Symbol of the Serpent:

The Significance of the Serpent Motif in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series

The label of “serpent” typically applies to snakes, dragons, “great worms,” and any number of sub-creatures. These creatures are forever intertwined, whether it be in fantasy literature, Biblical scripture, or ancient texts. Consistently seen as “evil,” these creatures represent sin, avarice, greed, and deadly power. Yet are they truly evil? Within multiple texts spanning across time and cultures, snakes have been lauded as symbols of life and light just as much as they have been branded evil. J.K. Rowling utilizes the symbolic serpent multiple times within her popular *Harry Potter* series, and her use of the serpent motif serves to illustrate her views on snakes, dragons, and all manner of serpent besides. The inherent “good” or “evil” qualities present in Rowling’s characters, specifically in regards to the denizens of Slytherin House, whose symbol is the serpent, are explored throughout the series as well. J.K. Rowling consistently presents a negative outlook on Slytherin House. All manner of snake within her series seems to promote an ill omen or some sort of evil purpose, yet her main character – the hero of the tale, Harry Potter – has some serpentine traits himself. J.K. Rowling uses the serpent motif to illustrate that snakes are indeed a symbol of evil within her world, yet they do not have to be.

The designation of “serpent” can encompass a wide range of creatures. Lauren Berman, author of the article “Dragons and Serpents in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series: Are They...
Evil?” notes that the term “serpent” is usually “synonymous or closely related” to both snakes and dragons (45). She references both the Bible’s portrayal of the creatures as well as their portrayal throughout the Middle Ages and points out how many of the references to serpents denote the creatures as sinful. Dragons and snakes, interchangeable entities, reflect the sins of Man (as in the Garden of Eden) and are both associated, generally, with evil. J.K. Rowling makes it a point to differentiate between the two, however. Dragons and snakes are not interchangeable but two vastly separate entities within the Harry Potter series. Despite this separation, however, Rowling frequently associates her serpents with the side of evil. Snakes abound in the Harry Potter series – Nagini, the serpent as the symbol of Slytherin house, as well as Voldemort’s snake-like appearance – while dragons remain few and far between. The only members of the dragon clan the readers encounter are limited to Hagrid’s temporary pet dragon, Norbert, the dragons which must be avoided during the Triwizard Tournament, and the dragon serving as guardian (and prisoner) deep within Gringotts Bank. Why does Rowling differentiate between the two species? The reasons for this distinct boundary between snakes and dragons may be rooted within the morality of the tale.

Snakes within the Harry Potter series lie quite distinctly on the side of darkness. The only snake which serves no discernible purpose – and in fact does not play into either the side of good or the side of evil – is the boa constrictor which Harry accidentally releases from the zoo in The Sorcerer’s Stone. This snake serves as a catalyst for Harry’s strange affinity with serpents, though at the time the young boy has no clue of his abilities either as a wizard or as a being capable of speaking Parseltongue. The boa does Harry no harm, and in fact serves as the only instance of the serpent motif which does not directly correlate to some trial or other for the boy. Yet each usage of the serpent motif afterwards equates to a bad omen, moment of calamity, or a
trial that Harry must face against the forces of darkness. *The Chamber of Secrets* introduces the deadly basilisk, an enormous snake which does Voldemort’s bidding and nearly kills a number of students and staff. The symbol of the Death Eaters, Voldemort’s followers, is a skull with a forked tongue. Nagini, Voldemort’s familiar, attacks and nearly maims Arthur Weasley in *The Order of the Phoenix*. Why does Rowling consistently utilize her serpents – her snakes, primarily – for evil purposes?

Her dragons are another matter entirely. Rowling’s dragons, as noted by Berman, “are neither good nor evil but remain morally neutral throughout.” Rowling’s dragons are vicious, untamable beasts, to be sure, but they fight for neither the side of good nor for the forces of darkness. Rather than present them as forces of evil, Rowling presents her dragons as forces of nature alone. Rowling’s dragons share characteristics reminiscent of Western dragons – namely by serving as guardians. Hagrid informs Harry in *The Sorcerer’s Stone* that dragons guard the high security vaults within Gringotts Bank (recycling the conventional dragon trait of guarding gold). In this way, though morally neutral, dragons adopt a beneficial role towards wizardkind. In addition to serving as guardians, their body parts are used in medicinal potions, and they hold a place of prestige and reverence within the wizarding world. Why, then, does Rowling present her snakes so differently? The word dragon itself, Berman remarks, comes from the Greek word “drakon,” which means “big snake,” yet Rowling severs all ties between the creatures.

Dragons have been a staple of mythology and folklore throughout time, but snakes have played a prominent role in cultures across the world as well. The creatures have often been regarded as symbols of evil, yet they have also been associated with the forces of life as well. Snakes are an enigma and a mixture of both good and evil qualities wrapped into one. Berman refers to the snake as “the embodiment of contradiction as it symbolizes both death and
destruction due to its poisonous venom or fatally tight squeeze, as well as life and resurrection in light of its ability to shed and renew its skin” (45-46). Snakes contain the methods of both life and death within their bodies, yet Rowling chooses only to address their more negative characteristics. She follows in the pathways set forth by Christian lore, Norse mythology, Arab demonology, and Hebrew demonology, wherein the snake is depicted as “an elemental symbol of chaos and evil” or in which the snake represents “the all-encompassing power of evil” (Berman 46). Berman also mentions that snakes within these cultures and religious sects have long served “to symbolize lust and temptation” (46). Rowling appears to borrow heavily from the serpent associations set forth by these cultures in that her serpents serve as tempters (Draco Malfoy, denizen of Slytherin House, attempts to gain Harry’s friendship early on within the series by first extolling the benefits his friendship would reap with the young Potter), deceivers (Nagini cloaks herself in the guise of a human within The Deathly Hallows in order to attack Harry and Hermione), and bringers of chaos (in the form of the basilisk, the Death Eaters, and Voldemort himself).

The vices of serpents cannot be addressed without discussing their virtues as well, though these are practically nonexistent within the Harry Potter series. The Ancient Aztecs, Australian Aborigines, and Romans viewed snakes as symbols of fertility, healing, wisdom, and insight. In Egyptian lore, the cobra goddess Renenutet was revered “as a repository of supreme wisdom and good fortune” (Berman 46). As Berman also points out, the symbol of the medical profession, the caduceus, features two serpents entwined around a staff. The dual natures of the snake – its ability to bring both death (through its venom) and life (through the shedding of its skin) – are often ignored in favor of focusing solely on the negative qualities or associations with the creature. Snakes are not solely symbols of destructions or harbingers of death or ill omens. The
creatures create life and also sustain it; they impart nourishment and wisdom on those who would seek such boons. To focus on the serpent only as a symbol of death and darkness is to strip the creature of its complexity and potential. Why, then, does J.K. Rowling utilize the negative connotations associated with the snake (which, ironically enough, serves as the symbol for one quarter of Hogwarts’ students) rather than using the serpent motif in any sort of positive light?

Arguably speaking, the major symbolic serpent within the *Harry Potter* series is Slytherin House itself. Rowling introduces Slytherin House to both Harry and the readers (who are braving the new environment right along with him) as a house populated by unsavory individuals. After all, the darkest wizard of the age – Voldemort himself – was a Slytherin. As such, Harry associates Slytherin House with Voldemort exclusively from the beginning. He arrives at his first crossroads – the moment when he is to be sorted into one of the four houses of Hogwarts – with preconceived notions about Slytherin already in mind, Hagrid having already insisted to young, impressionable Harry that, “‘There’s not a single witch or wizard who went bad who wasn’t in Slytherin. You-Know-Who was one’” (*The Sorcerer’s Stone*, 61-62). Eliana Ionoaia asserts that, after having this knowledge imparted on him, Harry “makes the essential choice: he dissociates himself from… Slytherin” (13). Ionoaia insists that Harry chooses to dissociate himself from Slytherin in order to distance himself from a “group of people unhindered by morals, choosing a life of morality and virtue” (13). Peter Rogers agrees with this assessment, remarking that “Harry chooses to be part of a house that represents bravery” and “willingly disassociates himself from Slytherin, the house which represents prejudice” (7). Slytherin House represents prejudice because Rowling gave it no other purpose. It exists as the opposition to Harry and his Gryffindor sensibilities, as well as serving as the singularly “bad”
house. Claiming that every witch or wizard who ever “went bad” came solely from Slytherin and no other house, however, seems both implausible and highly discriminatory. Rowling presents her readers – and her characters – with staggering odds. According to Hagrid, twenty-five percent of each crop of new students has the potential to become a dark witch or wizard, and there exists a staggering one-hundred percent chance that all of these “bad” witches and wizards will come from none other than Slytherin House. These odds are daunting. Rowling has presented her readers with a house (and furthermore, a group of students) who even the staff at the school believe have the potential to become dark witches or wizards. Like young Harry, other new students no doubt hear of these rumors – that Slytherin House is a “bad” house and that most of its students are from dark families – before they have even been sorted. If a student becomes exposed to these rumors and then is sorted into Slytherin, he or she has damaging preconceived notions about his or her own house from the beginning. Perhaps it is these preconceived notions that have a hand in breeding discord among Slytherins and their fellow Hogwarts’ students.

Before delving into the Slytherin students, staff, and alumni Rowling introduces to her readers, however, one must first take into account the Sorting Hat’s song. Within this recitation the Sorting Hat extolls the virtues (traits) of each house – Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Gryffindors are “brave at heart” with “daring, nerve, and chivalry” while Hufflepuffs are “just and loyal… and unafraid of toil” (The Sorcerer’s Stone 88). Gryffindors are known for their courage while Hufflepuffs are known for their industriousness. The Sorting Hat praises Ravenclaw House as the house for “those of wit and learning,” and mentions that Slytherins are “cunning folks” who “use any means to achieve their ends” (The Sorcerer’s Stone 88). Ravenclaws are known for their intelligence while Slytherin students are known for their
“cunning.” It seems strange that Rowling would assign such outwardly positive attributes to three of the four houses while leaving Slytherin – the serpent house – with an attribute which immediately brings to mind deceit and unsavory implications. Take into account the previous implication that all bad witches and wizards have come from Slytherin (and only Slytherin). Each of the traits listed for the other houses could easily lead some wayward student astray. Peter Pettigrew proved that not all Gryffindors are particularly “good.” Hufflepuffs may be just and loyal, but if a student from that house devoted all of their industriousness and loyalty to the wrong cause, the outcome could be disastrous. Intelligence – particularly the thirst for it – could lead some hapless Ravenclaw down a morally questionable path. As for Slytherins, being cunning does not (and indeed should not) immediately be contrived as a negative quality. Using any means to achieve their ends simply means that Slytherins are ambitious individuals. Hermione Granger, a Gryffindor and one of the main heroines of the tale, is ambitious. Even Ronald Weasley and Harry Potter are ambitious in their own way, as they both do all that they can to achieve their goals, whether it be trying out for the Quidditch team (Ron) or attempting to teach a group of students how to defend themselves against the dark arts (Harry). Slytherins are ambitious, yes, but that trait could be applied to both good and bad pursuits.

Unfortunately for Rowling’s readers, she does not expose them to many favorable characters whom are from Slytherin. Take into account the main Slytherin characters – Draco Malfoy, Narcissus and Lucius Malfoy, Horace Slughorn, Severus Snape, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Voldemort. All of these characters – the Slytherins who receive the most development throughout the Harry Potter series – have some inherently bad traits and perform incredibly heinous acts. Even the characters who are meant to be on the side of the light (Snape, Slughorn, and Draco, to an extent) are difficult to accept as having any redeeming moral values. Horace
Slughorn is an elitist coward who only makes an effort towards the light when Dumbledore forces him to. Severus Snape, though a double spy for the Order of the Phoenix and an asset to the light, is “an extremely morally grey figure” and “a man whose ultimate tragedy is that he was never able to overcome his own prejudices (“The Problem of Slytherin”). Severus favors the students of Slytherin over any other house. His hatred of Gryffindors stems from his horrendous abuse at the hands of James Potter and his crew. There is no doubt that Severus had a difficult childhood – he was bullied excessively throughout his school years and suffered from an unrequited love for Lily Evans – but these circumstances do not excuse his morally skewed decisions later on. He takes out his hatred of James Potter on his young son simply because of that family connection. He also continuously ignores and belittles Hermione Granger in class, as well as terrorizing Neville Longbottom. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Remus Lupin exposes the students to a boggart, a creature that transforms into one’s greatest fear, it is revealed that Neville’s greatest fear – above even Bellatrix Lestrange, the woman who tortured and drove his parents mad – is Snape.

Arguably there are good Slytherins within the series. There is Andromeda Black (Tonk’s mother) and Regulus Black (a former Death Eater who turns against Voldemort). However, Rowling does not develop their characters enough for her readers to even begin to get to know them. At most these two characters receive only a few lines in the series and so readers know very little about them. Taking that issue into account, it is difficult to associate Slytherin with any inherently good character because all that Rowling exposes her readers to are the characters whom are inherently evil. Rowling does not add any Slytherin students to Dumbledore’s Army. She does not mention any Slytherin students fighting for the light in the Battle of Hogwarts. All of Voldemort’s followers that Rowling’s readers learn about are either disassociated with any
house or are former Slytherins. Again, Rowling presents her readers with odds that seem infinitely skewed. It would not have been difficult or even out of context for Rowling to mention a Slytherin student or two who had a desire to join Dumbledore’s Army. It would not have been difficult to mention that a few Slytherin students joined together with the rest of the houses (particularly since house unity was such an important theme in the later books) to combat Voldemort’s forces in *The Deathly Hallows*. Slytherins can (and should) have just as much love and loyalty for Hogwarts as students from Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor. By disregarding the Slytherin students, Rowling is once again missing out on an opportunity. She stuffs Slytherin students into a box cleanly marked “evil” without exploring the group’s true potential.

The continuous serpent motif throughout the *Harry Potter* series serves to express one simple fact – that J.K. Rowling regards snakes as symbols of evil. Her hero, however, has traits which could be applied to any Slytherin. If the Sorting Hat is to be believed, Harry Potter could do just as well in Slytherin as he could in Gryffindor. In fact, it is only Harry’s stalwart desire to be sorted into any house but Slytherin that spares him from becoming a member of that house. The Sorting Hat makes it a point to tell Harry that he could do great things in Slytherin: “Not Slytherin, eh? Are you sure? You could be great, you know, it’s all here in your head, and Slytherin will help you on the way to greatness, no doubt about that” (*The Sorcerer’s Stone* 97). Harry is ambitious and just as cunning as the next Slytherin. He relies on trickery and deceit many times throughout the series in order to obtain his goals (sneaking into the Restricted Section during his first year, stealing ingredients from Snape’s supply closet in order to brew the Polyjuice Potion in his second year, and sneaking around the multitude of secret passageways within Hogwarts throughout his entire run as a student there, to name a few instances), and he
even has the ability to speak to serpents. Granted, this ability was imparted to him without his wish or consent through the bond he shared with Voldemort, but the fact remains that Harry Potter, the hero of the entire series, can speak to and control the creature which is forever spelling out ill omens for him. By gifting her hero with Slytherin traits and serpentine capabilities, J.K. Rowling seems to be attempting to turn her own notions about snakes on their head. Of interest to note is Shobha Ramaswamy’s discussion of the villain/hero archetypes in her paper “Archetypes in Fantasy Fiction: A Study of J. R. R. Tolkien and J.K. Rowling.” She remarks that, “The archetypal villain is associated with darkness, sterility and death, in contrast to the hero who represents light, fertility and life” (x). Throughout time, region, and culture, snakes have been associated with all of these traits – darkness, death, light, and life. One could say that all of these concepts exist within the character of Harry Potter as well.

J.K. Rowling uses the serpent motif continuously throughout the *Harry Potter* series. In every book some calamity or trial occurs wherein a snake – symbolic or otherwise – is involved. A quarter of Hogwarts’ students learn and flourish under the symbol of the serpent, and even Harry Potter himself has a few serpentine traits which serve to both aid him in his various quests and cause him no end of grief. Her most morally grey or unscrupulous characters relate some way to a serpent, whether it be as former Slytherin students or otherwise. With these facts in mind there is no doubt that Rowling intends for her snakes to be viewed as evil entities. Her dragons, though a member of the serpent family, occupy a rung far above their smaller counterparts, and indeed serve no master, existing as a separate, nearly ethereal entity that has no role in the battle between the light and the dark. Her snakes, however, all appear to bow to the dark. Yet Rowling implies with Harry’s character that not all snakes will forever remain evil creatures. Through the guidance of a truly good character like Harry, who shares many traits
with the creatures and can indeed control them, Rowling seems to be imparting on her readers that the morality of serpents can be changed for the better. Through Harry, serpents can become symbols of good.
Works Cited


