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## **J. K. Rowling: The Scary Similarities of Voldemort and Hitler**

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1 was released on November 19, 2010, by Warner Bros. Pictures as the seventh movie in the very popular eight movie series. The movie was directed by David Yates and produced by J.K. Rowling, the author of the beloved Harry Potter book series. The series as a whole earned around \$7.7 billion dollars at both domestic and international box offices, and the movie itself earned around \$960 million dollars around the world, proving its universal appeal ("Harry Potter," n.d.). The movie also got praise from many different critics like Lisa Schwarzbaum (2012), who called the movie "the most cinematically rewarding chapter yet."

The setting of the movie is a magical version of 1990s Britain. The action-packed, fictional movie tells the story of the adventure taken on by Harry and his two best friends: Ron and Hermione. Harry is almost 17 years old, so he will soon have to forfeit the magical protection he has enjoyed as a child. Therefore, he and his friends have transitioned out of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and have begun a race against time and some powerful forces of dark magic to defeat Voldemort, the monster that has been chasing Harry since Harry nearly killed him as an infant 16 years earlier. The only problem is that Voldemort is stronger and more powerful than ever. He has infiltrated the Ministry of Magic and is persecuting Muggle-born wizards every day in an effort to achieve racial purity. Throughout their journey, Harry and his friends face many harrowing obstacles, such as Death Eaters and the mysterious Deathly Hallows, and their journey towards defeating Voldemort is still far from over when this movie ends. Therefore, the movie serves as a transition to the ultimate battle between Harry and Voldemort that takes place in part two of the movie, released the following year. (Barren, Heyman, & Rowling & Yates, 2010).

Although the presence of deep societal issues is not a typical characteristic of fantasy movies, beneath the magically captivating surface of this movie lie a couple of deeper issues for more matured audiences: racial purity and references to Nazism. These ideas of racial purity and references to Nazism are intertwined throughout the entire movie, and they are constantly linked to one monstrous figure in particular: Voldemort. He is hungry for power, and he will do anything to get that power, even kill innocent people. As Harry and his friends try to stop Voldemort, the teenage and adult audiences become so engrossed in the adventure that they look past the severity of Voldemort's doings. However, the academic audience of the film soon begins to make an analytical connection between Voldemort's quest for power and the rise to power of another evil figure: Adolf Hitler. They search for Rowling's intended purpose of the references and soon find that Rowling is comparing Voldemort to the ultimate definition of evil, which is Hitler. A closer analysis of Voldemort and his actions and Harry and his journey against these actions raises three serious questions: How similar are Voldemort and Hitler? What role does Harry play in the familiar connection made between these two villains? What do these similarities say about American culture?

The Harry Potter series has been known to produce a sense of magic since the first movie in the series was released. It is known as one of the most fantastical series of all time; however, it also creates a sense of reality for its viewers as they can relate to the main characters. The

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Harry Potter movies have been known to appeal to audiences of all ages, especially young adults. These young adults can relate to Harry's coming of age since it is something a lot of them are experiencing, as well. According to American cinema theorist and cultural critic Vivian Sobchack (2014), fantasy-action movies like *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* produce a sense of "magical thinking" in the audience that contribute to the popularity of these movies. The movie takes the audience on a journey and forces them to unlock their imaginations and become kids again. Prominent author George O'Hare (2000) reinforces this point when he claims that young adults are captivated by the magic of Harry Potter and the freedom from the outside world that they experience while watching the movie.

In American culture today, every good fantasy movie displays some sort of battle between good and evil or protagonist and villain. In this case, the villain in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* contributes to the great success of the movie because of the mystery, suspense, and danger he brings. The villain is Lord Voldemort, a pasty white, noseless figure who sends chills down viewers' backs (Barren, Heyman, & Rowling & Yates, 2010). Lord Voldemort, also known as Tom Marvolo Riddle, plays a prominent role in all of the Harry Potter movies, particularly in the later movies because he is stronger and a bigger threat to Harry. Lord Voldemort is a half-blooded wizard who was an orphan as a child. Voldemort developed a hatred for Muggle-born wizards because of his experience as an orphan. His father, a muggle named Tom Riddle Sr., abandoned Voldemort as a child after his witch mother died. Voldemort believed that if his father was a wizard, he would not have left. Therefore, he associated not having magic with being weak. He viewed pure-blood wizards as superior to all even though he was not a pure blood himself (Jenkins, 2016).

Voldemort showcased his hatred for Muggle-born, or mud blood, wizards from the very beginning of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* when he infiltrated and gained control over the Ministry of Magic, the government of the wizard world. He soon formed a Muggle-Born Register Commission to force all of the Muggle-born witches and wizards to register with the Ministry. Once Voldemort and his followers had the Muggle-borns identified, the commission tortured, imprisoned, interrogated, and sometimes killed them as they were trying to find out how the muggle-borns "stole" their magical power from other wizards (Barren, Heyman, & Rowling & Yates, 2010). According to author Tiffany Walters (2015), the purpose "for the creation of race categories in Harry Potter (as in other historical situations) was to create and sustain a social hierarchy." Walters asserts through this statement that Voldemort created this commission to develop a racial pecking order. Voldemort wanted to be at the top of this hierarchy because of his lowly beginnings. The creation of the commission was an assertion of his power and the power of the strong pure-blooded wizards around him. He used the commission and its actions to build up his strength and power and decrease the power of wizards who were not like him so that he would ultimately be ready to win his final showdown with Harry, which would give him full control over the wizarding world (Barren, Heyman, & Rowling & Yates, 2010).

Most educated viewers find Lord Voldemort's ideology and actions to be strangely familiar. They wonder where they have heard the story of a dictator striving for racial purity by killing thousands of innocent people, and immediately, one name pops into mind: Adolf Hitler. Surprisingly, these two villains are similar in many ways, including their pasts. Hitler came from a background full of poverty and abuse, and Voldemort had his fair share of struggles, as well. Both of their pasts are what ultimately motivated them to do what they did to those whom they despised (Jenkins, 2016). Joshua Cornell Jenkins (2016), a former college student at the

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University of South Carolina Upstate, asserts that “one of the most striking similarities between the two [Voldemort and Hitler] lies in their blood.” Jenkins implies through this statement that although Hitler had dark hair, blue eyes, and was rather short, Hitler still thought that the “tall, strong, blond haired and blue eyed Aryan race” was superior (Jenkins, 2016). Jenkins also asserts that even though Voldemort was a half-blooded wizard, he valued pure blooded wizards as the superior race. Strangely enough, they both valued races that they were not a part of. Finally, the two are eerily similar in their treatment of the races they oppose. Hitler went as far as to make all the Jews register and be accounted for during World War II, which is also what Voldemort did to the Muggle-borns with his Muggle Born Registration Commission. Hitler persecuted Jews by imprisoning, torturing, and killing them, just like Voldemort did to the Muggle-born wizards (Jenkins, 2016). Brian Scott Johnson (2010), a prominent scholar at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, describes Nazi leaders as, “seduced by the thrill of world domination, and because of this seduction have lost sight of the human costs for their schemes.” This description perfectly fits not only Hitler, who was a Nazi leader, but also Voldemort. In the film, Voldemort has become focused on getting control of the wizarding world, and he is relentlessly killing innocent people to gain power for himself, which is exactly what Hitler did to the Jewish people during the Holocaust (Barren, Heyman, & Rowling & Yates, 2010).

Harry also plays a familiar role when he battles against Voldemort's actions in the film. Harry comes in as the United States did in World War II. Both Harry and the United States were young and strong. The United States was the only hope to defeat the Germans just like Harry was the only hope to preserve the wizarding world by defeating Voldemort. The United States was pushed into the war by the bombing of Pearl Harbor just like Harry was pushed into the war with Voldemort when Voldemort tried to kill him and did kill his parents 16 years earlier. Harry, like the United States, took a beating throughout the war, but he showed resiliency and fought until the very end. During World War II, the United States had allies to aid them in defeating Germany just like Germany had allies to aid them in defeating the United States. In the movie, Harry's friends, Ron and Hermione, helped him throughout his journey to defeat Voldemort, and Voldemort had his followers, also called the Death Eaters, who helped him in his attempt to defeat Harry and take over the Ministry of Magic. In the end, it is magic and ingenuity that helps Harry win the war, and ingenuity also helped the United States win World War II (Barren, Heyman, & Rowling & Yates, 2010).

Some viewers may wonder what the purpose of the Nazi references and the presence of racial purity in the film is. They question what J.K. Rowling meant through these references and what she was trying to say about American culture when she wrote the storyline of the film. Scholar Brian Johnson gives the viewers insight into Rowling's purpose in his dissertation 'Just Like Hitler': Comparisons to Nazism in American Culture. According to Johnson (2010), Nazi references are “nearly ubiquitous in American culture.” He implies through this statement that Nazi references are in films, video games, music, and books. He also mentions in his essay that the Nazi references and representations of Hitler are “indicators of a national conversation surrounding definitions of good and evil.” He asserts through this statement that Americans associate Nazism and Hitler with being evil, so they use Nazi references and representations of Hitler to display and categorize certain actions and people as evil. In other words, in movies, television, and books, Hitler and Nazism fulfill the role of the typical definition of evil. Therefore, in this particular Harry Potter movie, Rowling's goal is to associate Voldemort with the ultimate definition of evil, which in the eyes of Americans is Hitler. She wants the audience to fear Voldemort, and she accomplishes this goal by comparing him to a villain like Hitler. In contrast,

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she compares Harry to the United States to bolster support for Harry in his fight against this ultimate image of evil. She ultimately makes the comparison to the United States to set Harry up as the ultimate symbol of good in the eyes of Americans.

In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, the young adult audience is taken on a wild adventure to save the wizarding world with their beloved friend Harry Potter. In order to save the wizarding world and Harry's life, the nearly invincible villain named Voldemort must be defeated. Voldemort has strengthened himself by killing muggle-born wizards in an attempt to achieve racial purity. The educated viewers of the movie notice a unique correlation between Voldemort's actions and the role of Harry in response to these actions. The audience quickly realizes and begins to compare Voldemort's actions with those of Adolf Hitler and Harry's role with that of the United States in World War II. Still, the audience struggles to understand what J.K. Rowling was trying to tell them through these Nazi references and ideas of racial purity. Scholar Dana Berthold (2010) sums up Rowling's general purpose when she claims that Americans live in a "racist, unhealthy culture." She implies later in her essay that Americans are the only ones who can change this culture that they live in. Americans are called by Rowling to take action against the evils of racial purity in this popular movie as well as many others; it just might take some analysis and comparison to find that call to action.

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