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Harry Potter and the Lesson of Adolescence

Harry Potter has had many encounters with enemies in his past; however, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, he stands in the bedroom of the Shrieking Shack flanked by his wisest friend, Hermione Granger, facing a situation vastly different than any he has before: one that calls into question his conceptions of “good” and “bad.” Knowing only the stories that explain how Sirius Black, the man standing before him, betrayed Harry’s parents leading to their murders, Harry must decide whether to fight Sirius or listen to his account. Harry’s usual instincts to render Sirius as “evil” struggle to overpower his thoughts of consideration, a conflict exacerbated by Professor Lupin, Harry’s recent confidante, urging him to listen to Sirius, a request almost rooted in betrayal itself. The room is filled both by a magnificent four poster cradling his injured friend, Ron Weasley, and tension tangible enough it is almost as prevalent as the dust that has accumulated after decades of neglect. With an invisible barrier separating friend from foe, the question becomes how to determine the divide. Harry, barely a teenager, must push his unruly hair out of his eyes to peer through his glasses and garner perspective.

To display this perspective, J.K. Rowling employs binaries to create a situation in which nothing is as it should be. Professors become untrustworthy, the young are forced to make adult decisions, animals turn into humans, and “bad” is actually “good.” This last binary is perhaps the most important, for in the past, there has been no question that Harry’s enemies have been evil, and for most of this novel Sirius Black is no exception. However, Rowling places Harry in a situation befitting his coming of age. He must learn to see in shades of gray and understand, as has been the case throughout this situation, that not everything is as it appears. Every action has greater significance than normal: for example, simply standing is too difficult for Ron due to his broken leg, and a transfiguration spell has the power to reveal long kept secrets. After Harry recognizes the weight behind his choices and decides to listen to Sirius’ story, he has taken the critical step away from childhood, for he chooses not to act on impulse. Through this choice Harry learns that Sirius has not actually betrayed his parents, but rather sacrificed his own well-being to keep them safe, and that there exists another culprit in the guise of a rat that has been hiding from his choices for years. In just a few hours, Harry’s entire perspective has been altered to now understand that good and evil still endure, just not as clearly demarcated.

However, one final and contradictory binary plays a crucial role in the outcome of Harry’s ordeal. Rowling sets up a stark contrast between light and dark in the beginning of the chapter: it is night, the Shack is so dark Harry and Hermione must be guided by the light at the end of their wands, and Sirius even has dark mannerisms. Soon after Harry is enlightened by the true details of what transpired 12 years ago, light provides the ultimate betrayal, ruining the chance that “good” will be able to fully prevail. As the group leaves the tunnel from the Shack, the clouds shift to reveal a full moon and illuminate Lupin in his werewolf form (and again the binaries are mixed, for the good of Lupin is periodically overrun by the evil of his condition). Instead of the light providing clarity, it instead confuses the situation, causing chaos and a new danger that allows for Peter Pettigrew (the true enemy in the situation that had been hiding as a rat in his Animagus form) to escape, and thus the ultimate lesson Harry must learn comes about: despite his acknowledgment of a “gray” area, there still exists the possibility that even the ends of the spectrum can completely switch. When this happens, Harry must make an equally significant decision to the one he faced in the Shack: while before he chose to accept Sirius, here
he must let him go, in a sense committing a similar act to Sirius’ in sacrificing his own happiness.

Furthermore, the filter in which Harry must make these determinations is important as well, for it has a large affect on the manner in which he views his situation. This filter can be broken down into multiple sections based on his discourse communities. A first discourse community to note is his affiliation with Gryffindor, for it provides a vastly different perspective on the scenario than, for example, a Slytherin. Being a Gryffindor allots bravery, as well as the ability to keep an open-mind. It provides a welcoming community, a fact that proves the most instrumental in Harry’s decision, for he chooses to welcome Sirius’ explanation and then ultimately Sirius himself. The second is that Harry is a young schoolboy maturing into adulthood, a process that has been expedited by the many dangerous and trying situations he has managed.

This second discourse community is the most significant, for it represents the true struggle Harry must face. In childhood, most situations are viewed in a binary matter, but as one grows older they realize this is not always the case. This realization is an integral part of growing older, and thus affects the filter that Harry uses to understand his situation. The question to consider is whether he has altered this filter, or instead has simply discovered a fresh, if possibly tainted, perspective.

Finally, just as his glasses are an integral part of his identity, so too is this transformational “eye opener.” Readers of all ages are able to relate to what Harry faces. Young readers can understand the difficulty of learning in which not everything has a simple answer, and adults can relate through reminiscence to the necessary, if sometimes unpleasant, phase of understanding that marks the transition from childhood to older adolescence.