

# Anthropocentrism in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*

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## **Abstract**

A deep ecological examination of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* sheds light on the ongoing issues such as anthropocentrism, climate change, concise living and coexistence in the world. The novel is not only rich in fantasy but also in magical animals, magical plants, and even magical beings, which provide a clear jumping off point for the discussion. The study centres on humans and their relationship with environment, especially in how they interact with the animals, the plants, and the other beings in the magical world, and explicitly deals with the relationships between these different beings.

**Keywords:** Harry Potter, J. K. Rowling, Deep Ecology, Anthropocentrism, Minimalism.

## **Introduction**

Understanding the environment is essential for every human being to create harmony and peace in this world. Literature embraces a special place in depicting deep ecology and its requisite. This article employs a deep ecological perspective to analyse J. K. Rowling's novel *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* and sheds light on the ongoing issues such as anthropocentrism, climate change, concise living, and coexistence in the world. The novel is not only rich in fantasy but also in magical animals, magical plants, and even magical beings. This article centres on the human and the environment, especially their relationship with and treatment of animals, plants, and other beings in the magical world. Through the lens of deep ecology, an anthropocentric viewpoint is analysed in the article.

Anthropocentrism, also known as humanocentrism, human supremacy, or human exceptionalism, situates the human above every other living organism on the planet. The concept of equality among the living things has been the subject of increasing debate among scholars, especially those of philosophy. Deep ecology is one theory that calls for an ecologically

equalised future by addressing the issues from the grass-root level, so to speak. Technocratic anthropocentric approaches such as recycling, technological help for environment, and resource management mimic corporate environmentalism, but ultimately fail to address root causes such as cultural and social norms and specific lifestyles, especially of the wealthy, that are a threat to the ongoing environmental emergency.

The issue of anthropocentrism has received attention particularly in the wake of rising concern regarding climate change. Clive Hamilton, an Australian academic, writes particularly about the failures of anthropocentric worldviews. In *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change* he writes, “Humanity’s determination to transform the planet for its own material benefit is now backfiring on us in the most spectacular way, so that the climate crisis is for the human species now an existential one.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, environmental issues are not confined to academics alone. Many artists also use their work to call for increased awareness of interspecies cooperation. There is a note of warning about the works of many classical writers, including Marcel Theroux, William Golding, and J. R. R. Tolkien. The *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling in particular showcases the relationship between human and non-human world. Though there is an excessive amount of research on the *Harry Potter* franchise, the plethora of animal references in the *Harry Potter Series* has thus far gone unnoticed. The myriad animal and plant references are not unconscious settings in the magical world; the author aims to emphasize the crucial role of nature in human life. The concept of deep allows for exploration of the natural setting in *Harry Potter*, with reference to the traumatic environmental crisis in the contemporary world.

### **An Introduction to Deep Ecology**

The study of deep ecology pushes the human-centred approach to the periphery. For survival, humans approach nature; otherwise, it would lead to a shallow ecology. Profound and undeniable worship of nature is the ultimate goal in deep ecology. Interdependence, interconnectedness, respect, and

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<sup>1</sup> C. Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change* (London: Earthscan, 2010), p. xiii.

mutual understandings of living organisms are among the topics discussed in this field. Deep ecology is quite opposite to Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest, as it places value on all living things.

Human-Animal Studies is an interdisciplinary approach in deep ecology that deals with the relationship between human and nonhuman animals; whereas Critical Plant Studies approaches philosophy and literature about floral life. Human-Animal Studies does not define animals in their usefulness to humans, but considers them equal beings to humans. In the same way, essential awareness, ethical perception and ideal rigor about the vegetational life are examined in Critical Plant Studies. Both Human-Animal Studies and Critical Plant Studies echo the concept that the deep ecology of every living organism is equal in the world and has intrinsic value. The deep study of ecology is especially pertinent due to the major environmental shifts happening at rapid speed in the living Earth.

The eight principles of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess's deep ecology are an essential framework for the values of deep ecology. A Gandhian follower, Naess is a biocentrist who sees environment as a part of one's self. He is the champion of deep ecology who postulates its principles:

1. Inherent value. All life has value in itself, independent of its usefulness to humans.
2. Diversity. Richness and diversity of life help the realization of these values and are valuable in themselves.
3. Vital needs. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Population. The impact of humans in the world are excessive and getting worse. Human lifestyles and population are key elements of this impact.
5. Human Interference. The diversity of life and cultures can flourish only with reduced human impact.
6. Policy change. Policies affecting basic economic, technological and ideological structures must change. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the current situation.
7. Quality of Life. The ideological change involves appreciating life quality rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living.
8. Obligation of Action. People who adhere to the deep ecology movement have to or try to be obligated to the changes in life.<sup>2</sup>

This framework is a significant tool in analysing approaches to the

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<sup>2</sup> Arne Naess, 'The Deep Ecology "Eight Points" Revisited', in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1995), pp. 213 – 221.

environment, especially in works of literature.

### **Harry Potter and the Anthropocene**

Based on Naess's principle of human interference, we can start to analyse how the natural world is represented in *Harry Potter*. To begin with, we will consider the topic of the Anthropocene; the period of geologic time when human activity began to have a significant impact on the Earth and the environment. The Anthropocene is generally agreed to have begun during the industrial revolution, when humans first began their mass reliance on fossil fuels and the production of large amounts of waste. Since then, humans have only moved to larger scales of production, and the impact on the environment has been immeasurable. This idea of mass waste and harm is present throughout *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*. Deep ecological principles such as quality of life, vital needs and population growth are explicitly evidenced in the novel.

The industrial revolution saw momentous change in class relations as the wealthy began to rely on workers to produce their capital. With wealth came the desire to consume more and more, leading to the consumerist paradigm that currently defines capitalism. The consumerist mindset of Harry's cousin Dudley leads him to expect more birthday presents every year.

Dudley, meanwhile, was counting his presents. His face fell. 'Thirty-six,' he said looking up at his mother and father. 'That's two less than last year.' ... Aunt Petunia obviously scented danger too, because she said quickly, 'And we'll buy you another *two* more presents while we're out today.'<sup>3</sup>

Even the two bedrooms owned by Dudley—one for him and another for his possessions—are evidence of Dudley's consumerist mindset, which is only encouraged by his parents. This is of course perpetuated with no concern for its environmental impact.

The novel showcases the overuse of resources not only in the muggle world, but also in the magical world. Similar to the Dursleys', Hogwarts School has a sumptuous and extraordinary food feast for special occasions, such as the beginning of term, Christmas, Hallowe'en, and the end of the year.

Harry's mouth fell open. The dishes in front of him were now piled with food. He had never seen so many things he liked to eat on one

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<sup>3</sup> J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 22.

table: roast beef, roast chicken, pork chops, lamb chops, sausages, bacon and steak, boiled potatoes, roast potatoes, chips, Yorkshire pudding, peas, carrots, gravy, ketchup and, for some strange reason mint humbugs.<sup>4</sup>

Population growth is another important aspect in the study of the Anthropocene. Human population overshadows every other species in the world, and our use of resources only worsens the issue. Rowling elaborates this idea through the Weasley family. When compared to other families in the novel, Weasley's family is outgrown at seven members – four boys and one girl – and various incidents in the novel critics the size of the family. Indeed, population growth harms nature but in the case of the Weasley family, they are more sustainable than most. They notably reuse items like wands, schoolbooks, and school robes, either passing them on to younger siblings or buying second-hand materials.

Nature is much more problematized in *Harry Potter*. Though Albus Dumbledore is a witty, skilled wizard in the Harry Potter world, he too exploits nature. The praise for his abilities and temperament is abundantly found throughout the works of Harry Potter; yet Dumbledore's subtle anthropocene remark presents the hidden anthropocentric nature: "Scars can come in useful. I have one myself above my left knee which is a perfect map of the London Underground."<sup>5</sup> This remark hints at his desire for property or for control over the land. In recent times, a number of wars are waged for the piece of land which ultimately creates more waste and damage to the mother Earth. The wars are not confined to the muggle world where non-magic people live, but also in the wizarding world. The various wars waged against dark wizards such as Voldemort have their own impact on the environment, destroying it through use of destructive magic. As such, it can be seen that wizards as well as muggles have a negative impact on the environment.

One such incident is vividly pictured in the very first chapter in the novel. When Harry was one year old, there was a battle in the wizarding world between Voldemort and Harry's parents. This personal war claimed many lives and disturbs the natural world. Owls frantically fly over cities in daylight to many places, contrary to their natural nocturnal behaviour.

And finally, bird-watchers everywhere have reported that the nation's owls have been behaving very unusually today. Although owls hunt at night and are hardly ever seen in daylight, there have been hundreds of sightings of these birds flying in every direction since sunrise.

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<sup>4</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 16.

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Experts are unable to explain why the owls have suddenly changed their sleeping pattern.<sup>6</sup>

It is evidently proved that human intervention changes the nature of the birds.

Humans not only stop with owls. In zoos, they confine animals in an artificial environment as opposed to their habitat. While some do focus on conservation and rehabilitation, many zoos are for-profit and exploit their animals. For Dursley's birthday celebration they go to a zoo. Dudley takes pleasure in mocking the captive animals, particularly provoking the boa constrictor to move. His father also joins to disturb the snake. The irony is that the placard says the snake is a boa constrictor from Brazil, but as the snake informs Harry, it has never seen Brazil in its life. From this situation Rowling wants to emphasize that the zoo animals have to be valued in their own inherent value but not as an entertainer for the human.

Diversity in the natural environment is encouraged to maintain the environmental equilibrium. This encouragement in environmental diversity is seen in the magical school. They allow pet animals to be with them in lodging areas which inculcate coexistence from their childhood. They have a separate shop for pet animals such as owls, rats, cats, and toads. The students accompanying their pet animals to school separates animals from the natural world. Still in the boarding school, the animals lodging with the students never harms the animals' natural habitat experience. The pet animals are allowed to have their basic needs. The incorporation of pet animals in boarding school creates a bond which pays way for coexistence between the human and the animal world. In particular, Ron is very sceptical about his pet rat, Scabbers, and even Neville's toad. He says, "If I'd brought a toad I'd lose it as quick as I could. Mind you, I brought Scabbers, so I can't talk."<sup>7</sup> In contrast to Ron, Harry and Hermione are very protective about their pets, the owl Hedwig and the cat Crookshanks, respectively.

The authority of humans is not just on living creatures. The apothecary is full of dead animals and other dried living organisms for procuring raw materials for potion making. Here, animals are sacrificed so humans can experiment. In response to this kind of anthropocentrism, Naess propounds the counter idea for loss of environment as biospheric egalitarianism, which states that the needs of the entire environment and humanity are imperative. Like humans, the environment also must preserve its privileges to survive on the planet in future. Diversity solitarily maintains the equilibrium of the

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<sup>6</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 111.

earth. Even at Halloween feast, thousands of live bats are put in for the decoration of a hall which evidently proves the anthropocentric nature of the people.

Large numbers of animals are used in Hogwarts School for teaching, particularly for Transfiguration and Potions. Transfiguration is a subject in Hogwarts School in which students learn about how to transform one thing into another, including animals. This is the violation into the animal world, described by Naess as human intervention. Transfiguration may be a hazardous and complex form of magic that can destabilise the nature of living organisms. Professor McGonagall teaches Transfiguration in Hogwarts where she demonstrates the transformation of a pig from a table. In Rowling's words, "Then she changed her desk into a pig and back again. They were all very impressed and couldn't wait to get started, but soon realized they weren't going to be changing the furniture into animals for a long time."<sup>8</sup> The disappearance of a living thing is highly neglected, which is clearly evident. "Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuff-box - points were given for how pretty the snuff-box was, but taken away if it had whiskers."<sup>9</sup> Another subject in Hogwarts School is Potions, which focuses less on magic and more on chemistry. This class uses a lot of dried animals and plants, and detailed steps to be followed to achieve the desired potion. Life-saving potions can be made, but they may use materials derived from animals.

When considering the relationship between humans and animals in *Harry Potter*, the existence of Animagi is highly significant. When a wizard becomes an Animagus, they can transform into an animal and come back into their original state at will. The foremost Animagus introduced in the novel is Professor McGonagall, who can turn into a cat. Wizards or witches changing to animal form challenge the order of nature. As a cat, Professor McGonagall cannot really act as an animal, as she is still essentially human. They might move among the clan and try to control or use it, which shows how supreme humans are. Notably, animals cannot learn to transform into humans.

Human intervention is not just limited to the human world; it is terrible in the magical world too. In this novel the exploitation of magical animal unicorns is well defined. Unicorn is shown as a powerful magical creature, and it is believed that blood has astonishing healing and even necromantic properties. Voldemort's lust for eternal life induces him to commit the

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<sup>8</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 281.

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heinous crime of drinking unicorn blood which strengthens him for his rebirth in a human body.

'That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn,' said Firenze. 'Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenceless to save yourself and you will have but a half life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips'.<sup>10</sup>

The life with unicorn blood is everlasting, yet sinful to the core. The inherent value of unicorns in the magical environment is irreplaceable. The inhumane act of harming the soft, charming, yet powerful creature casts a shadow on humanity. This is contacted by Rubeus Hagrid, the champion of animal welfare in *Harry Potter*, as he mourns the death of the unicorn and ensures the safety of all other animals on the grounds.

Humans are a part of the complicated maze of life in the world. The damage to the natural environment is an indirect way of damaging human existence. Voldemort complicates the natural world in his desire for eternal life. He kills a unicorn for his own benefit, but even then he is not fulfilled. No one can separate the human and the environment from one another.

Besides plenty of animal references, the wizarding world also has a number of distinct plants that are exploited in various ways. This can primarily be seen in the use of wands. The making of wand creates an imbalance in the environment because it uses different kinds of animal hairs or horns and trees to produce the core of it.

The setting of Hogwarts School is far away from the madding crowd from a human point of view; nevertheless, they intrude into the forest where the ecological system would otherwise not be disturbed. Although they march into the skirts of the forest, they lay a border not to cross into the forbidden forest from the pupils of the school. The vegetation in the forbidden forest is immense, as even Hagrid does not explore it fully. It is from this very forest that they source trees for events such as Christmas, and older pupils sometimes venture into the forest for their studies. Even younger students such as Harry, Ron, and Draco are made to enter as punishment for misbehaviour.

### *Supernatural Beings*

The novel further expresses the idea of anthropocentrism through its

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<sup>10</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 277.



treatment of non-human supernatural beings. These include goblins, giants, trolls, ghosts, and centaurs. These magical creatures deserve equal treatment which is one of the core principles in deep ecology. Each living organism has their own role to play in the world in spite of their usefulness to humans. Humans have to accept the feeling of oneness with the part of the whole nature and not as a separate entity.

Unfortunately, not all magical creatures are treated equally. Equal treatment of other living things irrespective of its usefulness to the human is not noticed both in the magical and muggle world. Gringotts is a wizard's bank operated by goblins. While they depend on goblins, wizards distrust them. As Hagrid says to Harry regarding Gringotts: "Yeah – so yeh'd be mad ter try an' rob it, I'll tell yeh that. Never mess with goblins, Harry. Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anything yeh wan ter keep safe – 'cept maybe Hogwarts."<sup>11</sup> Giants have a similar fate, being seen as unequal to humans. Dumbledore is notable for his kindness towards giants, employing the half-giant Hagrid and trusting him with highly important tasks. Although Dumbledore respects every living organism, he uses Hagrid to do important works that wizards cannot handle. Indirectly Dumbledore uses Hagrid to submit to his command, demonstrating that while he displays sympathy towards non-humans, he still participates in their exploitation.

Hagrid is an avid lover of animals, especially exotic animals, and does not value animals according to their benefit for society. He frequently puts himself in harm's way for the sake of aiding animals. One such incident is his role in nurturing a dragon egg until he hatches. Mainly, he shares his enthusiasm with his trio of friends, Harry, Ron and Hermione. They also start to show an avid interest in the hatching of the dragon egg. This demonstrates that he is passing down his attitude towards animals. Similarly, Fluffy is a three-headed dog who guards a trap door in one of Hogwarts' many rooms. Hagrid may not harm animals, but he still allows wizards to use Fluffy for their own purposes. This shows Hagrid is also not free from anthropocentric behaviour, though for the most part he lives fairly with nature. Hagrid is the epitome of correlation, interconnectedness, reverence, and deep understanding of other non-humans in the world.

Centuars are magical beings that reside in Hogwarts' Forbidden Forest. They have the body of a horse and human head and pay close attention to the environment around them, being particularly passionate about astronomy. Juxtaposing the wizards' supremacy above other magical

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<sup>11</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 68.

creatures, centaurs believe that they are above wizards and view them as lowly. They are also very protective of their environment, clearly showing their displeasure for someone intruding the forest area. When Hagrid goes in search of the predator who causes the unicorn to suffer blood loss, he tags along with a few of Hogwarts pupils with him. This displeases the centaurs in the forest: "Centaur's are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our Forest!"<sup>12</sup> This causes an argument between the centaurs, as they cannot reach on a consensus on how they should treat humans, ironically reflecting the way humans approach the environment.

Many aspects of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* contrast one another to emphasise the author's attitudes. The concept of reuse is represented through Harry's life with Dursley's and in the magical world by Weasley's family. In the childhood of Harry Potter, he uses most of Dudley's dresses and materials, never receiving anything new. Emotionally he may not be ready to accept the state as a sensible one, but in fact it is beneficial for the environment. The same goes for Ron, who is always cynical about the reuse of materials or books in his family. In the modern minimalist lifestyle, people are willingly taking these options instead of being imposed on them like Harry and Ron by their respective family members in the novel.

The magical world has an economical way of delivering the letters i.e., by owl post. They send or receive through the owl, which saves much pollution in the world and welcomes the idea of coexistence instead of anthropocentrism. It reduces the carbon footprint on the planet. Yet another appreciable way is using a broomstick, floo powder, or even a portkey to travel, which saves millions and millions of footprints of carbon. Unlike the muggle world, the wizard world has much less pollution. Further, each Hogwarts house has its own animal representation. In students' minds this inclusion of animals in each house creates oneness feeling with nature. Foremost technique of dealing with the crisis is to feel oneness with nature. Humans are a part of a design, and it completes when everyone is together in it but not in following the hierarchy. Richa Bhardwaj explains, "It is the ecosophical lifestyle that is 'simple in means, rich in ends' which holds the key to the present-day environmental situation."<sup>13</sup>

One of the challenging concepts is coexistence which is questioned in

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<sup>12</sup> Rowling, *Harry Potter and The Philosopher's Stone*, p. 277.

<sup>13</sup> Bhardwaj, Richa, 'Deep Ecology: Origins, Influences and Relevance', *Writer Editors Critics*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2019), pp. 65-71.

the novel. The coexistence between the four houses is always questioned because of the Slytherin founder's ideology of pure blood. Parental lineage of a magician child is considered as pure blood whereas one parent from magical world and another one from non-magical family or both of the child's parents from non-magical are considered as impure. As such, wizards are overly concerned with their own human matters.

### **Conclusion**

Fundamental change is needed in the responsible way of human living. In the words of Naess, not a single policy or reform will change it quickly, but a significant change of direction is needed in our entire human race's lifestyle. In order to attain it one should feel oneness with the nature. Just like any other organism in the world, man must depend upon the biodiversity for vital needs alone. These changes are best communicated through artistic mediums, including literature, and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* works as part of this. The novel questions the relationship between humans and the environment, positions wizards beside other magical creatures to trouble assumptions of anthropocentrism. Ultimately, the novel is part of a foundational movement away from humans' obsessions with our human selves and towards sustainable coexistence with the rest of the planet.