



## Significance and Origins of the Phoenix

Long used as a symbol for rebirth and reform, the phoenix is a majestic beast that appears throughout the Harry Potter series, both as a character furthering plot and as an image to deepen the readers understanding of the text through association with its literary significance. Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix in the novel, highlights these major attributes of the phoenix.

The phoenix has Greek and Egyptian roots; in Egyptian mythology, the phoenix was associated with a sun deity. Egyptian lore held that one phoenix existed, and it lived for five hundred years, immune to the subject of age through its constant death and rebirth by feasting on Arabian balsam and frankincense. They held that this rebirth happened as the phoenix would travel to a temple in Heliopolis then a younger phoenix would emerge directly out of its predecessor. In Grecian mythology, the bird was tied to the city of Phoenicia, supporting the image of a rebirth through fire. All accounts, however, attribute great strength, power, and wisdom to this beast. Most cultures depict this strength through deep oranges and reds, reflective of the bird's association with rebirth through fire, but some Grecian accounts show the matured phoenix as deep royal purple, stemming from the dye famously produced in Phoenicia.



This powerful image has been used throughout the development of the literary canon, primarily as a symbol for the passing of an old system or self, allowing the ushering in of something better. The common depiction of this alternation through fire highlights both the pain of such a transition and the totality and finality of the change. Because of the degree of separation

between the old and new portrayed through this image, the introduction or incorporation of a phoenix into a plot line is often for the purpose of altering dynamics of the story, indicating a pivot in the nature of an entity. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, Rowling shows us this use of the phoenix, encapsulating the movement against Voldemort's oppression, the ushering in of a new world without the previous discrimination and terrors that Voldemort and his followers championed. The entities highlighted through this symbol are not limited to character shifts, although maturity growth and motive change are common elements. Continued political and social change throughout the ages is often likened to the process that a phoenix goes through, and as a new system comes to power, it is often said that a phoenix has risen from the ashes.



Along with the ushering in of something new, the phoenix is a symbol of hope, as in the closing battle in *Harry Potter and Chamber of Secrets*, where Fawkes carries in the sorting hat bearing the Gryffindor sword, exactly what Harry needs. Then, in a show of both the power and wit that are characteristic to the phoenix, he gashes the eyes of the opposing basilisk. The majesty of the phoenix is well highlighted here, for it is not an overbearing or oppressive power that a phoenix possesses but rather a force well harnessed to accomplish good. Similarly, the namesake of the 5<sup>th</sup> novel, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, is a resounding symbol of hope and power that the students of Hogwarts



unite around throughout the series. This group of students, purposed to defend against dark forces, embodies hope and renewal in an effort to come out of some greater darkness, just as the phoenix has been used throughout the ages to show this same hope despite opposition. Through this symbol of the phoenix, the group becomes more than individuals but a unit with a common goal and, more importantly, a common hope.

Many beasts have connotations in the same way that words do. On page 207 of *Harry Potter and Chamber of Secrets*, Dumbledore characterizes the connotation of the phoenix, describing the creature as physically strong, with tears of healing powers, but most significantly, he describes them as being “highly faithful pets.” Since the creature’s appearance in Egyptian and Grecian myths, this beast has carried an essence of being good creature. While good does not mean safe, as highlighted by its stature in many portrayals, it shows again how this creature tends to use its many powers, revealing a certain majesty in its own ability to control its powers, this will power being further evidence for its civility, an important distinguishing factor from many mythical animals.

The phoenix has appeared throughout time and culture, from stories of its greatness echoed through marble etchings in ancient Grecian art, to CGIs of it sweeping across projections, theaters and phones in a modern world full of wizardry. But whether the phoenix has appeared in Egyptian myth or modern wizardry myth, it consistently communicates goodness and hope through its intelligently directed power, a trend continued by Rowling in many of her books.



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