In 1997 the fantasy novel *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, by J. K. Rowling, was released and quickly took a nation of young readers by storm. The series became a best seller among both children and adults, and was credited for generating a renewed interest in reading among children, especially boys (Beach); but not everyone was thrilled with this reading craze. There were other adults, especially within Christian groups, who were very concerned about the book’s Pagan setting and its potential effects on youth. Across the nation parents demanded libraries and schools remove the books from the shelves. The American Library Association reported that from 2000 to 2005 the *Harry Potter* series was at the top of the “most challenged books” list (“Harry Potter”).

In 2002, at a children’s book club I attended, a member of the group suggested reading the book *Harry Potter*. The group leader adamantly informed us that a Pagan book filled with magic and sorcery was inappropriate. She instead suggested we begin with something classic that upheld Christian values, such as J. R. R. Tolken’s *Lord of the Rings* - which ironically also contains magic, sorcery and other Pagan elements. This reaction and logic caught me off guard and left me wondering, “Why has *Harry Potter* been viewed with such polarized extremes among Christian readers when other works of fantasy literature are considered Christian allegories?” Are books inherently anti-Christian when they contain magic, dark sorcery, and other Pagan elements? Kurtz, Liebeschits, and McCarron suggest there are many archetypal
connections between Pagan myths and Christian stories. Although *Harry Potter* is a Pagan tale, the story, themes, and symbols promote values and ideals synonymous with Christian values and therefore are not anti-Christian. By understanding the relationship between Pagan and Christian literary elements, and their role in literature, we are better prepared to lead discussions regarding Christian values in the *Harry Potter* series.

First, it is important to understand fantasy as a genre. Patti J. Kurtz lists the “six traits essential to fantasy” identified by John Timmerman as: “story, character, another world, magic and the supernatural, good and evil, and the quest” and uses Northrop Fry’s essay, “Archetypal Criticism: A theory of Myths,” to show fantasy literature falls within the “romantic mode” of the monomyth (576). The monomyth consists of the “collective unconscious,” or universal experiences that we all share regardless of culture, race, or background. The romantic mode is where everything comes together the way you want it to, the place of “happily ever after” and where “all your dreams come true” (Bressler 132-133). These traits of the romantic mode are evident in mythology and are found in the “Christian Myth” which is described by Daniel P. Moloney as: “Creation, the Fall, Sin, Death, Heaven, [and] Hell…” (4). Viewing literature through Fry’s subsection of a psychoanalytic lens reveals similarities between stories which are mutually familiar to seemingly polarized religions. The universal experiences of humankind become common threads woven into myths and stories. These threads connect with the reader who then finds meaning in the stories based on their collective unconscious. Wolfgang Liebeschuetz explains the mythological tale is “neither Christian nor Pagan,” but is “shared basic ideas” of nature and the divine (196). Tales of fantasy, such as *Harry Potter*, are therefore going to contain themes, characters, and imagery which will be familiar to both Pagan and Christian readers. A close reading of fantasy literature reveals many archetypes commonly found in both
Pagan mythology and Christian stories, and thus Pagan and Christian perceptions of fantasy become two sides of the same coin, sharing a co-existence within the text.

The archetypal story or “symbolic situation” in *Harry Potter* should resonate with both Pagans and Christians. At the beginning of the story two key characters, Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall, have taken the orphaned child, Harry Potter, to be raised by his aunt and uncle. Professor McGonagall laments, “These people will never understand him! He’ll be famous – a legend…” to which Dumbledore replies, “Famous for something he won’t even remember! Can’t you see how much better off he’ll be, growing up away from all that until he’s ready to take it?” (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 13). The infant, Harry Potter, has been removed from his original environment and placed in a foster situation, unaware of his origins, until he is old enough to fulfill his destiny. The archetypal story within *Harry Potter* is the same as that in the Greek myth “Troy,” in which the hero, Paris, was taken from his home by his mother and placed atop a mountain where he was found and raised by strangers, completely unaware of his royal birth and destiny, yet fate eventually brings him back to fulfill his prophesied purpose (CTC). So the storyline is already familiar to Pagans, but Christians are also familiar with this archetypal story. David Dooley declares in his article “Harry Potter: Pro and Con,” that the success of *Harry Potter* is due to the story connecting with an ancient story buried deep within the Christian consciousness, the childhood fantasy of a disadvantaged child with an unknown, but greater, identity (3). Christians will recognize this story through the story of Moses, a Hebrew who is raised by the daughter of Pharaoh, unaware of his birth origins and his foreordination to lead the people of Israel to freedom, and through the story of Jesus, the son of God, born as a simple carpenter but sent to redeem the world. The fantasy story *Harry Potter*
will resonate with both Pagan and Christian readers because its archetypal story fits traditional stories from both cultures.

Since cultural myths are based upon an archetype, mythemes found in the *Harry Potter* novels are fundamental themes for Christian readers as well as Pagan readers. Bill McCarron’s analysis of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* claims “birth, death, and potential resurrection” are the novel’s resounding themes (1). In the second book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Secret Chamber*, these themes are symbolically played out in the imagery of Dumbledore’s mythological phoenix. Shortly after Harry enters Dumbledore’s office, a bird bursts into flames and dies. Dumbledore explains, “Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes.” Harry then notices a new baby bird emerging from the ashes. Dumbledore also explains that the birds are very strong and have healing powers (Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets* 207). This theme is well known to the Christian reader from the story of Jesus Christ, whose life’s purpose was to die for the sins of the world and be resurrected for the salvation of all. Harry and the Phoenix both allude to a Christ figure in that they are both reborn – the phoenix as a chick and Harry, figuratively, as he chooses to return to life to fight Voldemort (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone*). Such themes are not exclusive of one religion or another, but are recognized by the collective unconscious across cultures. This allows for cross-cultural identification with the stories and should not be at odds with the Christian faith.

Finally, the visual imagery in fantasy lends itself to an interpretive process familiar to Christian and Pagan readers. In Leibeschuetz’s article “Mythology and the Christian Empire,” he explains that the Bible and Pagan myths are written on a higher level and are interpreted by Christian theologians and Pagan philosophers relying heavily on “allegorical interpretation,” that
is, looking at the symbolism for meaning rather than literal translations (196). The superficial story is a vessel for conveying deeper truths and meaning. Leibeschuetz adds: “Myths are by their nature ambiguous [and] require interpretation” (201). This understanding could explain the varied perceptions of fantasy literature, as it draws upon familiar mythological tales. While a story may have Pagan ties on the surface, a close reading of the symbolism will reveal greater meaning and truths in line with Christian values. The *Harry Potter* series is littered with such visual imagery. During the “Ceremony of the Sorting Hat” in the first book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the images of the four school houses are given along with their symbolic meanings:

You might belong in Gryffindore,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you’ve a ready mind,
Where those of wit and learning,
Will always find their kind;
Or perhaps in Slytherin
You’ll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends. (118)

Each house has an associated symbolic animal and color that matches the qualities of the house and rounding out the symbolic image. For instance, the Gryffendore house’s associated symbols are a lion and the color red. Both symbols reflect courage and valor, an important trait of the protagonist in this story as well as stories of the Bible and many popular myths. This imagery strengthens the theme of courage, sacrifice, and the battle of good vs. evil. Such mythemes, though of Pagan origin, align with Christian values.

Christian readers would do well not to oppose the fantasy series *Harry Potter* based solely on its Pagan elements. Fantasy literature is inherently applicable to both Pagan and Christian readers because the stories, themes, and imagery found within fantasy literature connect to the same overarching monomyth that Christian scriptures and Pagan Myths are built on. Since Pagan and Christian archetypes are so intertwined, seemingly two sides of the same coin, it is possible to discover relevant interpretation of fantasy literature through either background. Perhaps the real objection some Christians find to more recent fantasy literature, and *Harry Potter* in particular, is its departure from traditional characterizations from the Victorian era, where the children were fixed characters: good or bad, obedient or naughty in favor of the dynamic characters of today’s literature where postmodernist children navigate the ambiguous coming of age, deciding when and how to bend rules (Chappell 285, 292). By better understanding where the objection lies, whether in the paganism or in the new postmodernist portrayal of a character, book clubs can select books appropriate for their group, parents can have relevant discussions with their children, and we can identify the real reasons for objecting to a work of literature, or at least why we find it unsettling.
Works Cited


Annotated Bibliography


Benjamin Barton, Associate Professor of Law, reviews author J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series as a critique of government. Barton feels the view of government presented in *Harry Potter* is relevant due to the popularity of the series and believes many children will learn more about government from reading the books than from any other books. He writes the portrayal of government in the final book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, is “particularly damning” as it relates to British and U.S. bureaucracies. While this article does not look at the Pagan aspects of the books, this analysis would be of interest in a postmodern analysis of the *Harry Potter* series as it offers a perspective into the characters’ rule-thwarting actions and the perspective that the end justifies the means.


John Dart contends the magic represented in *Harry Potter* is less of a threat to Christianity than other fantasy literature because it presents the art of magic as a natural science rather than speculation in the super-natural. He relies heavily on a presentation made by Michael Ostling which analyzes the context of magic in *Harry Potter* as having a genetic and learned nature rather than something of an occultic nature over which one
would have no control. He claims that because the magic is mechanical rather than occultic it demonstrates that even the Wicca operate on the assumption that this world is not enchanted. This review supports the argument that the *Harry Potter* series does not promote the occult nor does it threaten the spirituality of Christian readers.


In this article the author evaluates the arguments and logic of those seeking to have *Harry Potter* removed from circulation. Hill reasons that arguments to remove the books for references to Pagan or Satanic ideas is to believe readers cannot identify fantasy separate from real life. He further argues that protests over the “moral messages” are weak as such protests assume readers will take the text literally and “out of context.” Through his analysis of Christian objections to the *Harry Potter* series he shows many of the arguments contain fallacies in logic. His conclusion is that the morals within the series are consistent with Christian values.