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Good, Evil, and Every Shade In Between

*Prisoner of Azkaban* Literary Analysis

In J.K. Rowling’s book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the trio of main characters, Harry, Ron, and Hermione are emerging from childhood into the world of young adolescent. This transition of life stages usually conjures complex new dilemmas that lead to a reexamination of previous beliefs. One way this novel challenges young adult readers to rethink their beliefs is by shattering preconceived notions of good and evil as being simply binary. Up until this point in the series, the protagonist, Harry, has been confronted with situations that are relatively straight forward. In a matchup against Lord Voldemort,the main villain in *Philosopher’s Stone*, Harry doesn’t need to use critical thinking to determine whether or not he is facing evil. The same can be said for Harry’s battle against the Basilisk and Tom Riddle in *Chamber of Secrets*; Harry seeks to defeat an obvious evil to save Ginny’s life, a decision that requires little, if not any, moral deliberation. However, what happens when external evils, such as monsters, incarnations, and Voldemort are removed and internal, morally ambiguous situations arise? In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,* Harry’s experiences dismantle the binary nature of good and evil within the series by providing morally ambiguous characters.

By Chapter Four of the book, Remus Lupin is introduced and is depicted as demonstrating the characteristics of a good person, shown through his patience as a teacher, his chivalrousness as he stands between a dementor and Harry, and his charisma. He wins over the affection of the students quickly. To add to Lupin’s ethos, he admits that he was best friends with Harry’s father when they were in school together. Lupin even vouches for Harry after he is caught by Snape prowling the corridors at night, which further gains him Harry’s trust. Lupin then solidifies his righteousness by seeking truth and justice over what is easy when he supports Black and helps Harry to ensure Black’ freedom. By every account, Lupin is a morally good person in Harry’s eyes.

Yet Lupin isn’t without his faults. After Hermione calls out Lupin for endangering other students as he and his friends roamed the grounds at night as animagi and as a werewolf, Lupin says, “[It is] a thought that still haunts me… And there were near misses, many of them. We laughed about them afterwards. We were young, thoughtless” (355, this and all other quotations after in this paper are taken from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J.K. Rowling). Not only is Lupin admitting that he put his friends in danger by transforming with them around, he was also endangering the other students that were completely unaware of a werewolf on the loose at night. Gambling the lives of innocent and unknowing people is undoubtably morally questionable, with the only redeeming point in the lapse of judgement being that he feels remorse. Regardless, this speaks to Lupin’s guilty conscience and Harry must weigh that information when considering whether or not Lupin is innocent himself.

Another morally challenging event arises after Lupin transforms in front of Harry, Ron, and Hermione. In wolf form, Lupin chases after and nearly attacks Harry and Hermione, prepared to kill them. No one is seriously injured by Lupin’s recklessness, but once word gets out that Lupin is a werewolf, Lupin resigns and tells Harry that “this time tomorrow, the owls will start arriving from parents… they will not want a werewolf teaching their children, Harry. And after last night, I see their point. I could have bitten any of you… that must never happen again” (423). Unfortunately, within the wizarding community, werewolves are considered evil and shouldn’t be trusted around students, which is why Lupin resigns. Although the parents’ concerns aren’t entirely baseless, it’s obvious from Harry’s side of the narrative that Lupin has no bad or evil intentions. Even though Harry knows that Lupin is a good person, there’s no denying that Lupin transitioning around them was dangerous and the wizarding community’s perception of werewolves complicates Lupin’s character further. All of this combined shows Lupin in a region of good and evil that isn’t easily defined; there is moral ambiguity surrounding his character. Outside of his werewolf form, Lupin is a model figure on the “good” side of the narrative. However, he has an undeniably vicious side that taints his character. This provides Harry with a unique perspective that forces him to see that good and evil isn’t binary. Many view Lupin as evil based on his lycanthrope condition, but that’s without taking into account his character in his human form.

In addition to Lupin’s embodiment of both good and evil, Severus Snape features a side to him that isn’t entirely evil. In fact, in this novel, Snape has a side to him that makes him a victim. Snape is generally portrayed as already being a morally complicated, primarily evil professor. Alternatively, his nemesis, James Potter, is overwhelmingly portrayed as being a noble and morally just character. Yet, in this book, the personas are reversed, and Harry is presented with evidence that makes him think twice about the validity of his own image of his father. In a confrontation with Snape about James, Harry argued that, “He saved your life! Dumbledore told me! You wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for my dad!” (285). Harry has no reason to doubt this side of the story because of the image of the morally righteous person that his father has been depicted. This passage shows that Harry views his father as unquestionably the morally just individual who saves Snape’s life. Ruling against Snape’s favor is also his constant belittlement of Harry, which makes Harry assume that Snape’s character is unredeemable. But Snape shares his side of the story by retorting, “Have you been imagining some act of glorious heroism? Then let me correct you—your saintly father and his friends played a highly amusing joke on me that would have resulted in my death if your father hadn’t got cold feet at the last moment” (285).

With this new information, Harry now has to consider that the man that he has built up in his mind and heart as his righteous father might not be the person that Harry imagines he is. The perfectly idealized vision of James is now being threatened by the word of someone who Harry believes to be the evil one. His father and his friends had bullied Snape to the point that it almost cost him his life, which is morally wrong. To further complicate Harry’s feelings about this new information, Snape is depicted as the victim in this scenario and his father, along with his father’s friends, are now perpetrators. Harry is forced to consider these new sides to his previously binary view on good and evil, with his father now entering the morally ambiguous gray area.

Even though it’s proven that Black isn’t the evil murderer that he begins the novel as, Black resides in the gray area with Lupin and James as well. Something unique to Black’s particular shade of gray is that he places himself in the morally ambiguous region on his own. Black explains his reason for blame for Harry’s parents’ death by saying, “I as good as killed them… I persuaded Lily and James to change to Peter at the last moment, persuaded them to use him as Secret-Keeper instead of me… I’m to blame, I know it…” (365). Although it seems that Black has already made the decision that he is morally evil, it’s impossible for Harry to agree because he now knows that Peter Pettigrew is to blame for the death of his parents. However, if it weren’t for Black’s persuasion to make Pettigrew the Secret-Keeper, Lily and James could potentially be alive. This puts at least some blame on Black. Yet Harry understands Black had no idea that Pettigrew was planning on betraying Lily and James, thus also leaving Black a victim of betrayal and not the primary person of blame. To add to Harry’s confusion, he has the mixed emotions of wanting Black to be on the side of good because he is Harry’s godfather and only connection to his parents. This leaves Harry with the realization that good and evil aren’t mutually exclusive, and that Black deserves his freedom despite the many forces that view him as guilty.

Lupin, Snape, James, and Black all become morally ambiguous characters by the end of this book. As a human, Lupin strives to redeem his character because of his reckless endangerment of others and damning condition that’s viewed as evil by wizarding society. Snape’s actions on a normal basis paint him as an unreasonably unpleasant person who strives to make Harry’s life miserable, yet he was the victim of bullying and abuse from Harry’s father. James, who has previously been viewed by Harry as a “saintly” image of righteousness, suddenly falls from his pedestal and lands somewhere much darker now that Harry knows his father’s actions almost resulted in Snape’s death. Black even admitted to his own moral ambiguity by claiming partial responsibility for Harry’s parents’ death. These characters force Harry to rethink the validity of a binary good and evil. They present Harry with new perspectives that contradict popular opinion and challenge what is fact. Harry must learn that, in terms of good and evil, there is overlap and humans aren’t binary creatures. Young adults can learn with Harry as he discovers that morality is complex, and that human nature isn’t black or white.

Works Cited

Rowling, J. K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Scholastic, 2014.