The Ignorance of the Privileged

by TeaOli

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Problems With Erasing or Overlooking the Evidence of Hatred

Chapter 1 of 1

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Navigating the Darkness of the Dark Side

The idea for writing about the implications and possible repercussions of creating a sympathetic Lucius Malfoy in fanworks originated with a chat. I've reproduced it throughout this piece, unedited except where indicated by the use of square brackets ([]) and in the original order.

> **[My Friend]**: (Come to the dark side -- I have cookies!)
>
> :-D
>
> **me**: lol
>
> I really can't
>
> it's personal for me
>
> **[My Friend]**: Lol!

This is an extremely difficult subject for me to address. I go into the reasons why this is so later after I've presented my primary argument but for now, you need only know that the I began gathering my thoughts and writing them down *because* its subject is so difficult for me to talk about.

> **me**: but I can find fanon!Lucius amusing in humour fic
>
> **[My Friend]**: That's all I ask. ;-)
>
> **me**: I won't ever write him as "secretly good all along" or even "perfectly redeemed" because for me, that would be akin to writing a Nazi as "redeemed" or a member of the KKK as "secretly good".

[My Friend]: I can see that.

I am an inveterate seeker of approval. It's not a trait I admire in myself or in anyone. The flaw (for I do see it as a flaw) leaves me struggling to write without feedback, even though I often end up writing exactly the opposite of what the feedback recommends. This flaw of mine is what made me feel a need to *lol* before taking a deep breath and revealing something serious: "it's personal for me". My need for approval left My Friend who was chatting via mobile device and therefore was behind in a poor position, allowing her to LOL *with* me at what seemed like an inopportune moment. It is hard for me to speak out against perturbing issues before I become overwhelmed with negative feelings. I find it especially difficult to put forth opinions such as the one on which this essay is centred because its nature is almost guaranteed to garner *dis*approval alongside any approval it might earn.

As Fortune would have it, my tendency towards hand-wringing and lip-biting has led me to realise that in order to effectively address the central theme, I must explore more thoroughly than I initially intended the subjects which shape and give structure to my chief topic. During a later chat, during which My Friend and I in the presence of other friends discussed this essay, I learnt that many things which I had considered to be unassailable for the purpose of presenting my argument were, in fact, *not* considered "common knowledge" by My Friend.

I am well aware of the potential for what I am writing to cause offence; it is almost inevitable that I will because I am pointing fingers at a practice I find distasteful, and perhaps more personally relevant to some readers, I am pointing fingers at those in whom I believe the practice originated. No one, in my experience, likes to have blame placed at her feet especially when the blame is levelled either at having done something which she was previously unaware might be considered blame-worthy or at having done something she doesn't believe is blame-worthy at all. In part, I hope to make clear why I find the creation of the "fanon" version of Lucius Malfoy to be something worthy of censure.

A "Racist Monster"

> **me**: In all honesty, it disgusts me that so many of his early fans overlook the fact that he's a racist monster because he was played by a hot actor in the movies.

Parallels have long been drawn between the events driving JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and real-world racial and ethnic tensions and the resulting atrocities. Opposition to this view of the novels has existed for nearly as long. Only Rowling can definitively state her intentions; the rest of us are left to analysing the text in search of answers.

Rowling, to my knowledge, has not addressed this outright, but she *has* given us hints of a likely opinion. The comment most often cited is, unfortunately, no longer available at her web site. But it has been quoted often enough in analyses, opinion pieces, news articles, and other secondary sources for it to be readily accessible to anyone wishing to read it.

In response to a reader's question about the term "half-blood", Rowling responded as follows:

> The expressions 'pure-blood', 'half-blood' and 'Muggle-born' have been coined by people to whom these distinctions matter, and express their originators' prejudices. As far as somebody like Lucius Malfoy is concerned, for instance, a Muggle-born is as 'bad' as a Muggle. Therefore Harry would be considered only 'half' wizard, because of his mother's grandparents.
>
> If you think this is far-fetched, look at some of the real charts the Nazis used to show what constituted 'Aryan' or 'Jewish' blood. I saw one in the Holocaust Museum in Washington when I had already devised the 'pure-blood', 'half-blood' and 'Muggle-born' definitions, and was chilled to see that the Nazis used precisely the same warped logic as the Death Eaters. A single Jewish grandparent 'polluted' the blood, according to their propaganda.

From this answer, I concluded that Rowling at the very least recognises the parallel between the world she created and one she lives in. Although she mightn't have intentionally written the Death Eaters of which Lucius Malfoy is one as analogous to those who adhered to the ideology we know as *Nationalsozialismus* or *Nazism*, she made clear that she saw the parallels when she visited the Holocaust Museum.

While what happened over the course of the Harry Potter series and what happened prior to the series can in no way be compared to The Holocaust in which nearly six million Europeans of Jewish descent and an un-agreed upon number of non-Jews were murdered, or even to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide in which 800,000 Tutsis were murdered over the course of about one hundred days, it is clear that Rowling's Death Eaters held similar views about racial purity as the Nazis and the Hutus who participated in the Rwandan atrocities.

If you accept that Rowling saw a correlation between her Death Eaters and the Nazis, then you must also accept that the Lucius Malfoy she wrote is the equivalent of a racist and that he was likely capable of horrific actions; it is canon that he condoned and even facilitated the horrific actions of others. Whether or not that qualifies him as a monster is a matter of individual opinion.

It is *my* opinion, however, that he meets the requirements of being a "monster" simply by virtue of having acted on his racist beliefs. For the purposes of this essay, that opinion is incontrovertible. Lucius Malfoy is a racist *and* a monster.

Continuing a Dangerous Trope?

> [**me**, immediately following after the last]: But on the other hand, fanon!Lucius has become so firmly entrenched in the fandom, I find it harder to condemn fans who associate more with that iteration of the character than what was showed to us in canon.
>
> **[My Friend]**: Well, in a way, that's true to life. People never suspect the ones with the looks, money, and charm
>
> Yeah. I was late to the party for sure.
>
> **me**: You're right about it being true to life. However, that doesn't make it acceptable to me.
>
> I still don"t like it, but I understand how it happened. I just refuse to be a party to perpetuation the myth.
>
> **[My Friend]**: Right.
>
> **me**: And I also don't expect to change any minds.

as I said, fanon!Lucius isn't the same person as canon!Lucius.

in my mind, at least

[My Friend]: I agree -- totally different.

me: and while I think the origins of the former are found in a sort of ignorance of the privileged, that doesn't change the fact that he exists as an entity separate to the latter

The term "privilege" has a very specific meaning as I used it above. It was in the defining of privilege that I ran into my hurdle when discussing this essay in the second chat. As referred to here (and in that second chat), privilege refers to the accrued advantages members of a dominant group within a society with a hierarchal status structure have been granted by that society. The result is social inequality. This does not necessarily mean that legal advantages have been granted. In the second chat, My Friend equated "power" with legal rights; I contend that power is a combination of privilege and legal rights. I also believe that privilege is a more insidious component of the combination because those who have it are often unaware of its existence or unaware of the consequences of its existence. This lack of awareness is what I call "the ignorance of the privileged".

[My Friend]: Right.

me: okay

time to get off the soapbox

maybe I should write a short essay on the topic

[My Friend]: Hee! An essay would be good.

[two off-topic comments deleted]

me: I was kidding, but I might do it. I wouldn't be as comfortable explaining to others the way I just explained to you.

the essay would put my view out there

[My Friend]: I think the topic is ripe for essay.

me: so I wouldn't *need* to explain; I could just point to the essay

[My Friend]: And I'm sure lots of people agree with you.

me: possibly. but they aren't speaking up about it much in circles where I roam

The ones I've read who say something similar to what I say have a generalised dislike of JKR

[My Friend]: That's just b/c you hang with me, [Friend Two], [An Acquaintance], etc.

me: or a generalised dislike of several popular pairings

oh, but I read discussions of fic all over the interwebs

and making Lucius a good guy is a popular trope in HP fandom

[My Friend]: There are others in the exchange, for example, who don't want lucius anywhere near their gift

me: thank goodness!

but also consider this: if LM/SS/HG weren't already a popular thing, there wouldn't be a need for those of us who don't want him there to specify that we don't want him there

[My Friend]: Well, it's a popular trope in general -- redeeming bad boys.

True

me: that's also true

and I even understand the urge

[My Friend]: (They do it on soaps all the time)

me: but most of the good!Lucius stories I've read don't really consider the nature of his badness

LOL!!

I was about to make the soap comparison

[My Friend]: Hee!

Great minds.

me: "as badly written as a soap opera like when Luke suddenly didn't really rape Laura"

It is worth noting that in the section of the chat reproduced above, I chose an extreme example of the "reforming the delicious bad boy" trope. I did not do so lightly. I believe it is equally dangerous to erase or overlook the evidence of hatred in a character as it is to erase or overlook the actions of a character who has violated another character. When you add actions to hatred, as one must when considering Lucius Malfoy, the problem is compounded by the fact that *victims* of his beliefs exist.

Problems With Erasing or Overlooking the Evidence of Hatred

Of course, such dismissals and hand-waves are common throughout fandom. Creators of fanworks most often write or draw, etc. to entertain themselves or others. Often, real-world implications and consequences have no place in the worlds they are sharing with other fans. Unfortunately, that does not mean that readers will not see those implications and consequences. That the creator means to enjoy a departure from Real Life does not guarantee that their audiences do not see hatred being ignored or

overlooked the fanworks and then internalise that version of reality with regards to the character in question. In other words, some members of the audience will take the implicit message validating hatred as the norm.

That it takes nothing more than for a character to be portrayed by an actor a fan (or many fans) finds attractive for the character's actions to lose importance, and that it takes nothing more than fanworks creators' lack of awareness (or willingness to ignore such awareness should they have it) to allow them to promote a harmful dismissal of problematic behaviour is at the heart of my displeasure and abhorrence of the practice of writing a sympathetic Lucius Malfoy.

I read a message in those works which I am certain most creators did not intend:

Your feelings and those of other people who, like you, have a lesser place in society than I have don't matter; my pleasure is more important than acknowledging that I am endorsing one of society's uglier truths by not condemning it. I can afford to *not* learn about things which distress you and which you can't avoid.

And, by extension, I see another message:

You and those people who, like you, have a lesser place in society than I have don't matter; I am more important than you. I am *better* than you, and I can afford to ignore that which *oppresses* you because that sort of oppression is not a part of my life and/or worldview.

Writing Redemption

Of course, not every fan who creates a sympathetic Lucius is ignorant of the implications or consciously dismissing those that they do recognise. Some people genuinely believe in the power of redemption. This belief is not without merit or precedent.

In Rwanda, there are "Reconciliation Villages" where Tutsi survivors of the 1994 genocide live side by side with Hutus perpetrators of the crimes which occurred during that time. One story I have frequently seen on television (this is a video link)* and read online tells the tale of childhood acquaintances who live in such a village:

Fredrick Kazigwemo is responsible, either directly or indirectly, for the deaths of many members of his neighbour's family. She has forgiven him, she said, but not without effort and prayer. She attributes the power to forgive Kazigwemo to God, saying that she could not have managed on her own.

Kazigwemo said he asked God forgiveness for his past actions (which he blames on government brainwashing). But he did not expect forgiveness from people, he said.

Redemption is possible. Forgiveness can happen even in the aftermath of the most horrific crimes against humanity. But redeeming a character in a manner that is considerate and compassionate in a way that does not dismiss the consequences of the actions of real-word people who held analogous views and positions in history, thereby showing an ignorance or a lack of empathy for people who were the victims or would-be victims of dangerous beliefs is something most Lucius Malfoy aficionados who have produced fanworks presenting him as a sympathetic character have not made the effort to accomplish.

My Friend and several of my friends and acquaintances tend to fall into two main categories for writing their sympathetic Lucius Malfoy characterisations. There is sometimes some overlap between the paths chosen by members of either group, but along broad lines, the stories which have been written by Lucius fans whom I know and like have fallen into one of two broad categories:

The first group make a distinction between fanon!Lucius and canon!Lucius (as I and My Friend did during that first chat session) when writing. They know that they are deviating from canon as they write the character, and so they write with the idea that since they are quite obviously not attempting to write Rowling's Lucius Malfoy, there really isn't a great need to show his redemption that is, if they bother to write him as redeemed at all. A problem with those stories which acknowledge his past, but brush it aside as being his *past* but not his *present* and therefore not worthy of further discussion is that they fail to take into account the need for such concepts to be read within a very narrow context. As was demonstrated during the second chat session I had with a larger group, concepts and the contexts in which they are created are not universal. My problem with stories that depict Malfoy as unredeemed but sympathetic anyway should be self-evident: I find nothing of the "delicious bad boy" in a character who is a racist, even if he is no longer a member of a group bent on the genocide or subjugation of those he considers inferior.

The second group make attempts to show his growth. Unfortunately, these attempts, in my opinion, most often fall short in showing how deeply wrong his original beliefs and the actions those beliefs prompted were. While they acknowledge that he has done wrong in the past, they do not often depict the nature of his past crimes as horrific as I believe them to be. They have rarely taken into consideration that his actions could have long-term effects on his victims, or that surviving victims are still living in a society that largely allowed them to be victimised.

One of my German teachers best described what I am trying to say:

"We don't like talking about it or even thinking about it, really," she told our class. "No one wants to accept that our people were once responsible with something so bad. But we can't ignore what happened or make light of it because you can start to forget."

She was reprimanding one of my classmates for having jokingly called another classmate a Nazi. (The context of the teasing was that both classmates were German-American, but the latter was first generation American.) I didn't write down everything she said that day, only what I've quoted above, but I vaguely remembered that the expression on her face and the tone of her voice had far more on an impact on me than her actual words. After all, the words are just another way of saying, "Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it." It took a very specific context to apply a more meaningful concept to her words: Don't forget we have hated, so that we remember not to hate again.

Searching For Empathy

In the United States, if a group consisting of members of many races has a discussion about race, it is likely that *someone* among the group will experience negative emotions some point. This likelihood will be increased if one or more members of the group is not a racial minority. One might feel attacked and get defensive in response. Another might feel embarrassed. Or angered. Or hurt. Some might be disgusted, or frightened. Or bored. Some might express these emotions openly, or others might keep them to themselves. Accusations might fly back and forth, or several people in the group might quietly seethe. All of these things might be going on during the same discussion.

Of course it's also possible that everyone might be interested in learning about the experiences and opinions of others or in sharing their own experiences and opinions. That's the best-case scenario, but unfortunately not as likely as to occur. And yet that is exactly what I am hoping for here.

I am a Black woman who was born and raised in the United States. I state this not because it is the sum total of who I am and not even because it is the core of the argument I presented; I share this part of who I am because I feel it would be disingenuous to call a character a "racist monster" as I did above without acknowledging that I belong to a race that has historically been on the receiving end of intense racial hatred in the place where I have spent the greater part of my life. But while I believe those parts of my whole self have both had a strong influence on how I view the topic at hand, they have not been my only influences.

So, while my race and where I live have undoubtedly had an effect on my opinions, they are not the my only influences. (It is also important to note that I don't speak for other women who share my race and country. There are women of colour among my friends and acquaintances who are Lucius fans.)

Equally important to the way in which I form opinions is the fact that I was raised by men and women who expected me to examine my beliefs and to form logical arguments to express them. In my experience, it has been difficult to remain logical while speaking about racial hatred, but I have attempted to do so here.

For my friends and acquaintances, my dislike of the character and my disappointment and disgust over the way so many fans write him is a serious matter, yet not one that

is serious enough to exempt me from being teased about it. That no one in either group of my Lucius-loving friends *does* recognise the depths of my aversion to the character is in no small part *my* fault:

Because I am an inveterate seeker of approval, in the very recent past I have laughed with them rather than express how painful I find their inability to understand and by laughing, I have unintentionally supported the idea that *my feelings* (about this topic) *don't matter much.*

Because I haven't been willing to endure the stress of participating in a discussion that would inevitably touch on race, I have stopped short of providing context I presented in this essay.

Because I have convinced myself that I can ignore implicit messages and focus on writing, I supported friends' efforts to share better stories even when those stories have centred on a characterisation of Lucius Malfoy that I consider dangerous and harmful.

I have been my own greatest obstacle to finding the empathy I sought. I hope that this essay goes far enough to change that, and that I will never be invited to "come to the dark side" again.

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*For those who do not wish to or who *cannot* view the video link, here is a link to an imperfect transcript of the video:
http://edition.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1204/06/cnr.04.html. The section on the Rwandan Reconciliation Village begins about one third of the way down the page.

I must thank my friends for supporting my decision to write this essay despite the fact that it could be read as a condemnation of a practice they enjoy.

I'm giving an extra helping of gratitude to karelia for not only beta-reading this for me but also for reminding of the power of redemption. We might not agree on where forgiveness should begin, but without her intervention, I would have forgotten a very important lesson about these two concepts. (I'll leave it to readers to come to their own conclusions about the nature of that lesson.) Hugs, karelia. I am so grateful to know you.