

Wands and Witches

At Hogwarts, the students have to study witches in the Muggle world. There were witches, or what people considered witches, in our world. The term "witch" and "wizard" became a derogatory word sometime during the middle ages, and it was during this time that many innocent people died because they were accused of "witchcraft." Once again, as with the mythology, the Harry Potter books are part of a long line of tales about witches, wizards, and their witchcraft.

WAND

A wand is a tool that directs the witch or wizard's energy outward and a way to aim her energy and power. Since all of the magical energy is directed to this one place (the wand), it becomes very powerful. Imagine it like a power sprayer attachment for a hose—all of the water is concentrated in that little sprayer, and it makes the water come out so much more powerfully than when it travels through the big hose. The Celtic Druids and the Norse Volvas carried wands. There is actually archeological evidence of wands—wands have been discovered in the graves of women and men in Northern Europe and Great Britain.

Wands were typically made out of ash, elder, and rowan.

In Harry Potter wands are an essential tool of wizards and witches. Mr. Ollivander tells Harry when he's buying his wand, that "*the wand chooses the wizard*," (SS, 82), and when Harry picks up the wand that will be his he "*felt a sudden warmth in his fingers*" (SS, 85). Wands have magical properties in and of themselves, but they are even more powerful when used by the right wizard.

- In *The Sorcerer's Stone*, we learn that Harry's wand and Voldemort's wand are connected by the Phoenix feather in their cores. The same Phoenix gave two feathers, one for the wand that became Voldemort's and one that became Harry's.
- In *The Chamber of Secrets* we see the danger of using a wand that doesn't work properly. Ron's wand is broken when he and Harry crash the magical car into the Whomping Willow. Ron attempts to use his broken wand throughout the year, but it fails, most spectacularly, when he tries to curse Malfoy with slugs and ends up cursing himself.
- In *The Goblet of Fire*, we are introduced to the weighing of the wands. Each champion for the Tri-Wizard Tournament must have his or her wand "weighed" to ensure that it works and is not jinxed to help or hinder the champion. We see the importance of a wand that is made well and works properly.

The importance of the connection between Harry's and Voldemort's wands that we learned about in *The Sorcerer's Stone* becomes very important when they meet in the graveyard. Voldemort shouts "Avada Kedavra" while Harry shouts "Expelliarmus" at the same time and their wands become linked. As he holds the connection with Voldemort, Harry is saved by what comes out of Voldemort's wand. He sees the phantoms of the people Voldemort had killed with that wand and they then surround Voldemort which allows Harry to break the connection, get to the port-key, and escape back to Hogwarts.

- *The Deathly Hallows* is the book in which wands play the most important part. At first, when Harry is escaping from Privet Drive, he has a strange experience with his wand when Voldemort is about to kill him, "*his wand acted of its own accord. He felt it drag his hand around like some great magnet...*" (DH, 61). It seems, at this point, that the connection between the two wands is so great that Harry's wand will act on its own when confronted with its mate.

Voldemort realizes that the connection between their wands is keeping him from killing Harry, so he decides to borrow a wand from one of his Death Eaters. This is not a request to be taken lightly, since the wizards believe that their wands chose them and that they have a special connection with their wands. This is a serious request, "*the faces around him displayed nothing but shock; he might have announced that he wanted to borrow one of their arms*" (DH, 7). But, Voldemort demands Lucius Malfoy's wand and gets it. It is not as powerful as Voldemort's own wand, but he is a powerful enough wizard to make it work for him. However, he only wants it to use temporarily until he can obtain the Elder Wand.

Harry's wand is broken when he and Hermione escape from Nagini in Bathilda Bagshot's house. Harry is distraught by the loss of his wand, "*Harry took it into his hands as though it was a living thing that had suffered a terrible injury...*" (DH, 348). That Harry thinks of his wand as a living thing is a good example of how attached wizards and witches were to their wands. Harry, of course, was very attached to his wand, "*the wand that had survived so much,*" and it is as if he has lost a dear friend.

The Elder Wand

The Elder Wand is the one gained by one of the Peverell brothers in the story of the Deathly Hallows in *The Tales of Beetle the Bard*. The Elder Wand is a wand "*more powerful than any in existence*" and it always wins in a duel.

Sound Familiar? The Norse god Thor had a hammer that always hit its mark and King Arthur's sword, Excalibur, never lost a fight.

Voldemort wants the Elder Wand to defeat Harry. It is fitting that the most powerful wand in existence comes from the elder tree since elder is the tree that symbolized death and endings. Once Voldemort has control of the Elder Wand he kills Harry with it. But elder is also the tree of life and renewal. Harry is resurrected and returns to fight Voldemort in the end.

In the Battle of Hogwarts, the ownership of the Elder Wand becomes very important in the fight between Harry and Voldemort. Voldemort believes that Snape was the previous owner, and since he killed Snape the Elder Wand is his to command. However, Harry believes that Draco Malfoy is the master of the Elder Wand, and since Harry disarmed Malfoy previously then he, Harry, is "*the true master of the Elder Wand*" (DH, 743). Once again, when meeting in wand combat Voldemort shouts "Avada Kedavra" and Harry shouts "Expelliarmus." This time the connection kills Voldemort and sends the Elder Wand, "*spinning through the air toward the master it would not kill, who had come to take full possession of it at last*" (DH, 744).

The wands and the connection between the wand of Voldemort and Harry is an extremely important part of the books. Wands choose the masters, and the right wand can make all the difference in the world!

In Greek mythology the god Hermes carried a "wand." The Caduceus was a wand with two serpents curling up the length of it and topped with wings. Hermes was often depicted carrying his wand.

In Norse mythology the Volvas carried wands. The word Volva actually means "wand carrier."

In Celtic mythology the Druids carried wands.

Wands and Swords

During the middle ages, a knight's sword was every bit as important to him as a wand is to a witch or wizard. Unlike the Harry Potter world where any witch or wizard could carry a wand, during the middle ages only a knight could carry a sword. Warrior knights had to be able to wield a sword well because it would mean the difference between life and death. Often swords were handed down in families from father to son, and some swords were legendary, like King Arthur's sword Excalibur. A medieval knight losing his beloved sword would act in the same way as Harry did when his wand broke, *"he could not think properly: Everything was a blur of panic and fear"* (DH, 348).

Wands and the Samurai Sword

I have not explored any myths or legends or stories from Asia, because they are not that big of an influence on the books. However, one Asian tradition comes to mind when thinking about wands and a wizard's

connection to his wand. In the Asian martial arts, especially in Japan, your weapon is seen in the same way as the wizards in Harry Potter viewed their wands—your weapon is an extension of your energy and is seen as an extension of you.

This is very much the way the Japanese Samurai viewed their swords. They always kept their swords by their sides, even when they were sleeping. To take a samurai's sword was to take away a part of his "ki," ki being his life force. The sword of a samurai was known as the "soul of the samurai."

Swordsmiths became famous in their own right, similar to the way Ollivander and Gregorovich in Harry Potter are famous wand-makers. The making of a samurai sword was a long and involved process, and it started with the very basic elements. People considered the samurai sword a work of art. It was thought to embody its own spirit, much in the same way that a wizard's wand has its own spirit. The samurai sword was made up of four elements: earth, iron, fire, and water. The wands in the Harry Potter books also contain individual elements, like dragon's heartstrings or unicorn hair or the feather of a Phoenix.

WITCH TRIALS AND HUNTS

In Harry Potter the subject of witches and their torture is brought up in the student's History of Magic course. Of course, in the Harry Potter books real witches (like Harry) could not have been harmed by Muggles, because they are too powerful. In *The Prisoner of Azkaban* Harry was assigned homework in his History of Magic course, "*Witch Burning in the Fourteenth Century Was Completely Pointless—Discuss*" (PA 1). Harry's textbook goes on to explain that "*non magic people...were particularly afraid of magic in medieval times...*" (PA 2).

From Wise Men and Women to Witches

In pre-modern times, when we lived in more tribal communities there were women who practiced healing and medicine. They were called "wise-women" and they had the gift of foresight or prophecy, and they remembered the wisdom of their people through songs and tales. These powers might not all reside in one person; in fact, one person might be skilled at healing, another prophecy, and so on. However, they were highly regarded, as we've seen with the Norse Volvas and the Celtic Druids. There has also been a tendency in some cultures to mistrust those who have "powers" others do not have. A woman gifted with unusual powers might be mistrusted, like Medea in the Greek legend of Jason and the Argonauts.

As Christianity spread over Europe, the priests developed a mistrust of those women and men who held the wisdom and powers of the pre-Christian religions (the "old ways"). These wise men and women took their knowledge underground, so it was not forgotten. They were often the target of those fearful of the old ways and mistreated because of their knowledge and unusual practices. Whenever misfortune would strike a community, they were the first people to be accused of wrongdoing, which eventually led to being accused of "witchcraft."

The Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of the Witches)

In the 15th century two priests wrote a book, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and it contained a detailed explanation of witchcraft. It described how to recognize a witch, what witches did, how they could hurt people or destroy property, and how to try a witch. As a result of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the creation of "witch hunters," men who would travel from town to town searching for witches, the number of witches found

and killed skyrocketed. There were outbreaks of witch hysteria followed by executions. Sometimes the number of executions was small, say 20 or so people, but in some instances hundreds or thousands of people were accused and executed as witches. During the 16th and 17th centuries between 50,000 and 80,000 people were killed as witches. The last witch executed in England died in 1682.

At this time in history, many people still believed in magic. They did not have scientific explanations for why the crops would grow well some years and not in others or why an animal would produce healthy offspring one time and not another. They did not know why people got sick. The usual answer was God or some other supernatural phenomenon. The flip-side to believing that God was the answer is believing that the Devil was the answer. If a woman could use herbs to cure her neighbor, then she could use those same herbs to make him sick or die. If one believed that chanting ritualistic words could help the year's harvest, then the flip-side was one's neighbor chanting evil words to destroy the harvest.

Witch Hunts and Trials

The first thing to happen in a witch hunt was that a person had to be accused of being a witch. For example, a person's milk goat would stop producing milk, or a woman's child would die, or one person's crops would fail. This caused a lot of pain and stress, and so the person affected might accuse his or her neighbor of causing the problem. The accuser might say that they heard the accused mumbling something under her breath when she walked by the goat, and then the next day the goat stopped producing milk. From here the stories grew more outlandish. Midwives were accused of cursing babies at birth, so that the child was born deformed or died soon after birth.

People believed that witches met with devils and demons in the night. The witches flew on broomsticks. They were even accused of sacrificing children to the devil.

The majority of the accused witches were women, particularly older women. Women, and especially older widow women, were the most vulnerable members of a community. Women at this time were already considered weak, and so people believed they could be easily swayed by the devil. Women also traditionally healed the sick and delivered babies. It was an understandable leap of logic to make; to go from the belief in the healing powers of a woman, who knew all about mysterious herbs and healing potions, to a devil worshiping witch who used those potions to cause death and destruction.

However, women were not the only ones accused of and executed for witchcraft. Men and children suffered as well, just not as frequently. In one principality in Germany, the leader of the witch hunting organization gained control of the property of witches he accused. This led to much abuse, and thousands of people were killed here, including many wealthy men. All of the property was confiscated and landed in the hands of the witch hunters. Clearly this was a case of pure greed.

Often when a person was accused of witchcraft she was arrested and tortured. In England they did not torture witches as cruelly as they did in other countries, but it was still a common punishment. What the witch hunters wanted from the witch was not only a confession of guilt but for her to name other witches. The accused witch would usually confess under torture and give names of other witches. The torture was so horrible that the accused witches would say anything to make it stop.

Testing and Punishment for a Witch

There were also tests to see if a person was a witch. The accused witch would be stripped and looked over for moles or other marks. These marks were considered marks of the devil, usually the place where the devil "kissed" the witch, and the accused witch would not feel pain on this marked area. The witch hunters would also "swim" accused witches. The witch was tied up and thrown into a pool of water. If she floated she was convicted as a witch. The theory behind this is that the water "rejected" the witch. The downside of this test is that many people of that time did not know how to swim and would drown, especially considering their hands were tied up. So, even if an accused witch passed the test and sank in the water, she'd die anyway by drowning.

The ultimate punishment for being convicted of witchcraft—death. Witches were usually burned, because people believed that their evil blood had to be eliminated completely and burning destroyed everything of the witch, including her blood.

The witch hunts and crazes stopped during the late 17th century. This was a time of great scientific advances. The very idea of witchcraft and magic was being destroyed. Many influential and powerful men discussed ideas of personal freedom and progress. People were no longer tried without representation or convicted without evidence. They also no longer believed in "magical" causes for death and destruction, but realized that death and destruction of property happened naturally.

No one knows why the witch craze started when it did, since the belief in magic and the supernatural had always been around. It is just one of those anomalies of history that events and people came together to make something happen. Unfortunately, this was an event and time that caused pain to thousands of people.

