

# What Makes Harry a Universal Hero?

THE DETAILS OF HARRY'S LIFE ARE WELL known to his fans. Some of them have even deduced facts J. K. Rowling leaves out, such the year he was born (see sidebar).

## HARRY THE HERO

But if we understand Harry's character deeply, it is not solely because of the facts. It seems that Harry, for all his unique qualities, is a very familiar hero. He is, from the very start of *Stone*, what readers might call a legendary Lost Prince or Hidden Monarch—just like Oedipus, Moses, King Arthur, and countless others in every culture. He never knew he was a wizard—or even that the magical world existed—before receiving the letter inviting him to Hogwarts.

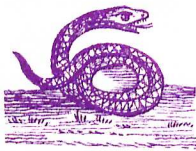
Making him even more familiar, he is, at least by the Dursleys' strange standards, an Ugly Duckling. They think everything about him is odd. So they treat him as Cinderella

## Potter, Harry

### When Was Harry Born?

Some fans say 1980, calculating from the 500th Deathday of Nearly Headless Nick in *Stone*. Nick died in 1492, dating the *Stone* adventure in 1992. Harry's 12 at the time. Though smaller details in the book contradict this conclusion, it is still a likely guess.

was treated, imprisoning him in a world far less interesting than his birthright, forcing him to sleep under stairs when a four-poster bed awaits him at Hogwarts, and feeding him scraps, which makes him astounded at the abundance of Hogwarts feasts.



Contact with Voldemort made Harry a **parselmouth**, able to speak with snakes.

#### HOW HARRY SEES HIMSELF

Though Harry's introduction to the wizard world instantly offers the recognition he so desperately craves—everybody he meets has already heard of “the great Harry Potter”—he still feels self-doubt. The lightning scar is not the only mark Voldemort left. There was a deeper consequence to that battle. Some of Voldemort's psyche found its way into Harry. He worries about the question that stumped the Sorting Hat early in *Stone*: Is he a Gryffindor, with the virtues that implies, or is he a Slytherin, susceptible to evil? In *Chamber*, Dumbledore explains a view of good and evil that has shades of gray, not just dark and light. The bit of Voldemort in Harry, he explains, simply makes him less conventional and more resourceful than the average Gryffindor. It also helps him understand Voldemort, which is an advantage. In future battles, this extra strength and knowledge will undoubtedly help Harry.

### BLOODLINES

Harry's mother, though a powerful witch, was Muggle-born. For those who care about bloodlines, like Draco Malfoy, Harry's status is inferior. But Harry seems, if anything, stronger for coming from mixed blood.

In fact, his conversations with Draco echo an incident in the childhood of another great British wizard, Merlin, recounted by the early historian Geoffrey of Monmouth: "A sudden quarrel broke out between two of the lads, whose names were Merlin and Dinabutus. As they argued, Dinabutus said to Merlin: 'Why do you try to compete with me, fathead? How can we two be equal in skill? I myself am of royal blood on both sides of my family. As for you, nobody knows who you are, for you never had a father!'"

But Merlin's nemesis, like Draco Malfoy, had a knack for prideful mistakes. His outburst attracted the attention of messengers for King Vortigern, who had been told to find a boy with no father. The young Merlin was brought to the king, and his career began that day.

THE HARRY WITH A THOUSAND FACES  
Harry's adventures also follow a familiar pattern. Scholar Joseph Campbell wrote at length

about “The Hero with a Thousand Faces,” the common character central to cultures all over the world. From Ulysses of ancient Greek myth to Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*, these heroes and their legends bear a striking similarity. Harry makes it a thousand and one.

Campbell summarized those stories this way: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder. Fabulous forces are there encountered and decisive victory is won. The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”

The hero’s journey has three stages, which Campbell labels Departure, Initiation, and Return. Within those stages are common themes. A glance at any of the books reveals evidence of the pattern:

### I. Departure

*The hero is called to adventure.*

*As Campbell describes it, the hero is first seen in our everyday world. He is beginning a new stage in life. A herald may arrive to announce that destiny has summoned the hero.*



The very start of *Stone* fits this design. Harry is suffering a dreary life with the Dursleys when he learns a place is waiting for him at Hogwarts. Because the Dursleys have inter-

cepted previous letters, Hagrid arrives to collect him.

Harry continues to spend summers with the Dursleys, so later books also begin with Harry in the ordinary world.

*The hero may refuse the call to adventure. He may have any number of reasons, from everyday responsibilities to a selfish refusal to help others. But if he does, he will find that he has no choice in the matter.*

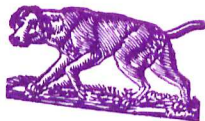
Although Harry does not go through this step in *Stone*, he does in later books.

In *Chamber* he is annoyed by the public attention his earlier adventure has created, and craves anonymity. But his intrepid character makes it impossible for him to ignore the mysterious occurrences—which, as destiny would have it, are directed at him.

In *Goblet*, even though he decides not to trick the Goblet of Fire into accepting his entry for the Triwizard Tournament, it selects him anyway.

*The hero meets a protector and guide who offers supernatural aid, often in the form of amulets.*

This occurs again and again. In *Stone*, Hagrid has been one of Harry's protectors



since birth. He was the wizard who first took Harry to the Dursleys when Harry was a baby. Soon after they meet again, when Harry is on his way to Hogwarts, they visit Diagon Alley, where Hagrid arranges for Harry to buy a wand and other wizarding supplies. As a birthday present, Hagrid also gives him an owl, Hedwig. As well, Dumbledore has been a protector and guide. In *Stone*, he gives Harry the invisibility cloak. And in *Azkaban*, Harry learns that Sirius has been protecting him.

*The hero encounters the first threshold to a new world. The protector can only lead the hero to the threshold; the hero must cross it alone. He may first have to fight or outwit a guardian of the threshold who wants to prevent the crossing.*

The climax of each of Harry's adventures begins with a solitary journey past a threshold.

In *Stone*, Ron can help Harry figure out the right chess moves, and Hermione can help Harry figure out which potions will get him through the black flames; but only Harry can go into "the last chamber," where he confronts Quirrell.

In *Chamber*, although he and Ron and Lockhart all travel down the drain to face the basilisk and save Ginny Weasley, Harry must



**In Alice in Wonderland,**

Alice also faces a challenging chess match.

make the final portion of the dangerous journey alone.

The hero enters "the Belly of the Whale," a phrase drawn from legends like the story of Jonah to signify being swallowed into the unknown.

Whether he plunges into the Chamber of Secrets or sneaks into Lupin's hideaway under the Whomping Willow, Harry is in "the Belly of the Whale."

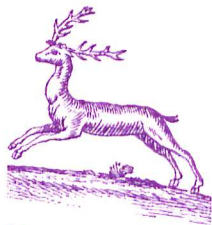
## II. Initiation

The hero follows a road of trials. The setting is unfamiliar. The hero may encounter companions who assist him in these trials. Invisible forces may also aid him.

These themes reappear in each book. Harry receives new amulets each time, such as the invisibility cloak in *Stone* and the Marauder's Map in *Azkaban*. He learns how to call on forces such as his Patronus.

The hero is abducted or must take a journey at night or by sea.

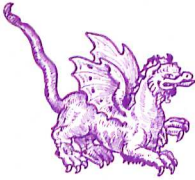
Harry is literally kidnapped when he touches the Goblet of Fire, which has been turned into a portkey.



Harry's **Patronus** appears as a stag, because that was his father's Animagus form.

The hero fights a symbolic dragon. He may suffer a ritual death, perhaps even dismemberment.

Harry battles a basilisk, Dementors, and, of course, the greatest symbolic dragon of all—Voldemort.



And it seems that in each adventure Harry suffers new, crippling injuries—for instance, he is literally dismembered in *Chamber*, when his arm breaks during the Quidditch match and his bones are accidentally removed with an incompetent spell.

*The hero is recognized by or reunited with his father. He comes to understand this source of control over his life.*

In every adventure Harry experiences a deeply touching moment of contact with his parents, such as when they appear in the Mirror of Erised in *Stone* and as ghost images released from Voldemort's wand in *Goblet*.

The hero becomes nearly divine. He has traveled past ignorance and fear.

Harry conquers fear in each adventure. Though he seems surprised to do so again and again, he has a sense, which grows after each confrontation with Voldemort, that the Dark Lord will not defeat him. As Dumbledore says



at the end of *Goblet*, “You have shouldered a grown wizard’s burden and found yourself equal to it.”

*The hero receives “the ultimate boon,” the goal of his quest. It may be an elixir of life. It may be different than the hero’s original goal because he is wiser.*

In *Stone*, the Mirror of Erised places “the ultimate boon”—which in fact does make an elixir of life—right in his pocket.

In *Chamber*, he defeats the monster that has lived underneath Hogwarts for decades, saving Ginny Weasley (and countless other students who might have become the basilisk’s victims).

In *Azkaban*, he “finds” the prize all the wizards are seeking: Sirius Black. But having learned the truth about Black, he finds a way to spare him an apparently inevitable death sentence—just as if he had given him an elixir of life.

In *Goblet*, the goal is obvious: the victory in the Triwizard Tournament. But what Harry discovers is much deeper. He fights Voldemort wand-to-wand, and escapes death again—this time by virtue of his own skills. He begins to realize just how powerful a wizard he is.



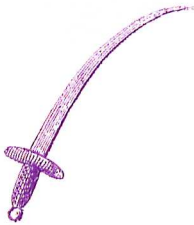
## III. Return

*The hero takes a "magic flight" back to his original world. He may be rescued by magical forces. One of his original protectors may aid him. A person or thing from his original world may appear to bring him back.*

Harry is miraculously saved in *Stone*, and travels back while still unconscious.

In *Chamber*, he is rescued by Fawkes. The phoenix brings the Sorting Hat to deliver Gryffindor's sword, then attacks the basilisk.

In *Goblet*, speaking to the image of Cedric Diggory released from Voldemort's wand, Harry makes a solemn commitment to return Diggory's body to Hogwarts.



*The hero crosses the return threshold. He may have difficulty adjusting to his original life, where people will not fully comprehend his experience.*

After each school year he must return to the Dursley home on Privet Drive, where understanding is impossible. Even other wizards have trouble comprehending, as described at the end of *Azkaban*: "Nobody at Hogwarts now knew the truth of what had happened. . . . As the end of term approached, Harry heard many different theories about

what had really happened, but none of them came close to the truth.”

*The hero becomes master of two worlds: the everyday world, which represents his material existence; and the magical world, which signifies his inner self.*

Simply being in the presence of Voldemort is the worst nightmare of most wizards. But Harry has been there often, seeing things no other wizard has seen. These encounters have made him aware of a part of his psyche that other wizards never consider. One can be sure that eventually—even if he is doubtful—these experiences will help him become a greater wizard than even Dumbledore. (No doubt Dumbledore is aware of this, and pleased by it.)

*The hero has won the freedom to live. He has conquered the fears that prevent him from living fully.*

Fear, we are told, is Harry's greatest enemy—even greater than Voldemort. In Azkaban, Professor Lupin did not let Harry practice fighting the boggart because he did not want an image of Voldemort flying through Hogwarts. But Harry tells him, “I

didn't think of Voldemort . . . I remembered those Dementors." Lupin is impressed by Harry's insight. "That suggests that what you fear most of all is fear. Very wise, Harry."

Of course, Rowling does not follow a step-by-step diagram. These patterns appear in each of her books, as they have in mythology and folklore for centuries, because the quest of heroes stays the same. To battle the dark forces in the world, heroes must face the dark forces within, and rediscover in each adventure that they are worthy of victory. We understand Harry because, as Campbell says, "every one of us shares the supreme ordeal."

See also:

**Dumbledore**  
**Voldemort**