Sense-making Myth for Late Modern Society?

– A study of Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars

Authors: Joseph Cushing
          Pontus Löf

Supervisor: Göran Svensson
Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION.............................................................................................................................................. 3
  1.1 THE AIM OF THE STUDY ............................................................................................................................... 4

2 METHOD AND MATERIAL .................................................................................................................................. 5

3 THEORY............................................................................................................................................................. 6
  3.1 THE ARTS AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR RELIGION ................................................................................................ 6
  3.2 THE CONCEPT OF LATE MODERNITY ........................................................................................................... 6
  3.3 THE MEDIA AND THE DISLODGING OF TRADITIONS .................................................................................... 7

4 BACKGROUND ................................................................................................................................................ 9
  4.1 LORD OF THE RINGS................................................................................................................................... 9
  4.2 STAR WARS................................................................................................................................................ 10
  4.3 HARRY POTTER.......................................................................................................................................... 12

5 SURVEY ........................................................................................................................................................... 15
  5.1 RESULTS FROM THE INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS ...................................................................................... 15
  5.2 RESULTS FROM THE QUESTIONS CONNECTED TO MYTH ............................................................................. 18

6 ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS................................................................................................................ 23

7 DISCUSSION ................................................................................................................................................... 26

8 REFERENCES................................................................................................................................................. 27
  8.1 PRINTED SOURCES...................................................................................................................................... 27
  8.2 WORLD WIDE WEB SOURCES .................................................................................................................... 27

APPENDIX A......................................................................................................................................................... 28

HARRY POTTER FAN SITES ............................................................................................................................... 28
LORD OF THE RINGS FAN SITES ........................................................................................................................ 28
STAR WARS FAN SITES ..................................................................................................................................... 28
1 Introduction

We live in a world where the media is an important part of our lives and big media conglomerates market cultural products across the globe. Hollywood dominates the international market for movies (e.g. Hollywood produced movies accounted for 71.7% of the box-office receipts across the EU in 1991).\(^1\) The most popular movie series (measured in ticket sales) of the latest years are *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*.\(^2\) Why do these movies attract so many people and why do certain fanatics queue outside box offices several weeks in advance? *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* have one thing in common: they are not set in our world but in warped magical fantasy worlds where there is a clear-cut definition of that which is good and that which is evil. Could the magical aspect of these stories be the key to understanding the popularity?

Religious historians talk about myths as stories about the meaning of life. According to Karen Armstrong, myths are something that has been around since the dawn of man.\(^3\) We humans have a unique ability to think about ourselves and our experiences of life, and we can imagine things beyond our everyday experience. This ability is utilized when people think about myths which are basically stories that put us in a larger context and show us the meaning of our own existence. Armstrong points out that the archeological findings from the Neanderthals have taught us five things about myth:

1. Myths often have their roots in our fear of personal annihilation.
2. Myths are materialized and given meaning in rituals (e.g. the sacrifice of animals).
3. Myths deals with the unknown; the situations that we lack words to describe.
4. Myths are meant to lead to action. Myths also put us in the state of mind to take this action – in this world or the next.
5. There exists an immanent world beyond our own that is richer, stronger and more consistent. According to this eternal philosophy we are only imperfect replicates of the archetypal pattern and we have to take part in the divine to truly realize our full potential.

---

\(^1\) Hesmondhalgh, p. 188.


\(^3\) Armstrong, p. 7-18.
Armstrong points out that our way of looking at the divine today is not the same as it was before the 18th century. Before the Enlightenment people made no distinction between the gods, humans and nature. The way we view history has also changed since the 18th century; whilst we nowadays want to know what really happened, people used to be interested in what importance a certain event had. Myth used to describe the eternal truths about human existence, which could be realized in transcendent experiences (often in religion, but also in art, music, poetry etc.), but today the word myth often simply refers to something that is false. Armstrong writes that one cannot say that a myth is true or false in the same manner as one would do in science. A myth is rather true if it is applied in our lives, transform us and give us meaning and guidance.

Over the last millennium the Western societies have changed a great deal. Church membership used to be universal and church attendance compulsory, but when the Western society became modernized, religion has become more intellectual and individual, rather than collective and ritual. There used to be one church, whilst we now have many. The scope of religious authority on a societal level has also shrunk. Some scholars think that religion has become more privatized (i.e. religion has become a personal preference) and that transcendence is shrinking (i.e. the focus is the experience of everyday life, rather than universal salvation). Can the reason behind the success of Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars be that it fills the void of the old “magical”, universal and ritualistic approach to myth?

1.1 The Aim of the Study

The main aim with this study is to investigate if Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars can be sense-making myths that fulfill a mythological need that is not met elsewhere in the so-called Western world. To do this one have to look into how Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars can be seen as myths, and examine how fans relate to these stories.

---

2 Method and Material

This study is mainly a survey designed as a self-completion semi-structured questionnaire that has been sent out via the Internet to a number of fans. The responses were submitted through e-mail forms from a website. The respondents are forum moderators of popular fan communities on the World Wide Web and originating from different countries (although the majority is from the U.S. or Sweden). An invitation to take part in the study was submitted to the fan sites listed in Appendix A. They were chosen because they seemed to be the most popular ones (mainly based on search results from the search engine Google). These are far from the only fan sites on the World Wide Web about *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. They also mainly cater for English and Swedish speaking fans.

As the survey was done anonymously, it is hard to measure how many of the moderators of these forums actually received the invitation. It is also nearly impossible to count how many of the moderators of the fan sites in question did not take part in the study. This means that this study is quite limited when it comes to scope and the result can not be generalized to all fans of *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* or even all forum moderators. The aim has been to get the moderators of the most popular fan sites to respond to the survey, as well as to try and get respondents that are non-American. The quantitative part of the survey results must be taken with a grain of salt. The focus is rather on the qualitative part, although the results from the closed questions will point the direction in the analysis of the open questions.

The reason moderators were picked is based on the fact that the population of moderators is relatively small, and the issue of random sampling is not as important as it would be if the population would consist of all fans using forums on fan communities. Also, forum moderators are usually knowledgeable fans with an extensive involvement in fandom.
3 Theory

Below are three theories that could support the idea that fans like *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* because it fulfills a mythological need that is not met elsewhere.

### 3.1 The Arts as a Substitute for Religion

Towards the end of the 19th century in Germany, the composer Richard Wagner and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche felt they lacked a sense of meaning in their society, due to rationalization, technology and the rise of market economy.\(^5\) These new developments had also killed the spirit of German culture, and they thought the rediscovery of myth could breed life into their society. Nietzsche believed that myth was an essential part of any culture as it increased the feeling of cohesion. Nietzsche’s definition of myth is that it is a constantly evolving and visually intense way of dealing with the meaningless and silent natural world; a way of talking with nature. Nietzsche thought the best arena for making meaning of one's existence was in The Arts (e.g. poetry, music and visual art) as he did not believe in religion. Both Nietzsche and Wagner tried to rediscover myth via cultural production, but they came to a disagreement about the aim of this production. Whilst Wagner saw myth in The Arts as a replacement of religion, Nietzsche saw them as a means of living a better life.

With this view *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* can be a way of either replacing religion or enhancing one's life through the sense-making morals of the stories.

### 3.2 The Concept of Late Modernity

The societies of today are different from the one that Nietzsche and Wagner lived in. Some thinkers have called the present world post modern, but the British sociologist Anthony Giddens has successfully pointed out that we rather live in late modern societies as our societies are not that different from modern societies (that are post traditional in nature), although he agrees that there have been some changes lately (e.g. consumerism, increased

---

\(^5\) Safranski, p. 74-95.
superficiality, cultural self-consciousness, etc.). According to Giddens, the self in late modern societies is not fixed but rather reflexively made. People choose a lifestyle. Relationships are negotiated and people need trust in their relationships and everyday life. People accept all knowledge as provisional and take calculated risks. All societies of the world can not be labeled late modern, but the respondents of the survey are from late modern countries – more or less.

3.3 The Media and the Dislodging of Traditions

John B. Thompson addresses some interesting points surrounding the ideas of traditions in relation to media. In his book, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, Thompson titles one of his chapter’s “The Re-mooring of Tradition”. He explains the structures of traditions in society as well as how the media has affected these traditions. This idea is relevant to our study, because as Thompson says, “With the development of the media… individuals were able to experience events, observe others and, in general, learn about worlds – both real and imaginary – that extended well beyond their day-to-day encounters.”

As he describes as “The Nature of Tradition”, “…tradition is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past.” Thus, the heritage from old mythologies is part of tradition. The power and authority in rural areas has been shifting due to the exposure to media. The power of the traditional communication network of human rather than media contact was prevalent here. Now with the exposure to media, people feel less constrained to tradition and open to new ideas in the context of modern societies. However, as these societies break tradition they also are responsible for what Thompson calls a “moral deficit.” This can be defined as “incapacity to deal with certain questions of a

---

6 Gauntlett, p. 95-98.
7 Thompson, p. 179-206.
8 Thompson, p. 180.
9 Thompson, p. 184.
fundamental kind concerning life and death, right and wrong, etc.,”\textsuperscript{10} and myth thus becomes obsolete to the modern citizen.

This theory supports the idea that the media can disseminate traditional beliefs at a global scale. Thus, the content of media products like *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* can influence all of humanity. The media has also made some traditional elements obsolete to the modern person, and *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* might be a substitute for the more magical aspects of old traditions.

\textsuperscript{10} Thompson, p. 194.
4 Background

4.1 Lord of the Rings

*Lord of the Rings* and the mythology, languages and stories surrounding it were conceived by the British language professor J.R.R. Tolkien. The story follows the young hobbit Frodo Baggins on his dangerous journey to destroy the One Ring that otherwise could make the ring’s maker, the Dark Lord Sauron, so powerful that he could eradicate all which is good in Middle-Earth. The story *Lord of the Rings* was first published by Allen & Unwin in 1954-1955 as the three novels *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*. There have been several attempts to turn the story into film, but the most successful was director Peter Jackson’s and New Line Cinema’s three movie installment from 2001, 2002 and 2003.

The Canadian author David Day has written a book about the origins of Tolkien’s mythology as well as other ring quests and has found connections to Norse Mythology, Arthurian Legends, Carolingian Legends, Celtic and Saxon Myths, German Romance, Greek and Roman Myths, Biblical Legends, Oriental Myths and more. According to Day, Tolkien’s life ambition was to create a mythology for the British people as Tolkien thought there where nothing but “impoverished chap-book stuff” available. Tolkien’s mythology was in fact a sort of alternate version of old British history and Tolkien wanted to tell the “true story” behind several myths (e.g. his creation and sinking of the island kingdom of Númenor was the true story behind Atlantis). Tolkien did not want people to think of *Lord of the Rings* as allegorical, but he acknowledged that it could be applicable to real world events (such as World War II, even though Tolkien thought there were evil orcs on both sides of the conflict). David Day stresses the interpretation of the One Ring as the atomic bomb, but points out that this was not Tolkien’s original intention as the books were written before atomic bombs were invented. The conclusion of Days’ book is that the message of *Lord of the Rings* is not tied to historical events but to two universal truths;

---

11 Day.
12 Day, p. 11-18. The quote is by Tolkien himself, from a letter to a reader.
13 Day, p. 177-183.
first, that power can corrupt anyone and secondly, that we need to rely on compassion in order to overthrow evil. The unusual hero Frodo Baggins does not destroy the One Ring by throwing it into the fire of Mount Doom himself, what saves Middle-Earth is his compassionate act of not killing the former owner Gollum. In the end the corrupted creature Gollum steals the ring from Frodo in order to satisfy his own desire, but trembles and falls into the fire and is destroyed together with his “precious”.

4.2 Star Wars

The Star Wars saga was created by the American filmmaker George Lucas in the 1970s and follows the life and death of Anakin Skywalker (that converts to the Dark Side), as well as his farming son Luke Skywalker (that becomes a hero as he saves the galaxy far, far away). It was first made public as the surprisingly successful movie Star Wars in 1977, but there have been several follow-ups and prequels (as well as spin-offs, books, comics, etc.). In this study Star Wars is viewed as the story of the six major movies which can be divided into the original trilogy (i.e. A New Hope from 1977, The Empire Strikes Back from 1980, Return of the Jedi from 1983) and the prequel trilogy (i.e. The Phantom Menace from 1999, Attack of the Clones from 2002 and Revenge of the Sith from 2005). The prequel trilogy’s story takes place before the original Star Wars trilogy.

Probably the most renowned scholar on comparative mythology was the American professor Joseph Campbell. He was excited about the uses of myth in Star Wars and was actually one of George Lucas’ inspirations.14 Campbell’s book The Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) mapped a common pattern within all religion and mythology, which he named “the Hero’s Journey” or the “monomyth”. According to Campbell, all religious and mythological stories follow the same pattern (i.e. the departure from everyday life, the initiation to a godlike status and the return as a master of the two worlds).

According to Lincoln Geraghty of the University of Portsmouth in the U.K., the “culturally inherited myths” in Star Wars follow the roots of western civilization.15 Also, myth is used to form an identity of a region; in this case a nation can be represented.

14 http://www.jitterbug.com/origins/myth.html
15 Geraghty.
Hence, a nation’s identity is formed by the political and social agendas of the myth creators’ ideology. Geraghty quotes Jon Wagner’s statement, “…myth opens a space for creativity within the irreconcilable polarities of our existence.”16 When the Star Wars trilogy was created in 1977, America was in need of hope, and it came in the form of the creativity surrounding the myths of Star Wars.

George Lucas’s theme of ancient mythology is what saved America’s hope and won the world’s heart. “Lucas devoured the great themes: epic struggles between good and evil, heroes and villains, magical princes and ogres, heroines and evil princesses, the transmission from fathers to sons of the powers of both good and evil. What the myths revealed to Lucas, among other things, was the capacity of the human imagination to conceive alternate realities to cope with reality: figures and places and events that were before now or beyond now but were rich with meaning to our present.”17 The audience of Star Wars can form their own “opinions from the mythical framework” from the different sources and points of view using their own fantasy with the mythology.

The fantasy of the myth in Star Wars relies on the “unseen magical forces which bring order and personality to the universe.”18 The battle for order in Star Wars is between good and evil with the use of young heroes and ancient magic and sorcery.

“…it is not because audiences want to live in a mythic past but rather history and myth offer a better template to fantasize about and create the future.”19 The uncertainty and problems in the present world and society are counteracted by the myths in Star Wars. The story told here, which distinguishes between the big dilemma of right and wrong, is told by going into the “alternate world” and past setting, which is the background for Star Wars.

16 Geraghty, p. 193.
17 Geraghty, p. 197.
18 Geraghty, p. 198.
19 Geraghty, p. 199.
4.3 Harry Potter


The stories of *Harry Potter* are as mythological as they are exciting and full of adventure. American history professor, Edmund M. Kern has written a book titled *The Wisdom of Harry Potter: What Our Favorite Hero Teaches Us about Moral Choices*, which delves into the topic of the uses of history, legend, and myth in the stories of *Harry Potter*. Kern describes the world of *Harry Potter*: “On the one hand through her realistic presentation of fantastic elements taken from the past, she provides an alternative version of the world. On the other, through her realistic presentation of familiar elements taken from the past, she provides an ordinary version of the world.”

Rowling uses the past which makes her stories appealing; “…she employs simple and exotic elements of history, legend, and myth to give her magical world its form.” The stories of *Harry Potter* are filled with ancient mythological symbols that add some moral values that Rowling expresses and they may or may not be noticed by readers. “In our own times, many symbols with impressive historical pedigrees go entirely unnoticed because they are unfamiliar. They take on new significance, however, within the context of Harry’s stories, which ask readers to suspend their disbelief of the fantastic. Symbols can certainly reflect human ideals, but they do not exist independently of how they are used.”

---

20 Kern, p. 191.
22 Kern, p. 200.
In the adventures, Harry encounters everything from mythological mermaids and mermen (mythologically symbolizes “enchantment, temptation, and death”) to the sphinx (in ancient mythology could either mean “royalty, fertility, and immortality (in Egypt) or death and destruction (in Mesopotamia)).” Rowling’s literary myth also has a parallel to Hercules’ tale. In *Harry Potter*, Fluffy, the three-headed dog guards the door to the forbidden corridor just as in the tale Hercules; the dog Cerberus guards the gate to the underworld. However, the most important symbols are found in the contrast of the two groups Gryffindor and Slytherin. Gryffindor which is the group of good wizards in *Harry Potter* is represented by the lion; for a griffin, is a half-lion half-eagle. A lion goes to represent “…a valorous souldier, whose magnanimity is such as he had rather expose himself to all dangers, and even to death itself, than to become captive.” Just as a lion is considered a king of its realm, so is a snake. The group Slytherin which is represented by the snake is mythically described as “…the infection of his pestiferous and poysunfull aspect, wherewith he poisoneth the aire.” This group of wizards called Slytherin can in no doubt be described as that which is not good.

In *Harry Potter* there is a triumph over evil with the help of good ethics and creativity from our protagonist Harry. By deciphering what is right and wrong, the problems of the world are solved. Kern believes that this is part of the reason why these books have become so popular. The main thesis of Kern's book is that the morals of *Harry Potter* are an updated version of stoicism, expressed in how Harry Potter balances his own desires and the needs of the world. Harry Potter's moral choices are ambiguous and Rowling provokes her readers to think about the balance between “rule-following versus rule-breaking; emotion versus reason, inherited predisposition versus acquired adaptability; and fate versus free will.”

---

25 Kern, p. 203.
26 Kern, p. 203.
27 Kern, p. 89.
28 Kern, p. 95.
The stories of *Harry Potter* have received much attention from religious authors, especially by modern American Evangelical Christians or more commonly known as “Conservative Christians”. The story of *Harry Potter* is a narrative (just as religious stories are narratives) and people can create their own conclusions from narratives and relate them to their own daily life.

Jeanette Sky studies these Christian authors as she contributes to the book *Implications of the Sacred in (Post) Modern Media* with her chapter titled “Harry Potter and Religious Mediatization (sic!)”. She describes the ideas from narratives of religion and myth as being part of a bigger cultural discourse where “…various religious ideas and belief systems coexist with secular elements.” The secular element in this case is *Harry Potter*.

The critiques which are coming from this religious community are from a specific dichotomy. “As these Christian communities tend to read the world in dichotomies between black and white, good and evil, most cultural products released into these communities tend to be read accordingly.”

The religious connections to the *Harry Potter* stories are very prevalent. Some Christian writers see the books as preaching Christianity. In referring to the stories of *Harry Potter*, Christian authors can see the evil in the antagonists and the good in protagonists of the story. Christian author, John Granger writes the following of *Harry Potter*: “The Harry Potter novels...touch our hearts because they contain themes, imagery, and engaging stories that echo the Great Story we are wired to receive and respond to. [...] they address the need (really an innate need akin to our need for physical nourishment) that we have for spiritual nourishment in the form of edifying, imaginative experience of life in Christ. Because the Harry Potter books serve this purpose, they are excellent vehicles for parents wanting to share the Christian message of love’s victory over death, of our relationship to God the Father through Christ, even of Christ’s two natures and singular essence.”

---

29 Sumiala-Seppänen (ed.), p. 236.
31 Sumiala-Seppänen (ed.), p. 248-249.
5 Survey

The survey was conducted in May 2006 and there were 49 forum moderators that responded to the survey. 42.9% of the respondents were Star Wars fans, 30.6% were Lord of the Rings fans and lastly 26.5% were Harry Potter fans. The respondents had the following demographics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>Australia 2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>Canada 6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing value</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>Croatia 2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany 2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Norway 4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sweden 28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>United Kingdom 6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>United States 46.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Missing value 6.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1 Results from the introductory questions

The first three questions regarding the stories concerned general matters, and the respondents could only respond to these questions openly. The answers have been grouped according to the stories as the reasons might be different between the stories.

What theme in X\(^\text{32}\) first sparked your interest?

The Harry Potter fans mostly found interest in J.K. Rowling’s popular writing style. A theme of Rowling’s writing style that mostly hooked people in was the exciting adventures along with the magical wonders, “[...] Contained in the stories was a very nice world to escape to – an alternate world, overflowing with magic, yet still a world recognizably our own” –American female.

\(^\text{32}\) Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings or Star Wars. Each group of fans was only asked to give accounts on their own story.
The *Lord of the Rings* fans had a lot of different answers. Many found the adventurous aspect (e.g. “the quest against insurmountable odds” –American male) and the alternative world (e.g. “I was very young but the elves and the hobbits were of much interest” –Swedish female) interesting, while others related to their personal lives (e.g. “…I was breathtaken at the amount of inspiration that Tolkien gave me to fulfill my goal to become a writer” –Australian female).

Many of the *Star Wars* fans replied that they were very young when they first saw a *Star Wars* movie. The alternative world, adventure, and the battle between good and evil were popular responses. The fact that it was set in space was also important to many respondents. As a Swedish male puts it, “[…] ‘robots’, lightsabers, aliens and spacefights was perfect for a kid of my age.”

Although there are many different answers, many fans of all stories say they were young when they first became interested and that they where intrigued by the adventurous writing style of the books as well as special effects when it came to the Star Wars movies. The alternate worlds of the stories were also a popular reason behind the initial attraction.

**What about X still interests you today?**

The *Harry Potter* fans generally found an interest in wanting to see how the series ends! However, the enchantment of the stories still intrigue the readers along with the fun involved with reading the stories, “I still love playing detective and trying to figure out who is working for whom in the series and what motivates them to act ” –American female.

The *Lord of the Rings* fans are intrigued by the work J.R.R. Tolkien put into his work. “By going through the Silmarillion, UT and HOME, you find that what is occurring in LotR is just the tip of the iceburg. It is the only book I know in which the author has placed so much detail and history into his world. There is so much there, you can almost be like an archeologist, digging into the history of whichever bit interests you.” –British male.

As an American female *Star Wars* fans responds, many are still intrigued by *Star Wars* because “[t]he timelessness of the story and the limitless possibilities for expansion.” There is also a social aspect of why people still are fans. “I don’t think I’d be as interested
as I am if I hadn’t met a lot of great friends through SW. I’d still be a fan, but I doubt I
would have spent a week outside the cinema queuing for Episode 3.” –Swedish female.

A general theme in the responses is an urge to know more about the worlds of the respective stories. The Lord of the Rings fans were interested at looking into the history of the world, whilst the Harry Potter fans were curious about the mysteries and of how the story ends. Some of the Star Wars fans were interested in what happens in the so-called “expanded universe” (complementary books, comics, movies etc. set in the Star Wars universe), but most only wanted to revisit the original unaltered movie trilogy because of nostalgia.

**Why do you think there are so many fans of X?**
The Harry Potter fans think that the characters which J.K. Rowling creates are easy for all people to identify with. Topics like teenage problems and the pressures of school are topics everyone can relate to. As a Swedish male writes, “…it’s a story which resembles many things in the real world…and that Harry is a human and [has] his teenage problems.”

The Lord of the Rings fans think the popularity depends upon the work Tolkien put into his world and his use of universal themes such as good vs. evil, hope, love, etc. An American female states it quite clearly: “Frodo is Everyman and to an even greater extent, so is Sam. Their choices, their perils, their sacrifices and ultimate victory at great cost speak to us of what we can accomplish if we are faithful to the task appointed unto us. The virtue and beauty of Middle Earth makes it something clearly worthy of sacrifice, and the believability of Middle Earth through the careful craftsmanship of JRR Tolkien makes the story resonate with readers.”

The Star Wars fans points out several reasons behind the success. Some point out the quality of the story and that it deals with universal questions, others point out that there is something for everyone in the world of Star Wars. Other fans focus on how George Lucas has managed to keep the interest going by releasing new products. Another important factor according to some is the fan community that is seen almost as a family.

A common explanation behind the success of these stories could thus be that they deal with universal questions, are set in multifaceted worlds that are different from our own, and that people can relate the stories to their everyday lives.
5.2 Results from the questions connected to myth

The questionnaire also contained three questions that was intended to test the relation between these stories and myth. These could be rated on a scale of five choices and the respondents were also instructed to give motivations for their answers. The open answers have been grouped according to the closed responses.

**Do you think you can translate the good and evil sides of X to the real world?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>26.5%</th>
<th>36.7%</th>
<th>43.3%</th>
<th>24.5%</th>
<th>12.2%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing value</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those that agreed acknowledge that good and evil are seen in today’s world. Most fans of all three stories found parallels to the evilness of Adolf Hitler to the evilness of the villain in their selected story. But all could agree that the courageousness and dignity of the heroes were good qualities while the selfishness and greed in the villain were evil. One fan of *Lord of the Rings* uses vocabulary from the story in her outlook on the world, “[…] But there is a need for the good people to act together, against the evil…to form a Fellowship, as it were.” –American female.

Those that disagreed mean that it is dangerous to apply a “black and white” perspective to real world situations. Two Swedish respondents point to U.S. foreign policy as an example of the danger with this kind of thinking (e.g. “I suspect that it could be a useful strategy for the Americans in their barbaric assaults against the Arabs to show them as inhuman orcs or southrons.”). One American respondent that disagreed with this statement had quite an interesting motivation: “The basic premise behind temptation and redemption, yes, can be translated… I don’t think the story applies to any specific political situation.”

Those that neither agreed nor disagreed had mainly three kinds of motivations. Some did not understand the question while some thought you can not translate any story to the real world. Lastly, some respondents had a more elaborated explanation, “It would truly be a wonderful world if things where as black and white as in the old films of Star Wars, where evil is evil and good is good. Often in the real world, a person i[s] neither truly evil
[nor] truly good. However even if many things in Star Wars [are] simply good and evil there are exceptions that you can link to the real world. For example Anakin’s turn to the dark side in the new films are full of decisions which at the time seems to be good ones but turns out to really add to Anakin’s downfall. Vader’s turn back to Anakin in Return of the Jedi is also an interesting one. It shows that he is not truly evil but a man with good intentions who made the wrong choices. Certainly applicable (sic!) in the real world.”

The fans were mainly divided into two sides when it comes to this question. One side thought that you could really apply evil to the real world quite literally (e.g. “The Emperor = George W. Bush”). The other side thought that it is dangerous to directly translate the black and white perspective to political situations or people. Some of these respondents thought that good and evil could rather be interpreted as the inner struggle within every human between selfishness and altruism.

Do you think X has become so popular because it deals with magical and mythological aspects?

| Strongly agree | 20.4% | 63.3% |
| Agree         | 42.9% |        |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 12.2% | 12.2% |
| Disagree      | 22.4% | 22.4% |
| Disagree strongly | 0.0%  |      |
| Missing value | 2.0%  | 2.0%  |

Many of those that agreed think of these stories as a kind of escapism, an escape from everyday life. “There is far too much reality in reality. When one is faced with making a living in today’s world, one longs to escape to a world where things are better defined, where one can believe in the goodness, or evil, of those one deals with. In Middle Earth – good is good, and evil is evil. It’s black and white. In the real world, there are far too many gray areas. Good people do bad things, and bad people are able to simulate good until the final blow falls. The magic and myth of Lord of the Rings makes things a lot simpler.” – American female. Others take this argument even further. “There is definitely a lack of spirituality in many western countries so the magical and mythological fulfill one aspect spirituality and religion used to give, like clear rules of what is good and bad, that there is something more than plain human beings.” – Canadian female. A Swedish male agrees
with this description: “I think that all human carry a longing for another world of mystery. That feeling is stronger within some of us, and those are often easy victims for the power of Tolkien’s creation. Tolkien’s world is built upon a base of myth and legend and we carry small fragments of these myths with us, and when someone comes along who can forge those fragments together to a qualitative epic, we love it.” An American male writes: “Mythology was designed to be, like Star Wars, relevant in any time period. It has morals and stories that we can use today.” There are also respondents who have a similar but different opinion: “While these aspects are at the core of the Saga, most people favor Star Wars due to its fun factor. It’s a fun way to occupy yourself for two hours. But I do believe that the magical feeling that the Saga has, is a close second.”

Those that disagreed believe that people’s interest in the stories is mostly from their fascination in the plot and settings of the story. Many in fact do not believe that magic is a crucial part to the story. “There is not much magic in LOTR when you get right down to it. There is a magic ring, but it is rarely used. And when it is used, the consequences have little to do with magic.”–American female. However, some respondents just chose to admit that they enjoy the adventure and aesthetics of the stories (e.g. “…because of the lightsaber fights, cool space battles, and Darth Vader”).

Those that neither agreed nor disagreed found most of the stories’ importance in the characters and plots, but did feel that the magic and mythology had some clear relevance. All could agree that the mythology of the story is more important than the magic in the stories.

Once again, one can divide the respondents into two groups. One group believes that fans are primarily interested in these stories because of its fun adventurous nature, its characters, its plots etc. and another group sees these stories as a form of escape which to some, is motivated by a spiritual longing for something more than everyday life.
Do you think you are a fan of X because society lacks a spirit of ancient religion and mythology (e.g. collective rituals directed at the so-called otherworldly)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree strongly</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing value</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those that agreed mean that they enjoy the fantasy world of their story because the world of their story has more mystery and unbelievable creatures. As one Swedish man puts it, “LotR is a way to dream about a time when fear of the darkness was real, you believed in ghosts and trolls.” Another popular theme is how the world of the fantasy gives its characters a purpose in life (e.g. “It would be nice to really KNOW that we have a purpose in life. The characters in Star Wars know this, all we can do is have faith, which is much harder”).

Those that disagreed were numerous and had several different reasons for not agreeing. Some did not understand the link between the supposed lack of myth and religion in society with their interest in the story. Other rightly pointed out that it depends on which society one is speaking of and some did not think there is a lack of myth and religion in society (mainly the respondents from the United States). Many respondents also pointed out other reasons behind their interest in their story. A fan from Sweden answered that he liked Star Wars mainly because of the nostalgia, the storytelling of the original trilogy and the Star Wars world (as he could escape into it like a “dream world”). Others are religious and do not think their story has a religious function. A female American answered, “I am already well planted in a religion and I don’t need Star Wars to fulfill that part of my life. Star Wars is a means of entertainment and escape for me and nothing more.” A Croatian respondent answered, “I come from a country that has history dating from the 7th century along with myriad of myths. Nope, I don’t need a new mythology to brighten up my day. What I need is an inspiration to keep with everyday toils and a message that everything’s possible.” Another American female respondent wrote, “Harry Potter could never replace the ancient religion I hold to in my life. Nor do I think the majority of readers (for casual
readers make up the bulk of sale, not the fanatics you find online) see it as a substitute. I imagine people like Harry Potter because it’s fun to partake of his journey; I think the void it fills in society is more of a literary kind. Harry came along when people were shifting to electronics, but deep in their hearts craved a high-quality, developed story that was imagination-driven and wonder-filled.” Some respondents also wrote that *Lord of the Rings* does not contain that much magic, and some *Star Wars* fans do not think The Force or The Jedi Order is that important for the quality of *Star Wars*.

Those that neither agreed nor disagreed mostly did not understand the question. However, a man from Great Britain thought that the idea of mythology and ancient religion is indeed still in our society, “In the West we still have people who study White and Black magic, while many other societies still practice magical ritual.” Two others still found their stories interesting and spiritual, but were clear to state that their interest was in the spiritual parts of the stories, not any possible underlying religious motive.

Many pointed out that myth and religion is still present in society – albeit in a different way than a few hundred years ago – and that *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* is not related to personal beliefs. Rather these stories functions as an escape from everyday life. The stories are made more appealing with mythological and magical elements, and are a contrast to our technological and complex world.
6 Analysis and Conclusions

How are *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* related to the concept of myth? Below is a line of argument that can support the idea that these stories functions as sense-making myth in late modern societies (as presented in section 3.2) where the media plays an important role of both dislodging traditions and distributing media texts such as *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* globally (see section 3.3).

1. Myth is a narrative (often involving references to the so-called otherworldly) that has the potential to transform people so that they can deal with the conceived lack of meaning in human life.
2. Of central importance to humans is to define what is good and what is evil, so that they can act in accordance to this dichotomy and feel that they are doing the right thing.
3. *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* are narratives that contain mythological themes (such as heroes, villains and godlike figures as well as the duality between good and evil).
4. One can find guidelines for what is good and evil in *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* that can be translated to the real world.
5. Fans are transformed by *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. The stories provide the fans with ethical guidance as well as gives them a sense of meaning and cohesion.

Points 1 and 2 are basically related to Karen Armstrong’s definition of myth (see section 1). The former arch bishop of the Church of Sweden, KG Hammar, has argued that the central meaning of Christianity is altruistic love and to dismantle the division of us and them (he referred to that Jesus helped outcasts and taught that you should love your enemy). This is an example of how a myth can provide a meaningful guide to how one should live life. Although Nietzsche did not applaud Christianity, he did see myth in the

---

33 Hammar.
Arts (such as literature) as a way of making sense out of our meaningless lives, which relates to point 1.

Points 3 and 4 are basically covered in section 4 of this study. Harry Potter teaches people to live a stoic life, whilst Frodo Baggins teaches people to rely on compassion and not to be tempted by power. Luke Skywalker becomes a hero by staying to his principles, whilst Anakin Skywalker is redeemed after a downfall to evil (because of egotistical reasons). The morals of the stories could be interpreted in the same way as KG Hammar interprets Christianity (i.e. altruistic love is better than selfish greed).

When it comes to point 5 one has to rely on the empirical material of this study. The survey presented above supports that the mythology and magic of the stories is part of their successful appeal. Many respondents highlighted the duality of good vs. evil in the stories and a majority thought one could translate this perspective to the real world. Some of the respondents thought it could be translated directly to political situations whilst others thought it could be applied to the inner struggle within humans. The inner struggle between selflessness and selfishness goes in line with KG Hammar’s version of Christianity, whilst the direct application of good and evil to political situations have a tendency to reinforce the concept of us vs. them. Several respondents actually related the ethics of the stories in exactly the way discussed here. “I [relate the Good and Evil of Star Wars] all the time, actually. I find it very easy to associate Star Wars to the real world. Mostly the good side of it. I use quotes from Star Wars, the books and movies, in discussions with people about religion and the world in general. (i.e. ‘The biggest problem in this universe is that no one helps each other.’ –Shmi Skywalker).” A Harry Potter fan wrote: “…Rowling incorporates very real themes into her stories, even if she does so in a fantastical manner. While her heroes and villains tend to be a bit black-and-white, they nevertheless convey certain character traits that are recognizable in real good and evil. Harry’s bravery, Voldemort’s lust for power – how the selfish pursuit of something not rightfully yours can mutilate you, body and soul.” A British Lord of the Rings fan wrote: “I think the whole issue of Sauron wanting his ring for ultimate power can be seen quite clearly in real life. People lust for power and power corrupts. Perhaps the power may not necessarily make them evil but they sure as heck are greedy, just as Sauron is in wanting to conquer the whole of middle-earth and enslave all to his will.”
In conclusion, this study does not give evidence that fans of these stories really do seek comfort in these stories when dealing with the big questions of life and death or with right and wrong (although the respondents thought it was possible to translate the good and evil sides of the stories to reality). Some respondents of the survey have given answers that might suggest that they use the stories as a kind of substitute for religion, but the vast majority sees the stories as entertainment and/or escapism. The study does show that the respondents find mythology and the duality between good and evil important ingredients in the stories and a part in their successful appeal.
7 Discussion

This study only suggests how Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings and Star Wars can be seen as myth. To investigate all fans of these stories requires a much larger study. The group of fans selected here would probably not be a good representation for all people who like these books and movies.

If one should do a similar but larger study, it would be interesting to focus more on if and how people have been influenced by the morals of these stories. One might also reconsider the use of the last question on the questionnaire\(^34\) as it is hard to answer because of its multiple assumptions and the complex matter.

Lastly there seemed to be a disagreement about whether today’s societies lack a sprit of ancient religion and myth. People (especially those from the United States) think religion is all around us, which of course is true in some sense. An American Star Wars fan states it quite sufficiently: “I don’t think society lacks the spirit of ancient religion/myth at all, honestly – our myths today just take different forms.” Another respondent even applies the concept of religion to Harry Potter fandom: “Real HP fans chat online about every detail, gather for movie and book release, feel happy to be part of a community, things that used to be the parish church or other religious buildings.” This would also be an interesting subject to dig further into.

\(^{34}\) I.e. “Do you think you are a fan of X because society lacks a spirit of ancient religion and mythology (e.g. collective rituals directed at the so-called otherworldly)?”
8 References

8.1 Printed sources


8.2 World Wide Web sources


---

35 Translates to *A Short History of Myth*.

36 Translates to *Ecce Homo – after two-thousand years*.

37 Translates to *Nietzsche – A Philosophical Biography* (or rather *Nietzsche – Biographie seines Denkens* as it was written in German).
Appendix A

List of fan sites that have been invited to take part in the survey:

**Harry Potter Fan Sites**

- The Leaky Cauldron: [http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/](http://www.the-leaky-cauldron.org/)

**Lord of the Rings Fan Sites**

- Tolkiens Arda: [http://www.tolkiensarda.se/](http://www.tolkiensarda.se/)

**Star Wars Fan Sites**

- starwars.nu: [http://se.starwars.nu/](http://se.starwars.nu/)
Myths in modern society. Curiosity is an inborn characteristic in all human beings. Much of the world is a mystery to us. In our excitement and wonder in finding the meaning behind our questions, man has created stories to give us the answers. Other myths are couched within modern terminology. Modern day myths are our current conspiracy theories. Even when we have been given answers to some of our questions, those answers don’t always satisfy us. So begins the creation of modern day myths. Our suspicions and imagination help us create answers that make sense to us, and our faith in those answers give the myths we create a substantial power. Related Articles: Even in the modern world people spread myths and legends.