

# Harry Potter Takes on the Muggles: A Psychological Analysis of the Last Great Hero of the "American Century"

---

by Jeffrey W. Hull, Ph. D.

"I particularly like working with teenagers. They are desperate for the initiations that are present within the work of our great contemporary poets and their antecedents. Because of the tumult in their own bodies, from the hormonal changes that are occurring, they know about this other wild energy in the world. And they want to know more about it. All they are getting from adults is a kind of obsession with the Dow Jones Index and academic credentials and a career. All these things are fine as long as it is understood that they are there to serve something greater. The average teenager, in a way, is aghast and distraught and horrified by the world that we are offering to them, by the conversation we are offering to them." (Whyte, 2000, p.203)

"Mr Dursley stood rooted to the spot. He had been hugged by a complete stranger. He also thought he had been called a Muggle, whatever that was. He was rattled. He hurried to his car and set off for home, hoping he was imagining things, which he had never hoped before, because, *he didn't approve of imagination...*"

I had just finished this sentence, was chuckling to myself, remembering the corporate clients that I had just left in California, and how much they reminded me of this Dursley, this Muggle character, when my coffee jiggled a little too much, and I caught the first whiff of mountain turbulence. "We're just flying through some low Rocky Mountain clouds", bellowed the captain, "sit tight until the ground flattens out in Eastern Colorado, and the ride should be smooth again. If you happen to be looking out the left windows, you'll see Boulder, Colorado Springs and Fullerton down below us as the mountains come to an end. But then again, maybe most of you know the area better by Littleton. Or should I say, Columbine? It's down there too, in the same general vicinity." And with that, the speaker went dead, the air went dead, the plane went smooth, and everything returned to normal. Or so it seemed. For me, the captain's words hung heavy, like molasses in mid-air, and even in the midst of the plane's hiccup and my internal gurgle at the humor and audacity of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1997), I was suddenly overcome by this massive wave of sadness. "Columbine indeed", I muttered to myself, with a pain wrenching my gut, "Thank you very much, sir. Can't you just fly the plane and leave us to our reveries?"

In spite of the spontaneous emotions of pain and grief, I did glance quickly out the window--hoping to see I know not what, ant-like police guards parading around the black dot of a high school?--and then returned to my book. And what a wondrous book it was--Harry and his magical adventures! You see, at about the same time of this turbulent scene, I had just put down my required graduate school reading, "Jung on Evil", and finally had a chance to pick up the much more amenable children's tome, when this unfortunate interruption from the cockpit ensued. This strange sadness stayed with me all the way across the Great Plains and up through the Ohio River Valley, dissipating only when the magical lights of Manhattan came into view. As the purple glow of Leona Helmsley's Empire State Building broke across the bow of the plane, Harry had successfully escaped from his aunt and uncle--his torturous Muggle guardians--and was safely ensconced on the train towards Hogwarts, the school for Wizardry. Much later, I came to understand that in those shaky moments over Colorado, the connection between my sadness, Columbine, and Harry Potter was an amazing example of synchronicity, worthy of returning to Jung.

Ultimately, this experience spawned the idea for this paper: to explore Harry Potter, from a cultural and depth psychological perspective, as a true hero--a wake-up call--for our neurotic society, as we slip soullessly, aimlessly, sans dreams, fantasies, imaginings, into the next millenium. In just a few short hours, this protean pre-pubescent protagonist, had taken me, on wings of joy and grief, across the country, and full circle, back to my own childhood, back to my own dark and desperate eleventh year as a budding wizard, back to that dutiful, embalming, mummifying moment when I first took up Muggle garb. It is the armor that I have worn for over thirty years now, slowly suffocating those long buried memories of my young artist self--a budding musician, poet, composer, novelist, painter--who is still gestating, still yearning, still waiting, to once again, believe in magic.

But wait, I do get ahead of myself. This kind of paper requires Muggle linearity and logic, perhaps a little context and background. I begin, of course, with the assumption that anyone reading this, anyone who still reads the printed word in English, will have heard of Harry Potter. To my mind, as we shall see, he is the last great heroic character of the period Time Magazine has humbly declared, "The American Century". Of course, he may more accurately be called the last great "anti-hero" of the century, and that paradoxically, may prove to be the key to his deserving true hero status---but we'll get there. Now, if by some odd chance you haven't heard of Harry and his gaggle of wizarding pals, here's the scoop: this story is told in a series of four children's books, written by a young British woman named J.K. Rowling. They are, by most estimates, the most widely read books of the last

fifty years, having sold some 10 Million copies, which is, for any work of fiction, absolutely miraculous, and for children's books, unheard of. The deeper truth (which you can discover yourself by sleuthing behind Wall Street Journals all over the country) is that Harry Potter is mostly read by adults, or at least adults *and kids*, and as I can personally attest: Rowling's writing is simple, powerful, hypnotic; she is a consummate, *imaginative* storyteller.

On the face of it, the Harry Potter stories are straightforward, mirth-inducing fun. They concern one eleven year old boy, a wizard orphan (or is it orphan wizard?), fostered to his Muggle step parents after the death of his real wizard parents at the hands of the evil wizard, Voldemort. The bulk of the story takes us on the wild adventures of our young wizard and his friends, into the land of Hogwarts, the "high school" for wizards, which involves all sorts of underground high jinx: flying sports teams and magic wands and spells and invisible cloaks and dragons and snakes and unicorns and transfigurations and giant spiders and half-alive ghosts and half-dead people and well, you get the picture. Harry is a special young wizard, with magical powers strong enough to kill even the most deadly of all the evil witches and warlocks, sort of a pre-pubescent Luke Skywalker whose "force" is always getting the better of him. And, as with all our super heroes, of any age, Harry triumphs in the end. However, even in the face of his rousing victories in Wizard-land, Rowling invariably takes Harry on a dastardly detour: he goes home from school, back to the land of Muggles and "normalcy" and abuse and stultifying boredom, where they don't believe in magic, imagination, or flying owls, and they certainly do not believe in him. And thus, like a good pre-teen in any modern age American suburb--e.g. Littleton, Colorado--Harry waits, struggles to keep his magical prowess under wraps (using magic in Muggle-land can get a young wizard expelled) and Rowling, of course, can prepare the next sequel, assuming Harry survives the summer.

By now, unless you've read the books yourself, and have had those same feelings of dread that I always get when the Dursleys and their fat, greedy, dull, techno-bully of a child, Dudley, return book after book, you may be wondering what is the deal with this "Muggle" thing? Or, like most of the reviewers who seem to purposely skip over the obvious social commentary (J.K. Rowling steadfastly refuses to publicly 'dig deep' into the psychology of her stories--for good reason, I would imagine), you may have read the books and not even noticed how remarkably similar her description of the Muggles is to *how we really live*. The Muggles are the humans in the book, the non-wizards, but they are not just non-magical: they deplore magic and anything having to do with the imagination. They despise unruliness, disorder, or anything in the least bit out-of-the-ordinary: they follow the clock, work hard at boring jobs, spoil their kids with sugar, fat, and endless material gadgets, and generally sloth

their way through the daily, weekly, annual, endless drudgery of life. Dursleys, Dudley, drills (Dursley's profession) and drudgery: Rowling's wordplay is poignant, if whimsical, but at the same time, when she flings these conjured anagrammatic alliterations in the air like arrows: she aims for the heart.

I believe in the thesis that the popular art of a given time contains and reflects the values, philosophies, and concerns of that particular epoch. William Barrett, in his analysis of twentieth century imagination puts it thus:

"Art is an expression of the collective soul of its time. *The forms of imagination* that any epoch produces are an ultimate datum on what that epoch is. Looking at these forms, we have to say this is truly what our age is, this is what we truly are. If the images of modern art may sometimes seem extreme to us, they really are not. The extremity is already in us but we have not yet come to recognize it." (Barrett, 1972, p. 10)

And so, Rowling, with a cunning eye for detail and touch of irony, has caught us on tape, as it were, dutifully, and for the most part unconsciously, living out our lives in a place very much like her land of the Muggles.

Children's stories, fairy tales, and legends, as a particular genre of folk art, have always fascinated depth psychologists because of the mythic quality of their symbols--of both a universally human and culturally specific nature. Like dreams, they are a rich storehouse of imaginal narrative and archetypal symbolism, reflecting the conscious and unconscious aspects of both the psyche of the writer, and the psyche of the culture at a particular time and place. As myths, they operate on a multitude of psychological levels: 1. As children's entertainment, they are mechanisms for learning, for inculcating the values, ethics, and directives of a culture; 2. As adult fantasy, they serve as a link to the past, the forgotten privilege of an earlier innocence, both personal and collective; 3. As treasure troves of archetypal symbolism, they can be linked to the deepest, most hidden aspects of the collective unconscious; and finally; 4. As situation and context specific, they reflect the zeitgeist, the foundational themes of a particular landscape, place, time, and culture. It is the first and fourth of these that I would like to explore further, as a means toward justifying my rather radical supposition that an eleven year old boy just might be the millennial hero--a messenger from the Gods--that we have been waiting for.

To make easier the job of extrapolating meaning from those mythical arrows shot at us from the quiver of J. K. Rowling, it helps to locate the work *in contrast* to that of another period. For unlike an archetypal interpretation, which would look for the universality of the presenting material, we are interested in the specific contextual dynamism of the imagery: how does it tell us about who we are, how we live, what heroes we admire and emulate today? Children's stories as popular as Harry Potter are rare indeed in any context, but considering that most of our heroes these days come almost exclusively from film and television and internet games, we have

to look back over fifty years to find a folktale comparable in power and impact. The Wizard of OZ, written in 1900 by L. Frank Baum, was undoubtedly the most popular children's book of the twentieth century until Harry came along, and as a story of a young, pre-teen (or at least early teen) who embarks on a mysterious pilgrimage to a land of wizards, witches, flying monkeys, and little people ("Munchkins", no less, hmmm, could we have here--pre-Muggles?) it is amazingly similar in plot, narrative, and approach to Harry Potter. However, if we dive below the surface, the differences become glaring and poignant. For the sake of brevity, let us examine just three of the main ones.

To start with, the plots of the two stories do seem parallel: a young adolescent gets whisked off, unwittingly, to an exciting, if frightening, place of magic and mystery, the complete opposite of the "typical" home in which they reside. Yet, the similarity ends here. The plot lines of the two stories, in fact, are completely divergent: Harry spends the entire story having a wonderful, growing, loving, supportive--if occasionally challenging--experience with powerful wizard friends and teachers; the last thing he wants is go home. Dorothy, on the other hand, finds Oz a rather frightening place, only befriends others reluctantly and because she needs them and spends virtually the entire time in Oz obsessed with going home: it seems "there's no place like it". Why the distinctly different takes on *home*? Well, the homes that these mythic characters find themselves born into, from an early twentieth century American farm to a suburban tract house in the midst of a buzzing office and factory center near London (Harry is not an American!!) are decades and worlds apart. In particular, when the Hollywood film of Dorothy's story was first produced in 1939, making Judy Garland a star, the story celebrated and underpinned a cultural mythos commonly described as America's finest hour: post-depression, resurgent optimism; unparalleled patriotism; breadbox to the world; bastion of freedom and democracy. America was awash with the sanity, safety and security of the family, the hometown, and the church. Why would anyone want to leave? In contrast, Harry's home, as Rowling depicts it, reflects a world of rigid, soul-numbing conformity lacking any sense of creativity or imagination. Harry's experience of *home* is replete with abuse and neglect, at the hands of compassion-less, overworked, overfed and undernourished adults. No wonder Harry wants to stay at Hogwarts: there's no place quite like *it*, either.

The second major discrepancy between the two stories concerns their fundamentally different notions of the nature and purpose of magic--of the imagination--in the first place. Dorothy is surrounded by the magic and mystery of her newfound home, replete with talking scarecrows and human-like lions, but she always remains

separate from it, an observer. She considers herself to be devoid of anything even remotely magical: she's just a normal, farm girl, lost in the wilderness. In fact, she only comes to understand the magical powers available to her in the form of those famous red shoes at the very climax of the story, and even then the magic comes from the shoes, not her, and is useful only insofar as it ensures her a safe ride home--to a place where no magical shoes will be needed. In the myth of America circa 1940, magic has already become antithetical to the predominant dogma of rationality and empiricism. A marginalized sideshow, it is useful only as a diversion. What is the fundamental learning, the value regarding the imaginative enterprise, being promulgated to young people who enjoyed "The Wizard of Oz" back then? Simply put: Homespun, puritan values of family, hard work, and common sense, are what you want to hold tight to; the imagination is too scary, too unpredictable, too uncontrollable, too unreal. It may be acceptable to "have a bad dream" now and then, but the imaginal worlds of childhood must never be mistaken for the real thing: the heart is in the heartland, not Oz.

Of course, it is patently obvious that the quintessential American values of productivity, efficiency and practicality also run heavily through Harry's adventures with the Muggles. Rowling, however, takes a much more ironic and penetrating drive down the Yellow Brick Road, carrying Harry and his pals much deeper into the wild kingdom of the imagination, to a place where everything, literally everything, is upside down and opposite to the "home" land of Muggle-ville. She is particularly potent at disrupting the steady valence of our symbols of logic and linearity: clocks tell time only when they feel like it; cars fly and talk and help out their friends, beautiful gardens are unruly and unkempt, books with disappearing ink make up their own stories. The appeal of magic to Harry is strong and inebriating, and the powers of his imagination, in contrast to Dorothy, are chock full of practical applications. Not only does Rowling give her wizard protagonist the power of magic from within, he is fairly steeped in it; in most cases, when unleashed from the constraints of his barren cupboard under the Dursley's stairs, Harry's magical powers run the show.

No wonder so many of us resonate deeply with Harry and his exploits. He has what we lack: access to his inherent magical powers, his imagination. Today's world has become the extreme manifestation of just those values Auntie Em instilled in Dorothy: belief in God, country, family, hard work and "common sense". Magic and mystery and the rich imaginal, soulful aspects of our culture have been marginalized to such an extent that only pre-teens and younger children are "allowed" to partake. Adults who insist on holding on to their imaginative,

creative sides, end up in artist's ghettos, or suffer along as purveyors of pop culture, or worse, succumbing to psychosis, schizophrenia or careers in advertising.

The third arena where the difference between our adventures with Harry and Dorothy glare loudly, is in the manner in which the author's portray the myth of the hero. There are heroics in both stories, as heroism and the cult of the individual who succeeds against all odds and vanquishes all enemies runs so deep in our collective unconscious as to be unwavering in Western civilization since the Greeks. Clearly, Dorothy and Harry are the heroine and hero of our stories, and they do carry similar cultural personas: both are young enough to still be hanging on to the last vestiges of Freud's latency stage, not threatening their fans or the parent's of them with emerging libidos--no echoes of eros to run them amok. They are also both *anti-heros* in a sense, immature, not-fully formed; they have the privileged innocence of youth; hence, they can take down the enemy without bloodying their hands. They are, in fact, antithetical to the proto-typical, hyper-masculine super hero prevalent throughout Western mythology: the Heracles archetype, who descends alone from the mountain atop his mighty steed, willing to reluctantly slay the corrupt king and fairly swim in blood in order to redeem a nation, or save the Princess. Both Dorothy and Harry recruit friends, collaborate and gleefully employ teamwork to accomplish their heroic deeds. In a sense, as young adults their heroism is less circumscribed by the pathological "Lone Ranger" stance required of the adult male hero in our culture. So long as they don't grow up, these kids are given a wider berth around which to participate in *communitas*, to be part of the gang, so to speak. Yet, as we know all too well, youth is fleeting.

This is where the similarities end, however, for in Dorothy's case, the acceptable heroine of her time and place would only claim hero status as an afterthought, deferring instead to her older, bigger, wiser, *male* role models: brother, father, even a travelling salesman. Dorothy, in the vintage cultural lore of her time, is really only a heroine in one sense: she successfully conquers her demons--her deep desires for adventure, excitement, mystery in greener, wider pastures--which can only get her into trouble. Her heroic act, her revelation, as it were, is to realize her place: in the home, hard at work serving her men and being protected by them. Now only fifty years later, it is probably safe to pronounce the demise of this misogynist, patriarchal version of our heroic morality play. In fact, all the efforts of feminism notwithstanding, I would argue that the death of this pseudo-heroine mythology arrived by way of the veritable train of "mugglization" of which we are speaking. It is just too inefficient for a woman to stay home and bake: the machine of productivity needs her labor.

Now in spite of the many similarities, the hero we find in Harry is quite of a different order: A stronger, more potent force has been unleashed as a last stand against the total hegemony of this Muggle mythology of efficiency, productivity and scientific rationality. An anti-hero like Dorothy, Harry is young and innocent, naive and brave, but unlike Dorothy, he rises to every occasion, discovering in Wizard-school the potency and power of his magical core. Magic is not something he avoids claiming for himself, or relinquishes in deference to his male elders. Magic is in his genes. On top of this, we can add two distinctive characteristics that further lift and separate Harry from the burden of an all-American heritage: he is an orphan *and a foreigner*.

Much can be said of the archetypal resonance of Rowling's main character being born an orphan: Harry is without roots, unburdened by family, culture, genetics. He is without history, and as such, with no story to live up to or to carry on, he is free to create himself afresh, to paint his own picture of who is to be and how he is to live. The archetype of the orphan, is, in a sense, the ultimate foreigner, one who arrives in our midst--in a basket on the doorstep--helping to break our bonds, and our bondage, with the past, allowing us to see the world anew. And the fact that Harry is British and not an American child, even though his relatives live in a muggle-land of quintessential American values and philosophy, is Rowling's ultimate conceit: America itself is just too far gone. No wizard born on American soil has a chance. Hence, our millennial hero must come from afar; he must arrive as if from another planet, an alien reminder of who we once might have been, and who we could be again. It is no accident that recent heroes of film and TV in the U.S. are often not human, but aliens from outer space--remember E.T.? The Lone Ranger is highly unlikely to come across the high plains to save us, for even if he could find Kansas; we are no longer there.

Now it remains to be seen whether Britain is far enough removed from America to offer us much hope--and here again, we experience Rowling's stellar skill with irony. It seems quite assured that England, circa 2001, is well on its way to being homogenized, steeped, curdled and cooked in the American stew, even though it is the very place from which much of American culture, especially the puritanical ethic of efficiency and hard work, was spawned. What goes around, comes around. Fortunately, Hogwarts school for wizards is situated in a far away place, in a different dimension than a Britain or an America; yet Harry and his wizard friends can enter and exit from this ethereal magic plane with ease. For truth be told: *it is right under our noses*.

Of course, in the Muggle culture of conformity and sameness, in which Harry has arisen, we can surely understand why we are meeting him at the tender age of eleven. If he were thirty, he would be dangerous to the

regime. What Rowling also knows intuitively is that a thirty year old Harry--even perhaps an adolescent Harry (as the clouds of Columbine drift by)--would likely go on a violent rampage, be killed, be locked up, at the very least, be dismissed. Only as an innocent eleven year old, un-tethered by genetic, cultural, familial baggage, does he stand a chance--just like the rest of us. To my mind, this points to Harry's unique appeal to adult readers: he offers a glimmer of hope, in the midst of a very sad, stark state of affairs.

So what does all this disturbing dissonance between the magical and non-magical landscapes of the early 1900's versus today tell us about *our cultural homeland* at the end of the century? Student of mythology and culture, Jamake Highwater, eloquently states it this way in his Language of Vision (1994):

For the Emperor, ...the magician is simply a charlatan. The Emperor grasps only the negative aspects of magic: its deception, trickery, and guile. He cannot grasp its marvelous creativity and imagination, because he cannot find such qualities in himself. As far as the Emperor is concerned, the Magician is an incorrigible liar. This becomes a case of the 'Magician's new clothes'. The Emperor is convinced that when it comes to truth and reality there are no substitutions or alternatives. Something is either truthful and real or it is untruthful and unreal. For this reason, he regards mythology as falsity, metaphor as double-talk, and the arts as pretty little fallacies at best, or at worse, abominable extravagances. (p.56)

The Emperor of logic, of positivism, scientism, secularism, and banality has won: the imagination is dead (or at least gasping for a last breath). Productivity and common sense rules us; we have been successfully "muggled", that is, robotized, de-humanized, such that life in the paved over vistas of Kansas and elsewhere is no longer a magical mystery tour: it is all mapped out, ordered, policed, dumbed-down to its basic grid. There are no more dark forests or rabbit holes to fall into, it is all on the surface, street-lit; an infrastructure of straight lines and sharp angles, designed for fast motion, efficiency, and most-of-all, the increasing production and consumption of stimulants--TV, gambling, amusement parks, and video games. Even the human body itself has been unzipped, cauterized, excavated, drawn and quartered: the mystery of the human genome now in order, life itself can be mapped as a straight line from birth to death, to be lived out with robotic precision in between--no detours please.

At this point perhaps I should pause, take a deep breath, and, out of a sense of fair play and intellectual rigor (a core value of Muggles like us), allow that some readers of this little diatribe will by now be ready to shout: "Grow up, Hull, get a life." Fair enough, I reply; I understand the argument: why take solace in all of our lost childhood innocence by pinning your hopes on an imaginary eleven year old from a fairy tale? We all have to grow up sometime: life, after all is not a Peter Pan story. Let us then, just for a moment, acknowledge another

perspective: America, at the turn of the century, is experiencing unparalleled prosperity, along with rich and diverse discoveries in technology and science. Jobs are plentiful and financially rewarding, if not particularly exciting, and life, overall is good. Y2K was a bust, and *man's* Promethean rise to conquer nature, to accumulate knowledge, and to take his rightful throne with the Gods, continues unabated. Thank you very much, George W.

Yet it is a fair question: why would I consider the magical, imaginative adventures of young Harry Potter to be such a potent, poignant metaphorical panacea for what I see as the sterile, soulless state of our culture? How does an eleven year old boy fill up the space of mythic hero, when we have so many other notables: Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Swarzenegger, The Governor of Minnesota? I would like to answer these questions in two stages. First, by visiting with one the great depth psychologists of our time, James Hillman, and second, by re-visiting that fateful scene in Littleton Colorado, not from thirty-five thousand feet, but from the hard ground of fact (a place where Muggles are quite comfortable).

Hillman has his own word for "muggle" consciousness, *senex*, an old word, from the latin, meaning "old man". As an astute observer of culture and its attendant myths, Hillman argues that this *senex* consciousness, the dry, brittle, authoritarian, inflexible, keeper of morality, law and order, is the pervasive zeitgeist of our time. The opposite of the *puer* consciousness, the youthful exuberance of which Harry Potter is reminiscent, a *senex*-dominated culture is, like an old man, full of wisdom and tradition, but hard and stubborn and cruel to the young, unwilling to see the truth of its inevitable demise. Hillman puts it this way:

The high god of our culture is a *senex* god; we are created after this image with a consciousness reflecting this structure. The temperament of the *senex* is cold, which can also be expressed as distance. *Senex* consciousness is outside of things, lonely, wandering, a consciousness set apart and outcast. Coldness is also cold reality, things just as they are, dry data, unchangeable cold hard facts. And coldness is cruel, without the warmth of heart and heat of rage, but slow revenge, torture, exacting tribute, bondage. (p.209)

So, children's story writers like J.K. Rowling are not the only ones to take notice of the shadow side of our turn-of-the-century prosperity. Hillman, and many other depth psychologists who make a practice of "seeing through", looking below the surface to the symptoms of pain and suffering evident in the voice of the margin, have taken to waving flags about the price we are paying for all this productivity and the plethora of consumption: we have lost the voice of our child prodigies, the creative, magical impulses, the mysterious gift of the imagination which fuels the human soul. Listen, hear another wise voice from the margin, that of Hillman's mentor and teacher, Carl Jung (1966):

Society by automatically stressing all the collective qualities in its individual representatives, puts a premium on mediocrity, on everything that settles down to vegetate in an easy irresponsible way. Individuality will inevitably be driven to the wall. This process begins in school, continues at the university, and rules all departments in which the state has a hand. (p.153)

Even a film like "American Beauty", that displays an American lifestyle mugged to the max, has touched a chord in the populace, winning awards and breaking box-office records, all the while shocking us with its exact mirroring of our far from united, states of despair, dis-ease, and depression. Like the quintessential suburban town depicted in the film, it is in the cozy, white-bread neighborhoods of Littleton, Colorado, where we find erratic, chilling, volcanic eruptions becoming more and more common place. What is happening with our disaffected youth? Can we not hear the cries of pain that have by now eclipsed the inner city and reached the "Wizard of Oz" sanctuaries of the heartland?

For sure, these outbreaks of extreme violence, like at Columbine High School, are still rare, and not necessarily representative of average teenage angst, yet as far back as Freud we have known that voices from the margin are the pre-cursors of cultural neurosis in the process of fermentation--previews of coming attractions. It may not be possible to know exactly what pushed the buttons inside Harris and Klebold to make them gun down their fellow students, but it is a fact--to use the Muggle nomenclature--that they were disaffected outsiders, struggling to find a *home* within the micro-cultural cliques of acceptance, circumscribed by the fortress walls of a localized school bureaucracy. Glen Slater's recent commentary (2000) on gun violence as the result of the collision of two foundational American myths--the dream of material success over against the freedom of the rugged individualist--speaks directly to my concern:

When Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into Columbine High School for the last time, they did so both to avenge and immortalize their self-imaged alienation. In a system that only acknowledges winners, and by competitive design creates losers, a system where the cult of individual image is primary, those who reach for the gun are always losers in search of restitution or revenge. In the aftermath of Littleton, Buckhead, Granada Hills, and Ft. Worth, stories of gunmen describe individuals who feel alienated from society and thwarted in their pursuit of the American Dream, a dream that has been reinforced in their minds *as the only legitimate way of life in this country*. (p. 22)

And what is this "dream" of ours that has become so deeply entrenched that failure to achieve it could make life unbearable, not worth living, could trigger rage so profound as to make men go berserk? To call it a dream, in fact, is surely a misnomer for the millenium. A nightmare of vast proportions, it is no longer dream-like in any way; it has lost all of its imaginal, fluid, animated, fantastical qualities. It is now nothing more than a detailed lesson plan, a cookbook, cookie-cutter recipe to be followed: get a "good", if repetitive and boring, job to

start, climb the ladder of success, acquire the material payoffs, and then, with a little free time before death, move someplace warm, relax, and do nothing. Sounds enticing. Slater is accurate in his estimation that the failure of some to find a toe hold on the ladder, for a whole variety of racial, economic, and institutional barriers, is a trigger for the kind of rage that results in mayhem. But what if the rebellion of youth, which is usually milder than massacre but more prevalent than an occasional Columbine, is the result of an earlier, more profound disaffection--not so much a failure to join or beat the system, but a flagrant rebellion *against the dream*, a rejection of the system itself. What if our alienated youths are really finely tuned wizards, who magically see right through the charade of material abundance, whose sight can pierce the veil of the exorbitant fee they must pay for a ride on the magic-less, mystery-less carpet ride of so-called successful life in America, circa 2001: *the loss of their souls*. What then?

We like to think, euphemistically, that our youth are the hope for the future, yet at the same time, we refuse to listen to the no-longer-hidden messages of their alienation and rebellion. The frightening truth is that we do just the opposite: we declare the rebellious young man, who refuses to be fitted for his Muggle suit, bad and menacing, in need of supervision, discipline, and a stronger indoctrination to Muggle ways. In fact, more and more often we resort to anesthetizing our truant or wild boys, expelling them on to the streets, shipping them off to boarding schools, or worse, locking them up. It is no wonder that, with the increased availability of hand guns, young males are five times as likely to kill themselves as girls, or that homicide is the second leading cause of death among young people (Kipniss, 2000). Through the penthouse windows of the Wall Street skyscraper, through the bullet proof skylights of the East Wing of the White House, through the one-way mirrors of the Vegas casinos, the Emperors, heroes of the industrial revolution, gaze out over the scarred landscape and target the enemy: the young boy with a spirit, the Harry Potter with hormones, who would disrupt the assembly line.

And here is where the forty year old me, cannot but stop, look, listen, *and remember*. First, the sadness, the feeling of tears welling up--against my best efforts to squelch them; tears that threaten to drip onto the pages of my Harry Potter book, to obfuscate the numinous narrative of my imaginal hero. And second, the location, on a flight cross country from one stultifying office environment to another, over the mountains of Colorado, where I too, gazed momentarily, over a scarred landscape, but saw a different enemy: the enemy within. This insight, it seems to me, is the crucial point of my story, that point where I grasp the true explanation for that relentless grip of sadness on that fateful flight: It pains me deeply to recognize the truth that I am the enemy. I am the Emperor,

one of the many, whose muggle garb has shrouded me in acceptability, kept me quiet, servile, hard-at-work, sans the imagination or the energy for rebellion, low these many years. It is so much more than just grieving for a lost youth: it is the emotional nadir, the rock bottom recognition, of a lost life.

The truth is, I can remember life as an eleven year old boy as if it were yesterday, because for the living breathing eleven year old who is still hidden deep within me, *it was*. An awkward time, a time of change, my eleventh year was full of demands, full of upheaval. My parents got divorced when I was eleven; we were temporarily homeless because of a devastating house fire, a grandparent and uncle passed away, and somewhere along the way, I felt the confusing rush, the onslaught of erotic feelings and fantasy. I was called upon to grow up quickly, to support my mother emotionally and practically, to handle moving arrangements, work through insurance papers, translate and implement custody agreements, manage my own body; it was a lot to work through for a young boy, a lot to assimilate, to make some sense of. Yet, at the same time, it was a wonderful time, a time of writing bad poetry, really learning how to read and think deeply--to form my own thoughts and opinions,--a time for nurturing and expressing myself in music, the arts, even dance. (I still love to dance, seems some pre-muggle activities just won't die easily, no matter how embarrassing their manifestation at forty).

In the life of many young boys (and girls), age eleven and thereabouts, is a time of major transition: one is on-deck for adulthood. It is the time when we are expected to relinquish our wizarding ways, and to quietly step into the line-up, to primp and prepare for our role as a "productive citizen" of the regime. And what if we refuse? Well, that, of course, is the fatal flaw in the system: failure is not an option. One does not just opt out, for there is no place to go, no Hogwarts to enroll in, no other homeland to return to. If we deign not to sign up for our place in the techno-industrial complex, we will surely wind up in a line-up anyway, but one of a different sort: at police headquarters.

Yet, against all the odds, neither of us, the forty year old mourning Muggle nor the barely breathing eleven year old boy, is willing to give up. So long as the fire of my imagination still burns brightly and my soul is alive, I am still cautiously optimistic. Especially now that I have a place to go for inspiration, a land far away in my imagination yet close to home in my soul: the land of Harry Potter and his wizard pals. And for this we have J.K. Rowling and the orphan wizard (or is it wizard orphan?) hero, Harry Potter, himself, to thank. A magical messiah for the millenium, he steadfastly refuses to be muggled. In reaching out to millions of children (and many

closeted wizard adults like me), his story inspires them to hold on dearly to their imaginative spark, to rebel vehemently against the machine of conformity and senex sensibility. *Trust the puer in yourself*, seems to be Rowling's overarching message, keep him or her, like Harry, brimming, burning, brazen with life. Written perhaps in disappearing ink, a secret script in the scroll, the message, nevertheless, is easily deciphered by anyone who's eleven year old inner-wizard is still alive and kicking.

Of course, the grown-up me, does not mean to imply that an imaginary character, like Harry Potter, is really going to prevent another tragedy like Columbine from happening again. I may believe in magic, but I do not underestimate the gravity of the situation facing America's youth in this time of fragmentation, disruption, and pain. On the other hand, it is not an accident or just a coincidence that the stories of Harry Potter seem to be reaching so many people at this particular time and place. Like my momentous airplane moment, his arrival is a synchronistic moment for the culture. A harbinger of hope, Harry touches something, *someone*, deeply in all of us: the lost and half forgotten magical child, who is available, accessible, side-by-side with us in all places and at all times, as we struggle to make our way through this muggle world. The bottom line: The Harry Potter in us refuses to die. He is our touchstone, a lighthouse beacon shining 360 degrees into the fog of civilization and its millennial discontents.

We can only hope that the list of Harry Potter fans includes the teachers, the policemen, the news reporters, the makers of video games, the school board, all of whom conspire unconsciously around our adolescents, to create a Columbine world. May they get the message, as I received it, such that when they gaze out their windows, high above a school yard of frustrated, unruly, and desperate teens, they no longer see an enemy: *they see themselves*.

"Your aunt and uncle will be proud, though, won't they?" said Hermione as they got off the train and joined the crowd thronging toward the enchanted barrier. "When they hear about...*all the heroic acts of magic*...you [performed] this year?" "Proud?" said Harry "Are you crazy? All those times that I could've died, and I didn't manage it? They'll be furious..." And together they walked back through the gateway to the Muggle world. (Rowling, 1999)

## **References**

- Barrett, W. (1972). Time of Need: Forms of Imagination in the Twentieth Century. New York: Harper & Row.
- Highwater, J. (1994). The Language of Vision: Meditations on Myth and Metaphor. New York: Grove Press.
- Hillman, J. (1989). A Blue Fire. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Jung, C. (1966) Two Essays on Analytical Psychology. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kipniss, A. (2000). *Reading, Writing, and Rapid Fire*. The Salt Journal. p. 30.
- Rowling, J. (1997). Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. New York: Scholastic.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1998). Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. New York: Scholastic.
- Slater, G. (2000). *A Psychology of Bullets*. The Salt Journal. p. 19-24.
- Whyte, D. (2000). *Current Timeless Observations*. The Salt Journal. p. 31.