups in classes, sports and friendships.” (203). For instance, the Slytherin team, with no girls in it, does not manage to win the Quidditch cup once in all the years Harry Potter and his friends are at Hogwarts. The world of Harry Potter is evolving, just like our own, towards a world where gender equality is the norm.

It is the teacher’s job to promote equality between men and women and understanding of other people (Skolverket:7). Wing says that “[w]hen a child reads a book, s/he brings with him/her a set of expectations about the way in which characters will behave. /…/ The observations show that children brings with them a whole range of expectations about gender […]” (502). Since the Harry Potter series tends to be stereotypical regarding gender roles it is important that the teacher brings this up to discussion and helps the pupils understand what is stereotypical and why. Wing argues that since children already have expectations on gender, developed from prejudices based on their family and their world, and these expectations differ from each other, it is vital that the book is discussed in the class, otherwise the pupils might just reproduce the expectations that they already have. She argues that the class discussion plays a large part in developing understanding and she says “[i]t was when they started to relate the book to their own lives and listen to their peers’ point of view that they began to express their surprise at the different treatment boys and girls receive” (502-503). The somewhat stereotypical portrayal of boys and girls in the Harry Potter books is therefore not necessarily bad, since they might open up for discussion and from discussion comes understanding. It also helps the teacher to teach the students to read critically. The fact that it is not always stereotypical is even more helpful, as Gallardo-C and Smith says: “This tendency to question the status quo extends throughout the series and invites readers to cultivate a more critical approach to societal norms” (203). Putting these none-stereotypical characters against the stereotypes enhances the critical reading of the books and when the
pupils’ views are challenged and brought to discussion they can be helped to notice stereotypical behaviour and understand that stereotyping does not promote values of equality.

3. Conclusion

In doing my analysis I have constantly had the national objectives for secondary education in mind. They state that schools should represent and impart the values of “[t]he inviolability of life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable” (Skolverket 2011:9). In reading the Harry Potter books two themes that correspond to the goals of the national objectives were especially clear to me.

The Harry Potter books contain several themes on moral values that correspond to the values teachers are expected to transmit according to the national objectives. In this essay I have chosen to focus on the moral theme of “good vs. evil” and the theme of equality. These two themes are constantly brought up throughout the books, often in connection to each other since the “good” characters are for equality and the “bad” characters are against equality. Within the theme of good vs. evil there is not only the black and white of some people being evil and some people being good. With the characters of Severus Snape and Sirius Black the moral dilemma of what is good and bad is introduced. These are characters who sometimes do unexpected things, e.g. Sirius Black is a good man but yet he intends to commit a murder and Snape is a nasty person who does horrible things which turn out to be for the sake of good. Bringing this to discussion with pupils may help them understand that the world is not simply black and white.

I have divided the equality theme into two parts: racial equality and gender equality. Racial equality is an important theme of the Harry Potter series. The whole struggle between the good and the evil is about who is a “real” wizard and therefore a real person. The evil side, led
by Lord Voldemort, wants to purify the wizard race and throw out everyone who is muggleborn (one or both parents are non-magical). Their main goal is wizard rule, muggles are less worth that magical people. This is what the good side, led by Dumbledore, fights against. By bringing up certain events and dialogues from the books teachers might help pupils understand their own world and help them learn how to feel empathy and act against oppression, as it says in the national objectives that teachers should.

With regards to gender equality, the *Harry Potter* books has sometimes been criticised for being stereotypical. The hero is male, and the girls are usually only mentioned as passive objects, the reader learns nothing more about them than their names. The further along the series you go, however, the female characters get more prominent roles and are not as stereotypically portrayed. Stereotypes can be helpful in a classroom discussion when they are discussed as stereotypes and the students are helped to reflect upon how and why they are stereotypical. The fact that the books’ portrayals of female characters become less stereotypical further along the series is very helpful since that can stand as a contrast to the stereotypes and help broaden the discussion further.

I find that the *Harry Potter* books are well suited to use as a base for discussions regarding moral values of “good vs. evil” and racial and gender equality. Through these discussions teachers can help students develop empathy and understanding for other human beings, in accordance with the objectives outlined in the national curriculum.
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