



Summer 2017

Harry Potter and the Meaning of Death

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Brown, Harrison D., "Harry Potter and the Meaning of Death" (2017). *Student Publications*. 587.
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Abstract

The paper reviews how J.K. Rowling is able to examine death in the Harry Potter book series. In the first part of the text the author touches on the deaths of Harry's parents and the scarring that Harry receives from that, as well as an examination of how the deaths of others, from close friends to acquaintances, have affected Harry, specifically pertaining to his personal responsibility for them and also his grieving process. The paper also goes into how Voldemort's inability to feel love, paired with his fear of dying, have pushed his quest for immortality (using Horcruxes). Harry's mastery of death (using the Hallows), his willingness to accept death, and his sense of love and sacrifice for his friends is what enables him to finally defeat Voldemort. The main message is that the Harry Potter books are great entertainment, but their underlying philosophy on death creates a depth that Rowling wants us to learn from: death is a part of life, and seeking love and friendship is much more important than worrying about death.

Keywords

harry potter, death, immortality, grief, deathly hallows

Disciplines

Children's and Young Adult Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

Comments

Written for FYS 150: Death and the Meaning of Life.

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FYS150

11/30/2017

Harry Potter and the Meaning of Death

When I was in the third grade, I found a book on the night table in my parent's room: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. I began reading it mostly because the name "Harry" was similar to my name (Harrison), and it interested me since I had not read many books until that point. I was immediately hooked, and after finishing the first book I begged my mom to take me to the library to check out the second. After shredding through the second and third books, I demanded the fourth, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Unfortunately, my mom would not get it for me since she had heard that it was traumatic and, as [Common Sense Media](#) (my mom use to love this site) reviews it, "Kids will be upset when a teen character dies, and sensitive readers may have trouble with the idea of a hand being severed and Harry's capture and torture." I whined and pouted, but she wouldn't budge, so I settled for rereading the first three books about a dozen times. On my ninth birthday, I was finally allowed to read the fourth book. It was the longest book I had ever read up to that point, over 700 pages, and I enjoyed every single one of those pages- except for a few. Just like my mom had been warned, in the book's climax an innocent student named Cedric Diggory is murdered in cold blood. I remember this as the first time a book made me cry, and it was quite an emotional reaction. I had not experienced death as a kid, which I guess means you can call me lucky. But this death in a book struck me. I moved on through the series, witnessing the death of Sirius Black (Harry's

godfather) in the fifth book, the killing of Dumbledore in *the Half-Blood Prince*, and the many deaths, including Voldemort's, in the final book: *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. As a kid, the deaths were just *there*, and I did not see any ulterior message or meaning to them. In reality, death is a central theme to the books, and plays a vital role in Harry's life and experiences at Hogwarts. Rowling teaches the reader about death using Harry's evolution as a character, and her main message is that we should never fear death.

In order to analyze death in the Harry Potter series, we need to start at the beginning: the deaths of Harry's parents, Lily and James Potter. In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, we learn that Lord Voldemort went to kill Lily and James who had been fighting against him and his evil followers, the Death Eaters. He killed James, and then killed Lily when she tried to protect Harry. It isn't until the fifth book, *the Order of the Phoenix*, where the reader learns that Voldemort set out to kill Harry after finding out about a prophecy foreshadowing that he might be killed by Harry, "Either must die at the hands of the other for neither can live while the other survives" (Order of the Phoenix, Rowling; page 741). This set of events illustrates one major reason death drives the series: Voldemort is extremely afraid of dying. Fraser Los in his article *Harry Potter and the Nature of Death* puts it this way, that "Voldemort's fear of death fuels his evil ways". When Lily Potter sacrifices herself to protect Harry, and Voldemort then tries to murder Harry, a defenseless baby, he triggers an ancient magic that causes his killing curse to rebound back to him. This ancient magic, which is based upon a mother's love, is something that Voldemort did not understand, as he is incapable of love. The killing curse left Harry alive, but also left a lightning-bolt scar on his forehead. Harry's scar is famous for its appearance, a literal representation of the bolt of green from the Avada Kedavra spell, but the scar also has a

deeper, emotional meaning. It is symbolic of the emotional scars people face when they deal with death and losing a loved one. Harry sees his scar every day, and is reminded of his parents' death and sacrifice each time he does. Nicola Melhuish writes in *The Importance of Death and Paganism in Harry Potter* that "The early death of his parents has meant that Harry has learned that death is an inevitable part of life and not necessarily something to be afraid of." We should heed what Dumbledore says in regards to death: "To the well organised mind, death is but the next great adventure." (Rowling, *The Philosopher's Stone*; page 215).

In the fourth book, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry's interaction with Voldemort leading to the murder of Cedric Diggory is another important instance where death shapes Harry's life. The Goblet of Fire's plot is centered around a wizarding tournament between three schools of magic, and Cedric and Harry are the two contestants from Hogwarts. In the final task of the tournament, Cedric and Harry reach the tournament cup at the same time, and decide to take it in unison. The cup ends up being a trap, teleporting the two students to a graveyard where Voldemort is trying to resurrect himself from his weak current form. Seeing the extra person with Harry, Voldemort instructs his servant Peter Pettigrew to "Kill the spare", which Pettigrew does. The death of Cedric is important not because Harry is good friends with him, but because Cedric literally dies in Harry's arms and Harry feels responsible for his death. Cedric is yet another innocent person that Voldemort shows no remorse in killing. This event is also significant because Voldemort is brought back to full strength. Up until this point, Harry has dealt with Voldemort through him possessing Professor Quirrell in *Sorcerer's Stone* and also when a sentient memory of Voldemort tries to kill Harry by commanding a deadly basilisk in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Voldemort at full strength forces

Harry to really question his own mortality. At the end of the book, Harry and Voldemort end up doing battle, and this is where one of the most interesting questions of death gets brought up: what happens when we die? As Harry and Voldemort duel, their two wands get connected by a spell, and the result is that all the people that Voldemort has killed are shown as shadow forms to Harry. Cedric, Harry's parents, and many others all form out of Voldemort's wand, and Harry is able to talk with them. There are actual ghosts in the Harry Potter world (we know since we see them floating the halls in Hogwarts throughout the series) but it is assumed that Harry's parents as well as Cedric have "moved on". So, the fact that they are able to talk with Harry even though they are dead would seem to give credence to an afterlife of some sort. This comforts Harry, especially talking with Cedric because of his notion of responsibility for his death, and Harry is able to escape with Cedric's body.

After many close calls, the fifth book (The Order of the Phoenix) is where we finally see how Harry reacts to a person close to him dying. In Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Harry gets introduced to Sirius Black, an accused mass murderer who was convicted under false pretenses. Black was a good friend of Harry's dad's and is Harry's godfather and legal guardian, and he helped fight Voldemort in the first wizarding war. Sirius goes on the run from the Ministry of Magic (the wizarding government), and in the fifth book his house is used as a secret base for the Order of the Phoenix, a group created by Dumbledore to fight Voldemort. Harry gets pretty close to Sirius during this time because Harry is living at the house with Sirius, and he begins to think of Sirius as the dad he never had. Unfortunately, at the end of the book, a battle takes place in the Ministry between Voldemort's forces called the Death Eaters and the Order, along with Harry and some friends. Sirius battles his cousin, a Death Eater named

Bellatrix, around a magical “veil” that is supposed to separate our world from the “beyond”. Sirius gets pushed through the veil as Harry watches, and it sends him in to a rage. In the weeks and months following Sirius’s death Harry finds it hard to come to terms with it. He is angry and moody around his friends, and blames himself for Sirius’s death because Voldemort tricked him to coming to the Ministry by fooling Harry into thinking Sirius was in danger. Rowling uses Harry’s feelings towards Sirius’s death to allow the reader to acknowledge the varying emotions that people go through when they are dealing with the death of a loved one. First Harry is angry, but then he feels a depressing sadness. Next, he starts to try to understand death, even “question[ing] one of the ghosts of Hogwarts, who has remained for five centuries after his beheading, but Nearly Headless Nick tells him, sadly, that the only reason he has remained is because he feared death too much, and failed to go on as he should” (Spilsbury). Finally, after talking with his friend Luna about the veil through which Sirius fell, he realizes that he will one day see Sirius again, and that brings him peace. This cycle of grief mimics what a lot of people experience as they deal with loss in their life.

Another close friend of Harry’s is killed in the sixth book, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Harry and Dumbledore are arriving back at Hogwarts, where Death Eaters are attacking the school. They land on the Astronomy tower, only to be met by Death Eaters and Harry’s enemy Draco Malfoy. Harry is paralyzed by Dumbledore and made invisible by his Invisibility Cloak so that the Death Eaters cannot see him. Malfoy reveals he has been trying to kill Dumbledore all school year, with various methods and having no success. Suddenly Professor Snape, a friend of Dumbledore’s and a former Death Eater, arrives. With Dumbledore pleading with Snape “Please, Severus, please”, Snape kills Dumbledore. This death is a massive

change for the book series. Dumbledore has been there from the very beginning for Harry, and he is said to be the only wizard that Voldemort fears. His departure means Harry's safety net is gone, and it creates just as much pain and rage as Sirius's death. Harry chases after Snape destroying everything in his path, and when he catches up to Snape he is so filled with blind anger and emotion that he tries to cast the Cruciatus (Torturing) Curse on Snape, a spell that is banned from use. Rowling expresses death here by showing how crazy it can make you feel. Harry is willing to try a spell he would never use in his right mind, one that is incredibly savage and banned for good reason, and yet it is something that most people would consider doing in his position. It is a part of our nature as humans to strike out in pain after we experience tragic loss, even though we may see it as irrational later. An interesting part to Dumbledore's death is that in a way, Dumbledore essentially committed assisted suicide. It turns out that Dumbledore's death was engineered between him and Snape, as Dumbledore had become fatally ill earlier in the year and had not told Harry. He knew that Malfoy was under orders to kill him, and he didn't want the boy's soul to be hurt. Dumbledore tells Snape that when the time comes, Snape must kill him. Dumbledore's acceptance of an early death, even though he could easily live longer but at the cost of Voldemort punishing Malfoy if Malfoy fails to kill Dumbledore, is a courageous one. Many people laud those who fight diseases such as cancer to the very end, but Dumbledore's decision to live his life fully until he needs to die is one Rowling mirrors after those in the real world who decide enough is enough. Dumbledore's death is the catalyst for the seventh book, where Voldemort is officially in control of the wizarding world and Harry has to go off on his own to defeat him.

The seventh and final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, is ominously named with the word “deathly” in the title. This foreshadows how the last book is going to be the darkest of the series. Throughout the book, Voldemort and his followers collect the highest death count of the series, including many familiar characters. The shift from earlier in the books where there was little death, to now where Harry has grown up and many of his friends are facing death, is meant to mimic our lives in general. Just as we as humans grow older and experience more death around us than we did as kids, Harry is seeing more loss at the end of the series than at the beginning, even though he is still technically a teenager. The book starts off with two significant deaths, that are meaningful in different ways. The first death is of Professor Moody. A warrior and one of the most powerful wizards fighting against Voldemort, Moody gets killed by Voldemort personally as he and others work to get Harry out of his childhood house safely. Moody is something of an enigma and a fan favorite, with a magical eye that can see through walls as well as the back of his head, and has a wide range of advice on fighting the Dark Arts. Rowling killing him off in the book’s early moments is a warning to the reader that this book will not be kind. Death is something that can happen to anyone, even to an accomplished wizard like Moody. In the context of the war, Moody also represents the grizzled soldier dying in battle. War is not fair, and those that go off to fight in war have to come to terms with that. Moody’s death is the first of many in a book taking place during wartime, of good forces versus evil ones. The second death in the beginning is of Hedwig, Harry’s pet owl. Hedwig is another fan favorite, a beautiful white snowy owl that Harry received in the first book after he learned he was a wizard. She is killed in the same chase that Professor Moody dies in by a stray Killing Curse. While Moody’s death could be expected, Hedwig’s death

is completely out of the blue. We as humans have a very close relationship with our pets, especially as kids because we're always petting and playing with them. It's cruel that Hedwig dies, but it is meant as another signal to the reader that war isn't fair and that death is unexpected. Also, Hedwig's death is officially where Harry's childhood is over. He's grown up over the years with Hedwig at his side, but now that he is a young adult and going off to fight Voldemort to the death, he has to do it without Hedwig. The first half of the book Harry spends adjusting to life on his own with Ron and Hermione, and he is confused on how he should go about killing Voldemort. He has to step up to the challenge and leave his childhood behind, but he isn't able to do so because of his fear for going on without Dumbledore, Sirius, Hedwig, and also those still alive that he is not able to contact. This demeanor finally changes when a third tragic death happens, this time being Dobby the house elf. Just like the two deaths before, Dobby is a beloved character, one filled with childlike innocence and unwavering loyalty. Dobby is killed while saving Harry and his friends from a Death Eater's house, a final act of friendship and sacrifice for Harry. At this display, Harry finally breaks down. "His scar burned, but he was master of the pain; he felt it, yet was apart from it. He had learned control at last, learned to shut his mind to Voldemort, the very thing Dumbledore had wanted him to learn from Snape. Just as Voldemort had not been able to possess Harry while Harry was consumed with grief for Sirius, so his thoughts could not penetrate Harry now, while he mourned Dobby. Grief, it seemed, drove Voldemort out . . . though Dumbledore, of course, would have said that it was love" (Hallows page 478). This death jolts Harry out of the daze he has been in, and focuses him single mindedly towards finishing off Voldemort.

Harry's mission in *the Deathly Hallows* is to destroy Horcruxes, parts of Voldemort's soul that he has hid in objects around the world. Once Harry gets rid of all the Horcruxes, then Voldemort will be able to be killed in battle. It is said how no human has ever been able to split their soul into more than two pieces before, and the fact that Voldemort does it seven times just goes to show what a monster he is. He is the definition of pure evil, corrupted beyond recognition. With his long black cloak, raspy voice, red eyes, pale white skin, and snake-like slit for a nose, the parallel to a demon is very easy to see. This appearance is all due to his quest for immortality, which in itself stems from Voldemort's fear of death. It's ironic that when Voldemort tries to prevent death from touching him, he really just turns himself into a creature that you might find in Hell. His hunt for Horcruxes is at odds with Harry and Dumbledore, who are aware of a different way to immortality. Harry becomes aware of a legend called The Tale of the Three Brothers, which seems like a harmless story at first. It involves three brothers meeting Death on a bridge, and Death gives each brother whatever they desire. The first brother wants the most powerful wand ever, to kill anyone who stands against him. The second brother is arrogant and asks for a way to bring the dead back, and Death gives him a stone that is able to do so. The third brother is the smartest, and he asks for a way to hide from Death. Death reluctantly hands the brother his own Cloak of Invisibility. The first brother is murdered in his sleep for his wand (known as the Elder Wand), and the second brother commits suicide after the stone (the Resurrection Stone) fails to bring his loved ones completely back, just their ghosts. The third brother hides from Death for a long time, and when he is ready allows Death to find him and take him. The legend says that the owner of the three objects (the Hallows) will be the Master of Death. So, in contrast with Voldemort's pursuit of immortality by destroying

his soul, by collecting all three Hallows a person should in theory control when they die. It's also interesting how Rowling characterizes death as Death, a living entity. The symbolism of Death as a person reflects how many people see dying as something to fear, and as something that can be stopped or run away from, like running from a person. Death is something that eventually comes for everyone, whether one is ready for it or not, but Rowling understands that worrying about and fearing death is not worth the trouble. The quest for the Hallows is not about never dying, but being able to die on your own terms.

The final commentary on death that Rowling provides is again about accepting death, but also on what happens after death. At the end of *the Deathly Hallows*, while Voldemort's forces are launching an all-out assault on Hogwarts, Harry finds out that he is the final Horcrux. He realizes that he has to die in order for Voldemort to be killed. Harry leaves for the Forbidden Forest, where Voldemort is based, without telling any of his friends. At this point, the reader understands that Harry has felt responsible for every single person who dies in his name, and that Harry has decided to prevent anyone else from sacrificing themselves for him.

"Dumbledore knew, as Voldemort knew, that Harry would not let anyone else die for him now that he had discovered it was in his power to stop it. The images of Fred, Lupin and Tonks lying dead in the Great Hall forced their way back into his mind's eye, and for a moment he could hardly breathe: Death was impatient..." (Hallows page 693). He is calm and at peace walking to his death, and in this moment of clarity he realizes that he is in possession of the Resurrection Stone from earlier. He uses it and the ghosts of his parents, Sirius, and others who died in his name appear before him. In this moment, Harry asks an age-old question, ""Does it hurt?" The childish question had escaped Harry's lips before he could stop it. "Dying? Not at all," said

Sirius. "Quicker and easier than falling asleep."" (Hallows page 699). Harry then goes to sacrifice himself to Voldemort. He walks up to him, standing resolute and at peace, and Voldemort strikes him with a Killing Curse. Instead of being killed though, Harry is sent to a kind of limbo, which takes the shape of a train station enveloped in white mist. There to meet him is none other than Dumbledore. Dumbledore explains that Harry is not dead, but has a chance to go back to the mortal world if he wishes to finish off Voldemort. Harry accepts, but asks a final question: "Tell me one last thing. Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?" Dumbledore then replied, "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean it is not real?" (Hallows page 723). The train station Harry finds himself in is related to the idea of him choosing to go onwards towards death (and presumed Heaven), or he can return to Earth to finish off Voldemort. Rowling shapes this experience seemingly off of near death experiences, where people believe that they die but then are able to come back to life. In Harry's case, he literally dies (well a part of him does, since the Horcrux, the part of Voldemort's soul inside Harry, is destroyed) and makes the choice to come back to life. This sets up the final battle, where Voldemort's defenses have been destroyed, and Harry kills his foe. In possession of all three Hallows, Harry defeats Voldemort and his evil Horcruxes. Rowling's vision that the search for immortality comes from a fear of death is realized, especially due to Harry's willingness to die earlier, something Voldemort could never imagine.

Harry grows up from a small boy with little knowledge to a young adult who has looked death in the face countless times and has yet to blink. By the end of the series, Harry has learned that death is not something to worry about, and that love and friendship are better things to spend time on. Rowling illustrates through Harry the power of sacrifice for a loved

one, how we all will cope with loss at some point and learn to deal with grief, and that above all we should not fear death, as it comes for all of us eventually. Just as Harry evolves over the seven books, the reader's understanding of death evolves throughout the series as well. *Harry Potter* is a classic book series that can be read at face value just as I did as a kid, but there truly is a whole philosophy to how Rowling treats the books, especially in dealing with death.

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