

“Wand of Elder, never prosper”: Imagination and Reality in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*

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Abstract

My purpose with this paper will be to offer a view on magic in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by analyzing one of the novel’s hallows, the Elder Wand. Through an analysis of this wand, which is said to be the most powerful wand ever made in the entire *Harry Potter* universe, I wish to discuss the many possibilities magic can offer in the world of witches and wizards, but also the limits that exist in the realm of magic. I will argue that, despite its many properties and its enticing realm, magic is not all-powerful, but rather something illusory that simply inspires one’s imagination. I will further propound that, although it is the main instrument of survival in the *Harry Potter* universe, even the protagonist’s actions evince that a balance between imagination and reality must be maintained. By using this novel and J.K. Rowling’s equally famous book of wizarding tales, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, in which the wand makes an appearance, I will demonstrate that the moral we are being offered through both books is that the endless pursuit of power and the many promises of imagination are things that need to be controlled. As one of the characters of the famous saga, Professor Albus Dumbledore, once said in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*: “It does not do to dwell in dreams and forget to live.”

Keywords: Magic; wands; Harry Potter; imagination; reality.

J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* universe, filled with all its magic, stirs the imaginations of millions of readers, who see many of their dreams and fantasies made a reality in the hundreds of pages of the more than familiar saga. In the words of Nancy Flanagan Knapp, “Hogwart’s school, the nearby village of Hogsmeade, and the whole of the wizardly world, [...] which Rowling has imagined as existing unnoticed side-by-side with our own less magical world, forms a rich and believable background to her stories” (Knapp 5).

In *Harry Potter*, magic is initially presented to us as something all-powerful, seemingly infallible; something that makes the impossible possible and, thus, makes the lives of witches and wizards much easier. By channeling their magical powers through their main tool of survival, their wands, wizards are capable of performing deeds that ordinary people can only conceive of in their wildest dreams. Summoning, Transfiguration, Offensive and Defensive spells are just some of the many wonders that comprise a wizard's arsenal. A fact to bear in mind regarding wands, pointed out by David Colbert in *The Magical Worlds of Harry Potter*, is that they are a wizard's most important tool. In a March 2001 Comic Relief live chat, Rowling herself stated that one can do unfocused and uncontrolled magic without a wand, nevertheless a wand is necessary to do "really good spells" ("Comic Relief live chat transcript, March 2001"). Colbert states that, apparently, wizards, including magicians of the primitive world, have always used wands or, in some cases, large rods to attest to their power. Some examples can be seen, according to Colbert, in Egypt, Greece and during the Stone Age (Colbert 434).

In Harry's world wands are made by combining parts of magical creatures like, for example, the hairs of unicorns, tail-feathers from phoenixes and the heart-strings of dragons, with staffs of trees like willow, mahogany, yew, oak, beech, maple and ebony. Furthermore and, very importantly, it is both stated in the series and by Colbert that each wand is not only matched to the personality of the individual, but each actually chooses the wizard (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* 92). Colbert uses dark wizards as an example to this phenomenon, since those who practiced dark magic often used cypress, which was associated with death (Colbert 436). In an August 2006 interview to the Radio City Music Hall, Rowling stated that "There's a very close relationship - as you know - between the wand that each wizard uses and themselves. [...] You need the ability to make these things work properly" ("An Evening with Harry, Carrie and Garp: Readings and questions #1 (partial transcript)").

In the midst of *Harry Potter's* magical prowess we find the Elder Wand, also known in the series as "the Wand of Destiny" or "the Death Stick". Considered by many characters of the series a myth and a reality by others, it is said to be the most powerful wand ever created in the history of the world of *Harry Potter* and can be seen, therefore, as the apex of magical knowledge and skill. Colbert states that in our own world, when magic ran amok in the past, some wizards have always favored wands made from the elder tree, which was considered especially magical (Colbert 436). But does the Elder Wand truly function as it is said to and is it, therefore, unbeatable? And is magic truly something infallible that will always outperform the many efforts and inventions of non-magical people, the Muggles?

The Elder Wand makes its first appearance in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, during the most important adventure of the three main characters: Harry Potter, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. The all-powerful wand is presented through a children's story, "The Tale of the Three Brothers", in which three wizarding brothers acquire three very powerful objects from Death, a hooded figure, as a reward for being able to evade it at a perilous occasion. One of these items, which is proved later in the series to be real and one of the three Hallows, is the Elder Wand, which

Death assured the eldest brother, who became the owner, to be more powerful than any other in existence. According to the tale, the brother who gets the wand is able, with the utmost ease, to kill a fellow wizard of his with whom he had once quarreled. However, after bragging about the powers of his wand for everyone to hear, he is afterwards killed in his sleep and the wand is taken from him.

This situation arouses many questions regarding the issue of how safe it is to use the Elder Wand. As the most powerful wand ever made, it is an object of enormous appeal to wizards in the world of *Harry Potter*. Its appeal is so powerful that it is also reported to have left a bloody trail written in several pages of wizarding history. Driven by greed and the search for power, wizards would duel and kill one another for ownership of the Elder Wand. In J.K. Rowling's *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* (the book in which "The Tale of the Three Brothers" is included), while analyzing and giving his own considerations regarding the Elder Wand, Albus Dumbledore, one of the main characters in the story, states that all human beings, be they wizards or Muggles, are imbued with the desire for power and that, sadly, they have a tendency to choose exactly that which is worst for them (Rowling, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* 104). As the apex of all magical power, the Elder Wand attracted the hearts of people that simply tried to find a way to make themselves more powerful and, thus, more protected. Nevertheless, semantically speaking, the owners of the wand always demonstrated a behavior opposite to the name of the wand itself, proving that only foolish individuals choose to go after the wand.

However, Dumbledore, one of the last owners of the wand, knew better: after winning it from his opponent and without killing him, he was able to use its immense powers to protect others by keeping it tame and, fearing that others might commit the same mistakes as his predecessors, he also made sure that no one would ever find out about it. Another character that shows the same wisdom and down-to-earth behavior by not searching for the wand is the main character, Harry Potter. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, during the quest to defeat his arch-nemesis, Lord Voldemort, the most feared dark wizard in the series, Harry becomes aware of the existence of the Elder Wand, which Voldemort also sought for himself.

Voldemort is a character whose unstoppable search for power and immortality can be explained, once again, through the wand that once chose him. According to J.K. Rowling, Voldemort's wand is made of yew. The yew tree is believed to have immense supernatural power. At one time the yew was one of the few evergreens in Britain, so it has become a symbol of both death and rebirth, the same immortality that Voldemort desperately desires (Colbert 436). In Harry's case, his wand's wood, Holly, is one that is said to repel evil, which makes it perfect for the series' protagonist (Rowling, "Wand Woods").

During his quest to defeat Voldemort, Harry is presented with two choices. The first one will lead to Voldemort's destruction by searching and destroying the pieces of his soul, his Horcruxes, which were scattered, so that he could keep himself immortal, but this course of action will also allow Voldemort to take possession of the Elder Wand.

The second choice would be to chase after the most powerful wand ever made, something which would include violating the grave of Dumbledore, who was previously killed, and inside which the wand lay. Harry, driven by his purpose to save the entire world from Voldemort and by maintaining the high moral standards which are common to all heroic figures, kept his feet on the ground and chose the first option, something that, despite being arduous and complicated, would lead him on to Voldemort's inevitable demise.

Harry's choice caused varied reactions between his two best friends: Ron and Hermione. Ron Weasley, influenced by the legend of the wand, deeply regretted Harry's choice, because he considered the wand a bullet-proof way of defeating Voldemort. However, as emphasized by Hermione Granger, breaking into Dumbledore's grave would have been a foul action and the search for the wand was a path that Dumbledore himself would not have desired for Harry. These actions on the part of the main character evince that to break one's moral standards is a very dangerous course of action and, so, he decides to keep his feet on the ground and uses the means necessary to defeat his enemy, but only those that are within the basic laws of morality. Unlike dark wizards, Harry knew that there were some kinds of magic that were not supposed to be sought for.

While pondering and planning their next move in the pursuit of Voldemort's Horcruxes, the trio came to know about another curious fact related to wands that helps them defeat Harry's destiny-bound nemesis. The British wand expert of the series, Ollivander, informs Harry that he has gained the allegiance of a wand that belonged to one of his other enemies and school bullies, Draco Malfoy, whom Harry had simply disarmed. Ollivander informs Harry that by defeating Draco Malfoy he had won Malfoy's wand's allegiance.

This means that every time a wizard is defeated in a duel the wand changes its loyalty to the victor. This also means that, despite wands being the most important magical instruments in the wizarding world, they prove to be quite unstable, even unreliable. This poses a question: where did the allegiance of the Elder Wand lay? With Dumbledore, Voldemort, or someone else?

Voldemort, who was also told of the wands' properties, believed that the Elder Wand belonged, at that moment, to the wizard that had killed Dumbledore. In Voldemort's view, the legend of the Elder Wand was to be taken to its fullest extent and so he kills one of his own servants, Severus Snape, who was responsible for Dumbledore's death. This killing was performed so that Voldemort could gain full control of the wand. Still, such a course of action proved not to be enough.

After going through many trials and tribulations, Harry finally reaches his final confrontation with Voldemort. At a certain point in the story, Harry, who interprets the legend of the Elder Wand in a way that Voldemort could never have done, becomes aware that the Elder Wand has passed its allegiance to him, for he disarmed the wizard that disarmed Dumbledore on the night of his death, Draco Malfoy himself, which meant Draco had had the Elder Wand's allegiance. This gives Harry the allegiance of not one, but two wands at once. Due to Voldemort's mistake and to the sworn allegiance of the wand to Harry, the wand would not obey Voldemort properly

and so he was rendered powerless and was, thus, defeated. In the words of William Irwin and Gregory Bassham, “Harry’s mastery of the Elder Wand contrasts sharply with the attempts by other wizards to obtain it.” This is to say that he never intended to take possession of the wand, nor did he wish to use it for “destructive purposes.” Furthermore, the only spell he uses in his final confrontation with Voldemort is a defensive one, “Expelliarmus”, which is intended to disarm your opponent (Irwin and Bassham 234). This shows once again that to maintain your moral standards is the proper course of action.

Contrarily to what the Elder Wand led people to believe, it did not drive people away and it did not make others fearful of its immense capacities, but it instead lured several other wizards, who took the wand and who, in turn, had the wand and their lives taken away. Instead of security, the Elder Wand always attracted trouble. Furthermore, the casualties caused by the wand were so many that its history actually proves the opposite of what it made people believe it could do: that it can be defeated and is not, therefore, the most powerful wand ever made and that pursuing it only brings disaster. This regrettable chain of events and the blindness of wizards is said to have given origin to a wizarding saying that may be said to summarize the whole history of the Elder Wand, which is the title of this article: “Wand of Elder, never prosper” (Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* 467). This is to say that the Elder Wand is just like fool’s gold, an apparently beautiful object, but one that has no true substance.

Despite its immense utility and dependency in the world of *Harry Potter*, magic, a power that mostly fuels the imagination, proves to have many flaws even in Harry’s world and is something that, at the end, is rendered tame by the solid grounds of reality. Moreover, the most powerful wand ever made demonstrates that magic, or power beyond that of our world, is, in fact, an illusion and that the powers of imagination are something to be put into compromise with reality itself. Harry himself knew that magic had its limitations and is, somehow, forced to find a compromise between the magic of his world and the harshness of reality. For example, one of Harry’s many regrets regarding magic is that it cannot resurrect the dead. Nevertheless, according to Amy. H. Sturgis, “a rule is a rule, and within Rowling’s series, the steady adherence to the laws of the magical universe seduces readers into belief” (Sturgis 6).

Regrettably, for the readers of *Harry Potter*, regardless of the many wonders imagination has to offer, magic is not limitless. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* we are taught that both wizards and Muggles have to face their many adversities, each group surviving the best way they can, but in the end both groups are the same and there are perks and disadvantages in living in both worlds. The only thing imagination can do is to continue to feed reality with its many wonders, especially because imagination has always required a solid ground on which to stand. Nevertheless, the ordeals of the main character are one of the reasons readers can identify themselves with the series as a whole.

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