

“First-Rate Education”: The Educational Roles of Merlyn and Dumbledore

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By  
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Soli deo Gloria!

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## Abstract

*The Once and Future King* (1957) and the *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) are *Bildungsroman* stories of young, orphaned boys, Wart and Harry, who endure extraordinary circumstances and become wise, mature, and heroic. The transformation that they undergo is the effect of strong education from their teachers, the wizards Merlyn and Dumbledore. This thesis uses progressive educational theory to demonstrate the model these wizards employ. This study also utilizes a study of discourse grammar and Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development to discuss the nature of Wart's and Harry's education. Because of the moral education demonstrated in the stories, reading them can have a positive impact on the development of readers of these popular fantasy novels.

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## INTRODUCTION

A story's hero is often not the person who holds the highest political or social position, nor the person with the most money or even the highest skills. In literary fiction, a hero often begins as an unassuming and unexpected character, and a situation requiring heroism is placed upon him. T. H. White reimagines the beginnings of King Arthur in this way: young Arthur is a subservient boy with no family of his own, faithfully completing his tutoring lessons with his tutor Merlyn while his friend Kay is destined for the throne. As a result of simple action of pulling a sword from a stone to help Kay, Wart finds a crown on his head—he is very suddenly a king. Similarly, Harry Potter is an orphan, but his circumstances are extraordinary. During his education at Hogwarts, he is placed in conflicts with wizards, Muggles, and monsters, and these encounters require him to make moral choices and become a heroic figure by defeating evil. In both *The Once and Future King* and the *Harry Potter* series, readers have the opportunity to watch these boys learn, make mistakes, and grow up—and the teacher guiding each of them as they develop is a wise old wizard who has a deep understanding of their circumstances and desires to see the boys transform. Through close mentorship from Merlyn and from Dumbledore, Wart and Harry undergo a process of transformation that should be a model for education and educators; however, some of the current practices in education disregard this potential mentorship and moral development in students.

Both series—*The Once and Future King* and *Harry Potter*—subtly satirize the practice of standardized tests; in the perspectives of the authors, testing students in excess is the clear antithesis of the education that Wart and Harry receive. Standardized tests and percentages have come to define education in many free nations; students are prepared and trained to intake information for a test, and they are implicitly taught that the resulting test scores define their

success and intelligence. In the *Harry Potter* series, the students are preparing endlessly for the O.W.L. (Ordinary Wizarding Level) examinations, and *The Once and Future King* depicts Wart and Kay taking silly, arbitrary medieval classes. The authors portray these tests in a negative light—they have no impact on the students’ future experiences—and the novels clearly show that testing is not what helps students grow and learn. In the Muggle world, the critique is similar: many social critics have expressed concern that modern children spend too much of their time taking standardized tests designed to evaluate how much a child knows in an arbitrary way.<sup>1</sup> But the very nature of education is to grow students and prepare them for another step in their lives. Many of these changes cannot take place in the confines of a testing environment, and students both desire and need an education that provides them with critical thinking skills and the ability to process moral situations and come to a strong, ethical conclusion. Education should also be offering these skills to students in order to create capable adults.

In the same way that education cannot be reduced to testing, fiction does not solely serve the purpose of providing entertainment—even children’s fiction. Reading is a powerful and transformative activity; while it is quite often entertaining, the time that one spends reading can also be redeemed by the content of the work. Fiction often conveys themes of good and evil, right against wrong, and the challenges presented in fictional works are often equally offered to readers. When characters make moral decisions, readers are challenged to evaluate these moral decisions, and the solutions are not always completely clear. Fiction by authors like White and Rowling has a transformative effect on readers—especially the adolescent readers that comprise

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<sup>1</sup> In a video posted to The White House’s Facebook page on October 24, 2015, President Obama expressed concern with the large number of standardized tests that students take, in direct response to concerns about government educational standards. President Obama said that his own educational experiences were shaped by teachers who inspired him and encouraged him on a personal basis—not tests that gauged his knowledge, and he promised to urge the Department of Education to work with individual states to reduce the number of these tests that students take. This video was posted in the wake of findings by a study performed by the Council of the Great City Schools showing the number of tests that students take each year (Hart et. al).

their intended audience. Because the authors arguably have a deliberate intention to convey messages like this, both of these authors should be read with the intention of discovering the lessons they wish to pass to their readers, and these lessons take place through a strong teacher-student relationship.

*The Once and Future King*, a compilation of four books (“The Sword in the Stone,” “The Queen of Air and Darkness,” “The Ill-Made Knight,” and “The Candle in the Wind”), was published in full in 1958. In these books, White revisits the classic adventures of King Arthur in a novel written in a modern style; he tells the story of the adolescence of King Arthur—called “the Wart”<sup>2</sup>—and his friend Kay, then follows Arthur through his battles as king and his personal challenges as Camelot falls. This study will primarily focus on “The Sword in the Stone,” during which most of Arthur’s education under his tutor Merlyn takes place. While *The Once and Future King* is popular and well-known, the *Harry Potter* series has seen runaway popularity unlike any other fantasy fiction; the seven books in the series were made into eight movies soon after their release, all of which were immediate successes. Readers around the world are enamored with the story of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, three close friends at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, who have adventures both serious and lighthearted. At this school, the students gain an education both in wizarding and in battling the evil power of Lord Voldemort. Both of these stories feature a few main elements that will be the focus of this study. Though

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter and the subsequent chapters, the protagonist of *The Once and Future King* will be called by the name “Wart.” The narrator and most other characters in the story almost always make the choice to call him “the Wart,” a semi-affectionate nickname of his given name, Arthur, “because it more or less rhymed with Art” (White 9). The nickname is given to him at the very beginning of the novel, and it sticks. The determiner “the” before the nickname gives the name a sense of impersonality, so that the boy is an object, not a person. “Wart” is not a very pleasant name, either. However, the article is dropped very occasionally when the name is at the beginning of a sentence, and more notably, it is dropped when someone is directly talking to Wart in a way that gives him humanity—not just talking *about* him. Thus, I will be using the name without the article in the interest of valuing the boy’s humanity, knowing that he grows up to be a great and wise king. However, the majority of my sources use his literary name, “the Wart,” and I have left those sources intact.



innumerable other features of the works and literary approaches could be taken into consideration when comparing these two works, I am strictly evaluating the educational relationships with the male protagonists. The most notable features I would like to address in these two works include the way that they feature a clear student-teacher relationship between an old man—a white-haired wizard—and a young boy, depict battles between good and evil and the struggles of wielding power well, and are written in a manner that engages the social and educational conversation during the time they were written. From the time that we meet these boys to our final glimpses of them, they transform individually, and they partake in transforming the world around them to be more moral; this thesis will analyze how this process occurs.

With this framework at the forefront, this thesis will attempt to accomplish two different goals. Its first goal is to demonstrate what kind of educators Merlyn and Dumbledore are; I will argue that the best educational theory to describe their approaches—besides the “wise old wizard” literary trope—is progressive theory, rooted in ideas from theorists John Dewey and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Its second goal is to demonstrate the positive effects of a progressive model of education on these tutors’ students—both on their one-on-one mentees and on the young readers of Rowling’s and White’s fiction who become students through participation in the activity of reading. I will argue that the characters in the novels as well as the students reading the books experience a growth and even a transformation that is primarily social and moral as a result of their education and the positive teacher figures that these authors portray. Their role models challenge them to reach a higher level of moral reasoning and be transformed into heroes.

The first chapter will provide some necessary definitions for terms such as “progressive theory” and “transformation.” Establishing these definitions will provide a framework for

chapters two and three; in these chapters, I will discuss *The Once and Future King* and the Harry Potter series, respectively. I argue that White and Rowling formed these characters—at least with some intentionality and deliberation—in order to convey specific ideas about education and moral development. Finally, the fourth chapter will broaden the scope to the impact of the teachers on all young readers—arguing that moral transformation does not just take place within these fantasy works but in the real world as well; this chapter provides a strong, clear purpose to the fantasy novels that many parents and scholars alike have disregarded as non-literary or not for children.

## CHAPTER ONE: “LEARN WHY THE WORLD WAGS AND WHAT WAGS IT”

When Wart expresses his disappointment to Merlyn at not being chosen to be a knight like his friend Kay, the tutor’s advice is simple: “learn something” (183). In fact, this is Merlyn’s advice in many situations in Wart’s childhood. Wart experiences frustration, boredom, jealousy, and anger, and his tutor Merlyn is available throughout the boy’s childhood to encourage him toward actively learning. Thus, education is a crucial component in the coming-of-age of Wart, and Wart’s modern counterpart Harry Potter as well. Without education, these boys could not become the successful leaders that they are at the end of their journeys. Learning—the experiential kind of learning demonstrated in *The Once and Future King* and the *Harry Potter* series—is a crucial part of a child’s formation into a mature adult who is capable of significant impact on the world, and progressive theory is a helpful theory to gain a deeper understanding of how the teachers in these works function to provide an education to their students.

### **Progressive Theory and Transformation**

Progressive theory, a primarily American social movement and theoretical framework, has had a dynamic impact on schools and education over the past century. As an educational theory, progressivism is rooted in works by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, and Sigmund Freud, theorists who were influential in both American social and educational formation. The premise of progressive theory departs from traditional education in that it prioritizes a student’s experiences as the foundation of education; the teacher is present primarily to facilitate this process. The theories set forth by these thinkers transformed American views of education; conferences, essays, and books have developed from these theories, as education professionals attempt to find a way to apply the framework set forth by individuals such as Dewey.<sup>3</sup> His

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Carol Montag cites Lillian Weber’s conference, the Progressive Education Network (PEN) National Conference, out of which came a collection called *The Roots of Open Education in America*. Other conference

progressive framework for education provides the possibility to trace a transformative process in students that is driven primarily by the student. In his essay “The Child and the Curriculum,” Dewey sets forth the necessary conditions that provide the framework for education: “[A]n immature, undeveloped being; and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnate in the matured experience of the adult. The educative process is the due interaction of these forces” (4). Within the interaction of the teacher and the student, the student can grow; this interaction is not structured as much as it is experiential. *Bildungsroman* fiction<sup>4</sup> frequently meets these criteria: young children begin their journeys as undeveloped and naïve, and they study, learn, and grow due to the influence of someone who is both knowledgeable and personally invested in their success. Harry Potter and Wart exemplify this condition, and are thus *Bildungsroman* characters.

In this interaction between teacher and student, the teacher—the adult whose life experiences inform and guide the student’s growth—plays the role of a maker or creator of a space that allows for discovery and problem-solving within the student’s life. According to educational theorist Allan Ornstein et al., the teacher is a person who is knowledgeable and committed to her<sup>5</sup> student’s experiences but does not interrupt or take over the experience (177). As Dewey says, this person “steers the boat” (qtd. in Simpson, Jackson, and Aycock 59). It is because teachers are inherently older and more experienced that they possess the skill to create transformation in a student’s life, from uninformed and incapable to independently capable: teachers serve as “guides in territory through which they have already passed, advisors in

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proceedings collections include *Reunion, Reaffirmation, and Resurgence* and *Education for Democracy* (5). 2015 marks 85 years of progressive education for the group.

<sup>4</sup> The definition of a *Bildungsroman* novel here is simply a coming-of-age novel, in which the protagonist undergoes significant formation from his youth to the end of the novel and experiences an awakening to new ideas. Often, a mentor or guide, either spiritual or educational, takes part in this process.

<sup>5</sup> In order to avoid confusion in this chapter, I will use feminine pronouns for the teacher (wise guide) role, and masculine pronouns for the student (young learner) role, in the tradition of many of the scholars who write about this subject. When I am specifically discussing teachers such as Merlyn and Dumbledore, I will use the appropriate masculine pronouns.

situations in which students reach an impasse, and fellow travelers” (Knight 108). The teacher leads the child into the discovery of new ideas, and in the process, allows those ideas to transform the student into a wise, capable adult who will pass along these skills to another generation.

A teacher who gives a student permission to learn creates the possibility for transformation in the student and in the society around him. In Rousseau’s philosophy, this framework provided by the teacher results in “the transformation of sensations into ideas” (Broome 89). A student who is constantly experiencing and taking in information must process it through the interaction with the teacher’s wisdom. However, a hands-off approach is crucial to a student’s individual development: “The teacher cannot be an authority in the traditional sense of being a dispenser of information . . . because a major reality of human existence is change” (Knight 107). In progressive theory, change can only occur if the teacher creates space for it; this change occurs on a student’s personal level and thus in his interactions with the society around him, as Dewey explains. She focuses her curriculum on facts that she knows her students will need (Knight 109), but she does not create a teacher-centered education focused on testing or lecturing; the model of testing for a student’s academic achievements has been substantially criticized in recent years with the introduction of Common Core curriculum. The student must make discoveries on his own that may not be measurable through tests, and the teacher draws dynamic, organic connections between these experiences (“The Child” 24). The teacher offers support such as motivation and a framework for a student to learn; within this relationship, a student’s experiences transform him into a knowledgeable, wise figure.

The goal of education is not for the student to retain facts and figures. J. F. Roxburgh, T. H. White’s mentor, writes through Dr. Archdale, a character in his book, “The phrase ‘a liberal

education' originally meant education for a free man—an *eleutheros*—as opposed to a slave. The slave's job in life was just to work; the free man's job was to be the best possible kind of man. Nowadays everybody has got to work, but some people can afford to have a shot at becoming the best possible kind of man before they start working" (6). Dewey did not want a student to sit and listen in order to obtain an education ("The Child" 31); instead, he ought to interact with many people, be active, make connections, and uncover his own interests. Again, Roxburgh says through Dr. Archdale, "Obviously a mind develops itself by exerting itself, and my first business, therefore, is to get boys' minds to exert themselves" (65). Students, according to Roxburgh's philosophy, ought to work actively at something they enjoy. Perrone calls these students "active inquirers" and calls for the development of more active inquirers in modern American classrooms (13). Children are actors in their own education, and they should find meaning in the virtue and experience of learning: "[E]ducation, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (Dewey 430). In other words, education benefits the student with their present experiences—like Wart and Harry's daily adventures—and their education should not be focused on a long-term, "someday" use. The content the student uncovers, as Rousseau argues, must be useful, even utilitarian (Broome 90), and it should allow for students to use it actively in their current circumstances. Simultaneously—and Dewey and Rousseau do not exclude this—the preparation for the future occurs through the process of living: the lessons that students learn allow them to make stronger choices in the future as well-functioning members of the society in which they live.

One of the main goals for this kind of education is the social engagement of the student—an engagement that transcends mere materialistic gain and focuses on ethical transformation and change. Weber calls this "humans striving to make both sense of the world and an impact upon

it” (qtd. in Montag 5). Dewey writes in his pedagogic creed that the teacher is responsible for actively participating in the formation of the student’s social life; then, as a direct result of the experiential education they receive, students can influence society and cause social reform (Ornstein et al. 177). This influence gives purpose and meaning to the education of the student. The transformation from an immature child to someone capable of enacting change is the power that Dewey anticipated from such an education. Rousseau prioritized experiences over everything—even reading—in his education with his student Emile. He believed that experience can allow for the development of an individual’s judgment and ultimately self-sufficiency (Schaeffer 83). Rousseau’s writings use Emile as a model student, and Rousseau describes in his work *Emile, or On Education*, developing Emile into a rational and social young man. He writes, “We have made an active and thinking being. It remains for us, in order to complete the man, only to make a loving and feeling being — that is to say, to perfect reason by sentiment” (*Emile*). Thus, progressive theory focuses on intellectual and emotional development in a student like Emile; like Rousseau, the teacher is intently aware of this change and desires to increase the student’s capabilities. A student’s socialization, as facilitated by the teacher, is crucial in creating him into a transformative member of society.

For the duration of this project, two key ideas will inform the reading of the literary texts by White and Rowling: the teacher is a knowledgeable guide whose primary role is to facilitate the student’s transformation, and the student is an active agent who participates in his own education. As this project will prove, this framework accurately defines the main teachers in *The Once and Future King* and in the *Harry Potter* series.

### **“Be Transformed”: Christian Critique and Reconciliation**

Progressive theory is not inherently a Christian practice, and its roots are not traceable to Christian teachings. In order for a Christian scholar to consider fiction using this educational framework, one must reconcile a Christian worldview to progressive theory. During the time that progressive theory began to take roots, another theory was gaining academic credibility: social Darwinism. Psychologists such as Granville Stanley Hall began to revisit fields such as behavioral science in light of evolutionary systems (Cremin 101). As a result, education shifted in the direction of a child-centered system of learning, and progressive theory stems from some evolutionary principles that argue that the student has developed in a way that makes him completely capable of independent success. In his critique of educational theories from a Christian worldview, George Knight addresses a root flaw in humanist educational theories such as progressive theory: a child-driven philosophy assumes that a child has evolved to the point where he innately possesses a fundamentally good nature and an ability to solve problems independently from didactic guidance (142). However, Christians assert that “the heart is deceitful” (Jer. 29:11) and even children have “fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Thus, in accordance with a Christian worldview, a child is inherently incapable of his own intellectual and moral development.

Knight’s concern bears consideration for Christian scholars; children cannot always discover the “correct” or “true” answer themselves, as their inherent sinful nature will lead them astray, and they need wise reproof from adults who care about them. However, in addition to being fallen creatures, children bear the image of God and His qualities. They have the desire to create and to know. Education and the training of the mind can be a catalyst to drive a child toward the redemption of his inherent nature for good purposes and a deeper understanding of



the world. In addition, because humans are born with an innate knowledge of good and evil, it can be especially beneficial for students to evaluate the world they come into contact with thoughtfully. Rousseau also discusses the moral education of the student, in which the teacher educates both the intellect and the soul (*On Education*); this moral education can train a student to be more discerning and pious, which is an important goal of a Christian education as well. Therefore, the basic premise of progressive theory can be used without conceding to a humanistic understanding of human nature, and this thesis will certainly approach human nature and progressive education with a biblical understanding of the nature and relationship of God and man.

In fact, progressive theory is essentially rooted in an idea that is fundamental for Christian belief, which is the redemptive value of transformation. The Bible and Christian tradition are deeply rooted in the power of transformation; Paul explains that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:17-18). Transformation is essentially the process of passing from one state into another as a result of a spiritual or social catalyst. Christians are transformed from a state of death to a state of life, which is symbolized by the rite of baptism in many churches. Christians “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). This regenerative process of transformation not only occurs at the moment of a Christian’s conversion but cyclically throughout the Christian’s life, until he is transformed into a spiritual body in Heaven. In a similar way, in progressive education, the student is transformed from one degree—immaturity

or a lack of wisdom—to a state of deeper understanding. The Bible is not only concerned with the soul; it is also a matter of the mind, as Christians are to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). Thus, transformation—the process of moving from one state to a better, higher state—is both an important Christian concept and a valuable educational process.

### **Change Embedded in the Words: Introducing Discourse Grammar**

A student’s transformation can play out in a work of fiction in the way that it does through *Wart and Harry*, which will be the primary focus of this study; additionally, images of transformation can be found embedded in the way a story is told and the words used to tell it. The study of a text’s grammar and diction reveals meaning from the authors that a simple thematic analysis does not consider; grammatical evidence supplements an analysis of the words in a story’s meanings. Both White and Rowling were deliberately outspoken and passionate about their educational beliefs,<sup>6</sup> so their language that explains their values through their fiction writing is likely deliberate as well. For this reason, an analysis of the language in the novels can lead to a deeper understanding of transformation.

The study of literary narrative theory offers an explanation for how a text’s construction affects the way the characters change and further the themes of the story. The transformation that occurs in the education of the characters, then, is further visible in the language of the narrative itself. Narrative transformation, a concept introduced by Tsvetan Todorov, is an especially helpful framework in understanding the structure of a work. The specific, focused analysis and assessment of language and events in Todorov’s theory of narrative provides a deeper meaning and wider vocabulary in the discussion of how the characters transform. Of specific interest is

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<sup>6</sup> For specific discussion on their educational beliefs, see the respective chapters on these authors’ works.

Todorov's discussion of suppositional transformation, in which events are related through predictions earlier in the story ("2 Principles" 41). For example, a lesson that a student learns in his youth becomes crucial in a climactic event later in his life, and this cohesive tie occurs through noticing key moments in the action. Both *The Once and Future King* and the *Harry Potter* series have serial, chronological narrative structures, and many events are only explained or understood later in the narrative; the students must be wise to understand how their education applies to their situations.

A close study of a text itself, such as the language and the plot structure, also reveals transformations throughout a novel. Robert E. Longacre's discourse grammar provides a key framework for understanding nuances of language and literature; in addition, M. A. K. Halliday and Ruquaiya Hasan provide practical tools for understanding these cohesive devices in literature. According to Halliday and Hasan, cohesion is "a semantic relation between an element in the text and some other element that is crucial to the interpretation of it" (8). This study of cohesion greatly aids scholars and lay readers in the interpretation of texts (11). For example, cohesive language relating to transformation—words such as "change" and words associated with transformative symbols like fire—appears in the text of both novels within discussions about Wart and Harry. Not only do the characters transform because of the actions the reader sees them take, but language related to changing and transforming describes these actions and events. Kate Behr provides some discussion about this topic in "Same-as-Difference," explaining that the transformation of the narrative style throughout the *Harry Potter* books can be directly compared to the transformation of Harry as a character; this transformation clearly appears in narrative elements like the plot structure and the language used. Applying this field of study to

*The Once and Future King* and *Harry Potter* can reveal that transformations occur within the text's language as well as in the characters.

Progressive theory, as set forth by Dewey and partially by Rousseau, thus serves as an educational framework to analyze the literary characters of Merlyn and Dumbledore, and narrative theory offers the detailed proof in the writing of the novels itself. As a result of fitting these teachers into their appropriate framework, it will be possible to understand how they impact their students and even encourage readers how respond to education—engaging in popular contemporary areas such as ethical responsibility and diversity because of their experiences as social beings.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE ONCE AND FUTURE STUDENT

“I want you to think like yourself, so that you will be a credit to all this education I have been giving you” (224), the wizard Merlyn says to King Arthur in anticipation of the king’s first battles. Merlyn’s challenge in tutoring the young King Arthur is to help the boy reach his destiny as king, though Wart has no royal training or blood. Merlyn forgoes the impersonal classroom education that Wart has had and immerses Wart into a *real* education—an education that is driven by Wart’s passions and future. White invents adventures and challenges for Wart in order to offer an explanation for the morals of the legendary King Arthur. White contrasts examples of ineffective, teacher-centered learning with the transformative power of Merlyn’s education in a manner that demonstrates his own convictions about what education should be. Through the lessons that Wart learns, White demonstrates the way that Wart’s experience-based, self-driven education contributes to his moral development<sup>7</sup> into an effective and just king. “The Sword in the Stone” plants many seeds that blossom in Arthur’s kingship, and, ultimately, the education succeeds because Arthur passes it on to a new generation through Tom, the young boy who appears at the end of the novel and becomes Arthur’s student. The educational model that White creates in *The Once and Future King* follows the progressive theorists of his time, as well as the theory of moral education; this model is evident through White’s biography and through the text of his story.

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<sup>7</sup> Before continuing the argument about moral development, a brief and uncomplicated definition of morality is warranted here, and it will continue to inform the discussion of morality in these works. A simple definition is as follows: “to act in a moral way, a person must first understand how his or her actions affect the welfare of others, judge whether such actions are right or wrong, intend to act in accord with this judgment and follow through with this intention” (Bear et al. qtd. in Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl 197). In other words, morality is twofold: a proper understanding of right and wrong, and a proper understanding of the interaction of good and evil with the society around oneself.

### The School of T. H. White: Authorial Intentions

In the opening scene of his Arthurian fantasy, White paints a negative picture of education, which serves as a contrast for the education that Merlyn provides. The unnamed governess is the first teacher figure the reader meets, and she is a miserable educator; she is “always getting muddled with her astrolabe, and when she got specially muddled she would take it out on Wart by rapping his knuckles” (9). She does not teach Wart or Kay; she only holds classes and punishes her students. The narration about the governess focuses entirely on her character, and White offers no indication that she focuses her education on the boys—she seems entirely unaware of their needs.<sup>8</sup> She has negatively affected Wart so that his heart sinks when Merlyn suggests that they begin lessons—“he thought with dread of Summulae Logicales and the filthy astrolabe” (44). Though this type of education is the traditional form, it is clearly ineffective, especially for a boy destined to be king. It is possible that if Wart’s education had continued in this manner, he could have become a less effective king because of his lack of practical knowledge and his disdain for learning. Instead, the governess’s disappearance “creates a textual space for the introduction of Merlyn as the Wart’s tutor” (Worthington 100). White deliberately offers this example in the opening scene of his novel to show a lesser alternative to Merlyn’s interactive, student-centric methods.

The character of the governess reflects White’s troubled educational experiences in an autobiographical manner. His own schooling at Cheltenham College in 1920 left him damaged for the rest of his life, and his adulthood was clouded with these troubles. At Cheltenham, he was physically and sexually mistreated by the college’s headmaster. He wrote in *England Have my*

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<sup>8</sup> White takes one more jab at such governesses while the boys are adventuring with Marian and Robin Hood: “They would have preferred to have gone with Robin, and thought that being put under Marian was like being trusted to a governess” (107). However, Wart and Kay find that despite being a female, Marian is a challenging companion—possibly due to her traditionally masculine, warrior-like athleticism and behavior—and they appreciate her guidance.

*Bones*, “At school I was horribly afraid of being beaten” (qtd. in Sprague 21). Scholar C. H. Adderley says that White’s school days included frequent beatings, sadism, and sexually inappropriate behavior (55), which led to complicated personal struggles and frequent psychological treatment later in life.<sup>9</sup> The school’s philosophy was “that education must be harassing and the harassing systematically applied” (Warner 30). Thus, it is not surprising that when White creates a character such as Wart and Kay’s governess in *The Once and Future King*, she acts much like White’s former housemaster at Cheltenham: she raps Wart’s knuckles and smacks him with a sword (9). By briefly introducing an ineffective and inappropriate governess—who is herself a twentieth-century figure that one might find at an English college—as he begins his story, White sets the stage for one of the educational problems that he seeks to remedy with the introduction of the character of Merlyn.

White raises other concerns with the current system of education in his opening chapter, primarily with the subject matter that the court has assigned to Kay and Wart. When we meet the boys, their education is typical of a medieval knight’s, as Kay’s father, Sir Ector, symbolizes an older order of education. He laments that the boys “[o]ught to be havin’ a first-rate eddication, at their age. When I was their age I was doin’ all this Latin and stuff at five o’clock every mornin’. Happiest time of me life” (10).<sup>10</sup> In this same fashion, Wart and Kay’s typical school days

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<sup>9</sup> For a psychoanalytic reading of White and the character of the governess, see Heather Worthington’s article “From Children’s Story to Adult Fiction.” In her study, she argues that White’s ambivalent portrayal of women in his writing expresses his own relationship to women, specifically his mother. The governess’s behavior implies sexually inappropriate behavior, and she is sent to a mental hospital. Her disappearance creates, Worthington says, a world mostly free of women for the boys to grow up in—a world *especially* free of mothers and mother figures (98). Her theory also could explain why White creates a female governess from the inspiration of his rotten male housemaster: he creates a female and ejects her from the situation, fueled by his disdain for both mothers and abusive housemasters—thus killing two birds with one stone.

<sup>10</sup> It is both humorous and ironic that this conversation between Sir Ector and Sir Grummore Grummursum takes place over a bottle of port passed back and forth. In addition, most of their –ing verbs leave off the final consonant (“rattlin’ good day,” “thinkin’,” “questin’”) in an accent that makes them sound less educated than even young Wart and Kay. In a later speech, Sir Ector says, “Friends, tenants and otherwise. Unaccustomed as I am to public speakin’—” (140). No other characters speak in such an abbreviated manner except for the tilting sergeant, who is connected with the medieval jousting matches that are not part of Wart’s formal education with Merlyn.

include classes in subjects such as *Summulae Logicales*, Astrology, Repetition, hawking, and the theory of chivalry. Elisabeth Brewer identifies these topics as perfectly medieval but dreadfully uninspiring, as White “wants to make the point that such studies are in appropriate and useless, taking no account of the pupils’ individual needs. Subjects are taught, but not the boys” (169). Not only the teachers, but also the topics are irrelevant to the lives that Kay and Wart are destined for. White is not as interested in an accurate portrayal of the Arthurian world that Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte d’Arthur*, presents, nor in the formation of the boys into proper medieval knights, as he is in their true moral education.

White also redeemed his unfortunate experiences by entering the world of education himself: he eventually served as Head of English at Stowe School, a progressive liberal arts school founded by headmaster J. F. Roxburgh. White redeemed education deliberately; as Kurth Sprague explains, “For him, teaching was not simply a job to be gotten through until his free time when he would be able to write . . . The didactic impulse ran strong in White” (20). Under Headmaster Roxburgh’s positive influence, White developed his own English curriculum, which prompted students to think for themselves and choose their own passions (Brower 165). Roxburgh lamented that schoolboys were “acceptable at a dance and invaluable in a shipwreck, but . . . no earthly good as an ordinary citizen on ordinary occasions” (36). Instead, they needed the cognitive skills to engage with ideas and interests outside of themselves. Thus, White especially sought to develop the imagination through teaching literature and creative writing; in “The Sword in the Stone,” this value manifests itself when Wart’s teachers use fictional stories to instruct Wart about moral lessons. For example, Merlyn tells Wart a fable about Rabbi Jachanan<sup>11</sup> and the prophet Elijah to explain that some ethically challenging situations seem

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<sup>11</sup> White takes especially interesting liberties in writing a Jewish character into one of his moral tales as a positive character spending time as Elijah’s peer, considering the poor treatment of Jews in medieval times.



unfair but are, in the greater scheme of life, justified (89). In another instance, the Badger tells Wart a fiction about the creation of Man and how he earned his position as king—or warring tyrant—over the animal kingdom (191). These fictional stories help to broaden Wart’s understanding of the world around him, which was a personal goal in White’s teaching as well. Because of his own work in the field of education, White surely believed in the power of stories to instruct; thus, he writes a unique teacher-student relationship into *The Once and Future King*.

By rejecting poor educational models and portraying Merlyn as a good teacher in *The Once and Future King*, White comments on the effective and ineffective strategies for education in twentieth-century England and for education in general. In many ways, Merlyn is the mouthpiece through which White speaks, allowing him to instruct both Wart and White’s readers. Adrienne Kertzer writes that the book “is an education into man’s place in the world . . . It offers a philosophy of life as learning in which wizards are not all powerful, but children have great potential” (281). This belief in the child’s potential is foundational to progressive educational theory.

### **Life Felt Deeply: A Progressive Framework**

Thus, White establishes Merlyn as a teacher who follows the twentieth-century model of progressive theory, allowing the student to learn from experience and be transformed by his self-guided inquiry into the world around him. This “patchwork of experience” (64), as Adderley calls it, is crucial to Wart’s gaining a complete education. White surely drew inspiration for this role from Roxburgh, who, in turn, drew inspiration from Aristotle’s *Politics*. In Book V of his *Politics*, Aristotle writes, “Those who let boys devote themselves too much to athletics and allow them to grow up uninstructed in essential things, in reality degrade and debase them, making them valuable to the community in one department only” (qtd. in Roxburgh 8). Roxburgh

further this sentiment in his treatise *Eleutheros*: “[Y]our education is what is left when you have forgotten everything you have ever been taught” (12). Wart’s education surely consists of the moral and ideological lessons that Merlyn has infused in him—not the *Summulae Logicales* and astrolabes from the governess’s lessons. In a truly progressive manner, Merlyn often allows Wart freedom to choose the adventures he takes—for example, the opportunity to transform into an animal in order to empathize with their experiences or view them critically—then gives the student freedom to draw his own conclusions.

In addition, it is clear from his writing that in White’s personal educational framework, children ought to be free to study subjects they choose in an interactive manner in pursuit of their holistic formation. In this way, White imitates the educational philosophy of his American contemporary, Dewey. One might say that White developed a fictional model of a true movement in progressive educational theory, drawing away from teacher-centric book-learning and pressing toward the development of good citizens. Sir Ector fears that Wart and Kay will be “runnin’ about all day like hooligans—after all, damn it all” (10). But for Dewey and White, students should actually be free to explore their own interests and decide on their own activities. Rousseau’s theory helps elucidate this belief: “The important thing is not to ward off death, but to make sure [children] really live . . . The man who gets most out of life is not the one who has lived longest, but the one who has felt life most deeply” (15). Though King Arthur’s life is tragic in many respects, his childhood and his accomplishments give his life meaning. Rousseau additionally exhorts teachers to “[t]rain the children, then, for the hardships they will one day have to endure” (17-18), and Merlyn immerses Wart in these hardships effectively. Merlyn’s sudden interruption of the dreary medieval educational life at Grammarye is crucial for Wart’s future as King Arthur.

White follows the example of prominent progressive theorists Dewey and Rousseau in other ways, as well; for instance, his characters fit Dewey's ideal for a dynamic teacher-student relationship. In "The Child and the Curriculum," Dewey writes that fundamentally, education must include "an immature, undeveloped being" (273)—which Wart surely is. When we meet him, Wart is unsure of himself, nervous, uneducated, and even stupid. He idolizes Kay (14) and acts impulsively, though he is ambitious. Dewey's second requirement is that the adult possess "matured experience" (273) with specific social values. Merlyn is uniquely capable of imparting his wisdom because of his "second sight"—he understands Wart's future better than anyone else does. White's biographer Sylvia Townsend Warner explains that White creates this relationship as a personal satisfaction of his desires: "*The Sword in the Stone* had allowed him two wish-fulfillments. He gave himself a dauntless, motherless boyhood; he also gave himself an ideal old age, free from care and the contradiction of circumstances, practicing an enlightened system of education on a chosen pupil, embellished with an enchanter's hat, omniscient, unconstrainable" (99). Both of these roles fill the requirements set forth by Dewey.

In some ways, the relationship between Wart and Merlyn also reflects the complex and controversial relationship between Emile and Rousseau. Though Merlyn enters Wart's life at a time after Wart has been weaned (not by women, evidently), the relationship follows several of the guidelines that Rousseau sets forth about the moral education of an adolescent boy. Rousseau specifically places emphasis on the value of allowing a pupil to endure experiences that form his character:

There is no moral knowledge which cannot be acquired either through the experience of other people or of ourselves . . . By some strange perversity we are taught all sorts of useless things, but nothing is done about the art of conduct. We

are supposed to be getting trained for society but are taught as if each one of us were going to live a life of contemplation in a solitary cell. (112-13)

Rousseau clearly disapproves of sending young people into the world without experiences; Merlyn surely believes the same way, as he provides Wart with plenty of opportunities to immerse himself in the visible consequences of philosophies such as “Might is Right.” For Emile, these opportunities occur when Rousseau “expos[es his] pupil to the mischances which may prove to him that he is now wiser than the rest of us” (111); Wart’s experiences are presented in his transformations into animals, where he encounters societies that differ from his own experience.

#### **“A New Kind of Creature”: Wart’s Animal Transformations**

In a fantastical display of progressive education, Merlyn facilitates change in Wart by creating situations that immerse the boy in the world of beasts and show the consequences of their actions. By analyzing these transformations, we can clearly see the benefits that they had on Wart’s development. The minor transformations he experiences as a boy—from a child to a fish, a bird, an ant, and other creatures—are microcosms of the greater transformation from a boy to a king. Beatrix Hesse claims that these transformations convey “that the ideal ruler is a man who acknowledges his kinship with animals” (87); however, this kinship does not seem to be White’s main focus. Instead, these transformations represent the transformation that Wart is undergoing and provide him a progressive opportunity to dictate his own lessons. Wart can seek guidance from Merlyn; at one point, he asks Merlyn, “Would you mind if I ask you a question?” and Merlyn responds, “It is what I am for” (34). Indeed, Merlyn’s primary role is not to fill Wart’s head with facts; instead, he is available to guide, correct, and respond to Wart, which makes him a highly effective progressive teacher. These experiences of immersion into the animal kingdom

are shadows of a medieval motif. In many stories, specifically Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a mortal man immerses himself into another world in order to learn a lesson. Dante travels through the depths of a realm not traveled by living men in order to gain vital understanding and wisdom from various beings. In the same way, Wart enters other worlds—though sometimes they are *more* civilized—and encounters challenges and lessons from each animal he encounters. This journey is a distinctly progressive process because, as Emile frequently did, Wart helps with the decisions for what his education will include; as a result, Merlyn allows him to be transformed from immature to wise.

The first encounter in Wart's education is aquatic: Merlyn transforms himself and Wart into fish in the moat around the castle, where Wart has his first lesson. Merlyn accompanies him on this journey in order to model the process of transformation, and he offers insights throughout their journey. Before encountering the first animals who will help educate him, Wart must endure the process of adjusting to swimming like a fish—and this is arguably his very first lesson. For Wart, it is “difficult to be a new kind of creature,” as fish swim quite differently than humans do (46). Merlyn chastises him, “You swim as if you were a boy” (46), for Wart has not yet learned to adopt a different way of life. White even encourages the reader to join in the perspective-shifting transformation: “In order to imagine yourself into the Wart's position, you would have to picture a round horizon, a few inches about your head, instead of the flat horizon you usually see ... It is difficult to imagine” (47). He then invites the reader to imagine himself or herself as a fisherman on the surface. Hesse points out the way that White uses “you” to extend this invitation (88). In this way, White's first direct lesson for Wart and for the reader is the importance of viewing life from another perspective in order to function effectively in a new

situation, and indeed, Wart will need this lesson for each of his new experiences in an animal's body.

In this scene where White invites his reader to join Wart in his experiences, Brewer even notes a reflection of White's educational theory in the style of the novel. White's headmaster at Stowe School, Roxburgh, taught him the value of speaking to students as one adult to another. This practice of addressing students as "reasonable beings" (173) translates to White's "confidential" tone in the novel, addressing the reader often as "you" and inviting him into the moment but in a tone neither childish nor too mature.<sup>12</sup> In this way, White expects both Wart and the reader to understand a new perspective in order to learn from the animals that will appear in later scenes. It seems that Merlyn must be available to teach him this lesson, though Merlyn does not join Wart for any other animal adventures, so that he can show Wart the value in seeing another perspective.

After Wart completes the adjustment to an underwater point of view, he and Merlyn meet with the King of the Moat. This king, Mr. P., tells him that "[p]ower of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right" (52). The rest of the story that White tells attempts to dismantle this twentieth-century philosophy,<sup>13</sup> and Wart must prove that he has

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<sup>12</sup> For example, as he describes the layout of Castle of the Forest Sauvage, the narrator explains the scene to the reader in this way: "If you look down and are not frightened of heights (the Society for the Preservation of This and That have put up some excellent railings to preserve you from tumbling over), you can see the whole anatomy of the inner court laid out beneath you like a map ... If you are a sensible person, you will spend days there, possibly weeks, working out for yourself by detection which were the stables, which the news, which were the cow byres ... the priest's room, and my lord's and lady's chambers. Then it will all grow about you again" (42). This quote also calls for the reader to see from a shifted perspective—it seems to be a common appeal to the reader in the story's narration.

<sup>13</sup> White was deeply steeped in the political atmosphere around him in the mid-twentieth century; thus, *The Once and Future King* is categorized occasionally as an anti-war novel. "Might makes right" is one of the philosophies of total war, which White was strongly opposed to. Jake La Jeunesse says, "The horrors of World War I and the looming threat of World War II inspired T. H. White to write the books of *The Once and Future King* with a similar warning" (21). Further, he writes, "Evidence abounds that White wrote out of a deep desire to prevent war and save lives" (23). He and other scholars have also pointed out the time anachronisms present throughout the work and explained that these play into these anti-war sentiments.

learned it when he becomes King Arthur. Indeed, Evan Lansing Smith explains that each of Wart's subsequent transformations "is meant to prepare Wart for the kingship of an ideal country, and each transformation introduces him to the variety of social and political systems he would be likely to encounter during a course in political philosophy" (40). In a speech he makes in the second book, "The Queen of Air and Darkness," King Arthur reveals the beginning stages of the philosophy that he has learned taking root. Frequently looking toward Merlyn for support, Wart exclaims in a moment of clarity and resolution:

Might is not Right. But there is a lot of Might knocking about in this world, and something has to be done about it. It is as if People were half horrible and half nice. Perhaps they are even more than half horrible, and when they are left to themselves they run wild . . . But you see, Merlyn is helping me to win my two battles so that I can stop this. He wants me to put things right . . . I have got to vanquish [Lot and Uriens and Anguish] . . . because they live by force. (247)

This shift in philosophy takes King Arthur into the Battle of Bedegraine and leads him to create the Knights of the Round Table. And indeed, he does succeed at using Might to help him win his battles; the narrator analyzes King Arthur's righteous success—though ultimate failure—during his kingship in the ending scene of "The Candle in the Wind": During the earliest days before his marriage he had tried to match [Force Majeur's] strength with strength—in his battles against the Gaelic confederation—only to find that two wrongs did not make a right. But he had crushed the feudal dream of war successfully" (629). Because of Merlyn's guidance, King Arthur has learned from the king Mr. P., as well as other political structures in the animal kingdom, that a system which fights evil with brute force is unjustified and unsuccessful.

Wart's next lessons provide him with more political ideals, though he never sits in a political science classroom. Through his back sight, Merlyn knows that these lessons will be crucial for Wart's kingship, so he offers Wart more opportunities to experience politics in various realms. During this analysis of his reign at the end of his life, King Arthur reflects on the many other lessons he learned from his childhood with Merlyn—specifically, the “belligerent ants, who claimed their boundaries, and the pacific geese, who did not” (638). In both philosophies, Wart observes and interacts with crucial ideals; moreover, White teaches his reader about these societies as well. First, Wart meets the ant colony. The ants are industrious, but they consider each other's individual value inextricably connected to their contribution to society—in this way, they are impersonal and “dead,” as White describes them (123). In their colony, there exists no sense of right and wrong, but “Done and Not Done” (124)—abbreviated and impersonal language that scholars have compared to the “Newspeak” in George Orwell's novel *1984* (Hesse 87). And they fight between species of ants, living under dictatorships, invading one another in order to rise to power. Brewer posits that the way that White presents this scene indicates that he intends this lesson for Wart to benefit the novel's twentieth-century reader (178). As a pacifist wrestling with these ideas, White offers these lessons through observations of the natural world, although his mouthpiece, Merlyn, “draws no conclusions for the boy” (*La Jeunesse* 24). In this way, White uses his writing as an avenue to discuss social issues of totalitarianism and Nazism and make a commentary on his own society. Because White viewed himself as a teacher through his writing, this lesson is intended to be a specific teachable moment that affects both Wart and the reader. Wart is not the only character who is transformed and educated by these moments, then—the reader is meant to respond and be transformed as well by drawing his or her own conclusions about Wart's political experiences.



This lesson from the ants about war serves Arthur well throughout his reign, and ultimately reminds him that his lifelong pursuit of justice through efforts such as the Round Table is not in vain, though mankind is fallen. As he reflects upon his ultimate defeat in the novel, King Arthur remembers the anguish that wars have caused him, prompted by deep-seated resentment from Morgause, Mordred, Uther Pendragon, and generations of previous kings. He almost believes that “the only hope was to not act at all,” but then he realizes, “that would be hateful” (631). Though the wars between the ants do seem to be futile, King Arthur fights for justice in order that “power might be used for useful ends” (629), not for the useless wars of previous generations. The complex lessons that Merlyn has taught Wart about justice through his experiences with the ants remind him that his struggles and heartbreaks have been meaningful and worthwhile.

However, White reveals his own conflicted views of war and pacifism in Wart’s encounter with an animal that has opposite values from the ants. Wart is exposed to both of these ideas and is allowed to draw inferences from what he discovers. Wart visits a flock of geese, where he meets and befriends Lyo-Lyok, the goose who instructs him: “She taught him what she knew with gentle kindness, and the more he learned, the more he came to love her brave, noble, quiet, and intelligent relations” (171). In his interactions with the geese and his adventure during their migration, Wart discovers that the geese fully value the individual life. Unlike the ants, the geese believe that it is savage to fight over unnecessary boundaries like borders and kill others of one’s own species. Geese have no borders over which to fight, since they can fly, and thus have freedom to venture anywhere. Lyo-Lyok also teaches Wart that fighting is not noble, though it is a trait of many knights. Wart will understand this lesson more fully when he experiences his first battles and discovers the bloodshed cost by fighting. However, Lyo-Lyok also teaches him that

their society is complex and that the geese's philosophy can be damaging. Each Whitefront goose is an individual and shares nothing; Lyo-Lyok tells Wart that "[a]ny goose who found something nice to eat considered it his own, and would peck any other one who tried to thieve it" (171). Their individualistic ideals lead to selfishness, which is their flaw. They do not work together to be productive in community. Once again, White directs these lessons about society toward his twentieth-century audience, but the condemnation of individualism and selfishness also offers a transcendent lesson that can apply to modern-day readers.

For his next animal encounter, Merlyn allows Wart to choose an experience, and Wart decides to enter the hawk mews as a bird—a merlin, in particular, much to Merlyn's flattery and approval. With this decision, Merlyn gives Wart the choice and responsibility to determine his education. This freedom is vital to a student's education, as Dewey argues in "Democracy and Education."<sup>14</sup> Alfie Kohn confirms the reality underlying this interaction between Wart and Merlyn, which is that, to a reasonable degree, a student must have freedom to choose in the classroom, instead of being controlled by a teacher's plans or desires. He argues that this practice will make a student not only more academically successful, but a more generous member of a community ("Choices for Children"). Therefore, by allowing Wart to choose his next lesson, Merlyn allows Wart to be more active in his education and thus more likely to be engaged and successful in his future.

In the mews, Wart is immersed in the political realm of the hawks, where Captain Balan challenges his courage and tests his knowledge of being a bird. Merlyn has already taught Wart to adapt to new perspectives during his fish episode, so Wart is able to think quickly with the

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<sup>14</sup> Dewey defines freedom in this way: "Freedom means essentially the part played by thinking—which is personal—in learning:—it means intellectual initiative, independence in observation, judicious invention, foresight of consequences, and ingenuity of adaptation to them" (310).

perspective of a bird of prey. Wart not only receives an education about falconry by witnessing it firsthand and wearing his own falcon's hood, but his social experience also teaches him much more than Merlyn can explain about bravery, honor, and leadership in a moment of fear under Colonel Cully's terrifying rule.<sup>15</sup> Instead of backing out of a challenge, he chooses to "go through this ordeal to earn his education" (82). This situation, Kohn might argue, grants Wart with more ownership of his education than a classroom environment would. However, in the next scene as he fights with Kay in a tussle that results in a bloody nose and a black eye, Wart is disappointed to find that he has still acted as "a beast" (87). He has behaved in a manner that is not fitting for his role as a human, and especially as a young man with future leadership responsibilities, and has instead acted like many of the animals that he has met on his journeys—self-seeking, impulsive, and thoughtlessly violent. In this moment, he realizes that physical struggles are not an effective way to resolve his conflict, but he has not gained the appropriate self-control and wisdom to harness his reaction. Thus, he realizes that his education is not yet complete.

Wart's final transformation into an animal is the culmination of his many magical lessons: he is transformed into a badger. This transformation is special because it occurs immediately following the most famous and telling dialogue between Wart and Merlyn. Wart laments to Merlyn that he shall never become a knight, and Merlyn, who knows Wart's bittersweet future, responds with his solution:

The best thing for being sad . . . is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie

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<sup>15</sup> Cully challenges Wart to a test of his fortitude under a frightening situation. Once he is victorious, he is celebrated; this scene includes an interesting moment of foreshadowing, as the birds sing of "Wart the King of Merlins" (85).

awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. (183)

And of course, Merlyn knows through his second sight that each of these tragedies will happen to Wart; he is a truly wise teacher for this reason.<sup>16</sup> He continues, “There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you” (183). This advice carries Wart well through his kingship, and at the end of his life he has become a strong, capable thinker (even if his natural abilities never serve him well); the narrator says, “The old man had always been a dutiful thinker, never an inspired one” (630). Merlyn has surely taught him how to think dutifully.

After this speech from Merlyn, Wart requests to be transformed into a badger after all, to distract his mind from Kay’s upcoming knighting. The badger reads Wart his doctoral treatise—written in just half an hour—and explains that though mankind is “the mightiest of the animals,” he may not be “the most blessed” (193). As the badger and Wart discuss war and the savagery that it requires of mankind, Wart naïvely muses, “I should have liked to go to war, if I could have been made a knight. I should have liked the banners and the trumpets, the flashing armour and the glorious charges. And oh, I should have liked to do great deeds, and be brave, and conquer my own fears. Don’t you have courage in warfare, Badger, and endurance, and comrades<sup>17</sup> whom you love?” (194). Though it appears that Wart has learned nothing from his various encounters with unsuccessful knights like King Pellinore and the animals he has been

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<sup>16</sup> One might also read this speech as autobiographical, though. As a pacifist, White was devastated by the two wars that bookended his life, and his abusive past led to unresolved homosexual relations; through it all, he maintained a passion for education and learning that transcended his inner demons.

<sup>17</sup> This vocabulary choice seems to be a clear reference to Communist Russia.

transformed into, Badger's final question surely drives Wart to deep consideration: "Which did you like best ... the ants or the wild geese?" (194). This question has no clear answer, since both communities of animals have flaws. However, the question reveals the deeper need for Wart's choices in his battles to be meaningful, and he does thoughtfully consider these battles once he becomes king.

### **Lessons in Kingship: The Application of Wart's Education**

The first moment when these lessons begin to affect Wart is, fittingly, in the moments before he pulls the sword from the stone and becomes king. In this scene, White departs from Malory. In Malory's interpretation, the sword comes out of the stone immediately on Wart's first try; in White's story, Wart senses the presence of "hundreds of old friends" who embolden him and remind him that he has learned to be strong and work hard. Adderley explains that "White is suggesting that the very education Merlyn gave him has enabled Wart not just to be a good king, but to become king in the first place" (66). Merlyn is directly responsible for the transformations that Wart has endured, and these transformations have led him to this moment. By contrast, after six years of tutoring, Kay does not change because he has not participated in all of Wart's adventures—in fact, he becomes "more difficult" and sarcastic (178), and when he is knighted, he talks down to Wart, his squire, moments before Wart removes the sword from the stone. However, Wart has continued to grow from the immature boy he was, and he is more prepared than ever before to fill the position that the sword grants him.

Ultimately, the crowning of King Arthur is fitting for several reasons. First, Wart only discovers the sword in the stone because he is on a quest to help Kay, who is a knight, to have a sword for his match. Though he does not appreciate Kay's attitude toward him as a squire, Wart displays a truly regal humility in his urgent pursuit of a sword for Kay. More importantly, Wart

replaces the ineffective king Uther Pendragon, who has made the partisans “sick of overlords and feudal giants, of knights who did what they pleased, of racial discrimination, and of the rule of Might as Right” (207). Merlyn has uniquely prepared Wart and transformed him into a king who is capable of addressing these devastating problems in the kingdom.

As Wart undergoes the transformation into a young King Arthur, Merlyn’s lessons become more relevant and intense. These realizations are a type of suppositional transformation, which Todorov discusses, as the reasons for Wart’s many transformations adventures are not fully realized until much later in his life. King Arthur begins fighting the Gaelic Wars, and he must establish his own philosophy of war. He is still young and immature—White describes him as “a young man, just on the threshold of life” and a “good learner who enjoyed being alive” (221)—but he thinks that fighting battles is a “splendid activity” (221), in total disregard of the cost of human life in battle. Because his student still views war somewhat like a child, though he has experienced and seen many things, Merlyn advises King Arthur to think deeply about his role as king and about the battles he chooses to engage in. His tutorship has prepared King Arthur already; he challenges King Arthur to think seriously (224) and demands, “Are you never going to think for yourself?” (222). Even in this moment, Wart does begin to draw connections. For example, the ridiculous, humorous battle that Wart witnesses between King Pellinore and Sir Grummore in Book One serves as an example that “the country is devastated” by the philosophy of Might is Right and by knights who fight for sport (225). The lessons that Wart learned through experiencing them firsthand become real to him, which is the fulfillment of his experience-based education. In Book Two, “The Queen of Air and Darkness,” the reader begins to see Wart truly understand and apply the seemingly scattered lessons he has learned. He asks, to Merlyn’s great pride, “Might isn’t right, is it, Merlyn?” (225). Arthur’s dialogues with Merlyn help the young

king establish his beliefs, as he is able to ask questions about history and determine ideas such as when wars are justified. His ultimate task during his kingship is to apply these lessons from his youth, and he does ultimately achieve this coming-of-age, as Alan Lupack explains: “Arthur learns to think for himself, and Merlin declares through the ‘Nunc Dimittis’ that his student is ready to face the world on his own. He proves that he is by arriving at the notion that Might is not Right but should be used for right and by fighting in a new way” (109). He is, then, more mature and prepared for his kingship.

### **“Trying to Set the World to Rights”: Moral Transformation**

Throughout all of Merlyn’s education, his primary focus in these magical transformations is to educate Wart morally—not necessarily intellectually. In the mid-twentieth century, while White was writing about Merlyn and Wart, educators were revisiting the idea of moral education, which flourished in early American schools in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with biblical proverbs and staunch religious character formation. Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental theory is one result of this resurgence of moral education; his educational philosophy aims to develop individual values and skills in students, then teach students how to contribute to their societies, in a process called cultural transmission (Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg 16), ultimately in the pursuit of justice.

Moral education operates under the premise that the interaction between teacher and student can develop morality, or a standard of right and wrong as understood individually and societally, in the student. Kohlberg, a contemporary of White, published his stages of moral development in the same year, 1958, as *The Once and Future King* was published in entirety, and both works certainly function under the same assumption: the teacher-student relationship is a valuable, vital way to transform children into ethical, moral adults. Merlyn teaches Arthur that

“good [is] worth trying” (628) and that Might is not Right; instead, he teaches him that “power might be used for useful ends” (629). The clearest cause for Wart’s significant transformation in *The Once and Future King*, which is evident in a comparison of the choices he makes in his early childhood and his decisions as king, is the practices of Merlyn to develop Wart’s moral understanding.

### **“Turn Me Into Something”: Narrative Transformations**

Interestingly, Wart’s transformation is visible not only in an analysis of the character of Wart, but in the fabric of the narrative as well. An analysis of the discourse grammar in a portion of the story reveals structural evidence of the language of moral transformation occurring in the narrative of *The Once and Future King*. It is valuable to observe how language and symbols of transformation and change appear in the grammatical structures of White’s writing. On a thematic level as well as a grammatical level, this work displays the language of transformation as Wart matures. In a detailed analysis of one scene in Book One of *The Once and Future King*, during which Wart discusses his and Kay’s animal transformations with Merlyn, identical or synonymous lexical words for “turning” appear frequently throughout the dialogue and narration. This word becomes a cohesive agent that allows the text to “hang together,” as Halliday and Hassan explain in their work on discourse grammar (276), as the characters use language relating to transformation repeatedly. The word “turn,” which is used as a synonym for “transform,” is present throughout this pivotal scene. Wart asks to be “turned,” and specifically requests for Merlyn to “turn [them] both the next time that [they] are turned” (88). “Change” is another synonymous cohesive word because it occurs four times in the episode and is used interchangeably with “turn.” All of these instances of “turn” and “change” are noteworthy not only because they occur with such cohesive frequency, but because they indicate the turning, or



transformation, occurring in the lives of Wart and Kay. In this case, the words are most often used to talk about Kay being changed into an animal, or “things”; and indeed, they occur seven times. Interestingly, the words appear in a few more unrelated places: when Merlyn describes the way that colors “*change*” in colors of a black eye, when Merlyn asks to “*change*” the subject, and when the bird Archimedes “*turns*” his back on his master. These words do not provide the text semantic cohesion, but they do provide lexical cohesion as theme words reiterated throughout the episode.

These reiterated words also serve as a theme word in this episode and in the larger text, and the emphasis on change further indicates the narrative’s focus on moral transformation. As one of the primary themes of *The Once and Future King* as a whole is the transformation of Wart from an uneducated, unwise boy into a man worthy to be a good king, this transformation occurs within the fabric of the language of the text as well. Lupack explains that part of the structural fabric of the novel is its emphasis on the element of time and the way in which, over time and as a result of his childhood lessons, Arthur must apply the lessons of his youth to his kingship (106). Thus, it is not simply for the sake of cohesion that White uses vocabulary of change and turning: these are words that further the novel’s theme of Wart’s transformation and progress.

In addition, the tone of the work increases in sincerity and severity consistently as Wart ages; it is clear that Wart is understanding a broader and more somber perspective on his moral education as the narrative progresses. His early years are filled with comedic narration and amusing situations. His first jousting match is completely comical; Sir Grummore and King Pellinore act ridiculously and not in a chivalrous, knightly manner at all. However, the situations are no longer lighthearted in his later experiences as he transforms and grows up. This silly situation, when revisited in the second book, becomes reality to King Arthur when Merlyn

connects this battle to barons and knights who “slice the poor people about as much as they want” and devastate the country (225). As Wart transforms into King Arthur, the childlike experiences become adult situations that have severe, life-and-death consequences. Hesse argues that the genre even shifts: “As the protagonist grows up, the saga itself moves from children’s book to adult novel” (86). Similarly, Smith notes that Books 1 and 2 can be read as comedy, while Books 3 and 4 move toward tragedy (40). Lupack adds that though the four books parallel each other, each takes a darker approach to the same repeated occurrences (109). This intensifying of the story reflects the way that Merlyn has shaped Wart: morally, he has become more serious, focused, and complex.

### **Conclusion: A Life Not in Vain**

At the very end of his life, King Arthur is discouraged by the tragedy in which his moral, valiant life has ended: “For if there was such a thing as original sin, if man was on the whole a villain, if the bible was right in saying that the heart of men was deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, then the purpose of his life had been a vain one” (629). His thought process spins wildly as he attempts to reconcile his moral and just pursuits with the hopelessness of the end of his life. Then, he is abruptly interrupted by a page—a small, innocent thirteen year-old boy named Tom of Newbold Revell, trotting into the room. King Arthur tells him to “[s]it down and try to listen” (635), and Arthur—now a very old man, like Merlyn was—tells one final story to the young boy: the story of how he learned about morality and did his best to implement it. Arthur asks him, “Will you promise to remember that you are a kind of vessel to carry on the idea, when things go wrong, and that the whole hope depends on you alive?” (637). And Tom promises that the candle that Arthur has carried for so long will burn, and that he will give it to others. This boy is the hope at the end of the novel for a redemptive future. It is typical that a

hero, after all of his trials and failures, will take on his own student to mentor with his newfound knowledge, and in doing so, participate in the transformation of the world around him (Robbins 800). In this way, Merlyn's training has been entirely successful: the experiential, moral education of young Wart will be carried forward by Tom.

Thus, the transformative power of education is clearly evident in White's writing, in a fulfilment of his personal goals and views. In depicting the relationship between Merlyn and Wart, and in his vocation as a teacher later in life, White endeavored to transform the philosophy of education in his twentieth-century world, despite the abuse he endured at Cheltenham College. By writing *The Once and Future King* and his other fiction, he redeemed his horrific childhood experiences using characters such as Merlyn to demonstrate that education can actually be fruitful and healthy. This vision is evident even in his death; his headstone in Athens is engraved with the following epitaph below his name and an outline of a reversed broadsword, written by his biographer Sylvia Townsend Warren:

AUTHOR  
WHO  
FROM A TROUBLED HEART  
DELIGHTED OTHERS  
LOVING AND PRAISING  
THIS LIFE. (Sprague 13)

His redemptive vision is reflected clearly in these memorializing words and in his body of writing produced from a dark and desolate personal life.

White demonstrates transformations throughout *The Once and Future King* through progressive, experiential education and moral development for young Wart. This story is a

fantasy classic, and it provides many political and educational lessons for its twentieth-century audience. White's writing carries a sense of future for its readers as well. Because White writes in a way that transcends time boundaries,<sup>18</sup> his work carries a sense of timelessness that allows the educational legacy of Merlyn to prevail. The work is, of course, rooted in its twentieth-century context.<sup>19</sup> But like the legacy of the Arthurian legends, White's work has the potential to transcend its time period and instruct later readers. White fulfills the legacy on his epitaph—delighting others—through his fiction, and he also teaches his readers through Merlyn, his literary mouthpiece to his once and future readership.

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<sup>18</sup> The anachronisms in his work—references outside of the medieval time frame that give the work a sense of multiple time frames and thus no perceived time frame at all—are well-documented by Marilyn K. Nellis in her article “Anachronistic Humor in Two Arthurian Romances of Education: *To the Chapel Perilous* and *The Sword in the Stone*.”

<sup>19</sup> Like his contemporaries, White interacted with ideas such as pacifism and a child's learning. Regarding White's studies of child psychology, Brewer cites influences such as psychologist Henry James's studies in child-adult interactions and literature such as J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (175). Thus, his work is both a children's story and a story with many lessons and implications for grown-ups. Brewer writes that Merlyn's insistence that Wart learns to think through experience “would have been congenial to many adult readers.”

## CHAPTER THREE: THE BOY WHO LEARNED

In literature, the medieval Merlin's influence has reached far beyond King Arthur, and White's character Wart has plenty of successors as well. Dumbledore, recipient of the honor of the Order of Merlin, resembles White's Merlyn in many ways, both in wizard-like physical appearance and in the mannerisms of wise, old men. In a 2008 interview with *The Guardian*, Rowling cited White as an influence on her writing and called Wart a "spiritual ancestor" for the character of Harry.<sup>20</sup> Other similarities have been observed between these fantasy worlds as well: Elizabeth D. Schafer compared Harry, Hermione, and Ron's loyalty and friendship to the Knights of the Round Table, an element of the King Arthur legends that Wart establishes in *The Once and Future King*. The expression "Merlin's beard!" even occurs in the story's dialogue at moments of surprise or awe, 13 times total—surely a nod from Rowling toward Dumbledore's ancient predecessor. The many connections between the two works, the *Harry Potter* series and *The Once and Future King*, merit a strong consideration of them in connection with one another and through a similar framework.

Both White and Rowling create fantasy worlds that resemble the real-life Muggle worlds around them in many political and social ways; they both develop teachers who are instructive and wise as well. Both series feature a young, unassuming, undeveloped boy—"not a pampered little prince, but as normal a boy as I could have hoped under the circumstances," as Dumbledore calls Harry (*Order of the Phoenix* 837), separated from his family and unprepared for any great challenges. The teacher is an older wizard with vast experience and knowledge who takes on the responsibility to guide the young boy to fulfill a destiny or purpose. Thus, it is appropriate and beneficial to evaluate the two popular works alongside one another; the teacher-student

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<sup>20</sup> The *New York Times* confirms that Rowling has often cited the Knights of the Round Table as a significant influence on her own writing in an article titled "Once and Future Sorcerer."

relationship between Dumbledore and Harry is significant and worth studying in this wildly popular series.

In the Harry Potter series, Dumbledore facilitates the formation of Harry—not from a boy to a king, like Wart, but from a boy to a hero for the wizarding world. As a progressive educator, Dumbledore guides Harry through his developmental years in a highly effective, albeit imperfect, manner, showing the pupil how to handle the challenges he faces. The relationship that Rowling creates between Dumbledore and Harry allows for Harry’s moral development and transformation from immature to capable, selfless, and wise; this development is important to Rowling because she personally prioritizes education as a means toward moral development and justice in the Muggle world.

### **Professor Rowling: The Author’s Pedagogy**

Studying Dumbledore as an example of a progressive educator is warranted especially because of Rowling’s own investment in education. Many of her statements about education appear throughout the text of her works—through the Hogwarts teachers she creates and the curriculum they teach—and her views are also apparent through her life and work. Through her interaction with the world as a public figure, Rowling reveals her personal views on education’s purpose and issues in the educational system today. The transformative power of education is crucial to Rowling, a former teacher<sup>21</sup> who believes that education plays a part in social justice and in creating good citizens. Rowling has made direct public statements about education; as an author, she is highly vocal on social media regarding contemporary political concerns and controversial topics. In July 2015, a *Mic* article calculated the total tuition cost of Hogwarts at \$43,000 annually—including books, wands, and other supplies—and in response, Rowling

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<sup>21</sup> Rowling taught English as a second language in Portugal and earned a post-graduate certificate of education in modern languages (“The JK Rowling Story”).

posted on Twitter, “There’s no tuition fee [at Hogwarts]! The Ministry of Magic covers the cost of all magical education!” When Mic reacted with a quip, “Guess us Muggles need to get it together,” Rowling responded: “Far be it from me to tell you Muggles what to do – but yes. You do.” Because she has created a fantasy school with an entire set of regulations, traditions, and standards, Rowling gives herself a unique voice in situations like this one to speak about the topic of free education. While tuition is not an explicit concern in the fictional world of Hogwarts, Rowling’s interaction and involvement with this contemporary issue shows that she is highly interested in engaging with the real-world political and social ramifications of her fictional school.

Rowling’s personal investment in education also informs her impassioned views on institutionalized children, for whom education is a significant concern and roadblock to freedom and success. This passion manifests itself in her fiction writing, as Harry is an orphan living in less than ideal conditions, with limited parental care and affection, but he is redeemed from this situation by his education at Hogwarts. In 2004, Rowling’s eyes were opened to the tragic and unaddressed needs of institutionalized children when she read an article in a newspaper detailing the circumstances of children living in caged beds, separated from their families and homes. In the same way that her characters typically run toward a problem and do what they can to solve it, she began to work against these human rights violations by founding a nonprofit organization called Lumos, which engages with communities and government to push for human rights, including education. Rowling frequently reposts tweets from Lumos, many of which connect her work with human rights to education. A January 2016 Twitter post that she retweeted reads, “A lack of medical care & education is keeping children in #orphanages in #Haiti.” For Rowling, education is important because a lack of education separates children from their parents.

Rowling's emphasis on the value of education transcends learning spells and potions in school; she values education for its power to transform the lives of children in orphanages. She has also retweeted a Lumos post saying that "[e]very child has the right to inclusive education." Inclusive education—the incorporation of children of all levels into educational situations—is specifically vital for this organization because of the transformational power of education on an individual's life and on society. According to Lumos' website, education can transform the lives of children as well as the lives of those around them:

Inclusive education will change children's lives, because it ensures all children have a chance to experience mainstream education, regardless of their physical or intellectual abilities or financial difficulties. These children will be part of the life of their families, mainstream schools, and communities . . . Also important is the fact that inclusive education is helping to change the mindsets of parents, teachers, people in the community; building a more understanding and integrated society. ("They Won't Be Invisible Any More")

The organization, which directly carries Rowling's vision for society, demonstrates and acts upon the importance of education to transform a child's life. Lumos seeks a goal of "transforming the lives of disadvantaged children" ("They Won't Be Invisible Any More"); Harry's education in Rowling's series is surely an example of some of the possibilities of transformation. Even Harry himself is an orphan who lives in poor conditions (the Cupboard Under the Stairs on 4 Privet Drive), and Tom Riddle grew up in an orphanage where he was abandoned by his parents; Rowling surely values and fights for good education for children like these. Because Rowling values education in this way, her passion shines through in her stories;



thus, studying her work in light of the educational benefits that one can glean does justice to her work.

### **Dumbledore as Progressive Educator**

Rowling's descriptions of Dumbledore demonstrate that he aligns with a progressive educational theory; his educational framework allows him to shape Harry's growth. Dumbledore has a unique position as headmaster of Hogwarts, as he can approach the students in a different way, but ultimately his role is to guide the educational formation and experiences of the students in his care at Hogwarts. In this role, Dumbledore allows his students to guide their own education, within reason. Harry remarks, "I think he sort of wanted to give me a chance. I think he knows more or less everything that goes on here, you know. I reckon he had a pretty good idea we were going to try, and instead of stopping us, he just taught us enough to help" (*Sorcerer's Stone* 302). In this thoughtful analysis from Harry, Dumbledore maintains his reputation as aware and intelligent, and, from this place of wisdom, he is able to provide Harry and his friends with directed experiences that will benefit them for the higher good—even higher than school rules.<sup>22</sup> A greater understanding of the higher good is the crux of Harry's education. Like Merlyn, Dumbledore knows that power is a vice that many young people must struggle with—and indeed, he desired power himself as a young man (*Deathly Hallows* 717). In return, he guides Harry because he sees that the young boy will need help to handle the responsibility of power: "It is a curious thing, Harry, but perhaps those who are best suited to power are those

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<sup>22</sup> Several informal internet theorists have hypothesized that Dumbledore was so involved in facilitating the situations in which Harry would learn that he crafted the obstacles that Harry, Ron, and Hermione conquer in *Sorcerer's Stone*. They cite Dumbledore giving Harry the Invisibility Cloak twice and the Mirror of Erised. A long and helpful article called "Albus Dumbledore and the Sorcerer's Stone" on [www.mugglenet.com](http://www.mugglenet.com) lists the various theoretical reasons why this theory is possible; other Internet sources validate this theory. The Harry Potter Lexicon, an online resource, concludes, "Dumbledore set events in motion to test Harry, to give him a chance to prove himself: to prepare Harry, to let him face Voldemort, as he will have to many more times to fulfill his prophesied destiny" (Hagel). If this theory is true, then this situation proves the later point about suppositional transformation throughout the novels.

who have never sought it. Those who, like you, have leadership thrust upon them, and take up the mantle because they must, and find to their own surprise that they wear it well” (*Deathly Hallows* 717). Because Dumbledore guides Harry through the experiences and trials of his boyhood, Harry is able to bear the position of leadership that he is given.

In many ways, Dumbledore embodies what is required of a strong progressive educator: wisdom and experience. Megan L. Birch describes him in this way: “Kind and gentle, energetic and wise, trusting and trusted, experienced and patient, Albus Dumbledore is a paragon, a quintessential ‘great’ teacher” (113). Especially in contrast with other teachers—who range from deathly boring to insane—Dumbledore is a figure who naturally provides excellent education through his conversations with students.<sup>23</sup> If a progressive teacher is a wise older teacher who guides his students, Dumbledore surely fits the description. Dumbledore’s role is similar to Merlyn’s: he “teaches and tests the hero and offers the gift of an amulet or talisman needed to help conquer the so-called villain or dragon” (Robbins 782). Harry not only receives objects that help him, but skills and maturity that allow him to be successful. In Dumbledore and Harry’s relationship, Dumbledore serves in many ways as a beacon and guide for Harry; as a progressive educator, his primary role is to lead his student into understanding. The strong bond of trust between them facilitates this type of structure, and Dumbledore is an instructor worthy of Harry’s trust:

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<sup>23</sup>A discussion of the character of Dumbledore is not without its complications. Rowling said herself in a Tweet that contemplating Dumbledore’s good and bad virtues “wouldn’t be an essay. That would be a week-long residential course.” He withholds information from Harry when he probably shouldn’t, and ultimately a foolish decision is his demise. Behr outlines some of Dumbledore’s weaknesses in “Philosopher’s Stone to Resurrection Stone” (267), and Dumbledore admits himself that “I make mistakes like the next man” (*Half-Blood Prince*). However, especially in the context of discussing Dumbledore in the classroom, it is a benefit to Dumbledore and to readers that his flaws shine through in the later books of the series. Elphias Doge describes him in his obituary as a man with “great humanity and sympathy” (*Deathly Hallows* 20), and he surely does everything for Harry out of a genuine desire for the greatest development in his student. No teacher has the perfect solutions for his students or is without flaw in his teaching—even the great wizard Dumbledore.

Professor Dumbledore, though very old, always gave an impression of great energy. . . He was often described as the greatest wizard of the age, but that wasn't why Harry respected him. You couldn't help trusting Albus Dumbledore, and as Harry watched him beaming around at the students, he felt really calm for the first time since the Dementor had entered the train compartment. (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 91)

This respect that Harry holds for his teacher allows for a productive and healthy growth in Harry's life, and Dumbledore's hands-off, interactive approach to education is a significant factor in Harry's development.

Dumbledore stands out even more distinctly because of the contrasts that Rowling provides in many of the other Hogwarts teachers. An especially revealing teacher is Professor Dolores Umbridge, who is introduced in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. An official from the Ministry of Magic who is hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, Umbridge focuses her instruction on theory, teaching her students no tangible, useful skills at a time when they especially need both knowledge and skill. On Rowling's website *Pottermore*, she explains that the villainous teacher is based on an unnamed teacher for whom Rowling harbored intense distaste, and considering Rowling's consistent interaction with her readers on venues such as Twitter and her background in education, Rowling may have written the character of Professor Umbridge as a critique of British educational practices or political figures. Professor Umbridge tells her class during her first lecture, "Now, it is the view of the Ministry that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about" (*Order of the Phoenix* 243). She appeals to the government's authority and serves as a representation of the government above her, which is reminiscent of some

contemporary concerns about teaching to the test and evaluating all students based on their performances on a test. The actress who portrays Umbridge in the Harry Potter film franchise, Imelda Staunton, calls her character “oh-so-very Margaret Thatcher” (qtd. in Vineyard). This often-impractical method of learning is in direct contrast with Dumbledore’s teaching philosophy. Birch observes that the school’s best education occurs outside of this type of instruction: “Depicting a highly ritualized school structured around competition and book learning, the series holds strong to the idea that ‘real’ learning occurs through progressive ‘hands-on’ experiences and mostly outside of the classroom” (104). Dumbledore never offers in-class instruction to his students during the narrative; however, he offers some of the best lessons, and classroom teachers like Umbridge show the potential ineffectiveness of test-based models of education.

Another conversation between Harry and Umbridge is especially revealing: “‘I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough –’ ‘And what good’s theory going to be in the real world?’ said Harry loudly, his fist in the air again. Professor Umbridge looked up. ‘This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world,’ she said softly” (243). The standardized tests required of the students, O.W.L.s. and N.E.W.T.s., are quite clearly examples of inappropriate ways to approach education, from Rowling’s view. A 2003 article in *The Scotsman* caught onto this criticism: “Delighted teachers have hailed *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* as a blistering satire on years of politically motivated interference in the running of schools,” calling Professor Umbridge “a grotesque parody of a modern-day school inspector” (“Rowling causes umbrage”). Umbridge calls her curriculum “a carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic” (*Order of the Phoenix* 240), and her ineffective and frustrating instruction reflects political involvement in education in past decades. Mary Taylor

Huber compares Umbridge's teaching strategies to the "behavioral objectives regime" that reigned in the 1960s and 1970s in American and British educational systems (71). For American twenty-first century readers as well, surrounded by increased debate about standardized tests, Common Core, the No Child Left Behind campaign, and pay for teachers, Rowling's criticisms are both timely and insightful. In contrast, Dumbledore is a highly skilled leader who "allows individuality to flourish" in his students ("Rowling causes umbrage"). Rowling does not disguise whose method she prefers and whose she is criticizing, and she thus presents her model of an ideal education through Dumbledore; this approach emphasizes developing a young person's whole self, including the student's ethical and moral maturity.

### **Kohlberg, Potter, and Dumbledore: A Moral Theory of Education**

The education that Dumbledore provides for Harry aligns well with the theory of moral development posited by twentieth-century psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. In 1971, Kohlberg published his work aiming to explain adolescent moral development with his cognitive-developmental theory of moralization<sup>24</sup>; in short, the theory is a series of six stages of moral development, a process through which most children progress as they interact with the world around them and grow in their understanding of moral actions (Reimer, Paolitto, and Hersh 43). In the preconventional level, usually occupied by younger children, children avoid punishment and respect authorities simply because the adult is in a higher position of authority or because the action benefits their own needs.<sup>25</sup> These children only consider concrete, immediate

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<sup>24</sup> In order to gather his data, Kohlberg performed a study of adolescent boys ages 10 to 16—the same demographic as Wart and Harry. He asked the boys a series of questions about a complex moral dilemma, such as whether stealing is okay in a certain situation or disrespecting one's parents is allowed if the parents are acting unfairly (Reimer, Paolitto, and Hersh 65). These moral situations are comparable to the many ethical challenges that Harry, Ron, and Hermione face, mostly in the tension between official school rules and greater values such as friendship, loyalty, or helping a fellow man.

<sup>25</sup> Whited observes that Mr. Dursley mistakenly believes that Harry is in this first level. He often uses force to discipline and interact with Harry, thinking that Harry will respect his authority and do as he is told; however, Harry

consequences for their actions. Though Harry and his friends may dip to this level in brief moments of childhood, they do not occupy this level. Children at this level believe the same adage that Wart learns in his animal adventures in *The Once and Future King*: “Might makes Right.” Ironically, this adage represents the mindset of political leaders in the novel. Harry also appears to make this type of lower decision when Malfoy steals the Remembrall by knocking Malfoy off his broomstick<sup>26</sup> (Whited 185), but he surely does not possess the characteristics displayed at the preconventional level throughout the novel in the way that other students, such as Draco Malfoy, fit.

For the majority of the series, Harry performs comfortably in the second phase, conventional. In the conventional level, a person acknowledges that he or she is a member of society and attempts to fit the roles designated by this societal relationship. A person will do his or her best to be a functioning, contributing member of the society in which he or she lives; Harry, for example, is socially obligated to compete for the Goblet of Fire, and thus he completes the duty expected of him. This person in the conventional level will also feel a strong sense of loyalty toward those around him or her. He values Snape’s and Dumbledore’s opinions about him, and he attempts to be a good person in their view. He also desires to make his parents proud, which is clear in the moments when he sees them reflected in the Mirror of Erised and desires to see them and talk to them. For this reason, Professor McGonagall’s words, “Your father would have been proud” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 152) are especially meaningful to Harry; his parents are one of his primary motivators for morality. Lana A. Whited’s study, titled “What Would Harry Do? J. K. Rowling and Lawrence Kohlberg’s Theories of Moral Development,”

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is clearly more developed than Mr. Dursley realizes. He cleverly bides his time and does not concede to his uncle simply because of the authority figure.

<sup>26</sup> Even this action is ultimately motivated by the desire to help bring justice to his friend—which is truly a conventional decision.

helps prove that Harry, for the first four books in the series, acts as a conventional adolescent. She explains his special dedication to Dumbledore in connection with this conventional stage in his moral development:

The only living person to whom Harry feels deeper loyalty than to Sirius Black is his headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. In fact, at the end of *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry is able to defeat a basilisk that has been terrorizing the school when Dumbledore's phoenix, Fawkes, arrives to assist him. Dumbledore tells Harry after the ordeal that only a demonstration of 'real loyalty' would have summoned the bird. (Whited 189)

Harry's loyalty to Dumbledore creates a special relationship between teacher and student; Dumbledore encourages Harry in this loyalty and conscientiousness and fosters his moral growth. Dumbledore, thus, encourages Harry to think conventionally with a consideration of what it means to be loyal and faithful to friends and leaders in pursuit of a stronger society, which helps the boy immensely. Harry's social duties to Hogwarts, his friends, and his superiors are a great motivator for many of his actions in the novel; thus, he fits into Kohlberg's conventional stage of development.<sup>27</sup>

But Harry, through his immense transformation in the series, supersedes the conventional phase and progresses to the highest of these three phases of development in the final *Harry*

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<sup>27</sup> Several critics have noticed the lack of female and diverse representation in Kohlberg's original theory; his initial study used only male adolescent subjects. The findings in his stages are tailored toward male development, and he concluded that while boys are capable of reaching stage six, most girls stay around stage three, which is more relationally driven and arguably more driven by nurturing behavior. While Kohlberg's conclusion was that "girls tended not to be as morally mature as boys" (Gercama 39), responses to his theory such as Carol Gilligan's have clarified the unique development of girls. Further studies on the moral development of females could be intriguing here because they could provide an interesting insight into Hermione's growth; she focuses much more on following the rules for rules' sake, but she also is highly loyal to her friends and driven toward justice for causes such as house elves. This may call for a restructured approach, such as an "ethics of care." The anthology *Hermione Granger Saves the World: Essays on the Feminist Heroine of Hogwarts* is an interesting starting point for this academic conversation.

*Potter* book. Several studies have rightly classified Harry into the second phase, such as Whited's excellent 2002 article. However, the best of these studies, including Whited's and Lauren Binnendyk and Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl's, were published before all seven books were released and cannot consider the whole arc of Harry's development. Thus, based on Harry's actions toward the end of the series, I argue in supplement to their theories that Harry deserves to be viewed in the postconventional level of Kohlberg's theory. The postconventional level consists of the fifth and sixth stages of moral development. Some scholars are unclear whether the sixth stage exists, as Kohlberg's study did not garner any empirical data on it (Reimer, Paolitto, and Hersh 77), and not all individuals reach the fifth stage. However, Harry certainly reaches the postconventional level. In this level, one is capable of "principled moral reasoning," or a commitment to seeing the world function under moral social standards with an emphasis on "the greater good." Though not all adults achieve this high level of moral reasoning, in the final book of the *Harry Potter* series, Harry does reach the fifth stage of moral development, and possibly the sixth as well.

The seven novels in the *Harry Potter* series provide plenty of examples where Harry learned a lesson then applied it; this literary phenomenon is another example of Todorov's suppositional transformations. The events that transpire at the beginning of the narrative make a much more complete picture later in the story. Similarly, Dumbledore chooses to reveal information to Harry knowing that it will serve him well later—though he does not have the second sight that Merlyn uses, Dumbledore still is privy to history and memories that are useful to Harry. For example, Harry's private lessons with Dumbledore in *Half-Blood Prince* include information about Voldemort that Harry must know when he encounters the dark wizard later. The information is revealed both to Harry and the reader gradually throughout the series of



novels. Dumbledore also provides Harry with guidance through the many complex experiences he has, in a progressive manner. Like Merlyn accompanies Wart in his transformation to being a fish, Dumbledore joins Harry on a search in a cave for Horcruxes, even asking him to abandon Dumbledore if need be—a proposition at which Harry hesitates. Harry also demonstrates his moral reasoning capabilities when he uses his father James Potter’s Patronus to protect himself and his friends and save many lives, as Dumbledore helps him to understand (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 426). In this way, Harry acts like his father, and Dumbledore—a friend of the Potters—shows Harry his father’s lasting influence on his life.

This Patronus connects to the most poignant demonstration of the way that Dumbledore teaches Harry lessons that affect him later in his educational experience. Harry has seen postconventional self-sacrifice and maturity modeled throughout his childhood through the influence of his absent parents. His own mother, Lily Potter, died to save Harry, prefiguring his own self-sacrifice. However, Dumbledore directly shows Harry these lessons; he explains to Harry in *Sorcerer’s Stone*, “Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love” (299). Because Harry has experienced this kind of love firsthand, and because Dumbledore presents it to his student in a way that shows Harry the potential he has for good as well. The sacrifices of his parents “demonstrate the truth that love is stronger than death. The Potters sacrifice their lives for love of their infant son while Voldemort is reduced to a ghastly living death. An act of hate will always harm the agent while an act of love preserves life” (Deavel and Deavel 58). This truth is present throughout the novel as a transcendent moral theme, and the Potters’ example is communicated effectively to Harry through his conversations with Dumbledore. Harry realizes that in order to make his parents proud—as they surely are when he sees them again in *Deathly Hallows*—he must follow their self-sacrificial examples.

Even at this point in his moral development, Harry has learned to use magic to help others and fulfill a greater ethical purpose, and Dumbledore teaches Harry about his parents' model to help him develop and make moral choices.

One demonstration of Harry's maturation to the postconventional level of moral development is the evidence that he understands that Voldemort, the incarnation of the evil forces in the world, cannot be allowed to continue reigning in the wizarding world; he is evil, and evil forces must be stopped. Because Harry himself contains a small part of Voldemort's soul, he must die in order that good may triumph. Dumbledore's ultimate purpose with Harry is to "teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength" (*Deathly Hallows* 686) in order to allow him to be sacrificed to death, to take a "cold-blooded walk to his own destruction" (*Deathly Hallows* 692) that ultimately restores justice in the world. Though he feels an understandable trepidation about his imminent death, Harry's courage in fighting for the greater good demonstrates his postconventional development.

Harry's conversation with Dumbledore in Book Seven is especially insightful, as he realizes that he had to sacrifice his own life in order to destroy the seventh Horcrux and thus destroy Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore tells Harry, "Your courage won" (*Deathly Hallows* 710), and his courage in the face of death for the sake of the greater good finalizes the killing of Lord Voldemort. Dumbledore encapsulates the postconventional understanding that Harry gains: "you are the true master of death, because the true master does not seek to run away from Death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying" (720). Harry ultimately understands that the battle between good and evil transcends his own life in a sacrifice beyond loyalty to Dumbledore or his friends. In this self-sacrificial action, Harry proves that he is capable of thinking outside of his own moral framework and

understanding, and, due to Dumbledore's consistent influence on him, Harry reaches the postconventional level of moral development. Dumbledore's final lesson is that Harry's pursuit in life should be for justice: "By returning [to the living], you may ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart" (722). This unselfish, highly moral goal is the result of Harry's moral education.

### **Harry's Transfiguration**

Harry's moral development, as influenced by Dumbledore, is the crux of his transformation during his time at Hogwarts. In addition to his education in morality, the scenarios that he finds himself in cause him to be much more focused and serious throughout the series. Behr points out a phenomenon that she calls "narrative transformations" in *Harry Potter*; these provide further evidence that Harry's education has transformed him. In keeping with Todorov's theory of narrative, Behr shows the way that language transforms its context—the charms, such as the "Riddikulus" charm, which allows students to use language to transform their fears into something else; their magical education allows them to learn to control this power (Behr 259). More than the charms, though, she notes the way that on the level of the narrative and the structure of the seven books in the *Harry Potter* series, transformation is embedded into the way that Rowling writes the story as well. For example, the story becomes more serious and intense; Behr explains that once the reader begins to enjoy and understand the wizarding world, "Rowling promptly defamiliarizes it by shifting the tone and effects from comic to menacing. As the series develops, spells or situations that initially seemed amusing or harmless become threatening" (262). She gives examples of characters, such as Cornelius Fudge, and magic, such as Polyjuice Potion, that seem fun and silly at first, drawing in younger readers, are "transformed and corrupted by power as the series continues" (262). Like *The Once and Future King*, these

novels move in a clear trajectory toward grave themes and situations because the content of Harry's education has become more intense. Rowling allows for the characters to change and grow more serious along with the settings around them; in this way, she transforms Hogwarts from a simple, familiar place to a setting for dramatic, dangerous situations. Harry's perception of the world around him transforms in a very similar way, as Behr explains. A recurring pattern in the novels is that "something innocent or incidental in an early book becomes complex, significant, and central to the developing character or plot of a later one" (264). She describes the Sorting Hat as a clear example of Harry's transformation: though the decision between Slytherin and Gryffindor is an insignificant moment in the first book, the moment between Harry and the Sorting Hat in Dumbledore's office in *Chamber of Secrets* carries much more meaning—Behr even labels it the "awakening of Harry's moral consciousness" (264). As Harry continues to learn from his experiences and from Dumbledore's wisdom, he naturally grows more serious, wise, and mature. Harry "transforms from a wide-eyed, innocent schoolboy to a suspicious, angry adolescent and then to a knowledgeable adult" (265). John Granger gives one clear example: in *Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry undergoes significant transformation from the beginning to the end of the school year. At the beginning of the year, he is uncontrollably angry and impulsive: he uses magic to blow up Aunt Marge because he is so frustrated with her, but this same boy "is so much changed that he throws himself in front of Pettigrew, the man who actually betrayed his parents and was almost solely responsible for their deaths" ("Literary Alchemy"). Transformation, then, is not simply an educational process, but a deeply ingrained element of the novels.

The Harry Potter series shows transformation in numerous ways in addition to the clear growth of Harry Potter; the imagery and language of transformation throughout the novel

reinforces the theme of change and growth in the protagonist's life. In other words, the text contains specific words and motifs that connect to one of the books' themes, the transformation of Harry Potter. An study of the series' textual cohesion—a principle of discourse grammar introduced by Halliday and Hassan—reveals that on a structural level, the Harry Potter books contain transformation imagery and language through recurring images of fire and phoenixes. Halliday and Hassan describe instances of reiterated words like this as “hidden information that is relevant to the interpretation of the item concerned” (289). This change is inherent to the works; Charles Taliaferro says in his article about the regeneration of the phoenix, “Rowling actually goes further than most philosophers have in illuminating the process of moving to new life through a kind of death . . . Dumbledore and Harry move to a deeper life by accepting death” (231). Fire is a purifying and changing element, especially in a medieval context, and phoenixes are reborn through fire; the presence of these items in the series deepens the overarching theme of transformation and regeneration. Edmund M. Kern calls the alchemical phoenix a “reconciler of opposites that brings restoration out of destruction—and life out of death” (244). In this way, the phoenix is an image of transformation and resurrection.

One specific scene in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* where this principle is evident is in Dumbledore and Harry's conversation in his office; Harry has been sent to the office to receive punishment for speaking Parseltongue, the language of snakes, and he encounters both Dumbledore and Dumbledore's bird, Fawkes, who is a phoenix. Throughout this singular episode, the word “fire” and synonyms or near-synonyms appear about a dozen times in various contexts, including phrases such as “little puffs of smoke,” “feverishly,” “fireball,” “smoldering pile of ash,” “reborn from the ashes,” and “burning.” These words provide the text with cohesion as a piece of literature; they also point toward a greater theme symbolized by fire

in the series. Fire is often associated with transformation because it is purifying and because it causes change in contexts such as metallurgy; Harry's experiences surely change and purify him under Dumbledore's guidance. As Dumbledore explains in the scene in his office, the phoenix is historically "reborn from the ashes," which is essentially transformation from one state to another through a trial much like death and resurrection. Harry witnesses the process of Fawkes' Burning Day, when Fawkes dies and is reborn from the ashes, a foreshadowing of his own transformation throughout the rest of the novels. Dumbledore's own phoenix Fawkes is a mythological return to the tradition of the phoenix's transformation; Fawkes' rebirth in *Chamber of Secrets* is parallel to Harry's trials by fire, and Dumbledore supports them both through their processes of regeneration. Granger draws a connection here between the purifying power of fire—the science of alchemy<sup>28</sup>—and the "purification and perfection of the soul in Christ and his saving, sacrificial love" (*Looking for God* 126). Christian imagery runs deeply in the symbolism of fire; just as the Christian is purified through the transformative power of fire, Harry must complete trials by fire throughout his adventures, and he ultimately experiences a rebirth in his own ultimate sacrifice to Voldemort.

This theme of fire occurs in other places in the series in word choices and events that are noteworthy, which provides textual cohesion to the entire series and reinforces the symbolism of fire as a cleansing and transformative agent. For example, Harry must pass through a fireplace using Floo powder with the Weasley family (*Chamber of Secrets* 47), Hermione must make it through physical trials by fire in pursuit of the Sorcerer's Stone (284), and Harry's name emerges from the Goblet of Fire (270). In more serious interactions, Sirius communicates with Harry

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<sup>28</sup> Granger offers a more detailed and clear definition of alchemy in this context: "It was a traditional or sacred science, supporting the work of the revealed tradition and its means of grace, for the purification and perfection of the alchemist's soul in correspondence with the metallurgical perfection of a base metal into gold" ("The Alchemist's Tale").

several times through a fireplace in the common room, where a fire always burns (*Order of the Phoenix* 301) and Harry's scar feels like it is on fire when Voldemort is near (*Sorcerer's Stone* 256). Finally, fire blazes in Dumbledore's blue eyes when he is passionate (*Sorcerer's Stone* 261, 292; *Goblet of Fire* 688, 705). The recurrence of fire in so many different situations in Harry's life is both a cohesive device that keeps the entire story connected and a thematic element that symbolizes the transformation—often in the form of trial by fire—that he endures during his education.

### **“Wee Potter’s the One”: Harry as Hero**

The influence of Dumbledore on Harry's life allows Harry to progress in his education; because Dumbledore has allowed him to reach the postconventional stage of development during his final trials, he is able to perform the heroic acts in the final book. Ruth Anne Robbins argues that a defining mark of a hero is that he is on a journey that transforms himself or the environment around him (776); Harry's adventures surely transform him as he follows his guide, Dumbledore.<sup>29</sup> The teacher has modeled the right actions for the student in this situation, and then he has allowed the student to experience his own tests and learning opportunities. Harry reminds himself that “he must be like Dumbledore” (*Deathly Hallows* 695) in one of the most crucial moments in the series. Dumbledore, like Merlin, is already at the postconventional stage, and the cognitive dissonance Harry experiences between his own level of maturity and his desire to follow Dumbledore's example brings Harry to the postconventional phase of moral development.

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<sup>29</sup> In her discussion on heroes, Robbins also cites Dr. Carol Pearson's work. Pearson posited twelve types of heroes, including the magician, and she notes that Dumbledore himself had his own heroic journey before becoming a mentor figure to Harry and passing on the legacy.

### **Conclusion: The Effect of Love**

The lessons that Dumbledore has taught Harry throughout Harry's education ultimately come to fruition in the in the climax of Harry's story, when Harry realizes that his fate is that he must die in order to kill evil. In his confrontation with Voldemort, he says boldly, "You won't be killing anyone else tonight . . . You won't be able to kill any of them ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people . . . I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you" (738). All of his education—from Dumbledore, his adventures, and his parents—must be applied in this moment, and his education throughout the series finally becomes tangible in a situation requiring true self-sacrifice. It is evident throughout the series that a major transformation has taken place in Harry's life; he was once young, impulsive, and unwise; he has become self-sacrificial and a hero to many people at Hogwarts. Surely Rowling modeled this development to her readers in order to show how successful and transformational education can be. The regeneration and development that Harry endures as a student of Dumbledore is a model for both children who are in their own adolescent stages and adults who teach these children.



## CHAPTER FOUR: MERLYN AND DUMBLEDORE IN THE CLASSROOM

Because White and Rowling incorporate an educational framework undergirding the narratives of Merlyn and Dumbledore, and, because these lessons connect to real-world educational concerns and theories, the lessons that these teachers provide are not solely for the edification of the characters in the novels. The relationships between teacher and student are relatable and understandable, and, because they are moral, they are also transformative for their readers. The impact that the virtuous wizards Merlyn and Dumbledore have on their students—to shape them into moral and wise men—is a change that readers can experience for themselves through the act of reading these books.<sup>30</sup> After all, many teachers agree that reading literature can be a natural bridge to discussions of and education about morality in the classroom; students can reason about literature at a level that is appropriate for their place in Kohlberg’s stages of moral development (Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl 199). Reading about characters who reflect a student’s own levels of moral development or higher levels is a valuable educational experience. *The Once and Future King* and *Harry Potter* set an educational model for their readers to follow toward moral development and thus a deeper pursuit into the nature of good and evil.<sup>31</sup>

Both works have garnered high levels of popularity<sup>32</sup> among children and adults, and this popularity has garnered some criticisms as well, especially for the *Harry Potter* series. Using non-canonized, non-classic literature in schools has always been a point of controversy; teaching literature containing magic and sorcery is an even more challenging issue, especially in Christian

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<sup>30</sup> The foundation of this whole theory is that reading spurs the imagination, and that the imagination can prompt true thought. This philosophy is rooted in Aristotelian thinking and is summed up well in the purpose of literature according to Horace: “to teach and delight” (*Ars Poetica*). These works of fiction have delighted children indeed (even to the point that “delight” is on White’s epitaph), and they also function to teach.

<sup>31</sup> Granger furthers this point in *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter*: “Joanne Rowling is a Christian novelist of the Inklings School writing to ‘baptise the imagination’ and prepare our hearts and minds for the conscious pursuit of the greater life in Jesus Christ” (qtd. in Kern 217).

<sup>32</sup> Each book in the Harry Potter series has sold over 50 million copies; *The Sword in the Stone* has been adapted to a Disney movie.

environments. This concern is worth considering briefly, but objections are ultimately insufficient in light of the moral and educational benefits in the works. In 2009, the American Library Association called *Harry Potter* the most banned book in America (Olukotun), and the Internet is replete with discussions and opinion pieces arguing vehemently for and against allowing children to read *Harry Potter* novels in schools—and at all. The debate has settled down lately after the 2011 release of the eighth film, but in December 2015,<sup>33</sup> *The Telegraph* reported that British Government’s behavioral tsar received renewed complaints about *Harry Potter* in the Religious Studies classroom due to the inherent “works of the devil” in magic (Espinoza). However, *Harry Potter* belongs in both literature classrooms and religious discussions.

By allowing these books into the classroom, teachers offer the students the potential for moral development, specifically due to the positive influence of Dumbledore. Many Christians have called Harry an allegory for Christ,<sup>34</sup> and while this comparison may be reasonable, the series can have another impact on children. In both *The Once and Future King* and the *Harry Potter* series, the intensity of the themes does increase; death, violence, war, and infidelity are much more frequent in later pages. So of course, these works demand readers’ maturity and discretion.<sup>35</sup> But these concerns should not exclude the stories from serious Christian

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<sup>33</sup> While it is nearly impossible to address or summarize each religious concern and complaint, Deborah J. H. Taub and Heather L. Servaty-Siev offer a helpful and thorough overview of the many individuals who have offered religious criticisms up to 2009 in their article, “Is Harry Potter Harmful to Children?” published in Elizabeth E. Heilman’s essay collection *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*. A clear explanation of the main religious concerns and arguments can be found in K. W. Kish’s article “Hunting Down Harry Potter: An Exploration of Religious Concerns about Children’s Literature.”

<sup>34</sup> Rowling herself clearly stated in a 2007 press conference, which was first reported by an MTV writer, that these religious connections are justified and apparent: “to me [the religious parallels have] always been obvious” (qtd. in Adler). To her, the epitaphs on his parents’ graves, which contain Matthew 6:19 and 1 Corinthians 15:26, “epitomize the whole series” (qtd. in Adler).

<sup>35</sup> The practice of mindfulness in the classroom has been steadily increasing in popularity during the past ten years as a way to develop children’s emotional intelligence. Another interesting field of study, which is not relevant to the present argument, might be exploring how the characters’ responses to trials such as grief, anger, or sadness inform and help their young readers who are enduring similar struggles.

consideration; from the viewpoint of Christian education, *Harry Potter* is highly valuable in its moral and ethical education of children.<sup>36</sup> Merlyn and Dumbledore become their teachers while they read, and Wart and Kay are their playmates; Harry, Ron, and Hermione are their classmates. Because of the transformative power of the education depicted in these stories, students should read these books in school, and teachers should use these characters as a model for instruction and learning. According to Gonzales and Willems, students can learn from observing fictional characters in action (233). Thus, the act of reading can be transformational and educational—a real-life manifestation of the fantasy themes.

### **“Fight, and Fight Again, and Keep Fighting”: Lessons on Good and Evil**

The moral challenges that arise in these works are just as prevalent in the lives of Wart and Harry as they are in real boys’ lives; thus, contemplating the guidance provided by Merlyn and Dumbledore can be beneficial to readers. Some of the conversation around using *The Once and Future King* in the classroom has shown the novel’s usefulness in conjunction with the Arthurian legends.<sup>37</sup> This theory is important and relevant to a discussion of the utility of teaching *The Once and Future King* in the classroom; however, the work also possesses merit by its own virtue of teaching and delighting its readers. In one case study, Eleanor K. Friedman delved into a unit on King Arthur with her eighth grade class in New York, assigning works ranging from Roger Lancelyn Green’s children’s book *King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table* to *The Once and Future King* and Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s*

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<sup>36</sup> In her article “Does Reading Moral Stories Build Character?”, Darcia Narvaez challenges the notion that reading contributes heavily to a student’s moral development, primarily because readers may understand the lessons at differing reading skill levels and stages of moral development. She also expresses a concern that children may not pick up on the moral lessons intended by the author. However, this refutation only reinforces the importance of literary teacher figures such as Merlyn and Dumbledore, as well as the need for an effective teacher to guide students toward the lessons presented in a work of literature.

<sup>37</sup>For some helpful connections for the classroom, see *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*, vol. 4. Joan Kaywell discusses *The Once and Future King* in Chapter 10.

Court. Her students effectively discussed the necessary history and themes, as she explains in her summary of her findings; but in addition, she found that a discussion of the “Might makes Right” mentality in comparison with the world around them resulted in a discussion about morality (202). She explains that “the children felt that more honor and goodness were needed in the world . . . This led directly into the theme and its deeper meaning” (203). In this study, Friedman offers an example that other teachers could imitate: using White’s modernization of the Arthurian legends can transcend the historical relevance and immerse the students into an evaluation of the world around them. When King Arthur tells Merlyn that he is “beginning to be interested in right and wrong” (234), the reader who has identified with this young man all along can begin to see why it is important to consider themes like this. Binnendyk and Schonert-Reichl suggest that moral dilemmas presented in literature can be used to begin conversations about morality, even challenging students to consider ideas in the next highest level of moral reasoning. Ultimately, teachers can translate these scenarios into real-life situations (200), and viewing a situation through Wart’s eyes or thinking about what Merlyn might say can benefit students.

Similarly, Dumbledore’s lessons instruct young readers in the values of moral thought, choices, and actions. In the midst of the other teachers’ voices throughout the Harry Potter novels, such as Professor Umbridge’s, Dumbledore’s is one of the clearest voices prompting Harry toward higher patterns of thought, and young readers would be wise to listen to his counsel as well. Catherine Jack Deavel and David Paul Deavel clarify that Dumbledore promotes “the choice of the good” (54). He tells Harry and thus the story’s readers, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities” (*Chamber of Secrets* 333). Dumbledore serves as a model of learning and considering challenges through an intelligent

framework (Kern 115) and reasoning through decisions with a high level of morality. Readers who absorb Dumbledore's counsel can learn the importance of decision-making in their own lives as well, and teachers can facilitate the way that their students apply this lesson to their interactions with peers and the world around them.

The choices that Dumbledore encourages often require a complex consideration of good and evil; the Harry Potter series thus requires that its readers also thoughtfully consider good versus evil. The fight between good and evil is the overarching theme of the series, which is typical of adolescent literature; and good must triumph over evil at the end, but only at great cost. Dumbledore's words ring in Harry's ears even after the headmaster's death: "Fight, and fight again, and keep fighting, for only then could evil be kept at bay" (*Half-Blood Prince*). Harry's primary goal is truly to conquer the evil represented by Voldemort, navigating between some of the blurred lines in the meantime. Glanzer explains that through reading *Harry Potter*, students learn the depth of the battle between ultimate good and evil—even though fighting for good sometimes means breaking rules or telling lies in an expression of civil disobedience. This complexity of thought is characteristic of Kohlberg's postconventional stage of moral development. Glanzer writes, "I do not want my sons or my students merely to grapple with ideas of the good. I also want them to learn to choose and fight for the good and against evil. I want them to learn to engage in moral battles" (527). Students can truly benefit when their teachers expose them to the way that Harry confronts evil and reasons through it. Glanzer explains that these lessons are especially relevant to the contemporary classroom: "Rowling provides a clear connection between learning and school activities and a larger moral struggle, something that American public school students may not always perceive. In the wizarding world, what one learns and experiences at school can actually help in the battle between good

and evil” (526). When a classroom teacher allows for discussions about Harry Potter’s themes in the classroom, students can even ask questions about the metaphysical battle between good and evil in the world, and Christian students can delve into an awareness of the presence of God in this battle.<sup>38</sup>

Harry’s battle between good and evil often involves his confrontation of difficult, challenging people, ideas, and situations; Dumbledore intentionally allows for these because in his progressive manner of education, he must allow Harry to experience his own challenges and struggles. In an interview with Stephen Fry, Rowling says that Dumbledore allows Harry to endure certain experiences for the sake of his education—and perhaps by reading them, children can learn these lessons as well:

Dumbledore is a very wise man who knows that Harry is going to have to learn a few hard lessons to prepare him for what may be coming in his life. He allows Harry to get into what he wouldn’t allow another pupil to do and he also unwillingly permits Harry to confront things he’d rather protect him from. As people who’ve read *The Order of The Phoenix* will know; Dumbledore has had to step back from Harry to teach him some of life’s harder lessons.

Readers can endure these experiences—fighting off Voldemort’s return, coping with Sirius Black’s death, and resisting educational disruptions at Hogwarts such as Professor Umbridge’s class—within the safety of their own imaginations and still be transformed by the lessons the stories teach about the battle between good and evil. Behr summarizes M. Katherine Grimes’s

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<sup>38</sup> For a different reading of the battle of good and evil, see Roberta Seelinger Trites’s 2001 article “The Harry Potter Novels as a Test Case for Adolescent Literature.” She reads this struggle between good and evil through a Marxist literary critical lens, explaining the books as a struggle for power, both magical and political, and an attempt to find one’s “place in the power structure” (480). A Christian view is certainly more aware that the struggle is not simply material, but spiritual.

argument, in which she “indicates how this aspect of character development makes a direct appeal to an adolescent and young adult audience, who see Harry as a ‘real boy’ who no longer things solely in black-and-white terms” (265). This complexity of moral thought is healthy and beneficial for students. Thomas Hibbs writes, “Children need more than a set of virtues to emulate, values to choose, or higher forms of moral reasoning to attain. They long to be caught up in a larger struggle between good and evil” (528). Through reading the *Harry Potter* novels in schools, students are caught up in this struggle, and they are in trustworthy care with Dumbledore as their wise guide.

Reading the *Harry Potter* series is beneficial to students, then, by allowing students to identify with characters and formulate ideas; one recent study posited that children who read *Harry Potter* may develop better ethically. This set of three studies published in *Scientific American* in 2014 linked reading the *Harry Potter* books to stronger empathy and compassion in children. This study demonstrated that “Rowling might get at the beautiful, sobering mess of life in a way that could have a meaningful impact on our children’s collective character,” specifically citing the benefits of fantasy literature (Stetka), such as *The Once and Future King* and the *Harry Potter* series. The act of reading these books, learning from Dumbledore like Harry does, can help students become better individuals. The practical application of this increased sense of empathy demonstrated itself when an African-American actress was cast in the role of Hermione in a theater production of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. The conversation that resulted was a testament to the empathy and openness of Rowling fans: they responded with an overwhelming amount of positivity,<sup>39</sup> and Rowling herself replied in an endorsement of the casting: “Canon:

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<sup>39</sup> Harry Potter fans who reacted with empathy show a high level of moral understanding, caring for other human beings out of loyalty to a well-functioning society. For articles showcasing the widely positive reception of the casting, see articles such as “Can Hermione be black? What a stupid question” by Chitra Ramaswamy and a *Time* magazine article “Actually, Harry Potter Fans Have Wondered if Hermione Was Black Before” by Sarah Begley.

brown eyes, frizzy hair and very clever. White skin was never specified. Rowling loves black Hermione” (qtd. in Ramaswamy). Rowling is surely an activist standing up for the rights of marginalized women and children, as we saw in Chapter 2, and her fans appeared to follow suit in their response to this casting. This example is just one way in which the study plays out: readers of *Harry Potter* are empathetic—surely in part because they have read about the empathetic characters in the novels.

### **“You Were the Best”: Following the Wizards’ Examples**

Students are not the only ones who can benefit from reading these works of fantasy; the works’ representations of progressive teachers offers insights into education as well. The professional teaching experiences of both authors, White and Rowling, give them a unique opportunity to speak to other teachers through their writing. Because of their experiences as teachers, these authors make claims through their fiction about education in the world around them. The form of fantasy literature allows for highly imaginative storytelling, and the form of writing allows for their ideas to be read and received long after their writing careers are over. While King Arthur and Harry Potter are occasionally analyzed as heroes following Joseph Campbell’s framework of an archetypal mythic hero, John L. Brown and Cerylle A. Moffett explain in their book *The Hero’s Journey: How Educators Can Transform Schools and Improve Learning* that teachers and educators often follow this journey as well. Teachers follow the transformative journey of the hero to pursue an end goal through chaotic times and glean insights from the quest. It is similarly helpful to approach Merlyn and Dumbledore in order to discover how they effectively educate their students.

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This evidence furthers the previous discussion about Hermione’s character challenging the male-dominated ideas in Kohlberg’s theories.



In *The Once and Future King*, Merlyn's tactics for "education" are at first eccentric; however, his practices ultimately cause Wart to grow up into a brave and noble king. Merlyn reminds us of vital truths; he reminds Wart and thus the reader that education is not "something which ought to be done when all else fails" (White 73-74), and "nobody with any go needs to do their education twice" (74). He demonstrates wisdom in his choices for Wart's transformations into animals, and he models the practice of staying alongside his student during lessons, then turning him loose in the fish and hawk episodes. Later in life, as King Arthur discovers Guenivere's infidelity with Lancelot, White reveals that Merlyn's education has been highly successful, but, in a scene filled with irony, this highly moral education makes him incapable of exacting revenge on Lancelot:

He, unfortunately for himself, had been beautifully brought up. His teacher had educated him as the child is educated in the womb, where it lives the history of man from fish to mammal—and, like the child in the womb, he had been protected with love meanwhile. The effect of such an education was that he had grown up without any of the useful accomplishments for living—without malice, vanity, suspicion, cruelty, and the commoner forms of selfishness . . . He had been given too much love and trust to be good at these things. Arthur . . . was only a simple and affectionate man, because Merlyn had believed that love and simplicity were worth having. (389)

White surely does not mean here that Merlyn's education was ineffective; he has, in fact, been highly effective if he has developed a student who is affectionate, selfless, and incapable of pursuing revenge. The love and simplicity in Merlyn's education seems weak in the face of the mounting difficulties in Arthur's life, but the love and trust infused in King Arthur's education is

what allows him to establish the Knights of the Round Table, fight justly, and pass his wisdom and legacy down to the young boy, Tom. The message that Merlyn conveys to modern readers, then, is that an educator who infuses good morals in his student succeeds at creating a virtuous person and a virtuous leader.

Dumbledore's methods of leadership and education challenge modern educators as well. He is aware of the struggle between good and evil, and he prepares his students well for it. Whited explains that "[p]art of Dumbledore's effectiveness with young people is that he, like Lawrence Kohlberg, is much more concerned with *why* students behave as they do than with the behavior itself" (197). His primary focus is readying Harry for the battle between good and evil, light and darkness that he knows is coming (199). *Harry Potter* readers are surrounded by an educational context where teachers are pressured to focus on standardized tests and struggle with effective student discipline; Dumbledore serves as a reminder that the more important struggle is the reasons behind students' behavior, instead of their surface-level actions, and these motives cannot be measured by tests. Fictional depictions of the struggle between good and evil are not only beneficial to the students, then, but to educators who read and teach the *Harry Potter* series as well.

In many ways, Dumbledore embodies a modern style of leadership that greatly contributes to his success: transformational leadership. This style of leadership was first introduced by scholar James MacGregor Burns; he reframed leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers, not simply a set of rules for leaders to follow, and he insisted that leadership must primarily be moral. A transformational leader draws trust and loyalty from those who follow him, and Dumbledore is a trusted figure (*Prisoner of Azkaban* 91) for whom all the Hogwarts students feel a deep sense of respect. In return, Dumbledore has a postconventional

understanding of his student that influences how he handles his educational role. When he detects an injustice in Cornelius Fudge's treatment of Harry, he explodes with passion:

'You are blinded,' said Dumbledore, his voice rising now, the aura of power around him palpable, his eyes blazing once more, 'by the love of the office you hold, Cornelius! You place too much importance, and you always have done, on the so-called purity of blood! You fail to recognize that it matters not what someone is born, but what they grow to be!'" (*Goblet of Fire* 707-708)

Dumbledore is not as concerned with the positions that he and Harry hold as he is with the potential transformation in Harry's life. Transformational leadership causes the teacher to bring out the best in the student (Barbour); Dumbledore surely believes the best about Harry and draws out his strengths.

Dumbledore's relationship to Harry, then, is a significant factor in the transformation of the student. JoAnn Danelo Barbour explains transformational leadership as a push toward greater values: "Through a teaching role, leaders help followers understand, adopt, and unite toward the pursuit of 'higher' goals rather than immediate needs and wants." She continues that transformational leaders are "[m]ost interested in end values of liberty, justice, and equality." Dumbledore's primary interests are surely the prevalence of justice and the formation of Harry, and he believes very strongly in the potential within Harry. Dumbledore's transformational leadership spurs Harry to a higher drive for morality and justice, and when an injustice arises with Professor Umbridge teaching only theory, not skill, Harry is prepared to address the injustice with the formation of Dumbledore's Army, a group of students focused on learning new

magical skills that will help them fight against Voldemort's army.<sup>40</sup> Harry was once a student, and with the formation of Dumbledore's Army, he becomes a teacher.

The applications of this leadership theory to the classroom are abundant, even if they are not readily apparent; Dumbledore sets the example of an educator whose leadership transforms the students around him and challenges his students, or followers, to higher morals, and in doing so, he establishes a strong moral education. His methods align with a progressive approach, allowing Harry to have many experiences on his own and offering moral guidance when necessary. Glanzer says that specifically, public school teachers "should be challenged by Rowling's provocative moral world, but they should also think about how to borrow something from it that would embolden the moral education they provide" (525). Dumbledore's model is worth borrowing from, as it has been proven to have an immense effect on the transformation of Harry from a boy into a heroic figure.

### **Conclusion**

Merlyn and Dumbledore are deeply engaged in the holistic education of their students; they transform young children into heroic, brave men. Renee Dickinson writes, "Hogwarts' learning culture . . . favors the annihilation of direct instruction in preference for practical life experience. The pedagogies of the teachers, rather than educating the students in their subjects, often force the students to teach themselves" (240). Teachers such as Dumbledore are always available for instruction and guidance, but much of the education occurs through the student's own initiative. Watching this process unfold throughout the novels can be instructive for both students and teachers. Merlyn creates a similar environment, in which Wart is constantly

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<sup>40</sup> Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe compares Harry's behavior in the creation of Dumbledore's Army to Henry V: "I think the Dumbledore's Army sequences really lift the film [*Order of the Phoenix*] in tone, as you see Harry go from this quite reluctant leader to this Henry V character who is stirring up the troops" (Vineyard).

thinking of new ideas for his education and Merlyn simply facilitates the scenarios in which Wart's learning takes place. White and Rowling effectively use their teacher figures to show their readers how they believe the educational relationship should function, and the lessons learned in the stories are available and ready to be put into practice by students and teachers alike.

## CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMING THE FUTURE

This study is meaningless if it does not carry Truth, and on the surface, the frameworks and literature discussed in this thesis do not appear to lend themselves to a Christian discussion of education. Though these children's fictional works are written for adolescent audiences, *Harry Potter* includes witchcraft, and *The Once and Future King* depicts sexual infidelity and war. Christians may find it challenging to reconcile the reading of secular books and the development of strong Christian students. But children are reading these books anyway, and they should be. *The Once and Future King* has found its place among the classics of Arthurian literature, and *Harry Potter* has become an international sensation that is difficult to compare to anything else. Christians should actively, gladly engage with works like these in academic and popular realms, knowing that these works contain Truth and Beauty because they are artfully written and they prioritize ethical, moral decisions. Furthermore, reading these specific series shows children a clear model of an effective progressive education and a healthy relationship between an older male figure and a young, developing boy. Strong mentoring relationships are undeniably a crucial part of a child's development. Many people are pushing for stronger mentors in inner-city schools and poor areas because they have clearly recognized the necessity of strong older figures, especially for young boys. Even Jesus models this discipleship relationship in the Bible, as he taught through his lifestyle and through telling stories to convey moral truths. The relationship between an older, wiser person and a young person is transformative, and reading about these characters can be transformative for young readers as well, as this project has suggested.

In future research, an analysis of the moral education of other main characters in the *Harry Potter* series, or even in *The Once and Future King*, would be pertinent. Harry's best

friend Ron develops morally in a significant but different way than Harry, so evaluating how he develops morally as a result of Dumbledore's influence could be an interesting approach to moral development in *Harry Potter*. Kohlberg's stages appear to place Harry in a higher position than Ron and Hermione; is there any possibility that they both achieve a high status of development in different ways? In addition, the novels show Hermione pushing for moral deeds like saving the house elves, which is a social good. Her feminine, nurturing qualities change the dynamics of Kohlberg's theory in ways that Kohlberg's male-centric theory did not anticipate. This theory, then, deserves to be challenged in light of the strong figure of Hermione. Similarly, Kay develops morally in a different way than Wart does—arguably because he lacks Merlyn's direct tutelage. It would also be interesting to conduct a survey similar to Kohlberg's moral dilemma questions before and after a reading of White's or Rowling's works. I mentioned one Italian study that demonstrated character improvements in students who read *Harry Potter*; this study could be expanded with further studies about deeper moral questions to evaluate students' understanding of morality as a result of reading the *Harry Potter* books. Such a study could also analyze students' beliefs about the manifestation of power in leadership as a result of reading *The Once and Future King*, and these results could even be considered in light of the political context of White's publication. Clearly, these two works demand further thought and discussion; such discussion can spur more conversation about the power of reading and the power of education on a child's life.

White's and Rowling's works have transformed the genres in which they were written; White, like Mark Twain, offered a generation of students access to the old stories about King Arthur, and Rowling introduced the power of imagination and friendship to a new generation of children. More importantly, however, these two authors introduced powerful examples of

effective educators, showing a dramatic transformation in the lives of Wart and Harry—and teachers and students will be wise to take notice.



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